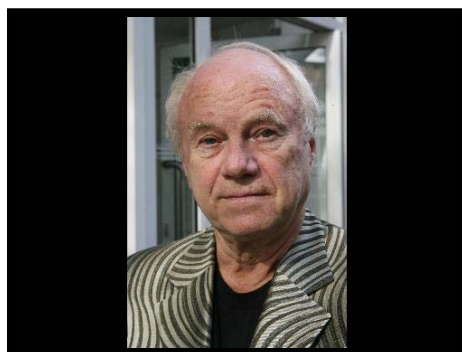




## Painter Rosenquist Savors Zeta-Jones Wet Kisses, Survives Fire

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Interview by Katya Kazakina



Feb. 23 (Bloomberg) -- Painter **James Rosenquist**, a stately, impish 76-year-old in a turquoise shirt and pinstripe suit, whistles for emphasis, puts on Russian and Japanese accents, and talks about "good friends" such as chef **Daniel Boulud**, soprano **Renee Fleming** and Jean Todt, president of Formula One's governing body, FIA.

I spoke with him shortly before the boisterous opening of "The Hole in the Middle of Time and the Hole in the Wallpaper" an exhibition of new paintings at New York's Acquavella Galleries. Guests included actor **Michael Douglas** and **Philippe de Montebello**, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The show comprises seven paintings and 14 motorized prints that spin, hum and reflect viewers in round mirrors built into the canvases. Prices range from \$250,000 to \$1.5 million.

The show caps a rollercoaster year for the artist, during which he lost his Florida house, studio and art valued at \$14 million in a fire, published a memoir ("**Painting** Below Zero: Notes on a Life in Art"), and created a painting for the Metropolitan Opera's new production of "Tosca."

Kazakina: Sounds like you have a lot of famous friends.

Rosenquist: It is fun to know the top people. **Catherine Zeta-Jones** gave me three wet kisses recently.

Kazakina: That's pretty hot.

Rosenquist: It's amazing how you meet people through other people. I knew a racecar driver, Stefan Johansson, who was very hot. He introduced me to Jean Todt. He introduced me to a French doctor. He introduced me to a French architect who redid the Louvre with I.M. Pei. He introduced me to Daniel Boulud.

Room Service

Kazakina: Is he a good friend?

Rosenquist: I had my knees replaced and I am in the hospital. Daniel calls me and says, "Jim, what are you doing there?" I said, "Oh, man, I am starving." He says, "I fix that." He sent over gourmet lunches and gourmet suppers. The chocolate desserts I gave to the nurses. They all loved me.

Kazakina: Does he own a painting of yours?

Rosenquist: No he doesn't. But I am going to give him something some day. That's the way it goes.

Kazakina: You survived a horrible fire last year. How did the experience affect you?

Rosenquist: It changes one's life a lot. I went away for the day. When I came back, there was nothing left. The fire was so hot it melted cars into puddles of aluminum on the ground. I lost my mother's scrapbooks, my print archive and a huge mural I did for France, 133 feet long. So, everything I had there was gone. Finished. Dust. Then you think: What's important? Your health, your family, living the best you can and enjoying every day. And doing my work, doing paintings.

'Being Alive'

Kazakina: Are you thinking more about your legacy?

Rosenquist: No. You live till you die and that's the end of it. What good is your legacy when you are dead? I worry about being alive, selling work, having fun, moving and doing things when I am alive.

Kazakina: The new works have so many clocks in them. Why?

Rosenquist: I am getting old so I really don't like clocks.

Kazakina: And yet the passage of time seems to be very much part of these works.

Rosenquist: You can say that has to do with the Eastern philosophy about being aware, at the moment. I am not in yesterday, I am not in tomorrow. I am right now.

When I do things, inspirations come from all different directions until it becomes one giant question and I have to do something about it.

I was invited to a prehistoric cave in Guernica, Spain. A quarter mile down in the earth I saw these beautiful drawings on the walls. And I thought: These people weren't stupid. They didn't have a wheel, but they had things in their minds that were pretty brilliant.

Children Playing

Then I came out of the cave and saw children playing in a parking lot. Inside, the cave looked the same as it did 6,000 years ago. But the entrance to the cave probably changed hundreds and hundreds of times. The idea of time and space seemed wacky.

Kazakina: Looking at these works brings to mind your earlier pieces. It's as if you are surveying your past.

Rosenquist: These images are all from my paintings from the 1960s on. They are all gone, goodbye. That's why it's like a memory bank. "Marilyn Monroe" is in the Museum of Modern Art. "Animal Screams" is in Sweden. "Military Intelligence" is owned by [Jon Shirley](#) (formerly) of [Microsoft](#). "Zone" is owned by Steve Wynn in Las Vegas. And so on and so on and so on. My past career is on the walls here.

Kazakina: Do you still paint everything yourself?

Rosenquist: I am the only one who paints because I am good. I painted every stroke on that painting. I mix all the paint up. I've been doing it for 50 years.

"The Hole in the Middle of Time and the Hole in the Wallpaper" runs through March 19 at [Acquavella Galleries](#), 18 E. 79th St. Information: +1-212-734-6300; <http://www.acquavellagalleries.com>.

([Katya Kazakina](#) is a reporter for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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