

ANDERSON IN CONTEXT

John R. Anderson challenges mainstream concepts, methods, and techniques of pre-World War II painting in America. “I don’t paint small...I want the whole canvas covered and things going on in every direction, I illuminate in new directions,” the painter revealed in an interview in 2017. Anderson’s abstract expressive creations appear to embody Lyrical Abstraction, cutting-edge artwork that was not particularly well received in the 1960s. Anderson believed in his work, but he did not find a receptive audience for it. His art went unappreciated along with the artistic movement that his work exemplifies. “All I ever wanted to do was paint,” Anderson said. In 1971, he found a sanctuary of personal freedom and sincerity in Yankton, South Dakota, where he paints still today. His work remains sheltered from social and artistic developments, and continues to represent the Lyrical Abstraction of the 1960s. Yankton’s privacy offered a unique preservation of time and individual progression.

Anderson developed his artistic ethos contemporaneous with the emergence of Lyrical Abstraction, which is rooted in **Abstract Expressionism**. Abstract Expressionism flourished in post-WWII New York City. The art movement was the first authentically American avant-garde movement to

achieve international influence: New York City—not Paris, not Europe—became the artistic epicenter.¹ Abstract Expressionism challenged conventional notions of painting. It emphasized the absolute individuality of the artist, and focused on the act of creating rather than on the finished product. It involved the “elimination of specific subject matters and a preference for spontaneous, impulsive qualities of experience.”² In addition to valuing the creative unconscious, Abstract Expressionists typically worked on a large scale, accentuated the flatness of the canvas, and treated all areas of the surface as equally important. This unconventional approach to art reflected a time of ingenuity and evolution.

During this time, Anderson enrolled at the **Minneapolis School of Fine Arts** (now Minneapolis College of Art and Design) in Minnesota. A notable instructor at the school during this era was **Oskar Kokoschka**, a celebrated Austrian painter who had fled his native country after his work was labeled degenerate art by the Nazis. Later, in 1958, Anderson earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the **University of Denver School of Art** in Colorado. At the time, the school was run by famed modernist painter **Vance Kirkland**. Among the faculty was **William Sanderson**, a painter influenced by Cubism.

Abstract Expressionism was not without critics. John McCoubrey referred to the movement as American Tradition Painting, arguing that it “manifest[s] the country’s longstanding search for its own identity in art.”³ Clement Greenberg viewed the movement as a “formalist, virtual international modernist art” which aims at “purifying the medium, squeezing out illusionistic space, and remaking the space as optical rather than tactile.”⁴ Harold Rosenberg coined the term **Action Painting**, observing that the artists treated the canvas “as an arena in which to act rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or express an object, actual or imagined.”⁵ Critics agreed that a revolution was underway. Specifically, **Color Field** painters such as Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Alma Thomas rejected gestural brushwork and conventional pictorial depth, and treated color as the key element.⁶ Action painters such as Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Mary Abbott applied paint with energetic gestural movements—sometimes by dribbling or splashing—and with no preconceived idea of what the imagery would look like.⁷ They approached the canvas with expressive brush strokes and emphasized the physical act of painting as an essential part of the finished product. According to Rosenberg, “what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event....The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation.”⁸ Anderson feels kinship with this approach: “Jackson

Pollock is fantastic, absolutely terrific,” Anderson commented. In the early 1960s, the concept of individual, expressionist freedom was further explored in painting as well as in the culture at large. In the late 1960s, Anderson painted extensively in **Mexico**. The “**pre-Columbian art** inspired me,” he revealed. Its influence can be seen in his paintings. The Lyrical Abstraction movement developed during this era.

Young painters would “merge the abstract and conceptual with bold color, making their work a medley of ideas, brushstroke, color, and emotion—hence, ‘lyrical.’”⁹ These artists used large canvases and acrylic paint, and treated all parts of the canvas with equal importance, moving between easel and floor for dripping, splattering, or smearing. “When I put [the canvas] on the floor, I started to see things, and I could see more things... and two months later I was able to look at a painting and see things that I didn’t see before, and this has been a progression ever since,” the artist explained. Anderson’s paintings are a grand melody of **color, texture, and movement**.

According to David L. Shirey, writing for the New York Times in 1971, these painters “employ opulent colors that are built up from washy lightness to impasto thickness, emphasize the surfaces of their work through hearty textures, treat form with a certain casualness, and exploit all of these characteristics for the purpose of



Detail from a 1966 painting



1971 painting

establishing illusory spaces and heightening color impact.”¹⁰ Lyrical Abstract painters paradoxically embraced a sense of chaos balanced by an impulse toward control, successfully finding ways to combine intellect and emotion. Larry Aldrich, who officially coined the term Lyrical Abstraction, observed that “the artist’s touch is always visible in this type of painting.”¹¹ The works of Larry Poons, John Seery, and Carol Haerer demonstrated this individualized and spontaneous expression that “sings with rich fluid color and quiet energy.”¹² Lyrical Abstraction can be understood as a coming of age of Abstract Expressionism, a flowering that, according to Lyrical Abstract artist **Ronnie Landfield**, produced “the most complex tangle of art styles, false starts and movements that has been seen since Paris in the first decade of the century when Impressionism, Postimpressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Dada and Surrealism collide.”¹³ As a result, the 1970s were

marked by confusion. Art branched into Color Field, Action, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Pop Art, Hard-edge, and Lyrical Abstraction Painting. At the forefront, two polarizing ideologies emerged: Formalism, favoring individual expression, originality, and authenticity; and Anti-Formalism, characterized by commercialism, pastiche, and irony. Anti-Formalism eventually prevailed, and Formalism gradually became passé.

Lyrical Abstraction was perceived as **Formalist**. It plunged into disfavor. The press mistakenly lumped Lyrical Abstraction together with Color Field Painting, affiliating it with Larry Aldrich’s Lyrical Abstraction show at the Whitney Museum. In hindsight, the show failed to capture the essence of the movement. According to Landfield, the exhibition left out “too many important artists.” It was “limp and wishy washy,” and represented a movement that lacked a meaningful spokesperson, or “an Emile Zola.”¹⁴ In the critical climate of the time,

artists whose works were associated with the term Lyrical Abstraction were beset with disapproval. According to Landfield: “A generation of abstract artists whose powerful works forever changed the face of contemporary art have been condemned by history to wander the desert of obscurity.”¹⁵ Anderson’s Lyrical Abstract works, likewise, remained hidden.

Lyrical Abstraction revolts against both Formalism and Anti-Formalism, and is therefore uniquely important. Rather than attempting to visually represent sociopolitical realities or philosophical theories, Lyrical Abstract painters adopt a personally passionate mindset, and a desire to **communicate concepts, actions, experiences, and emotions abstractly**—in addition to exploring art principles of composition, tone, value, line, hue, and texture. The movement incorporates “the prior three decades of American painting into a new, fresh, and bold statement. [The artists] pay homage to the structure and intellect of conceptual art,” while embracing individual expression and sensation.¹⁶ Art, then, becomes a delicate juxtaposition between deliberateness and spontaneity. **Wendy Blazier**, senior curator at and organizer of the 2009 Boca Raton Museum of Art exhibition *Expanding Boundaries: Lyrical Abstraction Selections from the Permanent Collection*, described Lyrical Abstract works as “a marriage of sensibilities between the action of gestural

abstraction, the nuances of color field, and the rational structure of minimalism.”¹⁷

The movement does not conform to an ideological standard nor to a philosophical orientation. Rather, it offers an opportunity for artistic reinvention. The artist adopts a new sense of time. As with Anderson’s work, the artist commonly takes several years to attain the desired expression. It is all about the **process**. “It takes time. That is why [many of my paintings] are [marked with different dates] all the way around. I change the date and direction as I proceed,” the painter explained.

Anderson alters the texture, color, and orientation of paintings, much like musicians alter the tone, tempo, and movement of a symphony. Anderson’s paintings are an immersive experience, best seen in person and up-close—inciting bewilderment, discussion, and reflection. These are not throwbacks to an art movement of the past; they are glimpses of the timeless present moment.

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Anderson at work

Notes

¹ Klin, Richard, Lily Prince, and Steven Zucker. *Abstract Expressionism For Beginners*. Danbury, CT: For Beginners, 2016.

² Golub, Leon. "A Critique of Abstract Expressionism." *College Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1955): 142-47.¹³ Landfield, Ronnie. "Lyrical Abstraction in the Late Sixties." *Abstract-art.com*. Essay. June 1995.

³ Polcari, Stephen. "Abstract Expressionism: 'New and Improved'." *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (1988): 174-80.

⁴ Klin, *Abstract Expressionism For Beginners*.

⁵ Chilvers, Ian, and John Glaves-Smith. *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁶ West, Shearer. "Colour Field Painting." *The Bloomsbury Guide to Art*, Bloomsbury, 1996.

⁷ Chilvers, *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*.

⁸ Klin, *Abstract Expressionism For Beginners*.

⁹ Wendy Blazier quoted in Vogt, Jennifer A. "Art review: Lyrical Abstraction show demonstrates resilience of American painting." *Palm Beach ArtsPaper*, June 22, 2009.

¹⁰ Shirey, David L. "Downtown Scene: Lyrical Abstraction." *The New York Times*. April 08, 1971.

¹¹ Whitney Museum of American Art. *Lyrical Abstraction*. Exhibition catalogue. 1971

¹² Boca Raton Museum of Art. "Expanding Boundaries: Lyrical Abstraction Selections from the Permanent Collection." Museum exhibition, Florida, Boca Raton. 2009.

<https://www.bocamuseum.org/exhibitions/expanding-boundarieslyrical-abstraction-selections-permanent-collection>

¹³ Landfield, Ronnie. "Lyrical Abstraction in the Late Sixties." *Abstract-art.com*. Essay. June 1995.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Shirey, "Downtown Scene: Lyrical Abstraction."

¹⁷ Vogt, "Art review: Lyrical Abstraction."