

Col. Lang:

I want to thank you very much for the reference to Mark Rothko. While at the National Gallery of Art last Monday, I had your comments in mind and decided to study for a short while Rothko's 1957 painting titled, "White and Greens in Blue". Overall, I found it an immensely rewarding experience, although a few days passed before the true impact of his work percolated up into my consciousness, thus allowing me to appreciate more fully his artistic greatness, at least in my view. Since you are the one who led me to that particular painting and since your comments played a significant role in the experience itself, I decided that I would like to share a few thoughts.

Generally speaking, it seems to me that Rothko's works, particularly his later ones, are a visual reflection of that inner space located beyond representational art forms but before the absolute nothingness of no image at all. It is a daring place to go artistically, and it is one fraught with danger, especially if the medium is visual art. It is close to the edge.

Whenever you travel to the edge -- especially in the world of abstraction -- you must trust the artist who takes you there. So it is important to determine the artist's intent for the viewer. Rothko revealed part of his aim when he stated: "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 the idea and the observer. To achieve this clarity is inevitably to be understood."

So it appears that Rothko intended the viewer actually to participate in the very creativity -- what he calls the "idea" -- that led to the creation of the work of art itself. As Rothko also stated, he wanted the viewer to have the "same religious experience" as he had when he created the work. So the viewer no longer stands apart from the work and critiques it. Instead the viewer becomes immersed in the "idea" as obstacles between painter, idea, and viewer dissolve.

But again, at least from my perspective, one cannot travel to that uncharted artistic locale with its unique experience unless he (or she) trusts the artist, primarily because the artist's creativity is to become yours, or to use Rothko's language, the idea is to become your idea. So it is important to take the next step and determine the "idea" that actually motivated his art. Rothko unquestionably was concerned about the spiritual condition of modern man, much like the other great heroic artists from all walks of life during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These artists, including Eliot, Joyce and Mann, recognized that prior forms, particular mythological and religious symbols, simply were no longer answering mankind's aesthetic, psychological and spiritual needs. And to quote from Wiki: "From this point on, his art would bear as its ultimate aim the burden of relieving modern man's fundamental spiritual emptiness, an emptiness created in part by the lack of a mythology to properly address, as Nietzsche wrote, 'the growth of a child's mind and . . . to a mature man his life and struggles' and to provide the aesthetic recognition necessary for the freeing of those unconscious energies previously liberated by the mythological images, symbols and rituals."

As indicated, Nietzsche profoundly influenced Rothko and nothing shaped his artistic perspective more than Nietzsche's famous work, The Birth of Tragedy. So we know that the "idea" in which he wanted us to participate drew its source from the concept of tragedy. As Rothko revealed, "The exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source of art." Rothko thus believed that the "exhilarated tragic experience" was the way to fill the void that has trapped us in a spiritual wasteland. The "exhilarated tragic experience" thus represented the ideal summit of his artistic vocation as well as the source that motivated all his actions that he undertook on our behalf.

If you believe in the heroism of Rothko's artistic aim -- the "exhilarated tragic experience" -- then you can trust him, not only to experience to the fullest his abstract art but also to deepen one's understanding of the art world in general. And it is fascinating that Rothko appeared to hold in disdain the artists from the school of pop art, including Jasper Johns (born in my home state, I add). His view is a surprise, considering the enormous popularity of pop art today. But, assuming the heroic nature of Rothko's artistic aims, perhaps one should suspend disbelief and at least consider his words as a type of warning. And by giving him the

benefit of the doubt, some works of pop art arguably begin to look as if they have a seductive sheen hiding the spiritual emptiness that marks the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. In other words, pop art does not serve the same heroic function as Rothko's art but instead it simply sugarcoats the spiritual wasteland, thus ultimately leading us into a deeper existential despair. The artistic experience on the surface of pop art may give you a rush. But if pulled in too deeply, the destination may unknowingly result in a type of death, if not for you, then your generation, and even your society. Perhaps this explains why Rothko labeled pop artists "charlatans and young opportunists" and wondered aloud during a 1962 exhibition of pop art, "are the young artists plotting to kill us all?"

So Rothko warned us not to trust at least some pop artists. And if you don't trust the artist, then you cannot fulfill Rothko's artistic objective as you no longer participate willingly in the "idea". Instead you separate from the art and then critique it. Big difference. With that in mind, all I am going to say is this: at least at this point, I don't trust Andy Warhol or his celebrity art. Sure, I'll critique it and even admire it. But I have no desire to participate in the Warhol experience.

But of course, we know that much of Rothko's later years were ones of despair and he ultimately ended it all by committing suicide. So what gives? How can we hold onto the belief that his aim was heroic and thus continue to trust him? The key, perhaps, is to recognize first that his art was located at a very dangerous place -- beyond representational art but before nothingness, by which I mean the place where there are no images at all. And if I may speculate, Rothko's art -- which was a visual medium -- had nowhere to go but into the realm of absolute nothingness. In his life's journey, he could not return to representational forms, particularly mythological and religious ones, because, as his earlier artwork suggests, he believed that they had lost their potency. As a result, he already had dedicated his life to looking for a new mythology for the rest of us to experience. The only alternative left was for him to go forward, so to speak, into a type of visual nothingness and therein lies the beginning of a tragedy.

To survive going into the experience of absolute nothingness -- which is a total annihilation of the ego -- you must leave behind the material world, including visual art. It is at this point that visual art stops and it is at this point we see the tragic limits of what Rothko called the "religious experience" of his art. From what I can glean, the only way to go into the experience of absolute nothingness and return is not a function of art because you go beyond all sense perceptions. Instead, such a journey can only be found in the religious world of apophatic contemplation -- the contemplative world where the goal is to go beyond all sights, sounds, and images. As a few examples of many, it is the world of Buddhist monks, the Trappist way of Thomas Merton and, in my opinion, the contemplative aspects of Satmar. It is a total rejection of the material world substituted by a complete reliance upon the spiritual. For some, this is an immersion into the spiritual void, a land of complete silence. It is a religious experience that cannot be realized through artistic expression.

Rothko at heart was a very spiritual man and obviously was searching for a religious experience. As a child, he excelled at studying Judaic orthodoxy. And later in his life, he was deeply influenced by the religious artwork of Fra Angelico. But like so many artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who recognized that religious forms had lost their potency, he began to view himself as a secularist and, at least ostensibly, rejected traditional religious symbols and rituals. Nevertheless, like so many secularists, he admitted a belief in God, so there is no doubt that the deep religious impulse always remained, as evidenced by the following quote: "'I insist upon the equal existence of the world engendered in the mind and the world engendered by God outside of it'. But, as his words suggest, since religious symbols had lost their power to transform the human soul, art for Rothko became not a window that would lead to a religious experience, but the religious experience itself. Such was bound to fail despite heroic intentions.

Commentators note that starting in the late 1950's, Rothko began to use darker colors, perhaps foreshadowing an oncoming despair. But at a different level, the increasing appearance of darker colors may have been a call to experience that which lies beyond all sensory perceptions -- an experience, as just noted, that is religious in nature and one that would require the sacrifice of his vocation, at least for awhile. Certainly the desire to enter this religious state was always there. "Silence is so accurate", he once wrote. Nevertheless he could not accept this type of sacrifice and enter the contemplative world of silence because

abstract art had become his religion instead of a window to the religious experience. So great contradictions arose. At one level, Rothko appeared to go out of his way to destroy the ego when creating art. He after all lived a life of poverty and seemed to go out of his way to avoid fame, as if he were leading a life of religious vows. But at another level, his ego could not let go of the idea that art-- his art --had the same function as the very deepest contemplative calling of religion. So Rothko was egoless and egotistical at the same time, and the inherent dissonance caused contradictions -- ones that he detested and tried to avoid. But isn't it a type of artistic egotism leading to more contradictions to say that one's art should never be seen in a restaurant and in the marketplace, thus implying that it should only be shown in a devotional chapel named after him -- the Rothko chapel?

One can only speculate but the question lingers: what would have happened if Rothko had given up his artistic vocation, albeit temporarily, and entered the darkness of absolute nothingness -- what some have called the dark night of the soul? Rothko, apparently, was deeply influenced by Jung, so the inner journey described in Jung's book, Symbols of Transformation may have served as his guidebook for such a journey. In psychological terms, the inner journey basically is a sacrifice of the ego into the collective unconscious and then a return, hopefully with something that will help mankind. Perhaps he would have returned from that experience with a new art "form" that would have reflected part of the inner journey. Perhaps he would have even returned to representational art in such a way that he could have expressed old mythological forms with a new luminous and transformative power. After all, to go into absolute nothingness and return is a death and rebirth experience, at least according to the Jungian school. So maybe such an experience would have led to a rebirth of traditional symbols. Making new out of the old, so to speak. But Rothko, like most of modern mankind in the West at that time, had rejected the transformative power of all traditional symbols, so he too became trapped in the spiritual wasteland.

This idea leads me to where I began -- his 1957 work, "White and Greens in Blue". This work appears to me as a midpoint in his transition from bright colors to dark colors. It is a work of great confidence and shows Rothko at the height of his artistic powers. The colors of the work represent, at least traditionally, those not of despair, but purity (white) and nature(green) in a sea of hope(blue). Perhaps Rothko was trying to capture our unconscious and give us the same transformative experience as Fra Angelico also desired when painting a Madonna, thus helping us with our modern day despair. Nothing is more heroic and the artistic sacrifice is unsurpassed.

Yet, we know the end. We know about the transition to darker colors and it is even foreshadowed ever so slightly in "White and Greens in Blue" where some of the shades are turning dark. But it is perhaps at that point of participating in this work of art that we come upon a revelation and see Rothko's life and death as, in fact, the birth of the tragic hero of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And it is through this compassion for Rothko as a tragic hero that we can participate more deeply in the "idea", which is the ultimate aim of his art. By suffering with the 20<sup>th</sup> century artist as a tragic hero, our eyes and heart open and we see the predicament not only of Rothko but of modern man leading inauthentic lives during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. And by doing so, we suddenly find that we are liberated from the spiritual wasteland. But the greater the exhilaration, the deeper we experience through compassion the Rothko tragedy, as we continually come to the recognition that he took upon himself immense suffering to give our lives an experience of authenticity. So his art brings out our love and respect for his heroism but, to use Aristotelian terms for a tragedy, it also evokes fear and pity.

In that sense, Rothko as a 20<sup>th</sup> century artist assumed the mythological and religious role of a tragic hero -- a tragic hero who took upon himself the existential despair of modern man in order to liberate us from the wasteland. By trusting Rothko and then immersing ourselves as deeply as possibly into his art, we suddenly experience compassion for the very predicament of modern man, thus dissolving the obstacles between painter, idea, and viewer. So through his art, we recognize Rothko for who he is and then participate in the "exhilarated tragic experience".