

James Rosenquist on the Re-staging of his F-111 at MoMA, the Zen of Duchamp, and Teaching Dalí to Drink a Screwdriver

by Mark Guiducci, JANUARY 30 2012



BY JONATHAN MUZIKAR.

The fourth floor of the Museum of Modern Art has a new resident. James Rosenquist's F-111, a monumental 23-panel piece, is being exhibited for the first time since 2006 in the original 1965 configuration that the artist created for his debut show at Leo Castelli's 77th Street gallery. At 10 feet tall and 86 feet long, F-111 covered all four walls of Castelli's gallery—painting in the round, if you will—so that the painting engulfed the viewers, encircling them, and left only a small break for a doorway. Working with the artist, MoMA curators have replicated the configuration of F-111 so that each of its unlikely collaged subjects—spaghetti, a swimmer, a mushroom cloud under a beach umbrella, light bulbs, a piece of cake, a Firestone tire, and a little girl under a hairdryer, all set against the body of an F-111 fighter jet—will overwhelm viewers exactly as they did in 1965.

To coincide with the re-exhibition of Rosenquist's work, often considered a cornerstone of the Pop-art movement, Vanity Fair visited the artist at his Tribeca home to discuss F-111. Arriving at the Rosenquist town house (white façade, turquoise trim), one immediately notices a sign over the six buzzers at the front door: RING ANY BELL. "Isn't that fun?" the artist will later say. "I own the whole building!"

Mark Guiducci: Seeing F-111 on MoMA's fourth floor is like walking into a piece of installation art. At least that's probably what we would call it today. Is that what you were thinking about in 1965, installation art?

James Rosenquist: Well, look. It's all very simple. It's just that the room in Castelli's gallery was something like 22 by 23 feet. Boom! That was it. So I thought, Hey baby, I'm gonna do a big blast in there for my first show with Leo. Leo had always said [in a heavy Italian accent], "Jeem! Jeem! If you ever think about leaving Dick [Bellamy, Rosenquist's former dealer], think of me first..." I saw him on a plane once and it was the right time. So we did this, my first big show there.

I was talking to [MoMA chief curator] Ann Temkin about how much galleries have grown, literally, since 1965. As big as F-111 is, with its 23 panels, it still feels quite intimate when you're surrounded by it. But F-111 filled the whole space of Leo Castelli's gallery in '65. And this was Leo Castelli! [Rosenquist is now represented by the Acquavella Galleries.] The most important gallery at the time was the size of the room we're sitting in.

Ya. And now museums are building bigger, bigger, bigger places to show things, but the danger [for an artist] is to do a big nothing with it... So I really worked and worked and worked and put a lot of thought into each picture. And I tell ya, I have seen younger artists do big paintings with nothing in it. You know, ideas can be fantastic; however, you have to do something pictorially that is as fantastic as your ideas.

What else do you remember about that period of your life? What else was influencing you?

Let's see. My friend the photojournalist Paul Berg had just come back from a combat mission in the police action in Vietnam. It was not really escalated to a war by then. And I went to this amusement park in Dallas, Six Flags Over Texas, and I saw a corroding B-36 bomber. Never used, I think. And I learned that the original idea of Chinese income taxes was not a demand but a contribution, so if you felt like it you contributed to a community, to a town or whatever, to build a life...I didn't like the idea of paying taxes for obsolete war weapons [like the E36 bomber]. All these things entered my mind when I started to think about [F-111]. And actually, it seems to me the right time to show it again, in light of the world right now. Even though it's 47 years old.



James Rosenquist, F-111 (detail), 1964–5. Oil on canvas with aluminum, 23 sections, 10 ft. x 86 ft, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman and Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (both by exchange). © 2012 James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photographs: left, © Christopher Felver/Corbis; right, by Jonathan Muzikar.

A lot of artists affected me...I have a Marcel Duchamp here by my front door. We traded works. He was an amazing guy. You know, he didn't try to kill you with his intellect or make you afraid. He was just a hell of a nice guy. I used to think that a lot of his thinking must have come from Eastern philosophy, and I once asked him about it. He said, "No. I read *Zen and the Art of Archery* once, but that's about it."

Dalí, too. I was doing winter window displays for Teller's [department store] at one point, and I went outside to see how they were looking. And there was Salvador Dalí going like this [rolls imaginary mustache]! I didn't meet him or anything. But then out of the blue he called me. I think my name must have been in the window. So he invited me to the St. Regis; he had a corner there. And that was his corner, man. It was his whole bar! At one point I was tired and I went like this [places elbow on the table to support his chin], and I put my elbow in the goddamn nut dish and all the peanuts flew up in the air. And he goes "WHOA! What do you want to drink?" And I said, "Ah, man, give me a screwdriver," and he goes, "Genius! A screwdriver!" He had never heard of that drink before. He thought I was being surrealistic or something! Everything had an exclamation point, for him.

You once said that you only ever needed four tools to work—a ruler, some paint, brushes, and blue chalk string...

That was for billboard painting!

I know, but would you say that it's still true for your work now?

Yeah, yeah. I don't need many materials. You need an idea, but the tools of oil painting are really simple. The great paintings in museums around the world are merely minerals mixed in oil, schmearred on cloth with the hair from the back of a pig's ear (that's where the Chinese bristle brush comes from). The famous drawings in the Albertina are merely burnt wood on parchment. You can't get any simpler than burnt wood. For ideas, you don't need computers or any of that business.

I don't want to rely on electricity to see my work in any form. No cinema, no video, no nothing. Like an Egyptian tomb. All you need to see my work is to bring your own intuition and sunlight. So you can slide the cover off the tomb that my painting is in and bam! You'll see it. Imagine how they first put light in those Egyptian tombs when they were discovered and the damn gold was still bright and shiny after thousands of years! So I think, well, if I use high-quality paint, you might discover my stuff in a cave someday and it will still look good with a little sunlight. I don't need a power source.



James Rosenquist, *F-111 (detail)*, 1964–5. Oil on canvas with aluminum, 23 sections, 10 ft. x 86 ft, the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman and Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (both by exchange). © 2012 James Rosenquist/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y. Photographs: left, © Christopher Felver/Corbis; right, by Jonathan Muzikar.