

James Rosenquist

Musing about the painting, Rosenquist said, "After my mother died in 1987, I painted *Through the Eye of the Needle* as a kind of commemoration of her unfulfilled life. She was an adventurer at heart. I always thought of my mother as someone who was avant-garde and very smart. But toward the end of her life she became discouraged. When she was young she'd been a pilot in North Dakota. Her hero was Amelia Earhart. I remember asking her if she had ever gotten her pilot's license. She said, "No, that was before women's liberation, but I flew all over the place anyway."

North Dakota and aviation are greatly entrenched in Rosenquist's work, particularly in his scale and size. Big skies, never-ending horizons, and the grand heights his mother and father soared to were all part of his childhood on the farm in Mekinock, ND, near the Airbase. While his parents searched for work throughout the Midwest, Jim would spend long summers with his paternal grandparents in North Dakota absorbing the vast open prairies. Eventually the Rosenquists settled in the Minneapolis area and, at age fourteen, James accepted a scholarship to attend Minneapolis School of Art at the Minneapolis Art Institute.

During his summer months in college, James painted gasoline signs and tanks for Phillips 66, and grain elevators throughout the Midwest. Eventually, he attended the Art Students League in New York and left Minnesota. Determined to become a mural painter, he looked to the League to learn "upscale", but became disheartened when no one was painting his desired scale, that is, big. To learn, James went back to billboards knowing the old traditions were alive and well.

According to the artist, billboard painters, "...cover huge areas with imagery by scaling images from sketches. They create something large using the grid method. Sometimes the grids would measure a quarter inch, or an inch to three feet, so a pencil line in a sketch would be almost a foot wide up on these big buildings. How does one deal with that? That was my question. I was not fascinated with the subject; I was fascinated with the technique." High above the New York's streets, Rosenquist became known as the "Billboard Michelangelo."

Rosenquist emerged as an artist with the likes of Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, and Roy Lichtenstein. Many considered him a founder of the Pop Art Movement, although Rosenquist himself would say otherwise. Nonetheless, his ability to "upscale" and the manner in which he used commercial advertising, placed him in the movement by critics and collectors alike.

Rosenquist's midwestern work ethic remained crucial to his success. After extended periods of time painting billboards in New York's Times Square and Minneapolis, or on gas tanks and grain bins throughout the lands he temporarily called home, he found success as a painter.

His first one-man exhibition at Green Gallery in New York City immediately sold out. His exhibition was followed by Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip paintings, then Andy Warhol's first one-man show of his *Marilyn Diptych*, *100 Soup Cans*, *100 Coke Bottles*, and *100 Dollar Bills*. In the biography *Painting Below Zero*, Rosenquist states, "I'm resigned to being lumped together with Andy, Roy, Claes [Oldenburg], and Tom [Wesselmann] because I used similar imagery, but there's a considerable difference in the way we each use that imagery. I was never concerned with logos or brand names or movie stars, like Andy, for instance. Unlike Roy, I wasn't interested in ironic simulations of pop media; I wanted to make mysterious pictures. I've never included commercial imagery in painting for its own sake, for its 'popness' alone. In my paintings there's always a reason for an image being there."

Rosenquist continued, "Pop artists were a disparate group to begin with: ex-abstract expressionist (Lichtenstein), ex-cartoonist (Oldenburg), ex-commercial artist (Warhol), ex-chicken farmer (George Segal), and ex-billboard painter (me) all working independently toward our own vision."

And so, Rosenquist's career took off. Growing up in the 1950s, where everything was bigger, faster, electric, and new, there wasn't much that didn't remind him he was living in a "material utopia." James began to paint fragments of these commercial objects creating a seemingly unresolved work leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. His work became a series of questions rather than answers.