

ARTS & CRAFTS | ROBERT KLIPPEL | ART VS. GOLD | ARCO MADRID

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ALICE SACHS ZIMET

IS FUTURISM'S
TIME NOW?

JAMES
ROSENQUIST
CONTEMPLATES
INFINITY



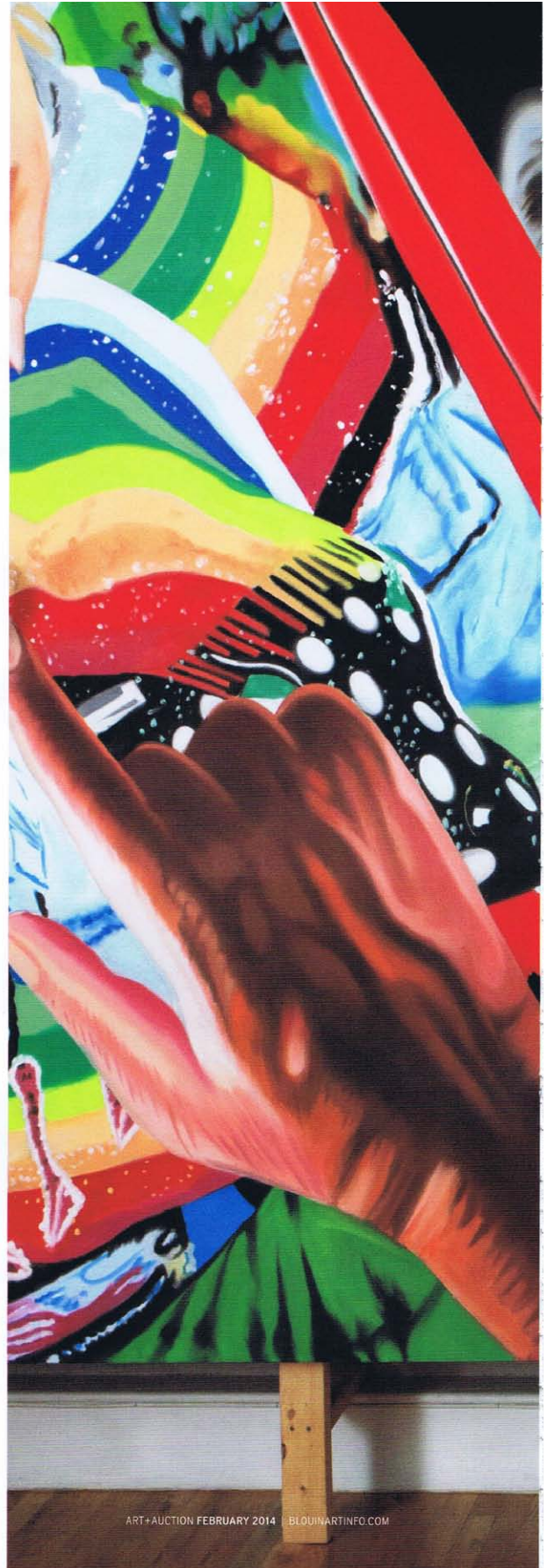
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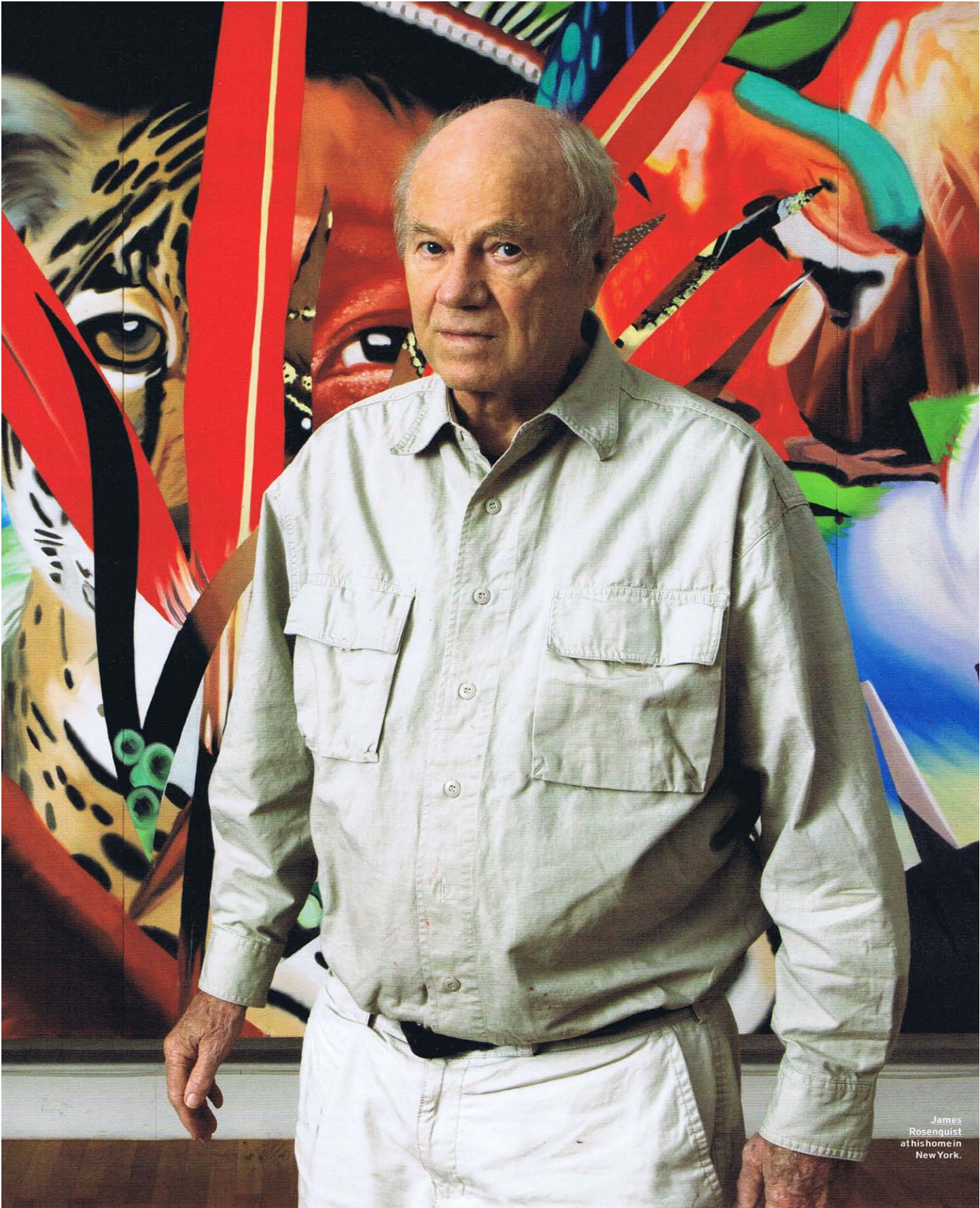
MASTER
OF
SPACE
AND
TIME

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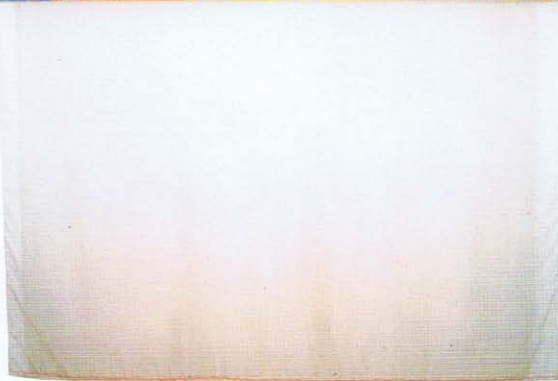
WITH NEW WORKS
THAT TRADE EQUALLY
ON THE CELESTIAL
AND THE CINEMATIC,
JAMES ROSENQUIST'S
PRACTICE CONTINUES
TO EXPAND

BY DANIEL KUNITZ
PORTRAIT BY KRISTINE LARSEN





James
Rosenquist
at his home in
New York.



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The nearly 30-foot-wide *A Pale Angel's Halo* (left) and *Slipping Off the Continental Divide*, a four-panel single work with a two-part title, from 1973, enjoyed a rare public viewing at Richard L. Feigen & Company in New York last fall.

AS JAMES ROSENQUIST greets me at his door, I compliment him on the building's outrageous turquoise trim. "It's tropical," says the artist of the five-story structure in New York's Tribeca neighborhood that he acquired in 1977 and has lived in with his family since 2006. The color reminds him of Florida, where for years he has produced all his work. And while he continues to return to that tropical precinct, he used to go up and down the coast "like a yo-yo," he says. "I had a beautiful space right on the Gulf, with a boat and a lot of room." In April 2009, however, a forest fire destroyed his Aripeka, Florida, home, including a large studio and his personal art collection. "I didn't cry in my beer after that," he says. "I just went back to work and tried to forget about it." Still, the event, in which he lost a reported \$14 million in artwork, seems to have had an understandably traumatic effect. He readily brings it up in conversation—"It was a real dent in my career, destroying a lot of stuff"—goaded by the fact that, because the property is deemed to be in a new flood plain, the government won't allow him to rebuild.

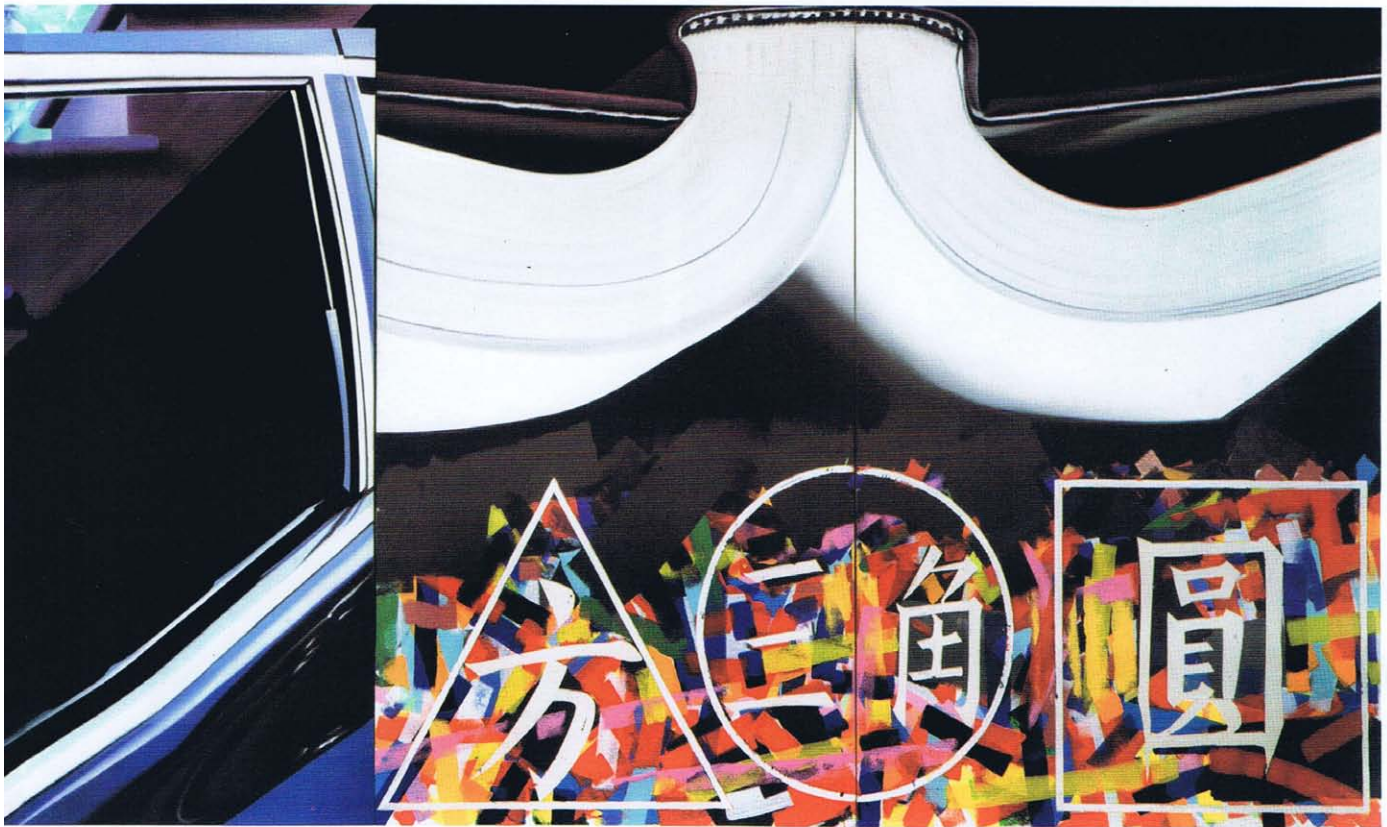
Asked if the loss of so much of his output in the fire caused him to reevaluate his oeuvre or career, he retorts, with some disdain, that no, he doesn't concern himself with the past, only with "what's ahead." Rosenquist does not look back, doesn't dwell on history. Indeed, he claims the past doesn't press on him: "Nothing weighs on me. I don't feel any weight." But he is very much concerned with time.

He turned 80 this past November and corrects me when I suggest that his upcoming exhibition, opening April 29 at Bjorn Wetterling Gallery in Stockholm, is composed of recent works. No, he says, they're "late works." And unlike those Pop pieces for which he is best known, Rosenquist's later efforts have few recognizable images. Stars, galactic dust, as well as the effects of red or blue shift abound, usually presented in tightly juxtaposed, sharp-edged prismatic planes. Most were made in 2012, and some were first shown at Acquavella, his gallery in New York. The following summer he had a bout of Rocky Mountain spotted fever, an illness that put him in the hospital for a month, where, he recounts, "I had hallucinations that were very vivid. They were cinematic, not like paintings."

It's a curious remark for Rosenquist, known above all for paintings as wide as a movie screen, such as his iconic, 86-foot-wide *F-111*, 1964, and the nearly 30-foot-wide, two-part *A Pale Angel's Halo* and *Slipping Off the Continental Divide*, 1973. The latter received a rare public viewing this past fall and winter at New York's Richard L. Feigen & Company. Like his other pieces in this format, *A Pale Angel's Halo* and *Slipping Off the Continental Divide* can't be absorbed in a single glance; its imagery must be read horizontally over time. In other words, it is cinematic.

A glowing semicircle stretches over a multicolored crumpled-paper (or crushed-metal) ground that, reading left

RICHARD L. FEIGEN & COMPANY, NEW YORK



to right, gives way to a staircase framed by a car window, a reference to a devastating automobile accident in 1971 that nearly killed the artist. In the final section, an open book hovers over three Chinese characters inscribed atop a confetti burst of slashing red, pink, blue, and white marks. In *Painting Below Zero: Notes on a Life in Art*, his 2009 autobiography, he wrote that the painting “was like saying goodbye to my past.”

Since then he has proved adept at keeping his eye steadily on the future and producing new canvases. He is enthusiastic, too, about tackling new questions through his work. Where once he was at the forefront of Pop, stringing together Coca-Cola bottle caps and painted fingernails, spaghetti, and bomber nose cones, among a profusion of other images of 20th-century culture, he now seems intent on probing the nature of the cosmos. A spate of 2012 paintings come with titles such as *Quantum Universe*, *Parallel Worlds*, *Multiverse You Are, I Am*, and *Sand of the Cosmic Desert in Every Direction*.

Generally laconic, even terse, speaking in the clipped tones of his North Dakota childhood, Rosenquist becomes expansive on the subject of the universe. “I talk to people very involved in [cosmology], and it always blows me away. They get into esoteric conversations that I don’t understand with words I haven’t even seen in a dictionary. Scientists say there is no such thing as time, gravity is a dust from

another universe, and outside our own universe are many, many universes in all directions. They speculate that attached to these universes are probably 6,000 planets identical to Earth. So are there things living out there? Animals, people, anything? It’s too bad we can’t visit them because we can’t go faster than the speed of light. Aaahhh! We can’t even go fast enough to get out of our own universe.”

Yet, as he acknowledges, these ultimate questions are spurred by the brute fact of our ultimate end. Ushering me over to a work propped against the floor-to-ceiling bookcase in the living room on the top floor of his house, he says, “My

WHERE ONCE HE WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF POP, ROSENQUIST NOW SEEMS INTENT ON PROBING THE NATURE OF THE COSMOS.

friend Bob Rauschenberg—I was with him [when he was] on his deathbed—he said to me, ‘I don’t mind death. I just don’t like the infinity part.’” His response to Rauschenberg’s death was a print, made with Universal Limited Art Editions, called *My Timeless Travel to Infinity*. He shows me a related painting, from 2007, called *The Infinite Sweep of the Minute Hand*, one of a number of Rosenquists that explore the concept of time. A vertical canvas 84 inches high, it depicts a fractured clock face, doubled below in a liquid



Late work leaves terra firma in the dust: *Sand of the Cosmic Desert in Every Direction*, left, a 7-by-6-foot piece, and *Quantum Universe*, 57 by 50½ inches, are oils on canvas from 2012.



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reflection and sprouting a candy-colored riot of gizmos, squiggles, and integers from its broken upper half. Inset into the piece near the top is a black, penlike laser clock that emits a beam, which, the artist explains, “Moves very slowly over the course of a minute if you put it in a small room. But if you put this sucker in a huge auditorium, it goes super fast. The farther away the wall is, the quicker the minute hand moves, but it always takes only a minute to complete its sweep—it’s the difference between time and space.” I can’t help dwelling on the fact that an enormous clock, albeit brightly hued, looms over his living quarters.

There is nothing ostentatious about the place. A skylight bathes the comfortable, modern furniture and wood floors in light. Toward the back of the building, past the elevator, is a spacious study cluttered with stacks of books, papers, and magazines. On the far side of the living room, large enough to hold a mural-length painting, is an open eat-in kitchen without state-of-the-art appliances. Indeed, one doesn’t imagine that Rosenquist and his wife, art writer Mimi Thompson Rosenquist, spend many evenings in. “I’m all over the damned place. I travel a lot,” he says. And when he’s in Manhattan, he hits the town. “I’ve been to so goddamn many parties. It’s probably my own fault, but I’m wearing myself out.”

Although his building is certainly large enough to house a studio, Rosenquist says he hasn’t worked in the city since 1985. Today he continues to paint in Florida, in a guesthouse converted into small studio. “There’s a lot more to think about, that’s what I’m working at,” he says. “I don’t know if

anybody will get it or understand it or like it or anything—it’s just what I’m going to do.” Musing on the cosmos has taken him far from the everyday images he used to cull from magazines and other printed matter in order to create the collages he employs as studies for the paintings. For pieces such as *Fractal*, 2013—in which a sort of chrome car wheel seems to spin at the center, throwing off sharp-edged planes that are each like a window on another galaxy or world—he collages bits of drawing and watercolor with imagined motifs. “I stick the collages on the wall and, if I still like them after a month or two, I make a painting.”

That he continues to go at it with such vigor is a testament to his forward-looking energy. To explain his motivation, he reaches into the past to make a point. He tells the story of a friend, a well-known photographer who earned abundantly throughout his career until a thieving accountant stole millions from him, and then IRS problems and a sick wife left him nearly destitute. “The thing is,” Rosenquist concludes, “you’ve got to keep working to stay in the game some way. You’ve got to keep working.”

In light of his own history, it is entirely understandable why the photographer’s fate might also strike a chord with Rosenquist. Yet further discussion makes clear that the point of the story is the game, pitting himself against the big questions in the manner this artist knows best: “It’s still a challenge to do something on a two-dimensional picture plane, where you have no music, no sound, no movement,” he says. “It’s still interesting, very interesting.” ■

BOTH IMAGES: ACQUAVELLA GALLERIES, NEW YORK