

RECORD REVIEW

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From left to right: Allie Krouch, Madeline Kearnin, Lauren Brois, Mr. Rosenquist, Dan Kassel

ABBY LUBY PHOTO



Celebrated Pop artist at Fox Lane High School

By ABBY LUBY

James Rosenquist, internationally known pop artist to emerge in the 1960's, spoke to about 100 eager and receptive Fox Lane high school students last week. Mr. Rosenquist's large canvases of every day images have made icons out of the commonplace and drama of the every day experience.

"I lived for 10 years looking down on Fox Lane," said Mr. Rosenquist, formerly of Bedford. "Now I live in New York City and my studio is in Florida."

While showing students slides of his work from the last 40 years, Mr. Rosenquist, 73, plucked out events from his life, weaving a rich biographical tapestry that included world-wide travel and a cohort of celebrated friends that included pop artists Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, poets Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg.

"When I was in 8th grade and an ice cream cone was a nickel I won a little scholarship to go to the Minnesota School of Art," said Mr. Rosenquist, who was born in Grand Forks, North Dakota. "The teachers were from the GI (government issue) bill from World War II. They gave me the best pencils and the best paper. They asked me 'do you ever think

abstractly?’ I said ‘no.’ They asked me ‘did you ever heard of jack the dripper’ I think they meant Jackson Pollack.”

As a young boy Mr. Rosenquist said he had no idea of the scope of art. “Art just wasn’t available to me,” he said. “I didn’t have toys. I had a wild and crazy Aunt Delores who made model airplanes and marionettes out of nothing. We had no video games, no ipods – zilch, but we had a lot of fun.”

In the 1950’s, encouraged by his mother, Mr. Rosenquist answered an ad for a sign painter. “They were paying \$1.60 an hour for painting. I was a teenager then and I painted Phillips 66 Gasoline shields on gas tanks at filling stations.”

Mr. Rosenquist said he also worked with ex-cons at that time. “They didn’t beat me up but I had to drink everything they put in front of me. They were a wild bunch of guys.”

In 1955 Mr. Rosenquist attended the Art Students League in New York City on a scholarship and after that earned his living as a billboard painter. “I was painting whiskey signs in Brooklyn that were two stories tall,” he said. “I got so tired of writing the label for the dam things which said ‘this spirit is made with the finest grains,’ that after a while I wrote ‘mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow.’ I guess that was the first pop art I did against advertising. In capitalism advertising is a necessary evil.”

Mr. Rosenquist said he joined the International Sign and Picture Painters Union during the McCarthy era. “That was local 230,” he said. “The union president warned me about hanging out with the ‘reds’ because I was having a beer with them.”

Painting signs was dangerous, said Mr. Rosenquist. “Two guys got killed making signs. One fell off a Budweiser sign and the other fell from a sign on a department store,” he said. “I asked them for a big raise of \$35 bucks – but that was stepping outside the union.”

Mr. Rosenquist started to apply billboard techniques to his own work. “The experience of painting large was great,” he told students. “I picked up gallons and gallons of paint left over from the billboards, used it in my studio and made abstractions. That [opportunity] no longer exists and I felt very happy to have that experience.”

By the early 1960’s Mr. Rosenquist had a distinct style of enlarged, fragmented images. He showed Fox Lane students one of his early works “F111.” “I sold it for \$25,000,” said Mr. Rosenquist. “The Museum of Modern Art brought it for \$5 million. I didn’t get a royalties.”

Each painting told a different story which Mr. Rosenquist frequently dramatized with changing voices for different characters. “This is called ‘Blue Spark,’” said Mr. Rosenquist. “When I was a starving artist living on the water front, my dealer called and told me the mayor of Chicago was coming here to look for some art.” At the time, Mr. Rosenquist said he was sick with pneumonia and couldn’t physically show his work. “I told him I would hang a painting up and he can come look at it but don’t expect me to get up from the couch. I left the door open and four hours later there is a knock on the door – but just then a wharf rat sticks his head up through the middle of the floor. My dealer and the mayor opened the door, they saw me, they saw the rat and they saw the painting and they shouted ‘we’ll take it’ and slammed the door. Slam! Now this painting is at a museum in Valencia.”

Students asked questions ranging from basic art techniques to personal motivation.

“How long does it take you to paint a painting that’s so big?” asked one student. “About 72 years and one month,” said Mr. Rosenquist. The answer was followed by laughter.

“Who inspired you?” asked another student. “Michelangelo, Da Vinci...” said Mr. Rosenquist. “Their compositions all use the golden mean rectangle which is an ideal space. It’s like a shortened shoe box. When you walk into a space like that suddenly you feel good. Artists use that division in their composition, it makes for interesting pictures.” The energy of working artists is also inspiring, said Mr. Rosenquist. “Look at Bernini (1598 – 1680) and his sculpture in Rome – how did he make marble lace without machinery or electricity?”

After the lecture, Ellen Groarke, senior art student said she found the talk interesting.

“I liked hearing about his life because I didn’t know that much about him,” said Ms. Groarke. “It was nice to see the school getting the acknowledgement by a person like Mr. Rosenquist. We are all hardworking artists here.” Kirsten Flaherty, also a senior art student said she learned a lot from Mr. Rosenquist’s talk. “I like his sense of realism,” she said.

Fox Lane High School art teacher Lauren De Nigris said the event was made possible because the father of one of her students, Dr. Kassel who was able to contact Mr. Rosenquist. “It’s an exciting opportunity for the students to meet and listen to a living artist that they have studied about,” said Ms. De Nigris. “A lot of students who want to be artists have never had the opportunity to speak to someone who is internationally well known. For the students meeting somebody, seeing their work and hearing them talk about their life says that they can be in the same position and can get to that space in their life.”

Before the lecture ended, a student asked how Mr. Rosenquist gets his ideas for his paintings. “Does it always happen the same way?”

“It’s usually a lot of disparate ideas,” answered Mr. Rosenquist. “The ideas can be completely different, but they relate in some way. I got an idea for a collage from a Japanese tea ceremony during World War II in a museum in Ohio. On the wall there was a little live flower, a little painting and a shrunken head. What did those three things mean? A flash of this, that, and of that. The spark it creates says something that may be exciting visually. It’s being able to see peculiar things and make associations with them, unlike what they are in and of themselves.”