THE NEW YORKER

# THE INFLATION OF ABSTRACTION

*The Met's show of Abstract Expressionism wants to remake the canon.*

**By Peter Schjeldahl** December 31, 2018

*Mark Rothko's "No. 3," from 1953, his peak year of miracles.*

© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko / Courtesy ARS

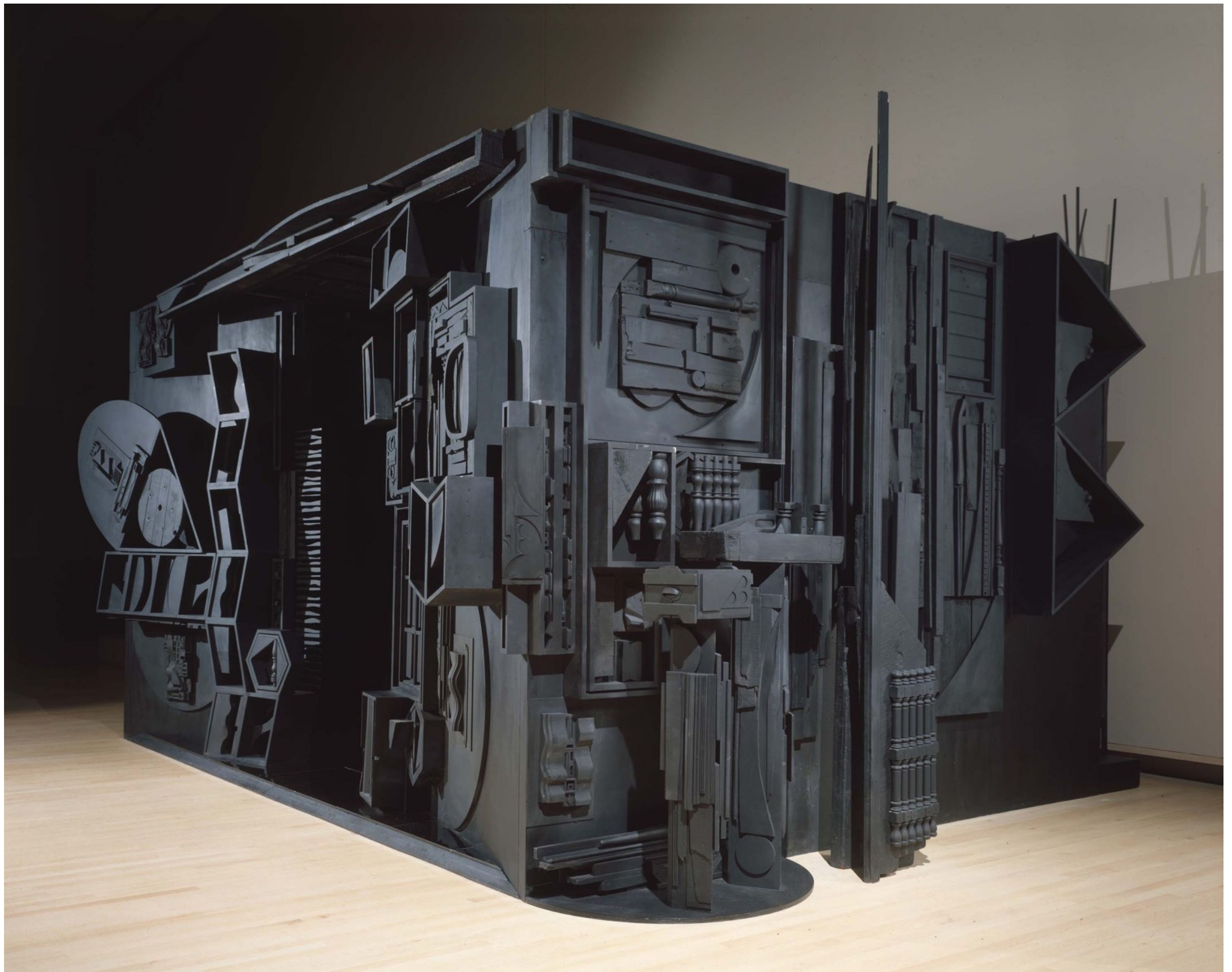
The first room of "Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera," a wishfully canon-expanding show of painting and sculpture from the past eight decades, at the Metropolitan Museum, affects like a mighty organ chord. It contains the museum's two best paintings by Jackson Pollock: "Pasiphaë" (1943), a quaking compaction of

mythological elements named for the accursed mother of the Minotaur, and "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" (1950), a singing orchestration of drips in black, white, brown, and teal enamel—bluntly material and, inextricably, sublime. There are six Pollock drawings, too, and "Number 7" (1952), one of his late, return-to-figuration paintings in mostly black on white, of an indistinct but hieratic head. The adjective "epic" does little enough to honor Pollock's mid-century glory, which anchors the standard art-historical saga of Abstract Expressionism—"The Triumph of American Painting," per the title of a 1976 book on the subject by Irving Sandler—as a revolution that stole the former thunder of Paris and set a stratospheric benchmark for subsequent artists. The movement has generated both awe and discomfort, like a pet whale, among makers, students, and lovers of art ever since.

*"Duck Walk," by Mark Bradford, from 2016.* Courtesy Mark Bradford / Hauser & Wirth

Advance notice of this show, which features abundant work by women and African-Americans and a few pieces from Europe, Latin America, and Japan, seemed to bode challenges to the heroic myth. This made me a bit nervous—I was weaned on Abstract Expressionism—but I was also game, as one must be now, for democratizing revisions of art history. I need not have fretted—or hoped. The show, curated by Randall Griffey, takes the old valuation as a given without mentioning its vulnerabilities: rhetorical inflation, often, and macho entitlement, always. (Zooming

in on the dazzling annals of the movement's historic struggles, you discover tacky barroom cockfights.) This perspective casts artists whose works reacted against or shrugged off Abstract Expressionism as little fish around the Leviathan. Why and how did the prestige of Abstract Expressionism collapse at the end of the nineteen-fifties? Ignored entirely are movements—French *tachisme*, Northern European COBRA—that contested New York supremacy at the time and seem ripe, now, for reconsideration. It would be hard to overstate the embarrassment that the show visits on independent-minded artists whom it shoehorns into a common genealogy.



*"Mrs. N's Palace," by Louise Nevelson, from 1964–77.* © 2018 Estate of Louise Nevelson / ARS

Unhappily displayed amid the Pollocks, an untitled painting on paper, mounted on canvas, by Kazuo Shiraga, from 1958, represents a movement in Japan that took the American innovation in a ferociously performative direction. It consists of frenzied smearings, by hands and feet, of oils in browns and reds. It is dramatic as a deed but, as a painting, slack, with no formal tension. The paint just sits there: evidence rather than expression. In this context, the work suggests a misunderstanding of the firmly disciplined Pollock as a wild man. Shiraga comes off as a callow provincial. That's

unfair. He and his peers in the Gutai group meaningfully responded to the disarray of their nation after the disasters of the Second World War. These artists weren't concerned with either the epic or, although their work was nonfigurative, the abstract in any pointed way, and pitting the Shiraga against masterpieces that supremely embody both feels beyond maladroit: cruel. One of the show's verbose wall texts acknowledges the stylistic and historical character of the Gutai group, but being told what to think hardly balances what one is given to see.

The show's oppressive effect intensifies in its magnificent second room, which gathers ten works by Mark Rothko that vary widely in quality but feature a gem in plangent red-orange and an ungraspable cream color, "No. 3," from 1953, his peak year of aesthetic miracles. This hammers home the majesty of the New York School —and almost exhausts, by the way, the major strength of the Met's holdings of art since the nineteen-forties. (But for a few loans, the show draws on the museum's collection.) The Met is justly infamous for softheaded, miscellaneous acquisitions of contemporary art—a minor failing of the greatest museum in the Western Hemisphere, but a fact that casts a shadow on a plan for a refurbished wing devoted to such work.

*"La Vie en Rose," by Joan Mitchell, from 1979.* © Estate of Joan Mitchell / Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

After the Rothko room, the exhibition goes to pieces. With exceptions including Willem de Kooning's "Easter Monday" (1955-56), an abstraction at once hyperactive and serene that can seem both to summarize and to kiss off the history of modern art, cogency becomes scarce. There are excellent sculptures by Isamu Noguchi and David Smith, and sculptures that make no sense at all, in this context, by Alexander Calder, Jean Tinguely, and, at the show's entrance, Dan Flavin. Several good-to-O.K. works by Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Franz Kline maintain the main line of Abstract Expressionism, from which paintings by Ellsworth Kelly and Cy Twombly sharply, but without affirmed notice, depart. Some later artists revive keynotes of the epoch—Joan Snyder with a lively smatter of drifting brushwork, from 1971, and, recently, Mark Bradford with grand splurges of jittery marks—at a cost of inviting comparison with their powerful precedents. "Mrs. N's Palace" (1964-77), by the sometimes winning sculptor Louise Nevelson, goes all in for Abstract Expressionism's tendency toward grandiosity. Crowding the middle of the show, it's a hut—or perhaps a shrine—made of black-painted wood scraps, almost twelve feet high, nearly twenty feet wide, and fifteen feet deep. Beyond the staggering first

impression that it makes, the work affords next to no visual engagement. A fussily decorative painting on four panels, “La Vie en Rose” (1979), likewise betrays Joan Mitchell. You wouldn’t guess from it, if you didn’t already know, that Mitchell is easily the premier second-generation Abstract Expressionist, and the most reliably thrilling.

*“Equilibrio,” by Carmen Herrera, from 2012.* © Carmen Herrera

Were this a more thoughtful show, it would not have installed “New York #2,” by Hedda Sterne (the only woman in the famous 1951 *Life* group photograph of the era’s new artists), so inconspicuously, or “Red Roses Sonata” (1972), by Alma Thomas, the once neglected but increasingly celebrated Washington, D.C., color-field painter. Sterne’s work is a tall, abstracted cityscape in grisaille that looks, from a distance, drawn or somehow printed but, up close, reveals itself to be tenderly brushed. One could argue that it’s an important dissent from the prevailing art of its time. Thomas’s painting, justifying its title, is a truly musical composition of red and green strokes. She was an astonishing colorist, more than equal in that respect to others in her stylistic cohort, like Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, and Kenneth Noland, who are also represented in the show. But “Red Roses” is more directly juxtaposed with a painting and two drawings by the superb British artist Bridget Riley, whose optically buzzy vertical stripes relate to it only by trivial analogy between intellectually opposed chromatic intensities.

*“Number 28,” by Jackson Pollock, from 1950.* Courtesy ARS

Clinching the gaucherie of the show is the use of the Herrera of its title: Carmen Herrera, a Cuban-born painter, now a hundred and three years old and living in New York, who only recently has gained the recognition that she deserves for her rigorously spare hard-edged abstractions. (In 2016, a show at the Whitney was her first in two decades at any institution.) On hand is a single smallish, modestly appealing painting, “Equilibrio” (2012), that pictures a stack of three downward-pointing black triangles. From Pollock to *this*? Without contextual reference to generations of preceding and contemporary geometric stylizers? (One stately shaped canvas by the American Robert Mangold and one so-so example by the Argentinian Alejandro Puente do not suffice.) Herrera’s eponymous presence is a gesture broadcasting the show’s character as an exercise in feel-good inclusion—the museum congratulating itself on liberal virtuousness, with its responsibility to draw

distinctions of quality and significance politely on hold. A desire to shake up received art history is more than admirable today—it's urgent for a future of pluralist values. But this show effectively reinforces the old status quo.

Here's a suggestion: reframe the undoubted greatness of Abstract Expressionism in terms of the risks of abject failure that its proponents ran. (I think of the oft-told anecdote of Pollock asking Lee Krasner, of a drip work that he had just made, "Is this a painting?") The drama is not inherent in the forms that they created, which may or may not prove lastingly influential. All artists must rise or fall by braving perils and finding opportunities specific to themselves and to their own times, the canon be damned. ♦

*This article appears in the print edition of the January 7, 2019, issue, with the headline "Abstract Inflation."*

*Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic. His forthcoming book, "Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings, 1988-2018," will be published in June.* Read more »

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