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How do painters from different generations see Abstract Expressionism today?

Basil Beattie RA and Aimée Parrott, both RA Schools alumni, met in the Academy's show to discuss the movement's enduring influence. Photograph by Anna Huix

Basil Beattie I remember the last exhibition of Abstract Expressionism, in 1959, at the Tate. I came away with the feeling that Abstract Expressionism was actually what I would call 'realism'. There was such variety within the blanket title of 'Abstract Expressionism' – such different modes of working, such different languages – yet there was a vividness and intensity of experience witnessing those canvases. That's what I mean by realism: the work reached a height of *real* experience. And the large scale of the paintings really confirmed that connection.

Aimée Parrott Was it the first time you saw this type of painting?

BB I was a student at the time, at the Royal Academy Schools. I already knew about De Kooning and Conrad Marca-Relli, and I had great respect for Rothko – I had seen some reproductions of these artists' works, but not many. The Tate show was very influential for students like me, as well as more established professional artists, notably the great abstract painters from St Ives.

AP Was abstract painting accepted at the RA Schools?

BB No, no – not at all. The painter John Hoyland, who was studying at the same time as me, had his work rejected from the final year student show because it was abstract. Everyone at that time still associated the Academy with that Royal Academy dinner [in 1949], when the President Alfred Munnings stood up and mocked contemporary art.

AP Yes, I think the Schools' reputation for being conservative lasted a long time after that, maybe up until the early 2000s. Among current students I think there is a certain amount of cynicism directed towards Abstract Expressionism, perhaps because it is linked to rather outdated ideas about the artist as a lone, male genius. The reception of the movement has been complicated by the fact that many of the artists have become part of the canon and as a result their paintings sell at very high prices, which sort of distracts from the work itself. I think the art market has become too powerful.

BB It has. It's frightening.

AP Jerry Saltz famously wrote an article a couple of years ago criticising 'Zombie

Formalism', the high volume of sloppy, gestural abstract painting made by young artists that was flooding the art market. I don't think the problem lies with the artist, rather with the aggressiveness of the art market driving trends and always chasing the 'next big thing' in a way that is unsustainable and doesn't allow the space or the time for young artists to develop. I think, particularly with painting, you really need that time.

BB The appeal of painting is that new technology isn't involved. It's still done directly by hand.

AP I think it's the directness of painting that appeals now, actually. It allows the mind to be led by the body, rather than the other way round, so you can discover things through a process. A lot of the artists who I looked at while I studied – Charline von Heyl, Amy Sillman, for example – talk about painting as an open process, where the finished piece is a result of ideas that are worked gradually out on the canvas.

BB Not spontaneous?

AP Still spontaneous, but revelling in a slowness. I think contemporary abstraction possibly doesn't have the high ideals of Abstract Expressionism, as painters today seem a bit more down-to-earth, more material-led, and more interested in the connection between the body and the canvas.

The material presence of a painting, its fragility and yet density – its sense of layered time which benefits from a long slow look in order to unfold – is in contrast to the slipperiness of the sanitised, disembodied image on a screen hastily scrolled through. I think this makes painting seem out of step, makes it stick out and sets up a very interesting tension between two very different modes of looking and experiencing.

When I paint it's about physically working through something, about letting things fall out of my control in order to be surprised and to learn. There seems a need among many painters to grapple with the physical, to think about a painting as not just an image but an object.

BB I would say that's always been the case, and certainly for the Abstract Expressionists. I always remember reading a transcript of a discussion between the critic Harold Rosenberg

and the painters Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt, Jack Tworikov and Robert Motherwell. Rosenberg asked the question, 'What's it like when you go into the studio?' Guston said he was reminded of what John Cage had said: the studio is full of other people, and as you begin to paint, the people begin to leave, one by one. And if you're really lucky, you leave. He emphasised the big, intense involvement, so you're not thinking of what to do and then doing it; you're doing it. Your hand becomes the brain.

AP I always find that if I haven't been in the studio for a while, the first things I come up with are dreadful, over-conceptualised ideas, with the mentality that 'this is the sort of painting I want to make'. I have to make my way through these bad ideas, until I get my eye and hand in, and stop being so self-conscious.

BB Yes, that sounds very familiar. Abstract Expressionism has been followed by a lot of very successful art that's to do with high planning. I've always been very aware that any process I've adopted has to have the possibility of change, of trial and error.

AP I find that very appealing in an artwork. A work is given energy when it retains physical traces of trains of thought, evidence of awkward moments and changes in direction, and a sense that the artist was grappling with something. That is more appealing to me than a work whose development is linear, where concept is followed by execution.

BB When I was a young artist, I didn't want to make abstract paintings that could be called 'abstractions from nature'. There was a lot of early modern art that was made by seeing something and then abstracting it. I remember *Life* magazine's full-colour reproductions of Rothko, and then on the opposite page, a sunset; then a Franz Kline, beautifully reproduced, and turn the page, a bridge scene at twilight. And the blurb underneath indicated that if you knew where to look in nature, you would see where the stimulations for these works came from. For Rothko that really wasn't true. Rothko was trying to paint something that had no visibility at all.

AP It was more to do with emotion.

BB Yes, he was giving emotion visibility – an aspect of being human that couldn't be

BELOW Basil Beattie RA and Aimée Parrott at the 'Abstract Expressionism' exhibition at the Royal Academy, with *Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red)*, 1949, by Mark Rothko





THIS PAGE *Faint*, 2016,
by Aimée Parrott
OPPOSITE PAGE
Never Before, 2001,
by Basil Beattie RA

‘The material presence of a painting, its fragility and yet density, is in contrast to the sanitised image on a screen’

identified through the eyes, except when you looked at his paintings.

AP The motivation these artists had for making paintings had very little to do with language and a lot to do with feeling. Therefore any attempt to explain them away is bound to fall short.

BB There was a lot of resistance to Abstract Expressionism when I was a student, but soon art schools became filled with it, filled with Pollock-esque paintings. That was wonderful in a way, but it soon became a cliché, like everything. Cliché happens very quickly. I suppose the problem for many people was that there was no way of finding any kind of control or choice in the mode. It just became a matter of splashing paint about.

The frightful thing was when you had it programmed into fine art foundation courses. There were lessons where students were asked to express certain feelings on canvas, which was rubbish of course. You can't do that. You can't simply say 'express this, express that'.

AP That's interesting in relation to a book I've been looking at a lot recently, Annie Besant's *Thought Forms* [1901], which is a catalogue of illustrations that attempt to visualise and categorise emotion and sensation. I find them really comical in their over simplification. I quite like how they fall short, and find their failure to bridge the gap interesting. For me it's a reminder that each of us is an individual, stuck within our

own reality, constantly dealing with failures to communicate but also driven by the inherent need to communicate, to express something.

BB That goes back to the origins of modern art.

AP Absolutely. I recently saw the Hilma Af Klimt show at the Serpentine, and then the Georgiana Houghton watercolours at the Courtauld. Both these artists talked about channelling spirits in order to make their abstract paintings. Houghton was around in the 1860s and '70s, making abstract watercolours way before anybody else. There was no platform for her and Af Klimt, partly because they were women, but also because no-one was making abstract work. It seems that by claiming they were channeling spirits they were able to deny some of the responsibility for making such unconventional works.

BB They were trying to visualise things that weren't visible.

AP Yes, and then you look at the historical context – the scientific discoveries being made then, such as electricity. It must have felt like the opening up of a parallel universe. There must have been a feeling of endless possibility, that invisible forces could be made almost tangible, that you could potentially leap between the spiritual and physical realms with ease.

BB That is what Rothko came to represent for me. I couldn't see him simply as a colourist

or formalist. His work wasn't to do with a relationship to a sunset. I have no doubt that Rothko liked sunsets and sunrises, but the imagery came from somewhere else.

AP My first interest in Abstract Expressionism came from Helen Frankenthaler, though she is seen as part of the second generation. She talked about her painting in relation to landscape.

BB You can see her connection to the landscape. But they weren't abstractions from landscape.

AP That's right. They are about her experience of landscape, how it makes her feel. Like the work of Peter Lanyon, whose paintings relate to his sensations of gliding.

BB Those paintings relate to the exhilaration of Lanyon's experience – flying, glimpsing the ground, going through cloud and mist, and suddenly being confronted by something else.

AP It is hard to put works like that into words. And that can be a real problem when it comes to the way art is talked about, especially in the media – so often there is a drive towards headline-grabbing sound bites and easily digestible narrative. Things become a cliché because they are allowed to be condensed into something and to become uncomplicated. The Abstract Expressionists never really saw themselves as a group – they never wrote a manifesto – and one of the good things about



this Royal Academy show is that it embraces a variety of approaches to abstraction.

BB Yes, what is tremendous in this show is the wide range of individuals – the room on Arshile Gorky, for example, who is a fantastic artist. It's great that a lot of the artists have got their own rooms. You've got a whole experience of seeing not just one or two, but a whole group of paintings.

AP The diversity of work makes that quite important. In the Rothko room, the lights are lower and as a result the paintings loom out at you in quite an overbearing way. I liked the theatricality of the Rothko room. The spell would be broken if other artists had been added.

BB It's one of those shows that I feel I need to see several times. It's a great show. It makes me breathe deep, which is something I remember from when I first saw these works in 1959. That's why I'm very interested in your view Aimée, how you see it now, because it is part of history whether we like it or not. But it wasn't part of history when I first saw it.

Now we learn that it was the CIA that was behind the European exhibitions of Abstract Expressionism, including the Tate show. So why were we seeing that work? When Guston turned back towards figuration in the 1970s, he lost a lot of friends. But De Kooning understood. De Kooning came out of Guston's exhibition and said, 'That's freedom'. And when I think about

what the CIA was promoting to the rest of the world, I have that in mind.

AP It's easy to be sceptical about a reproduction. But when faced with the physicality and the massive scale of certain works in the show, I felt overwhelmed. I was especially moved by the four-panel piece by Joan Mitchell [*Salut Tom*, 1979], right at the end of the exhibition – this massive, positive, explosion of energy as the artist hits her stride in middle age. There is such self-confidence in this painting. It would have been great to see more from her and also Janet Sobel, whose work I hadn't come across before and which was quite a revelation.

I was also interested looking at the Pollocks. I would say he was my least favourite before I arrived, because I've found the density of his surfaces overwhelming in reproduction. They look chaotic. But when you see the full things in front of you, you realise they are carefully put together, with very intentional marks and a real sense of rhythm.

BB The way that Pollock painted, it wasn't about composition, but about being in the painting. He was absolutely physically in the painting. They are remarkable in that sense. I wonder whether he ever got on stepladders to look down at them.

AP I wondered that as well. I work mostly on the floor, understanding the overall work is a challenge, especially when working on a large

scale. When the piece is pulled up onto the wall, it reveals all of the things that couldn't possibly have been conceived or planned for. These unforeseen developments inform what I do next.

BB Then you take it down again, put it back on the floor and alter it.

AP Or chuck it in the bin. There is an aspect of failure that this kind of work necessitates. But failure is inherent to being human. The continual engagement of a practice, for me, comes from responding to mistakes – trying to react pragmatically, making contingency plans for when things go wrong, erasing things and pulling things back from the brink.

BB Abstract Expressionism does reflect being human. And when confronted by these great works, I think they continue to fascinate and move us with their intensity and vision, in spite of their familiarity.

Abstract Expressionism Main Galleries, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 020 7300 8000, royalacademy.org.uk, until 2 Jan 2017. Lead sponsor BNP Paribas. Supported by the Terra Foundation for American Art. In celebration of the show, **Basil Beattie RA** has produced a limited-edition screenprint, 'Broken Promises', available from RA Art Sales, 020 7300 5933, <http://roy.ac/artsales>. **Aimée Parrott** Breese Little, London, 07919 416290, breeselittle.com, until 26 Nov

+ To discover more about 'Abstract Expressionism', visit <http://roy.ac/abex>