

James Rosenquist

Acquavella

Wouldn't it be great to play curator-for-a-day and add one of James Rosenquist's vibrant new outer-space-oriented "Multiverse" paintings to a re-creation of the small gallery at the old Museum of Modern Art that housed two remarkably quirky paintings: Pavel Tchelitchew's *Hide-and-Seek* (1940–2) and David Alfaro Siqueiros's *Echo of a Scream* (1937)? What these works share is the formation of a mysterious deep space from a miasma of semi-abstract forms. Variably vague images of babies' heads, skulls, and brains enter into the equation as well. In some of Rosenquist's new works, we are even reminded of the womb- and outer-space-like region inhabited by the floating baby in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which may in turn have been inspired by one of these earlier paintings. We could also add to this imaginary gallery a maximalist painting by Audrey Flack, who shares with Rosenquist a palette of glowing colors against black backgrounds and echoes of photorealism in the paint application, which for both can look airbrushed even when it isn't, and otherwise shows evidence of brush strokes.

A few years ago, Rosenquist's Florida studio burned to the ground. The artist rallied and shows no sign of slacking off, still exploring ambitious ideas with flair and professionalism. His large 2011 painting *The Geometry of Fire*, pieced together from smaller panels that fit into a smaller-than-usual temporary studio, shows a conflagration, with flames on one side and melted chromium on the

other. There are hints of a skull within the flames. Radiating from the center are the characteristic prismatic divisions that also define the "Multiverse" series. Rosenquist has long been interested in space—human travel to it and, more recently, the idea that there may be other forms of life in the parallel, alternate, or meta-universes that are being posited by scientists.

In his recent paintings—all 2012 and bearing some of the just-mentioned names that have been given to these theoretical universes outside our own—the forms seem broken up. Stars, flames, and what often look like internal organs all contribute to abstract fields defined by unrelated yet interacting parts. There is generally no central or focal image, no

narrative hint, and the works almost seem to explode in different directions. There is a wild dynamism of things popping and pow-ing in the best Pop tradition, but without any commercial, realist, or still-life referents. Unlike the peaceful, static space of Ross Bleckner, say, whose work Rosenquist's pinpoint stars sometimes evoke, this space is constantly erupting, crackling, and evolving. It seems about as close as we humanoids can get to visualizing the "multiple universes" that are active "out there." The effects may always look a bit surreal, and that is what ties Rosenquist to earlier painters and those to come who have imagined or will imagine such places, which may ultimately be regions of the mind. —*Cynthia Nadelman*



James Rosenquist, *Multiverse You Are, I Am*, 2012, oil on canvas, 132" x 120".

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