

Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac opens an in-depth exhibition of works from the 1960s by James Rosenquist



Installation view, James Rosenquist: Visualising the Sixties, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, 10th September - 9th November 2019. Photo: Ben Westoby.

LONDON.- The 1960s was a defining decade for James Rosenquist (1933–2017), one of the most revered and influential American artists of his generation. His paintings radically tested the possibilities of perception, of the image and of the painted medium itself, propelling him to the centre of art-world attention. At the forefront of his time and the nascent Pop art movement, he combined figurative painting techniques, collage and the use of found objects to convey the contradictions inherent to the American experience – juxtaposing John F. Kennedy and the American Dream with images relating to the Vietnam War, mass consumerism, segregation and technological innovation.

The first UK exhibition in over thirty years with an in-depth focus on this pivotal decade, James Rosenquist: Visualising the Sixties not only illuminates why the early years of the artist's career were so groundbreaking, but also demonstrates the innovative and experimental techniques Rosenquist employed throughout the decade, pushing the boundaries of his medium in an era that redefined the field of painting.

The exhibition features important paintings on both canvas and plastics from this era that highlight his innovations as one of the earliest pioneers of experiential art, juxtaposed with rarely seen studies for some of his most iconic paintings, which the artist kept private for most of his career. Casting new light on Rosenquist's practice, influences and motivations – both within and beyond the realms of Pop art – the exhibition includes seminal works loaned from international museums and foundations, alongside those from the artist's Estate and family. In addition to motorised paintings, works incorporating electric lightbulbs and pieces on diversely shaped canvases, the exhibition presents an interactive hanging piece on strips of Mylar plastic, explicitly designed to be walked through by visitors and never-before exhibited in the UK – described by Rosenquist as 'painting as immersion'.

Born in Grand Forks, North Dakota in 1933, Rosenquist studied art at the University of Minnesota (1952–54) before enrolling at the Art Students League, New York, also frequenting the Cedar Tavern where he met painters Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Milton Resnick. Working as a painter of monumental advertising billboards and painting abstract canvases in his spare time, in 1960 he abandoned commercial painting and set up a studio in Coenties Slip, New York. Cropping, fragmenting and re-colouring images from magazines, uniquely combined with the skills and gestures of sign-painting, Rosenquist began searching for a new language that would differentiate him from the second generation of Abstract Expressionists and set him apart from his peers.

In 1961, vanguard art dealers Leo Castelli, Ivan Karp, Ileana Sonnabend and Richard Bellamy visited Rosenquist's studio, and his first solo exhibition was held at Bellamy's Green Gallery, New York, the following year. Pop art was rapidly gaining momentum and the show sold out in its entirety, with many works going to the leading collectors associated with the movement, including Robert Scull, Richard Brown Baker and Count Panza di Biumo.

One of the important early works on display, *The Light that Won't Fail I* (1961) – on loan from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C. – demonstrates Rosenquist's mastery of collage techniques in painting, layering and transforming his imagery through uncanny, mysterious juxtapositions. The face of a smoking femme fatale, drawn from a Philip Morris advertisement, appears lit by the acid glow of neon lights and overlaid with a pair of sock-clad feet, while an outsized hair comb structures the upper edge of the canvas. The relationships between these disparate elements are elusive – seeming to shift with the viewer's perspective – and enticing in their ambiguity. The painting was purchased from the Green Gallery by the collector Joseph H. Hirshhorn and has since been exhibited in major retrospectives of the artist's work, including The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Whitney Museum of American Art in New York; The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; and The Menil Collection, Houston.

By cunningly working up, and at the same time undermining, a photographic surface ... Rosenquist is attacking one of our most entrenched visual conventions, and so making a point which can radically affect our relationship to the pictorial world. – Stephan Bann, Art Historian and Emeritus Professor of History of Art at the University of Bristol, 1969.

The 60s saw Rosenquist radically experiment with his compositions, embracing vibrant colour palettes, the shaped canvas, and incorporating three-dimensional objects into the picture plane. The innovative use of electrical lightbulbs appeared in works such as *Reification* (1961), *Painting with Bulb* (1962) and *Small Doorstop* (1963–1967). In *Reification*, a combination of bulbs and empty sockets are set against a fragmented rectangle of pillar-box red, spelling out the first three letters of the painting's title and suggesting an advertising slogan or shopfront.

Softer in palette and surreal in content, *Painting with Bulb* (1962) explores Rosenquist's fascination with the image itself. Attesting to his painterly skill, Rosenquist has subtly superimposed two segments of cloudy sky to create a double framing of the central flashlight fixture. In reference to his related painting *Noon* (1962), Rosenquist explained, 'I was fascinated by the fact that light can actually make things disappear', by eclipsing all else. Employing both metaphor and paradox, Rosenquist's lightbulb paintings place him alongside contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, who used lightbulbs in a number of his famed Combines.

One of Rosenquist's first shaped canvases and among the earliest works on display, *Coenties Slip Studio* (1961) presents an ambiguous, yet personal, portrait of the artist and his studio. With its title referencing the site of its production, whose East River residents also included Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, the painting is both free from explicit narrative yet suggestive and considered, exemplary of Rosenquist's ability to create mysterious compositions that challenge viewers and render the familiar uncanny. Unlike his contemporaries, Rosenquist produced numerous works on circular or television-shaped canvases in a variety of sizes throughout the decade. In *Paramus* (1966) – drawn from a 1954 illustration of the three coloured beams of an RCA television – circles of magenta and blue echo the orbit of their frame, recalling the swirls of blurred colour produced by an out-of-focus lens and the peripheries – or limits – of vision.

In the mid-1960s, Rosenquist veered away from the slick realist content of his painted collages to experiment with a wider variety of abstract and spatial effects. The social and political references of these works are sometimes oblique, but they also represent a more fundamental engagement with the character of post-war image culture, ranging from Colour Field painting to television advertising ... For Rosenquist, the politics of vision lay in its capacity to lie, and the ends to which these illusions could be put. – Alex J. Taylor, Assistant Professor and Academic Curator at the University of Pittsburgh, 2019

Exemplifying Rosenquist's pioneering engagement with newfound technologies and industrial innovations, the exhibition includes a number of works that incorporate Plexiglass, Mylar, acrylics and polythene – plastics that were still in their infancy at the time. Expanding the limits of the painted medium, the lower half of *Morning Sun* (1963) is encased by a sheet of painted plastic, suspended from a fishhook and twine on a bamboo stick that protrudes from the frame's upper edge, simultaneously obscuring and transforming the subjects painted behind.

Exhibited for the first time in the UK, *Forest Ranger* (1967) – on loan from Museum Ludwig, Cologne – is an interactive, free-hanging painting on strips of industrial Mylar, measuring over four metres in height and explicitly designed to be walked through by visitors. Depicting a World War II armoured vehicle drawn from a General Motors Chevrolet advertisement, *Forest Ranger* calls into question traditional divisions between modes of viewing and environments of display. With images of forest- and carcass-cutting technologies painted upon a sliced 'canvas', the work attests to Rosenquist's trailblazing position in the realms of experiential and immersive art.

The exhibition also features *Yellow Applause* (1966), a highly individual motorised painting in which two hands on separate canvases are brought together in a literal clap, enacting the actions suggested by the title. Rosenquist's inventiveness in display, content and form across these dynamic works set him apart from the Pop artists of the time and exemplify his revolutionary explorations into art – and vision – as experience.

I want people who look at my paintings to be able to pass through the illusory surface of the canvas and enter a space where the ideas in my head collide with theirs. – James Rosenquist

Works on Paper

Brought together for this exhibition, a number of rarely shown preparatory sketches and collaged source materials provide an anthological snapshot of a defining moment in Rosenquist's career, highlighting his eclectic approach to imagery. Ranging from densely layered sheets ripped from the pages of magazines – as with Source for The Promenade of Merce Cunningham (1963), the original collage for the Menil Collection's painting from the same year – to sparsely arranged, isolated fragments, the collages demonstrate not only Rosenquist's attentiveness to composition and form, but also the faithfulness of his reproductions and the bravura with which he painted. The sketches, similarly, demonstrate an attuned sensibility to craft and content, offering unique insight into Rosenquist's radical motivations and contextualising some of his most famous works, for example, Study for Marilyn (1962), a delicate crayon and pencil study for the iconic painting Marilyn (1962), now housed in The Museum of Modern Art, New York, with later lithographs in numerous private collections as well as Tate, London.

Those advertisements had the feel of looking through a big domed mirror, where you see something close up, but it's blurry at the edges of your peripheral vision ... If I saw something like that, I'd cut it out and look at it ... I wanted the space to be more important than the imagery, I wanted to use the imagery as tools ... the priority for me is visual invention ... content is secondary. – James Rosenquist

Jim often called his paintings autobiographical and they were. But in his multi-dimensional work he continually merged his personal world with global political concerns – the power of the military industrial complex, the destruction of our environment and human rights for all races and sexes, to name a few. His thoughts could travel in all directions like an outer space traffic pattern, and that ability, paired with his use of visual contradictions, allows meaning to remain elusive. Like Thelonius Monk (whose method of music-making: 'All ways always' attracted him). Jim was looking far out there, way into dimensional space that is yet to be defined, happy to keep questions unanswered. The atmosphere of his work is subtle, enigmatic but also dramatic and full of power. These different aspects of his work came naturally, and Jim had a plain-spoken reason for including them, 'I painted the things that needed painting.' – Mimi Thompson Rosenquist

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