Kristin Bell
ArH 493: Modern Art
Professor Sue Taylor
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Upending Convention—Re-imagining Abstract Expressionism and Art in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*

Thesis Statement: Despite its appearance as merely a revisionist history, in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, Ann Gibson constructs a compelling case for the complete re-imagining of not only Abstract Expressionism, but also much of the scaffolding that constitutes art historical discourse and understanding.

At first it seems that Ann Eden Gibson, in *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, is fundamentally concerned with writing a revisionist history of Abstract Expressionism, but what becomes apparent through the discourse (and what is confirmed in the conclusion) is that she crafted the first brick in the construction of a new framework for analyzing and understanding the theoretical underpinnings of New York's Abstract Expressionist art. This is significant, because she is not urging us to merely revise any history, but urges us to re-imagine and re-configure it. This shakes the foundations of not only Abstract Expressionist art, but also rattles the cages of other art historical theoretical work and the ways in which we understand and look at art more generally.

Gibson begins in the introduction by explaining that for artists who were not part of the core group of Abstract Expressionists, loosely defined as "the 'essential eight'—Adolph Gottlieb, Willem de Kooning, [Robert] Motherwell, Barnett Newman, [Jackson] Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, [Mark] Rothko and Clyfford Still,"[1] being recognized as Abstract Expressionists

[1] Ann Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xx.

(even up to today) was a losing proposition. The "others" were not considered part of the core, *not* because their art refused to embody formal and theoretical aspects of Abstract Expressionism —things like allover composition, abstraction, lack of figuration, human/existential themes, etc. —they just did not fit the mold of what has come to signify an Abstract Expressionist artist, namely, these "others" were not white, heterosexual, males living in New York. However, it was not a simple matter of outright exclusion in most cases. It is (and was) the subtle and invisible barriers that inhabit the art world (and larger culture) that lock out other artists from consideration.

For example, there is the case of Janet Sobel (figure 1), deemed by many, including Clement Greenberg, as a "primitive" painter. In his essay, "Art-Type Painting," Greenberg sings the praises of Sobel and says that "Pollock (and I myself) admired these pictures rather furtively…and it was the first really 'allover' one that I had ever seen."[2] In the same breath he states, rather tellingly, how Sobel "was, and still is, a housewife living in Brooklyn."[3] Greenberg did not make the "housewife" statement naïvely. Although *The Feminine Mystique* was not published until 1963 (a few years after this statement), surely Greenberg knew that no "real" Abstract Expressionist would even deign to be a "housewife." As Gibson explains, the masculine aspect of Abstract Expressionism was never left out. Abstract Expressionism defined its artists as "the most popular model for an American hero: the anti-intellectual man of action."[4] This man of action could be neither homosexual nor non-white, and he certainly couldn't be a she! "In an era

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[2] Clement Greenberg, "Art-Type Painting," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, ed. Clement Greenberg (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), para. 18 Kindle edition.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 3.

that preferred heroic art and in which heroism was understood as a masculine prerogative, 'feminine' characteristics in art works generally relegated them to minor status."[5] And these "feminine" characteristics included the artists themselves, not just what was in their art.

Not only was the Abstract Expressionist supposed to be the heroic figure, but as Gibson discusses in chapter two, the art had to be infused with "freedom and its principal sign in art, spontaneity…and its closely associated implication, authenticity."[6] There was a near obsession with the idea of originality, despite the fact that most of these core artists "borrowed" from other cultures. When ideas or motifs were used from other cultures they were not seen as being unoriginal in Abstract Expressionism; these ideas and motifs were now considered "universal" and humanist. The key is that these references had to come from cultures that were "other." If a black woman painted an African mask it was not part of the Abstract Expressionist milieu, because it then became subjective and, therefore not "universal."

In chapter three Gibson writes, "one of the ways in which Abstract Expressionist universalizing conquered diversity was through abstraction."[7] The use of abstraction "[kept] the specific debt from being obvious."[8] Again, the problem, especially with non-white artists, was that subjects were not distant enough from their identity even if they also utilized abstraction. In the example of Rose Piper (figure 2), Abstract Expressionist history tells us that she is just too much. She is too feminine, too black, too specific, and not "universal" enough, despite the fact

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[5] Ibid., 7.

[6] Ibid., 27.

[7] Ibid., 45.

[8] Ibid., 49.

that she painted abstract, allover "attenuated form[s] [that suggested] the essence of longing."[9] Is longing not universal? Even though she based her images on Blues songs where "the most frequent stance assumed by the women in these songs is independence and assertiveness—indeed defiance"[10] these abstract characters were never *heroic* as far as Abstract Expressionism was concerned. The heroic and abstract were even dismissed in Piper's *Death of Bessie Smith* (figure 3) in which Piper paints the story of Bessie Smith dying from blood loss because she has been ignored and left to die simply because she was black.

Even if Piper was not abstract enough and clung too much to figural work for the taste of Abstract Expressionism, there were other artists who did purely abstract work. Gibson writes, "geometric forms offered viewers a diminished basis for attributing race or gender to the maker or the subject matter of a work…[however, abstraction also] led to the perception that its practitioners were merely derivative or that they lacked vision."[11] Even with artists who obeyed the laws of pure abstraction, "as with Buffie Johnson, Norman Lewis, Janet Sobel, Michael West, and Hale Woodruff…personal identity counted in both production and critical interpretation."[12] The artists outside of the core could never be fully counted.

As was the case with Piper, if any artist was a bit "too much," he or she would fall outside of the core. For any of "these artists to have announced civil rights, feminism, or gay identity as informing their art would have guaranteed even firmer exclusion from the circles in which they

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[9] Graham Lock, "Blues on the Brush: Rose Piper's Blues and Negro Folk Songs Paintings of the 1940s," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), para. 13 Kindle edition.

[10] Ibid., para. 17 Kindle edition.

[11] Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 78.

[12] Ibid., 86.

worked and showed."[13] In chapter five Gibson explores the relevance of figuration, identity and metaphor versus metonymy. Even though Abstract Expressionists eschewed figuration, Gibson notes that "the representation of any subject matter (freedom just as much as maternity, transcendence just as much as Catholic or Haitian ritual) is tied to some kind of figuration. To privilege symbol and metaphor over the supposedly more pedestrian allegorical devices of narrative and mimesis…is more an assertion of power than it is a distinction of intrinsic quality."[14] Indeed, this seems the crux of the problem. It wasn't just that certain artists really didn't fit the definition of Abstract Expressionism, but they were not properly within the seat of privilege and power.

This problem of privilege and power is symptomatic of larger art historical discourse. For example, in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Greenbergian philosophies, which have been repeated and upheld, hold that there is a clear and qualitative distinction between kitsch and art/art culture. The latter is of value and is "progressive to the culture at large."[15] Greenberg draws a distinct line in the sand. Art and art culture, as Greenberg and others who subscribe to "the essential eight" idea of Abstract Expressionism contend, is humanist while "kitsch is merely another of inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to ingratiate themselves with their subjects."[16] However, the dichotomy is an *assumption* that is taken for truth. Alexis Boylan convincingly argues that modernity (and in turn Abstract Expressionism) is not humanist and

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[13] Ibid., 113.

[14] Ibid., 99.

[15] Alexis Boylan, "Stop Using Kitsch as a Weapon: Kitsch and Racism," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society* 22, no. 1 (2010): 45.

[16] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, ed. Clement Greenberg (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), sec. IV, para. 2 Kindle edition.

universal, but that it "is structured around and formed by colonialism, slavery, the master/slave relationship, and hybridity."[17] (I would also add patriarchy as well.)

This brings us to chapter six of the Gibson text which focuses on Primitivism. In summary, the problem of Primitivism explodes into the context of Abstract Expressionism, because of this fallacy that to be white, male, and heterosexual is to be "universal." Again, an Abstract Expressionist could quote primitive (female, non-white, homosexual) culture, and was encouraged to. This use of the primitive became "individual and universal," but any reference to the "primitive" by an actual "primitive" was not allowed. Gibson continues in chapter seven with an exploration of the feminine/female "primitive." Quoting Louise Bourgeois, Gibson notes, "'there were very few women in Abstract Expressionism, very very few, not because the men were ignoring us, there were not antagonistic, as such. It was much worse: they were blind. They did not know we existed.'"[18] Despite the blindness, the "primitives" resisted by "adopt[ing] various strategies—abstraction, stylistic diversity, masquerade—to negotiate the abyss."[19]

In the end, Gibson essentially asks us to resist as well. To not just patch together narratives of a monolithic "other," but to "move aside…the whole structure that Abstract Expressionism has provided for understanding art at mid-century…so that other developmental chronologies, issues, and values may be granted their place in our history."[20] The time of the "universal" and "blind" man has passed. In Gibson, we can see that this re-imagining has already begun—all the better for art, culture and history!

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[17] Boylan, "Stop Using Kitsch as a Weapon," 46.

[18] Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism*, 142.

[19] Ibid., 165.

[20] Ibid., 168.

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Images

Figure 1.

Janet Sobel, *The Attraction of Pink* (1944)

Figure 2.

Rose Piper, *Slow Down, Freight Train* (1946-47)

Figure 3.

Rose Piper, *Death of Bessie Smith* (1947)