THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THE ROTHKO READER

A Thesis Submitted to:

The Faculty of History of Art and Design
and Complimentary Studies

in Candidacy for the Degree (NCEA)

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

by

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MARCH 1991

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INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of abstract painting may be one of the most ill-fated projects in the history of modern art, or modern art criticism. The suggestion that "An abstraction refers to nothing, and so depicts nothing" does not prevent critics from attempting to translate the language of abstract painting. Relentless misreading and misinterpretation is frustrating for both painters and some critics. David Carrier asks:

> "Why the relentless attempts by naive and sophisticated critics alike to allegorize it, reading every horizontal panel as a landscape, every expressive gesture as the representation of feeling from the inner world of the artist?".[1]

It is obviously necessary to assess this mode of painting, but the most effective method of doing so is rare indeed. Regardless of how difficult it is to discuss interpretation of a non-representational painting such discussion is vital to abstract painting and art history in general.

Discussion of one painting or one exhibition is part of the process of putting the painter's work in the much broader context of art history. Rather than "is this account true?", one might better ask "what function does this text serve?"[2] Mark Rothko's work can be seen in isolation, and taken as much as possible at face value, seen in relation to the work of his contemporaries, seen as a component of American abstract painting, seen in relation to twentieth century painting and so on.

As the painter has departed from the scene, what we have left is the art object and the public, who have little chance of communicating directly with the painter. In this case, a misunderstanding or misinterpretation on behalf of the viewer cannot be reconciled with the painter. In his book "Artwriting", Carrier argues that misunderstanding will be rectified by the "test of time" as discussion and conflict of interpretation bring about understanding.[3]

In the third and final chapter of this essay I will be looking at what has been said of Mark Rothko's work by various critics, will be discussing the methods of interpretation employed and assessing the effectiveness of the painters own rhetoric. To put this public debate of Rothko's work into context, it is necessary to look also at the initial and more private intentions of the artist.

The idea that painting is a language is not new. It has been the subject of much debate and has interested such philosophers as Susanne Langer, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, all of whom believe art is not a language but an activity of disclosure outside the realm on spoken language and science. Rather than focusing of painting in general, what will be explored here will be the more specific area of abstract painting. The exploration will bring us into contact with the notion that a dialogue is held between an artist and himself which is enabled by mastery of materials and the codes used within painting.

Painting is accepted, generally, as a form of communication, a "disclosure" or an indication of a feeling or opinion etc. The "communication" begins in the studio when a painter's notions are materialised through paint and reflected back at her. This becomes a dialogue or a process of thought, through which she can make sense. When the painting is moved from the private studio to the public gallery the object enters into a different form of communication. It is submerged in the history of art and is seen in relation to that history. This journey or translation from one language into another will be discussed.

As the communicative possibilities of painting were important to this particular abstract painter, it is necessary to ask whether it is possible to translate the language of abstract painting? In translating it are we stepping outside the unit of Rothko's work which extends only as far as the gallery?

In "Artwriting", Carrier quotes Arthur Danto as saying an object is an artwork "only under interpretation".[4] When the artifact is placed in relation to a text it is identifiable as an "artwork". Beholding is not simple, it is complex and includes layers of established notions and opinions.

> "To believe that people can form judgments absolutely independent of what they hear and read shows unwarranted confidence in both their independence and capacity for introspection."[5]

The viewer views the painting with much experience behind him or her, just as the painter paints with experience and

memories from which escape is impossible. Obviously these experiences cannot be mutual; the gulf between the painting experience and the viewing experience, the painter and the viewer is huge.

Rothko's attempt to bridge this gap by involvement in the gallery, was his final connection with his paintings. For Rothko, communication began in the studio and ended with a body of work being presented in a space as originated by the painter. Similarly, the way in which a poet chooses to recite a poem has a huge effect on the listener. Thus, the effort put into delivery is as important as the effort put into the conception and creation of a work. So too in Rothko's case, this process of embracing the viewer is not separate from the process of painting, but is a part of it.

Rothko attempted to orchestrate the most effective viewing conditions in order to complete the structure of his paintings as a whole. The prime example of the importance of viewing conditions for Rothko is his Houston Chapel project or the "Rothko Chapel"; where the viewer is encouraged to meditate and concentrate on the images. Rothko insisted his paintings must be hung low and together. He felt that any more than one or two people viewing at one time was sacrilege. Rothko wanted conditions that would allow viewers to approach his painting "as a pure and unique experience, for which they should not be prepared".[6] In the second part of the essay I

intend to investigate Rothko's manipulation of galleries and the relevance this activity had to his work.

First of all, it is necessary to enquire into Rothko's aims, beginning in the studio. I will be presenting an account of the painter's intentions, hopefully representative of Rothko's notions and aspirations. I will be looking at the importance Rothko placed on formal elements, scale, colour, space, depth, etc., and on the other hand, his dealings with transcendentalism, the spiritual and his notions on "the human drama".

Assessing the development of Rothko's work is important to understand the relentless conviction and dedication with which he pursued his abstract "formula" for over twenty years. After arriving at abstraction in the late 1940's, Rothko painted over 800 canvasses, or "classic paintings". In this work, variations occurred only in colour and in proportions. Looking at what Rothko had to say about his paintings might give some insight into the logic behind this obsession.

PART ONE

Rothko's work in the 1930's was concerned with the isolation and solitude of humans, particularly those living in a technological age. The tragedy of the human condition, as explored this century by T.S. Elliot, Samuel Beckett, Edward Munch, Edward Hopper and innumerable less influential artists and writers, was to remain the subject of Rothko's paintings until his death in 1970. This subject was explored in what can be divided up into the three phases of Rothko's artistic career: the figure, myth and abstraction.

Rothko's artistic aims and intentions were initially embodied in the representation of the human figure. These paintings in the 1930's were predominantly influenced by European expressionists, such as Kirchiner, Nolde, and others including Rouault, Matisse and Soutine. However, the figure only satisfied his ambitions for one decade. He painted sparse subway scenes, occupied by spindly stick figures, or family scenes with bulky, heavy figures reminiscent of Picasso's sculptural, neo-classical figures. Rothko was not comfortable.

> "The solitary figure could not raise its limbs to a single gesture that might indicate its concern with the fact of mortality... Nor could the solitude be overcome. It could gather on beaches and streets and in parks only through coincidence and with its companions, form a tableau vivant of human incommunicability."[1]

Speaking of this incommunicability in 1947/48, Rothko said:

> "I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again."[2]

In communicating through paint, figuratively or abstractly, Rothko believed he was able to relieve himself of the "silence and solitude". However, at the end of the 1930's, reluctantly, he was compelled to let go of the figure;

> "It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes... But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it."[3]

Following this decision, Rothko engaged himself extensively with surrealist automatism and the concerns of surrealists such as Miro and Breton. The idea that automatism was essential to surrealism was suggested by Breton in 1941:

> "the essential discovery of surrealism is that, without preconceived intention, the pen that flows in order to write... appears charged with all the emotional intensity stored up within the poet or painter at a given moment."[4]

This notion captivated the imagination of not only Rothko but also his close ally Barnett Newman who experimented with both automatic drawing and writing: "How it went that's how it was... my idea was that with an automatic move you could create a world."[5]

Through the surrealist automatism, Rothko painted about "the human drama" or "tragedy". Nietzsche argued:

> "The images of myth must be the demonic guardians, ubiquitous but unnoticed, presiding over the growth of the child's mind and interpreting to the mature man his life and struggles."[6]

Rothko agreed that the role of the demonic guardian was essential: "Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama."[7] the drama Rothko referred to constantly, throughout his life.

Towards the end of the 1940's Rothko's mythical paintings evolved into the abstract images for which he is remembered today. The "classic paintings", as they are known, began in the 40's and the painter continued making them and refining them, until he died. By removing the line from his work and by limiting himself to rectangular shapes, he felt he was "concretising" his symbols with the intention of moving "toward a clearer issue", "toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea".[8] He no longer had the figure, the line or the symbol, he said that his new paintings were no longer in the "symbolic style".[9] But he did not completely remove these things or notions from his painting, he insisted what was involved was "not a removal but a substitution of symbols", this being said in 1953, roughly six years after his "abstract" beginnings. In the same interview, by William Seitz, Rothko explained: "My new areas of colour are things. I put them on the surface. These new shapes say what the symbols said."10

Rothko, it seems, left himself only one way of representing these shapes on canvas, that was through colour. In 1949 Rothko stopped publishing statements because of his "abhorrence of... explanatory data".[11] Resultantly, if seeking an explanation one must rely upon statements made by Rothko to friends, which may obviously be less reliable. Many of Rothko's dualistic, bright dark paintings were painted from 1954 to 1956. From this period on Rothko's predominantly bright colours became progressively darker.

The brighter "classic" paintings were painted in the late 40's early 50's. These paintings brought significant recognition, but not, the artist felt, for the right reasons. Critics found these paintings decorative and beautiful, but this was not what Rothko had hoped for. He maintained that the bright, clashing colours of the early paintings were not cheerful and exciting, but violent and tragic, "Rothko claims that his is the most violent painting in America today", wrote Dore Ashton.[13] It was seldom Rothko was pleased with a critic's interpretation of his work. One such case was a review by British critic, David Sylvester, who wrote (after consulting with the artist):

> "He uses apparatus of serenity in achieving violence... - violence and serenity are reconciled and fused - this is what makes Rothko's a tragic art."[14]

The deepening in his colours accompanied Rothko's worsening depression. According to friends, by the late 50's Rothko was

increasingly depressed. He referred to his brighter pictures as "easier to understand" and felt that people did not have the same affinity for his darker "more difficult" work. Anna Chave quotes a source as saying:

> "To a lady who wanted to exchange a dark painting that "depressed" her, Rothko said, "By all means bring it back." But when she wished to replace it with a brighter one, he refused and returned he money."15

When asked whether colour was more important than any other element of his work, he replied: "No not colour, but measures."16

In 1958 Rothko chose to refute his critics by giving a talk at the Pratt Institute. He said that: "although he had used colours and shapes in a way that painters before have not,"17 his purpose was not to make formalist innovations. He was not a formalist or an expressionist, as both camps had claimed, but he was attempting to formulate a universal message that would transcend self and that would be about the human condition generally or "human drama" as he put it. It was Rothko's aim to extend this message through "the global language of art" (as he and Gotleib regarded it).19 Rothko felt that universalism was inescapable. In a 1943 radio broadcast dealing with the portrait, Rothko noted:

> "the artist's real model is an ideal which embraces all of human drama rather than the appearance of a particular individual... The whole of man's experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea."21

This last point, whether intentionally or not, can be related to a notion Hegel refers to in his philosophy of Fine Art.

> "Works of art are not thought and notion simply as such, but an evolution of the notion out of itself - the might of the thinking spirit is discovered not merely in its ability to grasp **itself** in its most native form as pure thinking, but also, to retain the grasp of itself in "other " which it transforms but is not."

He goes on:

> "The work of art, in which thought divests itself of itself, belongs to the realm of comprehending thought; and mind, by subjecting it to scientific contemplation."[22]

Rothko replaced conventional subjects with his own self-transcendence, this was to become his "subject matter". Such experience is "real and existing in ourselves" and can be revealed through art, painting and, seemingly very important for Rothko, colour. In 1943 he said: "only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless"[23] and in 1958, during the Pratt talk he said that he had "a clear preoccupation with death"[24] which had begun to manifest itself in his work a year earlier. In 1957 he had started using browns, deep maroons and plums, greys and black.

When Seldon Rodman referred to Rothko as a "master of colour harmonies and relationships on a monumental scale", in the late 1950's, Rothko denied this and insisted he was not an abstract painter and that he was not concerned with the relationships of colour or form. In an attempt to set Rodman straight he added:

> "I'm interested only in expressing basic human conditions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom... And if you, as you say, are moved only by their colour relationships, then you miss the point."[25]

He explained to one critic that he regarded colour as "merely an instrument", a tool he could use to attain his real objective, which was "poignancy of mood".[26] He also once said that his squares are not squares but, "all my feelings about life, about humanity".[27] His use of colour, form and other pictorial devices were employed as a language, as a means to express something other than, and beyond themselves.

> "The progression of a painters work... will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer... To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood."[28]

Communication was always a concern central to Rothko's work. He believed painting is a "language" to "communicate something about the world".[29] He said in 1958, his work had come closer "to dealing with human emotion, with the human drama as much as I can possibly experience it",[30] in 1959 "a painting is not a picture of an experience; it is an experience".[31] An experience he wanted to extend to the understanding of the viewer. However, elimination of obstacles between the painter and the viewer was essential to attain understanding. The examples Rothko gave of these obstacles were memory, history and geometry. Not only in the studio did Rothko attempt to break down barriers between himself and the observer, but this quest was carried into the gallery where presentation was instrumental in the comprehension and enjoyment of his work.

PART TWO

Rothko, as often as possible, issued strict instructions to galleries regarding the hanging and presentation of his work. Certain aspects of presentation, such as size of the walls in relation to scale of the work, lighting and the size of the rooms, were all manipulated and necessarily maintained according to Rothko's stipulations - to avoid misinterpretation, misunderstanding and distortion of meaning, and to attain final understanding and successful communication. He pursued high standards in the gallery to a degree many people regarded as obsessive and eccentric.

Rothko had several concerns regarding the hanging of his work. One of these was the way in which his paintings were lit. The following passage contains suggestions from Rothko regarding installation of his paintings at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961:

> "The light, whether natural or artificial, should not be too strong... if there is too much light, the colour in the picture is washed out and a distortion of their look occurs. The ideal situation would be to hang them in a normally lit room - that is the way they were painted."

He insisted here and on other occasions that the paintings "should not be over lit or romanticized by spots". Essentially, "the entire picture should be evenly lighted and not too strongly."[1]

The opportunity to house his paintings in an environment very much under his control was granted Rothko, when in 1964 Dominique and John de Menil proposed to build a chapel which

would be multi-denominational and would be a place for private mediation and exchange of religious insights. This environment would be encouraged and enhanced by the presence of Rothko's "spiritual", "religious" canvasses. The French couple hired the architect Philip Johnson for the project. Johnson proposed to light the chapel with a central, overhead light. Rothko did not object to this suggestion, as that was the system he had in his own studio. However his characteristic anxiety that the light would be too strong, once again came to bother him.

Johnson, in answer to the painter's criticisms, modified structures and introduced different lighting systems, none of which calmed Rothko's worries. Eventually Johnson withdrew from the project. Rothko died shortly before the final installation of the work. As it is, the lighting situation has never been resolved. Since the opening of the chapel the lighting has been studied and changed but has always been a problem.

The lengths to which Rothko went to achieve correct lighting for his paintings is known. He had struggled for, and often obtained, control of lighting conditions. The lighting in the gallery was necessary to expose the light created by his subtle colour combinations. Failure to expose such an essential part of his work would be failure to communicate, which seems to have been his biggest fear.

He said that spotlighting his paintings "results in a distortion of their meaning". This phrase recurres often in Rothko's vocabulary. In the late 1950's he said:

> "Since my pictures are large colourful and unframed, and since museum walls are usually immense and formidable, there is the danger that the pictures relate themselves as decorative areas to the walls. This would be a distortion of their meaning..."[2]

To avoid this, Rothko controlled lighting and also took measures to dull the power and impact of white walls. For the painter, the walls of museums were to be fought and conquered so as not to detract from or control the paintings.

For the Whitechapel exhibition, already mentioned, Rothko instructed that the:

> "Walls should be made considerably off-white with umber and warmed by a little red. If the walls are too white, they are always fighting against the pictures..."

In the case of the chapel, the walls were not to be painted: he said he wanted only materials in their natural state to be used. He suggested using concrete walls, but it was too late to implement this idea. Finally it was agreed that the interior walls were to be made of concrete blocks, with uncoloured plaster sprayed on the surface. Once again, the gallery had to adapt. It had to be changed to enhance and compliment the mood of the paintings.

On a physical level, Rothko's paintings dominated the space of galleries and museums. However, their hanging demanded a fine

understanding of how they were constructed, and of their pictorial proportions and measurements. In 1961, for the installation in the Whitechapel gallery, he wrote:

> "The pictures should all be hung as close to the floor as possible, ideally not more than six inches above it."

In the case of the smaller pictures:

> "they should be somewhat raised but not "skyed" (never hung towards the ceiling). Again this is the way the pictures were painted. If this is not observed, the proportions of the rectangles become distorted and the picture changes."

According to Sidney Janis, his dealer in the mid-1950's, he hung his largest pictures in the smaller rooms. They reached almost from floor to ceiling and sometimes projected beyond the edge of the wall. These paintings were always close to the floor. He said in 1958, at the Pratt Institute, "A large picture is an immediate transaction; it takes you into it".[3] In 1951 he wrote that "historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous".[4] Contrary to this function, Rothko used scale

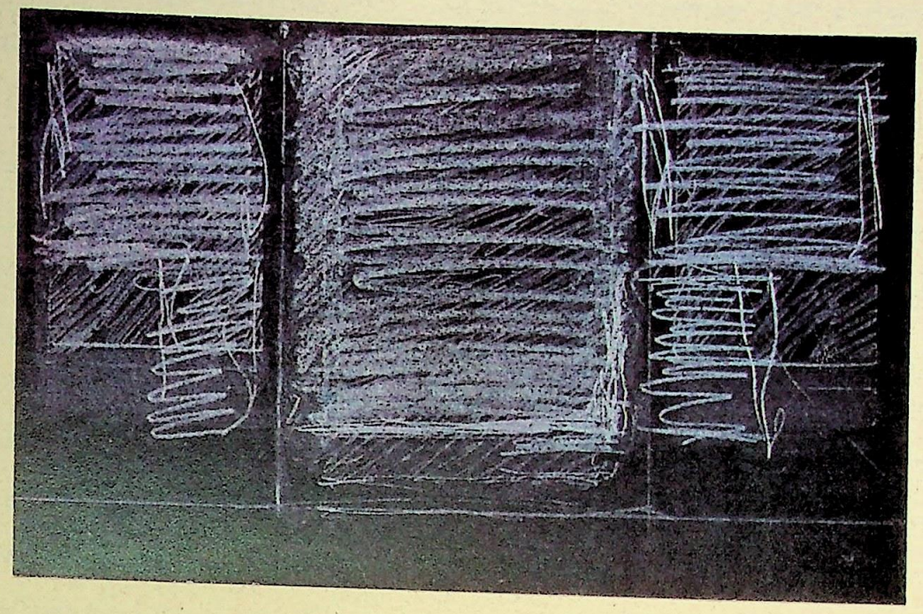
> "to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience... However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command."[4]

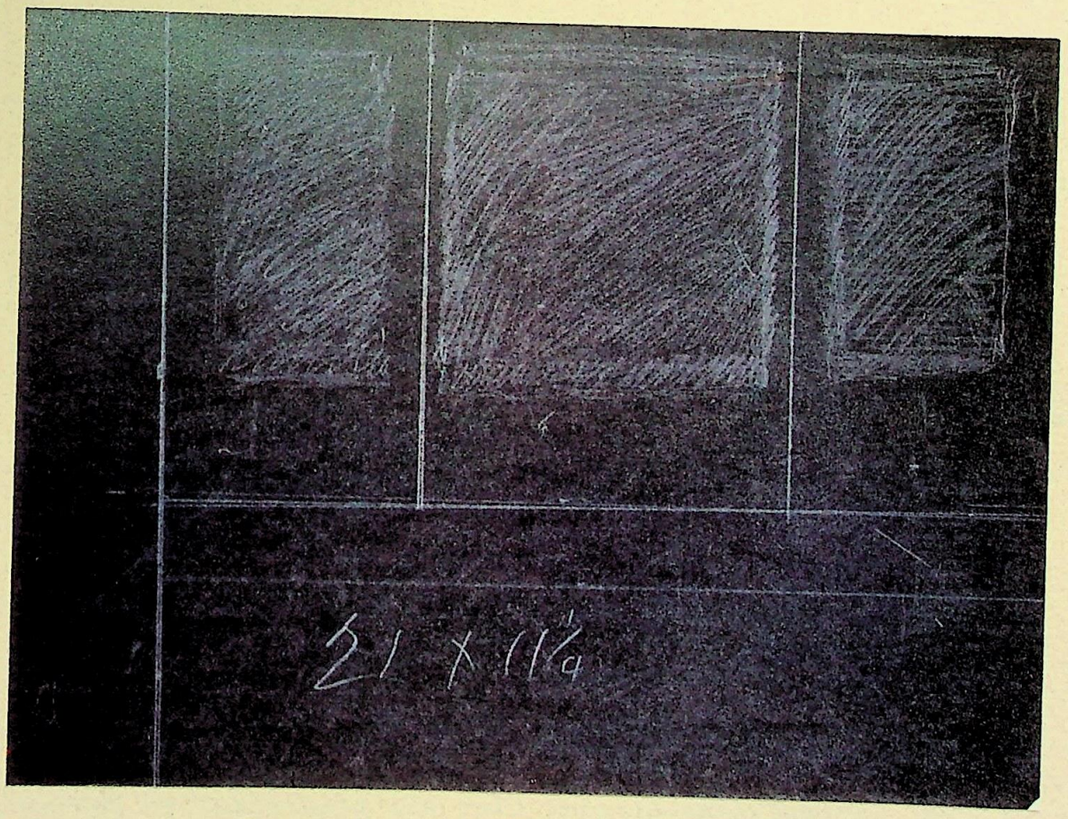
This is true, not only for the painter in his studio, but also for the viewer, confronted by a painting of such scale in the gallery. The experience of painting, as seen and experienced by Rothko, is extended, as much as possible, to the consciousness of the viewer.

> "I hang the largest pictures so that they must be first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture... I also hang the pictures low rather than high and particularly in the case of the largest ones, often as close to the floor as is feasible, for that is the way they were painted."[5]

However, Rothko's paintings were not spontaneous occurrences and the experience of painting was often shared (as dictated by scale of work) with one or more helpers. William Scharf, friend and assistant, recalled how himself and Rothko went about trying to achieve the uniform texture preferred by the painter, on a large canvas destined for the Huston Chapel. Rothko wanted to avoid brush strokes. However to achieve this uniform texture was beyond the speed and power of one person. Either Scharf or Rothko stood on a ladder and quickly brushed on thin paint at the top of the canvas, while the other one did the same below, trying to avoid the ladder.

Rothko's method of painting appears, from a distance, to have been long and drawn out. Certainly in the Chapel project, he went through weeks and months of decision-making about, apparently, tiny adjustments. For instance, he went through a long process of trial and error to determine the size and shape of the black rectangles for the paintings. Small graphite studies were made early on. These show alternatives considered by the painter for the relationship of the black rectangle in the central panel to those in the side panels. Formal questions were raised, concerning the height of the rectangles, the width of the rectangles proportionate to the





UNTITLED (SKETCH FOR CHAPEL TRIPTYCH), 1964/65
6 9/16 x 10 5/16 in.

UNTITLED (SKETCH FOR CHAPEL TRIPTYCH) 1964/65
9 x 12 in.

width of the canvas, etc. After this process had ended, decision-making went on to a larger scale.

For the Huston Chapel, numerous canvasses were worked on, and experimented with before the final eight paintings emerged in 1971. The importance of their environmental setting had been realised early on in the project. In 1964 an architectural mock-up of the Chapel was built in Rothko's 69th St. Studio, which gave him an opportunity to work along with the setting and surroundings of the paintings. On previous occasions, however, he had to manipulate galleries to suit the tones of his work.

The scale of his work, he believed, invited people into it. This effect would be further enhanced by the grouping of paintings. By placing large work in a small room, Rothko was distorting proportions and playing with space (this being a fine example of the extent to which his "works of art" went beyond the surface of the canvas). His art was not "painting", but the art of occupying a space. he insisted his paintings were to be shown in groups, regardless of their size.

> "By saturating the room with the feeling of the work, the walls are defeated and the poignancy of each single work had for me become more usable."6

This "saturation" of a room was another component of his method of installing his pain into an environment. In relation to the Rothko chapel, Barnett Newman said Rothko was

making a cathedral out of himself, out of his own feelings. By carefully manipulating galleries and museums he put his notions into a place where they would be kept and stored. There they can be studied and criticized in relation to what has gone before and what has come after them; or as he would have wished they can be experienced as much as possible though the atmosphere of the place by "the sensitive viewer". Rothko's paintings can be seen as props for a gallery or theatre where his "dramas" or notions are displayed and played out.

The opportunity to display ones ideas in this manner is, to say the least, rare. For example, the opportunity for Anselm Kiefer to document a history in a library made of lead is unique. Regardless of what happens to the world, including a nuclear situation, the contents of this library will be preserved within the lead pages. This documentation is not representative of humankind, but of one mans impression of the world. The possibilities and responsibilities are phenomenal.

> "The criterion for determining the order of aesthetic objects in the museum throughout the era of modernism - the "self-evident" quality of masterpieces - has been broken, and as a result anything goes."[7]

Although "anything goes", artists even today, are in the privileged position of being able to publicly comment on anything they choose (obviously true of only some countries), and on a larger scale than in any other period of art history. The move away form the galleries into the public space, and

the utilization of the gallery as a weapon instrumental in its own demise, was a reaction, in part, against the function of the institution, as supremely manipulated by Rothko.

PART THREE

J.R.R. Christie and Fred Orton, in "Writing on a Text of the Life" say this:

> "Inner experience only enters consciousness when it finds a language; whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent. If it is not to be passed over in silence, experience must be translated. Between "self" and "expression" lies the realm of translation and rhetoric".[1]

The credibility of interpretation and criticism of painting is questionable, as are the structures of "cultural management" whereby the critical status quo manifests itself.

Surrounding Rothko's work was much mystique inducing rhetoric (of the verbal kind). Possibly the best example of such rhetoric is found in Peter Selz's catalogue essay for Rothko's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the sixties. According to Selz "these paintings - open sarcophagi - moodily dare, and thus invite the spectator to enter their orifices." Phrases such as "the doors of the dead", "Orphic cycle", "artist in search of his muse" etc., stud Selz's essay, which had been widely criticised, and was withdrawn from the catalogue as requested by the painter, before the show went abroad.[2] In Hilton Kramer's words: "Artists are given license in these matters that art historians appropriate at their peril".[3]

This type of criticism, Robert Hughes maintains "faithfully echoed the statements Rothko made about his own art, in all their exalted ambition and frequent cloudiness", Hughes quotes Rothko, as saying "I can call spirits from the vasty deep".[4]

This kind of language which surrounded Rothko, saved his work "from the kind of analysis that might have argued that Rothko, far from being Yahweh's official stenographer, was a "painter", a maker of visual fictions - better than most, but still prone to repetition and quite able to succumb to his own formulas and reflexive cliches".[5] Translation of the interpretation of Rothko's work, of abstract painting generally, is consistently vague and cloudy. It is doomed from the beginning.

> "The language of Rothko appreciation tends to be coercive, because of a deep uncertainty about the nature of his art."[6]

Hughes cites Diane Weldman as one whose book supplies useful source material on Rothko's life and style, but when it comes to interpretation, "out come the violins, the woodwinds, the kettledrums, everything".[7] It appears every attempt to interpret Rothko's painting produces this effect.

Part of the problem with this kind of pictorial analysis is, as Kramer puts it: "its crass assumption that an abstract painting is something like a telegram containing a "message" in a code we are called upon to crack."[8] Such an assumption is made on the part of Anna Chave:

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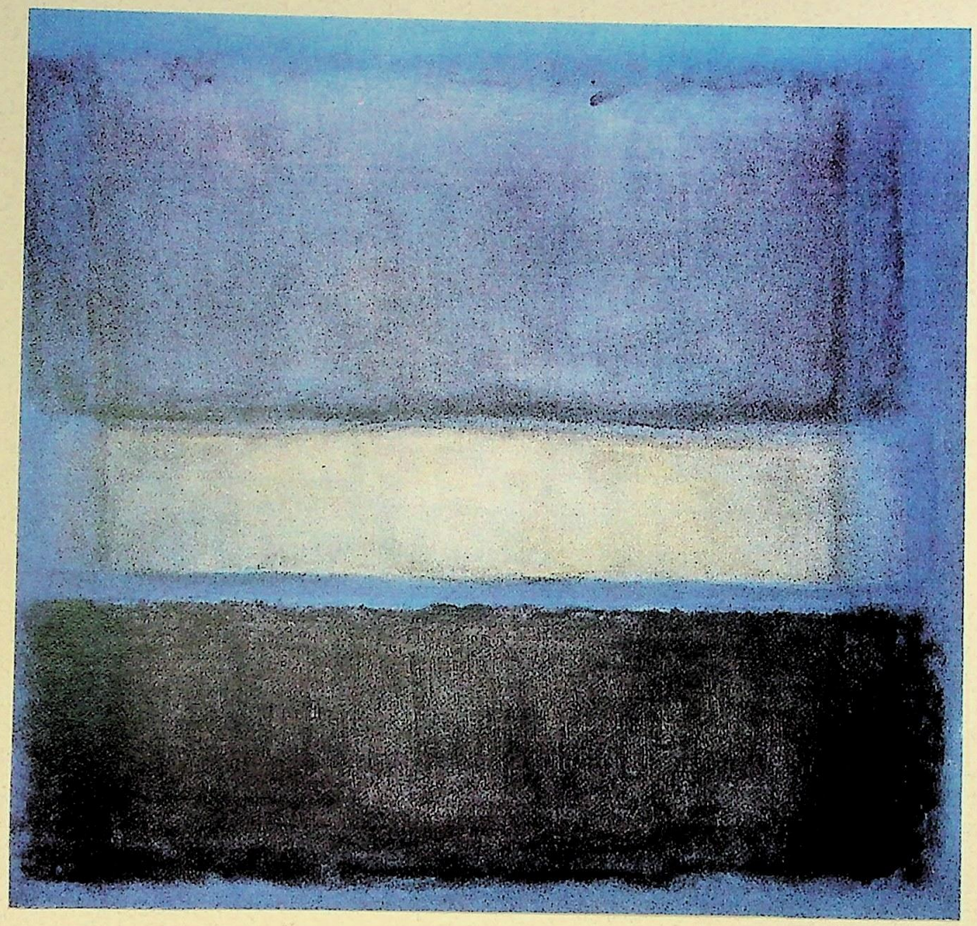
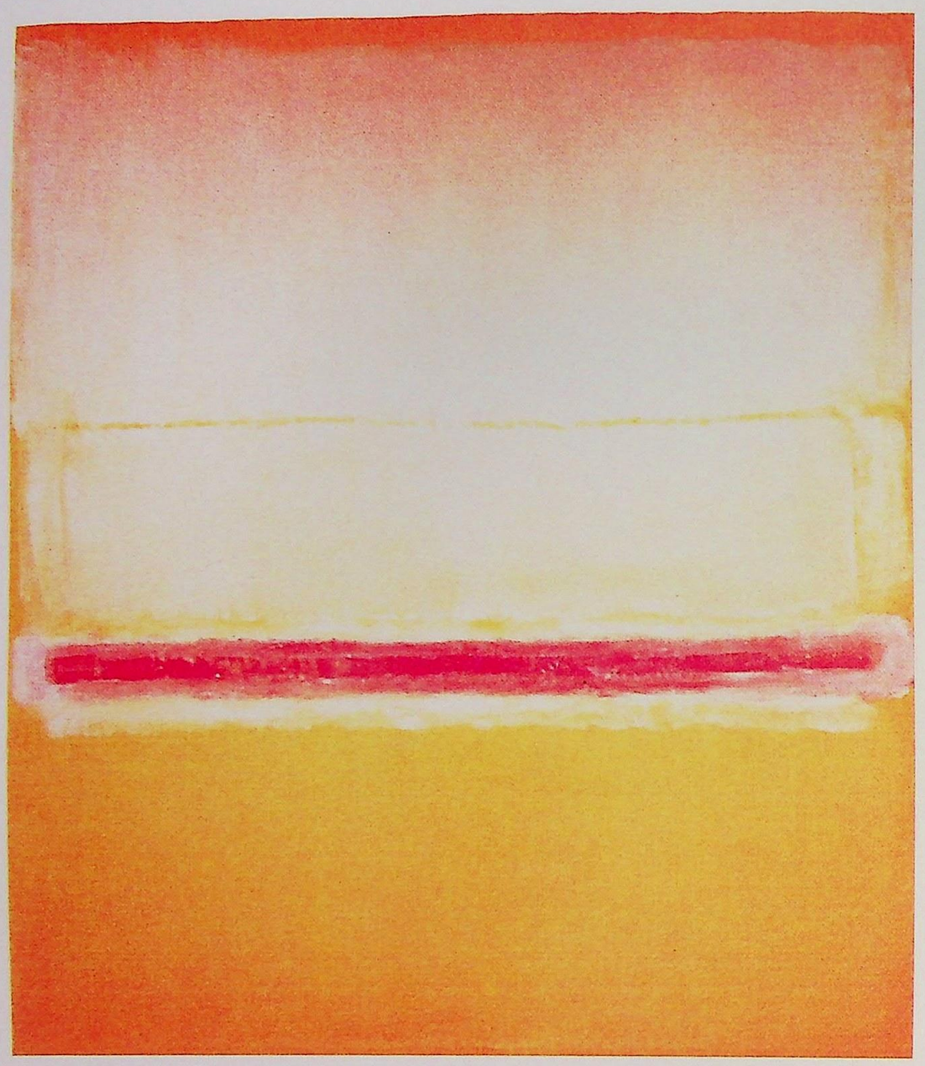


MARK ROTHKO
WHITE BAND (NO. 27)



MARK ROTHKO
No. 20, 1950.

she also states,

> "The message of the abstract painting veers decisively away from the textual or narrative, the explicitly recognizable and specifiable, into a more determinate realm."[10]

In attempting to "decode" the "message", Chave embarks on a journey of intellectualised subjective speculation, not as bad as Selz's account of Rothko's painting, but nevertheless indicative of "over the top" interpretation of abstract art. An example of, as Kramer calls it "this bizarre project of interpretation" is as follows:

> "Those images of Rothko's that parallel the pictorial structure of a Pieta (Bellini), such as White Band (No.27) and No.20, 1950, might be said at the same time to parallel the structure of a conventional mother and child image"

she continues

> "such tripartite pictures as the untitled yellow and black painting of 1953, which bear a relation to the pictorial structure of an entombment, also bear a relation to certain conventional adoration or nativity images."[11]

She reduces the various formal elements of Rothko's paintings to a code system, "dark brown and charcoal black stripes scumbled over a fiery red ground", "expresses" or means "a feeling of suppressed violence or morbidity".[12] In another case, she says:

> "By showing the horizontal figure at two different levels, earthbound and airborne, Rothko may again have been exploring possibilities for an image that could encompass a suggestion of the full cycle of life."[13]

It has already been argued that Rothko's own rhetoric fueled such confusion. But there is another element which should be taken into consideration: over-familiarity. Rothko's classic paintings eventually became, as Hughes put it, "reflexive cliches". In 1989, Patrick Heron wrote of Rothko:

> "He had virtually one concept. If he had painted only 25 canvasses each containing no more than two or three of those misty-edged, round-cornered rectangles... we might still have revered him as a radical reducer of pictorial formal content to its bare working minimum. But he painted over 800 such canvasses."[14]

These canvasses lead him nowhere, except suicide, says Heron. This familiarity with Rothko's work rather than captivating, stretches the boundaries of ones imagination, and results in the impulse to "interpret" abstraction or to allegorise it. Kramer says this:

> "A painting isn't a text, and to pretend that it is one is to denigrate the very idea of abstract art, and to add yet another chapter... to the history of philistine response to its existence."[15]

> "No possible program notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The appreciation of art is a true marriage of minds."[16]

However, as soon as a painting enters the public gallery it enters into a public debate. No matter how much Rothko dreamt of and wished for private communication with the "sensitive viewer", public criticism was always inevitable. In 1955, Clement Greenberg wrote that Rothko was "a brilliant original colourist". His "big vertical pictures... are among the

largest gems of abstract expressionism".[17] In Greenberg's opinion the purpose of abstract expressionism was to break away from cubism from the illusionistic space of cubism which destroys pictorial flatness. Rothko, Clifford Still and Barnett Newman had progressed further than their colleagues, because they had achieved "a more consistent and radical suppression of value contrasts than seen so far in abstract art", "colour breathes from the canvasses with an enveloping effect, which is intensified by the largeness itself of the picture".[18] Rothko accepted that he was concerned with formal innovations but objected to the implication that he was a picture-maker whose intention it was to paint flat colour-fields.

Not only was Rothko embraced by Greenberg, but also by Elaine de Kooning who, borrowing Harold Rosenberg's label, claimed Rothko as an "action painter", even though his paintings had no evidence of action, his "image seems to settle on the canvas indirectly, leaving no trace of the means that brought it there."[19] However Rothko declined the invitation. In answer to her article, he wrote a letter to Art News in December 1957:

> "To allude to my work as Action Painting borders on the fantastic. Action Painting is antithetical to the very look and spirit of my work."[20]

Rosenberg, also, considered Rothko's painting as the "antithesis to action painting". They were

> "based on the idea of one idea. This was an aspiration toward an aesthetic essence, which... (Rothko) sought to attain... by rationally calculating what was irreducible in painting."21

This clearly was far from Rothko's intentions. However, he never lived to respond to the article.

David Carrier manages to put perspective on art criticism in his book "Artwriting".

> "The test of time is itself puzzling. Why, after a century, can we better understand Manet, when we must read Clark to discover simple facts about the Folies-Bergere known to Manet's contemporaries? Why do four decades give us perspective on Pollock?"22

The reason is discussion and conflict of interpretation eventually result in some consensus of understanding. Ultimately, the rhetoric surrounding Rothko's work does not attempt to describe abstract paintings, to understand their content or decipher their "codes". It merely attempts to put them in context.

Rothko wrote:

> "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world."23

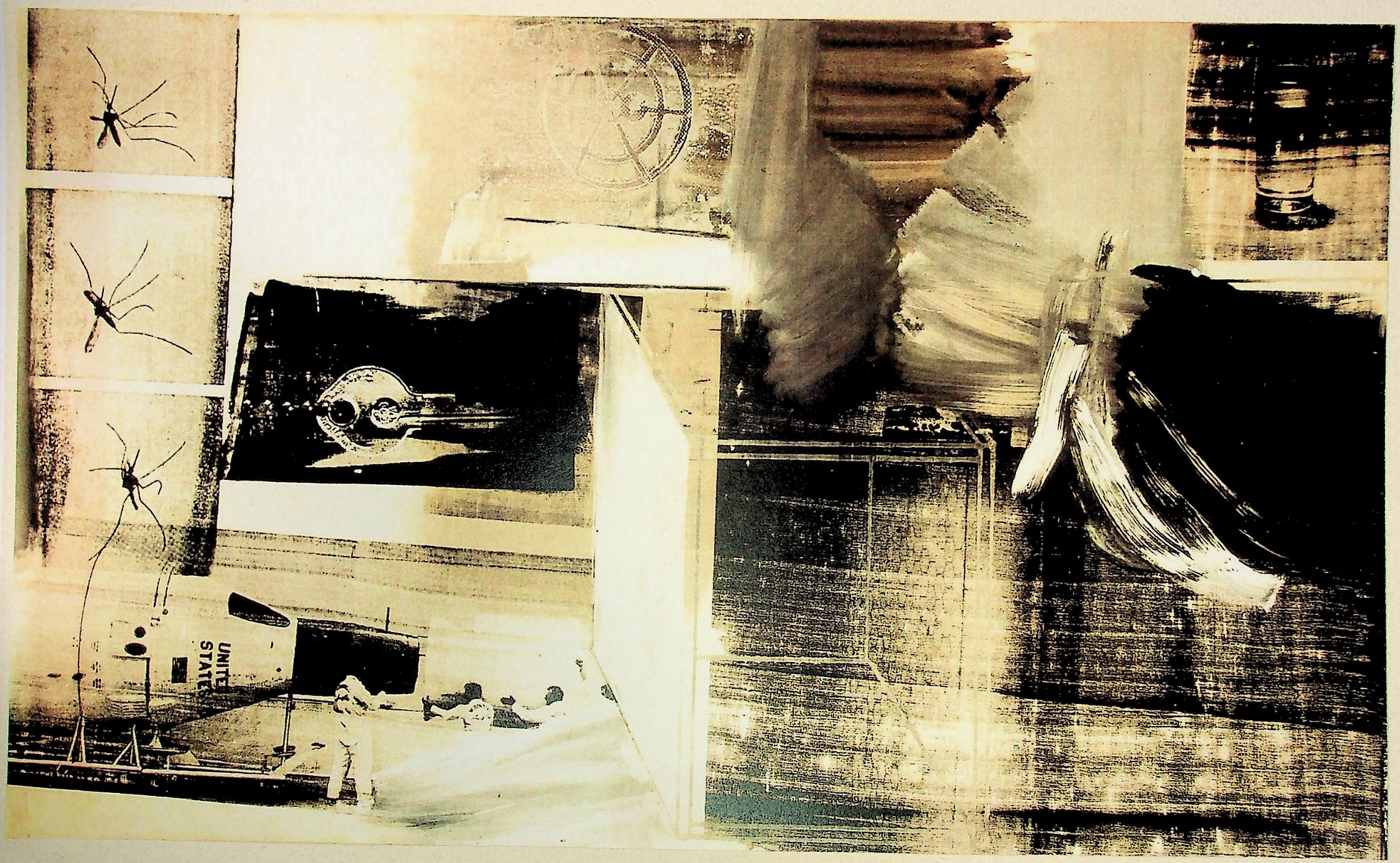
The sensitivity demanded by Rothko was something possibly acceptable in the 1950's, but as time went on, such purity of

vision was seen and is seen today as that of a "barbarian".[24] Such privacy and purity of vision has little or nothing to do with the original aims of modernism. Intentions had journeyed so far they had become unrecognisable.

> "The origins of modernism are three-fold: its proximity to revolutionary politics and the development of the western working class, the emergence of the second technological revolution (the motor car, the telephone, photography and film) and the break-up of the old artist academies and their ruling-class allegiance to classical precedents."[25]

The images being produced by the abstract-expressionists in the 1950's and 1960's were fetching inflated prices in the market place, which had established a new order on the ruins of the old. These canvasses, some of them monumental, hung in the homes and galleries of those who could afford such culture.

Rothko and his contemporaries were making art in what was a turbulent time, to say the least, in America. In the 1960's President Kennedy was assassinated, Martin Luther King was assassinated, the Americans were waging a highly emotive and unpopular war in Vietnam, America was also experiencing a rapid development in the technological revolution. The further advancement of television, telephone, film and photography resulted in "mass entertainments industry".[26] This along with "capitalization of mechanical reproduction" brought about change in art.


UNITED
STATES

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
CROCUS 1962
(OVER): PAYLOAD 1962

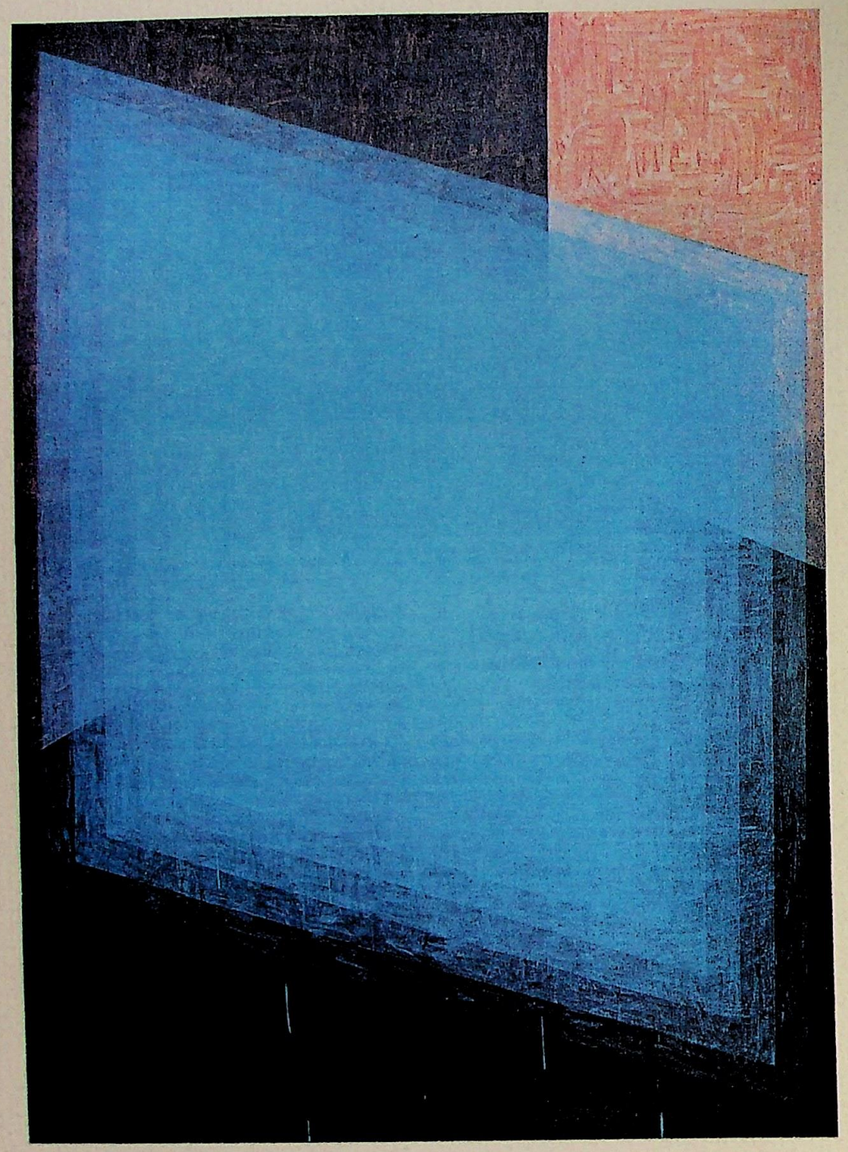
While the abstract expressionists were still at work, Robert Rauschenberg introduced photography, into his paintings which "began to conspire with painting in its own destruction".[27] By the 1960's pop culture had produced pop art, commenting on the commercialism of the culture which the abstractionists were managing to ignore.

> "Late modernism was literally corrupted - broken up. Its self-critical impulse was retained, but its ethical tone was rejected. This rejection led to an aestheticism of the non - or anti-artistic."

Such a reaction, Hal Foster says, allowed for "new modes of art: hybrid, ephemeral, site-specific, textual."[28] Abstract expressionist painting, for one thing, could not possibly compete with the power and diversity of the media used by these new modes.

Reversion into a "private language" in such an atmosphere is condemned as being ignorant and unrealistic. Ignorant of change, technology, post-modern culture, mass media. Artists working with a private language at this time are seen to be shrinking away from the times in which they live, escaping from the inescapable.

CONCLUSION



PETER SCHUYFF
UNTITLED, 1985
90 x 66 in.

The abstract expressionists of the 1950's and 60's, including Rothko, as a strategy, employed, in Hal Foster's words, "extreme subjectivity" which in the context of that time was effectively critical.[1] Today's abstractionists employ different tactics. For example the paintings of Sherrie Levine have a "ready-made status".

> "Her abstract paintings simulate modes of abstraction, as if to demonstrate they are no longer critically reflexive or historically necessary forms with direct access to unconscious truths... they are simply styles among others."[2]

Foster argues that artists like Levine, Phillip Taaffe and Peter Schuyff, by duplicating legitimate, "real" abstract art, are literally abstracting it, emptying "its historical form of content".[3] Other artists are involved in the representation of another sort of abstraction.

> "the abstraction of technological modes of control of nature (Jack Goldstein), of scientific paradigms of (dis) order (James Welling), of late-capitalist social space (Peter Halley), of cybernetic languages (Ashley Bickerton), of commodity and image production (Meyer Vaisman and Oliver Wasow)."[4]

The work of Levine, Welling and others in the group "evoke the abstraction of contemporary languages",[5] they "connect the creation of art technically to the production of everyday images".[6] It would appear that the resulting abstraction of these "contemporary languages" is itself a language which, if not private, is certainly elite. Not unlike some of their predecessors the work of these abstractionists is meaningless to the uninformed. It demands education and insight into the contemporary art world.

Hal Foster says:

> "It is the abstractive processes of capital that erode representation and abstraction alike. And ultimately it may be these processes that are the real subject, and the latent referent, of this new abstraction."[7]

So in effect, rather than referring to nothing outside themselves, these paintings "refer to the capitalist system in which they are commodities".[8] Baudrillard's philosophy of art concerning its role in the exchange system is one Carrier finds "repugnant". As he puts it:

> "A Rembrandt refers to what it depicts; a Halley refers only to its own exchange value."[9]

An alternative narrative is what is needed, suggests Carrier, to balance the effectiveness of Baudrillard's "prescription" for the present situation. These new imitative modes of abstraction are far from the targets of their criticism. Likewise, the relevant narratives are far from Greenbergian rhetoric of the 50's and 60's. The vocabulary of new abstraction has journeyed beyond that of "private language", but not so far, as to be widely understood. Perhaps, the public perception of abstract art will never extend beyond the decorative, the variety of "styles" that are incorporated within abstraction.

> "Nothing conveys more vividly and compellingly the notion of a destiny shaping human ends than do the great styles, whose evolutions and transformations seem like long scars that fate has left, in passing, on the face of the earth."[10]

NOTES

NOTES

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