

RAISING ROSENQUIST

By William F. Stern

James Rosenquist: A Retrospective, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (and the Menil Collection), May 17–August 17

HOW STARTLING Cullinan Hall at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, must have appeared when it opened in 1958. This vast room, with 30-foot ceilings, was like no other museum space in America. In designing the flexible exhibition space, architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe clearly anticipated the display of huge pieces of modern art. Forty-five years later Cullinan Hall has grandly fulfilled its potential with the hanging of three giant paintings by James Rosenquist as the culmination of his retrospective exhibition. Few museum spaces in this country could so gracefully accommodate these outsized paintings, each measuring 17 feet high by 46 feet wide. The effect is a combined triumph of both painting and architecture.

Each painting comprises 39 panels stacked in a running-bond brick pattern, six rows high. The assemblage for the panels is made up of wood stretchers and canvas on quarter-inch plywood backing, bolted together so tightly that the divisions between panels are barely visible from a distance. Rosenquist executed these paintings at his studio in Aripeka, Florida, north of Tampa. Before painting started, the panels were fabricated, bolted together, and suspended from the exposed structure of his warehouse-like studio. Having prepared the content for each painting as a collage drawing, Rosenquist, working from a mechanical lift, translated the drawing to full-scale painting. Not surprisingly, Rosenquist began his artistic career as a sign painter for billboard advertising.

At the Museum of Fine Arts, the paintings are displayed chronologically from left wall to center wall to right wall, starting with *Through the Eye of the Needle to the Anvil*, 1988, followed by *The Stowaway Peers Out at the Speed of Light*, 2000, and concluding with *Joystick*, 2002.

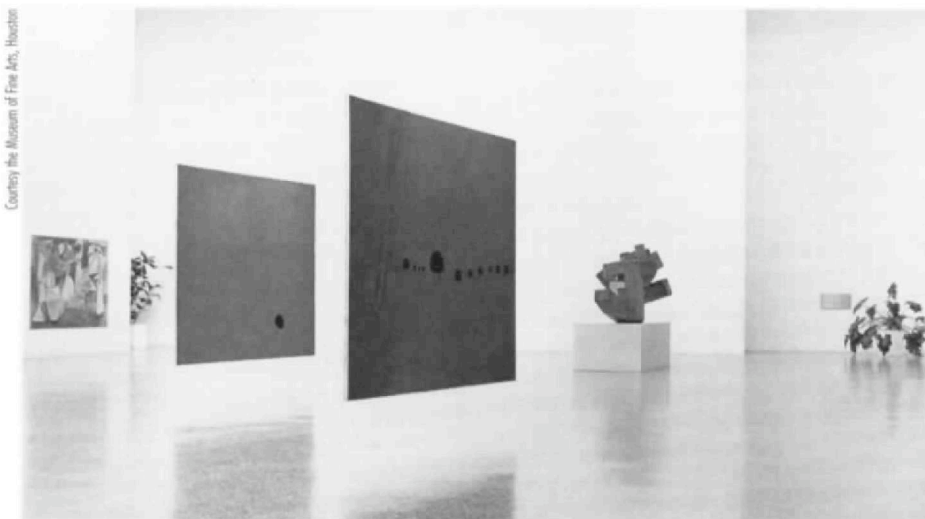
The three paintings, each projecting 18 inches from the wall, appear effortlessly suspended by cable, attached to U-hooks embedded in the white plaster ceiling. But what appears graceful and effortless was not easily accomplished, and is reminiscent of exhibitions during the early



Cullinan Hall, *James Rosenquist: A Retrospective*, 2003.

years after Cullinan Hall's completion. Indeed, Mies van der Rohe fully intended for paintings to be hung from the ceiling, and even provided a means to do so. Occupying the central portion of Cullinan Hall, a dropped acoustical-ceiling layer devised to hide air-conditioning ducts while deadening sound reverberation, incorporates a grid of light sockets that combine with structural connection points for suspending art. According to architect Anderson Todd (as noted in Stephen Fox's history of the the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), Mies van der Rohe told the trustees, "You can hang one of your Texas Cadillacs."¹ In 1962, then recently appointed director James Johnson Sweeney took advantage of Mies' display system with his exhibition "Three Spaniards — Picasso, Miro, Chillida," in which paintings were suspended from wires connected to the structural ceiling sockets. Many later exhibits during the Sweeney years utilized this system of display.

But the structural sockets exist only in the central portion of Cullinan Hall; there are no means to hang paintings from the ceiling along the three peripheral walls. For Jack Eby, the museum's current design director, and his associate Bill Cochrane, the challenge was to determine a way to hang the Rosenquist paintings, each of which weighs 1,000 pounds. Luckily the steel roof structure could accommodate the additional load. The roof of Cullinan Hall rests on internal steel beams, which are carried by five-foot-deep steel-plate girders exposed to the outside. To provide a connection to the steel beams, it was necessary to cut a narrow incision into the plaster, then weld steel struts between the beams, and finally



Cullinan Hall, *Three Spaniards — Picasso, Miro, Chillida*, 1962.

bolt U-hooks to the struts, three for each painting. The plaster was patched, and a rope-and-pulley hoisting mechanism was strung through the hooks. That left the assembly and raising of the paintings.

The process began by bolting together the top row of panels, adding a continuous aluminum strip along the top edge and securing the rope to the edge strip. That row was then raised, leaving enough space between the panels' bottom edges and the floor to assemble and secure the next row of panels, and the next, until all six rows were lifted together in place. The bolted assemblage was raised to its final height, and the rope and pulleys replaced by cable. When the paintings are lowered, the process will be reversed.

The three paintings are most dramatically viewed by looking across the space of Cullinan Hall from the upper level gallery of Brown Pavilion, the 1974 addition to the Museum of Fine Arts designed again by Mies Van der Rohe.

These monumental tableaux give the same sense of permanence and fit as the Rothko paintings at the nearby Rothko Chapel, a building designed specifically to house those commissioned works. Although the three Rosenquist paintings will move on when the exhibition closes, one can hope that the curators at the Museum of Fine Arts will not shy away from exhibiting art at Cullinan Hall in a way that Mies van der Rohe surely envisioned. ■

¹ "The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, An Architectural History, 1924-1986," *Bulletin*, April 1992.