



# HYPERALLERGIC

MUSEUMS

## An Ambitious Survey of the Titans of Abstract Expressionism

This expansive AbEx show is brash, irreverent, and unconstrained, just like the period it aims to express.

Jason Andrew | 5 days ago



Jackson Pollock, "Blue Poles" (1952), enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas, 212.1 x 488.9 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra (© The Pollock-Krasner Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016)

The titans of Abstract Expressionism are on view now at The Royal Academy of Arts in London. It's a massive show comprising

163 works by 30 painters, sculptors, and photographers, and will likely go down in history as the largest loan exhibition of its kind.

It's been close to 60 years since a show like this has been held on European soil ("New American Painting" toured eight European cities including the Tate, London, in 1958). The 12 colossal Beaux-Arts galleries can barely accommodate this explosive and ambitious survey of the prevailing personalities and perspectives associated with America's greatest art movement. Curated by David Anfam, the movement's leading expert, the show is brash, irreverent, and unconstrained, just like the period it aims to express. (For a tame chronological recap of the exhibition, buy the equally impressive publication that accompanies the show).

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Franz Kline, "Vawdavitch" (1955), oil on canvas, 158.1 x 204.9 cm, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Claire B. Zeisler 1976.39 (© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016; photo by Joe Ziolkowski)

Never has a generation of avant-garde artists been more revered than those central to the Abstract Expressionist movement in America. Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and their counterparts Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, David Smith, and Jack Tworikov made history with their gestural works celebrating existentialism and raw humanity. It is their works that reign supreme in the show. Bonding through their time together on the WPA in the 30s and the comradery of

The Club in the 50s, these artists made New York City the new capital of the art world with their new art.

Abstract Expressionism marked the first time in history that pure abstract art would rival old Modernism. “It was the moment when New York artists suddenly achieved self-awareness,” wrote the critic Thomas B. Hess in a profile about the scene for *New York Magazine* in December 1974, “realizing that they were together, and together could move ahead independently of a suffocating Paris-based aesthetic, which had dominated international markets of ideas and cash for over 150 years.”

Recalled painter Jack Tworkov:

The turning point was 1949. 1949 was the year when the idea of a group crystallized. Suddenly you realized that you weren't talking to the same people that Picasso and Braque were talking to. Suddenly we realized that we were looking at each other's work and talking to one another, not about Picasso or Braque. We had created for the first time an atmosphere where American artists could talk to American artists [...] Suddenly what the guys around me were saying was important [...] We suddenly stopped being interested in Paris [...] we became interested in one another.

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Much has been said about the movement's roots in Surrealism (the focus of the first gallery at the RA). But as Philip Pavia, founder of The Club, explained, “The surrealists didn't go far enough, or high enough, or deep enough, because they stopped at dreams [...] they never faced up to the initial problems of light and space. [...] Dreams and reverie do not make the space, the light, or the measure required by the true plastic modernists.” And we're

all too familiar with struggle of the artists of the period to dethrone Picasso, and ample testimony about the ever-important influence of the likes of Kandinsky, Cezanne, and Soutine. But, without downplaying Anfam's heroic undertaking, the only true way to view this exhibition is to free ourselves of these historic anchorings and see the movement for what it was: an aggressive dialogue between and among artists. "Each in their own way felt a need to help build and strengthen an outsiders' community of painters, sculptors, poets, composers, and oddball geniuses," wrote Hess.

These guys (and a few women) were all about the remake of the mark — brush wielding and fire breathing. Moreover, they were all about one-up-manship, and through the pairing and juxtaposition of many heroic and historic loans from collections around the world, this exhibition gives us the opportunity to see them duke it out in a good old argy-bargy: Gorky vs. the Surrealists, Pollock vs. de Kooning, Rothko vs. Newman, Still vs. Still, and the ever-present Motherwell puttering about.

The core strength of the show are the galleries dedicated to individual artists, which are tantamount to mini-retrospectives. Unlike the truncated yet scholarly efforts we have experienced in the past, at the RA, the number of works by an individual artist allow us to experience the many facets of his evolving oeuvre as we trek from one massive hanging to the next.

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Arshile Gorky, "Water of the Flowery Mill" (1944), oil on canvas, 107.3 x 123.8 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (© ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016; Digital image © 2016 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence)

A remarkable gallery of Gorkys sets the pace for show — and the revolution. “Gorky had a remarkable knack for camouflaging forms,” writes Anfam in the exhibit’s introduction, “so that their identities hover between the recognizable and the cryptic, the refined and the convulsive.” Mature works like “Water of the Flowery Mill” (1944) and “The Unattainable” (1945) twist and flex

as they wrestle down subject, light, space. The tragic events surrounding Gorky's life match the turmoil in his paintings, and they laid the groundwork for a rising cult of personalities.

Eighteen works by Jackson Pollock in the next gallery are proof of his singularity. On exhibit together for the first time, "Mural" (1943) and "Blue Poles" (1952) are prime examples of his exhaustive source of pure energy, and they bookend the career of one of America's greatest painters.

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Mark Rothko, "No. 15" (1957), oil on canvas, 261.6 x 295.9 cm, private collection, New York

The gallery dedicated to Rothko could be the beating heart of the exhibition. More than any painter associated with the movement, it was he who emoted most. Standing amidst these towering works, I am reminded of what de Kooning once told Rothko: "Your house has many mansions." "No. 15 (Dark Greens on Blue with Green Band)" (1957) is literally a tsunami of color and emotion. Seeing a late work by Rothko hanging next to one by Jack



Tworkov was particularly gripping, considering that Tworkov was one of the last people to see Rothko alive. It's epiphanies such as this that make the show a sensation.

Anfam told me, "Getting nine major masterpieces from the Clyfford Still Museum to travel always seemed a prospect too good to be true." But he did it (I'm sure his being the museum's senior consulting curator helped). And while many have commented that seeing so many works by Stills all at once tend to cancel each other out, I found the consistence on such scale staggering.



Clyfford Still, "PH-950" (1950), oil on canvas, 233.7 x 177.8 cm., Clyfford Still Museum, Denver (© City and County of Denver / DACS 2016; photo courtesy the Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO)

Barnet Newman and Ad Reinhardt share a gallery between them, which is likely the only thing they ever shared. And the gallery dedicated to de Kooning offers more than an impressive number of signature canvases leading up to and expanding beyond his "Women."

When we aren't experiencing a single artist full-throttle, several galleries are thematic. While I see the educational sincerity behind this

decision, these galleries come across as pedantic and simplistic, and they are laced with the rhetorical stuff that really annoyed these guys in the first place. They undermine the intentions and dialogues among the artists and curb the momentum of the movement (and the exhibition as a whole). It's like pressing pause while watching *Viva Zapata!* to discuss the dialogue. We don't care what the motives are — we just wanna see Marlon Brando deliver his lines.

Surprisingly, Lee Krasner's gallant "The Eye Is the First Circle" (1960) is the first painting to dominate the gallery leaving Gorky and leading to Pollock. It's through curatorial moves like this (and also the insertion of single works by Helen Frankenthaler, Louise Nevelson, and Janet Sobel) that Anfam takes swings at the established male-dominated hierarchy of Postwar American Art. Unfortunately, it's not a left hook or the knockout punch many of us have been waiting for.

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Lee Krasner, "The Eye Is the First Circle" (1960), oil on canvas, 235.6 x 487.4 cm, private collection (courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York)



Joan Mitchell, "Salut Tom" (1979), in the Abstract Expressionism exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, work on loan from a Private collection (© The Estate of Joan Mitchell; photo © David Parry)

The show will do little to expand the “official” canon. One or two works by women, even if they are as unparalleled as Joan Mitchell’s “Mandres” (1961–62) and her triptych “Salut Tom” (1979), which dominates the final gallery, or Louise Nevelson’s “Sky Cathedral” (1957–60), do not stand a fighting chance against the likes of 18 de Koonings, 15 Rothkos, 13 sculptures by David Smith, and 12 paintings by Clyfford Still. What Anfam’s selection is really telling us is that sometimes, whether we like it or not, history is exactly how it’s been written.

Yet in his own way, which is at times crowded and quite clumsy (like placing Bazziotes' "Mariner," 1960–61, as the final painting in the show), Anfaam continues to press the presence of women and outliers Mark Tobey (West Coast), Norman Lewis (African-American), Bradley Tomlin (homosexual), and photographers Barbara Morgan, Aaron Siskind, and Minor White. Anfaam pushes these artists not as minorities but for their timely contribution. It's at these moments that he could have been more unapologetic, more irreverent — more like the men who locked arms at the Cedar Bar.



David Smith, "Star Cage" (1950), painted and brushed steel, 114 x 130.2 x 65.4cm, lent by the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, the John Rood Sculpture Collection (© Estate of David Smith/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2016)

The show's largest misfortune is that it will leave you believing that the only sculptor aligned with the painters was David Smith. Four monumental Smiths are installed outside in the Annenberg Courtyard, and many more dot the main galleries. You will not see the names Ibram Lassaw, Seymour Lipton, or Reuben Nakian. There is more to be told than is here.



Willem De Kooning, "Woman II" (1952), oil, enamel, and charcoal on canvas, 149.9 x 109.3 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller, 1995 (© 2016 The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London 2016; digital image © 2016, The Museum of

On the lure around Abstract Expressionism that continues to fascinate, Anfam told me: "It's the sheer ambition of it. The artists' passion for what they were doing as if it were a matter of life and death. And the magnetism of art that sought to be a language of the emotions."

*Abstract Expressionism* is an audacious display of organizational might. It's a historic display of works that remind us how potent the dialogue and rivalry among artists can be.

## Abstract Expressionism

*continues at The Royal*

*Academy of Arts (Main Galleries, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BD) through January 2, 2017. The exhibition will travel to the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, from February 3 to June 4, 2017.*

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