

The New York Times



ABOVE, JULIEN JOURDES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; BELOW, THE JEWISH MUSEUM/HERBERT FERBER ESTAT

# Rivalry Played Out On Canvas and Page

Art is long, art criticism is often very, very brief, its Internet afterlife notwithstanding. Its viability relies on a mixture of prose style, soundbite concepts, timing and its ability to clarify visual experience. Naming a major art movement can also help embed a critic in a period's cultural achievement or its mythology.

**ROBERTA SMITH**  
ART REVIEW

Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg met many of these requirements, especially the myth part. Tenacious Jewish intellectuals formed by the leftist ferment of New York between the world wars, both entered the 1940s as lapsing Marxists drawn to culture and especially the new painting they saw emerging around them. In the late 1940s and '50s they were Abstract Expressionism's most prominent champions, defining its leaders, principles and achievements, often in diametric opposition to each other. Mounting mutual dislike was their bond.

Rosenberg and Greenberg are reunited in "Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning and American Art, 1940-1976," a fast-moving exhibition at the Jewish Museum. Their names aren't on the marquee, but their rivalry provides the structure for this exceedingly handsome if somewhat peripatetic show. It was organized by Norman L. Kleeblatt, the museum's chief curator, in consultation with curators from the museums to which it will travel: Douglas Dreishpoon of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and Charlotte Eyerman of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Greenberg and Rosenberg were giants among giants — sharing drinks, opinions and insults with painters like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman. Greenberg especially personified the arrogant critic brilliantly defining and then relentlessly pursuing his agenda, and his work continues to inspire study, debate and denunciation.

Writing with a clear Olympian style that nonetheless had intonations of a sportscaster calling a horse race, he formulated a narrowing, historically inevitable endgame for modernism: All art mediums would remain discrete while being reduced, by successive innovations, to their essences. For painting this meant abstraction, flatness and the elimination of touch. Pollock, dancing around the canvas flinging paint, was his ideal. At least until the late 1950s, when he decided that Newman's and Rothko's expanses of color pointed to the next big thing: Color Field painting.

Rosenberg wrote turgidly, tangling his thoughts up in parables, pronouncements and historical analogies, and, in the beginning at least, mentioning contemporary artists and artworks infrequently. Philosophical by

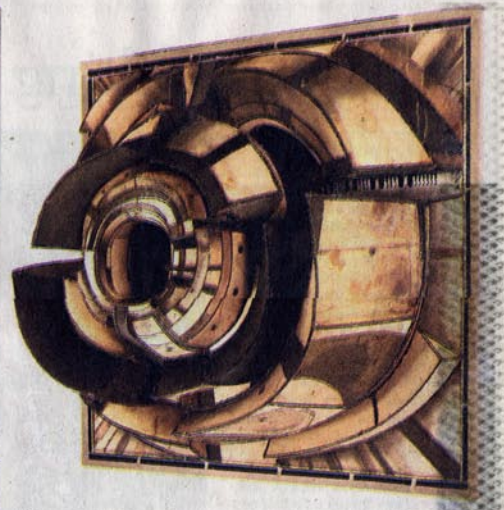
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Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning and American Art, 1940-1976 at the Jewish Museum includes, from left above, Willem de Kooning's "Gotham News" (1955), and Jackson Pollock's "Convergence" (1952), and at left, Herbert Ferber's "Surrational Zeus II" (1947).



JULIEN JOURDES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON/LEE BONTECOU, KNOELDER &amp; COMPANY, NEW YORK

From left, Arshile Gorky's "Liver Is the Cock's Comb" (1944), Hans Hofmann's "Fantasia" (1943), and "Sanctum Sanctorum" (1962), also by Hofmann. Above, Lee Bontecou's "Untitled" (1962).

## A Rivalry Played Out on Canvas and Page

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nature and influenced by Sartre, he saw painting as a spontaneous, existential act, a raging with brush against the universe that conveyed the very essence of the artist's being. Rosenberg famously characterized the painter's canvas "as an arena in which to act" and found his ideal in De Kooning, whose canvases were thick with loaded brushwork, alive with elegant angst and widely influential. Rosenberg gave the new style its first name: Action Painting, pinpointing a performative aspect in postwar art that is still being explored.

"Action/Abstraction" is not so much a historical survey as a series of lavishly illustrated talking points. It proceeds through various pairings and groupings that illuminate who Greenberg and Rosenberg promoted or ignored, where they differed or overlapped. They shared, for example, an abhorrence of mass culture and an ambivalence about

"Action/Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning and American Art, 1940-1976" is at the Jewish Museum through Sept. 21; 1109 Fifth Avenue, at 92nd Street, (212) 423-3271.

their Jewishness and a love of Barnett Newman's painting.

Concentrating at first on Abstract Expressionism's first generation, the show touches down wherever the Greenberg-Rosenberg dichotomy is best served. (It omits, for example, Adolph Gottlieb and Franz Kline.) It gives a brief nod to sculpture, which lagged behind painting during the '50s, but looks remarkably good here represented by David Smith, David Hare and especially Herbert Ferber. A section titled "Blind Spots" — work by Norman Lewis, Grace Hartigan and Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife — represents artists who were not white and male and were almost uniformly neglected by Greenberg and Rosenberg.

Three pithy "context" galleries organized by Maurice Berger, a senior researcher at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, add vividness, as does Mr. Berger's extensive timeline in the outstanding catalog (eight essays, all good). In a short film clip in the first such gallery, De Kooning asks Rosenberg, "Harold, am I an action painter?" It's a good question: Rosenberg deleted all artists' names from his best-known article, "The American Action Painters" of 1952. Also

on view are the delusional letters that Clyfford Still wrote to Rosenberg and Greenberg denouncing their (favorable) ideas about his painting, proving that a smaller art world was not always a friendlier one. The artworks and ephemera assembled here rub salt in all kinds of old wounds, even if the wounded are long gone.

The first gallery is a tour de force in itself. It lays out Abstract Expressionism's greatest artistic rivalry in four works by Pollock and three by De Kooning. Pollock's 1952 "Convergence" virtually explodes off the back wall, its imperious flings of red, yellow, blue and white pushed forward by a calligraphic undergrowth of black. The modest space pressurizes the large painting, but pressure becomes it.

The beginning of De Kooning's many-splendored career is represented by increasingly fraught surfaces: the inky darks and searing whites of "Black Friday," of 1948; the monstrous "Woman" of 1949-50 and the exultantly agitated "Gotham News" of 1955, contesting Pollock's porousness with congested folds of paint and space.

In the juxtapositions that follow, Greenberg's notion of art as

### ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional images from "Action/Abstraction" at the Jewish Museum:  
[nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)

formal problem solving contrasts repeatedly with Rosenberg's notion of art as an intuitive, hard-won distillation of a life lived. But the main conversation is between the artworks. While sharing burning colors, the vibrating forms of Arshile Gorky's hallucinatory "Liver Is the Cock's Comb" of 1944 clash with the martial push-pull of Hans Hofmann's "Sanctum Sanctorum" of 1962. Still paints as if he is simultaneously plastering and frescoing a wall, while Ad Reinhardt divides his surfaces with increasing precision and decreasing color or contrasts, culminating in an especially colorful "black" painting. Rothko and Newman debate the effects of soft and hard edges on fields of saturated color.

The similarities exceed the differences, raising the falseness of dichotomies. Were Greenberg's and Rosenberg's views really so far apart, or, for the usual deeply personal reasons, did they just find certain aspects of art easier

to talk about than others? (In the catalog Caroline A. Jones elaborates on Greenberg's need for order.)

The show's second half signals Abstract Expressionism's growing acceptance with pop culture artifacts, including a jigsaw puzzle of "Convergence." Neither Greenberg nor Rosenberg was able fully to accept the art that followed, but here the similarities end. Greenberg more or less squandered his reputation in his relentless promotion of Color Field painting and related sculpture, giving formalism a bad name while writing less and less. His blinkered view is represented by the homogeneity of Helen Frankenthaler's breakthrough stain painting "Mountains and Sea," of 1952, as well as works by Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Anthony Caro and Anne Truitt.

Rosenberg meanwhile kept looking, stayed relatively supple and went on writing. His prose perked up; names were named, and change was countenanced, as when he defended Philip Guston's widely renounced return to figuration. Coining the phrase "anxious objects" for the new art of the early 1960s, Rosenberg loosened his ideas of action and painterly gesture to include the

early efforts of younger artists like Claes Oldenburg, Peter Saul, Jasper Johns and Lee Bontecou, who are all (with Guston) represented here.

He saw works like Mr. Oldenburg's paint-dripped, plaster-and-cloth rendition of a heart-shaped funeral wreath as uneasily straddling the dividing line between painting and sculpture and art and reality. (Interestingly, at almost the same time, the younger critic-sculptor Donald Judd applied the less anxious term, "specific objects" to the work of some of the same artists.)

The show ends with very different works by the painter Frank Stella and Allan Kaprow, the inventor of Happenings, that push the two critics' fundamental idea to their logical conclusion. The orderly repeating black bands of Mr. Stella's 1959 "Marriage of Reason and Squalor" fulfilled Greenberg's ideal of flatness. And the disorder of Mr. Kaprow's participatory Happening-environment, "Words" of 1962 (recreated here by the artist Martha Rosler) pushed Rosenberg's notion of action into real time and space and included the audience. Neither critic was impressed but, as is so often the case, art went on without them.