

Kay Rosen at the Drawing Room

In an elegant little publication she created to accompany this show of 50 recent collages and one wall drawing, Kay Rosen writes that her raw material "comes to the table . . . with mature physical characteristics." Hence, her job doesn't involve formal decisions "as much as it involves respectfully trying to get into the 'head' of the given item with the intention of figuring out what its next step would be if there were a next step." This is considerably too modest; Rosen exercises a great deal of visual finesse. But it does suggest the spirit of her art, which is not just brainy but intuitive to the point of goofiness: how, for example, do you get inside the head of a paint swatch? The answer is best sought in the work, especially when it teeters between pure visuality and the deft, often comic wordplay that has occupied Rosen for more than 20 years.

Many of the jokes use titles for punch lines, as in *Fillmore Space*, a sheet of stamps of U.S. presidents with a space left blank for Millard Fillmore. Occasionally, she digs up buried homonyms, as with the "Ho Ho Ho" discovered in a scrap of paper bearing the words

"Idaho," "Frijoles" and "Moholy-Nagy"; this scrap is glued onto paper patterned with Yuletide holly. Rosen is not averse to transcendent silliness, as in *Wedding*, which features Red Grooms's signature and a swatch of paint labeled "Blushing Bride." Nor is she hobbled by tact. In her hands, the oft-reproduced photo of a silver tea service covered in Trade Center ash is branded with a towering black penciled "T" to become *T and Sympathy*.

Most of the work is small, but Rosen breaks out of the bibliophilic scale in two ways. Occupying one full wall is *On Top of Old Smokie*, a quartered rectangle in which each quadrant is painted a different decorator color: "Olive Grove," "Red Maple," etc.; the whole is bordered with a color called "Great Smokie Mountain." The trade names are printed on a card leaning against the wall next to used cans of paint, as in an ad for Home Depot (whence indeed the misspelling, "Smokie" instead of "Smoky," that seeded this crypto-landscape painting). Rosen also boosts the scale by stringing together the collages in a roughly linear way that hints at narrative progression; color, a favorite topic of linguists and philosophers, is a theme.

Rosen claims a handful of artists as kin, among whom Ed Ruscha is a particularly telling choice. Along with perfect pitch for a resonant phrase, they share a kind of hedge-your-bets mysticism, which allows that words may be too powerful to fully control or even understand. Sometimes, the best you can do is humor them.

—Nancy Princenthal

Kay Rosen: *Fillmore Space*, 2001, mixed-medium collage, 12½ by 8 inches; at the Drawing Room.

