

JAMES ROSENQUIST: VISUALISING THE SIXTIES

10th September – 9th November 2019

Nearly sixty years ago James ('Jim') Rosenquist quit painting commercial billboards and theatre marquees in New York City and embarked on his fine art career. Within a year, he had created his first 'Pop' painting: Zone (1960–61). Within five years, he had completed what many consider a magnum opus: the room-installation F-111 (1964–65), now in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art in New York. And within ten years, Rosenquist was campaigning for artists' rights in Congress as a leader alongside Robert Rauschenberg and other artists. From age twenty-seven to thirty-seven, he had grown from a young buck Pop artist who ruffled the artistic establishment to an esteemed insider, and an artist whose work Andy Warhol once described as his favourite.

– Sarah C. Bancroft, Executive Director, James Rosenquist Foundation

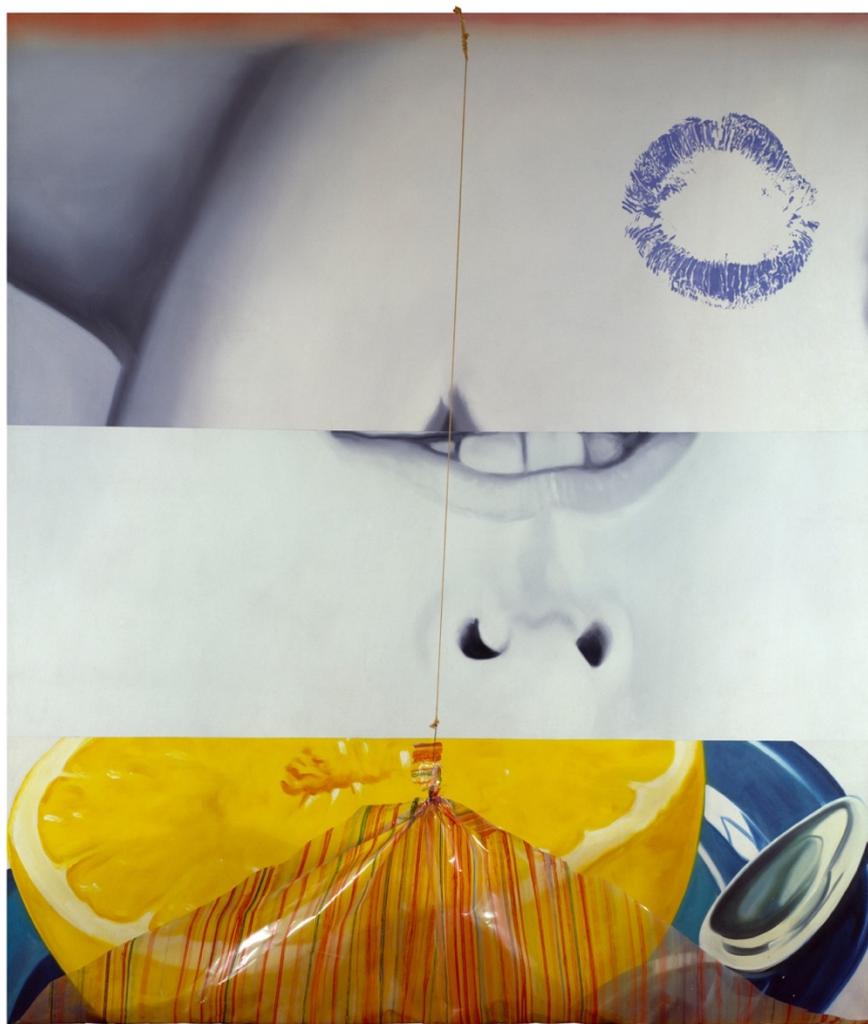


1.

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 photorealism, 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* will not only illuminate why the early years of the artist's career were so ground-breaking, but will also demonstrate 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 will feature important paintings on both canvas and plastics from this era that highlight his innovations as one of the earliest pioneers of experiential art, juxtaposed against 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 electrical lightbulbs and pieces on diversely shaped canvases, the exhibition will present 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 (1933), Rosenquist studied art at the University of Minnesota (1952-1954) before enrolling in the Arts Students League, New York, where he frequented the Cedar Tavern alongside artists, such as 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 studio-peers.

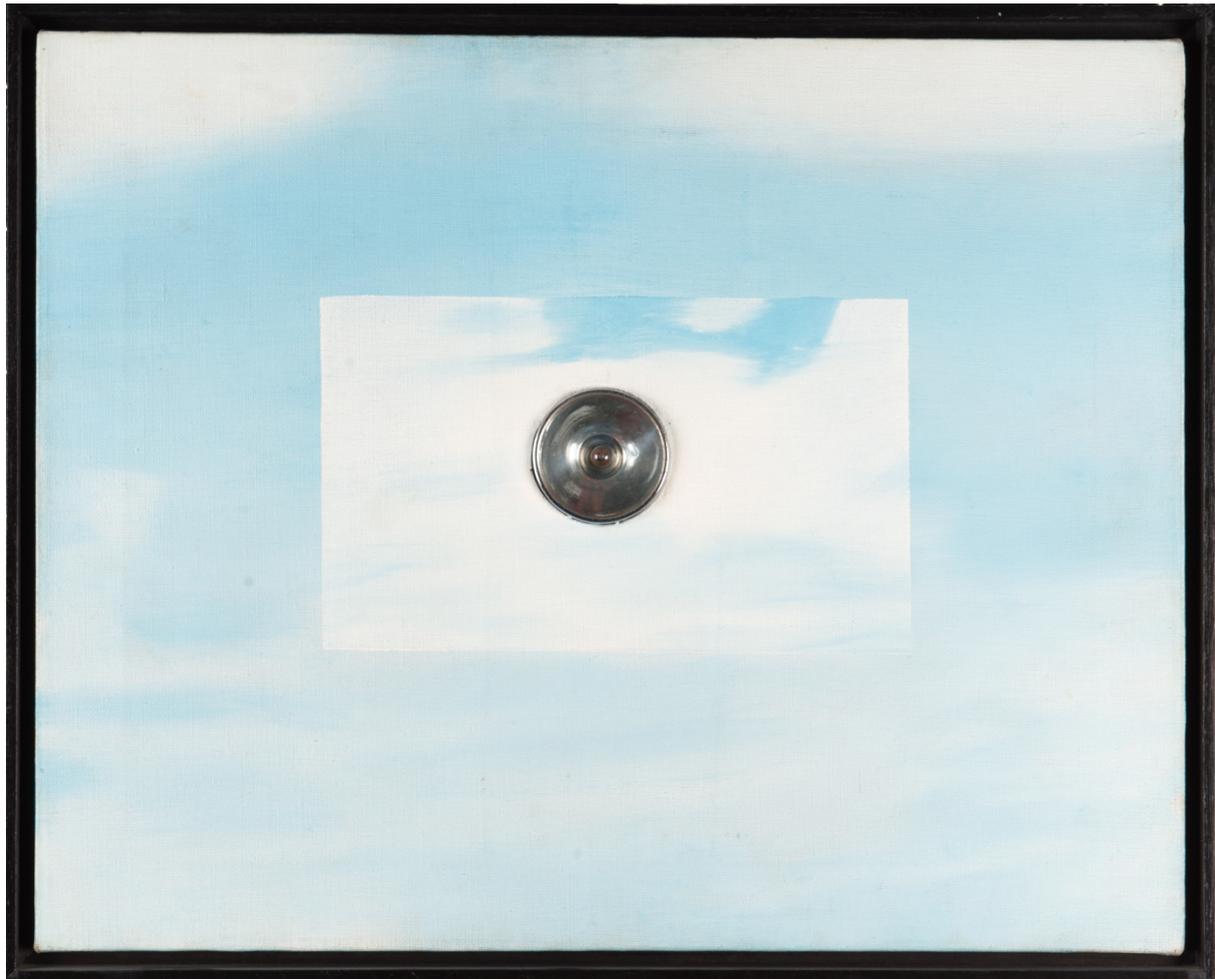
In 1962, vanguard art dealers, Leo Castelli, Ivan Karp, Ileana Sonnabend and Richard Bellamy visited his studio, and held his first solo exhibition at Bellamy's Green Gallery, New York, that same year. Pop Art was rapidly gaining momentum and the show sold out in its entirety, with many works going to the leading collectors associated with the movement, including Robert Scull, Richard Brown Baker and Count Panza di Biumo.

One of the most 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 oversized 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; the 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

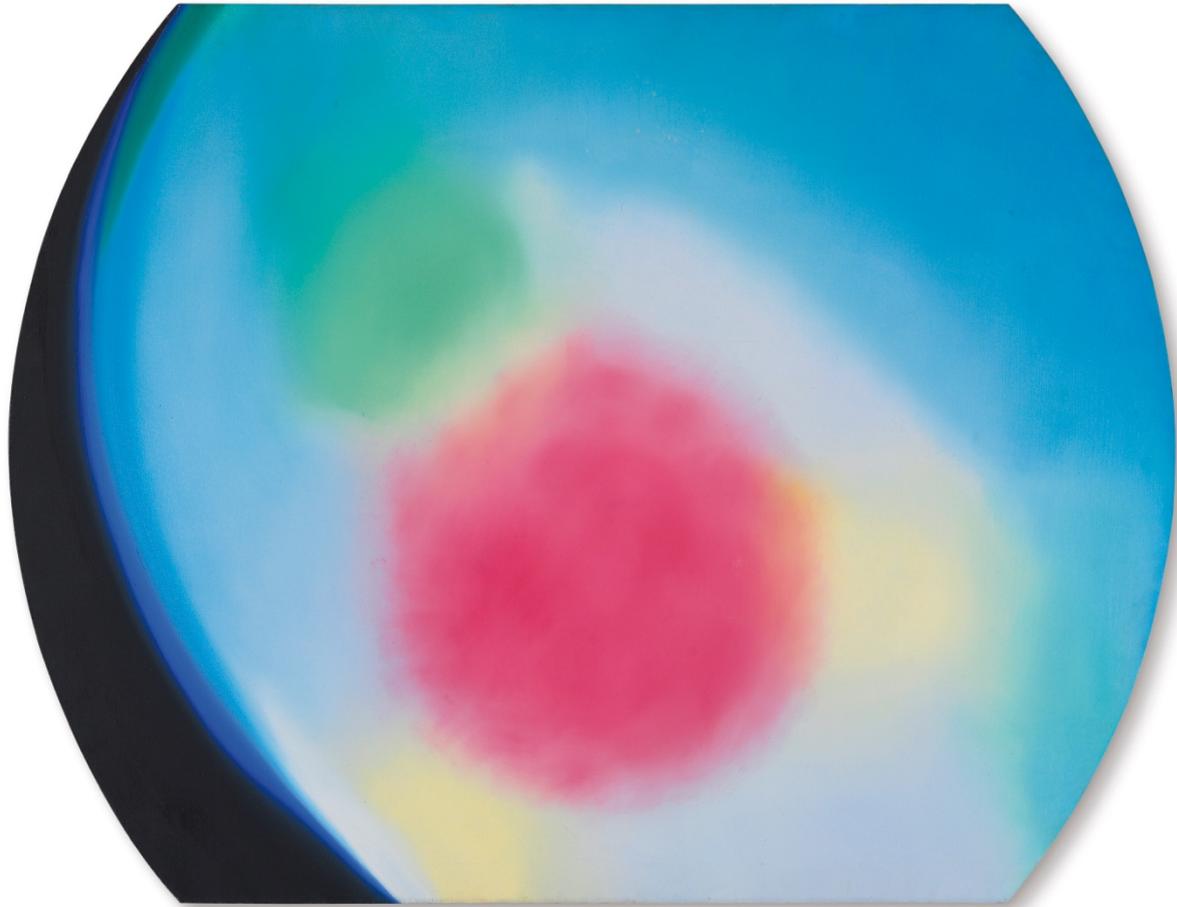
The 60s saw Rosenquist radically experiment with his compositions, embracing vibrant colour palettes, the shaped canvas, and incorporating three-dimensional objects into the picture plane. The innovative use of electrical lightbulbs appeared in works such as *Reification* (1961), *Painting with Bulb*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



3.

Softer in palette and surreal in content, *Painting with Bulb* (1962) explores Rosenquist's fascination with the image itself. Attesting to Rosenquist's painterly skill, a white camera emerges from a cloudy summer sky, with a central flashlight presiding in-lieu of its lens. The painting appears to mimic both the streaks of sunlight passing through clouds and a camera's invasive flash, transforming the viewer into the observed and the subject into voyeur. Employing both metaphor and subtle parody, Rosenquist's lightbulb paintings place him alongside contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg, who used the lightbulb in a number of his 'Combine' series.

One of Rosenquist's first shaped canvases and the earliest work 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 included Rauschenberg, Johns, Ellsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, the painting is both free from explicit narrative yet suggestive and considered, and exemplary of Rosenquist's ability to create mysterious compositions that challenge viewers and render the familiar strange. 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.



4.

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, Art Historian and Assistant Professor and Academic Curator at the University of Pittsburgh, 2019

Exemplifying Rosenquist's pioneering engagement with newfound technologies and industrial innovation, 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 his medium, the lower half of *Morning Sun* (1963) is encased by a sheet of painted plastic, suspended by the twine of a fishing rod which 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 – is an interactive, free-hanging painting on strips of industrial Mylar, measuring close to three metres in height

and explicitly designed to be walked through by visitors. Depicting a World War II military vehicle drawn 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 trail-blazing position in the realms of experiential and immersive art.

The exhibition will also feature *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 throughout these works dramatically set him apart from the Pop artists of the time and are exemplary of 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, n.d.

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 the fluidity of his production and the ease with which he approached his imagery. Ranging from densely layered sheets ripped from the pages of magazines (as with *Source for the Promenade of Merce Cunningham* (1963), the original collaged sources 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 of craft and unique attentiveness to subject, 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 MoMA, New York, with later lithographs in numerous private collections and the Tate, London.

"Those advertisements had the feel of looking through a big domed mirror, where you see something close up, but its 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

We would like to thank Mimi Thompson Rosenquist and the artist’s Estate, and Sarah Bancroft, Executive Director of the James Rosenquist Foundation, for their support in the exhibition.

James Rosenquist: Visualising The Sixties will be accompanied by a richly-illustrated catalogue including an essay by art historian Alex J. Taylor, Assistant Professor and Academic Curator at the University of Pittsburgh, who is completing a history of corporate art patronage in the 1960s, and a foreword by Sarah C. Bancroft, who has curated several exhibitions of Rosenquist's work, including the 2003 retrospective at the Guggenheim. The text focuses on Rosenquist's practice in relation to the visual culture and politics of the time, in particular its relationship to optics, televisual techniques and the Vietnam War.

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THE EXHIBITION RUNS FROM 10 SEPTEMBER 2019 – 9 NOVEMBER 2019

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All Artworks © 2019 Estate of James Rosenquist / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Images: 1. James Rosenquist, *The Light That Won't Fail I*, 1961. Oil on canvas. 182.2 x 244.5 cm (71 3/4 x 96 1/4 in.). Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966. Photo: Cathy Carver. 2. James Rosenquist, *Morning Sun*, 1963. Oil on canvas and plastic, with twine, bamboo and metal fishhook. 198.1 x 167.6 cm (78 x 66 in.). Collection of Mary Lou Rosenquist. 3. James Rosenquist, *Painting with Bulb*, 1962. Oil on canvas, with flash light fixture and bulb. 40.64 x 50.8 cm (16 x 20 in.). Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen. Donation Erna and Curt Burgauer 1987. Photo: Sebastian Stadler. 4. *Paramus*, 1966. Oil on shaped canvas. 121.9 x 157.5 cm (48 x 62 in.). Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London • Paris • Salzburg. Photo: S. Stadler.