

BERTHA AND KARL LEUBSDORF GALLERY

132 East 68th Street New York, NY 10065

Robert Motherwell's Academicism: A Review Christa Noel Robbins

February 18, 2015

Robert Motherwell was a central figure within the New York School of Abstract Expressionism. A lyrical painter, his works celebrate the dynamism of paint itself; they are grand, gestural and heroic. Their value, however, lies more often than not in the economy by which this heroism is achieved. One wonders, when contemplating what I regard as his best works—works such as his *Pink Nude with Bowed Head* (1958) and *Chi Ama, Crede* (1962)—how Motherwell knew to stop when he did: to allow this particular balance of disorder and finish.

In general, however, there's a little too much finesse to almost everything Motherwell did. The spontaneity we tend to associate with Motherwell is often too carefully contrived; there's a practiced flare that comes across as overly stylized, excessively rehearsed. That's why the few paintings I admire strike me as so good. They've managed to corral the twee sentiment that so many of his paintings unleash toward something somehow more faulty, more contingent and careless—careless enough to make you appreciate its emergence despite all odds.

But these few successes are not what makes Motherwell worth writing about. What makes him worth writing about is the extraordinary role he played as an educator, organizer and publisher within and for the postwar New York scene. From the 1948 founding of the Subjects of the Artists—a school turned peer-run symposium—to the publication of *The Dada Painters and Poets* in 1951, Motherwell was an extraordinary influence on the formation of a uniquely American modernist identity

in that he gave American modernists a historical knowledge of the tradition they were emerging into. A small, but far-from-insignificant aspect of this influence is on display right now at Hunter College in the form of an exhibition dedicated to Motherwell's talents as a teacher. Curated by Howard Singerman, the newly appointed chair of Hunter's Department of Art and Art History, the exhibition features small-scale works by Motherwell himself, alongside works by William Baziotos, Fritz Bultman, Richard Lippold, Ray Parker and George Sugarman—artists Motherwell brought to Hunter as he expanded the Department to focus increasingly on experimental modernist art and theory over and above practical and applied arts.

The exhibition features several good works by each of these artists, including a collection of small-scale figurative paintings by Motherwell. In addition to the art works on display, several archival documents are showcased, including Motherwell's syllabi and letters of recommendation for the hire of artists like Baziotos and Parker. It is here, in the manner in which the exhibition allows us to glimpse the material details of Motherwell's role as an art teacher in the early fifties, that its value truly lies. For just as Motherwell took it as his task to introduce American artists to modernist and avant-garde artists from Europe, so he based his curriculum at Hunter around the study not of technique or "foundations," but the artist him or herself. It was only by studying the artist, Motherwell contended, that one's own path to art can be forged: "The way to learn to paint—to begin one's orientation, I mean—is to hang around artists." This may sound like an appeal to see art and life as one, a theory of expression where artists need not study discipline and technique but only the world and their place in it, and it certainly is that. But it is also an appeal to think of the practice of art as one that emerges out of an intense and intimate engagement with the community of practitioners who have defined the field one wishes to enter.[1]

Catherine Craft recently characterized that community as an "audience of artists," demonstrating the manner in which American modernism was formed in and around a community of viewers.[2] It is just such a viewing practice that Motherwell aimed to cultivate in his students by introducing them to the most radical modernist artists of the day. The emphasis on studying artists over technique is also present in

open set

the syllabi that the Hunter exhibition puts on display, including one for a course called “The Artist and Modern Society.” The facsimile of Motherwell’s syllabus that was mounted for the exhibition features his hand-written annotations, including a correction of the title of the first section of the course. What was originally named “The Social Problem of Modern Art,” was revised to read “The Public’s Problem with Modern Art,” demonstrating his view that the artist is worthy of study for exactly the manner in which he or she challenges the public on both aesthetic and ethical grounds. The disregard for technique in the young artist’s education is reflected in Motherwell’s own, in his opting for a degree in philosophy over a degree in the fine arts. That decision demonstrates Motherwell’s conviction that artists must know about the world as they are as much ethical and aesthetic beings as they are artistic ones (Motherwell: “Every aesthetic decision is ultimately ethical in origin”). Artists must also know other artists. Technique may or may not follow: that is up to the artists themselves.

Maybe it was this emphasis on knowingness, this extraordinary academicism, that rendered Motherwell’s own pictorial practice so uneven. There’s a smartness there that is at times cringe-worthy. That smartness may not have served Motherwell’s practice every time, but it certainly served that of his peers and his students. Without Motherwell’s academicism, his close study of modernism and his desire to share it, the New York School may never have materialized, at least not with such a perfect combination of historical consciousness and material grace.

[1] All Motherwell quotes are taken from Howard Singerman’s excellent catalog essay in *Robert Motherwell and the New York School at Hunter* (Dedalus Foundation 2015).

[2] Catherine Craft, *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<http://www.open-set.com/cnrobbins/reviews/robert-motherwells-academicism-a-review/>