

Sample written by L. Epps
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ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ROSENQUIST'S *HOUSE OF FIRE*



Figure 1. James Rosenquist, *House of Fire*, 1981. Oil on canvas, 78 x 198 in. (198.1 x 502.9 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

INTRODUCTION

subject

arguments

thesis →

claim

The Pop Art movement of the late 20th century dealt with concepts such as capitalism, domesticity and media through visual means. After WWII, America simultaneously experienced a manufacturing and media boom.¹ Furthermore, in the midst of the instability and anxiety produced by the Cold War, the nuclear family, as well as domestic gender roles offered solace from the unstable global condition.² Thus the perfect, modern American dream began to form in which men went off to work, either in white or blue-collar jobs, while their wives stayed home to care for their children and maintain the home. As a result of these phenomena, advertising centered around manufacturing jobs and products tied to the domestic sphere – propagating the expectations of the new American dream to the public. With this change in the zeitgeist of America and the prevalence of these influential advertisements, pop artists reacted through their art – either embracing this idea of the perfect America or dismissing the contrived perfection showcased in the advertisements of the 1950s. James Rosenquist, a renowned pop artist, illustrated symbols of the ideals found within American society in many of his works – providing a commentary on the idea of the American Dream, or, rather, the lack thereof. In *House of Fire*, Rosenquist depicted everyday objects – groceries, an open window, and lipsticks – in precarious situations to comment on the dangers of succumbing to the idea of the modern American Dream.

DESCRIPTIVE
PARAGRAPH/
VISUAL ANALYSIS

(Stage 1 of
Panofsky's Iconographic
method: describing the
work of art using formal
elements)

In Figure 1, Rosenquist employed visual elements to bolster the message of his piece by incorporating saturated colors, namely red, and objects with conflicting scales. The *House of Fire* displays a triptych consisting of an upside-down grocery bag to the left, a series of open lipsticks to the right and a central open window with a descending glowing bucket. Set against a “red, hot backdrop”³ *House of Fire* alerts its viewers to its conceptual importance. The unsaturated red within the composition startles the audience, as “there is a seemingly infinite number of shades of red here, especially noticeable in the lipsticks [and] the fiery red-orange of the central panel.”⁴ The red serves to seize the attention of the viewers of the piece as well as warn of the impending danger surrounding the subject of the work, much like the red used in alarm systems and signage. In addition, Figure 1’s “abrupt and irrational jumps in scale...make[s] a striking, disquieting composition.”⁵ In *House of Fire* the sizes of the objects completely contradict as the lipsticks and the grocery bag are the same size as the central window. These erroneous scales further distress the viewers of the piece as the objects rebel against their expected sizes – establishing the piece’s overall unconformity in regards to the ideal American dream. The abundance of a saturated red in addition to the irrational scales seen within *House of Fire* warn the viewer of the message of the piece in which Rosenquist rejected the idea of the American dream.

¹“Pop Art Movement, Artists and Major Works,” The Art Story, 2017, accessed November 02, 2017, <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-pop-art.htm>.

² Jennifer Holt, “The Ideal Woman,” master’s thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/soundings/Holt.pdf>.

³ “James Rosenquist Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works,” The Art Story, 2017, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rosenquist-james-artworks.htm>

⁴Bradford D. Kelleher, John P. O’Neill, and Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art: United States of America*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987), 157.

⁵ Ibid.

PERSUASIVE
PARAGRAPH 1

topic sentence →

evidence →

Stage 2 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
identifying the described
elements using sources →

analysis →

Stage 3 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
interpretation of evidence) →

concluding
sentence →

In the representation of groceries within *House of Fire*, Rosenquist suggested the impending danger of yielding to the ideal American Dream. Figure 1, represents the quintessential depiction of groceries – bread, eggs, and vegetables inside a brown paper bag – hang upside down, shown the moment before they fall. Rosenquist pointed out that the groceries “threaten to drop like bombs.”⁶ He concluded that “aggression infiltrates the domestic sphere.”⁷ As a result of this precariousness, the groceries invoke anxiety within the audience, as viewers wait for an impossible conclusion of the groceries crashing down. Through this expectation of a violent end, it appears that the artist challenged the common assumption that groceries symbolize peaceful domesticity; instead, he insinuated that the idea of standard domesticity in itself is dangerous. Therefore, the bag of groceries seen in *House of Fire* serves as a warning of the doom that awaits those that submit to the idea of the American Dream.

PERSUASIVE
PARAGRAPH 2

Stage 3 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
interpretation of evidence)

topic sentence →

evidence →

Stage 2 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
identifying the described
elements using sources →

analysis →

Stage 3 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
interpretation of evidence) →

concluding
sentence →

In *House of Fire*, Rosenquist presented a central open window with a red-hot bucket coming through to remark on the hazards of believing the falsehood of the American dream. In his piece, Rosenquist represented a “supernaturally radiant bucket of molten steel descends through a window.”⁸ Windows, in the domestic sense, are usually regarded as innocuous openings that are seen in picturesque illustrations of home life. In contrast, the window in *House of Fire* performs as an aperture for a glowing hot bucket of melted metal, thus disrupting the idyllic scene of an open window, as well as the usual assumption of the purpose of a house window. This depiction of the bucket of molten steel coming down through the open window rejects the idea of windows as stable fixtures of domestic life, and propagates the idea that the American dream is harmful to the public. The juxtaposition of the harmless window serving as an opening for a hazardous bucket of scorching, molten steel in Figure 1 symbolizes the unexpected dangers of acquiescing to the seemingly perfect, modern American dream.

⁶ “James Rosenquist Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works,” *The Art Story*, 2017, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rosenquist-james-artworks.htm2> Ibid., 409.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “House of Fire,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, j.e. The Met Museum, 2017, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/482613>.

PERSUASIVE
PARAGRAPH 3

topic sentence →

Rosenquist's *House of Fire* exploits violent images of lipsticks to comment on the dangers of the idea of the American Dream. In *House of Fire* "huge aggressive lipsticks dwarf the other objects, and seem to rush into the painting, invading the central panel like a battery of weapons."⁹ As Russell describes "lipsticks launch themselves like missiles"¹⁰, evoking concepts of violence and danger. In this way, Rosenquist used lipsticks, a symbol of the domestic gender roles associated with the American dream, to reinforce his dissatisfaction with the public's pursuit of the supposed American dream. In the 1950s, the era from which pop artists like Rosenquist drew inspiration from, women were expected to remain visually attractive for their husbands throughout the day's activities of cleaning, cooking, and child rearing. Advertisements reinforced this expectation through the marketing of home products in which women were depicted in their gender roles, shaping the creation of the modern women's identity and pressuring women of the era to stay at home.¹¹ As a result, "women were more likely to be consumers of cleaning aids, food, clothing and cosmetics,"¹² giving the depicted lipsticks in *House of Fire* a heavier connotation in relation to their role in the modern American dream. By aligning the lipsticks "like a battery of guns,"¹³ Rosenquist insinuated that the gender roles, indicative of the American dream, are dangerous to the livelihoods of the public, similar to the danger weapons pose to humanity.

evidence

Stage 2 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
identifying the described
elements using sources

analysis

Stage 3 of Panofsky's
Iconographic method:
interpretation of evidence

concluding
sentence →

Through the ferocious portrayal of lipsticks, symbols of the gender roles associated with the American dream, Rosenquist essentially stated that yielding to aspects of the modern American dream, as well as the idea overall, is inevitably dangerous.

CONCLUSION

In Rosenquist's triptych, random objects became precarious, which equated to Rosenquist's assertion that submitting to the idea of the American dream is hazardous. The grocery bag, open window and the lipsticks are portrayed in perilous states to imply that chasing the American dream will lead the public into grave situations. In addition, Rosenquist disassociated the objects from their original connotations. *House of Fire* depicts a group of lipsticks as violent, contradicting their association with docile femininity; it illustrates an upended grocery bag, which usually symbolizes family stability; and it shows an open window, which usually functions as a connection to calming, fresh air, serving as an opening for a bucket of dangerous smelting metal. In the depiction of these icons, *House of Fire* not only operates as a warning for the public against pursuing the American dream, it also acts as a declaration that the American dream is not a dream at all – it is a nightmare much like lipsticks acting as weapons, groceries threatening to drop like bombs and windows serving as apertures for dangerous industrial materials.

⁹ Kelleher, *United States of America*, 157.

¹⁰ John Russell, "Art: A Good Way to Look at French Old Masters," *The New York Times*, March 26, 1982, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/03/26/arts/art-a-good-way-to-look-at-french-old-masters.html>.

¹¹ Jennifer Holt, "The Ideal Woman," master's thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://www.csustan.edu/sites/default/files/honors/documents/journals/soundings/Holt.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "House of Fire," 2017.

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