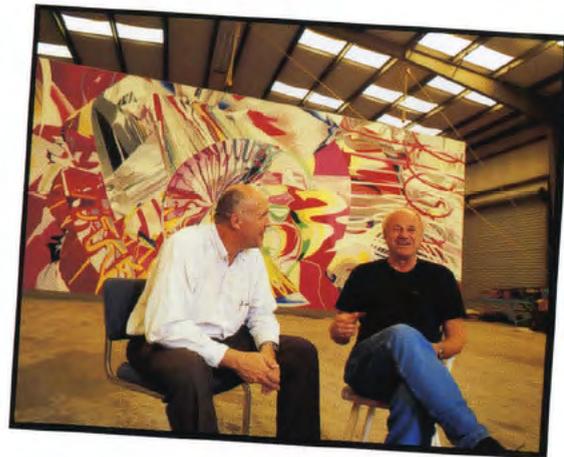
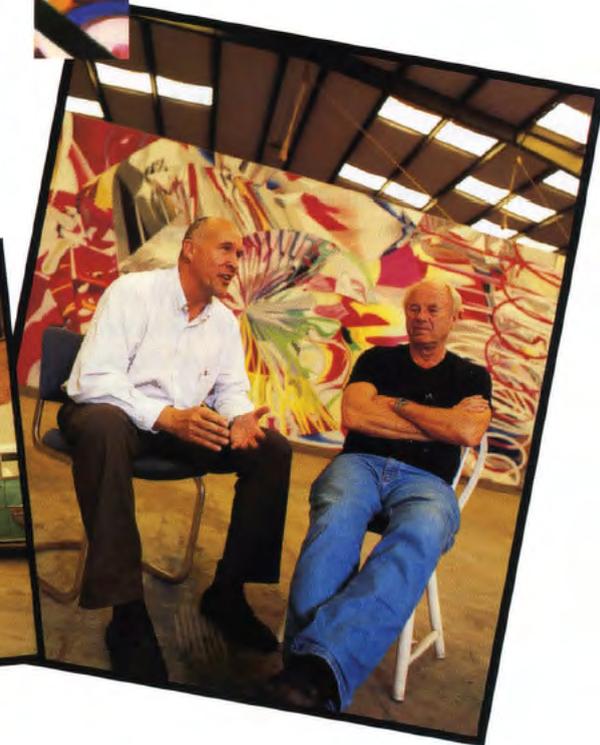
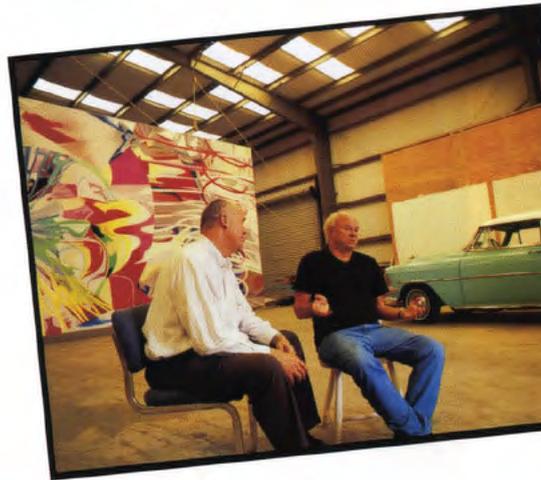


Aripeka



BY DENISE GEE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE TRAINA



At the water's edge, as well as conformity's, is James Rosenquist, who colors his world with provocative strokes of genius. On a fine Florida afternoon, the acclaimed artist visits with friend Hank Hine to catch up on what they have in common: the uncommon.



Driving an hour north of Tampa Bay, coursing the sterile Suncoast Parkway, and then heading west on carved-up County Line Road/Highway 578, you find yourself easing into the thickly foliated God 'n' Country land of folks who truly don't give a damn about artsy, New York-types fancying a look at "Old Florida." Passing a trailer flying a rebel flag, the VFW hall announcing its spaghetti supper, Capone's Billiard Lounge, the County Line Industrial Park, the Gold-n-Pawned shop and the Calvary Church of the Nazarene, it becomes clear that if you plan to settle awhile, you'd better have your head screwed on straight.

"Pioneer of Pop Art"? That's a crock. But hard-worn, paint-stained hands? That's doin' somethin'. James Rosenquist is doin' somethin'.

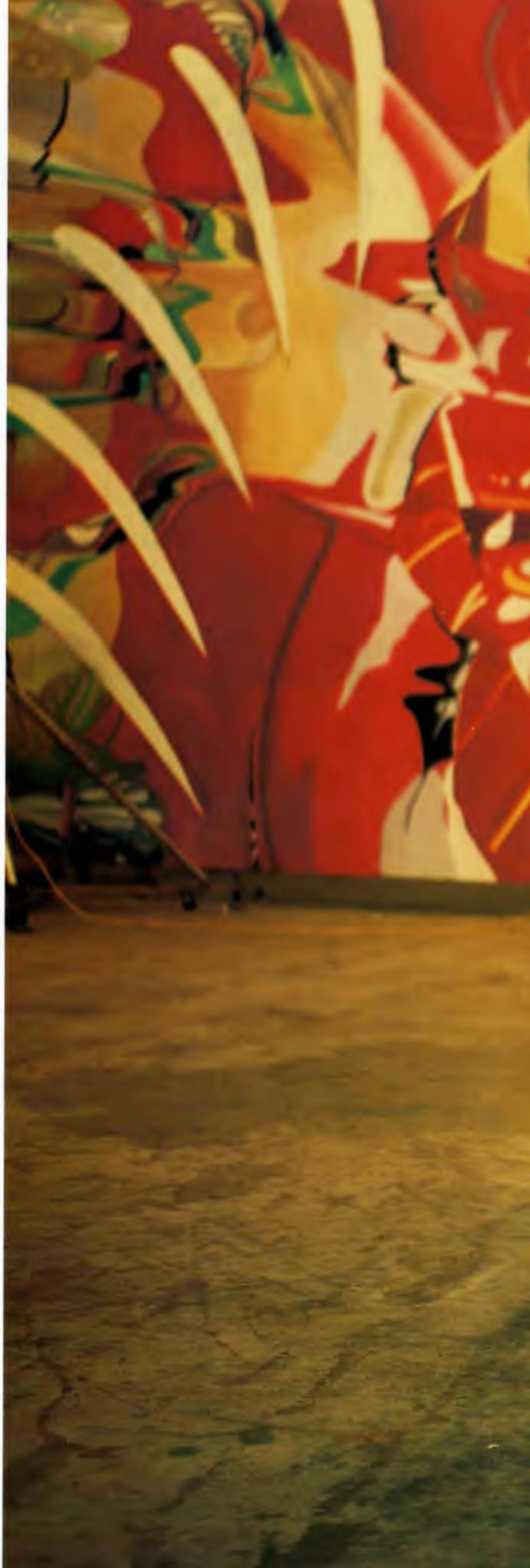
As one of the foremost artists of our time — his paintings sell from \$100,000 to \$500,000 (and grander-scale works have fetched multimillions) — Rosenquist lives, modestly, to paint his next symphony of soul, not to cash in on some factory-style work. And what's even more real about him is that he's just as much at home in one of the region's rough-and-tumble pubs as he is in the highbrow art crowds in Tampa or St. Petersburg, San Francisco or Hong Kong. Perhaps even more so.

"In these parts we have Aripeka Dave, Aripeka Donnie . . . I'm Aripeka Jim," the art-world legend says, referring to Hernando County neighbors who know as little about him as he does them. They all like it that way.

"I'm at peace here," he says of his waterfront sanctuary — a weathered grouping of buildings amounting to his camp-like home, some rustic cottages where guests, nobility even, often stay, and a metal warehouse/studio that gets "damn hot in summer." The compound looks more like an auto-repair enclave, but so what? His calling there is to enjoy walks along the rocky, grassy shore to hear "the quiet"; to immerse himself in conversations with colleagues, and as the sun sets, share some good wine; to be alone, focused only on a giant canvas coming to life.

"When I saw this place [in 1975], I knew I had to be here," says Rosenquist, whose fair skin and blond hair, brightened by the sun, keep him looking youthful, and whose slight limp (from a decades-old car accident) comes off like a swagger. "I remember first walking around here; a neighbor came over and said [*using his best Florida-cracker voice*] "Welcome to Paradise!" And it's there, in Paradise, that he divides his time, spending about half the year either in his SoHo studio or East Hamptons home before booking it back to where the 70-year-old says, "I'm more and more wanting to live full-time."

Art aficionados consider that a thrill. "Jim has a role in the community that I'm not sure he's quite aware of," says Charles Henri "Hank" Hine, director of the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg and a friend of the legendary artist. Hine is an artistic maestro in his own right. His visionary work in fine-art publishing, poetry, and teaching, Rosenquist says, "I deeply respect." The feeling, Hine says, is mutual.





JAMES ROSENQUIST

"I'm interested in contemporary vision — the flicker of chrome, reflections, rapid association, quick flashes of light. Bing-bang! Bing-bang! I don't do anecdotes; I accumulate experiences."

— from *Time* magazine, 1965

- ◆ **Born:** Grand Forks, N.D., 1933
- ◆ **Focus:** Blending subconscious images with pop-culture symbols to create grand-scale works that seduce viewers into a vibrant, tangled nest of reality.
- ◆ **Credits:** Began studying at the Minneapolis Art Institute in 1948 and University of Minnesota in 1952; received a scholarship to the Art Students' League in New York in 1955; after leaving commercial art, went on to international Pop Art fame with contemporaries Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. Inducted into the Florida Artists Hall of Fame in 2001.
- ◆ **Personal:** Married to writer Mimi Thompson; has two children (daughter Lily and son John).
- ◆ **Future:** Guggenheim Retrospective show opening in May at The Menil Collection in Houston (menil.org) and September at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (guggenheim.org).



Above, Rosenquist's *The Persistence of Electrical Nymphs In Space*, 1985 (204" x 552"); below, *Passenger — Speed of Light*, 1999 (57" x 66").

HANK HINE

"I'm not part of the avant-garde. I'm part of the garde that comes afterward, assimilates, consolidates, refines."

— from a Smithsonian Institution essay

- ◆ **Born:** Berkeley, Calif., 1950
- ◆ **Focus:** Dedicated to the traditions of modernism with a special interest in intellectual history, the printed book, text/image relationships and the opportunities of new media.
- ◆ **Credits:** Studied art, literature and creative writing at Stanford University, 1968-71; the evolution of literary forms, art/studio art, 20th century poetry and poetry writing at Brown University, 1971-74 (where he received his arts doctorate). Noted for founding the prestigious fine-art Limestone Press in San Francisco in 1975; came to Tampa two decades later to oversee the University of South Florida's Graphicstudio program. Joined the Salvador Dalí museum as executive director in 2001.
- ◆ **Personal:** Married to opera-tour company manager Dede Van Hagt; has two children (son Henri and daughter Grace).
- ◆ **Future:** Working on the museum's expansion as well as its creation of a Center for the Avant-Garde.





You see, Jim thinks nothing of driving to Tampa at 8 o'clock at night and going to a reception for a young artist while all the rest of the world is sort of 'snowed in,'" Hine explains. "All types of people count on Jim to come and be there and bring his spirit and urbanity and news from all over the world — like last week, from the King of Sweden. His generosity is about being a part of things."

"Well, I can't go to every party," Rosenquist says upon hearing the compliment, "but I try and go at least seven nights a week."

On this late afternoon, Hine offers Rosenquist one of two Cohiba cigars to ignite conversation. And with that, the duo wanders into Rosenquist's cavernous studio.

HH: Back when you first moved here, Jim, this was a long way from everywhere.

JR: It was. And people around asked me why I'd want to live in this "god-forsaken place." But you know, I like such places. Good people are here. One of the main things to do is to stand 'round a pickup and drink beer. I once invited someone over for a drink and he never came in my house. We just stood by his truck. "Why don't we just stay out here?" he said. "It's nice out here." Yeah, it is.

HH: It seems the isolation helps you get your work done.

JR: Well, I'm in New York a lot. I go there for, you know, *static*. When I'm here, I call New York and say, "How's the building?" and they say, "Well, the street blew up, they found a dead body on your doorstep and the 1st Precinct wants to know if you knew the guy," and they go on and on. OK, so I'm up *there* and I call down *here*, and I say, "Has my house burned down?" and they say, "Nope. We've only had a little kitty-cat come stay with us." It's just that simple. There's no ruckus here.

HH: This north and south axis — New York and Tampa — has been really important to you. You and [artist Robert] Rauschenberg [a part-time resident of Captiva Island] have managed to keep it going. Most artists go west — to California or Albuquerque — for a cultural change, as opposed to a climate change. But this setup seems to work for you. The Yankees, too, I guess.

JR: It's very simple, Hank. I was going to buy 10 acres in Marin County [Calif.] in the '70s; I loved the area. But while there I tried to call Europe, and there was a nine-hour difference. Then I'd call New York, and there was three hours' difference. It seemed nobody wanted to talk to *me* when I wanted to talk to *them*. It was too hard. Seriously. That's my main reason for being here. It's the same ol' groove, same ol' time zone. With just-as-nice weather.

HH: What are we seeing here, Jim?

JR: [*Sighs, reviewing the brilliantly hued 133-foot-wide canvas he worked on during the month of July.*] It's for the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Human Rights bill. I hope it will be in my upcoming Guggenheim retrospective.

HH: How long did it take you to finish it?

JR: [*Smiles.*] Sixty-nine years and 19 days.

HH: What's going on with your Guggenheim shows?

JR: You keep hearing about the end of the "Guggenheim Era," but the show's going to happen, I understand, even though they're having huge money problems. They just need to get their board problems in order. I know what can happen when you think there's a never-ending supply of money.

HH: The way you've constructed this canvas, it's made of individual panels clamped together. Did you conceive of this painting in its individual units or in its entirety?

JR: As you know, an idea starts off small — like a thread pulled off your sweater, one that takes on a new life elsewhere. And all of us are searching for the thread. That's the hard part.

HH: What does this thread reveal?

JR: This piece is kind of about my mother, who had a lot of ambitions, but she never brought them to, well . . . [*pauses.*] She was an aviator in 1931 [*makes the buzz sound of a prop plane*]. She even met Charles Lindbergh. She said he had a leather flying jacket and always had snot on his sleeve. He used to wipe his nose on it because he was *macho*. [*Hine laughs.*] He was a mess — he was *macho!*

For now, I'm calling it *Through the Eye of the*

continued on page 108



makes me think of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who died of an overdose at 28. I saw him just before he died. The critics said he stunk, he was no good, so he wanted to talk to me. But he died before then. I was very sad about that. Then I went to his retrospective at the Whitney, and I thought, if he'd seen all his work, he'd say, "I'm not so bad!" [*Voice booming.*] I think I'll *stick around* till I'm 50! This isn't *bad!*" Because, you see [*voice softening*], an artist doesn't *see* his own work. It's in your mind — you just do it. I just saw a painting of mine in Miami recently — what a *zinger!* I didn't know at the time it was that good or I would have asked more money for it.

HH: What was your relationship with Warhol?

JR: I knew him pretty well; he was a very funny guy. He had been a commercial artist, as I had been, and he also used to be at a lot of the same parties I went to. It was him, Rauschenberg, Mirasol . . . party after party after party. I remember one night we went to see *Goldfinger* and *Winnie the Pooh* at the same time. He used to like to direct, even before he really did. He'd say [*mimicks Andy's soft, quavering voice*], "Look at *her*. I'm going to go over there and stand by *her*. Now you go over there and stand by *him*." Once, I remember, he was right behind Joan Crawford; you could tell he was making her uneasy. [*Sighs.*] It's funny. When you were on your own with Andy, he'd be very talkative. But when he'd be with his group ["The Factory"], he wouldn't say a damn thing.

HH: So Pop Art, then, starts out as a subversive impulse?

JR: [*Nods.*] The way I see it is this: Before I got into what's called Pop Art, my style was more New Realist or Russian Realist — very different. But like most artists, I had to make a living. So I went to work painting billboards of chocolate cake, beer, shirts — you know, necessary evils. And in 1957, I think it was, I painted 147 whiskey bottles above every candy store in Brooklyn. On the label it said, in script, "This whiskey is made from the finest spirits." And I had to letter these things. After about 50 of them, I was so goddamned tired I started *painting* instead: "Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow," over and over. From the street you couldn't tell what it said; only I

could, which, for me, was the beginning of Pop Art.

Another story I have is when George Weissman at Philip Morris wanted me to paint the cover of the company's 35th annual report. I said, "George, you know I don't like cigarettes!" and he said, "Well, you know, we make Log Cabin syrup, too." And I thought, hey, I like *log cabins*. So I worked on it for them. I found a picture of flowering tobacco that inspired me. I ended up painting female faces flowing through tobacco flowers like smoke. And I called it, *Fleur de Tobac*. I *still* didn't sell it to 'em, though. [*Laughs.*] I sold it to a smoking clinic in Braunschweig, Germany. And I *still* don't like cigarettes. They're disgusting. A good cigar, though, that's different.



Mama.....Mia's

Join us for favorites like Seafood Paella, Rotisserie Lemon-Rosemary Chicken and Meatloaf that's nothing like your mama's. Open daily for lunch and dinner.

Live jazz on most Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Exceptional.



Food, laughter and life.

Old Hyde Park Village, 1633 Snow Avenue, Tampa. Reservations: 813.258.9400



“I didn’t know at the time that [the painting] was that good or I would have asked more money for it.” — James Rosenquist

[The duo moves into an office adjacent to his studio, cooling off with cold Beck’s beers. Relaxing into a leather sofa, Rosenquist stares forth and takes a deep breath.]

HH: Jim, at your Dalí show two years ago, you exhibited some paintings I’d never seen before. We were lucky to have them.

JR: I just showed what was available.

HH: Yes, but they were from the ’60s. You went through your work, selecting things that *meant something to you*. *[Rosenquist shakes his head, humbly.]* You also chose some things that meant something to you in relation to Dalí.

JR: Dalí! Yes. Well, he once invited me over for cocktails at the St. Regis — he had his corner in the bar. I was tired, it was the end of the day and I’d been working, and he stood up and said, “You like these people?!” *[loudly, in Dalí’s dramatic voice]* “If you don’t like them, I’ll make them leave!” *Ohhh-kayy*. Here I was in the middle of all these handsome people from St. Tropez; they looked pretty nice to me. So I said, “No, they don’t have to leave, they can stay.” And with that, we all sat down. I was so

distracted that I put my elbow down in the nuts, and all the nuts flew up in the air, and he [Dalí] gets up and says, “Voilà!!” — like something’s happening — and then he quickly says, “What do you want to drink?” And I say, “Oh, man, give me a screwdriver.” And he says, all lit up, “Brilliant! A screwdriver!!” He’d never heard of a screwdriver — he thought that was so clever. So then he pulls out a book on French fantastic painting before surrealism — like paintings of nuns running up stairs with bats, things like that . . .

HH: Creating human faces, things like that?

JR: Yeah, maybe, more like guys lying dead in a boat on the River Styx. And Dalí says about that painting *[loudly]*, “This is your color! Green! This is the Rosenquist Green!” And then he says, “We don’t know if these men are playing with themselves or if they are dead!” You know, with him, everything was an exclamation. *[Pauses to take a phone call, at which point two of his assistants stroll in, back from delivering a painting to south Florida.]*

JR: So, Hank, how long have we known each other?



Far left: *Coup d'Oeil* — *Speed of Light*, 2001 (74" x 64")
Center: *Wayfarer* — *Speed of Light*, 1999 (55" x 67")
Above: *Full House* — *Speed of Light*, 2001 (90" x 144")
All paintings shown are oil on canvas.

HH: Since I came to Florida in 1994.

JR: I remember calling you to say, "Hank, I've got an idea." And you'd say, "Well, why don't you come to the studio [the University of South Florida's Graphicstudio] and let's try it out." And I was always careful, because it was an institution, about not using too much of your time and materials.

HH: Well, on the contrary. All you did was *give*.

JR: Well, I gave 25 grand once.

HH: Which has now grown; they use it for scholarships. But mostly *you give*. This is the recollection I have: One time you were working in the Graphicstudio and I said, "Let's go over to the graduate student open-studio review." We walked through and, I tell you, I've done these all my life, and most people say to the students, "Well, there might be a subtext here," or something like that, talking in this large way, and Jim would say, dead-on, "You've got too many colors. You only need four or five . . ."

JR: *Eight* — there are only eight in the whole universe . . .

HH: ". . . and you need these brushes. Maybe

one this size, this size and this size." It was the most wonderful, practical thing. The kind of thing you *learn* from.

JR: Well, the first lesson is organization: Kids get frustrated when things are a mess. They put their cigarettes out in the paint and then leave and never come back. But if they come in and everything's organized, they'll get right to it. The second lesson is color — how to mix it; you can create a battleship gray out of red, yellow and blue. You've just got to realize that if you mix any color with another, it just blossoms. The third is, how to translate anything that interests them, like a crumpled beer can or a piece of cardboard, how to scale it off with squares into a room-size painting. And after that, the kids feel empowered to translate what they're seeing accurately into a painting. So, that's it. That's my take on it. I don't get involved in any aesthetics. All you need is an idea! □

Editor Denise Gee can be reached at dgee@tampabayillustrated.com.