



WHAT'S WITH MODERN ART?

FRANK O'HARA

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Selected Short Reviews & Other Art Writings



Edited by Bill Berkson

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In the process of gathering material for his marvelous comprehensive bibliography of Frank O'Hara's writings (Garland Publishing, 1980), Alexander Smith, Jr. (1948-1987) discovered "Teens Quiz a Critic: What's With Modern Art?" He also retyped practically all of the short reviews O'Hara wrote for *Art News*. Alex's typescripts formed the basis from which the present selection was made.

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Photograph of Frank O'Hara in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965, by Renate Ponsold, reproduced with the kind permission of the photographer. — B.B.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Alexander Smith, Jr.

Short Reviews 1953-55

December 1953

E. Box [Parsons] has lived all her life in London. She had her first one-man show there in 1949; this is her American debut. She has an eye for paint qualities common to primitives, and her world is an Edwardian home: mother, father, sister, brother, tiger, lion and lioness, dachshund, nurse, birds and lawn with fences. The mood is generally nostalgic. There is a minor elegance about the paintings and, like a pretty child who wishes to be always pleasing, the charm of this intention is seldom lost. Her sophistication is apparent in the differentiations she finds of expression and mood, sometimes within a picture, sometimes between two similar pictures; it is a lyrical method sufficiently awkward to be convincing.

Kenneth Callahan [M. Walker], well-known Northwest painter, shows new drawings, watercolors, temperas and oils. The watercolors, three *Shore Studies*, are filmy yet bright, and abstract in an evocative, non-analytical style. The major emphasis of the show is on the temperas and oils; apocalyptic scenes muted by their own mountainous utterance. Horses and riders or nude men and women are glimpsed on the shore, on the rocky skyline or in the heavens: their anatomy is that of El Greco, but their habitat comes from Romantic poetry, not painting, and they appear through the pearly mists of Shelley—which on canvas is sometimes just grey. The *Moonquest* series depicts the longing of these creatures for the crater-like earth of their genesis; *Horses and Riders* swiftly span a more colorful landscape of similar invention, rearing and plunging in one tempera as if they had just remembered *The Battle of Anghiari*. The prophetic tone of these works does not come clear without literary interpretation, but the authority of the painter does. His interest in calligraphy is everywhere: in the watercolors as abstract shorthand for visual details; in the oils and temperas as drawing of significant detail in light color to keep the surface up; and in the *Cascade Mountain* series of drawings, as a means of making the space felt almost as fully as in its Oriental counterparts.

January 1954

Kees van Dongen [Wildenstein] shows his latest work (1950-1953) for the first time in this country. He is now seventy-seven, and his charm and enthusiasm are purer now than they were when he became famous as the most glamorous painter of the Fauve group. He is not so ambitious as he was, but his style is still as wittily simple and his palette still as brilliant. There are landscapes of his native Holland, glowing and pure in feeling, there are exquisite pictures of horses and riders at Deauville and of the gaming tables at the Casino there; only in one picture, *Orange Vendor*, does he revive the happy sinfulness of some earlier pictures: the women's eyes are stained with green make-up, their cheeks blush vividly and their bosoms rise and fall as in a revelatory chapter of Proust. If there is occasionally a feeling of datedness or sentimentality, as in *Jean-Marie van Dongen*, it is hardly to be noticed, for he does not indulge in attitudes or pseudo-feelings or melodrama, it is all paint.

Paul-Emile Borduas [Passedoit], a well-known Canadian abstractionist, has his first one-man show in this country. The paintings date from 1947 to the present. The early ones use almost recognizable forms with heavily painted surface; later his technique becomes completely abstract in style, similar to much New York work, with great dependence on palette knife and on equality of surface working as well as of tonal distribution. Nevertheless, there is a vertical shot-stroke used in the late pictures which reminds one of pine needles and a large rectangular emphasis in composition which is open, airy and not that of a Hofmann student—though the surface is. Fanciful personal titles are given the paintings, but they are catalogued for the most part simply by number, since there is no private intention to the work.

Cubism to 1918 [Perls], including Picasso, Braque and Gris, opens with a study for the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and closes with Gris' *Journal*, 1918, as dry and as ripely glowing as a green apple, a full experience and fitting close for a well-selected show. Since no minor Cubists are included an almost deceptively clear development is traced by the works of Braque and Picasso, beginning in the one with the Fauvist *Estaque*, 1908, and in the other with the Cézannesque *Still-life with Flowers*, 1908, and proceeding toward the perfection and reticence of Braque's *Violin and Guitar*, 1913, and the grandeur of Picasso's *Bottle of Anis del Mono*, *Fruit Dish and Pipe*, 1915. Along the way one cannot fail to be impressed by Braque's *Violoncello*, 1912, simply by virtue of its calligraphic looseness and freshness, or by the Picasso collage, *Pipe, Glass, Bottle of Rum*, 1914, or by his *Pipes, Cup, Coffeepot, Carafe*, 1911, with its withdrawn landscape quality. Yet it remains for Gris, in this limited selection, to indicate the range and the freedom of expression which an exceptionally gifted sensibility could find in the Cubist discipline. He was the great individualist of the movement and it seems that he would have painted the way he did whether there had been a movement or not. The dashing color of *The Smoking Magician*, 1913, with its Chagallesque candor, the *Tumbler and Cards*, 1918, as inevitable and as charming in its composition as a Jack of Diamonds, the frankly beautiful *Composition With Newspaper*, 1916—Gris' is the most varied offering. And seldom may one call a work both exquisite and plain, as one must the lovely collage *The Bottled Banyuls*, 1914. If Gris does not steal the show, it is because he is so good.

Walter Stuempfig [Durlacher] shows new paintings (of the last two years) which do not depart in style or subject from those that have made him well-known. But he is not content to repeat past successes, and is not satisfied with the kind of achievement which many a Magic Realist (his subjects occasionally remind one of them) settled for. These paintings are sensitive and felicitous, and one would look long for as beautiful painting as appears in *Apple Street* or *Audubon* or *Boys on a Raft* or *The White House*. What's highlighted is performance: whether of a sporting print, of a Courbet small boat, of a Cézanne figure, of a Vuillard still-life, and he makes the painting his own, but there is a question of the picture typifying itself too readily. Another question: can a new work safely supply its own patina, that same patina

which Cocteau requires to be removed from the great works of the past before they can really move us? Well, he is an impressive painter and if some of the pictures closely resemble works of the past they do not do so slavishly; and it is the works of the past we most prefer.

February 1954

George Hartigan [De Nagy], in these new paintings, brings dramatic intensity to traditional subjects—still-life, self-portrait with flowers, matador—while retaining compositional openness and handling which is emphatically abstract: the values of the picture's organization are always asserted above those of subject, observation or sentiment. The largest pictures, *River Bathers* (cool and languorous) and *Ocean Bathers* (feverish and active), show free use of the inspiration Matisse's *River* and *Moroccans* afford us all, while developing images of activity and conflict with nature quite unlike Matisse's. Her paintings seem to be a means of dealing with experience on her own terms and insisting on her own meanings. The degree of abstraction serves this purpose, it has nothing to do with objectivity; sometimes the subject is used merely as a natural organization and image for emotion of an entirely different kind—viewed in this way *Black Still-life* might as well be called *Dark Night of the Soul*, for the painting is invested with as strong an emotion as the structure can bear. The freedom of emphasis has given this work a variety which is often willful but never arbitrary, and in some pictures, notably the *Coffee Pot and Cucumber* and *River Bathers*, there is a richness of performance which includes the pleasures of virtuosity without verging on display.

Gandy [Urban], in his first one-man show, succeeded in taking the strongest point of view on each occasion—and his work did not degenerate into gestures, it fixed feeling roughly and directly as a child's drawing does. This accomplishment was bitter and ripe: passion resulted rather than force, but the paintings didn't try to overwhelm you. All of them were somber and loaded with meaning. The painter made it through intense simplification of feeling, and the meaning of the work (notably in a gunmetal crucifixion which was overindulgently truculent) was insisted upon sometimes at the expense of its value. But always it was big, brilliant and impressive in emotion as well as performance, never just Neo-Romantic potboiling. *Where Will We Live When the World Grows Dark?* had no trace of sentimentality or distance about it; *Minton's* was vibrant and inclusive; the Crucifixion with the red band was ingrown and traumatic; the large seascape, *Boats*, had in its very lack of specificity a strong effect. Except for one drawing which was too Rouault, the collages and drawings were equally distinguished; in particular, there was a head drawn with the incisiveness of a penknife.

March 1954

Georges Braque's [Chalette] lithographs and etchings, some from the Cubist period, others done as recently as a few months ago, provide documentation of a sensitivity and distinction which is not so clear or so intimately precise in the famous works of this French artist, though one or two here have the disadvantage of looking like reproductions of larger works because of the similarity of themes. The limitations of temperament felt in some of his larger canvases is not apparent; the lithographs have a looseness of drawing and the etchings a clarity of detail which, in both cases, represents a reticence that is warm and communicative.

Paul Klee [Saidenberg] is fortunate in never having done a major work; each individual thought as it comes to us trembling with wit and sensibility seems to be all of him. Almost. What a show of this variety (small pictures 1915-1940 in mediums ranging from oil to ink) makes one feel is the longing for one complex work: the pictures themselves seem to have gathered together from the ends of the earth to assemble a more complete memorial to their creator's psyche, like dutiful children on an anniversary. When they go away again they will be individuals, but for now their family resemblance is very strong. Some of them are beautiful and amusing, others are phlegmatic and puerile. Despite the diversity of technique and whimsy in his work, Klee had only one expression: his most brilliant insights are never stunts, but they are the same in quality as the truism and the over-relaxed platitudes of the bad pictures—it is just that they know more and are not weakened by overstatement or restatement. His constant nagging at the attention by petty and often vapid titles is a sign of his own nervousness and of a documentation which is perhaps too thorough; he had made himself too accessible.

William Baziotis [Kootz] shows fine, circumspect new paintings in the style which brought him recognition. They approach certain music in the completion of their message and in the objectivity which all this delicacy and introspection manages to achieve. He has taken a minor idiom to express his concentration on being and he uses it with great economy of means, with tact and with sensitivity—just the opposite of what most contemporary painting is about. Of course there is occasionally a feeling of stagnation and any excursion this deep (beyond the passions, towards the velleities) is accompanied by claustrophobic fears, but then, that's true of the piano pieces of Debussy, too.

Reginald Wilson [Ganso] shows sly but humorless new paintings, sullen, like unused toys. What is so funny about the most facile devices of Klee and Miró wrenched from their context by a heavy-handed American and left for junk in a neighbor's yard? Painted with sulky neatness in mordant colors, the pictures have the same effect as a charming remark overheard at table when it is repeated in the garage.

Edward Laning [Hewitt] attempts to relate, through an Italianate consciousness, his passionate disagreement with the main premises of contemporary personal sentiment. These new paintings are so unrelenting that they stifle the imagination and fail to transcend their disgust, but this unflinching seriousness keeps them from the chic of other subjective symbolists. His friends are really ugly, they are not unpleasant memories of attractive *mal-aimés*; and there is an attic picture which is the very epitome of dust.

April 1954

John Graham [Stable] has not shown for several years. He takes a controversial position—clearly he is not interested in anything we take for granted as admirable in contemporary art. Most of these paintings are portrait busts of women, dead, alive or imaginary, done with a flat, laconic elegance and exquisite discrimination of drawing and color. The women are almost all dressed in black gowns and when they are not their garb is so enigmatic it has the same effect. They have the staring eyes of the Italian Mannerists and a horse-like tenseness of nostril; the flesh of the face, neck and shoulders is livid from being scrubbed with a stiff brush, or sickly pink as it falls off in patches, or blue and red in splotches from frostbite. They are beautiful women and Graham is a very distinguished illustrator of the predicaments he imposes upon them. Others have meticulous gashes painted into the flesh, and one even has an iron bar thrust through her neck, it seems. Executed with the cerebral detachment of a surgeon, most of the pictures are intellectually sadistic and have the cranky brilliance of a decadent like Fuseli, without Fuseli's sense of psychological and aesthetic complication. His draftsmanship and his love of the arabesque bring Graham to a point of oversophistication which is like a person who perpetually smiles.

Jane Freilicher [De Nagy], in her third show of paintings, has stripped her work of its former influences; she had been an excitingly individual practitioner of a style which stemmed from the American version of Expressionism, but with these new paintings her distinction appears in a light which is as radiant as it is personal. The pictures offer themselves without subterfuge or coyness. There are interiors with window views of the city which place you specifically without any great attention to realism or tightness of detail. The still-lives are further evidence that she is one of the few contemporary painters with the gift of strong composition unhampered by overt design or pseudo-abstraction, while the flower paintings express flowerdom in all its delicacy and lack of sentiment. Two or three of the pastels shown are luminous as anything the Impressionists did, with a characteristic reticence which changes their focus. The landscapes are individualized through detailed attention to the specific nature of the mass: she is not of the persuasion that all landscapes tend to model themselves on the same drawing of Cézanne. The color in all the pictures is lit from within and may be a description of her relationship to her work. She

seems not to struggle with the pictures, but to identify with them in a gentle, unassuming way—the way Matisse does.

Fairfield Porter (De Nagy), familiar to *Art News*' readers for his articles and initialed reviews, in his second one-man show has moved beyond the earlier felicity of sentiment (which linked him with certain pictures of Vuillard) to a more abstract concern for the verity of painting itself. In these landscapes, interiors and portraits, the negative space of semi-realist painting is made positive by abrupt terminations of the form in the atmosphere—of a tree in the sky, of a face in the pressure upon its surface and of the air it breathes. The composition of the paintings is pondered, it has its moods and its time of day, as if Porter were thinking about essentials. And all this happens in a mysterious way, like a grand theme when we see it appear in someone else's familiar surroundings. He has moved into an area of positive feeling for the painting where the ideas, the passions, the subjects do nothing other than identify his work, like handwriting—they have little to do with his main project which is apparently the perfect painting. And he is very close, at least, to his object.

Adolph Gottlieb's [Kootz] previous anthropological interests, which manifested themselves in his pictograph style, enabled him to create so natural an environment for contemporary taste that the more secretive distinction which is the property of purely aesthetic concerns tended to be underplayed. Then last year he exhibited canvases whose feeling for landscape created a darker, more personal tone. These new pictures retain elements of both developments. There is deep space due to the multiplicity of grids and events in space both between and behind these grids; there is also surface writing reminiscent of the pictograph signs: arrows, letters, profiles of a face—they are more closely integrated now in reference to pictorial values, less of a point in themselves, and there is a mastery of compositional device quite different from the former hieroglyphic assurance, more free, more dramatic. Often the thick surface strokes are not so much signs of specific meaning as signals of that speed which results from force as well as felicity. These are city paintings with the clarity, strength and correctness of man-made structures, but the process which is also apparent is one of light and of clear gestures moving to the surface out of the dark personal efforts of the canvas's interior world, and thus they have an emotional quality which is impressive because it is so self-revealing. *Labyrinth*, the largest painting (7 by 16 feet), is like walking along a corridor; its pleasures of detail are scaled large enough to insure the viewer his own personal freedom, and this is an attitude toward the surface which other paintings share. Some end in an ultimate black grid on the surface (*The Cage, Armature*) and these both imprison the painting's depth of intention and protect the viewer from its natural ferocity; in others, the final statement is that of yellow or white signs which have escaped from the dark forest of grids and offer themselves openly, their meaning clear, the acceptance of it left to the eye of the beholder. This is as important a position in relation to the surface as that of Pollock, more objective, less virtuoso, and in the statement of it Gottlieb has acquired a new depth of feeling.

Glarner and Vantongerloo [Fried] showed together. The former, who is one of the most free and evenly discursive Neo-Plastic painters, offered recent canvases which are distinguished in color and masterful with a strength which does not rely on abstract verisimilitude or the solution of some visual problem in the individual painting. His painting seems to operate from a conception of the center of the canvas. However they are carried over the total surface and a limited use of black and white causes a tone of natural light to permeate the picture and opposes the compositivity of much Neo-Plastic work. The Vantongerloo constructions are made of flecks of color imprisoned in plastic bars and knots. They are research models, evidences of a continuing experimentalism. His current attempt is to isolate and contain pure energy, which is metaphorically color in a plastic medium, which is metaphorically art.

May 1954

Miles Forst [Hansa] does not believe that there is a "way" of good painting or that there can be a systematized personal projection. His work depends upon power and speed of performance, clarity and instantaneousness of perception. His second show includes oils, collages and drawings ranging from large moody paintings, which are abstract references to passion, all the way to sketches on his daily newspaper which resemble a calligraphic diary. He is more interested in experience than esthetics, and can use other people's work with freedom and confidence, since they are what he is experiencing. The large collage, *Henry VIII*, for instance, starts from a brutal conception of one of Motherwell's most elegant periods, but the influence of Motherwell as one feels it in the picture is no more important than any other material of the collage; similarly, in the newspaper sketches a likeness to the telephone book sketches of Kline is immediately recognized, but one feels it to be accidental, as natural as an American poem which refers to the Chrysler Building. Forst is original in the inclusiveness of his work, which has an irony, a tang, all its own.

John Ferren [Stable], showed oils and watercolors, most done in California and with the freshness of the outdoors. Ferren's personal lyricism was strong, unpretentious and refined, and it represented the force which purity, when it is given its head, may bring to bear upon the sensibility. His drawing had the absorption of the Orient, but there was no Chinoiserie about it, and some of the pictures had a wild natural humor like a vase of flowers knocked over, while others were serenely introspective; several were based on tree motives and their motion in the wind, and one horizontal landscape had the panoramic sweep of a Western highway opening up before one with its few essential details. They all were immediate communications, simply and sparsely painted, and attention to stroke, texture and surface absorption (some were done on nylon) made for constant variety and brilliance of tone within the exclamation. The pictures' abstract calligraphic forms had real space around them

and air in which they seemed to expand and almost breathe; small dissonant areas provided points of subtle perception like a turn in a conversation full of insights, and in the more complicated paintings the simplicity and vividness of Ferren's conception created an area of sensibility where Ferren reigns supreme—he is perhaps the only painter who works strongly in this atmosphere of overt spiritual gratification without turning it into some lesser sensual gift.

Leon Golub [Artists'] studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and has appeared in several group shows; this is his first one-man show and its American Expressionist tone derives both from a Dubuffet-like directness of image and from a totemic abruptness of statement. Some canvases are stretched, others are nailed into boards; the heavy surface is compounded sometimes of plaster, glue or raffia as well as paint—the immediacy of these paintings comes not so much from inspiration as from satisfaction with the initial effort; the subject matter has no more variety of experience than a tribal deity without a tribe, though it has its own pathos and pertinence. These paintings are at their best when they are bare and emphatic.

E. Briggs [Stable] shows new paintings in which heavy forms are set in motion enigmatically and sometimes at great speed. A brilliant palette obscures and reveals these white forms as if we were seeing them through a prism during a hailstorm. From the contrast between the surface bravura and the half-seen abstract shapes, a surprising intimacy arises which is like seeing a public statue, thinking itself unobserved, move. The pictures inform us intimately, but without the references necessary for complete knowledge. Passing through the Pollock influence, Briggs reaches a kind of naturalism of the paint, so that the work, for all its New York School look, does not seem composed or theoretical—an organic rather than formal invention seems to be emphasized.

September 1954

Robert Mallary [Urban] lives in Southern California and has shown on the West Coast. His first one-man show offers a technical innovation in abstract painting. The works use the freedom and variety of the collage method, but the diverse materials and textures are unified (much the way glaze "pulls a painting together") by polyester resin, which lends a dark, heavy elegance to surfaces which are at first almost as rudely immediate as Dubuffet's. Since there is no representational image to be violated by the verve of the technique, the result is a somber, glossy lyricism bound by tight compositional bands. In *Landscape* green-golden strips of plaster imbedded in wire and resin hang like unripe bananas, giving a vernal tone to the rather baked surface; in all the paintings the antithesis between living and inanimate matter seems a subsidiary concern, like a mood. He manages to convey with finesse emotions which are often dangerous to art—for instance, *Earth Fire* is not an unfamiliar

subject, especially from the West Coast, but for once it is dealt with neither as vapid mystery nor cindery anguish; the emotion is particular, for all the elegance. In a few pictures there is a technical unification which is not matched by formal conviction, and then the decorative aspects of the materials are distracting, but never beyond the bounds of taste.

October 1954

Old and new [De Nagy] offers an opportunity to see what five seasons of exhibiting with a New York gallery does to an artist. The notion of progress in art, even when the artist is young, is a suspicious one: what you do notice is changes in aim. Robert Goodnough's theoretical early abstraction gives way in expressivity to the recent *Lovers* who languish violently on an oblique axis. Alfred Leslie's brilliant all-over orange picture is static, like a cry, while his later seated woman develops a mournful emotion bordering on hysteria through manipulation of the paint strokes. Grace Hartigan's early virtuoso collage has a big abstract objectivity and noise to it, whereas her *Daisy and Olga* eschews bravura for the enigmatic quality of the sitters' faces and costumes—almost as Holbein might have done them now (and had he known Beckmann). Harry Jackson moves from freely drawn-in-paint emotion to the Matisse-like architectonics of an interior; Jane Freilicher, from a post-Fauve outdoors verve in the paint itself to a reflective and intimate style in which the paint is the means rather than the sentiment. This tendency is in some degree true of all the above, in their attempt to work through the influence of the Action School to a personal statement. Larry Rivers and Fairfield Porter are different: the former has strengthened and refined a tendency towards realistic representation inherent in the Bonnard-like early work to effect a mature subtlety and grandeur, while Porter's early Maine landscape has such plastic felicity one is happy to note its closeness to the later work.

Pictures of the passing world [Serigraph], as it looked to Japanese printmakers from 1660 to 1858, are assembled from the collections of Miss Lillian Schoedler, the late Alfred Vance Churchill and a New York collector. The show will circulate to libraries, museums and schools. Concentrating on subject matter as well as techniques, the exhibition includes reprints, reproductions and original prints. The late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are seen in reproductions for the most part—scenes of vulgar life (the home and the theater) portrayed with droll facial expressions and humorously exaggerated arabesques in the garments. The mid-eighteenth-century prints display increasing interest in detail and realism, along with a technical wit and keenness of perception (perhaps at its best in the four pictures by Harunobu); later this interest inspires a profusion of observation (Shunman), as if each character were performing its act and an ideal illustration. The work of Utamaro is the high point of the show. His decisive portraiture, insight into the psychological effectiveness of slight anatomical exaggeration, his ponderous blacks and

articulate drawing, the amusing focus of his scenes make him stand well above the rest. In the nineteenth-century group, some disappointing Hiroshiges and Hokusais move into picturesque, rather heavy-handed landscapes with figures, with the exception of Hokusai's famous *Autumnal Moon at Ishiyama*.

Dale-Joe [Urban] has had several one-man shows on the West Coast where he studied with Richards Ruben and Felix Ruvolo. His debut in New York includes a variety of mediums: there are cloth hangings painted with dye, bleach and watercolor; paintings built up with gesso, picked out, gouged, written over with delicate calligraphy; pictures in gouache and ink and wax medium; sculptures of "found" objects, rusted and burnt. He paints as a necessary activity, as one would cook, incorporating the objects as well as the emotions of his experience (one painting uses an old shirt dipped in plaster and covered with varnish), rather like the Chinese poems which, by mentioning the small occurrences of everyday life, achieve a perfect stillness and poignancy. Many of the paintings resemble Oriental landscapes. There is fancifulness in the elaborations of the forms and a tendency to the opaque and to the subtle, but because of the closeness of the scrutiny there is no loss of pertinence.

Blanche Dombek [Peridot] hews sculptures from weathered wood. The perceptions of her reductive method are on a very grand scale, standing forth like denuded trees and like philosophical generalities about the monumental simplifications of nature. Details of cracks, cross-grains and gashes have no desperate connotation and no mythological fierceness (as they do sometimes in totems). Without being decorative or subsidiary they suggest dryads, caryatids and declamatory figures, facing forward in one case like a great-bellied owl, and the pressures of their utterance are exerted against artificiality and conceit. They wipe from one's mind some of their more graceful contemporaries in the way that a gust of wind obliterates a phrase of music when it is played in a stadium.

November 1954

Giorgio Cavallon [Egan] has not shown for three years. His new pictures, while proceeding in the Neo-Plastic direction, have widened in stylistic range and introduced a specificity and directness of emotional sensitivity unusual in a mode so often given over to general or structural statements. Organized in rectangles, the areas are painted with great variety, some colored sketchily, some with impasto, others with a clarity and tact unequalled since Mondrian and Malevich; because these areas are so decisive and so just there is the impression of drawing (the yellows in one picture assume a strength through their placement which is almost linear), but actually what is being painted is the individual mass, its velleities and shiftings and inner light, and he relates these individual masses to each other by the working out of a rare sensi-

bility. What words fail to convey is the light, a light tremulous and opaque through which sudden clearings, like bolts from the blue, shine forth, as if the sun had been washed white by a cloudburst. It is the part of Cavallon's strength that he does not depict this, but leads our sensibilities gently to the clearing and says: "There!"

Alex Katz [RoKo] almost always paints a first impression of a scene in nature or a still-life, and then considers at length the decisive changes which must be made, to complete it. This is his first show. The pictures are influenced by Cézanne. Color is used sparingly and tellingly in a structural way, though the representation of the subject is not neglected. Refinement and an almost Oriental quiet in the perception are the predominant qualities.

December 1954

Helen Frankenthaler [De Nagy] refuses to abandon her sensitivity to nature or any other force external to the act of painting. Although there is a vague feeling of landscape about many of her new pictures, she goes no further towards representation than her experience leads her—the "interests" of many other young painters are obviously digressions in the light of her experience. On the other hand, she will not "make a picture" in the technical sense: she is the medium of her material, never polishing her insights into a rhetorical statement, but rather letting the truth stand forth plainly and of itself. The colors in these abstractions cover a subtle range, seldom approaching the primary or ecstatic. There is understatement in many, such as *Plateau*, where the inside of the pile seems to be expounded, or *The Desert*, where the busy area to the left is pushed and pulled into activity by the ponderous masses (brownish white and grey) in the center and right, as a mountainside will seem to have composed suddenly a rocky declivity out of its tensions, with resultant eye-consuming and eye-narrowing details. In *Passport* she explores the depth of her page with a violent blue chasm in the middle and writing (yellow, red and olive drab) coming up on both sides; and in a couple of the heavily painted pictures she does not hesitate to deal with her subject with a frankness approaching sordidness, for the power of their impact is that of natural violence evoked in a lofty and immaculate tone—the compacted sordidness of one of those "unspeakable" chapters in Henry James. In all the paintings there is an original use of the artistic temper, a disdain of appearances, and sometimes a private unpleasantness of tenor which is made beautiful by its unimpeded self-assertion—which is to say that then the artist disappears and we have a fact of experience.

January 1955

Cy Twombly [Stable] previously showed with Gandy and with Rauschenberg and the heavy, brooding forms which dominated his canvases were given an air of force

and of experiment alien to them by their juxtaposition with quite different works. Here, in his first one-man show, the quality is clear and strong. His new paintings are drawn, scratched and crayoned over and under the surface with as much attention to esthetic tremors as to artistic excitement. Though they are all white with black and grey scoring, the range is far from a whisper, and this new development makes the painting itself the form. A bird seems to have passed through the impasto with cream-colored screams and bitter clawmarks. His admirably esoteric information, every wash or line struggling for survival, particularizes the sentiment. If drawing is as vital to painting as color, Twombly has an ever ready resource for his remarkable feelings. He also shows sculpture, witty and funereal, big white boxes with swinging cloth-covered pendulums and sticks and mirrors.

Bob Rauschenberg [Egan], *enfant terrible* of the New York School, is back again to even more brilliant effect—what he did to all-white and all-black in his last show and to nature painting with his controversial moss-dirt-and-ivy picture in the last Stable Annual, he tops in this show of blistering and at the same time poignant collages. Some of them seem practically room-size, and have various illuminations within them apart from their technical luminosity: bulbs flicker on and off, lights cast shadows, and lifting up a bit of pink gauze you stare out of the picture into your own magnified eye. He provides a means by which you, as well as he, can get “in” the painting. Doors open to reveal clearer images, or you can turn a huge wheel to change the effect at will. Many of the pieces are extrovert, reminiscent of his structure in the Merce Cunningham ballet *Minutiae*, but not all are so wildly ingenious: other pieces, including two sex organs (male and female) made from old red silk umbrellas, have a gentle and just passion for moving people. When you look back at the more ecstatic works they, too, have this quality not at all overshadowed by their brio. For all the baroque exuberance of the show, quieter pictures evidence a serious lyrical talent; simultaneously, in the big inventive pieces there is a big talent at play, creating its own occasions as a stage does.

Herman Rose [A.C.A.] has moved down from the rooftops in this new show, turning his close and tender scrutiny to still-life and landscape with new vividness and virtuosity; and there are cityscapes, too, notably a long narrow horizontal one with a facade along the lower half of the picture and crowded building behind, which is like looking through treetops. The painting is laid in with extraordinary ease. The still-lives have lighter color than before and a Manet-like variety of texture and tactile celebration, without losing their pertinence as aspects of city life. Again, *The Furnished Room* makes of sordidness and misery a beautiful experience, by its unflinching clarity of viewpoint; his stature here relates to the best of the Ashcan School. The subtle storminess of his pier buildings, the lyrical exposition of *The City* are first-rate accomplishments. An even clearer idea of distinctiveness may be gained by looking at the Museum of Modern Art's current exhibition in which he more than holds his own as you come upon him in heterogeneous surroundings and see

his singularity boldly contrasted with works in other styles, more popular right now, perhaps, but not more convincing.

Salvador Dali [Carstairs], the Marshal Rommel of Surrealism, prefaces his new show with an account of his recent “campaign” in Europe, where he finds the forces of figuration rallying everywhere against abstraction, hungry hordes presumably infuriated by the “Let them eat cake” of Riopelle. Are they turning to Surrealism? Dali himself is less of a Surrealist than before, more the metaphysical dream peddler, the cosmological dandy, the mathematical speculator whose terms are romantic ruins, wood and women. His incessant preoccupation with time as an element of space, ticking from the surface into the perspective depths and back like a pendulum, is strangely moving; the famous “limp watches” are shattering into fragments in the same landscape that gave them birth; the artist himself, nude, conducts you into a beautiful candy-dream where your faithful dog is asleep at your feet and the sea purrs at your fingertips. There are sweet vapors and the rich revelatory grain of woods and the vastly impressive passivity of megalomania, but it is not exactly a revolutionary's dream. He calls forth the minor or repressed admirations, sexual, tactile, sybaritic, technical—the subject is no longer of paranoiac importance—and makes a monument.

Sonia Delaunay [Fried], whom Arthur Cravan once accused of making her famous husband, Robert, a serious painter, now shows her paintings here for the first time, in retrospect from the second decade of the twentieth century to the present. She has a fresh and lively talent for abstractions which wheel and escalate slowly before your eyes, often with a delicate and flowery synchrony, often rotating their pure colors around diagonal axes which are like stems. Having spent much of her time in concern for the well-deserved recognition of her late husband's work, she now takes her place beside him as a worthy companion in art, as in life. Nothing mars the fresh, grassy color or relaxed geometrical forms, existing in a preternatural rather than philosophic calm.

February 1955

Simpson-Middleman [Heller] is the collaborative signature of Marshall Simpson and Roslyn Middleman, who work together on their pictures and here present new paintings done in the past two years. They are sharply linear in the definition of planes and employ a scientific precision of light in abstractions which are occasioned by sentiment and idea rather than by analysis of object or space. Thus they relate more to the Futurists than to the Cubists, though their impulse is towards stasis rather than motion. They have an intimacy not often found in this style, as if flat rectangles and triangles of clear color were drifting like birds through an interior, or as if a doorway were viewed through corrugated glass; but this is a response, not a

suggestion of the work. Some have the pure, almost sterile, look of water—which is a pleasant visual experience in itself.

March 1955

Georges Mathieu [Kootz] shows paintings executed in 1954 which continue his use of calligraphic forms against a field of solid color, drawn with the brush or straight from the tube in a rush of exasperated emotion. These new pictures are more complicated in their color, using closer reverberations of tone between pigment and field, and they complement *The Battle of Bouvines*, discussed in these pages, being heraldic homages to historic personages and events. He uses the calligraphic sign as the Orient uses it, implying a specific literary content so refined that it is available only to the happy few. He is daring, powerful, offering personal force expressed by proud and disdainful sentiments, sweeping thick lines of paint sparingly over the surface to tangle with smears and run off in red on red which stings the eye, or developing a lush arabesque. The result is an emblem of spiritual stress and conquest, the specific terms of which are historically important to the artist but kept a closely guarded secret, a personal cabal, fierce and intriguing. This, however, is not a fair representation of the charm and speed of subsidiary ideas which are sometimes delicate and tender.

Robert De Niro [Egan] is one of the most original and powerful younger painters showing today, and each show of his is an event. Like many other artists of major ambition he paints against what he dislikes, as well as with an intrinsic drive. These new works are in oil, gouaches and charcoal. There are large paintings, two of them bathers, which consume a larger space than the eye first realizes because of their scale and the intensity of the paint application. It sweeps and fills the figures, pressing against the earth as if rain were gradually washing them into the sea, a rain of rich color which is very controlled and autocratic, almost negligently applied. These are studio pictures in the French sense, strongly conceptual and pervaded by values which have nothing to do with what the eye sees outside the picture or in any other picture. They take control of seeing for the time you give them. A large crucifixion develops a free plasticity, and the colors now are the newly interpreted hues of the Renaissance, rich, sad and resigned blues and reds amidst which the cross looms larger than the situation—an antihumanist religious sentiment. Other works are no less beautiful, notably the three or four still-lives, one of which, in oils, is an original and moving addition to the tradition of "grand still-lives," definite and yet suggestive, waywardly pressed and stroked into form but arriving at classical coolness.

Leon Golub [Feigl] shows new work which is even more fiercely Expressionistic than that in his previous show, restricted to a coarse and consciously ugly texture for

the most part, and ranging from black through the greys and umbers to dirty white. He employs the deep surface of Dubuffet with none of that painter's elegance or irony. The relation of these heads and figures to their space is very often one of swollen, stifling contact—in *Bone Fetish* the image, like the canvas it almost swells over, is pierced by nails which hold it in the frame. In others a rare brightness of color makes the experience richer and more specific: it is not just the face or figure of a tortured subject brutally placed before the eyes, but a specific pain and mystery is revealed—rather than obscured—by the artist's own passions about it. Many seem to be pushing the bounds of art in some struggle which is, for all the formal organization and vigorous impasto and even collage-richness, being presented as psychology rather than plasticity, and this seems a brave stand.

September 1955

Joseph Cornell and Landes Lewitin [Stable] made fabulous partners in an exhibition of the former's intriguing boxes and the latter's figurative collages. Cornell's genius is apparently as unailing as it is unique, for his work has no ups and downs; the total and well-recognized excellence of his *oeuvre* is complete and distinct in each individual piece one sees. The pieces shown on this occasion can be described in detail, one with little liqueur glasses filled with a marble or a piece of wood, one posing a dark Renaissance man in a zodiac, others to be handled as the layers of white, pink and blue sand, held separate by glass, will shift across the plane to reveal the objects at the bottom obscurely and with a variety of films between it and the eye. But the effect of their beauty was so singular as to defy description; they are moving, too, as evidences of so pure and so uncompromising a spirit in our midst. Lewitin uses colored papers, figures from pictures, marbled and paper, all minutely cut to form sections of his exotic interiors and scenes in which the figures appeared in odd and ornate sensual relation to each other, like something happening in the *Arabian Nights* or Petronius. Small in scale, lavish in detail and subtly suggestive, they represented the world of the flesh in a special and fantastic way, giving to the Cornells near them a look of Platonic purity and wisdom.

Ernest Briggs, Dugmore, Joan Mitchell [Stable] showed new examples of their work along with pieces previously shown and well worth seeing again, abstractions of genuine elegance and force. Briggs, in several pictures, is dramatically involved with the conflict between horizontal and diagonal motion. The forms push against each other or sweep by in a blaze of impasto. The largest painting, in two panels, is more relaxed than the others and its forms find rest without loss of vividness, as in a landscape after a storm. In the two most recent pictures, the "storm" is going on before you and the forms heave under a surface of natural disorder. The 1953 Dugmore, a large landscape abstraction with clay-colored sky, is in the tradition coming from Monet through Still, a fixing of forms in a pure and eternal regard. His new picture has a more passionate expression but one which is not in the slightest romantic or

forced, bringing a brilliant range of blacks and reds to resolution and repose with no loss of exciting detail. Joan Mitchell takes a strong stand on major problems. Seeing the 1953 picture among the newer ones brings out its extraordinary qualities very clearly. It is strikingly vital and sad, urging black and white lights from the ambiguous and sustained neutral surface, reminding one of Marianne Moore's remark on obscurity: "One must be only as clear as one's natural reticence permits," and making its point through deliberate avoidance of specific forms. In the recent large picture, on the other hand, forms have been embraced, clarified and mastered: cloud shapes above, rock shapes below, and a middle area of colors lying in a frenzy, rich, red, tangled. The picture comes off in a crescendo of involvement. The smaller pictures, and especially a green one, have great merit, too.

November 1955

Max Beckmann [Viviano] is represented here by pictures from his estate, never before shown. Dating from 1933 to '48, they testify to the grandeur and intensity with which he looked upon occasional subjects, landscapes, portraits, equal to that of the better appreciated mythological pieces. His sensibility is seen to great advantage in the simple landscapes shown, without distraction of a literary nature and with new insight into the extraordinary plastic vitality and skill of his gift. What he revealed about certain aspects of life as an Expressionist, he matched with similar intensity in the pure pleasure of his painting. *The Dancer*, a large seated figure, is a masterpiece of formality, painterliness and contained psychology; and a smaller head, *Lady in Hat*, is almost its match, with a courageous anger expressed in the face, as if "dolorous, but still advancing." The *Film Studio* of 1933 explains the tragic implications of the synthetic in art, making his own sensibility the theater of the subject, while *Girl in Front of a Mirror* finds the subject in a full womanly expression, in the bland mood of self-appraisal. *Hotel l'Hambre* has a calm foreboding; *Woman in Chemise Reading*, an earthy, voluptuous reality in lofty style; *Bath in August* (1937), a kind of optimistic brutality, as if to say "know thyself, and ward off the wolves!"; each picture, finally, is absorbing.

Jackson Pollock 1912-1956

The black and white paintings of 1951 are neglected in many assessments of Pollock. The ambiguous unification of disparate qualities in these works, which gives them their originality and their richness, also makes them difficult. In the more obviously astonishing inventions of the previous period, when *Autumn Rhythm, Out of the Web* and *Number 32, 1950* appeared with their all-over energy, their chain-lightning and falling snow and sunlight, to apprehend one quality of a work, whether it was violence or lyricism, anxiety or nostalgia (as in *Lavender Mist*), was to be on the right track. Insight into one quality led onward to another until gradually the painting revealed itself in the history of one's responses: the violence of these works when they were first seen was only the sign of a subtlety which could not be immediately or easily assimilated. The conjunction of their qualities pictorially is scale, and it is achieved by that most aristocratic of contemporary artistic means: detail. But the black and white pictures of 1951 are another matter.

They are unsubtle and very complex. They are frontal assaults on imagery which had appeared in Pollock's work in the early 1940s and which, as if lurking in his subconscious through the intervening years, now come triumphantly to the fore. These paintings are the *Chants de Maldoror* of American art. Their compulsive figurative elements call forth associations which are totally false: we mistake the artist's subconscious for our own. Each work is a unique statement, simultaneously in terms of imagery and of esthetic stance. To fasten on any one quality is to misinterpret. *Number 3, 1951*, is not an arabesque; *Number 6, 1952*, has tenderness as its subject where a vicious spatial mutation, on first sight, seems to be occurring. As images they are counter to the theory of the collective unconscious; they are private and mysterious.

It is probably because they are not images at all, but ideographs from a subjective world we do not know. Just as *Maldoror* has a surface Byronism which leads us to feel familiar with it before we have known it sufficiently to experience its strangeness, so the semi-figurative aspect of this overt period of Pollock leads us to believe that we ascertain overt meanings. And we are quite wrong. Pollock did not "take up" the figure as a means of clearer communication. He employed it as one of the elements in an elaborate defense of his psyche, and through it he was able to make explicit and intransigent his conviction of the mystery of creativity. By this means he shows us the paltriness of recognitions, the vulgarity of obsessions, and the prodigal and lofty expenditure of his innermost resources which was so characteristic of him.

Alfonso Ossorio wrote, in his preface to the first exhibition of these works at the Betty Parsons Gallery, "His painting confronts us with a visual concept organically evolved from a belief in the unity that underlies the phenomena among which we live." These phenomena include inner changes and the outward terror they produce. They also include, for Pollock, his own phenomenal work, a major *oeuvre* accomplished in barely fifteen years. The black and white paintings present the crisis of Pollock's evaluation of his own accomplishment. Unlike Franz Kline, who found in black and white the ultimate colors, Pollock here expounds no-color. It is

as if, from 1947 to 1950, Pollock had so seduced and subdued the surface of the painting that it was now avaricious to absorb the essence of his life's action. As one looks, one does not know how long these signs, written large and plain, will last. Where before the canvas was a ground, a field, to be worked and developed, here it is a skin, the skin of an abyss which is contemplating its own nourishment. One of the dramas of these paintings is the intolerable conflict between an artistic intent of unerring articulateness and a medium which is seeking to devour its meaning. In the traditional sense, there is no surface, as there is no color. There is simply the hand of the artist, in mid-air, awaiting the confirmation of form. And these forms, which could have as well been painted on air, or on glass, like the *Number 29, 1950*, manage to refrain from disappearing, even though the complexity of motivation and demand is so extreme, because their own identity is his, and he is there and has the power to hold them. It is drawing, as so many of the great masters seem to tell us, that holds back the abyss.

New Images of Man, 1959

It is the nature of sculpture to be there. If you don't like it you wish it would get out of the way, because it occupies space which your body could occupy. Smith's sculptures are, big or small, figurative or abstract, very complete, very attentive to your presence, full of interest in and for you. As an example, they have no boring views: circle them as you may, they are never napping. They present a total attention and they are telling you that that is the way to be. On guard. In a sense they are benign, because they offer themselves for your pleasure. But beneath that kindness is a warning: don't be bored, don't be lazy, don't be trivial and don't be proud. The slightest loss of attention leads to death. The primary passion in these sculptures is to avert catastrophe, or to sink beneath it in a major way. So, as with the Greeks, it is a tragic art.

From *David Smith: Sculpting Master of Bolton Landing*, "Art: New York," WNDT-TV, November 18, 1964.

Teens Quiz A Critic:

"What's With Modern Art?"

Answering your questions is art critic and poet Frank O'Hara who works as assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Mr. O'Hara is author of a critical work on Jackson Pollock (Braziller) and writes for Art News.—Ed.

Q. When certain painters splash paint on a canvas, are there really symbols behind it? Are they thinking of something serious besides what you see on the canvas?

A. First of all, you have to think that if someone makes an effort to do anything, he's serious. Sometimes a form is symbolic, but at other times it's simply the artist's desire to show you something beautiful. If you don't find that texture or color or form beautiful, or if you don't think it's interesting to be shown something just for its beauty, then you may not think the artist is serious. But, in most cases the artist thought he was serious when he did it. For an example, do you think it was silly for Tiepolo to paint on ceilings, or do you think it's beautiful? Or by the same token, if a contemporary artist paints with his canvas on the floor it doesn't mean that it might not turn out to be beautiful. Another thing, when you use the word splash to mean paint arriving on canvas, you must remember that paint is a liquid and, as at the beach, a splash can be a very beautiful thing.

Almost all artists have studied art, and if they choose to have their work not look like Rembrandt, it's not because they don't know how to make their art look like him but that they want to do more than just copy.

Q. I understand that Pop Art is a reaction to Non-Objectivism but I wonder if a Pop Artist really likes the brutal super-realism that is his trend?

A. Pop Art is not a reaction, necessarily, but at best a response to what we see in America around us, both on billboards, on theater marquees, in newspapers and on TV. In a sense, it tries to use a more literal subject matter than non-objective art. It gives you the artist's interpretation of what we all see in daily life, rather than the non-objective artist's interpretation of what he feels about daily life. It's up to you to choose which you find more meaningful, and in the history of art, it would seem right now that non-objective art has



Master: The Family, from the Museum of Modern Art, photo by John D. Schir.

perhaps something a little more profound to say about what is happening to us all. But everything depends upon the individual talent and the individual artist; if that talent is involved with brutality, the artist didn't invent it, he observed it. In that sense, the artist's duty to his time has nothing to do with whether he likes it or not, any more than Picasso liked the idea of the town of Guernica being bombed, or the Renaissance painters liked to have Christ crucified over and over again.

Q. Is it in poor taste to admire and like an artist who is still alive and near to the art world, especially if what he paints appeals to teenagers in style and color?

A. It is never in poor taste to admire anyone, except possibly someone like Hitler. It is especially important to admire an artist while he is alive, so that he may have some pleasure and comfort as a result of his efforts. If what he paints appeals to teenagers, it should hardly be held against him since teens are the future and an integral part of his audience.

Q. I wonder why de Kooning's painting seems to show so much hate?

A. De Kooning is a very great painter and a very great man. As such, he would be incomplete in either capacity if he did not feel hate as well as love. I imagine you're thinking of the Women Series, and if you are, the individual paintings vary in their mood as much as the man's feelings

vary towards a woman or a woman's towards a man. There are some angry paintings in the series, and there are some calm ones. But the technique of the paintings in the drawing, the harsh lines and the violent colors, has more to do with the history of art than it has to do with any one woman, any more than Leonardo da Vinci, in the Mona Lisa, is indicating that all women smile all the time.

Q. Why are so many modern painters considered serious artists? I'm questioning the current art tastes; many artists seem to have little feeling but use art as a way of making money.

A. Many modern painters are considered serious artists, because they are serious. No artist works hard and long, alone in his studio, because it is a joke. One may not like what is created, but one cannot say it is not serious. As for current art tastes, they are formed more by the public than by the artist, unfortunately, which explains why there are, in every period, gifted artists who go unnoticed by the general public until they are "discovered" in a later period. Fortunately for us, there is a great deal of public activity in magazines and the newspapers about art, and we know more, right now, about what artists are doing than in any previous periods. I think that's a good thing. If an artist is fortunate enough to make money from his work right now, it should hardly be begrudged. Most artists, in order to support themselves and their families, also have outside jobs.

Q. Is art on its way out?

A. Of course art is not on its way out, any more than it is on its way in. We do not know of any human society which did not find art a necessary activity. Art exists in every period, in many cases as the only surviving testimony to the society which created it. Now we have artists' names attached to works, but if we did not know that Pollock or de Kooning did a certain work, it would still be great, just as the Egyptian art we see at the Metropolitan or in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is great, though we know no more than that a human being created it. Art is part of our species. It is a cultural and important activity—in contrast to monkeys having to be taught to paint. Ostriches can't even be taught! ■

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Q. I understand that Pop Art is a reaction to Non-Objectivism but I wonder if a Pop Artist really likes the brutal super-realism that is his trend? Sally Mecklem, Music and Art High School, N.Y.

A. Pop Art is not a reaction, necessarily, but at best a response to what we see in America around us, both on billboards, on theater marquees, in newspapers and on TV. In a sense, it tries to use a more literal subject matter than non-objective art. It gives you the artist's interpretation of what we all see in daily life, rather than the non-objective artist's interpretation of what he feels about daily life. It's up to you to choose which you find more meaningful, and in the history of art, it would seem right now that non-objective art has perhaps something a little more profound to say about what is happening to us all. But everything depends upon the individual talent and the individual artist; if that talent is involved with brutality, the artist didn't invent it, he observed it. In that sense, the artist's duty to his time has nothing to do with whether he likes it or not, any more than Picasso liked the idea of the town of Guernica being bombed, or the Renaissance painters liked to have Christ crucified over and over again.

Q. Is it in poor taste to admire and like an artist who is still alive and near to the art world, especially if what he paints appeals to teen-agers in style and color? Jane Cee Salmey, Morristown High School, New Jersey.

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Q. Why are so many modern painters considered serious artists? I'm questioning the current art tastes; many artists seem to have little feeling but use art as a way of making money. Suzanne Miles, Montclair High School, New Jersey.

A. Many modern painters are considered serious artists because they are serious! No artist works hard and long, alone in his studio, because it is a joke. One may not like what is created, but one cannot say it is not serious. As for current art tastes, they are formed more by the public than by the artists, unfortunately, which explains why there are, in every period, gifted artists who go unnoticed by the general public, until they are "discovered" in a later period. Fortunately for us, there is a great deal of public activity in magazines and the newspapers about art, and we know more, right now, about what artists are doing than in many previous periods. I think that's a good thing. If an artist is fortunate enough to make money from his work right now, it should hardly be begrudged. Most artists, in order to support themselves and their families, also have outside jobs.

Q. Is art on its way out? Andy Gross, Isaac E. Young Jr. High School.

A. Of course art is not on its way out, any more than it is on its way in. We do not know of any human society which did not find art a necessary activity. Art exists in every period, in many cases as the only surviving testimony to the society which created it. Now we have artists' names attached to works, but if we did not know that Pollock or de Kooning did a certain work, it would still be great, just as the

Egyptian art we see at the Metropolitan or in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts is great, though we know no more than that a human being created it. Art is part of our species, it is a natural and important activity—in contrast to monkeys having to be taught to paint. Ostriches can't even be taught!

Ingenue, December, 1964

Afterword

Arguably, the influx of New York School poets into art criticism dated from 1951 when, at the suggestion of Elaine de Kooning (who had been at *Art News* only a few months herself), Fairfield Porter was hired to write short reviews and feature articles. Two years later, Porter and de Kooning, both of them friends of Frank O'Hara, recommended O'Hara to Thomas B. Hess, who already knew him from panel discussions at the Club. Starting in May 1952, Barbara Guest was the first of the poets to become a regular *Art News* contributor; she was joined by O'Hara, who was in turn succeeded by James Schuyler in December 1955 and John Ashbery in 1957. As a rule, none of them stayed longer than a couple of years, the main exception being Schuyler, whose stint lasted on and off until 1962. (Ashbery's extended run as an *Art News* editor came later, after his return from Paris in 1966.)

In the 1980s, reminiscing about a '50s *Art News* reviewer's lot, Schuyler told Carl Little: "Every month you had a sheet with twenty-some shows to see. I mean, some of them you could dismiss in one line. *Art News* had this thing about covering every show in New York..." Hess, who decided who would review what, encouraged the poets to write expository prose their way without imposing a homogenous house style. When asked by a beginning critic about how to proceed, he would suggest that the best way would be to tell what you had seen as if in a letter to an intelligent and sensitive friend, but one who at the same time would let you know when what you had written made no sense. According to O'Hara, Schuyler sometimes acted as unofficial copy editor for O'Hara's and Guest's reviews: "Jimmy was the real writer," Frank said. "He knew where the commas should go."

O'Hara's first reviews for *Art News*, ten of them, appeared in December 1953 above the initials "F.O." In the January 1954 issue he was identified as an editorial associate on the magazine's masthead, and his byline in the "Reviews and Previews" section changed to the more appropriate "F.O'H." For the next 14 months he averaged around fifteen reviews per issue. (Hess once told me that, when it came to meeting deadlines, Frank almost always brought his pieces in late.) His first full-length article, "Porter Paints a Picture," came out in January 1955. By mid-spring of that year, however, his critical output began tapering off: no reviews by him appeared in the April, May or Summer issues; he resumed with eleven pieces in September but only one in October, by which time he had decided to quit. In a letter written in early October he told Anne and Fairfield Porter how he had explained to the managing editor, Betty Chamberlain, "that I didn't want to review any more as I got so tired and disgusted with my ones this last month and couldn't think of anything to say—as I remember I could hardly see the pictures...My well has run dry, I'm afraid, and anyway I had no time to write poems and I was getting to feel like a robot...Consequently I feel relieved to have at last come to a decision though I hate to disaffiliate from *A.N.* and my distinguished colleagues." His official exit was in November, with a flourish of twenty reviews. Although his name was then removed from the masthead, four final reviews by him appeared in December 1955, the same issue with which Schuyler began.

What was happening? The poems O'Hara wrote around the time he left off writ-

ing criticism suggest the urgency of the moment. He was nearing thirty, and between romances. After the James Dean elegies of October 1955, there come three poems of sharp decisiveness—"My Heart" (November 1), "To the Film Industry in Crisis" "In times of crisis, we must all decide again and again whom we love," (November 15) and "Sleeping on the Wing" (December 29). Two others, "Radio" and "Joseph Cornell," have kinds of esthetic observation he probably felt were too often missing from his criticism (viz., "Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning / to aspire to. I think it has an orange / bed in it, more than the ear can hold"). Having resigned from his job at the membership desk at the Museum of Modern Art in January 1953, he was rehired in January 1955 to begin the first phase of his exhibition-related work for the museum as a special assistant in the International Program. Another odd job that occupied him temporarily was that of Cecil Beaton's personal secretary in Beaton's suite at the Sherry Netherland. In December he learned that he was awarded a Rockefeller fellowship to be playwright-in-residence at the Poets Theater in Cambridge, Mass., for the spring semester 1956, which if little else proved a necessary pause before he launched into the remarkable set of poems he would write after his return to New York in the second half of that year, including "In Memory of My Feelings," "A Step Away from Them" and "Why I Am Not a Painter."

However deflating his monthly *Art News* assignments may have been for him, some of O'Hara's short reviews, together with his Porter article and "Nature and the New Painting," stand as the best of his early art writings, which is to say they measure up to such later pieces as the note on Larry Rivers in *The School of New York* and the three Art Chronicles he wrote for *Kulchur* in the early '60s. From 1955 to the mid-'60s, O'Hara's role at the Museum of Modern Art increased from that of an administrative assistant to a curator whose responsibilities extended to writing lengthy essays for the catalogues of the shows he organized, whether for the museum proper or for venues in other countries. In the actual organizing and mounting of exhibitions, Frank played out his feelings for MOMA as a site of composite grandeur, part salon of the *ancien regime*, part soundstage at Warner Brothers in the thirties. But the requisite accompanying essays for those shows almost always loomed as last-minute chores, and the constricted rhetoric in them shows the strain of trying to invent an appropriate tone for the general reader, which at the same time would be high enough to suit Frank's own lofty sense of occasion. In these official instances, his prose stiffened, and he became self-consciously oracular. Two exceptions are his introduction for the Kline retrospective that toured Europe in 1964 and the brief note on Pollock's black and white paintings written for Peter Selz's *New Images of Man* catalogue and included here.

At some point in 1964, O'Hara was asked by the public relations department at the museum to respond to a set of questions about modern art submitted by high school students in and around New York to *Ingenue*, a glossy magazine "for sophisticated teens." Reading "Teens Quiz a Critic: What's With Modern Art?," it's clear that Frank felt no compunction about addressing Sally, Andy, Jane Cec and Ann as smartly as he would his downtown artist and poet friends. His responses respect the target audience's sensitivity and intelligence while imparting one or two handy tips on ethics, besides.

— Bill Berkson

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