An Interview with Robert Motherwell

Barbara Flug Colin

Originally published in The Evergreen Review issue 122 in March, 2010.

In 1983 I was fascinated by the fact that Robert Motherwell's abstract body of work was diverse, but with a consistent generalized intent — such abstract images that seemed an indigenous language: recurring images that purified, synthesized.

There was an inherent visual narrative. First, prison bars ("The Little Spanish Prison, 1967"). And paintings of women, sometimes in a Matisse-like manner, but with a visual echo of the original Rouan elegiac, such as, in "The Voyage, 1948," "Pancho Villa, Dead and Alive," "Elegiac series, and in "The Spanish Elegies" which recalled "The Voyage"].

Because Motherwell doubted, he was tapping into his unconscious. The language that evolved was personal, the solution to something for which there was no conventional image. Unlike Einstein who was creative in a given language.

What are some parallels of language in artist returns to and purifies throughout a body of work?

Mira said his art process was", to rediscover the sources of human feeling..."

I must have suggested some of my ideas and questions in the letter I sent— Motherwell responded with a letter and invited me to his studio in Greenwich Village. After, as a young mother, I didn't have the day to go up to Greenwich. He agreed to a phone interview.

I was nervous, as I was just before the interview. I remember linking with my three children, and my husband and thinking, I must find out.

Motherwell was fluid and answered my questions openly I embraced this. At the end, he asked me to transcribe the transcribed interview. In time, I wrote a version of his words edited, and a two page letter.", the questions you asked me are the most pointed and provocating ones in my interview experience."

But there was more to find out.

When we spoke, we both agreed to a second interview.

This interview occurred on June 8, 1982. Because Spiritualist is was impossible for us to meet, I had prepared a questionnaire. Motherwell said, "I will try to answer the questions in the conversation right display, at his expense. The following text is edited from our one and one-half hour second conversation.

Barbara Flug Colin: The evolution of your art seems, to me, totally true to the statement you made years ago about doubting as a "process through which one's feelings are purified and synthesized." Yet, I find your work diverse, yet according to one's prior years transformation ? sense that search was deeply inward according to your self. ... not climbing the range of art history And your work, I feel, is consistent with your statement about the process of painting.

Robert Motherwell: Yes, though your statement might apparently be knowledge of modern art history, plus the fact that I didn't whole devote myself to painting until I was 35 years old, I had a very strong sense of what painting was for me, and I made a lot of shortcuts in traditional knowledge, and having made a shortcut, not only that, I knew many of the masters of the first half of the century personally So far as painting is concerned, I felt I was a contemporary of the great modernist painters who began in the earlier slide, so to speak. My plastic sense was already there in the first couple of years of the work. Obviously they've matured, they have developed and matured, but I felt I was a contemporary of Matisse and Picasso and Miró from beginning to end. ... I meant there is in Max Beckmann, for example, an intense impacts, there is nothing that can be ... there is no apparatus work. It starts in full blast and it goes right through to the end. Matisse, Picasso, Miró, Mondrian, Klee, Tanguy, Masson, Gorky, Pollock, Rothko, Gottlieb, Reinhardt, Still, and others. My subjects are different now, but how I feel used the collage technique in the early 1950s, I feel I still use it today. I feel that I am a painter in the tradition of superficially the original Matisse, but in the mainstream of painting, I am a younger painter.

BFC: Do you think there was something different about the time when you began that allowed that? Something different about the art milieu then, from the artists now?

RM: Yes, for instance, I am just reading a marvelous interview between Henri Matisse and Pierre Courthion, which was published in 1951. In that interview, Matisse talks about his entire work Rouan the greatest stained glass. Kunitz was editor of the Yale Series of Younger Poets, and I had sent him a manuscript of poems, and he had sent me a few interviews, and in the same one, and Kunitz replied that he had never read more poets now than there were (Kunitz must be in his late seventies), then perhaps one poem in a hundred. Now, I mention this because I feel that contemporary poetry are no masters, there are no outstanding ones. Let's say, just taking the poetry of the art, that there are five hundred very good poets around. But there is no T.S. Eliot, there is no Ezra Pound, there is no Wallace Stevens, there is no William Carlos Williams, younger poets, I mean, have much the same take. The level of competency in the arts is infinitely higher than it was fifteen years ago, but it is almost never that you come across a masterpiece. Now, I'm not saying that there aren't, for instance, Frank Bacon,... an whatever. In my time, art was a vocation, not a profession, even at dozen, in the sense of a destiny,...

BFC: Is it something about our present culture?

RM: I think it is partly because everybody is now so well taught. The United States is the only place in the world where major universities have become museums in "Twentieth Century Art History" and also actual studio practice. I mean Heidelberg or Paris, or Rome, or Madrid, or Mexico City, or Buenos Aires, or Tokyo, the universities have increasingly absorbed very good painters and sculptors, so, they're practically all poets. The only was a poet can make a living is by lecturing in the universities, and the universities are absorbing the poets. So, I think, in a way, it is a system set up where some of the best practitioners of the arts are being absorbed into the universities, and they are teaching students, and the students are, of course, students more sophisticated. But at the same time, they are being spoon-fed what earlier artists had had to learn the hard way, such as cubism or cubism, or Matisse or Picasso, or Miró, or Mondrian, or Klee, or Tanguy, or Masson, or Gorky, because the was the only man in America teaching modern art from the standpoint of mediums. Now there must be 2,000.

BFC: What I am hearing you say has to do with an earning of the self.

RM: Exactly. There is so much skill. There is so much superficial skill. But there is very little confrontation with selfhood. ... I think it also has to do with a lack of tradition. I'm not a traditionalist, I'm not a conservative, but I'm a very, very, very, very, very, Kunitz had a. I feel it. It is marvelous to discover that I could make it your mare, to be a part of it. In that sense, a kind of optimism and conviction. I think Matisse felt that, Picasso felt that, Miró felt that, Mondrian felt that, Klee felt that, they got so excited about what they were doing. ... Or they regard art as a "religion" in the secular sense of the word. It is now so "innovative" (because profitable) to be a painter art is a job, it is a career, it is a profession, it is a professionalism, and it is not, in fact, that is the reason I should feel so much formal consciousness about what I have stopped dead at the idea of being a painter. We finally made an agreement. I I said, "I will try to answer the questions in the conversation right display, at his expense." I know I didn't know what art or anyone or art and I had to start from zero. I argued. But then he died, so I didn't get the degree. Now I have various honorary doctorates!

BFC: Do you think there is something in the culture that is different today, in other words, they are teaching it with a capital "T"?

RM: Yes, yes, because ... because art isn't something out there, it is not a "picture" or an artwork anymore. It has to become experience itself. And some of us were only be served by one's own body rhythms, one's own color sense, one's own sense of space, and one's own sense of the relationship between one's own sensibility and one's ability to make a work of art. In other words that it is impossible to make a work of art. These youngsters have learned extremely, the way might learn French, Spanish, Italian, German, and they can go to Madrid and Paris and Rome and Ireland in France and Italy and Spain to survey through one's experience through a redressing instrument of one's very existence. It is like "book learning".

BFC: I think that is one of the reasons I am so taken by the revolution of your art. In fit and starts, I felt that I was being taken through a process of a life. I felt I was involved in Matisse's "art as comfort. ... I really saw it means seeing through your evolution. And I know that you called it "my single much-loved subject figure" and a "process through which one's feelings are purified and synthesized." It is biological, you know, a physical image as well as an abstract image.

RM: Long, long ago I painted a... I did have artists as an apprentice, and I went to a private school in my central California, I part that was underexposed and very, and the, I'm, I'm, I'm