

PAINTING

What the Mind's Eye Sees

Action painters were postwar exemplars of American individualism

Jason Edward Kaufman

The great leap of modern art in the early decades of the last century was the proposition that abstraction could be the highest form of artistic expression. A hundred years later, canvases marked only by paint splashes, slashes, drips, and flows are now counted among the canonical works of Western art. The terms “gestural abstraction” and “action painting” have been used to describe the sort of abstractions that directly reflect the action of an artist’s gestures in applying paint.

An exhibition called Action Painting at the Beyeler Museum outside Basel, Switzerland (January 27 to May 12, 2008) has gathered dozens of examples by artists who worked on both sides of the Atlantic. Among the Americans are Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and Helen Frankenthaler, alongside Europeans Jean Fautrier and Pierre Soulages, and European-born artists who worked in the United States such as Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and Hans Hofmann, among many others. The Action Painting show is not only an occasion to examine the historical development of this mode of image making, but also an opportunity to consider our experience of the work anew. Take American action painting, which coalesced into the dominant school of gestural painting after World War II. Are these once-radical works—say, Pollock’s *Number 7, 1951* (1951) and de Kooning’s *Valentine* (1947), both in the

Museum of Modern Art—visually engaging and deeply affecting today? Are they of lasting value? At a time when a painting by Pollock or de Kooning reportedly commands \$140 million in the private market—more than any other individual works of art—the question seems not only moot but verging on the absurd. But setting aside collectors’ embrace of these abstract expressionist works, and the critical respect for gestural painting in general, do these paintings merit their vaunted status?

The argument against abstraction was rejected decades ago. Why dredge it up again? Because the exercise is one that refreshes and deepens our appreciation of modern art. Moreover, despite the established position of mid-20th-century action painters, their celebrated works remain a mystery to most viewers. The hackneyed charge “My kid could do it” has been rebuffed routinely by experts, but for the general public it remains a lingering suspicion. Art has always been appreciated by an elite group of cognoscenti versed in theories that support the work. For other people, many forms of art will never have significant impact. But even among experts there remain many doubters about abstraction. A celebrated scholar of Italian Renaissance art, when asked by a student if he intended to visit the Morris Louis retrospective then at MoMA, smiled and replied wearily, “Imagine, all those shower curtains!”

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This anecdote illustrates a broader truth: action painting mystifies many more people than one might expect. What do museum visitors take away from their encounters with

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Jackson Pollock in 1950 with Lee Krasner, at work on One: Number 31, 1950

it? Some may find beauty, power, torment, or calm—just as they do in music. Abstract paintings may remind them of aspects of nature or of an inner mood or even of the collective unconscious, an expression of the symbolic forms that lie within all of us. I suspect, however, that more typically they find the works lightly engaging, inaccessible, or even risible. That the works hang in a museum where they are given the imprimatur of the intelligentsia is cause for discomfort and self-doubt. Unlike music, which unfolds over time, the experience of abstract art must be actively created by its audience. If the viewer does not extract a meaningful experience from the work, he bears some of the blame. Those who are knowledgeable about art can draw on a range of historical associations to add meaning to the experience of an abstract work. But perhaps gestural abstraction is just not intriguing enough to activate the mind of the general viewer.

sibility of automatic drawing as a way to reveal the unconscious. But recognizing the futility of eliminating the impact of consciousness, they shifted their interest from the automatic to the autographic, exploring the possibilities of unique hand-painted gesture as a vehicle of expression. Many of the abstract expressionists remained interested in psychology, particularly the work of Carl Jung, which postulated the existence of archetypal images and types embedded in a collective unconscious. They continued to look inward, seeking to make objective the vision of the mind's eye, and they fixed on the notion of the signature autographic gesture as the carrier of their personal feelings.

Alfred H. Barr Jr., founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, wrote in a 1952 article in *The New York Times Magazine* that many artists "feel that their painting is a stubborn, difficult, even desperate effort to discover the 'self' or 'reality.'" He summarized

An inquiry into the value of action painting necessarily gets at fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of art, topics that the American action painters themselves considered deeply. Indeed, those artists, including Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, Clyfford Still, and their followers, have been credited with having broken new ground in aesthetics, thereby advancing the history of art. Influenced by European artists, many of whom immigrated from Fascist Europe to America in the late 1930s and 1940s, the abstract expressionists who were to become gestural painters in the United States shared the surrealists' fascination with the pos-

the ethos with the quip "I paint therefore I am." The abstractions that resulted jettisoned overt representational imagery and became fields of marks that the artists and supportive critics deemed embodiments—sometimes with symbolic or metaphorical resonance—of ideas and states of mind. Pollock, in works like *Out of the Web: Number 7, 1949* (1949), laid his canvas on the floor and dribbled swirls of paint from his brush in overlapping skeins that resemble neural networks and astro-nomic seas. De Kooning, in works like *Valentine*, painted gracefully swooping arcs and interpenetrating shapes that retained allusions to the topography of the body. Clyfford Still, as in his *January 1951* (1951), created fields of somber black, midnight blue, red, or ocher in which patches of other colors suggest glimpses of hidden worlds. Franz Kline brushed muscular black swaths on white backgrounds, as in the Whitney Museum's *Dahlia* (1959). Morris Louis allowed gravity to pull liquid color down the canvas in diagonal bands, resulting in paintings like *Omega IV* (1959/60). These works—all of which are in the Beyeler exhibition—do not require the same sort of looking as representational art. They send the viewer inward in search of meaning and, in doing so, they extend the trajectory of the preceding five centuries of Western art.

The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, in his brilliant 1925 essay "The Dehumanization of Art," posited that the shift in focus from the observable world to the mind's eye was the inexorable course of art since the Renaissance. After single-point perspective unified the visual field, baroque art's thrusting space projected from the picture plane toward the eye. The impressionists were less concerned with describing the contours of objects and the fullness of space than with the effect of light as perceived by the retina. The symbolists passed through the eye to portray images of the imagination, an approach extended later by the surrealists. Subjectivity was further explored through color by the post-impressionists and expressionists, and the cubists devised a multi-perspectival means of presenting objects as seen by the mind over

time. Modernism's journey into the mind culminated with various forms of nonobjective abstraction that either reduced the outer world to perceived patterns and essences or abandoned it entirely by turning the gaze directly inward and producing images of visionary experience. In this sense, gestural painting is one of modernism's purest forms.

The aesthetician Rudolph Arnheim believed that modernism's reflexive search is emblematic of an epistemological revolution. In his essay "On Inspiration," which appeared in *ARTnews* in 1957, he wrote:

It took the Romantic movement to introduce the decisive shift that so profoundly affected our modern thinking—inspiration is no longer considered to come from the outside [scripture, the muses, standards of beauty, etc.] but from the inside, not from above but from below. . . . In many ways, this development must please the psychologists, who have contributed to putting it on firmer ground. They helped to redefine these fictitious external forces as forces of the human mind itself. They discovered that all human activities, weighty as well as slight, take place only partially in the limelight of consciousness; and they recognized that the gaps in the observable chain of causes and effects are filled by complex thought processes below the level of awareness. Man's creative accomplishments must be attributed to causes inherent somewhere in man himself.

Abstract expressionism's leading champion, the New York critic Clement Greenberg, acknowledged the difficulty for the public in appreciating these highly personal works. "The pictures of some of these Americans startle because they seem to rely on ungoverned spontaneity and haphazard effects; or," he said, referring to color-field works by Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, "because, at the other extreme, they present surfaces which appear to be largely devoid of pictorial incident." But the abstract expressionist's individualism was cast by some commentators as an agent of political change and seized by the government as an example of freedom and democracy. In the

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aftermath of the Allied victory in World War II, and with the European economy and culture in disarray, America gained a hitherto unprecedented prominence that the government exploited. By the 1950s, the U.S. State Department funded the export of exhibitions to Europe as a cultural counterpart to the Marshall Plan. MoMA's international council, which shared the government's opposition to totalitarianism, sent abstract expressionist works by Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Still, Gorky, Robert Motherwell, Philip Guston and others to eight European cities in 1956. Gestural abstraction was seen as the product of an American society that enshrines the rights of the individual.

A heavily illustrated article about Pollock published in *Life* magazine in 1949 went a long way to convincing the public that the new art was to be taken seriously. It presented him as an individualistic American on an artistic quest. He and fellow abstract expressionists de Kooning, Kline, and others were hailed as proponents of personal and social freedom of a kind not permitted by fascist and communist totalitarian regimes. New York critic Harold Rosenberg, who coined the term *action painting*, considered the canvas an arena for individual action; and the unfettered exercise of freedom in that arena was, he maintained, a moral imperative. The sculptor David Smith, whose welded-metal drawings in space were in some ways a three-dimensional equivalent to gestural abstraction, maintained that "the freedom of man's mind to celebrate his own feeling by a work of art parallels his social revolt from bondage."

But whereas the act of gestural painting could be construed as political, the works themselves are devoid of political content. For Greenberg they were the forefront of the avant-garde, an aesthetic assessment he based on Marxist-inspired notions of historical evolution. Having noted how the illusion of depth of field diminished from impressionism to cubism and other forms of abstraction, he concluded that painting was headed toward complete flatness. In his 1955 essay "'American-Type' Painting," he explained this as a historical necessity that results from each

medium shedding its extrinsic properties. "It seems to be a law of modernism—thus one that applies to almost all art that remains truly alive in our time—that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized." Modernist painting's essence consists of "flatness and the delineation of flatness," he later wrote, implicitly urging painters to eliminate representation, illusion, and stage-like depth of field as the proper province of literature and theater. He declared that New York artists, including Pollock, Kline, Still, Rothko, and Newman, who emerged during and after the war, were leaders in reducing pictorial art to its formal basics. Greenberg wrote that "their works constitute the first manifestation of American art to draw a standing protest at home as well as serious attention from Europe, where, though deplored more often than praised, they have already influenced an important part of the avant-garde."

Once action painting had been accepted as a viable mode of art making, its practitioners were no longer regarded as revolutionaries. History has relegated the second-generation abstract expressionists—Motherwell, Morris Louis, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell—to secondary status, and many others are considered insignificant academic followers. And the art historian Meyer Schapiro has observed that even the work of first-rank abstract expressionists devolved into repetition. Their efforts to create a "freely made . . . ordered world of its own kind" resulted in a concern for good composition and the development of a signature style. Their expressive spontaneity was reduced to a repeatable trademark.

Artists immediately assailed the abstract expressionist myth: Robert Rauschenberg erased a de Kooning drawing in 1953, symbolically negating the integrity and power of the artist's touch. Four years later he duplicated his own AbEx-style painting *Factum I* with *Factum II*—questioning the authenticity of the spontaneous mark as a vehicle for unique feeling. Jasper Johns also punctured abstract expressionist spontaneity by rendering its gestural brushwork in rigid encaustic. He mocked the machismo of abstract expressionist brood-

ing pathos in deadpan works such as *Painting with Two Balls*, a painterly canvas stretched apart in the middle to create a space into which he inserted two little balls. Frank Stella replaced the unpredictability of abstract expressionism by painting rigid geometric compositions that anticipated minimalism, and Lynda Benglis poured fluorescent pigments onto the floor where they solidified in colorful “frozen gestures.”

Johns demoted the de rigueur autograph gesture to a means of depicting flags, maps, and numerals, and Rauschenberg substituted photographic images gleaned from the media for gestural brushwork. Their return to recognizable subject matter presaged the pop artists' wholesale embrace of the world of mass-produced images and products. The language of art shifted from individualist self-expression to a field in which commonly encountered images were recombined and explored—a mode of aesthetic inquiry of greater relevancy and urgency in our media-drenched society. Andy Warhol completely abandoned the personal and symbolically gave himself over to mass-produced imagery and mechanical reproduction, establishing a critical antipode to gestural abstraction. In the pluralistic mix of styles today, in which artists borrow and repurpose imagery and modes of art-making from the past, the relative values of abstraction and figuration, the personal and the commonly shared, the hand-made and the mass-produced, are no longer hotly debated.

In retrospect, the American action painters' dream of inventing personal means to express their inner world has profound poignancy. Each individual's body, mind, and set of experiences are unique and inaccessible to others. But imagine if we could begin to know the texture and pace of another's thoughts and sensations. When artists seek to relieve the essential solitude of existence they serve art's highest function. The action painters mastered what they held to be unique forms of self-expression, but their languages remain little understood by contemporary audiences. Critics such as Greenberg and

Rosenberg helped to explain the artists' intent by situating the work within formalist or social theories, but we are left with the raw encounter with the work of art, which even today is not well understood.



Lynda Benglis

What is clear is that gestural painting can be interpreted in various ways and relies on reflection for meaning to emerge. But abstract art is not a mirror behind which the artist remains concealed and in which the spectator contemplates only himself. The work of art affects the nature of the viewer's response, but the secrets of the psychological and perceptual transfer of emotion and meaning remain to be unlocked. Can scientists develop a neurological map for how certain formal elements affect thoughts and moods? How can colors, textures, shapes, and gestures convey emotions and ideas? Is one spectator's response consistent with another's, and to what degree does any response correspond with the artist's intention? These questions are part of the legacy that the action painters have bequeathed. ♦