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CHECKLIST

James Bohary, American, born 1940
Hand Ball, 1998, acrylic on paper
Gift of Peter Vogt, Class of 1947, in Honor of His 50th Reunion; P.998.17

James Brooks, American, 1906–1992
V, 1951, oil on canvas
Gift of Jeffrey R. Brown, Class of 1961; P996.39

Harry Kramer, American, born 1939
Untitled, 1989, ink, charcoal, graphite on paper
Purchased through the Claire and Richard P. Morse 1953 Fund; D.994.7

Robert Motherwell, American, 1915–1991
Untitled No. 6, from *Africa Suite*, 1970,
screenprint on wove paper
Gift of George Friedman; PR.979.153.3

Robert Motherwell, American, 1915–1991
Untitled No. 9, from *Africa Suite*, 1970,
screenprint on wove paper
Gift of George Friedman; PR.979.153.5

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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS



James Bohary, *Hand Ball*, 1998, acrylic on paper. Gift of Peter Vogt, Class of 1947, in Honor of His 50th Reunion; P.998.17

OPEN TO INTERPRETATION

The Experience of Gestural Abstraction



James Brooks, *V*, 1951, oil on canvas. Gift of Jeffrey R. Brown, Class of 1961; P996.39

We often look at contemporary abstract art and disassociate ourselves from the object. Perhaps we even have the urge to denigrate the ink splashes, drip paintings, or scribbled drawings as juvenile work, thinking to ourselves, “I could do that!” While some do claim that abstract art simply does not speak to them, the gestural quality of the work by the four artists in this exhibition rests on a tangible physicality to which the viewer can easily relate. The works ask us to feel and think *through* them, inviting us to connect to the artist’s hand through the gestural mark. We experience abstract work as “objects that elicit multiple perceptions” and “engage or accommodate viewers in open-ended, real time events” (Spaid, 30). This exhibition suggests how we might become active agents in the creative process through the projection of our unique experiences upon the object itself.

The genre of gestural abstraction emphasizes spontaneity and instinct. These artists try to illuminate the subconscious and express themselves via their unique style or technique, as is evident in Bohary’s frenetic strokes or Motherwell’s bold organic forms. The viewer can

literally *see* the presence—the force, motion, and speed—of the artists’ hand and the path it has taken across the canvas or paper. The resulting abstract forms represent a topography of marks that the artist has left upon the blank space, enabling the viewer to *imagine* the artists’ movements and the brushstrokes, splatters, and sketches that produced the work. In this manner, we participate in the making of the art object through its physicality, imbuing personal meaning to the gestural marks rather than rejecting the work’s ambiguous composition as unapproachable.

The five pieces in this exhibition span over forty years, from the time of the abstract expressionist movement through its ongoing legacy today. The sociopolitical climates differed greatly, for instance, when Brooks created *V* in 1951 and Bohary created *Hand Ball* in 1998. The highly abstracted work, however, makes this genre timeless. The viewer can reactivate and participate in each work by negotiating a new and present meaning for it. Anne Gibson discusses meaning as an innovative process between viewer and art object, arguing that “meaning, a mutable term, is the sum of the art work’s engagement at any particular place and time. Meaning consists of whatever its audiences know” (Gibson, 167). The gesture becomes the artist’s intimate offering to us, through which we can experience the work’s tactility, rhythm, and mood. With an awareness of the genre’s emphasis on spontaneity, exploration of the subconscious, and respect for the artist’s intimate touch, we can engage with the object on our own terms. The abstract nature of the work facilitates individual interpretation: “Ambiguity is the protean strategy that . . . [opens the] art so that it could become anything and everything” (Gibson, 19). In this process of engagement with the ambiguous, we become both creator and interpreter. As such, we are free to respond to various elements of the work, whether the vibrant sweeping color in *Hand Ball*, the rhythm and density in *V*, or the meditative simplicity of the black forms in the white void of *African Suite*.

Highly abstracted compositions empower the audience with greater agency because their contents do not involve clear didactic scenes or narratives. That these works do not elicit rote visual experiences encourages us to undertake a dynamic, creative process of meaning-making and interpretation. For example, Kramer’s drawing invokes urgency and fury through lines that evoke a rapid, sketchlike quality, whereas Motherwell’s undulating forms connote deliberateness and a sophisticated calm. These physical manifestations of gesture allow the viewer to respond with a personal association of mood, feeling, and imagery. Jack Flam, a distinguished professor of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art, praises Motherwell’s expressive mark, wherein “a gesture makes feeling intelligible”; the gesture, then, is a tangible depiction of the intangible (Flam, 2).

Brooks notes that a painting is “a definite personality that sets up a communication or a dialogue occurs so that it can give you as much as you can give it” (Brooks, 8). Relying on John Dewey’s theory of “art as experience” (Flam, 6), I argue that the artist’s own dialogue with the object extends also to our experience of it as viewers. In the case of *V*, for example, we interact with the work’s “definite personality” as a coy entity that entices the gaze with bursts of yellow and pale blue while simultaneously discouraging us through the muted beige forms in the foreground. The longer we study the work, the more its forms reveal a complex density and recessional space, a richer visual experience than we might have expected at first.

The artist’s life history and character support the uniqueness of his or her touch in gestural art. Although the gestures manifested here in oil, ink, and graphite are those of the artist alone, their abstract physicality allows us to imagine the image-making process and therefore the work becomes a sounding board for our own lived experiences. Because of the intimate and personal nature of this genre, we can create a unique relationship to this art by relating it to our own experiences rather than dismissing it as obtuse. The personal bias that viewers bring to the experience of an art object profoundly affects their understanding of the creative and transformational process inherent in gestural abstraction. Thus if we are aware of the artists’ intentions and motivations, we can reactivate the work in the present context by interpreting its intangible feelings and responding to the artists’ touch through our own memories, emotions, and thoughts.

—Alexandra Franco ’07, The Homma Family Intern

Harry Kramer, untitled, 1989, ink, charcoal, graphite on paper. Purchased through the Claire and Richard P. Morse 1953 Fund; D.994.7

