

# JUDITH GODWIN'S CRITIQUE OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Modern art is a particularly intriguing area of investigation, in part because the changing cast of players causes us to reevaluate previous conceptions and posit new ideas. A case in point is our understanding of Abstract Expressionism, which has changed dramatically over the past half century. In the 1950s this style was thought to be concerned with risk and existential angst until Robert Rauschenberg demonstrated how improvisational gestures can be sophisticated forms of artifice. In the 1960s color field painters such as Jules Olitski alluded to the Rococo fantasies that were incipient in Pollock's seemingly chaotic drips and thus deprived them of their angst. At the same time Roy Lichtenstein turned the Abstract Expressionist gesture into a grand icon. And more recently Robert Arneson has poked fun at Pollock's role as a meaningful persona for a number of artists including himself.

In addition to these changes to Abstract Expressionism, art historians in the past decade have become increasingly aware of the important critiques of this style undertaken by women who worked on the fringes of this art. Although such artists as Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, and Joan Mitchell might appear to be merely perpetuating this art, they in fact were reevaluating its macho aspects and repositing its values in terms of their own concerns with landscape and with themselves. Even though Judith Godwin has not been considered part of this group, this mini-retrospective clearly demonstrates the way that she too has reconceived Abstract Expressionism in terms of her own experience as a woman.

Similar to Krasner and Mitchell, Godwin has taken Pollock's famous assertion "I am nature" and used it as a way of rethinking the traditional female/nature model of reality that has dominated artistic invention since the Renaissance. According to this paradigm, the male artist uses his mental powers to reconceive and thus dominate a female and supine nature, making it totally his own. In the process of reconstituting this view of the world the female Abstract Expressionists have tended to view nature as an interactive process which joins the artist and the world in a new inextricable union. Instead of finding this internal nature threatening as Pollock did, they have discovered it to be composed of separate yet interactive elements engaged in a meaningful abstract drama.

Judith Godwin was particularly well placed for such an undertaking. A native Virginian and the daughter of two devoted gardeners, she has found the nature metaphor an engaging way of positing the modernist self. Her early training with Hans Hofmann at his school in Provincetown and New York predisposed her to find abstract equivalents for her own experiences and to reconfigure nature in terms of the dynamic tensions of push/pull which he so eloquently described. Her early *Parrot* (1953) represents an understanding of Hofmann's tenets and a desire to place the abstract elements of color and form at the service of a familiar, engaging, and allusive nature. Of particular importance to this work are the abstract spirals and swathes of paint which function as independent nonobjective elements at the same time that they support the allusions to the bird cited in the title.

Similar to her contemporaries, Godwin was intrigued with jazz, particularly its contrapuntal rhythms and ability to encapsulate and sustain a mood. Her interest in jazz is apparent in *Blue Figures* (1954). In this work she reposit aspects of Abstract Expressionism in terms of interactive elements. Instead of sustaining an angst-ridden view of the modernist self, she regards this self as sustained by pulsating rhythms and enclosed in a protective realm formed of the dynamic relationships between space and objects which she had learned in Hofmann's school.

Part of the importance of Godwin's work in the 1950s depends on her ability to assimilate a range of

different currents into her work. Beginning in the mid-1950s she formed a friendly association with Franz Kline and a long-term familial relationship with Kenzo Okada who became a surrogate father. These two friendships have a distinct bearing on her art as *Divisions* (1955) and *Yellow Square* (1956) clearly attest. In both works she joins Kline's broad swathes with the subtlety of the Momoyama painting important to Okada. In addition, her readings of D.T. Suzuki, whom she met through Okada, reinforced her own leanings toward a Zen-inspired definition of ultimate reality as occurring in the prosaic familiar elements of daily life. In her work paint is ultimate realization and simply paint. It accords with the koan that describe satori as changing one's awareness but not one's tasks; even when enlightened one will continue to sweep floors and carry water.

In the 1950s Godwin's investigations were reinforced through the hegemony of Abstract Expressionism, her close association with prominent male members of the group, and her position at the Betty Parsons Gallery. In the 1960s with the death of Kline, Okada's frequent trips to Japan, Parson's closing of Section Eleven, and the development of such competing avant-garde styles as Pop, Op, and New Realism, her world changed. Godwin began dividing her time between New York, Connecticut, and Virginia. Landscape continued to be important for her, and Abstract Expressionism remained of central significance to her art. She worked more broadly and became increasingly involved with relationships between positive and negative spaces. One might say that her work of the 1960s and early 1970s develops the unresolved late style of Franz Kline. Perhaps, because Godwin acquired Kline's house in 1964 and restored it together with its garden, Kline was omnipresent in her thoughts. At any rate she used color in a way that he might well have appreciated. In such works as *Red Monument* (1960), *Mars Study* (1965), and *Red Lightning* (1966), she maintains strong value contrasts at the same time that she creates rich chromatic effects. Whereas Kline's paintings in color frequently become murky because saturated hues interfere with value contrasts, Godwin is able to achieve brilliant color without sacrificing structure. Her ability to view negative space as positive and to see color as a primary determinant of form is crucial to her success.

In *Suspension* (1971), as in a number of related pieces of this time, Godwin undertakes a feminist critique of Kline's black and white works. In this painting an imprimatura of pink forms a radiating surface for thin veils of white paint and thicker passages of black. The two, together with the purples of ochre, create a subtle, radiant, and diaphanous canvas that diverges from the harsh contrasts of Kline's black and white paintings. Instead of force and aggression, Godwin uses subtlety and understatement.

Long interested in dance and for years a devoted follower of Martha Graham, Godwin began in the late 1970s to create great sweeping arcs against broad fields of color suggestive of landscapes. In these works she is as much intrigued with Barbara Morgan's famous photographs of Graham pictured with sweeping heavy skirts and dynamic poses as she is with Graham's dance. Morgan's photographs provided Godwin with a way to hold movement in suspension while maintaining an essential tension. Over the years she has moved from the force of *Tropic Zone* (1978) to a stage with several abstract performers as seen in *Monolith* (1987) and *Capricorn* (1990). Even in *Purple Raven* (1985), which presents an abstract shiny purple and black bird, the dynamics between the flying form above creates a tension with the black shape below and the surrounding architectural structure.

Judith Godwin has plumbed Abstract Expressionism for a personal meaning that is consistent with her own orientation to the world. She has extended its incipient nature metaphor and found her inner realm to be compatible with an open and at times abandoned light-filled nature as can be seen in *Green for Danger* (1982) and *Sirocco* (1992). In place of the existential terror of the unknowable which plagued Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko among others, Godwin has found gesture the visual equivalent of dance and the so-called void part of an embracing world of mutually reinforcing positive and negative spaces. One might say that whereas most of the male Abstract Expressionists were approaching a dominated and restricted internal nature and trying to find a way to acknowledge its significance and need for freedom, Godwin's art represents the important next step of reveling in its freedom. Whereas

they approached the threshold of ecological thinking, Godwin, along with such prescient female Abstract Expressionists as Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell, is able to enter this realm through her art where she can enjoy some of its benefits.

Robert Hobbs

Robert Hobbs is the Rhoda Thalheimer Endowed Professor of American Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has written widely on Abstract Expressionism, and is currently completing a monograph on Lee Krasner.

## GODWIN: ON BECOMING AN ARTIST

That painting and sculpture are not skills, that can be taught in reference to pre-established criteria, whether academic or *modern*, but a process, whose content is *found*, subtle and deeply felt; that no true artist ends with the style that he expected to have when he began, anymore than anyone's life unrolls in the particular manner that one expected when young; that it is only by giving oneself up completely to the painting medium that one finds oneself and one's own style...such is the experience of the School of New York.

*The School of New York*

Robert Motherwell, 1 January 1951

Expressionism is one fundamental approach in the history and practice of modern art--an individualistic art, bonded to the artist's emotional state. In the figurative mode, expressionism utilizes distortion, exaggeration and strong color to convey rude, shocking, and candid communications of truthful feeling. The German and Austrian expressionists of the first quarter of the 20th century come first to mind--Kirchner, Heckel, Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, Beckmann, Kokoschka, Schiele and their many colleagues. At the same time Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch are prototypical expressionists of the late 19th/early 20th-centuries, as Grunewald remains the preeminent exemplar from the 16th.

In its abstract mode, expressionism was first recognized in the improvisations of Vassily Kandinsky, c.1910-13, wherein lines, color areas, and polyphonic imagery-systems interact while also coalescing into a fresh and decorative unity. Kandinsky's non-referential color, linear meanders, and arabesque are the external evidence of inner tensions, spontaneously arrived at, and perhaps less than entirely clear to the artist. While his works of the period owe much to the transitional period of the Murnau city- and landscapes, they achieved an immediate life of their own, crowded with idiosyncratic detail, independent color, vigorous linear motives, rough and smooth paint handling, and an intuitive sense of visual rhyme and balance. The artist's subjective feelings were rendered in a spontaneous and individualistic fashion.

By 1950 Judith Godwin was a regularly exhibiting artist. Having studied at Mary Baldwin College, in her native Virginia, she later continued her education at Richmond Professional Institute, College of William and Mary, 1951-3, and later at the Art Students League (NYC) and the Hans Hofmann School, in Provincetown and in New York. She met and came to know many of the leaders of the "first generation" of Abstract Expressionism, including Pollock, de Kooning, Kline, Rothko, and James Brooks. The world of vanguard art in the '50s was a small, little publicized, and more generously welcoming one than the one we know today. The experience of working in Hofmann's studio classes, reorganizing her learning around the systematic pedagogy and esthetics of the most distinguished teacher of modern painting, while coming to know dozens of young artists of many nations and predilections, was a stimulating and intimidating exposure that served to charge the young artist's work.