

new york

JAMES ROSENQUIST*Musée Guggenheim*

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*Galerie Jacobson Howard**Galerie Robert Miller*

Octobre - novembre 2003

A retrospective exhibition of James Rosenquist, the first in thirty years that includes paintings, collage, works on paper and sculpture from the 1950s to the present, provides an opportunity to reassess the contribution of this major American Pop artist. From his early abstractions and Pop icons to some recent ferocious compositions, Rosenquist has explored the relationship between commerce, icons of American culture, and the tradition of mural-sized painting since the 1950s. Walking down the ramp at the Guggenheim (one could write an essay about the "downward spiral" implication of any retrospective at the Guggenheim) two observations occurred to this reviewer; that Rosenquist's work has evolved dramatically over forty years, and that the artist has been doing some of his strongest work in the last decade.

Of all the Pop artists, James Rosenquist's work has always been the least literal and the most abstract, coming out of the collage tradition and the work of the 50s Pop precursors, Jasper Johns (the *Targets*) and Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines*. Having worked in an abstract style after his arrival in New York in 1955, in a modest attempt at the by then familiar strategies of Abstract Expressionism, Rosenquist, partly influenced from his years as a commercial billboard painter, began to employ advertising images in his paintings. At about the same time as Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein were exploring popular culture, Rosenquist found an endless supply of raw material for subject matter that, by its familiarity, made his work instantly relevant and topical.

Originally called New Realism, which it certainly was not, the work of the Pop artists touched a nerve in American artistic circles in the 1960s, reviled by art critics and embraced by discerning collectors, aware that a new phase of American art was emerging. For better or worse, Rosenquist and the Pop artists, inspired by the massive, ambitious abstract painting of the 50s, took on the American consciousness with a mirror, determined to make an art out of the stuff that Americans identified with, symbols of American world ascendancy; cars and corporate logos, movie stars, the jet and canned food.

Rosenquist made a dramatic breakthrough from a generic abstract style with the painting *Zone* (1960-61), a grisaille image of a woman, her hand on her face (lifted from an ad), next to a close-up view of a ripe tomato. The reference is obvious and awkward, assuming it is intended, but it is also humorous and provocative. Like a visual puzzle, *President Elect* (1960-61/64) shows a grinning John F. Kennedy cropped next to fragment of a pale green sedan. Connected by a woman's hands holding a dessert ("let them eat cake!") the painting offers a mixed message about American consumerism. No Rosenquist retrospective would be complete without the 86 foot-long *F-111* (1964-65), the artist's attempt to sum up America's 60s self image; military industrial power (a fighter jet, the entire length of the mural) a tire and a cake (both round, images of prosperity), an atomic bomb mushroom cloud, next to red (bloody?) strands of spaghetti. Not an overt political statement like Picasso's *Guernica*, *F-111* is a monumental expression of the artist's ambivalence toward America's naive materialist preoccupations.

Rosenquist's work from the 70s and 80s extended the concept of the confluence of disparate images—giant flowers superimposed on galactic space, more poetic and mysterious than his Pop pictures. At the same time, reflecting his concern over environmental issues, Rosenquist incorporated the local vegetation near his studio in Florida in *Welcome to the Water Planet* (1987), intent on making his painting convey the extraordinary beauty and delicacy of nature. Into the 90s, Rosenquist began to work again on a mural scale, as in *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist* (1997-98), with iconic, almost hieratic visions of shiny new metallic containers, like giant cornucopia spewing glossy lipsticks, near a line of drills that stand guard like soldiers. The most recent paintings are a vortex of bright colors and commercial design, like distorted boxes of detergent caught in a washing machine spin cycle, a kind of expressionist take on Pop art.

In a related exhibition, the new Jacobson Howard Gallery is showing collage studies that Rosenquist made throughout his career, which demonstrates how spontaneous, experimental and unpremeditated his paintings really are. Rosenquist has employed these collages to keep his ideas fresh, to surprise himself with possibilities beyond his own sensibility. At the Robert Miller Temporary Space, an installation of *Horizon Home Sweet Home* (shown last in 1970 at Leo Castelli Gallery), of large color and reflective panels, with a dry ice machine in the center of the room, is a funhouse of smoke and mirrors, something akin to Rosenquist's basic premise in his art: the illusion of the familiar.

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