

PRESSBOOK

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The New York Times

March 2016

Old Friends, Timeless Pop Artists

By RANDY KENNEDY

If you were to classify Pop artists using old categories, James Rosenquist would be a history painter, the creator of paradisiacal canvases sometimes large enough to turn corners and epic enough to embody the visual politics of their era. Erró, the Icelandic painter who has been friends with Mr. Rosenquist since the two met in New York in the early 1960s, would instead be a late-medieval religious allegorist. His works, based on collages of found pictures, are as packed with discrete images — of food, cars, celebrities, weapons, toys — as the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch are dense with damned souls. They convey a “nightmarish quality,” as the critic Arthur C. Danto once described it, the sense of drowning in a late-capitalist tsunami of stuff.

Though he has been making such fierce work for more than a half-century, Erró (born Guomundur Guomundsson), 83, now based in Paris, has been relatively little known in the United States. That has begun to change, partly because of his presence in “International Pop,” the history-reordering exhibition now making its final stop at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

On the occasion of a mini-retrospective of his work up now through April 23 at Galerie Perrotin in New York, Erró recently sat down with Mr. Rosenquist, 82, for a talk, moderated by Randy Kennedy, about New York, the hinterlands, Pop, art history and image-scavenging. These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

RANDY KENNEDY You were both raised in places of which the artist Donald Judd (speaking of West Texas) said that there “was a lot of land but nowhere to go” — Jim spent his first years in North Dakota and Minnesota and Erró in rural Iceland. What did coming from the periphery mean to you? What were you looking at when you were growing up?

JAMES ROSENQUIST I was looking at the dirt! (Laughs) I also had a teacher when I was young, a painter named Cameron Booth. He was a man of the world, he’d taught all over. He told me to get



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James Rosenquist, left, and the Icelandic painter Erró at Mr. Rosenquist’s home in Manhattan.

out of the Midwest and go to New York and study with Hans Hofmann, whom he had studied with in Europe. But Hofmann wasn’t here when I got here.

ERRÓ I grew up on a farm where you could ride a whole day on a horse and still be on the same farm. When I got to Paris in the late ‘50s everything was Abstract. Everything. There was not one gallery that would show figurative art. Someone sent me to see the dealer of Picasso, D. H. Kahnweiler, and I brought six paintings with me on the subway. And he became very upset. He said: ‘This is terrible! These Nordic paintings, they look like Edvard Munch!’ And he rushed out of the room.

KENNEDY In the early 1960s you began coming to New York, and it was here that you decided to start using only found commercial imagery. Why?

ERRÓ Partly because of Rosenquist, who was interesting to me because he showed me what could be done with composition. He reminded me of my favorite artists, of Tintoretto and Rubens. And of the whole group of Pop artists here — Pop is really not the right name — I thought

Rosenquist was the one who was engaged, I might not say politically, but in his time. And that was important to me.

ROSENQUIST It was more about composition. I’d do anything for composition. I’d tear things up.

ERRÓ What made us close to each other is that for both of us our work came from making collages. When I arrived in New York I’d never seen a supermarket before, you have to understand. And the ads for things like that in Paris were in black and white. It was extremely difficult to find images that excited me. But in New York I remember almost in front of the Chelsea Hotel there was a big place with newspapers on one side and magazines on the other side. And you could buy them by the kilo. And this helped me a lot.

ROSENQUIST I used to always make a collage before I made the painting. The reason was to make the painting better.

ERRÓ For me the wonderful thing about collage is that I don’t have to know what I’m doing. It’s like I’m making them in a dream. I keep all the things I save in an old-fashioned way. I have about

80 drawers with different subjects. When I need a rainy day, I look in the weather drawer and so on. The last drawer is the terrible one. I call it the hell drawer. It’s full of all the images that are very hard to show — everything from dictators to the toilet. And if I work on a difficult subject I open this drawer. Of course all of this would be easier to do with a printer, but I still like to do it by hand.

KENNEDY What did you think of Erró’s work when you first saw it?

ROSENQUIST Well, I always wanted to see more.

ERRÓ (Laughs) That’s a good answer!

ROSENQUIST But I did. Because of the motivation and the energy. It made me think of the cinema. There were all these ongoing things, so many of them, moving, like a storyboard.

ERRÓ The funny thing, I guess, is that the two of us are still here, still alive. All of our friends are gone now. What preserved us? Was it the red wine?

ROSENQUIST Maybe it was the paint.