

Question 5: Choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct and 2,500-word essay. Critically assess, consider primary themes, key writers and relevant practitioners.

Title: Abstract Expressionism

Word Count 2579

In this essay I will be looking at the conception, gestation and birth of Abstract Expressionism in America, exploring key concepts and ideas together with prominent artists of the movement and its critics and supporters, also focusing on the journey of a movement which resonates with me as an art student. Can Abstract Expressionism continue into the future of our art world?

In America in the 1930's and at the onset of Abstraction, the country was suffering a depression due the stock market crash of 1929. Throughout the 1930's globally, there were many political changes occurring. In Germany, the support for Hitler was increasing, In Europe the Spanish Civil war was brewing due to poverty and inequality, In the Soviet Union there was political unrest and by the end of the decade World War II had begun.

At this time of global instability and looming threat of bloodshed, artists Thomas Benton, Grant Wood and John Curry were adopting ways of working which represented their desire to be separate from all the social and political conflict but still uphold their sense of morality. The Regionalists as they were known, focused their realistic art on the figurative and narrative depicting rural communities and

holding onto past values. They deliberately turned their back on European Modernism. However, in Europe governments were using the Regionalists style of art for their propaganda leading up to and during World War II, which led to artists wanting to veer away and create a new type of art.



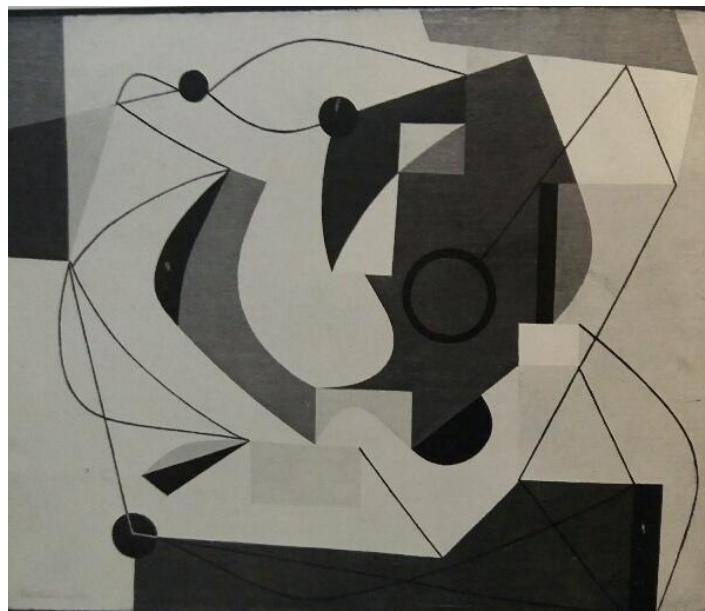
Pic 1 'Agriculture and Lumbering' Thomas Benton 1931

In 1933, Roosevelt financed a New Deal Project in support of artists. This project paid artists to produce artwork. Within this group of artists were Wilem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky. This project allowed them all to work at a pace they wanted and with any style, whilst expressing their need to reject Social Realism and Regionalism. They were attracted to doing the exact opposite of what Realism and regionalism had to offer and subsequently rebelled from the figurative and narrative style, moving more into the Avant-guard like cubism, constructivism and Bauhaus.

By the mid 1930's these abstract artists were having difficulty getting their work exhibited, and on the occasion that The Whitney Museum held an exhibition, they came under heavy criticism from the Partisan Review:

"death of genuine abstractions; most of the artists chosen had become stalled in various ill-digested ferments of impressionism, expressionism and half-hearted cubism". George.L.K.Morris (1935).

Due to this criticism it became almost impossible to find a gallery that would exhibit their work, so the abstract artists took it upon themselves to find their own way to show their work and formed a group called the American Abstract Artists (AAA). Within this group they could not agree about what constituted abstraction and the majority of the group felt that geometric cubist styles were the way forward into modern art.



Pic 2 'Untitled' Ad Reinhardt (1940)

The core words that they used to describe the content of their work were; 'purity, essentials and universals.' Sandler, I (1970).

"To understand abstract art is no more a problem than understanding any or all art. And this depends upon the ability of the individual to perceive essentials, to perceive that which is called universally significant". The Editors (1938)

The AAA turned their back on surrealism and expressionism and looked toward the Neoplasticism of Mondrian, as he had formulated a structure and rules to his art which were appealing to the AAA. In addition to the geometrical shapes they incorporated organic forms influenced by Picasso, Klee, Miro and Harp and the abstract details of Kandinsky and Leger. However, because they were stuck in their ways and World War II, it prevented them from moving forward. In 1940 the AAA demonstrated at the Museum of Modern Art trying to bring attention to their neglect of Abstract American Art and they also criticised the critics by mocking their reviews.

For the abstract artists that were unsupportive of the ideologies of the AAA, they formed smaller groups; one headed by Gottlib and Rothko whose later focus was more on colour, known as Colour-field, one by Hans Hoffmann and one by Gorky, Kooning, Davis, Graham and Smith. These three groups used to meet and exchange ideas.

Rothko and Gottlib were supporters of Milton Avery's French Masters approach and brought together a group of individual artists who painted in a loose flat way. Critic Herbert Lawrence said that the ethos of the group was, *"an attempt to combine a*

social consciousness with an abstract, expressionistic heritage, thus saving art from being mere propaganda on the hand, or mere formalism on the other”.

Hoffmann was very much influenced by Picasso's way of drawing and Matisse's use of colour. In his group he taught that there are 3 main principles needed to be taken into account all at the same time and these were; nature and its laws, the artists own personality, spiritual intuition and imagination, and the medium and its inherent laws. (Sandler,I 1970)

Hoffman had begun to create his own language of interpretation, by transferring objects with form and negative space and then to translate those into planes of colour. This new visual language began to persuade art critics such as Greenberg and Rosenberg.

Graham et al felt that art should convey the sense of something as opposed to its natural form and that all art should be expressed, *“in terms of pure form”* and that, *“the aim of painting as of any pure art is to exploit its legitimate assets which are limitless without encroaching on the domain of other arts. Thus, painting that resorts to literature, sculpture etc, to improve itself is a decadent art”*. (Graham,J) Graham felt that it was the process of art and the thinking of art that helped to reconnect an artist to their unconscious he persuaded the other members of the group to consider Freud and Jung's theories in relation to art. Although he was opposed to the surrealists' ideal he did value the surrealists concept of automatic writing, which would tie in with his support of Freuds theories of the unconscious. The authenticity of the free movement, thought and expression conveys the artist on the canvas.

With the lack of support from the museums, these groups of artists together with the AAA had acquired substantial knowledge in their field and starting looking towards Europe for other artists in a similar position to them and they began their search in Paris as it was the centre of the world art scene. namely Kandinsky and Mondrian. Their extensive research of the arts had set them way ahead of the art world in Paris who were very far behind.

By the 1940's the abstract artists were turning their ideas away from global issues and focusing more on their own experiences and visions and translated these into their art without any limits on the emotional content. Art critic Robert Motherwell stated that their;

“response to modern life was rebellious, individualistic, unconventional, sensitive, irritable, this attitude arose from a feeling of being ill at ease in the universe. Nothing as drastic an innovation as their abstract art could have come into existence, save as the consequence of a most profound, relentless, unquenchable need. The need is for felt experience-intense, immediate, direct, subtle, unified, warm, vivid, rhythmic.”

Abstract expressionists did not want to believe that their actions were predictable and machine like, they wanted to be spontaneous without planning or thinking ahead, however this led to a term used by them as ‘*crisis in subject matter*’. In that, if you are focusing on what to paint rather than how to paint you are not truly free of thought and therefore unable to convey the artists expression onto canvas.

Whilst the Abstract expressionists were in their infancy and still finding their feet, Samuel Kootz wrote a letter to the New York Times suggesting that the future of art is in America and where are all the American artists with their new ideas and experimentation, provoking them by saying they had had a long enough rest. This provocation was sufficient to encourage a response from art critic Edward Jewell who disagreed with Kootz and went on to help bring the artists together and offer an exhibition space to show their work, Kootz was unimpressed by the works and subsequently had arranged his own exhibition showing works of artists that he admired. Unfortunately, he had misjudged the situation as the French Surrealists were taking New York by storm, as they were well organised.

Peggy Guggenheim opened her own art gallery in America which exhibited abstract and surrealist works of art, it was here that Pollock showed his work. The relationship between the French surrealists and the Americans was fractious, the American's didn't like the lifestyle of the surrealists and Breton refused to learn English and communication was difficult but he did manage to express his bias against abstraction. The surrealists were disappointed to find that the Americans were not willing to become surrealist groupies and that they were already well established themselves.

Roberta Matta challenged Breton on his bias arguing that in Breton's first manifesto he had defined surrealism as, "*Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express verbally, in writing or by any other means the real process of thought. Thoughts dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside*

of all aesthetic or moral preoccupation." Despite Matta's attempts to form a group the abstract expressionists did not want to work with him.

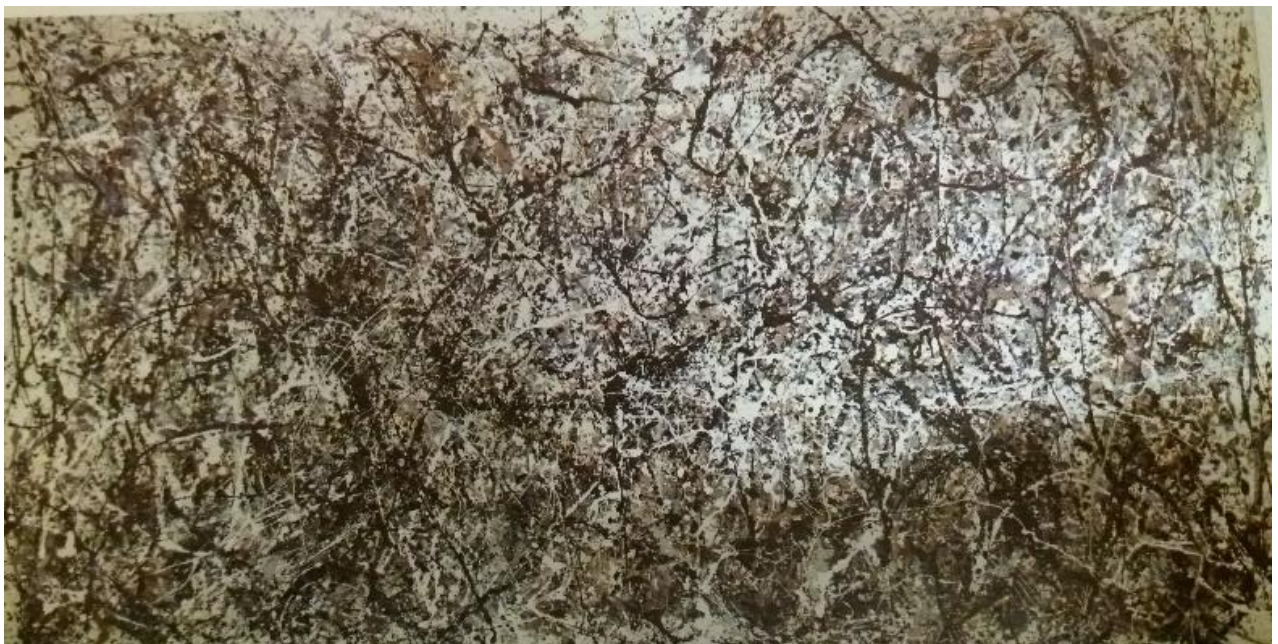
By 1945 art critics Jewel and Coates were increasing the public's awareness of a new movement in art but it took until 1947 for the Abstract Expressionists to reach maturity. Pollock, Kooning and Hofmann agreed that they would 'build an open field of free gestures, every detail of which would be painted with equal intensity. For the abstract expressionist the art was in the painting and those expressions, mark making, shapes and colours based on experience.

Kooning declares, "*Painting isn't just the visual thing that reaches your retina-it's what is behind it and in it. I'm not interested in abstracting or taking things out or reducing painting to design, form, line and colour. I paint this way because I can keep putting more and more things in it-drama, anger, pain, love, a figure, a horse, my ideas about space. Through your eyes it again becomes an emotion or idea. It doesn't matter if it is different from mine as long as it comes from the painting which has its own integrity and intensity*".

In 1947 when Pollock did his famous drip paintings, he expressed the importance of the contact he has with his canvass and that working on the floor allowed him to almost get into the painting and to have a free mind whilst in that process. This was of great significance to him. It is also important to acknowledge the work of his wife Lee Krasner who too was an abstract expressionist by this time but always seemed to be in the shadows of her husband success.



Pic 3 "untitled" Lee Krasner 1948



Pic 3a "One" Jackson Pollock 1950

By 1953 Pollock had felt that the drip painting had become too habitual and looked for new ideas. He moved towards anatomical abstraction. Some critics punished him for going backwards but critic Clement Greenberg defended Pollock by saying, "*Like*

some older masters of our time he develops according to a double rhythm in which each beat harks back to the one before the last. The anatomical motifs and compositional schemes sketched out in his first and less abstract phase are in this third one clarified and realised."

Through the 1950's Abstract Expressionism had a strong foothold on the art scene, and it was widely discussed in colleges and art schools, had coverage through broadcasting by critics who were close to the artists. These critics were Greenberg, Rosenberg and Hess.

Hess was a supporter of the older Abstract Expressionists like De Kooning, a traditionalist and Rosenberg was less traditional and more existential and he felt that 'action painting' which was his name for what the artists were doing was 'new and revolutionary', leaving the past and current styles behind.

He went on to say, "*At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act-rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.*"

Although the Abstract Expressionist movement ended around the late 60's it has still stood the test of time.

A current Abstract expressionist artist is Mark Bradford.



Pic 4 'The path to the river belongs to animals' Mark Bradford 2019

His most current exhibition is called 'Cerberus'. Bradford is inspired by ancient mythology, and he engages the mythological dog Cerberus. His interest lies in interstitial spaces and figures and the relationship between his art and the community keeping one foot in each place. His current exhibition addresses the difficulties that arise in between those two domains and the conflicts that can arise. He also reflects the very space in between where peace can be found to these conflicts.

The foundation process of his work is layering, which he adds paint to and strips, scratches and scores away. He incorporates many references but has deep interest in the distribution of power within our society and the impact that that has on us as individuals. His work is interactive and expressionistic.

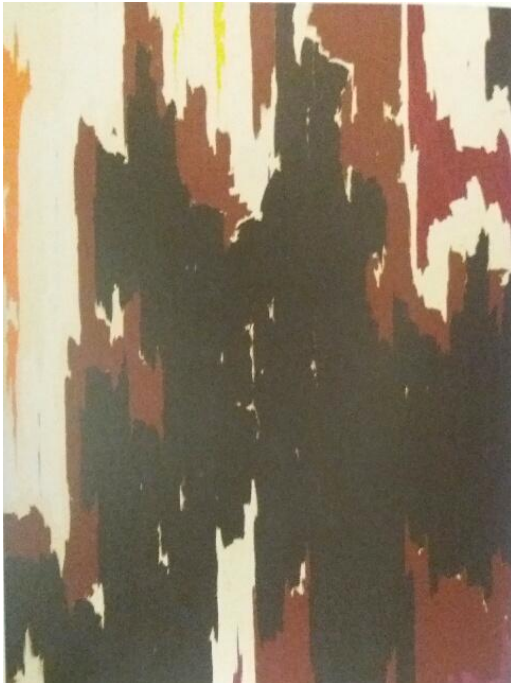
Bradford says, " *I have always been interested in pulling the world that exists beyond the studio walls, and outside the art world, into the work.*"

Jonathan Griffin, critic at the financial times felt that Bradford's work is "*dank and festering, with wads of coloured paper crusting their surfaces, coils of rope forming raised welts, and lines carved into their soft dark skins.*"

Jonathan asks Bradford, "*Are you in a tough place emotionally?*"

Bradford replies, "*No. It's just the world is very heavy. We are in a dark time. I mean, what the hell! Dark! I didn't set out to try and reflect that: I'm just making the work that I make.*"

It's clear to see that abstract art has stood the test of time, and that it has endless possibilities. As the artist is an individual and the abstract expression is unique to the individual artist it seems fair to say that it will be with us for some time in the future. The uniqueness of the artist coupled together with the free expressive process of representational mark making, colour, shapes and gestures that it can be one art movement that AI will be unable to replicate and can remain to its true nature.



Pic 5 PH-150 Clyfford Still 1958

"As before, the pictures are to be without titles of any kind. I want no allusions to interfere with or assist the spectator. Before them I want him to be on his own and if he finds in them an imagery unkind or unpleasant or evil, let him look to the state of his own soul." (Clyfford Still)

References

SANDLER, I. (1970). Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting. (Ch.1,2,7,8 & 20). London: Pall Mall Press Ltd.

ANFAM, D. (2017). Abstract Expressionism. (introduction & Ch.1) London: Royal Academy of Arts.

BENJAMIN, A. (1996). What is Abstraction? Academy edn. London: Academy Group Ltd.

DICKERMAN, L. (2012). Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925, How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

Griffin, J. (2019) Artist Mark Bradford: ‘I don’t represent anything.’ London: The Financial Times.

Pictures

Pic 1. *SANDLER, I. (1970). Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting. (pg.11) London: Pall Mall Press Ltd.*

Pic 2. *SANDLER, I. (1970). Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting. (pg.16) London: Pall Mall Press Ltd.*

Pic 3. *ANFAM, D. (2017). Abstract Expressionism. (pg.168) London: Royal Academy of Arts.*

Pic 3a. *ANFAM, D. (2017). Abstract Expressionism. (pg.16-17) London: Royal Academy of Arts.*

Pic 4. *Griffin, J. (2019) Artist Mark Bradford: ‘I don’t represent anything.’ The Financial Times.*

Pic 5. *ANFAM, D. (2017). Abstract Expressionism. (Pg.238) London: Royal Academy of Arts.*

Bibliography

ALBERS, J. (1963). Interaction of Color. Revised edn, 1975. London: Yale University Press Ltd.

BENJAMIN, A. (1996). What is Abstraction? Academy edn. London: Academy Group Ltd.

AUPING, M. (1987). Abstract Expressionism, The Critical Developments. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

DICKERMAN, L. (2012). Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925, How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

BARNETT, V & FRIEDEL, H. (1995). Vasily Kandinsky-A Colourful Life. Lenningen: Papierfabrik Scheufelen.

SOLOMAN, R. (1982). Kadinsky In Munich:1896-1914. New York: The Soloman. R. Guggenheim Foundation.

SANDLER, I. (1970). Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting. London: Pall Mall Press Ltd.

GIBSON, A. (1997). Abstract Expressionism-Other Politics. Hong Kong: World Print Ltd.

MARTER, J. (2016). Women of Abstract Expressionism, Denver Art Museum. Connecticut: Yale University Press.

MOSZYNSKA, A. (1990). Abstract Art. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

ANFAM, D. (2017). Abstract Expressionism. London: Royal Academy of Arts.

COPPEL, S. (2008). The American Scene-Prints from Hopper to Pollock. London: The British Museum Company Ltd.

WARD, J. (1989). American Realist Painting 1945-1980. Michigan: UMI Research Press.

MITCHELL, W. (1994). Picture Theory. London: The University of Chicago Press Ltd.

MARCH, F. (2007). The Abstraction of Landscape From Northern Romanticism to Abstract Expressionism. Madrid: Editorial de Arte y Ciencia, S.A.