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Museum Assignment

Shooting Painting American Embassy, 1961, and *Grandes Carrières*, 1962, share intensity, intrigue, and relevance in their respective movements. They are both visually astounding and philosophically profound.

In a letter to the New York Times (June 1943), prolific Abstract Expressionist painters, Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, attempt to clarify the aesthetic values of the Abstract Expressionist movement. They write: “To us, art is an adventure into an unknown world of the imagination... This world is fancy-free and violently opposed to common sense... There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject matter which is valid is tragic and timeless.” (Gottlieb and Rothko 1943) Many skilled artists maintained these Ab-Ex truths in the 1940s and early 50s. Among these artists stood Joan Mitchell, one of the few women to gain renown as an Abstract Expressionist. She gained recognition by staying true to many Abstract Expressionist values. She remained faithful to their core. Her paintings elicit a corporeal response rather than an intellectual.

In Paris, 1961, Joan Mitchell began to paint *Grandes Carrières*, and after much patience and care, she finished it the following year. Today, it is displayed at MoMA among other monumental works by prominent Abstract Expressionists, Rothko included, securing its place in Ab-Ex history. After Abstract Expressionism was no longer at the forefront of the art scene, Joan

Mitchell continued to encapsulate the rudiments of Ab-Ex in Paris, a city that was consumed with new, rousing ideas, all while upholding her own painting convictions.

Joan Mitchell's *Grandes Carrières* is magnetic. This magnetism suggests order amongst the thick, erratic overlap of paint. The central composition grounds it; it offers the chaos a respite. Each color, each gesture maintains varying degrees of independence from this central force, offering an equilibrium of attraction and repulsion. The chaos is an ant colony. The convolutions appear structureless and directionless; however, after thorough investigation, the purpose emerges efficacious. The smallest drips and flecks, ants, play a part within a larger whole.

The magnetism of this painting does not end within the bounds of the stretcher. The painting itself, stretcher and all, is a magnet. Its emergence in a viewer's periphery is enough to command attention. The scale is almost human. It is not grandiose nor transcendental in affect; however, it is soulful. It acts as a tether, connecting the earth to the body. It is the inexplicable relationship between the two. Mitchell nurtures this relationship of corporeality between the viewer and nature. The intimacy and care with which it was painted is evident. Mitchell remains the bridge; her touch continues to guide the viewer. She is umbilically connected to the painting, as the painting to the earth, and as the earth to the willing viewer. The colors mimic a landscape, perhaps a rose garden trampled. The phthalo blue disrupts the earthly colors, a firmament breaking up the soil.

In Paris, 1961, Nouveau Réalisme grew in international prominence as Abstract Expressionism waned. This shift occurred in conjunction with a collective political stir. Nouveau Réalisme reframed the intent and purpose of art; it allowed for socio-political conversation. Matters of interpersonal politics were no longer considered taboo in the art world. Art critic

Clement Greenberg's contentions regarding "pure" art had less authority. Among the emerging artists pledged to Nouveau Realisme, or New Realism, was Niki De Saint Phalle. She gained recognition largely because of the unconventional nature of her *Shooting Painting* series, namely the process by which they were created.

Nouveau Réalisme is physicality; it is a new kind of realism, as the name suggests. Merriam-Webster defines realism as "the theory or practice of fidelity in art and literature to nature or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization." (Merriam-Webster) In a way, this New Realism stays true to this definition. While devoid of formally representational rendering, it remains a "representation without idealization." (Merriam-Webster) It allows the artist to represent life, the mundane and the extraordinary, using their own language. Niki De Saint Phalle did just this. She merged formal art practices with new, controversial mediums. She did not idealize nor spiritualize her art. The art represents her observations of the world around her. She records these observations in *Shooting Painting American Embassy* and others.

Niki De Saint Phalle's *Shooting Painting American Embassy* is static. It mimics the proverbial paintbrush with which De Saint Phalle painted it: a gun, discharged. In its stillness, it reveals the violence of its process. It is contradictory. It both rejects and embraces expression. It swallows many formal elements of Abstract Expressionism —Pollock's drips, color intentionality, the undeniability of the artist's perspective— and spits out the intimacy between the artist and the canvas. The final product does not reveal the expression of the artist, but rather documentation of its aftermath. The painting itself is not a tornado of evocation, but rather the inert, devastated landscape once the tornado has long passed. It does not continue to stir the audience the way it did in the moments of its creation, but it does reveal the history. The paint is dried blood, shrapnel, splinters, physical evidence of an act of severity, as opposed to a still of

the act in motion. The balloons are bodies, minds, and the multiplication of their parts: communities, bureaucracies, governments, all fragile entities in need of disruption.

Shooting Painting American Embassy and *Grandes Carrières* disagree in purpose and philosophy. They disagree in medium and the extent to which the artist manipulates and influences the end result. They disagree in scale. They disagree in vigor. However, *Shooting Painting American Embassy* and *Grandes Carrières* share blues and browns, earth and sky. They share drips, and the directionality they hold. They share the starkness of a white ground, and the vibrance of the color against it. They share variance in texture. They share a level of abstraction. They share some form of rebellion against Abstract Expressionist values (Mitchell holding fast her allegiance to central compositions and De Saint Phalle's artistic philosophy). They share the museum in which they are displayed. They share two cities, Paris, where they were both created, and New York, where they both reside now. They share the year of their conception, 1961. Finally, they share an intensity, intrigue, and crucial influence on their aforementioned movements and on contemporary art of today.

References

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Joan Mitchell

Grandes Carrières

1962



Niki De Saint Phalle

Shooting Painting American Embassy

1961