

James Rosenquist
The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie



James Rosenquist, *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie*, 1992
Oil and charcoal on shaped canvas with wooden ladder and burnt wood
92 x 474 inches (263.6 x 1204 centimeters)

In a visual work, you try for some kind of magic, something that is readable in another part of the mind. It makes sense only if you can't translate it into words.
--James Rosenquist

“Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put a wall up to keep our people in, to prevent them from leaving us. I know of no town, no city that has been besieged for 18 years that still lives with the vitality and the force, and the hope and determination of the city of West Berlin. While the wall is the most obvious and vivid demonstration of the failures of the Communist system, for all the world to see, we take no satisfaction in it, for it is an offense not only against history, but an offense against humanity, separating families, dividing husbands and wives and brother and sisters, and dividing people who wish to be joined together.”

These are the words of President John F. Kennedy at the Rudolph Wilde Platz in Berlin on June 26, 1963. The speech ended with the now historical line: “All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’.”



James Rosenquist, *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist #2*, 1997
Oil on canvas; 138 1/16 x 576 1/16 inches (350.7 x 1463.2 centimeters)



James Rosenquist, *President Elect*, 1960-61/1964
Oil on Masonite; 89 3/4 x 144 inches (228 x 365.8 centimeters)

Twenty-five years later, on June 12, 1987, another United States President, Ronald Reagan, made the following remark in front of the Brandenburg Gate, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall.” On November 9, 1989, the citizens of Berlin started to demolish the Berlin Wall. Photos of the collapsing Wall covered the front pages of newspapers and possibly for the first time, people around the world were able to witness the difference between East and West Berlin on television.

James Rosenquist, who always followed the worldwide news, was shocked by how gray the East appeared in contrast to the colorful West. *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie*, 1994, is the first of a group of paintings that the artist made which address the Cold War and the idea of division, and precede *The Swimmer in the Econo-mist*, 1997-98, a triptych now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Like the artist’s masterpiece, *F-111*, 1964-65, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie*, showcases the artist’s commentary on political issues and his general anti-war sentiments. In a way, *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie* acts as the spiritual heir to *F-111*, particularly in its massive scale, appropriate to the grand historical subjects.



James Rosenquist, *The Holy Roman Empire through Checkpoint Charlie*, 1994 (detail)

In choosing this image, Rosenquist signifies the leaders of the past to the present, in a tradition which unites modern Germany to the glory of the ancient Western world. At the same time however, Nike's wings are burning with fire, indicating that the lessons she is teaching are riddled with death and tragedy.

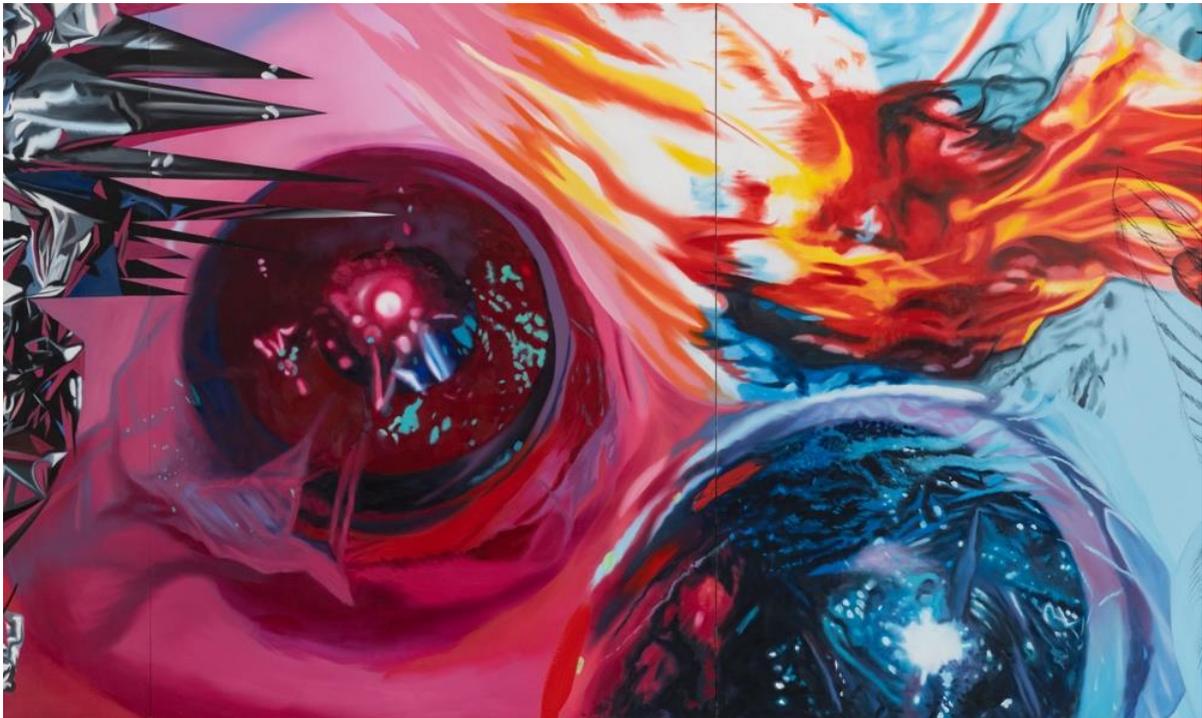
Rosenquist paints the flames in a realistic way, and to make it even more effective, attaches an actual piece of burnt wood to the canvas.

The female figure on the left of the artwork juxtaposes the male figure on a horse to the right. This man is based on the sculpture *Equestrian Statue of Frederick the Great* dating from 1851, located on the Unter den Linden, the avenue in Berlin which was the main focal point of social life before World War II. The painting seems to suggest that conquerors as "great" as Frederick II, were essentially drawn in, "to restore the glory that once was," as Rosenquist said in an interview in 2006. Yet, he also hints that glory comes with and brutality has been prevalent for hundreds of years throughout the world. Essentially, the leaders referred to as "great" represent leaders of the past and the present with a very complex history.

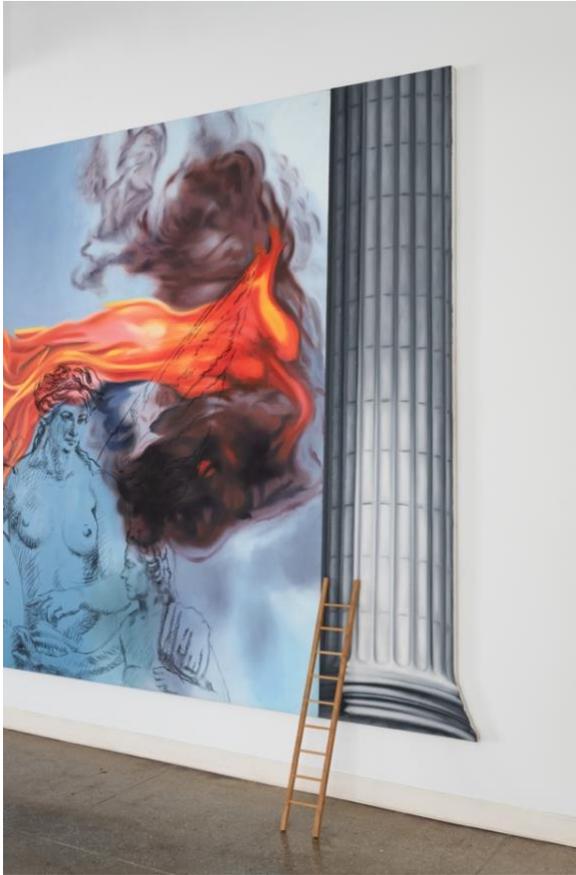
As the viewer moves to the right of the horse, Rosenquist uses silver metallic imagery to represent war in the contemporary age, which is no longer fought with horses, but with industrial arms. Abstract images, like the bold red eye in the center of the work, contain historical references such as the Russian Red Army Bolshevik group, and perhaps even allude to later times during the Cold War.



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On the right edge, the artist uses a shaped canvas to render the image of a column of the Brandenburg Gate. The Gate, the most iconic structure in Berlin, was commissioned as a representation of power by Frederick II the Great in the 1700s, but ultimately came to symbolize division between East and West Berlin, and eventually peace. In front of the column, and leaning against it, Rosenquist adds a small wooden ladder. The ladder can be seen as both a symbol of hope or possible fear and division. On one side, the ladder may represent the ability to cross over from East to West after the fall of the Wall. At the same time, the small size of the ladder in comparison to the size of the painting, alludes to the feeling of impossibility in crossing over the wall, a feeling of hopelessness, and the larger difficulty in overcoming such strong historical divisions.

Along with the small ladder, the burnt wood is the second object the artist used in this work. The wood is burned by the fire, symbolizing destruction. However, in the hand of the artist, the burnt wood becomes charcoal, the instrument for the drawing of Nike that follows.