Abstract Expressionism

Annenberg Courtyard: David Smith
1. Introduction and Early Work

Do not remove from gallery
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

1. Jackson Pollock, ‘Male and Female’
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
Annenberg Courtyard: David Smith

Page 6
List of works

Page 9
1. Introduction and Early Work

Page 12
List of works

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Abstract Expressionism

David Smith

b. 1906, Decatur, IN – d. 1965, South Shaftsbury, VT

As the key first-generation Abstract Expressionist sculptor, David Smith created an output that spanned a great range of themes and effects.

The works here represent four of the climactic series that Smith produced from 1956 until his untimely death in 1965.

They encompass rising forms that evoke the human presence (albeit in abstract terms) and others in which a more stern character, by turns mechanistic or architectonic, prevails.
The Courtyard display seeks to recreate the spirit of Smith’s installations in his fields at Bolton Landing in upstate New York. There, not only did each sculpture enter into a silent dialogue with others, but they also responded to the space and sky around them.

Thus, for example, the dazzling stainless-steel surfaces of the ‘Cubi’ answer to the brooding, inward darkness of ‘Zig III’.

Often, Smith’s imagery and ideas parallel concerns seen throughout Abstract Expressionism in general.

As such, further pieces by Smith stand at crucial junctures in the Academy’s galleries in order to amplify this sustained interaction between sculptor and painters, two and three dimensions.
List of works

1
David Smith
Zig III
1961
Painted steel
Private collection, courtesy The Estate of David Smith and Hauser & Wirth

2
David Smith
Sentinel V
1959
Stainless steel
The Estate of David Smith, courtesy Hauser & Wirth
3
David Smith
Cubi XXVII
1965
Stainless steel
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
By exchange, 1967

4
David Smith
Voltri Bolton X
1962
Steel
Jerome L. and Ellen Stern
You are in 1

Free-standing sculpture
Abstract Expressionism was a phenomenon as diverse and manifold as its makers. The collective label that critic Robert Coates coined in 1946 suggests two polarities: the emotional intensity of German Expressionism and the formal aesthetic of European abstraction.

The artists themselves ranged from native New Yorkers to European émigrés; others hailed from the American heartland and the West. However, despite their ethnic and biographical differences, the fledgling Abstract Expressionists shared a common experience.

Namely, they lived during the modern age of extremes and catastrophe that encompassed – among other terrible historical events – two World Wars, the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, atomic devastation and the ensuing Cold War.
By contrast, the United States’ growing status as a global power helped foster a concomitant self-confidence in its burgeoning art world.

The early years of Abstract Expressionism reflect the dark times in which it arose. Whether the shadowy skeletons of Jackson Pollock’s ‘Untitled Panels A–D’, Mark Rothko’s enclosing façade in ‘Interior’ or the Holocaust-influenced protagonists in Philip Guston’s ‘The Porch’, the human presence appears menaced, metamorphic and morbid.

By the 1940s, these tragic concerns modulated to a supposedly more universal language that involved myth-making (witness the religious or ritual tincture of Rothko’s ‘Gethsemane’ and Hans Hofmann’s ‘Idolatress I’), archetypes (the twin totemic personages of Pollock’s ‘Male and Female’) and primitivist forms (the savage biomorphs in Richard Pousette-Dart’s ‘Undulation’).
In Barnett Newman’s ‘Galaxy’, austere verticals suggest an embryonic cosmos, whereas Willem de Kooning’s biomorphism lends a strange sentience to erstwhile abstract motifs.

Another nascent tendency was to allow paint to flow almost with its own volition, as in the collaborative canvas by William Baziotes, Gerome Kamrowski and Pollock.

Lastly, the search for a symbolism heavy with portent and drama gave rise to the illegible scripts and enigmatic cyphers or glyphs seen in Bradley Walker Tomlin’s ‘Cadence’, David Smith’s ‘The Letter’ and Adolph Gottlieb’s foreboding pictograph, ‘Masquerade’. 
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

**Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)**

*Untitled (Self-portrait)*

C.1930–1933

Oil and gesso on canvas, mounted on composition board

Courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York, and The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc.

**Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)**

*Portrait of Willem de Kooning*

1937

Ink on paper

Donna and Carroll Janis
Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Self-portrait
1945–1947
Oil on board
Allan Stone Collection
Courtesy of Allan Stone Projects, New York

Lee Krasner (1908–1984)
Self-portrait
1931–1933
Oil on canvas
The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc.
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Gerome Kamrowski (1914–2004)
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
William Baziotes (1912–1963)

Untitled
1940-1941
Oil and enamel on canvas
Collection Rowland Weinstein
Courtesy Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Untitled
c. 1939
Oil on paper mounted on canvas
Private collection
Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899–1953)
Cadence in Stillness
1949
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992)
Undulation
1941-1942
Oil on linen
Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)
Masquerade
1945
Oil and tempera on canvas

Galaxy
1949
Oil on canvas
Collection of Lynn and Allen Turner
Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Gethsemane

1944

Oil and charcoal on canvas

Surrealism filtered into Rothko’s paintings of the mid-1940s; influenced by artists such as Max Ernst, he created images charged with symbolism and psychological undertones.

Taking inspiration from religion and supposedly “universal” myths, the Jewish Rothko here references the Christian betrayal and agony of Jesus. The scrims of translucent paint establish a technique that Rothko continued, with numerous refinements, throughout his career.

Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel
Jackson Pollock  
(1912–1956)  

Male and Female  
1942-1943  

Oil on canvas  

Here Pollock reveals the mythic polarities or archetypes that people his early work.  

Of the two sentinel-like presences, the curvaceous torso and long eyelashes seem to identify the leftward one as embodying the feminine force – as opposed to the stiffly upright columnar creature with numerals at the right.  

The energetic paint splashes seen in the top-left corner anticipate the artist’s later signature “drip” technique.  

Philadelphia Museum of Art  
Gift of Mr and Mrs H. Gates Lloyd, 1974
Philip Guston (1913–1980)
The Porch
1946–1947
Oil on canvas
Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois on behalf of the Krannert Art Museum, Champaign University of Illinois purchase, 1948-10-1

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)
Idolatress I
1944
Oil and aqueous media on Upson board
University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. Gift of Hans Hofmann
Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-726
1936
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
Interior
1936
Oil on hardboard
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
Gift of the Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 1986.43.26
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
Untitled Panels A–D
1934–1938
Oil on Masonite
Courtesy Washburn Gallery, New York, and The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Inc.

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
Self-portrait
1936
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christopher Rothko
Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)
Self-portrait
1937
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Free-standing sculpture

David Smith (1906–1965)
The Letter
1950
Welded steel

Among the most pictorial of Smith’s sculptures, this abacus-like “missive” is essentially meant to be seen from the front, although it plays with the notion of three dimensions.
The geometric format, with abstract pictograms arranged in a grid-like composition, echoes other works in this room, in particular Gottlieb’s ‘Masquerade’.

Smith’s allusion to painting is emphasised by the welded signature in the lower right-hand corner.

Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Museum of Art, Utica
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2. Arshile Gorky

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Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

Arshile Gorky, ‘Water of the Flowery Mill’
Abstract Expressionism

Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
2. Arshile Gorky

Page 7
List of works

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You are in 2

Free-standing sculpture
Seating
2.

Arshile Gorky

b. 1904, Khorgom, Armenia; d. 1948, Sherman, CT

Arshile Gorky’s importance for Abstract Expressionism rested on a deep knowledge of art history, which he transmitted to his canny protégé de Kooning – whom he depicted suavely in Gallery 1 – and an ability to fuse such trends as Cubism and Surrealism into a fresh syntax.

This hybrid idiom occurs precociously in ‘Untitled’ (‘Nighttime’, ‘Enigma’ and ‘Nostalgia’) (the title invokes the proto-Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico) and his ‘Still-life on a Table’, which echoes Pablo Picasso’s post-Cubist style between the wars.

Early on, Gorky also had a remarkable knack for camouflaging forms so that they hover between objectivity and the organic or convulsive.
Subsequently, Gorky’s renewed encounter with nature in the summers of 1942-1945 – when he studied in detail the flora and fauna of the Virginia and Connecticut landscapes – sparked memories of his fecund native Armenia.

The resulting works on paper display Gorky’s full-fledged genius as a colourist and as a master of line.

By 1944–1945 Gorky reached a zenith with such iconic canvases as ‘Water of the Flowery Mill’ and ‘The Unattainable’.

A fantastical array of motifs – melding vegetal, zoomorphic and figurative overtones – combines with explosive hues recalling Wassily Kandinsky’s apocalyptic compositions from just before the First World War. Their metamorphic spaces seem in a state of constant, febrile flux.
But a slew of tragic events – beginning with a fire in his studio in 1946, followed by a near-fatal car crash in early 1948 – led Gorky’s art to assume a chill, elegiac tenor, already suggested in the near-grisaille cat’s cradle of ‘Diary of a Seducer’ and the mysterious inner world of ‘The Limit’.

‘The Orators’ is a disguised scene of mourners around the funeral bier of Gorky’s father.

Having reached a psychic breaking-point, Gorky hanged himself in 1948. But de Kooning continued Gorky’s powerful legacy.

The whirling maelstrom of his ‘Collage’ – alit with a violent luminosity – is a searing dissection of human anatomy crucified, as it were, by a cruel swathe of steel tacks.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

**Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)**

**Untitled (Nighttime, Enigma and Nostalgia)**
c. 1931–1932

Ink on paper

The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum

**Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)**

**Untitled**
c. 1943

Graphite and wax crayon on paper

Private collection

Courtesy of Guggenheim Asher Associates
Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)

Untitled (Virginia Landscape)
1943
Graphite and wax crayon on paper
Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon

Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)

The Unattainable
1945
Oil on canvas
The Baltimore Museum of Art. Purchase with exchange funds from Blanche Adler Bequest, Frederic W. Cone, William A. Dickey Jr, Nelson and Juanita Greif Gutman Collection, Wilmer Hoffman, Mr and Mrs Albert Lion, Saidie A. May Bequest, Philip B. Perlman Bequest, Leo M. Rogers, Mrs James N. Rosenberg and Paul Vallotton
Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)
The Limit
1947
Oil on paper, mounted on canvas
Private collection

Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)
Diary of a Seducer
1945
Oil on canvas

In contrast to the colour-saturated ‘Water of the Flowery Mill’ (located on the adjacent wall), the near-grisaille tones and strong line of ‘Diary of a Seducer’ echo Gorky’s graphic work (also seen in this gallery).
The title refers to the angst-laden thought of the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard.

Although embedded in the Surrealist tradition – the title was suggested by Max Ernst – the painting’s compositional balance and the shallow and intricate space reflect Gorky’s knowledge and understanding of Cubism.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Mr and Mrs William A. M. Burden, 1985

Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)
The Orators
1947
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Willem de Kooning  
(1904–1997)  
Collage  
1950  
Oil, enamel and steel tacks on paper  
Solinger Collection

Arshile Gorky  
(1904–1948)  
Water of the Flowery Mill  
1944  
Oil on canvas  

A celebrated example of the landscape-inspired works Gorky produced in the last six years of his life, this painting references a mill and bridge on the Housatonic River in Connecticut.
Sinuous markings rendered with a sign writer’s “liner’s brush” – to which Gorky’s friend de Kooning had introduced him – merge with highly fluid paint handling, anticipating the future gesturalism of other Abstract Expressionists.

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York George A. Hearn Fund, 1956 (56.205.1)

Arshile Gorky (1904–1948)
Still-life on Table
1936–1937
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Free-standing sculpture

David Smith (1906–1965)
Blackburn, Song of an Irish Blacksmith
1949–1950
Steel and bronze on marble base
Lehmbruck Museum, Duisburg
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Molly Bretton, Access Manager

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3. Jackson Pollock

Do not remove from gallery
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

3  55 Jackson Pollock, Mural and Blue Poles

4  56 David Smith, Hudson River Landscape
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
3. Jackson Pollock

Page 8
List of works

The production of RA large print guides is generously supported by Robin Hambro
You are in 3

Free-standing sculpture
Jackson Pollock

b. 1912, Cody, WY; d. 1956, Springs, NY

Pollock’s status as a towering mover of Abstract Expressionism has rarely been in doubt.

Even in 1949, ‘Life’ magazine’s half-ironic headline asked: “Is he the greatest living artist?”.

When the collector and patron extraordinaire Peggy Guggenheim commissioned Pollock in the summer of 1943 to do a mural for her Manhattan townhouse, the outcome – the largest canvas of his entire career – proved a titanic milestone in the annals of early Abstract Expressionism.
Almost singlehandedly, ‘Mural’ (positioned at the far end of this wall) combined an audacious manner of paint handling – wherein the dynamic of the artist’s whole body became central – with epic dimensions fit to accommodate such energies.


With the raw canvas laid on the floor, Pollock poured and dribbled his pigments with surprising control (as he memorably retorted to a critic, “No chaos damn it”) to attain labyrinths that incarnate the artist’s bodily rhythms.

As such, Pollock’s skeins suggest both a kind of mind-writing and a muscular outpouring.
Pollock described these extraordinary traceries as “energy and motion made visible, memories arrested in space”. Perhaps most remarkable is how Pollock’s highly idiosyncratic style, far from being a strait-jacket, liberated such different effects.

These ran from the open-weave tumble of ‘Summertime’ to the barnstorming crescendo of the immensely dense ‘Blue Poles’ (far end of the opposite wall). The latter is itself a final backward glance to the processional patterns of ‘Mural’.

Similarly, Pollock had an acute command of scale, stretching from the almost microscopic webs of certain filigrees to the impetuous scroll of ‘Horizontal Composition’.

Traumatised by Pollock’s death in the summer of 1946 in a quasi-suicidal car crash near his home and studio in Springs, Long Island, it took his wife Lee Krasner until 1960 to wrestle with his formidable ghost.
The outcome was the bounding rhythms and arcing vectors of ‘The Eye Is the First Circle’. As such, this monumental canvas ranks as perhaps the most memorable single tribute to Pollock’s seismic achievement.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

First room

**Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)**

*Portrait of HM*

1945

Oil on canvas

The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City

Gift of Peggy Guggenheim

**Lee Krasner (1908–1984)**

*The Eye Is the First Circle*

1960

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Night Mist
1945
Oil on canvas
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach
Purchase, R. H. Norton Trust, 71.14

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Summertime: Number 9A
1948
Oil, enamel and commercial paint on canvas
Tate. Purchased 1988
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Number 12A: Yellow, Gray, Black
1948
Enamel and gesso on paper
Thomas L. Kempner, Jr. and Katheryn C. Patterson, New York

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Untitled
1946
Gouache on paper
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Number 20
1950
Oil on Masonite
University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson
Gift of Edward Joseph Gallagher Jr

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Number 4
1949
Oil, enamel and aluminium paint with pebbles on cut canvas, mounted on composition board
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven
Katharine Ordway Collection
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Composition (White, Black, Blue and Red on White)
1948
Casein on paper, mounted on Masonite
New Orleans Museum of Art
Bequest of Victor K. Kiam, 77.300

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Phosphorescence
1947
Oil, enamel and aluminium paint on canvas
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover
Gift of Peggy Guggenheim, 1950.3
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
Horizontal Composition
c. 1949
Oil and enamel on canvas mounted on composition board
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Gift of Sylvia and Joseph Slifka, New York, to American Friends of the Israel Museum

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
Number 7, 1950
1950
Oil, enamel and aluminium paint on canvas
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Sylvia Slifka in honour of William Rubin, 1993
Free-standing sculpture

David Smith (1906–1965)

Star Cage
1950
Painted and brushed steel
Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. The John Rood Sculpture Collection

David Smith (1906–1965)

Hudson River Landscape
1951
Welded painted steel and stainless steel

(continued over)
This animated composition exemplifies what Smith called his “drawings in space”. Created by welding together disused agricultural tools, Smith’s calligraphic line invokes the energy of the abstract paintings of his contemporaries. Suggestions of rail tracks, clouds and undulating terrain create an almost hieroglyphic memory of Smith’s train journey through time and space, along the Hudson River.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York Purchase

Second room

Jackson Pollock
(1912–1956)
Blue Poles
1952
Oil, enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas

(continued over)
The most iconic of Pollock’s late-period paintings, ‘Blue Poles’ represents one of the pinnacles of his achievement. Its position here, opposite ‘Mural’, effectively “bookends” the climactic decade of Pollock’s meteoric career.

Its seeming spontaneity actually belies the careful process of its creation, while tiny shards of glass embedded across the surface amplify its spectacular, crackling forcefulness.

The structure makes reference to the composition diagrams used by Pollock’s teacher, Thomas Hart Benton, as well as to the “processional” figuration that Pollock first definitively established in ‘Mural’.

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Purchased 1973
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Enchanted Forest
1947
Oil on canvas
Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
(Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York)

Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)

Number 4
1952
Duco on canvas
Ann and Gilbert Kinney
Jackson Pollock
(1912–1956)

Mural
1943

Oil and casein on canvas

Commissioned by Peggy Guggenheim for the hallway of her Manhattan townhouse, this is Pollock’s largest work.

The vastness of ‘Mural’ heralded a new energy and scale in Abstract Expressionism; by no coincidence, both Rothko and Gorky produced their largest canvases the following year.

The painting’s abstract style permits the suggestion of many forms – these vestiges of figuration reflect Pollock’s creative struggle with Picasso.
Smith’s sculpture ‘Tanktotem’ (located nearby) evokes a prancing bestial presence spun out of ‘Mural’ into three dimensions.

The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City
Gift of Peggy Guggenheim

David Smith (1906–1965)
Tanktotem III
1953
Steel
Audrey and David Mirvish, Toronto
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InTouch at the RA

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Abstract Expressionism

4. Gesture as Colour

Do not remove from gallery
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

5 Joan Mitchell, ‘Mandres’
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
4. Gesture as Colour

Page 7
List of works

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Seating
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Gesture as Colour

Although Abstract Expressionism is popularly considered as rooted in New York City, its protean reach extended to the West Coast.

Clyfford Still – one of its foremost exponents – spent his early life in Washington State and Alberta, Canada, until he moved to San Francisco in 1946. That year, Still invited Rothko to teach alongside him at the California School of Fine Arts.

From then onwards, Still exerted a crucial impact on Rothko that led the latter to finally pulverise the figurative residues in his art, eventually paving his way to a radical abstraction at the decade’s end.

Still’s genius as a colourist and his development of a highly idiosyncratic space – by turns visceral and cosmic – had a ripple effect on the art of Sam Francis, a West Coast native.
During the 1950s, Francis’s work shifted from almost monochromatic compositions dense with corpuscular motifs to others glowing with rich hues and, finally, an uplifted openness evoking rarefied, empyrean voids.

A spiritualised space occurs in the works of Mark Tobey, who spent most of his creative life in Seattle. Minute and intense, Tobey’s so-called “white writing” reflects the artist’s vibrant pantheistic view of the universe – script as sentience.

A similar sense of inward immensity marks the almost micrographic fields that Krasner and the Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel crafted in the late 1940s. In turn, Sobel’s art had a distinct, if still underestimated, influence on the density of Pollock’s all-over touch.
Outpacing neat categories that sometimes pigeonhole the Abstract Expressionists into “colour-field” artists versus “gesturalists”, Guston, Joan Mitchell and the young Helen Frankenthaler evolved their own respective visual palimpsests by the second half of the 1950s.

Whether in Guston’s lush yet fragile impasto, Mitchell’s fleet, tactile brushwork or Frankenthaler’s lyrical oil washes that sketch myths and memories as they permeate the canvas, each artist created their own unique fusion of colour and gesture.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Philip Guston (1913–1980)

Prague
1956
Oil on canvas
Cheryl and Blair Effron

Joan Mitchell (1912–1999)

Mandres
1961–1962
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Courtesy McClain Gallery
With its refined gestural dynamism, luminosity and lyrical use of colour, this work exemplifies the artist’s unique style.

Frankenthaler pioneered the “stain” technique, in which she poured thinned paint directly onto raw, unprimed canvas laid on the studio floor. Working from all sides, she created floating fields of translucent colour.

Frankenthaler herself mentioned “a kind of bull shape” in the composition of this work, perhaps the faintest nod towards the Greek myth of Europa’s abduction.
Sam Francis (1923–1994)

Untitled (Black Clouds)
1952
Oil on canvas
Dallas Museum of Art
Gift of Mr and Mrs Algur H. Meadows and the Meadows Foundation

Sam Francis (1923–1994)

Untitled
1956
Oil on canvas
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek Donation,
The New Carlsberg Foundation
Sam Francis (1923–1994)

Summer No. 2
1957
Oil on canvas
Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections
Gift of the Richard and Jeanne Levitt Family in memory of Ellis and Nelle Levitt, 1984.25

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red)
1949
Oil on canvas
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Gift of Elaine and Werner Dannheisser and the Dannheisser Foundation, 1978
Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-69
1946
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Mark Tobey (1890–1976)
Written over the Plains
1950
Mixed media on paper, mounted on Masonite
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Gift of Mr and Mrs Ferdinand C. Smith

Mark Tobey (1890–1976)
Parnassus
1963
Oil on canvas
Tobey’s all-over composition is often associated with the dense markings found on ancient tablets – a connection that is reflected in the title, which references the mountain that was home to the Muses in Greek mythology.

In the work, dynamic black lines show the influence of Zen calligraphy on Tobey, whose “white-writing” came to be known as his characteristic style (see ‘Written Over the Plains’, located nearby).

Seattle Art Museum
Gift of the Virginia Wright Fund

Janet Sobel (1894–1968)
Illusion of Solidity
C. 1945
Oil on canvas
In 1937, at the age of 43, Sobel started to paint using her children’s art materials.

By the early 1940s she was propelled into the art world by Peggy Guggenheim, showing at her gallery, Art of This Century, where Pollock and the art critic Clement Greenberg first saw her work.

Sobel’s fusion of the micro- and macrocosmic most likely impressed Pollock and influenced his subsequent adoption of the “all-over” painting style.

Courtesy Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York

Lee Krasner (1908–1984)
Untitled
1948
Oil on canvas
Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York
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Abstract Expressionism

5. The Violent Mark

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Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

Franz Kline, ‘Untitled 1952’
Abstract Expressionism

Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
5. The Violent Mark

Page 7
List of works

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Free-standing sculpture
5.
The Violent Mark

The gritty, speeding forces of New York City inspired several Abstract Expressionists.

Starting in 1950, Franz Kline’s mature technique explored black and white, colliding configurations and violent imbalance to create images at once architectonic and darkly poetic.

As Kline described it, his paintings have ragged “night forms” that express his conviction that “to think of ways of disorganising can be a form of organisation”.

Kline’s titles point to a macho world of people (‘Vawdavitch’ was a football star), grimness (‘Requiem’) and places, especially the industrial coal country of Pennsylvania where he was born, as well as romantic-sounding sites in Europe.
Towards the end of his life, Kline reintroduced almost neon-bright colour that heightened his great wrenching dramas, as in ‘Andrus’ (Dr Andrus treated the artist’s fatal heart condition). In turn, the stark planes and silhouettes of Smith’s sculptures frequently slice through their ambience with a comparable surge.

Aptly, too, Abstract Expressionism coincided with the heyday of the Hollywood film noir, a genre replete with tension, conflict and trauma.

The air of violence that permeates Kline’s imposing painterly structures recurs in the knife-like tangles and portentous nature of Jack Tworkov’s paintings.

As the Polish-born artist remarked, their central blurs are “an action brought near by a telescope but out of earshot ... In a thicket the actors might be lovers, or a murderer and his victim.”
Likewise, Robert Motherwell’s sombre palette and oppressive motifs reflect the artist’s lifelong preoccupation with the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War.

In the hands of Conrad Marca-Relli – who alternated between the United States and Italy – the violent mark-making evident in Kline and Tworkov’s work assumes a savage physical life of its own.

Cutting segments of canvas with a razor blade, Marca-Relli pinned the pieces to the support and then elaborated and blackened their surfaces.

Seeking what he called “the architecture of the figure”, Marca-Relli’s scorched battlegrounds raise collage (an erstwhile intimate medium) to a heroic pitch.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Spagna
1961
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Vawdavitch
1955
Oil on canvas
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
Claire B. Zeisler, 1976.39
Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Andrus
1961
Oil on canvas
The Collection of Jon Shirley

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Requiem
1958
Oil on canvas
Collection of Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo
Gift of Seymour H. Knox Jr, 1959

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Untitled
1952
Enamel on canvas

(continued over)
Although Franz Kline’s bold monochromatic brush strokes of the 1950s appear spontaneous, his technique was in fact among the most considered of all the Abstract Expressionists.

Often painting from drawings, Kline worked at night under artificial lighting, using thinned commercial paints and a house-painter’s brush.

Immediately after it was created, ‘Untitled’ was exhibited at the Whitney Museum Annual of 1952–1953, and it has remained one of his most celebrated works.

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Zinc Door
1961
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)
Wall Painting No. III
1953
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth
Conrad Marca-Relli
(1913–2000)
East Wall (LL-10-59)
1959
Collage and mixed media on canvas

Conrad Marca-Relli developed a technique of abstract collage in the early 1950s in which he attached biomorphically shaped painted and dyed canvas pieces to the surfaces of his pictures.

He cut these shapes out quickly in an attempt to capture his intuitive creative impulses and pinned them to a supporting canvas where they became elements of the painting, alongside colours applied by brushwork and splattering.

Private collection, Parma
Courtesy Archivio Marca-Relli
Conrad Marca-Relli (1913–2000)
Ornations L-R-4-57
1957
Oil and canvas collage on canvas
Mnuchin Gallery, New York

Jack Tworkov (1900–1982)
Transverse
1957–1958
Oil on canvas
Collection Ambassador and Mrs Donald Blinken, New York
Free-standing sculpture

David Smith (1906–1965)
Volton XVIII
1963

Painted steel

The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection, New York
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Molly Bretton, Access Manager

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6. Willem de Kooning
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

57 Willem de Kooning, ‘Pink Angels’
Abstract Expressionism

Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
6. Willem de Kooning

Page 7
List of works

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You are in 6
6.

Willem de Kooning

b. 1904, Rotterdam, Netherlands; d. 1997, East Hampton, NY

De Kooning’s formidable technical repertoire included the command of the gesture as a trace of violent emotion, as evident in the previous gallery. But it encompassed much more.

De Kooning alternated between abstraction and the figure to an extent matched only by Guston. Trained at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts, de Kooning could unleash some of the Abstract Expressionists’ most unruly pictorial fireworks.

The early landmark, ‘Pink Angels’, announced an obsession with female eroticaism. Rapidly, de Kooning also probed another dimension – in short, the lacerating shards that comprise the haunted nocturne ‘Dark Pond’.
In the same years, ‘Abstraction’ reveals the religious symbolism – running from undercurrents of lust and damnation to salvation – encoded in much of de Kooning’s half-recognisable iconography.

Here, he knowingly updated meditations on the human condition as venerable as those of such Netherlandish Old Masters and fellow countrymen as Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Bruegel the Elder.

In 1951 de Kooning returned decisively to the theme of woman.

The artist said that the Women “had to do with the female painted through the ages, all those idols” and “I see the horror in them now, but I didn’t mean it. I wanted them to be funny … so I made them satiric and monstrous, like sibyls.”

By the time of ‘Woman as Landscape’, the former threatening “bitch goddesses” begin to dissolve into nature’s flux.
In the 1960s de Kooning’s women became both more grotesque and approachable, suggesting the artist was finally coming to terms with his demons.

To the feverish realms of female sexuality, de Kooning opposed the chaotic medley of the modern urban metropolis – witness the garish, tumultuous ‘Composition’.

Subsequently this hurly-burly segued to what de Kooning called feelings “of going to the city or coming from it”. In ‘Villa Borghese’ and ‘Untitled’ swathes of creamy pink, green and sky-blue tints exude a mood of release as the bliss of the great outdoors lulled this most existential-minded of the Abstract Expressionists.
Willem de Kooning
(1904–1997)

Zot
1949

Oil on paper, mounted on wood

The modest size of ‘Zot’ (meaning “fool” in Dutch) belies its furiously compressed drama, in which traces of the figure and other details hurtle into one another. This abstraction clearly opposes ‘Dark Pond’ (hung nearby) with a deathly pallor.

Works in this series vary in scale but all were created by arranging pieces of cut paper and then rendering the resulting shapes in paint. A tiny orange-red trace, like a bloody smear, at upper right of centre adds to the visceral mood.

**Willem de Kooning**
*(1904–1997)*

**Abstraction**
1949–1950

Oil and oil resin on cardboard

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

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**Willem de Kooning**
*(1904–1997)*

**Pink Angels**
c. 1945

Oil and charcoal on canvas
De Kooning once said, “Flesh was the reason oil paint was invented.” Here, whirling charcoal lines score the seated female figure’s fleshy contours, encapsulating the artist’s lifelong oscillation between figuration and abstraction.

The semi-recognisable pink wraith may well allude to the profile of the cruel goddess Diana in Titian’s ‘Diana and Actaeon’ (1556–1559).

Above the figure’s knee a sketched form directly quotes the head of a tormented woman from Picasso’s ‘Guernica’, which de Kooning saw at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1943.

Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Woman

1949–1950

Oil on canvas


Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Woman II

1952

Oil on canvas

Between 1950 and 1953 de Kooning completed the series of six ‘Woman’ paintings – ferocious portrayals of femininity that led him to be accused of misogyny when they were first exhibited at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1953.

(continued over)
As with other works in the series, ‘Woman II’ was the result of an arduous process involving many stages.

Pinholes in the canvas are evidence that working drawings were fixed to the support, while charcoal markings reveal de Kooning’s many alterations to the composition.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, 1955

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)
Woman as Landscape
1955

Oil on canvas
Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Woman as Landscape
1965–1966
Oil on paper, mounted on canvas
Private collection

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Untitled (Woman in Forest)
c. 1963–1964
Oil on paper, mounted on Masonite
Private collection
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)
Composition
1955
Oil, enamel and charcoal on canvas
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)
Dark Pond
1948
Enamel on composition board
Frederick R. Weisman Art Foundation, Los Angeles
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)
Villa Borghese
1960
Oil on canvas
Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)
Untitled
1961
Oil on canvas
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham
Gift of Joachim Jean and Julian J. Aberbach, New York
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Untitled

1948

Oil on Masonite

Private collection
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7. (Wohl Central Hall)
Mark Rothko

Do not remove from gallery
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

58  Mark Rothko, ‘Yellow Band’
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents
Page 4
7. Mark Rothko

Page 7
List of works

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7.

Mark Rothko

b. 1903, Dvinsk, Russia; d. 1970, New York City, NY

Sited at the heart of these twelve galleries, Rothko’s iconic paintings of the 1950s and ’60s epitomise his perennial quest to formulate abstract embodiments of powerful human feelings: as he once memorably put it, “tragedy, ecstasy, doom”.

Instantly recognisable, the tiers of hovering rectangles that Rothko established from 1950 onwards and never abandoned until just before his death two decades later have elicited myriad interpretations.

Among them the notion that they offer surrogates for the upright human presence; that they evoke sublime abstract equivalents to landscape; and that they are fundamentally mood pieces.
The compositions at once invite and elude such readings. Appropriately, therefore, Rothko called his paintings “façades”.

The word “façade” not only confirms the frontal address that the works make to the spectator, it also captures their enigmatic hypnotism, since façades by definition at once reveal and conceal.

Adding to this impression of immediacy and reticence, the halos that sometimes enclose the rectangular chromatic fields lend them a numinous aura.

Yet these edgings also intimate things unseen beneath the rectangles’ ethereal surfaces.

The result is an uncanny mix of quiescence and drama.

The relatively close hang of the seven paintings in this gallery upholds Rothko’s wish that his art should, in a sense, “defeat” the walls with its plenitude. Similarly, it also enhances the almost claustrophobic intimacy that the artist wished to cast upon the viewer.
Of equal importance is Rothko’s ability to employ what he termed “measures” – subtle gradations of proportion, balance, translucency and opacity – in order to differentiate and enrich his ostensibly simple format.

Although Rothko created bright and more penumbral canvases at different stages throughout his maturity – note, for example, the startling blackness in ‘No. 4 (Untitled)’ – from 1957 onwards darkness tended to predominate.

Accordingly the paintings here pass silently from an earlier concern with light to a subsequent involvement with shadow. Always they aspire to what Rothko felt was the poignancy of music.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Untitled
1954
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christopher Rothko

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Yellow Band
1956
Oil on canvas
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska – Lincoln
Sheldon Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial, N-130.1961
Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
No. 64 (Untitled)
1960
Oil on canvas

Rothko dedicated the last two decades of his life to creating “colour field” paintings such as this one, saying “If a thing is worth doing once, it is worth doing over and over again – exploring it, probing it, demanding by this repetition that the public look at it.”

Rothko’s technique was central to the effects he created; by thinning his paints with turpentine, he was able to stain the canvas rather than pasting paint onto the surface.
His layering of different pigments in varying thicknesses adds a complexity to his apparently straightforward compositions, and by removing any narrative he enables a more direct emotional reaction to the image.

Private collection

**Mark Rothko (1903–1970)**

No. 15 (Dark Greens on Blue with Green Band)

1957

Oil on canvas

Private collection
Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Untitled
1960
Mixed media on canvas
Lent by the Toledo Museum of Art. Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, 1970.55

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

No. 1 (White and Red)
1962
Oil on canvas
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
Gift from the Women’s Committee Fund, 1962
Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

No. 4 (Untitled)

1953

Oil on canvas

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc., 85.43.2
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Abstract Expressionism


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Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

Ad Reinhardt, ‘Abstract Painting, No. 23’, 1963
Abstract Expressionism

Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4

Page 7
List of works

Lead Sponsor

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Free-standing sculpture
8.

Barnett Newman & Ad Reinhardt: Paths To The Absolute

b. 1905, New York City, NY; d. 1970, New York City, NY

b. 1913, Buffalo, NY; d. 1967, New York City, NY

Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt were profoundly different temperaments. The former was a Jew, born to Russian-Polish immigrants in Manhattan, whose secular faith deeply imbued his vision of abstraction. The latter hailed from Germanic ancestry and ceaselessly insisted that art be purged of everything extraneous to it.
Newman was an eloquent essayist, writing on topics as diverse as anarchism, New York City and “primitive” art. Reinhardt’s political sympathies lay on the left and he penned numerous cartoons satirising the art world and expounding his purist aesthetic.

Notwithstanding these radical differences, both artists pushed colour to its limits so that any decorative and sensuous associations segued to absolutes.

As seen in ‘Galaxy’ in Gallery 1, Newman had proposed in the late 1940s his two main pictorial motifs. Firstly, the verticals – sometimes dubbed “zips” – that act to establish focal zones; secondly, the continuums of intense hue that they structure.

In ‘Adam and Eve’ these stalwart uprights, combined with the earthy browns and red and the suggestive titles, convey an organic and primal aura, as though the pair herald some act of creation.
By contrast, in ‘Ulysses’, ‘Profile of Light’ and ‘Midnight Blue’ Newman wielded the other end of his spectrum – that is, a blueness that in the earliest painting summons feelings of unbounded oceanic immensity.

The later ‘Profile of Light’ projects a transcendental sublimity – as though radiance were an entity in itself – whereas ‘Midnight Blue’ may refer to the awesome Queen of the Night in Mozart’s opera ‘The Magic Flute’.

Taking the rectangle instead as his basic pictorial building block, Reinhardt made it a vehicle to condense chroma to its utmost.

From the reds and blues that he orchestrated during the 1950s, Reinhardt subsequently gravitated to a blackness that intimated a provocative nothingness and finality.

Cast into three-dimensional terms, Newman’s august sculpture and Smith’s minimalist ‘Forging VI’ add further layers to the inexhaustible possibilities of the vertical allied to Spartan austerity.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)

Untitled (White)
1945
Oil on canvas
Ann and Gilbert Kinney

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)

Abstract Painting
1950
Oil on canvas
Estate of Ad Reinhardt. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London
Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)
Abstract Painting
1956
Oil on canvas
Private collection

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)
Abstract Painting, No. 23
1963
Oil on canvas

From 1953 until his death in 1967, Ad Reinhardt painted only “black” paintings, and in his last five years focused solely on 60 × 60 inch square canvases.

He called these “ultimate paintings”, and felt that in them he had succeeded in purifying art.
Despite their monochromatic appearance, these works are composed of grids painted in deep shades of red, blue and green; the viewer’s gaze gradually adjusts to the canvas, encouraging a prolonged, hypnotic engagement that tests the limits of vision.

By extracting much of the oil from the paint Reinhardt crafted velvet-like surfaces, which he brushed on with infinite care.

Private collection, US
Courtesy Meredith Palmer Gallery, Ltd, New York

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)
Red Painting
1952
Oil on canvas
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis, 85.434

Eve
1950
Oil on canvas
Tate. Purchased 1980


Adam
1951–1952
Oil on canvas
Tate. Purchased 1968

Midnight Blue
1970
Oil and acrylic on canvas
Museum Ludwig, Cologne


Ulysses
1952
Oil on canvas
The Menil Collection, Houston
Formerly in the collection of Christophe de Menil, 1991–43
Profile of Light
1967
Acrylic on canvas

For Newman, the subject of a painting could never be merely aesthetic: “Life is physical but it is also metaphysical – only those who understand the meta can understand the physical.”

Although ‘Profile of Light’ is strictly symmetrical in its composition, its minor irregularity of blue paint bleeding into the central white strip on the right side, magnified by the scale of the painting, prompts the viewer to question this perfect entity.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid
Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)
Black and White
1950
Oil on canvas
Estate of Ad Reinhardt. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London

Free-standing sculpture

107
David Smith (1906–1965)
Forging VI
1955
Varnished steel
Private collection
Courtesy The Estate of David Smith and Hauser & Wirth

Here I (To Marcia)
1950
Bronze

Primarily a painter, Newman also produced drawings, prints and sculptures.

‘Here I’ was his first sculpture; originally made in plaster in 1950, it was cast in bronze in 1962, and is a three-dimensional manifestation of the vertical stripes or “zips” in Newman’s paintings.

The juxtaposition of the flat, jagged-edged upright with its smooth, narrow counterpart creates a dynamic interchange both between the forms and with the space around them.

Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Donation from Annalee Newman, 1988
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InTouch at the RA

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Abstract Expressionism

9. Darkness Visible

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Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

10 Robert Motherwell, ‘Elegy to the Spanish Republic’

Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
9. Darkness Visible

Page 7
List of works

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Seating
9. 

Darkness Visible

Because darkness is inherently provocative, reductive and mysterious, it exerted a logical and multifarious appeal to the Abstract Expressionists.

During the later 1940s Krasner’s ‘Little Image’ paintings cloaked their minuscule scripts in a subdued matrix.

From another perspective, the African-American Abstract Expressionist Norman Lewis associated blackness with racial issues. The obscure mêlée of ‘Metropolitan Crowd’ recalls the contemporary writings of Ralph Ellison, for whom ethnic blackness was inseparable from invisibility to the eyes of white people.

By comparison, for Motherwell blackness related to an Iberian bleak sense of existence, encapsulated in the catastrophe of the Spanish Civil War, an event he deemed “a tragedy which should not be forgot”.


Motherwell’s more than 200 ‘Elegies to the Spanish Republic’ are contemplative; the version in this gallery in particular was inspired by Pollock’s ‘Mural’, doubling as a memorial to that artist.

By contrast, ‘In Plato’s Cave No. 1’ takes the rectangular window motif from his mainly sunny ‘Open’ compositions and plunges it into a realm of metaphysical imponderability.

Alternatively, Milton Resnick seems to capture an air of almost enchanted, shimmering night-time.

The eclipsed solar disc of Gottlieb’s tellingly titled ‘Penumbra’ and the commotion below it proves that black could be exhilarating and electric.

Louise Nevelson also lauded darkness. In Nevelson’s assemblages everyday bric-a-brac amasses into enigmatic reliefs, rich and embedded with mythical/elemental overtones.
Uniting Guston’s work of the 1960s and Rothko’s final canvases is an overwhelming mood of melancholia.

Guston’s murky idiom appears to overlay recognisable memories with a grey cloudiness, as though their deeper content had to be screened from the gaze.

In the veritable lunar landscapes of Rothko’s ‘Black on Gray’ compositions the acrylic medium lends a crisp formality to the “darkness made visible” standing above the chill grey vistas below.

Tworkov’s gravely meditative ‘Idling II’ makes a tacit yet eloquent complement to his friend Rothko’s stern visual endgame, the latter works sealed by their distancing white borders.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Norman Lewis (1909–1979)

Metropolitan Crowd
1946

Oil on canvas


Lee Krasner (1908–1984)

Untitled
1948

Oil on panel

Caryn and Craig Effron
Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)

In Plato’s Cave No. 1
1972
Acrylic on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
The Nancy Lee and Perry Bass Fund, 1999.1.1

Milton Resnick (1917–2004)

Octave
1961
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York
Jack Tworkov (1900–1982)
Idling II
1970
Oil on canvas
Courtesy Estate of Jack Tworkov, and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
Untitled (Black on Gray)
1969/1970
Acrylic on canvas
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Gift, The Mark Rothko Foundation Inc., 1986
Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)

Elegy to the Spanish Republic
No. 126
1965–1975
Acrylic on canvas

The atrocities of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) inspired Motherwell’s series dedicated to the Spanish Republic, painted over 40 years.

Rather than focusing on particular events, the black and white oval and vertical forms represent meditations on life and death.

This particular work was commissioned by Iowa Museum of Art as a “response” to Pollock’s ‘Mural’ of 1943 (Gallery 3) and was conceived to hang opposite it – a position that determined the painting’s ambitious scale.
The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City. Purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts with matching funds and partial gift of Robert Motherwell, 1973.289

Philip Guston (1913–1980)
Duo
1961
Oil on canvas
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Louise Nevelson (1899–1988)
Sky Cathedral – Moon Garden + One
1957–1960
Painted wood
Constructed mainly from salvaged pieces of turned and shaped wood, Nevelson’s rectangular sculpture is designed to be viewed from the front, like a painting.

Prior to construction Nevelson painted each element in the same matt black, erasing any sense of the objects’ previous use, and unifying the component parts.

The composition, which owes much to Surrealism, creates different rhythms of flatness and recession through its grid of shallow enclosures.

Private collection

Courtesy Pace Gallery
Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)

Penumbra

1959

Oil on linen

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Bequest of Caroline Wiess Law, 2004.19
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Abstract Expressionism

10. Works on Paper and Photography

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Introduction to 10
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
10. Works on Paper and Photography

Page 7
List of works

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Free-standing sculpture
10. Works on Paper and Photography

Although Abstract Expressionism is commonly thought to pivot around grand canvases, its searching scope encompassed relatively small works on paper as well as photography.

The Abstract Expressionists often regarded their drawings and watercolours as fully formed pieces in their own right rather than preparatory studies, and imbued them with a spontaneity and sophistication comparable to their paintings.

For example, Francis’s diminutive composition still evinces the same intensity as his big canvases, as does Newman’s portrayal of light.
In 1951–1952 Pollock rang an unusual change on the process of drawing by thinning his enamel paint so that it soaked, blot-like, into the canvas weave: thus ‘Number 7’ evokes a phantasmagorical visage limned in an ambiguous space.

While Motherwell’s collage has an exuberance that almost outpaces his paintings, for de Kooning and Kline the monochrome and austere linearity associated with draughtsmanship led them to strip their signature idioms to striking essentials.

In the case of Guston, Reinhardt and Rothko, working on paper matched the vigour, calligraphy and bold colourism found in their paintings.

The hierarchy of media that long dogged the definition of Abstract Expressionism expunged photography from its fold. Yet Aaron Siskind was closely linked to the Abstract Expressionist painters.
Likewise, Minor White and Still both taught at the California School of Fine Arts from 1946 onwards.

The harsh markings, graffiti and other textures that Siskind and Frederick Sommer captured share the same expressive concern with violence, darkness and immediacy found in the paintings of Kline, Pollock, Still and others.

Harry Callahan, Herbert Matter (a close friend of Pollock), the prolific Albanian-born ‘Life’ photographer Gjon Mili and Barbara Morgan alike conjured abstract ideograms and swift motion that match the painters’ goals.

Perhaps most influentially, it was the German émigré Hans Namuth’s numerous shots of Pollock – caught in action creating his pourings on the floor – that amplified the critic Harold Rosenberg’s characterisation of Abstract Expressionism in 1952 as “action painting”.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)
At Five in the Afternoon
1948–1949
Casein and graphite on paperboard
Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York

Franz Kline (1910–1962)
Untitled
c. 1951
Oil on paper
Courtesy Jacobson Space, London
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

Untitled

1950

Enamel on paper mounted on paperboard

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC

Museum purchase from the Vincent Melzac Collection through The Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

Philip Guston (1913–1980)

Untitled

c. 1953

Ink on paper

Courtesy Acquavella Galleries
Jackson Pollock (1912–1956)
Number 7
1952
Enamel and oil on canvas
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)
Untitled
1950
Opaque watercolour on paper
Robert Motherwell (1915–1991)
New York City Collage
1959
Oil paint and collage on board
Denver Art Museum

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
Untitled
c. 1944
Gouache and watercolour on paper
Collection of Alice and Nahum Lainer
Mark Rothko (1903–1970)
Untitled
1968
Acrylic on paper
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC
Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation Inc., 1986

Untitled
1959
Brush and black ink on paper

Recalling Newman’s monumental “zip” canvases in Gallery 8, this smaller work evokes a similar sense of continuing beyond its borders.
The traces of movement present in Newman’s drawing can also be found in Barbara Morgan’s ‘Light Waves’ (hung nearby), where a long exposure and a moving light source combine to create the effect of drawing in light.

Private collection

Barbara Morgan (1900–1992)
Light Waves
1945
Gelatin silver print (photogram)
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York
Harry Callahan (1912–1999)
Detroit
1945
Gelatin silver print
Courtesy The Estate of Harry Callahan and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Aaron Siskind (1903–1991)
Martha’s Vineyard (Seaweed 2)
1943
Gelatin silver print
University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City
Mark Ranney Memorial Fund, 116.2014
Aaron Siskind (1903–1991)
Chicago 8
1948
Gelatin silver print
University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City
Mark Ranney Memorial Fund, 2014.156

Harry Callahan (1912–1999)
Sunlight on Water
1943
Vintage gelatin silver print
Courtesy The Estate of Harry Callahan and Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York
Minor White (1908–1976)

Resurrection (Peeled Paint on Windows, Jackson Street, Produce Area, San Francisco) 1951

Vintage gelatin silver print

Courtesy Gitterman Gallery, New York

Minor White (1908–1976)

72 N. Union Street, Rochester 1958

Silver gelatin print

Collection Roy Ooms 137
Hans Namuth (1915–1990)

Jackson Pollock, Summer 1950, painting ‘Autumn Rhythm: Number 30’ (1950) in his studio, Amagansett, Long Island, NY; behind him is ‘One: Number 31’ (1950)

1950

Gelatin silver print

In the summer of 1950 Hans Namuth photographed and filmed Jackson Pollock at work in his studio in Springs, Long Island.

Here, Pollock is shown painting ‘Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)’, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Namuth emphasises Pollock’s famed “action painting” technique in this dynamic image in which the artist appears to dissolve in light.

Peter Namuth
Barbara Morgan (1900–1992)
Pure Energy and Neurotic Man
1940
Gelatin silver print
University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City
Mark Ranney Memorial Fund, 2014.154

Gjon Mili (1904–1984)
Figure Skater Carol Lynne
1945
Photograph
The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City
Mark Ranney Memorial Fund, 92.2015
Herbert Matter (1907–1984)

Untitled
c. 1939–1943

Vintage gelatin silver print
Courtesy Gitterman Gallery, New York

Herbert Matter (1907–1984)

Untitled
c. 1940s

Vintage gelatin silver print
Courtesy Gitterman Gallery, New York
Frederick Sommer (1905–1999)
Sumaré
1951
Gelatin silver print, mounted on board
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York
The Frederick and Frances Sommer Foundation

Aaron Siskind (1903–1991)
Chicago
1947
Gelatin silver print
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York
The Aaron Siskind Foundation
Sam Francis (1923–1994)
Black in Red, Paris
1955
Gouache on paper

One of the smallest works in the exhibition, this gouache has a compressed energy that lends it power.

Francis’s layering of black on red gives the work depth, while the red strip, separated from the dark tones beneath, resonates with Still’s canvases in Gallery 11. Parallels can also be seen in Aaron Siskind’s print ‘Chicago’, located nearby.

Collection Manny and Jackie Silverman, Los Angeles
Free-standing sculpture

David Smith (1906–1965)

Tower Eight
1957
Silver
Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas

David Smith (1906–1965)

The Hero
1951–1952
Forged and welded steel, red lead paint
Brooklyn Museum, New York
Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 57.185
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Molly Bretton, Access Manager

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Abstract Expressionism

11. Clyfford Still

Do not remove from gallery
Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

59 Clyfford Still, ‘PH-1123’
Abstract Expressionism

Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
11. Clyfford Still

Page 7
List of works

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Seating
11.
Clyfford Still

b. 1904, Grandin, ND; d. 1980, Baltimore, MD

From first to last, Still remained a resolute outsider. For example, he spent only twelve of his seventy-five years in New York City.

Instead, during the 1920s and ’30s Still lived in Washington State, while also farming the prairies of Alberta, Canada. In sum, Still was a westerner – even more so than Pollock – who had a deep relationship with the land’s “awful bigness”.

Still’s originality largely reflects a simple geographical fact: his sheer remoteness, especially early on, from the wider art world.

A natural draughtsman, Still also had a voracious knowledge of art history, revering certain Old Masters, such as Rembrandt and J. M. W. Turner, and, closer to our time, Vincent van Gogh.
Paradoxically, this traditionalism spurred Still’s radicalism – heralded by ‘PH-235’, one of Abstract Expressionism’s earliest landmarks.

Starting with sparse landscapes, verticality became Still’s enduring leitmotif.

Whether distilled to the slenderest “lifelines” or towering monoliths, Still associated verticality with the upright living being and spiritual transcendence. Its nemeses are the yawning abysses, by turns molten and glacial, which interlock with these upthrusts.

No wonder that in 1950 Still – who had an almost Manichean outlook – wrote of his art in terms of “life and death merging in fearful union”.

Consequently, a struggle between luminosity and darkness heightens this elemental dramaturgy, intensified by Still’s scabrous surfaces rendered with the palette knife. The massive pictorial expanses also hold tiny contrasting accents that foster a flickering vitality.
Although Still broke with virtually all his Abstract Expressionist colleagues, he never altogether abandoned Pollock. Indeed, Still had planned to take Pollock on a road trip west in 1956.

Tragically, the latter’s fatal car crash intervened. For his part, Pollock went so far as to declare: “Still makes the rest of us look academic.”

Drawn (with one exception) from the unparalleled holdings of the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, the paintings here deliberately counterpoise the achievements of Pollock shown in Gallery 3.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-950
1950
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-235
1944
Oil on canvas
Still painted two other versions of this work, which he referred to as “replicas”; this suggests that he regarded the composition as exceptionally important.

Here, lightning-like bolts of white, acid yellow and green erupt into a vast, inky black chasm, defined by a snaking blood-red contour. In short, deathly gloom and sudden vitality contend.

Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-247
1951
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver
Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-385
1949
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-847
1953
Oil on canvas
Private collection
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-4
1952
Oil on canvas
(continued over)
The almost liquid texture of the paint illustrates that Still’s facture was highly various, ranging from a mordant dryness to ethereal scrims.

Note also how the dark silhouette along the lower right edge of the composition introduces an abyssal space that accentuates the soaring vermilion above.

Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)
PH-1140
1957
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver
Clyfford Still (1904–1980)

PH-150
1958
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver

Clyfford Still (1904–1980)

PH-1123
1954
Oil on canvas
Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver
Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver
Clyfford Still (1904–1980)

PH-605

1950

Oil on canvas

Lent by the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver

Gift of the Clyfford E. Still Estate to the City and County of Denver
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12. Late Work

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Audio tour

Main commentary

Descriptive commentary

Philip Guston,’ Low Tide’
Abstract Expressionism
Main Galleries:
24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017

Contents

Page 4
12. Late Work

Page 7
List of works

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12.

Late Work

In their final phases, the Abstract Expressionists, true to their individualism, gravitated in disparate directions.

Some addressed darkness, evident in Gallery 9, as if exploring the mystery of last things. Others sought brighter realms.

The short-lived William Baziotes pictured a primeval aquatic world where tentacular phantoms drift through pale, phosphorescent deeps.

Their mythic cast – redolent with deep time and primitivism – recalls Abstract Expressionism’s early interests, now writ large, while the opalescent textures intimate a universe glimpsed distantly in the mind’s eye.

Choosing full-blooded impasto, the septuagenarian de Kooning seized upon immediate sensations – the gusty reflections of eastern Long Island whence he moved in 1963.
Everything is flux in these pastorals. Note the reference to the Heraclitean epitaph on John Keats’s tombstone: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.”

Sensuous yet elegiac in their nod to transience, in these works de Kooning culminates what he had announced twenty years before in ‘Woman as Landscape’ (Gallery 6).

Mitchell’s ‘Salut Tom’ is an apotheosis wherein sunlight and shade contend. The quadriptych format probably recalls Monet’s enveloping ‘Nymphéas’, as it aggrandises the artist’s faith in the “landscape I carry around inside me”.

Again, though, the sentiment is valedictory: the title commemorates the critic Thomas B. Hess, who championed Abstract Expressionism.
Moreover, such canvases bespeak the impact of the German-born artist Hans Hofmann’s late abstractions. There, lush tactility, depth versus flatness and spectacular colours close Hofmann’s sixty-year celebration of the act of painting.

Guston, too, went out with a bang. In 1970 he shocked the art world with a brute return to figuration. Thereby, Guston brought Abstract Expressionism’s wheel full circle, reasserting its foundational engagement with the human presence.

In ‘Low Tide’ the waters of abstraction ebb to reveal unsettling fragments. Simultaneously hobnail heels and parodies of the letter “omega” – the last in the Greek alphabet – Guston’s quiet apocalypse also doubles as timely pictorial metaphor.

Ominous orbs rise / set on the ruddy Abstract Expressionist horizon.
List of works (clockwise in order of hang)

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)
In Sober Ecstasy
1965
Oil on canvas
Audrey and David Mirvish, Toronto

Joan Mitchell (1912–1999)
Salut Tom
1979
Oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Corcoran Collection, gift of the Women’s Committee of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and museum purchase with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, 2014.136.135
Willem de Kooning (1904–1997)

...Whose Name Was Writ in Water

1975

Oil on canvas

By the 1970s the women who had dominated the first few decades of de Kooning’s work gave way to a return to landscape. The artist’s style also changed, becoming more fluid and contemplative, as suggested by the title of this work.

Here de Kooning uses paint loosened with additional oil, enabling long, gestural strokes. A close examination of the drips suggests the constant turning of the canvas.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
Willem de Kooning  
(1904–1997)  
Untitled V  
1976  
Oil on canvas  
Private collection

Philip Guston  
(1913–1980)  
Low Tide  
1976  
Oil on canvas

In the late 1960s Guston returned to painting representational images, which he showed for the first time at the Marlborough Gallery in New York in 1970. The scathing reviews led to his retreat from the art world.
Guston’s figuration, which is present in his early work (see ‘The Porch’, Gallery 1), is revisited here in ‘Low Tide’, with its hobnail heels lined up like monuments, at once grotesque and poignantly ruined, against the backdrop of the sea.

Private collection
Courtesy Hauser & Wirth

William Baziotes (1912–1963)
Mariner
1960–1961
Oil on canvas
Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin
Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991
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