There's Someone Missing Here, It's Pollock

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The title of my essay glosses on both the obvious fact that there are no works by Jackson Pollock featured in this selection of American paintings from New York University’s Art Collection, and a more obscure remark which appears in Jean-Paul Sartre’s autobiographical text, *Les Mots* [The Words] (1964) “There’s someone missing here; it’s Sartre”. Just as the aging philosopher realized he could not effectively distance himself from his mythic public persona and recount the events of his own life without first adopting a rhetorical strategy that would allow him to talk about himself as an absence, we should similarly admit it would be impossible to fully grasp the importance of this exhibition without considering Pollock in absence. As fate would have it, John Baldessari, one of the artists featured here (Largest, 1967) (see page 92) may have already beaten us to the punch. His *White Shape*, created in 1984, is an exact reproduction of one of Hans Namuth’s famous 1950 black-and-white photographs of “Pollock Painting” with one major modification – the figure of Pollock has been excised altogether; the artist is recognizable by default only, as an absence. Just as *White Shape* forces us to take note of forgotten or overlooked details at the margins and periphery, this exhibition of Abstract Expressionist and New York School paintings I will use the former term to designate the first-generation of post-war avant-garde American artists, while the latter will be employed to refer more generally to the loose confederation of second-generation painters working in and around New York City during the 1950s and 1960s encourages us to come to terms with three hitherto underestimated facts: 1. in terms of age, gender, nationality, artistic background and training, etc., the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism and the New York School were quite diverse; 2. a plurality of styles co-exist in post-war New York – i.e., not everyone was making abstract or “action” paintings, 3. the history of Abstract Expressionism and the New York School need not necessarily revolve around Jackson Pollock’s life and oeuvre.

Regarding the first point, once Pollock has been removed from the picture it becomes easier to focus on the importance and uniqueness of other artists present here, especially, but not limited to: Hans Hofmann, Ad Reinhardt, Adolph Gottlieb, Philip Guston, and Helen Frankenthaler. Hans Hofmann, the oldest in the group, was born in Bavaria in 1880. Before the First World War he studied art in Paris and came into contact with Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Delaunay. As such, Hofmann represents Abstract Expressionism’s direct link back to European Modernism, or what Peter Bürger has called the “historic” avant-garde. While the history of Cubism’s and Surrealism’s influence on American artists has been well documented* (Painting with a Secret Title, 1957, by Jimmy Ernst, (see page 95) Max’s son, reminds us of Surrealism’s persistence into the late 1950s), the history of the legacy of the Bauhaus, Constructivism, and De Stijl in post-war New York has yet to be written (c.f., Burgoyne Diller, Third Theme, 1946-1947 (see page 27), Charmion Von Wiegand, Radiating Plane, 1949 (see page 33), and Ilya Bolotowsky, Large Architectural, 1951 (see page 35). Hofmann was not only a practicing artist, he was also one of the most important pedagogues in New York during the late 1930s and 1940s. He taught for a while at the Arts Students League alongside Pollock’s mentor, Thomas Hart Benton, until, unsurprisingly, he grew tired of the Regionalist’s chauvinism, jingoism, and notoriously unpleasant disposition. Hofmann left and started his own “school” – which consisted of a single large room, designed by the émigré architect Frederick Kiesler, in a building at 38 West 9th Street. It was here that he tutored one of his most talented and devoted students, the painter Lee Krasner, who would marry Pollock in 1945. The work by Hofmann included in this show, Blue Balance (1949) (see page 31), exemplifies some of the major tenets of his aesthetic philosophy, if not Modernism at large – an emphasis on the tension between implied depth and two-dimensional surface which he summed up as “push and pull”.

In 1938 Ad Reinhardt began showing with the Abstract American Artists, a home-grown organisation which serves to remind us that abstraction existed in America well before the rise of Abstract Expressionism. His Untitled 1940 (see page 23) is an excellent example of what these artists considered important at the time, namely, the rejection of all subject matter. Reinhardt was also an acute observer and satirist of the New York art scene. He went on to create some extremely clever and perspicacious art world–inspired cartoons for PM magazine. Later, together with Robert Motherwell (the brains behind Abstract Expressionism), Reinhardt edited Modern Artists in America (New York: Wittenborn, 1951). This book remains a testament to the fact that post-war American artists were acutely aware of their own place within the history of Modernism and modern art.

Adolph Gottlieb was quite active in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is perhaps best known for the large “Burst” paintings he made at this time. However, the previous decade he was working on his series of “Pictograph” paintings, of which Quest (1948) (see page 29) is a prime example. For some critics these images conjured up notions of ancient myths, “primitive” art, or the art of Northwest Coast American Indians, but Gottlieb often denied associations of this sort. As he explained in “Unintelligibility”, a lecture delivered at the Museum of...
Modern Art on May 5, 1948, he did not want his paintings to communicate anything specific, or to tell a story. If associations are to be made, perhaps we should relate the two main motifs in Gottlieb's painting—eyes and a vortex—back to Pollock's Eyes in the Heat (1946) and Vortex (1947).

Philip Guston, an artist whose work resists facile categorisation, completed Abstraction (1957) (see page 53) a decade before he returned to figuration and began to include menacing hooded individuals, light bulbs, clocks, etc. in his paintings. Strangely enough, Guston (then Philip Goldstein) was an adolescent friend of Pollock's. In 1928 they attended Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles together. There they penned two "incendiary" brochures criticizing the school's administration for "the unreasonable elevation of athletic ability and the consequent degradation of scholarship." Guston was suspended; Pollock, expelled. Helen Frankenthaler, like Hedda Sterne, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell, was overshadowed by the "all-boys club" mentality inherent in Abstract Expressionism and the New York School. For a brief moment, Clement Greenberg, the most important American art critic of the 1940s and 1950s, seemed to favor Frankenthaler over Pollock. Specifically, the critic heaped praise on Frankenthaler's "large and extraordinary" Mountains and Sea (1952), a painting which shares many similarities with the work in this show, Seascapes with Dunes (1962) (see page 79). But this small victory, if we can call it that, was pyrrhic. In the end Greenberg considered Frankenthaler important only insofar as her "stain" facture and liberated use of colour paved the way for second-generation male painters like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland.

On the second account, Pollock's absence leads us to reconsider commonplace notions about the stylistic cohesiveness of this so-called "School" and the inaccuracy of reductive labels such as Abstract Expressionism. As this exhibition clearly shows, not everyone working at this time was an abstractionist or an expressionist. By the early 1960s, traditional genres such as the nude, the portrait and the landscape, e.g., Will Barnet (Portrait of RR, 1965 (see page 87) and Alex Katz (Ada Seated, 1963 (see page 85), Philip Pearlstein (Two Models on Studio Floor, 1962 (see page 83)), Jane Wilson (Beyond Tompkins Square, 1964) (see page 102) -- were back in full force, never having disappeared completely during the previous decade. Pollock, to the chagrin of his supporters, returned to figuration at the end of his career. Months before his untimely end our laconic spectator admitted: "I don't care for Abstract Expressionism ...[painting today] is certainly not 'non-objective,' and not 'nonrepresentational' either." Scholar Michael Leja, among others, has contested the legitimacy of Abstract Expressionism and New York School as categorical terms. If there is one thing that united American artists working together in New York in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s did share, he has rightly suggested, it was their bohemian attitude and antagonism to "bourgeois" values, not a set of unwavering, agreed-upon stylistic and formal concerns.

Thirdly, Pollock's absence from this show affords us the opportunity to think about the trajectory of the scholarship on New York School painting before it became synonymous with what we might call "Pollock Studies". With the Museum of Modern Art's immense 1998 Pollock retrospective, and its related publications, and the release of Ed Harris' film Pollock (2000), Pollock has come to stand for American painting of the 1940s and 1950s tout court. However, this was not always the case. In 1955 William Seitz, Abstract Expressionism's first chronicler, saw Pollock as simply one among other core members of the Abstract Expressionism. Likewise, in his monumental but biased Triumph of American Painting (1970), Irving Sandler included, but did not devote special attention to, Pollock. Ironically, it was revisionist scholars, bent on de-mystifying Abstract Expressionism and exposing its imperialist agenda, who began to accord Pollock privileged status. That is to say, before he became Abstract Expressionism's warhorse, Pollock was cast as a Cold War Warrior, a pawn in a game of international intrigue. As Serge Guilbaut famously put it in his How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art (1983):

Pollock was transformed into a symbol, a symbol of man, free but frail... In contrast to [Totalitarian man] the free world offered the exuberant Jackson Pollock, the very image of exaltation and spontaneity. His psychological problems were but crucial tokens of the hardship of his freedom. In his "extremism" and violence Pollock represented the man possessed, the rebel transformed for the sake of the cause into nothing less than a liberal warrior in the Cold War.

As the eminent art historian David Anfam has noted, "Abstract Expressionism is not a field likely to be transformed in the near future by any sudden abundance of new facts. Indeed the subject has been so well researched that the archaeology of our knowledge is starting to look comparatively replete... An outcome of this situation has been to escalate subsidiary issues, set on by academic pressures to garner 'new' research and, especially in the United States, to publish doctoral theses." Anfam, along with Leja and Dore Ashton, has done a great deal in widening the cultural horizon against which Abstract Expressionism and the New York School should be understood."
has changed little since Anfam wrote the above lines in 1993, it seems to me that there is still one area of research worth pursuing further, namely: the middle ground between Abstract Expressionism and the rise of Pop art (perhaps best represented here by Robert Indiana's Yield, Brother Virgil, 1966) (see page 99). More specifically, there needs to be more work done focusing on Robert Rauschenberg as an important mediating figure between Jackson Pollock and those artists who came to the forefront of the American art scene in the 1960s and 1970s.

For this reason, I would like to spend the rest of my time discussing what I think is the most fascinating and important piece in this show: Rauschenberg's Collage with Horse, 1957 (see page 51). Made at a pivotal moment, when the artist was trying to make a name for himself and emerge from under the shadow of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism, this "combine painting" consists of oil paint, paper, fabric, and a piece of wood on brown cotton duck. The viewer's attention is first drawn to the series of "expressionistic" brushstrokes placed for the most part in the upper right-hand quarter of the composition. Completed the same year as Factum I and Factum II, two nearly identical combine paintings meant to be displayed next to one another, Rauschenberg's Collage with Horse is likewise an "assault on painterly presence" and a direct challenge to Abstract Expressionism's "traditional concepts of authorial authenticity and sublime expressivity."

While the artist's carefully chosen greens, reds, and dirty yellows are reminiscent of the reoccurring hues in De Kooning's paintings from the 1950s and 1960s, including the Woman with a Green and Beige Background (1956) (see page 89) shown here, the drips, of course, more directly conjure up Pollock in absentia. Moving clockwise from these brushstrokes and drips is, most notably, a small piece of affixed wood which juts out about an inch from the canvas, and a colour illustration of a horse running through a pasture. These elements, coupled with the work's title and brown cotton duck field, specifically look back to one of Pollock's lesser-known pieces, The Wooden Horse: Number 10A, 1948.

A discussion of The Wooden Horse: Number 10A, 1948, and its subsequent reception by American artists in the 1950s and 1960s is conspicuously absent from the extant scholarly literature on Pollock. If the work is mentioned at all, it is treated as an anomaly, a whimsical experiment, or a transitory manifestation on the road to the artist's classic drip period (1948-1951). Pollock's Wooden Horse, as Pollock himself would have described it, is a collage, which includes an objet trouvé, a veritable ready-made -- a fragment of a mass-produced children's hobbyhorse -- which has been attached to the left-hand side of the canvas. This three-dimensional object sits atop the skews and interlacings of paint for which Pollock would become known. At the tip of the horse's "nose", there is a small amount of yellow paint which Pollock seems to have added when, in the final step of his creative process, he came back and filled in some of the enclosed spaces formed by the white dripped lines (he did something similar in Summertime, the painting reproduced in the infamous August 1949 Life magazine article which asked, "Jackson Pollock, is he the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?"). There is an undeniable flip-flop quality to Pollock's hobbyhorse head. Art historian T.J. Clark has described it, evoking Wittgenstein, as the "classic duck-rabbit reversal thrown up by the ragged end of the horse's neck, with its notches standing for another creature's nose, mouth and chin". Turning our attention to Rauschenberg's Collage with Horse, it becomes clear that the artist meant for his horse to be reversible, too. The not-so-accidental torn segment adds to the beast's flatness and indeterminacy -- it is unclear if it is coming or going. William Rubin claims that the "head and shoulders" of a delineated figure can be seen on the right side of Pollock's Wooden Horse. Similarly, the horse on the left side of Rauschenberg's combine painting is mirrored by the large-collared Northern Baroque figure on the right.

Rauschenberg's work is therefore different from Pollock's in one main respect: Pollock's attached, three-dimensional wooden horse has become a two-dimensional photograph. This comes as no surprise given Rauschenberg's fondness at the time for including taxidermist specimens in his mid- to late 1950s works like Monogram (1955-1959), Odalisk (1955-1958), and Canyon (1959). These uncanny props, which bring to mind that strange scene midway through Alfred Hitchcock's The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956), break the two-dimensional plane of the canvas and jut out into our space. Describing Monogram, a stuffed goat standing upright and perpendicular to the field of the horizontalised canvas underneath it, Rauschenberg spoke about the shift from a two dimensional plane to a three-dimensional "pasture". In Rauschenberg's Collage with Horse, the horse, quoted from Pollock's collage, has made an inverse transition. To borrow Leo Steinberg's famous phrase, Pollock's hobbyhorse (as it now appears in Rauschenberg's work) has made the move "from nature to culture" and is now part of "a receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed or impressed". It has entered into Rauschenberg's archive of images, it is just one more reference among others. This, I would argue, was not the first time that Rauschenberg quoted Pollock's horse head and transformed it from a three-dimensional object to a photographic reference. He did the same thing precisely one year before, the year of Pollock's death, in Small Rebus (1956).
In her analysis of this work, Rosalind Krauss has commented on how Rauschenberg gives “such disparate types of images as magazine photos of sports events, a map section showing the north central United States, a snapshot of a family, postage stamps, a child’s drawing of a clock face, a reproduction of Titian’s Rape of Europa” an “equal degree of density” and “equal thickness in terms of their presence to experience.” She continues:

There is of course another space, one to which we all have recourse, in which this kind of experience of leveling occurs. It is a space in which the image of a painting we have seen in a museum, and the image of an actual event we have witnessed, and the image of one we have merely fantasized or dreamed, all do possess an equal degree of density. This is the space of memory. For as one remembers experience, each memory image seems to function for recall in a way that is independent of whether it happened or not, or what degree of denseness it had when we experienced it. The image of a screen from a movie may be equally vivid for memory as the face of an absent friend.  

Similarly, in Rauschenberg’s Collage with Horse, history is leveled out. All things appear equal. The reference to Pollock’s hobbyhorse is relegated to the same plane as a reproduction of a random Northern Baroque painting. This, as Krauss says, is the “space of memory.” But, a memory of what, of whom, specifically? At the risk of over-extend myself I would like to propose, Rauschenberg’s work gives space to the memory of Pollock’s recent death. It is a subtle attempt to both come to terms with his absence, and, simultaneously, his enduring artistic legacy. The three-holed archival card affixed at the bottom of Rauschenberg’s work lends credibility to associations of this sort. The card is a record of a mortgage agreement between two parties. A mortgage, technically defined, is a guarantee of the conveyance of property or performance on condition of premature voidance or death (mort).

In Rauschenberg’s Collage With Horse Pollock is gone, but not totally forgotten. The work suggests that at least one facet of Pollock’s artistic legacy has been “conveyed” and continues to live on in the present tense. The small affixed piece of wood in Rauschenberg’s Collage With Horse is a reminder of the material presence of Pollock’s Wooden Horse, and accordingly, Pollock himself. As Denis Hollier has proposed in regards to Joan Miró’s Spanish Dancer (1928), a collage which includes a hatpin that casts a shadow on the canvas support, attached elements of this sort pull collages into the present tense by opening “the internal space of the work to the context of its reception, mixing it with that of its beholder.”

In the end, then, my essay is not so much a traditional art-historical decipherment or strict iconographic reading of Rauschenberg’s Collage With Horse (with Pollock’s biography and Wooden Horse serving as my Ur-text), but rather an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which Rauschenberg continued to “perform” a certain facet of Pollock’s art after his death. Accordingly, we might conclude by bringing in one more hobbyhorse from the annals of art history — Sir Ernst Gombrich’s. What the great art historian has to say about this children’s-toy-philosophical-muse could very well apply to the legacy of Pollock’s Wooden Horse as it appears Rauschenberg’s 1957 Collage with Horse:

For that strange precinct we call “art” is like a hall of mirrors or a whispering gallery. Each form conjures up a thousand memories and after-images. No sooner is an image presented as art than, by this very act, a new frame of reference is created which it cannot escape.

Rauschenberg’s Collage With Horse creates “a new frame of reference” which enables us to better understand the importance of Pollock’s Wooden Horse. Further, it highlights a side of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism suppressed by Greenbergian aesthetics — a neo-Dadaist spirit that celebrates chance operation, the found object, and authorial abnegation. In fact, Rauschenberg’s re-interpretation of Pollock through Collage With Horse may have helped change the way younger artists thought their Abstract Expressionist predecessor. The year after Rauschenberg completed his combine painting, the “Happening” artist Allan Kaprow published an essay on “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” in which he proclaimed:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second Street . . . . Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things which will be discovered by the present generation of artists.

This exhibit, as James Elkins says in his introductory essay here, “answers an absence” by bringing certain Abstract Expressionist and New York School paintings to Ireland for the first time. It is my hope that it will also put some new ideas about Rauschenberg’s Collage With Horse (1957) “into circulation,” and in so doing, “change the history of art just a little” — even if Pollock is missing here.
Notes

[1] I would like to thank Fiona Kearney and James Elkins for inviting me to participate in this
exhibition, Lynne Gumpert and Michèle Wong at NYU for facilitating my research as well as the
students in my seminar on "Jackson Pollock and the New York School" (Columbia University,
Summer 2004), who first heard some of the ideas presented in this essay.

1 See William Rubin, "Surrealism in Exile and After", in Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage (New
York School (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1995); and Dickran Tashjian, Boatload Of Madmen:

2 For more on this see Jonathan Harris, "Ideologies of the Aesthetic: Hans Hoffman's 'Abstract
Expressionism' and the New York School", in American Abstract Expressionism, ed. David

3 Steven Nafish and Gregory White Smith, Jackson Pollock: An American Sage

4 See Clement Greenberg, "Louis and Noland", (1960), reprinted in Clement Greenberg: The
Press, 1993): 94-100. For a feminist take on this, see Anne Wagner, "Pollock's Nature,
Frankenthaler's Culture," in Pepe Karmel, ed., Jackson Pollock: New Approaches (New York:


7 See William C. Selma, Abstract-Expressionist Painting in America: An Interpretation of the Work
Based on the Work and Thought of Six Key Figures, Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University (1955); and

8 Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom,
and the Cold War (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): 201-202. See also, Max Kozloff,
"American Painting During the Cold War", Artforum 11:9 (May 1973): 43-54; and Eve Cockcroft,

9 David Anfam, "Of War, Demons and Negations", Art History 16:3 (September 1993): 479-484.

10 David Anfam, Abstract Expressionism (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990); and Dore Ashton, Abstract
Expressionism: A Cultural Reckoning (New York: Viking Press, 1973); and Michael Leja, Reframing
Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s

11 Benjamin Buchloh, "Andy Warhol's One-Dimensional Art", (1989), reprinted in Avant-Garde and the

12 Apparently, Pollock excavated this object from the rubble under his friend John Little's house.
See, Steven Nafish and Gregory White Smith, Jackson Pollock: An American Saga (New York:

13 T.C. Clark, Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism (New Haven and London:


15 Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria", in Other Criteria (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972): 84.


17 Denis Hollier, "Surrealist Precipitates: Shadows Don't Cast Shadows," October 69 (Summer 1994):
111-132. I am indebted to Rosalind Krauss' discussion of this article in her, "Perpetual Inventory", (1997),

18 For more traditional iconographic readings of Rauschenberg's works see Charles F. Stuckey, "Reading
Rauschenberg", Art in America 65:2 (March-April 1977): 74-84; and Thomas Crow, "This Is Now:
Becoming Robert Rauschenberg", Artforum 36:1 (September 1997): 95-96, 98, 100, 139, 142, 144,
and 152.

19 E.H. Gombrich, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form", in Meditations on a

Robert Rauschenberg  American, 1925

Collage with Horse
1957
oil and collage on canvas
30 3/4 x 36 3/4 inches (78.1 x 93.3 cm)