

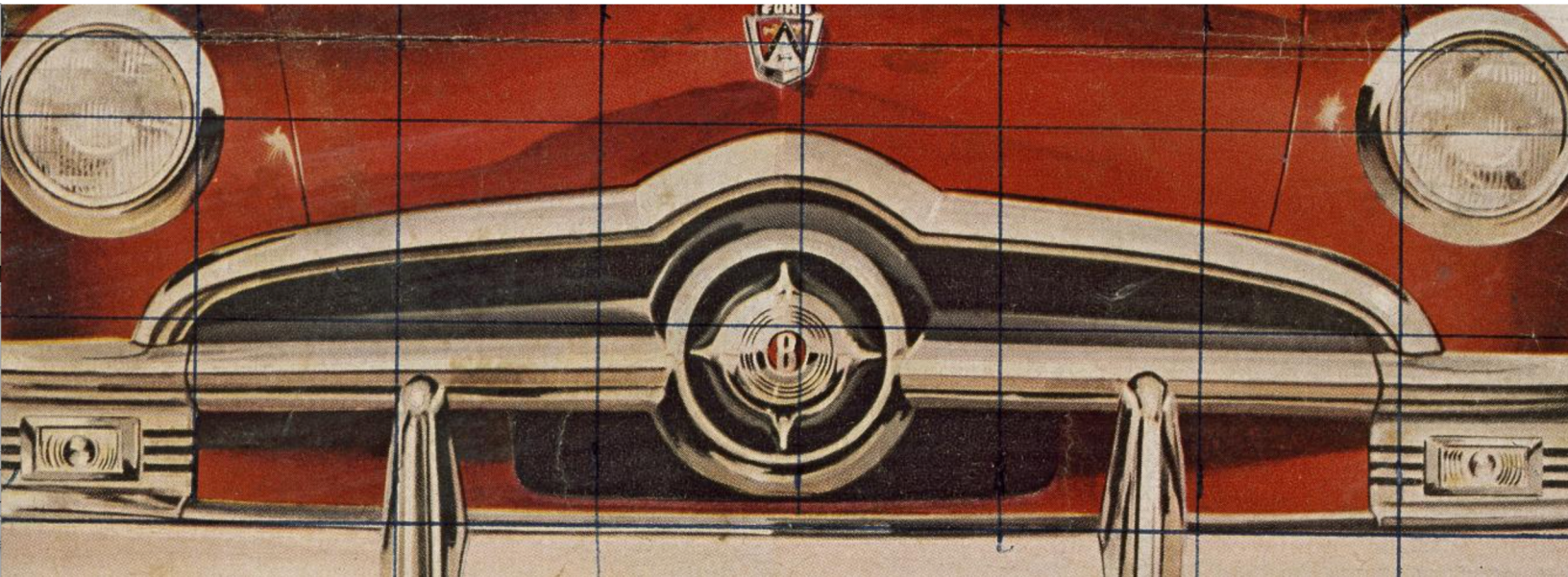
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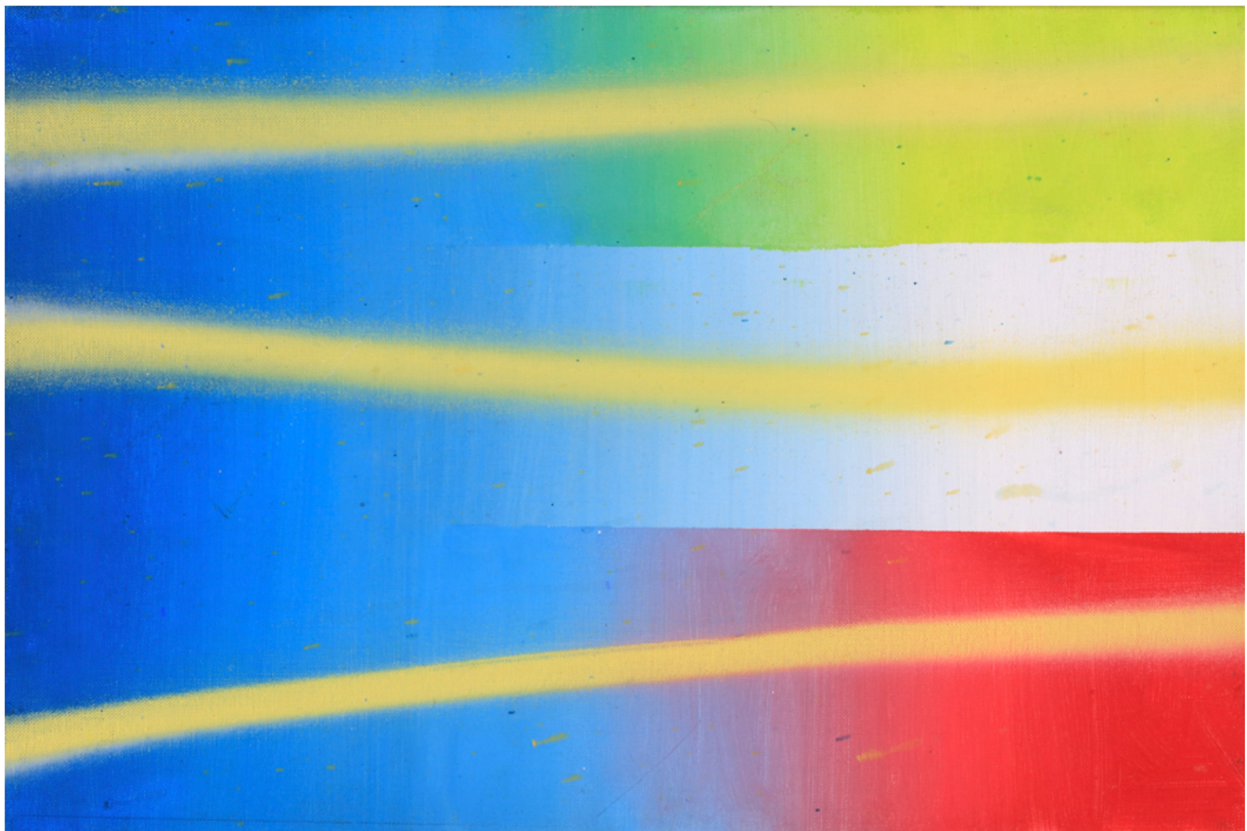
BY ALEX ESTORICK
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James Rosenquist Seduces By Sabotage

An exhibition at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, unveils the surrealist undercurrents of 1960s pop



To enter the corridor of collage studies at Thaddaeus Ropac is to watch the systematic unveiling of a 1960s American visual sensibility. Coupled with a series of painted montages, scaled up to test the viewer's tolerance for auratic seduction, this exhibition reveals something of the mind behind James Rosenquist's 'surreal movie'. Initially a commercial billboard painter in his native Minneapolis, Rosenquist continued his practice in Times Square after arriving in New York in 1955 to study at the Art Students League. Examining the preparatory 'ideograms' on display here – including the source for *I Love you with My Ford* (1961), with its matrix of grid lines overlaying a sumptuous red Crestline – reveals the workings of a mind trained to magnify all-over experience.



James Rosenquist, *Untitled*
(Study for Horse Blinders), 1968,
 oil on canvas, 31 x 46 cm.
 Courtesy: Galerie Thaddaeus
 Ropac, London, Paris and
 Salzburg; photograph: Glenn
 Steigelman

Yet, from the time of his foundational work as a fine artist, *Zone* (1960-61), Rosenquist's paintings picked holes in mass advertising's apparent seamlessness, as well as pop art's will to glorify the object. Another collaged study, this time for *Lanai* (1964), wedges an overturned car between a dish of tinned peaches and the faceless figure of a kneeling poolside nude. Training his focus on capitalism's language of libidinal violence, Rosenquist's combination of carefully constructed composition, his customary white-lead base and Day-Glo tones cauterizes the forms of his chosen subjects. The blinding polish of a kitchen fork is a leitmotif - one indebted to the artist's prior work on grisaille billboards - and an ostensible emblem of commodity fetish. Yet, Rosenquist was evasive about his iconography just as his images evade legibility. In a 1964 interview with Gene Swenson for *Art News*, he declared: 'The [real] subject matter



James
Rosenquist, *Untitled*
(*Blue Sky*), 1962, oil on
canvas and attached
canvas panels, 2.1 × 1.8
cm. Courtesy: Galerie
Thaddaeus Ropac,
London, Paris and The
Brant Foundation,
Greenwich,
Connecticut

In *Family Album Snapshots (Spaghetti Postcards)* (1963), the fork emerges from a sea of tinned spaghetti in a fleeting parody of high modernism's gestural spools, epitomizing the artist's unwillingness to tether himself either to tradition or pulp fiction. *Paramus* (1966) is a further case in point. Resplendent in its tricolour haze, it courts accusations of opticality - appealing to the eye alone. In fact, it replays the projected beams of a botched purifying coil on an RCA television. His painted study for *Horse Blinders* (1968-69) is similarly fugitive in its allusions to light-sensitive surface, with the canvas inflected by a transparent plastic sheet stapled on top and painted over in red. These works bear the trace of Ellsworth Kelly, Rosenquist's former neighbour at his Coenties Slip studio; yet, the inherent volatility that they provoke, with their effect on the viewer contingent on the ambient environment, reinforces Rosenquist as more surreal scenographer than painter of signs.



James Rosenquist, source and preparatory sketch for *The Light That Won't Fail I*, 1961, cropped magazine advertisement, paper, marker, pencil and crayon, 31 x 33 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, London, Paris and Salzburg; photograph: Peter Foe

The rare inclusion in this exhibition of *Forest Ranger* (1967) - a room-invading installation of mylar strips representing an armoured combat vehicle intersected with a novelty oversized hacksaw - celebrates Rosenquist as a pioneer of immersion-as-critique: instituting blind spots in the viewer's experience while calling attention to the military-industrial complex. It elaborates the artist's most famous installation, *F-111* (1964-65), at Leo Castelli Gallery: a 26-metre-long advert for the new fighter bomber being developed by the US military, complete with gleeful child and glowing mushroom cloud. Rosenquist originally sought to sell the 51 panels of *F-111* separately, thereby detonating its coherence as well as the dominion of new collectors fond of buying in bulk. In the event, Robert Scull bought the entire work the day after the show. (It now lives at New York's Museum of Modern Art.) He also bought *The Light That Won't Fail I* (1961), currently on display at Ropac, commenting that it 'annoyed [...] and at the same time charmed me'. James Rosenquist still seduces by sabotage.