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Robert Motherwell on Paper: Gesture, Variation, and Continuity

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EXHIBITION GUIDE

Robert Motherwell on Paper

GESTURE, VARIATION, AND CONTINUITY

OCTOBER 17 TO DECEMBER 13, 1997
MARSH ART GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND

The exhibition is organized and circulated by the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University. At the Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond, the exhibition is made possible with the generous support of the University of Richmond Cultural Affairs Committee. An accompanying exhibition catalogue is available, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., in association with the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery.

Open Tuesday through Saturday, 1 to 5 p.m., (closed Thanksgiving Week, 11/25-12/1).

MARSH ART GALLERY

George M. Modlin Center for the Arts, University of Richmond, Virginia
(804) 289-8276

FOREWORD

Abstract art is stripped bare of other things in order to intensify its rhythms, spatial intervals, and color structure, a process of emphasis.

— Robert Motherwell

The renowned Abstract Expressionist artist Robert Motherwell (1915-1991), best known as a painter, produced a remarkable body of works on paper. His drawings, prints, and collages show an intimate side of his visual sensibility and reveal the very personal "handwriting" of the artist as he responded to the subtleties of paper, both as a medium and a material.

The exhibition is divided into eleven themes or sections, and organized around serial creation, such as his "Lyric Suite" series, and thematic continuities, as seen in his well-known "elegies" motif. Motherwell's works on paper demonstrate the complex relationship between abstraction and figuration. The works present the artist's creative gesture in its various manifestations, as immediate impulse, as dialectic response, and as deliberate variation.

MOTHERWELL AND THIS EXHIBITION

Motherwell liked creating works on paper because "there is no way of correcting them; at times that's a great relief." But he also believed that "the real content of a painting is the rhythms and the proportions, just as a real person is his own rhythms and proportions, not what he happens to say to you when you meet him on the corner. This can lead to endless changes, trying to get the rhythm right."

But how does one know when it is right? "It's a decision not only aesthetically — will this look more beautiful? It's a decision that has to do with one's gut. . . to do with one's sense of sensuality. . . to do with one's sense of life. . . If it took two months to paint, my basic character has to be involved. I mean on a single day or in a few hours, I might be in a very peculiar state, to make something much lighter, much heavier, much smaller, much bigger than I normally would. But when you steadily work at something, your whole being comes out."

This sense of one's own personal character determining the art is parallel to the East Asian idea of brushwork coming from the inner nature of the artist. A passage from Ch'en Chih-mai's book on calligraphy that was scored by Motherwell states that "the artistic worth of a particular style is always determined by its purity, what Chou Hsing-lien called the 'face,' which alone belongs to the calligrapher, as personal to him as the timbre of his voice or the twinkle of his eyes."

Another marked passage in the same book states, "a calligraphic piece is a type of automatism, a realization of the artistic concept through the application of sophisticated brushwork. When the calligrapher's art is mature, his work is a grand display of linear ecstasies."

With Motherwell, however, the process of painting was quite different from the usual Chinese method of fully

This exhibition guide and extended copy on the wall labels were developed as part of an art history course, "The Modern in America," taught during the 1997 Fall Semester at the University of Richmond by Stephen Addiss, Tucker-Boatwright Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Art History. Dr. Addiss' students researched and worked on this brochure and selected the quotes used in the brochure and on the exhibition labels. The students were: Scott S. Allen, Matt Avitable, Maggie Brining, Henry Chang, Fiona Howl, Mark Karau, Annie Lipscomb, Karen Morgan, Johnny Nixon, Diana Thompson Vincelli, Joseph L. Winland, Jr., and Christy Yarnell.

The exhibition is organized and circulated by the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, and curated by David Rosand. At the Marsh Art Gallery, the exhibition is made possible with the generous support of the University of Richmond Cultural Affairs Committee.

Richard Waller

Director, Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond

developing a mental image of the work before starting. In contrast, he searched for what he called "feeling" by exploring the unknown; this often involved many changes.

"The game is organizing states of feeling. . . [through] light, color, weights, solidity, airiness, lyricism. . . My pictures have lots of mistakes buried in them — an x-ray would disclose crimes — layers of consciousness, of willing. They are a succession of humiliations resulting from the realization that only in a state of quickened subjectivity — of freedom from conscious notions — do I find the unknown, which the artist is constantly placing and displacing, relating and rupturing relationships; his task is to find a complex of qualities whose feeling is just right — veering toward the unknown and chaos, yet ordered and related in order to be apprehended. . . [T]hey will have condensed into quality, into feeling."

The impetus for this project was provided by two extraordinary visits David Rosand and I made to the home and studio of Motherwell during the final year of his life. On the first visit, on January 2, 1991, he reminisced about the first time he saw fine modern paintings in person. He was in college at Stanford, and a friend invited him to a party. He at first declined, but his friend said, "You like pictures, don't you? These people have lots of pictures." So he went, and it turned out to be the home of the Stein collection; remembering seeing the great works by Matisse, Motherwell commented, "Then I knew."

Later, we were in his studio, stimulated not only by the paintings that we saw, but perhaps even more by many bold drawings, graphic works, and collages that were new to us. He told us that galleries and museums were primarily interested in his big paintings, and these smaller and more intimate works on paper remained little known to the public. Suddenly the two things came together — his experience of viewing the works of a modern master

while at college, and the lack of attention to his smaller work — and the idea of this project was born. Why not publish these more intimate works with essays representing a range of viewpoints and show Motherwell's most personal art to university students? Perhaps someone else might not only look but see, and not only see but know.

On the second visit to the artist on June 23, we discussed the exhibition at greater length and were delighted by his interest. He told us that "people have never seen anything by me except the cliché things done by curators, and what they do is to make shows that are samples, and I hate 'em." The idea of grouping works on the same theme together to show the continuity of his art seemed to please him very much. We interviewed him on

ROBERT MOTHERWELL

Robert Motherwell, one of the most literate and prolific of the American painters known as Abstract Expressionists, was born on January 24, 1915, in Aberdeen, Washington. As a teenager, he moved to San Francisco, and it was while attending the Moran Prep School that he first discovered modern art — in the encyclopedia.

Motherwell studied at the Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, and the California School of Fine Art before enrolling in Stanford University. In 1937, he received a Bachelor's degree from Stanford where he studied philosophy, literature, and psychology. The same year, he traveled to Europe where he first encountered the writings of James Joyce, the author who became one of his lifelong literary heroes. He then entered Harvard's philosophy department with an interest in aesthetics.

By the fall of 1940, he was studying with the renowned art historian Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Schapiro encouraged him to paint and introduced him to European artists living in New York at the time, in particular to the surrealists. It was from them that he learned about "psychic automatism," which manifested itself in the "automatic scribbling" from which many of his works were derived. It was his belief that individual identity was revealed through brushstrokes.

Traveling to Mexico in 1941 with Chilean surrealist artist Roberto Matta, Motherwell turned seriously to abstract painting, creating his first known art works, his "Mexican Sketchbook." Over the next couple of years he created works with emotionally-charged brushwork and dark forms in response to the pervasive climate of war. He also began to tear paper for collages, a medium he returned to frequently throughout his career. His first one-person exhibition in New York was in 1944 at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century Gallery.

He spent much of his time lecturing and teaching in the late 1940s and 1950s at several colleges. With artists Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and others, he established an art school in 1948. He edited an art history series, *Documents of Modern Art*, beginning in 1944. He produced the single issue of the art magazine *Possibilities* (1947) with John Cage and others.

audiotape while looking at the works in his studio, and he told us that "our conversation becomes more and more a portrait of me that is more true than anything that exists."

We deeply regret that Motherwell did not live to participate throughout the entire preparations for this project, but we have carried on, with the support of the Dedalus Foundation, to present his vision, and perhaps his final portrait, through the paintings, drawings, collages, and prints on the medium he loved best, paper.

Stephen Addiss

Tucker-Boatwright Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Art History, University of Richmond

Best known for his "Elegy to the Spanish Republic" series begun in 1949, he created more than 140 paintings in the series over the decades. Their large black shapes form a continuing reminder of the profound emotion he shared with many of his contemporaries over the terror and loss of freedom during the Spanish Civil War.

By the late 1950s, Motherwell had returned to painting full time, continuing the "Elegy" series, and exploring "Je t'aime" in a series created after the decline of the second of his four marriages. He also looked to lithography to create some of his images, and would eventually produce some 200 editions of prints over the next thirty years. He continued to create collages, often incorporating found materials from his studio.

In 1962, he began to spend his summers on the coast at Provincetown, Massachusetts, where his "Beside the Sea" works were created. These works received the full force of the artist's arm as he splashed oil paint onto rag paper to capture the force and action of the ocean.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, he responded to the color field paintings being created by younger abstract artists by creating his "Open" series. These were generally single color canvasses on which three sides of a rectangle appear, suggesting the open windows favored by European painters as a metaphor for the relationship between the interior emotions and external senses.

Later in his life, even though he was plagued with heart problems, he continued to paint and to be active in the causes and organizations that were important to him. The artist was honored around the world with retrospective exhibitions and many distinguished awards, among them the Guggenheim International Award (1964), the American Academy of Arts and Letters Presidential Award (1989), and the National Medal of Arts (1990).

He believed his works on paper to be as important as his large-scale paintings — perhaps more revealing of the intimate side of his visual sensibility. He enthusiastically discussed the possibility of this exhibition at length with curator David Rosand and catalogue essay author Stephen Addiss. Before the project could be completely realized, however, Robert Motherwell died on July 16, 1991. He was 76 years old.

The exhibition is divided into eleven sections:

I. ELEGIES TO THE SPANISH REPUBLIC

Motherwell chose the blackest blacks to express human tragedy in his "Elegies." Black was a monumental reminder of the death of freedom in the Spanish Republic. The Spanish poet Alberti was so touched by his statements in black that he stood up at a lecture by the artist in 1980 and recited his poem "in its honor." In return, Motherwell created the *Alberti Elegy*, to honor the poet.

Motherwell's Black, by Rafael Alberti (1980)
(translation by Jack Flam)

Motherwell's black
profound compact entered into with night
Black black elegy
black with black blood coagulated
with chalk of bones outlining forms
Arm bands of mourning
black flags
black holes open for the shriek
black of the echo reflecting black
of rigid waters
Black of this land of eternal black
Oh black wall of Spain!
Still black airless obituaries
Pain of black concentrated anguish
Black pulling against black
expanding black waters
black back of black
Forever Motherwell's black resounds
Pierced black invisible stab
Endless black lament secret black
Black bottomless terror
black tongue cut without reply
Oh penetrating trapped black
Black of the gypsy's incurable curse
I can enter you black dissolved in tears
Through black emerge purified
Through Motherwell's black free black Spain
Poor Spain

II. AUTOMATISM

III. FROM LYRIC SUITE

On an impulse one day in a Japanese shop in New York City, . . . I bought ten packets of one hundred sheets each of a Japanese rice paper. It came to me in a flash: PAINT THE THOUSAND SHEETS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION, . . . WITHOUT REVISIONS OR ADDITIONS UPON CRITICAL REFLECTION AND JUDGEMENT. GIVE UP ONE'S BEING TO THE ENTERPRISE AND SEE WHAT LIES WITHIN, WHATEVER IT IS. VENTURE. DON'T LOOK BACK, DO NOT TIRE. EVERYTHING IS OPEN. BRUSHES AND BLANK WHITE PAPER!

Something like that, but intuited, not thought out. . .

So I began in early April, 1965. . . Anywhere from ten to fifty a day, on the floor. . . Unable to control spread of ink, which varied according to heat and humidity — never knew what one would end as, until "set"; each

picture would change before my eyes after I had finished working on it, sometimes for hours, as the ink spread like a spot of oil. . . Ventured about 600. RM

While working on this series, he listened over and over again to Alban Berg's "Lyric Suite" for string quartet.

IV. JE T'AIME

I have been making a series of paintings with "je t'aime" written across them in calligraphy. . . sometimes tenderly, sometimes in a shriek. . . I could paint "je t'aime" — I could never paint "I love you." . . It's not that the sentiment cannot be there, but that it sounds like a cliché. RM

V. BESIDE THE SEA

I quickly discovered that I could not imitate the spray satisfactorily. Then it occurred to me to use nature's own process: so I made yard long handles for my brushes. I hit the laminated paper with the full force of my 180 pounds. An adequate equivalent for the pounding summer sea spray appeared. . . to my delight. RM

VI. OPEN STUDIES AND BEYOND

Oppression in art, as in life, is when the conclusion to be reached is predetermined by inner or outer notions of how life or art ought to be. RM

VII. CHOREOGRAPHICS OF "M"

VIII. SAMURAI

Painting is flat space, and you can make it illusory if you want to, but one of the main thrusts of modernism is to get rid of illusion. . . of the enchantment of illusion. RM

IX. DRUNK WITH TURPENTINE

At some time during the day I get drunk on painting, almost everyday, and sometimes it's miserable, and let's say I've drunk too much and it becomes incoherent or I've no judgement. . . In a way, I've tried to suppress my learning and my intellectualism, and have almost deliberately gone out of my way not to do things rationally. It's the fore-ordained end that bothers me. . . There's always got to be an opening for life to creep in. RM

X. LITERARY FIGURES

XI. NIGHT MUSIC

The sensation of physically operating the world is very strong in the medium of collage. One cuts and chooses and shifts and pastes, and sometimes tears off and begins again. . . Without reference to likeness, it possesses feeling, because all the decisions in regard to it are ultimately made on the grounds of feeling. RM