

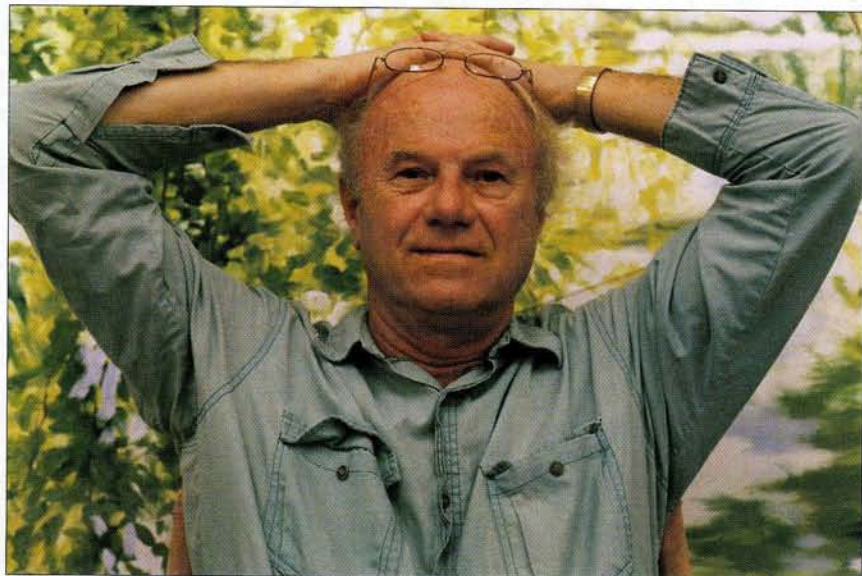
# 22 Stories Above Times Square

In a new memoir, **James Rosenquist** reflects on realism, billboards, why he paints, how he comes up with his titles, and what he thinks about Pop art

**BY MILTON ESTEROW**

**J**AMES ROSENQUIST, WHO GREW UP IN NORTH Dakota in a house without electricity, won a scholarship to study art for four Saturdays at the Minneapolis School of Art when he was 14 years old, in 1947. He knew that he was “involved in serious business” because they gave the students erasers that cost 25 cents and paper that cost 35 cents a sheet.

Few books on painting were available to him. He was much more familiar with illustrations that could be seen in adventure magazines, pulp fiction, and girlie magazines.



One day his teacher asked him, “Have you ever heard of French nonobjective painting?”

“No,” he said. “What’s that?”

“Well, let me put it this way: Have you ever painted abstractly?”

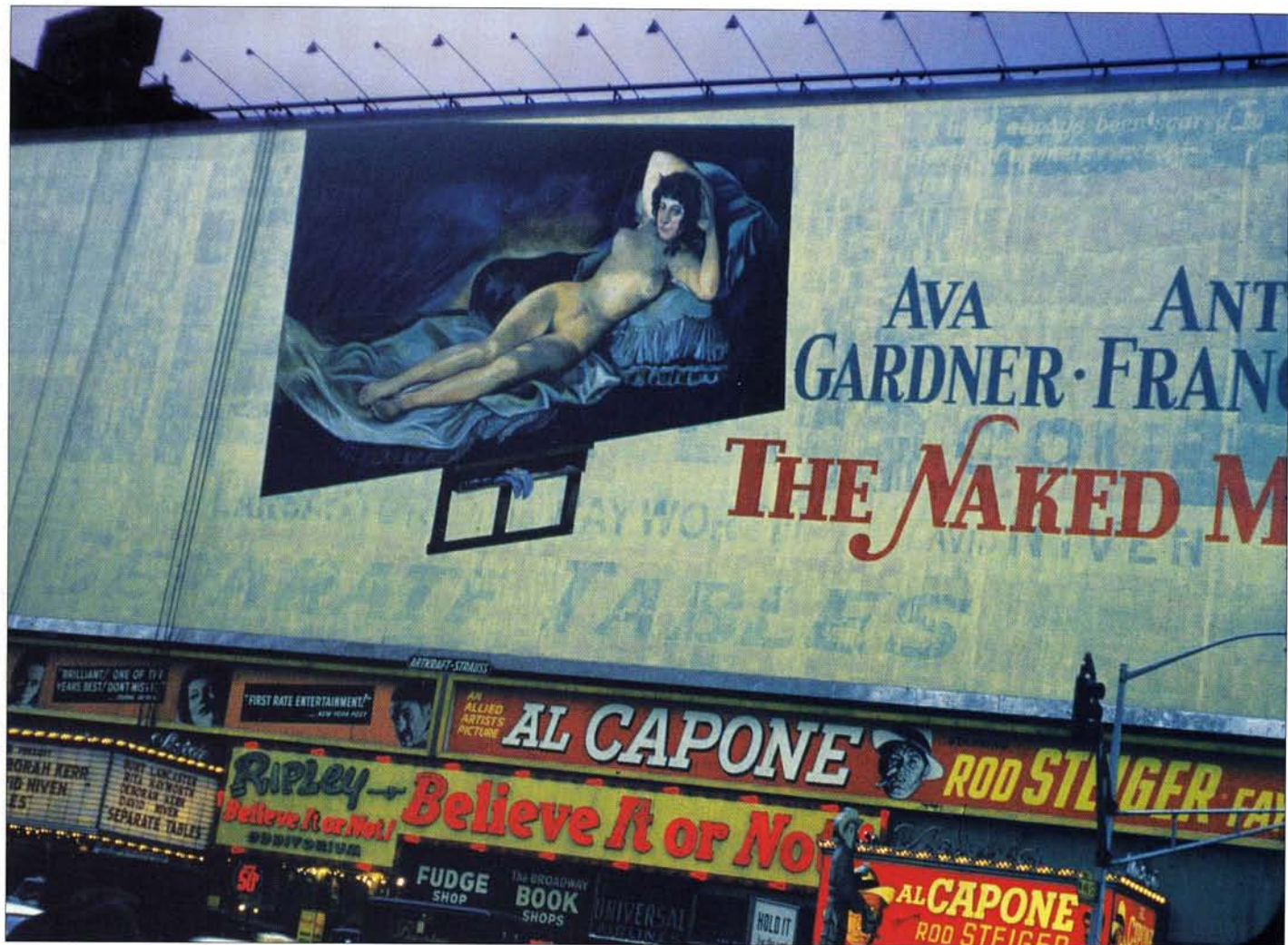
“No,” he said. “I paint things as real as I can.”

Rosenquist, of course, continued to paint things. Years later he became a member of the Sign, Pictorial and Display Union, Local 230, in New York. He painted billboards of Hollywood stars with faces 20 feet high, noses 10 feet tall, and eyes 3 feet wide. He painted Kirk Douglas as a Viking and Elizabeth Taylor in a bathing suit—while working on a scaffold 22 stories above Times Square—as well as signs all over the city for Seagram’s whiskey, Canadian Club, and Hebrew National salami.

“He would make that salami look mouthwatering,” Tama Starr, president of Artkraft Strauss, the company that employed Rosenquist, told me. “They called him Rosie in those days. He was brilliant and really well liked.”

Since those days, Rosenquist has had many shows at important galleries and retrospectives at the Whitney Museum and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and at other museums throughout the world. He even heard that his painting *The Stars and Stripes at the Speed of Light* was on the cover of a telephone book in Dubai.

*Milton Esterow is editor and publisher of ARTnews.*



ABOVE A 1958 sign in Times Square advertising *The Naked Maja*, a Goya biopic starring Ava Gardner and Anthony Franciosa. Rosenquist was told to make Gardner's private parts smaller. BELOW The artist and his mother in Minneapolis in front of a sign he painted in 1954.



His paintings have sold at auction for millions of dollars, but he hasn't forgotten that his father ran a Mobil gas station during the Depression and that "the big treat for me was being able to drink the bottom half of my father's five-cent Coca-Cola."

Rosenquist has written a memoir with David Dalton, *Painting Below Zero:*

*Notes on a Life in Art* (Knopf, 384 pages, \$50.00), with more than 135 illustrations. He has been almost everywhere, knows just about everybody, and reveals his heart and his mind and how and why he paints. It is one of the best books ever written by an artist.

He tells people that he was born in the Happy Dragon Chinese Restaurant in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where his parents were pioneering pilots. He says he has always thought it fitting that the hospital he was born in later became a Chinese restaurant.

There is so much to enjoy in this book. There is Rosenquist's decency, integrity, and wonderful sense of humor. He knows how to tell a good story. He feels very strongly about civil rights and moral issues. He has done many paintings in protest against "stupid wars, stupid laws, ruthless politicians, and greedy entrepreneurs." In 1972 he took part in an antiwar demonstration in Washington, D.C., and was arrested and jailed. He lay down on the ground with the actor Jon Voight, Dr. Spock, and others.

He attended the University of Minnesota, where he learned "oil painting, egg tempera, and Renaissance-style underpainting" from his mentor, Cameron Booth. He studied perspective, color theory, and figure drawing. With Booth he went to see Old Master, Impressionist, and Matisse paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago and was overwhelmed.

After graduating from the university in 1954 with a two-year associate in arts degree, he got a job painting billboards in Minnesota. His first billboard was of a young boy and a young girl. One of them was drinking a big bottle of Coca-Cola.

He painted soups, salads, macaroni and cheese, beer, and Davy Crockett coonskin caps. In 1955 he won a scholarship to the Art Students League of New York, arrived with less than \$300, and stayed at a YMCA for \$1.79 a night.

He designed display windows for Bonwit Teller, Tiffany & Co., and Bloomingdale's, and went to work for an outdoor

advertising company. One of his chores was to paint Schenley whiskey bottles.

"I painted that same dopey bottle some 140 times," he writes. "The label on the bottle said, THIS SPIRIT IS MADE FROM THE FINEST CANADIAN GRAINS. . . . I got so sick of painting this damn thing that I began painting MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB, ITS FLEECE WAS WHITE AS SNOW."

By 1960 he had a studio on

Coenties Slip in downtown Manhattan, where a number of artists lived, including Ellsworth Kelly.

Rosenquist writes, "I wanted to be an artist but I didn't have any idea what I wanted to do as an artist. . . . I knew I wanted to create a new kind of painting. . . . I constantly thought about the

notion of how imagery could be used in an abstract way, but how was I to achieve this? It seemed an almost absurd idea to use objects as abstractions, but that was what I was beginning to think about."

He points out that often "you start out with an idea or a notion and you don't know whether it's going to come off."

One night, years later, he was at Robert Rauschenberg's studio on Captiva Island in Florida. It was 3 A.M. and they had both had a lot to drink.

"I want to show you my new work," Rauschenberg said. It was six bamboo poles leaning against the wall, with strings and tin cans hanging from them.

"Bobby," Rosenquist said, "I've been looking at this piece for an hour and I don't get it."

"Well," Rauschenberg said, "I know you put things on the wall before you know what they are, too."



***I Love You with My Ford, 1961.***  
**"I'm not in love with spaghetti per se," Rosenquist notes in his memoir. "The spaghetti is there simply as a visceral color field!"**

Rosenquist also tells us about some of his major works—*Zone*, *F—111*, *Star Thief*, and many others.

To explain the book's title, he writes, "The idea of going for a zero nonobjective painting of pure color and pure form obsessed me. How does one get deeper? Beyond abstraction, beyond *that*. I began to think of color itself as a form of abstraction. What if I were to push the limits of that idea by randomly choosing objects solely in terms of color and shape regardless of meaning? In this way I would be able to create a form of abstraction through other means. I could see it in my mind's eye, but you can't always count on that."

He admits that he does not understand every work of art he sees: "There are any number of artists who put images together arbitrarily, images that don't seem to make any sense, at least not to me. I really work hard to create some kind of meaning out of the things I use—that way I can at least derive a question from them. They suggest meanings but they resist drawing conclusions. The work has an intrinsic meaning for me, but remains open to multiple interpretations. I want to encourage the possibility of exploring meanings beyond those I put there. Which is why I work so hard to *not* arrive at a title, or why I give my paintings enigmatic titles. I count on the viewer bringing something to the work."

He is not fond of the term Pop art: "I've never cared for the term, but after half a century of being described as a pop artist I'm resigned to it. Still, I don't know what pop art means, to tell you the truth.

... What united us [Warhol, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Wesselmann], you might say, was dread of the drip, the splash, the schmear, combined with an ironic attitude toward the banalities of American consumer culture. If anything, you might say we were *antipop* artists."

To viewers who say his imagery is enigmatic, Rosenquist replies that "there is always a story behind the pictures. Nothing is arbitrary in my paintings. If you ask me, 'What is that? Why are there tubes of lipstick there?' or 'Why is that dog climbing the stairs?' I can tell you exactly what got me off the chair to paint it.

"People ask me why I paint. I don't honestly know why, except that when I don't paint I get cranky. Maybe I paint to prove to myself that I had an idea."

He discusses some artists and critics:

Jasper Johns: "As an artist Jasper is intuitive, but as a person

he's very analytical. Even in a bar where everybody, including Jasper, was getting drunk, he was still capable of intellectualizing the physics of arm wrestling."

Clement Greenberg: "Larry's [Larry Poons] paintings were originally based on musical composition. And then the critic Clement Greenberg came along and messed him up. Larry would make a big painting, tack it on the wall, and Greenberg would come in and say, 'Now take four inches off the right and two inches off the left.' Greenberg composed the paintings for the artists; what a bunch of baloney that was."

Barnett Newman: "He was someone I liked to talk to about painting. Barney used to question what it is. I talked to Barney all the time, but I didn't necessarily understand everything he said. He was always trying to explain one-ment to me; the mysterious concept of Singular.

"I was out in Great Neck for a party with him and there, out in the bay, was a stick poking up out of the water. Barney turned to me and somewhat enigmatically said, 'That's *it*, that's what it is.' I began to think that 'it' was it because of peripheral vision. Everything that is fed into the side of one's eyes is what lays claim to reality."

Marcel Duchamp: "I brought him a sunflower flyswatter—when you hit a fly, the flower would open up—and a Mona Lisa New York button by Ray Donarski [the painting was being exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art]. Contrary to the aloof, mysterious character he's usually depicted as, I found

him down-to-earth and funny."

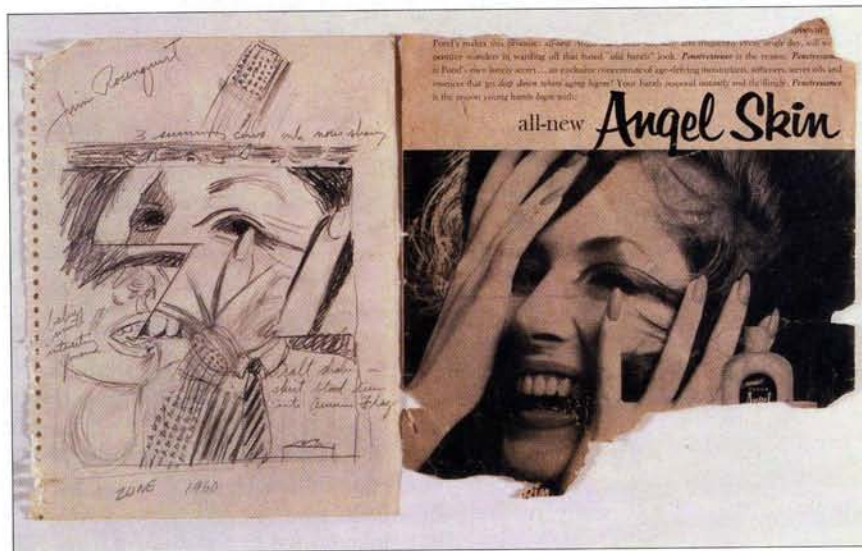
Rosenquist has had his ups and downs. There were periods when he couldn't sell anything. He was in a terrible automobile accident many years ago. Last year a forest fire destroyed his house, office, and studio, as well as 62 acres of lush vegetation in Aripeka, Florida. He lives in Florida and

New York with his wife and daughter.

His definition of art is superb: "All art is about feeling. Critics may talk about cool abstractionists and hot expressionists, but hot or cold, abstract or representational, it's all about elic-

iting emotion, otherwise we wouldn't do it."

*Painting Below Zero* would make a great movie. To promote the production, it would be fitting if members of the Sign, Pictorial and Display Union climbed high up on a scaffold to a billboard above Times Square and painted James Rosenquist with his face 20 feet high, his nose 10 feet tall, and his eyes 3 feet wide.



**A drawing inspired by a magazine cutout from 1960 became a study for the painting *Zone*, 1960–61.**