

NC 0019974 5



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE  
OF  
ART AND DESIGN

MARK ROTHKO

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:  
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN  
& COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES  
AND  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART  
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY  
RITA ANDERSON

MARCH 1990



NC 0019974 5



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE  
OF  
ART AND DESIGN

MARK ROTHKO


A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:  
THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART & DESIGN  
& COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES  
AND  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART  
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY  
RITA ANDERSON

MARCH 1990





## CONTENTS

Illustrations.....		(A)
INTRODUCTION.....		1
Chapter I	MYTH.....	4
	Development of Historicisation	
Chapter II	PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH.....	13
	Colour	
	Objects	
	Rothko and Communication	
Chapter III	SCIENTIFIC APPROACH & RELATIVITY.....	26
	Photography	
Chapter IV	CONCLUSION.....	33
Bibliography .....		(B)



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<u>NO.</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
1.	<u>Omen of the Eagle</u> by Mark Rothko.....	35
2.	<u>Syrian Bull</u> .....	36
3.	<u>Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea</u> .....	37
4.	<u>Birth Of Cephalapods</u> .....	37
5.	<u>Number 14</u> .....	38
6.	<u>Number 20</u> .....	39
7.	<u>Untitled</u> .....	40
8.	<u>Green, Red and Blue</u> .....	41
9.	<u>Blue and Orange</u> .....	42.
10.	<u>No. 117</u> .....	43.



## INTRODUCTION

### MARK ROTHKO

Mark Rothko was an artist who rose to prominence along with the founders of the New York School shortly after the 2nd World War. The work of this artist has never failed to impress me. The basicness of the images and how and what they translate to the viewer never ceases to be a source of preoccupation.

The following text is not concerned with the subject of Abstract Expressionism as a movement but sets out to offer an interpretation of Rothko's art based on the elements which make up his art images. The one element which interests me more than others is that of time. Throughout his lifetime Rothko has spoken of his awareness of this element. Therefore in work which primarily seemed so fundamental the question arises, how and by what means could this element be detected and translated to the viewer?

Rothko with his compatriots in the New York School, such as Pollock, de Kooning and Gottlieb were all seeking a means to engaged the audiences perceptual faculties in such a way that they might question their understanding and reading of artworks. For this reason the work was created for private rather than public places, when possible, and further, was intended to be viewed only by one or two persons at a time. Rothko's interest in the sheer physical presence of his work is tied to his interest in human psychological and physical reaction to his work and it's elements.



Criticism of abstract work has often considered the work to be devoid of subject matter. Rothko, in stating that he was concerned more with the humanist moralist side of his work than the aesthetic, has only seemed to fuel this argument. What Rothko has attempted to create in his work is a new understanding of what subject matter is. For this reason daily observational referents are dispensed with in order that the elements of colour, line and tone fill their place.

The paintings of Rothko that concern me most are those which date from the 1940s onwards. One of the most striking characteristics of these paintings is the use of colour. Colour, Rothko insisted, was nothing more than an 'instrument' for expressing something larger - the important subject of his pictures. I hold that colour is largely the subject of his images and aligned to this is their psychological properties in generating a sense of time for the viewer.

It was Rothko's intention to 'affect' as many people as possible and he urged that contained within each painting was a certain trans-historical form that universally would reach people. In attempting to reach back to a specific period in history Rothko attempts to secure a suspension of time. This notion in itself therefore implies the dissolution of history. It is my intention to come to an understanding of myth with regard to time and history. Historically Rothko has been placed within his environment in the US to show its path of development and the kind of effects it has had on the individual.



On a number of occasions Rothko has argued for his work to be considered 'realistic'. As late as the '50s he denounced abstract art for being too depersonalised. Ironically by this point Rothko's own art had become remarkably abstract in the exclusion of visible referents. He felt that to include such things would only serve to confuse the viewer who was prone to too many materialist associations and for this reason the 'object of painting' would go unnoticed. It is my intention to reveal that the exclusion of such referents severs our understanding of existence and time.

Therefore the aim of this text is to present an alternative approach to understanding the work of Rothko based on deciphering the relation of the elements employed. These elements culminate in translating a single common denominator time. I have divided the thesis into specific sections which deal with Myth, Colour to Photography all in the light of revealing Rothko's communicative ability.



CHAPTER I

MYTH



## CHAPTER I

### MYTH

Myth has been used in Rothko's work to generate a sense of time for the viewer. Myth is concerned with exploring the nature of man's existence, the state of which is unknown, and has consistently been a sense of preoccupation for every generation through the centuries. Rothko set about producing pictures which addressed these 'eternally familiar needs'(1).

In Paris in 1924 a group collectively known as the Surrealists published their first manifesto in which they urged artists to create works which would highlight the 'free' workings of the thought process namely the unconscious. In the United States the movement came to prominence during the 1930s and 1940s and many artists began to employ some of their experiments.

Automatism was a device employed by the Surrealists to unleash the workings of the unconscious and it's inner truths.

Rothko on a number of occasions has stated that Surrealism was one of the strongest influences in his work. His paintings reveal evidence of this, the 'Birth of Cephalopods', (1944) for instance, displays looping lines, a characteristic of automatic writing. In employing such a device Rothko was endeavouring to arrive at a level of specific communication.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Chave, Mark Rothko, p.92



A sense of the unconscious was to be transmitted to the viewer for it was believed myth resided therein. Rothko praised the Surrealists for 'rediscovering mythical possibilities in every day life. In turn they had acknowledged the values of the tribal world for it was there that myth had originated.(2)

Within many such cultures the tribes people when confronted by something they didn't understand turned to a supernatural explanation for an answer. The inhabitants of the community based their understanding on two opposite premises one being magical and the other scientific (thus bearing a resemblance to western schools of thought, those based on religion and science). However within a variety of different tribes from the Trobriands to the Lhota of India there is no notion of ordinary causality(3). Time is divisible into different segments which employ both historical fact and observation of the present order of nature. The image of a river is given for time flowing and branching into different tributaries 'leads into the future and builds a past'(4). In the western world however time is known to us as a succession of the arts of our experience. Myth in the tribal world is treated in a similar way. Within the Lhota community life is understood as possessing many levels 'Lebensraum' one after the other they proceed for an indefinite number and in no particular order. The anthropologist Essertier maintains that humans deal with cosmic events in order to extend an opinion about the world and to reaffirm the power of the mind. It is no coincidence that Rothko set about creating a past, a mythical past during the period of the 2nd World War in opposition to a mandate for art to contain social contemporary issues.

---

<sup>2</sup> Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko*, p.77

<sup>3</sup> *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, p.88

<sup>4</sup> S. Langer, *Mind on Essay on Human Feeling*, p.



Myth in an oral context is a traditional handing down in tribal societies and is then something which is made sense of in their particular environment. When tales are recounted of past experiences everyone present is expected to participate and by so doing the original myth is thus continually changed, taking on new associations. Myth therefore in such environments can be seen to exist in two important forms (i) in a traditional form and (ii) in a contemporary form in which it is made relevant to a particular society. Rothko in his attempt to create a mythical past has it would appear failed to understand that it is made up of these two elements. His creation of myth is the 'spirit of myth which is generic to all myths of all times'. Here the artist acknowledges his understanding of mythic tradition but in so doing fails to recognise the existence of the other component necessary for it's continuation.

Central to Surrealist thought was the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud in particular his analysis of the unconscious mind. Around 1920 Freud had put forth his theory of the 'repetition compulsion'. According to this one could expect to find oneself in situations which had been experienced before(5). The element involved which made these incidences seem both familiar and unfamiliar was change. In opposition to this Rothko adopted his notion of the 'single tragic idea'. The viewpoint relates to the theories of C.J. Frazer who held that a universal theme underlay all mythological traditions concerning origins and endings, in other words, 'the cycle of life, birth to death'(6). Rothko attested this theory declaring 'all art deals with the imitation of immortality'. He preceded to borrow themes from the Greek tragedies as a parallel to prevailing political and social distress and turmoil.

---

<sup>5</sup> S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* p.42

<sup>6</sup> Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko* p.97



In reaching back to a particular time in history and endeavouring to borrow from its understanding of existence Rothko has neglected to come to terms with such understanding in his own environment. The cycles of life remain, however the nature of our understanding has not, and is continually changing.

A disciple of Freud, Carl Jung called for the existence of channels necessary for the release of unconscious expression. Visionary imagery was to be one such outlet. It had been the intention of artists i.e. Gottlieb dealing with myth to reconcile old and new models for the expression of inner states which the Surrealists had shown existed in the tribal world. Rothko has even declared that a prophetic dream can exist side by side with casual events of today(7). However in banishing the depiction of everyday referents in his work he has curtailed the ability of myth to change and take on new meanings. Rothko places tragedy in isolation selecting it out of the struggles of life he positions it on a pedestal unable to interact with given elements. Myth represented for Rothko the understanding of our existence through emotion. However in representing that emotion he has represented the negative without the positive where there is sorrow, joy is to be found. Works such as the Sacrifice of Iphigenia, The Omen of the Eagle and Oresteia all reveal this reliance on tragic themes. Rothko did acknowledge the problematic nature of working in such a specific way with mythological themes for such a view of myth was not one held by the majority of people. He thus fell to using it in the light of there being no other avenue of approach.

The traditional understanding of myth that is the handing down of it's essence was thought to belong to the actual workings of the body.



Jung contended that human beings contained in their unconscious inherited psychological 'archtypes' which in turn belong to a collective unconscious (this unconscious expressing itself in the form of dreams and nightmares)(8). The importance of memory and it's workings as stipulated by Theodule Rebot emphasised the importance of the past in our lives. This work showed that memory disappears according to a law of regression from the most recent to the earliest. The memories of childhood being the most secure and firmly fixed and last to disappear. Nietzsche urged artists to resist the pressures from society to deny our unconscious existence and to forget that the unconscious contained the living past in it's faculties. Rothko endeavoured to express this unconscious past declaring in 1943 'myths exist as much in our unconscious today as they have in the past'<sup>8a</sup>. However he also claimed that the substance of myth changed only in detail and did not recognise this as being an important understanding. After all it is the detail which influences our reading of substance.

---

<sup>8</sup> S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, p.42  
<sup>8a</sup> A. Chave *Mark Rothko* p.66



## Development of Historicisation

Until recent times the human intellect dealing with subjects such as the nature of human existence, had to work in collaboration with a religious understanding of the subject. This was particularly prevalent in Medieval culture where the religious aspect was particularly dominant, for this reason all the explanations of life were to be found in God's Divine Order. The dawning of the Renaissance witnessed a modification of this practise, meanings became geared towards co-existence whereby components were grouped based on the nature of their semblance. In one such theory man was defined as composing of four humours, black and yellow bile, phlegm and blood, his personality being determined by the relative properties he had to each. Gradually developments in scientific thought began to shift the emphasis from the understanding of 'nature' as being verisimilitude to that of infinite progression<sup>(9)</sup>. The theories of August Comte is representative of such scientific inquiry which became known as Positivism. Positivism affirmed that all knowledge regarding matters of fact should only be based on the 'positive' data of experience and also that out beyond the realm of fact there existed only pure logic and mathematics. It was to become the task of the sciences to study the facts and irregularities of nature and society and to formulate these findings into laws.

These schools of thought have in part been responsible for a change in the social content of life the structure of which developed into historicisation. Industrial and technological factors have also pressed for such a development and in so doing have altered our understanding of time.

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Boulton (Ed), A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas, p.92



No more could the labourer depend on the 'biological' or organic clock of the natural world thus forcing the individual into objective and impersonal age(10). The needs of the individual became masked and hidden in order to conform to industrial policies. Up to the turn of the century communities each had their own specific time, however in order that industry be allowed to run more effectively a set time had to be followed. The International Agreement on Standard Time and zones was thus signed in 1884. Therefore time became structured as an external entity in society. Culture did not escape this fate, for the plot of a book remained linear expressing the lives of it's characters.

In the opinion of poet Wallace Stevens the American painters depicted the natural world without pathos or sentiment, coldly rendering what was in front of them. Such painters' majestic landscapes thus seen to be representative of the dreamland vision of both commissioning and purchasing industrialists. A realist movement soon after developed in an attempt to create work which would express the individuality of the creator. Drawing inspiration from everyday reality these artists endeavoured to make this external space their own. Prevalent during the period was a rigid campaign to instigate an authentic art movement which would be distinctively American in substance. In New York in 1935 Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb organised a group of artists together calling themselves the 'Ten'. The group aspired to overcome opposition within the gallery system to their sombre, expressive works. Rothko's images from this period reveal a muddy expressive nature and the left movement during the 1930s hailed his work as being radical.

---

<sup>10</sup> D.M. Lowe, *The History of Bourgeois Perception*



Throughout this period cultural production was closely monitored by the State. Roosevelt elected in 1933 had established the Works Progress Administration giving employment relief to 7,500 artists. In its last decade this programme became a major instrument for propagating State ideals. Subject matter was suggested to participants ranging from local history, past and present. The unions were infiltrated by the communists and the air soon filled with rebellion. Those artists involved very quickly came to realise that they were dominated by a small elite whose domination spread over the enormous middle-class. Any art produced which was some way against prevailing attitudes was unlikely to get the approval from selectors.

Many artists began to notice this development. Barnett Newman was one such artist alarmed by the dictates of governing bodies concerning art practises. He warned artists to avoid becoming the mere tools of politicians who now realised the communicative power of the visual arts.

Power and the need for it is directly associated with history. History itself is representative of the political forces within society and their growth. Marxism, the political movement of the working class, has as it's ultimate objective the conquest of political power and the participation of the working class in the proceeds of industrialisation, to this end the State is viewed as the factor of order or regulator of the system. Lenin held that the State is where one can unravel the unity of these structures(11).

---

<sup>11</sup> B. Edwards, *The Rise of the U.S.A.*, p.



In the American constitution it is written that all men are created equal, endowed with certain unalienable rights especially that of life and liberty. Paradoxically, this set of rules instigated by the ruling body can also be withdrawn by it, for instance the State by law has the right to terminate life. The word 'power' itself means to affect other people, now it becomes challenged by artists such as Rothko in his attempt to similarly affect other people "it is our intention to make the viewer see the world our way not their's".<sup>11A.</sup> What soon began to be recognised throughout the United States was the sense of the individual's loss of significance or sense of belonging. America, it could be argued, has failed to develop a sense of tragedy, the Garden of Eden myth being the most dominant. Rothko under the guidance of Max Weber was encouraged to forge a conscious link between past and present art; his past was not an attempt to deal with American history but rather a past which showed evidence of sharing the traumatic events of his environment of the 1940s<sup>12</sup>. This notion stands against that of historicisation for instead of the past leading and becoming relevant to the present the present state of affairs was to be understood by past events.

---

<sup>11A</sup> Dore Ashton Rothko p 79  
<sup>12</sup> Anna Chave, Mark Rothko, p. 43



CHAPTER II

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH



## CHAPTER II PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

In approaching the work of Rothko one has to take into consideration the psychological discoveries and theories prevalent in the cultural environment of which he was a part. These theories highlighted the workings of perception and time thus offering new possibilities for interpreting and reading art.

The psychological discovery of the unconscious had come about in 1775 by Franz Meser(1). Prior to this date it's existence was to be understood only by a religious explanation: from this period on time was to be understood as belonging to the actual workings of the body. To come to an understanding of time therefore necessitates, when dealing with visual artists, a certain knowledge of the workings of perception. In order to perceive a property of time, namely duration, a complex interaction of given elements based on information being conveyed to the senses has to come about. Therefore the artist has to provide specific elements and information in his work to allow this process to transpire. In 1951 the idea was put forth that in examining temporal experience, the perception of duration was not to be considered as being an immediate component of stimulus but as indirect, our knowledge being formed by the analysis of 'cues' which are altered by the passing of physical time(2). Such stimulus was divided into two categories, the first being referred to as 'filled' intervals.

---

<sup>1</sup> D.M. Lowe, *The History of Bourgeois Perception*, p.26

<sup>2</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Woodrow), p.307



A characteristic of such intervals are signs for example a flash of light or a tone both of which last for a period of time. The second category is referred to as 'unfilled' and these intervals relate to the period of time between the light and dark elements. Interestingly in 1971 Buffardi pointed out that filled intervals are perceived as being longer than unfilled of proportional physical duration(3). In Rothko's work these filled and unfilled stimuli characteristics are ever present and in the work of the late 1940s on flashes of light exist in collaboration to dark tones.

Perceiving duration is also dependent on the presence of other factors such as the amount of muscular effort involved in a task. When elements such as pain or danger are involved the greater the sense of duration perception. Further the greater the number of elements involved (from speed, to light and darkness) which occur during a given interlude the shorter the perceived duration will be(4). One of the problems that arise from this is that physical and perceived movement are far from perfectly correlated. The human eye never remains still and continuously makes small movements known as 'physiological nyslagnu'. On the retina images are always in motion but we never see the world as swirling before us. Therefore to reinforce to the viewer that motion is taking place the artist has to find a means to translate this.

Rothko was an artist who based his work more on a psychological than an objective premise incorporating pain as a dominant element within the work. By 1945 Rothko had decided that he could no longer present his idea of human tragedy by the existing codes governing the forms in the 'external' world.

---

<sup>3</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Woodrow), p.302

<sup>4</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Cauldwell), p.310



He began to experiment with specific elements as communicators of this inner drama. Two of these elements were structure and form and these became the most dominant.

In order that a sense of motion be derived from a piece of work structures have to be present. A perception test carried out by psychologists asked viewers to equate speed in two separate displays both of which contained black squares. The experiment highlighted the fact that the velocity of the object could only be determined by the size of the framework surrounding it. Induced movement is produced by a smaller enclosed object surrounded by a larger one<sup>(5)</sup>. Rothko's paintings of the late 1950s and early 60s reveal objects contained within structural rectangular shapes. The tension created between the larger and smaller structures confront us. No. 117 from 1961 shows the larger structure surrounding three box-sized shapes reminiscent of the experiment previously mentioned. These boxes of varying sizes appear to move and vibrate the rectangular shape enclosing the boxes to vie with each other for dominance. A sense of distance is created between what is perceived and the perceiver for the squares descend subtly in size. Distance is another element which the artist has to reinforce to the viewer, an object placed further away from us appears to move much slower than one placed near. A descent in size of boxes within a structure has the same quality. Rothko therefore drew on the developments in the psychological arena in order to forge an alternative approach to viewing art.

---

<sup>5</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Brown), p.318



The human mind acts somewhat as a storage container for past experiences. The anticipation of the movement of a car is based on such retained information. Objects that we expect to move in a piece of art will do so by pre-conditioning. However there are exceptions to this rule. The squares on Rothko's canvases seem to leap from the containers. In art, illusion is involved in enhancing 'things' with a sense of movement. When fixing our gaze on something in motion, such as the water running from a tap, when we look away, the things we see immediately after also appear to move. The borders of the squares in Rothko's work seem to dissolve into obliteration after a period of looking at the work. The research of Brown in 1931 throws light on this problem. He maintains that structures when present in work can be used as devices to heighten a sense of motion. An object contained within a given border automatically wipes away those structures(6). When I look at No. 117 (Fig 10.) I can observe that the artist has already tried to help us in this respect and the edges of the inner boxes are softened to accelerate the illusion.

Psychological research has thus split time into two components the internal and external. Everyone, it is argued, possesses his/her 'biological clock'. The idea relates to the presence and functioning of particular body mechanisms or organs which act as a base for duration(7). Life itself is divisible into cycles of duration e.g. dawn to dusk, the tides, the earth revolving on it's axis and the reproductive cycle of the woman. Cycles lead to cycles with the end heralding the beginning of a new process - change upon change - waves upon waves rush to greet me at the shore well meaning aren't we all in our - ever-failing ordained chore. The thought process acts as the mediator between the person's inner and outer experiences.

---

<sup>6</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Duncler), p.324

<sup>7</sup> W. Dember, *Psychology of Perception* (Francois), p.312



## Colour

Colour has long played an essential role in artistic practise. Rothko has often been described as being a 'colourist' for this element was to play a fundamental role in this work(8). Rothko has turned his attention to this property in the hope of changing our traditional expectations of it.

Sir Isacc Newton (1642) discovered the seven colours of the spectrum which arose from the decomposition of light filtered through a prism. These seven colours were to match the seven degrees of a scale in music. Colours ascending and descending mirroring the emotional qualities off the pitch of music(9). From this period on colour slowly began to be associated with a more individual expression in art. In Rothko's work a muted palette is employed where colours deepen in hue from a particular level of brightness. He uses colour as a device to heighten a sense of measure within the basic structure of the canvas. Colour itself is a property which is constantly changing and this sense of change and measure can be enhanced by an artist's colour combinations. In direction perception cool colours appear to recede and warm to approach. No. 18 from 1963 shows the dramatic contrast which has been created between the black rectangular shape positioned on top and the orange underneath. The black and orange colours rather than drawing one into the image work as if a blind to our gaze. For example in Van Gogh's cafe - scene of the Terrace at Night (1888). The dominant blue works in collaboration to the yellow. The perspective of line and colour both draw the spectator into the scene on the left hand side and back out through the right. Within the historical tradition of painting this process of balance was prevalent.

---

<sup>8</sup> A. Chave, *Mark Rothko*, p.

<sup>9</sup> E. Gibson, *Painting and Reality*, p52



In Rothko's work the process has been altered somewhat. For the black rectangular area in no. 18 does not surrender hidden forms to the viewer as one of Rembrandt's blackest paintings do after a moment of looking(10). Physiologically black implies the absence of stimulation the problem is that the spectator is not aware that specific stimulation is present i.e. flashes of light, tone. The interaction of struggles are thus implemented. First that between the dark and light hues of a warm and cool nature and the second where the spectators eyes move from one square of colour to the next in search of traditional referent stimuli i.e. an object. The space of the colour does not surrender this to the spectator's gaze.

From the 1950s on Rothko's handling of colour alters, where darker more sombre colours began to take the place of brighter ones. Psychologist David Katz once wrote that colour rather than shape is more closely related to emotion(11). Van Gogh recognised this potential of colour as the communicator of emotion. His self portraits are not merely paintings of heads but through the use of light, colour and mark making he renders an atmosphere on the image. The referent in the image in this case a head is thrown back to the viewer to appeal to his emotional faculties. In Rothko's work this does not happen for colour is not tied to such a referent in the objective world.

What is generic to mankind is emotion and since our understandings of it stems from experiences of an internal and external nature, emotion should be representative of this.

---

<sup>10</sup> History of Colour in Painting p.35

<sup>11</sup> Colour Theory p.11



## Objects

On examining the work of an artist it should be borne in mind that a discrepancy can exist between what the artist has intended in his work and what the viewer subsequently understands. Work passed out of the creator's hands has now to be understood as the 'object' for the painting is in itself an object and further it contains in its imagery representations of objects through the implementation of art elements i.e. line, colour, tone. Rothko's work reveals many preoccupations one of which is the relationship of objects to the pictorial image. Employing the word 'object' here I am referring to the occupier of space by a given entity.

Cezanne was an artist who pioneered work based on the relationship of objects to the pictorial space. In France during the previous centuries the prevailing artistic movement of Neo-Classicism, viewed by D. Lowe as being representative of the social and political objective premise of ruling bodies had begun to subside to a movement which stressed a more individual expression-Romanticism. It was Cezanne's desire to express *his* experiences of the world which soon revealed itself in his understanding of specific structures in space, 'sphere, cone and cylinder'. Within his work, colour, volume and space were the three protagonists which forced a directional change in the structure and specific rendering of objects. In so doing Cezanne both manages to retain his individual expression and the particular reality of the object in question. The static fixed linear perspective as formulated in the Renaissance are dispensed with. Cezanne's still lines reveal a multiple viewpoint, the objects themselves also possess many flattering and volumetric forms<sup>(12)</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Johnson, *Modern Art and the Object*, p.63



Picasso like Cezanne similarity attested to an understanding of this multiple or dualistic nature of expression. "I see the world as an object and activity of the self" (13). In still life with Gourd the artist has tilted the horizontal plane of the table and it's objects forward shattering our sensations of depth into a shallow relief space. He bends and distorts the contours of his objects as if in his journey of vision where the eye has been allowed to jump backwards and forwards. Space is both rendered as negative and positive, receding and approaching, and is obviously ambiguous.

Rothko was very much aware of the practises of these two artists and recognised the problem of objects and their relation to the pictorial space. A drawing which I had done some time ago now comes to mind. The image shows a figure enclosed by a thick rectangular shape which is situated in a given space or background. A question arose, what if the figure was removed what understanding did this remaining space have? The figure that once belonged was the anchor for time within the image. it is necessary to recall Einsteins Theory of Relativity for a moment. Before 1915 Time and Space were considered to be static factors where events took place and were not affected by what transpired in it. However, the General Theory of Relativity decreed that a body which moves in both Time and Space affects the curvature of these components and similarly time and space affect the body. Without a body or object to travel through time and space, time itself is a difficult property to conceive of and detect.

---

<sup>13</sup> H. Abrams, *Picasso*, p.16



The object or figure in the drawing now removed has decreased our ability to detect time in the work. What is left is the space and not the event. Rothko has attempted to make colour the 'object' in his work by the removal of the use of traditional referents. Ortega Y. Gasset was to state in regard to perspectivism and the General Theory of Relativity that there were as many realities as points of view(14). Rothko has chosen to deal with a select number of these realities and has not attempted to deal with the multiple possibilities offered to the visual artist. These numerous possibilities depend on the amount of particular stimuli and elements i.e. colour, structure, light, dark, object or body included within an image. Thus Rothko has decided to present the viewer with a certain amount of components and not the multiple possibilities open to him.

---

<sup>14</sup> S. Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space*, p.139



## Rothko and Communication

What a shock to the system to wake up one morning and not know what time it is.  
Spending the summer on a 'desert' island in the Atlantic ocean I found myself  
without a watch thus the structure I was accustomed to no longer prevailed.  
Thinking of times spent back in Ireland, faces known, people loved, in particular  
my dead grandmother seemed only to complicate my understanding of existence.

Waiting longer days and longer longer nights  
Pulverised by the early morning dawn  
Anticipating each beat thousands to the found.

Though I can't be with you you're always on my mind  
Memories outlast me and make hanging moods  
Like a door ajar ever waiting to peak in  
Recalled the time we tried to take you underfoot  
You're always on my mind.

Though the sea divides us we have no mind entirely our own  
A living recreator each thought being renewed.  
It's not a clinging to the past a fear of what's to come  
Just appreciation for all that's been said and done.  
When I stare at the light the curtains blow not in but out.  
The toaster causes all to stop, reminding here of what I must do  
Weaving through the room.  
Don't reach out to touch, sky will let fall kite soon enough  
Cherish the memories richer than all jewels they can't be dust  
Moving on the plains you come but never go  
Four walls no longer can enclose curtains signal up



The coming of a blush causes one to confound  
No order does it obey dispersing as you dismay  
A dissolve of footsteps sound like rhythm in the beat.  
Replaying the past like a deja-vu, Time no longer can exist.

Allied to this is how literature deals with the internal and external facets of existence. Rothko was an artist who appreciated the value and communication properties of the other arts and in particular poetry and music. Coming from a religious and politically active society (he was 14 yrs when the Russian Revolution occurred) these two influences were to have a profound affect on his later work. Rothko was impressed with the work of Mallarme who was interested in the clarification of language. He spoke about trying to capture, not objects in space but the effects they produce or 'inner drama'. The problem in his work was how to capture the internal pause or negative part of an idea. Mallarme, in defence of art, put forth the view that the poet's expression was to be stilled and freed from the mere representation of every day objects(15). The artist in other words was to go beyond representing this flower as an object and to discover it's other qualities.

Hierarchial Birds (1944) shows evidence of Mallarmes idea. The full eye reminiscent of the Egyptian culture is present. The form of a bird is visible in the centre. It is a bird and at the same time not. This is a rhythmic image; floating swirling forms interact across the canvas. Confusion and clutter however reek from it's essence. Particularly agitating is one symbol in particular, positioned at the top of the painting it stares at my gaze.

---

<sup>15</sup> Dore-Ashton, Mark Rothko, p.114



Is this possibly the G clef or treble clef as in musical notations? This is not clarity or essence but complete and utter undefinition. By severing the top half of a familiar symbol Rothko has now empowered it with any clearer a meaning but mutilated it's very essence.

Literature like painting is capable of generating a different sense of time. Prufrock by T.S. Elliot is a superb example of the duality of personality of the individual "let us go you and I through certain half deserted streets.." to prepare a face to meet the faces we meet". Through the symbolism of language and imagery the external and inner persona of the individual is revealed to us. The poem commences as a narrative. Prufrock is on the way to some function and describes his journey (through his psychological eyes) through the streets. One definition of existence is not given the narrative structure works in collaboration with a disjoined one. Roland Barthes lends support to this view(16). In a photograph taken by Koen Wessing in 1979 (In Nicaragua) he gives his reason for liking this scene of a street people with nuns and soldiers. The photograph is representative of our experience of life where one set of forces interact with another set by opposites. In painting the presence of opposites can also be employed. Impressionism was a movement in art that represented objects in space and their 'dualities' (duality being a property of time). Monet's Rouen Cathedral series is an example of this. In these works the facade of the cathedral dominates the space it is the referent in the image. This referent interacts with it's environment and becomes a part of it through perceptible acts. The two dominant elements within the work interact, the occupier of space and the remaining space.

---

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucinda*, p.38



The presence of darkness, light, warmth and colour generate a sense of distance, movement and balance within the work. This is truly an image that exists on many levels and for this reason is to be considered timeless. Rather than the fact that it was painted during a special period of the day.

Emily Dickinson is a writer capable of blending inner and outer experience of the person as well as past experiences with those to come. "Because I could not stop for death he kindly stopped for me - the carriage held but all ourselves and immortality also we passed the fields of gazing grain" we passed the setting sun". The past is evoked to meet the future. Dickinson in her personal life had stepped outside prevalent attitudes within society which stressed that life should be understood as a linear structure and has succeeded in this respect.



CHAPTER III

SCIENTIFIC APPROACH  
AND RELATIVITY



### CHAPTER III

## SCIENTIFIC APPROACH & RELATIVITY

In forming an understanding of time one similarly has to come to an understanding of space. For one to be present the other must also, time can be nothing without a given space or an interval of it. Social and scientific precepts have been responsible for the change of emphasis in history governing our understanding of time.

Just as the nature of existence is ever changing so too are the theories of physics which attempt an understanding of life. Aristotle was one of the first philosophers to come to terms with the origin of nature and existence. His philosophical views held that one could work out all the laws that govern the universe by just thought. He believed that it wasn't necessary to check this understanding by observation (Rothko sympathised with his view). One of the major differences between Aristotle's teachings and those of latter day theorists was that of 'Absolute Rest'. Aristotle and later Sir Isacc Newton both believed in absolute time where one can measure the interval of time between two events and this time would be the same for whoever measured it(1).



It wasn't until the rise to prominence of Newton that Aristotle teaching of 'Absolute Rest' could be dispensed with. Newton had discovered a law to describe the force of gravity "which states that everybody attracts every other body with a force that is proportional to the mass of each body. The world therefore to be understood as being in constant motion and at the same time directional, for the direction of gravity is akin to a specific direction.

The most revolutionary development to occur in our understanding of this element was by Einstein. In 1905 he published his paper 'Annalen der Physik' in which he explained the photo-electric effects of metal under the influence of light. For Einstein light no longer was to be thought of as radiation but energy travelling through space. A decade later came his theory of Relativity which stated that every reference body has its own particular time. We are asked to imagine many clocks in a gravitational field. Each one is moving at a speed determined by the degree of the gravitational field of the motion of the object observed. With this paper Einstein abolished in theory more than practise the belief that an infinite time existed. Another suggestion of the Relativity theory is that time should be slower near a large body such as the earth. As light moves upwards in the earth's gravitational field it loses energy and thus the frequency is decreased. Historical time can therefore be considered as an illusion for fixed linear time does not exist in the natural world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time p.20



Prior to 1915 space and time were considered to be a fixed phenomenon in which events took place but which was not affected by that which happened in it. In relativity they affect each other, the earth becomes merely a dot in the system of the universe which is perpetually expanding (Hubble 1929)(2). There is always something else to replace that which has gone. As galaxies expand and move away others come in to take their position behind every wave is a thousand more to fill the groove. For Stephan Hawking everything in the universe can be described in terms of particles. The word 'spin' is used when referring to the way the particles look from different directions. Spin A for example could be a dot and looks the same from every direction. Other spins do change when viewed from alternative angles. Hawking further argues for the existence of three varieties of time. The first is known as Thermodynamic and here we are asked to bear in mind the numerous disorder possibilities for there are many more than ordered ones. The second is referred to as 'psychological' time where we are able to remember past events. Finally, there is that time which deals with the universe 'Cosmological' (remembering that the universe is expanding rather than contracting).

In referring to his art Rothko often used the term dualism and observed that his work possessed many oppositions. In No. 18(1963) there is indeed the presence of light and darkness, but the question has to be asked how far does the dualism expand? What confronts me in this painting are the black and orange squares. Although the orange approaches more than the black the two colours do not lend space but occupy it.

---

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, p.39



Anna Chave argues that Rothko's paintings are traditional in that their organisation of shapes and composition bear a resemblance to those constructed in the work of such an artist as Quentin Massys i.e. Adoration of the Magi. Anna Chave has failed to recognise that the shapes in Rothko's paintings all of a particular variety are supposed to resemble four distinct and differing elements i.e. background, foreground, pillars, figure. As we have seen the nature of particles is their sub-divided particles of an infinite number. Everything within the observational realm becomes the extension of the human being through symbolism. We can see the nature of a specific shape where we wish, form a meaning particular to ourselves relating to it but every particle has its own characteristic. The diagram of No. 18 (1945) at first appears to resemble that of the tempera painting but only in the context of one level 'a shape'. Upon banishing so many natural particles Rothko has eased to be able to depict the nature of our existence.



## Photography

The camera was developed in 1839 and the cinematic one between 1893 and 1896, never before had there been a means to capture the speed of the natural world. One of the major advantages of photograph is it's ability to depict society and in so doing becoming an expression of the values of it's culture.

Similar to the craft of painting photography is concerned with the representation of things in space. Very seldom can a photograph be distinguished from it's referent and more often than not it falls to presenting reality to the viewer. In photography a naturalistic approach tends to be encouraged, the image remaining as close as possible to the perceived image of the viewer. The camera however, it can be argued, lacks the expressive freedom which only the inner eyes of the painter can explore. Arnold Arnheim points out that photographs are not entirely made and controlled by man for they are mere deposits of light. It is the task of the photographer to find and that of the painters to make.(3)

A photograph I took a long time ago comes to mind. I had intended the photograph to be of a black bag tied to a railing. What in actual fact transpired was that the photograph was not representative of what I had seen, but rather what the photograph revealed was the interaction of given objects frozen in a moment of time. The lady carries a bunch of flowers and gazes out to sea. The bag is obliterated as a narrative is set up. The photograph can thus recall what actually was. When Ed. Muybridge photographed the horse in motion his audience were unfamiliar with the representation of motion in such a way. Memories and observations are bound by our subjective thoughts and prejudices but the camera can overcome this.



The photograph has appealed to artists in different ways. My first introduction to the work of Hockney was in the seventies when an exhibition of his was shown in Dublin. Like Rothko he recognised the importance of poetry and frowned upon the lack of content in abstract art.

Hockney upon purchasing his first camera recalled the motive of depicting a person in a 'particular' place. This is not an imagined inverted one resembled place but 'the' place. Slowly as his work evolved he began to recognise a problem in that his paintings began to very closely resemble the photos taken. His work from the 1970s are said to suffer from emotional shallowness and from a lack of an understanding of paint(4). What Hockney noticed was that these photographs were the mere fraction of a second but a painting takes time to execute. The difference which existed between his photos and paintings was that mere fraction a second. Rendered to objects. In the light of this realisation Hockney began studying the water motion enclosed in swimming pools. However he also began to simplify his images of the water's movement. The images appear to resemble the artists photographs and it's representation of water that his tactile, emotional and multi-faceted experiences of it.

The canvas became flat the rendering of the water itself one approach, the flatness created by colour. Line is another element present but is sparsely employed. The paintings have much in common with Rothko's, one by figurative-ends the other by abstract. The clarification of both these artist's works does not necessarily mean it moves nearer a particular understanding by displacing unessential matter. In this case should be seen as the removal of vital experience. The photograph may not be a memory but Hockney's experience of water is not.

---

<sup>4</sup> MARCO, Lwingstone, David Hockney



I don't know what time it is so I'll look at the clock, not the natural one for the sun has gone, but the one on the wall. So I stare at the clock 'the rhythm in the beat' the pendulum moves from side to side, left to right - silence - left to right. The structure has made it's path in one direction. What happens when it gets to the end? It starts moving to the beginning for there is no end. The present makes the past, for it's only a matter of definition. I can't answer where does it start and where does it end and I am puzzled. It's like looking through a key hole seeing a small part of something that is much more and the associations go on and on. I can trace my family back when they were born but before that it all ends., I can trace them forwards when they all died but that's where my understanding ceases to be but for God.

I have **T I M E** now to stare at the clock, the figures read one, two, three. Soon I recollect the 07/07/77 for on that day my other while writing a letter told me that there would never be another day like this. Ten years after in London on the 08/08/88 I kept thinking of that prior date and my mother writing. I never saw the point in New Years day. After all the Chinese have their own calender why can't I. First entry, left school in '84 and leaving college 1990.

I gripped in my hand a fist of sand and out it poured. It fell down some straight to ground others dispersed all around and bits blew across the bay.



CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION



## CONCLUSION

Today Rothko seems to hold a position in art where to some he is suggestive of nothingness and be the antithesis of reality and yet to others be the only kind of beauty found acceptable. In a sense like Wagner in music, you either love him or hate him. This ambivalence is perhaps due to the manner in which by reacting to and against his immediate political and social environment he was setting about creating images which would demand a level of questioning far and above the normal from the viewer. One of the most important of these questions pertains to how the artist communicates his/her idea and how the onlooker will read and understand the presented information.

His main concern in art lies primarily in presenting his understanding of existence and thus time, to the viewer. Through a selective process of given art elements he choose to communicate this concern by employing the use of colour, tone and line. In so doing Rothko was endeavouring to change our expectations of what subject matter is and for this reason daily observational referents are dispensed with in order that colours take their place. In the work colour has been used to express emotion and it is here that difficulties arise. Orega Y. Gasset as we have seen stated that "there are as many realities as points of view"<sup>(1)</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> S. Kern, Culture of Time and Space



Rothko has narrowed these realities down to just a few. When dealing with myth he reached back to a particular period in history e.g. Greco/Roman times. He saw in it a parallel to his own prevailing times of trouble and distress. Thus Rothko was attempting to secure a suspension of time, which is unobtainable. Furthermore he failed to make myth relevant to his contemporary society. Here as is often the case, Rothko has represented a singular viewpoint, in other words the negative without the positive. Where there is space there is time, sorrow, joy to form an understanding of one necessities an understanding of the other. Rothko has not dealt with myth and the other elements of his work in a comprehensive way. The very fundamentals of our understanding are based on the interaction of negative and positive elements and if one of these is excluded a wider scope of knowledge is curtailed. Therefore Rothko's work is too dogmatic with not enough contrast or paradox included. Keats recognised this problem for artists and spoke of it in regard to 'negative capability'<sup>(2)</sup> where he strongly urged artists to avoid reaching after fact and reason. Rothko however did not heed such advice and has failed to present 'existence' for he has dissected it.

---

<sup>2</sup> G. Materson, *The Life of Keats*, p. 107

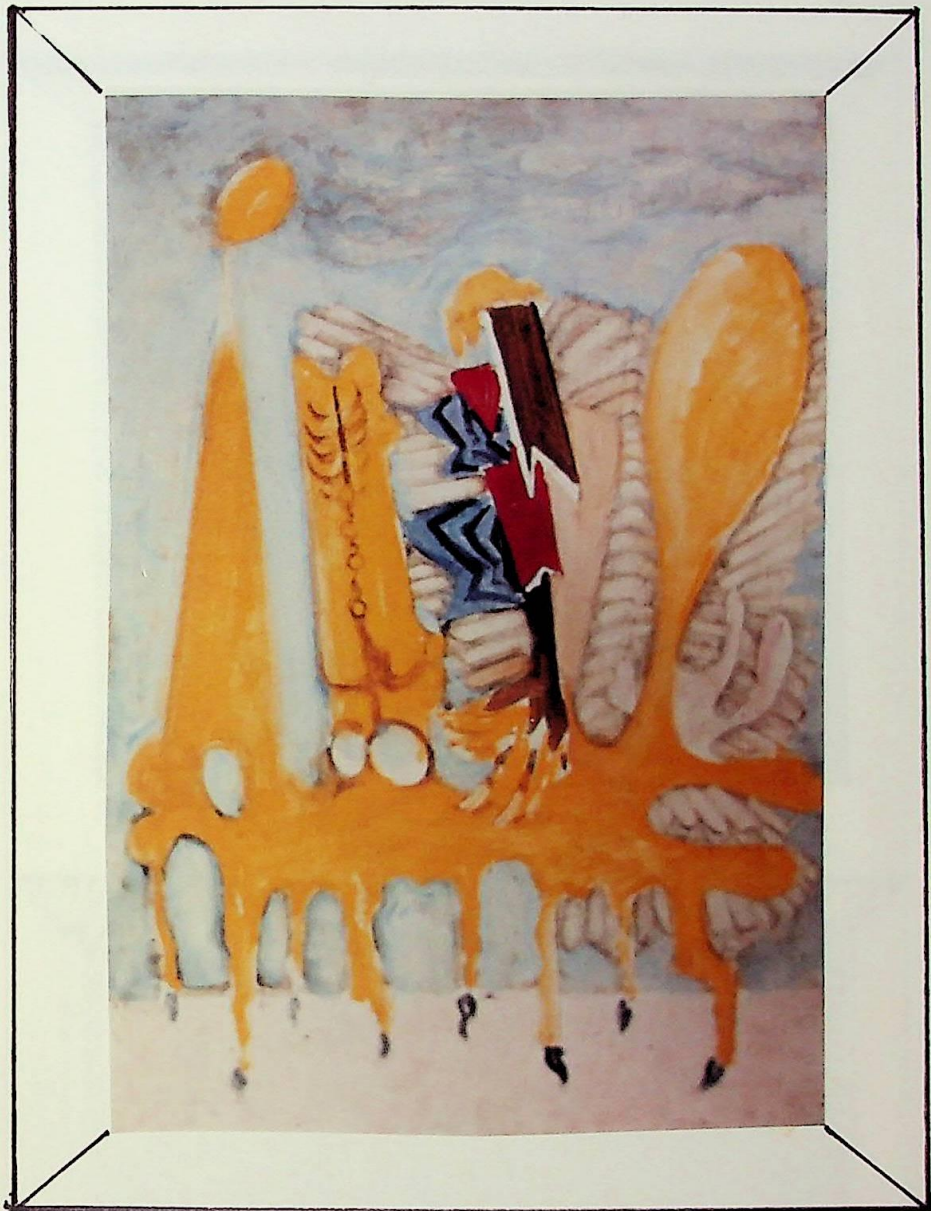




The Omen of the Eagle 1942.

Fig 1.





The Syrian Bull 1943

Fig2.





Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea 1944.  
FIG. 3



Birth of Cephalopods 1944. FIG. 4.

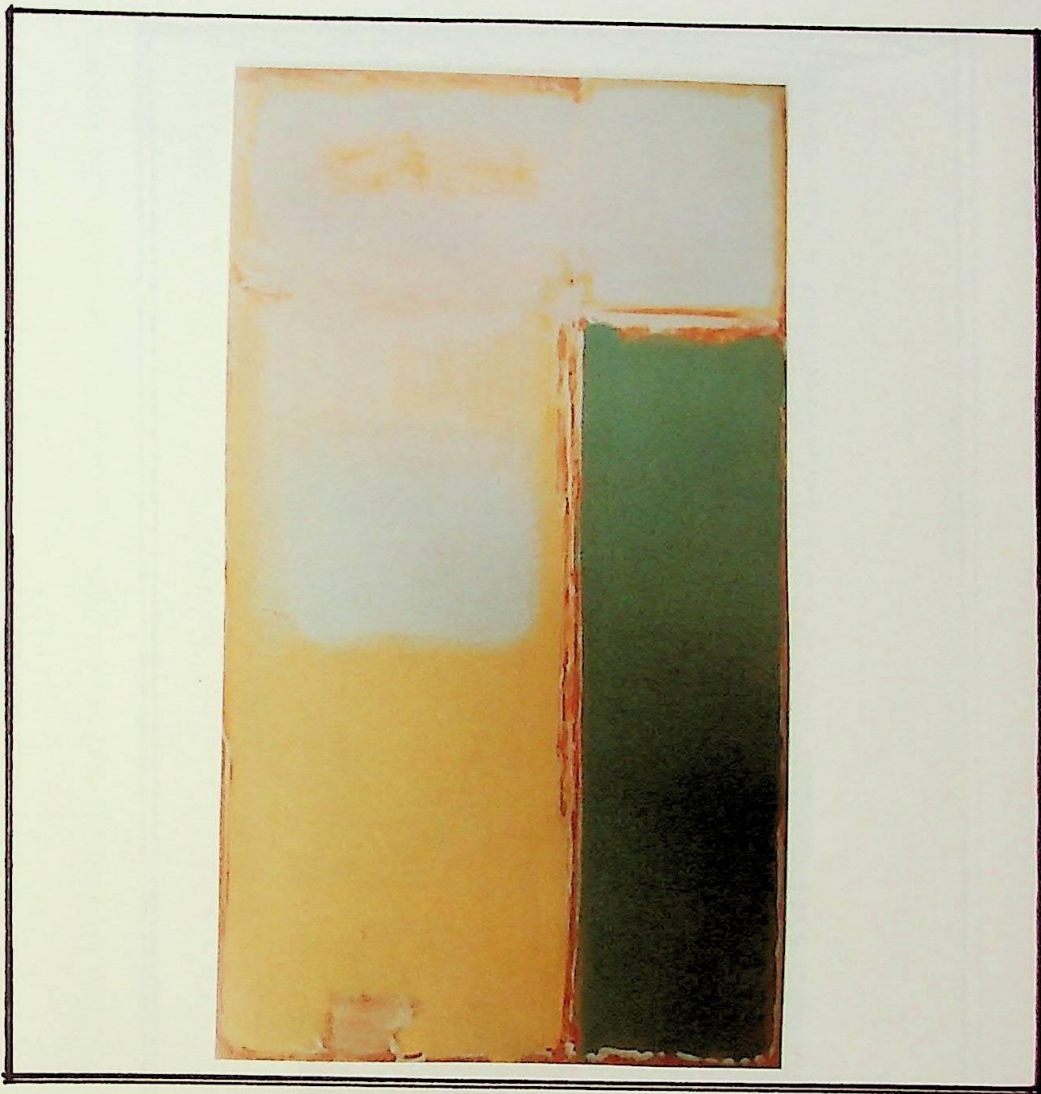




Number 14 1947.

Fig. 5

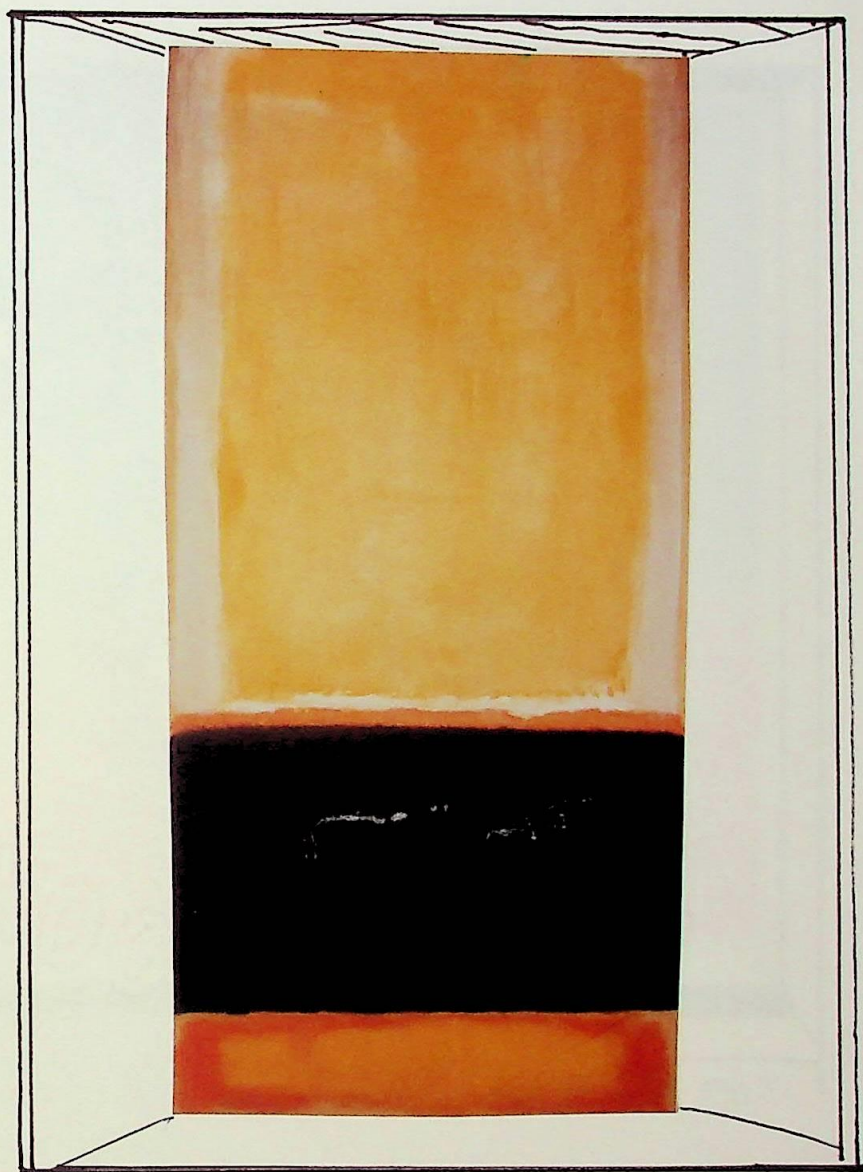




Number 20 1949

Fig. 5

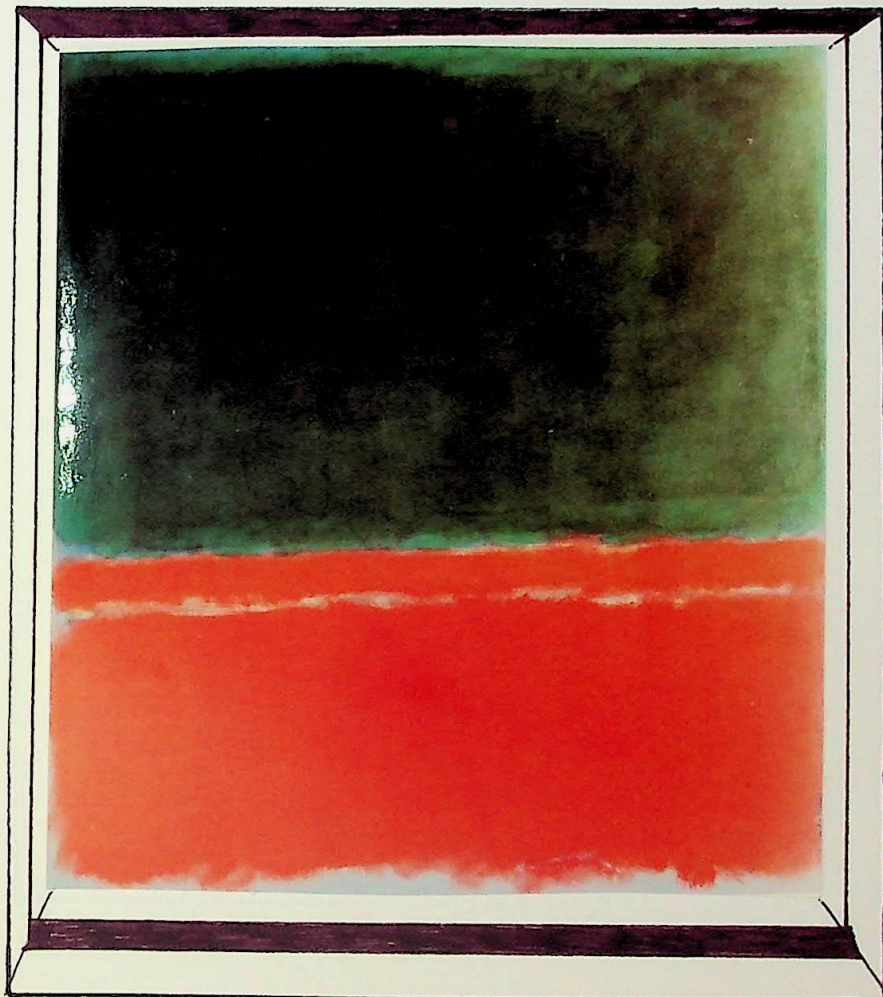




Untitled 1963

Fig 7

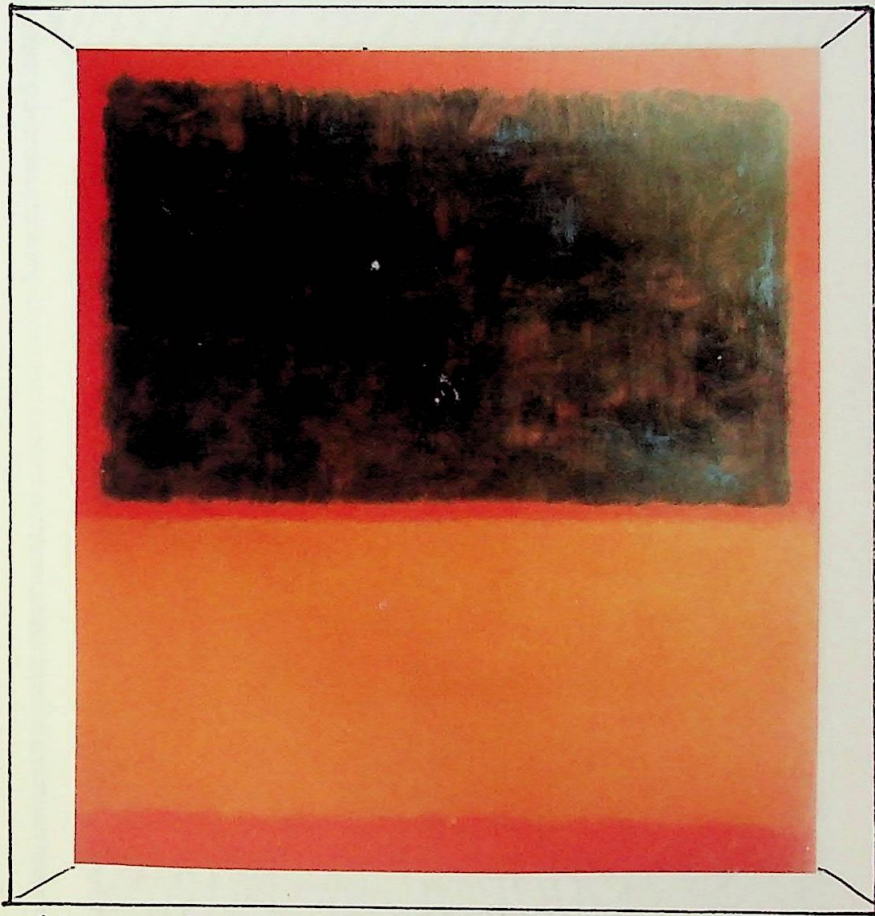




green Red and Blue 1956

Fig 8.

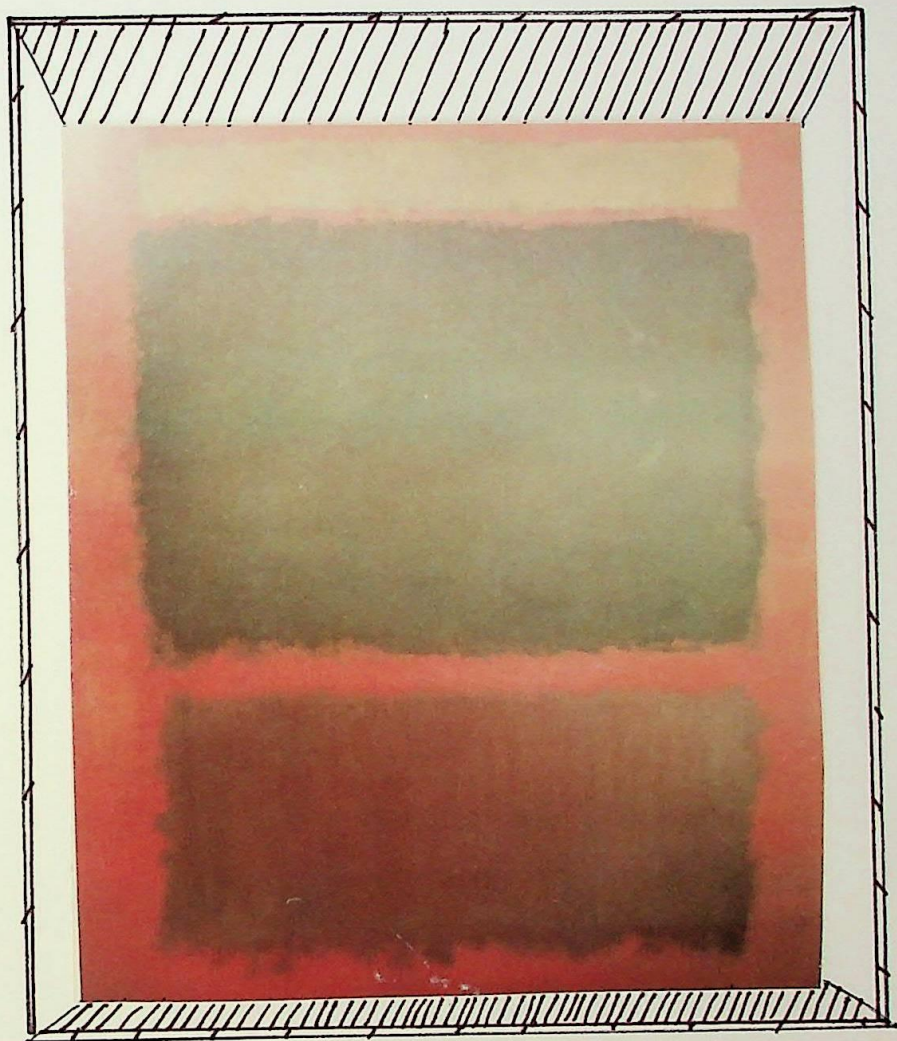




Blue and Orange 1956

Fig. 9.





No 117 1961.

Fig 10.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnheim, Rudolf. Visual Thinking. London: University of Chicago Press, 1969
- Arnheim, Rudolf. New Essays on the Psychology of Art.  
University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Baigell, M., Williams, J. Artists Against War & Fascism.  
Rutgens University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucinda. Flamingo.
- Boulton, J.T. ed. A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas.  
Routledge Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987.
- Bryson Norman. World of Image. Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Chave, Anna. Mark Rothko. Yale University Press, 1982.
- Dember, W.N., Joel, Warm. Psychology of Perception. Holt Saunders.
- Dore Ashton. Mark Rothko. New York Oxford University Press 1983
- Edwards, Bertram. The Rise of the USA. Glasgow: Blackie, 1968.
- Gilson, Etienne. Painting and Reality. Princeton University Press, 1955.
- Kern, Stephen. The Culture of Time and Space. Redwood Burn Ltd., 1983.
- Langer, S.K. Mind an Essay on Human Feeling. John Hopkins University Press, 1984.
- Livingstone, Marco. David Hockney. Thames & Hudson, 1981.
- Lowe, D.M. The History of Bourgeois Perception. Chicago Press.
- Lynton N, Alistir Smoth. Looking into Paintings. Robert Cummings, D. Collins  
The Open University, 1985.
- May, Rollo. Power and Innocence. Souvenir Press.
- Ornstine, R.E. On the Experience of Time. Penguin Books, 1969.
- Rosenblum, Robert. Modern Paintings and the Northern Romantic Tradition.  
Thamse & Hudsins, 1983.
- Watts, Alan. Time. Celestial Arts California, 1975.