MASTERPIECE: "F-117" (1965) BY JAMES ROSENQUIST

DESTRUCTION ALL AROUND

BY RICHARD B. WOODWARD

James Rosenquist’s "F-117" is so familiar now that one has to look closely to recall that at least a century ago, the painting was quickly identified as a Pop Art icon in textbooks. Students have been poring over its candy-colored imagery of incongruous images on an “any history” quiz for decades.

What’s missing about its current installment at New York’s Museum of Modern Art is that, until now, museums may have been more interested in the piece. That’s reason enough to visit the fourth floor, where until July 30 the 86-foot-long behemoth can be seen as Mr. Rosenquist introduced the painting in 1965 at the Castelli Gallery in New York: a flat-surfaced, streamlined mural that fills the entire space for a space (23 feet by 23 feet) little bigger than a squash court.

This 1965 installation alters the experience and perhaps even the meaning of the work. On previous occasions when I’ve seen it, the viewer is faced with a three-dimensional piece of art that sits on a wall but is not part of the wall itself. The viewer’s eye is drawn to the detail and to the overall composition of the mural, which is part of a larger narrative of the history of American military aviation.

The silhouettes of an F-117, the most technologically advanced aircraft of its time, sit side by side on the walls, facing the audience. The viewer is invited to step back and observe the piece from a distance.

The confinement is menacing, the violence not so easily laughed off.

Mr. Rosenquist has said he made it in a reaction to U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, a claim that has never been substantiated. The work is a result of the artist’s interest in the history of American military aviation. The piece is part of a larger narrative of the history of American military aviation.

As in advertising, the images within the painting are meant to make us think about the nature of war and its impact on society. The viewer is invited to step back and observe the piece from a distance.

The MUSEUM OF MODERN ART’S installation features this 86-foot-long, four-sided behemoth to the original arrangement intended by the artist.

Mr. Rosenquist’s portrayals of war are not subtle, but nor are they simple. The job is to make us think about the nature of war and its impact on society. The viewer is invited to step back and observe the piece from a distance.

In the current MoMA installation, however, the violence isn’t so easily laughed off. Instead of being surrounded by four walls, the piece now offers a comfortingly safe little area for the visitor to stop and look. The confinement is menacing, the violence not so easily laughed off.

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