

North Dakota Museum of Art

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Museum to Celebrate James Rosenquist's 80th Birthday

James Rosenquist has always maintained a connection to North Dakota. He was born in 1933 at the Deaconess Hospital in Grand Forks to Ruth Hendrickson Rosenquist and Louis Rosenquist. The two met at the Grand Forks International Airport and shared a passion for flying. In his autobiography, *Painting Below Zero*, Rosenquist states, "Perhaps because the land is so flat—there were no mountains to climb—in North Dakota people wanted to go up in the air. My mom and dad wanted to fly, and they both became pioneering pilots." Despite not having a pilot's license, Rosenquist's mother took to the skies, while James' earliest memories involving planes were of his father letting him play in the cockpit of biplanes at the airport.

On August 22, 7 pm, the Museum will open *James Rosenquist: An Exhibition Celebrating His 80th Birthday*. The exhibition consists of one painting – *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil*, an homage to his mother who was an early North Dakota aviation pioneer. The painting measures 17 x 46 feet and once installed, will cover the entire wall of the Museum's east gallery. *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil* is the perfect vehicle to explore the artist's North Dakota roots in aviation and celebrate his 80th birthday.

Musing about the painting, Rosenquist said, "After my mother died in 1987, I painted *Through the Eye of the Needle* as a kind of commemoration of her unfulfilled life. She was an adventurer at heart. I always thought of my mother as someone who was avant-garde and very smart. But toward the end of her life she became discouraged. When she was young she'd been a pilot in North Dakota. Her hero was Amelia Earhart. I remember asking her if she had ever gotten her pilot's license. She said, "No, that was before women's liberation, but I flew all over the place anyway."

Rosenquist's birthday celebration will take place Sunday, October 20 at 4 pm. Mr. Rosenquist and his wife Mimi Thompson will be joined by Judith Goldman, curator of the exhibition, and author of many books and catalogs on the artist.

North Dakota and aviation are greatly entrenched in Rosenquist's work, particularly in his scale and size. Big skies, never-ending horizons, and the grand heights his mother and father soared to were all part of his childhood on the farm in Mekinock, ND, near the Airbase. While his parents searched for work throughout the Midwest, Jim would spend long summers with his paternal grandparents in North Dakota absorbing the vast open prairies. Eventually the Rosenquists settled in the Minneapolis area and, at age fourteen, James accepted a scholarship to attend Minneapolis School of Art at the Minneapolis Art Institute.

During his summer months in college, James painted gasoline signs and tanks for Phillips 66, and grain elevators throughout the Midwest. Eventually, he attended the Art Students League in New York and left Minnesota. Determined to become a mural painter, he looked to the League to learn "upscaling", but became disheartened when no one was painting his desired scale, that is, big. To learn, James went back to billboards knowing the old traditions were alive and well.

According to the artist, billboard painters, "...cover huge areas with imagery by scaling images from sketches. They create something large using the grid method. Sometimes the grids would measure a quarter inch, or an inch to three feet, so a pencil line in a sketch would be almost a foot wide up on these big buildings. How does one deal with that? That was my question. I was not fascinated with the subject; I was fascinated with the technique." High above the New York streets, Rosenquist became known as the "Billboard Michelangelo".

Rosenquist emerged as an artist with the likes of Andy Warhol, Jim Dine, and Roy Lichtenstein. Many considered him a founder of the Pop Art Movement, although Rosenquist himself would say otherwise. Nonetheless, his ability to "upscale" and the manner in which he used commercial advertising, placed him in the Movement by critics and collectors alike.

Rosenquist's Midwestern work ethic remained crucial to his success. After extended periods of time painting billboards in New York's Times Square and Minneapolis, or on gas tanks and grain bins throughout the lands he temporarily called home, he found success as a painter.

His first one-man exhibition at Green Gallery in New York City immediately sold out. His exhibition was followed by Roy Lichtenstein's comic-strip paintings, then Andy Warhol's first one-man show of his *Marilyn Diptych*, *100 Soup Cans*, *100 Coke Bottles*, and *100 Dollar Bills*. In the biography *Painting Below Zero*, Rosenquist states, "I'm resigned to being lumped together with Andy, Roy, Claes [Oldenburg], and Tom [Wesselmann] because I used similar imagery, but there's a considerable difference in the way we each use that imagery. I was never concerned with logos or brand names or movie stars, like Andy, for instance. Unlike Roy, I wasn't interested in ironic simulations of pop media; I wanted to make mysterious pictures. I've never included commercial imagery in painting for its own sake, for its 'popness' alone. In my paintings there's always a reason for an image being there."

Rosenquist continued, "Pop artists were a disparate group to begin with: ex-abstract expressionist (Lichtenstein), ex-cartoonist (Oldenburg), ex-commercial artist (Warhol), ex-chicken farmer (George Segal), and ex-billboard painter (me) all working independently toward our own vision."

And so, Rosenquist's career took off. Growing up in the 1950s, where everything was bigger, faster, electric, and new, there wasn't much that didn't remind him he was living in a "material utopia." James began to paint fragments of these commercial objects creating a seemingly unresolved work leaving the interpretation up to the viewer. His work became a series of questions rather than answers.

The North Dakota Museum of Art is located on Centennial Drive on the campus of the University of North Dakota. Hours are 9 – 5 pm on weekdays; 1 – 5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. The exhibition which opens on August 22 and birthday celebration on October 20 are free and open to the public. Recommended donations are \$5 for adults and change from children.