

News: Cover

The Big Picture

James Rosenquist's art seems even larger in retrospect

By Adrienne M. Golub

Published 10.16.2003

http://tampa.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/the_big_picture/Content?oid=3315

On a warm evening in mid-June, Tampa Museum of Art guests sip wine and nibble upscale appetizers while artist James Rosenquist works the crowd, schmoozing, and radiating his unique blend of sophistication and folksiness. He's paradoxically charismatic and reserved at the same time; his demeanor suggests a man comfortable in his own skin. For good reason. His first full-career retrospective, an exhibition of international consequence, spanning 1958 to 2002, just opened at two major Houston museums. New York is next.

He's been invited here tonight to give a talk in conjunction with the *Modern Art in Florida* exhibition. After introductions by Tampa museum director Emily Kass, Rosenquist, in paint-stained denims and sport jacket, takes the podium in the standing-room-only Center Gallery. The well-dressed crowd hangs on every word as he straddles subjects, leaping, as is his habit, from one to another. He charms them with tidbits from his seminal years: The Art Students League scholarship in 1955. Painting billboards over Times Square. Reminiscences of Mary McCarthy, Joan Miro, and Aaron Copeland dropping by his 1963 Paris opening and the altercation between painters arguing over his early style. Deftly, his long-ago quip is delivered in measured tones. "This Paris is a fantastic place," he says, "to hit someone over an aesthetic!" He's delighted with himself. At each gem the audience chuckles in unison. And the crowd is *his*.

He continues, wrapping them in snippets of art-world trivia, the international junkets, Russia in 1991, and the price tag of his most famous painting, "F-111." Viewed as an early antiwar statement, it sold for \$50,000 in 1965; MoMA purchased it several years ago for \$5-million.

We're witnessing classic Rosenquist, a virtuoso performance with impeccable standup delivery chock-full of practiced anecdotes laced with mimicry. Impersonated voices flow from the blond, balding, nearly 70-year-old artist/raconteur, his name-dropping repertoire enviable in its scope. People like 1960s Pop-promoting gallery owner Leo Castelli, Willem DeKooning, and Robert Rauschenberg.

"He does Castelli and Jasper [Johns] perfectly," says Graphicstudio founder, Don Saff. "It's like going to the comedy club."

Alexa Favata, assistant director of University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, says, "He's Tampa's own pop star, our only real celebrity." Born in North Dakota in 1933, he's been a Florida resident since 1976. He's had exhibitions at USF, a public art commission in downtown Tampa, and Surrealist works mounted at the Dali Museum in 1999. He received an honorary doctorate from USF and in 2001, was inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame, joining Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Rauschenberg. The Retrospective *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective*, organized by the Guggenheim, was originally scheduled for a New York City opening in October 2002. After 9-11 altered the lineup, the show debuted in May 2003 at the Menil Collection and Houston Museum of Fine Art

(HMFA). The exhibition of 170 works includes paintings (some of the largest in the world), works on paper, and wonderful, never-before-seen preparatory collages. It opens at the New York Guggenheim on Oct. 16, then Oregon's Portland Museum of Art. Last stop, the Gehry-designed Bilbao Guggenheim in Spain.

At weekend lectures, Rosenquist shared the Menil spotlight with the retrospective's curator, Walter Hopps, and the HMFA stage with co-curator Sarah Bancroft, also of the Guggenheim.

At the Menil, the early years (1958-1969) began with three abstract expressionist paintings, his gestural brushstrokes applied with leftover billboard enamel and oils. Then his increasingly complex compositions, signature fragmented imagery, experimentation with mechanical devices and attached objects, and sculpture reflecting a colorist's eye and conceptual spirit. In the lobby, a 1999 painting owned by Tampa collectors Doug and Maureen Cohn. Its vivacious striations of color announce his return to abstraction and preoccupation with motion.

Rosenquist is glowing. A veteran of more than 123 solo exhibitions, including numerous partial retrospectives, and more than 450 group exhibitions, he's now experiencing the rarity of a *full-career* retrospective spanning 45 years. Accompanied by his wife, artist/writer Mimi Thompson, their teenage daughter, Lily, and his grown son, John, from his first marriage, he strolls the galleries, soaking up physical evidence of his accomplishment. A *CBS Sunday Morning* television crew follows, interviewing him for a segment to be broadcast when the exhibition opens in New York.

At the HMFA, I'm unprepared for such an awe-inspiring artistic encounter. The huge works exude the intense optimism once equated with the American spirit and mostly absent in the contemporary art scene.

Rosenquist has been called "Whitman-esque." The *Houston Chronicle* art critic writes that the show leaves you "breathless." A "knockout," say Houston art collectors Alfred and Joyce Goodman, "The best thing we've ever seen there [HMFA]." For Houston painter/photographer Nancy Jarman, the experience is "spiritual." Later she calls me to relate a friend's reaction, a ballet dancer left "spellbound, speechless, and inspired."

The seduction begins in the enormous central gallery, where a trio of 86-foot abstract murals dwarfs the viewer. The murals are based on the artist's curiosity about Einsteinian theory and perception. Art historian Carter Ratcliff says Rosenquist's "monumental knack for sending pictorial energy drifting, cascading, and roiling, is what gives him more in common with Jackson Pollock than with any of the other Pop artists."

Memorable works echo the artist's erudition and opinions on world problems: the colossal "Swimmer in the Econo-mist" (1997-98), commissioned by the Deutsche-Guggenheim Bank, "Time Dust-Black Hole" (1992), a mural-size painting in grisaille (black and gray), and one of my favorites (the only misstep is placing it behind a railing). The enigmatic and arresting "Gift-Wrapped Doll" series (1992-93). Each painted doll head eerily wrapped in simulated cellophane is meant as a subliminal response to AIDS.

The late '80s floral paintings flaunt Rosenquist's phenomenal breadth and stop me in my tracks. These are works that *must* be viewed in person. *Stunning* lyrical canvases accomplished without trappings of sentimentality on a gigantic scale. Palm fronds, eyes, ribbons of Matisse-like cutouts crisscrossing creamy tones. An absolute anomaly to the notion of Rosenquist the Pop artist.

Taken together, the works in this beautifully staged exhibition gift a slumbering art world with a marriage of passionate painting, prints inflated to phenomenal sizes, and ideas equal to a conceptual artist's. Saff, a retrospective consultant and Guggenheim Senior Curator of Prints and Drawings, says the retrospective will have a "different complexion" at each venue. The question remains whether New York's Guggenheim can mount these as spectacularly as this.

Pop Goes the Artwork The Pop connection, yay or nay, is at the crux of Rosenquist criticism. As early as 1960, he juxtaposed disparate fragments of images gleaned from popular sources such as *Life* magazine, or from photographs that he collected (in recent years, copyright issues have forced him to use his own photographs). He tacked these on the walls of his New York City studio along with sketches and small collages that he scaled up (using a grid system to enlarge and reproduce images) before painting. Because of this, he was lumped together with other rising Pop stars like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg. But their visual statements could be absorbed immediately -- like Warhol's soup cans.

Rosenquist's fragments coalesced into impersonal compositions without easily decipherable narratives, at least in the beginning. "Imagery was expendable," he remarked in 1972. In his painting "I Love You with My Ford" (1961), three images are pressed to the frontal plane, each juxtaposed against the others as if the whole were intended to deliver a message. An automobile grill, a reclining woman, and an all-over spaghetti design simulating slimy Technicolor worms. Content is elusive, obliquely highlighting our consumer society but distant from the "cohesive" narrative or "resonant commentary" that Menil museum notes tie to his underlying sensibility. And just what is that sensibility? "I could make mysterious paintings," he said.

When Rosenquist deconstructs his spaghetti motif -- which he reused for decades -- he is matter-of-fact and hilarious. "I like to look at it. I like to paint it. And I like to eat it." It resurfaces in "F-111," his French mural commission where a glass lens is filled with vivid spaghetti. By 1999, pasta mutations contribute to the abstract cacophony in "Passenger-Speed of Light."

Other favored motifs range from body parts to automobile and airplane parts. Combs, legs and shoes, metallic hair dryers, gears, and detergent boxes. Women's fingers, long, lanky and lacking cartilage -- reminders of the artist's early '60s temp job painting elegant women for Bonwit Taylor and Tiffany's windows. A cake slice juxtaposed next to a JFK portrait with fingers that emerge surrealistically from his head. Dynamic clusters of lipsticks and bundled pencils metamorphosing into aesthetically classy, energy-producing projectiles dissecting space.

But why such attraction to isolated images? He remembers a childhood visit to the Minneapolis Art Museum and afterwards, questioning the odd juxtaposition of mummies, flowers, and shrunken heads. When he moved to New York City in 1955, the urban environment further shaped his aesthetic. "I'm interested in contemporary vision," he says, "the flicker of chrome, reflections, rapid association, quick flashes of it. Bing-bang! Bing-bang! I don't do anecdotes; I accumulate experiences."

That sort of discontinuity fits with his idiosyncratic *verbal* style as well. Art critic Marcia Tucker curated his 1972 comprehensive retrospective and later reflected on the phenomenon: "... like the story he's [Rosenquist] telling me that doesn't have all the parts. They're fragments, and I don't get the whole story and I'm unsure of asking him to repeat because he's onto some other memory." Printmaking scholar Ruth E. Fine writes of his "often disjointed, crossed, and fragmented" thought patterns.

Midstream in a conversation, when the artist isn't working from prepared notes, he pauses, looks

pensive, and then appears to reach into an internal vault of stored memories that he retrieves at will. This probably describes most of us, but in his case it leads to a flood of fragmented verbal recollections. *Fragments* of narratives. "The man and the work are in lockstep, whether verbal or visual," says Vincent Ahern, USF coordinator for public art, who directed a public art project with the artist.

Rosenquist demonstrates an extraordinary ability to free-associate ideas and, with great inventive panache, convert them into visual forms. Beginning in 1962, his art struck a chord and the pieces in his first exhibition, at New York City's Greene Gallery, were sold before it opened. On opening night, he wondered if anyone would show up. One hundred and fifty did, apparently a record for those days.

The era was one of stunning historical and cultural polarities. In the outer world, compelling global realities such as the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis and, by 1963, the Kennedy assassination tragically damaged the national psyche. Within the art world, the movement away from Abstract Expressionist angst led toward more accessible art forms, particularly Pop Art. Famed gallerist Ivan Karp, on the scene from the beginning, characterizes the effect as a "severe shock to the prevailing mood."

After the Greene Gallery closed, Rosenquist joined Castelli Gallery. "I was with him [Castelli] for 30 years with just a handshake," he told me recently. "Leo was very much a European gentleman. The representation of an artist's work is very important. Leo was on the side of artists rather than on the side of the collector. He did favors for artists, gave stipends to artists. It was nice to be represented by a man of that caliber."

I asked about his relationship with Gagosian Gallery. Larry "Go-Go" Gagosian sold Sam Waksal (ImClone founder/CEO and Martha Stewart pal) four paintings for \$15-million and shipped them to New Jersey instead of Waksal's Manhattan residence. Rosenquist said, "I left Gagosian about a month before he was indicted ... I left him because I couldn't talk to him. But he was always straight with me. He sold my paintings and he paid promptly. I'm glad to be out of there with that aroma around him, but he was a straight shooter with me."

All Roads Lead to Aripeka At the Houston opening I introduced myself to Walter Hopps, Guggenheim's distinguished adjunct senior curator of 20th century art, longtime Rosenquist friend and former Menil director. Aware of his pilgrimages to the artist's Florida retreat, I mentioned I was from Tampa.

"Ahhhh, Tampa," he said, with a bright glimmer of recognition.

"*That's* where I go through to get to Aripeka."

Not an image that a culturally ascending city wants to project, I thought. But Tampa is hardly the metaphorical stepchild. For over three decades, the artist has been professionally and personally bound to the Bay area where friends, supporters, and collectors are legion. He remains especially close to Ann and Jay Ross, key players in the 1968 founding of USF's Graphicstudio, and Gail and Arnold Levine, who have hosted social events for USF and Rosenquist for years. Museum director Margaret Miller and artist Theo Wujcik are among those on the A list. In 2000, Rosenquist co-curated Wujcik's retrospective (with Miller) at Largo's Gulf Coast Museum of Art, a generous move from an artist, albeit one with a reputation for generosity.

One week after Rosenquist's Tampa Museum appearance, I visit his waterfront compound in Aripeka, less than an hour's drive north of Tampa. An unpaved driveway weaves between overgrown tropical

foliage, tall trees draped with dried moss, and spiked palm fronds that he has used as visual motifs in his art. The cluster of buildings includes his primary residence built above a ground-level screened room, a cluttered office and a gargantuan 60-by-250-foot studio. Beyond are marshland, tall reeds and Indian Bay leading into the Gulf of Mexico.

Ancient lore has it that all roads led to Rome, but during the last year, one might have joked that -- at least metaphorically -- all roads led to Aripeka. CBS's Morley Safer and *Interview* magazine editor Ingrid Sischy (on assignment for *Vanity Fair* magazine) made the trek to a town so minuscule that few Floridians have heard of it. Rosenquist's devotion is unconditional; he has a home in Bedford, N.Y., and a studio on Chambers Street in New York City, but he emphasizes that he lives and votes in Aripeka.

Artist/friend Arline Erdrich says, "He's been all over the world. He's dined and socialized with queens and princesses but he's most comfortable back here in Aripeka where he can just wear his jeans and hang out with the guys who fish."

Rosenquist bought the 28-acre property in 1976 (some of it under water, he told me). There wasn't much more than a general store and post office. His friend Dan Stack remembers, "The only restaurant that was open late closed at 9 p.m. Nothing was closer than 10 or 15 miles away."

By 2002, strip-mall culture had become the norm. When a proposed Wal-Mart superstore threatened the idyllic area (bordering a black bear corridor), Rosenquist picketed the Route 19 site with a group including Beverly Coe, his secretary/assistant of 18 years. Wal-Mart won. The incident echoed another one in 1972, when the artist was jailed in Washington, D.C., for protesting the Vietnam War. His painting "Snow Fence" (1973) recalls cellblock scratches -- by which inmates mark time -- and a snow fence, which provides a critical landmark when one is lost in a blizzard.

His environmental activism surged after the vicious 1993 hurricane-force No-Name storm caught coastal residents off guard. With his studio and office flooded, the artist lost archival documentation, works on paper, and photographs. He joined and participated actively in the Gulf Coast Conservancy land trust designed to fight nearby encroaching development, and C.A.U.S.E. (Coalition for Anti-Urban Sprawl and the Environment), groups initiated by Erdrich. His profound passion for environmental issues was already known through works like his "Water Planet" series, in both paint and print, grisaille and color. First in the series is the hauntingly beautiful painting "Welcome to the Water Planet" (1987), with a monumental lotus-like plant posed cruciform-fashion against a dynamic field of sea and land, and a sky animated by wondrous astronomical events. A stylized palm frond barrier anchors components to the surface.

One of the reasons Rosenquist chose to live in Florida, he tells me during an interview in his cluttered office, is that our time zone, compatible with telephoning Europe and New York during normal business hours, was critical for him. While we talk, he takes a phone call from the Guggenheim Museum. He banters while I glance around what is ostensibly Rosenquist command central, where Beverly Coe and longtime assistant and archivist Cindy Hemstreet help direct what could be called the Rosenquist "industry." A stream of former Graphicstudio printers have been on his payroll, and many assistants worked with the artist for years.

After the interview, we step outside into the intense afternoon sun. In a memorable gesture of pure primal adulation, James Rosenquist stretches his arms above his head and extols his love for Florida. Defining Moment In 1971 the artist arrived in Tampa for a two-week residency at Graphicstudio. Rosenquist rented two Ybor City storefronts at 1724 and 1726 Seventh Ave., and slept on a cot. Painter

Tom Kettner remembers that artists could survive then on one big meal a day for little money at local restaurants. Rosenquist, he says, was "one of the guys."

He began work at Graphicstudio on prints bearing start dates of January 25. A defining moment would soon occur and have a lasting effect on the print facility and on Rosenquist.

On Feb. 12, his wife Mary Lou, and son John, then 8, arrived for a weekend visit, and the artist picked them up at the airport. During a rainstorm their car was struck broadside by a hit-and-run driver, and all three were taken to Tampa General Hospital. Mary Lou was in a coma for three months, and John for nearly a month. Rosenquist's injuries were less serious, and he was released shortly after. Don Saff remembers that "one of the attending physicians thought he'd [John] probably not make it." Both survived but required years of therapy.

USF art department faculty and students donated blood, and Robert Rauschenberg arrived from Captiva to support his friend. (Eventually Saff invited Rauschenberg to print at Graphicstudio. The artist replied, "I thought you'd never ask." It led to a long and productive professional relationship.)

Master printer Maurice Sanchez worked with the artist in East Hampton during the early '70s. "Jim was like a phoenix rising out of the flames; it was a kind of death," he says now of the accident.

Besides the trauma of his family's critical injuries, the financial drain was enormous. Though famous, he wasn't wealthy. Almost immediately he was \$60,000 in debt, approximately \$270,000 in today's money. Continuing to work was critical despite his desperate circumstance.

Published accounts skirt around the accident, which had long-term physical repercussions for the artist's wife and son. In art-historical terms, the question is whether it influenced Rosenquist's art. "Suffering does not make art," he told me. Yet the effects *were* lingering, both in terms of art and business. He once remarked that the '70s were "not a very good time in my artwork at all. Then I got back on track again."

In *Time Dust*, her Rosenquist print catalogue *raisonne*, Constance Glen discusses the late 1970s when Rosenquist (and many other artists) "participated in the production of what have become known as 'tax shelter' portfolios -- largely in the hope that unrelenting work would heal his art and hasten his personal recovery. The phenomenon brought large quantities of prints by a wide variety of artists to an expanding market in a very short period, before changes in tax laws halted the flow."

When I asked the artist about the tax shelter phenomenon, he patiently explained the ramifications. "Artists were given an opportunity to give a lot of work and make money. People who bought it were given a big tax rebate and then the government renege."

Ultimately, the accident altered the Graphicstudio process. After Rosenquist was invited to work indefinitely while his wife and son recovered, the open-ended residency became a model for visiting artists.

In 2001, USF commissioned Rosenquist to create his first public sculpture for St. Petersburg's All Children's Medical Research Center. The result, a 30-foot Pop Art Band-Aid called "It Heals Up," hangs from the roof. He calls it his "optimistic sculpture" and says it shows "how the magic of the human body can overcome terrible afflictions with the magic and hard work and expertise of the doctors and staff." He donated the work, valued at a half-million dollars.

Beginnings and Values Any inquiry into James Rosenquist's life is incomplete without touching on the

social consciousness he traces to his Depression-era birth and links to his ongoing political/cultural involvement. His outspoken verbal and visual commentaries often rail against the military-industrial complex.

During the 1970s, Rosenquist lobbied Congress for an Artist's Bill of Rights together with his accountant (the late Rubin Gorewitz, artist's advocate and tax-shelter guru), Rauschenberg, N.Y. Sen. Jacob Javitts and his wife Marion. Ever the kibitzer, the artist tells of wearing tropical shirts to congressional sub-committee meetings. (In 1966 he commissioned a designer paper suit, wearing it to gallery and museum openings for an entire year.)

In 1978 Joan Mondale invited him to serve on the National Endowment for the Arts. Because he had protested Vietnam, he says, "the FBI knocked on my door." Adjusting his voice, he impersonates the agent, "I'm with the FBI. My name is O'Neil. I'm usually in drugs. Are you a Communist? Are you a patriotic citizen? And do you uphold the Constitution?" I refused to answer. The FBI asks [former Ybor artist] Rick Traweek, 'Do you think James Rosenquist is a patriotic citizen?' Five months later I passed the Senate. At the first meeting I wore a tropical shirt. I always wore Florida shirts. Everyone kidded me." He served for six years.

Another favorite anecdote is how he coerced government officials to invite his then 10-year-old daughter to a White House dinner honoring him for his involvement in and donations to the Print for Embassies program. He asked to bring Lily. "They said no children. I said, 'listen, in 1936 my mother took me to see Franklin Roosevelt. I've voted Democratic all my life. If you want my daughter's Democratic vote for the rest of her life, you'd better invite her.' She was the only child with all these foreign ambassadors."

Larger than Life I asked Rosenquist what this retrospective means to him.

"I'm thankful that my life and career are so different than other people's careers. So thankful that other people collected my work and saved it. I'm grateful to get them together. Stockbrokers don't have the visible evidence of their life's work."

And then the man of monumental art and statistics to match says, "I took a roll of white paper a foot wide and glued a rough image (each only a few inches) of everything I've ever done."

He asked me how big I thought the roll came to.

"268 feet wide," he answers. "Spread out you could see my whole damn career."

James Rosenquist, larger than life, right to the end.

Weekly Planet art critic, Adrienne M. Golub can be reached by email at randagolub@aol.com.

©1996-2011 Creative Loafing Media - All Rights Reserved