

Thoughts on the Abstract Expressionists

in conjunction with the Holter Museum's 2012 exhibition: Montana Painters and the Legacy of the Poindexter Collection

Of all the art movements of the past 100 years, the one that has meant the most to me is Abstract Expressionism. My first art classes were dominated by ideas, both understood and misunderstood, derived from key members of the Ab Ex artists, especially Jackson Pollock and Willem DeKooning. Art was a search, a process of construction and destruction, full of human touch and emotion. The more touch and emotion put into the work the better. There was an aura of existential angst and posturing about all of this. "What does it mean to make a mark?? How can it be an authentic experience and not just an empty style??"

Later when I was at Reed College, my teacher Willard Midgette and one of his advanced painting students, David Reed, were very close to Milton Resnick. Resnick had a show of his works on paper there that I looked at as intensely as I have ever looked at anything in my life. Their effect on me was mysterious and long lasting. Also his ideas on painting, as I heard them from Midgette and Reed, were a touchstone in a deepening of my idea of art.

After Reed College, I moved to New York City and saw major shows of DeKooning and Kline. At the time I was reading "An Emotional Memoir of Franz Kline" by Fielding Dawson. I am not sure how good a book it is, but it meant a lot to me then. The stories in this book typified the artistic life for me: the way Kline and Pollock lived to be painters. Their passion and vision were very moving. I also read some short pieces written by DeKooning that were in the catalogue for his show at the Museum of Modern Art. These writings were so fresh. One was about the role of portraying flesh in the development of oil painting. Another was about what abstract art means to me, and told a story about a crazed man who went around a village madly measuring everything and how the look in his eye seemed very abstract. They were not like regular art writings, but almost like a Kafka short story and seemed a great way to talk about art, unlike the articles in *Artforum* that seemed so academic and unnecessarily arid.

If I think of the only artist of this group whose work may actually have some resemblance to mine, it would be Gorky. Although I have read books about him and seen a lot of his work, I have never spent any time trying to emulate him or have his work influence mine. Even so, there is something in his landscapes and the liquidity of the spaces in his work that feels very similar to the way I sense the landscape. This group believed in painting as an art and craft where paint became almost a mystical material full of life and energy. This idea is so different from the Minimalists, Pop artists and most of the work since then.

I saw a panel of artists talking about DeKooning a few years ago. There was a retrospective of his work on at the Metropolitan Museum and they had a panel discussion on his art with the artists Brice Marden, Terry Winters, and Elizabeth Murray. These younger painters kept talking about how inspiring his work was to them. One aspect that several of them mentioned was "the velocity of his

brushstroke.” I have thought about that a lot since then. The physical life of the brushstroke as it embodies reality.

It took me years to figure out that all of these artists, although lumped together by the media, were really doing extremely different things. The artist of this group that has meant the most to me in the past decade had been Rothko. His unusual use of materials and the luminous and dislocated spaces he achieves with his layering of glue and pigment layer beneath a scraped layer of egg and oil paint has been a beacon for me trying to achieve a similar light and space with pigments layered with egg tempera, but with figurative imagery. The sophistication and mastery of Rothko’s work is the opposite of the rather petulant and childish version of expressionism that I had been so excited about at the age of 17. Even after 10 years of research and experimentation I am still mystified as to how Rothko developed such a rarefied painting technique.

The way the abstract expressionists have inspired me as an artist are so numerous and varied it is almost impossible to write about them in a coherent fashion. In contrast to much of the art since then, their work is painted and lived by the artist and their paint, so individually felt, embodies their vision in a very direct and physical way. It is not a product made with commercial intent or as a cynical comment on mass media. It is an art refreshingly free from both cynicism and market politics. I am not particularly interested in doing work similar to these painters. My path has gone a different way, but their work and lives as painters still encourage me today in my life as a painter.

—Robert Royhl, Spring 2012