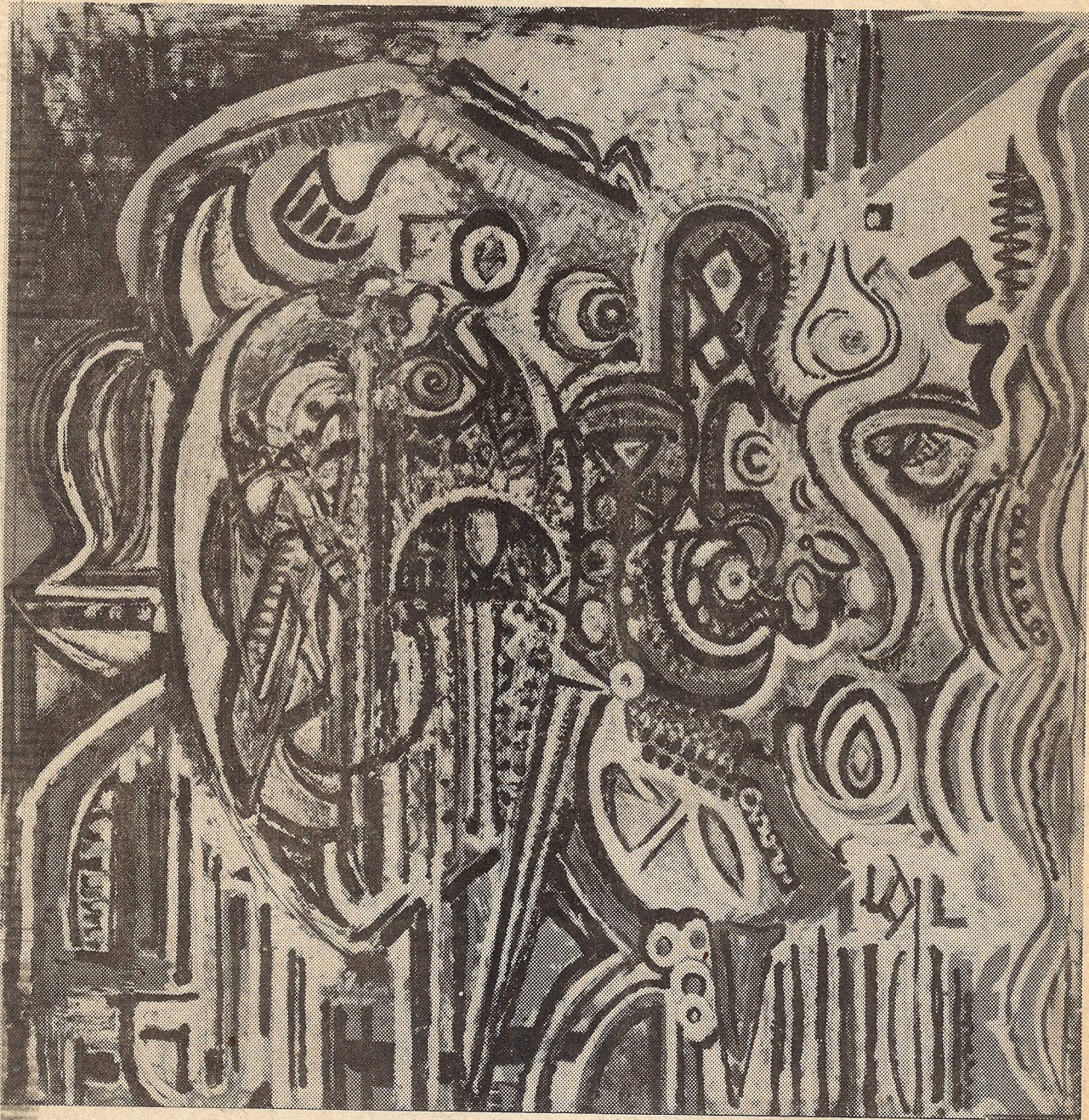


# Making Vivid the Spirit Of the New York School



Pousette-Dart's "Pegeen" (1943), at Cornell—"This exhibition reestablishes his place in the first rank of artists at work in the crucial war years."

The writing of the history of art, especially the history of art recent enough to remain subject to the correction (or, as is sometimes the case, the falsification) of living witnesses, is a conundrum of considerable size. So much depends upon the perspectives and prejudices of the moment, and so many of these depend upon those networks of personal and political association—and business connections, too—that are an inevitable part of the lives of the artists who produce the art, of the dealers and museum curators who select it for exhibition, and of the writers who set down the history of both. The wonder is not that distortions occur in the writing of such art history, but that anything remotely resembling a coherent and persuasive chronicle ever sees the light of day. Everybody knows that a friendship or a love affair or a divorce, a move to the country or a decision not to, an altercation with a dealer or an affront to a critic or curator, can sometimes determine an artist's place in written history; yet, the history is written as if it were a completely "objective" account of objects and their attributes. The myth of "objectivity" is, I suppose, one of the fictions essential to the writing of such history, but it remains a myth all the same.

Take the history of the Abstract Expressionist painters of the New York School, for example. How is it to be written? Who is to be included? When the Museum of Modern Art organized a major exhibition called "The New American Painting" in the late 1950's, one of the painters omitted was Hans Hofmann. Yet Hofmann was clearly regarded as an artist of considerable importance by both Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, two critics who disagreed about much else. When Thomas B. Hess wrote his pioneering study of "Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase," published in 1951, the section he devoted to the New York painters included reproductions of work by Hyman Bloom, Lee Gatch, Jack Tworikov, Balcomb Greene and Estaban Vicente, among many others, but nothing of Barnett Newman's. For Mr. Hess in 1951, Newman was clearly a minor figure at best. Yet, since then Mr. Hess has written two monographs on Newman that accord this artist a primary place in the movement. When Irving Sandler's "The Triumph of American Painting" appeared in 1970, it carried on its jacket a famous group photograph of the New York School in which only one woman is to be seen among the 15 painters represented: Hedda Sterne. Yet Miss Sterne's name is not even listed in the book's index. And so it goes with much of the historical writing on this subject. Perspectives shifts, prestige waxes and wanes for reasons seldom elucidated, and the works of art nominated for historical consideration appear and disappear as if by magic.

It is against this background that the exhibition called "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years," organized by Robert Carleton Hobbs and Gail Levin at Cornell University's Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in Ithaca, N. Y. (through May 14), assumes a special interest. The focus of this exhibition, though it includes among its more than 100 works a few pictures from the late 1930's and a few executed as late as 1949, is primarily on the war years and their immediate aftermath. It thus recalls us to the important fact that this period—the period of World War II—was the crucible in which the art of the New York School was formed: a fact that the Tenth Street myths of the 1950's tended to obscure. It also has the effect of separating the pioneers of the school from those others—some of them estimable artists, to be sure—who joined the movement later.

In "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years," there are thus no paintings by Franz Kline or Philip Guston or James Brooks, for example, and Barnett Newman barely squeaks in with a small watercolor said to have been painted circa 1945. On the other hand, there are seven pictures by Lee Krasner, who until recently was denied any sort of serious place in this history except as the wife of Jackson Pollock. Is this a case of an historical injustice finally being set right—

and Tomlin. The work is too heterogenous in style and too mixed in quality to lend itself to easy summary or generalization; yet, in one respect at least it can claim a certain unity that sets it apart from much of the art of the later years: This is in its distance from any sort of slick and glamorous look. For the most part the paintings in this exhibition are untouched by—what shall one call it?—the look of money or success. They are not "pretty" and easy in the way so much abstract painting—and not only abstract painting—has since become. There is something about the physical quality of the paintings, too—is it, perhaps, the absence of that bright, dead look we have become inured to since the advent of acrylics and other plastic pigments?—that is almost poignant in itself. The atmosphere of struggle is palpable and affecting.

This is, moreover, art that is very close to its European sources. Perhaps that, too, sets it apart from some of the later work. (This is a point well made in Gail Levin's catalog essay

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on "Miró, Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Expressionism.") What is particularly interesting about this aspect of the exhibition is not the obvious dependency of this or that artist on one or more European masters, but the spirit in which the European masters are struggled with. There is very little attempt here to reduce the heritage of European modernism to a series of formalist strategies: That, too, came later. The imperative interest lies in the discovery or creation of some personal archetype or myth—in symbolism that employs the painted surface of the canvas for some avowal of the spirit beyond the merely esthetic.

In part, of course, this was a reflection of the Surrealist ethos that played so crucial a role in the formation of the New York School, but one feels it even in a painter like Clyfford Still, who seems to have been very little touched by that ethos. It probably had something to do with the war, and it certainly had a lot to do with the reaction then in progress against the discredited clichés of 1930's radicalism in politics. Freud and Jung tended to supplant Marx as intellectual deities; the radical aspiration was turned inward, with painters concentrating on "the discovery of the unknown within themselves," as Mr. Hobbs puts it in his essay for the catalog. The search for "meaning" was still a burning issue, and not easily come by. Painting had not yet become so dazzlingly and dispiritingly efficient in finding its eye-pleasing forms. The language of this search for "meaning" was still governed to a very large extent by the conventions of Cubism and Surrealism, but they were already in process of dissolution. It was the beginning of the end of modern painting.

I have never myself seen an exhibition that made the essential spirit of American painting in the war years so vivid, so naked to the eye and to the mind. Removed from the world of glamor and money and success that afterwards overtook the New York School, the paintings that have been gathered in "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years" offer a fresh start for anyone attempting to come to terms with the art history of the last four decades. New Yorkers will be glad to hear that the exhibition will be coming to the Whitney Museum in the fall (Oct. 5-Dec. 3) after it returns from a summer visit (June 17-July 12) to the Seibu Museum of Art in Tokyo. ■