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Abstract Expressionism

The abstract expressionist movement shook the art world. It began in the early 1940's and shifted the world's attention to New York City, where artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were shattering publicly held notions of what was considered art. It's authentic period of vibrancy and newness lasted from the early 1940's to the mid 1950's.

The social and political context in which the abstract expressionist movement came about was highly influential to the artists of that time, and a familiarity with that context is deeply informative to the viewer. WWII had just ended and American soldiers were returning home from overseas, along with a huge influx of artists and intellectuals from Europe who had been driven from their homes. This allowed America to step into the spotlight as a hub for the artists of the world at the same time as it emerged as a global superpower. There was still segregation between blacks and whites in public places. Later in the movement America entered into the cold war with Russia and the McCarthy trials were in the forefront of American minds. Individualism in abstract expressionism is reflective of a newly individualistic nation, the recent birth of America as a superpower and a period of economic freedom (for many).

The Birth of Abstract Expressionist Paintings

The breakthrough came when artists decided to paint-- just to paint. They were doing away with the idea of painting as a window into another world, or a narrative, or a representation of reality. Rather they embraced the *action* of painting, paint for paint's sake, and didn't try to make the canvas look like anything but canvas.

If there is one overarching theme in abstract expressionism, it is originality. Each artist had his or her own distinct style/philosophy/persona. The banner title of abstract expressionism came to encompass a multitude of styles, but the common factors were the search for the truly original, the non-figurative, and embracing the 2-d plane.

Barnett Newman said, "We are freeing ourselves from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, which have been the devices of European painting." (Balken, p. 17)

There is a general sense of "If you don't get it, then I can't explain it to you." about most abstract expressionist work. The intention was for the work to wholly and absolutely speak for itself. Artists wanted each painting to hold it's own emotional space, instantly transferring the emotional or psychological condition of the artist as it was made. Therefore, in addition to addressing the aesthetic qualities of each work, it seems equally important to discuss the artistic philosophy and driving motivation of each artist to further inform the viewer's sense of what the works (and the movement itself) are really about.

Originality was the driving force behind abstract expressionist work; in the world of abstract expressionism the extent to which you were like anyone else was the extent to which you were worse than him. As a result there is no set of cohesive stylistic

characteristics defining the movement. Instead, the term abstract expressionism serves as a hazy catchall for several different sub-categories.

The first of these is gestural abstraction. This style is known for harsh lines, bold brushstrokes, and total figureless abstraction. Artists who often worked in this style include Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, and Robert Motherwell. Color field painting is characterized by the even flat fields of luminous, often symbolic color created by Rothko, Newman, and Still. American action painting can be seen as a third and separate category, although for some time the phrase was used interchangeably with abstract expressionism. In this aspect of the movement the action of painting was the main issue. For Harold Rosenberg, an art critic and artist, the real significance of action painting was not the work itself, but the sum total of the decisions and actions made by the artist. The painting was only a ghost. As Rosenberg saw it, "The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from Value- political, moral, and aesthetic." This comment was in reference to "*Cathedral*" by Pollock. (Balken p. 23)

It was believed at the time by artists, critics and connoisseurs that high art, quality, major art had to be original. In trying to achieve some mythical original "first" in art, the artists were in essence trying to sever themselves from historical and cultural influences and return to the pure self, pure emotion. In other words, they were trying to attain 'universality' in art. (Craven)

Rosenberg said, "The liberation from Paris as the center of the art world resulted not in the establishment of an American art or genre, but rather the end of a need for one," (Balken p.75). Although Rosenberg and others saw abstract expressionism as universal in essence, there was a definite atmosphere of American nationalism in the movement, a certain zeal for denouncing the history and rules set out by the previously dominating authority of French surrealist, modernist and cubist painters.

The Artists

For about a decade in New York City a group of many of the 'major' artists of the time formed a group called 'the club', which has also been referred to as the New York School. Included in 'the club' were artists Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Still, Rothko, Newman, and Motherwell, among others. They met weekly to discuss art, impending shows, and mainly the philosophical and existential issues that informed their work. Although art historians have used this fact to back up their definition of a concrete abstract expressionist movement, the artists themselves felt otherwise. Gottlieb said in an interview, "There was no sense of solidarity, there was no ideology. If there was any sense of solidarity, it was out of a sense of mutual self protection... like everybody was out to get you so you had to stick together a little bit," (Gibson).

Jackson Pollock's contributions to abstract expressionism and its assertion of the 2-d plane are what earned him continued recognition for his innovative genius. One of Pollock's revolutionary steps was doing away with the brush altogether (a tool which he saw as a hindrance and too academic). Rather, his method was to pour and drip paint directly onto the canvas, creating rhythmic, often violent, layers of paint with no reference to figure or narrative content. This method resulted in a very intentionally flat composition with no illusion of depth, yet with a lot of movement and energy. Embracing

the flatness of the canvas would become a common point in the art of many abstract expressionists' styles. (Landau)

The renowned and powerful art critic Clement Greenberg announced Jackson Pollock's genius early on. Jackson Pollock came to embody the spirit of the "American Hero". He was the quintessential rugged western man (he was from Wyoming), and represented the new powerful individualist ideal of the American artist. Greenberg commended him as the 'major' artist of Abstract expressionism for his elimination of the 3-d picture plane, his "purity", and his all over evenness and compositional flatness. (Balken p.28)

Lee Krasner was the most conventionally well recognized woman abstract expressionist painter, but spent much of her professional career negotiating her own art with her role as Jackson Pollock's wife. It is widely known that they were highly influential to one another. Clement Greenberg once stated, "Lee Krasner has the best eyes for composition in painting today," (Landau p.47). She contributed greatly to Pollock's compositions while exploring her own abstractions. In the series called her "little images" she made more than thirty paintings, exploring a vaguely hieroglyphic format; critics today read this as an expressive language in which words aren't present, stretching the techniques for placing emotional content in abstraction. (Landau)

Since the title 'abstract expressionism' so poorly defined the dramatically varying styles and content of the artists, the philosophy of universality and complete avoidance of figure was not an absolute. Willem de Kooning is most famous in the abstract expressionism genre for his "Woman" series, in which he claimed to be painting an aspect of his own self. These images maintain their flat abstracted nature, but stray far into the figurative arena. Arshile Gorky, known for "*The Liver's the Cocks Comb*", was highly influenced by the surrealists Picasso and Joan Miro`. This becomes apparent in the whimsically meandering black lines often present in his work, as well as in repeated vague and abstracted references to female genitalia in his earlier works.

Ad Reinhardt was also heavily influenced by the surrealist movement and cubism, and unlike some of his contemporaries, he thought there were certain aspects of European modernism that deserved to be continued. His work gradually evolved into more color plane work, which he felt expressed the sublime.

Franz Kline grew up painting gritty images of the coalmines where he grew up in Pennsylvania, which later evolved into robust abstractions. He became good friends with both Pollock and de Kooning and they supported one another's development of the gestural and expressive side to painting.

Political and Social Climate; An Evolution

The culture of the avante garde was highly influential to the abstract expressionism movement - the desire to be just outside the acceptable realm of the everyday art viewer. The drive for originality which directed aesthetic choices also formed some opinions about what qualified as high art. David Hare, an abstract expressionist sculptor said, "We shouldn't be accepted by the public. As soon as we are accepted, we are no longer artists but decorators," (Gibson p.97).

It was felt that "high" art could not be literal, political, or make any sort of currently identifiable social statement. Art historians today see the withdrawal of artists

from the political arena without much surprise. To be non-political in art was safe territory for artists. This was a time when the only political choices were equally unacceptable ones: Communism or McCarthyism. Abstract expressionist artists reacted to this unpleasant political climate by withdrawing their concerns to the purely aesthetic. (Gibson)

Phillip Guston's work *For BTW* follows the strict guidelines of abstraction that were common in the movement: flatness of composition, all over motion and pronounced brushstrokes. Guston serves as an example of the direction many abstractionists would eventually go. He became disenchanted by formalist theory and veered back toward the figure, saying "There is something ridiculous and miserly in the myth we inherit from abstract art: that painting is autonomous, pure and for itself, and therefore we habitually analyze it's ingredients and define it's limits. But painting is impure. It is the adjustment of its impurities which forces painting's continuities," (Balken 47).

The preceding information constitutes the commonly accepted perspective on abstract expressionism as a movement. It also represents the canon's analysis of which person's art qualifies as major and whose art falls short. It is now recognized that the social climate during the 1940's made it inhospitable, if not impossible, for anyone who was not a white man to produce "major" works, as judged by critics (other white men) like Greenberg. (Doss)

As Gibson says in her introduction to *Abstract Expressionism; New Politics*, "Abstract expressionism as it has most often been defined incorporates a stylistic stretch from Barnett Newman's Scholarly persona and linear restraint, to Willem de Kooning's bohemian painterliness. As Lawrence Alloway observed in the late 1960's, 'the unity of action painting, color field painting and abstract expressionism was purely verbal, a product of generalization from incomplete data.' But the themes and styles of abstraction in the works of African Americans such as Rose piper or Thelma Johnson Sreat, in some ways least like abstract expressionism as we know it to be defined, make it necessary either to pull abstract expressionism into a different shape or admit that it's self proclaimed universality stops short at the boundaries of race and gender," (Gibson, p. xxii).

Critics' role in the perpetuation gender and racial biases are evident in commentary which denounced the art of women abstract expressionist painters like Elaine de Kooning and Lee Krasner as simply trying to "tidy up" their husbands' energetic and "virile" works with "feminine elegance and decorativeness". In fact, Lee Krasner was told at her first one-woman show in the late 1930's that her "work was so good you would never know it was painted by a woman," (Landau p.70).

Gertrude Barrer, a prolific and moving abstract expressionist artist, had her first one woman show while pregnant with her second child. "I truly believe that if I had been born a male, I would have been famous- I had the talent and I had the drive," said Barrer (Gibson, p.170).

The stereotype of "The American Hero" that encompassed much of abstract expressionism could not include many influential contributing artists in the social reality of the segregated 1940's and 1950's. Women, African Americans, and homosexuals were seen as incapable of creating 'universal' art, as it would be inherently influenced by their race, gender or sexuality. White men were the only ones seen fit to thrust into the international spotlight with this new 'original and universal' art style. However, the

accommodations and resistances these disempowered artists made toward that prevailing patriarchy/canon formed the basis for a new kind of heroism. Their art is as interesting and energetic as that of their better-known colleagues, forcing viewers and critics to redefine the limits of the major and minor artists in the abstract expressionist movement.

The vibrant fresh period in which abstract expressionism was really breaking boundaries lasted from the early 1940's until the mid 1950's, with the death of Jackson Pollock in 1956. By then imitators and the general public had gotten hold of the visual impact of all-over splatter compositions. Anyone can splatter paint. However, the genius of the original abstract expressionists was in their intention, in their philosophy, and in the vibrancy and courage in their action.