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### The Reality of Things: Mark Rothko's Progression from Figuration to Abstraction

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# The Reality of Things: Mark Rothko's Progression from Figuration to Abstraction



A Senior Thesis Presented By  
Madeline Nelson

To the Art History Department  
In Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in Art History  
Advisor: Professor Michael FitzGerald

Trinity College  
Hartford, Connecticut

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*Chapter One: The Artist's Corpus*

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Nothing, at first glance, seems a more unlikely point of departure for a discussion of Mark Rothko's Color Field paintings than his work under the Art Students League. The two eras belong to different poles of artistic instinct: the first, dark paints thickly impastoed, raw and unfounded in the first hesitant attempt at the human figure, the other, thin washes of gossamer color in hazy geometric form. However, where these two eras coincide is where we find Rothko's most crucial concerns as he embarked on the creation of his mature format. Rothko's emancipation from figuration would come step-by-step and we can approach the artist's corpus as a single entity with its own unique internal pathways, as an accumulation of stylistic elements unique to Rothko's artistry.

Rothko enthusiasts form a sort of club of perceptive individuals: "For those attuned to the artist's special vision, the experience can be akin to a trancelike rapture."<sup>1</sup> This suggests that there are some who are receptive to the Rothko experience, and others who are not. The following text will avoid these implications in the investigation of a veiled consistency of style shared by Rothko's works dating from the late twenties to 1970. While Rothko's state of mind will be considered, formal analyses of treatment of line, luminosity, space, and geometry will dominate the following exploration of the artist's career.

Largely a self-taught as a painter, Mark Rothko's work seems to have little precedent in the history of painting. The visual arts did not play a role in the artist's youth and he was

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, Glenn. "Introduction: Irreconcilable Rothko." *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 1.

unaware of museums or art galleries until his twenties.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his childhood, however, Rothko was surrounded by cultural and social values, and when he finally encountered the world of painting, his mind was fully formed, or what he called his “delayed maturity”.<sup>3</sup> Rothko’s city scenes of the thirties are characterized by isolated, immobile human figures identifiable as rigid, faceless, and flat commuters, shoppers, or schoolchildren. In the thirties, Rothko produced a number of these haunting images of the New York transit system in which windows, doors, and walls serve as structural and expressive devices of confinement. In the forties, Rothko’s experiments in mythmaking turned increasingly symbolic. Devoted to themes of prophecy and archaic ritual, Rothko’s paintings of the forties are characterized by a biomorphic style stimulated by the Surrealists. The Color Fields of the fifties and sixties command geometrical subtraction in order to move away from the illusionistic element of the traditional painting. Rothko’s mature style is unique in the sense that, although it stimulates multiple associations, it eludes any obligation to represent external reality. In this regard, Rothko limits his role as the interpreter of the work so that the viewer must independently communicate with the painting, uninfluenced by the representation of the outer visual world as viewed through the eyes of the artist.

Although Rothko rejected the symbol of the human figure to enact his Color Field drama, the artist never abandoned his search for means of expressing human emotion: “I paint very large pictures. I realize that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however is precisely because I was to be very

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<sup>2</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Two: Dvinsk/Portland.” *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Ten: Rothko’s New Vision.” *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 284.

intimate and human.”<sup>4</sup> He developed his own method for wrestling with universal human concerns: “For art to me is as anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness.”<sup>5</sup>

On March 29, 1950, Mark Rothko, at forty-six years old, and pregnant wife Mell boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* for a five-month trip to Europe funded by an inheritance from Mell’s late mother. Rothko was not traveling to Europe to return to his origins in Dvinsk, Latvia. Instead, the couple visited Paris and Cagnes-sur-Mer, each for three weeks, Florence, Arezzo, Siena, and Rome for four weeks, London for three weeks, and Venice for nine days.<sup>6</sup> The trip was shaped largely around viewing Old Masters, yet contrary to a beginner painter eager to absorb his surroundings, Rothko embarked on the voyage to confirm preconceived judgements: “I travelled all over Europe and looked at hundreds of madonnas but all I saw was the symbol, never the concrete expression of motherhood, [...] What is attractive here is the crumbling, monstrous.”<sup>7</sup> In writing to Barnett Newman from Paris, Rothko laments, “Never did I ever conceive that the civilization here would seem as alien and as unapproachable as the actuality as it appears to me.”

<sup>8</sup> Everything changed when the artist arrived in Florence.

In the Church of San Marco, Rothko stumbled upon Fra Angelico frescoes in the cells of the convent. Inspired by the evenly dispersed light and meditative atmosphere, Rothko began to visualize the ideal physical and social conditions for his own paintings: “Rothko’s experience in

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<sup>4</sup> Crow, Thomas. “The Marginal Difference in Rothko’s Abstraction” *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 25.

<sup>5</sup> López-Remiro, Miguel, editor. “Personal Statement, 1945.” *Writings on Art*, by Mark Rothko, Yale University Press, 2005, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Breslin, “Rothko’s New Vision”, 283-284.

<sup>7</sup> Breslin, “Rothko’s New Vision”, 284-285.

<sup>8</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Letter to Barnett Newman, April 6, 1950”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 66.

Europe confirmed him in his ambition. [...] The murals in San Marco were painted in the spirit of meditation.”<sup>9</sup> No longer composed of bright lapis lazuli, the Fra Angelico murals present muted colors that create a pale, but heavenly light. Rothko formulated that large works like his own should not be valued as decorative, but as emanations of the sacred, as objects integral to daily life: “The function of the old philosopher, namely the poet, was then no different from that of the artist, for like the artist he reduced all of his perceptions of actuality to the most basic level to which humans relate: sensuality.”<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Rothko appreciated the quiet solitude found in the cells of San Marco and related the sensation to that of his own art, purged of representation to evoke tragic isolation.

In his manuscript *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko celebrates Renaissance Florentine Giotto in reproducing a statement by Bernhard Berenson: “The painter must, therefore, do consciously what we all do unconsciously-- construct his third dimension. [...] It was of the power to stimulate tactile consciousness-- of the essential, as I have ventured to call it, in the art of painting-- that Giotto was supreme master.”<sup>11</sup> Rothko’s recitation of Berenson’s statement reveals that even in the years leading up to his European voyage, the artist was already seeking to effectively employ plastic means to render believable tactility.

It is possible that the memory of the murals at San Marco or Berenson’s exposition of Giotto’s representation of tactility were still with Rothko as he embarked on *No. 10* (fig. 1) in 1950. The composition is exemplary of the artist’s signature style: irregular patches of color

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<sup>9</sup> Ashton, Dore. “Rothko’s Frame of Mind” *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “Particularization and Generalization.” *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “Plasticity” *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 44.

divided horizontally into three dominant planes that softly and subtly merge into one another. Looking at *No. 10*, the viewer enters a space whose formal elements-- colors, shapes, mass, and spatial relationships-- continuously shift in ceaseless movement. From afar, the composition appears to be simple and absolute. Yet, upon closer inspection, *No. 10* reveals intricacies born of a nuanced mastery of the formal elements of painting.

*No. 10* asserts a dominant vertical position with horizontal blocks of white, yellow, and gray set upon a violet-blue ground. The viewer is drawn to the central yellow rectangle. This rectangle, seemingly containing nothing, remains weightless and expands out of the picture plane towards the viewer. The viewer can peer into this surface to find varying densities of paint. The eye flicks between shades of deep, golden yellow and dark orange with a barely perceivable brownish-red beneath. The mysterious shadow is difficult to arrest. A gray rectangle rests below, detached from the pulsing yellow, but floating autonomously all the same. Thinly painted and appearing more like gauze than marble, the gray rectangle contains two vertical white columns that point to the yellow rectangle above. A white horizontal band joins the two columns like a lintel, as if the gray rectangle serves as an architectural structure. At the top of the canvas, resting above the yellow block, lies a strip of brownish-red, a narrow rectangle beneath a vigorously-brushed white bar. It snakes down each side of the yellow rectangle below. This dried-blood red is the remnants of an earlier, larger rectangle, but when placed beneath the yellow, can only be perceived as elusive dark orange shapes. Upon closer inspection, the viewer can spot another earlier rectangle-- white patches along the top and sides of the yellow signal the existence of a white rectangle between the red and yellow.



In *No. 10*, flecks of gray speckle the right side of the yellow rectangle. The yellow conceals, but reveals a dark red beneath. The electric blue intensifies the yellow, which in turn, intensifies the blue. Although autonomous, each section craves mutual interaction. Rothko's actors, the rectangles, perform in relation to the audience, urgently communicating a desire to summon sentiment.

Paintings like *No. 10* require an emotionally-intelligent viewer, one "whose needs for freedom and limitation, distance and intimacy," are provided for by the painting.<sup>12</sup> Of this new stylistic identity, Rothko explained: "The progression of a painter's work, as it travels in time from point to point, will be toward clarity: toward the elimination of all obstacles between the painter and the idea, and between the idea and the observer. [...] To achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood."<sup>13</sup>

Mark Rothko, born Marcus Rothkowitz, the youngest of four children of Jacob and Anna Goldin Rothkowitz, was raised in Dvinsk, Latvia in the early twentieth century-- at the time, a city under oppressive nationalization programs.<sup>14</sup> Part of the Pale of Settlement, Rothko's hometown consisted largely of Russia's Jewish population governed by an iron-fisted military presence. In Rothko's time, 25,000 troops were stationed in Dvinsk. The repressive force was inescapable. In the early years of the twentieth century, Dvinsk became a hotspot for political dissent. Political speeches and demonstrations by Jewish socialist groups and Zionist organizations were held in the city center. Dvinsk grew progressively intemperate-- soldiers stormed crowds, raids and assassinations became commonplace, Dvinsk was placed under

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<sup>12</sup> Breslin, "Rothko's New Vision", 282.

<sup>13</sup> López-Remiro, Miguel, editor. "Statement on His Attitude in Painting, 1949." *Writings on Art*, by Mark Rothko, Yale University Press, 2005, 65.

<sup>14</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 11.

martial law. The ensuing revolution, taking place in Rothko's early childhood, was dramatically anti-Semitic. Soon thereafter, the Jewish population began to emigrate to the United States.<sup>15</sup>

A strong Zionist and Russian Jewish intellectual, Jacob Rothkowitz, the artist's father, preserved an oppositional relation to formal religion and was devoted to dissident politics: "He was profoundly Marxist and violently anti-religious, partly because in Dvinsk the orthodox Jews were a repressive majority."<sup>16</sup> Tension between secular education, political zeal, and religious fervor created conflicts for Jacob in his understanding of the modernization that was taking place among Eastern European Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Jacob insisted his children receive formal educations. Eldest daughter Sonia attended Russian public schools before studying dentistry at the University of Warsaw; son Moise studied pharmacy at the University of Vilna.<sup>17</sup> Eight to thirteen years younger than his siblings, Marcus was a figure apart and received a religious education under the threat of the 1905 pogroms.

Pogroms in the Russian Empire were large-scale, targeted, and repeated riots against the Jewish population and began occurring after the Russian Empire acquired territories with large Jewish populations. These territories were designated "the Pale of Settlement", within which Jews were reluctantly permitted to live. Most Jews were forbidden from moving to other parts of the Empire unless they converted to the Russian Orthodox state religion.<sup>18</sup> There were no pogroms in Dvinsk, and so Rothko never directly witnessed any, but in reaction to the 1905 bloody carnage, Jacob turned ardently orthodox and decided to send his youngest son to *cheder*,

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<sup>15</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 15.

<sup>17</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 16.

<sup>18</sup> Staliunas, Darius. "Jew-Hatred and Anti-Jewish Violence in the Former Lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the Long Nineteenth Century." *New Directions in the History of the Jews in the Polish Lands*, edited by Antony Polonsky et al., Academic Studies Press, Brighton, 2018, 285-294.

a traditional elementary school that taught the basics of Judaism and the Hebrew language.

Marcus became subject to a strict, tedious regime of prayer, translation of Hebrew texts and rote memorization of Talmudic law, and greatly resented his father for his bleak early education. As an adult, Rothko seldom reminisced in paint or prose about his childhood, his hometown, or the Russian persecution.<sup>19</sup>

We can look closely at the central drama in Rothko's explicitly autobiographical work, *The Rothkowitz Family* (fig. 2) to address the artist's perception of his own familial relations. In the composition, the artist establishes a psychologically complex family artificially united. This work presents a mother holding a chubby, sleeping infant below the father's adoring gaze, as if emulating a Renaissance painting of the Holy Family. Rothko encloses the three figures within a long curving line that starts at the top of the mother's head, travels down the profile of her forehead, up and across the father's right arm and shoulder, and down his left arm to the top of the baby's head. Rothko employs grotesque distortion to accentuate expressionistic qualities: the mother's twisting elongated arms protect and enfold the child, the father's head bends impossibly to the right in awe. The intense bond between the father and child excludes the mother. In turn, the mother gazes only at the father, as if awaiting instruction. She dons a pained expression, as if the literal and figurative weight of her baby is too much for her to bear. Meanwhile, the infant sleeps blissfully, unaware of the conflict.

Rothko draws attention to the emotional intensity of the mother figure by accentuating her massive size, foreground position, and indeterminate psychological state. At first glance, the mother's face appears flat, a pale mask of apprehension. However, upon closer inspection,

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<sup>19</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 18.

blue-gray shaded areas within and around the perimeter of the mask suggest a sorrow contrasted by the pink-cheeked admiring father. Rothko depicts his mother as more melancholy than warm, reminiscent of despondent Renaissance images of the Virgin and Christ Child, Mary all too aware of her newborn's fate.

In 1910, Jacob Rothkowitz chose America over Palestine in the interest of his family and economic opportunity. In 1912, after Jacob had established himself in Portland, Oregon, he sent for his two older sons, Albert and Moise. The emigration was justified as a necessary move towards security and freedom. In the early summer of 1913, Marcus, Sonia, and their mother arrived at a port on the Baltic Sea to make the same trip.<sup>20</sup> The three abandoned the instability of life in the Pale to reunite with Jacob, Moise, and Albert. They sailed on the SS *Czar* from Libau to Brooklyn, landing on August 17, 1913. Jacob's uncertainty regarding modernity and his own ethnic identity would reappear in the struggles of his youngest child who as an adult, wrestled with embracing an American identity through assimilation. At age ten, Rothko conceded to the feeling of being an imposter in a foreign land: "a Jewish kid dressed in a suit that is a Dvinsk not an American idea of a suit travelling across America and not able to speak English."<sup>21</sup> Rothko resented his forced migration and resisted assimilating "to a land where he never felt entirely at home."<sup>22</sup>

In September of 1913, Marcus was enrolled at Failing School, an institution with no formal instruction in English. At age ten, he was placed in first grade, as all immigrant children were, and was expected to learn the language by simply listening to it. The following year, the Rothkowitz family moved across the school district separating line in hopes of ameliorating the

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<sup>20</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 22.

<sup>21</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 22.

<sup>22</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 25.

education of their youngest member. Now, instead of attending Failing, Rothko was enrolled at the Shattuck School and was placed in the third grade.

Overwhelmed by a new language, new foods, and new social norms, young Rothko found solace in the forested Portland hills between Mount Hood and Mount St. Helen's, an "endless space of the landscape of Oregon lying covered in wintry snows, [...] the monumental emptiness that is nothingness and at the same time, a part of all."<sup>23</sup> Perhaps it was atop Portland hills that Rothko first encountered the visual quality of emptiness, an attribute that permeates *No. 10*, the central yellow rectangle containing nothing, floating weightlessly and expanding out into the viewer's space.

A strong sense of displacement pervades *Self Portrait* (fig. 3). We can approach *Self Portrait* to explore how the artist's psyche is deeply embedded in his works: "The real involvements in my life out of which my pictures flow and into which they must return."<sup>24</sup> In *Self Portrait*, Rothko draws attention to his barrel-chested and impressive physical size. The artist assembles a contrast between the vigorous, agitated brushwork of the brown and yellow background and the immobile center figure, red lips pouting, head turned slightly to the right towards an unknown light source. Rothko accentuates his bony facial features and receding hairline, establishing a dichotomy between strength and vulnerability. In *Self Portrait*, Rothko does not present himself as an artist. He is not pictured holding a brush or a palette, nor does he place himself in his studio. Instead, the artist draws attention to the body parts required for the act of painting: the eyes and the hands. And yet, Rothko depicts himself as impaired in these areas: eyes represented as dark blue voids, hands oversized and fleshy. The man presented in *Self*

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<sup>23</sup> Breslin, "Dvinsk/Portland", 32.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen-Solal, Annie. "The Avant-Garde Jewish Painter and His Journey of Dispersion: 1954-1958." *Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel*, Yale University Press, 2015, 141.

*Portrait* is bulky and physically dominant, yet incapacitated, as if the act of painting may pain him.

Rothko's forced emigration protected him from the physical dangers of war which engulfed Dvinsk just a year after his family fled. Yet, the move also planted the artist in a country where as a leftist Jew, his social position was threatened. At Lincoln High School, Rothko would encounter intense pressure towards patriotism, Americanization, and anti-radicalization. *The Rothkowitz Family* and *Self Portrait* serve to remind the viewer of what the artist cannot abandon: familial and racial attachments that at once define and disadvantage him. Although modern art transcends national origins, in his route to modernity, Rothko both resisted and drew upon his ethnic identity.

There exists a certain consistency that links Rothko's earliest works and the writings that accompany them to the achieved abstract form of the fifties and beyond. The following chapters will pinpoint these intricacies shared by Rothko's works dating from the late twenties to 1970. While it is tempting to look at Rothko's classic abstractions as a revolutionary departure from the art that came before, the artist makes clear that the "plastic process", or the development of art, is inherently revolutionary.<sup>25</sup> It requires a trajectory of technique and representation through which the artist must weave:

"You ask how I got started in the direction which I am now following. It of course immediately raises the hope of a logical and ordered continuity for your painting life in which one thing is solved and gives rise to the next and then the next with a continuous development. But alas, when one look at this past how many distraction, how many dark alleys, and how much wandering. I know that in my case there were many such."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mark Rothko et al., "Plasticity" *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 44.

<sup>26</sup> López-Remiro, Miguel, editor. "Relation to one's own past, ca. 1954" *Writings on Art*, by Mark Rothko, Yale University Press, 2005, 111.

This thesis will survey a continuity of style demonstrated by Rothko's works by delving first into the artist's earliest understanding of artistic instinct at the Arts Students League, looking closely at his treatment of luminosity in the watercolors of the late twenties and early thirties. The subsequent chapter will investigate Rothko's participation in The Ten and the WPA while looking closely at the artist's treatment of space and geometry in *Street Scene*, *Subway Scene* and *Untitled (Subway)*. Chapter Four will explore the artist's involvement in the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors and concurrent experiments in mythmaking as an act of emancipating his art from external reality. Chapter Five will establish the artist's mature works, the Multiforms and the Color Fields, as stylistic private property and will scrutinize Rothko's understanding of Abstract Expressionism. Lastly, Chapter Six will examine the Rothko Chapel as the pinnacle of the artist's career.

Glenn Phillips describes Rothko's corpus as abound with "irreconcilable contradictions" that rest at the core of the viewing experience.<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to resolve these discrepancies, this thesis moves chronologically from the untitled watercolors of the twenties to *Untitled, 1970* to discover a veiled consistency of style, and perhaps, to see Rothko in a new way.

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<sup>27</sup> Phillips, "Introduction", 8.

*Chapter Two: The Untitled Watercolors*

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Mark Rothko excelled academically at Lincoln High School and by June of 1921, eight years after his arrival in Portland, graduated with a scholarship to Yale University. However, Rothko's college career coincided with a period of acute anti-Semitism across the campuses of Ivy League schools, and by the spring of 1923, Rothko had grown disenchanted with the idea of higher education. In the fall of 1923, he left Yale and moved to New York to consider a career in the arts. Rothko "was not exposed to paintings at all as a boy" and recalls his discovery of painting as purely accidental: stumbling upon some students sketching a nude model at the Arts Students League.<sup>28</sup> As if by divine, pure, and absolute conversion, Rothko surrendered to the art form: "I decided that was the life for me."<sup>29</sup>

In October of 1925, Rothko enrolled at the Arts Students League and took a class under Max Weber. In 1905, Weber had travelled to Paris where he studied at traditional ateliers, gravitating toward Avant Garde circles and in 1907, studying under Matisse.<sup>30</sup> While in Paris, Weber grew particularly interested in Cézanne's work on view at the Salon d'Automne.<sup>31</sup> When he returned to New York in 1909, the artist found that almost no one had heard of his new idols Cezanne and Gauguin, much less of Picasso, Derain, Delaunay, and Rousseau. As a result,

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<sup>28</sup> Breslin, James E. B. "Chapter Two: Dvinsk/Portland" *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Breslin, James E. B. "Chapter Three: New Haven/New York" *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, John R. "The Sources of Max Weber's Cubism." *Art Journal*, vol. 35, no. 3, 1976, 231–236.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, "The Sources", 231.



Weber shared his knowledge of the Parisian Avant Garde to the proliferating circle of Americans surrounding Alfred Stieglitz.<sup>32</sup>

Weber taught at the Art Students League from 1920 to 1921, and 1925 to 1927.

Throughout the twenties, and during Rothko's time at the League, Weber abandoned Cubism and began to paint in a more representational style that was influenced by German Expressionism and Fauvism.<sup>33</sup> Weber was the kind of authority figure with whom Rothko could connect. An orthodox Jew with expertise in painting, music, and literature, Weber appealed to Rothko in his artistic transgressions. As Rothko sifted his way through modernism, he employed Weber's help in pinpointing a philosophy of art that would one day lead him far from the ways of his contemporaries.

*Draped Head* (fig. 1), painted by Weber in 1926, exposes the aesthetic ideals that were present at the Arts Students League during Rothko's time as a student under Weber's tutelage. In *Draped Head*, Weber explores themes related to his Jewish heritage. The artist remains among the first to create a body of work based on the Jewish experience, producing sixty paintings and prints devoted to Jewish subjects, many of whom are depicted praying in traditional manners.<sup>34</sup> In *Draped Head*, Weber, an outsider reveling in remembered customs, presents a woman wearing a plain scarf and modest garb posing in a gesture of prayer and reflection. The emotionally-charged monumental bust dominates the pictorial plane: "a deep religious archaic spirit in fitting attitudes and gestures."<sup>35</sup> The woman's facial structure is simplified, giving her a mask-like appearance. In this way, Weber recalls the figural style he had developed in Paris born

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<sup>32</sup> Lane, "The Sources", 231.

<sup>33</sup> Lane, "The Sources", 231.

<sup>34</sup> Baigell, Matthew. "Max Weber's Jewish Paintings." *American Jewish History*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2000, 341–360.

<sup>35</sup> Baigell, "Jewish Paintings", 352.

from Matisse and Picasso, whose work at that time was influenced by African art. We do not know Weber's degree of concern for his community at the height of antisemitism in New York, but *Draped Head*, a close study of a Jewish subject in Cubist form and Fauvist color, implies that Weber's emotions were at fever pitch. Duncan Phillips writes of *Draped Head*: "a little masterpiece of tragedy. The tormented soul of a Race speaks through this portrait which carries on the Byzantine and El Greco traditions."<sup>36</sup>

Much like Rothko, Weber was not interested in becoming an assimilated American, choosing instead to express his unique existence through his art. It is likely that Rothko observed the development of *Draped Head* during his time at the League, a period in which Weber was embarking on a more objective and monumental style. In *Draped Head*, Weber's approach is nostalgic and haunting. Weber's image does not attempt to describe Jewish life in America, but rather, invoke the life of an individual content in their identity. Weber's mature style is fraught by a penetrating, poignant sentiment characteristic of his more intimate and personal compositions. The woman of *Draped Head* is a dematerialized, other-worldly being of religious sensibility placed within a confined interior. Yet, the ruminative figure seems to expand beyond the narrow surrounding space.

Rothko studied under Weber at the Arts Students League until May of 1926. Located on 57th Street between Broadway and 7th Avenue, the Arts Students League provided an alternative, American-style academy of art. "Organized on a sound democratic principle, being run for students and by students," details the 1925 catalogue, the Arts Students League "comes from the needs of those who compose it."<sup>37</sup> In class, Weber encouraged a new plastic approach, a

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<sup>36</sup> Passantino, Erika D., and David W. Scott. *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: a Collection in the Making*. New Haven, Conn., 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Breslin, "New Haven/New York", 60.

sense of construction that related art to music and literature: “painting was a kind of poetry.”<sup>38</sup>

Weber would circulate through the classroom to “talk to each student about his work, often painting over the student’s work.”<sup>39</sup> For the first time, Rothko did not bear his teeth at authority.

Instead, Rothko’s work of the late twenties and early thirties responds to Weber’s instruction in the rendering of thickly impastoed domestic and urban scenes that align with the emotional force of creation demonstrated by *Draped Head*: “Always it is expression before means, [...] Art is not mere representation, it is revelation, prophecy.”<sup>40</sup>

Alongside sporadic studies at the Arts Students League, Rothko attended the New School of Design, a small commercial art studio, and took a class in which Arshile Gorky served as the monitor. Similar to Rothko, Gorky was essentially self-taught as an artist, and obtained most of his education through visits to museums and galleries, embarking on a systematic study of the masters of the European Avant Garde.<sup>41</sup> Gorky stressed the importance of tradition and continuity, claiming that an artist can mature only after having experienced a period of apprenticeship. Rothko’s time at both the League and the New School of Design proved crucial to his development as an artist. Under Weber and Gorky, the artist realized that it was possible for him to be a painter, and furthermore, that he would need to clarify his ideas about painting in order to set him apart from his contemporaries.

While living in New York in the early thirties, Rothko established surrogate families: close friends who supported the artist’s new career and helped pacify the economic and emotional force of the Depression. Most influential to the development of Rothko’s earliest ideas

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<sup>38</sup> Breslin, “New Haven/New York”, 62.

<sup>39</sup> Breslin, “New Haven/New York”, 62.

<sup>40</sup> Breslin, “New Haven/New York”, 63.

<sup>41</sup> Millard, Charles W. “Arshile Gorky.” *The Hudson Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1982, 105–111.

regarding painting was Milton Avery, whose simplified forms and flat color areas greatly informed the artist's corpus. Born in 1885, Milton Avery was nearly old enough to be Rothko's father. "Questioning, looking for an anchor", Rothko was initiated into the Avery coterie with Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman.<sup>42</sup> The group would meet at their mentor's apartment on West 72nd Street for sketching classes and poetry readings: "This instruction, the example, the nearness in the flesh of this marvelous man, [...] I shall never forget."<sup>43</sup> Soon after joining the group, "Rothko was at the house every night."<sup>44</sup>

Avery developed a unique relationship with European modernity, not by studying the geometry of Picasso, but the colors of Matisse. Avery simplified landscape and human figuration into flat areas of opaque color, yet retained identifiable subjects: "They should express a more or less abstract idea, largely of an aesthetic nature."<sup>45</sup> In *Steeplechase* (fig. 2) from 1929, Avery presents a slice of Coney Island. Sunbathers, families, tourists, and a rifle range populate the foreground. In the background, a tall wooden roller-coaster with a large sign advertising the park rises above a carousel dotted with bright lights. Avery employs tones of deep gray and blue for both the sky and the beach to render an overcast day. Avery's brushwork, thin layers of pigment rubbed onto the canvas with a stiff brush, produces a modified texture.<sup>46</sup> In *Steeplechase*, Avery deviates from realism to focus on aesthetic design. The human figures are not proportionate, perspective is skewed, and shapes are flat. However, the composition achieves a sense of spatial

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<sup>42</sup> Breslin, James E. B. "Chapter Four: Starting Out in the Depression" *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 94.

<sup>43</sup> Breslin, "Starting Out", 93.

<sup>44</sup> Breslin, "Starting Out", 91.

<sup>45</sup> Breslin, "Starting Out", 95.

<sup>46</sup> Metropolitan Museum Of Art. *Notable Acquisitions: 1984-1985*. Metropolitan Museum Of Art, 2012.

depth through the arrangement of elements along receding horizontal layers: “The canvas must be completely organized through the perfect arrangement of form, line, color and space.”<sup>47</sup>

Avery’s emphasis on aesthetic design and simplified treatment of color and space provided an artistic anchor for Rothko. We can look closely at an untitled watercolor (fig. 3) from the early thirties to pinpoint stylistic attributes that Rothko borrowed from Avery in the creation of both his watercolor and Color Field compositions. In this first untitled watercolor, Rothko presents four human figures on the beach. Much like Avery’s *Steeplechase*, a limited palette of a dark gray and blue suggests an overcast day. The figures’ clothing is also dark, save the light blue dress of the woman in the foreground. While the woman in the blue dress rests on her stomach, two rear figures, perhaps a man and a woman, rest on their elbows and sit facing the water, right arms extended toward the top right corner of the canvas. These three adults form a single shape. Yet, in spite of their physical intimacy, Rothko’s actors remain emotionally distant-- a hallmark of Rothko’s city scenes of the thirties. A rectangular area of sand dominates the pictorial plane. This space becomes a ground upon which narrow bands of gray and brown accumulate and much like the Color Fields, these rectangles are incapable of containing the figures. It is clear that Rothko’s mature works, though produced long after his friendship with Avery ended, owe much of their floating forms and expressive use of color to Avery. Gentleness and silence, leading qualities of the Color Fields, were buried deep within the amateur Rothko by Milton Avery.

In 1929, Rothko began teaching art to children at the Center Academy in Brooklyn, a progressive Yeshiva attached to the Jewish Center. The job permitted summers off, and in the

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<sup>47</sup> Breslin, “Starting Out”, 96.

summer of 1933, Rothko and his first wife Edith embarked on a series of low-budget vacations, camping intermittently while hitch-hiking across the country to visit Rothko's family. They arrived in Portland and pitched a tent in Washington Park, nestled in the hills above the city.<sup>48</sup> During this time, Rothko produced a number of watercolors *en plein air* that depict the natural landscape around Portland. Representative of this series is an untitled work (fig. 4) in which the artist assumes a vantage point in the hills south of Washington Park, looking across the Willamette Valley towards the rural eastern side of the river. For the first time since childhood, Rothko experimented with visually depicting monumental emptiness, an attribute that permeates the Color Fields: "Here, says the painter, is what my world is composed: a quantity of sky, a quantity of earth, and a quantity of animation."<sup>49</sup>

A far cry from the somber beach scene, in this untitled watercolor, Rothko presents a cheerful landscape. A long curved line in the foreground envelops trees and the edge of a steep hill. This bowl-like shape frames the monumental emptiness before the spectator. A tree on the right side of the canvas attracts the viewer's attention, top branches severed from the trunk. Rothko draws attention to the sensation of distance: a dock creates an arrow-like shape that juts out into the vantage point. Furthermore, Rothko emphasizes how far away the two hills are on the farthest shoreline. The plane of the valley floor is tilted upward, thus shortening the panoramic view. Rothko employs agitated horizontal brush strokes to depict the sky, leaving behind plenty of white canvas to show through. In the Portland watercolor, Rothko does not render particulars. The artist is primarily concerned with the treatment of luminosity as produced by feathery strokes that shine through thin washes of color. Here, Rothko calls upon Weber in

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<sup>48</sup> Breslin, "Starting Out", 86.

<sup>49</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "'Space in painting,' ca. 1954." *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 112.

romanticizing Cézanne. The artist avoids the severe and rugged aspects of nature to present a refined, untroubled landscape that expands outward. This untitled watercolor suggests that in his first attempt at a conventional landscape, Rothko was greatly interested in the treatment of light, a primary attribute of the Color Fields.

From the beginning of his career, Rothko was not intrigued by the sharply contoured details of a realistically rendered landscape, but instead, with what biographer James Breslin refers to as “adequate suggestion”, or a landscape’s expressive quality.<sup>50</sup> In both watercolors, Rothko draws attention to certain parts of the scene-- a pier, some trees in the distance-- but refuses to render particulars. Rothko’s untitled watercolors demonstrate the artist’s first attempts at the concept of suggestion. These early works share indisputable stylistic attributes with the Color Fields in the treatment of line and luminosity.

Rothko’s treatment of luminosity in the beach scene is comprised of somber, disembodied colors thinly applied to create a boundless space in which the familiar physical world is dematerialized. What remains most striking and expressive in the Portland watercolor are Rothko’s feathery strokes and subsequent luminosity that emit from thin washes of color. Much like the untitled watercolors, Rothko’s mature paintings reject any line that might define volume in exchange for a luminosity that seems to come from within the painting.

We can look closely at *Untitled* (fig. 5) from 1948 to observe this same treatment of line and luminosity. *Untitled* is comprised of a series of glowing, translucent, and soft-edged two-dimensional forms. Some of these geometric forms are circular, others rectangular, but all are impossible to identify as recognizable objects. However, the composition can be read as two

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<sup>50</sup> Breslin, “Starting Out”, 87.

red circular splotches in the center that hover above a horizontal red smear, the white above and below these red forms evoking a head of hair and a nose respectively. The yellow oval to the right, an ear. These forms generate a barrel-chested human figure reminiscent of Rothko's 1936 *Self Portrait*. It is unlikely that Rothko intended for *Untitled* to recall *Self Portrait*, as the artist consistently repudiated his own earlier works, but nonetheless, the composition serves to remind the viewer that the artist's corpus acts as a single entity comprised of its own unique internal connections.

Despite appearing to belong to different poles of artistic instinct, Rothko's early and late works share indisputable stylistic attributes. Much like the sunbathers of Rothko's beach scene watercolor, the color patches of *Untitled*-- white, yellow, blue, gray, red, and orange-- lack solidity, weight, and sharp definition. They appear to float just above the surface of the canvas. Similar to the Portland hills watercolor, the warm and glowing soft edges of these forms allow the space to expand outward to indeterminate boundaries. In the untitled watercolors and *Untitled*, Rothko's flat shapes cover, but being translucent, do not completely conceal the ground beneath. Colors glow through, slip around the edges, or appear as ghostly shapes. *Untitled* recalls the artist's early watercolors in the rejection of mimesis. Rothko is not seeking a recognizable image, but desires luminosity.

Rothko's early ideas concerning painting were inspired by Weber's representation of inner spirit, Gorky's unique set of color preferences, and Avery's simplified treatment of space. Most notably however, Rothko's treatment of line and luminosity in the Color Fields predates the artist's mature style and is distinguishable in the watercolors of the late twenties and early thirties. Rothko retained the concepts he absorbed at the Arts Students League and the New



School of Design and his training at these institutions, guided by Weber, Gorky, and Avery, led the artist to the vernacular of the Color Fields. The language of Rothko's late style, developed when he was nearly sixty and demonstrated by *Untitled*, is a product of the artist's conscious evaluation of abstract expressionism and the logistics of producing his own stylistic private property. In spite of its formal modernization, the conception of the Color Fields is deeply rooted in Rothko's premature ideas regarding painting.

*Chapter Three: New York Subway Scenes*

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Under the patronage of Robert Godsoe, art critic and gallery owner, Rothko became acquainted with a selection of artists at the Uptown Gallery, a group of vagabond painters who in 1935, formed The Ten.<sup>51</sup> In actuality, the group was comprised of nine individuals, the tenth spot serving as a rotating position. The group included Ben-Zion, Ilya Bolotowsky, Adolph Gottlieb, Louis Harris, Yankel Kufeld, Louis Schanker, Nahum Tschacbasov, Mark Rothko, and Joseph Solman, all nine members being Jewish.<sup>52</sup> The Ten established the first generation of Jewish painters in America to actively revolt against the aristocracy of the Whitney Museum of American Art and its loyalty to American regionalist painting.

In November of 1938, the collective published a set of theses for a show titled “The Ten: Whitney Dissenters” that ran concurrently with the Whitney Biennial, just two doors down from the Mercury Galleries. In the statement, The Ten defines themselves by combatting the dominion granted to Regionalist artists by the Whitney:

“As a group they are homogeneous in their consistent opposition to conservatism, in their capacity to see objects and events as though for the first time, free from the accretions of habit and divorced from the conventions of a thousand years of painting. They are heterogeneous in their diverse intellectual and emotional interpretations of the environment.”<sup>53</sup>

The polemic, written by Rothko as secretary for The Ten, continues: “the public is beginning to recognize an ‘American Art’ that is determined by non-aesthetic standards-- geographical, ethnical, moral or narrative-- depending upon the various lexicographers who

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<sup>51</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Four: Starting Out in the Depression”. *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Breslin, “Starting Out”, 101.

<sup>53</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “The Ten: Whitney Dissenters, 1938”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 16.

bestow the term.”<sup>54</sup> To Rothko, the Whitney signified economic and social privilege and an authority who declared the limits of the art world, subsisting as a “curiously restricted chauvinism which condemns the occasional influence of the cubist and abstractionist innovators.”<sup>55</sup>

In an article covering The Whitney Dissenters exhibition, reporter Jeannette Lowe marks Rothko’s *Conversation* (fig. 1) as “an example of what the group states it stands for in the preface to the catalog [...] freshly seen and painted with spontaneity and emotional power.”<sup>56</sup> Now titled *Untitled (Two Women at Window)* at the National Gallery of Art, the composition, painted at the time of Rothko’s appointment under the Works Progress Administration, presents two figures of muddy gray flesh, faces flat and masklike. The women, three-quarter length portraits, are framed by an open window. Rothko does not present his female figures as seductive or voluptuous, but much like the mother of *The Rothkowitz Family*, as imposing and bulky, composed of thick, heavy lines without much detail or modeling. These women are physically gargantuan, yet abstracted, at once oppressed by their restricted space and oppressive.

The set of theses published by The Whitney Dissenters concludes: “The title of this exhibition is designed to call attention to a significant section of art being produced in America.”

<sup>57</sup> The Ten, although a collective strength and active presence in the art arena, eventually succumbed to the demands of individuality in the development of modernism and suffered an organic split.

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<sup>54</sup> Rothko, “The Ten: Whitney Dissenters”, 16-17.

<sup>55</sup> Rothko, “The Ten: Whitney Dissenters”, 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> Lowe, Jeannette. “‘Whitney Dissenters’ Hold Their Own Exhibition.” *The Art News*, 12 Nov. 1938.

<sup>57</sup> Rothko, “The Ten: Whitney Dissenters”, 16-17.

In June of 1936, Mark Rothko, alongside Milton Avery, Willem de Kooning, and Arshile Gorky, became one of the five hundred artists invited to apply for a grant from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) under the Treasury Department, a federal government agency that employed musicians, artists, and writers to carry out public works projects, including the decoration of public buildings and the management of arts, media, and literacy projects. Rothko was appointed at \$95.44/month for fifteen hours of work a week.<sup>58</sup> To collect his paycheck, Rothko was required to submit an oil painting every four to six weeks for allocation to public buildings. Unlike the muralists who were expected to produce traditional American scenes, Rothko enjoyed working without supervision in his own studio where he could strongly oppose any inclusion of political themes into his art: “We must follow the logic of art; and if history did not anticipate it, it is history which must change. History is not demonstrated by pictures, nor should pictures be demonstrated by history.”<sup>59</sup>

The concurrent collapse of the art market diminished any rivalry among painters and helped establish solidarity among New York artists. However, Milton Avery lamented that the WPA supervisors were often disagreeable while conducting evaluations of his studio: “Oil work submitted very poor. Artist’s reputation suggest that his work is better than examples submitted would indicate.”<sup>60</sup> For Rothko, however, the program provided defense against the economic crisis of the thirties and served as “a Godsend to so many artists who really needed help.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Five: Working for the WPA”. *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 120.

<sup>59</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “‘Scribble Book,’ ca. 1934.” *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 4–13.

<sup>60</sup> Breslin, “WPA”, 121.

<sup>61</sup> Breslin, “WPA”, 122.

Throughout the thirties, Rothko produced a number of chilling subway scenes in which the artist encapsulates the dehumanizing aspects of urban existence: stifling air, faded surroundings, and the subdued behavior it demands of its inhabitants. In *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)*, Giacometti-like figures fuse with doorways, windows, and pillars. *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)* emphasize the individual. The artist does not lament a collective suffering of urban life, but accentuates the psychological drama of the individual who exists within the confined space. In *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)*, Rothko explores a few artistic means that rail against the limitations of the painterly conventions of the time period: a primal treatment of figuration that interferes with the viewer's typical understanding of humanity in a social context, and the stripping down of detail in order to establish an abstract space.

*Subway Scene* (fig. 2), “one of the few canvases he ever brought out of the racks when visitors asked to see his early work,”<sup>62</sup> presents the Nostrand Avenue stop on the IRT/New Lots line of the New York subway, the station at which Rothko's commute from Manhattan to the Brooklyn Jewish Center terminated.<sup>63</sup> In this work, Rothko's primary interest is the platform of the station, a modern, public space where strangers rub shoulders as they go about their business in silent passivity. Rothko does not present the station as a grimy, underground space filled with noisy, jostling crowds of volcanic energy. Rather, *Subway Scene*, much like the artist's beach scene watercolor, suggests gentleness and quiet. In the center of the composition, a brown sliver of a figure ascends the stairs to the street while another figure concurrently descends. In the rear of the composition, one wide-shouldered figure in gray approaches the turnstile while another

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<sup>62</sup> Breslin, “WPA”, 127.

<sup>63</sup> Breslin, “WPA”, 127.

approaches the change booth. These figures, thin splotches of color, remain flat and anonymous, faceless beings held within a grid of vertical and horizontal rectangles. These geometric planes are established by the entrance/exit, cement floor, steel posts, ceiling beams, and blue iron bars that obstruct the spectator's view. The ceiling of the station is low and the floor is slightly tilted upward as if to slide the back walls forward toward the viewer. In *Subway Scene*, Rothko stresses movement, placing the viewer within a space where strangers enter, leave, go up, and go down, yet all within a space that remains severely compressed.

Rothko's distorted spatial relationships are further exploited in *Street Scene* (fig. 3). Here, Rothko's primary interest is the divide between public life and private life as delineated by a sharply defined line. This line separates the edge of a public building from a black backdrop that envelops a group of human figures. The classical architecture of this building is contrasted by the gray space to the right. Here again, Rothko recalls his early watercolors in that the actors of his composition-- commuters, businessmen-- form a single triangular shape. Yet, in spite of their physical intimacy, Rothko's figures remain emotionally distant from one another, still strangers independently going about their daily routines. Much like *Subway Scene*, these figures are anonymous urbanites, seemingly immobilized by the geometric planes that encase them, one being the facade of the public building, perspective skewed as it is seen both frontally and from an angle. Rothko's grid is further established by a set of semicircular concrete stairs which commuters descend to the sidewalk. *Street Scene* suggests Rothko's mature style in the dissolution of physical objects to communicate emotion through colored spaces. While *Subway Scene* integrates the public and the private in an communal space of ceaseless movement, *Street Scene* severs the two.

In *Untitled (Subway)* (fig. 4), Rothko's figures are elongated and attenuated, as if the posts of the subway platforms lengthen them into a series of vertical compartments. This composition presents a collection of tall, spindly, stick-like figures, commuters who are stiff and inexpressive. Much like *Street Scene*, in *Untitled (Subway)*, Rothko's palette investigates the communicative power of color alongside a refusal to subscribe to the illusion of perspective:

“Once color is out of the paint can, it is seen in the world of human action in relation to the time and the event of the day and the eyes for whom the time and events occur. In other words, my colors are not colors that are laboratory tools which is isolated from all accidentals and impurities so that they have a specified identity or purity.”<sup>64</sup>

In the works of the thirties, Rothko refers explicitly to restricted space and tightly contained domestic existence. In order to address Rothko's treatment of space, it is critical to link the subway scenes of the thirties to the writings that accompany them. What survives of Rothko's unpublished writing is “The Scribble Book”, a collection of notes regarding the pedagogy of children's art. The text declares Rothko's ideas pertaining to color, design, movement, and scale: “The scale conception involves the relationship of objects to their surroundings-- the emphasis of things or space.”<sup>65</sup> These technical sections remain fairly sparse and preliminary, as if Rothko's knowledge would later fill in the gaps with an abundance of detail. “The Scribble Book” offers insight on whether or not Rothko himself recognized his distinctive treatment of space in *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)*.

In “The Scribble Book”, Rothko refers to freedom paradoxically: “Can manifest itself through tightness as well as exuberance, thru fixation on detail as well as large massed areas.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Notecards, ca. 1950-1960”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 143.

<sup>65</sup> Rothko, “Scribble Book”, 10.

<sup>66</sup> Rothko, “Scribble Book”, 11.

Here, Rothko refers to the two poles of his career: *Self Portrait*, in which vigorous brushwork details a set of pouting red lips and a receding hairline, and the Color Fields, in which layers of sheer pigment form obscure shapes. *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)* occupy the middle ground between these two eras, demonstrating both figuration and a degradation of form. According to the artist, movement is best expressed through a limited space, such as the platforms and sidewalks of *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)*: “A limited space and limited objects are more likely to express action and a communicable experience of movement.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, Rothko warns of the “mistaken notion that physical vigor implies action. It implies nothing but that the person who practices it wields the brush vigorously.”<sup>68</sup> *Subway Scene* satisfies Rothko’s own statement regarding movement in that the artist stresses action through the directional gestures of the figures, yet all within a space that remains severely compressed. The space of *Subway Scene* is limited in the low ceiling and obstructed view, while the “objects”, or the commuters, are limited in that they remain featureless. Meanwhile, *Street Scene* satisfies Rothko’s section on balance: “The right number of inhibitions or suppressions to provide the leaven, just the right disturbance of equilibrium, to imbue that excitement, that right exhalation of spirit which demonstrates the difference between dynamic organism and static machination.”<sup>69</sup> *Street Scene* satisfies this statement in that perspective is modified: the public building is oriented to be seen both frontally and at an angle, and the sidewalk is tilted slightly upward. These choices by the artist disturb any sense of realism and demonstrate Rothko’s preferred approach to dynamism and immobility. While the public building of *Street Scene* stands unyielding to the conditions of urban life, its passersby retain a sense of energy.

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<sup>67</sup> Rothko, “Scribble Book”, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Rothko, “Scribble Book”, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Rothko, “Scribble Book”, 11.



Rothko clarifies his ideas pertaining to treatment of space years later in his cryptic manuscript *The Artist's Reality*, a collection of raw essays estimated to have been written between 1940 and 1941: "If one understands, or if one has the sensibility to live in, the particular kind of space to which a painting is committed, then he has obtained the most comprehensive statement of the artist's attitude toward reality. Space, therefore, is the chief plastic manifestation of the artist's conception of reality."<sup>70</sup> On this philosophical basis, Rothko crowns treatment of space as the key to the meaning of the painting. In a statement titled "Space in Painting", written four years following the inauguration of his mature style, Rothko offers a collection of analogies in order to explain his treatment of depth: "an experience of penetration into layers of things more and more distant"-- a straightforward enough approach to establishing perspective.<sup>71</sup> In *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko recommends "the removal of veils" to relinquish "our dependence upon the sensations of things being closer and farther for the purpose of establishing a real relationship,"-- effectively debunking the former statement.<sup>72</sup> In writing to Katharine Kuh, art consultant, curator, critic, and friend, in July of 1954, Rothko pleads:

"If, for example, I were to undertake the discussion of 'space' I would first have to disabuse the word from its current meanings in books on art, astrology, atomicism, and multidimensionality; and then I would have to redefine and distort it beyond all recognition in order to attain a common meeting ground for discussion. That is a dangerous and futile battle. The strategy may be brilliant but the soldier is dead."<sup>73</sup>

Form and space are the defining elements of *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)*. Space is so distorted in these compositions that it is hard to tell the actual size of the

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<sup>70</sup> Mark Rothko et al., "Space", *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 58.

<sup>71</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "'Space in painting' ca. 1954." *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 112.

<sup>72</sup> Rothko, "Space in painting", 112.

<sup>73</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "Letter to Katharine Kuh, July 28, 1954.." *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 92.

figures in relation to their environment. Rothko's actors seem to nearly disappear into each other, or into the tiled walls of the underground subway. Rothko's treatment of space in *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)* is perhaps the area of greatest formal similarity with the Color Fields. Rothko's loosely formulated and often conflicting convictions regarding space as detailed in "The Scribble Book" come to a head in *Blue, Green, and Brown* (fig. 5) in which Rothko's treatment of structure, seemingly indistinguishable from color, establishes a layered depth that augments the vertical architecture of the composition. Variations in saturation elicit a shallow space. In *Blue, Green, and Brown*, conventional recession into depth, as well as weight and gravity, have been eliminated. Yet, although recession into depth has been eradicated, *Blue, Green, and Brown* is by no means flat or two-dimensional. In *Blue, Green, and Brown*, Rothko's rectangular fields shift along an axis, appearing to fade into one another. In this regard, color is the primary carrier of space. The space implied in *Blue, Green, and Brown* evokes the sensation of physical imminence in the spectator, as if the canvas fluctuates towards and away from the viewer.

*Blue, Green, and Brown* displays a corresponding treatment of space as *Subway Scene*, *Street Scene*, and *Untitled (Subway)* in the impression of impingement. While the rectangles of the Color Field move along an axis melding into one another, the tiled walls of *Subway Scene* lean forward, the commuters of *Street Scene* fuse into a single triangular shape, and the spindly figures of *Untitled (Subway)* become one with doorways, windows, and pillars. All four compositions degrade form, or reject precise detail to imply movement in space.

In the late thirties, Rothko could not in practical terms have imagined himself as an abstract expressionist. At the time, Rothko was not only fighting the demands of the

marketplace, but also his own style, still seeking the expressive means that would lead him to his mature format. This period of questioning would strengthen his work in the long run, but Rothko could not have perceived that in 1935. He was still working in a climate of expectation in which the value of realist art was alive. It would not be until the Multiforms of the late forties, compositions that eliminate all references to the furnishings of the present, that Mark Rothko would truly become a modern painter. Ironically, on a pictorial level, Rothko's liberation would require the abandonment of figuration in exchange for generalized architectural elements that dominate both these early works and the Color Fields.

### Chapter Four: Mythmaking

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“Obviously, plasticity is a virtue which is considered desirable in every painting,”<sup>74</sup> writes Mark Rothko in his manuscript *The Artist’s Reality*, a collection of raw essays estimated to have been written during an interruption in Rothko’s career from approximately 1940 to 1941. *The Artist’s Reality*, discovered in a folder labeled “Miscellaneous Papers” two decades following Rothko’s suicide, details the painter’s understanding of the societal perception of the artist, emotionalism, plasticity, and subject matter: “For, while the authority of the doctor or plumber is never questioned, everyone deems himself a good judge and as adequate arbiter of what a work of art should be and how it should be done.”<sup>75</sup> In *The Artist’s Reality*, Rothko, being neither a philosopher nor an art historian, presents a series of arguments that often lack reason and coherency, his tone often coming across as vexed or resentful.

*The Artist’s Reality* offers little insight into the trajectory of Rothko’s career and the artist certainly would not have wanted a guide to his work, suggesting instead that the spectator “take a journey within the realm of the canvas... move with the artist’s shapes in and out, entering into mysterious recesses. [...] Without taking the journey, the spectator has really missed the essential experience of the picture.”<sup>76</sup> Much like “The Scribble Book”, *The Artist’s Reality* offers a glimpse into Rothko’s worldview in considerable, if unresolved detail.

In the chapter titled “Plasticity”, Rothko affirms that plasticity pertains to the weight, perceivable space, and tangible texture of a piece, regardless if it is of the modern taste or one of

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<sup>74</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “Plasticity.” *Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “The Artist’s Dilemma” *Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Rothko, “Plasticity”, 47.

Dutch-painterly reverence: “Academic painters, on the whole, will deny that modern paintings achieve any sense of plasticity in their use of space. [...] Both groups of painters are interested in the sense of existence which a painting achieves.”<sup>77</sup> In this regard, Rothko affirms that achieved plasticity requires the conception of reality, “a convincing sense of existence.”<sup>78</sup> The artist must employ plastic means to express their notion of reality, or their understanding of contemporary ideas. In the early forties, at the height of German invasion in Dvinsk, while living thousands of miles away in a metropolis clouded by the same war, Rothko employed his own notions of plasticity to place himself in the context of the contemporary art scene.

In April of 1940, under pressure from the Hoover administration, Mark Rothko, alongside seventeen other members, resigned from the American Artists’ Congress following an investigation of political dissent by the FBI. Less than two years before the Soviet Union countered Nazi Germany in World War II, and following a series of ultimatums and failed negotiations, the Soviet Red Army launched an invasion of Finland in hopes of securing sixteen miles along the Karelian Isthmus to create a buffer zone around the city of Leningrad.<sup>79</sup> Finnish troops were ultimately no match for the sheer immensity of the Red Army and in February of 1940, following one of the largest artillery bombardments since World War I, the Soviets defeated Finnish defenses. The Russian invasion of Finland in November of 1939 produced a political crisis within the American Artists’ Congress that eventually broke the group’s left-liberal alliance. The leftists of the group had originally ignored the Russian-Finnish War, while the liberal half of the group demanded that they make clear whether or not their group was

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<sup>77</sup> Rothko, “Plasticity”, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Rothko, “Plasticity”, 49.

<sup>79</sup> Toivonen, Timo. “War and Equality: The Social Background of the Victims of the Finnish Winter War.” *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1998, 471–482.

a “remnant of the cultural front of the Communist Party or an independent artists’ organization.”

<sup>80</sup> The political divide effectively destroyed the American Artists’ Congress.

By mid-June of 1940, many of the liberals, including Rothko, who had resigned from the American Artists’ Congress established a new group “to promote the welfare of free progressive artists working in America,” that is, foster political and economic stability for artists “who felt the repercussions” of a shaken world “as though they were only yards away.”<sup>81</sup> An immediate hurdle for the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors was how to sever art from politics all the while illustrating the historical repercussions of World War II. However, Federation bulletin “No Blackout for Art”, produced by founders Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, Meyer Shapiro, and Mark Rothko, suggests the converse: “True modern art is vigorously alive and has the same great future as democracy.”<sup>82</sup> The Federation’s loosely formulated and often conflicting convictions called for individualism, an identity that was native, but not regionalist. Throughout the forties, the Federation attempted to maintain neutrality, however, following Pearl Harbor and the Siege of Leningrad, the Federation could more precisely repudiate Regionalism than uphold its own mission of assuredly furthering the “mutual interests” of its members: “We bear in mind the noble privilege to create art as art instead of practicing a pictorial form of storytelling with aesthetic concept.”<sup>83</sup>

Despite the organic split of The Ten, Rothko would continue to work in a collaborative venture with Adolph Gottlieb, both expressionists in painting and liberals in politics. The two had grown close in June of 1938 when Rothko assumed the role of a sympathetic colleague after

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<sup>80</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Six: All-Out War”. *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 154.

<sup>81</sup> Breslin, “All-Out War”, 155.

<sup>82</sup> Breslin, “All-Out War”, 158.

<sup>83</sup> Breslin, “All-Out War”, 157.

Gottlieb had shown his new work to The Ten and received only negative feedback. Both Rothko and Gottlieb recognized a halt in American painting, but felt challenged, and perhaps even liberated by the circumstance: “the situation was very desperate and everything seemed hopeless and we had nothing to lose.”<sup>84</sup>

In June of 1943, Rothko and Gottlieb collaborated with Newman in writing to art critic Edward Alden Jewell following the reporter’s critique of *The Syrian Bull* and *The Rape of Persephone*. Jewell consequently published the letter in the *New York Times* on June 13, 1943 under headline: “The Realm of Art: A New Platform and ‘Globalism’ Pops Into View”, at once presenting the artists’ response, but also mockingly dubbing the Federation’s aesthetic and concluding the article in “confessed befuddlement” over both the text and noted paintings.<sup>85</sup> Jewell reports: “You will have to make of Marcus Rothko's *The Syrian Bull* what you can; nor is this department prepared to shed the slightest enlightenment when it comes to Adolph Gottlieb’s *Rape of Persephone*.”<sup>86</sup>

In drafts of the letter, Rothko and Gottlieb assume an objective tone: “In naming my picture *The Syrian Bull*, I was helping the onlooker by naming an association with the art of the past, [...] I am therefore neither the first nor the last painter of our day who will continue to reveal new aspects of these timeless myths.”<sup>87</sup> In the final draft of the letter, Rothko and Gottlieb emerge ardently dogmatic: “No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. [...] There is no such

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<sup>84</sup> Breslin, “All-Out War”, 163.

<sup>85</sup> Clearwater, Bonnie. “Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to The New York Times.” *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1984, 23–25.

<sup>86</sup> Clearwater, “Shared Myths”, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Manuscript drafts of a letter to the editor by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, 1943”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 31.

thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless.”<sup>88</sup> In the published letter, Rothko and Gottlieb share the artistic aims that inform *The Syrian Bull* and *The Rape of Persephone*:

“*The Rape of Persephone* is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications, [...] *The Syrian Bull*, a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. [...] It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way-- not his way.”<sup>89</sup>

The early drafts of the letter, though assertive, are civil, whereas the language of the published statement is more averse. Rothko and Gottlieb seek a primal means of expression that at once escapes explanation and defense: “We consider them clear statements. Your failure to dismiss or disparage them is a *prima facie* evidence that they carry some communicative power.”

<sup>90</sup> The *New York Times* letter serves to detail the mission of Rothko’s experiments in mythmaking. Much like the frozen, symbolic moments of *The Rothkowitz Family* or *Street Scene*, in *The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle*, Rothko seeks to reduce a narrative to its core moment.

*The Syrian Bull* (fig. 1) references the obscure myth of Mithra, Persian god of celestial light whose mystery religion was practiced in the Roman Empire between the first and fourth centuries. Mithraism honors the legend that by slaying a bull, Mithra created the world. Traditional iconography of Mithra survive primarily in reliefs such as the *Double-sided Mithraic Relief* on view at the Louvre. In this amphiglyph, the deity sits astride a bull, left hand grasping the beast by the mouth, right hand plunging a dagger into the bull’s shoulder. The other side of the relief presents Mithra sharing a banquet with the god Sol.

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<sup>88</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Rothko and Gottlieb’s letter to the editor”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 36.

<sup>89</sup> Rothko, Lopez-Remiro, “Letter to the editor”, 36.

<sup>90</sup> Rothko, Lopez-Remiro, “Letter to the editor”, 35.



In *The Syrian Bull*, Rothko transforms the image of the savage bull into a flat, thinly painted yellow shape that floats above a pale pink ground, black hooves and eight spindly legs hovering just above the earth. To the right, a yellow bulbous form begins to separate from the bull's torso and drifts upward. To the left, a yellow disc teeters atop a yellow cone, perhaps serving as the tip of the bull's tail. Adjacent, a yellow rectangle contains the schematic remains of the rib cage and spine of the beast. Mithra, appearing as a bird, sits atop the bull, folds of the deity's cape transformed into a mass of feathered wings. The god's face is obscured by what appears to be a splintering brown board. Beast's rib cage is exposed, yet deity's visage concealed, the composition at once violently unveils and shrouds the legend. To the left, two red geometric shapes are joined by two blue chevrons. Below, the bird's claw plunges into the yellow body. Set within a conventional earth and sky division, Rothko's abstract forms of *The Syrian Bull* signal a swift departure from the shallow, confined space of *Subway Scene*. Rothko's actors, as explicated in manuscript "The Romantics Were Prompted", "have no direct association with any particular visible experience, but in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms," and stand within a sunlit, pulpous environment, no longer geometric, but organic.<sup>91</sup>

*The Omen of the Eagle* (fig. 2) references the Agamemnon Trilogy of Aeschylus: "The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth [...] It involves a pantheism in which man, bird, beast and tree merge into a single tragic idea."<sup>92</sup> The title of the work alludes to a chorus of *Agamemnon* in which an omen of two eagles devouring a hare foretell an eventual Greek victory over Troy following the abduction of Helen: "They [had come

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<sup>91</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "'The romantics were prompted,' 1947". *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 59.

<sup>92</sup> Breslin, "All-Out War", 166.

down from the air and] were roosting in a most visible space, for all to see. And they were devouring a rabbit that was bursting with the vitality of offspring ready to be born.”<sup>93</sup>

Compositionally, *The Omen of the Eagle* is split into four horizontal tiers. The top tier is comprised of a row of yellow faces, right and left edges presenting two sets of kissing faces reminiscent of Constantin Brancusi’s *The Kiss*, a plaster that had been exhibited at the 1913 Armory Show. Pasted between the bookend lovers, a defeated face, a sleepy face, a gratified face, and an angry face provide multiple views of the same sculptural visage. The row of heads sits above two fleshy pear-shaped forms, perhaps the heads of two eagles, one in profile, the other in three-quarter view, grimly standing within what appears to be either an exposed rib cage or a set of highly stylized feathered wings. In this regard, Rothko’s eagles can be read as either primal scavengers picking at the corpse of another animal, or monumental creatures flaunting their natural form. Rothko’s archaic figures dominate the canvas. The two eagles pose atop a collection bulbous forms that are at once architectural and organic, at once inviting and obstructing the spectator from entering the scene. In *The Omen of the Eagle*, Rothko forcibly merges predator and victim into one tragic figure that embodies the intrinsic conflict of the scene: the expression of instinctual aggression (as illustrated by the *Agamemnon* eagle’s assault on the hare.)

*The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle* were painted in the two years following an interruption in Rothko’s career from 1940 to 1941, a period in which the artist wrestled with contemporary ideas concerning sensuality, impressionism, and primitivism in his manuscript *The Artist’s Reality*. In chapters titled “The Myth” and “The Attempted Myth of Today”, Rothko

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<sup>93</sup> Aeschylus. “Agamemnon.” Edited by Gregory Crane and Graeme Bird. Translated by Herbert Weir Smyth, *Center for Hellenic Studies: Harvard University*, [chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5295](https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5295).

offers surprisingly precise, if premature, exposition of his subsequent paintings, *The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle*, all the while refusing to reference these works directly: “In a sense, the whole artistic process since the Renaissance can be described as a nostalgic yearning for a myth and a search for new symbols that will enable art to symbolize again the utmost fullness of reality.”<sup>94</sup> Rothko certainly applied this conception of mythmaking in the creation of *The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle*: “...subject matter referable not to the anecdote but rather to the abstractions of forms and sensations, [...] We have a basic duality in art: one must choose between the representation of objective and subjective reality.”<sup>95</sup>

In *The Artist's Reality*, Rothko discusses the role of plasticity in mythmaking: “The presence of mythical subject matter in a painting is always coexistent with tactile plasticity.”<sup>96</sup> According to Rothko, if achieved plasticity requires a degree of believability through perceivable weight, space, and texture, then the artist must employ plastic means to depict their individual notion of existence in presenting a mythological subject matter. Rothko warns: “We find artists who have employed anecdotes that supposedly relate to social generalization by means of the plastic language evolved by these subjective arts, namely expressionism and surrealism. Their failure here to achieve their purposes is due to their failure to recognize the organic and indivisible character of subject matter and the plastic elements.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, the artist must unite subject matter and plastic elements in portraying mythological subjects: “If our titles recall

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<sup>94</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “The Myth”. *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 96.

<sup>95</sup> Rothko, “The Myth”, 96-97.

<sup>96</sup> Rothko, “The Myth”, 97.

<sup>97</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “The Attempted Myth of Today”. *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 103.

the known myths of antiquity, we have used them again because they are eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas.”<sup>98</sup>

The top horizontal rows of *The Omen of the Eagle* form a single vertical rectangle that anticipates Rothko’s mature format, demonstrated in this chapter by *Light Red Over Black* (fig. 3). As is suggested by the work’s title, the composition consists of two large black rectangles enclosed within a scarlet border. Rothko’s uniform application of red paint contrasts with the blurred rectangles it surrounds. These areas of black paint were sparsely applied and blended with blue pigment, creating pulsating, hazy forms that give the canvas a sense of movement and depth. In *Light Red Over Black*, Rothko pairs two black regions, the top painted more densely than the bottom, to allow the red field below to bleed through. Consequently, the top block appears to recede in depth and expand at its sides, whereas the bottom block projects forward. The diffused top and bottom periphery of the bottom black rectangle demonstrates Rothko’s treatment of atmospheric effect: “Here, then, we have an exploitation of human feelings through the representation of expression and the heightened effect of these through the discovery of atmospheric light.”<sup>99</sup> Here, Rothko explores the interplay between light and depth, creating the impression of moving planes and recession.

Instead of freeing his rectangles to undulate back and forth, *The Omen of the Eagle* arrests these architectural forms and secures them on a pedestal comprised of twisted human feet, animal claws, and a cloven hoof. In this regard, *The Omen of the Eagle* recalls the subway scenes of the thirties in that the artist’s actors are locked into their environment.

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<sup>98</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “‘The Portrait and the Modern Artist’ by Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, October 13, 1943. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 39.

<sup>99</sup> Rothko, “The Myth”, 101.

“But these easy program notes can help only the simple-minded,” writes Rothko and Gottlieb in response to art critic Jewell.<sup>100</sup> They continue: “We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.”<sup>101</sup> In this regard, in the practice of mythmaking, Rothko and Gottlieb align themselves closely with Surrealism and the modern abstract tradition born from Cubism. In writing to Jewell, Rothko and Gottlieb reform the critic’s attack on their work into an occasion for promotion of theory: “If our work embodies these beliefs, it must insult anyone who is spiritually attuned to interior decoration; pictures for the home; pictures for over the mantle.”<sup>102</sup>

In the ten years between 1939 and 1949, Rothko altered his style slowly and cautiously. In October of 1942, Peggy Guggenheim’s reputable Art of This Century Gallery opened at 30 West 57th Street in Manhattan, the mission of which was to financially support the American Red Cross “during a time when people are fighting for their lives.”<sup>103</sup> United States navy, army, and marine planes were bombing Japanese troop concentrations, Hitler had issued the Commando Order stating that any allied commandos encountered by German forces should be killed immediately without trial, while along the coast of England, German planes bombed villages. Art of This Century appeared as a war-time gallery that blended the upheaval of artistic expression in Paris in the twenties and individual experimentation of twentieth century art. In a program titled *Art in New York* on Radio WNYC on October 13, 1943, Rothko and Gottlieb explain the aesthetic principles that align with the mission of Art of This Century:

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<sup>100</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Seven: ‘Globalism’ Pops Into View”. *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 193.

<sup>101</sup> Breslin, “Globalism”, 193.

<sup>102</sup> Breslin, “Globalism”, 194.

<sup>103</sup> Breslin, “Globalism”, 179.

“That these feelings are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact, and to us an art that glosses over or evades these feelings is superficial or meaningless. That is why we insist on subject matter, a subject matter that embraces these feelings and permits them to be expressed.”<sup>104</sup>

Within the gallery, Peggy Guggenheim’s collection of modern art was designed to demonstrate “impartiality between Surrealist and Abstract art,” yet in the first two years of Art of This Century, the collector primarily exhibited international Surrealists who were mostly French, anti-art, and politically left.<sup>105</sup> In response, the New York painters born from the Ten, the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors, and the like sought to replace Parisian vanguardism with American internationalism: “The surrealists have asserted their belief in subject matter but to us it is not enough to illustrate dreams.”<sup>106</sup> In the years following the opening of Art of This Century, Guggenheim granted one-man shows to younger American painters: “If, in the minds of painters like Rothko and Gottlieb, the American wedding of Surrealist and abstract art produced abstract expressionism, then Peggy Guggenheim was the rich Jewish aunt who paid for the reception.”<sup>107</sup>

*Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* (fig. 4), exhibited at Rothko’s own solo exhibit at Art of This Century, provides ample assessment of the artist’s experiments in mythmaking. Much like Rothko’s untitled watercolor beach scene, *Slow Swirl* is inhabited by isolated, meditative individuals. Set within a luminous beige atmosphere, two hourglass figures lazily float upward away from a brown sea and toward a rosy horizon. The green figure on the left, donning an angular cap and swirling necklace, appears less primal and more clearly defined than the figure

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<sup>104</sup> Rothko, López-Remiro, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist”, 40.

<sup>105</sup> Breslin, “Globalism”, 181.

<sup>106</sup> Rothko, López-Remiro, “The Portrait and the Modern Artist”, 40.

<sup>107</sup> Breslin, “Globalism”, 181.

on the right. To the left of the figure's necklace, one green curvilinear line echoes the contour of the supposed female's body before thinning out above what appears to be a bony paw. At the figure's waist, two thicker green lines curve in, then out, nearly severing the woman's body in two. A white, pink, black, and blue shape across the figure's breast resembles an inner organ reminiscent of the exposed rib cage of *The Syrian Bull*. Meanwhile, the figure on the right flaunts bulky shoulders, yet the rest of his form is less distinguished. Compared to his female counterpart, this figure's parts appear less securely attached to each other. Instead, he forms a loosely unified figure and more closely resembles a primal form of humanity.

The translucent figures of *Slow Swirl*, both of whom strongly resemble prehistoric animals, are perhaps too elusive to define as any sexual identity because throughout the composition, contour lines are broken and discontinuous, as if the figure's bodies are in the process of taking form, still merging with air and sea. In this regard, the artistic process demonstrated by Rothko's experiments in mythmaking is no longer about depicting the substantiality of a person-- say, *Self Portrait*-- in some arrested moment, but instead, is about establishing a field in which forms recede and expand within a luminous environment.

Following the creation of *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, it would be another six years before Rothko finally settled on his mature format of hazy rectangles that he would exploit for the remainder of his career. Viewed in hindsight, however, Rothko's mythmaking works from the forties demonstrate a continuous and coherent development, as though only once references to the physical, tangible world had been eliminated could Rothko truly become an abstract expressionist painter.

*Chapter Five: Private Property*

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Between 1947 and 1950, Mark Rothko, rather cautiously, entered a period of sustained and bold abstraction. In 1947, the artist made the crucial move toward melding the outlines of his foreground actors with the colored areas that stand behind them. The result, *Untitled* (fig. 1).

The era of the Multiforms began in late 1946 and concluded in 1949, bridging Rothko's biomorphic imagery of the forties and his mature format unveiled at the Betty Parsons Gallery in January of 1950. A critical issue in confronting the Multiforms is the extent to which the viewer's perception is influenced by the knowledge of the artist's entire career. In embarking on the Multiforms, did Rothko intend to eventually arrive at a new format, or is this a retrospective illusion? This section of my thesis will confront the Multiforms by the purpose they serve rather than the cause by which they arose. Rather than serving as a bridge between Rothko's surrealist works and his mature format, I argue that the Multiforms act as an interlude that relinquishes the figuration and descriptive titles of the forties without fully arriving at the formal abstraction of *No. 10*.

I do not find anything particularly "multiple" about the Multiforms in comparison to Rothko's earlier work. The Multiforms only appear so in contrast to the striking simplicity of the Color Fields. In this regard, it is unlikely that the term is the artist's own, as biographer Dore Ashton affirms, "I never heard Rothko refer to them that way."<sup>108</sup> *Untitled*, on view at the Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Art Museum, is comprised of a mass of evenly distributed swirling forms held within a rectangular frame. The composition involves a limited palette of black,

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<sup>108</sup> Cooper, Harry. "Rothko's Soup." *Mark Rothko: an Essential Reader*, by Alison de Lima Greene, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015, 32.



maroon, white, light blue, and pale yellow thin, matte paints applied in layers. Dr. Harry Cooper, curator of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Art, draws attention to two drips of white paint in the middle of the canvas. These, he explains, “testified to Rothko’s improvisational method-- not only his willingness to leave an accident in place but his decision to turn the canvas 180 degrees from the way in which he had painted.”<sup>109</sup> These drips destroy any sense of up or down in *Untitled* and justify the sensation that when viewing the work, the spectator may feel as though they are looking down onto the scene from an aerial perspective. *Untitled* serves as exemplary of the Multiforms in that the composition demonstrates Rothko’s preliminary experimentation in improvisation before embracing full abstraction.

To wrestle with the Multiforms is to resist retrospective vision. Rothko marked the pivotal creation of *Untitled* with “The Romantics Were Prompted”, a manifesto published in the winter of 1947, the first and only extended statement in which the artist refers directly to his own work and in which he aims to justify his abandonment of figuration: “I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.”<sup>110</sup> We can imagine Rothko’s actors as the layered splotches of black, maroon, white, light blue, and pale yellow in *Untitled*. Rothko details that these actors “begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they are seen to have the quantity and function which was intended.”<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Cooper, “Rothko’s Soup”, 34.

<sup>110</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “The Romantics Were Prompted, 1947”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 58.

<sup>111</sup> Rothko, López-Remiro, “The Romantics”, 58.

The semantics of “The Romantics Were Prompted” imply that a self-doubting Rothko is attempting to prepare his audience for his new works, the Multiforms: “I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breaching and stretching one’s arms again.”<sup>112</sup> Here, perhaps Rothko refers to his collection of disquieting subway scenes in which the artist explores the dehumanizing aspects of urban existence, growing to realize that “the presentation of this drama in the familiar world was never possible.”<sup>113</sup> For Rothko, the question of abstraction versus representation relies upon his ability to effectively communicate mysterious simplicity.

The title of a work lies at the heart of how the spectator views, understands, and interacts with it. There are nearly 150 late-career Rothko works that share the term *Untitled*.<sup>114</sup> As Rothko moved towards full abstraction, his paintings began to bear this name, and any that do not (say, *Homage to Matisse*), are exceedingly rare. Based on my studies of *The Artist’s Reality*, “The Scribble Book”, and “The Romantics Were Prompted”, texts in which the artist is deeply concerned with communicating with his viewer, I do not believe this choice to be random or the result of apathy. For example, in *The Artist’s Reality*, Rothko equates his work to an “essential process; one that is biological and inevitable.”<sup>115</sup> In “The Scribble Book”, Rothko declares his attempts at expressionism are “an attempt to recapture the freshness of childhood vision. They also supply a clue to parallel demonstrations in the works of the old masters.”<sup>116</sup> In “The Romantics Were Prompted”, Rothko explicitly references his own artistry: “The artist can

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<sup>112</sup> Rothko, López-Remiro, “The Romantics”, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Rothko, López-Remiro, “The Romantics”, 59.

<sup>114</sup> Rothko, Christopher. “Untitled.” *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, Yale University Press, 2018, 157.

<sup>115</sup> Mark Rothko et al., “Art as a Natural Biological Function”. *Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*, Yale University Press, 2004, 8.

<sup>116</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Scribble Book, ca. 1934”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 9.

abandon his plastic bankbook, just as he has abandoned other forms of security.”<sup>117</sup> Rothko’s attempts at finding a language to foster direct engagement with the viewer prove that the artist would never leave the matter of passively titling a work *Untitled* to chance.

In the progression from the Multiforms to the Color Fields, Rothko’s reluctance to title works transitioned into numbering, an equally generic and inexpressive method of designation. Christopher Rothko hypothesizes that, “If the number title had been of any importance, it would have traveled with the painting.”<sup>118</sup> Yet, “If a painting were exhibited a second time, it apparently needed to get back in line with all the works that had not been exhibited before and take a new number.”<sup>119</sup> In 1954, color titles appear per request by patron Sidney Janis in hopes that potential buyers would be able to remember and identify a work.<sup>120</sup> Although *Untitled* contradicts Rothko and Gottlieb’s 1946 statement, “There is no such thing as good painting about nothing,”<sup>121</sup> I argue that Rothko intentionally removed titles from his works following a realization that the labels of his mythmaking compositions of the forties placed a veil between the viewer and the painting. *The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle* explicitly announce their frames of reference and offer the viewer a key to enter the world of the painting, yet this is a bounded experience. I hypothesize that Rothko discovered that narrative cues and specific references to time and place limit the viewer’s interaction with the painting.

The aesthetic difference between the Multiforms and the Color Fields lies in Mark Rothko’s degeneration into geometrical subtraction. Between 1947 and 1950, the Multiforms

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<sup>117</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “The Romantics Were Prompted, 1947”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 58.

<sup>118</sup> Rothko, “Untitled.” 159.

<sup>119</sup> Rothko, “Untitled.” 159.

<sup>120</sup> Rothko, “Untitled.” 159.

<sup>121</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. “Rothko and Gottlieb’s letter to the editor”. *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 36.

marked a shift to a more purified color abstraction, generally more geometric and improvisational in character than the Color Fields which exhibit an increasingly regular, horizontal layering of forms.

While studying abroad in Paris in the spring of 2018, I returned to Centre Georges Pompidou on several occasions to stand before *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)* (fig. 2). My encounters with this work always began at the end of a distant line of sight. Over the course of my long approach, the composition, looming large over the wall it independently occupies, would suddenly reveal its intimate and provoking surface. *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)*, deep red background with a commanding black rectangle hovering above a muddied red block, is composed of the strokes of a broad, square brush that was still capable of a delicate touch. While some Color Fields suggest a sense of vulnerability in their flux between expansion and contraction as if in a state of becoming, *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)* defiantly proclaims itself. The black rectangle appears to belong to a world unto itself, opaque and hardly taking notice of the red rectangle below. My favorite discovery in *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)* was the way in which the transition between the rectangular fields is handled. The spectator can admire Rothko's hand in strokes of greater pressure that push the main colors into the ground plane located in the sliver between the two rectangles.

In his first year of the Color Fields, Rothko established a set of working procedures that he would exploit for the remainder of his career. Beginning with an unprimed canvas, Rothko would apply a layer of glue blended with powdered pigment, then laying a ground color by applying pigment around the periphery of the canvas so as to cover the margins of the painting, careful to allow the tip of the brush to flick over the surface so as to not cover the canvas too

thickly.<sup>122</sup> After 1950, Rothko's commitment to the rectangle was unwavering, making clear that the shape offered the artist tremendous flexibility and allowed for Rothko to express whatever he liked within its borders without distracting from the other formal elements of the composition. Christopher Rothko notes, "Whether we are conscious of it or not, the rectangle provides, roughly the shape of our field of vision. [...] Thus we can understand that Rothko chose the rectangle precisely because it defines space in the most natural and most absolute way."<sup>123</sup> However, "Rothko's rectangles are not 'stacked'", warns his son, lamenting that this term undermines the spirit and expressive means of his father's Color Fields.<sup>124</sup>

When faced with the issue of syntax in interpreting Rothko's Color Fields, it is critical to recognize that the concept of stacking is greatly antithetical to the artist's classic format and philosophies about art as detailed in *The Artist's Reality*, "The Scribble Book", and "The Romantics Were Prompted". The term alludes to a haphazard accumulation of hard-edged, foursquare parts and the antidote is investigation of form. Rothko meticulously crafts form in order to maximize expression. In using the term "stacked", the viewer misperceives Rothko's form-- the key to unlocking an authentic interaction with the work. I propose that the spectator observe the way in which Rothko's rectangles appear to levitate, as if a magnetic force works to push them apart. Rothko's rectangles float not just above each other, but also above the background, producing a perceivable sense of three-dimensionality.

On top of the ground plane, Rothko would build up layers of fields of color with glazes of powdered pigments and whole eggs diluted with turpentine, thinning his paints to near

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<sup>122</sup> Breslin, James E. B. "Chapter Eleven: Recognitions". *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 316.

<sup>123</sup> Rothko, Christopher. "The Quiet Dominance of Form." *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, Yale University Press, 2018, 56.

<sup>124</sup> Rothko, Christopher. "Stacked". *Mark Rothko: From the Inside Out*, Yale University Press, 2018, 112.

disintegration. Rothko, who had inaugurated his artistic career by applying dark paints thickly impastoed, now preferred thin washes of diaphanous color. “I’m not interested in color,” affirmed the artist in conversation with Gifford Phillips, founder of the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C, again making clear that form is the superior element.<sup>125</sup> Reading a Color Field as primarily concerned with color neglects both the intrinsic meaning of the artist’s corpus and how that meaning is produced.

In January of 2019, my mother and I visited The Rothko Room at The Phillips Collection, the first space dedicated explicitly to the artist and unlike the famed Rothko Chapel, the only project he experienced in person. The intimate space hosts four Rothko paintings: *Green and Maroon*, *Ochre and Red on Red*, *Green and Tangerine on Red*, and *Orange and Red on Red*, devoting one wall to each painting. Sitting on a wooden bench in the center of the room, I felt strangely intruded upon when other visitors drifted in and out of the space. Dim lights enhanced the resonance of the colors. I sat facing *Green and Maroon* (fig. 3) first, the composition that occupies the right wall of the room. This mid-fifties work is comprised of a blue border that surrounds a green rectangle and a maroon rectangle. The topmost bits of both rectangles are severed by the border while a sliver of white divides the two, appearing to me like a horizon line at daybreak. In *Green and Maroon*, Rothko’s palette is dimmed and appears more dense due to underlying shades of dark blue, red and gray. As a result, a somber stillness pervades the composition. I swiveled to face *Ochre and Red on Red* (fig. 4) and was met by a blazing yellow square, which in comparison to the darker red of its surroundings, appeared to surge out of the pictorial plane and into my space. My viewing experience of *Ochre and Red on Red* was entirely

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<sup>125</sup> Rothko, “The Quiet Dominance of Form.” 53.

contradictory to that of *Green and Maroon* due to an increased sensation of vivacity in Rothko's fiery palette. *Ochre and Red on Red* serves as exemplary of Rothko's highly emotional and fervent works of high-keyed pigments as manifested by bright yellow above red-orange against a deep, dark red background. I pivoted to face *Green and Tangerine on Red* (fig. 5). Composed of two massive rectangles, one forest green, the other bright orange, *Green and Tangerine on Red* "could symbolize the normal, happier side of living; and in proportion the dark, blue-green, rectangular measure above it could stand for the black clouds or worries that always hang over us."<sup>126</sup> This statement recalled by Marjorie Phillips alludes to opposing emotional states born from Rothko's meticulous color manipulations. I swiveled once more to *Orange and Red on Red* (fig. 6). Located on the rear wall, positioned to be seen just before a visitor exits the room, I considered this composition to serve as a resolution. Perhaps *Orange and Red on Red* settles the ensemble's concurrent tensions between sobriety and fervency. In writing about the installation of the Rothko Room, Phillips noted, "What we recall are not memories but old emotions disturbed or resolved—some sense of well being suddenly shadowed by a cloud-- yellow ochres strangely suffused with a drift of gray prevailing over an ambience of rose or the fire diminishing into a glow of embers, or the light when the night descends."<sup>127</sup>

When Rothko visited the Phillips Collection in January of 1961, he proposed a new arrangement for his paintings and requested a wooden bench be installed in the center of the room. However, whatever adaptations the artist did make to the placement of the panels, Duncan Phillips reversed.<sup>128</sup> Mark Rothko was greatly preoccupied with the multiple layers of the

<sup>126</sup> Auping, Michael. *Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth 110*. Third Millennium Publ., 2002.

<sup>127</sup> Cohen-Solal, Annie. "Years of Experimentation, Recognition, and Torment - The Second Anchoring in Britain: 1960-1964." *Mark Rothko: Toward the Light in the Chapel*, Yale University Press, 2015, 173.

<sup>128</sup> Kennicott, Philip. "Two Rooms, 14 Rothkos and a World of Difference." *The Washington Post*, 20 Jan. 2017.

viewing experience and longed to manipulate the encounter between the spectator and the work. Across installations, Rothko's increasing attempts to control the environment in which his works were shown can be seen as a means to invoke an experience of totality. Rothko's concern for hanging height, room size, lighting, and wall color expands my classification of the Color Fields beyond a technical investigation of the creation of the compositions to the issue of proto-installation art.

As designated by art historian, critic, and curator Briony Fer, the viewing experience begins with "the wall as the screen of the encounter."<sup>129</sup> Evidenced by the Rothko Room at the Phillips Collection, the artist preferred to crowd his paintings: "By saturating the room with the feeling of the work, the walls are defeated and the poignancy of each single work had for me become more visible."<sup>130</sup> However, I argue that *Green and Maroon*, *Ochre and Red on Red*, *Green and Tangerine on Red*, and *Orange and Red on Red* do not necessarily "defeat" the wall upon which they hang, but instead blend seamlessly due to the absence of a frame. The color at the periphery of the canvas-- whether steely blue, fiery red, muddy orange, or bright cheery-- melds with the muted gray of the walls.

The Rothko Room closes in on the viewer: "The first experience is to be within the picture."<sup>131</sup> In this regard, the large scale of the Color Fields evokes intimacy, not distance, as a result of the forced closeness to the work. Rothko preferred for his works to be hung low, not more than six inches above the floor so as to ensure that the lighting was evenly dispersed and that the paintings refrain from being "over-lit or romanticized by spots."<sup>132</sup> Ironically, according

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<sup>129</sup> Fer, Briony. "Rothko and Repetition." *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 164.

<sup>130</sup> Fer, "Rothko and Repetition.", 164.

<sup>131</sup> Crow, Thomas. "The Marginal Difference in Rothko's Abstraction" *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 26.

<sup>132</sup> Fer, "Rothko and Repetition." 164.



to Rothko, the ideal viewing experience should not take place in a museum environment, an atmosphere the artist believed posed a threat to the perception of his paintings:

“Since my pictures are large, colorful and unframed, and since museum walls are usually immense and formidable, there is the danger that the pictures relate themselves as decorative areas to the walls. This would be a distortion of their meaning, since the pictures are intimate and intense, and are the opposite of what is decorative; and have been painted in a scale of normal living rather than an institutional scale.”<sup>133</sup>

Mark Rothko’s last one-man show in New York during his lifetime was hosted by the Museum of Modern Art from January 18, 1961 to March 12, 1961. Peter Selz, curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the time, assembled and installed the show.

<sup>134</sup> In the months leading up to the exhibit, Selz selected fifty-four works by the artist, but primarily emphasized eleven 1958-1959 murals to be displayed for the first time to the general public. Highlighting the distinct simplification Rothko achieved in his late-career, Selz details in the show’s press release:

“Subject matter in the conventional sense had, as we know, been abandoned for some time. Now line and movement were also eliminated, texture is not important. Conventional recession into depth, as well as weight and gravity, has been eliminated, yet we cannot even speak of flatness when confronted with the surfaces which actually breathe and expand. Light has become an attribute of color. [...] Rothko's constant stripping-down of his pictures to their barest essentials, to a simplicity beyond complexity, is intrinsic to their being.”<sup>135</sup>

Incorporated in the 1961 show, *No. 16 (Red, Brown, and Black)* (fig. 7) establishes an atmospheric depth of shadowy, nocturnal hues of rich purples, maroons, and browns. At once lustrous and weighty, the composition reveals a nuanced mastery of the formal elements of painting: color, pictorial space, treatment of surface, and brushwork. Here, Rothko employs generous amounts of turpentine to create a hazy, matte surface. To soften the geometry of the

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<sup>133</sup> Elderfield, John. “Transformations.” *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 104.

<sup>134</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter One: Parnassus on 53rd Street.” *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 4.

<sup>135</sup> “Mark Rothko: January 18 - March 12, 1961.” *Moma.org*.

field, the artist maneuvered a small, turpentine-soaked cloth around the corners and edges of the rectangular forms to blur the contours.<sup>136</sup> The resulting degradation accentuates the perceptual effects of color, creating the illusion of depth on an otherwise flat surface.

Nearby, *Untitled* (fig. 8), an earlier surrealist composition, was displayed. The delicate watercolor presents a thin winding line that curves from the upper left corner down to lower right corner. Another narrow vertical line falls down the center of the canvas. Scroll-like marks cross repeated horizontal lines in the lower half of the drawing: a musical notation, the symbols of a staff and a clef. A large circular shape in the lower quadrant of the canvas creates the sound hole in the base of a musical instrument, perhaps a mandolin with a thin neck and strings.<sup>137</sup> Rothko draws attention to his selection and treatment of color, setting orange and blue forms against lightly washed abstract fields. The geometric shadow across the upper section of the composition suggests the rectangular slabs of the Color Fields to be established four years later.

Nearby, *No.5/No. 22* (fig. 9) was hung. This 1950 composition stands witness to a dramatic change in Rothko's artistic instinct: the abandonment the representation of the human form, or any other identifiable objects such as demonstrated by *Untitled*, in exchange for an identity, stylistic private property, a new language with which to grapple with the living spirit as an ever-changing organism. In *No.5/No. 22*, strong, gestural markings across the central red band consist of long, gently undulating lines formed by scraping the surface of the canvas before the paint had dried.<sup>138</sup> Dominating the focal point of the pictorial plane, these horizontal lines contrast sharply with the hazy, indeterminate edges of the rectangular elements of the painting.

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<sup>136</sup> Breslin, James E. B. "Chapter Eleven: Recognitions." *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 311-312.

<sup>137</sup> Selz, Peter. *Mark Rothko*. Published for the Museum of Modern Art by Arno Press, 1972.

<sup>138</sup> Andrea Pappas, "Mark Rothko, No. 5/No. 22," Object Narrative, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion*, 2014.

*No.5/No. 22* asserts an imposing vertical presence composed of colored horizontal blocks of yellow, gold, red, and orange. Consisting of just a few simple, geometric elements, it may have been easy for museum visitors at the time to dismiss the early Color Fields as static or merely decorative. And so the question arises: How is the spectator meant to look at and interact with these works?

The viewer is drawn first to the intense, glowing color of the central band of fiery red. The dominant position of the stripe lashes across the viewer's eyes. The rectangle appears secured or fastened, as if tied down to the canvas by Rothko's diligent horizontal markings. Yet, the space is also translucent. The viewer can step into the blazing rectangle, warmed by the embracing fields of gold above and below. Varying densities of paint transform these hues from golden to muddy yellow to deep orange. Looking closely at *No.5/No. 22*, the viewer enters a pictorial space in which the formal elements continuously shift, eluding the obligation to represent any external reality.

In an interview with William Seitz in 1952, Rothko stressed "Abstract art never interested me; I always painted realistically. My present paintings are realistic."<sup>139</sup> Rothko's mature format, as demonstrated by *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)*, *Green and Maroon*, *Green and Tangerine on Red*, *Ochre and Red on Red*, and *Orange and Red on Red* stands apart from his contemporaries in his treatment of the interplay between grand scale and fine detail. Yet, the simplicity of the Color Fields renders them fragile. On the most immediate level, they are nothing more than large rectangles of color on a colored background. Furthermore, color titles can be futile because a title that simply describes the colors presented in the painting suggests the

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<sup>139</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "Notes from an interview by William Seitz, January 22, 1952". *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 77.

level on which the viewer is meant to engage with the work. A color title provides a crutch that offers misleading counsel as to how to read the painting: as just a wash of colors. Rothko's Color Fields are far too ethereal, so dangerously close to empty, that any misdirection can impede the viewer's ability to interact with the work.

In the late forties, Rothko certainly imagined himself as an abstract painter. Yet, at the time, the artist was wrestling with the demands of a new style of expressive means. This period of solidifying his mature format strengthened his work in the years leading to his paramount commission, The Rothko Chapel.

*Chapter Six: The Rothko Chapel*

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Perhaps still wrestling to define the works selected for Rothko's last one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art, Curator Peter Selz simply states in the prologue of the exhibition catalogue: "Rothko paints large surfaces which prompt us to contemplate."<sup>140</sup> Later, in the museum's press release, Selz seems to find the means with which to describe these works:

"Silent paintings with their enormous, beautiful, opaque surfaces are mirrors, reflecting what the viewer brings with him. In this sense, they can even be said to deal directly with human emotions, desires, relationships, for they are mirrors of our fantasy and serve as echoes of our experience."<sup>141</sup>

Mark Rothko's last one-man show in New York presented paintings which were, in fact, related to man's scale and measure. But whereas in Renaissance painting, man was the measure of space, in Rothko's painting, space is the measure of man. This was and remains the essential nature of the viewer's response to a Rothko work: to contemplate a large surfaces without perception obstructed by the means of painting. It was difficult for an unprepared audience to comprehend Mark Rothko's departure into new, uncharted artistic instinct.

It was difficult for Rothko to surrender his paintings to MoMA. He postponed the event twice, then pulling and reinstalling six works two days before the show was to open.<sup>142</sup> Following the opening of the show on January 18th, Rothko visited nearly daily to observe the show and nervously calculate responses by visitors. He would hover anxiously, prepared to

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<sup>140</sup> Selz, *Mark Rothko*.

<sup>141</sup> "Mark Rothko: January 18 - March 12, 1961." *Moma.org*.

<sup>142</sup> Breslin, "Parnassus", 6.

convert anyone who dared appear skeptical: “He’d be looking for your approbation and he would be testing you at the same time, testing your loyalty to him and your sensitivity to his work.”<sup>143</sup>

Yet, it became clear that Rothko himself was his greatest cynic: “Everyone can see what a fraud I am.”<sup>144</sup> For the show, the artist had hand-selected a collection he believed to be the best of his life’s work. Now that these works had finally been revealed to the public and to his closest friends and family, Rothko found himself completely unveiled and exposed. When asked why the show had caused him so much grief, Rothko replied: “I want to prove to my family that it was a good thing that I became a painter.”<sup>145</sup>

The Museum of Modern Art show proved to be a crucial turning point in Rothko’s career. By the mid-sixties, Rothko was moving in two opposing directions, at once attracting power and prestige as a major figure in the New York art scene, all the while withdrawing from the glitter of the industry.<sup>146</sup> He grew uncharacteristically apathetic towards the placement of his paintings in the public eye and began to lose interest in easel painting. Instead, the artist sought permanent homes for groups of his paintings, as if preparing a future for his works in which he would no longer be present. Soon thereafter, all that mattered to Rothko were public commissions.

In 1965, Mark Rothko signed a \$250,000 contract with the de Menil family in Houston for the production of a set of murals.<sup>147</sup> The artist would dedicate the final years of his career to decorating the interior of a chapel in Texas.

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<sup>143</sup> Breslin, James E. B. “Chapter Sixteen: The Houston Chapel.” *Mark Rothko: A Biography*, University of Chicago Press, 1998, 471.

<sup>144</sup> Breslin, “Parnassus”, 6.

<sup>145</sup> Breslin, “Parnassus”, 6.

<sup>146</sup> Breslin, “Parnassus”, 6.

<sup>147</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 471.

Rothko's patrons for the chapel murals, John and Dominique de Menil, were French cosmopolitans, John born from a poor, military family, Dominique, a wealthy textile manufacturing family. Both received their Bachelor of Arts Degrees from the University of Paris, John's in political science and law, Dominique's in mathematics and physics. The scholars wed in 1931. World War II forced the couple to flee Paris for Houston where they began to collect art. Upon arriving in America, Dominique, having converted to Roman Catholicism, was placed under the mentorship of Father Marie-Alain Couturier, a Dominican priest and painter active in the movement to revive sacred art through reinterpretation by modern, living artists. Father Couturier introduced Dominique to European artist-refugees and the world of collecting. Forty years later, the de Menils possessed 10,000 objects: African tribal items, archaic Mediterranean art, modern European Surrealist work, and pieces by contemporary Americans.<sup>148</sup> Thanks to Father Couturier, Dominique would learn the vernacular that would appeal to Mark Rothko years later.

The de Menils did not fraternize well with Houston's conservative rich. The couple publicly supported progressive political causes and hosted shows for the Contemporary Arts Association, exhibiting Van Gogh, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, and Alexander Calder.<sup>149</sup> The de Menils soon took artistic command of Houston's small Catholic college, the University of St. Thomas, redesigning the urban planning of the campus and funding research for the art department: "It began to look more like de Menil University than St. Thomas."<sup>150</sup> The de Menils merged French culture, Texas wealth, and Roman Catholicism in the domination of the Houston

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<sup>148</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 460-462.

<sup>149</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 462.

<sup>150</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 462.

art scene, none of which would have appealed to Mark Rothko in the least. How then, did this “modern Medici” couple schmooze the reticent, guarded artist?<sup>151</sup>

First, the couple proposed a religious environment rather than a public institution. In this way, the private collectors assured the artist that they were philanthropists involved in progressive politics, not a corporation like Seagram. For Rothko, the Houston chapel would offer a suitable environment for his sacred objects to receive their proper recognition. The space would liberate Rothko from competing with rivals, from museum bureaucracy, and from the crowds of skeptics that so deeply disturbed him. The chapel severed any connection to the Upper East Side of New York City. Rothko admired that the collection demanded difficulty of access, a pilgrimage journey away from marketplace professionals. In this way, the work would attract ordinary, sympathetic, and committed viewers-- individuals Rothko believed to be the ideal audience for his paintings. Surprisingly, the artist was not disturbed that his paintings were to be hung in a Roman Catholic chapel. Ten years before the de Menils contacted Rothko, the artist had already been dreaming of establishing a series of intimate one-man museums across the country, resting places far from the large contemporary museums in New York for travelers to visit and find respite. Sealing the deal, the de Menils assured Rothko that he retained complete freedom in the project: “The magnitude, on every level of experience and meaning, of the task in which you have involved me, exceeds all of my preconceptions. And it is teaching me to extend myself beyond what I thought was possible for me. For this I thank you.”<sup>152</sup>

Rothko worked closely with architect Philip Johnson over the three years that the artist dedicated to the creation of the murals. In 1957, Johnson had created the master plan for the

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<sup>151</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 462.

<sup>152</sup> Helfenstein, Josef, et al. *Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique De Menil*. Yale University Press with the Menil Collection, 2010, 190.



University of St. Thomas, visualizing a series of low, modernist brick and steel buildings turned inward, backs to the city. In this way, the architect strove for a sense of community and cohesion reminiscent of the cloister of a monastery.<sup>153</sup> Johnson's first design for the Houston Chapel was ambitious: a square floor atop a platform, capped by a high, pyramid-shaped tower, apex pierced so as to admit light through an oculus. When the architect proposed the design to Rothko, he immediately retorted with concern over the lighting and believed the works should be displayed in an environment as close as possible to the one in which they were created: his 69th Street studio, a red brick building located amidst the upscale brownstones of New York's Upper East Side.<sup>154</sup> Believing his canvases to be attached to the place of their origin, Rothko wanted to model the Houston chapel based on the 69th Street studio, and not the other way around: "The paintings, he felt, should be seen in the same light in which they had been painted. His love for familiar surroundings was such that he wanted also to have the same cement floor."<sup>155</sup> The studio was a bit smaller than the chapel, but with a thirty-foot sloping wood-beam ceiling with a skylight at the center. The interior was sparsely furnished, only a few bookshelves, wooden chairs, thrift store sofas, racks for storing paintings, a bed, and a stereo inhabited the space.

For the Houston chapel, Rothko suggested to Johnson an octagonal floor in hopes of enclosing the viewer within his paintings: "He wanted a very simple envelope, [...] he did not want any stunts. He did not want anyone to feel that they would go to the Chapel because it was an architectural wonder."<sup>156</sup> Perhaps inspired by the formal elements he had observed in 1950 at the convent of the Church of San Marco, the artist demanded sourceless, evenly dispersed light

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<sup>153</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 464.

<sup>154</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 465.

<sup>155</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 468.

<sup>156</sup> Breslin, "Houston", 465.

to support the physical and social circumstances of the paintings as contemplative objects: “It would be Rothko’s task-- a task that he took very seriously and at which he labored for years-- to find a scheme for the chapel in Houston in which his works would form a whole, in which everything breathed together, and in which the light, as in Byzantine churches, would be at once trapped within and also free.”<sup>157</sup>

In October 1964, Johnson accepted Rothko’s proposals, but the two would dispute over the following three years until Johnson resigned in 1967 and the project was handed down to Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry who both readily adopted Rothko’s every suggestion.

Rothko required assistance in the creation of the chapel murals, his first monochromatic, nocturnal works. In the fall of 1964, William Scharf, close friend and fellow artist, prepared the 69th Street studio by constructing storage racks and a three-wall model of the chapel interior. Scharf assembled two pulley systems, one which would allow the artist to raise and lower the paintings, the other which would allow him to adjust the skylight in the center of the ceiling. Rothko and Scharf tackled the large surface areas of the murals together. One of the men would ascend a ladder while working rapidly on the top half of the canvas, the other maneuvered the ladder from below. Scharf apprenticed Rothko throughout that first year, until “he reached a point where he didn’t want another painter around.”<sup>158</sup>

Yet, Rothko had no choice. At sixty-two years old, he was incapable of independently hoisting his canvases on and off the walls and navigating the heavy paintings up and down using Scharf’s pulley system. When Scharf left the 69th Street studio, Rothko employed Roy Edwards and Ray Kelly, young scholars from the Arts Students League. Edwards and Rothko would

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<sup>157</sup> Ashton, Dore. “Rothko’s Frame of Mind” *Seeing Rothko*, by Glenn Phillips and Thomas E. Crow, Tate, 2007, 23.

<sup>158</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 469.

stretch unprimed cotton duck canvas across wooden stretchers one day, and adjust the tightness and remove any wrinkles the next. Then, the two would begin the long process of mixing paints, stirring boiled rabbit skin glue, plastic compound, and powdered pigments until the consistency was “very thin and watery.”<sup>159</sup> No longer capable of maneuvering a ladder, Rothko would place a stretched canvas on its side against one of the walls of the studio. The two scholars, armed with four to six inch house-painter brushes, would dip into buckets of thin maroon paint and begin applying from opposite ends. From behind, Rothko would shout commands: “You’re slowing down on your corner!” or “Pick up on this end!”<sup>160</sup>

Edwards and Kelly completed the grounds of the fourteen Houston Chapel panels, seven of which remain entirely monochromatic, signaling that Rothko’s hand did not touch the pure canvas in half of the chapel murals.<sup>161</sup> Of the remaining canvases, the two side-wall triptychs and the single rear-wall painting, Rothko created a straight-edged black rectangle running up the height of the canvas using masking tape, another sharp departure from the delicacy of his former hazy borders. Unlike the soft edges of earlier works, the Houston chapel panels evoke restricted movement. More inward turning, the drama of the chapel murals is meditative and develops slower than the bright color juxtapositions of the fifties Color Fields. Perhaps by the mid-sixties, Rothko no longer felt he needed to solicit the viewer and instead, allowed the viewer to come autonomously to the work.

When I visited the Rothko Chapel in January of 2019, I was joined by my mother and father. We traversed the small campus of the University of St. Thomas through a quiet neighborhood of brick homes and bungalows. Outside of the Rothko Chapel, we approached a

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<sup>159</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 472.

<sup>160</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 472.

<sup>161</sup> Breslin, “Houston”, 470.

reflecting pool and paused in front of Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* (fig. 1), twenty-five feet of six thousand pounds of steel. The sculpture's base is comprised of a pyramid with an inverted obelisk precariously balancing upon the tip. At first glance, the sculpture appears to defy the laws of physics, the meeting point connecting at just two inches. No historical relevance has been attributed to the structure, aside from its dedication Martin Luther King Jr. after his assassination: "It is concerned with life."<sup>162</sup> Much like the interior of the Rothko Chapel, *Broken Obelisk* is not strictly expressive, but evokes a silence that allows for a wider range of possible interpretation reliant upon the viewer.

We approached the windowless brick facade of the Rothko Chapel, a set of simple wooden doors ahead (fig. 2). Much like the inconspicuous entrances of ancient Zen gardens and tea houses, there are no steps, no portico, no columns to usher visitors inside the space. Unadorned, modest, geometric: a structure with seemingly no relation to the charming neighborhood outside. We entered through two large, heavy wooden doors, and stepped into a dimly lit, small foyer where an ununiformed guard sat at an information booth. We were asked only to sign in before entering the chapel from either the right or left entrance on either side of the foyer. We stepped through the door to the right into a small hallway lined on one side by a bench with a few books scattered across it: The Book of Mormon, The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an, The Holy Bible, The Torah, and The Tibetan Book of the Dead. I paused at the end of the hallway in the right entryway before stepping into the chapel.

I first noticed the octagonal skylight at the center of the ceiling. The skylight was shrouded by a thick canvas tent with a central octagonal hole. It was 11AM and the Texan sun

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<sup>162</sup> Polcari, Stephen. "Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk." *Art Journal*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1994, 48.

provided a concentrated light source beaming from this central opening that illuminated the space. The perimeter of the tent cast light upon the top third of each canvas, no lights installed into the floorboards to illuminate the canvases from below. Only natural light pervaded the chapel. I presumed the light would change depending on the time of day, year, and weather conditions. Perhaps on an overcast day, the dark panels would appear resolute and opaque, whereas on brighter days, the light would break up the black to reveal areas of varying opacity that simultaneously recede and push forward. In this space, nothing was fixed.

The stucco ceiling above absorbed the central light source to create countless miniscule shadows across its rusticated surface. The walls, a light gray. The floor, tiled cement. I soon noticed that sound echoed deeply in the space-- every footstep, every pull of a coat zipper, every scratch of pencil across paper infiltrated the atmosphere. Yet, the space was certainly less restricting than the tight interior of The Rothko Room at the Phillips Collection.

I took several steps into the chapel before pausing in front the apse. I was first struck by the octagonal space-- so encompassing, as if the walls should not be flat enough to hang paintings upon. Yet, the apse, distinguished by its recessed wall, gives the room a front and grants prominence to the large dark-maroon triptych ahead.

The three imposing canvases create a formal, symmetrical arrangement, the central panel lighter, the sides darker. This monochromatic triptych rejects any reference to an external reality, containing no borders that might be read as a gate, door, or window. Here, Rothko abandons any interaction or drama between rectangles of varying color, size, and weight. I stood below the three monumental, towering paintings.

I was first drawn to the triptych's central panel, slightly brighter and permeated by subtle nuances of tone. I recognized that the darker adjacent panels enhanced these attributes. However, the longer I sat before the triptych, the more the paintings seemed to shift, until the central panel darkened and merged with its neighbors. Soon, I struggled to separate the three panels. My attention drifted to the two neighboring canvases. At first glance, all four of the angle-wall paintings appear identical-- all monochromatic, all 11 feet by 15 feet. I approached the panel to the left of the triptych and observed the horizontal rows of undulating tones of deep purple, nearly Clyfford Still-like in jagged flashes of deep color. After some time, I found the means with which to describe these canvases: a nocturnal aerial view of pine trees.

I moved to the side wall triptychs. The central panels are raised and flanked by smaller side panels, as if in hierarchical order. The three panels are occupied by black rectangles contained within straight-edged maroon borders. I struggled with the side wall triptychs and found these pieces impenetrable. I spent some time moving back and forth between the two walls, aching for the borders to dissolve, to disintegrate into an earlier Rothko style I was familiar with. Instead, the straight edges and contours began to appear to me like architectural features that draw attention back to the strict octagonal space I was contained within.

Similarly, the single, rear vertical painting contains a straight-edged black rectangle against dark maroon. However, the dark maroon does not serve as a border, but instead, occupies the bottom fifth of the painting-- a solid obstruction resting approximately chest-high. Access, again, is made difficult. The panel, two and a half feet narrower than the angle-wall paintings, appears dramatically more vertical, as if the interior black rectangle has been compressed. While the three triptychs and four angle-wall paintings crowd their walls, the rear canvas demands

singularity, isolated on a wall about two times its width. For me, this panel, positioned to be seen just before a visitor leaves the chapel, serves as a resolution. Perhaps the rear-wall canvas settles the ensemble's concurrent tensions between restraint and dispersal, singularity and relation. From across the room, each painting as a whole appeared manageable, but each time I selected one to approach, it became oppressive, imposing, each an awesome presence that demanded a sympathetic viewer.

Rothko would not have wanted visitors to isolate each canvas and observe the piece as a self-contained object. Even when I stood inches from a one painting, I could always spot the adjacent in my peripheral vision. In this way, I realized it is critical to find relation within the collection rather than fixate on a single panel. Nor should the visitor remain isolated and stationary. I soon realized that viewing the fourteen paintings was a physical process, one that required experimenting with bodily movement so as to wrestle with the limitations of the space. I was forced to accept that I would always have my back to a work, and I would always be distracted by a nearby painting in my peripheral.

Between 11AM and 1PM, fifteen visitors inhabited the space. Those who arrived alone, secured a bench to themselves while families tended to sit together. Within the two hours, only five visitors stood up to approach the works to get a closer look. Most others gazed from afar and whispered to each other. A man in blue sat facing the rear painting and scrunched up his face, trying to make sense of it all while his wife circled the octagon like a bird of prey. An older woman in an orange vest closed her eyes and swayed side to side. A student, perhaps of the University of St. Thomas, inserted a pair of earbuds and did not shift his attention away from the front left canvas for nearly an hour. I realized that most of the visitors had pivoted their bodies to

face the apse, perhaps subconsciously taking cues from one another about which direction to turn, so no one was directly confronted, sitting face to face across the octagon.

Mark Rothko never visited the Houston Chapel, never installed the canvases, and never confronted the lighting conditions of the large, low, central skylight. Rothko would be dead nearly a year by the time the Chapel opened its doors on February 28, 1971 as an ecumenical space presided over by Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant religious officials. On the night of the opening, Dominique spoke before a crowd of Rothko enthusiasts:

“I am supposed to talk about the paintings by Mark Rothko, but I don’t think I can explain them. I don’t think what I say or anyone says is the last word. I think the paintings themselves will tell us what to think of them-- if we give them a chance. They will educate us to judge them.”<sup>163</sup>

The Rothko Chapel murals are particularly spiritual in that they renounce the world of material objects, of historical time and social turmoil: “And here again I wonder if it is not prophetic that Rothko should have left us the one message that can be totally accepted by everyone, believers as well as non believers: the sense of mystery.”<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Menil, “Inaugural Address”, 18-19.

<sup>164</sup> Menil, Dominique. “Address at the Opening of the Rothko Chapel”, *The Rothko Chapel: Writings on Art and the Threshold of the Divine*. Yale University Press, 2010, 22.



*Chapter Seven: The Reality of Things*

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*Untitled* (fig. 1) is classified by David Anfam's catalogue raisonné of Rothko's work as the penultimate painting of the artist's oeuvre.<sup>165</sup> Three inky green regions of color hover atop a groundwork of brilliant indigo. The green is separated by vivid blue horizon lines, bars of rich cerulean that concurrently surge forward and backward. The upper right corner of the composition is punctuated by a vertical drip stain freezing the moment in time at which Rothko painted the canvas. This drip records the history of the painting's making and saturates the work with a distinct sensation of temporality. A radiant dimensionality reminiscent of Caravaggio's virtuosity for rendering natural light in oil paint flickers through and around Rothko's planes of color. *Untitled* is a quintessential example of the deeply metaphysical experience that Rothko asked of his abstraction: a synchronously expansive, yet intimate theater of the sublime. The spectator must not purely *look* at this painting, but be actively engulfed in its waves.

Prior to the 1970 completion of *Untitled*, Rothko painted eighteen nearly identical compositions: two adjoining color zones of black on gray superstructure (fig. 2). This last cohesive body of paintings evokes a staggering sense of tragedy and serves as meditations on certitude and mortality. In these 1969 works, the dark always sits atop the light, as if a shade is being lowered in a window, as if these paintings mark the artist's final contemplation on humanity. What is most striking in this context is the artist's triumphant return to full color in the vibrancy of *Untitled*, as if the present work serves as an fervent song of praise to the painter's soul following a prolonged period of darkness.

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<sup>165</sup> Anfam, David. *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas: Catalogue Raisonné*, New Haven and London, 1998.

Guggenheim curator Diane Waldman confronts Rothko's last paintings as the ultimate realization of the painter's goals:

"No longer is his art earthbound, sensual, corporeal. He had attained a harmony, an equilibrium, a wholeness, in the Jungian sense, that enabled him to express universal truths in his breakthrough works, fusing the conscious and the unconscious, the finite and the infinite, the equivocal and the unequivocal, the sensuous and the spiritual. Now he had left behind all that spoke of the carnate, the concrete. He had reached the farther shore of art."<sup>166</sup>

The simplicity of the Color Fields renders them fragile. On the most immediate level, they are nothing more than large rectangles of color on a colored background. These works are far too ethereal, so dangerously close to empty, that any misdirection can impede the viewer's ability to interact with the work. Yet, I pray my thesis has made one thing clear: Mark Rothko's Color Fields were not a revolutionary departure from the art that came before. If we, as art historians, label the Color Fields as revolutionary, we only scratch the surface of a corpus of intricate, poignant canvases. When I first stood before a mature Rothko, I was instantly captivated. There seemed to be no rhyme or reason for my attraction to the Color Fields, but I was eager to get to the bottom of my encounter.

Mark Rothko's emancipation from figuration consists of a veiled consistency of style shared by works dating from the late twenties to 1970. Rothko's untitled watercolors led the artist to the vernacular of the Color Fields, and more specifically, to his desired treatment of line and luminosity. The city scenes of the thirties investigate treatment of form and space, and specifically, the effect of geometric planes to solidify the mode Rothko would exploit for the remainder of his career. In the forties, Rothko's experiments in mythmaking turned increasingly symbolic. Devoted to themes of prophecy and archaic ritual, Rothko's paintings of the forties are

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<sup>166</sup> Waldman, Diane. *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective*, Exh. Cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1978, p. 69.

characterized by a biomorphic style that lends itself to the Color Fields in the artist's appreciation of plasticity. Throughout the fifties and sixties, Rothko exploited his signature style of floating rectangles aligned vertically against a colored ground, suggesting in numerous variations of color and tone an astonishing range of atmospheres and moods.

Mark Rothko prized his career as one void of "a logical and ordered continuity, [...] in which one thing is solved and gives rise to the next."<sup>167</sup> In works like *Untitled*, the artist advocates for "making clear the obscure."<sup>168</sup> Yet, this is precisely the challenge in writing about Mark Rothko: his documentation is elusive and slippery. Rothko's mature style is unique in the sense that, although it stimulates multiple associations, it eludes any obligation to represent external reality. The artist limits his role as interpreter so that the viewer must independently communicate with the painting, uninfluenced by the representation of the outer visual world as viewed through the eyes of the artist.

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<sup>167</sup> López-Remiro, Miguel, editor. "Relation to one's own past, ca. 1954" *Writings on Art*, by Mark Rothko, Yale University Press, 2005, 111.

<sup>168</sup> Rothko, Mark. López-Remiro, Miguel. "'Space in painting' ca. 1954." *Writings on Art*, Yale University Press, 2006, 112.

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26. Waldman, Diane. *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970: A Retrospective*, Exh. Cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1978, p. 69.

*Images for Chapter One*

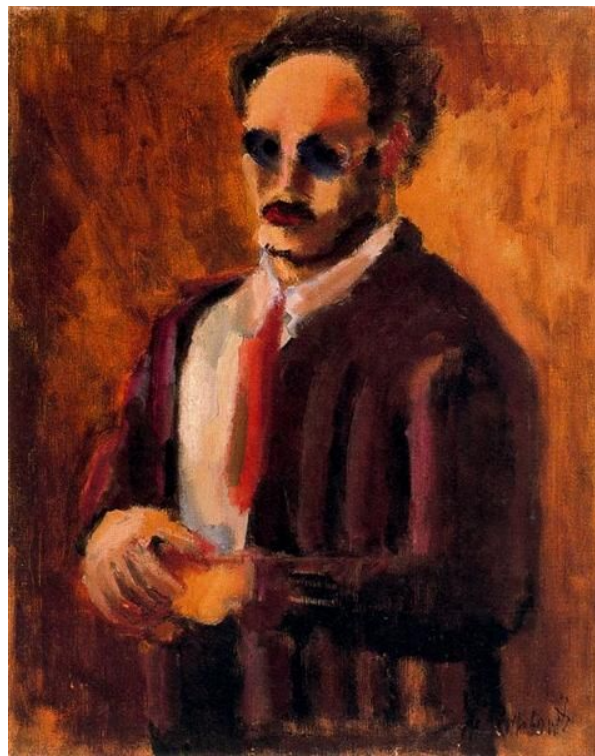
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1. Mark Rothko. *No. 10*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 7' 6 3/8" x 57 1/8". Museum of Modern Art, New York.



2. Mark Rothko, *The Rothkowitz Family*, c. 1936. Oil on canvas. 20 1/4" x 30 1/8". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

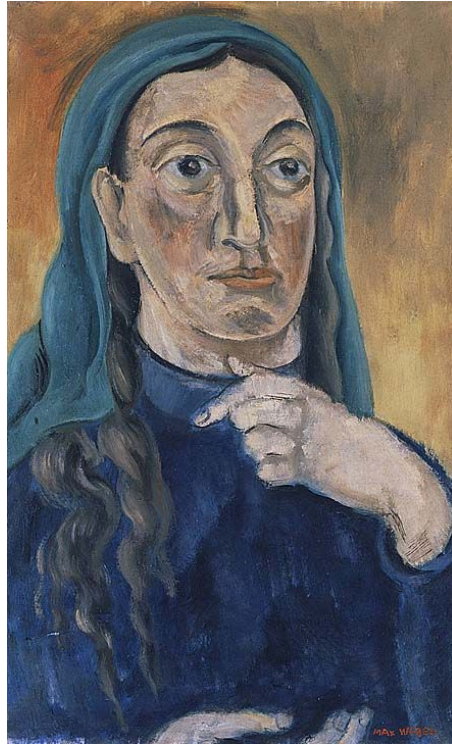


3. Mark Rothko, *Self-Portrait*, 1936. Oil on canvas. Rothko Estate.



*Images for Chapter Two*

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1. Max Weber, *Draped Head*, before 1923. Oil on canvas. 21 1/8" x 13 1/8". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



2. Milton Avery, *Steeplechase*, 1929. Oil on canvas. 32" x 40". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





3. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, late 1920s, early 1930s. Watercolor, brush and black ink, and graphite on wove paper. 15 3/16" x 22 1/2". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C



4. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, late 1920s, early 1930s. Watercolor and ink on paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

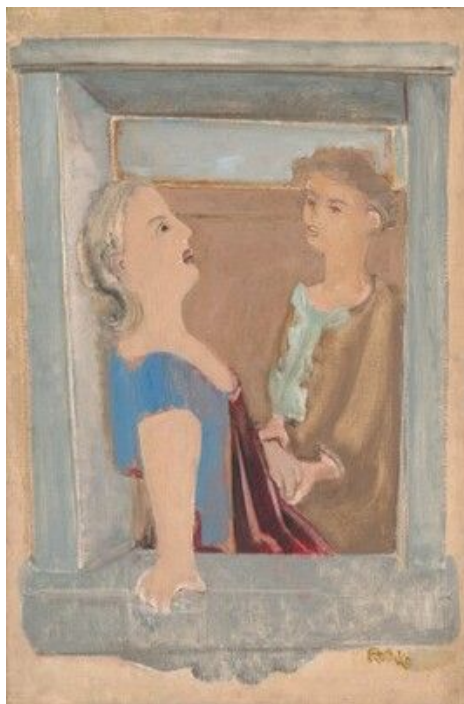


5. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1948. Oil on canvas. 60" × 49 4/5". Rothko Estate.

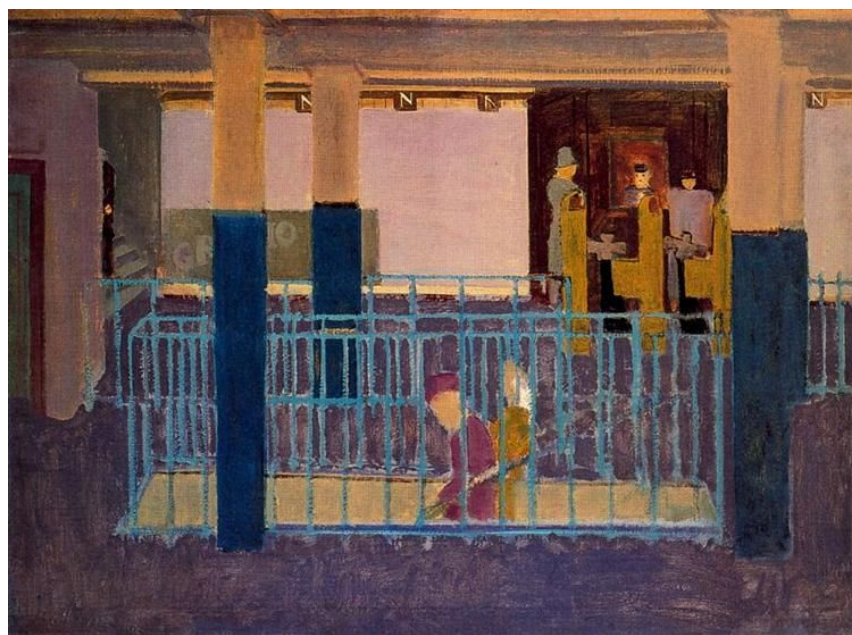


*Images for Chapter Three*

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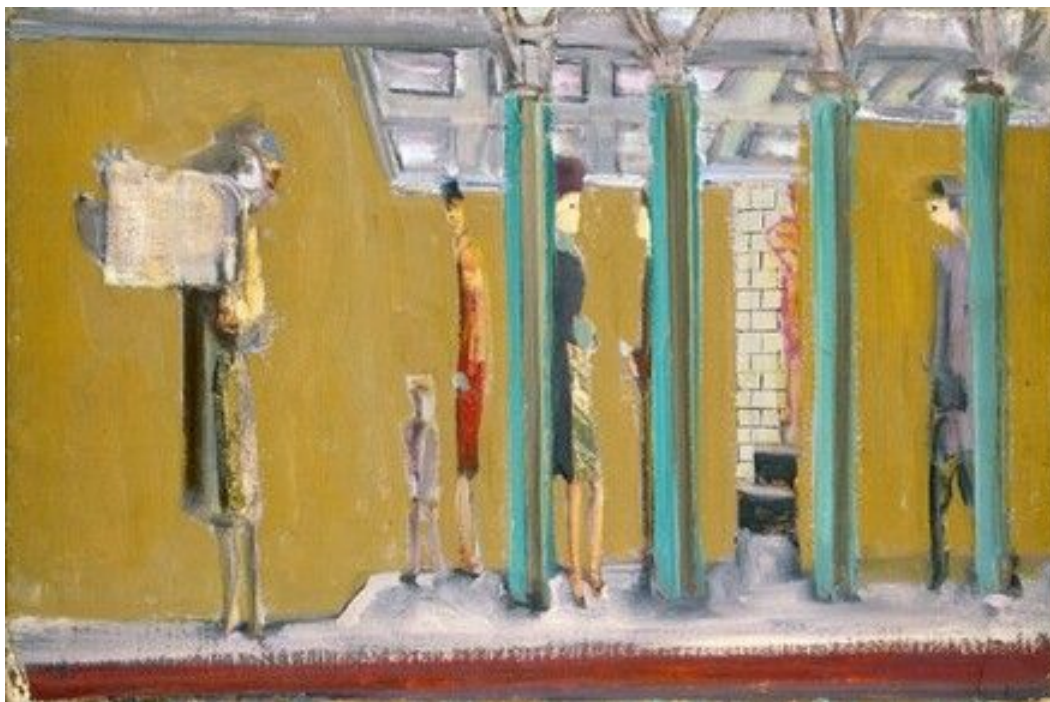
1. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Two Women at the Window)*, 1937. Oil on canvas. 36" x 24". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



2. Mark Rothko, *Subway Scene*, 1936. Oil on canvas. Rothko Estate.



3. Mark Rothko, *Street Scene*, 1937. Oil on canvas. 28 15/16" x 39 15/16". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



4. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Subway)*, 1937. Oil on canvas. 20 1/8" x 30". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



5. Mark Rothko, *Blue, Green, and Brown*, 1952 (alternatively dated to 1951). Oil on canvas.  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

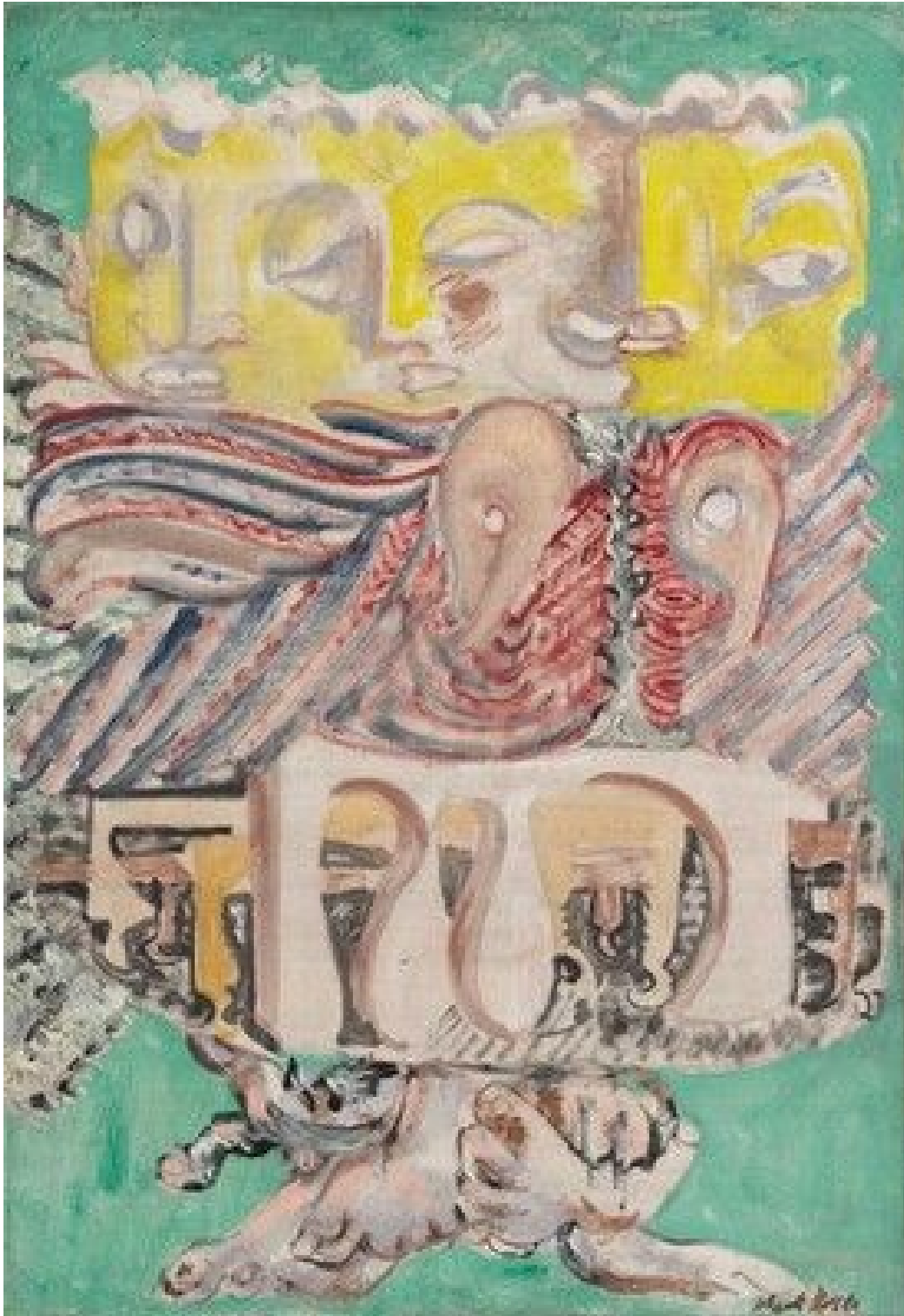


*Images for Chapter Four*

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1. Mark Rothko, *The Syrian Bull*, 1943. Oil and graphite on canvas. 39 3/8" x 27 7/8". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College.

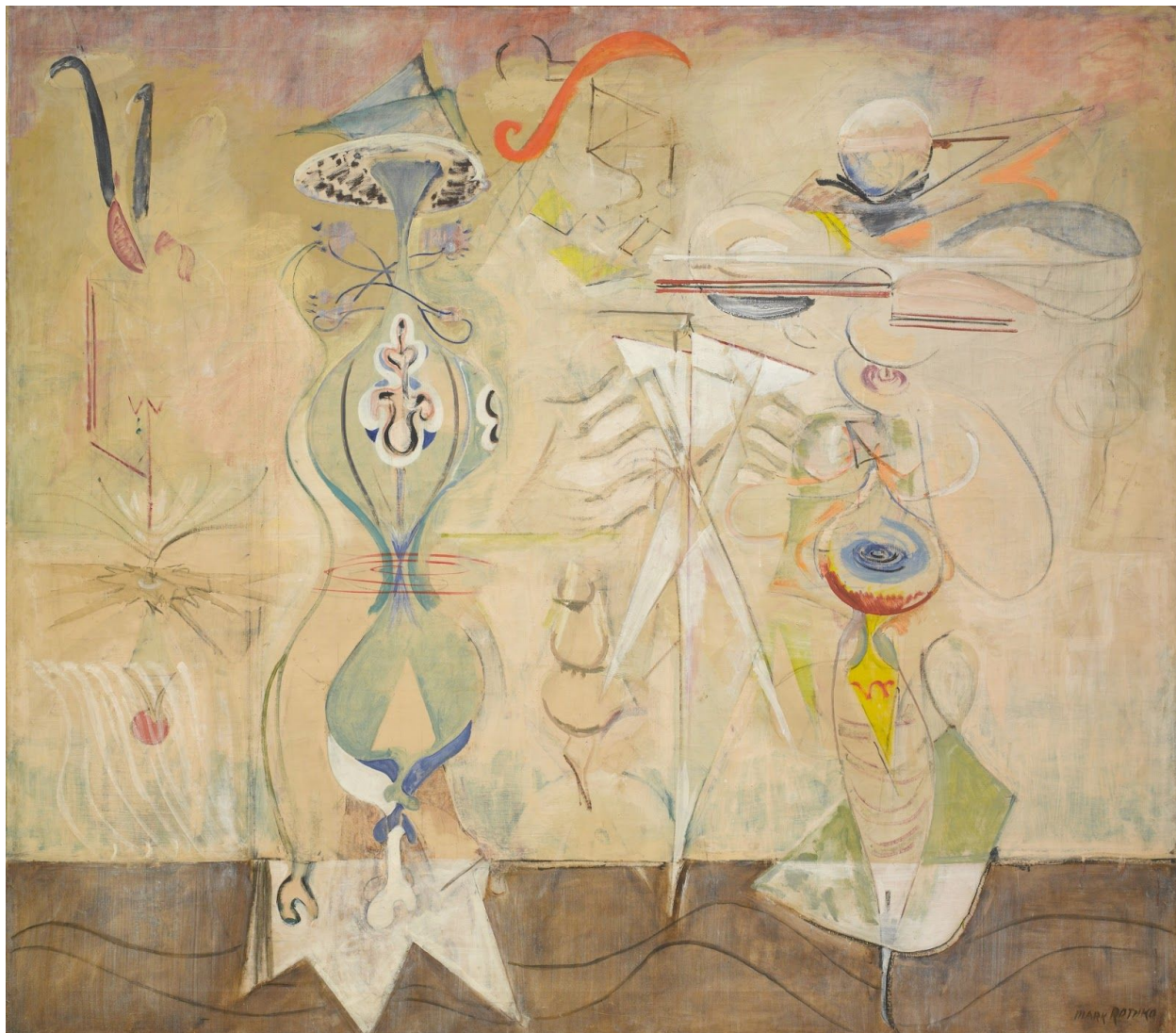


2. Mark Rothko, *The Omen of the Eagle*, 1942. Oil and graphite on canvas. 25 3/4" x 17 3/4".  
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



3. Mark Rothko, *Light Red Over Black*, 1957. Oil on canvas. 91 5/8" x 60 1/8". Tate Modern, London.





4. Mark Rothko, *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*, 1944. Oil on canvas. 6' 3 3/8" x 7' 3/4".  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.

*Images for Chapter Five*

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1. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1947. Oil on canvas. 41 3/4" x 36 3/4". Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.



2. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black, Red Over Black on Red)*, 1964. Oil on canvas. 80 7/10" x 75 49/50". Centre Pompidou, Paris.



3. Mark Rothko, *Green and Maroon*, 1953. Oil on canvas. 91 1/8" x 54 7/8". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



4. Mark Rothko, *Ochre and Red on Red*, 1954. Oil on canvas. 92 5/8" x 63 3/4". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.





5. Mark Rothko, *Green and Tangerine on Red*, 1956. Oil on canvas. 93 5/8" x 69 1/4". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



6. Mark Rothko, *Orange and Red on Red*, 1957. Oil on canvas. 68 7/8" x 66 3/8". The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



7. Mark Rothko, *No. 16 (Red, Brown, and Black)*, 1958. Oil on canvas. 8' 10 5/8" x 9' 9 1/4".  
Museum of Modern Art, New York.



8. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1944. Watercolor and ink on paper. 21" x 14". Tate Modern, London.



9. Mark Rothko, *No. 5/No. 22*, 1950. Oil on canvas. 9' 9" x 8' 11 1/8". Museum of Modern Art, New York.



*Images for Chapter Six*

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1. Hans Namuth, *Mark Rothko in his 69th Street Studio with Rothko Chapel Murals*, 1964. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona (1991). Hans Namuth Estate (1998). Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society, New York.



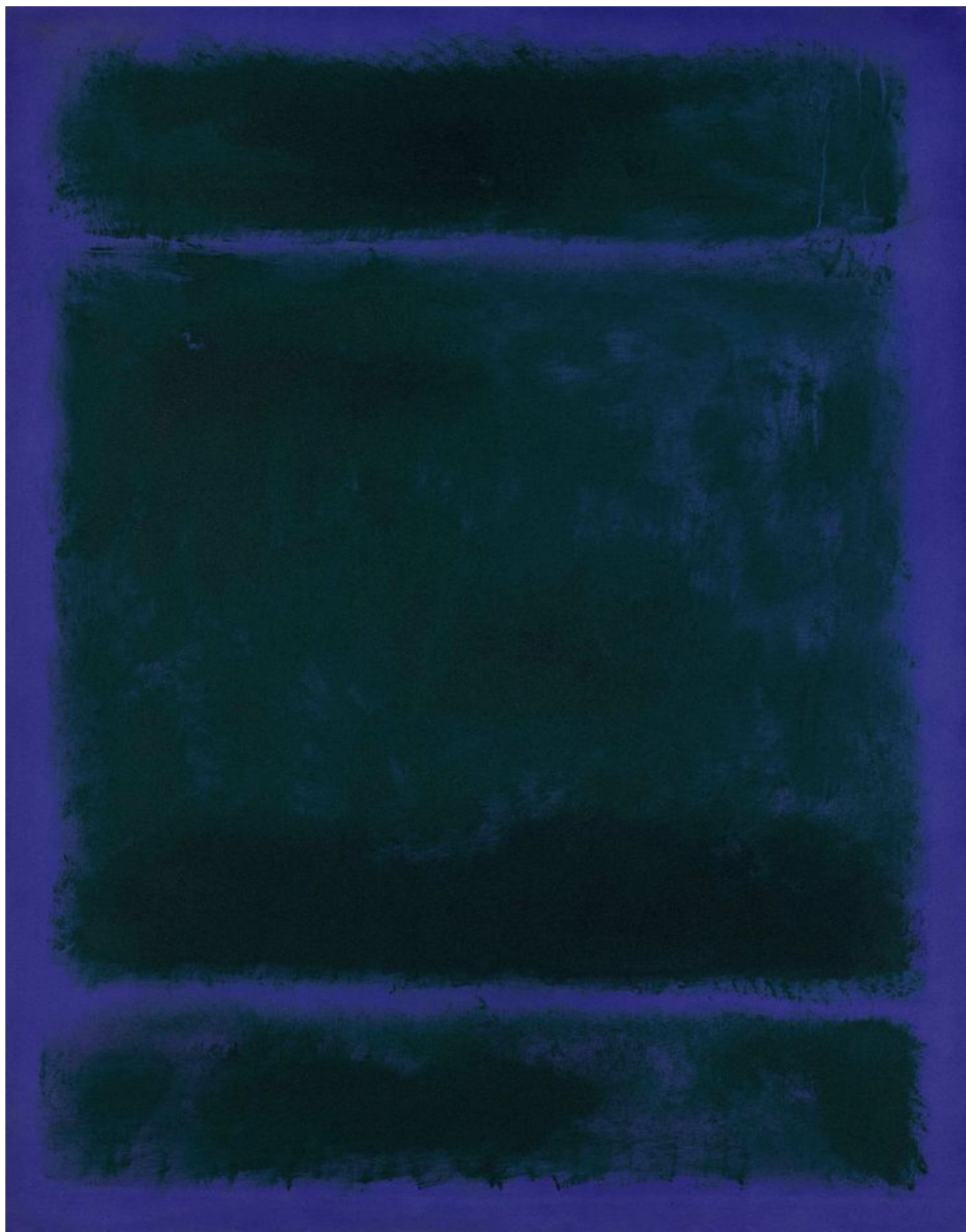
2. Barnett Newman, *Broken Obelisk*, 1969. Corten steel. 24' 7 1/4" x 10' 5 1/2" x 10' 5 1/2".  
Rothko Chapel, Houston.



3. The Rothko Chapel, opened 1971, Houston.

*Images for Chapter Seven*

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1. Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1970. Oil on canvas. 68" x 54". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.





2. Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black on Gray)*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas. 80 1/8" x 69 1/8". Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.