time on his mind

At 73, the artist James Rosenquist has never been busier. Judith Goldman drops in on a Pop legend. Photographed by Irving Penn.

Seen from a distance, waiting to board a plane, James Rosenquist, painter of monumental pictures and Pop Art's dark horse, could be any Florida-bound tourist. He has the all-American looks one associates with airline pilots: even features, blue eyes, and a ring of blond hair that rests on his head like a fallen halo. Rosenquist is 73 but has the drive and daring of a young painter and an innocent "gee whiz" aura that brings to mind a Jimmy Stewart character. But as he rises to greet me, he looks tired. He has spent the last week in New York City, balancing the demands of family and career, and he is ready to leave town. "It's hard to get anything done in New York," he says. "It's hard to get art supplies and it's hard to get your car."

At the moment, Rosenquist has a lot to do. A major deadline looms for an exhibition at the Acquavella Galleries—his first at the prestigious gallery to feature entirely new work. He's been lucky with dealers. For decades, Leo Castelli represented him, then he had a sold-out show at the Gagosian Gallery (but left when Larry Gagosian didn't take his calls), and now he's at Acquavella, where he and Lucien Freud, the gallery's only other living artist, share space with modern masters.

A Florida resident, Rosenquist travels at least twice a month from his studio on Florida's Gulf Coast to the loft in lower Manhattan where his wife, painter Mimi Thompson, and his son and daughter live. He finds New York distracting and hasn't painted there since 1985. Florida is his refuge. He has grown accustomed to its light and space. It is where he works best.

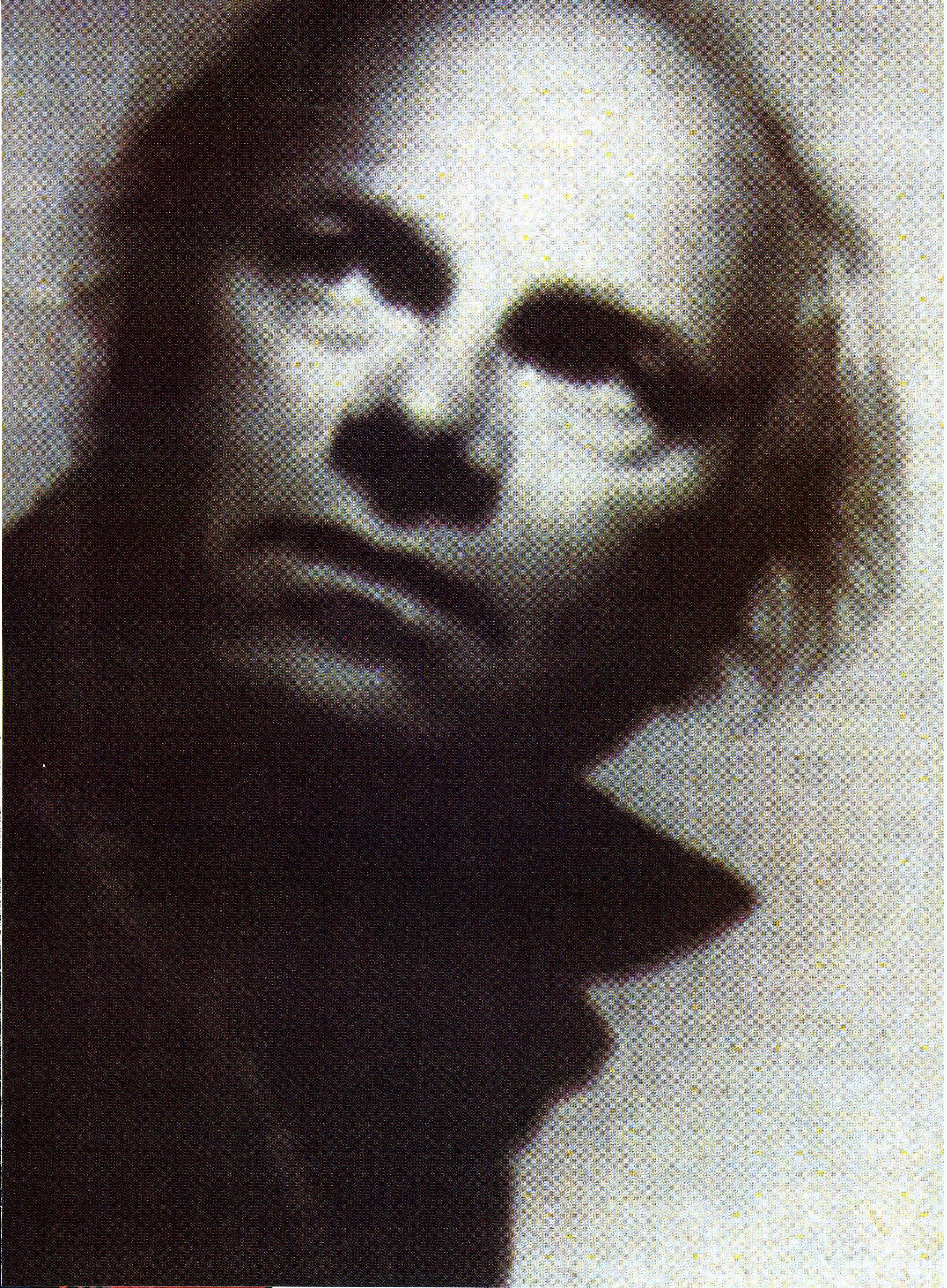
As soon as we reach Tampa, Rosenquist's fatigue vanishes and he turns playful. He has a corny, theatrical streak, and having somehow managed to get off the plane first he is waiting to greet me. "Welcome to Tampa," he says, arms outstretched, knees bent. "Let's get ready to rumble," he continues, wiggling his knees back and forth in the hubba-hubba motion of a circus clown. The mock welcome over, we head to his car, a four-year-old Toyota hybrid, for the 45-minute drive to Aripeka. The Toyota is a big change from the Mercedeses and Ferraris he once drove. When I ask about the car, he seems pleased that I've noticed and informs me that the hybrid gets 48 miles to the gallon and never needs repairs.

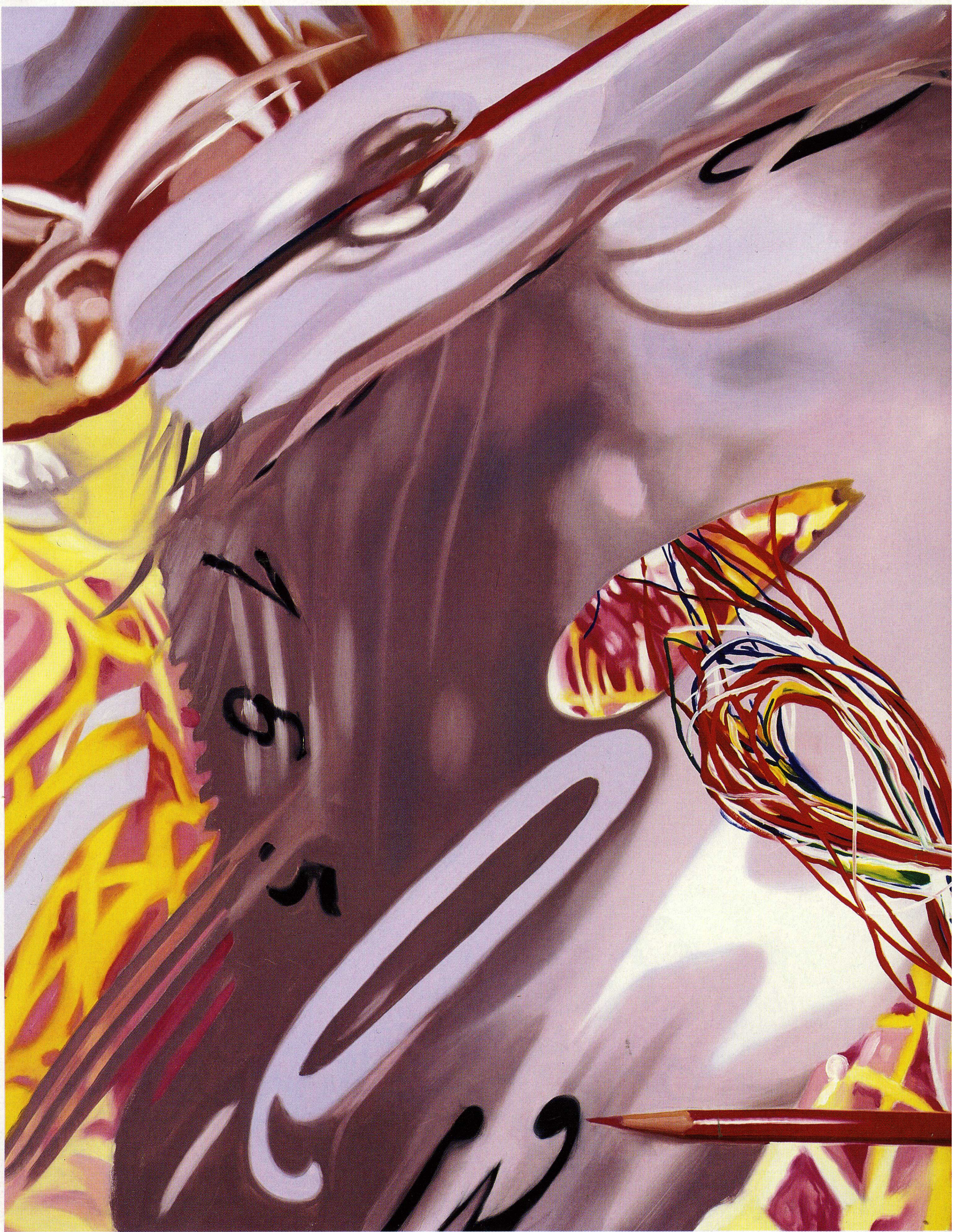
Two weeks earlier, Rosenquist had finished five paintings for the forthcoming show. "I like to work hard," he explains, "go away, and come back to see if the paintings are any good. Time is a great editor." Coincidentally, time is also the theme of his new pictures. It is a daunting topic, hard to convey in words, harder still to capture on canvas. (All I can think of is Harold Lloyd hanging precariously off the hands of the big clock in *Safety Last!*) When I ask how he chose his subject, Rosenquist laughs. "Because I'm getting older," he says, "and when you get older you wonder how time passed and where it went and how to use what's left and why time is sometimes fast and sometimes slow."

Rosenquist's move from space to time has an inherent logic, given his long-standing interest in space, a theme that pervaded his childhood. His mother was an aviatrix, his father worked at the local airport, and as a child Rosenquist daydreamed about the plane on which he and his imaginary girlfriend would escape the flat, endless prairies of North Dakota. But when I mention the connection, he replies, "My paintings were not about space." I understand what he means. Despite the fact that fighter jets, Apollo spacecraft, and meteorites have made regular appearances in his work, the ostensible subject of a Rosenquist picture is never its main or only point. Subject matter entices viewers into the space of a painting. It is the scaffolding that permits him to create new visions.

Too small to appear on most maps, Aripeka has a population of 400, a post office, and a bait shop whose owner doubles as the tiny hamlet's unofficial mayor. There are no tourists here, only locals and Northerners who come to fish. Rosenquist does not fish or do much of anything besides work, and once he crosses the Hammock Creek Bridge to his property on the Gulf, he seldom leaves until it's time to visit New York. It is early evening when we arrive, still

POET OF POP
James Rosenquist, one of the most influential painters of his generation, will show original work at Acquavella Galleries this fall. "I like to work hard," he says, "go away, and come back to see if the paintings are any good. Time is a great editor."





NUMBER CRUNCH
Time Blade, 2007, by James Rosenquist.

light enough to see that nothing has changed since my first visit 24 years ago, when I came to interview Rosenquist for a book I was writing. Low and flat, empty except for stands of palm trees, the place has the rough-and-tumble atmosphere of a campground. The house still needs to be repainted, and the ground is covered with the parched leaves of palm trees. There is a general sense of disarray, as if an army battalion had just moved out.

The next morning, I accompany Rosenquist to his studio, which sits in a clearing beyond the house. Built to accommodate his murals, the aluminum-and-steel structure is large enough to hold five of his 17-foot-by-46-foot murals with room to spare. At any given time, Rosenquist uses only a small portion of the studio. A carpentry shop occupies the middle section, and at the far end he stores big paintings along with the gas guzzlers he once drove (among them a red Ferrari, a 1950s aquamarine Chevy with Powerglide, and two defunct Mercedeses). These days he works toward the front in the natural light streaming down from 90 skylights. A radio is tuned to the local NPR station, and two large tables hold cans of Winsor & Newton paint and jars of brushes; other tables are covered with brightly colored paper streamers reminiscent of the gyrating, kaleidoscopic shapes that appear in his paintings.

"No one goes hungry while being exposed to the images in his painting," says Robert Rauschenberg

The five new works hang on a center wall. All of them feature larger-than-life-size images of lightbulbs, clock faces, numbers, and pencils. Rife with metaphors and visual puns, the pictures are surprising and quite unlike Rosenquist's recent abstract explorations of space, in which he creates what the late art historian Robert Rosenblum described as "wild, almost incomprehensible cosmic space." They seem literal, even didactic, and initially I don't know what to make of them until I realize that Rosenquist is doing what he's done so brilliantly before: taking a commonplace concept—time—and, by placing it in an unfamiliar context, creating an entirely new vision.

That was exactly what he did as a young Pop painter. Informed by years painting billboards, Rosenquist selected everyday images from magazines, which he fragmented, greatly enlarged, and combined into mysterious collage compositions. "How does it occur to anyone to put high-heeled shoes, the head of a pin, and an anvil in one painting?" wrote the late, revered curator Walter Hopps about *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil,* an elegiac mural about the life and death of the artist's mother. "It is just sheer poetic imagination."

Rosenquist was a poet of Pop, and his paintings, with their dense images, resisted easy interpretation. Still, his first one-man show in 1962 at the legendary Green Gallery sold out to the most discriminating collectors of the time, and, aside from a bad spell in the 1970s, he has been at the top of his game ever since. In 1965, he painted *F-111,* a controversial antiwar painting that marked the end of his straightforward collage compositions and the beginning of his ongoing investigations of vision and space. Since then, Rosenquist has pushed his art relentlessly forward, taking on complex themes ranging from the military-industrial complex to love in the age of AIDS, and continued to produce ambitiously scaled pictures. The subject of major retrospectives, most recently in 2004 at the Guggenheim in New York and Bilbao, Rosenquist, once the youngest member of the Pop generation, is among the most influential artists working today.

"No one goes hungry while being exposed to the images in his painting," says his good friend Robert Rauschenberg. Artists as varied as Frank Stella and Jeff Koons acknowledge a debt to him. "I really admire his hand," writes painter David Salle. "Jim is technically one of the best painters in the world. All that creamy paint. Would my work have been possible without his work? I don't know. Maybe not."

Joining me in front of the paintings, Rosenquist explains how he'd struggled with the subject. "The idea of time is so peculiar," he says. "Dig, here we are, you and me, in a moment that will never happen again." Fascinated by the concept of time, he didn't know how to portray it. Off and on for the better part of a year he thought about the topic, picking up odd facts about clocks. "They were invented," he told me, "so priests could get to prayers on time." He'd go to bed thinking about time, and the titles of two paintings—*Idea, 2:50 A.M.* and *Idea, 3:50 A.M.*—reflect late-night epiphanies.

In Rosenquist's paintings, time curves, liquefies, fades away and, careening out of control, spills out of the picture toward the viewer with tsunami force. Wild and unruly, in *Time Blade,* it does everything, in fact, but stand still. In one painting, the undulating face of a clock melts, like Salvador Dalí's watch. In another, a clock literally pops its springs, exploding into skeins of colored shapes and lines. In *The Hole in the Center of the Clock,* Rosenquist portrays two faces of time: The clock's bottom half represents the time that orders our lives; its other half depicts the speed of time passing and the devastation it wreaks. And what about the hole in the center? "That's the still center around which time moves," Rosenquist explains. "It's the place where time stops."

As I study the pictures, Rosenquist goes off to another part of the studio. He returns, carrying a handful of brushes: "These are Harmony Fitch brushes," he explains. "They're old sign-painters' brushes, and they're so good they can almost paint the picture themselves." Pausing for a minute, he says, "The object is just to get the paint out of the tube onto the canvas in the right place." Behind us hangs the largest and most complex painting in the series, *Time Blades-Learning Curves.* Commissioned by the New School for Social Research in New York, the unfinished canvas is filled with letters, numbers, pencils, and a lightbulb. With its spatial complexity and tangle of symbols, the painting is a brilliant parable about learning and the time it entails. I ask Rosenquist about the sharp-toothed circular metal saw on which the clock's face appears.

"To be an artist," he answers, "you have to work hard and blindly about something you know nothing about."

"That takes courage?"

"It takes something," he says, laughing.

"And the metal saw?"

"Clocks are brutal," Rosenquist answers.

I do not ask about the pencils. They not only stand in for the hands of time but represent the artist's hands. Rosenquist conceived these pictures. He knows that art is the only antidote, the grand monument that withstands the inevitable passage of time. □

TICK-TOCK
Rosenquist's *The Hole in the Center of the Clock,* from a new series of paintings. "The idea of time is so peculiar," the artist says. "Dig, here we are, in a moment that will never happen again."

Courtesy of Acquavella Galleries