

Rosenquist Writ Large, By Himself

In his 1996 book, "True Colors: The Real Life of the Art World," Anthony Haden-Guest wrote that the painter James Rosenquist possessed, most of the time, a

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new memoir, which is an unexpected treat — it's a ruddy and humble book, lighted from within by the author's plainspoken, blue-collar charm.

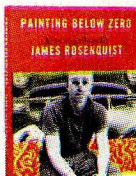
Mr. Rosenquist came of age as a Pop artist in Manhattan during the 1960s, alongside Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. He knew everyone, and seemed to be everywhere. He shared a studio building by the Lower Manhattan waterfront with Ellsworth Kelly

Painting Below Zero

Notes on a Life
in Art

By James Rosenquist
with David Dalton

Illustrated. 370 pages.
Alfred A. Knopf. \$50.



and Agnes Martin; Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg painted nearby. He drank in the Cedar Tavern with Willem de Kooning and LeRoi Jones.

"Painting Below Zero" might easily have been, in other words, the kind of memoir that spills over with acid-sketched action and incident, a compendium of art-world gossip around the 1960s, '70s and '80s. And, for sure, there's a bit of that stuff in here.

Mr. Rosenquist describes strange nights in Hollywood accompanying the actor Dennis Hopper, who "prowled through the unlocked houses of aspiring actors and actresses." Mr. Rosenquist gave a party for Abbie Hoff-

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James Rosenquist's Life and Art, Both Writ Large, and by Himself

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man's future girlfriend during which people danced indoors between lighted road flares. The Warhol star Ultra Violet cavorted topless on Mr. Rosenquist's front lawn in East Hampton one Sunday morning just as church was letting out. He was not all work and no play.

"Painting Below Zero" is hardly a tell-all, however. Instead it's a modest but inviting coming-of-

age story, a calm self-portrait by an unusual kind of Pop artist and an unusual kind of man.

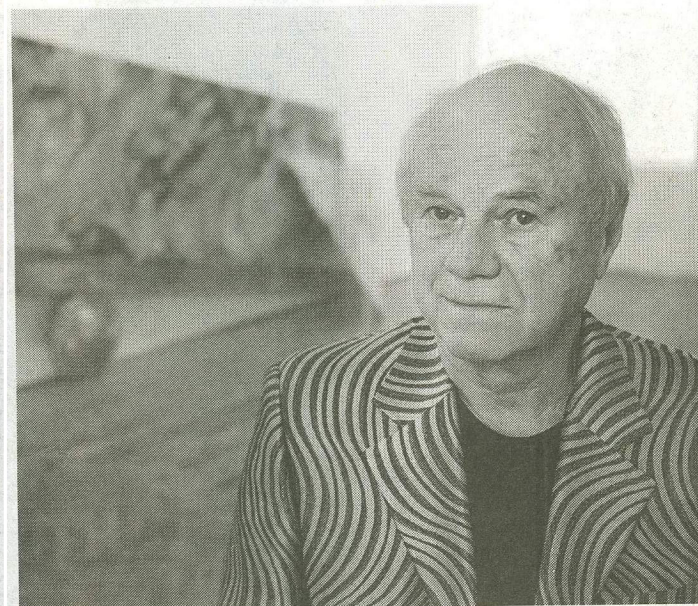
Born in 1933, Mr. Rosenquist grew up mostly in North Dakota, "where the land is totally flat," he writes, "like a screen on which you can project whatever you imagine." His parents were pioneering amateur pilots but poor. His father dragged the family around while working various jobs, including running motels and gas stations. Mr. Rosenquist, an only child, attended seven

schools by the time he was 12.

Mesmerized by Norman Rockwell's Saturday Evening Post covers, Mr. Rosenquist took solace in painting and found he had a knack for it. As a teenager he was hired to paint billboards and Phillips 66 emblems on gas tanks. This difficult outdoor labor was his art school. He became skilled at taking small objects and, on those billboards, blowing them up to superhuman size.

Mr. Rosenquist moved to New York City in 1955, and busily continued his commercial work to survive. "I painted billboards above every candy store in Brooklyn," he writes. "I got so I could paint a Schenley whiskey bottle in my sleep."

At the same time, he was thinking hard about his own career as an artist. He plucked bits of inspiration from wherever he could, including photographs of muralists like Diego Rivera. He liked



SUZANNE PLUNKETT/BLOOMBERG NEWS

James Rosenquist in a gallery in London in 2006.

the look of "practical, craftsmen-like painters walking around in their coveralls, making no fuss about their art, just doing their work."

Mr. Rosenquist began painting seriously during a moment when

the art world was ready to move beyond Jackson Pollack and Abstract Expressionism. He and his peers did not want produce the kind of spontaneous paintings they sometimes denigrated as "schmearings."

Mr. Rosenquist began painting complex and surreal canvases, often drawing upon the kind of commercial imagery that filled his billboards. "My chromatic alphabet came from Franco-American spaghetti and Kentucky bourbon," he writes.

He was soon painting on a vast, exhilarating scale. His breakthrough 1965 work, "F-111," was a painting of a fighter plane juxtaposed with images of things like a Firestone tire and a little girl under a hair dryer, and more spaghetti. It was huge, more than 22 feet wide and 24 feet long, painted on 51 panels that wrapped around the entirety of the Castelli Gallery.

"I'm the one who gave steroids to Pop art," Mr. Rosenquist cheerfully admits. He spends a good deal of time distinguishing his work from that of painters like Warhol and Lichtenstein. "I was never concerned with logos or brand names or movie stars, like Andy, for instance," he writes. "Unlike Roy, I wasn't interested in ironic simulations of pop media; I wanted to make mysterious pictures."

Speaking of his generation of artists, he writes: "What united us was dread of the drip, the splash, the schmear, combined with an ironic attitude toward the banalities of American consumer

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A selection from "Painting Below Zero":

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culture. If anything, you might say we were *antipop* artists."

There's some cognitive dissonance in "Painting Below Zero," a type of mental static that has always run under the surface of Mr. Rosenquist's work. He's claimed many times that he loathes the kind of commercial images that fill his paintings; he's said he is interested in them mostly because of their form and color.

Readers of "Painting Below Zero" will come to believe that Mr. Rosenquist fervently believes that. But they will also, when confronted with the vibrant color images that fill this book's pages, puzzle long and hard over how an artist can draw so much abiding sustenance over such a large period of time while dealing with material he truly has no feel for. It doesn't entirely compute.

The second half of "Painting Below Zero" can't quite sustain the energy of the first. As this narrative moves on, Mr. Rosenquist explains (and sometimes over-explains) the imagery in too many of his paintings, nearly talking the joy and mystery right out of them.

Some of the joy was drawn out of his own life when, in 1971, his son and first wife were badly hurt in a car crash. The couple eventually divorced. In 1987 he married his current wife, with whom he has a daughter, and began spending a good deal of his time in Arippeka, Fla., a tiny Gulf Coast town north of Tampa.

Mr. Rosenquist seems content there but also increasingly isolated. "Many of my old friends are gone now," he observes. "I have a hard time dealing with the fact that they're just not there to talk to. I can't call them up for a rabbit-skin glue recipe anymore."

Tragedy of a different sort struck this past April, when a forest fire burned to the ground Mr. Rosenquist's house, office and studio in Arippeka. It was a disaster he seems to have taken with relative equanimity.

You can hear the North Dakota boy in his voice everywhere in this book, but especially when he writes, "When things become peculiar, frustrating and strange, I think it's a good time to start painting."