

Robert Motherwell – Pure Painting

12 October 2023 – 14 January 2024

Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien

PRESS KIT

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Facts & Figures

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Curator:	Evelyn Benesch and Susan Davidson
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Press Release

Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien shows “Robert Motherwell - Pure Painting”

The exhibition will run from 12 October 2023 to 14 January 2024 at the exhibition hall at Freyung in Vienna. The first Robert Motherwell retrospective in Europe since 25 years.

With “Robert Motherwell – Pure Painting”, the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien is showing the work of a leading representative of Abstract Expressionism, the monumental, gestural movement in painting that began in the late 1940s and is regarded as the first original form of American Post-War art. The exhibition will be the first retrospective since 1976 held in Austria that deals with the work of this important American artist, and the first in Europe since 1998.

Motherwell, the intellectual counterpart to the more media-effective Jackson Pollock, has close links to European literature and painting. His figurative beginnings are rooted in French Surrealism; in the mid-1950s he developed a purely abstract painting style in large format as his artistic language. His significance lies in the formation and definition of American abstract painting after the Second World War.

In addition to his artistic endeavours, Motherwell was deeply influenced by literature – James Joyce’s “Ulysses” (1922), for instance, was a lifelong literary companion. He was also a pre-eminent publisher, author, and critic, promoting modern and contemporary art from across the globe. In the series Documents of Modern Art, he edited texts by Guillaume Apollinaire and a Dada anthology, among other manuscripts. In his 1951 catalogue foreword to a group exhibition with fellow artists Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and others, Motherwell coined the term “New York School” that defined the artistic intentions arising in the city to differentiate the style from the contemporary École de Paris.

Motherwell was also a well-regarded teacher: first at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, at the time the most progressive educational institute for art; then at the short lived The Subjects of the Artist school conceived by Motherwell with Rothko and others; and at Hunter College in New York.

Motherwell's oeuvre is marked by variations, repetitions, and the ever-recurring preoccupation with one theme or compositional design. Thus, he worked on various series over decades, repeatedly revisiting earlier works. The exhibition shows his most important cycles: "Elegies to the Spanish Republic", a reaction to the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), which Motherwell viewed as a metaphor of every injustice. The dominant archaic forms and the strict black and white of his "Elegies to the Spanish Republic" series are his most recognized hallmark. From 1948 until his death, he produced more than 150 "Elegies" as an unforgettable commemoration of human suffering, and abstract, poetic symbol of the inexorable cycle of life and death.

An intensely intellectual painter, Motherwell permeated his abstract works with emotion yet at the same time with asceticism reflective of the human psyche. The series aptly named "Opens" – resulting from the relationship between the proportions of two paintings leaning one against the other in his studio – which preoccupied him from 1967 until 1981, likewise in more than 200 examples, stands for this aspect. Here, in a minimalistic, "pure" kind of painting marked by austerity and reduction, Motherwell transports emotions by means of sophisticated colour systems and reserved expression. Ultimately, he utilised this practice to arrive at his main interest – "pure painting".

"Robert Motherwell – Pure Painting" is produced in cooperation with The Modern in Fort Worth/Texas. The exhibition includes around forty representative works from Motherwell's total oeuvre from important private collections and major, mainly American museums, as: Guggenheim Bilbao Museum; The Art Institute of Chicago; Denver Art Museum; Tate, London; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart; Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach/Florida.

Curators are Evelyn Benesch for the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien and Susan Davidson for the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

Biography

Robert Motherwell

1915–1940 Robert Burns Motherwell is born on January 24, 1915, in Aberdeen, Washington, USA, the son of a banker; the family settles in California by 1927. During a trip to Europe in 1935 he buys his first copy of “Ulysses” by James Joyce. Between 1936 and 1939, he studies philosophy and literature at Stanford and Harvard.

1940–1950 Motherwell studies art history at Columbia University in New York, but soon decides to pursue a career as an artist. He socializes with the exiled European Surrealists André Breton and Marcel Duchamp and participates in the experiments with Automatism initiated by Roberto Matta. In Peggy Guggenheim’s museum/gallery, Art of This Century, where he receives his first solo exhibition, he meets, among others, Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock; he also forms friendships with Mark Rothko and David Smith. Motherwell joins the Samuel M. Kootz Gallery.

1950–1960 Motherwell marries Betty Little in spring 1950; his daughters Jeannie and Lise are born in 1953 and 1955.

Motherwell is included in the iconic group “Irascible 18” photograph published in “Life” magazine (January 1951) related to the protest regarding the exclusion of abstract painting in the exhibition American Painting Today at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He is now represented by the Sidney Janis Gallery.

After his divorce from Betty Little in 1958, Motherwell marries painter Helen Frankenthaler.

1960–1970 In 1962 Motherwell purchases a house and studio that face Cape Cod’s water in Provincetown, Massachusetts; he rents various studios in New York City in order to produce his large-scale paintings. In 1964 he

changes to the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery. A feature in “Newsweek” and a photo series by Alexander Liberman in “Vogue” is evidence of his growing recognition. In 1965 a retrospective is organized at the Museum of Modern Art, one of the first artists of his generation to receive this tribute.

1970–1990 Motherwell buys a carriage house Greenwich, Connecticut; he sets up separate painting, print and drawing studios in ancillary buildings on the property. After his separation from Frankenthaler, in 1972, he marries photographer Renate Ponsold.

In 1976 a Motherwell retrospective tours Europe; it travels to the Museum of the 20th Century in Vienna in spring 1977. Motherwell attends the opening.

He paints the wall picture “Reconciliation Elegy” for the east wing of the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., designed by I. M. Pei, where it is installed in 1978.

Diverse awards honour Motherwell’s life’s work, including the Grande Médaille de Vermeil de la Ville de Paris in 1978, the Medalla de Oro de las Bellas Artes in 1986, and the National Medal of Arts, presented by President George W. Bush at the White House in 1989.

1991 Motherwell renames his foundation, the Dedalus Foundation after Stephen Dedalus, the alter ego of James Joyce in “Ulysses”. The Dedalus Foundation’s mission not only administers Motherwell’s artistic legacy, but also supports the communication and understanding of modern art in general.

Robert Motherwell dies from the effects of a stroke in July 1991 in Provincetown.

Quotes

Robert Motherwell

“I think the so-called ‘abstractness’ of Modern Art is not that it is about abstract things, but that it’s an art really in the tradition of French Symbolist poetry, which is to say, an art that refuses to spell everything out. It’s a kind of shorthand, where a great deal is simply assumed.” (1960)

“I essentially work by revision. It is very rarely that I paint a picture from beginning to end and that’s it; actually I make a beginning, there are parts of it I like which I retain, there are parts I dislike and I revise. Sometimes the greater part of the picture I revise, and in most of my more serious pictures I would guess that they are the result of a great many revisions.” (1964)

“The major decisions in the process of painting,” he wrote, “are on the grounds of truth, not taste.” (1950)

“Making an ‘Elegy’ is like building a temple, an altar, a ritual place. Unlike the rest of my work, the ‘Elegies’ are, for the most part, public statements. The Elegies reflect the internationalist in me, interested in the historical forces of the twentieth century, with strong feelings about the conflicting forces in it.” (1983)

“Pictures no more than poems change anything. But they can represent that freedom of choice without censorship so precious to the human spirit and its integrity.” (1986)

“What modern art is, both its greatness and its limitations, is an art of individuals.” (1985)

“My ultimate heroes are Zen masters on one side and Piero della Francesca on the other.” (1985)

The Catalog

Robert Motherwell – Pure Painting

Edited by Susan Davidson

Published by Hatje Cantz

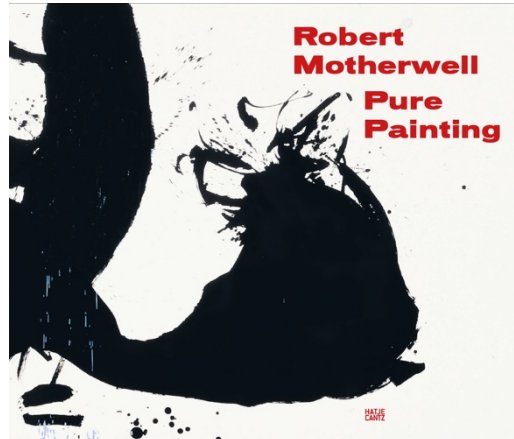
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Available for 37 euros in the shop at the Bank Austria Kunstforum Wien and in well-stocked bookstores

An intensely intellectual painter, Robert Motherwell is renowned for his distinctive Abstract Expressionist style. The seminal artist permeated his gestural works with an expressionism and austerity reflective of the human psyche; at the same time his oeuvre addressed political and humanitarian themes. “Robert Motherwell – Pure Painting” is an in-depth exploration of his artistic practice. Leading art scholars examine the American artist’s turn from Surrealism to abstraction and analyze the major series that developed over his fifty-year career. The catalog highlights Motherwell’s practice of repeated revisions on his paintings, the nineteenth-century French painting tradition, and investigates his relationship to Spanish techniques and processes, with an emphasis on their underlying political significance.



ROBERT MOTHERWELL – PURE PAINTING

Credits

001		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Two Figures with Cerulean Blue Stripe</i>, 1960 Öl auf Leinwand 213,4 × 277,5 cm Privatbesitz. Courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
002		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Elegy to the Spanish Republic</i>, um 1962/1982 Magna und Acryl auf Leinwand 182,9 × 244,5 cm Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Museumsankauf, Friends of Art Endowment Fund © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
003		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>The Garden Window</i>, 1969/1990 Acryl und Kohle auf Leinwand 153,4 × 101,9 cm Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Museumsankauf, Friends of Art Endowment Fund © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
004		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Summer Open with Mediterranean Blue</i>, 1974 Acryl und Kohle auf Leinwand 122,2 × 274,6 cm Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Museumsankauf, Friends of the Art Endowment Fund © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>

005		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Face of the Night (For Octavio Paz)</i>, um 1977-79/1981 Acryl auf Leinwand 182,9 x 458,2 cm Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Museumsankauf, Friends of Art Endowment Fund © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
006		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Stephen's Iron Crown</i>, 1981 Acryl auf Leinwand 223,5 x 305,1 cm Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Museumsankauf, Sid W. Richardson Foundation Endowment Fund © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
007		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Caprice No. 3</i>, 1962 Öl auf Leinwand 167,6 x 121,9 cm Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Eliza S. Paine Fund und Schenkung der Dedalus Foundation, 1997 © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
008		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>The Little Spanish Prison</i>, 1941–1944/um 1959/1969 Öl auf Leinwand 69,2 x 43,5 cm The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Schenkung Renate Ponsold Motherwell © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>

009		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Wall Painting with Stripes</i>, 1944/1945 Öl auf Leinwand 137,2 x 170,5 cm The Art Institute of Chicago, Ankauf mit Mitteln zur Verfügung gestellt von Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman zu Ehren ihrer Enkel Ellen Steinberg und Peter Steinberg, Schenkung der Lannan Foundation © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
010		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Je t'aime No. II</i>, 1955 Öl und Kohle auf Leinwand 137,2 x 182,9 cm Privatbesitz © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
011		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>Elegy to the Spanish Republic No. 103</i>, 1965 Öl auf Leinwand 182,9 x 243,8 cm Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sof.a, Madrid © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
012		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>The Spanish Death</i>, 1975 Acryl auf Leinwand 243,8 x 189,2 cm mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Wien, Leihgabe der österreichischen Ludwig-Stiftung seit 1991 © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>

013		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>A Rose for James Joyce</i>, 1988 Acryl auf Leinwand 198,1 x 96,5 cm Privatbesitz © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>
014		<p>Robert Motherwell <i>The Feminine II</i>, 1988 Acryl und Kohle auf Leinwand 223,5 x 304,8 cm Liong Keng Kwee © Copyright 2023 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY</p>

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