

The Museum of Modern Art

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Robert Motherwell: Lyric Suite

Some thirty "ink paintings" by Robert Motherwell will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from September 8 through October 13. Part of a series of 600 works entitled Lyric Suite, twenty-four of the small paintings on exhibition have been given to the Museum by the artist in memory of his close friend, the American poet Frank O'Hara. This generous gift makes it possible to show a portion of Lyric Suite, which, due to its size, can perhaps never be exhibited in its entirety. Directed and installed in the Northeast Galleries on the first floor by Eila Kokkinen, Assistant Curator for Drawings of The Museum of Modern Art's Department of Drawings and Prints, the series represents an important phase of development in Motherwell's work.

Motherwell's longstanding concern with "automatism" was in part clarified by questions put to him by Frank O'Hara in the winter of 1964/65 while O'Hara was preparing The Museum of Modern Art's retrospective on Motherwell's work. The "ink paintings", completed in April and May of 1965, are based upon the principles of automatism. On an impulse, Motherwell purchased a thousand sheets of oriental paper. The idea for the series came to him a few weeks later "out of the blue": "...PAINT THE THOUSAND SHEETS WITHOUT INTERRUPTION...", without self-imposed critical judgement, without change or revision after execution. Using sable brushes of various sizes and standard colored artist's inks on absorbent Japanese "rice" paper, Motherwell worked rapidly, finishing ten to fifty paintings a day. The inks, brushed or accidentally dripped from the brush, spread freely, forming unexpected patterns. Occasionally inks bled at the edges and dried into unanticipated shades.

In his answers to several queries made by The Museum of Modern Art in the summer of 1969, Motherwell described his procedure:

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Unable to control spread of ink, which varied according to heat and humidity -- never knew what one would end as, until 'set'; each picture would change before my eyes after I had finished working it, sometimes for hours -- as the ink spread, like a spot of oil. I repeat, because of the technical process of spreading and drying after I had ended my participation, the pictures literally continued to paint themselves as the ink spread in collaboration with the paper. Was tempted to use blotting paper at a miraculously fine moment on some of them, but never did. A few spread until a square inch or two of white was all that was left of the original blank white paper.

The paintings thus executed are remarkable for a freshness, clarity, and purity of feeling which the artist believes has reappeared in much of his later work.

Commenting on the series, Motherwell says, "No artist should be his own critic. I wasn't with the Lyric Suite. I like it as much as any of my works. The feeling seems pure and clear, like mountain air. Lyricism has its own kind of beauty, as the tragic (the Spanish Elegies) and the ironical (some of the collages) have theirs."

Additional information and photos available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Maeve Kinkead, Assistant, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 956-7501, 7294.