

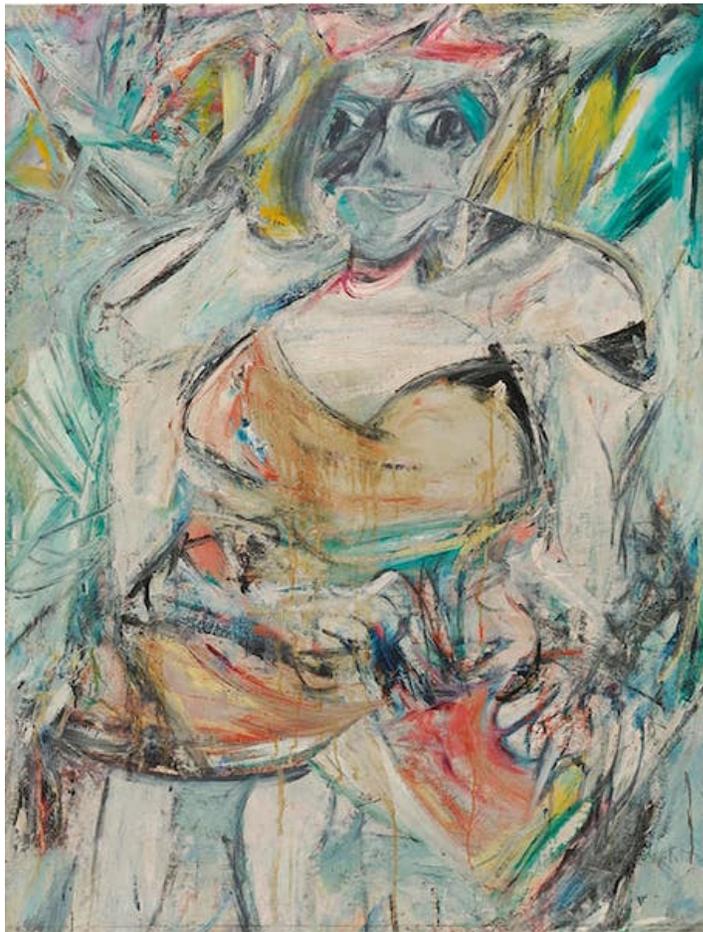


FINANCIAL TIMES

Visual Arts

Jackie Wullschlager on Abstract Expressionism at the RA

The most pleasurable, provocative exhibition of American art in Britain this century



'Woman II' (1952) by Willem de Kooning © The Museum of Modern Art, New York

SEPTEMBER 23, 2016 by: Jackie Wullschlager

Outstanding, astounding, filled with thrills but also with melancholy, Abstract Expressionism at the Royal Academy is the most pleasurable, provocative exhibition of American art in Britain this century.

Gathering trophy works that have not been seen together in six decades — Willem de Kooning’s ferocious “Woman II” from MoMA in New York, Jackson Pollock’s swan song “Blue Poles” from Canberra — the exhibition invites us to re-experience the authority, audacity and emotional shock of Abstract Expressionist painting, its epic scale and spiritual yearning, from the perspective of a world where those ambitions and ideals in art have mostly disappeared.

The show feels historic from first to last: a perfect-pitch unfolding of the movement’s origins, apogee, disintegration, range. All American topography is packed on to these walls. The windswept Atlantic in de Kooning’s undulating surf and sand is sensual as the human body in “Woman as Landscape”. Pennsylvania’s coal, steel works, railroads are distilled into sooty diagonal beams in the violent-delicate architectonic calligraphy of Franz Kline’s “Zinc Door” and “Vawdavitch”. Jagged, slender, flickering bursts of vertical impasto colour, layered on with a palette knife to make vast surfaces look raw and torn, suggest stalagmites, monoliths, foliage in sparse landscapes or yawning abysses in some dozen paintings evoking what Clyfford Still called western America’s “awful bigness”.



'Vawdavitch' (1955) by Franz Kline © Joe Ziolkowski

Pollock claimed Still made the other Abstract Expressionists look academic. But Still’s dramas of luminosity and darkness have been almost invisible since 1980, when the terms of his will prevented sale of his works. Seen at full stretch here, they confront visitors with fresh visionary force.

Expansive displays similarly dedicated to the other big shots — and this show is unapologetically a triumph of the giants — open with the poignant figure of Arshile Gorky, the émigré Armenian precursor whose convulsive hybrid compositions merging Cubism and Surrealism laid the foundations for the American artists. The scale-up from Gorky’s European-size canvases to monumental, teeming, muscular surfaces in poured, dribbled pigments — “Summertime”, “Night Mist” — whose labyrinthine, weaving, leaping skeins

make manifest the artist's reach and bodily rhythms, and create the drama of the next room devoted to Pollock.



This is bookended by the 20ft augural work “Mural”, painted on raw canvas on the floor for Peggy Guggenheim’s apartment, where vestiges of human forms dance across a vast ever-moving composition, and Pollock’s final masterpiece crackling with tiny shards of glass, “Blue Poles”, where the processional figuration is wholly abstracted. It is a unique pairing, delightfully watched over by David Smith’s thrusting sentinel “Tanktotem III”, composed of convex and concave fragments derived from cylindrical steel boiler parts.

With Smith, Pollock, de Kooning, Gorky, you see a wrestling with remnants of the figure that goes back to a battle with Picasso, “the guy to beat” according to de Kooning. The Oedipal fight is glorious in the grotesque, grinning “Woman” series, comic distortions achieved by whiplash line and raucous colour: descendants of “Les Demoiselles” in the age of Marilyn Monroe, the pin-up and incipient feminism.



'Star Cage' (1950) by David Smith © Estate of David Smith

Mark Rothko by contrast set out to “defeat” the museum wall itself. An exquisite “Interior” (1936) depicting paintings in a neoclassical gallery on velvety panels framed by marble columns, luminous and boxed in like tombs, fascinatingly heralds the tiers of hovering rectangles as façades that Rothko developed in the next decades.

Following his subtle gradations of proportion, balance, translucency, opaqueness — from the ravishing “Untitled (Violet, Black, Orange, Yellow on White and Red)” and “Yellow Band” to the majestic bleakness of “Untitled (Black on Gray)” — this is a rich presentation, more satisfying than the all-out darkness of Tate’s recent show.



Gorky, Arshile (1904-1948): Water of the Flowery Mill, 1944

“Tragedy, ecstasy, gloom” were Rothko’s themes, pushed to absolute expression. Abstraction in the 1950s was sincerely felt as a moral as well as an aesthetic faith, though America’s puritanical tradition resonates often here. Ad Reinhardt called his black canvases “ultimate paintings”: grids brushed in deep reds, blues, greens, to create smooth, apparently monochrome expanses, aimed to purify art into “nothingness and finality”. They are in conversation with the sumptuous mourning black of Robert Motherwell’s “Elegy to the Spanish Republic”, and Barnett Newman’s musing on the sublime in monochromes such as “Midnight Blue”, continuums of intense colour interrupted by narrow upright zips.



*'PH-950' (1950) by Clyfford Still © Clyfford Still
Museum, Denver*

The Royal Academy calls these works “paths to the absolute”: where did they come from and lead to? Distance makes it even clearer that Abstract Expressionism, whose idiom is violent, desperate and extreme, emerged from the chaos of mid-20th-century conflict and catastrophe. The name, coined by Robert Coates in 1946, references the emotional intensity of German expressionism and the formal aesthetic of European abstraction: both forged around the crises of the first world war and the Russian Revolution. After the second world war, the flight to abstraction repeated itself, inflected with American grandeur of scope and new cultural confidence.

Today, we barely distinguish abstract from figurative; most painting is a hybrid. Is that the movement’s legacy? Or a signal that, pushing formal qualities to an end point, it went nowhere, could only burn itself out? Certainly minimalism and pop, which replaced it as the western house style, offered neutrality and impersonal diction in reaction to its extreme, all-over individual expression. These latter movements still dominate; curator David Anfam says Abstract Expressionism therefore “has good claims to being the last full-scale humanist art form”.



'Blue Poles' (1952) by Jackson Pollock

I think that is why the paintings here, so full-blooded, sensational, belligerent, nevertheless feel as if they come from very far away — especially in the knockout final room of old-age works, fluid, reckless, elegiac, made between 1975 and 1979 and already aware of their belatedness. All turn on water slippage, transience, ruin. Joan Mitchell's quadriptych "Salut Tom", painted in Normandy, is a homage in sunlight and shadow to the dissolving forms of Monet's "Nymphaeas". Philip Guston, controversially returning to a savage abbreviated figuration, lines up enormous hobnail heels like broken monuments looking out to sea in "Low Tide". And, washed with long liquid strokes, speckled with drips, de Kooning's unparalleled portrait of ebb and flow "Whose Name Was Writ in Water" is a meditation on impermanence and the end of a tradition — as well as one of the greatest monuments to art's durability and power of expression.

Royal Academy, London, to January 2, [royalacademy.org.uk](https://www.royalacademy.org.uk) (<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/>) Sponsored by BNP Paribas

Photographs: Joe Ziolkowski; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Estate of David Smith; Clyfford Still Museum, Denver

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.