

The New York School: Aaron Siskind in Context, November 7, 2003-January 25, 2004

During the early 1940s, many New York artists were tremendously affected by the political events of World War II (1939-45) and began to question the direction of their work. In 1967, Adolph Gottlieb, described the wartime period as one with a “sense of crisis. I felt I had to dig into myself, find out what it was I wanted to express.”

Many, including Aaron Siskind, found license to pursue more personal work through surrealism, a European art movement influenced by the new science of psychology. Surrealism developed in the aftermath of World War I (1914-18), originally as a literary philosophy. The surrealists rejected rational thought and many values of Western culture, believing these had led to an unprecedented violence. By 1939, many European surrealists had relocated to the U.S. to escape Hitler’s persecution and the war, and their work was widely exhibited in New York. As their American counterparts struggled to understand a level of brutality new in their experience, surrealism seemed increasingly relevant.

Artists of the New York School embraced the surrealists’ idea that the unconscious could be as great a force on life as the conscious. Ambiguous imagery drawn from the subconscious mind seemed much more attuned to modern realities. The New Yorkers were particularly interested in the surrealists’ notion of automatism, a kind of stream-of-consciousness writing. They saw in it a path to unpremeditated, spontaneous gestures and a method that could direct their work. Another key idea absorbed by New York artists from surrealism was the importance of subject matter, especially that which could express, in Barnett Newman’s words, “subjective thought, a feeling, a subjective idea.”

Both Newman and Gottlieb were longtime friends of Siskind, who came to know through them many other New York School painters, later to be called Abstract Expressionists. This gallery contains some of their formative works. In the adjacent gallery, their more familiar mature styles are represented.

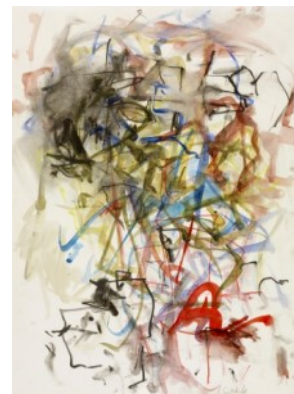
CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Joan Mitchell, American, 1926-1992

Untitled, 1966

Watercolor on paper

Gift of The Bayard and Harriet K. Ewing Collection 1993.105.3



Louise Bourgeois, American, b. France, 1911-2010
Still Life, 1963
Wood, plaster, and paint
Museum Works of Art Fund 66.163



Joseph Cornell, American, 1903-1972
Untitled, 1949-1952
Wood, glass and sand
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 82.107

Cornell is admired for his box sculptures such as this in which he assembles found objects and images. These "assemblages" combine a formal abstract structure with the fantasy of surrealism, a strategy also used by Aaron Siskind. Cornell and Siskind met in the late 1940s. Siskind photographed Cornell's work, as he did for many artists, among them de Kooning, Gottlieb, Newman, and Rothko, most often in exchange for art. A Siskind photograph of Cornell's 1949 exhibition at the Egan Gallery, New York, is on view in the case. In 1974, coming upon some box-like altars at a cemetery in Mérida, Mexico, Siskind began a series of pictures entitled "Remembering Joseph Cornell in Mérida."



Helen Frankenthaler, American, 1928 - 2011
Holocaust, 1955
Enamel, oil, and turpentine on canvas
The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th-Century American Art
72.108



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Philip Guston, American, 1913-1980
Winter Forms, 1963
Gouache on paper
Gift of the Estate of Musa Guston 1992.059.1



Buffie Johnson, American, 1912-2006
Palimpsest, ca. 1955
Oil on canvas
Anonymous gift 57.095



Franz Kline, American, 1910-1962
Studio Shapes, 1951
Oil paint on newsprint
Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th-Century American Art: Gift
of Roy Neuberger 70.008



Siskind and Kline became close friends in the late 1940s. They lived across the street from one another in New York's Greenwich Village.

A person like Franz – we respected each other....Certain elements of his work were ones that I had already developed, see? And when he carried it further in his own work it affected me as well. We were the same kind of people. We were little people. We were very loving people but we were also a little macho inside. And we were both developing. Developing was very important.

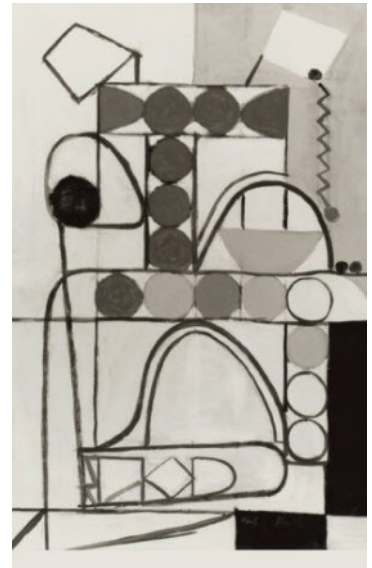
(Siskind, from an interview for the oral history project "Mark Rothko and His Times," Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., October 2, 1982.)

Siskind celebrated his great admiration for the gesture in Kline's work in a series of photographs begun around 1960, but which he focused upon most intently in the 1970s. An example from the series

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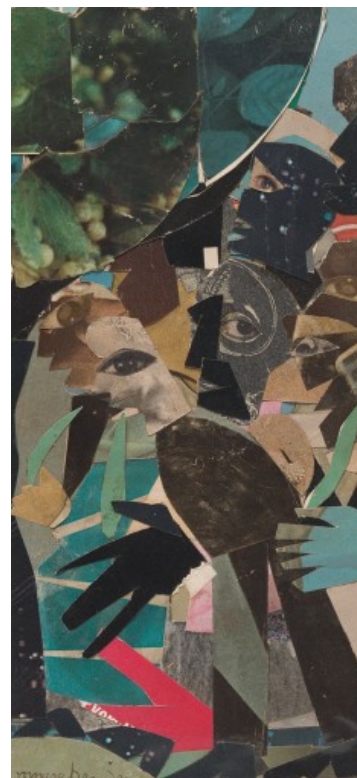
"Homage to Franz Kline" currently hangs in the Museum's Works on Paper Gallery.

Karl Knaths, American, 1891-1971
Composition 2, 1945
Oil on canvas
Gift of Emil Arnold 65.102



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Romare Howard Bearden, American, 1911-1988
Ritual, ca. 1965
Paper collage
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2002.31



Willem de Kooning, American, 1904-1998
Black and White Abstraction, ca. 1950
Sapolin enamel on chart paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 56.186



Morris Engel, American, 1918-2005
Aaron Siskind at Egan Gallery, ca. 1949
Gelatin silver print
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2003.79



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Jackson Pollock, American, 1912-1956

Untitled, 1939-1940

Pencil on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Erwin Strasmich in memory of Ida Malloy
1991.023

For Pollock, contact with the surrealists was crucial to his artistic development. This drawing is a particularly developed example of images that Pollock created and discussed during psychiatric counseling that began in 1938. The drawing refers to the theories of Carl Jung, who viewed the unconscious as a vast reservoir of collective memory that manifests itself as universal myths and symbols, such as the mandala forms that surround the figure on the horse. Pollock's emblematic jottings were inspired in part by occult mysticism and the imagery of Native American religions, which were also sources for surrealist production



Jackson Pollock, American, 1912-1956

Magic Lantern, 1947

Oil, enamel, and carpet tacks on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Peggy Guggenheim 54.005

The fact that good European moderns are now here is very important, for they bring with them an understanding of the problems of modern painting. I am particularly impressed with their concept of the source of art being the unconscious. This idea interests me more than these specific painters do, for the two artists I admire most, Picasso and Miró, are still abroad.

(Pollock, in *Arts and Architecture* [February 1944], p. 14)



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Ad Reinhardt, American, 1913-1967
No. 18, 1956
Oil on canvas
Gift of Richard Brown Baker 1996.11.43

I am very skeptical about most of what people say pictures mean or paintings mean. I lean very much toward, way over toward a guy like Ad Reinhardt, although I think he exaggerated, when he said pictures don't mean anything. I have a kind of feeling that a work of art is something that you can never put your finger on in terms of meaning. I think that's its essential quality.

(Siskind in audiotaped interview with Don Anderson, Louisville, Kentucky, April 29, 1970, Oral History Center, University Archives and Records Center, University of Louisville.)



Mark Rothko, American, 1903-1970

Untitled, 1954

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase in honor of Daniel Robbins: The Chace Fund, The Collectors' Acquisition Fund, Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund, Mary B. Jackson Fund, Walter H. Kimball Fund, Jesse Metcalf Fund, Museum Gift Fund, and gifts of Mrs. George Harding, Mrs. Lewis Madeira, Mrs. Malcolm Farmer, Mrs. Frank Mauran, George H. Waterman III, Mrs. Murray S. Danforth, Mrs. Russell Field, Mrs. Albert Pilavin, Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Ewing, Mr. and Mrs. Tracy Barnes, Mr. and Mrs. William Boardman, Mr. and Mrs. Roy Neuberger, Mrs. Lee Day Gillespie, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Haffenreffer, and Richard Brown Baker 71.091

Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man's experience is expressed by his outward appearance. Freed from the need of describing a particular person, the possibilities are



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endless. The whole of man's experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea.
(Rothko, Pratt lectures, 1958)

Anne Ryan, American, 1889-1954

Collage #441, 1953

Cut and torn paper, fabric, and silver foil mounted on paper

Gift of James D. and Diane Davies Burke 2000.110.1



David Smith, American, 1906-1965

Untitled, 1960

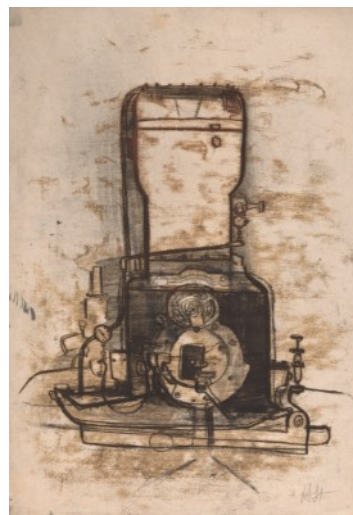
Ink and oil paint on paper

Mary B. Jackson Fund 78.049



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Hedda Sterne, American, 1910 - 2011
Untitled (Radar), from the series *Machines*, ca. 1949
Trace monotype on paper
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2002.106.2



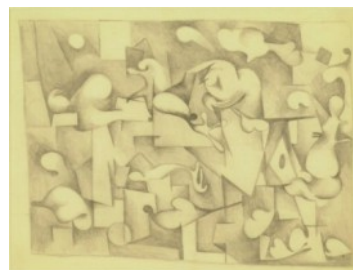
Arthur Swoger, American, 1912-2000
Guston Show at Sydney Janis, 1958
Gelatin silver print (contact sheet)
Gift of Rachel Swoger 2005.124

In this contact sheet, Swogercaptures visitors at a 1958 show of Philip Guston's paintings at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. Guston is seen in the bottom two images in the first vertical column, as well as others throughout the sheet. In these two frames, Guston is speaking with animation to Mercedes Matther, a painter who also circulated in the Abstract Expressionist circle. An image of Aaron Siskind – with disheveled hair and a cigarette in his mouth at a rakish angle – in conversation with a female guest appears in the third column. In one of the fourth-column frames, gallery owner Sydney Janis admires Guston's paintings and speaks with guests.



Elaine de Kooning, American, 1918-1989
Untitled, ca. 1949
Graphite on wove paper
Partial Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Barnett Fain
Gift from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barnett Fain 2001.80.54

Often I would go to Aaron's studio and look through photographs. We wouldn't talk so much about pictures....It was original imagery that painters appreciated. Franz [Kline] thought they were marvelous and would be enthusiastic about certain pictures....Aaron's were expressionistic. He could take something that was still and make it come alive with action....I wrote [a press release] for the Egan [Gallery



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in 1951]. I studied the work for a couple of nights. Critics didn't have the vocabulary. It gave critics something to crib from.

(Elaine de Kooning from audiotaped interview with Carl Chiarenza, ca. 1970, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C., and Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson.)