

**JACKSON POLLOCK IN VENICE
THE 'IRASCIBLES' AND THE NEW
YORK SCHOOL**

BRUNO ALFIERI ET AL.

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In the summer of 1950, as he was ramping up to the three huge canvasses that from our vantage point mark the apex of his creative life, Jackson Pollock had his first solo show in Europe. The exhibition, drawn from Peggy Guggenheim's collection and mounted at the Sala Napoleonica in Venice, included many of the earliest dripped or poured paintings, the idiom for which Pollock was then becoming recognised and which he would soon articulate even more convincingly. The artist's flurry of mid-century exhibition activity, which also includes the Biennales of 1948 and 1950, is remembered in 'Jackson Pollock in Venice', mounted last Spring at the Museo Correr concurrently with 'The "Irascibles" and the New York School' at the Centro Culturale Candiani, in Mestre. The catalogues for the two shows have been published in one volume, augmenting the considerable body of Pollock and New York School literature recently produced.

Inevitably, the book will be evaluated in the light of Kirk Varnadoe and Pepe Karmel's *Jackson Pollock*, published in conjunction with the artist's retrospective at MoMA in 1998–9, and Ellen Landau's *Jackson Pollock of 1989*, which remain the standard monographs. The cast of characters in the new book is considerable and the included essays constitute a collage of original material and pieces reprinted or adapted from earlier sources. Some are clearly defined in scope and others are not. Following a brief introductory reminiscence by Giandomenico Romanelli, Bruno Alfieri gives us a witty and vivid memoir of the mounting of the show and of Peggy Guggenheim's part in it. (Alfieri wrote and published the accompanying brochure, which was misquoted and distorted by journalists wishing to mock Pollock's work.) Philip Ryland examines further Guggenheim's looming presence in Pollock's career.

Pollock's ties to Surrealism by way of automatic writing form the subject of an essay by Achille Bonito Oliva. The problem may be in the translation, but the meta-

phors are overboard and the prose is airless. Oliva tells us that 'creativity becomes the harpoon that seizes the luminous and the nocturnal shard in the magma of the unconscious'. We get dozens of paragraphs of this. The author does get off one good phrase – 'garden of surface' – to describe Pollock's abundant materiality, but otherwise the surfeit of murky musings makes the reader long for the narrative momentum of a work such as Carter Ratcliff's *Fate of a Gesture*. The Jungian component of Pollock's art and life and his early influences – the Mexican muralists, American Indian sand painters, Thomas Hart Benton – are efficiently addressed in the first of two essays by Sam Hunter.

In her essay 'The body and nature', Landau examines the idea of buried figuration in Pollock's mark-making, elaborating on the artist's assertion that he is 'very representational some of the time and a little all of the time'. Thus the all-over, 'abstract' paintings may have had in their generative stages some loose sort of figurative, referential component, natural enough for a painter intensely concerned with the unconscious and interested in the Surrealists' use of automatic drawing. There is a comment by Robert Motherwell (quoted in Varnadoe) to the effect that Pollock's drip technique may have begun as a way to deny or negate the Picasso images the artist feared were emerging from the paint; Landau takes this further, suggesting that such 'veiling' was a working method Pollock employed regularly.

Pollock's career trajectory, after Guggenheim closed her Art of This Century Gallery and moved to Venice in 1947, is laid out in an excerpt from the Varnadoe essay 'Comet', from the MoMA catalogue. As elsewhere in the book, there are many references to works not illustrated. We are given *Untitled (Frogman)* as an example of the black paintings when it is *Echo* to which the piece refers. And Landau's essay on the Lee Krasner's collage-paintings of the early 1950s, which incorporate chunks of her husband's disused canvasses and are among her gutsiest work, has no colour plate at all to anchor it. The inverse is also true: paintings by Pousette-Dart, Gottlieb, Sterne and others, and four beautifully photographed David Smith sculptures, are presented with no accompanying text aside from captions. Kline is represented by delightful ink-and-brush drawings of

reclining cats and of figures in architectural contexts, raising the issue of the figurative sources of that artist's major work and crying out for some contextualising information.

Such anomalies abound. We are presented with William Lieberman's page-by-page analysis of Pollock's 'last sketchbook', a pad of 5-by-12-inch mulberry paper containing scrawled notes (including a list in-progress of the 'irascible eighteen') and informal ink drawings, which was published in facsimile in 1982 and for which this essay served as introduction. Some of the drawings are similar in approach to the 'black' paintings of the early 1950s, where an initial linear tracery is augmented by bunched-up, denser marks pushing the untouched white areas forward. Of the 38 or so pages in the sketchbook, only three are reproduced – unfortunately none of the last ten pages, their layered, translucent washes and sensuously overlapping brushstrokes suggesting, as Lieberman notes, a new direction that might have been.

The final essay in the first section is 'The America of Jackson Pollock' by Fernanda Pivano, which seems to be an attempt to place Pollock in the political and social context of his times by listing contemporaneous developments: HUAC, *Howl*, the Bomb; but Pollock's subject was always painting in relation to the psyche, not the wider world. Unsatisfyingly, Pivano concludes that Pollock exerted himself 'for our nostalgia'. Even today, debate over the merit of Pollock's work is lively, the art-historical jury still out regarding specific major works. Varnadoe loathes *Blue Poles*; John Golding, in *Paths to the Absolute*, praises it. Nostalgia only applies to what you can put in a box, and Pollock just isn't boxed up yet, and may never be.

In addition to her essay on Krasner's collage paintings, the 'Irascibles' section comprises Landau on 'The erotics of influence', or the effect on the creative lives of Pollock and Krasner of their marriage and working relationship, and Hunter on the Colour-Field group of New York School painters, focusing especially on Ad Reinhardt. It is an absorbing essay, as Reinhardt was a singularity even within this group (which included Newman and Rothko) because of his avowedly non-spiritual, non-romantic, non-gestural, reductivist take on abstraction; for these reasons he was embraced by the Minimalists (who briefly tried the name 'Rejectivists') a

generation later. Why he stands, in this catalogue, for the entire uneasy cadre consisting of de Kooning, Kline, Motherwell, Still and all the other unkindred spirits who assembled for the famous *Life* magazine cover photograph is unclear.

The expected features of an exhibition-accompanying tome are all here: the catalogue of works in the exhibition, the biographical outline of Pollock and the brief biographical sketches of the Irascibles, the useful bibliography. The plates are great, in the Skira tradition. Unfamiliar works are scattered throughout, like a carved bone sculpture of 1943 that is now in Houston, and an early-1950s ink drawing on handmade paper, reproduced in colour on a full page, that alone is worth the cover price. In the end, however, this is a confused and confusing production, and a missed opportunity to extend the discussion of Pollock's influence beyond his immediate milieu.

Maybe it is unfair to criticise a project for failing to do what it never really set out to do, but while the cross-fertilisation of the New York School and post-war Italian artists has been sketched out by Anna Costantini in *The Italian Metamorphosis, 1943-1968*, it awaits further exploration. Burri and the other Informale practitioners, the Forma group, and even Arte Povera, involved as those artists were in issues of process, in truth to materials, and in their skepticism of a newly affluent consumer culture, all owe much to the paint-slinging American. A MoMA-organised Pollock retrospective landed like an alien spaceship in Rome in 1958. To elaborate on one of Landau's themes, it would be great to see the work of that image-veiler-by-subtraction Mimmo Rotella hanging next to a big Pollock – and what of such latter-day image-veilers as Gerhard Richter (of the landscapes) and Arnulf Rainer?

In any case, the renewed critical focus on painters of the New York School – De Kooning, Newman, Hofmann and Joan Mitchell have also been the subjects of major new catalogues or monographs – is of great interest for those of us who were taught by that generation's disciples and students. Distinctly out of fashion for decades, the Abstract Expressionists' unironic pursuit held in high regard the minimising of lag time between impulse and expression. Then Pop and big money changed everything.

STEPHEN MAINE

Painter and writer, Brooklyn, New York