

# American Abstract Today – a prescriptive review

In the autumn of 1923 there was a sense of uneasiness about Mark Rothko. After disavowing the stiflingly atmosphere of Yale University, he had decided to go to New York City and find work but more importantly, he was looking for a place where he could accomplish a destiny of which, by now, he had a diffuse sense.

In later conversations, a less restless Rothko would reminisce about how, after leaving Yale, he had come to Manhattan to “wonder about, bum about and starve for a bit”. In truth he spent most of his days chain-smoking and waiting for something to click into place. Frustrated with the uncertainty, he started teaching at a Jewish school and in the spare moments the job afforded him he read every Greek tragedy that he could get his hands on. More importantly though, he thought... What he thought about was how to make a new type of art, abstract art that would communicate basic human emotions but also capture both the sense of tragic brutality and the astonishing wonders of existence.

Back in 2014, upon entering the new exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery entitled **American Abstract Today** I was excited to see whether Rothko’s project has survived or whether it has been diluted to a series of platitudinous efforts.

In the first room, Lisa Anne Auerbach’s *Oops! Toxic B.S.* stands out in terms of this heavy handed attitude towards the scope and possibilities of abstract art. The work consists of a mannequin clad in knitting that functions as a vehicle for trite pop culture slogans. More than anything, I feel it works best as a reminder that even conceptual art needs some sort of redeeming aesthetic quality in order to work. Nevertheless, her other exhibited works, *Crystal Energy* and *Find your Inner Metal Voice*, explore some fascinating possibilities of her chosen medium (knitted merino wool on linen canvas) as a tongue in cheek, politically involved art that emerges from, and comments on, our post capitalist, sweatshops-tolerant society. And what better way to do it than use gratuitous self-help mantras and frivolous social media style sentences to inform her art and, in the same movement, inform us as well of the fact that our world has, of late, become the equivalent of ideational sweatshop in its own rights.

The other highlights of the exhibition are Wyatt Khan’s raw canvases which can be interpreted as artistic statements on the issue of abstraction itself. Having been developed from explorations of the shape of a surface and the effect it might have on the work, both *Late Nite* and *Sideways* foster a dialogue between the idea of two dimensionality and three dimensionality. I believe that their value and power lies in this very tension, abstract art itself being postulated on the desire to remove references to the representational world and a constant reassessment of the idea of perspective.

Finally, in regards to the more orthodox medium of painting on canvas, Keltie Ferris’ *!@#%&^&#\*() , (!!!!!!)* and *00>><<00* achieve a conceptual weight that qualifies them as great and challenging pieces of art. Made from enlarged digital pixilation and spray-paint (ubiquitous presences in our hyper modern times) they acquire an ethereal quality that is somehow between beauty and plainness and, reminiscent of out of focus urban landscapes, they sooth rather than alienate and comfort rather than irk.

Back to where we started, the breakthrough came for Rothko a few frustrating years later, when at the Metropolitan Museum of Art he saw Matisse’s *Red Studio* and realised that colour itself could be liberated from antiquated notions of what it could do, or should do, on the canvas. He went to see it every day for weeks and in front of it, he began to crystallise the concepts that would take his work to heights of profundity and scope that painting had not reached since the old masters. In the process he showed the world that American art had also depth and not just dazzle. In 2014, *American Abstract Today* does not quite achieve that dichotomy. Of course, not all artists should aspire to the intellectual heights of Rothko, but all good ones should acknowledge it.