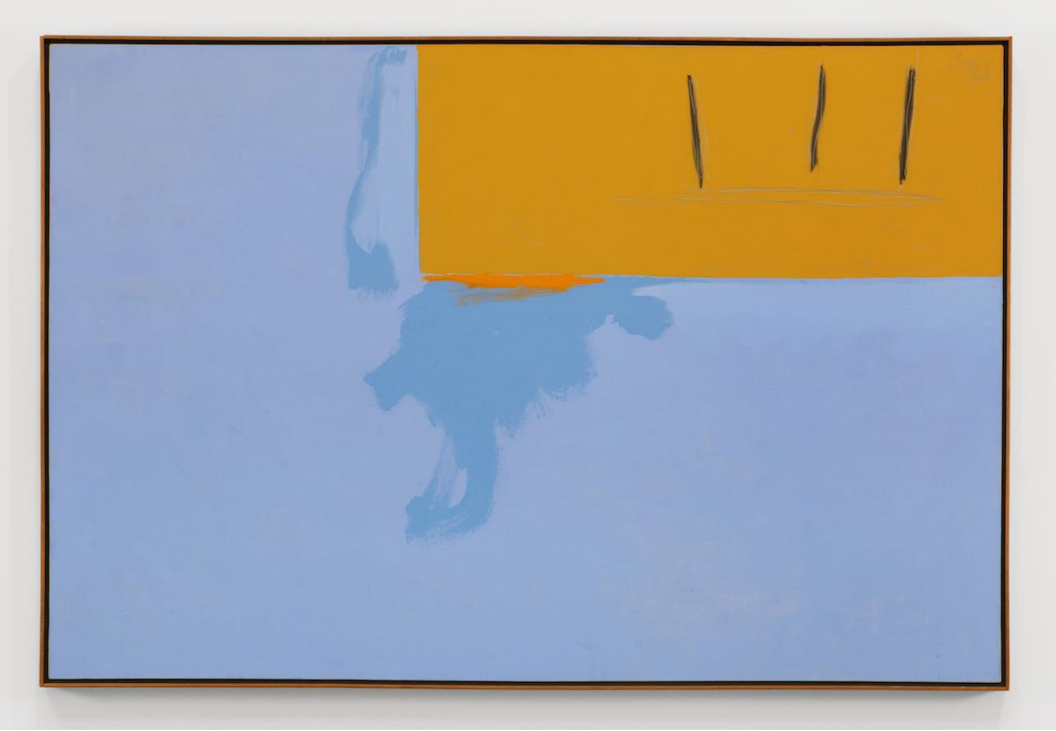
HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Another Look at Robert Motherwell

John Yau Sunday, June 7, 2015



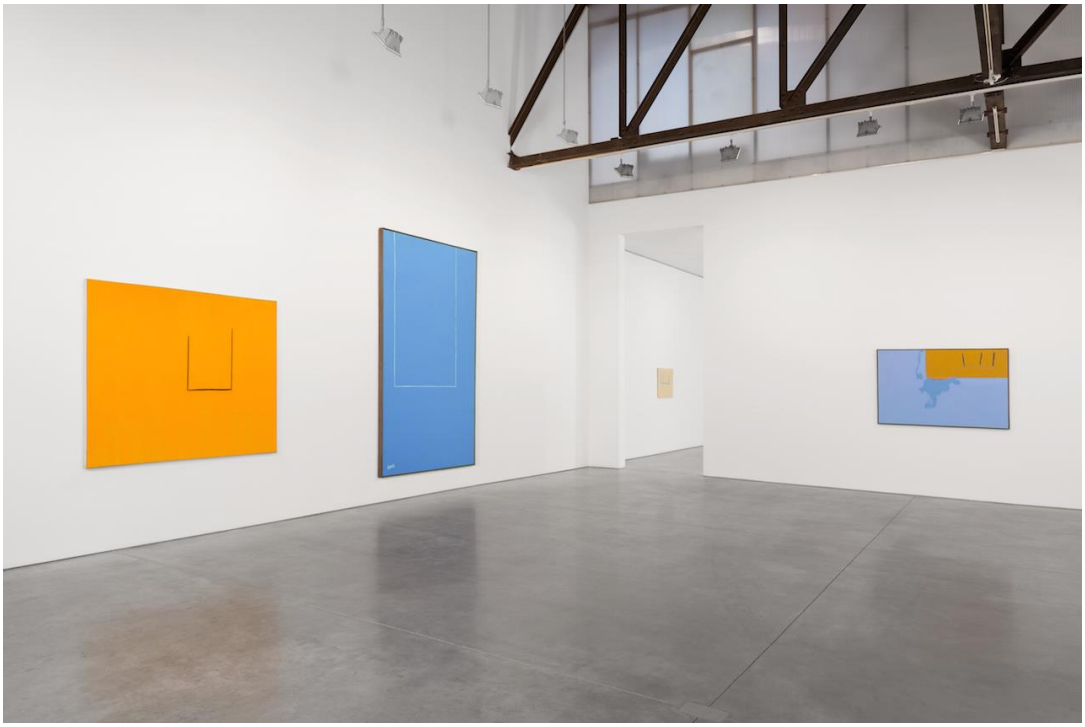
Robert Motherwell, “Cape Cod” (1971), acrylic, charcoal, and graphite on canvas, 40 1/4 x 60 inches
(© The Dedalus Foundation) (all photos by Lance Brewer and Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York)

Robert Motherwell didn’t believe that Pablo Picasso or Henri Matisse were figures to be overthrown. Instead of trying to triumph over them, he was convinced that he could expand upon their innovations. Moreover, he felt that if he tackled the same issues that they wrestled with, he could achieve something that was all his own. This was his big gamble, but, to my mind, it paid off. Instead of reacting against these European masters, a rebellion that surely propelled a number of postwar American artists to jettison the paintbrush along with drawing, spatiality, and composition, Motherwell regarded Picasso and Matisse as cornerstones to build upon.

Motherwell’s response to Picasso and Matisse are evident in his two series, “Elegies to the Spanish Republic,” which he started in 1948, and the “Open” paintings, which he began in 1967, nearly two decades later. While it is imperative to remember that “Elegies” helped define a crucial moment in the history of

Abstract Expressionism, I think it is equally significant to remember that Motherwell started the "Open" paintings at a time when Pop and Minimalism had superseded Abstract Expressionism in the public mind. And on a personal note, he began the "Open" series in 1967, shortly after his retrospective, organized by Frank O'Hara, debuted at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1965), to a mélange of mixed and dismissive reviews.

By the mid-1960s, the tide had turned against Abstract Expressionism, just as it had turned against every movement that had preceded it, and there was something drearily predictable about the negative responses. David Bourdon titled his review "Elephantine Doodling" (*Village Voice*, November 11, 1965), and no one blinked. Rather than hiding out or claiming to be a victim, Motherwell got up off the floor and did something few recognized at the time. He had a second act, which I think in some ways surpasses what he had done previously and had made his reputation on.



Installation view: "Robert Motherwell: Opens" (May 1 – June 20, 2015), Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

Motherwell is best known for his series, "Elegies to the Spanish Republic," in which he tests abstract painting's ability to convey what the Spanish philosopher and poet Miguel de Unamuno titled one of his books, "a tragic sense of life." And while many informed observers consider the "Elegies" to be the major accomplishment of the artist's long and distinguished career, I want to propose a very different reading, which is that the "Open" paintings, while less overtly dramatic than the "Elegies," supersede them in their range, complexity, subtlety, and, more importantly, in the directness with which Motherwell tackled the formal issues that had long preoccupied him. These issues, however, had been redefined by a younger generation of abstract artists and theorists, the Minimalists and Color Field painters, into a question of

painting's essential identity: was it a thing or a surface or both? As Motherwell saw it, the question had become: was it possible to make a painting that resisted traditional categories without rejecting tradition?

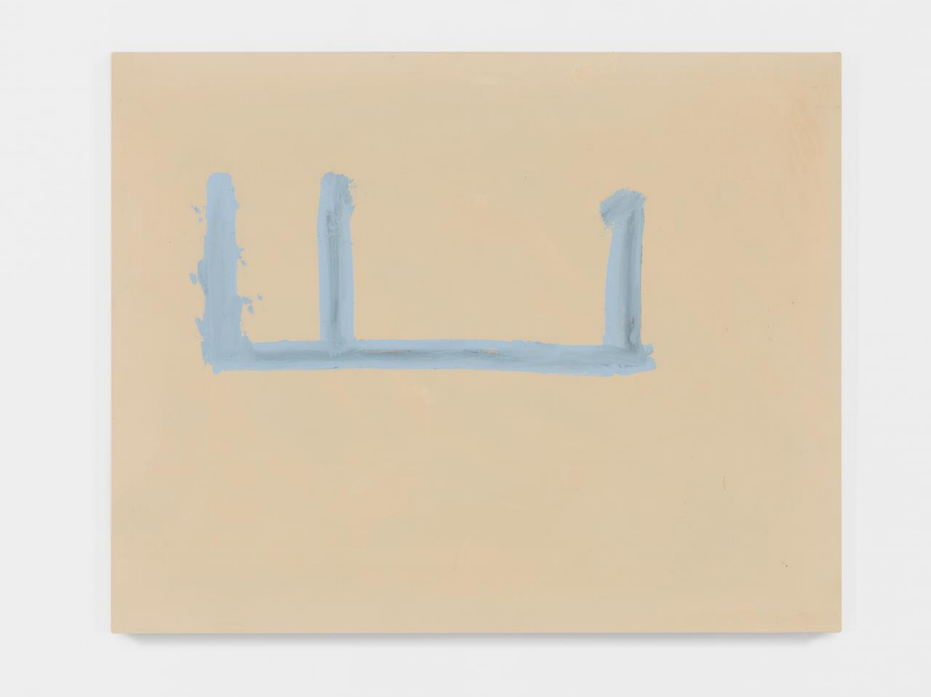
In the "Opens," Motherwell builds upon Matisse—in particular the most abstract of his paintings, such as *View of Notre Dame* (1914), completed during the dark days of World War I—and shifts his attention to light and atmosphere, among other things. The real difference between the "Elegies" and the "Opens" is that the earlier series retains a faint trace of symbolism that can include a Freudian reading of their phallic and testicular shapes, while the latter paintings are more purely visual in their content.

In this regard, Motherwell does something unexpected; he deliberately moves closer to the concerns of a younger generation, but always on his own terms. Something similar occurs in John Ashbery's most recent book, *Breezeway* (2015), where the poet uses lines by younger poets such as Todd Colby and Nicholas Hundley as epigrams. To pull this off, one has to possess a special confidence. I would further add that it is in the "Open" series that Motherwell proves himself a subtle colorist, an aspect of his accomplishment that is easy to overlook if we focus solely on his "Elegies."

In Robert Motherwell: Opens at Andrea Rosen (May 1 – June 20, 2015), the viewer can see what the artist does best, which is tease out meaning from a highly-circumscribed format that consists of a three-sided, linear rectangle, open at the top, juxtaposed against a monochromatic ground. Instead of arriving at a pure or ideal form or composition, Motherwell tried to discover what this obdurate structure could yield. Often, in the "Open" paintings, the three-sided linear structure is centrally located and abutted against the top edge. In other works, the structure is open at the top, and the line defining the left side is shorter than the line defining the right side. The placement of the structure within the field, as well as its size in relationship to the monochromatic expanse, is where Motherwell was able to generation friction. Another was in the combinations of color.

In the "Opens," Motherwell manages to extend a line of thinking that includes both Mondrian's geometric abstractions and Matisse's most abstract depictions of a window. While his monochrome grounds align his work with those for whom monochromatic painting became the next logical step in the advancement of abstract art toward a reductive purity, Motherwell was sharply, yet graciously, critical of those painters who had studied his work of the 1940s, specifically *The Little Spanish Prison* (1941-1944) and *Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive* (1943) and employed stripes as a modular unit in their paintings.

In contrast to the younger artists he influenced, Motherwell did not believe that opticality and flatness had supplanted drawing and spatiality. He certainly did not agree with those who believed that painting had a fixed *telos* or goal; and he was convinced that it was up to painters to keep art and art history open, and to continue wresting from it something new and fresh. He wanted to have all of it, not just the formal issues or social content that were deemed historically viable. Acknowledging the drive towards purity is one thing, while succumbing to it is another. Motherwell was less interested in the latter. I also think that his grand sense that painting could be in touch with history, poetry and everyday life is something he communicated to Cy Twombly, who studied with him in the summer of 1951 at Black Mountain College.

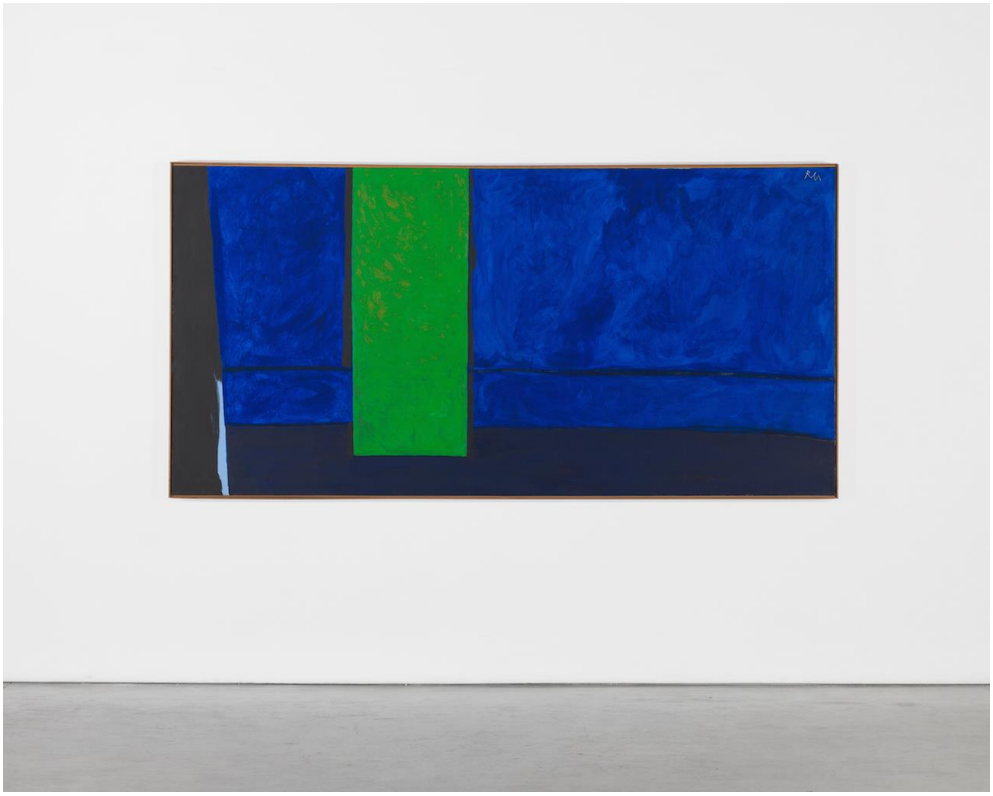


Robert Motherwell, “Open No. 126: In Beige with Blue” (1970), acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 23 7/8 x 29 1/2 inches (© The Dedalus Foundation)

If the “Open” series is partly a critique of the paradigms of abstraction that were then held in high esteem, what makes the best paintings in the “Open” series compelling today is that they are more than that. For one thing, Motherwell defined a set of parameters that are significantly different from the ones that he established in his “Elegies,” and within their stern limitations he was able to focus on the basics—color, light, geometry, and line—as well as embrace the seemingly incommensurable possibilities of drawing and monochrome.

In contrast to those who defined painting as either a two-dimensional surface or as self-contained object (or a combination of the two), Motherwell defined it as both a wall and a window, and thus paradoxically something that is equally closed and open. Certainly, this paradox can be viewed as the artist’s reading of tradition and Modernism. Motherwell might also have been drawn to this conundrum because it suggested that the formal problems of painting could never be satisfactorily resolved. For him, the relationship between inevitability and opportunity is too variable to be circumscribed by a predetermined goal.

Motherwell’s “windows” open on nothing but themselves. They evoke space and suggest a bond between the inside and outside by extending the charcoal lines to the top edge of the canvas and presumably beyond, directly challenging the formalist orthodoxy that defined painting as a self-contained object or surface. In “Cape Cod” (1971), Motherwell abuts a burnt siena rectangle along the painting’s top right edge and down its right side. The cerulean blue ground, with its darker blue stain extending down from the left side of the burnt siena rectangle’s bottom edge evokes wall, ocean, wave and water stain. At the same time the burnt siena evokes sand and wall. Solidity and change seem to be a central concern of the painting.



Robert Motherwell, “Open No. 165: In Blue and Black” (1970), acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 54 x 108 inches (© The Dedalus Foundation)

In “Open No. 120” (1969), the white open structure descending from the top edge of the vertical blue monochrome ground is echoed by the jagged white line to the left of it. Gravity and our desire to hold it in abeyance animate the painting. In “Open No. 165: In Blue and Black” (1970), Motherwell seems to be channeling Matisse’s masterpiece “The Conversation” (1908 – 1912). In this painting, Motherwell follows the logic implied by Matisse’s paintings, and makes a wholly abstract work. In “Open No. 126: In Beige with Blue” (1970), he brings together visuality (the monochromatic ground) and text (the three pronged, linear structure), aspects the Neo-Platonic and Judaic tradition. In the “Opens,” Motherwell accomplished what he set out to do, which is to unite very different aspects of his life, from things seen and experienced to works of art he loved and wanted to honor.

Robert Motherwell: Opens *continues at Andrea Rosen Gallery (525 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through June 20.*