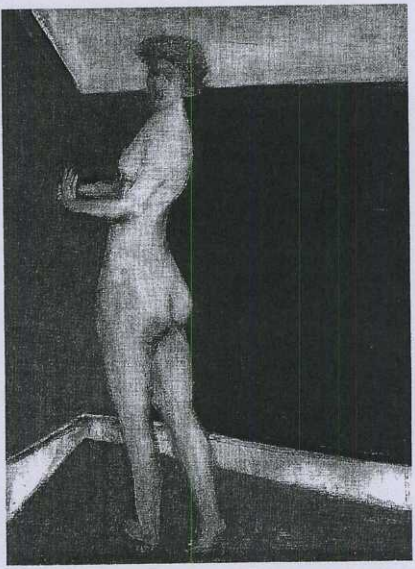
Washington and New York
Mark Rothko

As the subject of a newly published catalogue raisonné, several monographs, an exhaustive biography, and several full-scale retrospectives since his death in 1970, Mark Rothko appears secure in his status as a pillar of the New York School and so of post-War art in general. What do we learn from the Rothko retrospective originating at the National Gallery in Washington (3rd May to 16th August) and now at the **Whitney Museum, New York**, to 29th November, that we did not already know from that at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum twenty years ago? The answer must be, not a lot – although the present show will of course unfold Rothko's legacy before some new audiences. By amply displaying his unsung Milton Avery-like attempts of the 1930s (Fig.54) and his Surrealist efforts of the 1940s (Fig.55), both



54. *Untitled*, by Mark Rothko. 1937–38. 60.7 by 46.1 cm. (National Gallery of Art, Washington; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

retrospectives have made plain that the graceful mastery of Rothko's best mature work was hard-won, that he was neither highly trained nor innately fluent at drawing or painting (unlike, say, his contemporary Willem de Kooning). With occasional, felicitous exceptions, the early work now mostly commands widespread attention for its halting predictions of what was to come. The relation between the early and the mature work, a focus of my own 1989 study on Rothko, also interests the Washington show's curator, Jeffrey Weiss, who discerns parallels between the compressed urban, architectural spaces of the 1930s subway scenes and the spatial qualities of the mature paintings. But (in a catalogue essay preoccupied, in a somewhat wall-eyed way, with a small body of the very early work and a small body of the very late work) Weiss discusses the so-called classic Rothko paintings only in rather distant or general terms. Closer scrutiny might have revealed that, far from being in any sense architectural, the tissuey forms that are conveniently called Rothko's 'rectangles' often verge on the amorphous and fluid.

Rothko's art once impressed many as courageous, if not outrageous, for its perceived, stark blankness and bigness coupled with its nearly obsessive insistence on its own restrictive compositional terms. With hindsight his concerns can appear less radically anti-traditional when compared to his New York School colleagues. He shared with Barnett Newman a humanist mission to realise an abstract art bodied forth with momentous 'subject matter', but Newman's more coolly rendered paintings (along with those of Ad Reinhardt) better anticipated the desubjectivised Minimalist currents to come. And in his adherence to an (abstractly) iconic, figure-ground schema, and his cherishing of the felt, feathery play of brushstrokes against stretched canvas, Rothko may seem virtually retrograde in comparison with Jackson Pollock whose work remains, amidst the New York School group, ever the hub of critical interest.

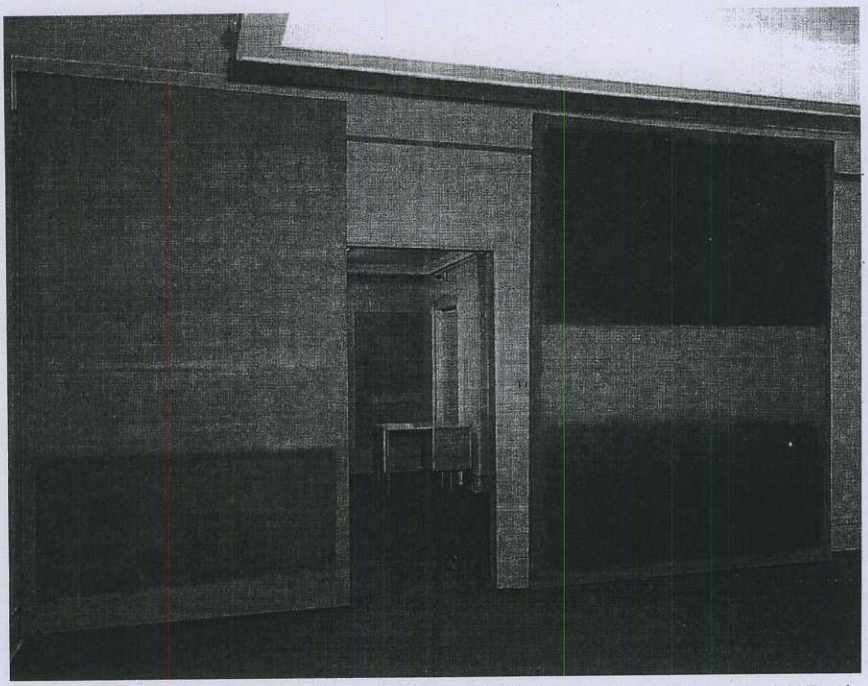
Some hints of protectiveness or defensiveness lurk beneath the confident rhetorical tone of the National Gallery's catalogue then – a text with a somewhat insular approach to Rothko's legacy.[1] In an awkward, formalist conceit, each essayist has been assigned a topic such as colour, or darkness, or surface, or space, in Rothko's art. At the close of an illuminating discussion of his 'surface' or technique, the conservator Carol Mancusi-Ungaro admonishes us to approach Rothko's paintings with 'appreciation' not 'heartless scrutiny'. For his part, Weiss argues for a view of Rothko as 'an innovative modernist and something like the last old master'. To counter the notion of Rothko as possibly a moribund figure, the last of a breed, the catalogue includes interviews with prominent artists of succeeding generations; yet of the five (oddly selected) interlocutors – Ellsworth Kelly, Brice Marden, Gerhard Richter, Robert Ryman, and George Segal – Marden alone can testify whole-heartedly to the importance of Rothko's example.

To my mind, an opportunity was missed in the present retrospective to retrieve an under-appreciated and, indeed, forward-looking dimension of Rothko's practice, namely his efforts to create particular aesthetic contexts affording specific kinaesthetic experiences for viewers by keeping as strict a control as possible over the arranging and lighting of his art. Excessive or eccentric as these efforts may have seemed to curators and dealers at the time, they eased the path for innumerable, environment-minded artists to follow (Segal self-professedly among them). Rothko's aim was to assure, however provisionally, situations where his paintings might best emerge as interconnected articles of feeling and of a kind of belief, or yearning for belief, rather than languishing as mere isolated ornaments, the trophies of collectors.

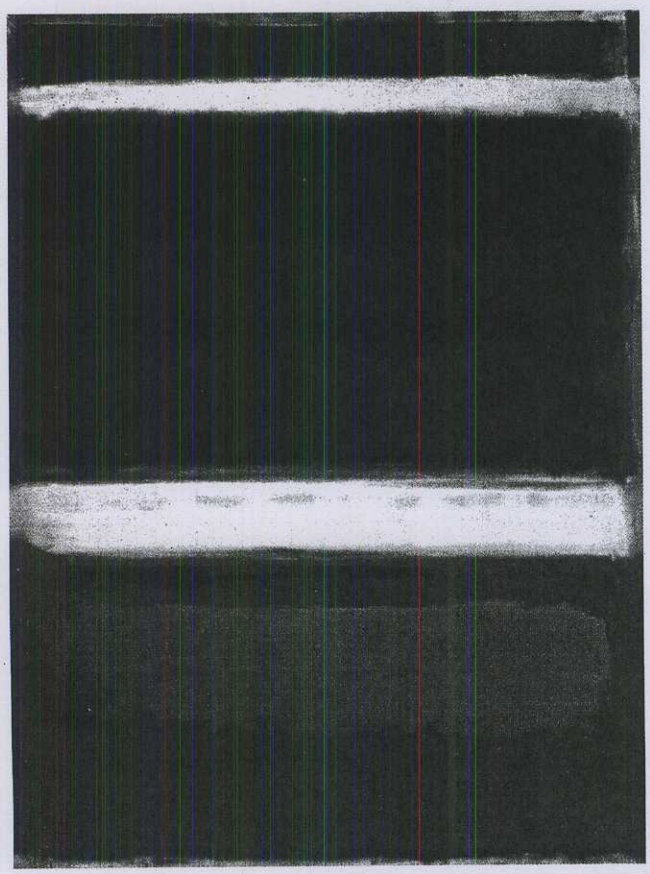
Rothko loved music, the opera, the theatre. That his paintings bear some resemblance to theatrical backdrops has been noted – as Segal, for one, remembers 'seeing Rothko's [1961] retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. I was told he had hung it himself. The paintings were two or three inches apart and the lighting was low. In my eyes people looked ravishing with those bands of glowing colour behind them'. Rothko explained that he chose to paint large pictures not in order to be 'grandiose', but to be 'very intimate and human'.[2] He ideally wanted those large pictures to be 'first encountered at close quarters, so that the first experience is to be within the picture'. And by crowding his works together in rooms of 'normal' scale (Fig.56) he hoped to 'defeat' the walls and to 'saturat[e] the room with the feeling of the work'. Rothko feared that rooms of 'institutional scale' would rob his paintings of intensity, that they would be reduced to 'relat[ing] themselves as decorative areas to the walls'.[3] That his fears were justified has become clearer as the newer museum galleries, including those I.M. Pei designed for the East Wing of the National Gallery, have assumed Brobdingnagian proportions. If the intent was to be the more accommodating to the larger works of the post-War era (Fig.57), the effect, in the case of Abstract Expressionism, has been to turn paintings meant to impose an enveloping, even claustrophobic proximity with the viewer into distant objects proportioned, relatively, more like easel pictures, if not postage stamps.

The catalogue essayists for this show mostly aim to honour the artist's vision of his work, trying to do justice to Rothko in

55. *Gethsemane*, by Mark Rothko. 1944. Oil and charcoal on canvas, 138.1 by 90.2 cm. (Collection of Kate Rothko Prizel estate; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).



56. Installation of works by Rothko at Sidney Janis Gallery, New York (1955), showing *Rust and blue* (1953) and *Royal red and blue* (1954).



57. *No.3*, by Mark Rothko. 1949. 216.5 by 163.8 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York).

his own terms, as it were. Rothko has never wanted for champions, however, and a greater contribution might have been made had the writers been encouraged to exert more critical independence, and the show's installers in Washington been urged to adhere more strictly to the artist's vision for his art, hanging the paintings low and close together in modestly-sized rooms, mostly in a crepuscular light. To experiment with the lighting of Rothko's work is to discover that incremental changes, and especially a liberal touch with the dimmer switch, may make the difference between a fairly routine viewing and an experience nearer to the epiphanic, charged by that 'inner light' which the paintings were crafted to generate.

The more outsized works in the present retrospective (including examples from the Paul Mellon and Panza collections) generally come closest to 'defeating the walls' and absorbing the viewer, as do the sombre, understated paintings of the mid-1960s: the room of these at the National Gallery made the best case for Rothko's powers at a late stage in his career that I have seen yet. Brian O'Doherty discerns in the would-be tragical theatricality of such work at once the greatness of Rothko's ambition and an element of his practice that verges on a kind of 'legerdemain' or 'inspired charlatanry' (p.272). With his layered 'veils' of paint, Rothko could keep viewers tantalised, at once looking at and straining to look through his diaphanous surfaces. Marden refers to a 'Now you see it, now you don't' effect (p.360). My own reading was of a dialectic of presence and absence at play in the classic paintings, as they overlay traces of the pictorial schemata for landscapes – open space, voids, absence – on vestiges of pictorial schemata for the human figure as a vertical sequence of bilaterally symmetrical forms: a presence.[4]

What viewers gain from Rothko's art will inevitably be tinged by what they care to find there. O'Doherty and Barbara Novak (whose joint catalogue essay stands out for its quiet criticality) caution that 'at a certain threshold of perception, virtually any blankness (or blackness), given an appropriately solemn context, may return to the watcher self-generated illusions that he or she mistakes for profundities' (p.271). To some, those profundities are no mistake, of course: 'the concern which glows at the centre of [Rothko's] art is a fact of experience which, while systematized in dogma, is not rooted in it', observes Michael Gibson. 'Behind the painted veil, "the disguise is complete" and we are finally confronted – radiant or lowering – with the Presence'.[5] As a man unsettled in, indeed unsettled by, his spiritual beliefs and longings, Rothko resisted having his work cast as the transfixed visions of a mystic or esoteric. He longed, even so, for an audience engrossed more by the content than the form of his art, and it reassured him to encounter viewers more positive than he himself could be of its suitability to chapel-like settings. A key figure among those viewers was Dominique de Menil who in 1964 commissioned a suite of paintings for the chapel at Houston, Texas.

Rothko 'gambled everything', O'Doherty and Novak point out, on the premise 'that the minimal abstract means he could engage matters of the deepest consequence'. For those most estranged from Rothko's aims, that gamble must seem a sucker's bet. He lost that bet with Richter, for one, who distrusted Rothko's art for being 'both too holy and too decorative' – but only initially; over time, Richter confesses to having become 'less antagonistic to "the holy", to the spiritual experience . . . It is part of us, and we need that quality'. As a Rothko admirer from the outset, Marden also ventures: 'I think there are important issues that each artist must deal with, in terms of sprituality and mysticism . . . I think it will come back, and when it does, Rothko's going to be right up there.'

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[1]Catalogue: *Mark Rothko*. Edited by Jeffrey Weiss, with essays by John Gage, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Barbara Novak, Brian O'Doherty, Mark Rosenthal, and Jessica Stewart. 300 pp. with 116 col. pls. + numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1998). $65, ISBN 0–300–07505–7 (HB); $35, ISBN 0–894–68229–6 (PB). After New York the exhibition will be seen at the **Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris** from 8th January to 18th April.
[2]Statement of 1951, cited in the catalogue, p.342.
[3]Statement of 1954, cited *ibid.*, p.345.
[4]A. CHAVE; *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction*, New Haven [1989].
[5]M. GIBSON: Mark Rothko: 'The Painted Veil' in the special *Rothko* issue of *Connaissance des Arts* [1998], p.45.

New York and Los Angeles
Charles Ray

Given the absence of identifiable movements and closely shared aesthetics in most contemporary art practice of the past twenty years, mavericks abound. Few, however, are as singular as Charles Ray, the California-based artist now in his mid-forties and the subject of a large retrospective recently at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (closed 30th August) and opening next month at the **Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles** (15th November to 14th March).[1] Ray's career began conventionally enough, rooted as it was in a Minimalist vocabulary and, simultaneously, in a performance-based aesthetic. Yet even its earliest expressions were infiltrated by quirks and irregularities. For instance, *32x33x35=34x33x35* of 1989, one of his several variants on the eponymous cube, is set into the gallery floor so that its interior appears uncannily deeper than its exterior. Another, *Ink box* of 1986 (Fig.58), filled to the top with black liquid, offers a deceptively smooth, glossy plane belied by the dangerous volatility of its surface. Similarly, *Rotating circle* of 1988, a disk set flush with the wall, appears, at first, merely that: in fact, it is spinning so fast that the eye cannot discern its motion. In other, related works this formal, geometric vocabulary is animated by means of the irregular, anarchic insertion of the maker's own body in an unlikely if potent wedding of Performance to Minimalist legacies. Through the hole in the top of the vermilion cube which forms the static component of *In memory of Moro* (1978), protrudes the artist's arm, brandishing a flag of the same hue. Allusion to the Italian politician kidnapped then murdered