

ART REVIEW: Robert Motherwell's Grand Statements at Kasmin

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by Franklin Hill Perrell

The youngest of Abstract Expressionism's core artists, Robert Motherwell (1915-1991) brought to the movement his personal prestige, intellect, academic rigor, and first class taste. He personified the link between the Abstract Expressionists and the European Surrealist exiles by articulating the methods of free association, theory of automatism, and pre-occupations with myth and avant-garde literature that spanned both groups. In addition to gaining early fame for his paintings, Motherwell's published writings created an intellectual context that enabled the New York School to become the anointed successor to the school of Paris.

"Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell" at Kasmin's new 27th Street gallery in New York features eight of the artist's most expansive paintings and illuminates his mastery of a succession of originative styles. The first exhibition to focus exclusively on the artist's paintings of heroic scale, they convey Motherwell's aspiration to grapple with the sublime and his inventive approach to abstraction. The exhibition is on view March 21 to May 18, 2019.

Grand Inquisitor, 1989-90, measuring almost 15 feet wide, announces the theme of the exhibition. A variant on the artist's famed Spanish Elegies, the painting is one of the "Hollow Men" series, named after a T.S. Eliot poem. Here, a bold band of black and an expansive swath of cadmium red, topped with searing mustard yellow (like the stripes in the Spanish flag), provides the contrasting background for three gestural, honey tinted ovals (which can suggest figures).



“The Grand Inquisitor” by Robert Motherwell, 1989-90, installed at Kasmin. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 171 1/8 inches, 182.9 x 434.7 cm. Private Collection. © 2019 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography by Christopher Stach. Courtesy Kasmin.

Even larger, *Dublin, 1916, Black and Tan*, 1963-64, stretches 17 feet and features a palette of cadmium red-orange, light blue, and deep pecan ochre, with black. A central abstract form, like a giant flag, evokes the Irish revolution from the early twentieth century. Emblazoned upon it is an emblematic shape, like a spade or arrow, painted in a rich chestnut hue, with evident speed and splatter. The white vertical below becomes the flag’s pole.

The flag is painted in Motherwell’s favored mix of cobalt and ultramarine with white, showing vestiges of orange, to produce a luminous effect. The artist’s engagement with Irish culture via James Joyce’s writing is common knowledge; less well known is the fact that he had an Irish grandfather.



“Dublin 1916, with Black and Tan” by Robert Motherwell, 1964. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 204 inches. Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection, New York State, Office of General Services. © 2019 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by Christopher Stach. Courtesy Kasmin.

The Forge, 1965-66/ 1967-68, evokes gravitas and mystery. A painting within a painting, it shows a sky blue horizontal box containing a wedge-like anvil shape. This arrangement is framed by several conjoined rectangles in shades of black. Motherwell’s “Open” paintings feature a charcoal outline of architectural shapes on a single color background. The imagery of *Open # 97: The Spanish House*, 1969, was sourced from a photo of a house in Cadaques, Spain, which Motherwell kept on display in his studio.



“Open No. 97: The Spanish House” by Robert Motherwell, 1969, installed in “Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell” at Kasmin. © 2019 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography by Diego Flores. Courtesy of Kasmin.

Among the other paintings, *Forced Entry*, 1961, is at once elegant and simple like a giant Matisse ink drawing. *Open No. 60: Mottled Brown and Green*, 1968, features a distinctive green under painting subsumed within a brushily over painted hue blended of sienna and ochre. The requisite form of a door or window is outlined in brushed white paint with adjacent touches of bright emerald green.



Installation of “Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell” at Kasmin. From left is “Open No. 97: The Spanish House, 1969”; “Open in Grey with White Edge,” 1971; “Open No. 60: In Mottled Brown and Green,” 1968-70; and “The Forge,” 1965-66/1967-68. © 2019 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photography by Diego Flores. Courtesy of Kasmin.

Motherwell may be the first major artist in American art history who emerged fully formed as an abstract painter. Asked about his early realist work, he answered: “There isn’t any,” during a 1971 Oral History interview with Paul Cummings for the Smithsonian Institute Archives of American Art.

Robert Motherwell’s life was, in many ways, exceptional. Coming from the west coast, and neither

impoverished or from an immigrant background, he bypassed the WPA and the typical studio art training of Abstract Expressionists. A precocious child artist, he won a scholarship at aged twelve to the Los Angeles Art Institute. His banker father gave him a confusing mixture of support and resistance to this interest.

At Harvard and Stanford, the artist studied philosophy as a way of simultaneously satisfying his cultural impulses and the parental mandate for an academic career. At Columbia, his professor Meyer Shapiro, told him to focus on making his own art. Motherwell was inspired further by friends among the [Surrealists group](#) (Roberto Matta, Max Ernst, Andre Breton), which led dealer Peggy Guggenheim to give him his first exhibition at her gallery, Art of this Century, in 1944.

In 1945, Motherwell bought four acres at the corner of Georgica and Jericho Roads in East Hampton, NY for \$1,200. His unique Quonset-hut style house (especially anomalous in the Georgica area), built by mid-century modern architect [Pierre Chareau](#), is no longer extant. Until 1952, Motherwell painted there, producing what he once nostalgically described as his best work. Many of these artworks were shown in a splendid exhibition, "[Robert Motherwell: The East Hampton Years, 1944-1952](#)," at Guild Hall in 2014.

Kasmin's exhibition "Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell" is the gallery's fourth in collaboration with the [Dedalus Foundation](#), the foundation started by Motherwell to further the understanding of modern art and modernism.

Motherwell's paintings at "Sheer Presence" are grand statements. Their sumptuousness arises from a consistent aesthetic: unabashedly beautiful, if spare or concise. The evident engagement with philosophical and political issues, and the symbolism of such elements as windows, doors, forges, and flags, hints at the artist's personal complexity. As manifestations of the Abstract Expressionist ethos, they exemplify Harold Rosenberg's definition of painting "as an arena in which to act."



Robert Motherwell in his Provincetown studio, 1969, with Open No. 97: The Spanish House. © 2019 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy Kasmin.

BASIC FACTS: “Sheer Presence: Monumental Paintings by Robert Motherwell” is on view March 21 to May 18, 2019 at Kasmin, 509 W. 27 Street, New York, NY 10001. www.kasmingallery.com.

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