

ABSTRACT

The Modern State of Being: Mystical Spirituality in Twentieth Century American Avant-Garde Painting

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The singlemost misunderstood aspect of twentieth century art is the advent of abstraction. In the aftermath of the first half of the twentieth century, modern man felt that in order to regain his humanity, in order to find freedom again, he must break free from the rational, scientific determinism that defined twentieth century reality.

Mysticism is the result of a reality in denial of natural laws, outside of rationality. This mystical reality manifested itself in the art of the twentieth century.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky asserts that pure abstraction obtains sublime transcendence. Spirituality in twentieth century art tends to attach itself to the modern artist's aspiration to achieve transcendent expression through the act of creation. In this thesis, I trace the progression of Kandinsky's tradition through the work of American avant-garde painters Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin. These three artists believed abstraction was the most powerful means by which to convey spiritual concepts of renewal, wholeness, infinitude, perfection, sublimity and transcendence in their work. Through these artists, this thesis illustrates

how the mystical spirituality of modern man manifests itself in the embrace of abstraction
in American art of the twentieth century.

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THE MODERN STATE OF BEING: MYSTICAL SPIRITUALITY IN
TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE PAINTING

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PREFACE

My freshman year at Baylor University, I was in a seminar style class called “Modernism: History, Art and Culture in the 20th century.” My memory of that class is unstructured discussion, asking questions, followed by questions about the questions. At the time, I knew I enjoyed the class, but I also knew that all of the loose ends left me mystified. In hindsight, there was method to the madness, for all those hard questions, left unanswered, became the most fruitful part of the class. What I didn’t know at the time was that the interest that class piqued, and all those unanswered questions I was left with, would percolate in my subconscious for two years before they bubbled to the surface and became the inspiration for my thesis. I was fascinated by the questions modern art raised, particularly with regard to the conception of abstraction in the twentieth century, and I realize now that unsettled feeling I had in my mind about questions I still hadn’t answered was what brought me to this line of research.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

A Modern State of Being

Academic art historians and critics still tend to discourage talking seriously about the spiritual in art. But considering how many artists continue to be motivated by spiritual urges, however the word spiritual is defined — this is something worth discussing.

— Ken Johnson, “ART REVIEW: The Modernist vs. The Mystic,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2005

Modern art is misunderstood by the typical viewer. Some accept it and venerate it; some doubt it and mock it. Most, if not all, are perplexed by it. The individual’s level of cultural experience, combined with their traditional sensibilities, or lack thereof, forms their opinion of modern art.

Take, for example, Jackson Pollock’s iconic drip painting, *Autumn Rhythm* (fig. 1). Jackson Pollock is celebrated as one of the seminal artists of the twentieth century, and his action painting style, used in *Autumn Rhythm*, garnered him this acclaim. Pollock’s choice to abandon a traditional canvas, paint, brush and structured composition, to drip paint in seemingly random motions on the floor, is his most discussed and celebrated attribute. Pollock’s drip paintings have been criticized as being chaotic, irrational, defiant of traditional art forms and even lacking in evident skill. The general viewer is conscious of the fact that *Autumn Rhythm* deserves respect as a painting, but does not truly understand what brought Pollock to paint in a purely abstract manner, and then proceed to title the result *Autumn Rhythm*.



Fig. 1. Jackson Pollock. *Autumn Rhythm*. 1950. Enamel on canvas, 105 x 207". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY.

Wassily Kandinsky opens his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, with these words: "Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions" (1). Every great work of art is an expression of humanity at that moment in history. It stands to reason that, if, as a society in general, we do not understand modern art, could it be that we have not looked at it in the context of modern man? To continue the example, what if *Autumn Rhythm* was understood through the lens of Pollock's inner life? A great deal of Pollock's inner life is infused with Jungian psychology, and in particular the concept of *automatic écriture*, writing or drawing produced without conscious intention, as if by spiritualistic origin. Pollock's action painting style is a result of spontaneous, unconscious expression of inner spirituality. The title *Autumn Rhythm* comes from Pollock's belief that he was part of nature, the embodiment of universal energy. An understanding of the inner will always inform the outer.

The general public misunderstands the advent of abstraction in the twentieth century. The general public's understanding is that abstraction is an avant-garde statement used to assert rebellion and unconventionality. While an aspect of this viewpoint is true, the modern artist's choice to use abstraction is much more complex. For the twentieth century artist, abstraction became a vehicle of inner meaning.

As the opening quote points out, there is a dearth of scholarly discussion on spirituality in the avant-garde, despite the fact that man never ceases to be concerned with the life of the spirit. A comprehensive understanding of modern art cannot be gained until the life of the spirit, whatever form it may take, is brought into consideration as a compelling driving force for the modern artist.

The choice to shy away from a discussion of modern spirituality creates an immense gap in our understanding of the deeper issues of twentieth century man. It is often assumed that, since modern artists have turned their backs on theism and organized religion, their work is devoid of spiritual expression. Yet man is a spiritual being, seeking knowledge of something more transcendent and infinite than finite man. Modern art manifests this, although in much more implicit ways than in previous centuries. One of the ways the modern artist channels his or her desire for transcendence is through abstraction.

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), Jackson Pollock (1912-1986) and Agnes Martin (1912-2004) have never been studied together through the lens of spirituality. This project brings these three homegrown American artists together in order to explore the influence of mystical spirituality on the American avant-garde of the twentieth century. Pollock, O'Keeffe and Martin were concerned with capturing their inner life within their

work. The individual spiritual concerns of each of these artists are evident in their respective techniques of abstraction. Although it manifests uniquely for each of them, the mystical paradigm of the individual's relation to the universal in pursuit of transcendence defines O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin's spiritualism. Specifically, each artist engages the universal emotion and beauty of nature as a means to the end of individual transcendence. Therefore, they create with the intent of attaining transcendence in their work.

Discussions of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) are characterized by feminist critique of the sexual nature of her body of flower paintings. O'Keeffe was an American avant-garde modernist painter whose career peaked in the 1930s-40s. The rugged beauty of the Southwestern desert of New Mexico was the catalyst for O'Keeffe's biomorphic abstractions of flowers and landscapes. It is precisely her attachment to nature that informs her individual spirituality. O'Keeffe saw in nature metaphors for the Sublime. Therefore, she drew a great deal from natural imagery as a vehicle to express inner emotion.

Jackson Pollock (1912-1986) is a defining figure in American Abstract Expressionism. Unlike other Abstract Expressionists, Pollock wasn't directly attached to European reactions to the war. To be clear, Pollock's psyche did not go unaffected by the pessimistic, war-ravaged culture; he was deeply affected. Therefore, Pollock's work is not a cultural critique in the explicit sense; instead, his work was driven by his individual quest for renewal. Hence, the influence of industrialism and the wars upon Pollock is embodied in his concern to reclaim his inner life. Pollock and O'Keeffe were both interested in metaphors of sexuality and primitive ideologies as means to capture spiritual

meaning. For Pollock, shamanistic rituals, including the fertility ritual, were allegories of renewal.

Agnes Martin (1912-2004) was a self-described Abstract Expressionist. Because she exhibited with the Minimalists — due to her stark aesthetic — she is often mislabeled a Minimalist. However, she identified herself with the Abstract Expressionists. Martin's spirituality is tied to the specific ideology of Zen Buddhism. Martin's acceptance of Zen dictated her formal choices. In contrast to O'Keeffe and Pollock, sexuality had no role in Martin's spirituality because Zen teaches that the ego, which is any hint of individual personhood, hinders transcendence. For Martin, the non-hierarchical nature of her geometric compositions conveyed the ego-lessness that was crucial to the attainment of transcendence. Like Pollock and O'Keeffe, Martin viewed nature as the source of universal emotion that the individual must tap into. Although Martin's works are completely non-objective, she intended for her works to capture a similar emotion to nature. Like O'Keeffe, Martin sought solace in the beauty of the New Mexico desert; both O'Keeffe and Martin were motivated by the desire to get in touch with the most basic, natural aspect of their human soul, and express this natural spirituality through their work, free from the clutter of modern pressures. This interest in the primitive is also evident in Pollock through his adoption of Shamanism. Therefore, all three artists, each in their own way, integrated Primitive elements in their work as a means to return to the vital essence of life.

These three artists represent a spectrum of abstraction within the American avant-garde of the twentieth century. It is important to distinguish the formal terms used in reference to the visual nature of these artists' work. *Abstraction* is the concept of visually

altering the facts of reality. Yet there are differing degrees of abstraction. *Non-objectivity* is the ultimate level of abstraction — a non-objective image contains no identifiable subject matter. Conversely, *representational* art always maintains a tie to the subject matter: being, place or thing. O’Keeffe, Pollock and Martin are each abstract artists, however they formally rely upon abstraction to differing degrees. The majority of O’Keeffe’s work and Pollock’s early imagery are abstract, yet not non-objective. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there is a move to total non-objectivity in Pollock’s drip paintings and Martin’s geometric work.

For O’Keeffe, Pollock and Martin, the formal qualities of their work speak to their inner lives. The advent of non-objectivity in the twentieth century was the result of the spiritual climate of twentieth century America. Spirituality in twentieth century art tended to attach itself to the modern artist’s aspiration to achieve transcendent expression through art or the act of creation. Modern artists wrestled with the question: Is the representation a vehicle or hindrance to reaching transcendent expression in art? In the twentieth century, the relationship between abstraction and spirituality was a dynamic of searching for a means of expression that captures the inner life.

In light of Pollock and Martin’s non-objective formal qualities, they are considered Abstract Expressionists. Abstract Expressionism was the post-war movement of avant-garde abstract artists concerned with their inner psyche. Beginning in America in the 1940s, Abstract Expressionism defined the American art scene well into the 1960s. O’Keeffe was working too early in the twentieth century to be formally considered an Abstract Expressionist; nonetheless, her inclusion in this thesis is warranted by the fact

that her individual spirituality has concerns similar to those of the Abstract Expressionists.

The origins of the Abstract Expressionist movement were in the European avant-garde, specifically in relation to the work of German Expressionist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). The influence of the European avant-garde upon O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin came in the form of Kandinsky's spirituality, as expressed in his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* influenced many twentieth century artists, the Abstract Expressionists in particular. Kandinsky saw pure abstraction as the ultimate means of conveying emotion, and believed any manner of representation was a hindrance to the attainment of the profound. For the twentieth century artist, abstraction became a vehicle of inner meaning. The similar spiritual lives of O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin can be traced to Kandinsky. For them, abstraction was a formal visual exercise that spoke to the inner meaning of their work.

Kandinsky understood the power of art and the unsurpassed potential art and emotion have to impart inner meaning. However, he was also concerned with the neglect of inner meaning in art, and wanted to reclaim its power of spiritual expression. Kandinsky believed that abstraction is the means by which the artist can express inner meaning in art. Expressions of the concrete, physical world weigh art down, therefore the artist intent on the pursuit of transcendence must throw off representation and pursue abstraction.

In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky goes on to express his great concern that art only concerned with external form or materialist effort has no future or power.

He believes art belongs to the spiritual life, and not only that, but that art is one of the mightiest elements the spiritual life possesses. Kandinsky's recognition of the place art holds in the scheme of reality is the same view held by the American Abstract Expressionists. For O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin, their art and their spirituality are one and the same, inherently integrated with each other. For Kandinsky and the Abstract Expressionists, mere representation could not convey the depth of the inner life. For Kandinsky, the material does not do justice to the vast array of emotion produced by the inner life. The profundity and grandeur of the life of the spirit cannot be captured by representation of the physical forms that merely stood as symbols of something greater. Kandinsky charges artists to press upward to communicate the life of the spirit through abstraction, an art form which frees the mind from banal associations of the everyday, physical world, and stirs up grander emotions of the life of the spirit.

With regard to *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dutch art historian Hans Rookmaaker asks the question in his book, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, "What does it mean 'to get rid of all traditional ways of thinking', to strive for 'a new expressionism' and 'poetic value', a spirituality beyond the material?" (112). Kandinsky has evoked a new reality, and it is an antipathy to rationality, principles, even to the physical world. Rookmaaker remarks, "Geometry is the basic principle of reality, but an irrational, strange and enigmatic geometry, like an esoteric, mysterious rite" (140). Furthermore, the geometry, which comprises what Kandinsky calls the harmony of the picture, is at odds with itself. Kandinsky's explanation of his "harmony" is quite confusing: "The strife of colors, the sense of the balance we have lost, tottering principles, unexpected assaults, great questions, apparently useless striving, storm and

tempest, broken chains, oppositions and contradictions — these make up our harmony” (53). This definition of harmony is a complete antithesis to traditional definitions of harmony; never before has harmony been defined as oppositions and contradictions. Kandinsky is challenging traditional structure and proposing a new reality that abolishes rationality at its basis.

O’Keeffe, Pollock and Martin were unmistakably influenced by Kandinsky’s spiritual tradition, as put forth in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. O’Keeffe’s relation to Kandinsky’s theory is simple and explicit. Georgia O’Keeffe studied and spoke directly of the influence of Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* upon her work. Reading it the year after its publication, it was a foundational text for her, and she went back to it often throughout her life. Pollock’s relation to Kandinsky is represented by shared ideologies. Jackson Pollock’s early work explored Native American Shamanism both in subject matter and in primitive theory. Interestingly, Kandinsky studied Russian Shamanism, and *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* contains influence of Primitive Russian Shamanistic ideologies. Kandinsky’s influence upon Agnes Martin was more implicit, yet still strong, and came as a result of a heritage of influence. Martin considered American Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (1903-1970) her primary influence, especially Rothko’s contemplative color field paintings. Kandinsky’s theory of art and the spirit, and especially his philosophies of the power of color for transcendence, directly influenced Rothko.

Despite these more concrete ties, it is these three artists’ concerns with expressing inner meaning in their art by means of abstraction that unites them in Kandinsky’s tradition. Following Kandinsky, O’Keeffe, Pollock and Martin all sought to convey

spiritual values in their art. For O'Keeffe, sublimity in nature was a major theme; Pollock's work sprang from images of renewal in Native American Shamanism; and Martin was driven to capture transcendence through the perfection of geometry.

O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin represent three artists who demonstrate the progression of the life of the spirit in twentieth century American spirituality. They did not engage in the pessimistic, war-ravaged artistic expressions of the twentieth century; instead, they reacted against them by seeking a transcendent abstraction. The mystical spirituality of O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin reclaimed spirituality to compete with the forces of industrialism. For these three artists, the mystical pursuit of transcendence, characterized by the unconscious's communion with nature, defined their quest to reclaim the inner life. O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin were part of a cultural turn towards mysticism as a restorative power after the crises of the industrial era.

In *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, Rookmaaker offers an extensive explanation of the rise of mysticism in the West in the twentieth century. He explains the tension modern man has with science and technology:

Man wants to be human. Caught in technocracy, in computerized bureaucracy, he tries to wrestle free. But to get his freedom he must 'jump out of the box,' find a freedom outside technocracy, outside the world of naturalistic laws and determinism. For modern man understands reality only in terms of scientism. So he has, it would seem, to get out of reality. He becomes a mystic. (202)

Modern man felt that in order to regain his humanity, in order to find freedom again, he must break free from reality as he knew it: rational, scientific determinism. But the result of a reality in denial of natural laws, outside of rationality, is mysticism. Man rejected an ordered, structured view of God, the universe and humankind, and sought answers in mysticism. The philosophies of Eastern religion began to accumulate

followers in the West. Zen Buddhism, “in which reality is accepted and yet overcome by being bypassed, and man has become free by being able to transcend the dilemmas of life and thought” (Rookmaaker 202) gained extensive ground among the twentieth century American avant-garde.

Previously, mystical thought had always included God or the concept of a god. However, twentieth century Mysticism was nihilistic, God was no longer, man as an individual was no longer, and it became about a transcendent experience. In an attempt to free himself from the bondage of Naturalism and scientific determinism and regain his humanity, his spirituality, man cut all ties with a rational reality and mysticism resulted. Rookmaaker comments, “For many reasons art has been assigned the role of the revelation of this existential, irrational order which is above technocracy and apart from technocracy” (48). Art’s assignment to the role of revelation draws directly from Kandinsky’s tradition, in which art is the prophet of the deeper workings of humanity. This raises the point that art is always a manifestation of humanity. Abstract Expressionism scholar, Stephen Polcari, points out that Abstract Expressionism was the artistic tradition that grew out of “the great tragic period of modern Western history, the first half of the twentieth century” (3). At the dawn of the century, the optimism at the prospect of American progress resulting from technological advances was uncontainable. Fifty years later, cynical and despairing, the American people wanted no more of the technology that promised prosperity yet robbed them of humanity. E. H. Gombrich explains this phenomenon well:

For art not only wants to keep in step with science and technology, it also wants to provide an escape from these monsters. It is for this reason, as we have seen, that artists have come to shun that which is rational and mechanical and that so

many of them embrace some mystical faith that stresses the value of spontaneity and individuality. (613)

America reacted to the crisis of the overwhelming tragedies of the century by seeking solace in mystical spirituality. The three avant-garde painters central to this paper possessed artistic intent that was informed by a personal engagement with American-bred mystical spirituality as a quest to reclaim the inner soul of humanity.

The careers of O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin peaked at different times throughout the century. These three artists represent both genders, as well as being geographically and stylistically diverse. O'Keeffe and Martin were women working in the Southwestern deserts; Pollock remained in New York City, in the spotlight. The historical progression from O'Keeffe to Pollock to Martin also shows an artistic progression, from the representational qualities of O'Keeffe's work to Martin's complete non-objectivity. Despite their differing approaches to abstraction, there are similarities in their approaches to spirituality. These similarities demonstrate that, for the twentieth century avant-garde painter, abstraction was a vehicle that visualized the invisible.

O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin represent an American evolution of mystical spirituality in abstract art. Their individual approaches toward spirituality demonstrate that a pursuit of the life of the spirit had not been eradicated in the industrial era. These artists were less influenced by the pessimistic turn of postwar European artists, and retained a spirituality more attached to a quest for transcendence through nature. Despite their outward differences, these artists had significant similarities: all three worked within Kandinsky's tradition, and united within the rubric of American mysticism, in a quest to reclaim humanity. The following study of O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin does not claim to be the traditional definitive exposition on the life and work of three major American

artists; rather, it endeavors to approach these artists in a unique way, specific to their use of abstraction as a formal indication of spiritual urges.

CHAPTER TWO

Georgia O'Keeffe

Georgia O'Keeffe and the Stieglitz Circle

American art of the twentieth century has been, in many ways, a wresting between representation and abstraction. A close comparison of the approaches taken by modernists in the Stieglitz circle and of those taken by artists working after World War II would certainly yield fascinating similarities and differences.

(Fine et al. 33)

The Stieglitz circle, comprised of the most dynamic and successful American modernists of the early twentieth century, pioneered the avant-garde in New York City during that period. Despite the fact that the American avant-garde was coming into its own, European influences remained strong. The American modernists continued to dialogue with the prominent European ideas of the day, one of which was Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky's theory, which claimed abstraction was the means to inner meaning in art, resounded with the artists of the Stieglitz circle and was met with excitement. To a degree, it was accepted, however the American Modernists of the Stieglitz circle found that the theory ran its course when attempting to capture inner meaning. The opening quote from this chapter explains this phenomenon well: "American art of the twentieth century has been, in many ways, a wresting between representation and abstraction. A close comparison of the approaches taken by modernists in the Stieglitz circle and of those taken by artists working after World War II would certainly yield fascinating similarities and differences" (Fine et al. 33). The

modernists of the Stieglitz circle had not yet cut ties with all forms of representation, yet they gravitated towards abstraction as the vehicle for expression in their work. As a result of Georgia O'Keeffe's marriage to Alfred Stieglitz, O'Keeffe became a part of the Stieglitz circle. Her exposure to the ideas and art discussed within the Stieglitz circle greatly influenced the artist she became; therefore, the atmosphere of the Stieglitz circle is the context in which one must study O'Keeffe. It is imperative to discuss the Stieglitz circle, even specific artists within that circle, with regard to O'Keeffe. Although at first they may seem unrelated, the conversations, artists and experiences were first-hand influences upon O'Keeffe.

This chapter will attempt to capture the tension between representation and abstraction in avant-garde painters of the early part of the twentieth century, primarily through the work of O'Keeffe. The following two chapters examine the work of Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin within the paradox of the language of abstraction. Pollock and Martin's non-objective approach does promise fascinating differences and remarkable similarities to the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

The central difference between the early and later halves of the twentieth century is in the position the avant-garde took with regard to the physical world. The artists of the Stieglitz circle challenged Kandinsky's view of the physical world. The Stieglitz circle sat in a very interesting place with regard to their feelings toward the power of abstraction. Its artists, painting at the beginning of the century, had not yet reached the nihilistic mysticism that comes with a rejection of a rational approach to reality. The Abstract Expressionists working in the aftermath of WWII, however, had reached a breaking point. In many ways, O'Keeffe was remarkably similar to the Abstract

Expressionists working after WWII, however there are differences in their reverence towards nature and the physical world. O'Keeffe's work, although influenced by the Kandinsky's theory, maintained a tie to the rational, physical world.

Georgia O'Keeffe was born near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, in 1887, and passed away in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1986, at the age of ninety-eight. Her autobiographical background is thoroughly intertwined with the prominent American modernists of the day, almost completely as a result of her involvement in the Stieglitz circle. In 1907, at the age of twenty-one, she attended the Art Students League, where she studied under William Merritt Chase. Despite her great success there, she gave up painting a year later due to internal frustration with the academic expectation to always paint mimetically (Fine et al. 40). O'Keeffe expressed her frustration with the manner she had been taught: "In school I was taught to paint things as I see them. But it seemed so stupid! If one could only reproduce nature, and always with less beauty than the original, why paint at all?" (Fine et al. 40). She abandoned painting for four years, until she took a class at the University of Virginia in 1912, taught by Alon Bement. This proved revolutionary for O'Keeffe as an artist, chiefly because Bement taught O'Keeffe the principles of Arthur Wesley Dow. The influence of Dow's ideas upon O'Keeffe is unsurpassed; Dow's artistic ideas of self-expression and beauty became a lifelong muse for O'Keeffe. For the remainder of her life she would reference the liberating decision to disregard her academic training and paint to express herself. The second half of this chapter explores the specific influences Dow's ideas had upon O'Keeffe's work in greater depth.

A second important turning point in O'Keeffe's life was the beginning of her relationship with Alfred Stieglitz and her involvement with his gallery, 291. In 1916, a

collection of O’Keeffe’s drawings was shown to Stieglitz. Stieglitz was fascinated, and wanted to exhibit them right away. He initiated a correspondence, and thus began O’Keeffe’s life-long involvement with Stieglitz, who would later become her husband. Stieglitz’s work with the publication *Camera Work*, and with *291*, exposed O’Keeffe to ideas and artists of the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, Stieglitz translated *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* into English shortly after its publication, and featured it in *Camera Work*. O’Keeffe was immersed in a vibrant intellectual life and was well educated on the issues of the day (Fine et al. 22). O’Keeffe’s library at her home in Abiquiu, New Mexico, is a testament to the vast spectrum of ideas the Stieglitz circle discussed.

The complexity and density of the intellectual milieu in which the Stieglitz circle was immersed is reflected in Georgia O’Keeffe’s library at Abiquiu ... [the collection] signals O’Keeffe’s and Stieglitz’s familiarity with the day’s most advanced issues not only in literature and philosophy, but also in human sexuality, censorship, radical politics, and what Mumford called, “The Metropolitan Milieu.” At 291 these topics would have been the basis of extended conversation presided over by Stieglitz. (Fine et al. 22)

The Stieglitz circle was not in a vacuum, but rather they were directly engaging themselves with the primary issues of the day. O’Keeffe flourished in this intellectual climate.

Not surprisingly, the ideas put forth in Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* influenced the artists in the Stieglitz circle immensely. The book was published in Munich in 1911, and shortly thereafter Stieglitz had it translated into English, and proceeded to publish a portion of it in *Camera Work*. Two artists in particular, Marsden Hartley and Arthur Dove, adopted Kandinsky’s theory of abstraction and began to rely

heavily on color and form for expression. Both Hartley and Dove were American modernists and crucial members of the Stieglitz circle.

Marsden Hartley moved a great deal in the European avant-garde circles. He was a member of the Stein Salon, and friends with Kandinsky — moreover, identifying with his reliance upon color and form for expression. In a letter to Stieglitz, Gertrude Stein marveled at the achievement of Kandinsky's principles in Hartley's work. Gertrude Stein was a leading figure in the European avant-garde. Stein was an author herself, but more importantly she was an enthusiastic proponent of modern art and presided over the Stein Salon, a gathering place for the avant-garde intellectuals of Paris, such as Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso. She became a mentor and critic of Modernist literary and artistic endeavors, and her opinion was well respected and sought after. Her insights were so revered they were undisputedly accepted as authoritative (Fine et al. 23). Stein's critique of both the American and European avant-garde provided a dialogue between Europe and America, as is evident in her praise of Hartley's artistic implementation of Kandinsky's theory. Stein wrote to Stieglitz:

In his painting he has done what in Kandinsky is only a direction. Hartley has really done it. He has used color to express a picture and he has done it so completely that while there is nothing mystic or strange about his production, it is genuinely transcendent. There is not motion but there is an absence of the stillness that even in the big men often leads to non-existence. (Fine et al. 23)

Hartley's enthusiasm for purely abstract expression wore off, however, and in 1928 he returned to painting the "visible world," consciously announcing he had moved away from Kandinsky's ideas in his artwork. Hartley's explanation of his decision is fascinating:

I have made the complete return to nature and nature is, as we all know, primarily an intellectual idea. I am satisfied that painting also is like nature, an intellectual

idea, and that the laws of nature as presented to the mind through the eye — and the eye is the painter's first and last vehicle — are the means of transport to the real mode of thought; the only legitimate source of aesthetic experience for the intelligent painter. (Fine at al. 28)

Hartley expresses the disconcerting result of applying Kandinsky's principles to his paintings: it is impossible to remove the reality of the physical world from painting. He realized that to deny what one sees is to have no reality, no basis for creating. However, Hartley expresses that nature and painting are merely ideas in man's mind. Nevertheless, he expresses a level of trust in what his eye tells him, therefore concluding that the "only legitimate aesthetic experience" is a result of what one sees, and that is nature.

Nevertheless, nature remains only an idea. Furthermore, the "laws of nature", as Hartley puts it, are "presented" by the eye. Thus, the painter's "only legitimate source of aesthetic experience" exists in possible deception. Hartley is going round and round with his ideas of reality. This is significant, since O'Keeffe worked in a similar tension. She accepted Kandinsky's theory, yet worked in a complicated tension with his rejection of all manner of representation.

Arthur Dove is known for his mystical, abstracted landscapes. His pictorial language was the result of his depiction of what he felt to be the most essential and expressive parts of the landscape. Naturally, Kandinsky's theory resounded with Dove's process. The following quote explains the tension Arthur Dove found between the visible world of nature and Kandinsky's theory:

[Dove] illustrates a central difference between the kind of abstraction practiced by American artists of this period (based in nature) and that prominent in the work of their European counterparts (based in theory). Engaged with balancing a propensity toward the concrete with the most current European theories, which often emphasized abstract principles, Americans looked to the shapes and forms, the "thingness" of the world around them, to reveal their inner states. No matter how abstract their work may appear, it was emotionally rooted in the visible

world. For example, the lyrical *Nature Symbolized No. 2* suggests the extent to which Dove absorbed the lessons of Kandinsky. Dove's pastel, however, is a hymn to nature grounded in natural forms and shapes, his tie to the object expanding in the subjective emotion of music and memory. (Fine et al. 30)

This quote delineates the fundamental difference between European and American abstraction. Dove's landscapes were an attempt to reconcile current European theories of abstraction with a more concrete reality. Dove's work exemplifies that he had indeed engaged with Kandinsky's theory of abstraction, yet part of him held back, he could not completely forsake all semblance of the physical reality in which he lived his daily life. Dove's work is truly a "hymn to nature" — it is a celebration derived from the beauty of the visible world. Dove did take to heart the theory of Kandinsky that abstraction of form and color impart inner meaning, yet he could not entirely divorce his reality of beauty from the visible world. O'Keeffe painted in a similar tension. Scholars have gone back and forth regarding whether O'Keeffe was a realist or an abstract painter. Fairfield Porter, an American art critic, insightfully pointed out about O'Keeffe in 1955 that, "It has been pointed out long ago that Georgia O'Keeffe is a realist, and what made this statement original at the time was it was made when she was painting abstractions. Now that she is not painting many abstractions, it may be valuable to point out the abstract qualities of her realism" (Fine et al. 33). Whether O'Keeffe is considered a realist with abstract tendencies, or an abstract artist with a tie to the physical world, the point remains the same: in the midst of abstraction, O'Keeffe retains her tie to the natural world.

As Porter points out, there are abstract qualities to O'Keeffe's realism. Take for example, O'Keeffe's watercolor, *Light Coming Onto the Plains* (fig. 2). Although a highly abstracted image, the painting retains a representational quality. At the time, O'Keeffe's work seemed daringly abstract, since it was simplified and distilled from

nature. As the century moved forward, abstraction reached its saturation point, such as in the non-objective work of Pollock.

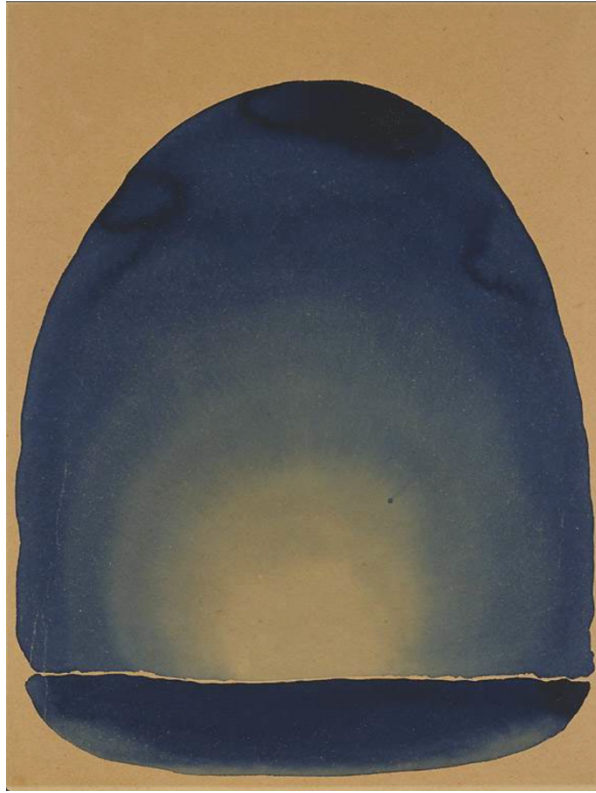


Fig. 2. Georgia O'Keeffe. *Light Coming Over the Plains No. II*. 1917. Watercolor on paper, 11 7/8 x 8 7/8". Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

It will shortly become apparent that the Stieglitz circle, and more specifically Kandinsky's relevance to the artists of the Stieglitz circle, particularly for Dove, Hartley and O'Keeffe, is very relevant to a discussion of O'Keeffe's spirituality. O'Keeffe's relationship to natural representation in her work, within the context of abstraction, is directly related to her spirituality, since O'Keeffe believed that nature holds spiritual powers.

Renewal in the Desert: The Sublimity of Nature in O'Keeffe's Work

To get her true meaning one must evaluate O'Keeffe's abstraction as one would see Wassily Kandinsky's before the Bauhaus or Piet Mondrian's before De Stijl — that is, to see abstraction early in the twentieth century not as a style or movement but as a method — call it practice of perception — within a dynamically new spatial arena.

(Fine et al. 43)

Georgia O'Keeffe's work quests for spirituality through her expressions of the sublimity of nature. Thus it is important to establish the attitude toward nature and the visible world held by O'Keeffe and the other artists of the Stieglitz Circle. O'Keeffe relied greatly on her ability to abstract, and the power she had as a painter to tap into the unconscious and depict those emotions through abstraction. In 1924, a joint exhibition of her paintings with Alfred Stieglitz's photographs proved to be a pivotal point for her as an artist. The exhibit was intended to stress the "unity of purpose" of the two bodies of work, represented by different mediums. However, for O'Keeffe it proved to be an experience that stressed the vast differences between the two. To O'Keeffe, photography drew its meaning from the conscious, objective world, but her painting was the result of expression which sprung out of a spiritual awareness of the unconscious. She felt that the power of abstraction granted her through the freedom of painting gave her greater power of expression (O'Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 72).

O'Keeffe's choice to paint abstractly was the result of her admiration of Arthur Wesley Dow's principles, which she learned studying under him at Columbia University's Teachers College. Dow was disparaging of traditional academic training, which resounded with O'Keeffe, since she too felt stifled by it. Instead, Dow promoted art which spoke to the senses, art which expressed "the poetry and mystery of nature,"

and sought to reveal creative power “as a divine gift, the natural endowment of every human soul” (Weisman 10).

The introduction to this thesis discussed the theme of the influence of Eastern Mysticism upon the West in the twentieth century. O’Keeffe’s influences are no exception in this regard; Dow was mentored by the orientalist Ernest Fenollosa. The following quote explains Fenollosa’s “Eastern aesthetic philosophy” and its specific influence upon O’Keeffe:

Dow’s belief that all acts may be artistic derived from the thinking of his mentor, orientalist Ernest Fenollosa. Described by a contemporary as a “musician, poet, painter, dreamer, prophet, philosopher, mystic,” Fenollosa attempted in the early years of the 20th century to reeducate American eyes towards “seeing new wholes.” At the heart of his philosophy lay Eastern aesthetic perceptions emphasizing the spiritual relationship between the unique work of art and the individual. Seeds planted by Dow and Fenollosa came to fruition in O’Keeffe’s art, particularly in her need to depict images whole. (Weisman 10)

The concept of “the whole” reflecting spiritual meaning in art repeatedly reoccurs in twentieth century art. The individual’s proper relation to the whole is a foundational idea in mystical Eastern philosophy. Jackson Pollock sought wholeness through renewal provided by Shamanistic ritual. Agnes Martin explored this relationship with her egoless geometric compositions within the ideologies of Zen Buddhism.

Dow’s influence upon O’Keeffe was instrumental in her formation as an avant-garde artist concerned with the inner life. Dow believed that landscape painting had a very specific inner purpose, which reaches beyond conveying the topography:

As Dow liked to say, “It is not the province of the landscape painter to represent so much topography, but to express an emotion, and he must do so by art.” Those connections — those understandings about spatial, sensory, and emotional proximity — give many of O’Keeffe’s paintings a self referential, even propiocentric, quality. In other words, she knew exactly where the object was, and where her body was situated relative to it. Moreover, she shared that

experience with the viewer, who, confronted with unprecedented close-ups of objects, is forced into intimacy with them. (Moss et al. 52)

To Dow, the task of the landscape painter is a subtle and intuitive one. Merely painting the lay of the land is not sufficient; instead, the painter of nature must attune themselves to the intangible emotions nature conveys. The landscape painter must capture the rugged power of the mountains, the exquisite beauty of a flower and the serene strength of a river. Additionally, the artist must capture the different emotions that result from one's proximity to nature, such as the intimate feeling being close can give. O'Keeffe's success as a painter is attributed to her ability to, in a sense, empathize with nature, and capture those experiences so beautifully and succinctly for her viewers.

For O'Keeffe, the vast, expansive beauty of the Southwestern desert was a source of inner emotion to be expressed in her work. O'Keeffe split her time between Texas and New Mexico, however she spent the later part of her career mostly in Taos, New Mexico. Southwestern landscapes had been a source of inspiration for O'Keeffe since 1929, and she moved permanently to New Mexico in 1945. The following quote speaks to the power the desert's beauty had in O'Keeffe's art. For O'Keeffe, the desert beauty had a transcendent quality that embodied spiritual meaning:

Exposure to the desert's beauty seemed to intensify mystical and visionary qualities in her art. "In quivering landscapes," art critic Barbara Rose noted regarding O'Keeffe's early work in the Southwest, "nature is imbued with a pantheistic, transcendental life of its own." Wherever she lived, O'Keeffe dedicated herself to finding and giving shape to the "feeling of infinity on the horizon line or just over the next hill." (Weisman 10)

For O'Keeffe, images in nature were metaphors for the sublime. Infinity, wholeness, renewal, these were all experiences O'Keeffe sought to express through her abstractions. She explained that, "these unexplainable things in nature make me feel the world is big

far beyond my understanding — to understand maybe by trying to put it into form” (Weisman 10). O’Keeffe’s personal letters give us a window into her artistic process and manner of working. O’Keeffe would paint and draw from images of nature stored in her head. She would not draw exactly what her eyes saw, but rather what she felt, or her internal response to what she saw. By doing this, she moved beyond her conscious grasp and into what she called the “unknown,” to depict intangible emotions. It was a way of transcending rational thought to portray emotion. Often, to get into this state where she transcended thinking and tapped into the unconscious unknown, O’Keeffe would draw an image over and over again. O’Keeffe expressed in her writings that the images resulting from this expressing the “unknown” articulated her emotions better than words. She said these images made her feel, “more truly articulate than the word” (O’Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 10).

This experience she records having is an idea the British philosopher Edward Burke called the Sublime. In 1757, Burke recorded “the feeling of being so overwhelmed by an all-encompassing wonder and awe that awareness of everything else suspended” (O’Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 13). Although Burke claimed that terror was a prerequisite for sublimity, for O’Keeffe terror had nothing to do with it. For O’Keeffe, her experience of sublimity came from “her rapturous experience of nature’s inexplicability and immensity” (O’Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 13). Whether terror or rapture precedes sublimity, the awe transports the individual to something grander than themselves.

An outstanding article by Edward Levine, published in *Art Journal* in 1971, titled “Abstract Expressionism: The Mystical Experience,” provided fascinating insights into

how the formal qualities of Abstract Expressionism are indicative of the Abstract Expressionist spiritual view of the universe. Levine also puts the Abstract Expressionist movement in dialogue with the Romantics and Cubists that preceded them. A discussion of a portion of the article most pertinent to O’Keeffe is helpful.

For the purposes of this chapter, one of the most salient points Levine makes is his reference to an article by Robert Rosenblum called “The Abstract Sublime.” Rosenblum draws parallels between the aesthetic experiences of the nineteenth century Romantics and the twentieth century Abstract Expressionists, based upon the ideal of the sublime. Rosenblum goes on to assert that the Abstract Expressionists rejected the Cubist traditions not for formal reasons, but rather for emotional ones. Levine quotes

Rosenblum:

Yet it should not be overlooked that this denial of the Cubist tradition is not only determined by formal needs, but also by emotional ones that, in the anxieties of the atomic age, suddenly seem to correspond with a Romantic tradition of the irrational and the awesome as well as with a romantic vocabulary of boundless energies and limitless spaces. (Levine 23)

Rosenblum postulates that the anxieties of the atomic age were responsible for the Abstract Expressionists’ return to the romantic’s irrational ideals of boundless energies and limitless space. Levine agrees with Rosenblum’s assertion and goes on to explain the metaphysical reasons artists seek to achieve limitlessness. Levine believes limitlessness is an attempt by the artist to reconcile his troubled inner life with the cosmic consciousness. Levine believes Rosenblum’s reading of Abstract Expressionism is critical for two reasons. First, Rosenblum sees Abstract Expressionism as “a continuation of a tradition which marks a crisis in man’s relationship with the universe” (23). Secondly, Rosenblum perceptively notes that the Abstract Expressionists’ break with the

Cubist aesthetic is the result of a fundamental difference in worldview: the Abstract Expressionists' view of the world aligned with a metaphysical view of the universe, not the existentialist view that pervaded the Cubists' worldview. However, Levine points out that he goes a step further than Rosenblum, since he believes the Abstract Expressionist's relationship to the sublime "not only pertains to a sense of nature's limitlessness but to a cosmic consciousness and a conflict resolving around the concept of the self" (23).

The Sublime is often used to describe the grandeur of deity, and indeed for O'Keeffe nature is a metaphor for something greater. Although she was raised in a Christian home and attended an Episcopal school growing up, O'Keeffe's life and work, as known from scholarship and well as an extensive collection of personal writings, was not influenced by Christian theism. There is no indication that O'Keeffe approached nature as God's creation, and revered it such. Rather, for O'Keeffe, nature was replete with metaphors that comprised her mystical spirituality. O'Keeffe empathized with the rugged beauty of the Southwestern desert landscape. "'The plains — the wonderful great big sky — makes me want to breathe so deep I'll break,' she exulted. 'I belonged... that was my country — Terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness'" (O'Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 13).

The majestic, expansive mountains and desert landscapes communicated an infinitude to O'Keeffe that she brilliantly captured in her work. Her surfaces are smooth, her forms seem to move, even pulse. Many of her paintings give the sensation of completely enveloping the viewer. O'Keeffe's love of the desert landscape embodies two paradoxes. The first is expressed by the Buddhist insight of the bodhistattva Avalokiteshvara in the Heart Sutra: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" (Moss et al.

61). O’Keeffe was familiar with Buddhist teachings, and this particular mantra defined the significance the desert held for O’Keeffe. For O’Keeffe, the empty space of the desert invited contemplation and transcendence. The second paradox is how the impersonal landscape of the desert became such a personal experience for O’Keeffe: “the vast impersonal desert became ... an utterly private space, where O’Keeffe’s most personal dreams, desires, and fantasies took visible form. I would argue that the austere sculptural landscapes of the West were utterly crucial to the development of a mythic quality of the paintings of O’Keeffe” (Moss et al. 61).

O’Keeffe also chose to crop her images, which creates an immeasurable, boundless effect. These artistic choices make the viewer feel as if they have entered into the pulsing, cycling life of nature, rather than that they are merely viewing nature. Through these decisions, O’Keeffe effectively implemented Dow’s principles of wholeness in her work. O’Keeffe’s work’s is defined by a sense of natural, life-giving and unbroken rhythms. Art historian Barbara Haskell gives a beautiful description of the viewer’s sensation when they encounter a work of O’Keeffe’s:

O’Keeffe’s animate, undulating forms elicited visceral responses in viewers, who felt themselves inextricably thrust into the pulsing center of her paintings. It was as if the throbbing forms she depicted, which seemed to move across the canvas as well as in depth, approximated the cadences of the human body, thereby triggering corresponding movements in the viewer that engendered emotional response. (O’Keeffe, Haskell and Nicholas 13)

O’Keeffe was truly a master, and her popularity as an artist is a result of the accessible nature of the inner emotional beauty of her work. The viewer can feel the infinitude of her compositions and the pulsing lifelike sensation her work conveys, even if they cannot identify these specific concepts in her work.

In her writings, O'Keeffe speaks of art's symbolic capacities. O'Keeffe's art has a definite visual vocabulary, which parallels universal religious symbols. Mircea Eliade, the historian of religion, has identified patterns of spiritual behavior that generate archetypal symbols. Eliade's Universal Pillars are present in O'Keeffe's work. An examination of Eliade's theory and O'Keeffe's paintings reveals a quest for spirituality in O'Keeffe's work.

One of the foundational concepts of Eliade's theory is the *sacred center*. Eliade's concept of the sacred center, and the idea of wholeness discussed by Dow, share the same spiritual purpose. Eliade's archetype of the sacred center can be explained this way:

Being at the center implies that one is where one belongs. There one is "home," safe, whole, unbroken. Without the center there could be no ordered and hence no sacred space, for the center makes life comprehensible by linking cosmic regions in harmonious unity. Images of the center often assume the shape of a circle. One has only to look at Buddhist mandalas or Navaho sand paintings to see the archetype of the center images in circular form. (Weisman 11)

Eliade's theory of the center is an excellent framework within which to discuss the viewpoint that O'Keeffe's flowers are depictions of female anatomy. O'Keeffe was known for neither confirming nor denying observations made about her work, but she denied outright any accusations that her flower paintings were sexual. It is likely that this denial was motivated by the hope that the viewer would see more than female anatomy when they encountered her flowers. O'Keeffe was fully aware of the Victorian sentiment that associated flowers with female sexuality; therefore, she knew how her paintings would be received. However, O'Keeffe, like Pollock, had a sacred reverence for the procreative renewing power of sexuality. For these artists, sexuality became part of their spirituality as a metaphor for the transformative renewal cycles of nature. Celia

Weisman, feminist art critic, states that it is detrimental to limit O'Keeffe's flowers to anatomical depictions:

One is struck by the beauty and sensuality of the flowers, as well as by the sense of penetration to that which is at the heart of both these particular flowers and all creation. Since they appear as enclosing, soft, protective spaces, the flower images also bring to mind vaginas and wombs. Yet to limit their significance to representations of female anatomy would be to reduce their power as symbols. (Weisman 11)

O'Keeffe completed *Abstraction White Rose* (fig. 3) in 1927; this work embodies many themes discussed so far. The composition is central and cropped, making it an example of the sacred center motif, as well as giving it the boundary-less effect O'Keeffe was so fond of. However, the cropping gives the sense not only of an infinite space, but also of intimacy. The contrast between the dark and light forms arranged in a circular composition rhythmically moves the viewer's eye in and out of the depths of the picture plane, giving the image the organic sensation of life. Light is emitted from the center of the composition, as if the viewer is witnessing an organism that is lit from within.

O'Keeffe's formal mechanisms create the sensation of life. As Weisman points out, O'Keeffe's flowers give a sense of a soft, closed space. O'Keeffe's formal hints at female sexuality are metaphors for the concept of renewal through fertility. Furthermore, although the image is identifiable as a flower, it is highly abstracted, relying mostly on form to convey the essence of the flower. Once again, although O'Keeffe implemented Kandinsky's theory of abstraction, she did not fully forsake all manner of representation of the physical world.



Fig. 3. Georgia O'Keeffe. *Abstraction White Rose*. 1927. Oil on canvas, 36 x 30". Whitney Museum, New York, NY.

The spiritual symbolism of renewal in nature also appears in O'Keeffe paintings of animal skulls alongside flowers. Although the symbols of renewal do not correspond to an Eliadean archetype, they do correspond to the concept of *sacred time*, which is the idea that within the overarching linear framework of time, the religious man senses a cyclical period of renewal. Within these periods of renewal, the individual, the community and the earth undergo renewal through death and rebirth (Weisman 13). The life and death motif in O'Keeffe's work strikes a fascinating parallel with Pollock's interest in the concept of Shamanistic transformation, which resulted in his lifelong quest for renewal in personal life. Weisman goes on to explain the role fertility, symbolized by the flowers, plays in the cyclical transformative process: "Death, here making the passage between earthly and transcendent spheres negotiable, is in itself a force for fertility and

balance. Thus, O’Keeffe permits us to sense both death and life simultaneously ... Nature’s continuous transformative process is thereby manifested” (Weisman 13).



Fig. 4. Georgia O’Keeffe. *Mule’s Skull and Pink Poinsettias*. 1936. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 30”. Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

There is an entire body of O’Keeffe paintings which uses the skull and flower motif. In *Mule’s Skull and Pink Poinsettias* (fig. 4), the composition is divided vertically into sky and desert mountains. The skull is placed in the bottom half of the composition, set against the backdrop of the mountains, the earthly realm. The poinsettias are floating in the heavenly sphere of the sky. The scale of the skull and flowers is much larger than reality, giving the indication that they exist for symbolic purposes, and not as mere aspects of the landscape. The skull receives the most realistic treatment in the landscape, as if to suggest that, although death seems the most concrete, the beauty of life transcends. The vertical cloud formation directly above the skull leads the eye from the

heavier bottom portion of the painting up into the illuminated heavenly realm. The entire painting has a mythic spiritual quality, as if an exchange is taking place in the painting between the symbol of death and the symbol of life. As Weisman points out, “death makes passage between earthly and heavenly spheres” (13). The transformative cycle of life and death depicted in her paintings demonstrates O’Keeffe’s quest for renewal.

The final motif by which O’Keeffe conveyed spirituality in her work is through the use of light or illumination. Light is a foundational symbol in Theosophy, a philosophy that maintains knowledge of God may be achieved through spiritual ecstasy. Coincidentally, Kandinsky’s spiritualism was influenced by Theosophy. In Theosophy, light or illumination represents supernatural phenomena. Clearly, O’Keeffe was drawing from the same traditions and practices of mystical expression as Kandinsky. The concept of spiritual ecstasy parallels O’Keeffe’s experiences of being in rapture at the grandeur of nature, or Sublimity. The light motif became a mystical portrayal of inner spirituality in O’Keeffe’s work. In *Art and Life Illuminated: Georgia O’Keeffe and Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce*, Art historian Karen Moss discusses the light motif in the works of Georgia O’Keeffe and Agnes Martin. Moss remarks that O’Keeffe uses illumination “to convey the mystical, ineffable and sublime qualities of nature” (Moss et al. 45). O’Keeffe’s use of light is so skilled her paintings seem to be lit from within. The light emits from behind flower petals and mountain ranges, giving the light a supernatural presence.

In conclusion, Georgia O’Keeffe not only remained rooted in the natural world, but also drew a great deal of her spirituality from the sublime experiences she had in nature. For O’Keeffe, the physical world was a necessary reality to remain grounded in.

O'Keeffe exists in the tension between pure abstraction and representation. Abstraction was a vehicle for spiritual expression for O'Keeffe; however, she did not rely solely upon abstraction for expression, as did Pollock and Martin.

CHAPTER THREE

Jackson Pollock

Jackson Pollock, an American Legend

Pollock will in time be able to compete for recognition as the greatest American painter of the twentieth century — no other American artist has presented such a case.

— Clement Greenberg

Jackson Pollock was an avant-garde painter who, to most, embodies the idea of the quintessential American rebel. Pollock evokes a picture of a tough looking artist with a cigar in his mouth, standing over his enormous canvas, drizzling paint. Pollock's alcoholism, the resulting tragic car crash that ended his life, as well as the Jungian psychotherapy he underwent, all add to the tragic figure America saw him to be. Pollock is rarely discussed as a spiritual artist, however his image as the iconic, romanticized bad boy of the twentieth century American avant-garde serves as a window into Pollock's soul and the urges for renewal that lie there.

Pollock was an angst-filled character; he used alcohol to numb the pain and anxiety he experienced. It is interesting to note that the Abstract Expressionists are notorious for their history of alcoholism and suicide. Some suicides, such as Rothko's, were comprised of a single violent act, however others were more of an existential suicide, such as Pollock's alcoholism. His drinking habit, combined with his notoriously reckless driving, was a lethal combination that would sooner or later kill him. Modern man was in crisis, and Pollock was no different. He was searching for inner meaning in the midst of his ravaged post-WWII generation. Although Pollock's art is rarely viewed

as having its origin in spiritual urges, Pollock's paintings embody mystical spirituality. Pollock's mysticism is influenced by Native American Shamanistic spirituality, as well as the philosophies of Freud and Jung. The remainder of this chapter will exemplify these sources of influence in Pollock's life and art.

Spirituality in Pollock's Art and Native American Shamanism

The question arises whether Pollock's introspection, his turn to the primal and mythic, is strictly autobiographical concern with his own personal problems, for which he seeks new life and a personal rebirth, or is historical, reflecting the needs of his period. It is both. In psychological parlance, he has transferred his personal needs to the world at large.

(Polcari 239)

Jackson Pollock was born in Cody, Wyoming, and grew up in the West until he moved to New York City in 1930 to study at the Art Student's League. Much of Pollock's aura was borrowed from the idea of the rugged American West cowboy. As a boy, he and his brother went to watch Native American sand painting rituals. There is no doubt that Pollock's exposure to the life and tradition of these Indians influenced his work later, as he became interested in Native American Shamanism and began to infuse Shamanistic elements into his work.

Pollock's turn to Native American spirituality was the result of inner turmoil he was attempting to resolve. Pollock's angst typified the anxieties of modern man. Stephen Polcari, leading Abstract Expressionist scholar and Pollock specialist, notes that Pollock's reaction was not idiosyncratic to his own experience; instead, it reflected society's needs as a whole. Polcari notes that Pollock's introspection and consequent turn toward the primal and mythic is a reflection upon both Pollock's own quest for

rebirth, as well as the overarching needs of society. Polcari states, “In psychological parlance, he has transferred his personal needs to the world at large” (Polcari 239). Technology and war had crushed humanity’s spirit, and society was seeking healing. Pollock’s psychological pain and pursuit of healing manifested itself in his alcoholism, his Jungian therapy, and his adoption of Native American spirituality. Polcari remarks that, “The growth of his alcoholism, the approach of war, the years of therapy with the practitioners of cultural psychologist Carl G. Jung and the rise of interest in American Indian Art and culture fueled a turn toward a conception that promised to heal him and society” (Polcari 18).

Both the Shamanistic and Jungian traditions place a strong emphasis on the individual and his or her need to partake in the universal by means of tapping into the unconscious. Put simply, Jungian psychology and Native American Shamanism are inherently mystical. The Jungian ideas are more implicit in Pollock’s work; Shamanistic content and imagery, conversely, is found very explicitly throughout his early work. It is difficult to separate out the influences of Pollock’s Jungian psychoanalysis and Native American Shamanism, for in a sense Shamanistic spirituality was the remedy to the problems brought to light by Pollock’s Jungian therapy. A brief explanation of the foundational ideas of Shamanism is in order, to lay a foundation for the remainder of the discussion.

Transformation of the individual is central to Shamanism, and there are many means in Shamanism by which the individual can undergo alteration. In Shamanism, the sacrifice of one’s previous self is required for transformation. This sacrifice is depicted symbolically by violent loss and pain, chaos and death. After sacrifice, Shamanism

believes in a form of reincarnation, or the shaman theme of “incorporation.” This takes place when the individual’s spirit or “neophyte” joins with nature. When this joining or incorporation occurs, the individual’s capacities are expanded, and he is no longer limited to rational abilities, but also has the ability to make new physical and spiritual connections in the world. The second step in transformation, or further alteration, takes place with regard to sexual relations. New life and growth is inherent to procreation, thus the Shamanistic theme of fertility is thought to bring about healing, renewal and restoration. Stephen Polcari notes that, “Pollock’s procreativity is a stand in for creativity” (Polcari 18). Shamanistic sexuality often takes form in fertility rituals, since religious ecstasy is the goal of Shamanism, brought about by the transformation rituals discussed previously. Pollock’s work strives to reenact this energetic ecstasy brought about by transformation.

A great deal of the imagery, or lack thereof, in Pollock’s work can be related to Shamanistic themes. For instance, Shamanism believes that masks are a means to transform into a supernatural being, and that totem poles represent gateways into the life of the spirit. The birds and other animals which appear in Pollock’s work are symbolic of the spirit’s incorporation or transformation. The majority of Pollock’s figurative work suggests sexual imagery, which also represents transformation. Pollock’s intent was not merely to formally represent Native American imagery, or even to evoke the idea of a mask. Rather, he intended to capture in his art the sacred powers the mask carried in Shamanism. To Pollock, the masks conveyed a primal, sacred and mythical spirit of transformation.



Fig. 5. Jackson Pollock. *Birth*. 1938-41. Oil on canvas, 116.4 x 55.1 cm. Tate London.

Pollock's painting *Birth* (fig. 5), completed during 1938-1941, is replete with shamanistic spirituality. Although abstracted, the composition creates an illusion of a totem pole. In Shamanism, the totem pole is a gateway to the life of the spirit. Native American aesthetic influences are evident, as the imagery is primitive and mythic. The title, *Birth*, indicated for Pollock that this painting depicted the Shamanistic motif of fertility, which is representative of renewal (Polcari 18). The subject matter of *Birth* indicates Pollock's interest in primitive rituals, and the spiritual powers they hold. Although the subject matter is detectable, Pollock is moving towards his non-objective style. The all-over composition and sensation of chaos, present in *Birth*, reappear in his drip paintings. The use of sharp contrasts between the darks and lights gives the image a

sense of opposing, clashing energies, as if a struggle is taking place — perhaps the struggle of the neophyte’s spirit as it seeks to fuse with nature and break into the unconscious.

Another of Pollock’s earlier images, *Man, Bird, Bull* (fig. 6), includes a bull, a horse, an eagle’s skeleton, a bird’s fetus and serpents. The animals are indicative of the Shamanistic process of “incorporation,” in which man’s soul fuses with nature, represented here by the animals, and gains spiritual contact. In “incorporation,” man’s rational abilities are surmounted and he enters a spiritual realm. Pollock also used the chaotic, all-over composition in this painting. The colors, particularly the dominant red tones and the strong dark lines, lend an aggressive emotion to the painting, perhaps once again indicative of the struggle man has in breaking into the unconscious energy of nature.



Fig. 6. Jackson Pollock. *Man, Bird, Bull*. 1938-41. Oil on canvas, 60.9 x 91.4 cm. Berry-Hill Galleries, New York, NY.

Pollock's interest in Shamanistic spirituality became increasingly complex and mystical in the later part of his career, during the time he turned to drip paintings in the late 1940s. Obtaining spiritual connections by fusing with nature became an increasingly predominant theme in Pollock's work.

"I am Nature": The Universal Unconscious in Pollock's Drip Paintings

Krasner explained: 'People think he means he's God. [...] He means he's total. He's undivided. He's one with nature.'

(Crowther and Wünsche 119)

Pollock is best known for his "action paintings" or drip canvases, however he did not begin working in this style until later in his life, specifically 1947. His arrival at action painting was not the result of evolving technique, but rather the eventual realization of his personal endeavor to find inner meaning in his life, and consequently his art. Often misunderstood, many think Pollock always painted non-objectively; however he painted in a figurative manner most of his life. However, the images and content that serve as the foundation of Pollock's earlier work played a role in his turn to abstraction; they simultaneously inspired and repulsed him.

Pollock's action paintings were the realization of his adoption of Jungian psychology and Native American Shamanism. These drips seem to depict nothingness; they have no ending and beginning. The drip method is a formal manifestation of the eventual conclusion that must be drawn from the mystical reality of Shamanism and Jungian thought. Pollock's views of the unconscious and the supernatural brought him to paint in this manner. The randomness and irrationality which confronts the viewer is not a result of Pollock's conscious, deliberate attempt to be rebellious and avant-garde, as so

many think, but rather reflects the place he came to in his inner life. There is an inherent element in the action paintings which disturbs and unsettles viewers, and often this feeling is associated with Pollock's avant-garde rebellion or a depiction of his anxiety. However, the reaction these paintings elicit within viewers is the result of deeper ideas that inform the artwork, and the conclusions that are drawn from these ideas.

This phenomenon within Pollock's painting style is well explained via a famous conversation which took place between Jackson Pollock and Hans Hofmann. On this occasion, Pollock was explaining to Hofmann the inspiration for his drip paintings. Fritz Bultman, a student of Hofmann's and friend of Pollock's, recalls the conversation:

... an intense dialogue between Hofmann and Pollock. One evening Pollock was trying to get across to Hans Hofmann his concept of the image: that you could paint from nature, which Hans was doing, but that if you painted out of yourself you created an image larger than a landscape. Hans disagreed with him in principle, and finally in talking about the origin of the image, Jackson said, "I am nature." (Crowther and Wünsche 121).

Hofmann was concerned and confused by Pollock's point of view, and went on to challenge him, questioning the results of this type of thinking:

Hofmann is said to have warned Pollock: "Ah, but if you work by heart, you will repeat yourself." Hofmann's interaction with "nature that is out there" would save him from repeating himself, whereas Pollock's "I am nature," reflecting a belief in "a oneness" between inner and outer worlds, collapses the split between subject and object. (Crowther and Wünsche 126)

What did Pollock mean by "I am nature"? Pollock's wife, Lee Krasner, also a painter, explained that when he said "I am nature," "He means he's total. He's undivided. He's one with nature" (Crowther and Wünsche 119). That is, Pollock finds the inspiration for his images within himself; he has lost himself in nature. Elizabeth Langhorne's excellent article, "Jackson Pollock: The Sin of Images," featured in *Meanings of Abstract Art*, enlightens her readers to Pollock's line of reasoning. When

Hofmann threatened that his work would be constructed in a realm of isolated subjectivity, Pollock did not believe this could be the case, for to reach towards the truth within him meant he would touch upon humanity. Hence, he would be free of the danger of isolated subjectivity (Crowther and Wünsche 127). Interestingly, Agnes Martin worked within the same paradigm of looking within oneself, which she called “perfection which is in the mind.” At the end of her life, in the midst of struggling with depression, she admitted her life’s work was totally idiosyncratic to her own experience.

This lack of distinction between outer world and inner life results in a blur of reality. The individual artist is lost and his identity is distorted into an undivided oneness with the outer world. Since the Renaissance, art has been built around the paradigm of the tension between subject and object, and when this distinction is lost the artist becomes lost in the subjective. Even Cubism, a recent style within the twentieth century, remains grounded in the relationship between inner and outer, subject and object. This mystical loss of individual identity in “a oneness” is an attempt to find transcendence above oneself and escape the pain inflicted by the tragedy of the twentieth century. Modern man cuts ties with a rational reality, including naturalism, and loses his individual personality in pursuit of a mystical, transcendent experience. This transcendent phenomenon exemplifies exactly what Pollock means when he says, “I am nature.” Pollock’s work embodies modern man as an artist, his struggles and his solution: abstraction.

Pollock’s arrival at pure abstraction in his work is birthed out of Kandinsky’s tradition, as put forth in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Kandinsky built a new mystical

reality for art, and it was the antithesis of rationality. He believed that representation was the death of art, and that abstraction must restore the inner soul of art.

As mentioned previously, Pollock's progression from figurative work to abstraction evolved from the content he used in his more representational work. Pollock often referred to the inspiration for his paintings as a "dream image" coming from "the unconscious." In her article, "Jackson Pollock: The Sin of Images," Elizabeth Langhorne explains the correlation between the "dream images" which inspired his later work and his past with Jungian therapy and Shamanic ritual. The Jungian concept of the 'dream image,' and a shaman's vision, were part of the same spiritual tradition. According to Langhorne, "Dr. Henderson, Pollock's first Jungian therapist, was fascinated by Native American shamanic ritual, and later described the ritual aspect of Pollock's 1939-1940 drawings as related to shamanic trance" (Crowther and Wünsche 121).

Pollock's concern for tapping into the unconscious was rooted in his belief in "the universal." When Hofmann challenged him on his statement, "I am nature," Pollock was referring to tapping into nature in the form of universal human emotion. He believed being in touch with himself would restore him unto a vast, universal and restorative ocean of human emotion. However, it was the mystical, primitive content of Native American Shamanism which led him to become interested in expressing himself by means of abstraction.

Additionally, Pollock was encouraged to pursue abstraction as a means to the universal by Wolfgang Paalen and John Graham, two important mentors and influences in his life, who were both fellow painters.

Wolfgang Paalen's personal beliefs and mentorship were an influence on Pollock's turn to abstraction. Paalen synthesized Shamanism and abstraction by using abstraction as an embodiment of Shamanistic ideals. Paalen's synthesis was built on common ground held by Shamanism and abstraction: that of identifying with universal human emotion. Paalen believed that Shamanic ritual and ceremony were anthropomorphic attempts to create common emotion between the individual and the world. However, for an artist, these personifications can be done away with and abstraction can assume their role. Polcari explains Paalen's belief in the power of abstraction: "non-anthropomorphic elements can, nevertheless, carry a human message, and express cosmic sensations in terms of human emotions. The artist organizes these emotions and affective values — rhythmically" (Polcari 130). Paalen's theory resounded with Pollock's quest to embody universal human emotion, and was instrumental in the evolution of Pollock's manner of painting.

John Graham was an early mentor in Pollock's life, who believed in *automatic écriture* — writing or drawing produced without conscious intention, as if by spiritualistic origin. It is spontaneous expression, which is the result of throwing off the conscious and allowing the unconscious to freely express. It is often thought that ghosts overtake one's hands in this process. Jungian psychology, known for occult practices, also encourages the practice of *automatic écriture*. Pollock, influenced by Jungian ideologies in his work, once remarked, "We're all of us influenced by Freud, I guess. I've been a Jungian for a long time" (Crowther and Wünsche 121). Pollock's drip method is more commonly attributed to the tradition of Surrealist automatism, which is very similar to *automatic écriture*. Pollock identified with Surrealist automatism,

because the Surrealists also sought to free the unconscious. Sandler remarks that, “Pollock’s method of dripping and pouring had its source in Surrealist automatism. He recognized it as the movement’s truly radical innovation because it enabled the unconscious to speak freely” (Sandler 106).

A famous turning point in Pollock’s career — in fact for the worse — was the event of Hans Namuth filming Pollock painting in 1950. Namuth explains Pollock’s response when he asked him about the role of the unconscious in the act of painting. Namuth writes, “The conscious part of his duties as a watchdog; when the unconscious sinfully produces a representational image, the conscious cries alarm and Pollock wrenches himself to reality and obliterates the offending form” (Sandler 131). The concept of the “offending image” correlates with Kandinsky’s idea that representation robs art of inner meaning, and the evils of physicality. Modern artists repeatedly reinforce the belief in representation as a threat to the ability to convey true emotion in art. However, when an abstract reality replaces representation, the need for rationality dissolves. Irving Sandler puts it well in his book, *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*: “In mythic terms, Pollock can be thought to have cast off Apollonian rationality and permitted Dionysian irrationality and chaos to take over” (Sandler 106). The distinction between Apollonian rationality and Dionysian irrationality is taken from the literary dichotomy used by Nietzsche in his work *The Birth of Tragedy*. Based upon the mythical gods of reason and ecstasy, the purpose of this dichotomy is to contrast rational and irrational views of the universe. In the twentieth century, the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy took the form of rejection of science, logic and

theory, and resulted in a turn to mysticism. Kandinsky gives a hint of this when he asserts that the physical world is evil, weighing down the spiritual potential of art.

We turn now to a discussion of a specific drip painting to illustrate the previous points about Pollock's spiritualism. Jackson Pollock's drip paintings rank among the most iconic images of American art, therefore encounters with Pollock's drip paintings rarely feel fresh. However, viewing a drip painting through the lens of Pollock's spiritualism provides more bountiful discussion. The all-over composition reflects Pollock's endeavor to tap into the universal cosmic consciousness. The spontaneity of the drips is indicative of Pollock's practice of *automatic écriture*, the practice of unconscious expression of spiritualistic origin. *Number 31* (fig. 7) is entirely abstract, free of the "offending form" Pollock fears will rob his image of inner meaning. The multi-layered, splattered, looped drips generate an image with a great deal of energy, similar to his earlier paintings. The outer speaks to the inner, for the visual energy and emotion of *Number 31* reflect Pollock's intent to tap into the universal energy of nature. It was with Pollock's drip painting method that he started to paint standing over his canvas, which was tacked to the floor. This method of painting involved his whole body, not merely his art and hand. This technique is a metaphor for the involvement of Pollock's entire being in the creation process, which reflects the paradigm of the individual's relation to the universal as a means to transcendence.



Fig. 7. Jackson Pollock. *Number 31*. 1950. Oil on masonite, 8' 10" x 17' 5 5/8". MOMA, New York, NY.

At the time, Pollock's synthesis of pure abstraction with the abandonment of control made his technique of action painting unimaginably radical. The execution and final product of the drip paintings did not resemble the traditional practice of painting in any way. A traditional canvas, easel and paint brushes were abandoned. However, even more shocking was the chaotic, seemingly random approach to creating a piece. In contrast to O'Keeffe, Pollock permitted the Dionysian chaos to overtake his approach to painting. The progression from Pollock to Martin pushes the severance from the physical world to its saturation point.

The Allegory of Renewal: Transformative Ritual in Pollock's Art

Organic, spiritual, vitalist energy, the thirties concept of transformative movement, the primitive ceremonies of growth, increase and spirit power, the surrealist automatist generative subconscious impulse, Freud's and Jung's psychic vitalism, nature's cycle of the season, mythic nurture and ritual cleansing, the physical movements of the

*human body in its operations and procedures — all of these
Pollock condensed into an allegorical statement about
endless human potential and transformation.*

(Polcari 258)

If the intent of Pollock's work could be summarized in one concept, *inner renewal* would be most appropriate. Almost all of the elements of Pollock's work can be traced back to his attempt to achieve transformation through his painting. Polcari notes the numerous rituals Pollock attempted in order to speak energy and transformation into life. To Pollock, these rituals were allegories of renewal. Primitive Shamanistic ceremonies, the cycle of the seasons, *automatic écriture* and the sexual act, are all concepts which comprised Pollock's spiritualism of renewal.

Pollock was a searching soul, and even nuances in his life point to his quest for rebirth. For instance, Pollock's radical decision to paint standing over the canvases, instead of using traditional methods, is an aspect of his technique that carries deeper meaning. In *Abstract Expressionism and the American Experience*, Irving Sandler observes that, "Being in the canvas was a metaphor for the artist's being or inward being. In short, using a radical technique, Pollock expressed a sense of authentic self, a self that was tormented and unsettled, which also evoked the mood of his time" (Sandler 116). Although Pollock's paintings are not explicitly self-portraits, they represent his inner life. His horizontal drip paintings, which he stood over to create, are an identification with working the land. One could say the canvases became a sort of surrogate earth to Pollock. Pollock's upbringing in the American West, which came with an awareness of the people's reliance upon the land for life, gave him an appreciation for the restorative nature of the earth. Even his canvases speak to his pursuit of a source of life-giving transformation.

Undoubtedly, the most apparent evidence of his quest for renewal is the reoccurrence of sexual themes. Twentieth century artists approached sexuality differently. Some, like Dada, approached it as an opportunity for perverted mockery. However Pollock, as well as O'Keeffe, had reverence for sexuality and the power it holds. The imagery in Pollock's early work almost exclusively has to do with sexuality. Shamanism holds that the sexual act has transformative powers from which can come renewal and new life. Sexuality is given a spiritual role in the life of the individual's spirit. Pollock was fascinated with the Pawnee fertility ceremony, the Hako, because it is thought to bring about renewal through relationship (Polcari 18). The sexual act is inherently creative — or technically procreative — therefore Pollock's fascination is logical. However, from his personal problems with women it is evident this interest became an obsessive means of escape.

Finally, renewal eluded Pollock. His alcoholism and wild lifestyle escalated until one night he died in a drunk driving accident — which he caused — at the age of 44. A tragic figure and American icon, Pollock makes a fascinating testament to the spiritual urges of twentieth century American Abstract Expressionists, who believed abstraction had inherent powers of spiritual expression.

CHAPTER FOUR

Agnes Martin

Agnes Martin: "Love of Limits, Loved the Illimitable"

Sandler: To begin with a general question, what would you like your pictures to convey?

Martin: I would like them to represent beauty, innocence and happiness; I would like them all to represent that. Exaltation.

— Agnes Martin,
interviewed by Irving Sandler, July 1993

Often mislabeled a Minimalist, Agnes Martin identified herself with the Abstract Expressionists, and their intent to tap into one's spiritual consciousness in order to convey inner meaning through art. However, because of the aesthetic and formal qualities of her work, as well as the period of the century in which her career flourished, Martin exhibited with the Minimalists, hence her typical classification. Nevertheless, it is important to study Martin in the vein in which she felt her artistic allegiances lay, namely Abstract Expressionism. Abstract Expressionism began in the 1940s and grew in reaction to the anxieties of WWII. The Abstract Expressionists wanted to capture "inwardness" in their art, and relied upon abstraction as a means to do so. This tradition of spirituality and abstraction originated in Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Martin was simultaneously concerned with conveying transcendence and beauty through her art by means of abstraction. Consequently, Martin felt an allegiance to the tradition of the Abstract Expressionists who drew upon Kandinsky's theory of inner meaning and abstraction.

Martin (1912-2004) passed away just ten years ago in a retirement community in Taos, New Mexico, at the age of 92. Of the three artists studied in this thesis, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin, Martin offers a fresh, contemporary glimpse at the form spirituality in abstraction has taken in recent years. Martin's career peaked later in her life, during the 1980s — which is a significant leap forward in history from the climax of Pollock's career in the 1950s, and O'Keeffe's throughout the 1930s and '40s. These three artists, whose work and lives spanned the twentieth century, demonstrate how the influence of Kandinsky's tradition has been woven in and out of the fabric of history since its publication up until the present day.

Given the more recent nature of Martin's work, there have been numerous retrospectives and exhibitions devoted solely to her work. Although the series of exhibitions at Dia: Beacon showing Martin's work is the most substantial, a smaller exhibit at the Drawing Center in Soho is intriguing. The show, "3 x Abstraction: New Methods of Drawing," held in 2005, a year after Martin's death, invited viewers to explore the relationship between spirituality and abstraction in modern art. The show included the drawings of Hilma af Klint, Emma Kunz and Agnes Martin. The drawings of the three artists curated into the show are linear and geometric in nature, yet all three artists attempted to convey mystical spirituality in their work. For Martin, the linear, geometric aspect of her work is a formal quality that carries spiritual meaning.

A review of the show in the New York Times called "The Modernist vs. The Mystic" (Johnson) makes the point: "Academic art historians and critics still tend to discourage talking seriously about the spiritual in art. But considering how many artists continue to be motivated by spiritual urges, however the word spiritual is defined — this

is something worth discussing.” Insightful and bold, the author of this review verbalizes a widespread problem with scholarship on twentieth century art. In the twentieth century, spirituality is a convoluted concept. However, the declared “death of God” and the rejection of organized religion does not signal the end of man’s quest for renewal and his search for inner meaning. No matter how veiled and confounded modern man’s search for something higher may be, comprehension of the different faces of the quest for spirituality is always worth pursuing. To the general eye, Martin’s art and life may not appear spiritual. However, she was deeply motivated by spiritual urges, and to understand her quest and the manner in which she expressed her spirituality sheds a whole new light upon Martin’s life and work, and by extension, modern man. The influences upon the inner life of Agnes Martin, and the conclusions she drew toward the end of her life, are truly indicative of modern times, making her a fitting conclusion to this study.

Martin’s Mysticism: Beauty is the Mystery of Life

Violence, destructiveness, and possessiveness are an integral part of response to the concrete. This distresses some people very much and they would like to escape from response to the concrete in order to avoid them. But there is no escape ... the transcendent is so blissful and seems much more innocent that we wish to seek to maintain it at the expense of the concrete response. But it is not possible and it is not desirable ... Now let us turn to abstract response, the response that we make in our minds free from our concrete environment. We know that it prevails. We know that it is infinite, dimensionless, without form and void.

(Martin and Glimcher 82-83)

Martin expressed her worldview not only through her work, but also through extensive writings. Since she is a recent artist, scholars have in-depth documentation of

her life from her own journals, interviews, and records of lectures she gave. Most of her writings do not carry on about trivial matters, but rather are intentional attempts to convey her view of the world. Consequently, scholars have a very definite idea of Martin's inner life and her ideas about art and its function in the world. Specifically, Martin discusses the ideal of beauty, perfection and transcendence a great deal in her writings. For instance, the epigraph is taken from a lecture she gave at Yale University in 1976. In the lecture, Martin talks about the concrete and abstract, the dichotomy of environments in which she believes we live our lives. Only when we transcend the concrete can we experience the beauty and perfection found only in an abstract realm. It is insights of this nature that typify Martin's writings, making them an excellent foundation for a discussion of her spirituality.

Although Martin's writings are published, and acknowledged as significant, they are not often integrated into actual scholarship to inform argument. However, there could not be a more relevant source from which to form opinions about Martin than her own writings. Therefore, this chapter draws heavily from primary sources. In particular, Martin's lecture on beauty given at Yale, and her interview with Irving Sandler in 1993, prove quite insightful.

Ironically, Martin dodged explicitly discussing influences upon her work. Nevertheless, there are a number of philosophical traditions she drew from. Regarding other artists who influenced Martin, she repeatedly expressed admiration for Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* immensely influenced Mark Rothko, the Abstract Expressionist known for his contemplative color field paintings. Kandinsky and Rothko are the natural pair scholars

rely on when discussing spiritual expression in abstraction in the twentieth century. Rothko relied upon broad fields of color with minimal compositional interruptions to transport the viewer into a contemplative state. Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko are often associated as the two major contemplative painters of the twentieth century. Agnes Martin followed in their philosophical tradition as a painter moving away from nature, yet trying to capture transcendence or the sublime. In 1993, Abstract Expressionist scholar Irving Sandler conducted an interview with Martin. Sandler asked insightful questions of Martin, which reveal a great deal about her intent as an artist. Martin's answers to a number of Sandler's questions will be foundational to our discussion of her in this chapter. The following excerpt of their conversation reveals the reason Martin admired Rothko's and Newman's motivation for their manner of painting.

Irving Sandler: Two artists that you admire are Mark Rothko, who tried to suggest what he termed 'transcendental experience' in his painting, and Barnett Newman, who preferred the term 'sublime.'

Agnes Martin: I agree with them. I have a great respect for their work and philosophy, their transcendentalism. They gave up so many things; they gave up line, they gave up form, they gave up organic form. They created an undefined space. I think that was so important. The abstract expressionists found that you can have an entirely objective reality that may be totally abstract. That's revolutionary. And they have so many different expressions. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

This idea of 'sublimity' also appeared in Georgia O'Keeffe's conception of what it means to convey spirituality in art. O'Keeffe's attitude toward sublimity grew out of a state of rapturous ecstasy in response to the rugged beauty of nature. Martin, however, in her response to Sandler, remarked that she admired Rothko and Newman's ability to give up organic form yet still attain transcendence in their work. Martin praised Rothko's work, saying he had "reached for zero so that nothing could stand in the way of truth" (Haskell

et al. 106). The concept of ‘zero’ is indicative of Zen influences. Martin was deeply reverent towards Zen philosophies, which will become apparent shortly.

The introduction discussed how modern man wanted to free himself from the technocracy he found himself trapped in, and regain his humanity. Yet many attempted to restore humanity through a rejection of Apollonian rationality and exchange it for Dionysian irrationality. Within this paper, the Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy was first established in relation to Pollock’s drip paintings. The progression from O’Keeffe to Pollock and finally to Martin manifests how a rational view of the world, and a favorable view toward Creation, ran its course in the twentieth century. This progression manifests the gradual rejection of the Apollonian rationality. Martin’s worldview finalizes the rejection of Apollonian reason, and complete acceptance of Dionysian mysticism. The following story told by a friend about Agnes Martin demonstrates this point:

On April 5, 1976, Agnes gave a lecture at Yale. As we drove up to the campus, she was very nervous. ‘I don’t think they are going to like it,’ she said. ‘They are too intellectual.’ I responded with, ‘But it’s a university!’ Slightly angered, she tells me that to make art you have to give up the intellectual in favor of innocence and inspiration. She went on, ‘It was very hard for me to give up intellectual theories — probably the hardest was giving up Einstein’s Theory of Relativity.’ I was at a loss of words. She then told me that the lecture would be on obedience. (Martin and Glimcher 80)

Martin once explained, “It took me twenty years to get beyond nature” (Cotter 78).

Evidently, Martin’s abandonment of “nature” and “the intellectual” was an internal struggle for her. As mentioned in the story, Martin stressed that one must cultivate “innocence and inspiration.” Martin was extremely taken with Zen and Taoism. During her time at Columbia University in the early 1940s, she studied Zen and Taoism extensively. Upon observation, the concepts of Eastern philosophy are evident in Martin’s work. The fundamental concepts of Eastern Mysticism, specifically Zen and

Taoism, infiltrate Martin's spirituality, and consequently her view of art and its function in the universe. Modern art scholar Hans Rookmaaker explains the draw of Zen for the twentieth century artists:

For the same reason he is willing to follow the ways of Zen, in which reality is accepted and yet overcome by being bypassed and man has become free by being able to transcend the dilemmas of life and thought. Zen has had a great attraction in our time, and many artists have been influenced by it ... Zen seemed to give an answer to the deep questions, and offered the wisdom of a long tradition where western man was just beginning his stumbling search for a new way. (Rookmaaker 202-203)

Zen transcends the concrete reality of the problems of the world, yet still gives answers to the questions. This was ideal for the twentieth century artist, who was facing the complex crisis of the twentieth century. A rational, logical approach to answering the deep questions of life had run its course in the mind of modern man, therefore a new approach must be embarked upon. For many artists, Zen was alluring.

The influence of Zen is very evident in Martin's work — in particular, the role of the individual. Eastern thought embodies a strange conflict around the concept of the individual. An individual is encouraged to strive to be his or her best self — in other words, self-perfection is the goal. Ironically, however, the means to that end is loss of individuality, becoming egoless. Man achieves the perfection that is transcendence when he surrenders his individual personhood and embraces the wholeness of universality. The obedience of self-denial produces beauty and happiness. Nothing is concrete or rational, instead intangible and mystical. Barbara Haskell, prolific art history scholar and current curator at the Whitney, explains the significance of surrender of the ego, denial of individual personhood: "What is gained from the abjuration of ego is the liberating

realization that we are insignificant in the total process of life, no more important than a grain of sand” (Haskell et al. 112).

Martin effectively conveys this mystical mindset through her writings and work. The goal of her work is transcendence. Transcendence is accomplished by perfection, and perfection is the result of impersonal egolessness. Only in the abstract state will the viewer experience beauty and happiness. Martin wanted her work to impart feeling and emotion, yet not *personal* emotion, because a hint of personality would embody ego, which is not transcendent. Barbara Haskell puts it well: “Only through such pure, egoless abstraction did she feel that the immaterial sublimity of reality could be communicated” (Haskell et al. 94). In her interview with Irving Sandler, Martin discusses how the grid expresses her view of egolessness:

S: You prefer the grid because it exemplifies wholeness, boundlessness and quiet.

M: And egolessness.

S: It is also non-hierarchical, no point having more emphasis than another.

M: That is the point, all the rectangles are the same size. I think that the rhythms are tranquil, don’t you? Everything that bothers us is left out. One man couldn’t stand that so he painted one of the rectangles! (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

The grid is Martin’s signature aesthetic; therefore her entire body of work serves as testament to her view of the individual and the transcendence found in surrender of the ego. Unfortunately, the aesthetic nuances of Martin’s work are very subtle and are therefore not done justice in a photocopy. The lines are delicate, the colors are soft and the composition simple, therefore intimacy with Martin’s work is required to experience the full range of power and beauty her work embodies. *Wood I* (fig. 8) was completed by Martin in 1965. The numerous units of grids in the work are metaphors for the

individual's surrender of his personhood. The pictorial plane is composed of tiny squares becoming a whole. In the context of the whole grid each square loses distinctive qualities and becomes part of the boundless quiet of the whole. Martin finds this abjuration of the individual a liberating concept: Zen teaches that once the ego is forsaken, transcendence is reached.

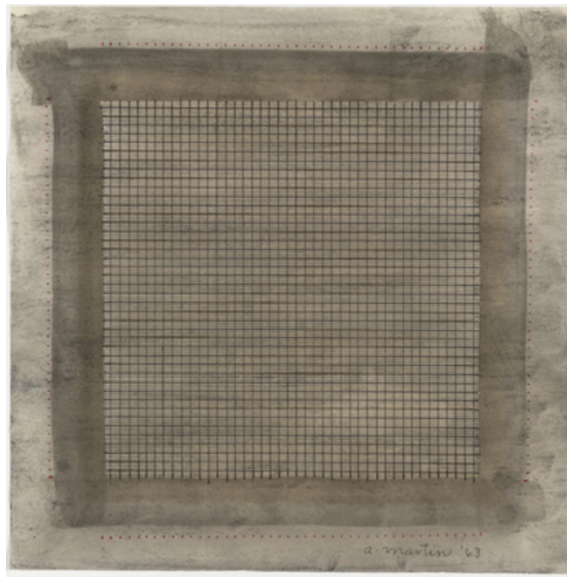


Fig. 8. Agnes Martin. *Wood I*. 1963. Ink, colored ink, ballpoint pen, and pencil on paper, 15 x 15 1/2". MOMA, New York, NY.

For Martin, reality was split into a dichotomy: the concrete response to life in this world, characterized by violence, destructiveness and possessiveness; and, alternatively, the abstract response, which once achieved, is bliss and innocence, free from the weight of the concrete. The abstract response is infinite, dimensionless, without form and void. Martin believed that each had to choose his or her approach to the world. Barbara Haskell explains how Martin believed you could achieve the abstract response:

To effect greater awareness of the sublimity of reality requires quieting the ego and relinquishing our sense of control over the process of destiny. Becoming

obedient to the beauty and happiness of reality engages a different understanding of the world than that which prevails today. (Haskell et al. 114)

In artistic terms, this abstract response takes the form of what Martin calls “inspiration,” achieved by surrendering to the inner mind and being free from the outer mind which records facts and lives in the reality of a concrete environment. In her own words, Martin describes the surrender of the mind to inspiration:

There are two parts of the mind. The outer mind that records facts and the inner mind that says “yes” and “no.” When you think of something that you should do the inner mind says “yes” and you feel elated. We call this inspiration. For an artist this is the only way. There is the only way. There is no help anywhere. He must listen to his own mind. The way of an artist is an entirely different way. It is a way of surrender. He must surrender to his own mind. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

Martin believed the “yes” response of the mind resulted in inspiration, and for the artist the path to beauty is the result of their inner mind’s choice to accept the abstract. Martin describes the emotion of the reception of the abstract as elation or sublimity. Sublimity achieved through abstraction, with the purpose of expressing beauty, was also a theme in O’Keeffe’s quest for spirituality. For both O’Keeffe and Martin, the emotion of beauty conveyed by nature played a role in capturing sublimity and transcendence.

Interestingly, both Pollock and Martin acknowledged that inspiration for their work came from dreamlike visions. Specifically, Pollock called this inspiration “shamanic visions.” It is evident from Martin’s writings that her work was a reflection of her inner spirituality, however she often explicitly explained that dreamlike visions were sources of inspiration for her work (Moss et al. 93).

Beauty Illustrates Happiness: The Perfection of Beauty in Martin's Work

Martin's utmost artistic concern was with capturing beauty. Often, however, beauty for an artist is a means to an end: an instrument to point to something greater. For Martin, beauty was the end, the goal. Beauty was the principle by which she lived and created. Beauty transmitted perfection and happiness. Therefore, capturing beauty in her art was her primary concern. Irving Sandler opened his interview with Martin with the following question:

S: To begin with a general question, what would you like your pictures to convey?

M: I would like them to represent beauty, innocence and happiness; I would like them all to represent that. Exaltation. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

For Martin, beauty is the mind's awareness of perfection. It is a mysterious experience only existing in the mind: "beauty is in the *mind* of the beholder" (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15). Martin explains, "When I think of art I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye, it is in the mind. In our mind there is awareness of perfection" (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 16). Why was Martin so intent on beauty? She believed that beauty speaks happiness into our lives, and she saw this concept embodied in the beauty of nature:

Beauty illustrates happiness; the wind in the grass, the glistening waves following each other, the flight of the birds, all speak of happiness. The clear blue sky illustrates a different kind of happiness and the soft dark night a different kind. There are an infinite number of different kinds of happiness. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 17)

The exquisite experiences nature evokes embody the perfection of beauty. The happiness that the beauty of nature imparts is the same transcendent happiness she wishes to capture in her work. Martin believes we surrender when in the beautiful presence of nature, and in that state man is happy. In 1966, she made this remark about man in nature:

When people go to the ocean they like to see it all day ... There's nobody living who couldn't stand all afternoon in front of a waterfall. It's a simple experience, you become lighter and lighter in weight, you wouldn't want anything else. Anyone who can sit on a stone in a field awhile can see my painting. Nature is like parting a curtain, you go into it. I want to draw a certain response like this ... Not a specific response but that quality of response from people when they leave themselves behind, often experienced in nature — an experience of simple joy ... the simple, direct going into a field of vision as you would cross an empty beach to look at the ocean. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 17)

In her work, Martin strove to recreate the emotion of being overtaken by the expansive beauty of nature. Irving Sandler questioned Martin about this resemblance of the emotion of nature in her work:

S: I sense that there are references to that nature in your work, for instance, in the horizontal in your grids, or more empathetically, the openness and expansiveness in your work.

M: A lot of people say my work is like a landscape. But the truth is that it isn't, because there are straight lines in my work and there are no straight lines in nature. My work is non-objective, like that of the abstract expressionists. But I want people, when they look at my paintings, to have the same feelings they experience when they look at landscape, so I never protest when they say my work is like landscape. I would say that my response to nature is really a response to beauty. The water looks beautiful, the trees look beautiful. It is beauty that really calls. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

Martin's painting, *The Tree* (fig. 9), is an example of this concept. The title is taken from nature, although clearly the work is not a representation of a tree. Rather, the painting is meant to convey the emotion a tree evokes. Martin intended the response evoked by the beauty of *The Tree* to be similar to the emotion of transcendence one feels when in the presence of the beauty of a tree in nature. The perfect dimensions of the canvas bear a great deal of significance, which will be discussed shortly. The horizontal composition imparts the emotion of expansiveness in nature Martin's believes is so inherent to the experience of transcendence. The emotional tone Martin's aesthetic sets is quite different from that of Pollock. None of the energy and struggle in Pollock's work is evident in

Martin's aesthetic. Earlier, Martin's belief in the abstract and concrete response to life was discussed. Martin's aesthetic conveys the abstract, transcendent response. As opposed to Pollock, Martin's paintings are free from any tension or strife; the peaceful colors and structured composition give them a beauty that comes from an ordered calm. Above all, Martin is concerned with beauty, for beauty is the perfection found only in one's mind, and the perfection of beauty is happiness.

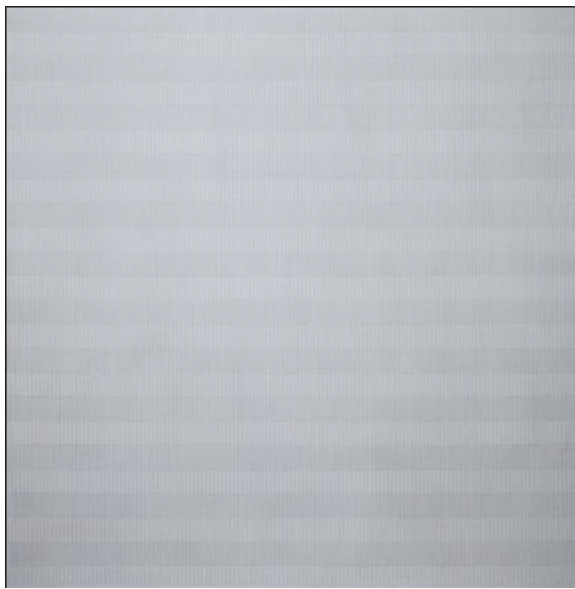


Fig. 9. Agnes Martin. *The Tree*. 1964. Oil and pencil on canvas, 6' x 6'. MOMA, New York, NY.

Perfection in the Mind: The Classical Attitude in Martin's Work

A corollary of Agnes Martin's mysticism is her ideal of perfection, which manifests itself in her art. Martin's view of art's function in the world was also influenced by concepts such as "classical" and "ideal." These ideas intend to capture a sort of transcendent perfection of ideal beauty. Martin spoke a great deal about perfection in her work, and cultivating the "classical attitude." Martin did not consider herself influenced by the Classical tradition, in the sense that she drew from Classical

style and forms, but rather from their philosophy of ideal beauty and perfection. Classicizing architecture is orderly and symmetrical. The Greeks depicted idealized athletic youths in their sculpture, which showcased perfect proportions. One thinks of Leonardo Da Vinci's classicizing *Vitruvian Man*, which emphasizes the symmetry of man's anatomy. Intrinsically, Agnes Martin's work that uses geometric lines and rectangles, and *Vitruvian Man*, have the same purpose: celebrating the perfection that is geometry. For the majority of her career, Martin used canvases that were 6' x 6', the projected dimensions of the diagram of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, who embodied symmetrical bodily perfection. It was not until later in her life, when her physical strength diminished and her studio space got smaller, that she shrank her canvas size to 5' x 5'. Martin said the goal of art is "to make us aware of perfection in the mind. The Greeks knew that in the mind you can draw a perfect circle, but you can't really draw a perfect circle. Everyone has a vision of perfection don't you think? A housewife wants to have a perfect home" (Cotter 78). For Martin, this concept of perfection in the mind manifests itself in her work through geometry, the straight lines, and most importantly her use of rectangles. Martin knew perfection was impossible, but the ideal of perfection, existing only in the mind, could be captured. Although Martin's squares and rectangles appear perfect, they are drawn by hand. Therefore, a close examination of her paintings reveals slight imperfections in the straightness of the lines. Martin was aware that this formal quality of her work would speak to her own individual imperfect pursuit of perfection. In her art, Martin strove to create an awareness of perfection that is in the mind. Thus, she felt that geometry and rectangles evoked contemplation of perfection best, because of their orderly, symmetrical nature. She explained herself once this way:

“classicists are people that look out with their back to the world.... To a detached person, the complication of the involved life is like chaos. If you don’t like chaos you’re a classicist” (Haskell et al. 114). To be classical was to have a calm and cool view of the world. In her interview with Irving Sandler, Martin discusses the shared intent of the Greek ideal, her art, and the work of the Minimalists:

S: Do you have some sympathy with the work of the Minimalists?

M: Well yes; they also were classical, you could say. They followed perfection in their minds. You can’t draw a perfect circle, but in your mind there is a perfect circle, that you can draw towards. You can’t be a perfect man, but in your mind you can conceive of a perfect man. That’s the Greek ideal. And the Minimalists were the same, working towards that perfection in the mind. But they insisted more than I did on being impersonal. They wanted absolutely to escape themselves and wanting to express something. They didn’t even allow people to put their names under their pictures. They listed the names at the back with the numbers. They even had to be talked into that. (Martin, Peyton-Jones and Anderson 15)

Conceiving of perfection is the thread that runs through all of these artists. More generally, humanism recurs in the tradition of conceiving of perfection. The Greeks glorified man; Leonardo Da Vinci’s Renaissance humanism glorified man; and, ironically, the nihilistic mysticism of the twentieth century is a situation with man denying the Creator and creation, yet becoming bogged down in trying to create a reality for himself that is beautiful.

Agnes Martin is a study in contradictions. Undoubtedly, she successfully achieved what she intended to do: create works that evoke emotions of transcendence. Her work has a beauty which comes from an ordered calm, or the “classical attitude” that she wanted to portray. However, after studying the philosophical outlook that informed her art, it becomes apparent that Martin’s worldview and resulting art is full of inherent paradoxes. Agnes Martin scholar Holland Cotter remarked that Emerson’s description of

Plato — “love of limits, loved the illimitable” (2) — might apply to Agnes Martin. Martin relied on the geometry in her work, yet wanted to create a sense of expansive freedom through her art. She rejected intellectualism, scientific theory, and for that matter rationality, for an unstructured, mystical view of the world, yet her paintings appear ordered, structured and rational. She remarked, “It took me twenty years to get beyond nature,” yet she wanted the essence of the beauty of nature to be captured in her work. Even Zen’s concept of the individual seems ironic: the individual must surrender his ego to attain transcendence above himself, therefore attaining happiness. Yet the individual is never given anything greater than man to strive towards; instead, the mystic is always questing inward. This paradox leads to the final point.

At the end of her life, Martin struggled a great deal with depression. She lost the broader scope of the purpose of her art and life. Towards the end, Martin felt she could not share with others what she had learned in her lifetime regarding beauty and happiness.

Martin recognized that her experiences in coming to understand the pervasiveness of beauty and happiness were of no use to others; indeed, she argued that no two people were alike, and that therefore she could not help anyone but herself. Yet she also affirmed that “the happiness of every living thing is what we want.” (Haskell et al. 114)

A sense of isolation and futility overtook her. In her mind, her life’s work became idiosyncratic to her own experience, unable to influence others for the better. She held to her desire of happiness for all, yet she had lost faith in her ability to impact the happiness of others. Martin, in her lecture at Yale, states, “The most troublesome anti-freedom concept is our belief in a transcendent supreme authority” (Martin and Glimcher 87). Clearly, to Martin, any higher being of power is destructive to freedom and happiness.

The contradictions in Martin's view of life and art should be attributed to her despondence at the end of her life. Martin's view of the world around her seemed to condense down to denial of reality. She constructed for herself an alter-reality, void of the structure and rationality that is inherent in the universe. Happiness seemed to elude her at the end of her life; knowledge, even faith, became futile to Martin at the end: experience meant everything.

CONCLUSION

Mounting an exhibition with 'the subject matter of the spiritual' in art represents a major shift in contemporary sensibilities.

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The general public misunderstands the advent of abstraction in the twentieth century. A museum exhibition exemplifying the origins of abstraction in the twentieth century would be an excellent opportunity to breach this gap of knowledge. I would like to propose that the ideas put forth in this thesis would translate well into an exhibition on mystical spirituality in American Abstract Expressionism.

Exhibitions fashioned with spirituality as their subject matter have been rare in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Contemporary scholarship has shied away from examining modern art through the lens of spirituality; however, this withdrawal from the spiritual is detrimental to a comprehensive understanding of modern art. The exhibitions that do explore spiritual urges in modern art have never brought together three major American artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin. Each member of this threesome is a major representative of the abstract tradition in America over the span of the entire twentieth century; therefore much scholarship has been devoted to their work. However, seldom are they brought together. Bringing O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin together as an exemplification of the spiritual nature of the abstract tradition in America would be a new interpretation yet to be undertaken.

Georgia O'Keeffe, Jackson Pollock and Agnes Martin each used abstraction as a vehicle of inner meaning. As established in Kandinsky's theory of abstraction, the physicality of material representation weighed down the spiritual potential of art. Abstraction was the means by which the spiritual artist transcended the concrete, physical world and expressed inner meaning.

Within this shared tradition of abstraction as a vehicle of inner meaning, there are many common motifs and ideals that overlap among O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin. Although the exhibit would be formed on the common ground of abstraction and spirituality, a demonstration of these shared motifs would comprise the exhibition.

Perhaps the most prominent spiritual theme in the work of O'Keeffe, Pollock and Martin is renewal. The life and death motif is evident in both O'Keeffe and Pollock's work. For instance, Pollock's *Figure Kneeling before Arch with Skulls*, and O'Keeffe's *Horse's Skull with White Rose*, are testament to the transformational cycle of life and death. More specifically, within the renewal theme is the fertility motif. O'Keeffe's body of flower paintings has innumerable examples of the fertility motif. O'Keeffe's *Flower Abstraction*, alongside Pollock's painting *Germination*, are examples of Pollock and O'Keeffe's belief that fertility and birth are sources of renewal.

Pollock and O'Keeffe were both exposed to Native American cultures, and developed an interest in Native American spiritual rituals. Images of the totem pole, a symbol of a spiritual gateway, appear in both Pollock and O'Keeffe's work. O'Keeffe completed a series of charcoal drawings and paintings of Kachina dolls, a personal form of the totem. *Kachina* (1934) by O'Keeffe, alongside Pollock's *Easter and the Totem*

Pole, or *Birth*, would make an excellent testament to their belief in the transformative power of ritual.

The second major spiritual theme to be exemplified in the exhibit is the role of the individual in relation to universal emotion. This theme manifests itself in relation to ideals of infinitude and wholeness. Infinite, expansive spaces are symbolic of the mystical loss of the individual in the whole of human emotion. This symbolism appears in all three artists' work, in different ways. For instance, Martin's concept of the loss of ego is portrayed through her use of geometry. Martin's non-hierarchical structure paintings, such as *Grey Stone II*, demonstrate the insignificance of the individual in relation to the whole. The horizontal composition of *Untitled #1* gives the sensation of an infinite horizon line. O'Keeffe's technique of cropping her images also provides a sense of expansive, boundary-less spaces, suggestive of infinity. O'Keeffe's images impart the emotion of intimacy within infinitude, which corresponds to the idea of the individual lost in the universal. O'Keeffe also uses circles to denote a sense of wholeness. O'Keeffe's *Black Abstraction* is an excellent example of intimacy within infinitude, as well as images of wholeness, perfection and endlessness, such as the circle. Pollock also demonstrates a concern for wholeness and infinity, and is also concerned with tapping into universal emotion and oneness with nature. His painting *Shimmering Substance* is impasto with oil paint. Shortly after making it, he turned to his drip painting style. The all-over abstract composition represents Pollock's endeavor to capture the universal human emotion. *Shimmering Substance* also contains a circle in the middle, a symbol of infinity and wholeness.

A corollary to the theme of humanity's universal emotion is man's relation to nature. For all three artists, the experience of nature embodied humanity's universal emotion. For Pollock, this manifested itself in his interest in the Shamanistic concept of man's fusion with nature. *Man, Bull, Bird* is an example of Shamanistic fusion. One of his drip paintings, such as *Autumn Rhythm*, reflects his statement, "I am nature."

Although her works were completely abstract, Martin wished her paintings to reflect the beauty in nature. Many of her works are titled after phenomena in nature to reflect the synonymous beauty of her works with nature. Her painting *Flower in the Wind*, completed in 1963, is an excellent example of Martin's affinity to turning to nature for expression. O'Keeffe called this experience of emotional and spiritual communion with nature *sublimity*. The beauty of nature transcended O'Keeffe to a realm of spiritual ecstasy. *Red, Yellow, and Black Streak* would be a good candidate to represent this concept. The composition is highly abstracted, yet resembles a sunset over a mountain or ocean. The energy of the swirling forms and the vibrant colors impart a sense of ecstasy, and the beauty O'Keeffe encountered in nature.

These comparisons represent only a fraction of the conversations that could comprise an exhibition on spirituality in American Abstraction. In conclusion, perhaps this exhibition would prove to be the catalyst for new and extensive dialogue on spirituality in the American avant-garde, thereby engaging other art forms, such as music, film, dance and sculpture, in this dialogue on modern spiritual urges in twentieth century American art.

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