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ART REVIEW

‘Mark Tobey: Threading Light’ Review

Unlike his East Coast contemporaries, the artist favored small scale and a meditative mood



Mark Tobey in his studio (1949) PHOTO: ARTHUR LYON DAHL/LARRY NOVAK (PHOTO)

By Peter Plagens

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Andover, Mass

“I believe that painting should come through the avenues of meditation rather than the canals of action,” said artist Mark Tobey (1890-1976). Generally remembered as a Pacific Northwest painter closely identified with Seattle, Tobey chafed at art reviews in the 1940s that constantly paired him with the “action painter” Jackson Pollock. Compared with the Abstract Expressionists, Tobey painted small, and his favorite medium was tempera on panel or paper. His color was subdued—mostly grays—and he developed a “white writing” approach to painting, in which he pondered “microscopic worlds” instead of the atomic explosions in the minds of Abstract Expressionists. Having converted to the Bahá’i faith in his late 20s, his outlook was a far cry from the existentialism that fueled the postwar New York art world.

Still, he was a modern American painter concerned with fame and his place in history. He won the City of Venice prize for painting at the 1958 Biennale, and boasted in 1962 that Pollock had “capitulated to my style.”

“Mark Tobey: Threading Light,” at Phillips Academy’s Addison Gallery of American Art, offers quiet testimony both to the artist’s ambition and his contemplation. It contains 67 paintings installed in rooms whose walls have been painted what one might call Tobey gray. (The exhibition appeared earlier at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice.)

Tobey came from the Midwest (one of the earliest paintings in the show, “Middle West [American Landscape],” 1929, is a veritable portrait of dreariness), had no formal art education save for some Saturday classes at the Art Institute of Chicago, and admitted that his “eyes weren’t prepared” for the famous Armory Show when he saw it in 1913. He cited 1918 as the beginning of a “dark period,” and very little of his art from the ’20s still exists, but Tobey



Mark Tobey, 'Threading Light,' 1942 PHOTO: © 2017 ESTATE OF MARK TOBEY/SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, ARS, NY

learned Chinese brushwork in 1924 and made a trip to Paris, then the center of modern art, the following year.

In fact, Tobey was a ceaseless traveler, visiting (in no particular order) England (where he taught

for a few years), Turkey, China, Palestine, Japan, Israel and Mexico. Back in Seattle in 1951, he was ambivalent in the extreme about being labeled part of a Pacific Northwest "school" of abstraction, and he told his longtime New York dealer, Marian Willard, that because of the isolation he couldn't paint there much longer. In 1960, Tobey moved to Basel, Switzerland, where he died 16 years later.

The "white writing" technique began in 1935, and was first displayed in his paintings in a 1944 exhibition in New York. Some of these works preceded Pollock's "drip" paintings by five years. While other artists—notably Janet Sobel in New York and the Danish émigré Knud Merrild in Los Angeles—beat Pollock to the line in terms of the linear pouring of paint, Tobey's accomplishment was to generate an overall, organically wiry calligraphic approach that exuded a gauzy poetry. Unlike Pollock's more stentorian all-over paintings, Tobey's quietly beckon the viewer to come in.

Tobey manages a remarkable amount of difference among "white writing" paintings of similarly modest size and mutedness. "Threading Light" (1942)—possibly the best work in the show—is under 30 inches tall, with a space-age flow to it. "Crystallizations" from two years later is less than 20 inches high, and dense as a rain cloud but as lacy as a veil. "Window" (1953), large for a casein-on-board picture at 44 by 28 inches, uses the suggestion of part of a window frame to bring in architecture. Late in his career, Tobey turned to oil on canvas, working in a scale of up to more than seven feet in one direction, but those oils seem forced into large scale by the art world's appetite for size.

Tobey came late to his signature style; he was in his mid-40s when he discovered it, and 50 by the time it blossomed fully within him. Debra Bricker Balken, the exhibition's curator and sole author of its beautiful catalog, cites a "conformity to lingering Renaissance norms" (i.e., the portrayal of volume with light and shadow) as the obstacle. For Tobey, real mystery in art eventually required some abstraction.



Mark Tobey, 'Window,' 1953 PHOTO: © 2017 ESTATE OF MARK TOBEY/SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, ARS, NY

Yet he was not just another Pacific Northwest artist masquerading as an Eastern mystic. He said his subject matter was actually “the restless pulse of our cities today,” and at least a couple of paintings—“Broadway” (1935) and “Fog in the Market” (1943)—affirm Ms. Balken’s point that Tobey’s “white writing” was “a means to move progressive art beyond the entrenched languages of Cubism.” Still, while Tobey’s usual painting scale was modest, his philosophical reach was expansive. “Why don’t art schools,” he once asked, “have a class on how to remain aware?” This exhibition could well be a pleasurable first session.

Mark Tobey: Threading Light

Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Mass., through March 11, 2018

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*

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