

# James Rosenquist

*Time Dust*

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*Time Dust* distends Rosenquist's space world far and wide. The work is a battle panorama. Explosions hit over the horizon. White heat vaporizes what we think a print should do. Printmaking has invaded painting territory. *Time Dust* is one of the largest prints ever made. These two hundred and fifty square feet of handmade paper demand new ways of talking about Rosenquist's art.

James Rosenquist's large horizontal compositions still incite words like *billboard* and *pop art*, like *enlargement* and *non sequitur*. This is because Americans, even art critics, are literal-minded people. The language we read most—the ever swinging vernacular of advertising and journalism—is the same language we speak. Billboard this, pop that, why not? After all, in his generative years, Rosenquist actually climbed the scaffolding, actually painted whiskey bottles bigger than ranch houses. After all, his images mimic, if not enshrine the inflated, luscious objects of commercial-industrial culture. Rosenquist's habit of juxtaposing disparate objects has always edged on the perverse, and historians might be tempted to see this as a latter-day appendage to Dada anarchy. Not true. The imagery of *Time Dust* does not deify the irrational, does not propose any esoteric/iconoclastic art criticism. Rosenquist's love of things inchoate veils a smiling, sincere parable of life late in this century.

*Time Dust* is a celebration, but also a warning. We are transported somewhere between our fingertips and the asteroid belt. Now we are looking through both ends of the telescope and there are messages to be read. Fervent revelation, wry storytelling, senses strained to extreme range, improvisation on a grand scale, quest for a personally intuited, but coherent iconography—this is where *Time Dust* is headed. This is what the artist says:

*Time Dust* celebrates the question: Will human life regenerate? Will junk left in space from Russian and American space exploration gravitate together and become a new body something could live on? Remember the astronauts who smuggled golf clubs and baby dolls up in space so they could remember the earth and keep from going crazy? What are the vestiges of this civilization worth? If the earth blows up could we measure what is lost, or, like Cocteau said about his house burning down, we can only save the memory?

Now: Rosenquist has always denied that his objects contain "meaning." Let someone else do narrative, he says. A couple of years ago, cruising past his *Welcome to the Water Planet* prints, I asked him if he really liked pencils. And pennies and plumbing as well? He made a face like a red pepper puckering in the sun. "No," he said, "you have to look at composition, color and space. Visual invention is the most important priority, but content comes later."

*Time Dust* radiates all the formal consistencies, all the visual puns, all the parallel tracks, all the ordinary objects made magical, even some tidy moralisms of what used to be called still life composition. Wit. Difficult perspective. Metallic, lustrous surfaces rendered with nonmetallic colors. Autobiography where you least expect it. Invented objects with ineffable affinities. A *memento mori* that says every pleasure comes to an end. Phantasmagoric, even entertaining pyrotechnics that say so what. An excited, irrational frenzy, like a luxurious dream. And, up front, virtuoso abstraction—a kaleidoscope collection of *things circular*, *things cylindrical*, *things spherical*.

This is not the way the world is. This is the world of Rosenquist since he got space. Things levitating just beyond reach, things wafting towards our peripheral vision, can't quite grasp them, pesky things, what are they and what do they want with us?

Take the aluminum can. Its popped top is a black keyhole, a dead light bulb in silhouette. Space junk sucking light—is this healthy for the Water Planet, where *The Only Remaining World Power* defines "durable goods" as stuff that lasts three years? Nearby, a ruby cruciform formation of No.2 soft pencils sails across our path—a spacecraft with calculated life. The pencils' sharpened ends propel the vehicle like so many fine-tuned jets. Pretty spectacular fireworks, mates, finite duration, pencils only last so long. Nearby, a logjam of rolled hundred dollar bills with flaming red venturi seems to be forever shifting position. This collection of executive Roman candles Rosenquist intends as a pun on the extraordinary cost of military space flight. Burning from both ends, too, haven't we been warned about this before?

Beneath the fiery currency is a slashed fragment of Donald Duck, for Rosenquist an allusion to another kind

of money-driven power. Oh my God, look, he's taken it straight through the eye.

Stand in front of *Time Dust* dead center. A blinding flash of solar light disperses left side from right. Here is one of the artist's most enduring ideas—light enticing us inward, light embracing the world, even as light levitates, atomizes everything within range. As Rosenquist says, "Light attracts humans like it attracts insects. Ants and moths seem to be pre-programed to habitually organize and build, but also make the same mistakes again and again. Do humans do the same thing? Just look down at Yugoslavia from outer space in 1992."

We are far above the earth. We look back and see the Water Planet twice. First, quite large, partially eclipsed by an oyster shell, then, within the shell, our world condensed to a pearl. What a divine metaphor, the earth, moistened by oceans and clouds, its surface luminescent as a pearl! Rosenquist reminds us of the old Eastern adage that the self is like a pearl produced by irritation within a vast stream of water. Our Water Planet, then, "is our irritation or our pearl." Adjacent are mosaic color perception charts of the sort Israel Dvorine published in 1944 for military and medical use. Faintly visible within these is not an expected Dvorine numeral but the silhouette of a worker ant. Are we looking through a stereo microscope at our tiny hero, or are we hallucinating through a telescope? After we mess with our earth, the pearl of the universe, will the ants inherit what's left?

Cruising further, a highly schematic topographical map of a Lincolnhead penny represents for Rosenquist our conception of real estate as money. Ruggedly debossed, this penny overlaps the bell of a French horn. Wafting out the horn is a quotation from a Mozart pianoforte manuscript. The embossed treble cleft and musical notation wave their way upwards, something like one of the more appalling trademarks of 1940s nightclub decor—wavy musical notations symbolizing jazz and bigband schlock. This is not the reference, though. Mozart's life-giving music, his ebullient personality, is what Rosenquist has in mind. In the open spaces of *Time Dust*, perhaps we hear a brief passage from the *Music of the Spheres*. This philosophical speculation overlaps an empty spacefood pouch. Astronauts and their earthbound support staff as the ultimate litterbugs.

Capping off the composition are a couple of exclamation points, two images that dangle down like origami ornaments. The bluish one is an origami moth that looks like a swingwing bomber. Its reddish counterpart is a dragonfly. When he was a kid, Rosenquist wanted to be a pilot. Now he is.

So far I've talked about *Time Dust* as if it were a painting. This is not totally fallacious, since the imagery is of a sort Rosenquist has devised for his work on canvas, though this great print derives from no previous work. All of the fifty-odd images are lithographs and screenprints on white paper, routed out, then collaged to a densely textured background. Their final positions were determined by the artist standing on a work table and looking down on portions lying on the floor. As it ended up, seven background panels butt to make a paper surface thirty five feet long. The artist and eight assistants constructed these seven elephantine chunks of paper on the asphalt reaches of the Tyler Graphics parking lot. Eighteen supersaturated colors go all the way through—they are pulpy particles shot through stencils with a gun ordinarily used for texturing stucco walls. This is a typical Ken Tyler mastermechanic mindstroke—borrowing common industrial tools and customizing them to challenge the speculative sensibilities of the artist. All the way through the eighteen month trial of *Time Dust*, Rosenquist whipped up the full-scale drawings, did the separations, monitored the registrations, cut the stencils, eyeballed, if not hand crafted every aspect of the project.

The paper pulp substrata of *Time Dust* gives you physical terrain so dense, so luxurious, it's hard to see how anyone could go back to wheeling out steamroller prints again. Integrating the tapestry-like background with the applied imagery are assorted chunks of multicolored pulp. These are asteroids on the loose. They exist at the extreme end of the surface spectrum, running from carpet cushiness to floor slickness. Even these despised hunks of rock are part of Rosenquist's vision: Humans inextricably joined to the heavens as surely as to the earth, joined to the objects they discard even as surely as to the objects they hold. Music and money, fireworks and spacerides. The sky is so clear we can see the earth from here.

Philip Larson, 1992

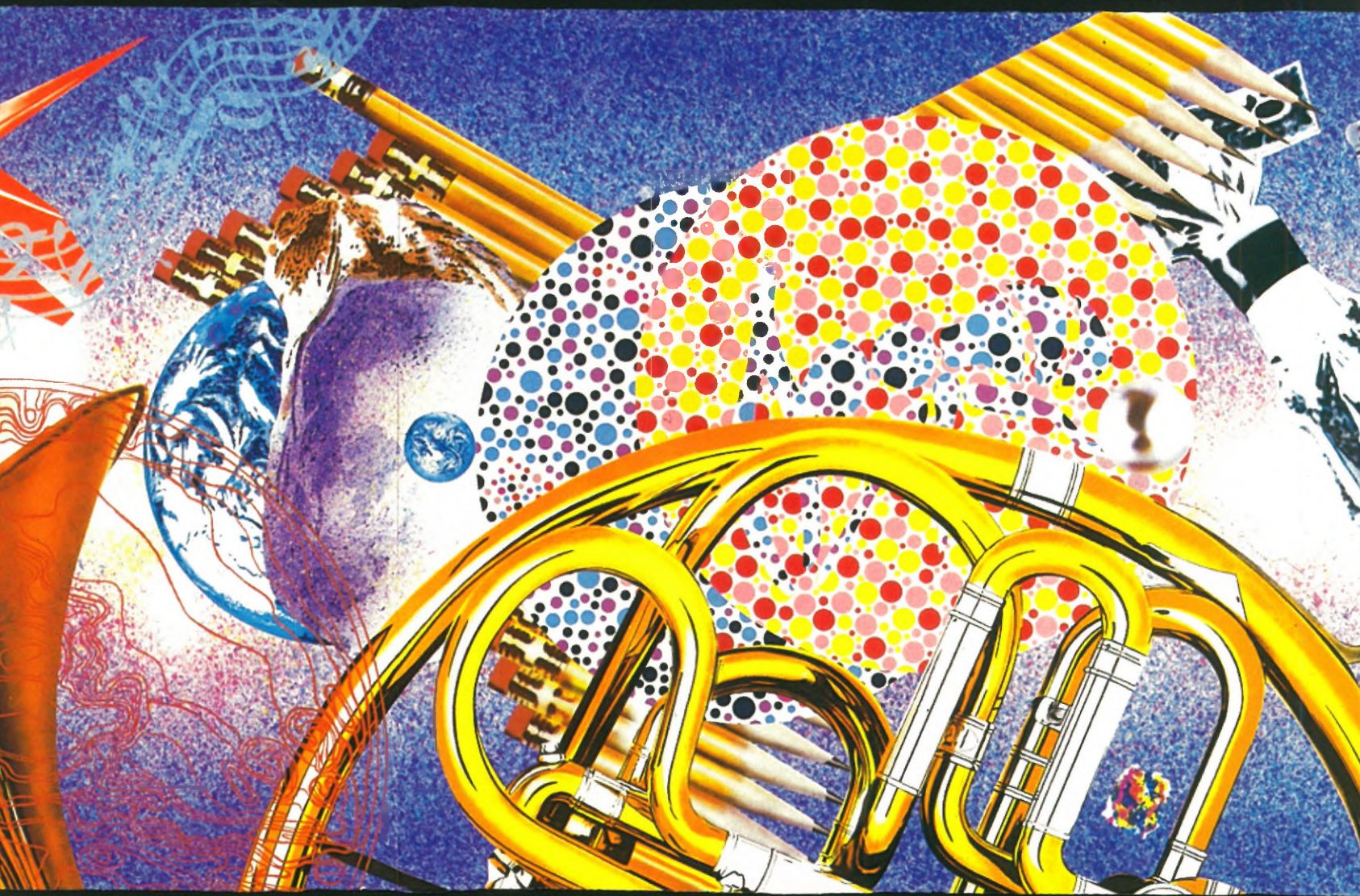
















Top:  
James Rosenquist spraying colored paper  
pulp onto newly-formed sheets of paper.  
(Left to right: Kenneth Tyler, John Fulton,  
Tom Strianese, Rolf Kaul, and Jed Marshall  
assisting. July 1990).

Above:  
Same as above. (But left to right:  
John Fulton, Kenneth Tyler, Paul Stillpass,  
and Michael Mueller assisting).



Top right:  
Rosenquist drawing on prepared acetate  
sheets. (July 1991).

Top:  
John Huteson pulling impression from  
relief printing element. (May 1992).



Left:  
Rosenquist determining placement of  
lithography collage elements. (Tyler  
[kneeling], Michael Mueller [left], and  
Henry McGee [right] assisting. July 1991).



# Time Dust

1992

*Time Dust* is an eighty-two color print comprised of colored, pressed paper pulp, relief printing, lithography, etching, and screenprinted collage elements on seven sheets of 85 3/4" x 60" (217.8 x 152.4 cm) white TGL handmade paper. The total dimensions are 85 3/4" x 420" (217.8 x 1006.8 cm). The printing elements were one copper plate, fifty-nine aluminum plates, four irregularly shaped magnesium plates and twelve screens. There are fifty-two collage elements on the seven sheets. A chrome plated chain is attached to each print with a metal fastener.

The seven hand-colored base sheets and colored paper collage pieces are TGL handmade papers; the lithography and screen collage elements are printed on white Rives BFK and Somerset mould-made papers; the etching collage is printed on white Suzuki handmade paper.

TGL paper made by Tom Strianese and Jed Marshall; image stencils hand-cut by Strianese and Marshall; paper coloring by the artist assisted by Kenneth Tyler, Strianese, Marshall, Paul Stillpass, Michael Mueller, Rolf Kaul, Eric Ting, and John Fulton; aluminum plate preparation, processing, proofing, and edition printing by John Hutcheson and Lee Funderburg assisted by Scott Lewis and Kevin Falco; magnesium plate preparation by Tyler and processing by The Swan Engraving Co. and Anthony Kirk; proofing by Tyler, Strianese, Marshall, Falco, and Funderburg; edition printing by Hutcheson and Lewis assisted by Tyler and Falco; copper plate preparation, processing, proofing, and edition printing by Kirk; screen preparation, proofing, and edition printing by Mueller assisted by Carolyn Mazzucca, Ting, and Hutcheson; preparation and adhering of collage elements by Henry McGee and Mueller assisted by Lewis, Mazzucca, and Falco.



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