

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

## ‘Abstract Expressionism’ Review: Some Americans Abroad At London’s Royal Academy of Arts, a pantheon of the established who’s- who of the movement

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‘Blue Poles’ (1952), by Jackson Pollock PHOTO: NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA/THE POLLOCK-KRASNER FOUNDATION/ ARS, NY/ DACS, LONDON

*London* - It’s a spine-tingling experience for an American visitor to encounter the spectacular Abstract Expressionism exhibition at London’s Royal Academy of Arts. The truly patriotic may also see it as a confirmation of, as art historian and critic Irving Sandler put it in the title of his 1970 book on the movement, “The Triumph of American Painting.” Perhaps that’s why, on entering the RA’s courtyard, one can’t help but chuckle at the life-size bronze of the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), first president of the Royal Academy, apparently looking away from the imposing group of David Smith (1906-1965) abstract metal sculptures installed as an introduction to the show.

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### Abstract Expressionism

*Royal Academy of Arts  
Through Jan. 2, 2017*

As the heir to various modes of European abstract painting, American Abstract Expressionism was understood to be a home-grown approach to art that exercised a powerful force from the 1940s into the 1960s. This first major U.K. exhibition in almost six decades on a subject so central to American art history—163 works in a splendid sequential visual package with beginning, middle and end—is meant to present these works as “informed by new thinking.” But it mostly confirms the canonical and heroic mythology of an art world commandeered by a small group of macho guys that’s long been the primary way in which this historical yarn has been spun.

So the London show may disappoint those who want to reset the inclusiveness button in regard to gender equity, despite several paintings by Lee Krasner, and single works by Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, Janet Sobel and Louise Nevelson (strangely, the only sculptor of any gender other than Smith to merit inclusion). A far greater number of artists and their variant styles—especially the inclusion of more sculpture than only the splendid Smiths here—would have presented a more complete and complex view of what comes off as a fairly neat and familiar package.

Perhaps that’s an unfair quibble, considering several gallery sequences of astonishing power and beauty. The somewhat overwhelming promenade that moves us from a room of Jackson Pollock

through one of Mark Rothko and then Clyfford Still provides breathtaking views of each painter's work. Seeing Pollock's 1943 University of Iowa "Mural" across from his 1952 "Blue Poles" describes the confident trajectory that catapulted the artist to the forefront of both celebratory and derisive comments about contemporary art. In the earlier work, Pollock is a bold draftsman, daring to paint quasi-pictorial scribbles across an immense canvas. By the 1950s, the self-assurance with which he controlled his signature dripping of paint produced one of the most beautiful and paradigmatic works of modernist art.

The Rothko gallery includes an especially rich selection of luminous paintings—blocks of pigment combinations and contrasts that initially often look unlikely but ultimately feel inevitable, confirming our sense of his sublime, and varied, color sensibility. Because of the artist's personal eccentricities and unwillingness to sell, groups of Clyfford Still's craggy and almost coarse paintings can generally be seen only in those museums (in Buffalo, N.Y., San Francisco and Denver) that have significant Still holdings; so it's likely that the large gallery with nine of his majestic paintings may turn out to be the most significant visual discovery for London viewers.



'PH-950' (1950), by Clyfford Still PHOTO:  
CLYFFORD STILL MUSEUM/CITY AND COUNTY OF  
DENVER/DACS

David Anfam, a noted independent American scholar, and Edith Devaney, RA contemporary curator, have brought more than their considerable expertise to this exhibition. They have also persuaded an impressive array of institutional lenders to part with seminal works. So it's exciting to see the gallery devoted to Arshile Gorky include the Met's delicious "Water of the Flowery Mill," with its joyful interplay of intense and soft colors, and the Willem de Kooning gallery displaying MoMA's threatening "Woman II." Other artists given either a full gallery or an array of works include Barnett Newman, Robert Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, Philip Guston and Franz Kline. No less interesting are the curators' juxtapositions of various artists in galleries devoted to themes that are engaging, if not necessarily persuasive. "Gesture as Color" plays Mark Tobey's refined sensibility against eerily similar work by Krasner and Sobel. A single work by the African-American painter Norman Lewis is oddly placed in the powerful, if dour, "Darkness Visible" gallery, which underplays the artist's pictorial sensibilities.

There's also a gallery devoted to works on paper and photography that feels like an afterthought, since many of the photographers were working within a tradition of experimental abstract photographic imagery that predated the Abstract Expressionists.

More problematic is the fact that this neatly wrapped exhibition package suggests that Abstract Expressionism was exclusively New York-based, with no reminders of how influential both Still and Rothko were during their West Coast teaching stints. And Hans Hofmann, represented here by only two paintings, is given short shrift, considering his major impact as a teacher of so many prominent artists, including three in this exhibition.

Yet this London exhibition rewards the visitor with so much visual treasure that it should make even an American salivate and wish that it were coming to our shores and not just to its only other showing, in Bilbao, Spain.

*Mr. Freudenheim, a former art-museum director, served as the assistant secretary for museums at the Smithsonian.*