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All That Form Allows

WHEN I LIVED IN PROVIDENCE I would wake before the airless damp hour fell, go to the RISD museum at opening-time, sit on a scarred teak bench in a narrow yellow room before a Rothko of blood, cream and persimmon, and remain until closing or until I wept. It was my sole constant; I remember doing nothing else. What is it in us which does not belong entirely to life? Even to ask, one clouds it altogether. I returned to San Francisco before the summer yielded to fall, and nearly before the guard's amusement yielded to disdain. My notes for this piece were, like the testimonies, records, and commentaries I read, only as high as they were vague. However I approached it—biographically, philosophically, empirically—what I saw in Rothko eluded me, only that I could not but look. In Mallarmé's terms I could not convey the thing, but the effect of the thing.

In 1964, Rothko agreed to design the space and supply the paintings for a Catholic chapel under the Uni-



versity of St. Thomas in Houston; he considered it his masterpiece. John and Dominique de Menil commissioned him, demanding no profession of faith. After strife with the Basilians at St. Thomas, they conferred on the Chapel ecumenical (today, interdenominational) status. The spiritual philanthropy of Marie-Alain Couturier, who realized the Matisse Chapel in Vence, informed theirs. To a friend who doubted that Houston would bear such high culture, John replied: "It's in the desert that miracles happen." The chapel was complete in 1971, one year after Rothko's suicide.

The architect—Philip Johnson—yielded to Rothko's demands for the chapel's shape and lighting. Rothko insisted upon an octagonal chapel with an apse, a narthex, two vestries as of early Byzantine churches, and a skylight as in his studio. Paintings were truly seen in the light by which they were painted. By the end of the year he rented a larger studio in Manhattan; by the summer of 1967 Rothko was in Europe with his family and the canvasses were painted. By the next summer he was convalescing in Provincetown in the wake of an aortic aneurysm and a divorce. He overdrank and over-ate. His depression ended with Sinequan and razors.

The chapel holds seven paintings of black over maroon and seven plum tonal paintings, like vacant Stations of the Cross. There are three in a

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central triptych, six in cruciform side- triptychs, and five lone panels—one facing the apse, and four on facing walls. The largest surpass eleven feet in width and fifteen feet in height. There are plaster-grey walls, flush benches, and a mottled stone floor. Harsh light pours from above. The crimson, flax, and salmon of the forties and fifties yield to hard, dim and retentive hues. A black field lined in charcoal rules half. They are so opaque as to be indistinguishable in pictures. Because he worked with assistants, Rothko's hand has not touched half of these; to whom am I responding? One, Roy Edwards, attested that Rothko could exhaust himself for a month over half an inch.

These are resonances of one hard and uneasy idea. They confront their doubles, at once frozen and self-effacing. They deny the hold which his earlier color-fields demand: they are invisible as paintings and tangible as mere objects. The Impressionists knew one century past that darkness admits no resonance; the shifts from blood to coal are delicate and dead-pan. Here is less the absence of form than the presence of a mute and solid formlessness.

Regardless, Rothko's break with form was as ambivalent as his early commitment to it: "It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes... But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it." He maintained that "there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing... the subject is crucial and only that subject matter is valid which is tragic and timeless." Paintings were truly seen in the feeling by which they were painted. In his own terms, the subject of Rothko's chapel pieces is "basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on." With the clear absence of clear figure, one is moved into oneself—tragic, ecstatic, doom-ridden.

But this seems at once too plain and too lengthy. Sadness and happiness are basic emotions; these are neither. After the late forties, Rothko neither explained nor titled his work. When asked to account for these staunch panels, so very near to nothing: "Silence is so accurate." After the opening of his MOMA retrospective in 1961, Rothko came to a friend's door at five in the morning and declared: "[I'm] in despair . . . because everyone can see what a fraud I am." The more I look at these, the more difficult it is to imagine a profound reply.

In *Pictures & Tears* (2001), James Elkin posits that "it is likely that the majority of people who have wept over twentieth-century paintings have done so in front of Rothko's paintings." I try to abhor tragedy for tears' sake; there must be some other principle which sets these apart from what Philip Guston called "the sort of paintings people count money in front of." I call a Chapel clerk and ask. She tells me only that they get a lot of cancer patients, people who have taken tests and found that they are dying and people who have taken tests and found that they are not dying. I learn that the base fee for weddings is \$2,000; \$1,000 for funerals. I tell her that the wake is a bargain; she tells me that it's worth it. Which one, I say.

The tears spent upon our desire bestow no more value upon it. It is difficult to want something which we cannot hold—or which cannot hold us—apart from tears, however provisionally, however delusionally. I believe that Rothko sought not to undo form but to make cohere the eventual formlessness of all forms, not to spurn the seen world but to present its

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slipping from our grasp. Rothko, again: "It really is a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one's arms again." There is an order which only yields and an order which only maims, silence and solitude. I would like to believe that somewhere in the heart there is neither; a silence to live with, a bearable snarl.

Here, vaguely & sheerly: plum into claret, ochre into ash, a clean, bloated, and provisional form to all that light allows. Color confuses itself with its boundary: feathery and raggedly, ink and dusk. Each becomes its opposite until all is melted, scoured, and blurred in a still and pallid swell. It is neither deep nor flat. Here, forms in self-effacing suspension. They are too incongruous and too indistinguishable to tell what is hid and what lost. Rothko wanted them seen in a light low enough to allow "the most subtle vibrations of the color." What tragedies are called through color alone?

Clarity, for Rothko, was a matter of control. To "achieve this clarity is, inevitably, to be understood." His genius renders one's physical relation to the work essential to the work: to look returns one to the event of looking. He was convinced that the paintings would be misunderstood unless he "controlled the situation" in which they were dyed and hung. They stand close and surround serially; here, where he crafts the very space they hold, it has a hermetic quality. The color holds to the line of the canvas, and the paintings to the line of the chapel walls: one form leaves off another, with "no direct association with any particular visible experience... in them one recognizes the principle and passion of organisms." It is an intimacy which smaller works would preclude. If the Chapel had not come Rothko's way, he would have invented it.

Rothko's suicide charged the Chapel's opening with a gloom it would not otherwise have held. The de Menils asked his friend Morton Feldman to compose a tribute; *The Rothko Chapel* was done in months. Rothko once told a reporter that he wanted to convey what Michelangelo conveyed by the Laurentian Library, making one "feel that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is to butt their heads forever against the wall." Feldman maintained that "freedom is best understood by someone like Rothko, who was free to do only one thing—to make a Rothko—and did so over and over again." The space seems both empty and taken, alternately charred and smoldering. Frankly, it rewards no scrutiny. Rothko wanted to paint what "*you don't want to look at.*" Why the same vacancy, over and over again?

Rothko's order in placement and preservation coheres despite, not because of all this repetition: his materials are shoddy and the handling careless. Fifty years later his paintings are dulled, cracked, and roughly dried. During the 1970's they spurred the foulest legal feud in art history: his dealer and accountant seized pieces he willed to his children and to the artists' foundation he intended to establish. I look at them and cannot orient myself but by seeing a tangle of the deep and flat, the near and far. The gulf is part of the unity: the woodwork is eaten by the cost at which its order is wrought. Each becomes its opposite. But there is no tragedy or ecstasy—doom, perhaps—in yielding. The tragedy is that there is no other

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place, no still point but in the turning. No good painting is about “nothing”; Rothko rather wanted his work to “cover up this ‘nothingness’”: to veil as it shows, to show without relief.

For one day I did nothing but research this piece. For another, I did nothing but write it. On the third, I sat in the Rothko room at the MOMA. How right, I thought, that before every Rothko there is a bench. It is said that his genius was for positive and negative space, but here there is neither—only the yielding and not yielding, like some static flood. There is an orange full over oxblood the color of the ground, as the diffused light of a dim day is fuller than the painful light of a bright day. It is unclear where he marks and where he erases. The whole bled into a bar of sapphire, but I could not place where—here the amber gathers the azure, there the olive gathers the ochre. The forms douse each other. It brought to mind the word ‘immolation’. I gazed until I felt backed into a corner. To look at a Rothko is an experience I can as little define as master, but suddenly the room *swam* with calm; without grace, without truce. I can only describe it as a dense, blank, deliberately accumulated resonance. It did not yield until the fourth day. Then I felt still.

Rothko patterned the rectilinear planes he painted over and over again from Renaissance tomb compositions. If the Chapel culminates his life’s work, it is a raw space out of death: the vault fills to the panel’s edge; light rakes from above. Light is all of the world which disturbed Rothko: not merely that *it* changes but that it changes the world between seasons, days, and hours beyond command. The most frequently used word in the guest book by the foyer is “peace”: one man affirms that “indeed a sacred feeling filled me and inspired peace and awe,” another admits “at a time of turmoil and change a peaceful contemplative respite.” There is a place in the heart which does not belong entirely to life. There is no other place. Rothko paints a stillness which moves. “You are in it,” he said. “It isn’t something you can command.” So long as we look, and continue to look, the form slips from our gaze. Perhaps this is all that form allows: space to bear it, for a flash.

