

Lecture Notes

Syllabus 3/23/05 – EUROPEAN ABSTRACTION AND NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – PART TWO

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

The name we use to apply to the art of group of NY artists in 40 and 50s

- With rise of Fascism in Europe in 1933 there was an influx of European modernist artists to London and NY and became part of NY art scene by 1940.
- An equally large group of young Americans came to NY to study avant garde art
- Motherwell, Still and Guston's (below) art was not about an arena in which to act, recording the artist's gesture or the process of the making of the piece (like Pollack and the action painters). Motherwell, Still were about the end product: colors, textures, shapes on the surface and the viewer's response to it
- However, the gesture still important in creating the evocative content they wanted

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM PART II:



- **01_Elegy to the Spanish Republic #34 – 1953-54 – Robert**

Motherwell

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Directly Inspired by Matisse (see Jazz the Cowboy below)
- Degree in Philosophy – tried painting after he saw a Matisse painting (“It was like an arrow struck through my heart”). Amazed by Matisse’s “chunk of blue” and wanted that quality



- **02_Jazz The Cowboy – 1947 - Matisse**

- Started out doing sort of automatist surrealist/cubist/abstract kinds of drawings and collages.
- Then took trip with Matta to Spain. Became taken with the cause of Spanish Revolution.
- Decided to make a series of images that “would speak to the force of the paint and the forms” – just the visual force creating tension across the surface the way Matisse achieved expression through the sum total of all the elements of his painting
- Makes it epic, large; chunks of black pushing and pulling as though imprisoned, trying to get out (alluding to Spanish prisoners but very generally)



- **03_Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue – 1974 – Robert Motherwell**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Began this series of color abstractions in the 1970s
- Huge canvasses painted with beautiful pigments, with variations and subtle texture from brushstrokes
- The viewer is just supposed to “experience” it. Not supposed to have a specific narrative.
- Friends with Rothko and Gottlieb who wrote NYTimes article saying they shouldn’t have to explain his art, that it should speak for itself. “We are for an art that is tragic and timeless.”
- This art is supposed to have timeless, eternal, nonspecific, humanistic content that was epic that could be understood if you could get rid of the idea that you need an explanation



- **04_Number 2 – 1949 – Clifford Still**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Still was painting teacher in California
- California remained figurative, with lots of impressionism through 40s and 50s **except for Clifford Still**
- Still a dramatic persona, invited Rothko to come to CA
- Enormous painting – Still wanted viewer engulfed, having to experience peripheral vision, feel overwhelmed by paint on the surface.
- Paintings compared to “plate tectonics” since he used thick pigment like moving crusts of paint



- **05_Dial – 1956 – Philip Guston**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- NOT IN BOOK
- Guston expelled from School of Industrial Arts with Pollack c/o they used a periodical produced by English department and lampooned the department with it
- Went to NY to study, worked on WPA murals
- Wrestled between figuration and abstraction. Influenced by Mondrian. Painterly brush strokes.



06_Studio – 1969 – Philip Guston

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Later work. Returns to the figure, but not traditionally. More like an imaginary character. Very painterly.
- Strange iconography – diagrams, clocks, artist tools, KKK
- Influenced by surrealism, de Chirico’s metaphysical paintings, enigmatic, combined with painterly attention to the surface that was so much a part of 1950’s painting
- Later, Guston’s art inspired the 1970s Bay Painters – a movement to return to figurative, painterly abstraction

COLOR FIELD = The height of formalist abstraction. Greenberg (critic) is primary promoter of late formalist abstraction.

They wanted to make large scale art that was epic and nonspecific & spoke for itself.

They didn’t want to tell narrative stories.

They wanted to move the viewer and create an everlasting statement of truth that was meant to be experienced



07_Slow Swirl by the Edge of the Sea – 1944 – Mark Rothko

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Early work, influenced by surrealists – automatic drawings like this
- While in San Francisco under influence of Clifford Still these creatures slowly morphed into large shapes ultimately settling on a formula. See below.



08_Untitled – 1949 – Mark Rothko

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Rothko very specific about how his paintings should be viewed:
 - Under dim light
 - In an empty room

- Sit and contemplate for a length of time
- The painting then becomes “experienced” – many thin layers of glazed colors are mesmerizing, calming in their sublimeness.



- **09_ Untitled – Rothko**
NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

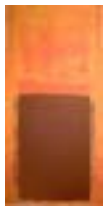
- “Rothko paintings breathe and exhale pure light”



- **10_ Untitled - Rothko**
NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”



- **11_ Untitled – Rothko**
NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”



- **12_ Untitled – Rothko**
NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”
 - Homage to Matisse. Rothko moved by Matisse’s The Red Studio in Red of 1911 with cadmium red field in whole canvas



- **13_Orb – 1964 – Adolph Gottlieb**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Gottlieb influenced by native American pictographs, symbols and mythology.
- Began doing surrealist automatism and moved into a more generalized vocabulary of generalized icons and images



- **14_Duet – 1962 – Adolph Gottlieb**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Big, beautiful & spectacular. Great example of this period and Gottlieb’s work
- With Rothko authored letter “we are for an art that is tragic timeless”
- Refers to art that is epic, univesal and timeless and NO narratives or things you can identify or articulate. They just speak to you. Viewer must stand there and let them speak.
- Did a series of “bursts” – painterly dripped and splashed gestural sprays on lower half of canvas; generalized background; orbs above



- **15_Genesis: The Break – 1946 – Barnett Newman**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Newman an opera buff in Greenwich Village in early 50s
- Immigrant Jewish family, very old world
- Judeo Christian mythology informs a lot of his work
- Newman interested in Botany/plant forms
- Transforms from organic doodles into Asian looking calligraphy
- Title suggests beginning of creation and separation of dark and light in a general way



- **16_(& 17_photo) – Vir Heroicus Sublimas – 1950-51 – Barnett Newman**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- Huge painting. Brilliant red field of color. Vertical breaks are called “zips.” Requires peripheral vision when staring at a zip, and you sink into the red.
- The Heroic Sublime Man
- Color Field is absolutely Romantic and overwhelms – like early German Romantic 19th century paintings by Friedrich where little bitty man is overwhelmed by huge sublime scenes of nature



- **18 Abstract Painting Blue – 1952 – Ad Reinhart**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM – “color field”

- One of the original NY School artists
- Famous debate written about by art historian Ann Gibson concerning racist character of the promotion and use of late formalist modernist art.
- Reinhart wrote in *25 Lines on Art*, “The art college should be a cloistered ivory tower for artists, removed from the concerns of the real world. Art should be about art. Painting should be about painting. There should be no content other than the art itself.” He was not speaking as a racist/chauvinist but as an artist fully under the influence of critics like Greenberg and Rosenberg who believed that this was a progression they saw in Modernism in the 20th century.
- Reducing expression to field of color
- No narrative content
- Art becoming about art
- Greenberg says painting should be about painting and nothing else.
- This painting is the perfect embodiment of Greenberg theory
- Different values of blue with rectangular shapes that echo the shape of the support. It’s art that’s about itself.

SCULPTORS WORKING IN TANDEM WITH ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST PAINTERS:



- **19_Sentinel V - 1957 – David Smith**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM - sculpture

- One of two sculptors Greenberg said are the best thing that ever happened
- Greenberg’s theories become contradictory when he tries applying them to sculpture

- Smith worked with welded metal sculpture. Influenced from job working in WWII welding plant.
- Influenced early on (1940s) by surrealist automatism
- Sculptures resemble line drawings in space
- Set up metal working factory on big farm in NY
- Stainless steel



- **20_Cubi Series (VIII,VII, IX) – 1963-4 – David Smith**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM - sculpture

- Most famous for this Cubi Series
- Surfaces sanded/ground to reflect differently in the sun
- Enormous
- Greenberg felt these were hypocritical because sculpture should only be about sculpture; traditional media were being threatened by new media; the way for sculpture to establish its importance was to demonstrate something that no other art could offer. If a sculpture starts acting like a painting, that goes against the rules. Because of the surface of his sculptures, Smith goes against the rules by having his sculpture act like a painting with gestural marks and patterns on the surface.



- **21_Close up of Cubi Series #IX – 1963-4 – David Smith**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM - sculpture



- **22_Medici Slot Machine– 1942 – Joseph Cornell**

NY ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Influenced by surrealism, philosophy (existentialism etc)
- Began making objects/boxes with the idea of surrealism in the juxtaposition of objects that don't normally belong together but that will trigger new associations and meanings
- Odd juxtapositions but not for no reason - he picks things he's interested in: maps, history, memories
- Takes various things to combine in personally expressive ways in shadow boxes – not as narratives but to evoke mood and get you wondering, thinking and exploring for yourself
- This box has boy – reproduction of a Renaissance portrait; plans of the Roman Forum (even tho Medicis were from Florence); photo frames in vertical strips – all gathered to suggest intimate, magical world

POST-WAR EXPRESSIONISM OUTSIDE THE US (EUROPEANS)

- In late 1940s & 1950s there was an abstract expressionist movement in painting in Europe.
- International focus shifted to NY School by 1956 (Jackson Pollack etc.) and by the 60s and 70s the art history textbooks had decided there really wasn't any art of any consequence going on anywhere but in New York. Not true!



- **23_The Enigma of Frozen Water – 1970 – Asger Jorn (CoBra)**
EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- CoBra Group = Copenhagen, Brussels & Amsterdam
- Evocative, bold colors. That's the whole point. See below



- **24_Angry Landscape – 1967 – Karel Appel (CoBra)**

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Two paintings (23 & 24) are similar. Bold flat colors directly from tube. New pigments (cadmium) combined in angry, dissonant ways, w/ palette knives and sticks
- Statement of artists' individuality and the right to express themselves however and as boldly as they wished. Bold. Raw. Real. "Us!"



- **25_Painting – 1953 – Georges Matthieu**

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Working about the same time in Paris as CoBra but not part of that group
- Inspired by:
 - Dada performance art
 - Dubuffet's rough approach (Hotel d'Harry with the Yellow Teeth) and
 - the acclaim the "color field" paintings were getting
 - Most especially: Action Painters (like Pollack)
- Created "L'Art informel" = informal art – abstractions based on natural forms or gestures



- **26_Matthieu Demonstrating Action Painting Osaka 1957**

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Matthieu (French) was important as a performance artist:
 - Often squeezed tubes right onto canvas, usually with an orchestra and an audience
 - This performance art grew directly out of Action Painting. A literalization of Rosenberg’s words in American Action Painters essay: “The canvas was an arena in which to act”). See #25



- **27 & 28_ Hurling Colors 1956 – Simomoto**

(Gutai Group, Japan)

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Pollack and other modernist art was influential in Post WWII Japan, but Matthieu eclipsed Pollack in his influence on a group of young Japanese artists.
- Post WWII in Japan,
 - the doors of Japan were open to American and European influence after having been closed for most of the 20th century.
 - Avant garde Japanese artists had been experimenting with Fauvism, Impressionism and whatever they could do with indigenous Japanese art, but after the Treaty now had everything at their disposal to experiment with.
 - The Gutai Group was one group who deliberately blended indigenous Japanese philosophy & traditions with contemporary art.
 - Invited Matthieu to give performance in conjunction with a Gutai exhibition in Osaka.
 - Drew upon performance element of action painting, gestural abstraction, and added “respect for & emphasis in materials” tying in to Shinto tradition
- Simomoto made expressionist paintings by flinging glass bottles full of paint, smashing them onto canvasses spread on the ground
- It’s all about the performance and the process of the creation of the art



- **29_Concetto Spaziale - 1960 – Lucio Fontana**

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Concetto Spaziale = spacial concept
- Tagli – Italian word for slash
- Arnason says this is inaugurating conceptual art – McClintock says “Bahooey to that” because that means Duchamp & Dada never existed.
- However, Fontana is theorizing / philosophizing painting in a new way. Doing what 60’s conceptual artists did.
- Wrote many Manifestos. Inspired by Futurists and was philosophical about painting.
 - Concerned with central concern of artists obsession from the Renaissance on, to try to represent space in 2 dimensions.
 - One of the things so radical/remarkable about NY School abstraction was what they did with pictorial space
 - Greenberg ‘s whole thing is about space; the flatness, the 2-dimensionality & the notion we can have “optical space” instead of tactile illusionistic space
 - Fontana decided to make painting that operated somehow in literal space.
 - Slashes were an accident that became his hallmark
 - Slashes meant he could now work with space literally
 - White Manifesto is about dealing with space in a new way (using televisions etc.). Awfully ahead of its time.



- **30_Spatial Concept: The End of God – 1963 – Lucio Fontana**

EUROPEAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- Trying to literally represent space by punching holes and lining with 2nd canvas underneath