

art

## Jackson Pollock: A Critique of His Achievement

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In New York, abstract expressionism has never really died. We still pray to Jackson Pollock on a regular basis, not only because he is a major, and profoundly American, artist, but because his mythology floats what can only be described as a bloated market for his art. There was a time when Pollock and his other colleagues—Gorky and de Kooning—were impossibly poor, but their tenacity and creativity have been translated into immense amounts of hard cash. To this day we have artists pursuing careers by maintaining styles that actively reference a movement that had its high points in the middle of the last century! All this time has past, and yet New Yorkers cling to the relevance of an expressionist art, created mostly without a recognizable subject. It seems as if the Museum of Modern Art in New York organizes a show of Pollock about every two years or so. This may be an exaggeration, but the truth is that we can't let the man peaceably subside into art history. It has something to do with the American moment—the short period just after the Second World War, when we had saved the world from fascism and our hidden imperial tactics were not yet exposed.

It is important to put Pollock into a context, for without one we succumb to the myth of his unexamined greatness. His depressions, womanizing, and alcoholism built a reputation that preceded and surrounded him as a person—but did not necessarily explain the achievements of his creativity. More or less a bad boy—we remember the painter urinating in the fireplace of famous collector Peggy Guggenheim in New York City—Pollock quite tenaciously overcame his vulnerabilities and mood swings to produce, for a bit less than ten years, a body of work that remains outstanding, luminously inspired, and technically and stylistically new. Still, that doesn't solve the problem of determining just to what extent Pollock developed an undying achievement, seen in light of academic art history of the period. My feeling is that he is surely a major artist, but that his life has been surrounded by the gossip of his transgressions—behavior that challenged the acceptable norm, but which was nonetheless tolerated by a public fascinated with genius. The trouble is that the mythology of the person damages our ability to judge objectively the quality of the art. Certain artists have lives that cannot be separated from their artistic output—for example, we have the case of Van Gogh. His instability, like that of Pollock's, is enmeshed in our experience of his work, the late work especially.

But stories of an artist's personal life cannot salvage achievement that is not outstanding. In the case of Pollock, the work has been accorded great critical favor from the start. His intensity of purpose, experienced in the fixed stare he threw at everything he saw, was seen early on as the accomplishment of someone destined for greatness. The Museum of Modern Art's show, "Jackson Pollock: A Collection Survey, 1934-1954," comprised roughly fifty works of art, ranging from raw, rough early efforts that are figurative and describe mythologies, to the pioneering drip abstractions of the 1940s and '50s. All in all, it is a very good exhibition that successfully covers the beginnings of Pollock's creativity

to the masterful works that came later, including the masterpiece entitled *One: Number 31, 1950*, the center of the show. The exhibition then fits into a middle category of size, being too large to be brushed away as a short anthology but not big enough to be considered a major exploration. Even so, the audience has enough material to see its way through Pollock's endeavors and make an informed judgment about the quality of his work.

To my mind, this survey is an accomplished reading of a major artist. The trick is not to fall for the jingoism surrounding Pollock's reputation. Yes, he is a preeminent painter, whose discipline within the expressionism of the drip resulted in art of enduring importance; and yes, he represented in many ways the boldness and risk-taking of American life during the period he worked. But I do not think we help his large audience develop an accurate judgment by constructing a mythic reading of the man. The mythology must be separated from the achievement. The primary reason Americans find this so hard to do is because Pollock really did embody the glory—and perhaps as well the bombast—of the culture at the time. It is much more interesting to see how the exhibition charts the development of the artist, rather than setting the paintings up as supports for a legendary reputation. Surely it is more *useful* to rationally conceive of the arc of Pollock's career as a development over time rather than the inspired exaltations of an alcoholic genius.

At the same time, this restraint does not diminish the qualities of Pollock as a person. Clearly he was a charismatic figure, someone in close relations with a tempestuous unconscious. It must have cost a tremendous amount personally for him to access an unknown that enabled him to paint so extraordinarily well—and so differently from everyone else. To paint the way he did, directly as an action and without premeditation, meant that he had to forge a straight path to his inner self. Even in the early work, inspired as it is by mythological reference, both private and public, one senses that Pollock began by trying to break through to the other side of his psyche, in ways that accentuated the violence of the attempt. Born in 1912 in Wyoming, Pollock came to live in New York with his older brother Charles at the age of 18. Once there, he studied with the accomplished painter and muralist Thomas Hart Benton, who provided a bit of a home for Pollock at this time. As the exhibition demonstrates, the early paintings are dark, rough, and emotionally fraught—attempts on the artist's part to harness passions that he could not fully control. If we look at *The Flame* (1934-38), Pollock paints white and red flames over charred wood; the painting's intensity surely corroborates with the force of his own personality—flame is a more than obvious metaphor for ardor, its place among human feelings.

*One: Number 31, 1950* is a masterpiece that fulfills the promise of the works created by drips and pours of paint, begun by the artist in the late 1940s. A dense conglomeration of the active use of alkyd paint, bought not from the art supply store but from hardware retail, *One* is a very large work, 269.5 by 530.8 cm in size, active in every quartile of the picture but lacking a real center in the true all-over manner. Painted with oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, the work primarily consists of black paint scattered over white, creating thin skeins of imagery that form a palimpsest—a visible record of Pollock's

activities. By emphasizing the action of the paint without direct reference to a representational image, Pollock also stresses paint as paint—its simple existence as a material. The substance is used as it is, not as a vehicle for an image based on illusory perspective. The attention paid to paint as a mere substance was revolutionary at the time, being backed by the prominent critic Clement Greenberg, who saw such a focus as greater honesty than the pretense of perspective, whose seemingly extended depth developed on what was actually a two-dimensional plane.

But *One* is more than a dismissal of a 500-year-long painting practice; it is a real triumph of physical undertaking. And it looks like the work of no one else. The sheer independence of Pollock's style makes it clear that he had found a way to present the movement of thought just as much as the movement of materials. Maybe, the word *thought* isn't quite enough to describe the amalgam of attributes linked to such a work of art. It is tied deeply to expansive, nearly anarchic feeling, which is a good way to describe the ab-ex movement. Yet there is marked esthetic intelligence in *One*, which refuses to reside in any other category than the one created by its own facture. As a painting, it is oriented toward a high seriousness of purpose, being deliberately epic in the sense that its dimensions are meant to overwhelm rather than reassure the viewer. The work's condensed, complicated language of drips and skeins of elaborate a view of the unconscious and the roiling impulses that occur behind the forefront of awareness.

The idea of the artist as a heroic protagonist was especially strong during the abstract-expressionist period, a time when emotional and physical stamina were both needed to survive indifference and neglect. Today, we have a newly bureaucratized art world, in which one racks up awards and residencies as a way of building a career. There is nothing wrong in doing so, especially when we consider that the MFA program has become the mainstay of fine art education in America. But the professionalization of art as a vocation has had the unfortunate effect of turning art into a career rather than a calling. In retrospect, Pollock's life hardly looks in any way like a series of calculated decisions; rather it seems as if it is the record of one very gifted painter's attempts to put some order in his life—even though his art reflects a profoundly chaotic reality settled deep in his mind. But the intense complexity of *One*, completed in the summer and fall of 1950, not only expresses personal anxiety in a major manner, it also relates to the angst of the time.

Just as Giacometti produced work that summed up the grim spirit of post-Second World War society in Europe, so has Pollock's art recognized the universal bias of a time when interest in psychoanalysis was high—Pollock himself underwent Jungian analysis for his drinking and personal problems. This brings up a couple of questions. First, is Pollock's direct exploration of the unconscious *inherently* fraught, so that his art not only described a private journey but was additionally archetypal, being addressed toward the inner lives of everyone and not just himself? And second, just how effective is abstraction in rendering something so convoluted as the mind's inner life? In a way, Pollock is involved not only with art as physical activity, he is also asserting the metaphorical value of painting in the broadest sense. When the subject of your art is the mind itself, the work

becomes a window into consciousness, and the abstraction becomes the way in which that consciousness is universalized.

*One* matters as a painting not only because it represents a new methodology for making art; it also reconnects us with primal feeling. This kind of expressionism is based on emotion, to the point where it is impossible to analyze it on the basis of intellectual perception alone. At the same time, the movement might be criticized for the theatricality of its art. Practiced without constraints, abstract expressionism becomes inchoate and decorative, lacking a structure to keep it from excess. But when the practice is informed by an intuition that does not reject an organization for the sake of sentiment alone, as does in fact happen in *One*, the style takes off into *substantive* regions of expression. The feelings become the glue holding the composition together, but even more than that, the skeins of paint in *One* establish a cohesiveness that cannot be called entirely emotional. This is the reason why the painting will last. A structure in a painting will remain a structure even if its origins are intuitive, that is, lacking an obvious framework. *One* established the truth of its materials; paint is what it is and is to be experienced as pigment rather than be submerged into a representation. But that is only part of its ecstatic claim. On a larger level, the work is about imaginative freedom, tied to the instant of its making.

By 1947, Pollock had begun the spattering of the canvas he is known for, a technique he would rely on for approximately a decade. But the earlier mythic paintings already were pointing the way toward a style predicated on extreme freedom, as well as a drive toward personal exploration. *The She-Wolf* (1943) precedes the painter's command of the drip and splatter, but it is painted highly expressively, with a crowded background of curling lines that also cross over the white outline of the wolf. The title would likely seem to refer to the legend of the wolf that suckled Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. Pollock himself refused to comment on the painting's significance, asserting in 1944 that "*She-Wolf* came into existence because I had to paint it." Analysis would only demystify what Pollock believed to be a picture about origins, perhaps applicable to his own development as a painter. He commented: "Any attempt on my part to say something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it." The same might be said of the professional writer undertaking a contextualization of this important painting. It becomes clear in a work like this, tempestuous and aggressively busy, that Pollock's impulse is about lineage, both in a public and private way.

One hesitates to go beyond making so generalized a statement because a particular reading, mostly of a psychological kind, would box in the experience of the art. Also, a psychic reading has dangers of its own—it is true that if one's demons die, so does one's gods. The violence of *The She-Wolf* of course has something to do with Pollock's state of mind at the time—it is additionally a succinct reprise of the violence of his esthetic. But at the same time it must be said that the picture depicts a known mythology, one that can only be seen as metaphorical in regard to Pollock's personal life. This relationship between painting and psyche is primarily *indirect*. The work is in no way confessional. And the privacy Pollock demanded was part of the spirit of the time. Today we live in a culture in which the particulars of an artist's life are worked over with absurd intensity.

Pollock's representations of a private self cannot be tacked on to specific events or trauma simply because the work is abstract. By comparison, the American poetry movement called the Confessionals School, active just after the end of Pollock's career, made the frank dissemination of their personal lives a point of pride. Almost all the prominent writers in the movement, including Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, yielded to madness or suicide—I think likely because they made their personal lives too transparent. One of the advantages of Pollock's technique is that it could be read as a general statement of mind without being descriptive of the details of his circumstances.

Even with all this being true, it is clear that in America we continue to praise the artist who breaks the rules. Or at least we do so when the artist is gone. Pollock broke the rules not only socially but also methodologically with the drip. The element of performance in the creation of his art pushed his creativity to a new level, in which the physical activity of the person became just as important as the thoughts and emotions accompanying the project of art. While I have made it clear that there is a precedent in Pollock's work for the late drip paintings, it is also evident that at one point he broke through to a style that is unique. In some ways, it seems to have descended mysteriously from the skies, so original was his system. For this reason alone, we must acknowledge him as a major artist, but he offers as well a metaphysical vehemence that captures a period when art was lived romantically, rather than organized into a bureaucracy. This meant Pollock's personality and life would come under as much scrutiny as his paintings.

An untitled painting from 1950, a work made with ink on paper, represents Pollock at his unfettered best. The drips, splashes, and threads of ink culminate in an all-over pattern that emphasizes speed and swift decision-making. Pollock's esthetic of freedom, strengthened by his increasing technical skill, has become an emblem and metaphor for the American way of life. His aura still precedes his work, even in academic discussions of the period. We have talked about whether this is an accurate way of assessing his achievement, which eventually transcends all the anecdotes. Unfortunately, his legacy has been long misused; his work has been rigidified into a code by lesser artists. I teach at an art school, and even now, I am surprised at the number of students who follow an abstract-expressionist inclination. It may be that the innate bravado of Pollock's style, its combination of rebellion and emotionalism, continues to attract young painters who want exactly those qualities in their art.

But the question remains: At what point does the repetition of a technique lose its force? Well after Pollock had died, his manner of painting maintained prominence in the American art schools. This is not necessarily a good thing! When a style hardens into a mannered or rigid doctrine, it becomes necessary to reexamine its efficacy in speaking to the current circumstances in painting. As distinguished as the abstract expressionist movement was, the time for its evaluation is now necessary. Because of its reliance on feeling, the New York School always had a slight tendency to overstate the case, visually speaking. In the hands of the best of the artists of Pollock's time, the emotionalism was kept in check. But in lesser and later painters, the method stiffened into rhetoric and no longer felt valid as a style. Some times a good artist or writer can have a pernicious effect

on those following him—think, for example, of the legacy of the poet William Carlos Williams, whose inspired demotic has been copied to death. In the same, the freedoms, personal and professional, embodied by Pollock have made him a magnet for painters even now.

Sadly, though, the liberation promised by Pollock is deeply dated. For the most part, with the exceptions described above, his art has become a touchstone for an attitude indicative of a time when American culture was much less complex. The Zeitgeist has changed profoundly, and many new avenues of expression—performance art, art using technology, relational art—have taken over as cutting-edge activities. Painting no longer holds its place as the highest of the fine arts. New, highly politicized mythologies have usurped the legend of the tormented individual, beholden to the dictates of his imagination. In a way a communal mindset has replaced the task of an individualistic integrity, although this kind of thinking has mostly occurred outside the boundaries of painting. But the attack on individualism for political reasons has not resulted in outstanding art. Instead, much contemporary art has become too abstract—that is, too conceptual—and too literal at the same time.

Such an environment is not a good place to make art freely, nor does the ethic of community necessarily promise better art than before. Yet art must go on to the next thing, whatever that might be. Clearly, pop art was a reaction to the high-minded egotism that played so large a role in the abstract-expressionist esthetic. This was a healthy corrective, but something was lost as well—namely, the heroism and anti-materialist cast of the New York School. Warhol celebrated fame and affluence, convinced as he was that materialism and celebrity could form a basis for very ambitious art. In a way he was correct; his work in part documented high society in the same way nobility was rendered in earlier periods in the West. The problem, though, is that Warhol didn't take much of a gamble in his grab for fame. If you associate yourself with celebrated people and make pop portraits of them, it is easy to become celebrated yourself. But the mostly male ab-ex painters, however self-involved they may have been, clearly rejected high society for a community of devoted artists. Pollock benefited from their courage and support immensely.

Pollock's output at this time did not exclude graphic work. There were several engravings that existed in the show. *Untitled (I), state I of* (1944) is a partially abstract treatment of figures dancing around a fire. Again, the circumstances of the image suggest mythic activities, a kind of spiritual endeavor whose final goal is not known. The gray lines and planes suggest a somber mood, but the activity itself—circling a live fire—can only be considered as joyful. In much of Pollock's work one finds this sort of duality: a kind of balance between violence and darkness and the utter, physical delight of painting. In a way, the action of throwing paint onto the canvas, or the engraving's meticulous lines, signify a belief that can both organize and transcend the free-wheeling id, if only to construct a design capable momentarily of doing so. This particular work also reminds us that Pollock never lost his feeling for figurative art, even if the drip paintings were constant after 1947. Perhaps there is no such thing as a purely abstract art, although Pollock certainly seems determined to make such work.

*Full Fathom Five* (1947), one of the first of Pollock's drip paintings, presents a dense, encrusted surface built up by black and shiny silver house paint. Embedded within the thick layers of paint are such real-life articles as cigarette butts and a key. The feeling is one of inordinate, even malevolent, depth; the title comes from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, in which the sprite Ariel addresses a death by shipwreck. The general darkness of the painting corresponds to an ongoing moodiness on the part of Pollock, who was never satisfactorily able to solve his personal difficulties. These drip paintings, then, suggest an internal violence that only the outward flinging of paint seems to have assuaged. Again, we must try to separate the myth from the reality. Pollock's hardships certainly informed his art, but they cannot be read as an in-depth account of the success of the drip paintings. His psyche does not provide us with an interpretive map of his art. In most ways, the drip paintings are archetypal; their command of a certain kind of impersonal fury would lead Pollock's audience away from, rather than toward, an analysis of personality. And this is by no means a bad thing, primarily because it is a healthy corrective to what amounts to gossip about the artist. Certainly, Pollock was a charismatic, extraordinarily attractive man, but his mores do not necessarily shed light on the extraordinary work in his later life.

And while it is not Pollock's fault that he would become an icon of critical and popular success, his influence on following generations of painters became rigidly doctrinaire. This would result in a stultifying imitation of true feeling, not the genuine emotion experienced in his art. As I have mentioned, even now, in the art school where I teach, I find myself regularly coming across expressionist styles. If we take 1950 as a general high point for Pollock's accomplishments, it becomes clear that the tenets of his style have served as a model for a certain kind of art for more than 65 years—roughly three generations! As a writer, and to some extent as someone who agrees with Ezra Pound's injunction "Make it new," I need to hope that art will move on to a succeeding insight. Because Pollock now sells for such great sums of money, many writers, curators, and viewers agree to his apotheosis. But it is much more complicated than that. We need to honestly contextualize him in a way that does justice to what he has actually done, rather than praise his sometimes outrageous behavior. The truth is that Pollock has become a god for the American art world. But there is another truth, a greater one, that sees him for what he is: a deeply troubled major painter, who did the best that he could to control the stormy emotions that consumed him. In the MoMA show, there is a late painting, called *Easter and the Totem* (1953), undertaken after the period of drip art. It shows the heavy influence of Matisse in its colors and use of black. But the painting seems fragmented and inchoate—it is as if Pollock were trying to reinvent himself in a European manner after fashioning some of the most uncompromisingly American pictures of his generation. No matter how he is seen—as a gifted rogue or a transcendent painter—no one can take away the achievements of his art. He is certainly among the finest painters of his generation, and he remains profoundly important now. Only time can tell whether this importance will translate into a permanent historical standing, free of the flourish and rhetoric of his personality.

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