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CHECKLIST

Nancy Haynes, American, born 1947
Absent Myself, 1989,
oil on panel
Purchased through a gift from Wynn Kramarsky; P.989.32

Brice Marden, American, born 1938
After Botticelli IV, 1993,
etching and aquatint on heavy wove paper
Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.994.25.1

Pierre Jean Louis Soulages, French, born 1919
Untitled, 1953–54,
India ink, graphite
Gift of Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H; P.959.137.4

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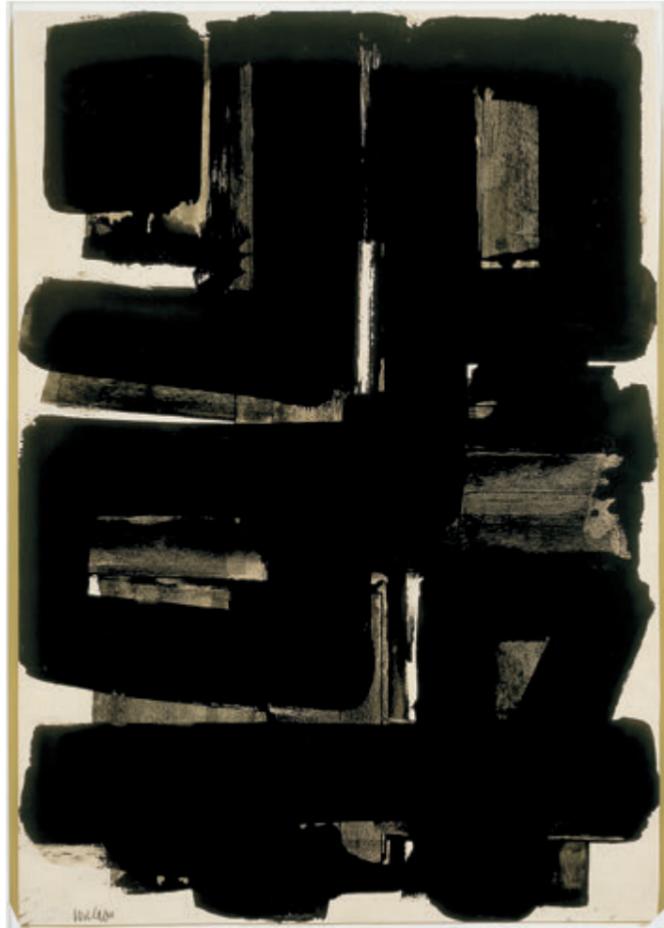
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Nancy Haynes, *Absent Myself*, 1989, oil on panel. Purchased through a gift from Wynn Kramarsky; P.989.32.

ABSTRACTING EMOTION

The Intersection between Black and White



Pierre Jean Louis Soulages, *Untitled*, 1953–54, India ink, graphite. Gift of Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H; P959.137.4 © 2009 Artists Rights Society (ARS), NEW YORK/ADAGP, Paris

In Western culture, the color black is a code or symbol sometimes associated with depression, darkness, and despair. As art historian E. H. Gombrich described it, “Black seems to us a more ‘natural’ sign for grief . . . the correlation makes sense in terms of expressiveness. But clearly, black is infinitely more likely to be thus interpreted as an expression of gloom where we know [there exists] a choice between alternatives” (Gombrich, 61). While acknowledging these preconceptions about

black as a color, some twentieth-century artists have gone beyond them to imbue the color with very personal associations. Nancy Haynes, Brice Marden, and Pierre Soulages, among others, both engage with and manipulate the cultural significance of black using the principles of abstraction. Each of these artists harnesses a range of tones, forms, lines, and edges to create a unique style and form of expression centered upon black.

Pierre Jean Louis Soulages, a French artist who flourished in the mid-twentieth century, emphasized the calligraphic quality of his works through bold and obvious brushstrokes. *Untitled* is a powerful piece; the thick black lines seem to dive through the paper, trapped only by its edges, expressing a furtive restlessness. Soulages claimed his inspiration to be the Romanesque architecture of his home in Rodez, France, and this is echoed in the highly rectangular forms of the composition. His interest in the juxtaposition of light and dark stems from his desire to create a pictorial space that impresses upon the viewer an emotive state. His deliberate choice of black is as much a study in contrast and gradation as it is in the color itself. Pieces such as *Untitled* earned Soulages an interesting moniker: the “painter of black and light.”

Where Soulages’s hand is apparent in the strong, broad strokes of *Untitled*, Brice Marden’s physical gestures are equally obvious in *After Botticelli IV*, from a series of five prints. Influenced by both minimalism and second-generation abstract expressionism, Marden creates emotional complexity through formal simplicity. *After Botticelli IV* shows layered lines of black dancing within the rectangular boundary of the print. Created through the process of aquatint etching, the lines seem to hum with energy. Rather than a world of darkness, however, the predominant color here is the white of the page itself. As renderings of the sporadic motion of thought and feeling, Marden’s lines nuance the blunter associations regarding black with their clarity and intensity of expression.

As Leah Ollman observes, “Nancy Haynes carries the torch of post-war abstraction into the present with breathtaking sensual intelligence.” *Absent Myself* is an interaction between black and white, rendered in oil paint on a square canvas. The form of the painting shows a fluttering field of dark and light, with a line running down the center of the canvas, bisecting the square into two equal panels. This line is created as the painting’s edges of tonality merge, and the subtle glow of hundreds of shades between the extremes of black and white creates a field of depth and space. There is a world, its aspects and populace indistinguishable, that is created within the square canvas, which has become a window through which the viewer can witness the effervescent shimmer of light against shadow. The painting reads as highly emotional—the darkness is foreboding, lurking, proud of its ability to swallow the

feeble light. However, despite this threat, the soft shades of white persist as an amorphous mass that shifts and creates a space through which the viewer can visually penetrate the darkness. It is this tension in the space of the canvas between nothing and something, absence and presence, dark and light, black and white, that creates room for so many interpretations.

Evidently, black is not the limiting factor in color or in meaning that we might assume from a monochromatic palette. With proper examination, we can experience a gamut of emotions derived directly from the use of black in certain artists’ work. Each artist here confounds the viewer’s culturally imbued understandings of certain visual codes to raise questions not only about the contrast of color but also of the meanings assigned to the colors. By at once relying on these associations and manipulating their messages, each artist is able to express distinct experiences. The color is not limited to or reliant upon an association with darkness—with Marden, for example, we see a striking forcefulness, and with Haynes, a calming space. In the end, black is not a consistent signal or code for any of these artists; they engage with and create tension both against and in tandem with its darkness. It is through each artist’s expression that black becomes more than a shade of color and opens a discourse upon a highly personal mode of abstraction.

Gwendolyn Tetirick ’13,
The Kathryn Conroy Intern

Brice Marden, *After Botticelli IV*, 1993, etching and aquatint on heavy wove paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.994.25.1 © Brice Marden, 2009, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

