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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

JACKSON POLLOCK: THE MYTH AND THE DRIP.

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF ART AND DESIGN AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

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FACULTY OF FINE ART - DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

**REFERENCE
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BY TOM MOLLOY APRIL 1987

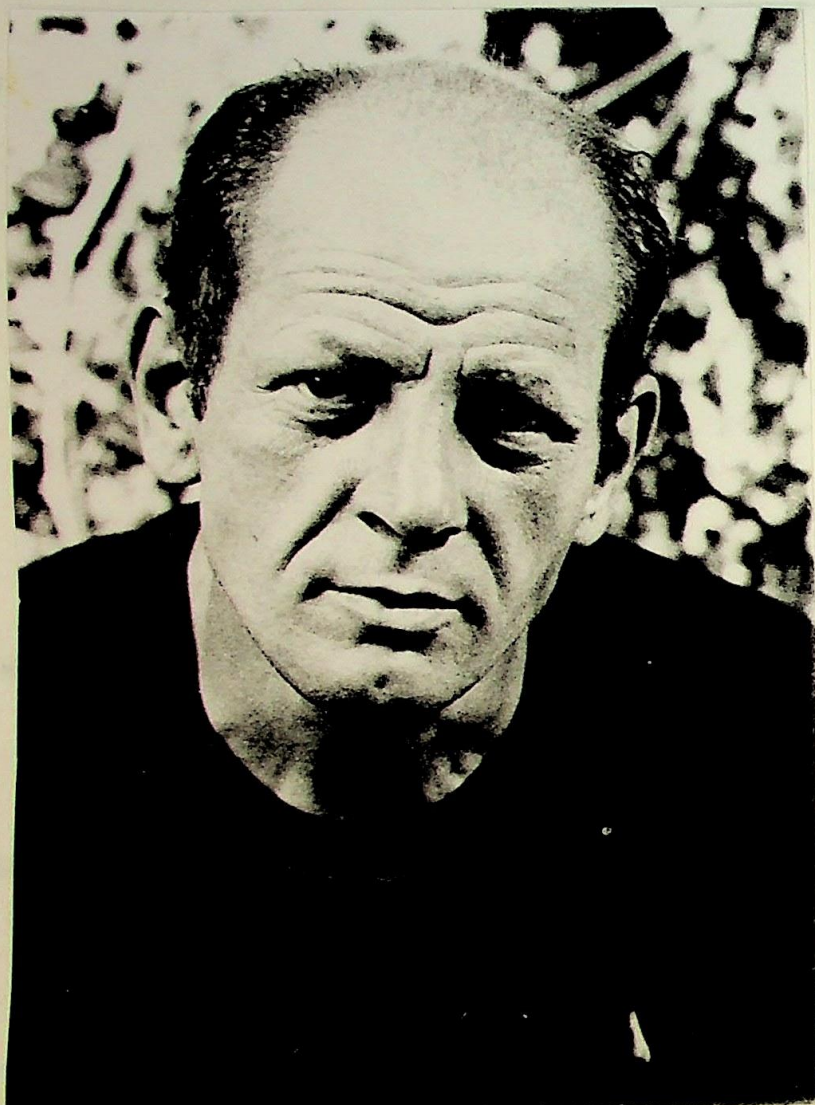
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PL. I Jackson Pollock (Photo: Hans Namuth)

JACKSON POLLOCK, DISCOURSES ON ART

Technic is the result of a need _____

New needs demand new technics _____

Total control _____ denial of

The accident _____

States of order _____

Organic intensity _____

Energy and motion

Made visible _____

Memories arrested in space,

Human needs and motives _____

Acceptance _____

JACKSON POLLOCK

" Accident in the hands of an artist who knows how to take the advantage of its hints, will often produce bold and capricious beauties of handling and facility, such as he would not have thought of, or mentioned, with his pencil under the regular restraint of his hand ".

JOSHUA REYNOLDS, DISCOURSES ON ART

INTRODUCTION

art criticism, like most other specialized fields of endeavour, has of late been subjected to a rather drastic criticism on the part of the public. It is now generally recognized that the artist is not a person who lives in a vacuum, but that his work is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time.

Many of the more important aspects of Pollock's art have been overlooked and often ignored, due to the subjective examination which it has received and its being considered as an individual's (and) expression. The examination of Pollock's art has been largely due to the exclusive emphasis on the various factors which contributed to his work. It is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time.

Many historians and art critics have tended to see Pollock as a person who was deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time. This is a fact which has been recognized by the public, and it is now generally accepted that the artist is a person who is deeply influenced by the social and economic conditions of his time.

Art criticism, like most other specialized fields of endeavour, can at times be so selective that often what it discards for its own purposes maybe of ulterior importance to the artist and the work itself. Criticism usually views art relative to norms such as history, theory, social circumstances etc. To have proven standards in relation to which art can be viewed can aid comprehension of the work, particularly if the work happens to be extremely radical, challenging and not immediately accessible. However to work within the limits of a rigid framework can often be to the detriment of other significant aspects of the work. This would seem to be the case with Jackson Pollock. His life and work has been examined and written about by historians, critics, social commentators, psychologists, biographers and the popular press.

Many of the more important aspects of Pollock's art have been misrepresented and often ignored, due to the subjective examination which it has received from the variety of individuals from opposing backgrounds. The wholeness of Pollock's art has been dispersed due to the exclusive simplification of all the various factors which contributed to that wholeness. Though it would be impossible to comprehend his complexity of mind and action all at once, to detatch and examine individual aspects of him without giving due consideration to his wholeness, tends to water down an understanding of his ambitions and aspirations.

Many historians and formalist critics have tended to see Pollock merely as a vector who carried the formal elements of colour line and form from the school of Paris through to the post painterly minimalism of the sixties. Why?

In many cases it was in order to proliferate their own conception of the evolution of mainstream western culture. This is what Pollock has become most renowned for. It is true that with his drip paintings he advanced many of the ideas contained within modernist art theory. However to deal with Pollock's art exclusively on those terms, as many critics have done, denies the importance of his subjective and esoteric aspirations. Despite the formal advances he made it was the latter which forced him to change direction and develop throughout his short career. Though from time to time Pollock did over indulge in history, technique and form, he constantly returned to his own private reasons as to why he painted. Above all Pollock wanted his art to prove to him his ability to communicate his complexity of thought and character.

When he was satisfied that his art was not capable of doing this he changed his techniques regardless of the consequences it would have with critics, history and his viewing public at large. Though he was a restless artist, his need for change signifies above all, his ability to view his work with a certain amount of detached honesty. He became renowned and remembered for his drip paintings, but the very fact that he stopped doing these indicates that they were not capable of meeting the requirements he felt within himself. Though his subsequent work, from 1951 until his death in 1956, may not have been as formally successful as the drip paintings, they are indeed a truer reflection of Pollock's actual character. Art history tends to pick out the most spectacular successes from all its sources, but what it leaves behind can often be more important to the artists involved. Twentieth century art history and criticism develops in a logical and linear fashion, artists do not.

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER I

DRIP PAINTINGS 1947 - 1950.

In 1951 during an interview, Jackson Pollock made the statement,

' ...today painters do not have to go to a subject matter outside of themselves. Most modern painters work from a different source. They work from within...' (I)

Pollock said this at a time when he was particularly confident about his work. The previous three or four years had been exceptionally productive, and although not exceptionally rewarding financially, they had brought him much favourable critical acclaim. Like the above statement many of his other remarks and observations concerning his work, focus on a precise aspect not only of the nature of his work but also that of the artist himself. This comment is in many ways a summation of his feelings and intentions, which were most evident within his work since 1947. It also expresses the prevailing attitude of many of his contemporaries. Pollock had by 1951 developed a clear understanding of the nature of his drip paintings. As the above statement suggests, Pollock believed that it was possible for an artist to choose not to go beyond his own mind in order to create work with meaning and sensibility, but rather discover his subject matter within himself. This would suggest that the artist identifies his emotions, feelings and sensations, and uses his medium to expose them in some way or other. Kandinsky spent much of his life exploring such a possibility. Kandinsky, along with many of the other non-objective painters chose to directly use emotions as subject matter; much of their intention being the distillation of pure thought and feeling in an attempt to generate an exceptionally refined and rational mode of expression.

In many ways they endeavoured to illustrate feeling. They attempted to treat these intangible aspects of the human character as their subject matter in much the same way as a representational artist might treat nature as subject matter.

By observing, scrutinizing and eventually extracting and emphasising that which is considered necessary.

Though concerned to some extent with similar objectives as to Kandinsky, for Pollock emotion did not function as direct subject matter. With his drip paintings Pollock did not propose to expose specific feelings and emotions in an objective and premeditated fashion. The formal components within a Pollock painting do not directly correspond to specific feelings and levels of sensation. Kandinsky believed that through the calculated juxtaposition of the basic formal pictorial elements of colour, line and plane, various emotional responses could be aroused in the viewer. Kandinsky wanted to rationally order his feelings in a very objective fashion. The critic Clement Greenberg believed that Pollock was also capable of doing this and maintained that it was one of his main attributes. Though comparisons may be drawn between Kandinsky and certain aspects of Abstract Expressionism, Pollock did not rationally order his emotions in the way Greenberg would have liked him to do. It may be true that he controlled them in some way from 1947 to 1950, but purely by the fact that he returned to a more uncontrolled and obsessive manner of working after 1950 must surely indicate that he was not totally content with the security he had found in his drip paintings.

An important distinction must be drawn here between Kandinsky's non-objective approach toward emotional involvement in painting and Pollock's own approach. Kandinsky, it would seem, chose to work 'with' his emotions and feelings, whereas Pollock worked 'from' them. Kandinsky went so far as to confidently pin-point what emotional sensation each colour was capable of arousing within the spectator.

He believed that each colour had an inherent ability to stimulate, and to varying degrees. In his book FROM POINT AND LINE TO PLANE, he meticulously examines how formal elements are capable of reacting with one another, and how they are capable of provoking various emotional responses, according to their relationship with each other and to the picture plane. Though Kandinsky successfully worked through many of his concepts about formal concerns and spirituality, his approach was essentially rational and pragmatic rather than purely subjective. On the other hand Pollock worked 'from' his emotions in what would seem to be a more necessary and existential way.

He did not examine and extract his emotions for the purpose of illustrating ^{THEM} with paint. Rather he allowed his intense feelings to surface through the violently energetic methods which he had developed by 1947. He treated his feelings as a whole and not as Kandinsky attempted to do, as separate entities. By dripping paint in his adopted manner he was able to find a type of mental stability, something which he lacked in his personal life. At times his methods were almost of therapeutic value to him. They allowed him the opportunity for a form of non-hierarchical mental release, without having to confront the actual personal problems which constantly weighed on his mind. It would seem to be that the drip paintings did not deal with precise issues, but acted in a generalised way by giving Pollock a respite from his personal and social inhibitions. It may be worth taking into account here, that Pollock, a confirmed alcoholic, had not been drinking for a year and a half, during which time he made the most renowned of his drip paintings. Pollock himself realised in 1951 that his seductively beautiful drip paintings were not dealing with specific personal issues on a direct level. Like his drug therapy which efficiently masked his anxiety to the extent that alcohol was not necessary, so too did the drip painting act in this way.

Subsequently he returned to using a recognisable iconography. By returning to representation in the manner he did, Pollock once again directly confronted specific personal problems, the same problems he tried to come to terms with prior to 1947. Essentially it would seem that Pollock had a more esoteric need to deal with subjective issues than Kandinsky did, or the other artists of that time who had also been concerned with similar spiritual affinities, such as Mondrian and Malevich. Arising from the fact that Pollock did not propose to illustrate his feelings but rather express them (2) , he encountered a significant problem of how to convert emotion into content.

Kandinsky who had also encountered this problem resolved it by communicating sensations through form and colour in a precise, analytical and calculated fashion. This is particularly evident within his later paintings. However they seem to lack the ability to provoke an intense spiritual response without the knowledge of his theories. It seems that a clear understanding of Kandinsky's theories is required if his paintings are to be appreciated fully. Pollock differs in that he did not go to the canvas with a preconceived modernist formula for creating distinctive spiritual sensations. Kandinsky worked from the known in an effort to create the unknown. Pollock on the otherhand, as he himself said in 1951, worked 'from the abstract to the concrete'. (3) By saying this he believed, that he was not bringing specific personal emotions to the canvas, but when the painting was complete his emotional involvement during the process of painting could at least be felt if not be immediately recognised.

By viewing his finished paintings as 'concrete' statements about his emotional instability, he believed they would be judged in terms of having worked or not. This was something which Pollock was anxious about throughout his career.

Though he was open to and accepted constructive criticism, he had a constant fear of being misunderstood both on a professional and personal level. By working towards the concrete, rather than towards the abstract, he felt it would be easier to judge the merits of the finished paintings and 'his criterion like the inventor's, was whether it worked or not'. (4) He disliked and resented criticism of his work which dealt exclusively with its technical considerations. He felt that such criticism missed the point of his efforts. For Pollock criticism of his work 'should be directed at least in terms of what he is doing rather than by standards of what painting ought to be'. (5)

By demanding that his work be appreciated in terms of process, ^R rather than purely on technical ability and innovation we are given some indication as to Pollock's content and how he arrived at it. He probably formulated this attitude through his contact with the European Surrealists in New York during the thirties and forties and while working at the experimental workshop of Siqueiros during 1936. His need to express his emotions and the difficulty of converting them into content was eventually resolved through his unique manner of applying paint to the canvas.

In order to translate his emotions, without having to describe them, the act of applying paint to the canvas became almost of meditative or therapeutic value to him. To enhance and exploit this situation fully, it was necessary to distance himself from traditional techniques, ^{TECHNIQUES} which work within the confines of an established tradition are generally more accessible and available to an audience. A Renaissance brush stroke, by its very nature, is fundamentally similar to a twentieth century brush stroke, and the power it holds works more or less within the same limited area. Age old traditional techniques are imbued with a patina of familiarity which gives reassurance and security, whether they are used by Rembrandt, Monet or Picasso.

As Pollock was concerned with something totally new, or at least attempting a totally new approach, he found it necessary to adopt a new approach to technique. New techniques which go beyond tradition also demand that the finished work itself be not totally viewed relative to that tradition. Pollock's art by its existential nature demands this. Pollock himself realised that all 'technic (sic) is the result of a need' and that 'new needs demand new technics (sic)'. (6)

Pollock's innovative techniques distanced him from tradition, and in doing so created a void which he could fill with his own unique concerns. By using techniques and methods which were more evocative of primitive ritual than of traditional Western High Art, it allowed the result of his emotional involvement to emerge in a subliminal rather than illustrative manner. Through dripping fluid paint on an unprimed horizontal surface in an energetic and vivacious fashion, the act of painting became for him a form of catharsis. In this way the actual experience of painting became the subject matter of the finished canvas. The eventual image was to become the result of an action which happened between the artist who had approached the canvas with 'a material in his hand to do something to that other material in front of him'. (7)

As this would suggest the paintings themselves are autobiographical: they are a record of a unique experience of expression felt by the artist while creating the work. This experience was recorded through the physical process of creating.

The above attitude was not only synonymous with Pollock's work but was also an underlying and intricate part of subsequent Abstract Expressionist theory. It affects to one degree or other, most of the important New York School painters of the forties and fifties.

This attitude went beyond certain important European values concerning Expressionism. It was not until Pollock 'broke the ice for us', (8) as De Kooning generously remarked, that the notion of a painting being capable of faithfully recording feelings expressed during the activity of painting became a practical possibility. From then on expressionist painting would no longer have to be a statement concerned with a preconceived response to external circumstances and situations. The prevailing attitude inherent within European Expressionism was that the initial emotions which inspired a painting should be sustained throughout the activity of painting.

For example, a painting by the German, George Grosz, from the twenties, contains and illustrates the initial anger which drove him to create that work. This anger and pitch of emotion must persist throughout the duration of the activity of painting, if the painting is to be successful within his terms.

A typical Grosz painting such as PILLARS OF SOCIETY (PL 2) from 1926 demonstrates this point. Through its explicit narrative nature it emphatically illustrates the artist's disgust and anger towards an external social situation.



In order to make such a potent statement it was necessary for Grosz to maintain his initial anger and disgust throughout the making of the painting. In PILLARS OF SOCIETY, Grosz brought a very precise reaction to his canvas and ^{if} the resulting ~~paint~~ drawing does not illustrate and communicate this reaction then the work would have failed within the limits he had set himself. Grosz cannot allow his feelings about his subject matter to waver during the process of painting.

This was also an attitude which was dominant within American Realism and Social Realism of the twenties and thirties, which Pollock had direct contact with through his association with Thomas Hart Benton at the Art Student League. This sort of approach to Expressionism did not allow Pollock the personal freedom to utilise his emotions as he desired. Expressionism, whether the type used by Grosz, Van Gogh or Kirchner always seemed to be one step removed from the artist.

Basically Pollock was looking for something to come from or out of his painting, be it proof to him of somekind of mental stability or reassurance that he was capable of communicating his feelings. Grosz, unlike Pollock, was involved with provoking a particular preconceived response from his viewer by means of his direct and provocative manner of working. Though Pollock said that he had a general notion as to what his results would be like, he did not impose his character on the work in progress, rather he hoped that certain aspects of his character would unconsciously come through in the finished paintings.

Pollock's compositions were not pre planned. He could not have pre planned them if only for the fact of their large format and the way they were executed, on the floor. This allowed him to get 'in' to the painting, as he could never view them as a whole until they were hanging vertically.

It was only when a mark was actually applied to the canvas that a response to it could be made by him. Each subsequent mark is a reaction to what had gone before it. By working from all four sides the canvases had no top or bottom. It was only when his efforts were hung on the wall, with a top and bottom posthumously decided upon, that the canvases became paintings. By using his impulsive and spontaneous methods he was free to work quickly and instinctively, thereby allowing for a minimum of rational thought about the actual mark making and how it was progressing relative to the whole of the canvas.

His natural and unconscious sense of movement and reaction was thus allowed to act without constraint. In this respect his paintings became receptacles capable of capturing thought processes and his emotional disposition, free from the inhibitions of history and his contemporary's art and theories. Those factors could then only affect him in a subliminal way. Thus a Pollock Drip Painting is a record of the fundamental elements which constituted his mind and actions for the duration of painting that picture.

Pollock's earlier works (pre 1949) generally work within the European Tradition as described above. He worked with strict compositional frameworks and normally used a recognisable image. Typical examples of this being MOON WOMAN CUTS THE CIRCLE , THE SHE WOLF (PL 3) and BIRTH (PL 4).

Pollock eventually found it necessary to dispense with the image from his work. However he did not do so in order to have a blank canvas available on which he could juggle with the formal elements of painting as some critics have advocated. Clement Greenberg saw Pollock's strength not in his ability to create direct emotional statements. He says that,



Plate 3 THE SHE WOLF

"Pollock's strength lies in the emphatic surfaces of his pictures, which it is his concern to maintain and intensify in all that thick, fuliginous flatness... it is the tension inherent in the constructed, re-created flatness of the surface that produces the strength of his art". (9)

At that time Pollock felt that a recognisable subject matter came between him and his emotions.



Plate 4 BIRTH

By having an image within the painting Pollock felt that it acted as a distraction from his intentions due to the associations which it was capable of arousing in the viewer. As he said in 1951,

"the viewer should not look for, but look passively - and try to receive what the painting has to offer and not bring a subject matter or preconceived idea of what they are looking for... (his work) should be enjoyed just as music is enjoyed - after a while you may like it or you may not". (10)

Pollock's use of mythological and often ambiguous titles within his earlier paintings was an effort to do away with easy association which the viewer might have with the images. At the same time the titles were an effort to evoke within the viewer an experience similar to the creative experience, he actually experienced while painting.

Good examples of this are the loosely evocative surrealist type titles like, GUARDIANS OF THE SECRET , SEARCH FOR A SYMBOL and STENOGRAPHIC FIGURE. The 1943 painting PASIPHAË was originally titled MOBY DICK. He changed it when he learned the mythological story of Pasiphaë's bull from James Johnson Sweeney. Feeling that the mythological story was more in keeping with the experience he felt while painting that and more synonymous with his feelings about the painting than Herman Melville's MOBY DICK, was justification enough for him to change the title and therefore people's interpretation of the painting.

As Pollock became progressively more involved with the actual experience of painting, the elimination of the object from his work seemed to be a natural progression for him.

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For similar reasons, later he also found it necessary to dispense with many of the formal pictorial elements such as colour, form and composition, to varying degrees. It is still not fully clear whether this minimalisation of his work was out of personal necessity or pressure from the then current avant garde. By all accounts, at certain periods during his career the latter two possibilities probably affected him.

The critic Harold Rosenberg states in his essay, THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS (1959) that, 'liberation from the object meant liberation from 'nature', society and art already there'. (II) Going by a strict interpretation of this criterion, paint which has no apparent representational imagery is no more than the result of the artist's action and experience having confronted the canvas with paint. This notion of an art experience would seem to be at the core of Pollock's work.

The resulting image for Pollock of this experience would be a surprise to him as he does not go to the canvas with a preconceived notion of an image in his mind. Pollock worked from his unconscious to a large extent, allowing it to control how his body would function as he worked his way around the unstretched canvas. While working Pollock seemed to enter a trance like state, as is evident from Hans Namuth's black and white photographs and from the film he made with Peter Falkenberg in 1951. Recalling his first visit to Pollock's studio Namuth said,

"there was complete silence... then unexpectedly, he picked up can and paintbrush and started to move around the canvas ... his movements, slow at first, gradually became faster and more dance like as he flung black and white and rust coloured paint on to the canvas. He completely forgot that Lee (Krasner) and I were there, he did not seem to hear the click of the camera shutter". (12)

Namuth's comments could be read adversely to suggest that Pollock was somebody out of control, excorciating his neurosis by flinging paint across a room. Far from this, Pollock's concentration, emotional involvement and innate sense of decision making during the experience of creating a work of art is what is most evident in the finished canvases. An important factor within his work was his ability to make an unchaotic statement about his psychic while using a fairly unconscious approach.

What may help to explain this is Carl Jung's statement that 'the unconscious functions ^{SATISFACTORILY ONLY WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS FULFILLS} its task to the limit of its capacities'. (13) Robert Goodnough who also watched Pollock working during 1950 said that the importance of the nature of the experience was that 'it is not something that has lost contact with reality, but might be called a synthesis of countless contacts which have become refined in the area of the emotions during the act of painting'. (14)

By using unconventional means of applying paint, Pollock helped to block out his conscious mind, thus inviting his unconscious mind to act. Jungian dream theory works in much the same way by allowing the unconscious aspects of our mind to surface once consciousness is suppressed by sleep. Pollock had contact with numerous Jungian advocates throughout his life and in 1956 stated that he had been 'Jungian for a long time'. (15)

The experience which Pollock encountered while painting is somewhat similar to the art experience proposed by the American aesthete John Dewey in his book ART AS EXPERIENCE (1934) Dewey considered that when an artist is so involved with the act of creating 'that the object and pleasure are one and undivided in the experience'. (16)

For both Dewey and Pollock the main consideration which determines whether the experience is art or not is the extent of the artist's involvement during the act of creating. If the emotional trance is interrupted the result according to Dewey is simply not art, for Pollock it is a mess. Pollock made this clear in a precise way in 1947 when he said,

"When I am painting, I'm not aware of what I am doing ... I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image etc. because the painting has a life of its own ... it is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well". (17)

By working from his unconscious mind in this manner, if one accepts the Jungian notion of archetypes, it was possible for Pollock to draw from the wealth of shared experiences common to the collective unconsciousness. According to Jungian psychology 'a person could find within himself resonances of meaning shared by the human race through all time'. (18)

This allowed Pollock access to the same unconsciousness which would have been used by primitive artists throughout history. Pollock himself has claimed to have greatly admired and to have been influenced by the Navaho Indian sand painters of South Western America. Curiously enough these sand paintings were made by pouring different coloured sand into precise patterns on the ground during the healing ceremonies of great emotional intensity, under the supervision of a medicine man. During these primitive ceremonies there is a close union created between priest, healer, patient and artist, something which may be difficult to understand in a modern Western situation.

Though this may be worth bearing in mind, to hope to compare conclusively that Pollock's intentions were similar to those of the Navaho would probably amount to little more than speculation.

With his drip paintings Pollock certainly shows the same ease of access to the unconscious as have certain primitive artists but his own way he was very much part of the Western tradition through his individual^{ty} and conscious intelligence. Whether there is any truth in Jung's theories about the collective unconsciousness, Pollock's painting certainly seem to be able to provoke a reaction within the viewer, a reaction similar in many ways to the reaction which the natural world is capable of provoking within a contemplative mind.

In some ways a Pollock drip painting embodies the actual feelings which the nineteenth century romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich attempted to illustrate in paintings such as MONK BY THE SEA (1804) or TWO MEN CONTEMPLATING THE MOON (1809) (PL 5)

PLATE 5



Pollock as well as Rothko, Still and Newman tried in a secular world to find a convincing means of expressing those religious experiences that had been previously channeled into the traditional themes of Christian art. It is worth recalling at this point the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas and Barnett Newman's Station's of the Cross.

In John Berger's book PERMANENT RED, Pollock can be seen, though not necessarily intentionally, as a sort of Jungian figure.

Berger compares him to 'a man brought up in a white cell' who is suddenly given some 'sticks and bright paints.' Though lacking all external visual stimuli this man may come up with gestures and actions similar to those of Pollock's, as he could only 'express his ideas and feelings about growth, time, energy and death'.

Berger goes on to state that Pollock imaginatively subjectively isolated himself almost to that extent in an effort to 'discover the universal in yourself, for in a one man world you are universal'. (19) Though Berger's analogy and emphatic statements may not take into consideration some of the more important elements which contributed to the formation of Pollock's drip paintings, inherent within them there are many truths about his humanity and his ideology.

FOOTNOTES

1. Elizabeth Frank, JACKSON POLLOCK , P 110.
2. Ibid. "The modern artist is working in space and time, and is expressing his feelings rather than illustrating ..."
3. Robert Goodnough, 'Pollock paints a picture', ART NEWS , May 1951, P 51
4. Brian O' Doherty, AMERICAN MASTERS , P 116.
5. Goodnough, P 41.
6. E. A. Carmean, AMERICAN ART AT THE MID CENTURY, P. 151.
7. Harold Rosenberg, THE TRADITION OF THE NEW , P. 25.
8. Harold Rosenberg, THE ANXIOUS OBJECT, P. 30.
9. Tom Wolfe, THE PAINTED WORD , PP 56 - 57.
10. Elizabeth Frank, P 110.
11. Rosenberg, THE TRADITION OF THE NEW , P 30.
12. Hans Namuth, POLLOCK PAINTING ,
13. Ellen Johnson, 'Jackson Pollock and Nature', STUDIO INTERNATIONAL, June 1973, P. 259 .

FOOTNOTES CONTD.

- I4. Goodnough P. 60.
- I5. Donald E Gordon, 'Pollock's bird or how Jung did not offer much help in myth making', ART IN AMERICA, October 1980, P. 51.
- I6. Stewart Buettner, AMERICAN ART THEORY 1945 - 1970 , P. 59 .
- I7. Frank P. 109 .
- I8. Joshua A Taylor, THE FINE ARTS IN AMERICA , P. 207.
- I9. John Berger, PERMANENT RED, P.P. 68 - 69.
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CHAPTER II

For many artists, black and white are not only colors, but also a way of life. Their paintings seem to constitute one of the most important and greatest artistic and cultural monuments. These magnificent paintings, it may be argued, destroyed many age old dogmatic notions concerning the nature and function of painting and they also opened up numerous new possibilities for expression. In such respects, Pollock apparently resolved many of the formal problems which were confronted by artists at the turn of the century. Some of these problems were initially brought to light by the Impressionists and the Cubists. At the same time, through his paintings, we are allowed a unique insight into the character and mind of a fearlessly searching and extremely inventive artist.

CRITICS AND THE BLACK POURINGS.

He was a man of emotional extremes. His art is also polarized in that he seems to place equal emphasis and importance on both objectivity and subjectivity. This ambiguity may be seen to be due to the fact that he was, within his own life time, critically evaluated by two opposing viewpoints. The same paintings were made to neatly fit into and exemplify both the towering and manifestations of the opposing modernist critics Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

Probably as in most great paintings with the formal and the subjective were so important that neither could be ignored. At that time many people believed in the arts were taking a place in life with the same paintings he personified opposing artistic theories and ideas, and was therefore praised and championed by those suffering viewpoints. Due to his radical techniques, his emotional profound elements and his frequent unconventional social behaviour, his greatness was secured, and it never allowed itself to be disputed.

"Theology of opinion about a work of art means that the work is new, unique and vital. When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself".

For many artists, historians, critics and students, Pollock's paintings seem to constitute one of the twentieth century's greatest artistic and cultural anomalies. These contentious paintings, it may be argued, destroyed many age old dogmatic axioms concerning the nature and construction of painting and they also opened up numerous new possibilities for examination. In some respects, Pollock apparently resolved many of the formal problems which were prevalent in Europe at the turn of the century : Formal considerations such as those initially brought to light by the Impressionists and the Cubists. At the same time, through his paintings, we are allowed a unique insight into the character and mind of a restlessly searching and extremely inventive artist.

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Possibly as in most great paintings both the formal and the subjective were so important that neither could be ignored. At that time many people involved in the arts were staking a claim in him. With the same paintings he personified opposing critic's theories and ideas, and was therefore praised and championed by those differing viewpoints. Due to his radical techniques, his occasional profound comments and his frequent unconventional social behaviour, his greatness was sensed, but it never allowed itself to be pinpointed.

"Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex and vital. When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself".

These apt aphorisms from Oscar Wilde's preface to THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY could well be applicable to Pollock's relationship to critics during the forties and fifties.

It is worth bearing in mind that both Greenberg and Rosenberg were extremely perceptive and talented writers being ambitious by nature. (I) Their criticism not only helped to raise Pollock's stature in the art world, but also consciously served to enhance their own intellectual reputations as the vanguard critics of that period. Their writings are sophisticated, deliberate and immaculately constructed. In a sense they used the art and the myths concerning the artists to create their own art form and myths.

Subsequently they were treated with the same prestige by having their own critics who dealt exclusively with criticizing the original criticism. Tom Wolfe is a good example of this with his book THE PAINTED WORD (1975) he almost exclusively deals with the critics rather than with the artists themselves. Curiously enough Wolfe's criticism is in fact his art form.

Of all the critics, Greenberg is the one most associated with Pollock. Prior to the second world war he was a left wing activist but became a leading anti-communist liberal during the Mc Carthy era. He joined the Anti - Soviet magazine COMMENTARY in 1945. He found himself in an uncompromising situation during the Cold War in being both a champion of Modernism (a degenerate art form which undermined American Democracy) and being an anti-communist activist. To resolve his ambiguous situation towards Modernism and Abstract Expressionism

he emphasised the visual innovations which were presumably possible only in a society based on freedom of speech and expression, thus diverting attention from the radical political convictions of many New York artists.

In his famous essay AVANT GARDE AND KITSCH, first published in 1939, Greenberg says that

"The true and most important function of the avant garde was not to 'experiment' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence". (2)

Though a statement like this helped him to cast off certain political convictions it also gives an indication as to his subsequent formal viewpoints about painting. Greenberg failed 'to see anything essential in it (Abstract Expressionism) that cannot be shown to have evolved out of either Cubism or Impressionism'. (3) Thus he viewed painting as an activity of linear progression of its technical and formal elements. His theories about preserving the aesthetic object through flatness and the delimitation of flatness, which reached a pinnacle during the sixties with Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, was an attempt to introduce complexity in to the work without painting having to be involved in expressive gestures. His aesthetic object was eventually to be an impersonal absolute of clarity and openness. Greenberg's call was for the destruction of imagination expression for the sake of engaging upon a 'quest for the essence of painting, which he sees in purely physicalist's terms as the ineluctable flatness of the support' (4) IS

contrary to the importance which Pollock himself placed upon the process and imaginative expression. He insisted on 'aesthetic consistency ... only in results and never in method or means'. (5) Though Pollock's drip paintings may have renounced the blatantly expressive nature of his earlier work to a certain extent, they were, however, very much about emotional release, even if they are more subtle. Pollock recognised the calm and security which had become a regular feature of paintings like ONE, AUTUMN RHYTHM and LAVANDER MIST .

He consequently found a need to return to a more obsessive type of painting as that found in his black poured paintings. If as Greenberg suggested, creating an aesthetic object from formal assessments was Pollock's main contribution to art history, 'then one wonders what all that spilling of paint, booze and blood was about'. (6) This is also relevant to many of the other prominent artists of that period, including Rothko, Kline, Gorki and David Smith.

Similarly Rosenberg, whose protégé was De Kooning, worked exclusively within the framework of his own theories. It is true that he advocated the action and the process as being an intricate part of the work, but he ignored the resulting images and their implications. Thus in Pollock's work he ignored their true content. Though Rosenberg said that 'a painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist' (7), he viewed the action as a gesture of liberation by artists 'who hang around in the space between art and political action' (8)

Rosenberg called almost for action for the sake of action. His action was a symbol of liberation but never went beyond that. Though Pollock took action to a refined point Rosenberg could not fully acknowledge it as a liberated act because of the presumably psychological personal and esoteric reasons why Pollock had used the action or gesture. In his famous essay, THE AMERICAN ACTION PAINTERS (1959) his subheading, 'Apocalypse and Wallpaper' can be seen to be an indirect slur on Pollock's art. Instead of considering the images on the canvas, and their implications, Rosenberg defines a position for the artists and the intellectuals which allows them independence and integrity, free from the responsibility of the actual work.

However the cardinal issue within Pollock's work throughout his career was the esoteric need to make and develop images which would be proof to him that he was capable of alleviating and communicating the feelings and emotions which affected him on a personal level. Both Greenberg and Rosenberg deny this, as they both took from his work, what they required to demonstrate and exemplify their own theories.

Greenberg in particular, though a personal friend of Pollock's, would seem to almost deny that there was a confused and frustrated human behind the facade of the drip. This is particularly evident when one considers that his theories are applicable to Pollock as well as to the minimalists of the sixties.

In 1951, after three years of his notorious drip paintings Pollock returned to using a recognisable iconography, much to the distaste of Greenberg and to the amusement of Rosenberg. Why should the uncrowned king of mainstream western art suddenly decide to opt out. He had become notorious, though not rich, through his drip paintings. By 1951 the Museum of Modern Art had bought one of his paintings, he had represented America at the Venice Biennale and since 1943 had many critically successful one man shows. According to his critics he had more or less destroyed the Western tradition of painting. Allan Kaprow said in 1958 that Pollock had created 'an art which, in meaning, looks, impulse, seems to break fairly sharply with the traditions of painters back at least to the Greeks'. (9)

Though this is a rather generalised and enthusiastic statement it is a huge claim to make about any painter. If Pollock felt the same about his work as his many critics did, why did he reject his adopted methods? In doing so he would have to surrender his affiliations with two of the world's most eminent critics, forfeit his position as the figurehead of America's first major painting movement, and also have to return to working out of a tradition of painters which went back to at least the Greeks.

Though the black poured paintings may at first appear different from his drip paintings through the reappearance of images their smaller size, the predominance of black and the feeling of containment which was not evident since the mid forties, however as Lee Krasner saw it ,

"All Jackson's work grows from this period (from the mid thirties on) I see no more sharp breaks, but rather a continuing development of the same themes and obsessions". (10)

The black paintings were 'like monumental drawings or maybe painting with the immediacy of drawing'. (11) That served the same purpose as his earlier drawings and paintings: that of allowing his images to come through. The paint does not veil the images, nor does it describe the images but rather the shape and forms of figure and animals are part of the paint, carried and revealed by it. In such paintings as NO. 5 1952 (PL 6) and NO. 7 1952 (PL 7) the half veiled images which emerge from the paint are still embodied in it.



PL 6 NO. 5 1952



PL.7. NO 7 1952

His consuming interest in the unconscious mind and mythology are now given true form. The unconscious means of working, something he inherited from his drip paintings was now having a pragmatic use for him. These black paintings were also perhaps

"acting as a corrective to the misconceptions non-objective artists and young artists, might have about the meaning or the 'splashing out' - of a Pollock ... He was acknowledging the importance of his subject matter as essential to his art - and putting at a distance those who might think painting exclusively a formal and decorative exercise" (12)

Another interesting aspect of his later works, particularly after 1952, was his return to titling his work. No longer would he simply title paintings with a number and a date, a Greenberg notion which allowed the work to be distant from the artist. As the work became more figurative and allegorical he returned to cryptic titles such as WHITE LIGHT (1954), THE DEEP (1952), and EASTER AND THE TOTEM (1953). He even renamed some of his earlier drip paintings with more suitably evocative and personal titles. NUMBER 30 1950 was changed to AUTUMN RHYTHM, ^{AND} NUMBER 1 1950 was changed to LAVANDER MIST.

Though his work during the fifties was inconclusive, its many abortive directions indicate that he was once again desperately searching. Styles and approaches differ greatly, from BLUE POLES (PL 8) to THE DEEP (PL 9) to FROGMAN (PL 10) and PORTRAIT AND A DREAM (PL 11).

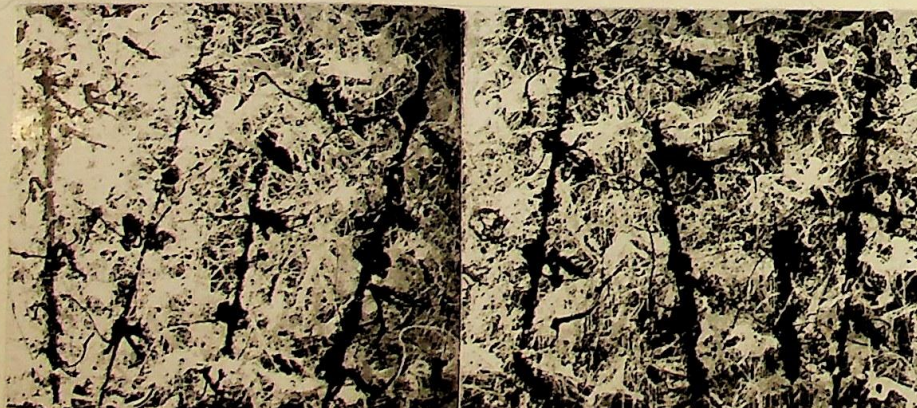


Plate 8



Plate 9



Plate 10



Plate II

He was searching for what his classical drip painting had rejected from his earlier concerns, or were not capable of capturing because of the overwhelming importance which had been placed upon technique.

The devices of his drip paintings had almost become vices. Blue Poles (1952) is a particularly sad painting, in that it was an attempt to return to the security of the drip period when other methods were not proving conclusive. Pollock's striving can be sensed in something like this. Whereas for Greenberg BLUE POLES is merely a failure, because he reviewed it within the same criterion which he had viewed his other drip paintings. Indeed it is an admission of uncertainty, but it is an honest search of possibilities by an artist, who for so long was not fully satisfied on his terms, with his work. Greenberg said Pollock's work was Dionysian during his most productive period rather than Appolonian, and that with his work from 1950 until his death, this attitude reversed.

Maybe Pollock was always Appolonian and that the security he found within his drip painting for three years was a welcome respite from his neurosis and the constant uncertainty of searching. Pollock's attitude, not only on artistic matters, was that no genuine reward came out of something that was too easy. When the drip paintings became predictable he needed to change.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jeffrey Potter, TO A VIOLENT GRAVE, P 81, May Tabak, Harold Rosenberg's widow, recalls Rosenberg saying to Lee Krasner, 'don't tell me who's famous. But if there's going to be anyone famous here, it me and not the drunk (Pollock) upstairs'.
2. Annette Cox, ART AS POLITICS, pp 153 - 54.
3. Harold Rosenberg, THE ANXIOUS OBJECT, P 43.
4. Peter Fuller, BEYOND THE CRISIS IN ART, P 22.
5. Ibid, P 22.
6. Ibid, P 99.
7. Harold Rosenberg, THE TRADITION OF THE NEW, P 27.
8. Cox, P 129.
9. Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock', ART NEWS, Oct 1958, P 56.
10. William Lieberman, 'Jackson Pollock: Black and White', Exhibition Cat., Marlborough, March 1969, P 7.
11. Ibid.
12. Francis V O' Connor, ' Jackson Pollock, the Black Pourings 1951 - 1953', Exhib. Cat., May - June 1980 P 9.

CHAPTER III

POLLOCK AND HIS MYTH.

By the time of his death in 1956, the name Jackson Pollock had come to mean a variety of different things to different people. The range of cultural references which were placed upon him were as particular as the various aspects of the man himself. The artist who had been hailed as the first of the new school of his native New York had become a legend in his own time. To those who knew him personally, including fellow artists, his family and friends, gallery owners and critics, his fame was an accepted fact of life. But to those who knew him only as a name, the myth of Jackson Pollock was a reality. The myth of Jackson Pollock was a reality because it was a reality that he was a man who had achieved a certain status in the art world, and that he was a man who had achieved a certain status in the art world.

Practically all the varying aspects of his life have had their fair share of criticism, both good and bad. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'.

By contrast his friend, the artist, described him as 'a man who was a man'. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character ranges from his sister-in-law, who described him as 'a man who was a man', to his friend, who described him as 'a man who was a man'.

By the time of his death in 1956, the name Jackson Pollock had come to mean a variety of different things to different people. The range of cultural references which were placed upon him were as polarised as the various aspects of the man himself. The critics who championed him often did so from completely contrary viewpoints, the legacy of which is still discussed and debated today with equal emphasis and heated argument. Those who knew him personally, including fellow artists, his family and friends, gallery owners and critics, had such varying opinions about Pollock as the artist, and Pollock as the person, that to reach a complete and genuine understanding of him would seem virtually impossible.

Practically all the varying aspects of his life have had their fair share of criticism, both good and bad. The diversity of feeling about Pollock's character range from his sister in law Elizabeth Pollock's comments that 'anything cruel or spiteful about another person, or hearing of someone's failure, gave him great pleasure', going on to say 'Jackson was a taker, not a giver, who rarely - the truth is I remember no incident at all - proffered a helping hand either in the flesh or in the spirit'. (1)

By contrast his friend Jeffrey Potter recalled that 'Jackson's curiosity and empathy for the concerns of others made him a loyal friend, but in his loneliness and later despair, he could almost seem a professional orphan'. (2) Professional critical analysis ranges widely too. In 1956, TIME magazine cynically bestowed the title 'Jack the Dripper' on him and commented that the results of his and De Kooning's efforts 'were huge canvases excitedly smeared, spattered, daubed, dribbled and gobbled with colour in the shade of freewheeling overall designs, as if the artists had been playing with paints and got carried away'. (3)

On the other hand Peter Fuller commented on the all-over drip paintings that they 'are skilled, brilliantly controlled and orchestrated paintings of a desperate professional artist..'

(4) These comments may mean little within themselves. However what is most noticeable about the diverse reports from those who were associated with him, either professionally or personally is that he provoked a forceful reaction from them, whether positive or negative. His complex character, like his work, is not one which could ever be ignored or overlooked.

His personality and character can and is often traced back to his somewhat unconventional upbringing in Western America. Pollock was the youngest of five brothers. He was the son of a hard working though failed father, who was beaten by the depression, and an exceptionally strong willed and ambitious mother, who was the dominant personality in the Pollock household and did everything for her sons. Elizabeth Pollock recalled that 'Stella (Jackson's mother) was incapable of finding fault with her children ... praise you for everything you did and see in you only the best' (5)

Jackson it would seem, was somewhat favoured above the rest of her sons. His brother Charles recalled that their mother was 'more sympathetic toward Jack'. (6) As a teenager he was head strong and rebellious. There are numerous accounts from his early life of encounters between him and various school authorities. This was something which he was to carry with him throughout later life. From the time of his first visit to New York in 1930 his awkwardness has been noted by those early friends he made through his brothers and at the Art Students League. A fellow student at the League, Axel Horn, recalled that Pollock was the perfect prototype of the Westerner: 'rugged shy, socially awkward and inarticulate'. (7)

Being a Westerner, Pollock tried hard to be accepted into the New York artistic scene of the thirties. Though he possessed little natural talent as an academic draughtsman he worked hard in the life room. Under the guidance of his friend and teacher the scene painter, Thomas Hart Benton. It did not 'take him too long, apparently, to learn to draw from nature correctly if not fluently'. (8) Pollock studied at the Art Students League for two and a half academic years.

Benton's teaching methods were 'blunt and pragmatic' (9), and though Pollock was soon to react strongly against Benton's artistic dogma of social ideologies, his tenacity concerning certain pictorial forms would affect Pollock throughout his life. Pollock had little time for Benton's regionalism but quickly assimilated Benton's style. The influence of Benton's use of heavy modelling and chiaroscuro, along with his compact and at times claustrophobic compositions, evident within the painting CITY ACTIVITIES WITH SUBWAY (1930) (PL 12), can be clearly seen in many of Pollock's later stages of development.



Plate 12

Benton said of Pollock that he 'finally rejected my ideas about the social function of art ... he followed a Benton example but this was in matters of form rather than content'. (10) Pollock also bears this out while replying to an interviewer in 1950 that Benton 'gave me the only formal instruction I ever had, he introduced me to renaissance art ... he drove his kind of realism at me so hard I bounced right into non-objective painting'. (11)

Pollock unlike his teacher did not isolate himself from the Europeans. Though Benton had studied in Paris during the early part of the century, by the thirties he considered abstract painters to be an 'intellectually diseased lot', who were 'victims of sickly rationalisations' and 'psychic inversions'. (12)

Though he was very familiar with the implications and theories of modernism, he rejected them for the simpler alternative of appealing to a national audience through nostalgia and sentimentality. During such a period of severe depression as the thirties, he attempted to remind people of their past conquests and the value of nationalism.

As Benton himself said, that he along with the other scene painters Grant Wood and John Stewart Curry, 'symbolised esthetically what the majority of Americans had in mind - America itself' (13) Benton decided to back out of 'the adult game in Paris and went home to dream about Kansas', (14) whereas Pollock decided to take up some of the more challenging problems which he saw to be inherent within modernism.

A myth about Pollock's personality and character had already begun to develop at this early stage in New York, around his reputation for being a hard drinking and inconsiderate, macho small town Westerner. It was not until Pollock shrugged off much of Benton's repressive influence and allowed his art to find an identity that a myth of his own began to develop.

Somewhere along the line these two myths intermingled and eventually reached a pinnacle during the period of the drip paintings. Though somewhat necessary for a fuller understanding of Pollock's art, the legacy of his myth had lead to much confusion and can often conceal many of the more important aspects of his ambitions and realisations. After 1950, when Pollock was no longer at the forefront of Abstract Expressionism and was not receiving as much critical attention as he had previously, his popular myth also became less significant. Curiously enough there was more potential myth making material available at that time than ever before. From 1950 to 1956 he unconfidently experimented with numerous styles and techniques, became more socially boisterous, mentally unstable and indulgent in alcohol than ever before.

He had an affair with a young artist, Ruth Kligman, who had lived in Pollock's house for some time during 1956, in the absence of Lee Krasner who had gone on a visit to Paris. Despite his unconventional and rash behaviour the popular press and his critics found little reason to capitalise on it as they no longer required it to prove and reinforce their own viewpoints.

The period of Pollock's art which has become most renowned, lasted for a mere three to four years, reaching a climax with the large 'classical drip paintings', AUTUMN RHYTHMN (1950), (PL 13), ONE (1950) (PL 14), and LAVENDER MIST (1950) (PL 15). Though not his largest paintings ever, within them he fully resolved what his particular drip technique could accomplish. With their 'thorough use of the pouring application and the uncompromising unity which resulted' (16) these three paintings were the definitive culmination of at least his previous three years work. In the eyes of popular cultural history, AUTUMN RHYTHMN, ONE and LAVENDER MIST have become Pollock's equivalent of Van Gogh's SUNFLOWERS or Da Vinci's MONA LISA .



Plate I3 AUTUMN RHYTHM



Plate I4 ONE

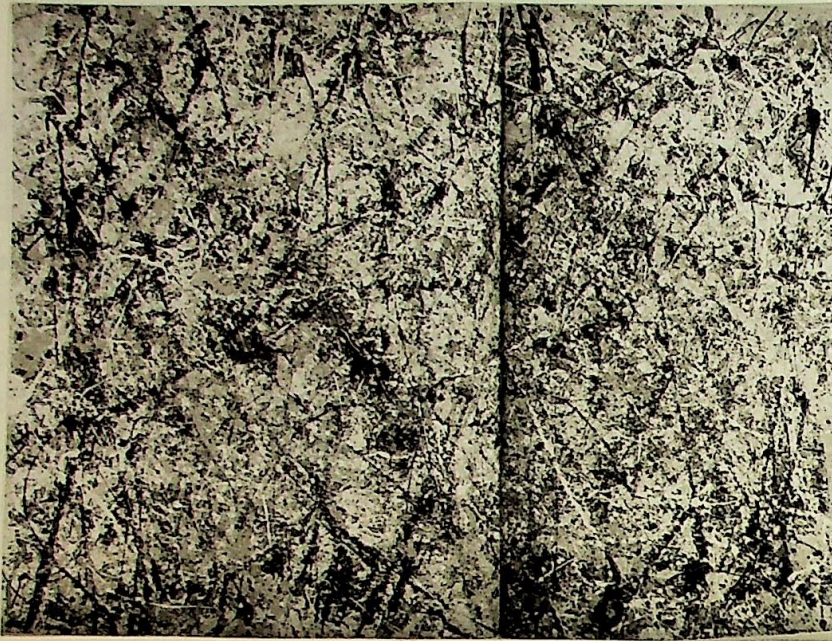


Plate 15 LAVANDER MIST

Leaving aside the intricate and often perplexing theories and doctrines concerning the drip paintings, it can be said that Pollock was very much an artist who exemplified the notion of a vanguard artist. Though he did not necessarily develop in a linear and logical manner, throughout his life his work was in a state of constant flux. As William Rubin said of him,

"Pollock never treaded water: perpetually challenged himself, nor did he ever identify with a single style or a single conception of painting. He kept his art open-ended and was not loath in 1951, after almost four years of development of the all-over drip conception, to veer off in another direction". (17)

At times his development was slow and contemplative, while at other times it could be quite radical and impulsive. His art was never straight forward.

Due particularly to their convoluted nature and the amount of both informed and ill-informed speculation which has been attached to them, Pollock's painting can hardly be now read at face value. Because of an ever increasing body of diverse critical analysis it has become progressively more difficult to appreciate his paintings as paintings in their own right, something which Pollock worked hard to achieve and ideally desired and which the paintings themselves seem to demand. Being a restless person by nature and insisting upon constant change as an artist, he brought many of his ideas and techniques to an essential degree of refinement.

Probably his two most obvious direct artistic influences were, the Cubism of Picasso and the form of Surrealism associated with Miro and Masson. Taking these two somewhat antithetical styles he extended and developed them with his own individual technique and character. Eventually he arrived at an art form, which was of such originality and refinement that it went beyond most peoples immediate comprehension, both on a formal and esoteric level. All serious art poses problems for the spectator, however this is not to say that the more problems which arise out of an art work is an indication of its seriousness. Generally speaking abstract art has caused more reason for discourse than figurative or representational art. Pollock is certainly no exception to this.

'For the spectator, the picture is an isolated object, a closed, self contained system of meanings and to that extent, an end'. (18) The nature of the self contained system of meanings which Pollock developed was such that it dispelled many traditional values and long standing artistic axioms. The difficult nature of the drip canvases, along with the conflicting viewpoints of the various art critics (each vying for some attention) and in particular the stories and reports about Pollock's unpredictable personality and lifestyle contributed in one degree or other in forming Pollock's myth.

Even though initially his work caused a large amount of confusion, it was not ignored. He became notorious through the myths which 'made his painting relevant, but only by misrepresenting them. (19) It was as if the importance of his work could almost be sensed but remained logically inexplicable. What is curious here is the nature of people's reactions. To form a myth around Pollock and his work required less effort than attempting to form an understanding of a refined form of abstract art that did not happen to leave itself open to easy interpretation.

There is little doubt that Pollock was a man of extremes, both in his personal life and as a painter. Likewise his art seems to have been caught between his romantic, emotional energies and his intellectual insights. Together with his unconventional though original approach and solution to his painting, the Jackson Pollock myth arose primarily from the anecdotes which circulated about his background of hard drinking and occasional boisterous behaviour toward friends and bystanders alike.

Throughout his life he has been noted for his severe depression usually synonymous with a minimum of artistic activity, Lee Krasner recalls that Pollock 'would become so withdrawn as to be impenetrable'. (20) Dr De Lazla, his doctor during the forties, put this down to his 'doubt about himself - as a person and as an artist'. (21) The artist Allan Kaprow saw Pollock's eventual death as 'a respite from almost certain future suffering'. (22) Whereas it gave TIME magazine the opportunity for a final contemptuous stab by calling him the 'bearded shock trooper of modern painting', (23) in his obituary.

His life style and the nature of Pollock's death has led to much speculation about his mental state. Not only did it add a tragic note to an already dramatic myth, about a life which had been lived at an intense pitch, but it brought to light speculation about suicidal tendencies, which would seem to have been dismissed at this stage, and also about a sort of death wish which Pollock had.

His acquaintance, the painter Paul Brach, rather bluntly recalls Pollock prior to his death :

"He was looking to do it, but I don't think it was real suicide. At that point he didn't give a shit and its the way you die when you don't give a shit, Jackson was living at the edge and the edge broke". (24)

His death emphasised a self destructive tendency which he had, something which became particularly evident during the latter years of his life. Stanley Hayter, who ran the renowned graphic studio 'Atelier 17', recalls Pollock 'drinking not to feel good but to hurt himself'. (25) By the time the stories and anecdotes about his life had filtered through to the public they had hardened in to legendary fiction, legends which usually depended upon gross exaggeration and inaccuracies for their existence. These ranged from the popular notion that the drip paintings were executed while drunk, to a French critic claiming in 1959 that Pollock 'even cut and sold the immense surfaces obtained in this (drip) manner by the metre'. (26)

Though the myths surrounding Pollock may hold the seed of certain truths, they are not important within themselves. What is important is why they exist, who created them, to what extent did the artist himself endorse them and what bearing do they have on the work?

To some extent the myths which surrounded him turned him into a romantic character, particularly the circumstances surrounding his death. They created an illusion that he went beyond normal human experience by sacrificing intellectual decision for mindless kinetic activity and was in some ways competing with the external forces of nature, somewhat similar to Captain Ahab, the hero of Herman Melville's MOBY DICK, which Pollock greatly admired.

Like Ahab, Pollock was also beaten by external circumstances and had become eccentric and perverse because of them. However both men held on to a personal belief in the possibility of attaining what it was that eluded them throughout their lives. At a time when his work was not held in such regard as it is today, breaking new ground was an uncertain and lonely occupation. Added to this is the fact that he was an American breaking new ground, ground which in essence belonged to Europe and in particular to the school of Paris. Though the pressure on Pollock and his contemporaries to produce an art form that would typify America, was strong, he saw such a notion as ridiculous. He viewed his work as being more universal than it is parochial.

At the same time 'he was conscious of being an American phenomenon' (27) and it is hard to believe that he was not affected by his stereotyped Western upbringing, the acute nationalism of that period and by the type of Americanism called for by Greenberg and Rosenberg.

By its very nature Pollock's art was concerned with taking risks. The myths which surrounded him made the risks easier to take. Pollock embraced many of these myths, to one degree or other as they allowed him the reassurance and confidence he needed in order to continue to create work which most people did not understand or particularly like. Without the myth, the content and technique of his work could not have gone as far as they did, therefore his myth became part of his art, as 'it reflects an aspect of the content of his painting'. (28)

Being aware of this Pollock himself found it necessary to enhance many of the myths surrounding him. Because of his severe doubts about himself and his art he often played up many of the myths through impetuous social behaviour, brought on usually by bouts of heavy drinking. While consciously partaking to some extent in creating his own myth, through his actions and occasional profound remarks, he remained deeply serious towards his work at all times and never treated it with contempt.

Pollock did much to forward the myths which surrounded him. In 1949 he willfully allowed the popular magazine LIFE to do an article about him titled 'Jackson Pollock - Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?'. Even though he knew that this type of article could do little to explain exactly his intentions and would probably only serve to proliferate the public's growing misconceptions about him, he consented to do the article for at that time it was an opportunity for greater public awareness and recognition which he believed was his due. Although he was ambitious for his work, he primarily desired recognition and the certainty that his work was actually understood properly. Pollock did not want his myth to outgrow his work, nor did he allow it to interfere with what he considered to be his work's cardinal concerns.

One such occasion was at the time of his first one man show at Pegg Guggenheim's 'Art of the Century' Gallery in 1943. James J Sweeney wrote the catalogue introduction to the show, which had included amongst the twenty five exhibits, the paintings MOON WOMAN CUTS THE CIRCLE, MALE AND FEMALE, and GUARDIANS OF THE SECRET. Sweeney's introduction compared Pollock's energy to the forces of nature calling it 'volcanic', 'lavish' and 'explosive'. In essence Pollock did not object to this but reacted strongly against Sweeney's overall tone insisting that above all the work required self-discipline.

Calling it 'undisciplined' and 'untidy' annoyed Pollock sufficiently enough to add the more controlled and deliberate painting SEARCH FOR A SYMBOL (PL I6) to the exhibition prior to the opening, in an attempt to show that despite the vigour and boldness of his work, he did not allow it to 'surge beyond order'. (29)

Another incident which caused Pollock considerable outrage, due to somebody misunderstanding and misrepresenting the important aspects of his works, was an article which appeared in TIME magazine in 1950 by the Italian critic Bruno Alfieri. The article was titled, 'Chaos, Damn it'. It was a critical essay about work which Pollock was showing in Venice at that time. There were three paintings in the Biennale, while Peggy Guggenheim's entire collection of his work was concurrently showing at the 'Museo Correr'. Alfieri wrote of Pollock in the article,

"It is easy to detect the following thing in all of his paintings

- chaos
- absolute lack of harmony
- complete lack of structural organisation
- total absence of technique, however rudimentary
- once again, chaos ..." (30)

The over emphasis which the article placed on the presumed chaotic nature of his work annoyed Pollock enough to send a telegram to the publisher which read 'no chaos, damn it'. This was the only reply he ever made to any published criticism of his work. Pollock had always considered the control which he exerted to be an intricate part of his work. Without this control and intimate contact with the paintings, Pollock believed that chaos and accident would prevail and that the result would be a 'mess'.

During the summer of 1950, the young photographer Hans Namuth, approached Pollock at an exhibition opening with the request that he be allowed photograph Pollock while working. Though at the time Namuth was not fully aware of the implications of the work and merely asked out of his own curiosity. The series of photographs which he made are a unique document about an artist's approach to process and technique as has ever been recorded. (PL 17. 18)



Plate 16 SEARCH FOR A SYMBOL



Plate 17 Pollock in his studio



Plate 18 Pollock in his studio

They are particularly significant considering the emphasis which Pollock attached to his process and techniques as being an intricate part of the finished painting. The implications and importance which this series of black and white photographs would have, along with the ten minute colour film which Namuth subsequently made, were not realised by either the photographer or the artist at that time.

The reason why Pollock should have allowed Namuth, a young relatively unknown photographer, to shoot him seems strange, considering that nobody up until then, except Lee Krasner, was allowed to watch him at work. He was now inviting the whole world, including the often cynical art world, into his studio during the most crucial time for the work. The reason for this may possibly have been, that he was more confident than usual with his work and himself during that particular year.

The 'classical drip paintings' were painted during 1950 and signify the climax of the previous three years work. They had gained him his most critical appraisal to date. Though sales of his work were few he had represented America at the Twenty fifth Venice Biennale during that year. To be photographed while working signified in some ways that he was at least receiving serious recognition, that he was indeed considered to be a major artist. The photographs would also probably help to alleviate some of the misconceptions people had of him. While at the same time they would illustrate better than words some of the concepts which he often found difficult to express properly in interviews, such as being 'in the painting', 'the painting haveing a life of its own' and that he worked from the 'abstract to the concrete'.

Namuths photographs did not show a drunken possessed mad man performing some type of primitive ritualistic exorcism, whose primary intentions were to shock his audience by violating traditional art forms.

On the contrary they allow us an incredible insight, not only into his techniques but also give us a rare glimpse of his immense concentration and sensitivity, his controlled decision making, and the subtlety of his paint handling. One of the most striking aspects of the photographs is the almost church like silence which seems to prevail in his studio. Pollock's honesty and genuine belief in his work is sensed as he continued to work regardless of the camera. Pollock himself recalled his feelings about the presence of the camera to his friend and neighbour, Jeffrey Potter:

"When I'm working, working, right, I'm in my work so outside things don't matter - if they do, then I've lost it. That happens sometimes, I guess because things get in the way of the flow - like roots blocking a soil line". (31)

The majority of Namuth photographs are not posed, unlike most photographs of artists, composers and writers who are photographed during the act of creating. In this respect Namuth truly acts as a fly on the wall, and this is probably the reason for the photographs honest and objective appeal.

Due to this honesty and objectiveness, the photographs themselves dispel any confusion or misunderstandings which people had as to how the paintings were made. Despite this, they still retain all their truly mystical and intangible qualities. Pollock welcomed Namuth into 'his studio because he had nothing to hide, no secrets, no tricks'. (32) He was not afraid to disclose to his audience, his methods of working as he believed it was unique and inimitable. Even if he was copied it would be on a purely technical level. The copies could not contain the force of will and emotion which he was able to instil into the work.

"Of course anybody can pour paint on a canvas, as anybody can bang a piano, but to create one must purify the emotions few have the strength, will or even the need to do this". (33)

Some of Namuth's photographs show us Pollock sitting in sombre and brooding moods, contemplating or 'getting acquainted' with his day's efforts (PL I9). Though these may be posed photographs his serious, frowning face coupled with the starkness of his studio, accentuated by the nature of black and white photography, serves to emphasise the basic existential qualities which underlie Pollock and his paintings, even though there are many genuine truths within the photographs, because of them he became easy prey for cynics and disapproving critics. Due to the photographs it became easier for people who could not or did not want to understand this radical artist's efforts, to ridicule him. Usually the reason for this was that Pollock's work went beyond intellectual explanation and often undermined many critics' antiquated notions and assumptions concerning the nature of painting.

For the first time Pollock the person is unveiled to the public. The photographs focus on Pollock the person more so than on the paintings. Due to the nature of the photographs the paintings lose their scale, colour and tactile surfaces, while the stature of the artist increases and dominates them. Because of this and the already circulating myths concerning his drinking habits, his neurosis, his occasional boisterous behaviour and his radical and frenetic way of painting, Pollock became a cult figure. Namuth's photographs had a larger audience than Pollock's painting. Unfortunately the photos put Pollock into the Marlon Brando /James Dean role of hero, both of whom realised their hero status through their images and myths. From then on Pollock would not only play the mad disorientated artist, but would also now look the part the public needed him to play. Though the photos have left us with an invaluable insight into how Pollock worked and are a unique historical document, they have inevitably helped to perpetuate Pollock as a cultural myth.



Plate I9 Pollock in his studio : Hans Namuth

Footbotes

1. Jeffrey Potter, TO A VIOLENT GRAVE, P 46.
2. Ibid,P9.
3. 'The Wild Ones', TIME, 20, February 1956, P 70 .
4. Peter Fuller, BEYOND THE CRISIS IN ART, P 102 .
5. Potter, P 19 .
6. Ibid .
7. William Rubin, 'Jackson Pollock and the Modern Tradition', ART FORUM, February 1967 P 21 .
8. Clement Greenberg, 'Inspiration, vision, intuitive decision', VOGUE, I April, 1967, P 160 .
9. Francis V. O' Connor, 'The Genesis of Jackson Pollock: 1912 to 1943', ART FORUM, May 1967, P 17 .
10. Ibid .
11. Ibid .
12. Time Life (Ed), AMERICAN PAINTINGS 1900 - 1970, P 64.
13. Ibid .
14. Thomas Hess, 'Jackson Pollock: The Art of a Myth', Art News, January 1967, P 40 .

Footnotes continued

15. Lawrence Alloway, JACKSON POLLOCK, Exhib. Cat.,
Marlborough, June 1961, Pl 52.
16. E. A. Carmean, AMERICAN ART AT MID CENTURY, P 127.
17. William Rubin, P 17.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid P. 14.
20. C.L. Wysuph, JACKSON POLLOCK: PSYCHOANALYTIC DRAWINGS
P. 14.
21. Potter, P 63.
22. Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock',
ART NEWS, October 1958, P 25.
23. 'Milestones', TIME, 20, August 1956, P 90.
24. Potter, P 266.
25. Ibid, P 79.
26. Rubin, P 21.
27. Potter, P 223.
28. Hess, P 39.
29. Alloway, Plate 33.
30. Carmean, P 151.

Footnotes continued.

31. Potter, P 129 .
32. Hans Namuth, POLLOCK PAINTING ,
33. Robert Goodnough, 'Pollock paints a picture',
ART NEWS, May 1951, P 61.

CONCLUSION

Pollock's myth has by now outgrown his paintings. His name is flashed around by critics and historians as a generalisation for strengthening their respective arguments and viewpoints. He has become like Van Gogh and Picasso, a cultural figurehead, easily identifiable and patronised. His work not only influenced subsequent young artists but is also unfortunately a constant source of inspiration for fashion designers and advertisement artists. Maybe Pollock, due to his radical approach and his ability to create seductively harmonious abstract patterns, is partially responsible for this. However the generalisations and myths which society has created around him have had the result that the work itself has become progressively more difficult to read at face value. This is particularly sad considering the force of emotion and enormous willpower which compelled him to make such work. To get a proper perspective of any art work it must be attempted to be read from the artist's perspective.

An excessive amount of talking and speculation has surrounded Pollock for the last forty years and not enough looking. Through the use of language as a common denominator for reviewing work, Pollock's art has lost much of its visual stimulus. Pollock's paintings more so than most other painting requires to be sensed visually, it is not possible to feel Beethoven's emotional input to his fifth symphony through reading and talking about it, similarly why should it be acceptable to expect to feel Pollock's emotional input without looking at the work.

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