

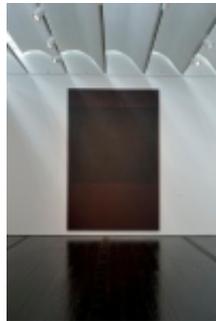


cablegram

art, Dispatches, Houston, painting, Rothko Chapel, The Menil Collection

| Dispatches #20 | Mark Rothko Paintings, The Menil Collection and The Rothko Chapel, Houston, TX

In art, criticism, Dispatches on 06/09/2011 at 9:35 am



I was initially hesitant to write that I was moved by a series of paintings by Mark Rothko, recently installed at The Menil Collection (<http://www.menil.org/>). While I have certainly encountered art that is touching, disturbing, engulfing, or otherwise impressionable, to have these experiences in front of large abstract paintings by a master of Abstract Expressionism, seems somewhat old fashioned and, well, distressingly earnest.

Yet I'd wager my response was completely appropriate, the six paintings I saw were originally created for the Rothko Chapel (<http://www.rothkochapel.org/>), the ecumenical structure commissioned by Dominique and John de Menil and designed by Philip Johnson. Completed in 1966, Rothko did not include these works in the last selection of 14 paintings that he'd chosen for the chapel prior to his death. The artist killed himself before the building was completed and the works were installed in 1970. The current installation at the Menil was created as a tribute to the

Chapel's 40th anniversary.

Each of the over 14-foot-tall canvases features a black rectangle that takes up about two-thirds of the composition and floats on a deep maroon background. At the Menil, they are situated in their own room, which has two parallel entrances to walk through so you see three paintings to your right, each on its own wall, and the same on your left.

I didn't know these paintings were going to be on view, so I entered that room a little surprised but immediately enthralled. After all, these very dark, formidable works tower over the viewer and have been placed in a rather confining space. Yet they became magnetic, pulling me in to see what exactly was going on in each piece — how the spacing between the black and maroon varied between compositions, how the canvas at times peaked out with its bumpy texture and other times retreated, how the sides of each canvas were inches thick and covered in paint, how the intermittent and filtered sunlight revealed secret strokes of color then took them away. It was as if I receiving an on-the-spot lesson in formalism and abstraction, while simultaneously and without my awareness, my consciousness was being cleansed. Thirty minutes of looking and examining, of experiencing awe and puzzlement, left me more calm and nourished than I'd ever achieved on my own through meditation.

So I ventured over to the Rothko Chapel, which I had seen a handful of times before. And as much as I hate this phrase when used in conjunction with art, for the first time as I stood in the middle of the octagon-shaped room I "got it." I felt the paintings anew, I took my time, and I drank them up. I didn't cry, although that is not an uncommon reaction for viewers in front of a Rothko painting, which even the artist himself knew about. Instead I allowed my eyes to lead me through without self judgment or hesitancy, and as a result I was privileged to have an extended aesthetic experience that, well, moved me.

My self-conscious concerns about describing my own response made me wonder if Rothko himself ever questioned his authenticity and purpose. And I remembered an art professor who was teaching us about Rothko's work and mentioned the artist's suicide as if it was almost a given outcome. The professor said something like, "You can't be in your studio and touch God every day and then expect to go on with your life."

Regarding the chapel, Rothko said to Dominique de Menil that he wanted the viewer to feel a tension between doom and promise. However, I left both the Menil Collection installation and the chapel with a serene optimism. I was focused not on the potentiality of a sublime or holy encounter but on the idea that art can be truly surprising and revelatory. That you cannot predict when or how or what kind of art may affect you, but simply knowing it can and in a way different than any other stimuli, is incredibly affirming.

-**N. Elizabeth Schlatter** is a curator and writer living in Richmond, VA.

Images: Mark Rothko, *Untitled* [Alternate Panels for the Rothko Chapel], 1966, dry pigments, rabbit-skin glue, egg/oil emulsion, and synthetic polymer on canvas, dimensions vary but approximately 177 x 96 inches, The Menil Collection.

Photo credit: (c) Hester + Hardaway Photographers, Fayetteville, Texas

► [8 Responses](#)

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#) Theme: [DePo Masthead](#) by [Automattic](#).

Follow

Follow “cablegram”

Powered by [WordPress.com](#)