

Going on From Picasso? Late Modernism and the Dynamics of History.

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Abstract

The thesis identifies and interrogates the development of a historical sensibility in the work of artists in post-war New York. It argues that scholars' marginalisation of this question is behind wider failures to account for the development of modern painting, from the limited debates about painting's 'return' in the 1980s (founded on the question of identity) up to the present day. I ask why, in the decades following World War II, so many painters appeared to forsake aims of progress and innovation, calling instead for some form of return to the highpoints of pre-war modernism. Writing in the 1960s, F.N. Souza railed against abstract expressionism and pop art for 'giving up after Picasso'. A decade earlier Grace Hartigan made the same point: 'Why must I go on from Picasso?'. Such postures have always looked regressive: critics at the time dismissed them for misrecognising the advances of abstract painting, for abandoning optical integrity, for reintroducing illusion, content, memory, or space. Even in the 1970s and later, once the high modernist consensus had been overturned, they still looked reactionary. Modernist painting was transformed over these decades. It achieved definitive theoretical and historical formulation as a continuous tradition stretching back over 100 years. The term 'modernism' entered general use; the great permanent American collections acquired their definitive forms and were opened to the public. But this newly imagined tradition quickly came under attack for the exclusionary and prescriptive operations it implied. The artists I analyse have seemed to fall between the horns of this divide: neither moving modernism forward, nor departing from it. Even at the time, they were accused of following fashion rather than innovating. Neither side of the debate has had much use for them (it is difficult to decide who out of Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss expressed stronger dislike for Hartigan and Joan Mitchell). They have seemed too proximate, too static, too rooted in the achievements of the immediate past.

I think this has things the wrong way round. What shows up in the critical record and subsequent scholarship as regression, belatedness, or anachronism often in practice worked in opposite directions. Artists used demands for conformity to an imagined tradition to interrogate and intervene in modernism's histories while these were still under construction. They did not need to share a common aesthetic or political programme. No manifestoes here. They did not even have to look similar. Many were unaware of one another's existence. What matters is that each of them came in different ways to conceive of the history of modernist painting as something huge, definite, and unavoidable, but at the same time to see in that rigidity a source of renewed creativity and critical engagement. Each looked towards history as a source of engagement with the present. As in the various re-stagings of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907; itself, of course, a crossing-point for multiple traditions) carried out by Hartigan in the 1950s, Souza in the 1960s, and Robert Colescott in the 1980s, they actively diverted and reshaped these histories, turning such reflection into the material for continued painterly practice. The conditions for this kind of reorientation were historically unprecedented, grounded in the situation of the post-war United States: the advancing globalisation of the capitalist economy; the institutionalisation of modernist painting as official high culture; the political and intellectual climate of the Cold War; movements for decolonisation and advancing US neocolonialism; the demands for Civil Rights. Each of my chapters analyses a cluster of such framing factors, the legacies of which are still with us today.

Introduction: Five *Demoiselles*.

*Is this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard
Of destructions', a picture of ourselves,
Now, an image of our society?*

- Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'.

'Why must I go on from Picasso?', Grace Hartigan asked her journal in 1952.¹ A decade later F.N. Souza made a similar point. He railed against the abstract expressionism and pop art that dominated the New York art world of his day for 'giving up after Picasso... avoiding the whole problem of draughtsmanship'.² His own work, by contrast, stayed faithful to the master: 'I am still a figurative painter'.³ It was not rare for artists to adopt such stances in the forty years following World War II. They responded to the definition of modernism as continuous tradition by cultivating forms of historicism, mimesis, allegory, repetition, iteration, conjunction, and citation in ways that have gone either misrecognised or ignored in modern art historical scholarship. Hartigan and Souza were characteristic: both painted versions of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig.1.1, 1907) in which this pillar of modernist tradition was remade into an occasion for creative revision and critique. During the 1950s Barnett Newman, Georges Mathieu, and Larry Rivers cast the net more widely, generating connections between their own work and the grandiose salon painting of the nineteenth century; while in the 1970s and 1980s Rose Piper and Robert Colescott ranged even further, across the broad spectrum of post-Renaissance art history.

Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

¹ Grace Hartigan, *The Journals of Grace Hartigan 1951-1955*, ed. William T. La Moy and Joseph P. McCaffrey (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 52.

² Yashodhara Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.94.

³ Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art*, p.94.

Measured against the teleological values that structure most modernist art history, these efforts have always looked regressive. Some of them have been excised from the critical record, treated as aberrations in otherwise progressive careers. This is true of the work Newman made in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In paintings like *Horizon Light* (1949) and *Concord* (1949), he engaged with ideas of national history, nature, and the American landscape that have never been reconcilable with more radically modernist interpretations of his art. Where critics have taken note of such practices, they have dismissed them as anachronisms, as misrecognitions of advanced artistic practice or debased forms of fashion-following, rather than legitimate ways of making art. Clement Greenberg's attempt to destroy Joan Mitchell's career in 1962 by advising her gallerist Lawrence Rubin to 'get rid of that gestural horror' is only the nastiest example of the opposition that could be provoked by such painting which, insofar as it was historically engaged, could be dismissed as not just retrospective but regressive.⁴ During the 1950s and early 1960s painters such as Mitchell and Hartigan were charged with abandoning optical integrity, with reintroducing illusion, depth, content, subjectivity, memory, and three-dimensional space. 'Homeless representation' was Greenberg's term for them. He meant to describe a rootless style, caught between past and present, modern technique and traditional content, in which 'a plastic and descriptive painterliness... is applied to abstract ends, but which continues to suggest representational ones'.⁵ Even in the 1970s and later, after the Greenbergian consensus had been (partly) overturned, these painters still looked reactionary: so many speedbumps on the road from late modernist univocity to postmodern pluralism.

⁴ See the account of Greenberg's pressurisation of Rubin in Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women: Lee Krasner, Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell, and Helen Frankenthaler* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018), p.709.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.131.

This suspicion reached a pitch during the 1980s, in debates over the ‘return of painting’. For postmodern critics orbiting the journal *October*, retrospective painting now appeared, as if from nowhere, to work in the service of full-blown neoliberal reaction. In a series of essays decrying historicism in recent painting, Benjamin Buchloh attacked ‘the nostalgia of artistic production for its own past conventions’ for attempting ‘to continue a culture oriented to an esoteric elite, thus guaranteeing that elite’s right to continued cultural and political leadership’.⁶ I think this had things the wrong way round. What seemed, to the critics of the 1980s, like an eruption of retrospective painting, an outbreak of neo-classicism unprecedented since Jean Cocteau declared the *rappel à l’ordre* in 1926, was often a more nuanced continuation of a critical project begun with the canonisation of modernism in the late 1940s. Artists like Hartigan and Souza mobilised demands for conformity to an imagined tradition to interrogate and intervene in modernism’s histories while these were still under construction. Colescott and Piper did the same. What is more, as the case of Newman exemplifies, this was a project that could touch even the most progressive modernist: one whose entire project had been imagined, following the war, through the decision ‘to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before’.⁷

There was a time when this kind of absolute novelty, claimed for their work by artists like Newman, blocked appreciation of modernism’s temporal complexity. During the era of postmodernism, modernist painting was identified with a now-rejected novelty, plenitude, and immediacy. As Fredric Jameson acknowledged, this negative definition was paradoxical.

⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting’ in *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (London: MIT Press, 2015), pp.152; 131.

⁷ Barnett Newman, ‘Statement from “Jackson Pollock: An Artists’ Symposium, Part I, 1967”’ in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (New York: Knopf, 1990), p.192.

It assumed a ‘dependence of the postmodern on what remain essentially modernist categories of the new, which cannot be eradicated from the “new” dispensation whatever its rhetoric’.⁸ The picture of post-war art that still predominates draws on this idea of continuity in difference: modernism innovated, postmodernism repeated the innovations, and both did so in order to get away from a calcified, traditional past. In Hal Foster’s account of the *Demoiselles*, the painting is valued, in modernist terms, for the transgressive effects it drew from confrontation with the colonised, non-Western other – with the West African and Oceanic art which Picasso encountered in the Trocadéro. Here ‘the move to a more direct address is crucial to the breakthrough in high modernist painting to a more immediate visibility – more frontal, flat, and abstract’.⁹ When it comes to post-war art, on the other hand, what counts for Foster are not those works that constituted such ‘breakthroughs’ in themselves, but those that repeated the moves of previous modernists, in the process resurrecting the values of ‘an avant-gardist modernism that did intend “a break with the past”’.¹⁰

Whether positively or negatively inflected, the fetish made out of novelty by modernist and postmodernist critics vulgarised understanding of the artworks, of their complicated balancings of imitation and invention. Since then, even receptive critics have manifested a telling resistance to thinking through these complexities. Hartigan, we hear, was ‘both modern and traditional’; Mathieu ‘managed to be both reactionary and revolutionary at the same time’.¹¹ Such formulations posit a distinction – bridged by a paradox – that was

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p.5.

⁹ Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (London: MIT Press, 2004), pp.34-36.

¹⁰ Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (London: MIT Press, 1996), p.xi.

¹¹ Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Grace Hartigan: A Painter’s World* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), p.26; Bernard Marcadé, ‘Pretentious? Moi? Document: Georges Mathieu’, *Tate Etc.*, vol.18 (Spring 2010), p.82.

never so evident in practice. For these strategies were not so discreet as to be neatly bundled up and divided between an initial, heroic, innovative modernism and its post-war repetitions. Repetition, retrogression, and anachronism always crisscrossed the field. Moreover, it was often through the returning of attention to modernist work produced by post-war artists that repetitive or retrospective elements in the work of the pre-war modernists were brought into focus. Citation and re-engagement were mutually constitutive. Art historians have begun to take note of these subtleties. Foster has written recently of modernist studies that ‘there is now a fatigue with the rhetoric of rupture’.¹² This observation marks a disciplinary shift that has placed the distinction between modernist originality and postmodern repetition under pressure. The *Demoiselles* is a case in point. When Foster called that painting ‘a break not only with the academic tradition of figure painting... but also with the very structure of Western painting as understood since the Renaissance’, he was drawing on a line of modernist critics, leading back to Alfred Barr Jr. and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, all of them invested in the idea of that painting as a caesura.¹³ By contrast, Alexander Nagel has recently insisted on the continuities of the *Demoiselles* with a deep tradition of European religious art. He calls Picasso’s work, not a break, but ‘a polemical return to the overt address of altarpieces, with an array of figures all facing outward, a pictorial structure that flew in the face of the previous two centuries of tidily framed salon painting’.¹⁴ Nagel argues that such returns and echoes were grist for modernists in search of innovation: ‘it was, apparently, impossible to think of seeing an end to the gallery picture and the modern category of the fine arts... without working through one or another form of premodern art-making’.¹⁵

¹² Foster, ‘Preposterous Timing’, *London Review of Books*, vol.34, no.21 (8 November 2012).

¹³ Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*, p.33.

¹⁴ Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art Out of Time* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), p.27.

¹⁵ Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, p.241.

This suggests a more complicated temporality for the modernist artwork. Nagel and Christopher S. Wood have elsewhere argued something similar for Renaissance art, wherever it repeated medieval tropes and compositions. Rather than generating a new picture of reality, such work, they claim, produced addresses to the past:

forms of life, ways of picturing or building, customs and costumes came to seem obsolete and yet retrievable, retrievable perhaps because they were obsolete. The differentness of the past made repetition an option. The figuring of succession in turn made reckoning possible, enabling a comparison of the present to the past, and bringing forth new worries about the inferiority or superiority of the present.¹⁶

On one level, this conception of anachronism as a critical and artistic tool, a mode of reflection on past and present alike, can help illuminate the late modernism I discuss in this thesis. No less than Picasso (or Gilles Deleuze, whose later writings on the subject acknowledged their own debt to the modernism of Picasso, James Joyce, and Stéphane Mallarmé), Hartigan and Souza gloried in painting's capacity to uncover 'differentness' in 'repetition'.¹⁷ But this in fact begs another set of questions. To stay with the *Demoiselles* for a moment: suppose we accept Nagel's claim that the painting is anachronistic and medievalist (leaving aside for the moment the Eurocentrism implicit in his insistence on 'the primariness of the Western medieval field of reference' and concomitant refusal to deal with the African elements in the painting as other than minor regressions 'collected together by the first, organising regression on the level of structure and format').¹⁸ What is it, then, that made the piece modern? Was it just this anachronism? Are we to say, as G.W.F. Hegel once did, that the question of anachronism, of 'whether the artist should forget his own time and keep his eye only on the past' defines modern art?¹⁹ If so, then how are we to distinguish Picasso's

¹⁶ Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p.10.

¹⁷ 'When the modern work of art develops its permutating series and its circular structures, it indicates to philosophy a path leading to the abandonment of representation'. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.86.

¹⁸ Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, p.27.

¹⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art: Volume 1*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p.265.

medievalism from any number of Victorian medievalisms – from a John Everett Millais or an Edward Burne-Jones or a Puvis de Chavannes? Is there a meaningful difference? Need there be?

Nagel does not pose such questions, perhaps because he is not preoccupied with history so much as with, in his own words, ‘cross-temporal encounters, acts of material resistance to historical logic’.²⁰ This is an understanding of history that approaches the kinds of historicist scientism against which Friedrich Nietzsche railed in his second *Untimely Meditation*, when he underlined how history ‘keeps alive for us the memory of the great “fighters against history”, that is, against the blind power of the actual’.²¹ As Nietzsche well knew, artworks and artists alike are embedded in history as a critical and moral project; and such history is not anachronism. Any repetitions, returns, or counter-chronological flights that artists performed need to be understood in relation, not just to their own times, but to those of the histories that comprehend them. This double historiographical comprehension – enfolding both the work and the history of the work – is not to be found in contemplating the painting alone, nor in reconstructing the process of its composition, nor even in identifying its historical sources, however plural they may be. It lives, no less, in the successive layers of interpretation that attach themselves to the completed work and deliver it to the historian’s gaze, in the institutions that enframe it, as well as in those repetitions and imitations, carried out by subsequent artists, which confirm the work’s ongoing vitality as a model for contemporary practice. It is here that an emphasis on post-war painting – and the various addresses to tradition carried out by its practitioners – becomes essential for understanding modernism as a whole. Picasso might have cited elements of medieval altarpieces in

²⁰ Nagel, *Medieval Modern*, p.23.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.106.

conjunction with Spanish baroque painting, African sculpture, and any number of other sources. None of these alone made the *Demoiselles* either anachronistic or modern. Rather, it was that work's resonance with other artworks within an evolving discursive complex that drew out and revitalised the multiple temporalities the painting contained.

Theodor Adorno, who attempted, in the aftermath of World War II, to understand the elements of regression in the art of his time, described such a structure as a 'constellation'.

'The history', he wrote,

is in the individual thing and outside it; it is something encompassing in which the individual has its place. Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it... The history locked within the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualisation and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge.²²

This was to foreground the position from which knowledge is produced in determining the meaning of the object in question. Surveying the state of the modernist tradition (centred on Picasso) during the 1960s, Adorno worried that 'the fatal ageing of the modern' might have eroded the distinction, first posited by Walter Benjamin, between the modern artwork, committed to 'the new', and the 'document', whose function is conservative.²³ The nomenclature of post-war institutions like Documenta – the quinquennial Kassel exhibition which began in 1955 as a retrospective of modernist art repressed under National Socialism – suggested as much. Although such exhibitions 'provide an enormous service', Adorno wrote, they might also 'abet a historicist aesthetic consciousness that they, being museums of the contemporary, want to oppose. Concepts of this sort', he went on, 'and especially those of the so-called classics of modernism, contribute all too well to the loss of tension in post-World

²² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p.163.

²³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p.452.

War II art'.²⁴ It is hard to disagree with this proposition: that the establishment of an increasingly unitary modernist tradition, replete with its 'classics', placed pressures on contemporary production to which it was often unequal. But, once again, the choice of terms needs attention. 'Historicist aesthetic consciousness' characterises a particular way of deploying history, not the historical per se, nor the significance of cultivating a historical sensibility. And it marks a genuine requirement that became more pressing for modernists as the century wore on. From 1939, when the newly acquired *Demoiselles* formed the centrepiece of the Museum of Modern Art's great Picasso retrospective, twentieth-century painting was understood to run from such fountainheads ('the first cubist picture... a laboratory' as Barr called it, picking up a phrase from Breton) towards the abstract totality marked by the 'cubist grid'.²⁵ The *Demoiselles* acquired iconic centrality within an increasingly circumscribed tradition. Griselda Pollock suggests that it came to substitute, typologically, for the academic history painting that modernism had supposedly abolished with Edouard Manet. She calls it an 'anchor work', a template for subsequent entries in the canon, a symbol for all the exclusions that canonisation implies, a phallus.²⁶ Barr thought it was the painting of the century. And what did such a judgement *mean* for painters who came after? Did it condemn them to be epigones? Alexandrians? Artists coming of age during these years encountered modernist tradition, increasingly, as *the* tradition, as something pre-formed, with its masterpieces, closures, and conceptual dead-ends. It was hardly surprising that they thought about these issues through a historical lens. Picasso in 1907 would not even have known what modernism was. For Hartigan in 1952, for Souza in 1962, the situation was different entirely. They knew what modernism meant. For them it meant Picasso.

²⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, pp.249-250.

²⁵ Alfred H. Barr, Jr. *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p.56.

²⁶ Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.170.

Nothing was made simpler by this situation. Granted, the moniker ‘modernist’ grew more concrete post-war. It came to mark a place within a tradition behind (or in front of) which stood figures like Picasso and paintings like the *Demoiselles*. But the meaning of such monuments remained contingent, still subject to intervention and revision. The history of the *Demoiselles* itself was evidence enough for this. Its position at the head of the tradition of twentieth-century painting was ambiguous. Consensus around the picture’s significance had shifted massively since it was first produced. Its current pre-eminence in modernist historiography is as much a product of post-war American political and cultural hegemony, of Barr’s aesthetic preoccupations, curatorial decisions, and lending policies, as of the cubist paintings which developed its innovations in the 1910s. Aside from a fifteen-day showing at the Salon d’Antin in 1916, which caused a minor scandal, the painting had never been exhibited publicly before MoMA acquired it. A small cadre of artists had seen it in Picasso’s studio. Georges Braque is supposed to have compared viewing the painting to being made to drink kerosene or eat tow.²⁷ He began immediately to experiment with comparable figure compositions. Henri Matisse, whose first reaction was loathing, came to experiment with some of the *Demoiselles*’ implications in paintings such as *Bathers by a River* (1916). André Derain made – then destroyed – a work in response. By 1920, Kahnweiler was calling the painting ‘the beginning of Cubism, the first upsurge, a desperate titanic clash with all of the problems at once’.²⁸ He still had no name for it, however. It was not until Barr’s retrospective and his accompanying catalogue that the painting’s worldwide fame was secured. Barr insisted on its centrality for twentieth-century art. He laid the emphasis on proto-cubist form

²⁷ William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1989), p.348.

²⁸ Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, trans. Henry Aronson (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1949), p.7.

as anticipating subsequent developments. ‘*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* may be called the first cubist picture’, he wrote, ‘for the breaking up of natural forms, whether figures, still life or drapery, into a semi-abstract all-over design of tilting shifting planes compressed into a shallow space is already cubism’.²⁹

This was a brilliant reading. It derived from Barr’s formalist desire, visualised in the famous diagram with which he introduced the catalogue for *Cubism and Abstract Art*, to organise modernist painting into a coherent progression leading, through cubism, to abstraction. This drive coexisted with others. Barr’s understanding of Picasso’s art in particular was more complex than commentators have since allowed. Even though he thought that the ‘logical goal’ of cubism was an ‘abstract’ art of ‘absolute purity’, he nonetheless saw this tendency as an ‘impoverishment’.³⁰ In Picasso’s hands, he argued, cubist painting never lost its representational function: ‘a cubist picture is not only a *design* but a precisely controlled and far-fetched metaphor’.³¹ However, in Mondrian and Malevich, he saw this bivalence – which is actually present in all painting, no matter how abstract – abolished. Whether or not he was right in this, his insistence on metaphor and representation as valuable resources for modernist painting, and the opposition he drew between these and pure abstraction, informed his work as museum-director and influenced the development of modernist painting through the 1950s.³² In the case of his reading of the *Demoiselles*, however, the attempted assimilation of the painting into a coherent narrative leading towards abstraction resulted in distortion. As Leo Steinberg was to argue thirty years later, in spite of his admiration for the ‘sculptural’ elements of Picasso’s art, Barr’s emphasis on abstract

²⁹ Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.56.

³⁰ Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p.13

³¹ Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.74.

³² It culminated in 1954, with the confrontation he staged in MoMA’s *XXVth Anniversary Exhibition* between Hartigan’s *River Bathers* (1953) and Mark Rothko’s *No.10* (1950), to which I will return in my second chapter.

design, his reading of the painting as ‘a triumph of form over content’, assimilated the experience of the *Demoiselles* to that of the ‘mature’ cubist paintings it was supposed to have anticipated.³³ It begged its own question. In so doing, it ignored the painting’s most powerful effects. Steinberg emphasised many of these (although he downplayed others: the impact of African art most significantly).³⁴ He examined the diversity of Picasso’s sources, his confrontational staging of female sexual aggression. ‘Those five figures’, he asked, ‘did they have to be whores?’³⁵ In a painting supposedly given over to ‘all-over design’ and cubist flatness, he pointed out the use of ‘spacemaking devices’ drawn from Spanish baroque painting: the framing curtains, the intrusion of the fruit bowl in the foreground, rearing up like the prow of a ship, and the rightmost demoiselle arriving, full tilt, from a backstage area which she opens for the viewer in a similar manner to the chamberlain in Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656).³⁶ These divergent, barely integrated elements contradicted the abstract unity claimed for the piece by Barr. They produced a highly pressurised, fragmentary space that had more in common with the heterodox canvases of Picasso’s post-war *Women of Algiers* (1954-55) and *Las Meninas* variations (1957) than with anything to have come out of analytical cubism. ‘Picasso’s ultimate challenge’, Steinberg wrote, ‘is to the notion that the coherence of the artwork demands a stylistic consistency among the things represented; that one style must obtain in every part of the canvas, whether to correspond with the supposed unity of an instant visual experience or to maintain constancy in transformation’.³⁷ Barr had made the *Demoiselles* famous, the fountainhead of MoMA’s tradition, the pivot of its

³³ Leo Steinberg, ‘The Philosophical Brothel’, *October*, vol.44 (Spring 1988), p.9.

³⁴ For a reading of the *Demoiselles* that corrects for the ‘racially perverse’ elements of Steinberg’s account, see Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham: Durham University Press, 2019), p.4 and *passim*.

³⁵ Steinberg, ‘Philosophical Brothel’, p.11.

³⁶ Steinberg, ‘Philosophical Brothel’, p.47.

³⁷ Steinberg, ‘Philosophical Brothel’, p.61.

chronology. The price of this fame, it seemed, was incomprehension. With Steinberg's intervention, the unitary canon breaks down into a plurality of competing meanings.

What part did artists play in this tussle? Did the paintings made in homage to the *Demoiselles* ever have comparable effects on the discourse that framed it? Or on that history of modernism in which it was made to participate? Before MoMA bought it, no painters cited the *Demoiselles* directly. Braque, Derain, Matisse, and Picasso himself might have produced responses, but always with the intention of developing certain formal and conceptual tendencies contained within the work in novel directions. Too much fidelity to the original would have disrupted this goal. The recorded facts – that Matisse remained at work on his most powerful response for seven years, that Derain destroyed his – are indications enough of a common reluctance to get too close: 'To come near the work, to travel in her wake, is a sign of certain death'.³⁸ The *Demoiselles* had not yet acquired categorical status as a masterpiece. It was not yet the painting of the century. And so nobody felt the need to mimic it. This began to change once Barr made it the focus of his narrative. In 1954, when Hartigan did a large painting of a bridal parlour window near to her studio in downtown Manhattan (fig.1.2), she grafted her imagery of grinning mannequins onto a figurative armature lifted straight from the *Demoiselles* (this was no great leap: already in 1920 Kahnweiler had written of Picasso's painting that 'the nudes, with large, quiet eyes, stand rigid, like mannequins').³⁹ Five years later, Souza made a painting, titled after a brothel near to his home in north London, which he modelled even more closely on Picasso's image. He called it *Young Ladies from Belsize Park* (fig.1.3). And in 1985, when Colescott was casting around for an image to culminate fifteen

³⁸ Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*, trans. Natasha Wimmer (London: Picador, 2009), p.456.

³⁹ Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism*, p.7.

years of pastiche aimed squarely at the Western canon, the choice was obvious: he produced not one, but two versions of *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama* (figs.1.4, 1.5).

Such explicit revisitings of modernist precedent were typical of painting in the second half of the last century. Steinberg was sensitive to such practices. His analysis of Picasso depends on an understanding of modernist painting as citational: self-consciously involved with the work of the past. He was clear that this tendency linked modernism to the work of earlier periods. 'There is as much unpredictable originality', as he wrote later that decade, 'in quoting, imitating, transposing, and echoing as there is in inventing'.⁴⁰ He paid less attention to these dynamics in the painting of his immediate contemporaries. He did not seem to notice those artists, many of them active in New York, whose work moved in the same direction as his criticism. But they too looked back, towards modernist tradition, across an ever-expanding gulf, in order to engage with its meaning and open up ways of working in the present. What is more, as is usually the case (though often forgotten), art travelled in advance of criticism. In 1972, when he wrote 'The Philosophical Brothel', Steinberg had precious little critical writing to draw on that did not conform to Barr's teleological reading. He did not pause to consider contemporary painting (he never noticed Souza, and he disliked Hartigan). His insistence that Picasso's women were not occasions for abstract design but rather interrogations of sexuality grounded in effects drawn from Baroque painters like Velázquez and Francisco Goya seemed to come from nowhere. 'Before Steinberg's essay', writes Christopher Green, 'the *Demoiselles d'Avignon* was the birthplace of cubism, the marker of an epochal shift from content to form in modern painting; after Steinberg's essay,

⁴⁰ Steinberg, 'The Glorious Company' in *Renaissance and Baroque Art: Selected Essays*, ed. Sheila Schwartz (London: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p.230.

it has become the marker of an epochal shift to a new kind of engagement with sexuality'.⁴¹ The picture this draws, of a stifling 'cubist' consensus prevailing over thirty years, might hold true at the level of critical writing. But one has only to glance at Hartigan's *Grand Street Brides*, finished almost twenty years earlier, to see how far criticism lagged behind painting, how blunt were its instruments next to palette and brush.

Hartigan had been thinking seriously about the *Demoiselles*, at least since the summer of 1952, when 'something clicked' during a visit to MoMA and she began to mention the painting in her journals.⁴² There it forms part of a ramifying map of precedents unfolding across the 1950s through hundreds of hours spent in New York's museums. After a successful debut as an abstract expressionist, she was trying to get out from under the domination of that style by searching the galleries for alternatives. 'I was on the edge of succumbing to the need of looking "modern" – abstract – contemporary' she wrote that year, 'all of which is fashion, not painting, and is most dangerous'.⁴³ Her lists of movements and precursors have echoes of Barr's diagrams. They share his mania for periodisation, his Vasarian love of the lone genius – Matisse, Picasso, and Paul Cézanne in particular. But they invert the forward momentum that made him visualise modern art as a torpedo blasting its way to the future (fig.6.5). Barr valued the *Demoiselles* as 'a transitional picture'. For Hartigan, the paintings of Picasso and Cézanne were more like palimpsests; always peeling back to offer access to more distant points of historical reference. Looking at Cézanne's *Bathers* (fig.1.6, 1890) at the Metropolitan's massive retrospective in April 1952, she wrote that 'he was doing something there – the way he opened up a back for instance. I want to

⁴¹ Christopher Green, 'An Introduction to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*' in *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, ed. Christopher Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.9.

⁴² Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.36.

⁴³ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.34.

draw from him as well as from Rubens, Delacroix, Breughel and of course Titian and Tintoretto'.⁴⁴ 'Opening up a back' is a delightfully ambiguous phrase. On the one hand, it recalls actual gestures: Cézanne's vibrant, delineated figures, viewed from the rear, stretching their back muscles in the cool blue light. On the other hand, the conjunction of Hartigan's sentences looks past such physical immediacy, seeking its sources in those 'Old Masters' which Cézanne, too, idolised. In her hands, contemplation of Picasso's legacy does similar things. It takes her further, 'to Goya, the first of the moderns'.⁴⁵ This manner of excavation – passing through modernist precedent to end up somewhere on the other side – is what she attempted with *Grand Street Brides*. The painting makes no effort to conceal its reliance on the *Demoiselles* for structure. In so doing it uncovers, insists upon, and even generates a host of sources within Picasso's painting that would only acquire art historical shape with Steinberg's essays of the 1970s.

From the beginning it was evident that Hartigan had not gone back to the *Demoiselles* in order to rehearse, again, the passage to cubism. The first viewers of *Grand Street Brides* noted its resistance to integration within that narrative. 'It is no accident', wrote James Thrall Soby in 1955, 'that Hartigan greatly admires Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" of 1907. For her, presumably, the picture is important not because it announces the beginning of cubism's aesthetic, but because it proposes a bold choreography involving disparate figures, their action united by swift fusions of colour and line'.⁴⁶ There is something patronising in Soby's tone here, which grasps the contemporary valences of Hartigan's use of Picasso, even as it neglects her painting's historical reach. Hartigan retained the frontal address and exaggerated features of Picasso's women, their linear separation from one another, and their

⁴⁴ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.31.

⁴⁵ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.52.

⁴⁶ James Thrall Soby, 'Non-Abstract Authorities', *Saturday Review* (23 April 1955), p.52.

organisation, as independent units, into two clear groups. The group to the left is bolstered in her painting by another seated figure. The one on the right is still formed by two women, one behind the other. Measured against these repetitions, differences stand out more clearly.

Hartigan's canvas is ten inches wider than Picasso's, and more than twenty inches shorter. It no longer echoes the vertical dimensions of a trecento altarpiece, which so struck Breton upon seeing the *Demoiselles*. And it has none of the muting of colour contrasts employed by Picasso to unify his composition. Hartigan's bridal mannequins have spread out. The scumbled background, crossed by floating stained black frames, comes away behind them. She has excluded the most potent, 'baroque' of Picasso's 'spacemaking devices': not only the table with its priapic fruit bowl, but also the curtains that frame the composition to left and right. Doubtless the addition of a sixth mannequin, seated, in a yellow dress, was supposed to rectify this loss of pressure by packing her composition more tightly. But the final result is nevertheless a massive drop in tension, in the squeezing of depth and projection, recession and penetration that had characterised the contradictory space of the original *Demoiselles*. Where Picasso's women had roiled in a field caught between crush and expansion, pierced by the fruit bowl, Hartigan's float behind the picture plane in veils of colour, thinned with turpentine and wiped across the surface with a rag. The viewer is no longer invited to penetrate this plane in some transcendental linkage of feminine and masculine space. The plane here is solid, like a window. Wiped paint insists on this equivalence, particularly at those points – the crotch of the leftmost bride and the body of the bride in green – where it has been smeared across the figures rather than conforming to their anatomy. The splat of lead white just above the figure in yellow, where Hartigan has hurled unmixed colour at the surface, reads like a shatter-mark in a shop window after a riot.

Insistence on surface was to be expected. Hartigan was working in New York during the 1950s, after all. This was an episteme dominated by large, flat, abstract canvases, unmixed colour, and gestural painting; by painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and the critical and curatorial voices of Barr and Greenberg. Soby's idea that Hartigan looked to the *Demoiselles* for a 'bold choreography of colour and line' speaks more to the contemporary hegemony of abstract expressionism than to the particulars of either painting. The surface had to be stressed and stretched; Picasso's curtains and fruit bowl had to go. *Grand Street Brides* references their departure, while it also raises the question of what ought to take their place. The rightmost bride retains the gesture of her counterpart in the *Demoiselles*, but she no longer storms onto the scene from a recessed space offstage, parting a curtain as she goes. Instead, she parts her own veil in two long strokes of white paint that lie flush to the picture plane, framing her orange face. The leftmost bride parts a veil too as she spreads her hands, where her counterpart in the *Demoiselles* had raised the foreground curtain. There is an air of redundancy in the way these gestures rework those of Picasso's original. The manner of disclosure implied in lifting a curtain is theatrical. It brings what was once private, concealed from the eye, into the light of day. Lifting a curtain is a public gesture, much more so than lifting a transparent veil (which in any case reveals to the viewer the human face that she already knew to be there). Preserved and diminished, the gestures of Picasso's women are dialectically inverted. They become flattening devices, recalling the viewer to the surface of the canvas, the outlines of the face, and the presence of Hartigan's loaded brush.

This was no simple transformation. Hartigan was not trying to produce another paean to flatness or autonomy (she and Greenberg loathed one another). *Grand Street Brides* does not offer itself to a linear chronology of artistic progress. Granted that her use of Picasso is

marked by the contemporary painting that surrounded her, it is also the case that she intended to mobilise the *Demoiselles* against this consensus, to ‘open up a back’ within which the map of historical precedent charted in her journals could find form. In the absence of the complicated spatial constructions available to Picasso, she did this by developing and exaggerating the historical references that Steinberg and others would later draw out as implicit in the *Demoiselles* and spreading these across the surface in washes of thinned paint. *Grand Street Brides* was the culmination of a sequence of studies and copies of Spanish painting begun in 1952, the lodestars of which were Goya and Velázquez. She had reproduced the zigzag flicker of baroque costume in an oil study of the latter’s *Infanta Margarita in a White Dress* (fig.1.9, 1952), experimented with his multi-figure compositions in a charcoal sketch of *The Surrender of Breda* (1953), and introduced the motif of the veiled woman in a cropped copy of Goya’s *Señora Sabasa Garcia* (fig.1.7, 1954). It is tempting to play spot-the-difference between these pictures and their sources (figs.1.8, 1.10), to note how, in copying Goya, Hartigan used stronger highlights for a sitter’s veil, how she changed a facial expression from calm observation to frowning confrontation; or else how the raised horizon and distant fields of Velázquez’s *Surrender*, which Heinrich Wölfflin saw as characteristic of baroque painting’s ‘recessional’ character, have vanished in a storm of hatching.⁴⁷ And this is part of Hartigan’s point, as well as being the source of her many redundancies: in repeating these aged compositions, she excised what was no longer usable.

It is no accident that these paintings were inspired, in a typical stacking of citation upon citation, by Manet’s studies in the Prado one hundred years previously. Hartigan would have known his strange little etched *Infanta* (fig.1.11, 1862-4) then in the collection of the

⁴⁷ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (London: Dover Publications, Inc., 1950), p.82.

Metropolitan, from the regular sketching trips she made there with Rivers. Her own painted *Infanta* in white recalled not just Manet's model, but his entire orientation towards the art of the past. It made a repetition of his repetition. Manet's many references to past art have long bedevilled interpretations of this 'first modernist painter'. Michael Fried suggests that they registered the obsolescence of previously binding conventions: 'the past was no longer alive, no longer capable by mere connectedness, mere contact, of giving life to the present (hence the obsession of Manet and his contemporaries with explicitly recycling it in their work)'.⁴⁸ Others have been less sure of the deadness of this past to which Manet was drawn. Steinberg, for instance, points out how, far from isolating Manet from his antecedents, the practice of obvious citation repeated established practice, 'the perennial recirculation of recognisable antecedents' undertaken by all painters, Titian and Michelangelo alike.⁴⁹ Rather than severing connections, it encouraged them. Something similar could certainly be said of Hartigan's generation, the novelty of their situation being that the objects of their attention became those of modernism itself. These painters experienced the monuments of high modernism as tradition, comparable to the paintings of Goya and Velázquez; as interchangeable with the art of the Old Masters; and, like them, as available for appropriation and alteration.

With *Grand Street Brides*, Hartigan pursued an equivalence between modernist tradition and the wider history of painting. The painting gathers the threads from her studies of early modern Spanish art at the same time as it recurs to Picasso. Colour played an important role here. In Hartigan's painting it is deictic, bounded within the figures even when smeared across them. There is something declarative about the way the curve of the right-hand figure's purple dress is picked out against the white of the bride to her left. It insists on

⁴⁸ Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.343.

⁴⁹ Steinberg, 'The Glorious Company', p.213.

the integrity of her contours. The background makes a similar point. Its framing shapes repeat the enclosure of light with dark. At the same time, they echo the framed pictures in front of which Goya and Velázquez liked to range their subjects. Read against the picture gallery in the background of Goya's *Charles IV of Spain and his Family* (1800-1), or the Titians above the open door in *Las Meninas*, the Rothko-like effect of these stained forms suggests its own gallery of modern masterpieces. The overall effect is much more conventional than that of the *Demoiselles*. Picasso diminished contrast and unified colour across his figures in order to balance the stylistic and spatial disjunctions that would otherwise have shattered his painting to pieces. There is minimal variation of skin-tone in the *Demoiselles*, little in the way of shading. Barr or Greenberg would have pointed out how this muting of colour anticipated analytical cubism. But Hartigan was no cubist. She had no need to unify her picture surface. And so she returns us, with her discreet figures dressed in colourful costumes, to the group format against a darkened ground attained by those Spanish masters – by Velázquez and Goya in particular – from whom, Steinberg reminds us, Picasso had sought his effects in the first place.

Why did Hartigan feel the need to throw her voice, to use Picasso's language; not just to repeat his composition, but also to draw out, exaggerate, and even reinterpret his sources? Why risk the 'loss of tension' that, according to Adorno, was the lot of historicist art? Why go back so far, to the very beginnings of cubism, when the problems generated by the *Demoiselles* were presumed by everyone who mattered to have been solved by what had followed? I have been arguing that the attempt had something to do with the status of modernist painting in the post-war period. The theorisation of a continuous tradition established the conditions for a kind of painting that was more inclined to repetition than before, more open to allegory, parody, and dialectic, and, because of this, more critical. This

is to say that painters and theorists did more than confirm a unilinear tradition by repeating it. Often, an orientation towards the monuments of pre-war art could draw out the contradictions that were repressed in the process of enshrining them. Adorno is paradigmatic in this regard. Not only was he wedded to a tradition of progressive modernism that insisted on rupture and novelty as its key terms. He also recognised how the elaboration of that tradition provided the conditions for its own mimetic undermining. In its contradictions, his work offers theoretical co-ordinates for understanding painting such as Hartigan's, just as her kind of painting throws light on his theory. Her orientation towards tradition – her self-conscious reverence for a whole lineage of Western painters – connects to Picasso's own deposits of historical reference. The problematic character of such residues, their resistance to integration within a progressive narrative of technical refinement or advancing autonomy, has caused problems for art history. They recall another of Adorno's maxims: 'that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder'.⁵⁰

Adorno often sounded as if the historicism which he identified as a potential outcome of modernism's institutionalisation could only be a conservative phenomenon: as if, by citing 'an available or fictitious tradition', artists like Hartigan would inevitably 'attribute [to tradition] a power it no longer possesses' (here he could be seen to anticipate the arguments of Buchloh and the critics of the 1980s).⁵¹ Rather than rejecting the aesthetically 'pre-formed' by making use of only such material as had not been rendered taboo by the advanced art of the immediate past, this historicism erected the forms of a no-longer binding tradition as a kind of objectivity, as if this were demanded by contemporary practice. On Adorno's account, this was always false, since it relied on an act of the same arbitrary subjectivity (why

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.5.

⁵¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.47.

repeat this past form, rather than another?) that was supposed to have been abolished by returning to tradition: ‘A rigour that establishes restrictions by imitating long-past heteronomous forms obeys nothing other than that very subjective volition that is to be tamed’.⁵²

But Adorno also allowed for another form of historical thinking – one that would incorporate the art of the past, not to reify or vindicate tradition, but to stimulate disjunctions, even critique. Sometimes he suggested that such an approach was intrinsic to modernism itself, that ‘anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity’.⁵³ This is the idea that lies behind his affection for Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Proust’s outdated ‘preoccupation with a historically-condemned luxury class’, the fading remnants of the French aristocracy, was what orientated his novel towards a wider dynamic of historical decline which went far beyond the petty squabbles of his subjects, indeed, which ‘turn[ed] out to be that of a major social tendency’.⁵⁴ And, like Hegel and Georg Lukács before him, Adorno thought that *Don Quixote* stood on the threshold of modern art, not because it evaded citation of past and ‘pre-formed’ art, but because it was riddled with it. ‘Knights errant were now out of fashion’, Cervantes had written, while fashioning his own knight errant and setting him in motion across a modernising La Mancha.⁵⁵ This committed his novel, Adorno thought, to ‘a particular and irrelevant programme, that of abolishing the chivalric romance, which had been dragged along from feudal times into the bourgeois age’ – in other words, to abolishing a genre that had already been basically abolished.⁵⁶ Cervantes brought his hero’s old-fashioned ideology into contact

⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.237.

⁵³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2020), p.235.

⁵⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.178.

⁵⁵ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1979), p.281.

⁵⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.336.

with the modernising society of early-seventeenth-century Spain. In cataloguing the failures of the one to account for the other, he registered not just the obsolescence of chivalry (which would have been obvious to his readers in any case), but the impossibility that *any* such ideology of heroic individualism might account for modern existence. Tilting at windmills became the emblematic form for ‘the authentic expression of the crisis of immanent meaning in the demystified world’.⁵⁷

If such temporal disjunction had served modern art in its first flush of youth, at the birth of the novel, why should it not do the same in its dotage? Even in the midst of damning the retrospective modernism of his own day, above all Igor Stravinsky’s ‘music about music’, for ‘treat[ing] its model in a manner much like that of the child who takes apart his toys and puts them together again incoherently’, Adorno allowed for this possibility.⁵⁸ The odd phrasing of his criticism anticipates its ambivalence: since when had modernism shied away from the childish or the incoherent? Writing fifty years previously, August Strindberg had praised Paul Gauguin in exactly the same terms Adorno used for Stravinsky; he had dubbed him both a ‘savage’ and a ‘child who takes his toys to pieces so as to make others from them’.⁵⁹ Strindberg had been repeating a still-older modernist identification with the child who dismantles her toys. In ‘A Philosophy of Toys’ (1853), with which Adorno was certainly familiar, Charles Baudelaire admired ‘the overriding desire of most children... to get at and *see the soul* of their toys’, and called this ‘a first metaphysical tendency’.⁶⁰ Not only did Adorno’s appropriation of this hundred-year-old motif of modernist criticism make his

⁵⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.336.

⁵⁸ Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd., 1973), p.186.

⁵⁹ August Strindberg, ‘Reply to a Request from Gauguin, 1 February 1895’ in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschell B. Chipp (London: University of California Press, 1968), p.82.

⁶⁰ Charles Baudelaire, ‘A Philosophy of Toys’ in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p.202.

writing into a comparable species of late modernist *bricolage* to that which he condemned in Stravinsky. It also rendered that condemnation ambiguous, shot through with an older vein of appreciation in which the flawed mimicry practised by both ‘savages’ and children was seen to offer new forms of aesthetic truth. ‘Genius’, to quote Baudelaire again, ‘is nothing more or less than *childhood recovered at will*’.⁶¹ Adorno’s criticism of Stravinsky’s repetitions retained this suspicion; he allowed that such art might produce ‘an element which is not entirely domesticated, an undisciplined mimetic factor – indeed, something of true nature itself. This might be the way in which primitives would portray a missionary through dance, before they devour him’.⁶² The metaphor is uncomfortable, of course. It betrays the same racial bias, the same fear of alterity, and the same primitivist elision of childhood and non-Western culture that blighted its author’s critiques of popular music and anticolonial intellectualism. Adorno could sometimes come close to ascribing some particularly non-Western or non-white essence to any mimetic orientation towards tradition.⁶³ But his underlying argument is astute. It reveals how, immediately after World War II, a mimetic, cannibalistic orientation towards modernist tradition was seen by that tradition’s most ardent defender not only as potentially critical, but also as opening onto a different comprehension of reality, ‘something of true nature itself’.

Grand Street Brides realises Adorno’s suspicion that retrospection might generate new forms of truth. The painting is doubly mimetic: both an image of a specific real-world location (a bridal parlour window on Grand Street, photographed by Walter Silver two blocks

⁶¹ Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), p.8.

⁶² Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p.186.

⁶³ Cf. his remark about ‘African students of political economy, Siamese at Oxford, and... art-historians and musicologists of petty bourgeois origins’ who show ‘a ready inclination to combine with the assimilation of new material, an inordinate respect for all that is established, accepted, acknowledged’. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.56.

from Hartigan's studio) and a revisiting of modernist tradition incarnated in the *Demoiselles*. In Hartigan's grafting of one onto the other, in the drawing of equivalences and contradictions between the working-class boutiques of lower Manhattan and the brothels of fin de siècle Barcelona, repetition acquires a politics. When Steinberg complained that viewers habituated to seeing the *Demoiselles* as the gateway to cubism had lost the capacity to grasp its subjects' identities as sex workers, he failed to reflect on Hartigan. He thought all of Picasso's effects converged on this 'one insistent theme... the naked brothel interior, the male complicity in an orgy of female exposure'.⁶⁴ And although *Grand Street Brides* moves, at a formal level, to diminish some of these effects, they remain its fixed reference.

Hartigan's picture plane is not so permeable as to invite complicity. She has substituted bridal mannequins for sex workers. The viewer is surely no longer intended to see themselves in the exclusive position of a male client. But the logic of the substitute works both ways. Like the missing library book theorised in Jacques Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, the absent object is both hidden and recalled, symbolically, by the object that replaces it: 'what is hidden is never but what is *missing from its place*, as the call slip puts it when speaking of a volume lost in the library'.⁶⁵ Likewise, the position of the male client is neither represented in Hartigan's painting, nor exactly abolished. It is recalled in the many citations that link her mannequins to Picasso's women. This is the place to insist not only on the details of posture and gaze that led so many early viewers of the *Demoiselles* to compare them to mannequins, but also on Hartigan's retention and transformation of such crucial West African and Iberian motifs as the vast, blank eyes of Picasso's women and the mask-like face of his rightmost, irrupting demoiselle, recalled in that of her rightmost bride. These retentions invite a similar

⁶⁴ Steinberg, 'Philosophical Brothel', p.60.

⁶⁵ Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', trans. Jeffrey Mehlman in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p.40.

primitivist elision between the forms of non-western art and the features of the classed or gendered other as that performed by Picasso's painting: in his case with the women of the rue d'Avignon; in Hartigan's, with the women who bought their wedding dresses on Grand Street. And then there are those features of Hartigan's composition which exceeded Picasso's: the dirty, smudged quality of her colour; the leering face of the figure in yellow; her background's gothic murkiness; the violent scrubbings that disrupt the paint surface across her figures' genital areas. These push her painting away from any image of sanitised matrimony, back towards Picasso's brothel.

How does painting get out of this brothel? Must it remain where Jacques Derrida located it when he pointed to the shared etymology between *bord* (framing edge) and *bordel*?⁶⁶ What would escape from that ultimate modernist metaphysic, the commodification of female bodies, the array of available flesh, even look like? It would certainly look nothing like marriage – *Grand Street Brides* makes that clear enough. Modernism took a vicious delight in revealing idealised and commodified femininity to be one and the same thing: common symptoms of women's economic disenfranchisement. Swann's wife turns out to be a courtesan. So does Manet's Venus. 'I passed by the brothel', writes Franz Kafka, 'as though past the house of a beloved'.⁶⁷ Hartigan would have recognised this logic. She had been married and divorced twice by this point, both times in the sorts of cheap ceremony catered to by the shops on Grand Street. She knew fulfilment did not lie that way. Her mannequins are ghoulish and tawdry because they peddle a fantasy with which she herself was well acquainted. They breathe the same claustrophobic air as another great product of

⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.54.

⁶⁷ Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod (New York: Schocken Books, 2011), p.12.

modernism's post-war limbo: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir had been to Grand Street too, during a visit to New York in 1947. She described:

a street whose fantastic appearance seemed part of a girl's dream or a bachelor's nightmare: in every shop they sold wedding dresses; to right and to left for several miles on end young women smiled through tulle veils crowned with orange blossom... This virginal street, which promises Cinderella a kiss from Prince Charming, leads to the Bowery where men without women are standing in the rain, leaning against walls or crouching on the steps of little stairways: ragged, hungry and lonely, they cross the street and are smiled on by the brides in white satin dresses; they do not look, but pass through this triumph of lilies belonging to another world.⁶⁸

Beauvoir was much affected by this sight of a marriage market flourishing in the midst of poverty. The critique of marriage which she mounted two years later in *The Second Sex* would integrate these opposites by emphasising the economic contradictions within the institution itself. The homeless men and smiling Cinderellas were no longer separate beings, 'belonging to another world'. Now they were mutually implicated in the figure of the bride, forced to sell her body – 'an object for sale... capital ripe for exploitation' – for want of economic alternatives.⁶⁹ This reduction of marriage to economic coercion likened it to sex-work: 'Marriage', wrote Beauvoir, 'entails prostitution... From the economic point of view, [the prostitute's] situation mirrors that of the married woman'.⁷⁰

Beauvoir's critique approaches the nub of Hartigan's historicism. It is not only that, by making monstrous prostitutes into monstrous brides, her painting highlighted the analogies between two cultural archetypes whose effects on women's lives (her own included) were real and devastating. More importantly, by anchoring the meaning of her painting to Picasso's work, she drew out and emphasised a point that feminist historians of modernism have since made with damning regularity: that modernism's rupturing of social

⁶⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Patrick Dudley (London: Duckworth, 1952), p.246.

⁶⁹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: II: L'expérience vécue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.218.

⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: II*, pp.420-421.

and aesthetic norms concealed deeper, gendered continuities. As Griselda Pollock points out, the assault on bourgeois ideals of virtuous femininity carried out in paintings like the *Demoiselles* retained the same binarism as the system they attacked. In each case, femininity was cast as ‘the negated other of masculinity: i.e. what the masculine [was] not’.⁷¹ What changed was the emphasis. Where artists had previously recurred to ‘the image of the vacant Madonna’ as the antithesis to all that was ugly and fallen, they now turned to ‘the figuratively non-maternal body of the sexualised woman, the prostitute’.⁷² But the desired effects were the same: ‘the construction of artistic identity that is not only virile but autogenetic, claiming creativity for its masculine self’.⁷³ In painting sex workers, Picasso was conforming to a regulatory ideal whose opposite pole was chastity and marriage. Virgin whores all, Hartigan’s brides collapse the terms of this binarism that had caused generations of avant-garde artists to seek the exterior to bourgeois society in women’s exploited bodies.

Minority Modernism

Bent back towards the modernist tradition, repeating it, reworking it, translating it into different registers, historicism acquired new forms of aesthetic and political efficacy. The scope of these effects was extra-artistic. It is no accident that each of the artists who returned to the *Demoiselles* in the forty years after World War II felt themselves part of some resistant minority, not only excluded from the definitions of tradition then under construction but *at the same time* as desirous and deserving of some form of access to that tradition. This was a deforming desire. It reworked everything it touched. As my chapters argue at greater length, each with reference to a different cluster of historical factors, the contradictory desire for

⁷¹ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p.100.

⁷² Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p.35.

⁷³ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, p.35.

modernism – with its odd conjunctions of hero-worship and rejection, repetition and divergence – needs to be read within the context of a wider, global set of social, economic, and political developments across the period. Significant among these were not only the hardening of geopolitical fault lines attendant on the progress of the Cold War, but also the global spread of capitalism. At the same time, thanks to the advances of the anti-colonial, feminist, and civil-rights movements, billions of people hitherto considered to be outside history came to see themselves, as if for the first time, as subjects of historical and political discourse. ‘All these “natives”’, as Jameson puts it, ‘became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonised of the First World – “minorities”, marginals, and women – fully as much as its external subjects and official “natives”’.⁷⁴ The contradictory critique of, and desire for, modernism was a typical cultural form of this emergence into visibility.

Adorno recognised the disruptive potential of such a process, but he also feared it. A sympathetic theorisation of politicised repetition did not emerge until after his death, with the publications of Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1970s and 1980s. They wrote about ‘becoming minoritarian’, with reference to the process by which reified, institutionalised form is rewritten in being repeated: ‘The more a language has or acquires the characteristics of a major language, the more it is affected by continuous variations that transpose it into a “minor” language’.⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly for the times, their model of a ‘major language’, of ‘the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male speaking a standard language’, was modernism: ‘Joyce’s or Ezra Pound’s *Ulysses*’.⁷⁶ The more modernism became established

⁷⁴ Jameson, ‘Periodizing the 60s’ in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), p.486.

⁷⁵ Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.119.

⁷⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.122.

as a unitary, progressive tradition, a dominant language embodied in masterpieces like the *Demoiselles*, the more its masterpieces were mimicked and transformed, and the less unitary that tradition became. Like the English language, ‘major on a world scale’ and therefore ‘worked upon by all the minorities in the world’, modernism’s very centrality in the post-war years, determined by institutions like MoMA and Documenta, encouraged alteration.⁷⁷

For artists like Hartigan and Colescott, both of them Americans working as what Jameson calls ‘internal minorities’, alteration involved both the imitation of Picasso’s imagery and, in different ways, the exaggeration and critical deconstruction of his metaphysic. For artists like Souza, operating as an ‘external minority’, the situation presented its own difficulties. He was working within the bounds of a distinct Indian postcolonialism; any relation to modernism, understood as hegemonic Western high culture, implied a judgement on the modernity it was asked to stand for. As Frantz Fanon would later argue a propos artistic practice in the aftermath of the Algerian War, it was not enough for artists to respond to this situation simply by rejecting modernism in favour of a recovered, pre-modern ‘national culture’. That way lay reaction and mythmaking, denial of the fact that modernity had always been a global phenomenon. But nor should artists seek to abandon the history of oppression and the struggle for independence via assimilation to a neutral modernity coded, in advance, as Western. Rather, a properly post-colonial art ‘ought to use the past with the intention of opening the future’.⁷⁸ It should recognise how ‘modern techniques of information, language, and dress have dialectically reorganised the people’s intelligences’.⁷⁹ Modernism and modernity were to be appropriated, in other words, but in a manner that

⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p.119.

⁷⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963) p.232.

⁷⁹ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p.225.

registered both the violent colonial past on which they had been constructed, and the historical appearance of a post-colonial subjectivity capable of recognising this.

The work Souza produced during the 1950s and 1960s while living first in London, then New York, represents one of the most consistent attempts to think through the contradictory nature of these demands. The simultaneous appropriation and rejection of modernism demanded by thinkers like Fanon became the focus of his art. It was by emphasising the non-Western bases of modernist innovation that the dichotomy between a modernised West and its to-be-modernised other could be broken down. He seems to have felt this situation as equal parts liberation and unbearable restriction. The anecdote recalled by the gallerist John Kasmin – that during the 1950s Souza would visit the same park bench each day to weep publicly that he would never be as great as Picasso – reflects the double-bind.⁸⁰ It registers both a desire for assimilation to the modernist tradition embodied by Picasso, and a sense of frustrated externality to that tradition: blocked by the baggage of the past. Souza encountered Picasso as an impossible prototype, unavoidable and unreachable. And so he obsessed over him. His *Young Ladies from Belsize Park* (1962) adds little to Picasso's composition that was not already there. At the same time, in its various subtractions, omissions, and shifts of emphasis, the painting registers the impossibility of exact conformity to Picasso's norm. The work was the culmination of a series of studies produced over the course of 1962. Each of these turned the focus of the *Demoiselles* towards the rightmost woman. In sketches and studies that hover between mimesis and renunciation, Souza made her the occasion for a kind of destructive repetition. He pulled apart and reconstituted her features. In their smallness, sketchiness, and fragmentariness, each of his

⁸⁰ John Kasmin cited in Diva Gujral, 'South Asian Modernists and the London Gallerist Who Championed Them', *Frieze* (9 April 2018), <https://www.frieze.com/article/south-asian-modernists-and-london-gallerist-who-championed-them> (accessed 29/09/2021).

revisitings of the *Demoiselles* dramatised their own split situation, the unreachability of their archetype. All Picasso's grandeur was sucked away. Souza's longing gaze deformed a prototype made unreachable by the intercession of history.

Young Ladies has none of the embellishments and alterations of setting, character, or dress that mark Hartigan's and Colecott's paintings. The viewer is again brought face-to-face with five naked women. Their postures substitute almost exactly for Picasso's: the leftmost woman still raises a hand, huge like a seal's flipper, to pull back the proscenium curtain; the squatter once again turns her back to the viewer while simultaneously – impossibly – rotating her head through 180 degrees to look out of the canvas, full-face; the middle two women raise the same arms and strike the same poses. To the right, the final woman charges in from the rear, the grisaille round her head still carrying with it the promise of some deeper space behind the scenes. All this is the same, deliberately so. Souza dedicated serious preparation to these details: he had been digesting them from the original *Demoiselles* in sketches and studies produced over the course of that year. And as with Hartigan's movement towards Picasso's sources, it was through this effort towards similitude and mimesis – Adorno's 'cannibal dance' – that difference, distance, and critical orientation emerged. Emphases changed; forces were exaggerated or diminished. 'We can only say "the same"', as Deleuze would write later in the decade, 'if we think difference'.⁸¹

In Souza's first drawing of the *Demoiselles*, from early in 1962 (fig.1.12), these differences were borne out in details of scale and execution. The drawing's dimensions do not correspond to the sketchbook's page (as they had done in most of Picasso's sketches for his own painting). Rather, the frame of the image is diminished and internally displaced. It

⁸¹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p.82.

occupies less than half the sheet of paper, rotated to a portrait orientation. The rest of the sheet is taken up with a signature, a date, and the kinds of dense doodling – hatched, ramifying webs of lines, hairy like spiders’ mandibles – that Souza elsewhere identified as the ‘germ’ of his art.⁸² The effect of this mise-en-abyme was to reduce Picasso’s image to one among others, like a postcard glued to a page, an entry in a scrapbook, or a picture framed on a gallery wall. This is no innocent detail; during the 1950s Hartigan and Joan Mitchell would both use the figure of the frame-within-a-frame to position themselves as outsiders to modernist tradition, understood as a sequenced arrangement of pictures hung on a gallery wall. In Souza’s case, the diminution with which he responded to the *Demoiselles* referenced his drawing’s origin, not in direct study of the original, but in reproductions cribbed from books and periodicals – the fruits of that painting’s centrality, by the 1960s, in modernism’s international pedagogy. More importantly, in its negative dimensions, the drawing typifies Souza’s response to what Mitchell and Hartigan both, similarly, resented in that pedagogy: to the loss of authorial agency implied by its catalogue of masterpieces. I will elaborate the dimensions of this response more fully in subsequent chapters. Enough to note here that Souza always registered the art of his modernist predecessors, Picasso pre-eminent among them, as a crushing weight, a force that imposed archetypes on an artist even as it sapped his resources to process them. It was through such stylised negativity that an adequate response to tradition might be articulated, one capable of acknowledging its historical complicity in capitalist colonialism. Confronted with the *Demoiselles* (and what aspiring modernist, in the 1960s, was *not* confronted with the *Demoiselles*?), Souza responded by abolishing Picasso’s materialism, by shrinking his giantesses, by sketching out their clarity. He dispensed with the impression of artistic agency so central to the original’s effects. Squashed at his women’s feet, no longer thrusting in from the foreground, the table with its fruit bowl has lost all

⁸² F.N. Souza, *Words and Lines* (London: Villiers Publications Ltd., 1959), p.18.

phallic potency. The fate of the demoiselle second from right, shrunk to half her previous stature, could stand for that of the whole drawing. The features of the rightmost women have been hatched over to the point of erasure.

How to interpret this? Souza was a modernist. Negation was a mode of his thought. Lack of visibility never marks anything so simple as omission in his pictures: often quite the reverse. If he has scribbled over the faces of the rightmost women, he has also made them much larger, relative to the rest of his drawing. The head of the woman arriving from the rear has become the picture's centre of gravity, massive, absorbing into itself all the drama of the original painting's charging woman and parted curtain. In the *Demoiselles*, this curtain had opened a depth up behind the painted scene. Souza omits it from his drawing only to preserve and enlarge the aperture in the space around the woman's raised arms and vast head. This was a difficult manoeuvre. I do not want to discount the possibility that the lack of resolution the drawing gives to her features comes down to a more basic failure on Souza's part to get the lines right, to balance the opposition between convex facial features and concave recession. But this failure would still be part of his point, an aspect of his drawing's riposte to the overpowering, contradictory force contained within the features of the original demoiselle. Along with those of the crouching figure in front of her, these have always registered as the most 'African' component of Picasso's painting, the point at which the avant-gardist search for alterity settled, definitively, upon the forms of non-Western art. Steinberg called the rightmost demoiselle 'the savage' whenever he wrote about her.⁸³ This was nothing new. It merely preserved, in racist, value-laden terms, an observation that has prevailed since the painting's creation: that the two groups of women employ radically

⁸³ Steinberg, 'The Algerian Women and Picasso At Large' in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p.171.

different stylistic tropes, with Picasso exploring medieval Iberian prototypes for the left-hand group, West African ones for those to the right. Barr thought the right-hand figures, because of ‘their grotesque masks with concave profiles and staring eyes... derived from BaKota metal-covered fetishes from the Gabun’.⁸⁴ They were the final additions to Picasso’s painting, dynamic reflections of his researches in the Trocadéro. The disjunction they introduced into the work led early commentators like Kahnweiler to call it ‘unfinished’.⁸⁵ But they also generated uncomfortable equivalences. They flattened time, linking the non-Western to the medieval in a primitivist nexus that has remained definitive. Souza invoked the same equivalence on countless occasions in the 1950s and 1960s, as when he painted the *Crucifixion* (fig.5.12, 1959) suspended part-way between medieval bas-relief and African sculpture. He saw modernism’s non-Western and medieval elements as buried social and aesthetic truths: points of emphasis to be drawn out in his recourse to tradition. The centrality he gives to Picasso’s supposedly most African woman cannot be viewed outside this broader postcolonial project.

His next study, *Head of a Woman: Demoiselles d’Avignon* (fig.1.13, 1962) acknowledged the problematic character of the rightmost demoiselle even more explicitly. It was a scaled-up effort to pin down her characteristics. Souza zoomed in on her head, cropped it close, expanded it to fill the frame, and keyed his colour and brushwork to a pitch of intensity that pushed even further the ‘savage’ features that had drawn the shudders of Western critics in front of Picasso’s painting. The face has the same upturned profile, the same ‘staring eyes’ that unsettled Barr. Picasso’s *grisaille* is retained in the black shading that frames it to the upper left. But the crimson ground, the swirls of orange and black paint that

⁸⁴ Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.30.

⁸⁵ Kahnweiler, *Rise of Cubism*, p.6.

dilate the eyes, and the mouth, full of tombstone teeth – these are Souza’s own touches. They are typically grisly points of emphasis, outgrowths of the cruelty and suffering that he sought in so much of his art during this period. His Crucifixions are not far off. Again, his effort was mimetic, forcing towards a new historical dynamic: to inhabit and push to a pitch all the violence and fear implicit in Picasso’s initial recourse to African art.

And what of the final painting, *Young Ladies from Belsize Park*? Did it bring these dynamics of alterity, negation, and violence to some ultimate statement? Could it? Can a repetition, the latest in a chain of substitutions, *be* a ‘final painting’? Or does the gesture of substitution disrupt the possibility of completion along lines leading from cause to effect? Colecott would invite such questions twenty years later when he painted two versions of the *Demoiselles* rather than one, splitting the significance of Picasso’s archetype for contemporary practice, recognising the possibility of further repetitions, further dislocations. Souza did something similar by leaving *Young Ladies* visibly unfinished. The work is pitched (as Kahnweiler already believed of Picasso’s piece) somewhere between a sketch and a painting. By drawing his women and their setting in pen, then painting – partially – over and around them, Souza made a guiding principle of hesitancy. The dimensions are important. *Young Ladies* is less than half the height of the original *Demoiselles*, hardly more than half its width. The figures have been laid down in sharp pen-strokes, lines and shading that twist in different directions, slicing bodies into segments. This sketch work is retained, unconcealed: the flayed substrate of each demoiselle’s anatomy laid open. Around and on top of this Souza has painted the thick black outlines of the young women’s bodies, the stylised densities of their facial features, and the scintillating background. The juxtaposition of these two modes of picturing makes the painting a field of contradictions. Muscles and contours appear out of step, or else cross one another out. Shading opens lines of recession that are cancelled by

thick, flat lines of paint. Facial features double and recur. Predictably, given Souza's preoccupations, the right-hand figure group is the site where these contrasts are most pronounced. The squatting woman has two sets of eyes, one painted and another, directly below, in pen. The features of the rearmost woman are massive once more. They look to have been painted in black, and then overlaid with blue, green, and purple. Paint constitutes and then undoes her features: it makes an impossibility out of her. Like Souza on the park bench, weeping at the unreachability of Picasso, fat blue tears run down her right cheek. The painting insists on these points of emphasis. Unlike *Grand Street Brides*, with its implicit claim to have uncovered the sources of Picasso's painting, it multiplies, without resolving, the uncertainties involved in attempting to extract a way forward for postcolonial practice from this foundational document of modernist primitivism. It turns the *Demoiselles*, once more, into a problem.

Retrospection's afterlives

The uncertainties which Souza discovered in the *Demoiselles* suggest difficulties for the writing of art history. In *Young Ladies*, he used the impossibility of replicating Picasso's prototype to generate multiplicity and inversion, to heap reflection on *both* modernism's utility for contemporary practice *and* its compromised colonial past. Seldom has Benjamin's observation that the word 'modern' is 'as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope' felt more apt.⁸⁶ This was a complicated venture, resistant to narrative closure, producing emphasis without leading to resolution. It turned the *Demoiselles* into a battery of hesitations. This could lead, in Souza's work and that of others, to political and aesthetic compromise, to the muddling of progress and regression. Recall the undertones

⁸⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.545.

of petit bourgeois class hatred that bubble beneath *Grand Street Brides*, the judgements it passes on cheapness in display. Look at the anachronistic gender politics Souza imports from the advanced art of half-a-century previously. It was surely not in pursuit of political clarity that these painters turned to traditional forms. All too often, the refusal to break with the object of critique came to look like reaction.

Adorno's anxiety about what he saw as retrospective art comes into focus again here. He thought that paintings like the *Demoiselles* were important above all because they insisted on newness, on 'starting out with a clean slate': because they broke with a compromised past.⁸⁷ To repeat such a composition would be to erase what had first made it modern. The too-faithful pursuit of modernism ends up betraying it. This idea has had a long life. Jameson has argued that wherever 'modernity' appears in historical writing it signifies a break, 'setting a date and positing a beginning'.⁸⁸ On this model, those post-war artists in whose work such a distinction no longer seems operational, whose work 'transforms the older modernist experimentation into an arsenal of tried and true techniques', no longer qualify as proper modernists.⁸⁹ This is not a useless distinction; it grasps something of the barrenness and hypocrisies of the countless hack artists – low-grade *section d'or* cubists, knockdown abstract expressionists of the Michael Goldberg stripe – who have always sailed in the wake of modernism's innovations. The claim of this thesis, however, is that to dismiss all such mimicry as straightforward regression is to impoverish our historical understanding and gloss over the stakes and effects of late modernist art. What is left out on such an account is any recognition of the minoritarian effects of repetition, or anachronism, or return. These methods responded to shifts in the culture at large by impacting and distorting the traditions to which

⁸⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.295.

⁸⁸ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p.31.

⁸⁹ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p.166.

they recurred. In the process, they opened avenues for subsequent practice. Adorno was careful not to exclude this possibility. Many of the art historians who succeeded him were less dialectical. Their accounts of post-war art rejected the idea of a modernism that was iterative and repetitive, equal parts retrospection and critique. Buchloh's work was explicit here. At the beginning of the 1980s he yoked 'the rediscovery of history' in contemporary painting to the infamous *rappel à l'ordre*.⁹⁰ Both, he argued, were rejections of that lineage of progressive modernism in which 'the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation' had been dismantled.⁹¹ 'Then as now', he wrote, 'the key terms of this ideological backlash are the idealisation of the perennial monuments of art history and its masters, the attempt to establish a new aesthetic orthodoxy, and the demand for respect for cultural tradition'.⁹²

Buchloh's judgement was polemical. Insofar as it took aim at the charlatan class of buyers and lackeys released into an engorged art market by the excesses of 1980s neoliberalism, it was even necessary. But by insisting on the reactionary character of any and all mimetic recourse to 'cultural tradition', his writings and those of his peers ended up reifying the very tradition they were supposed to challenge. When Buchloh called abstract expressionism 'a return to the patriarchal supremacy of painting as the centrally governing practice of visual culture', when Foster praised minimalism for 'contest[ing] the bourgeois principles of autonomous art and expressive artist', when Rosalind Krauss wrote that 'modernism was to ... insist that Painting exist within the indivisible present of the extremest possible perceptual intensity', the echoes of Greenberg were everywhere apparent.⁹³ Each of

⁹⁰ Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', p.131.

⁹¹ Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', p.115.

⁹² Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', pp.122-123.

⁹³ Buchloh, '1930a' in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Buchloh, David Joselit, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), p.262; *The Return of the Real*, p.4; Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (London: MIT Press, 1996), pp.213-214.

them hypostatized modernist painting, as Greenberg had, in terms of a continuous, self-enclosed tradition moving towards ever-greater conceptual clarity in order, then, to reject it. Within such a tradition, there could be little space for reflection or critique, still less for modes of temporality that fell outside ‘the extremest possible perceptual intensity’. It is no wonder that, in Buchloh’s later writings, it was painting in general that came in for condemnation. ‘Any artistic claims to embody the special skill set of a virtuoso painter’ now appeared ‘an involuntary travesty’.⁹⁴

And yet to reject painting on these terms was – and is – to miss a fundamental point about modernism, one already indicated in Adorno’s affection for Cervantes and Proust: that it was always shot through with the past, informed, at its best, by sensibilities and anxieties directed towards history. T.J. Clark has made a similar historical point in his recent defence of the same 1920s Picasso paintings dismissed by Buchloh as reactionary precursors to the 1980s. Rejecting the image of modernism as ‘an arrow pointing to the future’, Clark argues instead that ‘retrogression is its deepest and most persistent note’.⁹⁵ This is not a depoliticising claim. The reasons for modernism’s recourse to retrogression, retrospection, and citation were often critical, ‘a set of spells against an intolerable present’.⁹⁶ Such motivations remained after World War II; indeed, they were often intensified. Souza’s insistence that, in order to understand his painting, one had to understand the threat of nuclear war, is a case in point. What changed in the latter half of the century was the emphasis: increasingly, painters looked back to modernity and modernism, rather than towards any more distant historical archetype. Even when they looked further, as in Georges Mathieu’s attempts to forge a link

⁹⁴ Buchloh, ‘A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde: *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)*, 1966’ in *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed. Isabella Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p.250.

⁹⁵ T.J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.14.

⁹⁶ Clark, *Picasso and Truth*, p.14.

between abstraction and history painting, or Rose Piper's studies of the Flemish Primitives, the effect was often to register new breaks and historical disjunctions. As Steinberg was to point out in 1978, in the catalogue for the Whitney's *Art about Art* exhibition, painters in the late 1970s and 1980s were no more to be credited with inventing iteration, repetition, and historicism than neo-dadaists like Robert Rauschenberg were to be celebrated for inventing the readymade. 'In their traffic with art, artists employ preformed images as they employ whatever else feeds into their work'.⁹⁷ To dismiss all the historicising painting of the period as a specific outgrowth of a debased market, as Foster did when he wrote the phenomenon off as a 'neoconservative postmodernism' operating through 'pastiche' rather than 'form', is to miss its deeper, modernist roots.⁹⁸ Recent work by Karen Lang and Alex Potts, looking respectively at historical reference in the paintings of Philip Guston and at the persistence of realism in post-war art, has begun to reverse this dismissal and offer new tools of historical explanation.⁹⁹ These might begin to correct the omissions of critics like Foster and Buchloh, whose writings have proved unable to account for, or even to recognise, painters whose mimetic orientation towards tradition might be less than affirmatory. Foster's epigrammatic reduction of Jean-Michel Basquiat to a 'street-artist' turned 'primitive/prodigy' is typical in this regard.¹⁰⁰ So too is Buchloh's justification for neglecting the work of women artists. He argues that it took him until the 1980s to begin writing about women's art, because it was only by this time that certain of them 'had refrained at least for a time from the regression into the most traditional role behaviour of the artist'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Steinberg, 'Glorious Company', p.213.

⁹⁸ Foster, *Return of the Real*, p.72.

⁹⁹ Karen Lang, 'Philip Guston: History and the Art of Painting', (Slade Lectures, University of Oxford, January-February 2020); Alex Potts, *Experiments in Modern Realism: World Making in Postwar European and American Art* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), p.49.

¹⁰¹ Buchloh, 'Introduction' in *Neo-Avant-Garde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (London: MIT Press, 2003), p.xxix.

There is more than one way to mime a norm, however. The two versions of the *Demoiselles* which Robert Colescott painted in 1985 made this clear. These were the last paintings which the artist made in a mode of direct mimicry begun over a decade earlier. Like Hartigan's and Souza's revisitings before him, each of Colescott's *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama* adopted an attitude towards modernist tradition that was both mimetic and iconoclastic. It is difficult to imagine who out of Buchloh or Greenberg would have hated them more. The two versions *vestida* and *desnuda* cite Goya's two versions of the *Maja* (1797-1805), 'opening up a back' once more towards the tradition of Spanish painting in which Picasso worked. Unlike Hartigan's and Souza's efforts, each of Colescott's *Demoiselles* was done to the precise dimensions of Picasso's: there was no attempt to conceal the chain of substitution, the dependence of artwork upon artwork. Nothing was changed in either the positioning of the women or the 'baroque' details of the setting. Again and again the fruit-laden table pierces the foreground. Again and again the same curtains are swept aside. The effect is to preserve something of the original painting's sexual charge, noted by Steinberg as pitched between 'male complicity' and a 'tidal wave of female aggression'.¹⁰² Colescott's *demoiselles* repeat Picasso's tropes of threatening femininity, sexually available female flesh, and racial alterity squeezed into a roiling, contradictory space. This, surely, would count for Buchloh as the 'traditional role behaviour of the artist', the freewheeling myth of masculine genius resurrected and spattered across the canvas for an elite clientele ready to draw low-grade visual pleasure from identifying the forms of academic tradition. The *Demoiselles* was almost eighty years old by now. Its place in history was assured.

And yet, as had been true of his predecessors, the similitude Colescott pursued in recourse to this paradigm modernist painting was anything but affirmatory. Both *Demoiselles*

¹⁰² Steinberg, 'Philosophical Brothel', pp. 15; 64.

d'Alabama are as repellent and unsettling as the original *Demoiselles*. As signalled by the central, phallic melon – morphed here into a slice of watermelon, symbol for racist caricature *par excellence* – Colecott deformed Picasso's composition along lines driven by contemporary racial prejudice and sexual desire. He turned the *Demoiselles* into a pretext for illusionism, stereotype, and troubling visual pleasure. Both his paintings dispelled the original's angularity, the stress laid there on unity of surface. They were composed of discreet bodies built from large, streaky patches of violently contrasting colour. The rightmost of his demoiselles, the white woman who sits looking out of both canvases, epitomised this shift. In Picasso's painting her posture is ambiguous, her right leg interrupted by the proscenium curtain so that it is impossible to discern whether she sits with her back turned or squats facing the viewer. This was necessary, in a painting so given over to vision and visibility that it needed to show all sides of its figures at once. In Colecott's paintings this woman has none of the same simultaneity of aspect. Instead, seated, with her back turned and her legs pressed together so that they telescope into the interior of the painting, she incarnates the simplification of the painting's space, the reintroduction of illusionistic spatial projection. Space is not all that Colecott simplifies here. It is no accident that he substituted a stereotyped white woman for Picasso's masked West African. His women are no less complexes of exaggeration, desire, and fear than Picasso's had been, but he strips the avant-gardist formal justification away from them, allowing their racial and sexual dynamics to become, if anything, more pronounced. His *vestidas* wear the lurid clothing of contemporary sex-workers. His *desnudas* set black and white flesh alongside one another in a manner that has more in common with contemporary cartoonists like Robert Crumb than with any primitivist encounter with medieval or non-Western art.

All this amounts to an emphasis on the popular mechanics of visual pleasure, rather than the kinds of asceticism and renunciation which characterise the *Demoiselles*. Colour, expressivity, and sexuality were stressed in Colescott's paintings to the point at which they came apart, visual and sexual pleasure transposed into their opposites. Each of his images was painted with the thick pigment and acid colour, loaded dry onto the brush, that Peter Schjeldahl has compared to the surf of waves or the frosting on cake: 'textures good enough to eat'.¹⁰³ The metaphor is doubly apt. *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama* are *culinary* in the sense given that word by Adorno when he denounced 'delights which seek to be consumed immediately for their own sake as if in art the sensory were not the bearer of something intellectual which only shows itself in the whole rather than in isolated topical moments'.¹⁰⁴ Adorno associated these effects with popular culture, jazz in particular. The syncopated beat, the 'singer with the golden throat' – these were devices that broke art down into a prefabricated assemblage of commodified parts.¹⁰⁵ It is easy to see the connection with his critique of historicism. He thought both phenomena emphasised reproduction over production; that both forsook the principles of synthesis, creativity, and artistic unity in favour of 'pre-formed' components, coming to read as threats to an exemplary, Eurocentric tradition of high modernism. Delighting in the fulfilment of such fears, in the exaggeration of gender and race, of visual pleasure and commodified popular culture, Colescott's two *Demoiselles d'Alabama* were typical of that lineage of iterative painting which turned the repetition of 'pre-formed' elements into the material for critical reflection. The paintings are riotous with colour. Pictorial unity falls apart into isolated visual moments. This breakdown is encapsulated by Colescott's decision to make two versions of his painting, rather than one:

¹⁰³ Peter Schjeldahl, 'Walk this Way', *The Village Voice* (2 June 1998), p.173.

¹⁰⁴ Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), p.274.

¹⁰⁵ Adorno, 'On the Fetish Character', p.273.

with the implicit suggestion that others are possible, that the chain of repetition and substitution might continue indefinitely. But if all this amounts to visual pleasure (of the kind that Colecott's art world aficionados so often praise), it is sickly and clagging: the stereotypes are too blatant, the references too obvious, the paint surface too agitated and acidic. Colecott's paintings answered Adorno's attack in a manner that inverted its terms. They bent a hypertrophic emphasis on visual pleasure towards the 'something intellectual', the critical substance, that Colecott no less than Adorno took to be art's true content. Colecott's *Demoiselles* emphasised such points of disjunction and discomfort. They broke modernist tradition into a series of unanswered questions, sexual frustrations, and aggravated racial stereotypes.

Across the many repetitions of the *Demoiselles*, modernism fractured into minoritarian plurality. Rather than operating as the fountainhead for a unilinear, progressive tradition, as Barr had once proudly imagined, Picasso's painting emerges as both cause and result of its many iterations. With each repetition, the painting became something different: whether an uncorrupted source of purity, innovation, and totality; a route towards a regenerated feminist historicism; an ambiguous, impossible model for postcolonial practice; or a progenitor of stereotyped crassness, racial prejudice, and *avant-gardiste* fraudulence. The copies and justifications created these dimensions in the original, just as the original created the conditions for the copies. They made the *Demoiselles* into the paradigmatic modern work it is. Picasso – whose own practice rested on borrowings, repetitions, and competition with the art of the past – would surely have found little to argue with here. His 'variations' on Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* canvases and Velázquez's *Las Meninas* bear serious comparison to the repetitions of his own work carried out by Hartigan, Souza, and Colecott. Taken together, they imply a horizontal model of artistic meaning, one in which

the meaning of an artwork is generated in relation to its copies, rather than inhering in the original as a (recoverable) creative product – the model preferred by the progressive imaginaries of traditional modernist art history. Lately, the failings in this tradition have become clearer. Foster himself has pointed out a ‘fatigue with the rhetoric of rupture’ and a concomitant need to come up with narratives of modernity that depart from progressive linearity. In his Mellon Lectures, he abandoned the idea of historical breaks in order to address the kind of post-war painting and sculpture that had supposedly been rendered irrelevant by the neo-avant-gardists he and his peers once championed. Now, such anachronistic figures as Jean Dubuffet come in for serious critical reflection, in whose work ‘progress has become regression... as if history had stalled and dialectics were suspended’.¹⁰⁶ When the contemporary painter Kerry James Marshall makes work restaging certain figures and devices from *Las Meninas* (once again that painting!), Foster has praise for him. ‘Why not’ – he muses – ‘have the same form serve black people in the same ways?’.¹⁰⁷ One by one, his fellows at *October* have gone the same way, nuancing or even abandoning the absolutism of the 1980s. Thierry de Duve now writes about the built-in failures of the modernist and postmodernist critique of representation to address identity politics.¹⁰⁸ Krauss’s latest book is a monograph on de Kooning that rotates around motifs repeated from Picasso and Matisse: painter and model, open windows, women on the beach.¹⁰⁹

The five demoiselles in their five iterations can help us understand the renewed interest in modernist painting that sweeps in on our current heterodox moment. They show

¹⁰⁶ Foster, *Brutal Aesthetics: Dubuffet, Bataille, Jorn, Paolozzi, Oldenburg* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), p.17.

¹⁰⁷ Foster, *What Comes After Farce?: Art and Criticism at a Time of Debacle* (London: Verso, 2020), p.86.

¹⁰⁸ Thierry de Duve, *Aesthetics at Large: Volume 1: Art, Ethics, Politics* (London: Chicago University Press, 2019), pp.67-68.

¹⁰⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *Willem De Kooning Nonstop: Cherchez La Femme* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp.16-17.

that there never was any such thing as a ‘modernist tradition’, in the sense of something fixed or unilinear, giving the rule to its successors, but that tradition was itself a trope, something which artists fashioned and refashioned in practice. The icons, monoliths, and precedents that dotted the landscape of post-war art could function as sources of temporal plurality, historical consciousness and political intervention. My remaining chapters explore this fragmented territory. They ask what became of modernism across its many repetitions and disjunctions, how renewed forms of attention to the dynamics of history encoded in artworks shaped the course of artistic practice in the latter half of the last century. Artists looked to history to redeem painting. In the process they altered the stakes of the modernist project.

The first chapter charts forms of historical engagement with idioms of past and present in post-war painting in order to open onto a troubling set of political questions. It analyses the nationalisation of modernism in America through the art of Larry Rivers, Barnett Newman, and Georges Mathieu. Modernism became the official high culture of the US – and by extension, of ‘the West’ – during the 1950s and 1960s. Rivers and Mathieu both arrived at conceptions of painting that attempted to elevate this connection by placing modernist painting in touch with history painting and the historicised glories of their separate national pasts, while at the same time retaining critical contemporaneity. The real and apparent contradictions raised by this approach became part of the point: in Dorothy Miller’s catalogue to the exhibition *12 Americans* (1956), Rivers is described as a ‘reactionary’. A few pages later he calls himself a ‘revolutionary’.¹¹⁰ Mathieu lived such contradictions. He was a Don Quixote figure, a pseudo-aristocratic oddity, a self-anointed knight with one foot in the past and one in the future. Far from the eccentric sideshow which the work of these painters has

¹¹⁰ See Dorothy C. Miller ‘Foreword and Acknowledgement’ and Larry Rivers ‘Statement’ in *12 Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1956), unpaginated.

often been taken to be, I argue that it gives us terms for understanding the development of post-war abstraction more generally. Newman's work in the 1950s reveals itself to have been grappling with a parallel attempt to place painting in touch with the national past.

My second chapter studies the post-war institutionalisation of modernism, and the opportunities which this offered to artists, by looking at Grace Hartigan's and Joan Mitchell's painting in the 1950s. It focuses on the relationship between their work and the constructions of modernist chronology then approaching completion in such museums as MoMA and summed up in the historiographic treatment of the work of Matisse. Hartigan and Mitchell sought to conceptualise the gap between Matisse's tradition and their own painting by using the idea of the framed picture hung on the wall. Both used the distance this produced to rework aspects of modernist tradition from positions that recognised their own externality to that tradition. I argue that the resulting paintings were feminist, that by looking hard at modernist tradition, by repeating its tropes and figures in a manner that conveyed the tensions of this endeavour, Hartigan and Mitchell made paintings that were not anachronistic, but historically astute and productively critical. They cleared space for feminist politics.

My third chapter analyses the effects of commodification on historicist painting through a focus on Rose Piper. Piper used her early paintings to interrogate the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and the options left open for black modernism by the decline of that movement. In the paintings from her *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* series (1946-1947), the place of commodification in recalling modernist prototypes was thematised through attention to popular music, particularly the work of Bessie Smith. Piper's late paintings, produced after thirty years at work in the textile industry, need to be read as the culmination of this project rather than as an unfortunate diversion. In them, she directed the technical and institutional

knowledge gleaned from her career as a designer towards a searching, self-reflexive critique of race, gender, and the commodity form. These images in turn opened the way to a re-articulation and renewal of black modernism.

The final chapter asks how and why the stakes of this citational, reflexive, temporally disjunctive modernist painting began to alter in the 1960s. Hartigan left New York and her painting declined. Rivers turned to pop subjects. Newman purged his art of nationalist and naturalistic reference. I use an epistolary confrontation between Newman and Souza to track the shifting institutional and political pressures placed on painting during the period. Souza's earlier work used an exaggerated proximity to modernist tradition, epitomised in the figure of Picasso, to mount a critique of the part played by that tradition in the histories of colonialism and racial oppression. But the risks of such closeness – that it might equate to anachronism and repetition – were borne out in his paintings' often-ambiguous politics. His confrontation with Newman, and the work which each of them made in the late 1960s, shows a common recognition of such impasses, as well as a shared attempt to marry an insistence on historicity to contemporary political substance: both used citation of past art to turn their attention to modern warfare, Newman towards Vietnam, Souza to Bangladesh.

To conclude, I look at a single painting, Hartigan's *The Persian Jacket* (1952), in order to draw together many of the methodological and historical threads of the thesis. In particular, I interrogate the relationship between fashion and painting presupposed by a historicist art. Hartigan's art identified the dangers of modernist modishness. It deliberately embodied such risks, transforming proximity to institutionalised narratives into a capacity to critique and divert them.

Chapter 1: Abstract Nationalisms: Barnett Newman and Buried History.

The last muscle of the aristocracy is madness.

- Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*.

The Trouble with Consistency

Barnett Newman stopped painting after 1955. *Uriel* (fig.2.1) was the only work he finished that year. It brought to completion the series of pale blue paintings he had begun in 1954 with *The Gate* (1954), *The Word II* (1954), *Primordial Light* (1954), *White Fire I* (1954), and *Right Here* (1954). *Uriel* synthesized the effects of these on a grand scale: their odd combinations of opacity and atmosphere, the stutter produced by laying multiple vertical ‘zips’ beside one another, the sense the paintings created of one elemental material giving way to another. Then Newman stopped. 1956 was empty of production. 1957 brought the first of his heart attacks, but no more work. And in 1958, he took up painting again, in a new direction. Contemporaries registered this change. Responses to his post-1958 paintings concurred on his ability, as the critic Barbara Rose put it, ‘to keep pace with the youngsters’.¹¹¹ The gap between the layered transitions of *Uriel* and the monochrome, ghostly *Stations of the Cross* (fig.2.2) has always yawned wide.

But gaps are hard to write about. Criticism needs objects, just as it needs narratives. And if art historians have recognized the shift in Newman’s practice after 1958, this has been

¹¹¹ Barbara Rose, “Vogue’s Spotlight: Art: Openness and Robert Motherwell, ‘an infallible eye’” *Vogue* 154 no.2 (1 August 1969), p.62.

in isolation from his two-year break in painting and the difficult work leading up to it.¹¹² Often, the break is simply ignored, and Newman's change of direction is framed as a response to shifting political demands, or to the Pop and Minimalist aesthetics that dominated New York in the 1960s. 'His young Minimalist admirers', as Yve-Alain Bois put it in an influential roundtable on modernism's mid-century trajectory, 'provided him with a new critical vocabulary'.¹¹³ Elsewhere the shift has been explained biographically: the critical failure of Newman's first two solo-exhibitions, in 1950 and 1951, is made to account for his dwindling output.¹¹⁴ Misery and neglect stopped him painting, so this narrative goes, and imitation set him in motion again. No doubt there is some truth to this. Anyone familiar with depression and creative isolation will recognise Newman's description to his friend Thomas Hess, of the period from 1955 to 1957 as 'the blackest years'.¹¹⁵ But to leave things there, as does every authority on his work (with the notable exception of Hess), is to rest with external factors: it is to ignore the possibility of a more dialectical link between the problems Newman encountered in his painting and the society in which he lived.

The question that needs asking, at this point, is whether Newman stopped painting for reasons *internal* to his practice. What if he encountered a set of problems *within his art* that had become intractable by 1955? Hess is the only writer to take such questions seriously. They bring him into contact with the unsystematizable character of Newman's work in the years leading up to the break. He reads the problematic character of *Uriel* as loss of

¹¹² For an exhaustive technical consideration of Newman's change in direction, without mention of his break, see Bradford A. Epley, Michelle White, and Sarah K. Rich, *Barnett Newman: The Late Work, 1965 – 1970* (London: Yale University Press, 2015).

¹¹³ 'Roundtable: Art at mid-century' in Foster et. al, *Art Since 1900*, p.355. Mark Godfrey, *Abstraction and the Holocaust* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p.57.

¹¹⁴ Richard Shiff, 'To Create Oneself,' in Richard Shiff, Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, and Heidi Colman-Freyberger (eds.) *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Yale University Press, 2004), pp.19-20.

¹¹⁵ Thomas B. Hess, *Barnett Newman* (London: Tate, 1972), p.91.

inspiration, a chastened Newman reshuffling the components of a stale pictorial idiom, breaking no ground: ‘His next moves, in terms of recombination and variation, must have seemed too easy. His impetus toward a breakthrough had stopped’.¹¹⁶ This gets us closer to the problem of Newman’s inconsistency, without attempting an answer. Granted that he saw the materials he had been developing for the past seven years as suddenly void of expressive force, we are still entitled to ask *why* this was the case, if up to then they had served him so well. On this, Hess can offer no insight. He returns to the narrative of disappointment. Newman’s ‘personal drama’, he writes, ‘was acutely paralleled by a pictorial one’.¹¹⁷

We might get a better purchase on the development of Newman’s painting, and that of Abstract Expressionism in general, if we widen the field of historical inquiry beyond a few familiar names and events: Robert Motherwell’s opening night snub in 1950 (‘I thought you were one of us’), the derisive critical responses to his two exhibitions, Mark Rothko’s failure to speak up in Newman’s defence. Certainly, these names and events occupied a section of the artistic plane on which Newman moved, but their predominance in art historical discourse has caused other names to drop out of circulation. Georges Mathieu, the French abstract painter, a much more visible figure than Newman in the early 1950s, is one. Larry Rivers is another. To anticipate, my claim is that the problems Newman encountered within his paintings only came to his full attention through the process of engagement with the work of these two painters, in particular with the attempts of each to restore those links between painting, national history, and nature that the post-war dominance of abstraction had appeared to sever. Newman recognized something of himself in Mathieu and Rivers. His

¹¹⁶ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.58.

¹¹⁷ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.58.

change in direction cannot be understood apart from the kinds of retrospective modernist painting they articulated.

Abstraction as Feudal History

The catalyst for Newman's confrontation with this different vision of modernism was an article, 'Mathieu Paints a Picture', which appeared in *ARTnews* in February 1955. There, in photographs by Robert Descharnes and text by Michel Tapié, Mathieu attempted to provide a nationalistic, historical foundation for abstract painting. Having worked since 1947 as a public relations manager for the shipping company United States Lines, Mathieu was already something of a *bête noire* among sections of the Manhattan art scene. As Catherine Dossin points out, his job made him one of the few French artists – at a time when transatlantic travel was expensive, and Paris still took itself to be the centre of the art world – with the opportunities and inclination to visit New York regularly.¹¹⁸ Mathieu held his first Manhattan exhibition at the Stable Gallery in 1952. In 1953 the Guggenheim Museum bought *Painting* (1952), Alfred Barr bought a piece for the Museum of Modern Art, and Sam Kootz's influential gallery gave him a permanent contract. Back in Paris, he arranged exhibitions that hung modern French painting alongside the New York avant-garde. The glossy bilingual magazine he edited for United States Lines published articles by Hess and Greenberg alongside reproductions of Wols and Pollock.

Mathieu's internationalism, which chimed with expansions in global markets, trade, and tourism over the period, ultimately extended well beyond North America. The speed with which he dashed off paintings – large, complicated work in around three-quarters of an hour;

¹¹⁸ Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s-1980s: A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p.60.

smaller, simpler pieces like *La Bulle Omnium Datum Optimum* (1958) in as little as four seconds – meant that work could be completed on site, in the countries he visited, often in front of live audiences. This raised his profile, eliminated transportation costs, pushed up profits, and generated more commissions. Looking back on his career, he recalled how ‘in six years, from 1956 to 1962, I had the opportunity to put on fifty-seven separate exhibitions in North and South America, in the Far and Middle East, in Europe, and to paint in public in fifteen countries as different as Italy and Belgium, the USA and France, Argentina and Israel’.¹¹⁹ (By contrast, Newman participated in thirty-seven shows over this period, one of which was a solo-exhibition.) Mathieu never migrated. He remained based in Paris. But he did *circulate*, and so did his art. By 1955, his popularity was approaching its US zenith (although in global terms it was just beginning – he was to visit Japan in 1957, where the Gutai group would claim him as an inspiration and huge crowds would gather to see him paint). Pointing to prices in excess of \$3,000 per painting, *Time* called him ‘the reigning darling of advance-guard art’.¹²⁰ Greenberg summed up the attraction of Mathieu’s work for American collectors in the 1950s: ‘the Modern Museum was then readier to buy a Mathieu than it was a de Kooning’.¹²¹

‘Mathieu Paints a Picture’ crowned this trend. Its circumstances were propitious: the article appeared in the same series as had Hans Namuth’s legendary photographs of Pollock painting, four years previously. Descharnes’s images of Mathieu, at work on *The Battle of Bouvines* (fig.2.3, 1955), aimed for a similar mode of mythic theatricality. He wears a velvet-sheened suit, white, garter-like straps around his legs – ‘bandages’ as one correspondent

¹¹⁹ Georges Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance: Au-delà du Tachisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.135.

¹²⁰ Anonymous, ‘The Fox of Paris’, *Time*, (7 March 1955), p.32

¹²¹ Trish Evans and Charles Harrison, ‘A Conversation with Clement Greenberg in Three Parts’ in *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, ed. Robert C. Morgan (London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), p.184.

described them – and a white leather hat.¹²² In one image, he applies a looping stroke of paint with a long-handled brush in each hand, head back, fencing with the canvas. Two show him squirting paint from the tube. In another he throws it. As they had for Pollock – or indeed for Picasso, whose filmed and photographed exploits in the 1950s (painting on glass, drawing at high speed, remarking on the lifetime of thought embodied in a single superfast gesture) are a constant, unacknowledged presence behind Mathieu's work – the photographs generate a sense of immediacy. They seem to reconstruct the process blow-by-blow. It is no coincidence that '*tubism*', the method which Mathieu claimed to invent during this period, involved the application of paint straight from the tube. Mathieu's tubes collapsed distance. Each mark was direct, an index of a specific gesture. To view his painting properly is to reconstruct these gestures, in time, mark by mark. Natalie Adamson and Steven Harris have dubbed this effect 'archaeological' as it appeared in French abstract painting in the 1950s. They argue that a shared emphasis on bare materials and decipherable gestures generated a kind of painting that 'accumulates and accrues possible meaning as it grows in density', that 'seems to require the viewer to become both archaeologist and storyteller'.¹²³ To view *Bouvines* properly is to perform a reconstruction. What lay behind this? To what extent did this demand represent a challenge to conventional ways of understanding history – a call to a certain historical activism?

Where to begin? Like all of Mathieu's big paintings, *Bouvines* (fig.2.4) is very loud. Its colours are brash: scribbles of red, black, and sickly yellow; small accents, like punctuation marks, of green and sky-blue emerging at the margins, frosted with curlicues of

¹²² Rita Leonard Schafer, 'Letter to the Editor', *ARTnews*, vol.54, no.2 (April 1955), p.6.

¹²³ Natalie Adamson and Steven Harris, 'Material Imagination: Art in Europe, 1946-72,' *Art History*, vol.39, no.4 (15 August 2016), p.646.

white. Everything looks jumbled up, colours smudged into one another, mixed haphazardly. But as is often the case with abstract painting, any impression of chaos is fleeting. Mathieu's touch is cursive, after all. It looks like writing. And writing implies facility. It promises a familiar process. Even if Mathieu had not had himself filmed and photographed, the layering of paint shows which strokes followed which: how he began with black and red lines, built up against the coppery ground along a series of diagonals and horizontals. These form ground planes, against which other figures stand out. At points – the top and bottom right, in particular – this produces the effect of a horizon viewed from a distance, an effect that he would literalise in later works such as *The Liberation of Orléans by Joan of Arc* (fig.2.13). Towards the centre, where the space is more compacted and the *tubist* scrawls more prominent, the figures are pushed forwards, like letters on a page. The canvas operates as a screen for projections: everything on the surface. The splats of black and red paint that spatter the surface towards the lower-left and upper-right insist upon their own thrownness.

Bowvines is all display. Its strongest diagonal, beginning in the centre and accelerating downwards from left to right, thickening as it goes, shoots off toward the right-hand edge with all the virtuosity of a pianist's *glissando*. This was a favourite technique, wheeled out for the large paintings, especially those made in public. Mathieu had used it in *Homage to Marshal Turenne* (1952), and we see it reproduced, almost exactly, in *The Battle of Hastings* (fig.2.5, 1956). 'I know of no other Western painter', as one admirer put it, 'who can impart such a sense of speed to his line, or throw a line across a canvas that may be fifteen feet or more in length with a single movement. A trick? A tour de force? Or an illustration of what mastery means?'¹²⁴ Even in 1957, then, the stakes were clear. The risk of fraudulence, of

¹²⁴ James Fitzsimmons, *Lyrical Abstraction in New Paintings by Mathieu* (New York: Kootz Gallery, 1957), p.7.

empty facility, of technique become trickery, was always part of the appeal ('an aesthetic of risk', Mathieu called it).¹²⁵ In front of *Bouvines*, one gets the impression of painting dissected, its ribs splayed open. And if all that is revealed are inanities, pale invocations of nature, meaningless scribblings, tours de force, then that – this is the claim – is what painting has come to. *Bouvines* wants us to read it, line by bloody line, and to come away with nothing.

'Nothing', of course, is a charged term in modernism. It is not to be confused with the absence of creativity, or of expression, or of art. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* premiered at the Théâtre de Babylone the year before Mathieu began work on *Bouvines*. Although lacking *Godot's* emphasis on control and restraint, it is difficult to look at Mathieu's scribbles for too long without recalling the shouts of 'quaquaquaqua' with which, during Lucky's monologue, Beckett performed the disarticulation of thought from language.¹²⁶ Adorno's notion, that Beckett's writing dwelt in 'the image world of nothingness as something', could be applied, in another sense, to Mathieu.¹²⁷ These two artists, polar opposites in so many ways, shared a common fascination with subjective isolation and the boundaries of communication, with speech that goes nowhere and writing that refuses to signify. Undecipherable scripts were all the rage in post-war Paris. On the one hand, these bespoke a renewed admiration for the art of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy (an openness that probably accounts for Mathieu's popularity in Japan and his importance for the Gutai group).¹²⁸ 'At last!' Mathieu recalled André Malraux exclaiming on encountering his painting in 1951, 'Western calligraphy!'¹²⁹ Then again, as Mathieu himself pointed out, this encounter

¹²⁵ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance*, p.127.

¹²⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p.62.

¹²⁷ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p.381.

¹²⁸ Jirō Yoshihara, 'The Gutai Manifesto' in *100 Artists Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, ed. Alex Danchev (London: Penguin, 2011), p.333

¹²⁹ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance*, p.67.

was largely based on misrecognition, rather than any more culturally sensitive investigation of non-Western languages and traditions. For Mathieu and his peers, calligraphy promised a refusal of meaning, a metaphysic of form ‘liberated’, in his words, ‘from literal signifying content’.¹³⁰ Mathieu was friends with Henri Michaux, whose 200 illegible ink drawings, entitled *Calligraphies* (1948) are among the most celebrated examples of this practice. Unreadable writing promised expression without legibility, ‘nothingness as something’. Recall the words Beckett found to praise Tal Coat’s paintings: ‘the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express’.¹³¹

Nor was such exploration of the potential of negativity limited to Paris. Insisting on the gap between artist and audience was common currency for modernists on both sides of the Atlantic. Franz Kline and Mark Tobey both explored calligraphy in this regard.¹³² ‘Demands for communication are both presumptuous and irrelevant’, reads a favourite quotation of Mathieu’s, from Clyfford Still.¹³³ In a sense, *Bouvines* was typical of its episteme. But even with such examples in mind, the frictionless ease with which Mathieu cycles through painting’s means – from calligraphic curlicues to decorative figures, from half-formed horizons to thrown splats – and declares each meaningless, is remarkable.

Mathieu used his art to explore the threat posed to painting by empty, recursive technique. But he and his interlocutors also sought to counteract this risk, to restore painting

¹³⁰ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance*, pp.67; 198.

¹³¹ Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: John Calder, 1965), p.103.

¹³² For an account of the place of calligraphy in Kline and Tobey’s work, and its suppression in Greenberg’s writing, see Stanley K. Abe, ‘To Avoid the Inscrutable: Abstract Expressionism and the ‘Oriental Mode’ in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (London: MIT Press, 2006), pp.52-73.

¹³³ Clyfford Still, ‘Statement’ in *15 Americans*, ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952), p.22. Quoted in Mathieu, *De la révolte*, p.183.

at the last minute to its formerly elevated status. This was the source of their reaction, the reason for their appeal to history. When Harold Rosenberg reflected in 1952 that ‘the French painter thinks of himself as a battleground of history’, he surely had Mathieu in mind.¹³⁴ The Battle of Bouvines of 1214 – in which an outnumbered force of French knights commanded by King Philip Augustus smashed the combined strength of England, Flanders, and the Holy Roman Empire – had long stood as an example of feudal might, beloved by the French right. Mathieu picked the battle for his subject not only for its nationalistic cachet but because his ancestor, Mathieu de Montmorency, had fought in it. And surely the production of a painting has never unfolded with such self-conscious, historicizing fanfare. Tapié’s article set the tone. First he noted the ‘enormous’ studio Mathieu rented for the occasion, ‘where the biggest sets for Paris films are painted’. Then he remarked the historical resonances of the artist’s costume (‘black silk... a white helmet’), and those of the audience, with the Flemish poet Emmanuel Looten dressed as the Count of Flanders and Tapié himself representing the Count of Toulouse. ‘My grandmother’, he added, ‘was a Toulouse-Lautrec’. Finally, he stressed the timing of Mathieu’s performance: ‘since the Battle of Bouvines took place on a Sunday, early in the afternoon, it was on a Sunday, just after lunch, that he set to work’. Tapié saw his historical analogies mirrored in the painting:

In the hodge-podge of paint tubes by the hundreds, of brushes as long as halberds, of spilt oil cans, Mathieu, demiurge of destiny, summoned onto his canvas in a few hours (exactly the time taken by the fighting) first the army of the king of France, with the communal militias (to the left of the picture) and then the armies of the coalition and Otto IV, Holy Roman Emperor, whose flight was finally indicated by a trail of black, almost ten feet long, beginning at the centre of the canvas and descending to its lower right-hand corner...¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Harold Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’, *ARTnews*, vol.51, no.8 (1952), pp.23; 48.

¹³⁵ Michel Tapié, ‘Mathieu Paints a Picture’, *ARTnews*, vol.53, no.10 (February 1955), p.75.

Many have bridled at the chauvinism of such writing, at its ghastly aristocratic pretensions.¹³⁶ There is little to separate ‘my grandmother was a Toulouse-Lautrec’ from Gaullist panic over national dilution, or the image of French greatness summoned by Bouvines from that of French colonialism’s *mission civilisatrice*. But Tapié was taking his cues from Mathieu (‘I am one of the most nationalist among the French, which is to say, also one of the least democratic’).¹³⁷ He never outstripped his subject, whose own political inclinations took him so far as to design the masthead for the extreme-right, monarchist journal *La nation française* in 1955. And his article sums up the principles of Mathieu’s art: the attempt to root the work in a particular time and place by renting the biggest studio in Paris and inviting an audience; the theatrical resonances (‘the biggest sets for Paris films...’); the exaggeration of temporality brought on by painting within a precise time limit; the connection of these elements to a distant, imagined, national history (the time of the battle) by means as ephemeral and as genealogically elitist as the blood-ties between himself, the audience, and France’s feudal past. These combine in Tapié’s interpretation of the painting. He reads the temporal, ‘archaeological’ character of *Bouvines*’ paint marks for historical narrative. No longer a show of empty rhetoric or a stab at immediacy, Mathieu’s hurled splat of black paint becomes a communal militia; the *glissando* is Emperor Otto IV, fleeing before the French knights.

For Tapié, such invocations of history corrected a formal absence, counteracting the paintings’ reduction of technique to facility. History was to ground and garland Mathieu and his art, to assert a concrete, national identity impervious to the forces of circulation and exchange to which they were being steadily assimilated. This accounts for the paintings’ oft-

¹³⁶ For a representative sample, see ‘Editor’s Letters’, *ARTnews*, vol.54, no.2 (April 1955), p.6.

¹³⁷ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance*, p.183.

remarked paradoxical character, their capacity, as one critic puts it, ‘to be both reactionary and revolutionary at the same time’.¹³⁸ The more photographers and television crews were invited to record him at work, the more commissions he accepted for corporate logos, airline advertisements, coins, porcelain, and even a factory, the greater became Mathieu’s reactionary insistence on an inalienable national lineage, what he called ‘cultural DNA’. ‘Patrimony is not the past’, as he wrote. ‘It is the past provided with a visa for the future. It possesses a timeless signification . . . It constitutes the essence of the human soul or that of a people. . . Patrimony is cultural DNA’.¹³⁹ So *Capetians Everywhere!* (1954) was painted in front of a medieval chateau for the benefit of photographers from *Life* magazine; *Louis XIII and Queen Anne of Austria Entering Paris, on their Return from Bordeaux* (1960) took shape in the courtyard of another: the Chateau de Courances; and *The Battle of Hastings* unfolded in a London street, as if creation by a Frenchman on English ground would force the painting closer to the Norman Conquest.¹⁴⁰ In each case, setting and costume were called on to operate in the same manner as splats of paint and *tubist* scrawls: to generate a kind of de-aestheticised immediacy of meaning. But this was never successful, nor even entirely serious: rather it was a ploy, a performance, a deliberately provocative invocation of the historical in circumstances that exploded and reformulated its meaning. Audiences were unconvinced by the historical interpretations. The paintings looked too modern. ‘Despite himself’, wrote one contemporary, ‘Mathieu’s interlocked squiggles . . . bring to mind the night driver’s world of electric lights, flashing neon, and high speeds’.¹⁴¹ Mathieu himself acknowledged this: he had no desire to

¹³⁸ Bernard Marcadé, ‘Pretentious? Moi? Document: Georges Mathieu’, *Tate Etc.*, vol.18 (Spring 2010), p.82.

¹³⁹ Mathieu, *L’abstraction prophétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p.466.

¹⁴⁰ None of these images seem to have been published. For photographs from the *Life* shoot and the production of *Louis XIII and Queen Anne of Austria*, see Getty Images: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/georges-mathieu?phrase=%22georges%20mathieu%22&sort=best>, accessed 16/08/2021.

¹⁴¹ Anonymous, ‘The Fox of Paris,’ p.32.

be characterized as a history painter. And if he liked to boast that he never ruined a canvas, that every work was a success, this amounts to saying that he ruined all of them. Each of his pictures dramatises the challenge of matching an imagined past of national excellence to a dynamic present of abstraction, speed, spectacle, and exchange.

Newman *contra* Mathieu

Mathieu staged his reactionary nationalism in response to globalization, as he travelled around the world creating high-speed painted spectacles. This nationalism was the theme of Tapié's piece, and of much of the outrage that arose to greet Mathieu in the United States. Newman and Clyfford Still wrote defensive responses to Tapié's article (although critics, curators, and collectors, from Greenberg, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashberry to Kootz and Barr, remained in Mathieu's favour).¹⁴² 'Mathieu's work', writes Annmarie Perl on his reception in the US, 'provoked a nationalistic response in American artists. Mathieu asserted the increasingly nationalistic character of what had been for all involved the essentially internationalist movement of gestural abstraction. At the same time, he contradicted the evermore common claim that Abstract Expressionism was essentially American in its origin and character'.¹⁴³ Art historians have contented themselves with these terms: American artists found Mathieu annoying because his work was ridiculous, expressed un-American values, and sold well. It appeared as a parody of Abstract Expressionism, 'nothing less than an open insult', as Molly Warnock puts it.¹⁴⁴ Warnock's and Perl's analyses are helpful, as are similar

¹⁴² Clyfford Still, 'Letter to the Editor', *ARTnews*, vol.54, no.2 (April 1955), p.6; Newman, 'Letter to the Editor', *ARTnews*' in *Selected Writings*, pp.199-200.

¹⁴³ Annmarie Perl, 'Mathieu, as Seen from the United States, from the 1950s to Today' in *Georges Mathieu: Les années 1960-1970*, ed. Daniel Templon (Paris: Templon, 2018), p.34.

¹⁴⁴ Molly Warnock, 'Acting the Part: Georges Mathieu's *Battle of Bouvines*', *Artforum* (Summer 2011), p.352.

arguments by Dore Ashton, Benjamin Buchloh, and Amelia Jones.¹⁴⁵ Each of them raises the possibility that American Abstract Expressionists attacked Mathieu, not on account of the divergences they saw between his work and their own, but on account of the *proximities*. However, this is as far as the analyses go. Their comparisons between Mathieu and the New York School always stop with Pollock; with the idea, articulated by Buchloh, that Mathieu represented ‘the random expansion of Pollock’s radical principles of a newly found painterly performativity... blindly subjected to the process of spectacularisation’.¹⁴⁶ Yet this is to ignore the fact that Pollock – deep, by this point, into his last downward spiral – paid no attention to Mathieu’s clowning. It was Newman and Still, two painters whose work appears to diverge from Mathieu’s in the most radical ways, who launched the strongest attacks. Leaving Still aside for the moment, why did Newman, a painter whose style has so little to do with Mathieu’s, react so forcefully against him?

The first part of the answer is obvious. There were affinities between the two men that went beyond style. Each was a non-objective painter, among the most radical of the post-war generation. Each was committed to making art that processed the horrors of mid-century through studied negation. And each adopted similar principles in pursuit of this goal: composition should be spontaneous, made without preparation or prevision. Representation was to be abolished, the external world – and cognates like ‘nature’ and ‘figuration’ – set aside the better to foreground individual subjectivity. What mattered, for each of them, was ‘the declaration of man’s nature as against Nature’ (Newman); ‘the growing liberation of art from reference: reference to nature, to canons of beauty, to the preparatory sketch’

¹⁴⁵ Dore Ashton, ‘Mathieu et les Autres’ in *Georges Mathieu* (Paris: galerie du Jeu de Paume, 2003), pp.53-66; Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (London: MIT Press, 2003), p.250; Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.89.

¹⁴⁶ Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde*, p.250.

(Mathieu).¹⁴⁷ Proclaiming the abolition of natural reference placed similar constraints on their work; both painters, for instance, rarely used the colour green. ‘With painting having driven nature away, there was no more reason to use green’, as Mathieu put it.¹⁴⁸ And they both attacked the same predecessors, those, like Piet Mondrian and the other artists of De Stijl, who had pursued similar goals by geometrical means. For Mathieu, abstract art had become ‘the anti-geometric offensive’.¹⁴⁹ For Newman, it was ‘this death image, the grip of geometry, that ha[d] to be confronted’.¹⁵⁰ Newman singled out Mondrian in particular, accusing him of having failed to eliminate natural reference from his paintings: ‘Mondrian, no matter how formally pure his abstraction, creates a diagrammatic world which is the geometric equivalent for the seen landscape, the vertical trees on a horizon, and we are brought into the world of material purity through a representational depiction of its mathematical equivalents. A ninety-degree angle is a known image’.¹⁵¹ We should not be surprised to see an affinity between these sentiments of Newman’s regarding painting and those of Mathieu. They partake of a common set of principles held by abstract painters of the 1940s and ’50s.

Yet Newman and Still both tried, in their responses to Tapié’s piece, to put such affinities at a distance. Each called Mathieu a European offshoot, ‘provincial’, a ‘parasite’.¹⁵² ‘I blush’, wrote Still, ‘with the embarrassment all artists must feel when viewing this sordid parody – especially for those sincere men who in the late ’40s went from here and the West

¹⁴⁷ Barnett Newman, ‘Amlash Sculpture from Iran’ in *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O’Neill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p.130; and Mathieu, *De la révolte à la Renaissance*, p.213.

¹⁴⁸ Mathieu, *L’abstraction prophétique*, p.239.

¹⁴⁹ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la renaissance*, p.63.

¹⁵⁰ Newman, “‘Statement from *The New American Painting*” in *Selected Writings*, p.179.

¹⁵¹ Newman, ‘Response to Clement Greenberg’ in *Selected Writings*, p.163.

¹⁵² Still, ‘Letter to the Editor’, p.6; Newman, ‘Letter to the Editor’, p.200.

Coast to Paris and exposed their work to this parasitical and antic “tramp”.¹⁵³ He does not dwell on the quality of Mathieu’s art, or extract terms of aesthetic contrast with the Americans. These do not even seem available to him: Mathieu is too close. Instead, Still slanders Mathieu as a thief who stole his ideas from ‘sincere’ Americans. The fabricated nature of this claim – the inaccuracy of which survives today in Buchloh’s groundless insistence that Mathieu’s paintings are ‘grotesque misreadings’ of Pollock’s – is less interesting than what it suppresses.¹⁵⁴ Still charges Mathieu, unfairly, with belatedness, but he seems unable to generate a more meaningful contradiction between the Frenchman’s painting and the work of the Abstract Expressionists. In spite of himself, his letter acknowledges the proximity of Mathieu’s work to what was going on in New York.

Newman’s unpublished letter (drafts of which he sent to both *ARTnews* and *Time*) tried harder to generate contrast. He ridiculed Mathieu and Tapié for attempting to ‘dig up’ distant ‘fighter-ancestors’, for turning painting into a ‘burlesque of immediacy’. Singling out the contemporary resonances of such a project – its evasion of French military and political humiliations – he asked whether there were ‘any readers of *ARTnews* who wish to join me in sending a pair of sterling silver roller skates, suitably engraved, to Georges Mathieu so that he may redo his I WAS THERE dance routine of the Battle of Bouvines into a big Blitzkrieg production?’ He invited his readers to imagine the fate of an American painter misguided enough to attempt a similar project:

what would happen if an American art student, dressed in Buckskin, and standing in a rowboat off New Hope, Pennsylvania, were to paint a picture of Washington crossing the Delaware, with results as inept and amateurish. He might get to show it in the streets of Washington Square. But this clumsy and provincial work by a French art student

¹⁵³ Still, ‘Letter to the Editor’, p.6.

¹⁵⁴ Buchloh, ‘A Nude in the Neo-Avant-Garde: *Ema (Nude on a Staircase)*, 1966’, *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p.257. Mathieu in fact made his first abstractions in 1945 and exhibited them in 1946, long before he had seen any contemporary American painting.

will, I am certain, have the Rockefellers, the Burdens, the Harry Guggenheims, and the Jock Whitneys on their knees in admiration.¹⁵⁵

Mathieu always explained his artistic preoccupation with history as stemming from the nature of French life. ‘When we walk in the street, at each moment, we see a mansion of the seventeenth century, or a gothic church; at each moment we are flooded with [*imbibés par*] artistic forms, unlike in the USA’.¹⁵⁶ Repeating a trope that originated with Alexis de Tocqueville but found currency among twentieth-century French intellectuals attempting transatlantic comparisons (Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre were all partial to it), he contrasted the immediacy of history in French life with its putative absence in the United States.¹⁵⁷ This was obviously false, as Newman pointed out: Americans had their own sites of historical meaning. New Hope, where George Washington is supposed to have lodged before crossing the Delaware in 1776, was as iconic as the Bastille. Elsewhere Newman wrote about sites of a far greater antiquity: the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks in Ohio, constructed by Native Americans between 400 and 100 BCE.¹⁵⁸ But his sketch of a buckskin-attired art student put in doubt any artist’s ability to make meaningful contact with such history. Instead, he explained Mathieu’s invocations of distant glories as responses to living memory. It was ‘too bad’, he wrote, that Mathieu and Tapié ‘could not find a more recent fighter-ancestor, so that they could have done the choreography for, let us say, the breakthrough at Sedan, but I suppose they had no relatives who were fighting in 1940’. Newman read the abstract violence of Mathieu’s art as conditioned by World War II and its aftermath, by what Hannah Feldman has called ‘the crises in public memory that France would experience throughout the 1950s and after. . .organized around the refusal to allow for

¹⁵⁵ Newman, ‘Letter to the Editor, *ARTnews*’ in *Selected Writings*, pp.199-200.

¹⁵⁶ Mathieu, *L’abstraction prophétique*, p.251.

¹⁵⁷ See Simone de Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), p.23; Albert Camus, *American Journals*, trans. Hugh Levick (London: Abacus, 1989), p.44; and Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Aftermath of War*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2008), pp.131-133.

¹⁵⁸ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.73.

the representation of recent experience'.¹⁵⁹ This nationwide project of forgetting threaded its way through French life. Newman, on the other hand, could celebrate his country's role as Europe's military liberator. By 1955, thanks to the Marshall Plan and the Bretton Woods agreement, he could add economic salvation (or domination, depending on whom you asked) to this. But for the French, the passivity implied by capitulation and collaboration with the Nazis, to say nothing of the dependence on US dollars demanded by reconstruction, constituted national shame. 'In the space of five years', as Sartre put it, 'we have acquired a formidable inferiority complex'.¹⁶⁰ Forgetting was a solution. National myths of activity and resistance were erected, shameful history erased. The fantasies of violence, immediacy, and glorious feudal history that one finds threaded through Mathieu's art begin to make sense when seen in the light of this general repression of recent events, coupled to longings for a different past of active resistance.

But the contrast which Newman draws between Mathieu and himself is less stable than it appears. This becomes clearer as soon as one realises that the hypothetical figure around whom his argument rotates – that oafish 'American art student' who tries to connect with history by painting the Delaware crossing – was no abstract example, but a real person: Larry Rivers. Like Newman, Rivers was an American Jew, raised in the Bronx by immigrant parents. In 1953, he had made a painting entitled *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (fig.2.6). It is to this work that Newman referred. This raises further questions. What becomes of Newman's argument, which had seemed so keyed to nationalism, once its target shifts from a reactionary Frenchman to a young American painter, based in New York? What

¹⁵⁹ Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonising Art and Representation in France, 1945--1962* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), p.33.

¹⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, 'La Nationalisation de la Littérature', *Les Temps Modernes*, vol.1, no.2 (November 1945), pp.207-208, quoted and translated in Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Vintage, 2010), p.100.

connections did he see between Rivers and Mathieu? Or between their paintings and his own? What common ground might have lain between *Washington* and *Bouvines* in which he felt implicated, and from which he sought to distance himself?

***Washington* comes to MoMA**

Rivers described *Washington Crossing the Delaware* as a manifesto, the moment at which he arrived at an artistic identity. What that identity was has always been less easy to determine, pulled between a series of archetypes – de Kooning’s *Woman* series (1950-52), neoclassical drawing, Gustave Courbet’s large-scale realist paintings of the late-1840s and 1850s – that jar with one another.¹⁶¹ With *Washington*, Rivers sought to mesh these influences and the subject of the most famous history painting in the American canon: Emmanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (fig.2.7, 1851). This was nothing if not timely. 1952, the year before Rivers began his painting, had seen celebrations of the one hundred seventy-fifth anniversary of Washington’s crossing, marked by waves of patriotism.¹⁶² Reproductions of Leutze’s image proliferated in the pages of such popular magazines as the *National Geographic*.¹⁶³ In a move that Mathieu would doubtless have approved of, since it echoed his preference for sites of “exceptional historical concentration,” in February 1952 Leutze’s work was even relocated to Washington Crossing Methodist Church, Pennsylvania, “near the site of the Continental Army’s embarkation”, as if its presence at the (disputed) location of the original crossing might bridge past and present.¹⁶⁴ Rivers’s painting channelled this kind of patriotic

¹⁶¹ Fairfield Porter, ‘Rivers Paints a Picture’, *ARTnews*, vol.52, no.9 (January 1954), p.57.

¹⁶² The actual anniversary took place on 26 December 1951, but celebrations persisted through the following year.

¹⁶³ Albert W. Atwood, ‘Today on the Delaware, Pennsylvania’s Glorious Revolution’, *National Geographic*, no.102 (July 1952), p.15;

¹⁶⁴ Mathieu cited in ‘*Les Capétiens partout*’, <https://georges-mathieu.fr/en/artworks/les-capetiens-partout-capetians-everywhere/>, accessed 26/09/21. Atwood, “Today on the Delaware”, 15.

mythmaking in its relation to Cold War nationalism. As he wrote later, ‘in the eyes of senator Joe McCarthy I was at least a patriot’.¹⁶⁵

But *Washington* is no simple McCarthyite propaganda piece. It stands in ambivalent relation to its principal sources: to both history painting and Abstract Expressionism. Rivers took the wide, flat areas of colour, the emphasis on synthetic materials, and the preoccupation with gesture that had already become so characteristic of New York School painting, and submitted them to a figurative, propagandistic impulse unapologetically derived from neoclassicism (he even copied Washington’s body from Jacques-Louis David’s *Napoleon in his Study at the Tuileries*, 1812). At points these imperatives cohere and Rivers’s scrubby, buffed up colour assumes a referential function. Take the band of greens and browns that traverses the painting horizontally, passing behind Washington’s head. These loose-brushed colours cushion the white horse’s rear hoof. They ground it in a landscape, a season, a time of day. Higher up, a grey sweep forms the painting’s horizon, growing almost pink towards its centre, where it meets a silly orange sun. Such passages seem to augur another kind of modernism, one that would bend its immediacy and truth to materials towards the articulation of historical narrative – a modernism that would follow Ralph Waldo Emerson’s injunction to ‘bring the past for judgement into the thousand-eyed present’.¹⁶⁶ But these are off-notes in Rivers’ picture, exceptions. More characteristically, the vocabularies of abstraction and neoclassicism undo one another. This is apparent in the point, left of the white horse, where Rivers has smeared colour vertically, cutting off the lateral spread of the riverbank before it reaches the edge of the canvas. Likewise in the amorphous mass of white that fills the space between Washington’s right shoulder and the torso of the minuteman at bottom left. Here

¹⁶⁵ Larry Rivers, ‘A Discussion of the Work of Larry Rivers’, *ARTnews* vol.60, no.1 (March 1961), p.54.

¹⁶⁶ Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in *Essays and Poems*, ed. Tony Tanner (London: J.M. Dent, 1992), p.29.

paint abolishes pictorial and narrative space. It even violates the figures, most glaringly Washington himself: the white fog cuts right through him. The pink of his face bleeds into its surroundings. He seems to leak from his own outlines. In the gap between his spread legs, brown paint split by a gash of black mimes the white lines of his calves like *pentimenti*: two superfluous, miniature legs. Paint – the thinned, flat, spreading paint of the Abstract Expressionist – makes a joke of him.

Washington's structure undoes any determinate orientation towards its figurative, narrative elements. Like David before him, Rivers equated his subject with drawing, with the mobile charcoal lines that generated his numbed cast of characters. But his obsessive method – sketching in charcoal, over which washes of paint were applied, each form and layer rubbed or scraped off again and again, covered over with other layers, other figures – mobilized his colour against his line. He forced the point when, five years later, he made another version of the painting (fig.2.8). Now his figures were barely visible. All were scrubbed and spectral beneath broad layers of grey, white, and moss green. Decoration undid figuration. ‘These paintings’, Rivers told Fairfield Porter, ‘consist of the faint remains of all the things that I did not want, that the whole canvas wouldn’t give up no matter how much I scribbled, scrubbed, scraped or merged; so in a way all of it grows out of an abundance of dissatisfactions’.¹⁶⁷ He was not alone in seeing disjunction and dissatisfaction at the heart of his work, although there were significant distinctions in interpretative emphasis. Leo Steinberg, in 1955, diagnosed ‘the crux of the Rivers problem’ in response to *Double Portrait of Berdie* (fig.2.9, 1955). He saw the painting as proof that Rivers had the capacities, not of a serious artist, but of ‘a mild-mannered decorative painter’, because its elements failed so conspicuously to fit together. He

¹⁶⁷ Porter, ‘Rivers Paints a Picture’, p.82.

liked the ‘rugs and coverlets and the charming Redonesque still life tacked to the back wall’, but thought they jarred against the realistic depiction of Rivers’ naked mother-in-law:

What makes the model’s ugliness offensive is thus first of all a painterly failure: she is not inevitably *found* in a space scooped out in one act of vision; she was put there, and we can therefore ask why; and having been put there, why she was painted with so clinical an eye for obnoxious detail, when a milder eye was in fact available for the intimate parts of the scene. It is this lack of intrinsic aesthetic unity, this evidence of contrivance, which makes the total absence of compassion in the rendering of “Birdie” [sic.] so revolting.¹⁶⁸

Even setting on one side for a moment the sexism behind Steinberg’s characterization of Berdie’s aged body as ‘revolting’, how well in fact did he grasp the stakes of this kind of painting? For Steinberg, Rivers’s treatment of detail, whether historical (as in *Washington*) or observational (as in *Berdie*), was prefigured as arbitrary, as a break in the decorative surface. In delivering his judgement of failure of artistic coherence, he did not identify or explore what Rivers was trying to grapple with. When Rivers spoke of ‘what the whole canvas wouldn’t give up’ – of the visceral tension between will and process, between completeness of vision and palimpsest – he was articulating an approach to painting as to history itself. *Washington*, the crux of his challenge both to Abstract Expressionism and to received images of history, was an attempt to stage the reconciliation of abstract painting and historical subject matter. Insofar as this exposed the tensions between modes of expression, it necessarily involved messiness and frustration, and the failures of resolution left a residue of dissatisfaction. As they had for Mathieu, history and abstraction came apart in Rivers’ hands. But in some sense, this lay at the core of the project: they had to do so.

Rivers painted *Washington* in 1953, but its repercussions did not play out until 1955.

This was the year in which MoMA finally bought the work for \$2,500;¹⁶⁹ *ARTnews* published

¹⁶⁸ Leo Steinberg, ‘Month in Review’, *Arts Magazine*, vol.30 (January 1956), p.48.

¹⁶⁹ Alfred Barr had wanted it for the museum immediately upon seeing it in 1953, but the process had taken two years.

‘Mathieu Paints a Picture’; and Newman, having written his letter of protest, gave up painting for two years. Rivers liked to joke about the irritation his art provoked in Newman (‘Barnett Newman will really hate this one’, he wrote in an article about his own work in 1961).¹⁷⁰ The thought of *Washington* crossing, not the Delaware this time, but the threshold of MoMA, an institution that had as yet accorded him no recognition whatsoever, must have incensed the older artist. Although absent from the scholarship, it is inconceivable that Newman did not have Rivers in mind when he sat down to write his letter: ‘I cannot help but wonder what would happen if an American art student, dressed in Buckskin were to paint a picture of Washington crossing the Delaware. He might get to show it in the streets of Washington Square’.

Newman’s letter does more than mark a difference between French and American art. It is more serious than that. The attempt to ground abstract painting in a concrete time and place, fixed by natural and historical reference – the project that he ridiculed in Mathieu – was the same as that pursued by the contemporary American painting embodied by Rivers: a type of painting that threatened, with Barr’s purchase of *Washington* for MoMA, to usurp the predominance of pure abstraction. What looks at first like chauvinistic assertion of excellence was actually a recognition of weakness. How far did this acknowledgement go? Might something of the same nationalistic myth-building that Newman attacked in Mathieu and Rivers also be found in his own paintings? After all, Mathieu might have painted his Bouvines, Rivers his Delaware, but Newman had *Concord* (fig.2.10, 1949). Coming from an artist who honeymooned in Concord, Massachusetts, visiting Walden Pond and the homes of Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the title invokes one of the most famous historical sites in the United States, ‘our only field known to fame’ according to

¹⁷⁰ Rivers, ‘Discussion of the Work of Larry Rivers’, p.46.

Thoreau: not just the site of the first battle of the American Revolution but also the cradle of nineteenth-century Transcendentalism.¹⁷¹

And then there is Newman's language: 'Battle', 'breakthrough', 'fighter-ancestor', 'immediacy'. 'I WAS THERE'. These terms, with which he reproached Mathieu and Rivers, would not have been out of place in describing his own approach to painting. Like Mathieu, Newman had spent the 1940s in search of national ancestors: Pre-Contact Indigenous artists in his case. His idea of a 'common heritage', continental in scope, was less nationalistic than Mathieu's hymns to feudalism.¹⁷² But he, too, linked historical memory, rooted in the culture and landscape of the Americas, to the immediate effects of his paintings. This came through most vividly in his recollections of a visit to the Hopewell Ceremonial Earthworks in 1949. This Native American complex, built by the vanished Hopewell Culture, bore witness to both the antiquity of the human presence in North America, and the terrible rupture imposed on the continent's history by the coming of the Europeans. Visiting these vast remains one hundred years previously, Emerson had felt 'the desire to do away this wild, savage and preposterous There or Then, and introduce in its place the Here and the Now... to banish the *Not me*, and supply the *Me...* to abolish difference, and restore unity'.¹⁷³ To experience such historical sites, Emerson holds, one should not pretend to recreate the past – which anyway is irrecoverable – nor to comprehend it from some objective viewpoint. Instead, history should be *used*. 'Bring the past for judgement into the thousand-eyed present', as he wrote

¹⁷¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden: 150th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.86. For work exploring the importance of transcendentalism to Newman's thinking, see Rosenberg, 'Newman: Meaning in Abstract Art, II' in *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record*, ed. David Shapiro and Cecile Shapiro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.349; Francine Amy Koslow, *Henry David Thoreau as a Source for Artistic Inspiration* (Lincoln MA: DeCordova and Dana Museum, 1984), pp.8-9; 38-39; Christopher Snow Hopkins, 'Secret Symmetry: Barnett Newman and Henry David Thoreau', *Art New England: Online* (September/October 2017); and Bois, "The Wild and Company," *October*, vol.143 (Winter 2013), p.125.

¹⁷² Newman, 'Pre-Columbian Stone Sculpture' in *Selected Writings*, p.63.

¹⁷³ Emerson, 'History' in *Essays and Poems*, p.7.

elsewhere, ‘and live ever in a new day’.¹⁷⁴ In such passages, the histories of Native American civilization and indigenous expropriation are erased except as appendages to individual subjectivity. Recalling his own visit to the circles, Newman ventriloquized Emerson almost word for word: ‘Looking at the site you feel, Here I am, *here*... and out beyond there... there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes... But here you get a sense of your own presence... I became involved with the idea of making the viewer present: the idea that “Man Is Present”’.¹⁷⁵ Again, the experience of a historical landscape has less to do with its actual features than with its confirmation of subjective integrity, the ‘unity’ of which Emerson spoke. Nature is banished, the individual made present. But how much distance separates Mathieu’s ‘I WAS THERE’ from Newman’s ‘Man is Present’, or the Ohio mounds from the traces of Washington’s crossing and Philip Augustus’ wars? Did not Mathieu, with his aggressively modern paintings, international travel, and courtship of the culture industry, also obey the Emersonian injunction to invoke history only as an adjunct to the present? Did not Rivers? Such questions must have weighed on Newman when he wrote his letter at the start of 1955. Some quality in both men’s work found a correlate in what he had been doing thus far.

A Property in the Horizon

The overlap that so troubled Newman had something to do with painting’s relation to nature, with what he and Mathieu had both set out, as abstract artists, to exclude. ‘Out beyond there, there is chaos, nature, rivers, landscapes. . .here you get a sense of your own presence’. But nature – understood as whatever remainder of brute, meaningless reality intrudes upon the artist’s controlling subjectivity – is not so easily shut out. Newman and Mathieu were

¹⁷⁴ Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’ in *Essays and Poems*, p.29.

¹⁷⁵ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.73.

pretending, in 1955, to a similitude that each rarely achieved. Not that it never happened. Newman had some success, famously, in 1948, with the exclusion of compositional relations in depth from *Onement I* (fig.2.11, 1948).¹⁷⁶ Mathieu, too, approached the reduction of painting to pure technique in canvases such as *Homage to Godfrey of Bouillon* (fig.2.12) that approximate huge, written signs on undifferentiated fields. But neither artist was able to sustain this commitment. Mathieu moved on to the bloody horizons of his battles and cityscapes. The figurative militarism we find in a late painting like *The Liberation of Orléans* (fig.2.13, 1982), with its horsemen and banners, only crowns a tendency that had been there since the beginning. (In the case of *Rivers*, this inclination was never even concealed. *Washington's* greens and browns make open sport with such reference.) And in Newman's painting, already by 1949, natural terms had begun to creep back in: metaphors of shifting sunlight, wood-grained texture, moist greens and deep, variegated washes. Most significantly, nature returned through the horizontal format to which he resorted in *Untitled 2* (1949), *Dionysius* (fig.2.17), *Argos* (1949), and *Horizon Light* (fig.2.14). It has long been debated how far the effect he had noted with such scorn in Mondrian's work – that the grids' horizontals might read as abstract horizons – intrudes on these paintings. Hess thought that compositional measures, like the modulation of colour along *Horizon Light's* zip, or the evasions of symmetry in the other paintings, kept the horizon at bay. 'The sensation is not that of a landscape', he wrote, 'but of forces pulling the image wide apart'.¹⁷⁷ Others have been less sure. Bois reverses Hess's judgement. He dubs the paintings 'failures' because 'in *Argos*, in *Dionysius*, and in the small untitled painting done at the same time, and no matter

¹⁷⁶ See the discussion of that painting in Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (London: MIT Press, 1993), pp.187-196.

¹⁷⁷ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.63.

how hard Newman calculated their placement so as to undercut this effect, one of the two horizontal ‘zips’ that each of these paintings “contains” reads like a horizon’. Illusionism returns, ‘the pictorial field is negated as a whole, the background recedes and the painting reads like an abstract landscape’.¹⁷⁸

Bois’ analysis is rather contorted. He ties himself in knots explaining why Newman kept returning, in 1951 and then again in 1952, to a compositional trope which he had recognized to have ‘failed’ as far back as 1949. The low, asymmetrical ‘horizon’ of *Prometheus Bound* (fig.2.15, 1952) makes little sense coming from the brush of someone who had supposedly banished such reference from his work a year before (even Hess was unable to resist its metaphorical dimensions. He described the painting as ‘a thin white coast’).¹⁷⁹ Where a painting like *Achilles* (fig.2.16, 1952) threatens to rupture his teleology with its ragged, zigzagging, excessively compositional edge (the whole point of which, surely, is to insist on the spontaneity of painting, its resistance to integration within a narrative of logical problem-solving), Bois ignores it. But for all that, he is correct to see ‘an abstract landscape’ in the 1949 works, even if his conclusion, that this made them ‘failures’ in Newman’s eyes, is tendentious. These paintings really do reconstruct some sort of relation to landscape, particularly to the horizon. They bring back the outside world, obliquely. But what kind of relationship do they posit? And what might this imply for Newman’s critique of the national, political values he found in Mathieu and Rivers?

Let me begin where invocations of landscape seem least avoidable, with *Horizon Light*. Hess thinks that the shift in colour, which turns the zip from sea-green to a lighter blue,

¹⁷⁸ Bois, *Painting as Model*, p.197.

¹⁷⁹ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.78.

ought to be read as something pure, belonging to the resources of painting rather than the world outside. Bois takes this line too. He sees the colour-shift as a failed ‘solution’ to the ‘problem’ of the horizon: ‘not only does this fail to regain the wholeness of the field achieved in *Onement I*, but the “zip” itself seems to tilt in space, and the contrast between verticality and horizontality seems to bring Newman’s art even closer to that of Mondrian’.¹⁸⁰ Although he concedes the natural reference, Bois, like Hess, thinks this was a problem for Newman, something the artist still wanted to hide. Yet the painting’s title, given a few years later later (certainly after the Betty Parsons Gallery’s *Ten Years* anniversary show in 1955, where, according to the *Catalogue Raisonné*, Newman exhibited the painting under the title “No.7”1949) contradicts this.¹⁸¹ It places landscape front and centre. Most viewers have preferred to follow this cue, to read the colour-shift as recalling something like streaks of light on the horizon marking dawn. Newman’s friend, the sculptor Robert Murray, called the painting a lesson in ‘how to deal with phenomena in nature without resorting to pictorial representation’.¹⁸² Far from cancelling nature, he saw *Horizon Light* as expressing its effects.

There are two interpretations, then. For Murray, *Horizon Light* recalls nature. For Hess and Bois, it devotes its every technical resource to negating such associations (Bois only differs from Hess in judging the effort unsuccessful). Both interpretations, the naturalistic and the nature-cancelling, have a purchase on the differentials and transitions that *Horizon Light* takes for its subject. The painting’s significance lies in the way in which it pulls these readings together, articulating technical shifts as points of natural reference where oppositional terms like ‘force’ and ‘landscape’, ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’, coalesce. Typically

¹⁸⁰ Bois, *Painting as Model*, p.197.

¹⁸¹ Richard Shiff et. al. *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 206.

¹⁸² Ben Heller, Robert Murray, B.H. Friedman and Allan Stone, ‘Remembering Newman’, in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), p.15.

for Newman at this stage, the crucial zone is the centre, at the point where the darker turquoise starts to come apart, to reveal the marks of a dry brush shading into light blue. This sense of transition, of dark becoming light as the eye travels along its length, has always counted, for me, among his paintings' most concrete natural allusions. The warm, peach blush of ground and raw canvas which peeks over the top of the zip further to the right is something like overkill: a literal crack of dawn. But if these passages give us Newman at his most naturalistic, they also reveal him at his most artificial. The brushwork is delicate painting: sensuous and difficult (no wonder he was proud enough to make the piece his sole submission to Parsons's show, the only painting he exhibited between 1952 and 1957). It is also uncharacteristically showy. Each brush-mark draws attention to itself. The area below the zip, at the left-hand edge, seems intended as a counterweight. Here, where the turquoise paint is densest, it has dripped, following the verticality of the canvas. If the centre shows us colour pulling apart, separating into discrete values under the precise control of the brush and the eye, the left-hand area works in the opposite direction. It is all blurring and blending. The point of *Horizon Light* seems to be the progress from this conclusion to its opposite, and back again, along the line of vision. Relative to its length, this is the narrowest horizontal work Newman made. It allows little scope for the eye's vertical movement. Viewers are supposed to scan this small painting, horizontally, and to feel colour and brushwork become freer, more self-evident, as they go. Here the natural reading and the technical one overlap. The painting produces its effects – the sensation of an eye, traversing an unobstructed horizon as light breaks across it – in those passages where it most insists on its status as technique.

Newman's paintings of 1949 do not exclude natural reference in favour of pure, autonomous process. In this sense, they are a departure from *Onement I*. But nor do they pursue a naturalism that would suspend the insistence on technique achieved in that piece.

Instead, they work to show up nature itself as technically mediated. They merge the natural metaphors of sunlight and open horizons with an exaggerated emphasis on their own fabrication. This culminated, in *Dionysius* (fig. 17, 1949), with a painting that references nature so directly and self-consciously that it tips towards pastiche. When Mathieu wrote that abstract painters ought to avoid green, he was repeating an accepted dogma, beginning with Mondrian, with which Newman clearly sympathized. Green was too intentional, too illusionistic. It smelt too much of the forests and riverbanks of the romantics. With the significant exception of *Concord*, *Dionysius* is the only green painting Newman ever made (perhaps the vandals who smeared green paint on *Abraham* and *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* in 1957 were conscious of this antipathy).¹⁸³ The painting's two zips – one thin, yellow, and vibrantly bright, the other a thicker, modulated orange – each produce the 'horizon effect', receding behind the variegated ground above and below, tilting the field into depth. It is no coincidence that Newman employs his gaudiest, most evocative colours for the painting that was the culmination of his horizontal experiments for that year.¹⁸⁴ *Dionysius* recognises the inescapability of its natural referent and, instead of working to cancel it (as Hess and Bois would have it), responds by invoking the great clichés of pastoral landscape painting. It strains these to the point of ridicule: it is nothing but empty, expansive horizons, sunrise and sunset. A utopian landscape, devoid of human intervention.

This simultaneous insistence on naturalness and artificiality supports one of the most suggestive readings of Newman's horizontal paintings, offered by Peter de Bolla in his book *Art Matters*. He, too, acknowledges their problematic character, complaining that 'they

¹⁸³ Bois records the incident in 'On Two Paintings by Barnett Newman', *October*, 108 (Spring 2004), p.25.

¹⁸⁴ I follow the chronology offered in Newman's *Catalogue Raisonné*, which draws on Annalee Newman's own sequencing. This contradicts Bois, who follows Hess in claiming that *Horizon Light* was the final horizontal work Newman produced in 1949. See Shiff et. al., *Barnett Newman: A Catalogue Raisonné*, pp.204-211.

fragment the viewing experience along the wrong axis, as if horizontality remains too mired in the worldliness of things, anchors the experience too firmly in the optical or the physical senses. It is almost as if the horizontal zip is there to be read or interpreted like a line of type'.¹⁸⁵ The first half of this description is familiar: horizontality makes these paintings too materialist, too tied to landscape. The latter, comparing them to the written word, is less so. We are used to such descriptions of Mathieu's *Bouvines*, which deliberately exploits the confusion between abstract mark and written sign. 'To paint, that is to say, to write, to write, that is to say, to paint': Mathieu's words for his own painting seem far away from *Dionysius*.¹⁸⁶ Surely few paintings better incarnate what Ann Gibson calls 'Abstract Expressionism's evasion of language'.¹⁸⁷ But de Bolla's comparison identifies something about the experience of viewing Newman's horizontal paintings that comes close to reading the written word. In both cases, even in the midst of the most compelling description, one is aware of scanning a set of mediating, artificial components, whether brushstrokes or sentences, in order to arrive at a referent.

De Bolla's analogy with reading helps to clarify the links in Newman's paintings between technical artifice and natural reference. More importantly, it positions these within a genealogy, a set of tropes for imagining the American landscape that reach back to Newman's Transcendentalist heroes Emerson and Thoreau. They, too, were preoccupied with that theme of an unobstructed horizon, devoid of (and enticing to) human intervention which, although not the exclusive property of American art, is perhaps its defining *topos*. As Emerson put it: 'It is the magical lights of the horizon, and the blue sky for the background,

¹⁸⁵ Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), p.51.

¹⁸⁶ Mathieu, *De la révolte à la renaissance*, p.131.

¹⁸⁷ Ann Gibson, 'Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language', *Art Journal*, vol.47, no.2 (Autumn 1988), pp.208-214.

which save all our works of art, which were otherwise baubles'.¹⁸⁸ The empty horizon had particular weight for Transcendentalism, which invoked unspoilt nature – the new beginnings symbolized by European colonization of the continent – as a metaphor for personal and artistic renewal. This made the experience of the American landscape synonymous with the writing of it: 'Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet'.¹⁸⁹ Emerson's 'property in the horizon' is what goes beyond the procedures of civil law, and the violent seizures of indigenous land accompanying it, that had already, by the time he was writing, carved up most of the continent in terms of settler ownership. As in Newman's paintings, where the horizon is what remains of nature, radically denuded, Emerson's horizon represents the landscape in its impossible, original totality, re-discovered and integrated by the poet's subjectivity in the process of writing.

There is a paradox here, for Emerson as for Newman. Access to the virgin nature symbolized by the horizon is assumed, but only as a function of a linguistic (or painterly) discourse already shot through with cultural meaning. Virginia Woolf would describe this readymade character of language as 'the penalty of living in an old civilisation with a notebook'.¹⁹⁰ This contradiction marked the development of Emerson's writing, which moved from an expansive language of circles and widening horizons in early essays such as 'Nature' (1836), towards the suspicion that these were artificial linguistic placeholders, standing in front of an unreachable reality. By 1844, in 'Experience', the glittering horizon had become for him an empty trope: 'Men seem to have learned of the horizon', he wrote,

¹⁸⁸ Emerson, 'Nature' in *Essays and Poems*, p.263.

¹⁸⁹ Emerson, *Nature* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.4.

¹⁹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2000), p.131.

‘the art of perpetual retreating and reference’.¹⁹¹ Thoreau’s work exhibits the same bipolarity. His imagery is always undoing itself, punning back towards its own status as lines of type, nature turning into the pages of a book. Writing about the farmers on the banks of the Concord River, he asks his reader to ‘look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they put pen to paper. Or what have they not written on the face of the earth already, clearing and burning, and scratching, harrowing, and ploughing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of parchment’.¹⁹² If, as this suggests, modern farming has written over the landscape, then it is the writer’s responsibility to redo the script, to return the natural world to its original pristine state. Hence the metaphors which punctuate *Walden*: of snowy animal tracks as sentences, the earth as a poem, or the agricultural experiments Thoreau conducts as a language ‘making the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms’.¹⁹³ Everywhere the question of writing, of technique, overlaps with the metaphor of a primal *American* landscape: an unspoilt horizon for experience.

Paintings like *Dionysius* and *Horizon Light* do similar work to those self-reflexive passages in Thoreau or Emerson where naturalness reveals itself as mediation, a dream and emanation of culture. Bois and de Bolla see these pictures as aberrations, problems swiftly resolved. But the terms they generated continued to crop up in the paintings Newman produced up to 1955 and in his attack on Mathieu and Rivers. They were there in the bleak, low horizons of *Day Before One* (1951) and *Prometheus Bound*; there too in the ragged edge of *Achilles*, which zigzags across the bottom of the canvas, detaching the zip from its ground,

¹⁹¹ Emerson, ‘Experience’ in *Essays and Poems*, p.203.

¹⁹² Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (London: Penguin, 1998), 9.

¹⁹³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 157. This section draws on Stanley Cavell’s argument in *The Senses of Walden* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp.25-26.

fluttering it like a veil, or a curtain. And then there are those strange paintings, already mentioned, which culminated, in 1955, with *Uriel*. Each deploys the same shade of duck-egg blue, thin and opaque. Sometimes this blue appears as flat and solid as a plaster wall. At other points it is indistinct, almost transparent. Marginal in the first three paintings (*The Gate*, *The Word II*, and *Primordial Light*), it is squeezed between other colours or pushed out to the sides. In the last three (*White Fire I*, *Right Here*, and *Uriel*) the blue areas expand. The sense of dilation in *Uriel* is palpable. As he had in *The Word II*, Newman directs it into a tension, an oscillation with the mud-brown field to the right. The alternating zips, one black, one blue, and one brown, mirror, reverse, and repeat one another. Some have read this effect in terms of transfiguration, as a meeting of elements, brown earth giving way to blue sky.¹⁹⁴ But it is an awkward kind of alchemy. The lack of value-change between fields (of the kind that had made *Horizon Light* so sensuous) produce more of a stutter than a synthesis: Blue. Black. Blue. Brown. The work pulls in two directions around such transitions; its vast expanse of blue, almost the colour of open sky, recalls the depths of paintings like *Cathedra* (1951). But the stiffness of its effects seems determined to point up this kind of transcendent experience as a hoax, something forever out of reach.

Newman lets his title do some work in this direction. The archangel it invokes (drawn from the Old Testament and *Paradise Lost*) recurs in Emerson's writing. There he stands for the interdependence of human concepts and the natural world, for the impossibility of separating one from the other. Angelic, Uriel dwells in the skies. But if, for Emerson, contemplation of the heavens marked the point at which human imagination strains hardest to escape material bounds, it was also liable to express our circumscription within these bounds:

¹⁹⁴ Hess, *Barnett Newman*, p.93; and Carter Ratcliff, 'American Sublime', *Tate International Arts and Culture*, vol.1 (Sept/Oct 2002).

‘The blue zenith is the point in which romance and reality meet. I think, if we should be rapt away into all we dream of heaven, and should converse with Gabriel and Uriel, the upper sky would be all that would remain of our furniture’.¹⁹⁵ We cannot imagine divinity except as a sort of empty, objectless sky. Our most exalted concepts turn out to be variations on what was naturally available. Uriel is one of these hybrids, an angel imagined out of human materials. He poses the dual question of the dependence of our concepts upon nature, and of nature upon our concepts. If we cannot imagine heaven without reference to the sky, it is equally the case that we cannot consider ‘the blue zenith’ without thinking of heaven. This idea is typically Emersonian (and typically modernist). It incorporates the two sides of his writing: the coloniser’s faith in unspoilt, American nature, and the fear that this is inaccessible, that a fresh start is impossible, buried beneath existing meanings. Uriel was a cipher for this dialectic; in Emerson’s poem of the same name, the angel asserts both the resistance of nature to categorization and the unavoidably conceptual form of our thought, imposing categories on what most resists them:

Line in nature is not found;
 Unit and universe are round;
 In vain produced, all rays return;
 Evil will bless, and ice will burn¹⁹⁶

The angel asserts the inadequacy of human constructions of truth, symbolized by the straight line of geometrical construction, the separation of hot and cold, and the good/evil binarism of conventional morality. Newman’s painting also abounds with such symbols, with rigid geometries and invocations of hot and cold: paintings with razor-sharp boundaries and titles like *White Fire I* (1954), *Black Fire I* (1961), and *White and Hot* (1967). Emerson’s verse isolates such emblems of human certainty from the broader, circular sphere of ‘unit and universe’ that renders values relative, that makes evil ‘bless’ and ice ‘burn’. The attempt to

¹⁹⁵ Emerson, ‘Nature’ in *Essays and Poems*, p.261.

¹⁹⁶ Emerson, ‘Uriel’ in *Essays and Poems*, p.306.

impose stable, cultural meaning on nature, the poet suggests, is fruitless. Even hot and cold are relative. The gods themselves fall victim to this flux, for what are gods but attempts to make nature conform to human understanding? Following the angel's words, they vanish. Uriel himself 'Withdrew, that hour, into his cloud'. But the poem cannot leave things there, barren and unwritten. The bare nature left behind proves as fertile a ground for meaning as the divine order had been:

Now and then, truth-speaking things
 Shamed the angels' veiling wings;
 And, shrilling from the solar course,
 Or from fruit of chemic force,
 Procession of a soul in matter,
 Or the speeding change of water,
 Or out of the good of evil born,
 Came Uriel's voice of cherub scorn,
 And a blush tinged the upper sky,
 And the gods shook, they knew not why.¹⁹⁷

It is difficult to imagine writing that bears more directly on the character and limitations of Newman's project in the years leading up to 1955. Like Emerson, Newman had used the straight line to assert human meaning as the antithesis of natural reference. This had been the claim of *Onement I*. But like the last lines of 'Uriel', which link truth to empirical deduction and contingency rather than rational induction ('chemic force' and 'the speeding change of water'), his subsequent work drew such distinctions into question. When nature returned, it did so as a function of that same straight line, rotated ninety degrees to form a horizon. Newman was aware of this tension. In 1950, at one of the artists' sessions at Studio 35, he had disagreed with de Kooning on the very point that troubled Emerson's angel: 'Geometry can be organic. Straight lines do exist in nature. When I draw a straight line, it does exist. It exists optically. When de Kooning says it doesn't exist optically, he means it doesn't exist in nature. But the edge of the UN building is a straight line. If it can be made, it

¹⁹⁷ Emerson, 'Uriel', pp.306-307.

does exist in nature'.¹⁹⁸ Just as his horizontal paintings invoke nature, but only as an artificial construction, determined by the technique they always threaten to dissolve back into, Newman's words answer Uriel's problem by asserting the construction of the natural world according to human concepts. The subtleties of Emerson's dialectic are abolished; nature reappears as a function of human action, produced in the construction of a building or the painting of an artwork.

For the Transcendentalists, the suspicion that nature could not be known outside of the cultural inheritance was one half of a polarity, the other side of which was faith in genuine experience: the hut in the woods, the walk in the forest, the boat ride down the Merrimack River. By Newman's time, this distinction had collapsed. Thoreau could look to absolve himself and his culture of blame for the immiseration of the Native Americans who interrupted his reveries from time to time by reflecting on the eternal character of the woods around Walden Pond, against which the passing of each civilization seemed to acquire the character of a natural process.¹⁹⁹ For Newman, this idea of a primal nature, resistant to intervention and acting as its own justification for human brutality had itself become a historical artefact, a trope no longer to be believed in. His paintings cannot imagine that openness, that horizon, that vast sky, so essential to American myths of expansion, aside from factitiousness.

Not All the Berries are Huckleberries

This was the character of Newman's art in 1955, when 'Mathieu Paints a Picture' appeared: still deeply preoccupied with myth, nature, the landscape of the Americas, and the idea of a

¹⁹⁸ Newman, 'Remarks at Artists' Session at Studio 35' in *Selected Writings*, p.241.

¹⁹⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, p.179.

primal frontier. That the artificiality of these constructions was becoming harder and harder to avoid is part of his paintings' point, born out in the increasingly brittle character of their effects. *Uriel* has always seemed, in the very ungainliness with which it repeats and exaggerates the earlier paintings, to be bringing something to an end. It was Newman's last painting to make use of naturalistic colour. Then came 'the blackest years'. The work he made afterwards, beginning with *Outcry* (fig.2.18, 1958) was more extreme in its attempts to cancel nature – to set the world aside – than anything he had produced hitherto. I have been arguing that his encounter with Mathieu and Rivers was a factor in this shift. Mathieu's very person seemed to embody the futility of attempting to root abstract painting in 'cultural DNA'. Rivers's *Washington* showed the project coming apart at the seams. When Newman mocked an imagined art student re-enacting the crossing of the Delaware, some of his vitriol went towards the connection between national identity and the experience of nature with which his own work had, up to then, been concerned. We hate most in others those qualities we dislike in ourselves. Washington Square threatened him, too.

By 1955, the proximity of his art to a vision of nature uncomfortably aligned with nationalistic cliché had become, for Newman, a serious problem. When he came that year to formulate his response to 'the errors of fact' he found in 'American-Type Painting', Greenberg's seminal essay for *Partisan Review*, he was most irritated by the implied connection between his own art, Clyfford Still's, and a kind of kitsch, popular landscape painting that Greenberg referred to as 'buckeye'.²⁰⁰ In his essay, Greenberg had called Still's art 'Whitmanesque' because of its affinities with popular taste. 'Still's painting', he wrote,

is infused with that stale, prosaic kind of painting to which Barnett Newman has given the name "buckeye"... "Buckeye" painters, as far as I am aware, do landscapes exclusively and work more or less directly from nature. By piling dry paint – though not exactly in impasto – they try to capture the brilliance of daylight, and the process

²⁰⁰ Newman, 'Letter to Clement Greenberg' in *Selected Writings*, p.203.

of painting becomes a race between hot shadows and hot lights whose invariable outcome is a livid, dry, sour picture with a warm, brittle surface that intensifies the acid fire of the generally predominating reds, browns, greens and yellows. Though I can see why it is easy to stumble into “buckeye” effects, I cannot understand fully why they should be so universal and so uniform.²⁰¹

By synthesising these effects within a high modernist register, Still’s painting represented, for Greenberg, a countermovement, ‘the conquest by high art of one more area of experience, and its liberation from *Kitsch*’.²⁰² It represented a way back out of academicism, one he saw followed by Newman and Rothko as well.

Greenberg’s description of ‘buckeye’ painting is lyrical. It is also strangely objectless. He tells us these paintings are landscapes, but does not specify of what type. He names some places where they might be seen, but none of the painters who made them. And he seems unaware of the term’s history in American art, particularly its formalisation in the fairground aesthetics and paintings of the artist Walt Kuhn.²⁰³ Instead of detail, Greenberg’s words produce abstract, coloured images. His descriptions, with their emphasis on colour contrasts, abstract natural effects and flattened, brittle surfaces, fit Newman’s art in the years 1949-1955: the hot, dry colour in *Horizon Light*, its piling of paint (‘not exactly impasto’), its effort – Greenberg’s words here are uncannily apt – ‘to capture the brilliance of daylight’. Like the nameless ‘buckeye’ painters, Newman’s art was directed towards transitions in hue, rather than value: from wet, modulated green to electric yellow in *Dionysius*, from brown to flickering red in *Achilles*. By ignoring the content and bracketing the formal qualities of the landscapes he described, Greenberg brought them closer to the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism. This was what Newman reacted against. Writing to Greenberg, he denied

²⁰¹ Greenberg, ‘American Type Painting’, in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp.230-231.

²⁰² Greenberg, ‘American Type Painting’, p.231.

²⁰³ Kathleen Spies, ‘A “New American Taste”: Walt Kuhn, Modernism, and the Buckeye’, *American Art*, vol.32, no.3 (1 September 2018), pp.43-65.

inventing the word ‘buckeye’ and protested against its pertinence to his paintings: ‘I only used it, as I am certain (since the word goes back for several centuries) other painters from Hogarth to Eakins have used it... although “buckeye” may be nonvalue painting, it does not make all nonvalue painting “buckeye”. Huckleberries are berries but not all the berries are huckleberries’.²⁰⁴

Greenberg removed the reference when he had the essay reprinted as part of *Art and Culture* in 1961. He bowed to a friendship he took seriously. But his eye had not let him down. It is no coincidence that Newman and Still, his principal ‘buckeye’ modernists, were the two Abstract Expressionists who objected most to Mathieu. When Newman had written to *ARTnews* six months previously, the venom of his rejection disclosed a deeper similarity, one he was only beginning to understand. Both Newman and Mathieu had used their work in the decade following World War Two to process the effects of advancing modernity – of urbanization, the internationalization of capital, and the destructive refashioning of nature – by resuscitating national myths. For Mathieu, this meant French aristocratic glory, the time of feudal military excellence imagined as inhering in the very soil of France. For Newman it meant an Emersonian horizon, an open, unspoilt frontier, devoid of human meaning, a new beginning. In each case, the synthesis proved unstable. Rivers’s painting, in which abstract painting and nationalistic cliché undid one another, not only demonstrated its impossibility, but used that impossibility to open onto further work. Newman declined to take a similar route. In the 1960s, he isolated and eliminated such content from his practice, moving towards a ‘purism’ in excess of anything he had attempted before. That this move generated its own contradictions, that retrospection and mythmaking were not to be evaded in any simple sense, goes without saying. Newman never managed purity as well as his reputation

²⁰⁴ Newman, ‘Letter to Clement Greenberg’, p.203.

suggests. His attempt to reorientate his practice in response to the increasingly strained character of its historical terms resulted in a different set of referents (of which, more in chapter 4). Mathieu would have found the very attempt unthinkable. Like some reborn knight of the rueful countenance, he followed his chivalric history to the bitter end.

Chapter 2: Framing Matisse: Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchell in the 1950s.

Matisse is dead, what a gap is left! Soon they will all be gone, and what is to become of art?

- Grace Hartigan, 4 November 1954.

Windows on the past

It is not enough to say that repetition and iteration were important tools for modernists in the aftermath of World War II. These are abstract concepts. They needed to be concretised in paint. Their import – the concern they signalled with differing conceptions of painting, with its momentum, location, and potential for historical engagement – varied from situation to situation, artist to artist, group to group. For Barnett Newman in the early 1950s it was the horizontal line that summoned the past. For F.N. Souza it was the colour black. For Joan Mitchell and Grace Hartigan, it was the picture frame, or the window-rhymed-with-the-picture-frame, made emblematic for modernism by Matisse in paintings like *Open Window, Collioure* (fig.3.9, 1905) and *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* (fig.3.1, 1914). An observation of T.J. Clark's rings true for that whole 'Second Generation' of abstract expressionists who came of age during the epoch of modernism's institutionalisation, making their most important work during the 1950s: that 'modernism... is always debating whether anything – especially any human thing – can make an appearance again in the void of Matisse's 1914 window'.²⁰⁵ Artists repeated, figured, and thematised the window and the frame, those very structural elements that abstract expressionism had seemed to dispense with by making paintings so flat that they could not be seen 'into', and so large that they rendered picture frames redundant. Recalled, the vanished frame became its own kind of citation, rife with metaphor. The

²⁰⁵ T.J. Clark, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam', *October*, vol.100 (Spring 2002), p.167.

paintings which Hartigan and Mitchell produced during the 1950s are definitive in this regard. Both drew attention to the framing edges of their canvases in order to question what it meant to really *look* at modernist tradition in the light of recent developments; to memorialise it, to see its masterpieces vindicated, celebrated, framed on the museum wall: windows onto a tradition at once desired and resented. The querying was never disinterested: it opened onto a set of proto-feminist positions. Whatever was meant by ‘tradition’ did not walk away unscathed.

Compare two paintings: Mitchell’s *King of Spades* (fig.3.2), done in Paris in 1956, and Hartigan’s *On Orchard Street* (fig.3.3), made in New York the following year. Both assume a retrospective orientation towards a variety of modernist precedents, in particular the lineage of twentieth-century French art identified with the (then recently deceased) figure of Matisse. Both have his open windows in the background. This claim will need some justification, given the obvious differences between Hartigan’s painting and Mitchell’s. The two artists have been used to exemplify the divergent afterlives of abstract expressionism as it entered its ‘Second Generation’: split, as Barbara Rose put it in 1965, between a ‘semi-*abstraction*’ applied to figurative subjects and a purer abstract painting occupied ‘by landscape motifs rather than the figure’.²⁰⁶ The contrast is there. The differences are important. They must have felt vital during the period when Rose was writing, when authority to speak for the legacy of abstract expressionism was still vigorously contested. At that point these two painters, the one publicly committed to a historicist revival of figure painting, the other to ‘remembered landscapes’, must have seemed worlds apart.²⁰⁷ But their paintings also bespeak a deeper commonality, like different answers to the same questions:

²⁰⁶ Barbara Rose, ‘The Second Generation: Academy and Breakthrough’, *Artforum* (September 1965), p.58.

²⁰⁷ Mitchell cited in Dorothy Seiberling, ‘Women Artists in Ascendance’, *Life* (13 May 1957), p.77.

what to make of modernism, as its paragons died, as it retreated into the past? How to conceptualise this retreat? How best to intervene in the genealogies then under construction? What options were left open to painters?

On Orchard Street and *King of Spades* move in opposite directions around such questions. In Hartigan's painting, contemplation of the heritage of modernism promises to place the painter in renewed contact with the world. In Mitchell's, this contact is obstructed. They stand on either side of Matisse's window: Hartigan on the outside, in the bustle of the street, gazing upon a modernism figured as overabundance; Mitchell looking outwards towards modernism, across an indefinite distance, from a place of constraint and enclosure. This is partly a difference of subject matter, partly one of structure. *On Orchard Street* came at the end of a series of paintings directed at the commercial life of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Hartigan had declared her intention to paint shop windows in 1954. She saw them as ready-made subjects for painting, formalised – in advance – in modernist terms: the windows would 'frame the composition', the narrow depth of the displays would 'provide a shallow space', and the backing dividing display from shop floor would 'define the back plane'.²⁰⁸ *Grand Street Brides* (1954) made clear the extent of this perceived synergy between the spaces of modernist painting and those of commercial display: it collapsed the one onto the other, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* onto a budget bridal parlour.

More work followed. The muted palette and thin, smeared paint of the *Brides* gave way to thicker blocks of unmixed colour explicitly derived from Matisse. 'Street scenes of brilliant and clashing patches of colour that recall the fauves', as one critic described them.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Grace Hartigan: A Painter's World* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), p.33.

²⁰⁹ Andre Chastel, 'Pollock et ses frères', *Le Monde* (17 January 1959), p.11.

First the aptly named *Homage to Matisse* (fig.3.17 1955), then *Giftwares* (1955), *City Life* (1956), *East Side Peddler* (1956), *Summer Street* (1956), *Chinatown* (1956), *Billboard* (1957), *Broadway Restaurant* (1957). Each canvas proposed an equivalence between a different commercial element, drawn from the vicinity of Hartigan's studio, and the flat, chromatic intensities of pre-war modernism. 'I have found my "subject"', she wrote around this time. 'It contains that which is vulgar and vital in American modern life and the possibilities of its transcendence into the beautiful'.²¹⁰ *On Orchard Street* is typical of this development, in all its ambiguities. The real Orchard Street was a Lower East Side commercial hub where African Americans, immigrant Jews, and Puerto Ricans lived in tenement housing and ran tailoring businesses and market stalls. Rents were very low, which explains the presence of Hartigan's studio three blocks away, at 25 Essex Street. Not quite the byword for ghettoised poverty that it had been at the turn of the century (and would become again during subsequent decades), in the 1950s the street still retained a sufficiently run-down cachet to draw realist painters, the last dregs of the Ashcan School, in search of a little urban grit (fig.3.4). None of this is apparent from Hartigan's painting; indeed it is suppressed. *On Orchard Street* toys with the large areas of flat, bright, close-valued colour, orientated towards the boundaries of the canvas, that characterised a whole generation of post-Impressionist painting and reached an apotheosis in Matisse's cut outs and paintings like *Red Interior: Still Life on a Blue Table* (fig.3.5, 1947). It projects these, like the beams from a magic lantern, onto what might be a window display or a market stall. Vaguely delineated commodities (fruit? flowers?) rock amid a shallow arrangement of coloured planes. Like others she produced at the time (the same rounded forms appear in *Homage to Matisse*), the painting positions its viewers as consumers in a double sense. On the one hand, we look

²¹⁰ Francoise S Puniello and Halina Rusak, *Abstract Expressionist Women Painters: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1996), p.171.

through a framing window at a saturated display, trying to pick out what might be for sale. At the same time, we are invited to enjoy the beautifying effects and repackaged devices of a historicised modernism, applied to contemporary subject matter. The comparison this draws is neither as euphoric nor as stable as it might seem. As will become clear, Hartigan's best paintings fretted over the reduction of modernism to an available commodity, over the splitting and accommodation, the multiple degrees of compromise such a reduction demanded from artist and viewer alike.

Something quite different is going on with *King of Spades* in its relation to the same tradition. Like Hartigan, Mitchell mingled mimetic reference and abstraction in her paintings. Generations of viewers have seen wet, blustery landscapes swimming across their surfaces: 'mountainous landscapes or turbulent seas' for Elaine de Kooning, writing in 1955; 'cliffs', trees, 'messy vegetation' for John Ashbery a decade later.²¹¹ De Kooning coined the term 'Abstract Impressionism' for this kind of painting, linking Mitchell to artists like Philip Guston and Sam Francis who similarly in the mid-1950s began to exploit the tendency of loosely gridded, coloured brushwork to echo the shapes and textures of inchoate landscapes. She pointed to the ambivalence of this approach, how it retained certain technical devices from Impressionism but dispensed with the nineteenth century's faith in the descriptive capacities of the painted mark: 'Retaining the quiet uniform pattern of strokes that spread over the canvas without climax or emphasis, these followers keep the Impressionist manner of looking at a scene but leave out the scene'.²¹² In Mitchell's painting, the signs and tropes

²¹¹ Elaine de Kooning, 'Subject: What, how or who?', *ARTnews*, vol.54, no.2 (April 1955), p.61; John Ashbery, *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles, 1957-1987* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1989), p.100.

²¹² De Kooning, 'Subject: What, how or who?', p.62. The extent of this separation between artist and landscape was a subject for debate. Looking at the same painters a few years later (and including de Kooning herself on his list), Rosenberg wrote that 'the separation between the artist and his visual environment has been overcome not by cancelling the setting (as is contended by those who lump together the different kinds of abstract art) but by frankly giving precedence to art over subject

of natural abundance were shadowed by an equally powerful sense that the objects depicted were ungraspable – ‘removed from the original perception’ in Dore Ashton’s words – cut off from artist and viewer alike by some deep, abstracting scepticism about painting’s ability to capture experience.²¹³ ‘You have a feeling’, writes Ashbery, ‘that her paintings show a location, even though you don’t know where it is’.²¹⁴

Mitchell was aware of this putative contradiction, and explained it by suggesting that her pictures were attempts to record memories rather than represent reality. She thought Hartigan’s renderings of the Lower East Side ugly and literal.²¹⁵ Her own paintings were never so direct – the year after making *King of Spades*, she began to describe them as ‘remembered landscapes which involve my feelings’.²¹⁶ There were echoes of Matisse here (‘I do not literally paint that table, but the emotion it produces in me’), and of Proust.²¹⁷ She had studied *In Search of Lost Time* under Wallace Fowlie at the New School earlier in the decade, had read it in French and English, would have known Proust’s descriptions of ‘remembered fragments of landscape’, his digressive, additive process, and his mistrust of immediate experience relative to the possibilities opened by memory and anticipation.²¹⁸ These were presuppositions she shared; she fleshed them out a year later: ‘I paint from remembered landscapes that I carry around with me – and remembered feelings of them,

matter’. Rosenberg, ‘The Art Galleries: The American Scene’, *The New Yorker* (16 March 1963), p.156.

²¹³ Dore Ashton, ‘The Lyrical Principle: On Joan Mitchell’, *Raritan*, vol.28, no.2 (Autumn 2008), p.10.

²¹⁴ Ashbery, ‘Joan Mitchell’ in *Reported Sightings*, p.98.

²¹⁵ ‘Joan Mitchell said she admired my courage in making ugly pictures’. Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.91.

²¹⁶ Seiberling, ‘Women Artists in Ascendance’, p.77.

²¹⁷ Yve-Alain Bois, *Matisse and Picasso* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), p.77. Others have written on the links between Mitchell and Proust. See Véronique M. Fôti, ‘Adversity and Practices of Painting: Merleau-Ponty, Monet, and Joan Mitchell’, *Philosophy Today: An International Journal of Contemporary Philosophy*, vol.60, no.2 (Spring 2016), p.401.

²¹⁸ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 6: Finding Time Again*, trans. Ian Patterson (London: Penguin, 2003), p.42.

which of course become transformed. I could certainly never mirror nature. I would like more to paint what it leaves me with... I like to look out a window or first walk in it – nature – and then I paint'.²¹⁹ She was less willing to specify what, exactly, was remembered in these paintings. Contrary to the current strain of psycho-biographical criticism that proceeds by mining them for particular images from her past (from 'specific locations and specific moments in Paris, in New York, and on Long Island' to 'memories of bridges... sensations of girders'), the paintings never illustrated any literal memory.²²⁰ Mitchell was an abstract expressionist. The memories she engaged were never the distinct but static images of the *mémoire volontaire*, that 'imaginary photograph album' of which she also liked to speak and of which Proust, who first coined the term, was so disparaging.²²¹ It is often pointed out how few moments of remembrance *In Search of Lost Time* actually contains, relative to the figures it generates for recollection interrupted, frustrated, or placed just out of reach.²²² These range from the 'sort of luminous panel, cut out from among indistinct shadows', through which, before the first bite of the madeleine, Proust's narrator glimpses a narrow architectural section of Combray, to 'the translucent alabaster' through which the flowers of remembered gardens are barely glimpsed, to 'the dusty haze of memory', out of which he sees Albertine appear, looking different each time from his recollection of her.²²³ 'Proust had a bad memory', as Mitchell's friend Samuel Beckett once observed.²²⁴ It is thanks to this deficiency

²¹⁹ Judith Bernstock, *Joan Mitchell* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1988), p.31.

²²⁰ 'Katy Siegel, 'Par Avion' in *Joan Mitchell*, ed. Sarah Roberts and Katy Siegel (London: Yale University Press, 2020), p.45; Patricia Albers, *Joan Mitchell, Lady Painter: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2011), p.51.

²²¹ Yves Michaud, 'Excerpts from Conversations with Joan Mitchell' in *Joan Mitchell: New Paintings* (New York: Xavier Fourcade, 1986), n.p.

²²² 'Proust's work is based not on the exposition of memory, but on the apprenticeship to signs'. Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Continuum, 2008), p.4.

²²³ Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 1: The Way by Swann's*, trans. Lydia Davis (London: Penguin, 2002), p.46; Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 5: The Prisoner and The Fugitive*, trans. Carol Clark (London: Penguin, 2003), p.262; Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 2: In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2003), p.506.

²²⁴ Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues*, p.29.

that his narrator can experience the intensity of unexpected recollection – the return of what has ‘kept its distance, its isolation in the depths of a valley or at the very peak of a summit’ and which, returning, ‘make[s] us breathe a new air, new precisely because it is an air we have breathed before’.²²⁵ Likewise, Mitchell’s canvases were more concerned with what interrupts clarity of recollection than with descriptive replication. Here it is worth noting that wherever the idea of memory appeared in her discourse, it was always accompanied by another Proustian spatial device – the window – which served to convey the idea of a distance between herself and the recollected experience: ‘I like to look out a window...’ ‘I am up against a wall looking for a view. If I looked out my window, what would I paint?’²²⁶ In *King of Spades*, she made much of the various analogies, familiar to Proust and cubism alike, between the painting’s depicted forms, the physical boundaries of the canvas, and the old metaphor of the window onto the world. If memory was to emerge, if something was to be recalled, this formal nexus would be its location.

The surface of *King of Spades* balances a density of coloured brushwork against the transparent shimmer of its white ground. Mitchell is often celebrated for the bright colours of her later canvases, what Maggie Nelson calls their ‘blazing particularity’.²²⁷ Hints of these have already begun to appear in *King of Spades*’ turquoises, reds, and miniscule accents of unmixed yellow. But, beginning in 1956, white became her most expressive pigment. She enjoyed its metaphorical associations as well as its structural utility. White accents worked to keep the excesses of her colours hemmed in, to create a ‘clear zone of nothingness’ in the words of one critic.²²⁸ The ghostly lines that dance around the edges of *King of Spades* speak

²²⁵ Proust, *Finding Time Again*, pp.178-9.

²²⁶ Irving Sandler, ‘Mitchell Paints a Picture’, *ARTnews*, vol.56 (1957), p.45.

²²⁷ Maggie Nelson, *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p.31.

²²⁸ Dave Hickey, ‘Joan Mitchell: Epigrammata’ in *25 Women: Essays on Their Art* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p.17.

to this process of erasure, carried out with brush and finger. White paint was laid over those areas, mostly around the picture's edges, that had grown too bright. Combined with her technique for laying on colour, this process helped to generate surfaces that are as visually diverting as they are surprisingly repetitive. In a condemnatory but perceptive essay on Mitchell's work, Rosalind Krauss called the 'centroidal arrangements of marks' that bunched pictorial incident towards the centre of the canvases 'a kind of formula', a 'mandala structure'.²²⁹ The range of marks themselves was as narrow as that of the structures they were located in. These elements changed as Mitchell's career progressed – the canvases of the early 1960s are noted for widening her repertoire to incorporate new colours and gestures – but their function did not. Alongside the recurring use of white, they formed a limited stock of components, articulating each painting as deliberate, structural, and constructive; formed from the studied assemblage of a limited number of determinate parts, rather than splashed out in the productive frenzy that was supposed to characterise 'action painting'. Harold Rosenberg – who ought to have known – wrote that 'Mitchell repudiates automatism'.²³⁰ In *King of Spades*, the bevelled navy vertical that begins near the painting's top right corner and follows the framing edge down for about 15 inches is repeated in blues, greens, and browns running along the same edge. A huge turquoise ellipse at centre left, made by a brush so loaded with turpentine-thinned paint that it has drizzled little verticals upon contact with the canvas, is echoed in a black horizontal above and towards the centre. The same whiplash figure, in which a horizontal line twists itself into a vertical or a diagonal, appears again and again – particularly at top left, where it is almost the only mark to be found. Right-angles proliferate.

²²⁹ Rosalind Krauss, 'Painting Becomes Cyclorama', *Artforum* vol.12, no.10 (Summer 1974), p.51.

²³⁰ Harold Rosenberg, 'Joan Mitchell: Artist Against Background' in *Art on the Edge* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p.83.

The more astute of Mitchell's early commentators noted how many of these discreet gestures assumed a definite orientation towards at least two of the picture's edges, horizontal or vertical. As Irving Sandler wrote in 1957, 'the artist's armlong sweeps are always caught back in horizontal and vertical lines, giving her paintings their structure'.²³¹ The painter whose work Mitchell studied most seriously during the early 1950s was not Pollock or de Kooning, but Piet Mondrian.²³² The horizontals and verticals dashed across *King of Spades* form a loose, crisscrossed lattice, a grid of colour and line strung across the picture plane that concentrates towards the painting's centre and thins out at its edges. Between and around these lines, the white field projects into indeterminate depth. As Krauss was to point out, the effect of this grid, however spacious and diffuse, was twofold: on the one hand it generated a sense of expansive space lying somewhere beyond it, on the other it recalled its viewer to the surface and edges of the picture as tangible, limiting facts: 'the canvas was understood to be a radiant and luminous field whose centre became more densely precise in terms of volume wrought by layers of depicted substance. At the same time, this thickened centre asserted its identity as a flattened – because material – encrustation of painted planes. As such it read as a kind of emblematic shield contrasted to the glowing and undefined space behind it'.²³³ This centroidal structure was always configured relative to the framing edge which registered as a point of ultimate constraint; *King of Spades* insists on this relation, not only in the rectilinear voids that open here and there between the struts of Mitchell's grid, but more emphatically in the way in which her coloured forms gather towards the centre and thin out at the peripheries. 'Mitchell never abandoned the idea of the frame', writes Siri Hustvedt, 'she accepted the old

²³¹ Sandler, 'Mitchell Paints a Picture', p.47.

²³² The special dispensation she sought and received in 1951 from the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (renamed the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum the following year) to study those paintings of his that were not then on display, would have given her daily access to paintings like *Tableau No. 2/Composition No. VII* (1913).

²³³ Krauss, 'Painting Becomes Cyclorama', p.51.

metaphor of the painting as a window inside which something is seen'.²³⁴ No matter how beautiful her painting became, how intense her colours, her paintings simultaneously insisted upon this embrasure, this gap themselves and the world around them, marked with finality by the picture's edge. This was their window frame, their distance. Such gaps forced the point, on which Beckett also insisted, 'that between the banality of life and the magic of [art] there is a great gulf fixed'.²³⁵

Photo Framing

Mitchell and Hartigan probed the same basic metaphor – the same Albertian analogy – linking the window and the picture frame. Both found a new richness of experience in this emblematic device of a historicised modernism. The point over which they differed concerned painting's capacity to grasp that experience. Mitchell's painting emphasised distance; Hartigan's proximity. This contrast was emphasised when *On Orchard Street* and *King of Spades* both appeared, prominently, in Dorothy Seiberling's landmark 1957 article 'Women Artists in Ascendance'. Published in *Life* magazine, the piece featured Mitchell, Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Nell Blaine, and Jane Wilson. Seiberling announced a 'movement', 'a sizeable and remarkable group of young women' whose work 'is being sought by leading museums, galleries and collectors' (recently acquired, this notoriety was not to last. Erasure from the histories of post-war painting was swift. Recovery is still ongoing).²³⁶ Brief texts on each artist followed, illustrated by photographs of them in their studios alongside their work. Gordon Parks took Hartigan's photograph (fig.3.6); Mitchell's was taken by Loomis Dean (fig.3.7). In both images, artist, artwork, and studio environment

²³⁴ Siri Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005), p.141.

²³⁵ Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues*, p.83.

²³⁶ Seiberling, 'Women Artists in Ascendance', p.74. For discussion of this erasure, see Daniel Belasco, 'See Us Now: The Feminist Positions of Helen Frankenthaler and Grace Hartigan, 1957-1962', *Journal of Art History*, vol.83, no.2 (2014), p.67.

were co-ordinated in ways that spoke to the intentions of the paintings. This was characteristic. Like others of their generation, Mitchell and Hartigan recognised the potential of photography to enhance or deform artistic practice, to suggest an interpretation or derail an intention. They had learned from the successes and failures of Pollock's self-promotion earlier in the decade (it was Seiberling who, in 1949, had written the article in *Life*, headed 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?' which established his popular renown).²³⁷ Each cultivated an artificial, manipulated attitude towards the camera's lens. The other major article on Mitchell's painting to appear in 1957, Sandler's 'Mitchell Paints a Picture' in *ARTnews*, was illustrated with photographs by Rudy Burckhardt that purported to show the artist at work. In fact, as Burckhardt later recalled, the images were staged by Mitchell, who 'did not want to paint for the camera', but 'was willing to fake it'.²³⁸ She didn't even let Burckhardt into the studio while she painted: 'I set up the camera, showed her how to turn on a couple of lights and take the picture... She took a picture every day after she finished painting for, I think, two weeks'.²³⁹

Dean's photograph for Seiberling's article gives a similarly affected impression of spontaneity. It shows Mitchell, seated, encircled by her paintings, rooted in a foreground and background of smothering whites and dancing colours. Some canvases lie face up on the floor behind her, alongside scattered supplies: a paint tin, a rag, some brushes. Others are pinned, facing outwards, to two plyboard walls built on a right-angle. Most are unstretched, apart from *The 14th of July* (1956), which is propped against the rear wall. *Café* (1956) frames her head. Further left, cropped by the photograph's edge, is *Casino* (1956). The bottom edges

²³⁷ Seiberling, 'Jackson Pollock: Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?', *Life*, no.27 (8 August 1949), p.42ff.

²³⁸ Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, p.624.

²³⁹ Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, p.624.

of the diptych *The Bridge* (1956) are visible above. *King of Spades* lies in front. She holds it up to the camera, cropping the lower half of her body. Scattered materials and strewn, unstretched canvas tell a familiar abstract expressionist story: the artist, interrupted in the work of creation, has barely had time to drop her brushes and assume a pose. As soon as the photographer leaves, she will renew the attack. Of course, this effect is as false in Dean's photograph as it was in Burckhardt's. Mitchell never worked in such an environment. She was not Pollock, who liked to surround himself with work in progress during his "get acquainted" period'.²⁴⁰ While painting she would turn unfinished canvases to the wall ('I can't paint with everything showing', she once remarked to Linda Nochlin).²⁴¹ The artfully disarrayed paintings that surround her in Dean's photograph were all finished, down to the last brushstroke. Any spontaneity was fictive. In spite, or rather because of this deceptive inversion of her working practices, Dean's photograph speaks to the kinds of reading she wanted for the paintings. These are hung, propped, and strewn cheek-by-jowl, in all directions. Placed edge to edge, their attention to their own limits is stressed. They shrink from one another, and from Mitchell herself, retreating inside their framing orthogonals. The colours of *The 14th of July* swim away from the densities of *Café*. The rust-coloured whiplash at the top of that canvas, so much like those which line the upper edge of *King of Spades*, reads as emphatic closure, sealing the painting off from the bottom edge of *The Bridge* (this effect is enhanced in the painting's final, stretched, state where the rusty horizontal runs right along the picture's edge). Against this backdrop, there is something declarative about the manner in which Mitchell holds up the raw canvas edge of *King of Spades*, squeezing its

²⁴⁰ Jackson Pollock, 'My Painting' in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen Landau (London: Yale University Press, 2005), p.140.

²⁴¹ Linda Nochlin, *Oral History Interview with Joan Mitchell* (16 April 1986), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

warp between finger and thumb: 'here is the boundary; here is the limit; beyond this, no illusion will go'.

There is none of the same contraction in Parks' photograph of Hartigan, perched on a windowsill beside *On Orchard Street*. Here framing edges appear as permeable membranes, never as solid or final. Behind her, visible through the studio's window, is the faint frontage of a shop across the street. Like those of the tailoring businesses on nearby Orchard Street, the sign reads 'CLOTHING: SALE PRICE'. The blurred shapes that hover above it resemble more of her abstract forms. Mitchell would never have allowed this kind of continuity between her painted surfaces and the outside world; Hartigan encouraged it. Her sweater and lipstick pick up her painting's dominant reds. Split vertically down the centre, Parks' image conjoins the studio window, opening onto a commercial exterior, and the painting, which does the same. The photograph develops the implications of the painting: that the picture extends beyond the framing edge, which comes to read as an arbitrary cut, a window through which only a limited section of an infinitely extended view is seen.

The photographs of Mitchell and Hartigan articulate a contradiction, but also a similarity. They emphasise the double character of the framing edge, pointed out by Jacques Derrida. As the point that marks the work of art off from the world around it, the frame is also the point at which artwork and world come into contact. It is 'what separates the internal from the external, with a border which is itself double in its trait, and joins together what it splits'.²⁴² In both images, framing edges are emphasised as tactile limits. The difference is that whereas in Mitchell's work this recognition produces centripetal compositions that

²⁴² Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, p.331.

shrink back within their frames, in Hartigan's the resulting compositions are centrifugal, implying further expansion.

Framing Escape

How much of a difference was this? Mondrian's paintings – *exempla* for the derivation of structural logic from the framing edge – had moved between centripetal and centrifugal configurations. Orientating one's composition towards the framing edge, creating *mises-en-abime*, enjoying the rhymes between window and canvas – none of these approaches were new to painting in the mid-1950s. They were seen as anachronisms, enough to earn both Mitchell and Hartigan the moniker 'late cubist' in a milieu that was supposed to have broken with all such constraints. In 1955, Greenberg had written in "'American-Type' Painting' (the same essay that so irritated Newman by describing his paintings as 'buckeye') that what had defined pre-war European painting was the drive to acknowledge the framing edges – 'Mondrian *had* to accept his straight lines' – following the loss of depth and illusion attendant on abstraction.²⁴³ The picture plane had flattened out; 'edges could be prevented from breaking through this taughtened surface only by being kept regular and near-geometrical, so that they would echo the shape of the frame more insistently'.²⁴⁴ What characterised post-war American abstract expressionism, by contrast – what ushered in a new era for painting – was 'a need to "escape" from the frame – from the enclosing rectangle of the canvas – which Cézanne and the Cubists had established as the all-controlling coordinate of design and drawing'.²⁴⁵ This escape route 'was discovered to lie in a surface so large that its enclosing edges would lay outside or only on the periphery of the artist's field of vision as

²⁴³ Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting' in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p.219.

²⁴⁴ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting', p.227.

²⁴⁵ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting', p.226.

he worked'.²⁴⁶ Crucially, Greenberg saw the mature work of Newman and Mark Rothko – paintings whose orthogonals, fields, and straight-ruled lines would seem to acknowledge the framing edge more than ever – as having achieved this aim of breaking out of the frame most fully. Rothko's *No.10* (fig.3.8, 1950) and Newman's *Cathedra* (1951) retained a geometrical orientation towards the frame, what Michael Fried, building on Greenberg's analysis, would call 'deductive structure'.²⁴⁷ But this was no longer experienced as constraint on his and Greenberg's account because the paintings themselves were so expansive, their surfaces 'dissolved in the illusion of optical space'.²⁴⁸ Newman's straight lines, to quote Greenberg once more, 'do not echo those of the frame, but parody it... What is destroyed is the Cubist, and immemorial, notion and feeling of the picture edge as a confine; with Newman, the picture edge is repeated inside, and *makes* the picture, instead of merely being *echoed*'.²⁴⁹

Greenberg's language is world-historical: the dynamics of modernist painting forever altered by relocation from Paris to New York. But the matter was by no means as settled as he made out. In 1955 he was responding to an artistic field that contained work such as Mitchell's and Hartigan's, in which this 'Cubist, and immemorial, feeling of the picture edge as a confine', far from having been 'destroyed', was preserved, even enhanced. By the end of the decade, when 'late cubist' had mutated into a slur in his criticism, this tactile appeal to the picture as framed and confined, rather than 'optical' and 'expansive', had become pervasive. He diagnosed it as an inherent tendency of 'painterly' abstraction.²⁵⁰ The paradoxical situation, to which Mitchell, Hartigan, and Greenberg alike were responding, was this: that

²⁴⁶ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting', p.227.

²⁴⁷ Michael Fried, 'Three American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella' in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.233.

²⁴⁸ Fried, 'Three American Painters', p.234.

²⁴⁹ Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting', p.227.

²⁵⁰ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism' in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brian (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp.123-124.

the late modernist removal of picture frames never abolished their function. The position of the framing edge as a *parergon*, to use Derrida's Kantian term, became all the more emphatic as it became more fraught. Derrida called the frame a 'surface between the two limits', a reversible marker for the point at which background ends and the work of art begins.²⁵¹ This was an essential function; it made the frame 'precisely an ill-detachable detachment', distinct from the artwork, but without which there would be no artwork at all.²⁵² As he and others pointed out, the removal of the picture frames from abstract paintings often compelled painters into a more direct acknowledgement of framing edges, a more anxious delimitation of their work from the world around it. Reflecting on the phenomenon of abstract paintings 'hung altogether unframed', Meyer Schapiro observed that 'the boundary is transformed into an element of representation... like a window frame through which one glimpses only a part of the space behind it'.²⁵³

Why this refusal to transcend the frame? As Derrida and Schapiro both make clear, frames achieved their importance historically, within a gallery apparatus premised upon the display of discreet, delimited works of art. The frame itself is a relatively recent invention, coming 'late in the second millennium BC (if even then)'.²⁵⁴ In the modern day, it is accompanied by a whole array of other 'surrounds of the work of art... title, signature, museum, archive, reproduction, discourse, market'.²⁵⁵ It was these surrounds which, more than ever before, thickened and agglomerated around modernist painting in the decades following World War II. The renewed emphasis that artists like Mitchell and Hartigan placed upon their paintings' tangible limits needs to be read alongside this phenomenon, what

²⁵¹ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, p.63.

²⁵² Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, p.59.

²⁵³ Meyer Schapiro, 'On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol.6, no.10 (1972-1973), pp.11; 19.

²⁵⁴ Schapiro, 'Some Problems', p.11.

²⁵⁵ Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, p.11.

Adorno would later call ‘the fatal ageing of the modern’: the historicisation of modernism, the death and canonisation of its major practitioners, the absorption and organisation of their work within the great museums and collections.²⁵⁶ The frame became a charged metaphor within this expanding museological apparatus, a symbol for all of the problems and contradictions implied by organisation and display. As developments in contemporary painting placed frames and framing under pressure, as Greenberg proselytised ‘escape’ from the frame, and artists lined up to reject the Albertian notion of painting as ‘an open window through which the [subject] is observed’, the modern work that not only sat within its frame, but insisted on this fact, became emblematic of a historicised modernism; of history understood as a sequence of framed pictures, hung on gallery walls.²⁵⁷ Framed and sequenced – and thus open to repetition.

It is tempting to see the excitement that greeted the arrival in New York, in 1949, of Matisse’s *Open Window, Collioure*, as prophetic. Here was painting built entirely around the analogy between window and frame: small, intricate, a succession of jewelled boxes nestled within one another, windows opening onto windows, frames within frames. Precisely the kind of work that, for Greenberg, had become outmoded and anachronistic with abstract expressionism. The painting, bought jointly by Janis and Carstairs galleries, asserted Matisse’s status, in Krauss’ words, as ‘the painter of windows-rhymed-with-canvases’.²⁵⁸ In 1951 it appeared in Barr’s great exhibition *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* at the Museum of Modern Art. A year later it was sold to the Whitneys. Mitchell and Hartigan both saw it, in person and in countless reproductions. For much of the decade Hartigan treasured a copy of

²⁵⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.452.

²⁵⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Rocco Sinisgalli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.19.

²⁵⁸ Krauss, *Willem de Kooning Nonstop*, p.19.

Barr's enormous catalogue, where Matisse's window appears as a full-page colour plate. A remark of hers from 1955, made about a passage from André Gide's journals, spells out the importance of the window motif in this appreciation. Gide had written that

In a work of art I rather like to find transposed, on the *scale* of the characters, the very subject of that work. Nothing throws a clearer light upon it or more surely establishes the proportions of the whole. Thus in certain paintings of Memling or Quentin Metzys a small convex and dark mirror reflects the interior of the room in which the scene of the painting is taking place. Likewise in Velasquez's painting of the "Meniñas". Finally, in literature, in the play scene in Hamlet – . In "Wilhelm Meister" the scene of the puppets or the celebration at the castle. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the story that is read to Roderick, etc.

'For myself', Hartigan goes on, 'I might add the open doorways and windows in Matisse'.²⁵⁹

Mitchell most likely shared this assessment. In the winter of 1949, while staying in Le Lavandou, across the bay from Collioure, she made her own *View from Window*, a painting that perhaps had more in common with Matisse's later *Porte-fenêtre à Collioure* than his *Open Window*. *View from Window* rendered the cliffs and fields of the Côte d'Azur in colours as allergic to fauvist plenty as possible. While the window itself never actually appeared, it was everywhere implied: in the transparent, rectangular blue shape at bottom left; in the mottled flatness of the paint higher up, streaked vertically like rain running down glass; in the way the landscape peels back along the painting's top edge, with which it runs parallel, as if declining to continue beyond the field of representation. In shop window paintings like *On Orchard Street*, Hartigan would turn this manoeuvre, whereby the function of Matisse's windows was transferred to the canvas edge, into a rule of thumb. Matisse became a touchstone for both artists – 'my master', as Hartigan took to calling him.²⁶⁰

Why recur to these tropes? Why repeat the metaphor of the picture as a bounded surface, through which a viewer looks? Why resist the movement of painting beyond the

²⁵⁹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.184.

²⁶⁰ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.80.

framing edge? One answer is that by emphasising their framing devices, by insisting on the equivalence between window and picture frame, Hartigan and Mitchell made art addressed to a historicised modernism, the modernism of Matisse (beyond whom, of course, stood the open windows of romanticism and the nineteenth century). A central claim, made across this thesis, is that this was not necessarily a conservative endeavour. It could signal an intervention in the histories of modernism then under construction, an assault on closed, progressive tradition, even a form of political expression. An admiring or passive orientation towards tradition could do the work of disruption. This was Adorno's claim, when he came, via some remarks of Proust's, to theorise the effects of museum display on modern painting. For Proust, the museum's severing of artworks from the contexts of their production, its isolation of each work, framed, in a specific position on the wall, had revealed a vital truth about art in modernity: the savage competition between artworks concealed beneath the idea of a unitary tradition (only ever 'the impression of continuity, the illusion of unity').²⁶¹ Like Mitchell and Hartigan, repeating the devices of a European 'master', Proust adopted the position of 'an admiring consumer, an amateur, inclined to that effusive and for artists highly suspect awe before the work of art'.²⁶² According to Adorno, it was this connoisseurial distance, the view of one who 'strolls through an exhibition', that was at the root of Proust's emphasis on memory, as well as being what allowed him the central insight of the 'dialectical attitude': that 'competition among works is the test of truth'.²⁶³ By retaining and emphasising their framing devices, Mitchell and Hartigan achieved a comparable degree of reflective distance. They mimed the attitudes and distances of curation and connoisseurship, in such a

²⁶¹ Proust, *The Way by Swann's*, p.374.

²⁶² Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum' in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Sherry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), p.180.

²⁶³ Adorno, 'Valéry Proust Museum', pp.179-180.

manner as to place their own work in competition with the historicised modernism they invoked.

Remembered Landscapes

Mitchell's cryptic references to 'remembered landscapes' begin to make better sense in light of Adorno's remarks on Proust, who could seem unable to describe a sunset without comparing it to a canvas by Claude Monet.²⁶⁴ Her paintings from the mid-1950s performed their own exercises in productive connoisseurship. They memorialised the art of the past. The critics were not wrong when they remarked the echoes of Monet's late work in other paintings from 1956 like *East Ninth Street* (fig.3.11), *The Bridge* (fig.3.13), and *George Went Swimming at Barnes Hole, but It Got Too Cold*. 'It is this generality and its sense of contemplativeness', wrote Louis Finkelstein, 'this openness of the eye so lacking in *hubris*, this relinquishing of theatricality which brings us back to the waters of the *Nymphéas*'.²⁶⁵ Monet's *The Japanese Footbridge* (fig.3.12, c.1920-22) arrived at MoMA that year. It went on display in the museum's exhibition of *Recent European Acquisitions*. Comparisons were obvious. Mitchell's painting took a similar delight in the scintillating effects of bunched, close-valued, brilliantly coloured brushstrokes that Benjamin once likened in Monet's paintings to an ant-heap.²⁶⁶ The interest in natural subjects was there too, at the expense of everything urban or industrial. So were the metaphors: reflections of light on water, or of objects in water; trees, bridges, sunsets. 'The studio is put out on a promontory next to the lily pond', as Clark writes of the later Monet, 'and the paintings are filled with weeds, water,

²⁶⁴ 'The sun just then getting lower, the seagulls were now yellow, like the water-lilies in another canvas of the same series by Monet'. Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 4: Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2003), p.211.

²⁶⁵ Louis Finkelstein, 'New Look: Abstract Impressionism', *ARTnews*, vol.55, no.1 (March 1956), p.68.

²⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), p.130.

flowers, and the reflections of clouds'.²⁶⁷ All this applies to Mitchell's paintings, which have often seemed too rooted in the practices and imagery of another century and another continent. There is bite to Krauss's criticism – that they behaved as if 'a lot of art history' had simply never happened.²⁶⁸ In one sense, Mitchell never stopped acting as if the garden at Giverny were still, for painting, a reality (here even the journalistic commonplace about her having 'moved into Monet's house' has a value).²⁶⁹ 'Definition of the "modern"' – Benjamin's words can help us here – 'as the new in the context of what has always already been there'.²⁷⁰

East Ninth Street retained the pyrotechnics of *The Japanese Footbridge*. It dialled these up, generating contrasts out of its ceruleans and cinnabars, and intensities from its increased scale, that surpassed Monet's. But these were hemmed in as they never had been in his paintings by an ever more tightly articulated framing structure and muting white surround. She never painted *en plein air*. Like Proust and Beckett and any number of other insomniac modernists, she preferred to work by night. When she painted during the day, she

²⁶⁷ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p.195.

²⁶⁸ Krauss, 'Painting Becomes Cyclorama', p.50.

²⁶⁹ See Deborah Solomon, 'In Monet's Light', *The New York Times Magazine* (November 24 1991), p.45.

²⁷⁰ The example Benjamin chose to illustrate the maxim is telling. He looked to Kafka, writing that 'the always new, always identical "heathscape" in Kafka is not a bad expression of this state of affairs'. The reference here is to Titorelli, the painter from *The Trial* who produces, Kafka writes, 'exactly the same old moorland scene' over and over again. The qualities that make Titorelli a modernist can help us understand Mitchell, who devoted her career to conjuring the same fragmented landscape, again and again, out of a loosened cubist grid, each time so as to make it appear different, new. Kafka's painter lives and works in a decaying district, in an airless room above the courthouse where Josef K. stands trial for his unknown crime. In Titorelli's room there is a window, 'through which all that could be seen in the fog was the snow-covered roof of the neighbouring building'. It is from this cramped, myopic perch that he paints his innumerable, identical 'heathsapes'. The distance this implies, between the artist's reality and the natural subjects he represents, is Mitchell's too. Adorno thought the leaching of affect that attended such distances made Kafka's an art of 'the panic-stricken person who has withdrawn all affective cathexis from objects [which] petrify into a third thing, neither dream... nor the aping of reality, but rather its enigmatic image composed of scattered fragments'. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p.544; Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Richard Stokes (London: Modern Voices, 2005), p.157; Adorno, 'Notes on Kafka' in *Prisms*, p.264.

would pin burlap over the windows of her studio. ‘It was all inside her head’, as one of her assistants later recalled, ‘she didn’t have to go outside’.²⁷¹ The right-angle of white paint that closes *East Ninth Street*’s bottom corner is emphatic. The artist no longer strolled through his garden or sat beside his lily pond. Now she stared at the abundance through a window, from a distance.

It is here, as a result of formal structure, that the political implications of Mitchell’s painting come into sharper focus. *East Ninth Street* is typical of her work during the second half of the 1950s. Her paintings became the site of a repeated chromatic dialectic, a crisscrossed series of oppositions between colour and whiteness. If colour was the mode in which the art of the past might return to life in all its glory, whiteness was the force that would hem it back in. The two forces were mutually constitutive. As Adorno said of Proust, it was only by confirming the death of the art of the past – by organising it, reifying it, severing it from living context – that the museum allowed the work it absorbed to enter into the revitalising dynamics of conflict and interpretation. It was only once framed that Monet’s colours could be restored. But this restoration was also competitive. Mitchell’s art sued for entry to the modernist tradition marked by Monet. In the process, it deformed that tradition. White was the colour of this intervention. A much-repeated comment, given towards the end of her life, gets at some of the stakes she thought were involved here. White, she insisted, was ‘death. It’s hospitals. It’s my horrible nurses. You can add in Melville, *Moby Dick*, a chapter on white. White is absolute horror, just horror’.²⁷² It makes sense that she would turn to Melville for support here. His pre-eminence in American literature was a product of the criticism of the 1940s. By the 1950s, when she was developing her technique, he was

²⁷¹ Joyce Pensato, ‘To a Sunflower’ in *Joan Mitchell*, ed. Roberts and Siegel, p.326.

²⁷² Mitchell quoted in Bernstock, *Joan Mitchell*, p.39.

everywhere. ‘The American vanguard painter took to the white expanse of canvas’, wrote Rosenberg in 1952, ‘as Melville’s Ishmael took to the sea’.²⁷³ Sam Francis made paintings called *Moby Dick* (1957-8) and *The Whiteness of the Whale* (1957). In Melville’s novel, that whiteness casts a pall of irrelevance over other colours:

all other earthly hues – every stately or lovely emblazoning – the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colourless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us like a leper; and like wilful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect around him.²⁷⁴

Melville’s association of colour with a deceitful, threatening, but submissive femininity, ‘the harlot whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel house within’, may sound too emphatic, measured against a painting like *East Ninth Street*. Doubtless, Mitchell knew it would, whenever she recalled it. Melville’s words speak for the nineteenth century. They revel in the contradictory stability of their epistemology (stable precisely because able to maintain its contradictions). Femininity, says Melville’s Ishmael, is like colour – the most natural thing in the world, but also artificial, deceitful, a lure for the fallibility of the senses, belonging alike to the beauty of a sunset and the ‘painting’ of a sex worker. And in each case it is secondary, a feature of appearance. Something apart from reality itself. White and male were always supposed to end up on top (a ‘pre-eminence’, he goes on to say, which ‘applies to the human race itself, giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe’).²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Rosenberg, ‘The American Action Painters’, p.48.

²⁷⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.175.

²⁷⁵ Melville, *Moby Dick*, p.168.

East Ninth Street has none of Melville's certainty. Mitchell's whites are not pure like the whale's monstrous forehead; they mingle with the colours they efface. Their 'pre-eminence' seems less assured. But the basic opposition – between natural, colourful appearance and an enclosing, grounding whiteness – this still holds. How could it not? As Simone de Beauvoir wrote at the close of the 1940s, the cultural link between femininity, nature, and artifice was still very much in place. Women (particularly bourgeois women like Beauvoir and Mitchell) were expected to embody a natural ideal within close artificial constraints. Enclosure within the home made these demands manifest: 'confined within a narrow space, nature shrinks to the dimensions of a pot of geraniums; walls bar the horizon'.²⁷⁶ Beauvoir knew that women's art at its most radical needed to make something out of these contradictions if it were to have any hope of undoing them. Her own work was often ruthless in this regard. How else to explain the character of Paula in *The Mandarins* – driven insane by commitment to a dream of domesticity – except as an exercise in such description? And where else would organised feminist resistance begin, except in response to such descriptions? She was clear that too few of these existed (Hélène Cixous would make a similar point a generation later when calling for *écriture féminine* that 'almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity').²⁷⁷ 'Women', Beauvoir wrote, 'do not say "we"'.²⁷⁸ The task, for art and philosophy alike, was clear: 'to study woman's traditional destiny with care. How does woman submit to her condition? How does she experience it? In what world does she find herself imprisoned? What escape is permitted?'²⁷⁹ A feminist art should not pretend to a liberation that did not yet exist. It should inhabit and expose oppression. She thought that a line from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, spoken by a character

²⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: II*, p.252.

²⁷⁷ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, vol.1, no.4 (Summer 1976), p.885.

²⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe I: Les Faités et les mythes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.23.

²⁷⁹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: II*, p.5.

immured in domesticity, was exemplary: ‘Whether it is summer, whether it is winter, I no longer know by the moor grass, and the heath flower; only by the steam on the window-pane, or the frost on the window-pane’.²⁸⁰ Here was ‘reality’, Beauvoir wrote, ‘concentrated within the house’.²⁸¹ Mitchell’s windows, through which the colours of the past are invoked in all their radiance and indistinctness, do similar work. Their dynamics of enclosure and restraint – the limitations they place on the colours of modernist tradition – these reflect and contest social constraints operational in the world beyond.

Enclosure as a rule of painting, then: a constructive principle to set alongside others such as colour, openness, abstraction, and mimesis. Sometimes honoured in the breach, but never to be left behind. The open windows of Matisse’s modernism were retained, their constraining, distancing effects exaggerated at the same time as their size and dramatic effects were massively enhanced. And it was through this very distance that a political, even feminist, intervention in modernist tradition might be carried out. Distance and enclosure had their compensations, in other words. These, too, had to be understood. Mitchell wanted her painting to stand apart from both the outside world and the tradition they recalled. ‘Painting is safety to me’, she wrote to Michael Goldberg. ‘Make me a house of many stretchers’.²⁸² She enjoyed this image of shelter. She was still using it thirty years later, still talking about ‘a sort of scaffolding made of painting stretchers around a lot of coloured chaos’.²⁸³ As the 1950s progressed, her colour expanded and contracted, always in relation to the encompassing white surrounds and the ultimate boundary marked by the framing edge. This dialectic reached a crux in those apocalyptic paintings – represented pre-eminently in these

²⁸⁰ Woolf, *The Waves*, p.122.

²⁸¹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe: II*, p.253.

²⁸² Mitchell quoted in Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, p.696.

²⁸³ Michaud, ‘Conversations with Joan Mitchell’, n.p.

early years by the small diptych *The Bridge*, but which culminated in the following decade with *Girolata Triptych* (fig.3.14, 1963), *First Cypress* (fig.3.15, c.1964), and *Chicago* (1966-7) – in which colour seems to gather itself into a writhing, textured mass that dashes itself to pieces against the side of the framing rectangle. In *Girolata*, for instance, the central mass of blues and olive greens is sliced off at its left-hand edge by a white vertical that directly mimics the limits imposed, six inches further to the right, by those of the canvas. The same is true of the right-hand edge of *First Cypress*. These are the paintings in which colour comes closest (but never close enough) to bursting its bounds. The multi-panel format of *The Bridge* dramatises this threat of escape. The blue-black slash must have felt unacceptably liberatory, smashed into the edge of its right-hand canvas. Hung alone, it would have implied lateral expansion, a line extending beyond the bounds of the frame, linking inside to outside. Hung alongside its left-hand pendant, a block of white shuts off its trajectory, emphatic as a full-stop.

Competition as the Test of Truth

Like others in the 1950s, Mitchell and Hartigan were dealing with the historicisation of modernism, its formulation into a consistent tradition. The metaphor of the picture framed on the wall allowed each to locate their own painting in a critical relation to this tradition, in line with the Proustian idea of artworks as at war with one another. In Mitchell's case, this meant an emphasis on distance and isolation. She positioned the artist as an outsider to the lineage of Monet and Matisse, cut off from its colours, strolling disinterestedly through a gallery. Like Proust or Woolf, she transfigured this withdrawal into a new productivity, a new sexual politics. Hartigan reflected on the same process, although in paintings like *On Orchard Street*, she moved the other way – full tilt towards the tradition marked by her predecessors. Her paintings are meditations – often embarrassingly so – on the effects of too

much proximity, of too deep an immersion in the painting and practices of the past. The windows she recalled were not Mitchell's dense embrasures, steamed or frosted, that placed the view beyond in doubt. They were shop windows, so wide that their margins escaped the visual field, glittering with the abundance of wares made available by the devices of a revived modernism. The block colours, thick contours, and still-life subjects of paintings like *Giftwares* and *Homage to Matisse* made this overlap between modernist tradition and contemporary commodities clear: Lower East Side commerce aflame with the colours of the Riviera. They revelled in kitsch. Her pronouncements often did the same. She could sound as if, by repetition alone, art could or should win some kind of 'triumph over the sordidness of the Lower East Side'.²⁸⁴ Doubtless she really believed this. Perhaps the critics did too. They cooed over her 'sublimation' of the Lower East Side, over the beautifying effects of 'segments of reality dipped into vivid colour'.²⁸⁵ 'She triumphs', writes one modern commentator, 'in her ability to find excitement in sordid surroundings'.²⁸⁶ There is something reactionary and vulgar in such sentiments. They embody the worst end of that aspect of abstract expressionism defined, as Clark puts it, by 'the style of a certain petty bourgeoisie's aspiration to aristocracy, to a totalising cultural power': proletarian excess transfigured by middlebrow taste.²⁸⁷ But the paintings themselves were never so sure (which is to say, in Clark's words, that they are constantly encountering 'the false underlying the vehement').²⁸⁸ They thematised modernism's availability, the process of its commodification, the location of its masterpieces on the wall – but they were also ruthless in exposing the complications that accompanied this altered status.

²⁸⁴ Mattison, *Grace Hartigan*, p.40.

²⁸⁵ Robert M. Coates, 'The Art Galleries: Excursions (and Alarums) Abroad, *The New Yorker* (6 June 1959), p.151. Helmi Gasser cited in *The New American Painting: As Shown in Eight European Countries 1958-1959*, ed. Dorothy Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), p.7

²⁸⁶ Mattison, *Grace Hartigan*, p.40.

²⁸⁷ T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p.389.

²⁸⁸ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p.382.

Listen to Hartigan's description of visiting her painting *River Bathers* (fig.3.18, 1953) in the fall of 1954 where it hung at the apex of MoMA's massive *XXVth Anniversary Exhibition*. The show was curated by Barr and Dorothy Miller. Each floor was organised around stages in the development of modernism: impressionism first; then expressionism and *neue sachlichkeit*; finally, on the third floor, cubism and abstraction. Abstract expressionism came last, an implicit culmination. 'I rushed up', she wrote,

through the rooms, from the great Picassos to the cubists, futurists, supremists [sic] – a room of mediocre European “abstract expressionism”, then a lot of American mush with the beautiful red Gorky, – the Pollocks & DeK's in a room not open yet – and the final room, Kline, Rothko, Still, Baziotes and me. The picture was a shock, especially the colour intensity. Still and Rothko look pale by comparison. It is a beautiful picture, it has everything that is young in me, and ecstatic.²⁸⁹

Of note here is not just the historicism summoned by Barr's and Miller's curation – the genealogy leading all the way 'from the great Picassos' to 'me'. This was already implicit in Hartigan's painting, which is flagrant in its imitation of a long tradition of modernist bather scenes, Matisse's *Bathers by a River* (fig.3.19, 1917) in particular (but behind that, Picasso, Cézanne, even Renoir). More striking is Hartigan's implication that to participate in this illustrious heritage was also to change the way it was seen, to make 'Still and Rothko look pale by comparison'. Looking at the installation photographs (fig.3.16), it is easy to see what she meant. *River Bathers* was hung across from Rothko's *No.10*. The pairing can hardly have been more deliberate. Speaking to opposing versions of modernism, the two paintings would nevertheless have picked up and reflected one another's colours. Rothko's muted ochres are there in the body of Hartigan's bather second from left and the streaky verticals that make up her background. The river in which her three rearmost bathers stand would have chimed with the thin blue aureole that skirts *No.10*'s edges. For Greenberg, the effect of a painting like

²⁸⁹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.151.

Rothko's was to refuse the idea of the canvas as a delimited, illusionistic space, to produce 'a vision keyed to the primacy of colour'.²⁹⁰ That he was hasty in this judgement, that Rothko's paintings contained a good deal of illusionism, has been clear for a while. It is easier with hindsight to agree with Leo Steinberg's judgement, 'that the Abstract Expressionists were still nature painters', than it is to go along with Greenberg in arguing that Rothko's paintings 'are hardly easel pictures' anymore.²⁹¹ No very great distance separates the naturalistic colours and vague horizontal forms of *No. 10* from those of Mitchell's allusive landscapes. The hanging arrangement at MoMA forced this point. Opposite Rothko's painting, *River Bathers* would have pulled his colours back towards the mimetic associations, the beaches and sandbars, from which, hung alone, they might narrowly have escaped.

The contrast was clear: *River Bathers* against *No. 10*. Mimesis against abstraction. Historicism against innovation. Repetition and plurality against high modern asceticism and restraint. Of course, the oppositions would not have been so absolute as they seem when parsed into language. Miller and Barr's point was comparative as much as it was disjunctive: they meant to generate a dialogue between the two paintings. Barr was never such a purist as he has been made out to be. He thought modernism came in all shapes and sizes, that 'purification, however courageous, was also impoverishment'.²⁹² At MoMA, he and Miller pitched Hartigan's painting against Rothko's. In so doing, they responded to a historicist dynamic already present within *River Bathers*. The painting was a riff on Matisse's *Bathers by a River*, after all. It embodied a competitive, repetitive, mimetic attitude towards the work of other artists. Hartigan had been impressed with *Bathers by a River* when she saw it in

²⁹⁰ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p.129.

²⁹¹ Leo Steinberg, 'Other Criteria' in *Other Criteria*, p.84; Greenberg, "'American-Type" Painting', p.227.

²⁹² Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.74.

Barr's 1951 retrospective. She kept a postcard of the painting in her studio, to study it. *River Bathers* was the result of two years spent looking at the same image. 'Oh Matisse', sighed the painter Jane Freilicher when she saw the painting in Hartigan's studio, 'that's what comes from association with Alfred Barr'.²⁹³ Hartigan was upset by the judgement, although, as she admitted, she had little right to be. Her painting repeated many elements of Matisse's original composition: the four bathers, the shallow space, the river, the foliage, the verticality. On the other hand, as she might have pointed out to Freilicher, it did so in a manner that simultaneously reflected on the process of sustained looking that enabled its repetitions. Even as it repeated Matisse's composition, *River Bathers* reversed its affective impact.

Matisse's original canvas incarnated a certain hostility to vision. *Bathers by a River* was his response to Picasso's *Demoiselles*, his attempt to subject his own painting to the structural demands he saw there. This involved the compression of figures and spaces to fit the demands of a flattened surface, stretched as tight as the skin of a drum. All depth, all atmospherics, were sucked away. Bodies were enclosed in rigid outlines, deformed by what Yve-Alain Bois calls 'a progressive forcing of plane geometry... as if they were being put into a straitjacket'.²⁹⁴ Bois points out the preference for silhouette over contour that crept into Matisse's art at this point, most obviously in the women's 'featureless faces'.²⁹⁵ The same demands regulated the depiction of bodies and spaces. These became all outline, all surface. The bather second from right, who clasps her hands and extends her arms like a golfer lining up to putt, has had her spine ironed straight, her left shoulder clicked back until it occupies two places at once: anatomy trumped by consistency of silhouette. Strange things have happened to the picture space. This is no longer conceived as a homogeneous, three-

²⁹³ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.81.

²⁹⁴ Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, p.15.

²⁹⁵ Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, p.192.

dimensional medium, something uniform and unifying within which actions and figures might add up to a coherent whole. It has become two-dimensional. The vertical division of the canvas into block-coloured bands tenses the surface into a succession of wafer-thin, overlapping planes. Where they do appear, the signs of spatial recession generate something more like parody than illusion. It is impossible to imagine communication between the rightmost woman, who stands like a pillar stretched the length of the canvas, indexing its dimensions at this point of maximum proximity, and the golfer to her left, shut off in rigid contours against her spectral white ground; likewise the golfer is divided from the smallest woman, enclosed by black in whatever of 'background' the painting allows for. This last woman looks as if she has been shrunk and placed halfway up the canvas entirely to convey the absurdity of a term like 'depth' in a painting given over so completely to surface design. As with the sequence of fronds that begins in the blue section at right and continues, in diminishing sizes, in the white and black sections further to the left, Matisse undercuts the possibility that his figures might be read in terms of illusionistic depth by organising them so emphatically within the sequence of vertical sections. Greenberg surely had such painting in mind when he wrote that abstract expressionism never came close to European modernism in the elimination of '*trompe-l'oeil* illusion', that – in this respect, at least – the diagrammatic flatness of the first half of the century had never been surpassed.²⁹⁶

With everything on the surface, nothing is hidden: that is Matisse's claim. Depth, on the other hand, as Greenberg knew, implies concealment, a reverse side to the objects portrayed. Depth is latent. It calls out for interpretation. And interpretation generates meaning, narrative, drama. *Bathers by a River* showed what became of meaning without depth, without oxygen. The results are ghastly. The colourless snake, rearing in the middle,

²⁹⁶ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p.124.

pokes fun at would-be iconographers – at the notion that anyone might read a garden of Eden narrative from its flat, vacant, schematic nudes. Barr wrote that the snake ‘provides a certain focus for the attention of the bathers and for the eyes of the onlooker’, but nothing in the way of narrative or ‘drama’.²⁹⁷ He thought this absence of significance typified the painting. Matisse’s snake is a transparent ghost, his foliage a meaningless, repetitive wall. The pineapple on which the leftmost woman stands is as un-Edenic as could be: thick and grey, like a slab of cement. Even the river has been stripped back to a flat, blue, vertical band, pinned like a ribbon to the canvas edge.

What space is left for vision here? Matisse gave his women no eyes. What use would they have had for eyes? They occupy a sequence of discreet two-dimensional segments fixed emphatically to the surface of his canvas. Vision implies three dimensions, but beyond the two-dimensional membrane there is nothing for them, or us, to look at. It is in this sense that Bois’ observation, that Matisse ‘sets out to blind us’ rings true.²⁹⁸ *Bathers by a River* opens no depths within which vision might operate.

Everything is altered, however, the moment one sets out, as Hartigan did, to depict not the painting itself, but its afterlife, the dynamics of observation attendant on its display. For with the appearance of a viewer on the scene – and Hartigan was, self-consciously and before anything else, a viewer of modernism – we are once again dealing with three dimensions. She often insisted on this double character to her paintings, that the figures she put into them were self-portraits of herself in the act of creating the work: ‘I’m painting

²⁹⁷ Barr, *Matisse: His Art and his Public* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), p.190.

²⁹⁸ Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, p.29.

myself actually in the painting as well as standing outside, painting the painting'.²⁹⁹ This imposes a different set of obligations on the figures: to embody the return of vision in the act of painting, rather than its impossibility. In *River Bathers*, this responsibility is borne out pre-eminently in the features of her leftmost bather, modelled supposedly on those of Frank O'Hara. In Matisse's painting, this figure's back is turned. Perhaps she looks towards the woman to her right, although it is difficult to credit this degree of narrative in a painting so devoted to blind, rigid structure; surely the jagged foliage, erupting between the two women, would block and frustrate whatever interaction is implied? Better, I think, to see a kind of bleak pun in the way in which Matisse rhymes the back of his gazer's head with the faces of his other women: all are equally featureless, all equally unseeing. Hartigan's O'Hara figure is still indexed to her picture surface like one of Matisse's women. His feet rest on its base. His head seems glued to its top edge. But now he sports a pair of goggling eyes that bulge half-comically towards the figures bathing in the river. These eyes, a surrogate for the viewer's, signal the reorientation of Matisse's composition. This has been rotated 180 degrees, into shallow, uniform depth. The leftmost bather needs his wide eyes. For him, as for the viewer, the action is taking place elsewhere, in depth, away from the surface indexed by his body. And he wears his expression of bug-eyed alarm because there is so much – too much – to see. The river is horizontal again, physical. You can stand in it. The woman at right dips her toes in to make sure.

Intensities shift with this sudden injection of vision and space. The markers of pictorial meaning that had been evacuated from *Bathers by a River* come flooding back. Matisse made his women operate as discreet structural components of a taughtened surface.

²⁹⁹ Sharon Hirsch, *Grace Hartigan: Painting Art History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), p.35.

He gave them no space to interact, no air to breathe. This is the source of their monstrous solitude, what Barr called their ‘monumental dignity’.³⁰⁰ Hartigan’s painting is full of air. Each brushstroke fills it with more light, more space, more scintillation. Her figures are no longer self-sufficient. If the signs of ‘loneliness, alienation and anxiety’ – signs that she always insisted were the keys to her work – are to appear, they will need to be put there, added to each woman like a garment thrown around the shoulders.³⁰¹ They will need to be tangible. This accounts for her painting’s keyed up, overblown dramatics. Sunlight hits its figures with the force of a solid object. Light pulverises. The bather second from left, who leans her head back and shakes her fists at the sky, is unimaginable coming from Matisse. Even the young Cézanne might have found her excess of expression a bit direct. Each part of O’Hara’s body writhes in contradictory directions. His gender is unfixed; nothing seems left of him besides his staring eyes. The green of the landscape behind pokes right through his body. There are hundreds of candidates for Matisse’s snake; it rears its head in each long, curving brushstroke.

We are in a better position now to understand the challenge posed to Rothko’s painting at MoMA. *Bathers by a River*, the picture of ascetic, structural restraint, was revived, but in a mode of terminal excess. *River Bathers* is stuffed with possible meanings, riddled with prototypes. It is an endless field for interpretation. No wonder Hartigan’s observing figure stands so pathetically transfixed. He is a surrogate for the post-war museumgoer, and for the artist herself, delighted and astonished before the massive weight of precedent.

³⁰⁰ Barr, *Matisse*, p.190.

³⁰¹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.94.

Hartigan would repeat this device: the observer-figure who stares in what could either be joy or horror at an overwhelming diversity of colour and technique. It allowed her to transform her painting into a sustained reflection on modernism's contemporary situation. *River Bathers* does more than just repeat Matisse's prototype, more than transform his technique into an array of ready-made, reified procedures. It doubles back on itself, reflecting upon the museological apparatus, the framing discourse, and the processes of observation that offered tradition up as a plethora of models for contemporary practice. Like Mitchell's whitened surrounds, which summoned the resources of the past by framing them, Hartigan's painting insisted on the proximity of a specific mode of viewing to contemporary painting. They made the framed, linear succession of gallery pictures, rationalised and sequenced in the context of museum display into a *topos*. Observer-figures recurred in her paintings of the late 1950s. They shadowed and undercut her more direct celebrations of modernist tradition as commodified plenty. Often, as in *River Bathers*, they peered inwards towards the abundance from a position close to the picture plane. At other times they were themselves subsumed within the display, staring out, meeting the viewer's eye from a place at its centre.

In *East Side Peddler* (fig.3.21), the observer-figure occupies the same position as O'Hara in *River Bathers*. His head is turned in the same manner, his body flush to the picture plane, and he flashes a pair of dilated eyes towards the rest of the scene. This resembles the abstract arrangements of colour blocks she would employ for in *On Orchard Street* a few months later. But in this case the overlapping, rectilinear planes are set back in a shallow depth, behind the observer, into which he stares. Another window opens in the centre of the canvas, within which more abstract figures are displayed, miming the organisational effects of the picture frame. Hartigan's peddler is the viewer of *On Orchard Street* made visible, the connoisseur of modernism who strolls through the marketplace, picking up goods. At the

same time, however, he is shown as one of those goods, his body decorated with the same squares of white and red. He is hardly differentiated from the wares he observes. No Proustian distance is achieved here: the figure is overwhelmed by the plethora towards which he looks.

In other paintings she pushed this idea further, submerging her observer-figure in a shifting morass of coloured planes and artistic borrowings. So, in *Chinatown* (fig.3.20) a small doll – modernist surrogate for self *par excellence* – stares out from dead centre of another bright red still life. A stroke of yellow has almost effaced her body. Another doll, perched on what looks like a handcart is just discernible at the centre of *City Life* (fig.3.22). Her eyes have been crossed out in a thick black line. In *Billboard* (fig.3.23) a grinning face looks down from above, while a diminished figure – an echo of the observers in *River Bathers* and *East Side Peddler*, shrunk to the size of a novelty nutcracker – looks in from the side. In each painting, the figures of observation are effaced and diminished by the exuberance of the scene they look on, rendered an interchangeable part of its plenty.

Approaching solidarity

Hartigan once wrote that Mitchell's brand of abstraction was too easy: 'talent' and 'virtuosity', certainly, but 'without the real thing'.³⁰² For her part, Mitchell made fun of a painterly practice that involved the hagiographic listing of so many great names.³⁰³ There is nothing to suggest that either woman harboured a great deal of respect for the other's work. This is no surprise; they could hardly afford to. The environment in which they operated was intensely competitive. Work could only be sold through galleries that enforced strict, slim

³⁰² Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.22.

³⁰³ Katy Siegel, 'St. Mark's' in *Joan Mitchell*, ed. Roberts and Siegel, p.35.

quotas on the number of women artists represented. ‘Two women to a gallery’, as Mitchell later recalled, ‘if they were lucky’.³⁰⁴ When he got drunk, Greenberg liked to announce that he hoped, one day, to be the contemporary of the first great woman painter. ‘What shit’, Hartigan wrote, ‘he’d be the first to attack’.³⁰⁵ The modernist tradition that Greenberg helped to elaborate during the 1950s, to which Mitchell and Hartigan responded and in which they sought participation – that elite, austere lineage of European masters canonised over the course of the 1950s – was also the one which he helped to prune of its female component. Neither of them sought to reverse this work of historical omission through any kind of public pronouncement. The models they repeated, the archetypes they invoked, these were Picasso’s, Monet’s, and – above all – Matisse’s. There was no mention of Mary Cassatt or Georgia O’Keeffe or Sonia Delaunay. I do not think there could have been. Beauvoir would have pointed out the lack of opportunities for collective identification offered by the situation. ‘Mitchell’, as Amy Sillman puts it bluntly, ‘was no feminist’.³⁰⁶ The same was true of Hartigan. Both of them wanted to wrest acceptance from a nominally genderless discourse (although as Beauvoir would point out, to be genderless is the privilege of the dominant gender). Neither had much time for female identification; it took years for Hartigan to shed the pseudonym ‘George’. But the paintings they made during the 1950s *were* feminist, in exactly the manner demanded by Beauvoir: they constructed and interrogated forms of externality to an exclusionary discourse. In Mitchell’s paintings, modernism is figured as a distant exterior, shut out by frames and windows and smothering fog. In Hartigan’s, it is an exuberant, commodified bounty that leaks beyond its frame and contaminates its viewer. But in both cases it is figured as a threat and an excess, something that the artist can never quite

³⁰⁴ Nochlin, *Oral History Interview with Joan Mitchell*.

³⁰⁵ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.18.

³⁰⁶ Amy Sillman, ‘AbEx and Disco Balls: In Defence of Abstract Expressionism II’, *Artforum*, vol.49, no.10 (Summer 2011), p.321.

control. In both women's canvases, these forms of exteriority and difference are transformed into a kind of artistic production whose dynamism inverts the terms of exclusion. It is by looking hard at modernist tradition, by repeating its tropes and figures in a manner that conveyed the impossibility of this endeavour, that Hartigan and Mitchell made paintings that asserted their place in a critical history.

Chapter 3: Rose Piper: Commodification as Recollection?

*'Cause ain't nobody perfect
'Cause ain't nobody free.*

– Nina Simone,
“Blues for Mama”

Death and the Empress

Rose Piper remains a neglected figure in the history of modernism, perhaps because her work falls on the wrong side of a basic conceptual divide: between artwork and commodity. The imperfect nature of this distinction – the fact that any modernism worth the name exists somewhere *within* the gap between artistic and mass production – has hardly seemed like justification for a life's work passed deep in the latter's embrace. Piper spent three decades as a waged worker in commodity manufacture, designing polyester knits for New York's garment industry. These were bookended by two key exhibitions of her art, both held in New York, the first in 1947, the second in 1989. Moving between the stages of her career generates a series of shocks: one passes from the sleek brilliance of her early oils, to the industrial shimmer of her fabrics, to the garishness of her late acrylics. It is difficult to know what to do with such shocks. They seem irreconcilable: enough to burst the façade of any linear, progressive history of objects. What does Piper the fabric designer, one-time Vice President of Knits for Jarmel Knitting Mills, have to say to the painter of blues music and social protest? What became of her early paintings' interrogations of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance – of their complicated engagements with modernists like Bessie Smith and Aaron Douglas? Is the same retrospection to be found in the later paintings? Might it be found in the polyesters? And what would a hermeneutic capable of holding oil paint, polyester, and acrylic in view simultaneously even look like?

On the few occasions art historians have paused to consider Piper, they have preferred to avoid such questions. It has seemed more prudent to remain with the early paintings, to consign both her fabrics and the late work in which she reflected upon them to oblivion. Everything she produced after 1947, when she returned to the US after spending time in Paris on a Rosenwald grant, has been written off as a tragic waste of talent. She emerges into visibility only in her first guise, as a brilliant young artist bending modernism towards the articulation of black women's experience. Scholars such as Graham Lock and Ann Gibson have parsed Piper's early paintings in such terms, probing them for signs of black feminist consciousness and women's self-affirmation. For Gibson, they broach both a 'veiled resistance to white economic domination' and 'the taboo subject of female eroticism, which was made explicit in the tradition of women blues singers like Bessie Smith'.³⁰⁷ For Lock, they articulate a 'female gaze ... inspired by the spirit of assertiveness [Piper] heard in the blueswomen'.³⁰⁸ Piper's paintings, he goes on, resist 'the kind of gender stereotyping that characterised women as emotionally dependent on men'.³⁰⁹

The drawbacks to this kind of affirmative criticism, which identifies a clear set of active, political motives by abstracting out historical detail, are in its omissions. It is not only the case that, by severing Piper's early paintings from the mutilating circumstances of economic necessity against which she staked out the rest of her life, her later work becomes invisible. More seriously, the early paintings are themselves mutilated. Stripped of their critical negativity, they are indexed to the old bourgeois myth of art as self-realisation. Their

³⁰⁷ Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p.139.

³⁰⁸ Graham Lock, 'Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper's Blues and Negro Folk Songs Paintings of the 1940s' in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray, Oxford, 2009, p.52.

³⁰⁹ Lock, 'Blues on the Brush', p.57.

interrogations of modernist tradition and of the various mediations by which this tradition was made available to post-war artists drop out of consideration. This is to say that Lock and Gibson are correct to surmise that something new was going on in such paintings as *St. Louis Cyclone Blues* (fig.4.2, 1947), but wrong to read this as all positivity. Gibson argues that this kind of painting, by ‘depict[ing] sexualised women in specific situations’ refused bourgeois notions of pliant femininity.³¹⁰ She would presumably see in the woman’s upturned face, bathed blue in the light of the window, that same black female ‘independence and assertiveness – indeed defiance – bordering on and sometimes erupting into violence’ that Angela Davis has described as the particular essence of women’s blues music.³¹¹ But neither Gibson nor Lock is open to the woman’s other face, black rather than blue, which emerges where the flick of her hair stands out against the wall behind her to form an exaggerated mouth. This second face pulls the first downwards, away from the window, back into the darkness and poverty of the figure’s surroundings: the low ceiling, bare floorboards, and single bed, blue, cold, and hard as a sheet of slate. Here, Piper’s painting is closer to that other side of blues music, to which Davis is also sensitive: the side that calls out for political action, not by embodying an activist consciousness that did not yet exist, but by naming the problems generated by oppression. ‘The problem is named’, writes Davis, ‘whether it be eviction, prostitution, imprisonment, or homelessness brought on by floods and the resulting failure of the government to furnish emergency assistance to black people. Such issues were often stated in such a way that the naming of the problem was likely to provoke at least a rudimentary community consciousness of the need for eventual social transformation’.³¹² Blind to this second face, which turns towards the miserable state of life under conditions of

³¹⁰ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, p.139.

³¹¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p.21.

³¹² Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p.118.

oppression, Lock and Gibson miss the central point raised by Piper's life and work: that moments of creative self-affirmation, artistic or otherwise, are few and fragile, grounded on the same iron laws of economic necessity that deny creative freedom to the majority of people. 'No emancipation without that of society', as Adorno wrote in 1947, the year in which Piper's exhibition *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* opened at the RoKo Gallery, Michael Freilich's progressive Greenwich Village venue.³¹³ And although Piper travelled a great distance away from the kinds of European High Modernism he advocated, towards the kinds of commodified black art he despised, Adorno's maxim could stand for every one of the paintings she exhibited there, each of which reflects on its own entanglement within the apparatuses of economic and political exploitation it sets out to critique.

The paintings Piper exhibited at RoKo were complicated objects. Each was a departure from her training. A product of the Art Students League, like so many American artists who came of age in the 1940s, her roots were in social realism. Her 1945 Rosenwald Fund application had announced her intention 'to present an intimate and detailed account of... the influence that city life has had on the great masses of rural Negroes who have migrated to the cities during this war'.³¹⁴ She proposed to collect material directly, 'in the form of sketches of street scenes in New York's ghetto areas and the people who live in these areas: soldiers, blues singers, street vendors, soap box orators, prostitutes – people living on the brink of poverty'.³¹⁵ Although her paintings never lost this orientation towards the visual aspects of social and economic oppression, by 1946, when she wrote her second Rosenwald application, Piper's emphasis had shifted. She still spoke about the 'trampled-upon, hopeless

³¹³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.184.

³¹⁴ Rose Piper, 'Statement of Plan of Work' (1945), Julius Rosenwald Fund Collection, Box 440, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee, n.p.

³¹⁵ Piper, 'Statement of Plan of Work' (1945).

people who will be part of my painting – strangers, all, to peace and security. People to whom art means little but who are an integral part of its development’.³¹⁶ But the notion of direct, realist access to people’s lives was gone. Instead of sketches from the ghetto, she proposed to study music, to ‘do a series of paintings depicting first, the folk Negro, urban and rural as he comments on himself in his blues’.³¹⁷ The distance this approach implied – the mediated character it imparted to her painting – acknowledged Piper’s own detachment from the people she wanted to represent. A second-generation migrant, her connection to the rural southerners and first-generation urban migrants towards whom her paintings gravitated was arrived at second-hand, through participation in the later stages of the Harlem Renaissance. ‘My family came out of the south’, she recalled in 1989. ‘But what I knew about the south I learned from stories told by my mother and father and various relatives. I had to research the background for the Blues and work songs I used in my paintings. I didn’t know where to find authentic recordings. Sterling Brown told me to go to Harlem record stores and ask for “Race” records. It was a new experience for me’.³¹⁸

Regardless of subject matter, each of the fourteen paintings displayed at RoKo approached black life indirectly, because each (with the significant exception of *The Death of Bessie Smith*) was a visual reworking of popular music rather than a realist attempt to catch life on the wing. The music stood in for life by acting as Piper’s model. A viewer who knew Smith’s ‘Empty Bed Blues’ well enough to recall its bitterly ironic tale of a woman who brags so much about her lover’s prowess that another woman seduces him would have been able to locate the locked fingers and vacant stare of Piper’s seated figure (fig.4.3, 1946)

³¹⁶ Piper, ‘Statement of Plan of Work’ (1946), Julius Rosenwald Fund Collection, Box 440, Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee, n.p.

³¹⁷ Piper, ‘Statement of Plan of Work’ (1946).

³¹⁸ Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, p.111.

within a framework of broken relationships and sexual licence. This viewer would have known the central figure in *Back Water* (fig.4.4, 1946), who stands before the wreck of the Great Mississippi Flood, as the same one who sings, in Smith's 'Backwater Blues', that 'Backwater blues done call me to pack my things and go | 'Cause my house fell down | And I can't live there no mo'.³¹⁹ Yet in another sense, the music was itself displaced by being painted. With each reproduction, it was altered. The tone of 'Empty Bed Blues', on Smith's original rendition, exceeds definition as simply tragic. Like so much of her art it quivers with innuendo: 'When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue | My springs is getting rusty, sleeping single like I do'.³²⁰ Piper's painting can muster none of this levity in its portrayal of a single woman, alone in a tiny room, staring into space. Smith's anthropomorphic bed springs, rusted up for lack of love, have given way to an angular metal footboard whose bars are more like those of a prison.

By altering the emotional content of Smith's songs, Piper's paintings insisted on their own status as imperfect reproduction. Through this very inaccuracy, her paintings drew closer to the music they took as their subject. They mimed the performativity and reproducibility of the blues, qualities derived in part from the music's folk roots, in part from its commodification following the 1920s. Songs were treated not as autonomous entities but as common property. Emphasis fell on the musician's interpretation, rather than the song itself. Piper alluded to this separation between performance and written music when she called blues music 'subjective, highly personal and charged with emotion'.³²¹ Whatever their popular origin, these qualities came to align with the interests of publishers who were able to choose what music artists recorded according to commercial or political – rather than artistic

³¹⁹ Bessie Smith, 'Backwater Blues' in Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p.263.

³²⁰ Smith, 'Empty Bed Blues' in Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p.277.

³²¹ Piper, 'Statement of Plan of Work' (1946).

– imperatives. Columbia Records’ refusal in 1939 to record Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’ is only the most famous example of this practice. It was for such capitulation to mass production, to ‘the capital power of the publishers... dissemination through radio, and above all the sound film’ that Adorno damned the blues and its progeny, jazz. ‘Jazz is not what it is’, he wrote, ‘rather, it is what it is used for’.³²² Defenders of this most controversial corner of Adorno’s work have always pointed to his loathing of mass production in order to defend him against the less palatable – and perhaps more accurate – charge of racism. In Jameson’s words, ‘the history of musical development which Adorno has given us... is none other than the struggle between music and the commodity form’.³²³ And it is true that even the more repellent passages of ‘On Jazz’ are directed against the commodification of blackness that accompanied the popularisation of black music, rather than against black culture itself.

This will not do, of course. As Saidiya Hartman reminds us, the histories of blackness and commodification are hardly so easily separated. To condemn commodification in the art of those whose ancestors were themselves ‘human commodities’ is to miss the critical force of the music.³²⁴ And this is exactly what Adorno did when he returned to black music in *Minima Moralia*, in order to attack once more its reproduction within the levelled terrain of mass culture. Criticising the ‘standardisation’ undergone by even ‘progressive’ American intellectuals, he walked his reader through the homogenous interiors of their apartments. On the walls, he pointed out ‘the deceptively faithful colour reproductions of famous Van Goghs

³²² Adorno, ‘On Jazz’, trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *Discourse*, vol.12, no.1 (Fall-Winter 1989-90), p.47.

³²³ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p.395. This is not to say that Jameson defends Adorno’s entire philosophy of music. Recently he has criticised its ‘tendency to dismiss all of manipulated mass culture as false consciousness that leaves unused and deprives of their very reason for being the very rich instruments of formal analysis also developed by Adorno’. Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p.334.

³²⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p.6.

like the *Sunflowers* or the *Café at Arles*, on the bookshelf the boiled-down socialism... Also the gramophone with... a few noisy jazz records that make you feel at once collective, audacious, and comfortable'.³²⁵ His point, obvious enough, was that regardless of an artwork's putative content, mass production and consumption drained its capacity to generate dissonance:

Every opinion earns the approbation of friends, every argument is known by them beforehand. That all cultural products, even non-conformist ones, have been incorporated into the distribution-mechanisms of large-scale capital, that in the most developed country a product that does not bear the imprimatur of mass-production can scarcely reach a reader, viewer, listener at all, denies deviationary longings their subject matter in advance.³²⁶

It seems difficult to argue with Adorno when one recalls the millions of identical *Sunflowers* – those seemingly inexhaustible paradigms of modern decorative *kitsch* – that still line interiors across the world. Surely such standardised reproduction banalises whatever antisocial force modernism possessed. Yet Piper's *Empty Bed Blues*, and the musical tradition it mediates, pushes back against the brevity of such a judgement. It suggests that difference, rather than sameness, might be the fruit of reproduction and commodification. There is nothing necessarily liberatory in this; race and class are, after all, mutually enforcing, categorical differences upon which the more homogenising effects of capitalism continue to thrive. But it at least suggests that there is more to mass-produced art than standardisation, that the gramophone record might generate its own forms of dissonance. As Fred Moten puts it, articulating a black aesthetic that speaks both through and against the commodity, 'the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist'.³²⁷

³²⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.220.

³²⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.220.

³²⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p.1.

This sensitivity to resistant objects runs through much of the period's radical black art. It links Piper to others from her generation – to James Baldwin, for instance, with whom she was friendly for a period when both were based in New York. Baldwin opened spaces for resistant commodities each time the reproduced lyrics of black music began to punch holes in his writing. There is a scene in *Another Country* in which the jazz musician Rufus, homeless, desperate, and tormented by his awareness of racial difference visits the home of his best friend Vivaldo, a white aspiring writer. Like Adorno, Baldwin locates his readers inside a progressive American intellectual's apartment. Here too the records stacked against the wall are supposed, when played, to generate a space of commonality, one in which both men can feel (to recall Adorno's phrase) 'at once collective, audacious, and comfortable'. Vivaldo loves Rufus. He wants to help his friend. So he puts on a Bessie Smith record and they talk. But what emerges, between the speech and the music, is the distance separating the two men, a gap the coordinates of which are marked, but not clarified, by race:

Vivaldo said nothing. His face was pale and angry and he concentrated on looking through his records. Finally he put one on the machine; it was James Pete Johnson and Bessie Smith battling out *Backwater Blues*... *There's thousands of people*, Bessie now sang, *ain't got no place to go*, and for the first time Rufus began to hear in the severely understated monotony of this blues, something which spoke to his troubled mind. The piano bore the singer witness, stoic and ironic. Now that Rufus himself had no place to go – 'cause my house fell down and I can't live there no mo', sang Bessie – he heard the line and the tone of the singer, and he wondered how others had moved beyond the emptiness and horror which faced him now... "I bet you won't believe this", he said, "but I loved Leona. I did". "Oh", said Vivaldo, "I believe you! Of course I believe you. That's what all the bleeding was about." He got up and turned the record over. Then there was silence, except for the voice of Bessie Smith. *When my bed get empty, make me feel awful mean and blue*, "Oh, sing it, Bessie", Vivaldo muttered. *My springs is getting rusty, sleeping single like I do*.³²⁸

Baldwin's scene unfolds on two levels. Sometimes the two men speak, each effort ending in the silence of incomprehension. Then the music emerges as a kind of second mediation, in which Rufus discerns the finality of his situation, its 'emptiness and horror', but Vivaldo

³²⁸ James Baldwin, *Another Country* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp.56-58.

hears neither Rufus nor the music (since to hear the music properly in this context would be to recognise in it the same things that Rufus does. This, Vivaldo, who still wants to save his friend's life, will not do). He cannot understand why Rufus is destroying himself; he dooms him by this very incomprehension. At such points, while the characters' speech fights against the logic of the narrative, Smith's italicised lyrics are at one with it. As in Piper's painting, they are stripped of ambiguity and innuendo. Instead, they give voice to the deathliness that drives the novel's first section, in which the opening refrain, snatched from Holiday's 'All of Me' – *'you took the best, so why not take the rest?'* – heralds its close, with Rufus's suicide.³²⁹

Another Country was published in 1962. Smith and Holiday were both dead, destroyed in different ways by the racist, capitalist society within and against which they had launched their music. By having his character recognise himself in the recorded lyrics of dead black women, rather than in the speech of his living white friend, Baldwin acknowledged the continuing force of racial difference that interrupts comprehension and dooms the relationships in his novel to breakup and death. 'The problem is named', as Davis would have it. Resolution remains out of sight.

Although her exhibition took place fifteen years before the publication of Baldwin's novel, Piper too was looking back at the music of the dead, preserved in commodity form. Ma Rainey had died in 1939, Trixie Smith in 1943. And Bessie Smith, the one-time 'Empress of the Blues', had seen her extraordinary career wrecked during the Depression before being killed in a traffic accident outside Memphis in 1937. Although subsequently disproved, the tale that Smith had bled to death unnecessarily, having been turned away from a white

³²⁹ Baldwin, *Another Country*, p.1.

hospital, achieved widespread and enduring popularity because it chimed with the realities of a segregated America.³³⁰ By the late 1940s, Smith's death had come to symbolise both the aggravated character of racial discrimination in the Jim Crow South, and the passing of a more optimistic cultural moment, the Harlem Renaissance, when the overcoming of such barriers had seemed within the grasp of black artists and intellectuals. It is with this legacy that Piper signalled a re-engagement. The construction of an affirmative black aesthetic in Zora Neale Hurston's novels, the paintings of Aaron Douglas, and the poetry of Langston Hughes had each drawn on the dynamism of music like Smith's, to such an extent that Davis has argued for Smith's status as the paradigmatic Harlem Renaissance artist.³³¹ Hughes had voiced this link in 1926 when he called, in 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', for a black art orientated towards oral popular culture. Again, Smith was the fulcrum:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the coloured near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing *Water Boy*, and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.³³²

In his paintings Douglas sought the same contradictory beauty as Hughes and Smith: at once critical and optimistic, proletarian and high-cultural. It is difficult to exaggerate the influence that his images of black people wielding pickaxes, saxophones, and scientific instruments, had on Piper and others of her generation such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Sharon Patton has suggested that already, by 1930, the depiction of black faces, flat and in profile, had become so distinctive a signifier of Douglas's art that, when they appeared in the

³³⁰ Piper was still repeating the story in 1989. 'I was shocked', she told Gibson, 'when I learned that Bessie Smith had been allowed to bleed to death'. Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, p.223.

³³¹ 'Her music sought to accomplish the same goal as the visual and literary art associated with the Renaissance – the cultural articulation of African-American identities and consciousness' Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, p.144.

³³² Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', *The Nation*, vol.122 (23 June 1926), p.693.

work of other painters, they operated as ‘a tongue-in-cheek parody of the master of the New Negro artists’.³³³ Douglas made book illustrations, posters, record-covers, and easel paintings. But he is canonical for his murals. *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934), painted for the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, moved the viewer through a historical arc, beginning in an idealised Africa before traversing slavery, Reconstruction, and modernity. In each scene, upturned faces are silhouetted against the concentric rings of coloured light with which Douglas attempted to visualise black music, in his words ‘to objectify with paint and brush what I thought to be the visual emanations or expressions that came into view with the sounds’.³³⁴ Robert O’Meally has pointed out the technological aspect of this. It is, he suggests, unlikely that Douglas would have arrived at the notion of visualising music through circles were it not for ‘the new technology of the audio- recording – with its revolving cylinders and then its rotating flat disks of shellac, into which narrow wavy music-grooves had been cut’.³³⁵ Douglas’s musical ‘emanations’ operate in two senses, each of which transgresses the specificity of his medium. On the one hand they materialise the sounds of the musicians and instruments he depicts as the immediate products of musical performance: the plucking of a string or the blowing of a horn. On the other hand, they produce that emanation out of a second materiality: the inscribed, circular grooves of the vinyl record, what Adorno called its ‘thingness’.³³⁶

Douglas’s art can be said to anticipate Piper’s in its emphasis on the musical commodification brought about by the phonograph record, but whereas music is an often-

³³³ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.138.

³³⁴ Richard J. Powell, *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism*, (Washington, D.C.: Project for the Arts, 1989), p.35.

³³⁵ Robert G. O’Meally, ‘The Flat Plane, the Jagged Edge: Aaron Douglas’s Musical Art’, *American Studies*, vol.49, no.1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008), p.29.

³³⁶ ‘As an article, the record is already too old not to present us with its riddles, once one foregoes considering it as an art object and explores instead the contours of its thingness’. Adorno, ‘The Form of the Phonograph Record’, *October*, vol.55 (Winter 1990), p.58.

tragic presence in her paintings, in his it is redemptive. In *An Idyll of the Deep South* (fig.4.5 1934), his 'visual emanations' pulse across a scene in which the brutality of slavery is deferred, pushed to the edges of the composition (where it lingers in the form of the noose and the shovel) in favour of a moment of humanity, a gathering around the banjo. In *Song of the Towers* (fig.4.6, 1934), the soundwaves spring from the central figure's saxophone as he climbs a great mechanical cogwheel away from the fires of the south and the smog of urban poverty, towards a distant Statue of Liberty. Douglas was no naïve utopian. He knew that the grasping hands and belching chimneys with which he populated his foreground were realities for the black migrants celebrated in his painting. The year after he completed *Aspects of Negro Life* he joined the Communist Party. 'The Negro artist', he wrote in 1936, 'unlike the white artist, has never known the big house. He is essentially a product of the masses and can never take a position above or beyond their level'.³³⁷ This black proletarian viewpoint appears in the paintings as a kind of transformative, Communist optimism: in *Song of the Towers*, the cogwheel on which the saxophonist walks forms one circle and the musical emanations another. In the equivalence between the two, in their intersection, Douglas visualises both the roots of black cultural expression in the system of urban industrial capitalism and the potential for cultural expression to transform and transcend that system. Mechanisation and artistic expression harmonise with one another in the march towards freedom. This was the progressive core of Douglas's aesthetic, the notion of art as a participant in social change, what he called 'the will to self-expression, the spontaneous creativeness of the later 1920s, which spread vigorously throughout all the arts in an expression of anxiety and yearning from the soul of the Negro people'.³³⁸

³³⁷ Patton, *African-American Art*, p.144.

³³⁸ Cited in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*, (New York: Pantheon, 1993), p.132.

The paintings of *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* make frequent reference to Douglas; never cited by art historians like Gibson and Lock, he is at least as present in these paintings as Picasso, who always is. His attempt, so characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance, to capture music in paint inheres in the very conception of Piper's series. The upturned profiles with which he symbolised 'anxiety and yearning' recur in *St. Louis Cyclone Blues, I'm Gonna Take my Wings and Cleave the Air* (1947), *Long, Long Time to Freedom* (1947), and *Slow Down, Freight Train* (fig.4.7 1946-7). In repeating Douglas' tropes, however, Piper transformed them. She reversed the communist techno-optimism that pulsed through his work. A change of aspect often sufficed. It is through the bars of a cell that we glimpse a silhouetted black face in *Long, Long Time to Freedom* and even then, it belongs to someone in flight. In *Slow Down, Freight Train*, the return to Douglas's figure of the black migrant, via the theme of Trixie Smith's 'Freight Train Blues', is accomplished by a total reorientation of the picture-plane, now flipped 180-degrees. We are no longer looking forward towards the skyscrapers, statues, and shining cities with which Douglas populated his backgrounds, but backwards, as Piper's migrant raises his head in lament for the life he leaves behind. The next painting in the series, *Grievin' Hearted* (fig.4.8, 1947), showed the same figure, his dejected face thrust into the crook of an elbow. The woman in the background, casting a worried look backwards over her shoulder, stands for the viewer, who does the same. Piper said she was a self-portrait. And in *The Death of Bessie Smith* (fig.4.1), which was the culmination of Piper's deconstruction of Douglas's progressive message, we are no longer even looking backwards, but down, into the gutter. It is no coincidence that this, the outstanding work of Piper's *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* series, the painting in which all the desperate cynicism of her aesthetic was gathered together and spread flat across her canvas, was also the one in which she abandoned the correspondence that links each painting in her series to a specific

song.³³⁹ The bright blood that divides Smith's head from her neck and traces a filament down each of her arms makes it clear that, for all that this is a painting drenched in musical imagery, it is death that we are witnessing. Or rather, it is through death that music, in *The Death of Bessie Smith*, is made visible. Piper stages the reproduction of Smith's music and her death as two sides of the same process. The painting is overtly citational. In *Song of the Towers* the wheel on which the saxophonist walked had been a stepping-stone, *en route* to a better life. Douglas's cogwheel reappears here, as do his rotating sonic geometries. Smith is shown with her head thrown back, in profile, her lips parted in what could almost be song. At the same time, however, the painting pushes to breaking point the equivalence approached by Douglas: between the visualisation of music through paint and its mechanical reproduction. The black half-disk that spins inside a yellow one just below Smith's chin brings us closer to the look of gramophone record and turntable than Douglas ever dared go. His cogwheel and soundwaves have merged into a single mechanical form which sprouts metallic teeth, encircles Smith's head, and cuts through her body.

In Piper's image, Smith is singing as she dies. The abstract mechanism that objectifies the sounds of her voice is the same one that grinds through her body and shears off her limbs. It is because she is dying that she raises her head and parts her lips. This imbrication of musical reproduction and death reaches beyond the economic realities of exploitation, what Baldwin called 'the terrifying economics of a singer's life', whereby working-class black artists like Smith and Holiday generated stupendous revenues for publishers such as Universal only to find themselves swindled out of their earnings later on and left to die in

³³⁹ Lock argues that the painting responds instead to Myron O'Higgins's poem, 'Blues for Bessie'. Lock, 'Blues on the Brush', p.58.

poverty.³⁴⁰ It also passes judgement on the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and the place of Smith's music in the post-war, pre-Civil Rights landscape into which Piper's generation of black artists emerged. Piper did not begin listening to blues recordings until the late 1940s. Her connection to Smith emerged in the wake of the latter's death. By appearing as a culmination of the economic destitution and racial oppression thematised in the music, Smith's death made her art more vital than ever. This returns us to Baldwin, Adorno, and the question of art's commodification. In Baldwin's novels, it is the deathliness of the phonograph record, its separation from the long-dead voices which it nevertheless reproduces, that vitalises the music's presence in the narrative. Because it is a mass-produced commodity, Rufus has heard the same recording before. And because he has heard it before, he can notice something else in it when he hears it again, something that speaks to his experience of racial isolation and social death. Baldwin aligns commodification with death and shows it opening onto new forms of differentiated listening. This retrospective, recuperative function depends on reification and commodification to salvage a fragment of immediacy. Likewise, in their repetitive orientation towards the art of the past, Piper's early paintings insist on that most modernist of paradoxes: that immediacy has become so unrealisable that it might only be snatched at through what is already mediated; that it is by internalising alienation in its very structure, by approaching the condition of the commodity, that an art capable of grasping the conditions of contemporary life might emerge.

³⁴⁰ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p.560.

‘It Wasn’t Lovely’

Everything speaks in its own way.

- James Joyce, *Ulysses*.

Piper’s early work positioned reification and commodification as necessary constraints within the bounds of which a retrospective black modernism – one capable of passing judgement on the heritage and utility of the Harlem Renaissance – was nevertheless possible. Her career after 1948 illustrates the concrete, lived implications of such an aesthetic, which draws strength from the forces that threaten it. For three decades she harnessed her creativity to the demands of mass production. The distance that separates the Piper of 1948, who left New York for Paris, and the Piper of 1953, who entered the garment industry, is striking. In many respects, her Paris trip can be understood according to that familiar narrative according to which American artists, black Americans in particular, travelled to Europe in search of creative and political freedoms. This is certainly how she herself conceived of it: as a chance to gain some distance from the subjects and categories that informed her early work. The year before, she had written of the risks attached to achieving artistic success with images of peasant and proletarian black life. Too close a link to the particularities of race and class might, she worried,

support the fixed idea in the public mind of the propriety of folk subjects for artists from the minorities. It could prejudice my own freedom to work outside the context of my experience as a Negro and within the larger framework of my experience as a person; it could aid in perpetuating segregation in the arts, which in its most destructive implication means the appropriation of Negro painters by their Negro materials.³⁴¹

Paris was to help her transcend these ‘Negro materials’. This is how the city often appears in histories of modernism: as an itinerant’s city, enabling new ways of seeing.

³⁴¹ Lock, ‘Blues on the Brush’, p.60.

Douglas had gone there for a year in 1931. Baldwin moved there too, the same year as Piper, for the same reasons. ‘I wanted’, he wrote, ‘to prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in what way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them’.³⁴² And although his exile provoked a deepened engagement with race and its ideologies, his second novel, *Giovanni’s Room*, in its portrayal of a love affair between two white men, realised Piper’s wish for an art that could ‘work outside the context of experience as a Negro’. ‘If I had never left America’, reflects another of his protagonists, ‘[I] would never have established a life of my own, would never have entered my own life’.³⁴³

In a sense, Paris liberated Baldwin.³⁴⁴ Yet in another sense, he was already liberated. The city could only function as it did for him because by going there he had severed the social and economic ties that would otherwise have drawn him back to America. The reverse proved true for Piper. As a woman, with a husband and son in New York, she could make no such break with necessity. Baldwin spent four years in France before his first brief trip back to the US. Piper returned for good after three months. Those same contingencies from which she had hoped to escape – the ‘skewed life chances’ that, according to Hartman, are the particular inheritance of all those living through ‘the afterlife of slavery’ – reasserted themselves in the shape of the family.³⁴⁵ The litany of challenges Piper faced in 1949 reads like the plot of a bad novel: she remarried, had another baby, learned of her father’s diagnosis with terminal cancer and her mother’s escalating dementia, and had to deal with her new

³⁴² Baldwin, ‘The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American’ in *Collected Essays*, p.137.

³⁴³ Baldwin, ‘This Morning, This Evening, So Soon’ in *Early Novels and Stories*, ed. Morrison (New York: The Library of America, 1998), p.869.

³⁴⁴ An imperfect liberation, as Baldwin would have been the first to admit; for his reflections on the inadequacies of exile, see the essays ‘A Question of Identity’ and ‘Equal in Paris’ in *Collected Essays*, pp.91-116.

³⁴⁵ ‘This is the afterlife of slavery: skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, p.6.

husband's nervous breakdown. She summed up the impact of these blows in economic terms: 'I was in a situation. I was miserable. My mother went into a home, my father died, my brother got married and moved to California, my husband became scary and moved out, and *there I was*. No money. I had a seven-year-old and new-born baby. There I am. And people ask me "why did you give up painting?"'.³⁴⁶

The paintings at RoKo had followed blues music in salvaging a differential, historicist mode of expression from reification. But like all reflection they required a degree of distance from their objects, a measure of autonomy. It was only by stepping back from commodification that they made use of it. Compelled by circumstance to abandon this distance, Piper entered the field of commodity design directly. 'It wasn't lovely', as she put it, 'but it did save my life'.³⁴⁷ She founded a greetings card company, Ransier Studio Cards, in 1949. When that folded in 1953, she began a career as a textile designer. There is perhaps nothing extraordinary about this trajectory. Modernism thrived on a certain proximity to the commodity, expressed equally by the gramophone-like form with which the young Piper encircled Bessie Smith as by James Joyce's use of newspaper headlines in *Ulysses*; as much by Marcel Duchamp's invention of the readymade as by Proust's resolution to write his novel 'as if it were a dress I was making'.³⁴⁸ And although each of these artists maintained a separation between their own work and the commodity world from which they drew (Duchamp after all never actually manufactured a urinal. Proust left the dressmaking to his maid), there were as many others who registered the connection between artistic and mass production by engaging in the latter directly. Most relevant for our purposes is the work of

³⁴⁶ Meghan Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, (University of Missouri: Proquest Dissertations and Theses, 2016), p.21.

³⁴⁷ Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, p.38.

³⁴⁸ Proust, *Finding Time Again*, p.343.

those artists – nearly all of them women – who designed fabrics: Anni Albers, Sonia Delaunay, and Mary Hambidge; Dorothy Liebes, Gunta Stötzl, and Liubov Popova. Each retained the typically modernist conviction that in the encounter between market-driven commodity production and disinterested artistic sensibility, the latter was to transform the former: art would break, or at least curb, the worst excesses of production and consumption. Delaunay approached her fabrics as extensions of her paintings.³⁴⁹ Albers rationalised her woven wall hangings and architectural curtains along lines of medium-specificity and truth to materials. ‘Culture’, she wrote in 1965, ‘is measured by art, which sets the standard of quality toward which broad production slowly moves or should move’.³⁵⁰ This transformative approach had been Piper’s in her oil paintings. Her career in fabric left it behind.

The work of Albers and Delaunay illuminates, by what it is, everything that Piper’s fabrics were not. Piper never wore a *Simultaneous Dress* (1913), as Delaunay once did, to dance the tango at the Bal Bullier. Unlike Albers, she made no archaeological trips to Mexico; she taught no courses at Black Mountain College. No-one (except, perhaps, she herself) would ever have described one of her polyesters as ‘a living painting’, still less ‘a sculpture of living forms’ (as Robert Delaunay did the *Simultaneous Dress*).³⁵¹ It was not until her late paintings, once she had retired in economic security, that she attempted any kind of aesthetic reconciliation of her fabrics. As a designer, she did not transform the apparatus of commodity production, nor did she seek to. The very idea of such a transformation would probably have seemed anachronistic by 1953. The Bauhaus had been closed for twenty years. Its émigré

³⁴⁹ Sherry Buckberrough calls Delaunay’s fashion ‘a rationalisation of her two-dimensional patterns in the total production of her clothing, accessories, and interior design’. Buckberrough, ‘Delaunay Design: Aesthetics, Immigration, and the New Woman’, *Art Journal*, vol.54, no.1 (Spring 1995), p.51.

³⁵⁰ Anni Albers, *On Weaving: New Expanded Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p.54.

³⁵¹ Juliet Bellow, ‘Fashioning *Cléopâtre*: Sonia Delaunay’s New Woman’, *Art Journal*, vol.68, no.2 (2009), p.19.

members (Albers included) were now busy designing houses for American millionaires.³⁵² Piper never resisted this development. Instead she accommodated herself to it with as much aptitude, specialisation, and professional self-denial as the cultural worker (a journalist, in this case) described by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács had written about ‘the specialised “virtuoso”, the vendor of his objectified and reified faculties’.³⁵³ This was what Piper became. As a painter, she had cultivated certain powers of expression: draughtsmanship, ambition, commitment to medium, a steady hand, and a sense of flattened, graphic design. After she stopped painting in 1949, these became the qualities that brought her advancement once alienated from their initial purposes, applied to the industrial process, and sold to the highest bidder. Although she had limited success in her attempt to redeploy visual motifs from *Blues and Negro Folk Songs* as illustrations for greetings cards, it was as a fabric designer that she put the reification abhorred by Lukács (to say nothing of Adorno, who decried it as the universal condition of American society) to best use.

Piper ascribed her extraordinary success as a stylist and designer in an industry still dominated by white men to a combination of attention to detail and technical expertise gleaned on the job. Meghan Dohogne and J. Michelle Hill-Campbell both point to the complexity of such patterns as *New England Town* (fig.4.9, 1971) and *Paisley Jacquard* (fig.4.10 1975), produced while Piper was working for Lebanon Mills, as features that set her apart from the competition.³⁵⁴ Paisleys were her speciality. Not only did she paint her designs

³⁵² Already in 1944 Adorno had observed that ‘from a distance the difference between the Vienna Workshops and the Bauhaus is no longer considerable. Purely functional curves, having broken free of their purpose, are now becoming just as ornamental as the basic structures of Cubism’. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.42.

³⁵³ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p.100.

³⁵⁴ Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, p.29; J. Michelle Hill-Campbell, ‘Uncovering a Legacy: African-American Textile Designers’, *Surface Design Journal*, vol.23, no.4 (July 1999), p.23.

onto graph paper with a magnifying glass and brush; she worked out precise instructions for the silk-screening process, when each would be scaled up, stencilled as a negative onto mesh cloth, stretched over a screen, and squeegeed with ink. ‘I knew the machines inside and out’, she recalled in 2000. ‘I was a superb technician and that’s what counted then, before computers... I could send the mill exactly how it should be put up on the screen. The mechanics loved me’.³⁵⁵ In this technological orientation and emphasis on gridded, flattened structure, she had much in common with Albers. However, unlike Albers, who found a sympathetic conceptual medium in weaving, for Piper the transference of technical and mechanical skill from painting to fabric design was achieved at the expense of content.³⁵⁶ Her fabric designs had no place for the ‘trampled-upon, hopeless people’ she had painted and written about in 1946 and 1947. The conflation of political and aesthetic content broached in the paintings was replaced by designs that emphasised the rich patterns and luminous colour afforded by silkscreened and doubleknit polyester. ‘Just awful crazy’, as Piper described them, ‘but they sold’.³⁵⁷ There is a sense in which Piper’s fabric designs realised the universalising ambitions of her Paris trip. They achieved a lustrous, decorative surface by leaving behind specific classed or racial content for generic pattern: in *Paisley Jacquard* the traditional motif of trailing *butas* is enlivened by white-petalled flowers that sprout against black grounds; in *New England Town*, the mills, houses, and church steeples, familiar from a million identical chocolate boxes – what could be more free from ‘Negro materials’ than this ultimate cliché of white America? – stand under their obligatory dusting of snow.

³⁵⁵ Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, p.30.

³⁵⁶ Briony Fer points to the synchronisation of Albers’s aesthetic goals and her woven medium: ‘What could be more exemplary of modern abstraction than this insistence on a fundamental system of forms and structures that is open to almost endless permutation and difference?’ Briony Fer, ‘Close to the Stuff the World is Made of: Weaving as a Modern Project’ in *Anni Albers*, ed. Ann Coxon, Briony Fer and Maria Müller-Schareck (London: Tate, 2018), p.28.

³⁵⁷ Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, p.35.

The generic character of Piper's fabric designs was no impediment to her professional progress. Indeed, they were a necessary capitulation to an industrial process bent towards mass-market appeal and rapid expansion. Her entrance into the textile industry coincided with the post-war boom in US polyester manufacturing. In 1946, the year before her RoKo show, the chemicals giant DuPont bought the rights to polyethylene terephthalate, the basic thermoplastic resin in polyester manufacturing. This inaugurated three decades of research into synthetic fabrics. Dacron was invented in 1950, mylar and orlon in 1952. Between 1952 and 1956, in spite of their alarming tendency to discharge random electric shocks to whoever wore them, 70 million orlon sweaters were sold in the USA. By 1960 doubleknit polyester, the material of *Paisley Jacquard* and *New England Town*, had replaced less breathable woven synthetics. Welcomed in particular by women, for whom water-repellent and wrinkle-free fabric promised liberation from the drudgeries of washing and ironing, the US market share of synthetic against natural fibres increased year on year until 1973. If it is difficult for a contemporary viewer to grasp the notes of progress and liberation in such polyester designs as Piper's, this is because, as Jane Schneider has argued, we are still living through the economic and political shifts that determined their subsequent decline.³⁵⁸ As American capitalism changed shape in the late 1970s and 1980s, the prices and cultural capital of synthetic fabrics plummeted, while those of natural fibres like cotton and linen grew.

Part of the appeal of synthetic fibres in the 1950s and 1960s lay in the independence they offered from foreign raw materials and labour. Although a major exporter, the garment industry Piper had entered in 1953 organised production on a national scale, concentrated around unionised manufacturing hubs like New York, Pennsylvania, and Chicago. Conditions

³⁵⁸ Jane Schneider, 'In and Out of Polyester: Desire, Disdain and Global Fibre Competitions', *Anthropology Today*, vol.10, no.4 (August 1994), p.9.

were exploitative and pay was often very low (although designers like Piper earned good money). Looking back on the 1950s, Baldwin used Manhattan's garment district as a shorthand for racialised poverty in a manner that anticipated Piper's own subsequent reflections on the clothing industry.³⁵⁹ But work still fell under national regulations and enjoyed a degree of protection. By the time Piper retired in 1977, this was changing. The peak market share of synthetic fabrics had coincided with the 1973 OPEC oil price hike, after which US investment capital diversified and internationalised, increasing the premium on cheap foreign labour and paving the way, as David Harvey has argued, for contemporary neoliberalism.³⁶⁰ It is this globalisation, continuing apace throughout the 1980s, that Schneider blames for the decline of synthetics: 'The Cotton and Wool Boards are international, and it is the globalisation of textile manufacturing over the last two decades that... has created the most compelling context for the synthetics' decline'.³⁶¹ In a textbook case of artificially engineered taste, she writes, 'middle class consumers overthrew polyester in favour of natural fibres during a historical conjuncture in which these fibres were presented to them laden with foreign labour'.³⁶²

Piper retired from fabric design at a pivotal juncture. Jobs in New York's garment sector halved between 1970 and 1981. Polyester had flourished at a conjunction of economic

³⁵⁹ Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* in *Collected Essays*, p.373.

³⁶⁰ 'The New York investment banks had always been active internationally, but after 1973 they became even more so'. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.28.

³⁶¹ Schneider, 'In and Out of Polyester', p.7.

³⁶² Schneider, 'In and Out of Polyester', p.8. Schneider was writing before the rejuvenation of the market for synthetics in the late 1990s. This has to be treated as part of the same story, driven by the dialectic of labour exploitation and mechanisation already observed by Karl Marx 150 years ago: once a maximum pitch of exploitation is achieved, machinery is brought in to lower wages and increase production. Thus, as Sven Beckert writes, 'beginning in the mid-1990s, production of synthetic fibre began to outpace cotton textile manufacturing. Today, about 52 million metric tons of petroleum-based synthetic fibre is produced annually'. In spite of this revival in synthetic manufacturing, the feminist resonances with which the material was once imbued seem to have died for good. Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New Global History of Capitalism* (London: Penguin, 2014), p.431.

growth and technological optimism that Schneider terms ‘modernist’, in contrast to ‘post-modern’ cynicism regarding the liberating effects of technology.³⁶³ Now, as prices plummeted and tastes shifted, the wearing of synthetic fibres came to stand for deprivation: for those forced to buy clothing cheap or second-hand. Synthetics’ longevity, their resistance to wear and tear, made them a particularly generative emblem for these shifts in consumption, since the same garment could be recycled, via several different owners, further and further down the socioeconomic scale, without losing either its utility or its lustre. Piper summed up these contradictions, embedded in her textiles (and bourgeois distaste for them), when looking back over her career in 1995:

I got into the knitting field when the miracle fibre first came out, textured polyester. It was the fibre that garments were made of where you could go into your shower, completely dressed, and come out just the way you entered. It was wonderful. Also, it had the reputation of lasting forever. And *that* was something I noticed after I retired. When I would be walking down Broadway near where I lived some shabby down at the heels man would come staggering along. They would be kind of unkempt and everything. But there is one thing: they would all be wearing polyester double knit fabrics and there wouldn’t be a spot, there wouldn’t be a tear, the creases would still be in the fabric. It was unbelievable.³⁶⁴

Slave Song

*I used to watch bums walk down
the street years after in my
designs.*

- Rose Piper

Commentators on textiles often remark that the procedures by which fabric is photographed – as advertisements or samples – tend to extract designs from their place in the real world.³⁶⁵ Neither the sample’s abstract grid nor the dislocation of the fashion shoot give

³⁶³ Schneider, ‘In and Out of Polyester’, p.3.

³⁶⁴ Dohogne, *Rose Piper: New Discoveries*, p.22.

³⁶⁵ ‘Rather than simply functioning as documents, photographs of textiles obey strict conventions in presenting a very particular view of what a textile is within a modern image world’. Fer, ‘Close to the Stuff the World is Made of’, p.25.

any indication of how fabric is produced, nor of the lifecycle of the finished commodity once it enters circulation. Instead they constitute what Roland Barthes calls a ‘code’, or a ‘veil’, ‘a simulacrum of the real object’.³⁶⁶ Theorists have attempted to rend this veil, whether via Barthes’ application of semiotics to fashion’s discursive representations, or via a more straightforwardly materialist orientation towards production.³⁶⁷ Piper’s reflections on her time as a designer participated with experiential force in this line of demystification. Whether written, spoken, or painted, they drew out the operations of race, gender, and class at work behind designs as innocuous as *New England Town* and *Paisley Jacquard*, and located these within the conceptual horizon of a transformed US capitalism. This was (and is) the reality of ‘shabby, down-at-heel’ men on Broadway, of tumbling rates of black participation in the US labour force throughout the 1980s and racialised poverty on the 96th Street subway platform: the destitute clothed in the cheap commodities whose market saturation and global overproduction had eliminated the need for their labour in the first place. It is the reality of the work Piper produced after 1977, when she gave up fabric design and returned to artmaking.

This renewed orientation towards the commodity linked Piper’s late paintings and drawings to her previous work. Her objects had changed; she no longer looked towards the pre-war modernism of Douglas and Smith. Now she worked in acrylic or pen rather than oil paint. The commodities she engaged with were different: fabrics, garments, and mass-produced kitsch rather than jazz and blues records. And if she referenced a painter, they were more likely to be one of the brothers Van Eyck or the master of a Book of Hours than

³⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, (London: University of California Press, 1983), pp.xi-xii.

³⁶⁷ ‘Precisely because fashion is not art... focus needs to be placed upon the construction of concrete items of clothing’ Sophie Woodward, ‘Making Fashion Material’, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol.7, no.3 (2002), p.347.

Picasso. She could come close, with this new breadth of historical reference, to the kinds of postmodern historicism, ‘the nostalgia of artistic production for its own past conventions’ denounced, during these decades, by critics like Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster.³⁶⁸ The risk posed by such painting was clear. ‘It might’, as Foster wrote, ‘evince a posthistorical perspective, according to which art appears stripped of its historical contexts and discursive connections – as if it were a synchronous array of so many styles, devices, or signifiers to collect, pastiche, or otherwise manipulate, again with no one deemed more necessary, pertinent, or advanced than the next’.³⁶⁹ A painting such as Piper’s *About Women* (fig.4.11, 1983) is provocative in its historicism. It shows an array of objects – an imitation nineteenth-century porcelain figure, a Bloomingdale’s shopping bag, some textbooks on anatomy, a doll with the hands of a puppet and the rouged, caricatured face of an old white woman, a stuffed fox, and a tiny reproduction African sculpture – all rendered with a vivid realism that she liked to compare to Flemish Primitivism. A roughly cut out reproduction of Rogier van der Weyden’s *Durán Madonna* (c.1435-8), missing the top and bottom edges of its frame, is taped to the back wall: as if the descriptive precision of early Netherlandish oil painting might licence Piper’s own.

She was clear, however, that such references were never just arbitrary in the sense described by Buchloh and Foster – not picked at random from a storehouse of equally available historical materials. Rather, she saw them as emerging from a precise set of technical demands. These derived from the basic idea, which she told an interviewer towards the end of her life, that paintings like *About Women* translated the emphasis on magnified

³⁶⁸ Benjamin Buchloh, ‘Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting’ in *Formalism and Historicity: Models and Methods in Twentieth-Century Art* (London: MIT Press, 2015), pp.152.

³⁶⁹ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (London: MIT Press, 1996), p.99.

detail she had developed as a designer into a method of artmaking.³⁷⁰ They were meant to de-reify her fabrics. The imperatives generated by this project were twofold, reflected in the double status of the *Durán Madonna* in *About Women*, where it operates as both a commodified reproduction and an archetype for practice. Piper's discovery of a specific, material affinity between her medium (acrylic) and the mass-produced objects she chose to represent with it (fabrics in particular) recalled van der Weyden's delight in the capacity of oil paint to render the look and feel of materials. This was a religious delight in van der Weyden's case, and Piper retained something of this, explaining that her liking for Flemish Primitivism had begun with the illustrated Sunday School cards she collected as a child. Religious subjects, indeed, occupy an unprecedented centrality in her late work. Then again, it is these very ideological associations, attached to the reproduction of van der Weyden's image, that *About Women* problematises. As Piper's title suggests, each object in her still life is implicated in the racial and classed construction of contemporary femininity. The doll who grasps her department store bag is a grotesque caricature of affluent white American consumerism (the rhyme between her whiskers and those of her stuffed fox is positively cruel); the porcelain woman is a kitsch nineteenth-century ideal of femininity; the African figure a diminished alternative. In such company, van der Weyden's virgin has an ambiguous status. Does it stand as another mass-produced racial ideal, or – as the central figure on the wall, its cut-down frame giving it a recessive dynamism – as a form of transcendence, of resistance to commodification?

³⁷⁰ 'She discovered that many years of using graph paper when creating designs for knitted fabric left her with a heightened facility for minute detail'. Kathryn Piper, *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists*, ed. Sylvia Moore (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995), p.211.

About Women is typical of the dialectical sophistication with which Piper pursued her efforts at de-reification. This was no triumphal posthistoricism. Historical references came out of her more totalising concern with the ideological resonances of commodity production. The function of the *Durán Madonna* in *About Women* – at once a model for artistic practice and an ideologically suspect commodity – is a metonym for Piper’s entire working practice. Each of her images doubled back on itself to enfold her own ambivalent position as at once beneficiary and victim of the forces she portrayed. The profit-hungry, racist system of capitalist production that she so often critiqued was the same one that had made her rich and comfortable enough to retire and rededicate her life to art. This ambivalence coloured her work whenever she turned to address the textile industry directly. On the one hand, she retained a sense of the positive force of clothing – what Baldwin called ‘the style’ – in African American culture.³⁷¹ On the other, she was brought right up against the slave roots of US capitalism and the dynamics of contemporary racial oppression: ‘The current state of many inner-city blacks is not unlike the desperate situation of their slave ancestors’, as she put it in 1995.³⁷²

Self Portrait as a Young Stylist (fig.4.12, 1978) exemplifies these contradictions. It attacks the textile industry with a directness that seems, at first, to verge on caricature. What could be more obvious, more tautological even, than an image of a fashion show in which emaciated models, one black and one white, parade down a catwalk, watched by lizard-headed businessmen and giant buzzards? The inclusion of Piper herself as a naked, leering young woman riding a four-armed rooster with a death’s head and a tail made of fabric samples completes the picture of institutional malice. Catharsis seems to be the drawing’s

³⁷¹ ‘The style – that style possessed by no other people in this world’. Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p.396.

³⁷² Lock, ‘Blues on the Brush’, p.61.

tone: condemnation of the garment industry and Piper's own role in it, clearing the way for a transcendence in which the artist, liberated, can return to her rightful milieu. But Piper's work is rarely so simple. Her drawing contains as much fascination as condemnation for the objects it portrays. It warns us away from quick judgements. The detail on the rooster's tail is microscopically fine, as ostentatious a feat of draughtsmanship as she ever produced. Here, at the drawing's densest point, her pen has picked out each petal on the floral swatch, the intricacies of her favoured paisley, the blooming of acanthus leaves, and the effects of shadow on tartan. Fabric is the technical resource: her textile designs reappear in the same steady hand that had guaranteed her status in the industry. They stage a conflation of abstract decoration and figurative drawing that threatens any straightforward inference leading from censure of the former to praise of the latter. How could Piper condemn textile design, how could she transcend it, if the technique behind her drawings approached that of the textiles themselves? Her rooster, split between alluring textile plumage and fork-tongued monstrosity embodies this ambivalence, but it runs deeply, infecting all of the figures who populate this witches' walk. What does it do to our understanding of *Self Portrait* as moralising or otherwise to notice that the human figures watching the catwalk are all, like Piper, black? Are we to read them as dupes of the beasts surrounding them, or is something else going on? And what of the fact that the monsters themselves have walked straight out of African American oral tradition, where the moral resonances of anthropomorphic animals – of buzzards, lizards, and even, as Hurston reminds us, of the devil himself – are anything but clear-cut?³⁷³

³⁷³ 'The Devil is next after Jack as a culture hero. He can out-smart everyone but Jack. God is absolutely no match for him. He is good-natured and full of humour. The sort of person one may count on to help out in any difficulty' Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression' in *Negro: An Anthology*, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Continuum, 1994), p.26.

It might help at this point to turn to another work from 1978 in which fashion and folklore overlap: *Unbalanced Objects Being Balanced* (fig.4.13). In contrast to *Self Portrait*, Piper used an ink wash to bring atmosphere and transparency to the background. Her figures occupy a more unified space, and this allows the relationships between them to come into clearer focus. The platforms held precariously aloft by black hands and abstract acrobatic figures support such items – a leather boot, a young boy playing ball, Christ, a folkloric boo hag, a pointing white gremlin – as can be said to constitute elements of Afro-American ideology. Piper is at her most assertive in those passages, around the figure of the juggling Christ, which map the juxtaposition between collage and penmanship onto a contrast between overlapping belief systems. The pattern on Christ's outfit is drawn in the same dense, decorative hand as the textile samples in *Self Portrait*. His body is arranged like a cut-out: arms, legs, skirt, and torso floating madly in mid-air. Like the segmented bodies of the acrobats, it recalls the sewing pattern of a fabric designer, suspending him halfway between a technical specification and an image (Barthes saw the sewing pattern as the model, 'the principal shifter', for every such translation between fashion as a technological process and fashion as an iconic construction: between the fabric sample and the advertisement).³⁷⁴ Piper has constructed him, as Proust might have said, 'as if he were a dress she was making'. His haloed head and hands, cut from a reproduction, stand out, in colour, against the crouching figure behind him. They rhyme with the boo hag's gesture: she too turns her palm upwards, as if to catch the hat thrown by the acrobats to the left, while with her other hand she points to her own exposed muscles. The boo hag is a figure from Gullah folklore, perhaps the most famous: a witch who wears the skin of a beautiful woman by day. Come the night, she spins off her skin and flies away in search of victims to ride.³⁷⁵ A student of black folklore since

³⁷⁴ Barthes, *The Fashion System*, p.6.

³⁷⁵ 'De servan' watch her. Somet'in' she put on her flesh an' take off her skins. After take off her skins, she roll it up an' put it in her dirty clo'es in de back o' de baid. An' she gone out'. Henry Louis

the 1940s when she and Sterling Brown were close, Piper would have known the ambivalent connotations of even this monstrous figure. In antebellum South Carolina, the hag was known to prey on white and black people alike, enacting symbolic revenge on the masters for the condition of the slaves. Like the anthropomorphic monsters in *Self Portrait*, the hag's presence alongside Christ points less towards some obvious moral conclusion – regarding the frivolity of textile design, the empty showmanship of commodified popular religion, or the persistence of folklore at the heart of what Cedric J. Robinson calls 'the black radical tradition' – than to the imbrication of such elements in the tissue of African American life.³⁷⁶ Final judgement is discouraged. Where a gesture of condemnation does appear, in the pointing finger and bared teeth of the white gremlin, it is repulsive.

As she had done in her early work, Piper attempted in these late images to peel back the façade of commodity production to reveal the contradictory social and historical forces at work within. At times the results were complex. At others, they were jarringly simple. With the pencil drawing *Mostly Dark Things* (fig.4.14, 1982) she forced a direct confrontation between the histories of commodity production and slavery. Much larger than her previous drawings, it assumes the dimensions of an easel painting, realised in microscopically fine detail. The tone is one of close inspection, perspective tilted, picture plane bent uncomfortably towards its objects. Piper's drawing revels in such proximity, in the fine, textural transitions available to pencil: from gleaming copper kettle to earthenware teapot, from mahogany tea-tray to cotton napkin. Against this dense, descriptive background, it is all the more unsettling to discern the lid of the dark ceramic jug on which a drowning woman

Gates Jr. and Maria Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2018), p.243.

³⁷⁶ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p.xxxi.

throws up her hands. With this gesture, almost invisible, the ‘dark things’ of the title that underwrite the objects on the drawing’s surface come into view: the notorious dumping of surplus human ‘cargo’ during the Middle Passage, the presence of enslaved labour behind production of those paradigm modern commodities: sugar, cotton, and tea.

Piper gathered these threads together in her final solo-exhibition, *Rose Piper: Paintings and Works on Paper*, which ran at the Phelps Stokes Fund in New York between 1 and 13 May 1989. In an echo of *Blues and Negro Folk Songs*, the exhibition was built around another cycle of paintings that made reference to popular music. The ten panels in her *Slave Song Series* were based on the lyrics of spirituals, drawn from John Lovell Jr.’s book *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*. Once again, the emphasis fell less on the music itself than on its commodified reproduction: Piper claimed not to have heard most of the songs she depicted, simply to have read their lyrics. This time, however, her retreat from musical immediacy was accompanied by a turn towards surface texture, in line with her orientation towards fabric design. The abstract ‘visual emanations’ that had characterised her early work were largely absent. It is for this reason, as a betrayal of her earlier musical orientation, that Piper’s late work has been criticised. In Lock’s revealing phrase, ‘it seems to me the work of a highly skilled technician... in terms of its formal qualities, for this viewer at least, the thrill is gone’.³⁷⁷ This is to blame Piper for an effect she sought: rather than abandon the techniques garnered during her time as a designer and technician, she mobilised them towards a more searching critique of the commodity form.

Piper used acrylic on Masonite board for the *Slave Song* series. The effect was to flatten and exaggerate her palette. Her surfaces now glistened, as her fabrics had done, with

³⁷⁷ Lock, ‘Blues on the Brush’, p.62.

the sheen of artificial polymer. In *I Want Yuh to Go Down, Death, Easy, An' Bring My Servant Home* (fig.4.15, 1988), the careworn woman who sprawls before Death on the 96th Street platform is bright with colour: orange, pastel-pink, and vermillion. More fabrics spill from the bag on which she leans. Like a well-dressed Masaccio Madonna, the blue of Death's robe is set off against a trim of embossed gold leaf. A high-necked lace chemise and white gloves recall the attire of well-heeled nineteenth-century femininity. In *I Know My Robe's Goin' to Fit Me Well. I Tried It On, At the Gates of Hell* (fig.4.16, 1988) she pursued such ostentation further. Her central figure's robe is umber brocade. It is unclear whether the angels who surround him are carrying him upwards, or merely gathering up his vestments the better to show them off. Piper's Netherlandish models are close here, along with the link they assumed between sumptuous surface, material wealth, and spiritual transcendence. But the equivalence cannot survive intact in the context of overproduction and neoliberal modernity into which Piper transplants it. The poverty of her sprawling woman is manifested in the colours of her outfit: the excess of fabric on which she leans no more declares wealth or comfort than does the filth of the subway that surrounds her. And the vision before which her brocaded man rises, of black men in chains, declares the heritage of all such gaudy attire: the place of slavery at the historical root of the modern garment industry.

Renewing Black Modernism

Modernist art history has failed to account for Piper because it remains wedded to a set of narrative conventions in which great art overcomes the pressures and constraints of society at large. This has been the thrust of feminist attempts to reclaim her work. By contrast, Piper's significance is at one with her life's failures, with the times when contingency and necessity got the better of her. Her paintings and drawings are incomprehensible unless seen in the light of the thirty years she spent at work in an

exploitative industry, forced to compromise her artistic ideals. We need to understand the value of such compromise. As Baldwin wrote in *The Fire Next Time*, ‘people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are’.³⁷⁸ Piper’s art returned, repeatedly, to such social dynamics as reification, commodification, and economic compulsion because her life was passed in their shadow. Rather than ignoring these realities, which are those of the immeasurable majority of human beings, her work prompts us to linger with them, to uncover within them the resources for renewed artistic production and historical reflection. Her work acts as both rebuke to, and an embodiment of, Adorno’s maxim, that ‘the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity’.³⁷⁹ Van der Weyden emerges from the reproduction on the wall. Douglas steps out from the grooves of shellac. Making common cause with the commodity, Piper’s art approaches new forms of resistance.

³⁷⁸ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* in *Collected Essays*, p.343.

³⁷⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.30.

Chapter 4: Writing to Barnett Newman: F. N. Souza and the End of Modernism

Dear Mr Newman, esthetics may be for artists and ornithology for the birds, but a son of a gun like me is for the arsenal: I cannot agree with your kind of painting, Barney! You say: "Art should be ethics and not esthetics". Then again, "Colour is absolute, it is my subject matter". Which amounts to saying colour is ethics. Cowflops in green fields are not the Universe even though the cows may ruminant over them. I respect your grey hair but your paintings(?) are a ha! ha!

- F. N. Souza to Barnett Newman, 11 April 1969.

F. N. Souza wrote these lines, unsolicited, to Barnett Newman in 1969, two years after emigrating from London to New York. Coming from one avowed modernist to another, his mocking tones mask doubts about the continuing viability of painting and its capacity to make contact with material, political reality. These had been prompted by Newman's solo-exhibition, running at M. Knoedler & Co. from 25 March to 19 April.³⁸⁰ In criticising the show, Souza was pursuing a two-decades-old project: salvaging a programme for modernist painting which registered the expropriations of colonialism and the violent, contradictory politics of race it generated. That this was to be achieved, not by abandoning modernism, but through its reflexive critique, was a fundamental commitment of his art – one that connects him to the other late modernists discussed in this thesis. His refusal to relinquish the tradition marked by grand figures like Picasso, T.S. Eliot, Francis Bacon and Matisse generated some

³⁸⁰ Newman used the exhibition to assemble a selection of work produced since his last solo-exhibition, a decade earlier. A much-hyped coup for Knoedler, it announced the venerable gallery's pivot towards contemporary art under the directorship of Xavier Fourcade. Ann Temkin discusses the show at length in 'Barnett Newman on Exhibition', in *Barnett Newman*, ed. Ann Temkin (London: Tate Publishing, 2003), pp.66-71.

of his work's profoundest ambiguities: its insistence on appropriation, allegory and belatedness; its primitivist use of blackness; its pursuit of blindness and muteness; its inability to figure difference in terms other than monstrosity and horror; its casual deployment of antisemitism and misogyny. Such preoccupations are thorny, uncomfortable, and deeply bound up with the historicity of modernism. It was for his evasion of such difficulties, for his apparent denial of the history in which they partook, that Souza damned Newman in his letter.

Souza's choice of target was significant. Newman was the most important surviving member of a generation of modernist painters already passing into history. The Knoedler exhibition, his last one-man show, was to be his swansong. Paintings sold for \$100,000 each.³⁸¹ Critics agreed that the exhibition confirmed his iconic status. Philip Leider's assessment in the *York Times* was typical. He wrote that Newman had 'wrenched abstraction back to a firmer tradition, unseen since Mondrian'.³⁸² Yet the character of the paintings on show also divided opinion. Did they conform to developments in the advanced art of the 1960s, or did they insist on values inherited from the modernism of the 1940s and '50s? For some, the blaring colours, clean lines, and shaped canvases invoked pop art and minimalism, positioning Newman's work more closely to the spaces of mass production and consumption than it had ever been.³⁸³ Barbara Rose marvelled at his ability to 'keep pace with the youngsters', to 'show the young a thing or two about how an old master handles a shaped

³⁸¹ Paul Richard, 'Shock That Made Us See', *The Washington Post* (6 April 1969), p.93.

³⁸² Philip Leider, 'The Artist is Unexplained', *The New York Times* (6 April 1969), p.D25.

³⁸³ This has become a trope of the literature. Yve-Alain Bois remarks of Newman that 'his young minimalist admirers (Donald Judd in particular) provided him with a new critical vocabulary'. Foster et. al., *Art Since 1900*, p.355. See also Temkin, 'Barnett Newman on Exhibition', pp.18-75; for more on Newman's use of minimalist techniques, see Sarah K. Rich, *Seriality and Difference in the Late Work of Barnett Newman*, (PhD diss. Yale University, 1999); also her 'Bridging the Generation Gaps in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?*', *American Art*, vol.19, no.3 (Fall 2005), pp.16-39.

canvas'.³⁸⁴ For others, the paintings were simply modernism, clarified. 'How clean the sun when seen in its idea', wrote Harold Rosenberg in *The New Yorker*, 'washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven that has expelled us and our images'.³⁸⁵ Rosenberg was quoting Wallace Stevens' 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1942), which had voiced the hope that abstraction might articulate some pure, universal 'first idea', anterior to human meaning. This drive seemed borne out in Newman's latest work.³⁸⁶ Paintings such as *White and Hot*, (fig.5.1, 1967), on display in Knoedler's window, exhibited a degree of purity and austerity in excess of anything he had hitherto produced. Whether this purity was modernist, or something else, was an open question. As if to settle it, Newman gave an interview to *Newsweek*. Beneath a photograph of himself, seated in front of *White and Hot* (likened in the article to 'an atomic explosion'), he expounded his impeccably modernist principles (figs.5.2, 5.3). Painting, he remarked, ought to pursue 'massive', 'absolute' colour; it should transcend 'aesthetic' disinterest in favour of 'ethical' value; it should be 'truth, as real as your belly and your brain, without preconceived ideas or greybeard dogmas'; something that breaks, at each point, with precedent and tradition; each painting a 'world' unto itself. 'To continue', he concluded, 'is to start from scratch'.³⁸⁷

If Knoedler marked the peak of Newman's career, the reverse can be said of Souza. 1969 saw him at his lowest ebb for twenty years, neglected by the New York art world and faced with the dilemma of how to develop his obsession with modernist tradition into the production of vital, political art. Born in 1924, he had been raised a Catholic, initially in Portuguese Goa, then British Bombay. Early resistance to Macaulayan education ('intended',

³⁸⁴ Barbara Rose, 'Art: Openness and Robert Motherwell, "an infallible eye"', *Vogue*, vol.154, no.2 (1 August 1969), p.62.

³⁸⁵ Harold Rosenberg, 'The Art World', *The New Yorker* (19 April 1969), p.136.

³⁸⁶ The irony bound up with Stevens's wistfulness was apparently lost on Rosenberg.

³⁸⁷ David L. Shirey, 'Barney', *Newsweek* (14 April 1969), p.93.

he recalled, ‘to provide clerks and bureaucrats for maintaining what was a vast Imperial racket’) led to his expulsion, first from St. Francis Xavier’s College (for pornographic graffiti), then from the J.J. School of Art (for his support of the Quit India Movement).³⁸⁸ In 1947, he became a communist, before founding the Progressive Artists Group (PAG) with S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, K.H. Ara, H.A. Gade, and S.K. Bakre. Subsequent members included Tyeb Mehta and V.S. Gaitonde. The PAG made modernism its central principle, ‘a new art’, as Souza wrote in their first manifesto, ‘for a newly free India’.³⁸⁹ What this meant in practice was never fixed, but it involved the negotiation of formal and thematic precedent drawn from both Indian art history and the Western modernist tradition, from the national past and (implicitly) the international future. Constructing, negotiating and maintaining this kind of synthesis was a paradigmatic mid-century dilemma, faced by modernists across the former colonial world.³⁹⁰ Their solutions have posed a problem for critical reception. Modernist art history has traditionally defined modernity as Western, in opposition to a non-Western, unmodern otherness that it excludes in advance. Partha Mitter has labelled this false binary, which divides non-Western art between ‘authentic’ national art practices and an

³⁸⁸ F.N. Souza, *Words and Lines*, p.16. For a discussion of the Quit India Movement and its revolutionary implications, see Francis G. Hutchins, *India’s Revolution: Gandhi and the Quit India Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

³⁸⁹ Zehra Jumabhoy, ‘Chronology of Historical and Art Events, 1947-2014’ in *The Progressive Revolution: Modern Art for a New India*, ed. Jumabhoy and Boon Hui Tan (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2018), p.195.

³⁹⁰ Frantz Fanon gave the definitive account of this problem. ‘The native artist’, he warned, ‘who wishes at any cost to create a national work of art shuts himself up in a stereotyped reproduction of details... these people forget that the forms of thought and what it feeds on, together with modern techniques of information, language, and dress have dialectically reorganised the people’s intelligences’. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp.224-225. Fanon wrote with Algeria chiefly in mind. For accounts of comparable processes in postcolonial Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua, see Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonisation in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Rasheed Araeen, ‘Modernity, Modernism and Africa’s Authentic Voice’, *Third Text*, vol.24, no.2 (2010), pp.277-286; David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, (London: Yale University Press, 2002).

always-related relation to Western modernism, ‘the “Picasso manqué” syndrome’.³⁹¹ ‘Set against the originary discourse of the [Western] avant-garde’, he writes ‘other modernisms are dismissed as peripheral’.³⁹²

The tensions between nationalism and modernism had other, more immediate effects. Souza’s work was censored for obscenity in 1949, his nude self-portrait seized by the Bombay police. That same year, he left India. London brought the disappointments of a post-war metropolis in decline: poverty, scarcity, and British racism. ‘Grimness’ and ‘joylessness’ are what emerge from his writings of the time, the sense of a place deflated.³⁹³ However the city also held opportunities. Souza’s arrival coincided with that curious interregnum on the London art scene described by Kobena Mercer, Eddie Chambers, and Rasheed Araeen as a ‘post-colonial internationalism’.³⁹⁴ This was a time, before Enoch Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech, when identarian categories had not yet hardened to the exclusionary degree of the mid-1960s, and artists from Britain’s former colonies like Souza, Avinash Chandra, Frank

³⁹¹ Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.7. There are other names for this phenomenon. Rebecca M. Brown calls it ‘the modern/India paradox’, while Dipesh Chakrabarty, writing with the human sciences in mind, describes ‘the problem of asymmetric ignorance’. Leon Wainwright criticises ‘the politics of time’ that have generated a myth of non-Western modernists ‘as outsiders and mere mimics of European art, only ever in a process of “catching up” with a heritage that was not theirs’. The alternative to such constructions is a more dialectical approach to cultural expression and transmission. Recognising ‘the structural predicament of minority modernism’, Kobena Mercer offers the notion of ‘cosmopolitan modernisms’ as an alternative capable of ‘taking account of the three-fold interaction among non-Western artists, minority artists within the West, and western art movements that have engaged with different cultures’, while avoiding ‘the sequential mode of artistic chronology that many modernist art historians have inherited from the past’. See Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), p.2; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.28; Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p.5; Mercer, *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, (London: MIT Press, 2005), pp.142; 8; 11.

³⁹² Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism*, p.8.

³⁹³ ‘I was astonished by the grimness of Britain. Here was the country that was running, only a few years before, an empire encircling nearly three quarters of the globe. Yet there was no joy in it’. Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, (London: South Bank Centre, 1989), p.11.

³⁹⁴ Kobena Mercer, ‘Black Atlantic Abstraction: Aubrey Williams and Frank Bowling’ in *Discrepant Abstraction*, p.186.

Bowling and Aubrey Williams managed, briefly, to achieve critical and commercial success. Victor Musgrave's Gallery One gave Souza five solo-exhibitions during this era. His work was exhibited alongside Bacon, Graham Sutherland and Henry Moore as part of what Geeta Kapur calls 'a new English tradition of the grotesque'.³⁹⁵ He even met the Queen (fig.5.4). In Araeen's words, 'for almost ten years, from 1956 to 1966, [Souza] dominated the British art scene'.³⁹⁶ However, as Stuart Hall reminds us, we should take care not to idealise the period. Of this generation of artists, on the frontlines of emerging multiculturalism, 'many had a difficult time, found the doors of recognition barred and became progressively disenchanted'.³⁹⁷ When criticism, preoccupied with political and representational progress, forgets this, it underplays both the racism of post-war Britain and the contradictory, often reactionary content of Souza's own work. Chambers' claim that 'artists from what used to be commonly referred to as the "Asian subcontinent" were explicitly regarded as *British*, rather than as *immigrant* artists' overstates the case.³⁹⁸ It ignores those contemporary critics who were unable to see more in Souza's images than 'a certain Gauguinesque travel interest', the 'Indian bazaar' or 'the sadhu lying on his bed of nails'.³⁹⁹ Already by 1962 Edwin Mullins was complaining about critics' inability to see past racial characterisations of Souza's work: 'He is always "the artist from Goa"'.⁴⁰⁰ Negative consensus came to a head in 1966 with the silence that greeted *Black on Black*, Souza's exhibition of *Black Paintings* at the Grosvenor Gallery. Yet the British critical establishment had been growing disaffected with him for

³⁹⁵ Geeta Kapur 'Francis Newton Souza: Devil in the Flesh', *Third Text*, vol.3, no.8-9 (September 1989), p.32.

³⁹⁶ Araeen, *The Other Story*, p.23.

³⁹⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Assembling the 1980s: The Deluge – and After' in *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain*, ed. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, Sonia Boyce, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p.8.

³⁹⁸ Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History Since the 1950s*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p.26.

³⁹⁹ Carol Hogben, 'Souza', *Art News and Review*, vol.2, no.22 (2 December 1950), p.25; David Sylvester, 'A Goan Painter', *New Statesman*, vol.54, no.1396 (14 December 1957), p.816; W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting Now*, (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1965), unpaginated.

⁴⁰⁰ Edwin Mullins, *F.N. Souza*, (London: Anthony Blond, 1962), p.84.

years, valuing his paintings so long as they conformed to some identifiably 'Indian' essence, condemning them as derivative whenever they drew too close to 'Western' modernism.

'Souza is an artist who has looked intelligently at Picasso, Soutine and older, more formal religious art', wrote Guy Brett in a characteristic review, 'but is unable to make us aware of *his* presence in every stroke'.⁴⁰¹

These are the pressures under which Souza wrote to Newman. His letter is marked by ambivalence, by critical orientation towards a modernist tradition which he refuses to leave behind. For even as he pulls away from Newman, Souza presses up against him, cannibalising his images, ventriloquising his words, twisting them into the crudest of syllogisms. When Newman had remarked to *Newsweek* that 'art should be ethics and not aesthetics', he had been repeating himself, parroting a typically modernist claim to be painting beyond painting, making art that incarnated absolute values, art that transformed life. Yet in Souza's hands the statement is made to sound absurd, even dangerous. His disgust at Newman's deafness to the racial overtones of an 'ethics of colour' is palpable. And who could have blamed him, when Black Power had been organising around the radical politicisation of colour since the mid-1960s and artists, like students, were in the streets, protesting against racism, decrying the Vietnam War and boycotting the institutions?

Souza criticises Newman for his modernism, for trying to transcend material reality in favour of autonomy and universality: 'cowflops in green fields are not the universe'. However this argument, opposing the particular to the universal, was itself, by 1969, nothing new. It reprised an opposition made familiar by a century of modernist aesthetics. Whether

⁴⁰¹ Guy Brett, 'F.N. Souza Exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery', *The Guardian* (2 April 1964), p.41. The Indian press said similar things: 'The trouble with Mr. Souza is that he is not nearly so original as he thinks he is'. C.R.M., 'Gallumafry', *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (19 January 1958), p.17.

such a dialectic any longer served a purpose in characterising advanced art was an open question. Certainly, pop art's embrace of mass culture and the minimalist (and then postminimalist) deconstruction of aesthetic distance had seriously undermined it. 'No to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions', wrote Robert Morris, looking back on those years.⁴⁰² Questions of aesthetics, autonomy and universal expression had given way to concrete concerns with politics, labour and art's institutional status.⁴⁰³ The anti-war protestors who greeted the travelling exhibition *Minimal Art* in 1968 and 1969 confirmed that it was minimalism, rather than abstract expressionism, around which such debates now coalesced.⁴⁰⁴ While protests unfolded in Europe, New York saw the first 'Open Hearing' of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) on 10 April 1969, midway through Newman's show. Occupied with the exhibition and his own deteriorating health, Newman nevertheless appeared at the hearing by proxy. The art historian Barbara Reise delivered a speech that he had written, attacking the power of US museums to override artists' wishes with regards to their own work.⁴⁰⁵ Newman's participation at the meeting, with its thirteen notorious demands for reforming the art world in terms of workers' control, resistance to the war and greater diversity of representation in terms of race and gender, suggests that he recognised just how far away from modernism debates had shifted by this point. His name on the list of speakers is like a fossil from the previous generation, unearthed amongst the new:

⁴⁰² Cited in *Art Since 1900*, p.536.

⁴⁰³ For an account of these developments, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*, (London: University of California Press, 2009). For their roots in minimalism see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, (London: MIT Press, 1996), pp.35-70.

⁴⁰⁴ The convergence of pop and minimalist art with US global power has long been noted. Benjamin Buchloh calls the late 1960s 'a moment when artistic practices in the United States had reached the climax of a heretofore unknown cultural and national autonomy and self-containment, an attitude evident for example when [Dan] Flavin would call [Donald] Judd "the first all-American sculptor"'. Buchloh, *Formalism and Historicity*, pp.52-53. For a critique of the process whereby minimalism was made to stand for US aggression, see James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, (London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp.262-270.

⁴⁰⁵ AWC, *An Open Hearing on the Subject: What Should be the Program of the Art Workers Regarding Museum Reform and to Establish the Program of an Open Art Workers Coalition*, (New York: Art Workers Collective, 1969), pp.87-88.

Carl Andre; Hollis Frampton; Hans Haacke; Joseph Kosuth; Sol LeWitt; Lucy Lippard; Tom Lloyd; Lee Lozano; Barnett Newman.⁴⁰⁶

Why, then, did Souza choose Newman as the object of his attack? Why, when the version of modernist purism voiced in *Newsweek* was already outdated, on the point of being abandoned (even by Newman himself, if we take seriously his participation at the AWC's 'Open Hearing' and the arguments of the minimalists) did Souza choose to dwell on it? A glance at the circumstances of his letter suggests a provisional answer: if the problems generated by abstract painting felt tired in New York, this did not entail their exhaustion in the wider, global context.⁴⁰⁷ The 1960s were the golden age of the Rockefeller grants, which looked to build Cold War solidarity between India and the USA through cultural exchange. Between 1964 and 1974, fourteen Indian artists – among them most of Souza's peers from the PAG – received grants from the JDR III Fund to travel to the US.⁴⁰⁸ This was accompanied by a trend towards scaled-up abstract paintings that often responded, consciously, to abstract expressionism.⁴⁰⁹ Mehta, for instance, managed to combine an emphasis on blocked out colour fields reminiscent of Newman's work with a thematics of

⁴⁰⁶ AWC, *Open Hearing*, p.ii.

⁴⁰⁷ I focus here on Indian art. For discussions of the vital place of abstract expressionism in postrevolutionary Latin American art, see David Craven, 'Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to "American Art"' in *Discrepant Abstraction*, pp.30-52; 'The Cuban Revolution (1959 – 1989)' in *Art and Revolution*; Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p.108.

⁴⁰⁸ For a history of the JDR III Fund, see Christine Ithurbide, 'Shaping a Contemporary Art Scene: The Development of Artistic Circulation, Networks, and Cultural Policies between India and the U.S. since the 1950s', open access article, accessed 13 August 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320323518_Shaping_a_Contemporary_Art_Scene_The_Development_of_Artistic_Circulation_Networks_and_Cultural_Policies_between_India_and_the_US_since_the_1950s. For a discussion of the effects the grants had on Indian modernism, see Jumabhoy, 'A Progressive Revolution? The Modern and the Secular in Indian Art' in *The Progressive Revolution*, pp.16-27.

⁴⁰⁹ Mitter locates this development within a Cold War politics of "free world" abstraction pitted against Socialist Realism. Mitter, *Indian Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.205-206.

subjective displacement that registered the experience of Partition.⁴¹⁰ When Greenberg visited India in 1967, he noted this kind of synthesis, but criticised Indian artists for what he saw as too close an adherence to the model of North American painting.⁴¹¹ His Euro-American bias and modernist insistence on originality compelled him to dismiss Indian art as derivative. With this sort of binary in place, the work of Newman and his fellow abstract expressionists had become a site of cross-cultural exchange, around which the future of Indian art was being debated. To attack Newman in his letter was part of a wider effort on Souza's part to intervene in that debate, to suggest another direction.

The letter's composition (figs.5.5, 5.6), in which Newman's words and images are not left behind, but twisted into the substance of their own critique, suggests what that new direction might be. A partly erased copy of the *Newsweek* interview, it is one of Souza's earliest *Chemical Paintings*. By applying a solvent to newspapers and magazines, he would smear and erase print and photographs before fusing them with his own painted shapes and figures. In such work (in a manner that recalls both Bacon's practice of working from photographs and the Indian tradition of overpainted photography) painting forces itself into the space of mass-production.⁴¹² However, the presence it insists upon is oddly negative, dependent on a photographic original which it never fully effaces. Newman still sits, patrician-like, in front of *White and Hot* but his face is blurred and twisted, his hands engorged with paint. His clothing – suit, bowtie, and trademark monocle – is smeared pink, as if the flesh which seems to drip from his hands and face were writhing across his body.

⁴¹⁰ Atreyee Gupta, 'Dwelling in Abstraction: Post-Partition Segues into Post-War Art', *Third Text*, vol.31, no.2-3 (May 2017), p.436

⁴¹¹ Gupta, 'Dwelling in Abstraction', p.455.

⁴¹² See the discussion of overpainting in Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), pp.56-58. For Bacon's photographic method see Martin Hammer, 'Francis Bacon: Painting after Photography', *Art History*, vol.35, no.2 (April 2012), pp.354-371.

The pink line that violates the artist does the same to his painting, smudging its sharp, clean edges. Above, scrawled across the red field, the inscription ‘Souza 69’ lays autographic hold over *White and Hot*’s surface. However, this is a strange sort of authority, one simultaneously undercut by dependence on Newman’s original image. Souza attacks Newman by reproducing the latter’s work. He refuses to draw a clear binary between his own production and that of his opponent. This (partial) subversion is pushed further on the letter’s verso, where distorted versions of more Newman paintings – *Profile of Light* (1967) and *Jericho* (1968-9) – share the page with a weird, floating red biomorph, spotted with more pink lines: *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue I* (1966), its vibrant primary colours, reminiscent of Mondrian’s purism, defaced past recognition.

These appropriations of the paintings on show at Knoedler are important, not just for the challenge they throw down to Newman’s hold over his own work but for what they tell us about Souza’s practice at this point – his ‘reckless manner of cultural symbiosis’, Kapur calls it – and the response it offered to Mitter’s ‘Picasso manqué’ dilemma.⁴¹³ What looks, at first, like an impossible claim to authorship over another artist’s production in fact points to something far more unusual: to the use of that production as material for an exhausted creativity, pitched somewhere between originality and derivativeness, where awareness of the weight of the modernist legacy could comingle with its own subversion. This strategy has much in common with allegorical method as described by Craig Owens: ‘The allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter’.⁴¹⁴ For Owens, the emergence of allegorical practices from the mid-1950s

⁴¹³ Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), p.303.

⁴¹⁴ Craig Owens, ‘The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism’, *October*, no.12 (Spring 1980), p.69.

onwards marked a shift away from modernism, towards postmodernism. Robert Rauschenberg's *Combines* were among his central examples because he saw in their fragments and juxtapositions a form of appropriation that was plural, non-linear and defiant of modernist continuity.⁴¹⁵ Rauschenberg ripped elements from popular culture, decontextualised them and generated new meanings. I will return to the affinities between such effects and the *Chemical Paintings* below; suffice to note for now that Souza's letter worked in the opposite direction, in a similar manner to other late modernists. Rather than pull away from the modernist tradition embodied by Newman and towards the forms of mass culture, it uses those forms to work backwards over the tradition itself. This refusal to separate his art from what it criticises means that even as they generate new allegorical meanings, his paintings never dispense with the previous ones. They refuse the separation of old and new.

Souza recognised the cultural baggage that modernism had by this point acquired. His preoccupation with certain precedents – Picasso and Eliot chief among them – was unsurpassed for its longevity. In painting after painting and text after text, he brooded over the forms and techniques of his Western predecessors. This fact has formed the ground for successive ethical interpretations of his work. Kapur reads it as a rejection of Indian nationhood: 'he accepts almost wholly the terms and conditions of Western civilisation to which he has aligned himself by option, having migrated to the West'.⁴¹⁶ A subsequent generation of scholars has sought to redeem Souza on the same terms, reminding us of his Indianness by pointing out the affinities between, by turns, his black nudes and the goddess

⁴¹⁵ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse Part 2', *October*, no.13 (Summer 1980), p.68

⁴¹⁶ Kapur 'Devil in the Flesh', p.45. For a critique of Kapur's nationalist art history, which, in grounding itself upon supposedly autonomous values 'pre-empts any challenging of the political and social imaginaries in which society appears to itself', see Emilia Terracciano, *Art and Emergency: Modernism in Twentieth-Century India*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), pp.5-6.

Kali; his bright colours and Indian miniature painting; his landscapes and those of his youth in Goa; his erotic preoccupations and Hindu sculpture.⁴¹⁷ Yet to attempt to reach a judgement on Souza's art based on its position along a scale leading from some distinctively 'Indian' character to absolute 'Western' derivativeness is to miss its most provocative claim: that the modernist dualism of novelty/derivativeness was always a false one, reliant on inspiration drawn from the neglected art of Europe and its colonies. The dream of washing away this vast, expropriative tradition that Rosenberg had seen realised in Newman's late work would have horrified Souza. He could never have countenanced 'a heaven that has expelled us and our images'. Rather than overcome his precedents or escape towards some *tabula rasa*, he chose to dwell with the crushing weight of the problems and forms left behind. He knew this was the wellspring of his art, what marked him off from his Western peers, modernist or otherwise. As he remarked in 1991, 'these fellows gave up after Picasso and became abstract or they started painting garbage cans, thereby avoiding the whole problem of draughtsmanship. He stumped them and the whole of the western world into shambles'.⁴¹⁸

What are we to make of this? Obsession with tradition was nothing new for modernism. Eliot and Stevens had both mused on the difficulties of making a clean break; 'to pick a crisp salad from the garbage of the past is no snap', as Stevens put it.⁴¹⁹ A similar tone of proximity to the work of previous modernists (the 'purists and formalists' he all too airily dismissed) has struck viewers of Newman's late work.⁴²⁰ Yet Souza made such proximity the

⁴¹⁷ See Jumabhoy, 'A Progressive Revolution?', p.21; Yashodhara Dalmia, 'The Rise of Modern Art and the Progressives' in *The Progressive Revolution*, p.34; Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art*, p.92; Maria Aurora Couto, 'Souza: In Communion with Goa', *The Hindu* (31 March 2002); Amal Allana, 'Alkazi and the Progressives: Unravelling Multiple Strains of Indian Modernity' in *The Progressive Revolution*, p.50.

⁴¹⁸ Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art*, p.94.

⁴¹⁹ Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (London: University of California Press, 1996), p.232.

⁴²⁰ See Thierry de Duve, 'Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue?', *Artforum*, vol.22, no.1 (September 1983), pp.30-37.

overpowering centre of his practice. In so doing, he politicised it. By dwelling endlessly on the tropes and traditions of metropolitan Western modernism, he acknowledged and inverted its traditional extraction of aesthetic novelty from the colonial periphery. In a 1954 article he had highlighted the ambivalent fascination with India in the work of Eliot and Thomas Mann. (Edward Said would make the same argument forty years later, pointing to the ‘combination of dread and promise, of degeneration and desire’ that the subcontinent symbolises in both men’s work).⁴²¹ ‘By a horrifying means of language and invention’, Souza writes, ‘Mann creates an epidemic of cholera which originates in the marshes of India and causes the germs to be blown over by the winds of grace to bring death upon Aschenbach in Venice. And Eliot miraculously transforms a great message of deliverance from a fable in the Upanishads and wrings out rain from it to fructify the Waste Land’.⁴²² India operated for these authors as both nourishment and destruction, providing material for their writing (Mann’s plague, Eliot’s *shantih*s), even as it testified, threateningly, to the colonial other. As the reworked forms of his letter attest, Souza performed this process in reverse. By plundering canonical modernist forms, he could recognise their global, appropriative character along with the cultural impossibility of cleanly separating East from West (‘a dichotomy’, in his words, ‘as hard as nails and vague as fluff’), or old from new.⁴²³

This is the central message of Souza’s letter: that the modernist fetish of originality is a myth, that the image is always grounded in another image from which it cannot fully escape. He rejects both Newman’s claims to universality and the approach of those, like Morris, who would leave such questions behind. Even when they gesture towards transcendent themes,

⁴²¹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (London: Vintage, 1994), pp.227-228.

⁴²² Souza, ‘A Journey Through France and Italy 4’, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (7 February 1954), p.34.

⁴²³ Souza, ‘A Personal Statement’, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (17 July 1960), p.55.

Souza's paintings are explicitly, allegorically dependent upon others. This is why he objects so forcefully to Newman's claim that 'colour is absolute'. Colour for Newman, especially as it declared itself in shining, primary-coloured sheets at Knoedler, can often seem to transcend its material status.⁴²⁴ Colour in Souza's art – the mixing, blurring quality of the pink lines that snake across his letter speaks to this as much as his text – refuses such effects. It is no otherworldly ideal, like the sun of Stevens' 'first idea'. It is always bodily, always particular, always enmeshed in previous representations. This materiality is the root of his works' most difficult interrogations of the modernist tradition, as well as their most provocative political statements.

Black Particulars

Before Souza's emigration to the USA, one colour had secured this material, political function more than any other: Black. In such major paintings as *Reclining Nude* (1954), *Crucifixion* (fig.5.10, 1959), *Mad Prophet in New York* (1961) and *Black Nude* (fig.5.7, 1961) his figures' black skins and exaggerated features had doubled as symbols for difference and negation. Blackness operated in these paintings in a manner akin to that demanded by Adorno when he wrote that 'radical art today is synonymous with dark art: its background colour is black'.⁴²⁵ Adorno praised the use of black by modernist artists for its cultivation of dissonance. 'The caustic discordant moment, dynamically honed to a point and clearly set off from the homogeneous mass of affirmative elements' was to illustrate, by its very incongruence, the fraudulence and abuses of all abstract claims to universality and equality: 'this allure, scarcely less than revulsion for the imbecility of positive thinking draws modern

⁴²⁴ This was the impression they made on Michael Fried, who wrote that they 'address themselves to eyesight alone... they comprise an illusion of spatiality itself rendered sheerly optical'. Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, p.232.

⁴²⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.54.

art into a no-man's land that is the plenipotentiary of a liveable world'.⁴²⁶ If Adorno failed to acknowledge the racial subtext to his reading of blackness as pure particularity (an omission retained by modernists like Ad Reinhardt and Kazimir Malevich, for whom blackness operated as an abstract absolute), Souza's paintings seem to redeem this lack.⁴²⁷ Blackness locates them within a genealogy, a regime of modernist primitivism whose boundaries and prejudices they trouble and rework. And beyond this it invokes the realities of race and racism, immediately present to an Indian man living in post-war London. Yet there is a tension here. In Souza's art, blackness does political work. It resists universalising abstraction and makes contact with racial oppression. Yet it also secures participation in an illustrious line of exoticising primitivists stretching back to Picasso and Matisse. If its political character is radical, its historicity is often anything but. In 1966, with *Black on Black*, Souza forced this uneasy conflation of aesthetic and political value to its limits. No longer simply marking bodies, blackness now enfolded the surface of each painting like a kind of skin, disrupting vision and comprehension.

Blackness plays several roles in these paintings. The uneven monochrome of each surface summons instant connotations of racial difference while also standing in for negation, blindness, and invisibility. Black shuts down the possibility of a clear image, even as it provides the ground and material for that image. This is because the technical restrictions Souza sets himself – that the entire picture-surface, figure and ground, be made of the same wet, textured black oil paint – work against the demands of two-dimensional representation,

⁴²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.55. For Adorno's fullest defence of his idea that the task of modern art (as well as that of philosophy) is to resist the principles of abstract homogeneity and identity, to show that 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder', see his *Negative Dialectics*, p.5 and *passim*.

⁴²⁷ Reinhardt insisted on the 'aesthetic' nature of his black paintings, their isolation from racial and political issues: 'it has not to do with outer space or the colour of skin or the colour of matter'. Ad Reinhardt, 'Black as Symbol and Concept' in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor, (London: MIT Press, 2008), p.135.

that volume and contour be differentiated by colour and tone. If Newman's late work offers a vision of unearthly clarity, of impossibly sharp lines and bright colours, Souza's *Black Paintings* are more concerned with the difficulty of seeing what is right in front of us. In *Lovers* (fig.5.8, 1965), which seems not so much painted in black as carved from it, the physical, impacted character of the surface acquires a tactility resistant to illusionism. The eye leaps to its bulges and declivities; its bumps, scratches, and negative space. It struggles to assemble them into a coherent image. We have to pick out features one at a time – a knee, a bedpost, a buttock – relating them to each other, like a dreamer waking and blinking around in the dark, waiting for the room to come into view. The image plays on these ambiguities. It narrativises them. Perhaps we are supposed to question (without ever resolving) whether the central figure, who braces his leg on the floor as he holds his partner against the mattress, is indeed the consensual partner evoked by Souza's title? Our perceptual difficulties turn a familiar scene into something darker, intimacy into something more like violence. The impression of familiarity ruptured is even more pronounced in those *Black Paintings* that replicate famous images, canonical works of art history, via the black covering that renders them partly invisible; for example *Black Pope* (fig.5.9, 1965) modelled on Titian's *Portrait of Pope Paul III* (1543) or *Two Saints After El Greco* (1965). As we squint at these images, trying to place them within the traditions they relate to, blackness emerges as a force of constriction, a strategy (like the many eyes that sprout from the face of Souza's Pope) for making the familiar strange.⁴²⁸

⁴²⁸ Here it is worth noting Gilles Deleuze's suggestion that Bacon, with his screaming popes, was preoccupied not with visibility but with invisibility: 'Innocent X screams, but he screams behind the curtain, not only as someone who can no longer be seen, but as someone who cannot see, who has nothing left to see, whose only remaining function is to render visible these invisible forces that are making him scream'. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.44.

Souza's blackness is fugitive. It resists eyesight and comprehension. However, this resistance is rarely total because, painted in hasty layers of gloss paint over existing compositions, his surfaces are punctured by the coloured hints of previous work. In *Black Landscape* (fig.5.10, 1965), paint has been applied so quickly that it spreads and pulls apart. Splashes of orange and crimson emerge where the surface has been most disturbed, around the ridges that edge each line. So the jumble of boxy little houses which split the painting along its horizontal axis seem to shudder and crack open, while the two trees are rocked forty-five degrees off the vertical, as if the reds and yellows which surface around their roots were a destructive fire. 'Today', Souza remarked in 1963, 'my art rings with an apocalyptic message; with holocaust, thalidomide and the vision that man's own inventive evil may transform him into a monster'.⁴²⁹ This 'apocalyptic message' sets *Black Landscape's* tone. However the point is not so much what we see on the picture's surface: trees, houses and mountains juddering to pieces under a dark sky. Rather it is the sensation that the black impasto from which Souza produces his image might be shaken off by forces beneath to reveal another vision of apocalypse, unavailable to our eyes in their present, constricted state.

A Season in Hell

Souza's work approaches the apocalyptic elements of modernity: the holocaust and thalidomide of which he speaks, as well as the afterlives of imperialism, of which he does not. But it stages these as resistant, even unavailable, to vision. His art withdraws from figuring catastrophe. It takes refuge in particulars, in that 'somatic, unmeaningful stratum of life' to which, Adorno thought, the truth of modern art has been reduced.⁴³⁰ In so doing, it

⁴²⁹ Kapur 'Devil in the Flesh', p.53.

⁴³⁰ *Negative Dialectics*, p.361. Also relevant here is Adorno's account of Franz Kafka, who 'turns away from the most extreme scenes as though no eye could survive the sight'. 'Notes on Kafka' in *Prisms*, p.253.

allegorises the impossibility of direct representation. We are stuck at the surface of *Black Landscape*; we cannot penetrate further. We suspect all is not well in *Lovers*, although what, exactly, is wrong remains elusive. Given the kind of epistemology at work in the paintings, one which approaches horror via its absence, by masking it, it is no surprise that blindness and muteness figure so prominently. *Oedipus Rex* (1961) shields his many ruined eyes with a bandage. *The Man Born Blind* (1959, fig.5.11) peers from glassy sockets at Christ's sharpened fingernail millimetres from his face. Unsurprising, too, given Souza's insistent deployment of blackness as alterity, is the frequency with which blindness and muteness are made synonymous with a blackness that marks bodies and hides colour (but always inadequately). He was unapologetic in his borrowings: an explicitly racialised primitivism coupled with an awareness of, and resistance to, the power of the painter's gaze, were two fruits of his career-long obsession with Picasso. In *Young Ladies from Belsize Park* (1962), his restaging of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), each of Picasso's women has had her eyes violently crossed out (as in the figures second from left and top right), or left blank, pearly and sightless. Blank eyeballs cluster out of *Black Nude*. Stitches close the mouths of the crucified Christ and attendant saints (fig.5.12). Black surfaces, doubling for skins, shut off the *Black Paintings*.

Nietzsche wrote that we need art lest we perish from the truth.⁴³¹ With Souza, sensory impoverishment – and the imprisonment within bare particularity this entails – emerged as the only proportionate response to modern life and the modernist art that articulates it. Against Newman's claim to work autonomously, 'without preconceived ideas or greybeard dogmas', Souza painted as one constrained by the world around him and the legacies of

⁴³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: Selections from the Notebooks of the 1880s*, trans. R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpitti, (London: Penguin, 2017), p.465.

those, like Picasso, who had gone before. The aesthetic this produced was one that married transcendent, apocalyptic subject matter to a process of limitation and constraint. There is always too much to see in Souza's world. His viewers are always half-blinded. Blackness was often the sign of this predicament, which he acknowledged in writing as well as painting. It formed the subtext to the astonishing series of religious allegories he wrote in the early 1960s. The best of these, 'The Man Born Blind', formulates the relation between blackness and blindness as an explicit function of the modernist lineage. Based on the Gospel of John, the story is a tissue of direct quotation. Here though, it is not Picasso, grandee of modernist painting, but Eliot, anointed representative of its literature, within whose idiom Souza dwells.

The story begins with Christ, who approaches the man born blind. A crowd of onlookers accosts him with the same tropes of blackness and blindness that recur in the paintings: "This man is turned as blind as black water. Only upturned whites like pearls without sight and watering all the while". The blind man prays to God to give back his eyes, to lift the black water from them, to show them light: "Thou *art* their Light".⁴³² However Christ hesitates; in Souza's draft for the story he responds in words taken from Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Four Quartets*: 'People cannot bear very much reality'.⁴³³ In the published version the reply is screeched by a great bird: "Mankind cannot bear to see whether he can see or whether he be blind".⁴³⁴ Both formulations invert the Gospel. There, Christ promised vision to the faithful and blindness to those unable to recognise him: 'For judgement I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind' (9:39).⁴³⁵ Vision, restored, symbolises Christian duty: reality will

⁴³² Souza, 'The Man Born Blind', *Two Cities: La Revue Bilingue de Paris*, no.4, (15 May 1960), p.35.

⁴³³ Souza, 'The Man Born Blind [Draft]', Archives of the Grosvenor Gallery, unpaginated.

⁴³⁴ Souza, 'The Man Born Blind', p.37.

⁴³⁵ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (eds.), *The Bible: Authorised King James Version*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.129.

be both given back and made tolerable by revealed doctrine. Souza's Christ, by contrast, warns that even with this revelation, perhaps because of it, reality may be too much to bear. Even the light of the world may not redeem it.

The blind man insists, however. The miracle occurs as a flood of imagery, which I quote in full:

Nothing looked more fresh than this stale corrupted earth picked with sin, rotten to the core like the bitten apple thrown away. And there were men among trees. His face slowly moved with tormented delight. And the onlookers said, "Man, can you see? What can you see? Tell us what you can see." And the blind man cried out in a stumbling mouth. "I can see shadows, I can see trees walking like men... I can see... I can see..." And they said to one another, "Look, those are eyes that were pearls!" And the blind man said, "O Invincible Sun! With thy beam in my eye I can see in my brother's a mote. I see a short spring and a death rattle coming from the olive press. I see people in a ring playing blind man's buff. I see swinging trees of spinal cords and navel cords... and there I can also see bats turned into hats and umbrellas hanging on straps. I can see blood and blades and bullets. A lifted dress and messed and blooded pads... men's hair coiled like thread-worms in watering holes and gushing holes in heads. And there I can see beds and fair faces pressed. I see contrived corridors where the Virgin screams. I see habitations and hotels... I see the organs of increase decrease on creased and wet blankets. I see the dirty dream. I accept the preceding years and memories and also fears. My eyelids, opened painfully, like oysters, by force, pearls turned to pupils. I see rutting swine and runts on a smouldering battlefield. I am watching".⁴³⁶

Again and again, Souza invokes the 'pearls that were his eyes', *The Waste Land's* most repeated image (and perhaps Eliot's most famous borrowing), in such a way as to invert that line's original significance. Both the 'sea-change' with which Ariel taunts Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, and that which Eliot inflicts on his 'drowned Phoenician sailor', are hideous and deathly.⁴³⁷ 'Eyes like pearls', as Cervantes once wrote, 'suit a sea-bream better than a lady'.⁴³⁸ For Souza the reverse is true. The blind man's 'pearls' revert to human 'pupils', and it is this very return that is terrifying. Thanks to a heavenly 'Invincible Sun', not unlike that

⁴³⁶ Souza, 'The Man Born Blind', pp.38-39.

⁴³⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.123; T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*, (London: Faber, 1975), p.62.

⁴³⁸ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, p.533.

of Stevens, the blind man emerges into the world given by vision. What he finds there are not pure ‘first ideas’, washed clean of images, but ‘shadows’, flaws, the ‘mote’ in his brother’s eye, even the ‘blood and blades and bullets’ of the modern battlefield. As in his paintings, Souza conflates religious imagery, modern horror, and modernist precedent. So the ‘men among trees’ – an echo of the ‘three trees on the low sky’ which stand, in Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’, for the Crucifixion – become ‘trees walking like men’ and finally, ‘swinging trees of spinal cords and navel cords’.⁴³⁹

It will be clear, by this point, that the revelation imparted to Souza’s blind man operates on more than one level. In the immediacy of the narrative he is driven mad by existence revealed in all its contradictions, in a manner that recalls the fate of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As in the paintings (which employ blackness or masking in the same register), blindness emerges as the only proportionate response to modernity’s horrors. Yet this modernity is shown to be radically unstable because Souza constructs his story from so many fragments and memories of Eliot’s idiom. This mode of production, itself borrowed from Eliot, does similar work to the paintings’ appropriations of Picasso. It asserts the reality that Souza describes, the horror on which he insists, to be unimaginable outside the forms and tropes of the modernist tradition. One cannot be expressed without the other. Driven mad, the blind man becomes a cipher for Souza himself, faced with an impossible choice between inhabiting the constructions of his predecessors – the modernity they expressed – or escaping into blindness.

⁴³⁹ Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p.103.

Darkness Visible

What does it mean, politically, to sketch a cosmos where dark and light are juxtaposed so insistently? Where blackness symbolises the collapse of unmanageable totality into mythic particularity? Where it becomes synonymous with embodiment, even blindness? Such questions have a long, unpleasant history. They were asked by Enlightenment philosophers, writing at the dawn of what Toni Morrison calls ‘the age of scientific racism’, who opposed blackness to the universalising capacities of human thought.⁴⁴⁰ We might think here of Immanuel Kant’s equation of blackness with stupidity, or the role played by Africa in G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophy of history: as a sort of prison of particularity, anterior to moral and religious universals.⁴⁴¹ Anti-colonial thought has always counterposed a bitter scepticism to any such definition of the universal in terms of exclusion. Souza’s letter, criticising Newman for his blinkered universalism, taps into this. However, like Adorno, who retained these categories in reverse, Souza’s use of blackness to express a countervailing force of difference and particularity risks reproducing such division from another direction. Put simply, if he accepts blackness as, in some sense, the border at which universality comes to an end, then what becomes of the people marked as black, those for whom exclusion from such universal concepts as equality, citizenship, even humanity has always been justified along such lines?

I think that these are the questions we should ask of Souza’s monumental *Crucifixion* (fig.5.12). The painting shows a black-skinned Christ, crowned with thorns and licked by blue flames, flanked by black saints against a curtain of pale fire. For Paul Gilroy this is a crucial work which heralds the end of four-hundred years of aesthetic oppression during

⁴⁴⁰ Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’, in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p.89.

⁴⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick Frierson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp.58-59; G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, (Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), p.111.

which the representation of black people in British art had been largely the prerogative of white artists.⁴⁴² Analysing the subversion of these paradigms by artists of colour during the post-war period, Gilroy identifies ‘an implicit progression, as blacks cease to be passive objects being represented by others and become active subjects who shape their own images’.⁴⁴³ Souza’s *Crucifixion* announces this progress for him because by making Christ and his apostles black it ‘reorders the moral drama of the Crucifixion in a binary “racial” code of black and white’.⁴⁴⁴ On Gilroy’s reading, Souza reverses the Enlightenment binarism that mapped black and white skin onto the divide between universal and particular. He clads Christ, the figure of universal religion, in black skin. ‘In doing this, [he hopes] to affect what this country is now, and what it can be in the future’.⁴⁴⁵

This is doubtless true on one level, and Gilroy has done much elsewhere to chart the shifting fortunes of Afro-Asian unity in Britain.⁴⁴⁶ Others have followed his reading of *Crucifixion*. Gregory Salter, for instance, sees the painting as inverting the anaemic nineteenth century Jesuit art made by such painters as Heinrich Hofmann, which Souza recalled staring at in prints and reproductions during his childhood in Goa. ‘His *Crucifixion*’, Salter writes, ‘replaces a dignified, pure, white Christ with the distorted, suffering, lifeless body of his black Christ’.⁴⁴⁷ Recently Salter, Zehra Jumabhoy, and Priyesh Mistry have all

⁴⁴² The painting was the focus of the important exhibition Gilroy curated at the Tate Gallery, *Picturing Blackness in British Art*, which charted the changing representations of black people in British art along lines that began with imperialist constructions of racial difference and culminated in self-representation.

⁴⁴³ Paul Gilroy, *Picturing Blackness in British Art, 1700s – 1900s* (London: Tate Publishing, 1995), p.2.

⁴⁴⁴ Gilroy, *Picturing Blackness*, p.3.

⁴⁴⁵ Gilroy, *Picturing Blackness*, p.3.

⁴⁴⁶ For his consideration of these possibilities and their erosion in the 1980s and afterwards, see Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.38-39.

⁴⁴⁷ Gregory Salter, *Art and Masculinity in Post-War Britain: Reconstructing Home* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p.121.

explained Souza's use of blackness in the 1950s and 1960s as a rejection of normative whiteness and an expression of solidarity with Afro-Caribbean migrants facing racist violence.⁴⁴⁸ But there are serious gaps in this line of argument. In their haste to assimilate Souza to a narrative of progressive black self-representation, scholars have rushed over the fact that, as an Indian migrant living in North London, he was approaching the forms and motifs of African art indirectly, via a primitivism already charged with racial meaning. Key questions have been ignored. What work did primitivism do in this painting? How are we to reconcile its supposedly progressive agenda with the monstrous blackness it depicts? In what ways might this monstrosity operate alongside Souza's openly regressive attitudes towards other minorities, Jews and homosexuals in particular? And how are we to account for the fact that the same British critics who characterised Souza's paintings in racial, often racist, terms, were so unchallenged by *Crucifixion* when it first went on display in 1959? Nigel Gosling, during a typically orientalist radio discussion that year ('the oriental element emerges most clearly in the gaudy colours...') even singled out the painting as embodying 'the Western element' in Souza's art.⁴⁴⁹ Was this simple misinterpretation, or something else? Scholars have ignored these inconsistencies by treating Souza's painting as if it simply replaced the hackneyed image of a heroic, suffering white Christ – staple of mission schools all over the colonised world – with a black mirror-image. Rather, it undercut and reshaped the very structure of that image.

⁴⁴⁸ See Jumabhoy, 'Double Trouble', in *FN Souza Black on Black* (London: Grosvenor Gallery, 2013), p.10; Priyesh Mistry, 'Francis Newton Souza', in *All too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life*, ed. Elena Crippa, (London: Tate Publishing, 2018), p.93; 'Looking at Identity: Bacon, Souza, Freud', in *All Too Human*, p.48

⁴⁴⁹ 'The western element you can see in a variety of landscapes... and particularly in a large crucifixion conceived in a mood of extreme violence and anguish'. Nigel Gosling, *The Critics* (15 November 1959), Tate Gallery Archives.

This is the place to insist on the medievalism which, for Souza, was the other face of primitivism. When he saw them in 1954, he thought the eleventh-century bronze doors of Verona's church of San Zeno the finest works of art he had ever seen precisely because, 'crude and wonderful', they seemed to mingle the medieval and the non-Western. 'These doors are superb', he wrote, 'of an amazing aesthetic strangeness which only the Indus valley race, the Anglo-Saxons, the Sumerians and the primitive negroes possessed'.⁴⁵⁰ It is towards some such conflation of non-Western and pre-modern prototypes that his *Crucifixion* gestures. Although still in the same archetypal shallow space, still looking at the cross flanked on either side by gesturing saints, we are far from the images of the young Souza's Jesuit schoolroom. In *Crucifixions* such as Hofmann's (fig.5.13), the architectonics of the cross are rhymed with the suffering body of Christ. The variations produced by mid-century modernists like Bacon and Sutherland had retained this dynamic, if only to exaggerate it. For Bacon, the opposition between flesh and wood generated a feeling 'of [the] image just moving, undulating down the cross'.⁴⁵¹ He stressed this when, in the right-hand panel of *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (fig.5.15, 1962) he flipped the crucified body – halfway between a worm and a rack of meat – upside-down and made it pool towards the painting's bottom edge. Souza abolished all such movement. In place of a cross standing on the ground, to which Christ is nailed with his gaze turned away, a thorny, spiked Christ sprouting twigs and leaves is himself nailed to the floor, his arms spread wide. Wooden and erect, with baleful eyes directed, not towards heaven or some other middle distance, but straight at us, he is more cross than man, more punishment than salvation. The prototypes for this move were not to be found in the sanitised art of the nineteenth century. The grafting of the cross, Christ, the tree of knowledge, and the apocryphal tree of life onto a single stem was a medieval

⁴⁵⁰ Souza, 'A Journey Through France and Italy 4', p.35.

⁴⁵¹ David Sylvester, *The Brutality of Fact: Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p.14.

development – the first century *Gospel of Nicodemus* already speaks of ‘the tree of the cross’ – although its iconography peaked, as Simon Schama has argued, in the seventeenth century.⁴⁵² Painters like Giovanni da Modena (fig.5.14, c.1420) had shown Christ crucified onto the tree of knowledge. In Jacques Callot’s *Tree of St. Francis* (c.1621), the tree itself became the anthropomorphic substitute for the worshipped body, around which saints gather and the heavens open.

Souza’s *Crucifixion* recalled such prototypes. At the same time, it reached beyond them. He was a good modernist, after all. He thought Western art had gone wrong after Giotto. Primitivism was a rebuke to modernity before it was anything else: ‘The Renaissance is supposed to have been an enlightenment after the Dark Ages. But I like most to wander from Dark age to Dark age, lit by my own vision’.⁴⁵³ His compositional models were both more distant and more contemporary. On the one hand, there was West African art, arrived at through study of Picasso and around which art historical analysis has typically clustered. The features of the *Demoiselles* – noses flattened and rotated perpendicular to faces; eyes lined up flush to the picture plane – are there in those of Christ and the saints. *Young Ladies from Belsize Park* was only three years away. Then there was the medieval. Space on Souza’s picture plane is apportioned between the figures according to spiritual rank, rather than linear perspective.⁴⁵⁴ The lines delineating their bodies are subjected to the demands of surface pattern, rather than any kind of optical depth. They form what Otto Pächt would call an ‘aesthetic unity’ in which ‘the dense filling of the pictorial field (that is, the ground) occurs

⁴⁵² Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: HarperCollins, 1995), p.219.

⁴⁵³ Souza, ‘A Journey Through France and Italy 4’, p.35.

⁴⁵⁴ It was Meyer Schapiro who argued that this was a central principle of medieval art while also – in true primitivist fashion – suggesting it determined ‘Asiatic’ images. Meyer Schapiro, ‘On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art’, p.16.

by means of the strict accommodation of the objects' contours to one another'.⁴⁵⁵ Like the frontal arrangements of San Zeno's great doors, no object or body is allowed to recede behind any other. See how the line of Christ's body is indented, rather than obstructed, by the raised hand of the saint to his left; how the nails rammed into his feet demand corresponding indentations in the robes of each saint, which fall back before them.

What work are these devices doing? Like Eliot's 'three trees', Souza's recollection of a Medieval Christian tree cult was never meant to be static, asserting filiation to a vanished religiosity. It was aggressive and provocative. The conflation of the African and the medieval unsettled the significance of this prototypical Christian scene, producing a surface that is tensed, flattened, and populated with figures whose aspect and gestures are radically ambiguous. This ambiguity is summed up in the body of Christ, pinned flat to the edges of the frame, marking its width and height. Covered with marks and colours, pressed against the picture surface, whose limits it declares, his body comes, in a sense, to double for the canvas itself. Both cross and canvas, it takes on the terrible inertia of these surfaces, each of which await the inscription of *another* body, one who, in being represented on this canvas, would be nailed to this cross. The saints on either side are not exempted from such doubling, in which the monstrous trades places with the idea of salvation. Take the figure on the left, who raises his hand, ribbed like a skeleton's, to point towards the crucifixion from below the arch of Christ's armpit. Jointed twice, the figure's hand connects to both his upturned wrist and to the strange, bony line that protrudes from his open mouth. The momentary confusion this generates, the question of which body-part – mouth or wrist – the hand is connected to, implies that, even as he raises his hand, he also devours it.

⁴⁵⁵ Otto Pächt, 'Design Principles of Fifteenth Century Northern Painting' in *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, ed. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 2000), p.251.

The ambiguities of *Crucifixion*, produced at the nexus of race, primitivism, and monstrosity, connect to the darkest elements of Picasso's and Eliot's practices, to the horror each discovered in the face of non-Western, non-Christian civilisation. They anticipate Souza's criticisms of Newman, of the notion that colour, enmeshed as it is in evolving, political categories of race and racism, could ever double for ethical clarity. Race, Souza wants us to understand, is what ruptures ethics, cuts off the universal, creates stereotypes, violates individuals, nails them up in predetermined categories. To deny the reality of these categories – to produce a universality in your painting that is refused in society at large – only leaves oppression intact by ignoring it. In 'Resurrexit Sicut Dixit', another of his biblical narratives (unpublished, for reasons that will become clear) he follows this logic even further. Again his focus is the crucifixion, 'nail-plugged limbs stirring on the cross trees'.⁴⁵⁶ The first narrative climax, at which even Eliot at his most antisemitic might have winced, comes when a crowd of Jews arrives to taunt Christ.⁴⁵⁷ 'They all gaped and mocked and waited', Souza writes, 'the uncircumcised dogs and the circumcised vultures, all howling and clawing. Hatred, spit, gory gloating, mockery, jeers. Love and forgiveness were anathema on this accursed hilltop abattoir'.⁴⁵⁸ Reprising one of the oldest Western stereotypes, Jewish vultures – human carrion – circle the crosses on the ground while real vultures flap above. Love and

⁴⁵⁶ Souza, 'Resurrexit Sicut Dixit', Archives of the Grosvenor Gallery, p.1.

⁴⁵⁷ I have in mind the notorious lines from 'Gerontion': 'And the Jew squats on the window-sill, the owner, spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp, / Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London'. Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p.37. For a critique of Eliot's antisemitism see Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995). Christopher Ricks's defence of Eliot as investigating, rather than inciting prejudice, as prompting his audience 'to strict thought about the exact grounds on which anyone can pass judgements', is inapplicable to Souza's writing. Whereas Eliot's most antisemitic lines are placed in the mouths of characters like Gerontion, whose 'dry brain in its dry season' makes him a dubious authority, Souza's are imparted by omniscient narration. Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber, 1988), p.78.

⁴⁵⁸ Souza, 'Resurrexit Sicut Dixit', p.2.

forgiveness are denied to and by people no better than animals or, at best, ‘Levite butchers’.⁴⁵⁹

Looking back at the figure in *Crucifixion* who raises and consumes his own skeletal hand in a weird mix of declamation and cannibalism, we might ask, against Gilroy, to what extent Souza has indeed ‘reordered’ traditional pictures of the crucifixion, those which placed a crowd of gloating Pharisees around the cross. In his skin colour and facial features, which draw on West African sculpture via Picasso, the figure on the right of Christ is black. Yet in his predilection for devouring his own flesh he invokes a combination of stereotypes and taboos that link blacks *and* Jews, the narrative of ‘Resurrexit Sicut Dixit’ *and* the painting *Crucifixion*. It was Georges Bataille who first developed Sigmund Freud’s account of taboo to argue that the Western imaginary’s taboo on cannibalism relies on the scapegoating of certain groups, who are called upon to confirm the taboo by supposedly breaking it.⁴⁶⁰ This role has been played by different racial groups at different historical junctures. Colonial expansion and extraction relied upon exaggerated accounts of cannibalism among non-Western people, particularly Africans, a trope retained in the jokes about cannibals in *Heart of Darkness* and Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party*.⁴⁶¹ And, as Walter Laqueur has shown, the oppression of the Jews was grounded up to the twentieth century by tales of the blood libel

⁴⁵⁹ Souza, ‘Resurrexit Sicut Dixit’, p.6.

⁴⁶⁰ Bataille’s anthropology makes a strong case for the prohibition on (and suppressed desire for) cannibalism as the cornerstone of Western society. Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.71-72. He was developing Freud’s insight that every taboo contains the desire for its own transgression, Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. A.A. Brill (London: Routledge, 1919), p.50.

⁴⁶¹ In Conrad’s novel, Marlow’s expedition into the Heart of Darkness is enabled by the local cannibals he enlists. ‘Fine fellows, cannibals – in their place’, he reflects. Similarly, in *The Cocktail Party*, cannibalism marks the end of Christendom and the beginning of ‘heathendom’. Like Souza, Eliot conflates the crime of the Jews – the Crucifixion – with the ‘savage’ nature of the colonised. Celia, the missionary, is crucified by indigenous people during a religious dispute. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.37. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp.428-429.

which held that Jewish ritual demanded the consumption of Christian children (their blood used to bind Passover matzah).⁴⁶² For the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time*, what marks Albertine out as a good ‘daughter of the middle class... with [a] good Catholic upbringing’ is her belief ‘that Jews fed on the flesh of infant Christians’.⁴⁶³ In each case, the rights and privileges of modern Western society came to a halt before the image of the cannibal, that same image which Souza, in text and painting, deploys to such powerful effect. Faced with cannibalism, the universalising principles of liberty and equality that European societies had preached since the Enlightenment were found no longer to apply, and the justification emerged for the most outrageous abuses.

Antiblackness and antisemitism are different social forces. I want to suggest, however, that Souza’s explicitly political use of blackness makes a different kind of sense in the light of his antisemitism. Paintings such as *Crucifixion*, *Black Nude*, and *Black Landscape* employ blackness for its disruptive, dissonant materiality. Blackness stands in each canvas as the concrete antithesis to the universalism to which Souza so objected in Newman’s art. But this approach could carry along with it a set of old, harmful stereotypes which only become fully visible when applied to those – Jews, gays, women – for whom Souza is not summoned to speak by a well-meaning but overly generalising postcolonial discourse as a fellow member of the Global South’s diaspora. Recognising this helps to explain how non-threatening – how securely western, even – critics like Gosling found *Crucifixion*. More profoundly, it resonates beyond the boundaries of Souza’s project, querying the capacity of citational, allegorical modernist painting to trouble the categories on which it drew. If so brilliant a painter as

⁴⁶² Walter Laqueur, *The Changing Face of Anti-Semitism: From Ancient Times to the Present Day*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.43.

⁴⁶³ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time Volume 2: In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, trans. James Grieve (London: Penguin, 2003), p.480.

Souza set out to interrogate and deconstruct the patterns of racism and expropriation implicit in modernism, only to end up reproducing them, what hope would others have? Without diminishing the important modes of anticolonial critique Souza engages in his paintings, we should keep sight of how some of his best work, in mobilising the forces Western society has traditionally repressed and throwing them in the British public's face, risked redeploying the kinds of abjecting stereotype and exclusionary thinking that built that public in the first place.⁴⁶⁴

The End of Modernism?

Souza's critique of Newman cuts both ways. Newman, in aspiring to autonomy, blocked out the historicity of his art, reproducing a kind of exclusionary universal incapable of speaking to political and racial particulars. Yet approaching the problem in reverse, Souza reproduced the very tropes of otherness and limitation that grounded such exclusion to begin with. The real issue raised by his letter was not, then, what side of the dispute – particular or universal; allegory or autonomy – modernist painting ought to pursue. (In any case, the hybrid character of that document, its refusal to abandon Newman's words and images, suggests that any position on such matters was always provisional.) More fundamentally at issue was the question of whether modernism ought to continue at all, when the categories which determined its artefacts were shown to be so compromised. This doubt, born of reflection, opens onto an affinity between Souza and Newman. Both felt its urgency and in their work of the late-1960s sought resolutions that registered the impossibility of modernism without giving it up.

⁴⁶⁴ Here I echo Moten's critique of those passages in Fanon which accept imperialist definitions of the colonised as subhuman, in order to criticise the system which made them so. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), pp.10-11.

As his speech to the AWC confirmed, by 1969 Newman was already looking beyond modernism's traditional horizons. That his paintings disclosed this movement alongside a reluctance to abandon the project entirely is indicated by the confused responses to his Knoedler show, when critics celebrated him as much for retaining tradition as for dispensing with it. However, it is in his late sculpture that he made this ambivalence political. *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* (fig.5.17, 1968) addresses transformations in US society relating to public space and state violence. Yet it only does this by acknowledging the complicity of such changes with the modernism that had been their aesthetic guarantee. It is both Newman's most modernist work – a pictorial, modular grid – and his least – an industrially-manufactured, minimalist rectangle. For Souza too, continuing with modernism meant moving past it. As one of his first *Chemical Paintings*, his letter to Newman emerged at a point of transition for them both. Affected, perhaps, by the struggles for black liberation in the US made unavoidable by his move to New York, he dispensed with blackness as a cipher of particularity, inaugurating a search for new objects in which to root this distinction. This cut the ground out from under his paintings, weakening (without severing) his connection to primitivist tradition. In its place, he turned increasingly to mass media. Rather than covering old compositions with black paint (a technique to which he never returned), Souza made the *Chemical Paintings* by altering photographs. Sometimes, as in his letter to Newman, this meant defacing the words and images of other modernists. Elsewhere he cast the net wider, claiming the multiplicity of representations turned up by the global press as surfaces to cover and blind. Despite his protests to the contrary, this move registered the impact not only of Bacon's practice but also of post-Rauschenberg American pop art and the possibilities for allegorical appropriation that movement opened up.⁴⁶⁵ Simultaneously, it recalled

⁴⁶⁵ The successes of pop were synonymous in his mind with, by turns, gay and Jewish control of the New York art world. See the letter of his reproduced in Souza, *New Paintings and Drawings by Francis Newton Souza*, (Delhi: Dhoomi Mal Gallery, 1975), unpaginated.

overpainted Indian photography, refusing, once more, a clear division of East and West in terms reducible to a technical dualism.

During the Bangladesh War, Souza used his new technique to doctor photographs of military atrocity, making tentacled monsters out of soldiers and corpses, turning earth and sand into water, wind, and ash (fig.5.16). Such photographs, in their original context, carry a universalising premise: that everything that happens, in the entire world, is a potential subject for representation, rationalised within the picture of up-to-the-minute reality that is the newspaper.⁴⁶⁶ Souza's forms and figures reverse this claim. They repeat the form of the atrocity, now become a cartoonish battle of gods and monsters. It is for this reason – for seeking to add a frivolous layer of drama to images whose gravity cannot be surpassed – that the paintings have been criticised by critics like Kapur and marginalised in art history. Souza's own insistence on their sublimatory effects ('I challenge the camera as a "lesser" image and convert it into high art') has not helped in this regard.⁴⁶⁷ For Kapur, following his lead, the paintings 'seemed to assume that the artist's furious signature on the scene would make the tragedy more credible, or more tragic'.⁴⁶⁸ This is, I think, to take the message of the works the wrong way round. Souza's images never try to elevate the photograph to some higher realm of tragic credibility. They are too small for that, too indistinct. Rather, they continue the strategy, begun with the *Black Paintings*, of downplaying the kinds of painterly bombast with which he had made his name in London. Again, we have to squint beneath the blurred forms, trying to identify an original representation which is never fully obscured. By highlighting their dependence on this original, the *Chemical Paintings* acknowledge their

⁴⁶⁶ My understanding of how newspapers work draws on Benedict Anderson's. See his *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 2016), pp.33-35.

⁴⁶⁷ Srimati Lai, 'Exerpts from an Interview; at Souza's Studio in New York; August 1995' in *Solo Exhibition of Chemical Paintings by F.N. Souza*, (New Delhi: L.T.G. Art Gallery, 1995), unpaginated.

⁴⁶⁸ Kapur, 'Devil in the Flesh', p.53

own status as partial, even trivial distraction. Like all performative iconoclasm, they signal the power of what they deface. This is their point: that the rationalising claim of the newspaper does nothing to restrain the force of its representations, which overwhelm the artist, determine his imagery, and force him, as best he can, to look away.

The *Chemical Paintings* retained the allegorical thrust of Souza's earlier works – of sensory impoverishment in response to modern horror – while diminishing their emphasis on racial particularity. They took the notion of modernism as an overpowering tradition and extended it to encompass the entire global press. It would seem that for Newman no such solution was available. His difficulties, Souza helps us to see, had always stemmed from too smooth an evasion of the weight of existing representations, of visual tradition and the politics built into it. But this stance had begun to break down by the late-1960s. He too felt the increasing weight of political demands and sought, like Souza, to bend his work in response. *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* is one such effort, produced in response to police brutality rolled out against protestors by Chicago's racist mayor. The red paint flicked across the base of its Cor-Ten steel frame has less to do with abstract universals (with colour-as-ethics) than with the blood of protestors, beaten senseless by billy-club-wielding police. The sculpture looks like a blocked-off window, or a piece of military fencing. It symbolises, in its form and materials, the division of public space and the violent policing of its boundaries. For Patricia Kelly, the spattered paint in *Lace Curtain* pulls colour out of the ideal realm it inhabits in Newman's paintings, away from abstraction and towards mimetic representation. It is an anomaly, she argues, one that 'marks the extent to which social tensions had by 1968 impinged upon and infiltrated cultural production'.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ Patricia Kelly, 'When Push Comes to Shove: Barnett Newman, Abstraction, and the Politics of 1968', *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, vol.1, no.1 (June 2008), p.27.

What Kelly's argument misses, drawn as it is to the figurative connotations of barbed wire and blood, is the particular allegorical significance of *Lace Curtain*'s abstract, gridded form: the only grid Newman ever made, in any medium.⁴⁷⁰ He took care that it be laid out precisely, with horizontal and vertical filaments cut to identical lengths so that the knots in the wire occur more or less opposite one another. This gives his sculpture the character of a ratio. Each vertical wire has twelve knots and each horizontal has seven, adding up to 172. In conceptual terms the work is reducible to these specifications, delivered by Newman to a fabricator over the telephone. This displacement of composition is often linked, with good reason, to contemporary minimalism, to sculpture that, as Morris famously put it, 'takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer's field of vision'.⁴⁷¹ However the experience of viewing *Lace Curtain* disrupts such associations. The position of each knot varies slightly between wires. This produces oscillations in the visual field, an instability and a scope for human error that verges on the pictorial (and here the sculpture's rectangle recalls another archetype, the picture frame). Such effects point away from minimalism, back to the modular grid that had preoccupied Mondrian and his generation of modernist purists, those same artists whose work Newman recalled at Knoedler with the *Who's Afraid?* paintings (1966-70). As Fred Moten and others have remarked, in his late work Mondrian attempted to synthesise the creative diversity he found in African American culture with his earlier ambition for painting to enter the rationalised realm of architecture. His last picture (fig.5.18, 1942-44) can be read in these terms, as an affirmation both of New York's gridded structure, which rhymes with that of the painting and of the

⁴⁷⁰ Rosalind Krauss sums up this quality of grids in general when she notes 'that the grid is able – in a work of whatever quality – to emblemise the Modern'. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (London: MIT Press, 1985), p.12.

⁴⁷¹ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture Part II' in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), p.232.

(black) human creativity – jazz – this structure provided scope for: ‘*Victory Boogie Woogie* is all black, is all of what had been absorbed in black, is the explication of a dissonant, chromatic saturation, the inhabitation of a break or border, the disruption embedded in the grid’s boundaries’.⁴⁷²

Lace Curtain inverts Mondrian’s utopianism, while retaining his emphasis on the grid as generative of variation, metaphor, and disruption. Where Mondrian and architects like Le Corbusier had looked forward to a world of clean lines, light, and rationalised geometrical design, the brutality with which Newman now infused the modular grid acknowledged the complicity of such a vision with repression and violence. As Marshall Berman has argued, the restructuring of urban space in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s advanced via an application of modernist principles, one that dialectically reversed the liberatory aspirations they had originally expressed. Berman describes the federal-funded building projects of the post-war period as a sort of rationalised, modernist automaton that ‘integrated the whole nation into a unified flow whose lifeblood was the automobile... Thousands of urban neighbourhoods were obliterated’.⁴⁷³ First on the list had been Newman’s childhood neighbourhood, the Bronx: ravaged to make way for Robert Moses’ Cross-Bronx Expressway.⁴⁷⁴ Sarah Rich has elsewhere documented the effects on Newman of the massive demolition project launched in 1966 that destroyed the area of his downtown studio along ‘Mies van der Rohe-like’ modernist principles.⁴⁷⁵ His decision to build a grid – the ultimate symbol of pictorial modernism – as an act of political protest can only be viewed in the light of such developments, as a reflection on modernism’s complicity with the reconstruction of

⁴⁷² Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), p.157.

⁴⁷³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 2010), p.307.

⁴⁷⁴ See Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), pp.837-919.

⁴⁷⁵ Rich, ‘Bridging the Generation Gaps’, p.25.

urban space and the reformulations of society that had resulted. By approaching contemporary politics in this way, via the grid, *Lace Curtain* recognises, with Souza, that the only way for a modern artist to critique this reality is allegorically, by addressing and reshaping the existing body of cultural material, itself determined by a century of modernism.

Newman always expressed distaste for Mondrian's architectural ambitions.⁴⁷⁶ By repeating the Dutchman's forms, *Lace Curtain* undercuts the supposed apoliticism of abstraction, and of modernism in general, by implying that its critique of US society can only be achieved through a reflexive critique of modernism itself. It points towards another current in Newman's late work, one that coexists with, and often undermines, the more universalising 'ethical' strand singled out by Souza. This is the thought – which Souza never stopped thinking but Newman, it seems, was only beginning to formulate when he died – that there can be no moment of pure autonomy, no 'first idea'. Even the most spontaneous artwork is irrevocably grounded in the representations of the past. This overlap should not blunt our appreciation of these artists' profound differences, although it does suggest that at this point in modernism's decline, as the old doctrines were swept aside by escalating demands for social and political engagement, abandoning the project was not the only available response. Attention to the substance and historicity of modernism – to its forms, traditions, and techniques – could be debilitating. But it could also open onto consideration of modernism's role in contemporary society. It could open a path back to politics, one capable of registering the historical, aesthetic, and cultural forces at work in the present.

⁴⁷⁶ 'I never knew the man, but as I understand it, he actually lived in surroundings that duplicated and reflected his paintings... He insisted on the translation of his verticals into the physical situation of the environment'. Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p.257.

Conclusion: Fashion, not Painting?

When he diagnosed ‘the fatal ageing of the modern’, Adorno meant to identify a shift in the modernism of his own day, towards conservation at the expense of innovation.⁴⁷⁷ Definitions emerged in the post-war period that had not existed previously (at least, never at such a pitch of articulation). Modernism became comprehensible in terms of conceptual coherence and genealogical consistency: a tradition that ‘has never meant’, as Greenberg put it in 1960, ‘anything like a break with the past’.⁴⁷⁸ I have been arguing that Adorno’s pessimism was misplaced, that the idea of continuity was often the condition for a kind of intervention. Painting that obsessed over tradition, that historicised and repeated it, could also interpret, criticise, and rework it. Souza could attack Newman because he identified with him so closely: ‘*I, too, am a modernist. I will show you what our shared tradition really means. Cowflops in green fields are not the universe...*’. But this proximity generated its own problems. Modernism came into fashion in the decades immediately following World War II: institutionally, socially, and politically. The question of when renewed attention to tradition shaded into the mere following of fashion became more insistent. And what did this mean for the modernist project? What relation did it imply between the imperatives of innovative art and the normativity that fashion embodied?

Hartigan understood the stakes better than most. When she came, early in 1952, to formulate her dissatisfactions with abstract painting, fashion was the key term:

I don’t know what I’m after but whatever it is, if I must look conservative – reactionary – timid – or even (horrors) feminine – in the process then it must be. I think I know how really strong I am, and if a great painter like Matisse could paint weakly and

⁴⁷⁷ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.452.

⁴⁷⁸ Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’ in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: volume 4*, p.92. The political background to this formalisation of tradition has been well covered. See Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

timidly to clear his eyes for what was to come then I can too. I don't fear painting a bad picture or a weak one now... I was on the edge of succumbing to the need of looking "modern" – abstract – contemporary. All of which is fashion, not painting, and is most dangerous.⁴⁷⁹

She would repeat this argument: that abstract expressionism had become a 'fashion', 'a new academy'; that her own abstract paintings – roiling, tortured things like *Months and Moons* (fig.6, 1950), made under the aegis of Greenberg himself – had been the work of 'a robber'; that she 'had taken from the Abstract Expressionist painters older than I who had struggled tremendously for years to find this breakthrough'.⁴⁸⁰ The cycle of paintings after the old masters on which she was already at work when she wrote these words was supposed to break the consensus. This was a common refrain. Most of the painters discussed in this thesis uttered it at one time or another. Rivers could have been speaking for Hartigan too when he described himself, in 1956, as 'a revolutionary' because his work refused 'the dominant [i.e., abstract] interests of contemporary painting, the concern of the generation of painters a little older than myself', instead seeking 'to solidify my identity with the great painters. I can only hope to be original with what they have given me'.⁴⁸¹ Souza raised a similar charge against Newman and Andy Warhol and all those 'fellows [who] gave up after Picasso and became abstract or... started painting garbage cans'.⁴⁸² In each case, the rejection of contemporary practice went along with the attempt to revive or return to some precedent – Picasso or the Le Nain brothers or Jacques-Louis David – that seemed to hold out the promise of escape from conformity.

Lapsed historical exempla were not to be restored: nobody who seriously engaged with tradition felt that they could be. They fell apart or were transformed upon contact with

⁴⁷⁹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, pp.33-34.

⁴⁸⁰ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.50; Mattison, *Grace Hartigan: A Painter's World*, p.20.

⁴⁸¹ Larry Rivers, 'Statement' in *12 Americans*, unpaginated.

⁴⁸² Dalmia, *The Making of Modern Indian Art: The Progressives*, p.94.

the present. This was what made them useful – demands for engagement with tradition were bent towards contemporary ends; Mitchell’s Giverny was a far cry from Monet’s. But turning to tradition was no easy escape from capitalism or conformity. Fashion was not to be evaded by recalling, repeating, and refiguring a tradition that was becoming more and more fashionably commodified. The reproduction *Sunflowers* on a thousand intellectuals’ walls, which Adorno thought so characteristic of mid-century American conformism, suggested as much.⁴⁸³ Nor were older traditions – of the Hudson River School, say, or the Flemish Primitives – to be revived in such a way as to resist fashion’s demands. The various historicisms of the nineteenth century, those early products of artistic modernity against which modernism had so often launched its attacks, had already shown that historical revivals were eminently susceptible to fashion; indeed, as Frederic Schwartz has pointed out, historicism was often thought to emerge directly from the modern rule of fashion. For Werner Sombart, writing at the start of the century, historicism had simply manifested the modern artist’s submissive task ‘to play along with the historical fashion and to translate the styles of the past into Capitalese’.⁴⁸⁴ The world had changed in the fifty years that separated Sombart from Hartigan. But her painting no less than her thinking registered the same challenge: that the effort to escape from fashionable consensus might deliver an artist all the more securely into its grip. Like the work of others considered in this thesis, Hartigan’s paintings drew strength from tarrying with such contradictions – from looking them in the face, rather than abolishing them in a triumphal overcoming.

Consider the terms she raises – heavy with irony – to discuss paintings like her own that might successfully avoid the ‘fashion’ for the abstract: ‘Conservative – reactionary –

⁴⁸³ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.220.

⁴⁸⁴ Werner Sombart, *Kunstgewerbe und Kultur*, cited in Frederic J. Schwartz, ‘Cathedrals and Shoes: Concepts of Style in Wölfflin and Adorno’, *New German Critique* (Winter 1999), p.20.

timid – or even (horrors) feminine’. These are words that dogged the gendered reception of women’s art at mid-century, whether abstract or not. As Mitchell put it, ‘in France they’ve always said my work is violent gestural painting. In New York, they’ve said it’s decoration. On both sides, they say it’s female’.⁴⁸⁵ Likewise, Hartigan’s paintings always looked ‘fine, warm, feminine’ to critics no matter how massive their scale became, or how disturbing their subject matter.⁴⁸⁶ Terms like ‘warm’, ‘feminine’, or ‘conservative’ drew away from contemporary understandings of modernism as difficult and serious; away from art itself. They delivered the paintings up to the language in which fashion had always been couched. At the same time, by bringing on the figure of Matisse as a paragon of just this kind of painting, Hartigan’s words refuse a simple binarism between fashion and modernism. They are self-contradictory, deliberately so, suggesting complicity with fashion even as they deny it: that complicity indeed might be the precondition of denial.

What is the significance of such complicity? What does it mean to say that a modernist – even one as celebrated as Matisse – ‘follows fashion’? The claim is ambiguous. It might refer to artistic fashion, in which case it implies too great a degree of fidelity to the rules and norms governing the making of an artwork in a particular medium at a particular time. It can also connote subservience to those worldly fashions, of dress, custom, manners, or ethics, that regulate society. And at a wider remove it implies subservience to the market, the manipulation of fashions by commercial interests, their translation into Sombart’s ‘capitalese’. In each case it is difficult to imagine the words uttered with approval – by a friend or peer of the artist in question, say. Better to think of them in the mouth of a critic, as when Greenberg described the ‘whole generation’ that followed Willem de Kooning’s

⁴⁸⁵ Marin Sarvé-Tarr, ‘*The Bridge*, 1956’ in *Joan Mitchell*, ed. Roberts and Siegel, p.94.

⁴⁸⁶ Robert M. Coates, ‘The Art Galleries: Excursions (and Alarums) Abroad’, *The New Yorker* (6 June 1959), p.151.

manner of painting, ‘like the flute player of the fairy tale’.⁴⁸⁷ The notion that an artist follows fashion, as the children of Hamelin were duped into following the piper’s tune and coat of red and yellow, suggests condemnation, and a sense of juxtaposition. Insofar as fashion is conformist, ‘a form of imitation’, in Georg Simmel’s words, ‘and so of social equalisation’, it is opposed to what we expect from modernism.⁴⁸⁸ ‘Make it new’ was the maxim after all. On this understanding, the artist who follows fashion is no artist; the swallowing up of Rose Piper’s artistic career in the 1950s could serve as an existential illustration for this antipathy. Fashion annihilates art.

Then again, as Simmel also pointed out, conformity is only one half of the bipolarity that fashion embodies. Its other half is novelty, ‘changing incessantly’: ‘a form of life, for the contents of which the moment of acquired height marks the beginning of decline’.⁴⁸⁹ He thought this antinomy made fashion typically modern, that modernity was marked by ‘the increased power of fashion... [which] has overstepped the bounds of its original domain, which comprised only personal externals, and has acquired an increasing influence over taste, over theoretical convictions, and even over the moral foundations of life’.⁴⁹⁰ This expansion was terrifying to behold. It helped drive the cycles of acquisition, overproduction, and crisis to which we are the heirs. Karl Marx described the ‘murderous, meaningless caprices of fashion, caprices that consort so badly with the system of modern industry’.⁴⁹¹ Insofar as fashion implies change, and hence new forms of production, it means waste, creative destruction. This is its power; it is also what makes it useful. Fashion is both contemporary

⁴⁸⁷ Greenberg, unpublished interview quoted in Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Knopf, 2004), p.367.

⁴⁸⁸ Georg Simmel, ‘Fashion’, *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol.62, no.6 (May 1957), p.541.

⁴⁸⁹ Simmel, ‘Fashion’, pp.541; 556.

⁴⁹⁰ Simmel, ‘Fashion’, p.548.

⁴⁹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (London: Elecbook, 1998), p.688.

and historicist, seeking for novelty in the moment by reviving the once-outmoded styles of the past: a ‘parody of the motley cadaver’, as Benjamin put it.⁴⁹² He liked to recall that the French word for ‘sale’ is also the word for ‘revolution’.⁴⁹³ Fashion’s ‘flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago’ made history present.⁴⁹⁴ At the same time it made tangible the relation between the fleeting and the universal, the past and the future, that Baudelaire had recognised as the paradoxical site of modernity – and of any modernism looking to grasp it. This oscillating and vibrating dynamic did not disappear in the decades following Benjamin’s death, although the binary conceptions of historical progress that dominated Cold War historiography had little place for it. The attempt to redeem painting through history, carried out by the artists in this thesis, opened onto a dismantling of progressivist historiography. The sublimation of her fabric designs that Piper carried out in her late work bears witness to this process. Art metabolises fashion.

Fashion is at once static and mobile, conservative and radical, deathly and vital. Benjamin thought it contained the seeds of utopia while doing the work of oppression. This ambivalence placed it in a double relation to modernism. Fashion was modernism’s *pharmakon*: at once cure and poison. Hartigan’s words grasp this proximity. It has never been sufficient simply to reject the artists who ‘followed fashion’. All modern art follows fashion to some degree because – as Marx already knew – modernity itself is beset by fashion. Modernists made their place within a society that marched to fashion’s drum. Any renunciation had to start out from this point. What was important was to have a finger in the

⁴⁹² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p.63.

⁴⁹³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, pp.62-63.

⁴⁹⁴ Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p.261.

wind: to know which fashions to follow and which to reject; where to fall in line and where to resist.

Hartigan's words register another truth of post-war art: that as modernism became more fashionable, the second half of the equation – resistance – became more difficult. On 1 March 1951, *Vogue* published Cecil Beaton's photographs of 'The New Soft Look': models advertising cocktail dresses in front of Pollock's paintings. For T.J. Clark, these are the images that best represent 'the bad dream of modernism... that however urgent the impulse had been to recast aesthetic practice and move out into uncolonised areas of experience, all that resulted from a century's activity was a thickening – a stiffening – of the same old aesthetic mix'.⁴⁹⁵ Beaton's photographs are often seen as a turning point. 'Modernist refusal gets "mediated"' as Hal Foster puts it, 'it begins to be circulated on a mass level as a bohemian pose'.⁴⁹⁶ Clark acknowledges this shift, but he is less sure about the judgements that have tended to go along with it: regarding the reduction of Pollock's work to fashionable decoration, 'wallpapered money', to borrow Charles Harrison's phrase.⁴⁹⁷ On his reading, Pollock's paintings anticipated their fashionable misreadings; they did everything possible to mitigate fashion. Beaton's photographs posed the question of evasion, then, in terms that resonated with the post-war status of modernism in general: could high modern renunciation resist fashionable appropriation, spectacle, co-option? Ought it to? (Here the complexities of Beaton's own project – the photographs of bombed out London and *Indestructible Fashion* coexisting with the more straightforwardly commercial elements – give pause for thought.)

⁴⁹⁵ Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p.308.

⁴⁹⁶ 'Roundtable: Art at mid-century' in *Art Since 1900*, p.354.

⁴⁹⁷ Harrison used the phrase to describe an exhibition of Morris Louis's *Bronze Veils* he saw in 1969. Charles Harrison, 'Feeling the Earth Move' in *Since 1950: Art and its Criticism* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.130.

And, if not, what options remained? Might fashion be made to enact a more complex and unstable agency?

These were overwhelming questions. There were no straightforward answers. Regardless of whether one agrees with Rosalind Krauss, that some version of the quandary – of ‘celebrity’ and ‘fame’ and ‘panic in the midst of the swirl of people who were now attracted to him’ – was responsible for Pollock’s early death, it was obviously difficult to do work as a modernist in an environment marked by fashion’s tightening grip.⁴⁹⁸ All the artists in this thesis felt the squeeze. All *submitted* in one way or another. The question is whether this submission demanded the abandonment of criticism and resistance (along lines taken by Pop art in subsequent decades) or whether, as Adorno said of Proust, it was possible to ‘assum[e] this attitude (which is also that of the man who conducts himself as a spectator even in life) so completely and accurately that it became a new type of productivity’.⁴⁹⁹ I think that it was, that it was by submitting to fashion, strategically, that modernist painting achieved new forms of historical engagement without abandoning its old critical negativity. To say as much is to demand a different kind of attention to art history, one that is as sensitive to retrogression, citation and imitation as it is to innovation, breakthrough, and rupture; or rather, one that sees the latter emerging from the former, resistance out of submission, creativity out of tension. This is a constantly interrupted and deflected dialectic, rather than a project to think in terms of progress.

⁴⁹⁸ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p.269.

⁴⁹⁹ Adorno, ‘Valéry Proust Museum’ in *Prisms*, p.180.

The Persian Jacket

Take an example of creative abdication, of capitulation to the tastemakers, of conformity, imposed from without, to ‘so-called artistic fashions’; of fashion-following at its most submissive (and, I want to insist, at its most deeply ambivalent). On 11 May 1953, Hartigan gathered her brushes and a few pots of paint. She left her studio on Essex Street in the Lower East Side and travelled uptown, to MoMA. The distance was almost four miles, and the day was very hot.⁵⁰⁰ Perhaps she took the subway, or a taxi, rather than walking the hour and a half laden with painting equipment. I have a hunch, however, that she chose the cheaper option, given the anxieties about money that punctuate her journal for that year. The museum’s Director of Collections, Alfred Barr Jr., met her in the auditorium. From there, she was conducted to an office – not Barr’s, but one of his subordinate’s. Waiting for her inside was her painting, *The Persian Jacket* (Fig.6.1, 1952).

Hartigan had finished it the previous November, working from a session with a model whom she had dressed in garments found in a local market. At that point, she called the painting the best work she had ever done: ‘it has all I’ve learned so far from the masters in it’.⁵⁰¹ Those masters were numerous. *Persian Jacket* picks them up as quickly as it throws them away. There was Matisse, of course. Her title was direct in its quotation – she would have known his *Figure with a Persian Robe* (1936), then in the Barnes Collection. Matisse too had found a surface for abstract pattern and bright, block colours in the *Odalisques*, fabrics, and furnishings of an imaginary Orient: red jackets, purple coats, billowing orange trousers. The swirls of brocade Hartigan added to her own sitter’s lapels, the way she rolled

⁵⁰⁰ The Laguardia Weather Station recorded peak temperatures of 95°F. ‘New York City, NY Weather Calendar’, <https://www.wunderground.com/calendar/us/ny/new-york-city/KLGA/date/1953-5>, accessed 20/08/2021.

⁵⁰¹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.55.

up the jacket's cuffs to show its weave as colour shifts from umber to a brighter orange – such minutiae would not look out of place thrown across one of Matisse's rocaille armchairs or draped over his balcony in Nice. Her armchair is electric-yellow. His *Woman Seated before a Black Background* (fig.6.2, 1942) comes to mind each time these details jump forwards against the textured blackness of her background.

Hartigan was obsessed by Matisse ('my master') during the early 1950s. It makes sense that *Persian Jacket*, a painting of furnishings and attire, would look to him so closely. But his idealised renderings of Morocco are far from the painting's only resource. Whole eras of early modernism – Picasso in the 1920s, Cézanne in the 1870s – are summoned up in the ghostly play the painting makes out of an airless bourgeois setting: the seated portrait in a generic interior. More distant still, but obvious enough to Hartigan at the time, were the influences of figures like Goya and Manet. She saw them resurrected here, in the emphatic lines that enclose her figure's right arm and shoulder, and the waxy brightness of its skin.⁵⁰²

But if Hartigan used the subject matter of *Persian Jacket* to foreground an array of canonical references whose lodestar was Matisse, it is equally the case that, in technical terms, her painting insisted on contemporaneity. Its size, for one thing, is twice that of *Woman Seated before a Black Background*, far larger than Matisse's typical format for a seated portrait. It is almost life size, almost as large as de Kooning's *Woman I* (fig.6.3, 1950-2). Like that work, Hartigan's paint handling is tangible, slapped on in a thickened, compacted impasto common in New York at the time. Then there is the white high-heeled shoe that her sitter plants, flat, at the base of her canvas. This is a high street shoe, desirable,

⁵⁰² Hartigan's study of Goya and Manet is evident from her journal entries for this period. See in particular the description of her 'epiphany' when seeing their paintings in the Metropolitan Museum, Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.46.

off-the-shelf, ready-to-wear; a thousand miles away from the bare or sandalled or slippers feet of Matisse's odalisques. In fashion terms it is pure New York. It channels the advertising exigency of depicting heeled shoes in profile. Warhol, still in fashion illustration in 1952, was painting shoes like this: *I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Shoes* (1950), *Golden Shoe (Diana Vreeland)* (1950), and, appropriately enough given the connections between fashion, tradition, and historical recollection that we are pursuing here, *À la recherche du shoe perdu* (fig.6.4, 1955). De Kooning painted such shoes too. The feet of *Woman I* are stockinged and heeled, her right shoe fastened at the ankle by a little blue strap. Hartigan had admired the painting as she watched it develop in de Kooning's studio. She liked the contradictory postures he was able to extract from a brush so thickly loaded with paint that each stroke splayed out into the one beside it: the knees that seem at one moment to stick out from the picture plane and at others to swivel in line with it; the hands that turn in two directions at once. 'To me', she wrote after seeing the finished *Woman I* in 1953, 'one of the real mysteries is how she sits – she does, but doesn't'.⁵⁰³ In *Persian Jacket* she employed the same splashing, frayed-out brushwork – what Greenberg called 'the Tenth Street touch' and de Kooning called 'the Rubens brush' – to produce similar contradictions.⁵⁰⁴ Her figure has three left hands. One grasps the chair-arm like a claw. Another, just to the right, haloed in cream and yellow paint, reaches for something outside the frame. A third, faintly visible in profile above and to the left, brushes the dazzling swirl of lapel with its knuckles. The sitter's left leg seems to split in two just below the knee. Her foot is in at least two places at once. She has two chins, one described by the intersection of two black curves that meet just below her nose; the other, square as a cliff-face, formed where the white of her face connects with

⁵⁰³ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.74. Her thoughts on de Kooning's *Women* come so close to a description of *The Persian Jacket* itself that they have often been mistaken for one. Mattison makes this error in *Grace Hartigan: A Painter's World*, p.26.

⁵⁰⁴ Greenberg, *Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964), unpaginated; Julie Haifley, *Oral History Interview with Grace Hartigan* (10 May 1979), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the great sweep of black that runs along the jacket's neckline and more or less decapitates her. And so on. Even the armchair on which she sits helps double and deform the figure's body.

What did fashion have to do with this? Hartigan and de Kooning were friends. She respected his judgement ('he has one of the greatest minds of any artist'), craved his approval, copied down his sayings on art.⁵⁰⁵ She knew all about the *Women* long before their first scandalous outing at Sidney Janis in March 1953. Leo Steinberg wrote that it took the art world two years to catch its breath after seeing the six paintings de Kooning showed there.⁵⁰⁶ Hartigan, by contrast, had already articulated her response by the time the show opened. *Persian Jacket* is thus doubly fashionable. Not only does it reply – ahead of the curve, no less – to that *new fashion* in painting announced by de Kooning's 'return to the figure', with all the baggage of pictorial tradition and modernist history which that move implied (she was eloquent, elsewhere, on what that fashion meant, on the lure of de Kooning's manner, the 'great seducer', for painters of her generation).⁵⁰⁷ It does so in a way that places a literal emphasis on fashion's everyday manifestations: on the costume and furnishings that bedeck her sitter. It is these – bright orange, radiant yellow – that move beyond de Kooning's example, tying the painting in with the modernism of Matisse. *Persian Jacket* works between different levels of fashionability, mimicking the contemporary even as it gestures away from it.

Barr shared Hartigan's enthusiasm for the painting when he and MoMA's senior curator of American painting, Dorothy Miller, visited her gallery, Tibor de Nagy, on May 3.

⁵⁰⁵ Haifley, *Oral History Interview*.

⁵⁰⁶ Leo Steinberg, 'De Kooning's Woman' in *Other Criteria*, p.259.

⁵⁰⁷ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.74.

As Director of Collections, he was responsible for building, organising, and maintaining the Museum's recently established permanent collection, intended to represent the history of modern art, from the late nineteenth century up to the present day. When MoMA was founded in 1929, its collection had been impermanent: composed of acquisitions illustrating the art of the previous seventy-five years, with a strong emphasis on contemporary work, that would then be sold to the Metropolitan Museum once they got too old. The model here was the relationship then existing in Paris between the Louvre and the Musée du Luxembourg (which ended in 1939), in which the latter, devoted to the work of living artists, sold on to the former the work of those artists in the collection who had died. This drew a dividing line between the modern and the traditional, between museums like MoMA and 'other museums with more retrospective collections', which provided the logic for Barr's notorious diagrams of the collection as a torpedo moving through time (fig.6.5, 1941), picking up new work at its nose and shedding the old through its tail.⁵⁰⁸ This made sense during the interwar period, when funds were relatively scarce and modernism's popular appeal less certain. Things had changed by the 1950s. Not only had the value of modernist art increased as the articulation of its tradition became more precise and its assimilation to Western high culture become more secure; the museum's pedagogical and historicist agenda had also gained significance, in no small part due to Barr's own work. The catalogues which he wrote and published to accompany the retrospectives of Picasso and Matisse in 1939 and 1951 respectively set standards for the scholarship of modernism that still stand.⁵⁰⁹ They outlined a genealogy, leading from masterpiece to masterpiece, 'a sequence of artifacts, names of movements, styles, and influences' in W.J.T Mitchell's words, 'with only the most minimal reference to

⁵⁰⁸ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Paintings from the Museum Collection: Opens Museum of Modern Art's 25th Anniversary Year Celebration*, press release (12 October 1954), p.4.

⁵⁰⁹ See John Elderfield, 'Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s *Matisse: His Art and His Public, 1951*', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.152, no.1282 (January 2010), pp.36-9.

the historical conditions that gave them urgency'.⁵¹⁰ On Mitchell's account, it was Barr's writing that stripped the history of modernism down to a teleological, autonomous progression, a 'quest for purity', leading from Cézanne, through Matisse and Picasso, and on to abstract expressionism.⁵¹¹

It was to retain some such illustrative selection of masterpieces that the Museum had announced a policy shift on 15 February 1953. It would still collect the most cutting-edge examples of contemporary art, 'all significant and promising aspects of today's artistic production', but it would also 'make the most important works of art in the museum's possession the nucleus for a permanent collection of masterworks of modern art'.⁵¹² With this shift, the demands of contemporaneity were leavened by those of tradition. MoMA became split between the speculative assessment and acquisition of contemporary modernism and the retention and organisation of the tradition's masterpieces (in a manner that presaged the hiving off of 'modern' from 'contemporary' art in museological practice of the 1960s and later). Barr and Miller would have thrilled to see these two imperatives balanced, for a moment, in Hartigan's painting: both the technical relation to advanced contemporary painting *and* the citation of a whole chronology of modernist art reaching back through Matisse to Goya. They would have known that MoMA had almost completed the purchase of *Woman I*. De Kooning's painting was to be unveiled, to popular consternation, the following month. Hartigan's must have seemed a fitting pendant. They bundled her and *Persian Jacket* into a taxi and went to the Museum, where Barr wanted to observe the work at greater length.

⁵¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Ut Pictura Theoria: Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.15, no.2 (Winter 1989), p.363.

⁵¹¹ Mitchell, 'Ut Pictura Theoria', p.366.

⁵¹² Barr, 'Painting and Sculpture Collections July 1, 1951 to May 31, 1953', *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, vol.20, nos.3-4 (Summer 1953), p.3.

This had happened before. It was Barr's habit, when thinking about buying a painting for the collection, to have it brought to MoMA and kept near to his office in order 'to decide whether it stands up or not'.⁵¹³ In December of the previous year, he had done this with three of Hartigan's paintings: *Saint Serapion* (fig.7, 1952), *Venetian Self-Portrait* (1952), and *Still Life* (1952). It had taken two months for an anonymous committee to get in touch with her and reject them all. This time, Barr telephoned directly, after only six days. It is easy to imagine her excitement. He still liked the painting. He didn't rule out buying it. But he had doubts about its top left corner. This is dark in *Persian Jacket*'s current state, a field of vertical black strokes that hollow out the space behind the armchair. Haste is evident in their application. Traces of orange underlayer are still visible running down the left-hand edge of the canvas. A blob of red and sienna pushes up through the black covering above the sitter's shoulder. A faint orange line runs down to her wrist. This is difficult painting. Depth is not all it invokes. But it resolves into background in a manner that the rest of the packed surface resists. I am sure that Greenberg had this kind of effect in mind a decade later when he condemned the latent tendency in abstract expressionism towards depth and 'a heightened illusion of three-dimensional space'.⁵¹⁴ He blamed the impulse towards 'painterliness', the 'Tenth Street touch' that Hartigan, like so many of her generation, had borrowed from de Kooning: 'uneven densities of paint as produced by smearing, swiping, scrubbing, and scumbling, had in de Kooning's own hands created gradations of light and dark like those of conventional shading'.⁵¹⁵ Although Greenberg was insistent that these 'were kept from actually modelling back into deep space' in de Kooning's work, he saw such effects borne out in the increasing numbers of representational paintings that, like Hartigan's, made use of

⁵¹³ Alan Porter, *Interview by Dwight Macdonald*, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Library.

⁵¹⁴ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p.123.

⁵¹⁵ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', pp.123; 126.

abstract expressionist means.⁵¹⁶ He was right. Nothing in the *Women* produces so powerful an impression of depth as the point, in *Persian Jacket*, at which one's eye slides off from the deep orange of the armchair's edge and into the darkness that surrounds it. The sitter's whole body tilts forwards. Whether it did so on 9 May 1953, when Barr telephoned, is another question entirely.

I have been unable to locate a photograph of *Persian Jacket* in its original state, the state in which it travelled by taxi to MoMA. I am unsure whether one exists. But it is clear from Hartigan's journal that most, if not all, of the black paint in the picture's upper left-hand section came later, after it had arrived at the Museum. Orange, of the kind that dominates the sitter's torso and is still visible around the canvas edges, was initially its main note. This would have pushed the background forwards, level with the armchair and the seated figure. Matisse had use for this kind of tactic. Barr thought it ungainly in a painting like Hartigan's that was more 'realist' (in his words) than 'abstract'.⁵¹⁷ He was worried, he told her, that the area might 'bend in' too much, that it didn't 'sit right', that it had failed to account for what, 'in traditional painting would be the "background"'.⁵¹⁸ He asked her to come up to the museum and change it.

She went – who could refuse MoMA? Her journal for May 12 records the trip:

Took my paints to the Museum yesterday. They moved P. Jacket into Ritchie's office, and I worked on it for about half an hour, brushing out the orange on the left side of the canvas, and working in sienna, umbers & black. Also touched a few other areas – it is a great improvement in my eyes, I don't know how Barr feels about it, although he did say he thought it "read" better that way. He said nothing about the future of the picture, and I left quickly. Helped John [Bernard Myers] & Tibor [de Nagy] hang the group

⁵¹⁶ Greenberg, 'After Abstract Expressionism', p.126.

⁵¹⁷ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.80.

⁵¹⁸ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.80.

show. My Glad. still life hangs by the window and looks good. I pray to God I sell it, or something, my money is almost gone already.⁵¹⁹

She sold nothing from the group show. Few paintings by women did at the time. But *Persian Jacket* did sell. Barr found a donor and had it bought for the Museum. Evidently it ‘read’ well enough in its new state. The whole episode leaves an odd taste however, as it clearly did for Hartigan.⁵²⁰ ‘I feel no compromise is involved with my integrity in this affair’ she wrote, rather too emphatically.⁵²¹ The proximity in her journal between the alterations she made to *Persian Jacket* and catastrophic financial worries (‘my money is almost gone’) drives the point home.

This is not to suggest that she should not have made the changes, or even that she regretted them especially. What would regret mean in this case? She was a young woman scratching out a precarious living in a sexist art world still far off the short-lived commercial heights of the mid-1950s. Unlike other women artists who achieved successes during the period – Mitchell and Frankenthaler come to mind – she had no familial backing to speak of. Barr and Miller were to become her most important backers through the 1950s. It was Miller who encouraged her in 1952 to drop the pseudonym ‘George’ under which she had hitherto exhibited her paintings; Miller who, in 1956, included *Persian Jacket* in the *12 Americans* exhibition; Miller and Barr who, in 1958, would send five of Hartigan’s paintings to tour Europe as part of the exhibition *The New American Painting* – the only work by a woman so honoured. Appropriately enough, the photograph accompanying Hartigan’s selection of paintings in the catalogue was by none other than Cecil Beaton. Barr and Miller made

⁵¹⁹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, pp.80-81.

⁵²⁰ In stressing this point I am at odds with most of the writing on Hartigan, which reads Barr’s purchase of the painting as all triumph. See the accounts of the episode in Mattison, *A Painter’s World*, p.30 and Cathy Curtis, *Restless Ambition: Grace Hartigan, Painter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.111.

⁵²¹ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.80.

Hartigan fashionable: Beaton's photograph confirmed it. She could not afford to pass up this kind of patronage. Yet the changes she made to *Persian Jacket* at Barr's instigation require accounting for. Did they vulgarise her art, forcing it to play a role it was conceived in resistance to? Or were they, by contrast an outcome and a symptom, regrettable but by no means catastrophic, of a logic already present in the paintings?

Barr requested the changes because he thought he had recognised a tendency in *Persian Jacket*, a movement from the 'abstract' to the 'realist'. This was an idea that Hartigan shared. Like other figures discussed in this thesis, she saw herself as an artist in transition: away from a contemporaneity understood as conventional, towards some other form of painting recovered through critical engagement with tradition. Rather than escaping from contemporary fashions, this very movement produced tensions that generated her paintings' most disruptive effects. For what had really been escaped from? The technique that produced such paintings as *Months and Moons* was the same 'Tenth Street touch' that went into her subsequent re-stagings of artistic tradition. *Months and Moons* is a welter of interlocking forms: thick, black, cursive lines and pockets of coloured space. Hartigan worked her metaphors hard. White paint swirls and dissipates like smoke or drizzles in gouts of vertical or horizontal liquid. Evidently the painting was stood on different ends at different stages of completion: paint runoff flows in vertical and horizontal tracks across its surface. Little of this has changed by the time we come, in 1951, to *Saint Serapion*. Hartigan's inchoate shapes remain. But they are indexed to a canonical painting by Francisco de Zurbarán (1628). How was this move achieved? The martyred saint himself – a head and hands in Zurbarán's image, bruised, puffy, slumped to one side – has disappeared, leaving white robes and a black gap where a head once was. Hartigan flaps the robes about with her brushwork. The *trompe l'oeil* label pinned to Zurbarán's picture plane, which had named the thirteenth-century saint

for the convenience of literate viewers, is refigured as a blank, devoid of writing. There is a comical, Washington Irving-esque quality to this vanishing act, but it is also deeply disturbing: Zurbarán's example returned to, but unnamed, unreal, shorn of the physicality of martyrdom – of enchantment, one could almost say. Regression to the pre-pictorial stage when Zurbarán would make plaster maquettes of the clothes he was to paint? Contemporary artistic fashions and historicist repetition are placed in conjunction in a manner that destabilises both. Clothing is the vessel for this reflection. It is both the occasion for a demonstration of up-to-the-minute painterliness and a device for generating historical connections. Serapion is hollowed out physically. His habit makes the visual echo.

Barr was responding to the historical dimensions of Hartigan's project when he asked her to make the changes to *Persian Jacket*. It is no coincidence that he thought Picasso and Matisse – both of whose work, he wrote, 'was never purely abstract' – the greatest artists of the century; that the charge frequently levelled against him, that he took less interest in American art than in European, had weight; that he considered non-objective abstraction to be an 'impoverishment'; that at the same time as it promoted abstract expressionism, MoMA under his influence in the 1950s was so often involved in the purchase and display of the kind of work addressed in this thesis, painting that restaged and re-engaged with the icons of historicised tradition.⁵²² Recall the opposition between Hartigan's *River Bathers* (1953) and Rothko's *No.10* (1950) that would crown his and Miller's hanging arrangement for the great *XXVth Anniversary Exhibition* in 1954. At least in his curation, Barr never was the evangelist of the 'quest for purity' that critics like Mitchell have since made him into. Nor did he equate representation with retrogression. He was no Greenberg. He thought modernism could manifest a progressive tendency towards abstraction while also accommodating, in dialectical

⁵²² Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.74.

fashion, commitments to the kinds of representational practice which it had nominally surpassed. This, he wrote, was Picasso's great strength: 'the persistent connection, however vestigial, which [he] maintained between his art and its subject matter'.⁵²³ It was Barr who would insist on acquiring Rivers' *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953) – almost a manifesto for the combination of modernist technique with historical subject matter – upon seeing it in 1953.⁵²⁴ He not only enjoyed Hartigan's paintings' thrust into deeper space and figuration – their 'realism', as he called it; he thought such historical imprints were important, proof of modernism's vitality. Greenberg saw this challenge to abstraction for what it was, and had harsh things to say about it. Myers recalled him snarling that 'everyone knows Barr is a fool and knows nothing about art', when informed of Barr's liking for Hartigan's work.⁵²⁵ But Barr knew what he was doing. Not only were the alterations he asked Hartigan to make to *Persian Jacket* – alterations that carved out the space around the figure, situating it in a depth that conformed to his 'realist' classification for it – supposed to fit a category in the genealogy of modernism that he was building. They also responded, all too eagerly and domineeringly, to the character of the work itself: its reflection on history, tradition, painterly energy, and fashion.

Derivation and History

To understand how far all of this draws us away from modernism's usual narratives, one has only to recall how the production of *Woman I*, the model for *Persian Jacket*, is typically described: as evincing the triumph of individual creativity over the pressures of

⁵²³ Barr, *Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art*, p.88.

⁵²⁴ Myers recorded in his journal that 'Barr has been most interested in Larry Rivers' *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*. Gloria Vanderbilt has set up a museum purchase fund for pictures which, selected by a good committee, may be acquired by any museum that applies for the painting. The Rivers canvas was available and Mr. Barr wanted it and got it'. John Bernard Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), p.170.

⁵²⁵ Hartigan, *The Journals*, p.128.

fashion and the market. Rosenberg recalled de Kooning remarking to him that ‘Janis wants me to paint some abstractions and says he can sell any number of black and whites, but he can't move the Women. I need the money. So if I were an honest man, I'd paint abstractions. But I have no integrity! So I keep painting the Women’.⁵²⁶ Krauss retains this sense of independent compulsion: ‘De Kooning’ she writes, ‘could not desert his Women even though they interrupted the important breakthrough to abstraction’.⁵²⁷ *Persian Jacket* emerged from no such scruples regarding external intercession. The painting is derivative and mimetic, as close to a direct statement of late modernist painting conceived of as the following of established fashions – from Manet to Matisse and through to de Kooning – as one is likely to find. Far from the stamp of autonomous subjectivity, it bears that of economic compulsion and another's taste – Barr's – in its very structure. But this was not a limitation. The forces driving critical artmaking in the period were very often derivative or imitative. Hartigan's work was not so very far from de Kooning's, after all. If her painting made much of its filiation to various modernist and pre-modernist archetypes, it is equally true that de Kooning's did the same, that she took her cues from the uses to which the *Women* had put Rubens and Picasso.

Even before Barr's intervention forced the point, Hartigan knew that reconciling the Janus figures of fashion and tradition was not to be achieved simply by painting fewer abstractions for Sidney Janis. Late modernism operated within a society and an art world increasingly under fashion's sway: this was one cost of capitalism's post-war hegemony. What was needed were strategies for working within this structure, for turning proximity into critique and a fresh historical dynamic. *Persian Jacket* insists on this point in its plural

⁵²⁶ Thomas B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1969), p.74.

⁵²⁷ Krauss, *Willem De Kooning Nonstop*, p.4.

relation to fashion and tradition. The alterations Barr asked for added another level to the painting's thematising of artistic fashion: at the level of technique it still insisted on its proximity to de Kooning and New York School abstract painting; at that of content – the setting and attire of its sitter – it looked back further. The conventionalisation of its background, done at Barr's behest, only pushed this retrospection further still, towards the 'realist' painting of the mid-nineteenth century with which MoMA's collection began.

Persian Jacket is a perfect example of the historicist, minoritarian painting that emerged in the decades following World War II. The painting is a dialogue between history and fashion, a contest from which neither emerges unscathed. The most powerful effects of Hartigan's painting lay in such exchanges: its reflection on the place of fashion in artistic production, its reworking of modernist tradition, its capacity to bend gendered and exclusionary terms to its own advantage. The painting's layering of precedent upon precedent recognised the commodity status of modernism in an increasingly administered society. Subsequent paintings like *Grand Street Brides* would turn this recognition to political advantage, opening space for feminist critique. But *Persian Jacket* remained among the ambiguities of the project, embodying its lack of clear solutions. It fixed the point at which clear-eyed recognition of contemporary conditions shaded into submission, and (crucially) vice versa. Understanding these effects in all their complexities is work for a history of modernism that might cease to rotate around the endless return (via however many variations) to the old, ruthless binary between regression and progress. It demands a more nuanced and unresolved approach to modernism and modernity, one capable of recognising and valuing the mutually-reinforcing creative energies and ethical imperatives bound up in thinking with a historical sensibility.

Image Captions

- 1.1** Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907. Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm. New York: Museum of Modern Art.
- 1.2** Grace Hartigan, *Grand Street Brides*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 184.9 x 260 cm. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.
- 1.3** F.N. Souza, *Young Ladies from Belsize Park*, 1962. Oil and ink on canvas. 110.5 x 121.6 cm. Private collection.
- 1.4** Robert Colescott, *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Vestidas*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 233.6 x 233.6 cm. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum.
- 1.5** Robert Colescott, *Les Demoiselles d'Alabama: Desnudas*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 233.6 x 233.6 cm. Greenville, S.C.: Greenville County Museum of Art.
- 1.6** Paul Cézanne, *Bathers*, c.1890. Oil on canvas, 60 x 81 cm. Paris: Musée d'Orsay.
- 1.7** Grace Hartigan, *After Francisco Goya y Lucientes*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 45.7 x 38.1 cm. Private collection.
- 1.8** Francisco Goya, *Señora Sabasa Garcia*, c.1806/1811. Oil on canvas, 71 x 58 cm. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art.
- 1.9** Grace Hartigan, *Infanta Margarita, after Velázquez*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 81.28 x 76.2 cm. Private collection.
- 1.10** Diego Velázquez, *Infanta Margarita in a White and Silver Dress*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 105 x 88 cm. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum.
- 1.11** Edouard Manet, *The Infanta Marguerita after Velázquez*, 1862-4. Etching, 16.2 x 14.8 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
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