Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, May 2024, Vol. 15, pp. 175-191

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications.

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Greenberg, The Cold War, and French Existentialism: How Abstract Expressionism became Constructed as Inherently Masculine

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This paper investigates the development of Abstract Expressionism in 1940-1950s America, focusing on ways it has been constructed as a masculine form of expression. Emerging after the end of WW2 when the American national identity was being re-defined, the art movement became a site for the interplay of multiple socio-political and cultural tensions. The imposition of qualities traditionally associated with masculinity became a key aspect in the reception of the movement, reflecting the interests of multiple institutions. This paper deconstructs the amalgamation of factors that formed the masculine image of Abstract Expressionism. These factors range from the masculinising language of art critics such as Clement Greenberg to America's Cold War agenda to male artists' own internalisation of philosophical ideas that projected the movement's masculine aura. In the last section of my investigation, I will expose the gendered imbalance within Abstract Expressionism by analysing the contrast in the occupation of space by male and female artists in period photographs.

Introduction

Abstract Expressionism's signature large scale, rapidly handled, bold gestural paintings are associated with a strong masculine energy – this is a deeply ingrained conception that emerged as the movement started gaining recognition and is still very much prevalent today; as is the legend of the tough male heroes of Abstract Expressionism. Gwen F. Chanzit, the curator of the 2016 *Women of Abstract Expressionism* exhibition at the Denver Art Museum, posits that not only did abstract expressionists go down in the canon of art history as predominantly male, but 'their maleness, their heroic *machismo* spirit, has become a defining characteristic of the expansive, gestural paintings of Abstract Expressionism'.[1] But what formed this conception? It is my aim to identify and analyse the ways in which the movement was constructed

1 Gwen F. Chanzit in Joan Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 10.

as inherently masculine. I suggest that there are four main dimensions which collaboratively worked to render Abstract Expressionism as masculine: firstly, the masculinising language of critics such as Clement Greenberg concerning the paintings' formal qualities; secondly, the institutional response towards the movement and its prioritisation of work by male artists; thirdly, the implicit association of the movement with core American values amplified for bravado during the Cold War; and finally, the male abstract expressionists' own internalisation of a tortured, heroic masculinity influenced by French Existentialism and the Modern Man discourse. The first three categories will be concerned with the reception of abstract expressionist art, and in the last section I will discuss the production of abstract expressionist art.

Masculinising Language

I posit that contemporary art criticism has played an important role in the construction of Abstract Expressionism as a "macho" movement. An examination of Clement Greenberg's criticism provides copious examples of him ascribing masculine qualities to an abstract expressionist painting and promoting them as the work's strength. In various reviews of Pollock's shows Greenberg praises his work for its force and uncastrated emotion,[2] compliments it for being unafraid 'to look ugly',[3] as well as lauds Pollock's ability to 'create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control'.[4] James Johnson Sweeney, similarly, admires Pollock's talent, describing it as 'volcanic' and 'undisciplined', as well as 'lavish, explosive, untidy'.[5] Harold Rosenberg terms Abstract Expressionism 'action painting', describing the abstract expressionist canvas as 'an arena on which to act'.[6] Therefore, the language of contemporary art critics attributed qualities traditionally associated with masculinity to abstract expressionist art, using masculine adjectives to commend the

2 Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 75.

3 Ibid., 17.

4 Ibid., 75.

5 James Johnson Sweeney in Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970), 88.

6 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ARTNews* (December 1952): 76.

movement and solidify its authority. On the other hand, in reviewing what he deems to be Pollock's weaker canvases, Greenberg notes that the use of aluminium renders the pictures 'startingly close to prettiness', implicitly suggesting that decorativeness or effeminacy are undesirable qualities in a serious abstract expressionist work.[7] Moreover, Greenberg patronises female painters for their supposed inability to exhibit overtly masculine qualities in their art – in his review of Gertrude Barrer's show in 1947 he notes that despite being a promising artist she 'is not a large and heroic talent' calling her effects 'minor at best and somewhat restricted'.[8] Hence, the language of critics such as Greenberg served to construct Abstract Expressionism as a primarily masculine prerogative, associating femininity in art with vapidity and weakness. Unsurprisingly, Greenberg was not the only critic to valorise formal qualities that he perceived to be masculine, treating feminine properties as inferior and allocating them to the work of female artists: Gretchen T. Munson's patronising review of the "Man and Wife" 1949 exhibition, which featured work by abstract expressionist couples, identified a tendency among the female artists to 'tidy up their husband's styles', claiming that Lee Krasner's paintings converted Pollock's 'unrestrained, sweeping lines' into 'neat little squares and triangles'.[9] This gendered reception of abstract expressionist art, steeped in stereotypes and biases, illustrates how the celebratory critical response to the movement constructed it as a masculine form of expression, thus tacitly propagating the notion that women painters could only ever assume a secondary role in it.

Institutional Bias

The institutional response was also complicit in establishing Abstract Expressionism as a masculine form of expression. As the movement proceeded to gain wider cultural recognition and abstract expressionist paintings started being exhibited by big museums such as MoMA, works by male artists were suddenly in much higher demand to those by their female counterparts, and the qualities associated with

7 Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 202.

8 Ibid., 132.

9 Gretchen T. Munson in Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," *Representations*, no. 25 (Winter 1989), 45.

maleness assumed priority. Moreover, the first important articles and books written on Abstract Expressionism focused almost exclusively on works by men.[10] Kathleen Housley posits that once the public acclaim of the movement started to acquire momentum, the gender of the artist became important: if an abstract expressionist artist was to be presented as influential, 'maleness mattered' and 'aggressive artistic characteristics that were perceived to be masculine became valorised'.[11] The masculine characteristics typically praised in a Jackson Pollock or a Willem de Kooning are their unrestrained sweeping lines, their sense of violence, dynamism, impulsivity, and an underlying spirit of heroic antagonism. However, these attributes were not exclusive to work by men: the art of some female abstract expressionists exhibited those same qualities but did not reach a comparable level of recognition during their lifetime or posthumously.

An example of this is the paintings of Corinne West. West adopted the pseudonym of Michael for artistic purposes – this masking of her gender is in itself revealing – and many of her paintings exhibit the same level of intensity, violence, dynamism, and angst as those of her male contemporaries. Her works *Nihilism* (Fig. 1) and *Dagger of Light* (Fig. 2) can only be described as unrestrained, messy, textured, chaotic, and profoundly existential. They expressed West's anxiety in response to the invention of the atomic bomb and the threat of global annihilation, which is reflected in their explosive, anarchic composition, violent application of paint, and heavily layered texture. It is important to note that West's nuclear anxiety stemmed from the same intellectual concerns expressed by many celebrated male abstract expressionists, rendering her works as pieces of 'serious' art.[12] One could compare *Nihilism* to de Kooning's *Woman and Bicycle* (Fig. 3), drawing analogies between their visceral colours and the presence of a chaotic, preoccupied, shape-shifting subject. I would even posit that *Nihilism* and *Dagger of Light* possess the same vital, desperate energy

10 Joan Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 21.

11 Kathleen L. Housley in Joan Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 24.

12 Joan Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

as Pollock's *Convergence* (Fig. 4), sharing similarities with his bold, impulsive, splattering lines and overall sense of unchained, disordered movement. Therefore, West's paintings possess that brutal, existential, masculine quality that was so prized in works by male abstract expressionists whilst still managing to retain their own distinctive identity. However, Corinne West never came close to the level of institutional recognition as those male figures, nor did she go down in the canon of art history.[13] This indicates that as much as Abstract Expressionism was rendered masculine for its formal qualities, the institutional bias favoured works by male artists over those by female ones, even when the paintings by female abstract expressionists carried similar formal properties to those by their male counterparts.

The Cold War Agenda

A consideration of the geopolitical context behind the movement's success reveals another crucial way in which Abstract Expressionism was constructed as masculine. In his seminal essay "American Painting During the Cold War", Max Kozloff illuminates the underlying connection between the rise of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s, and the United States government's desire to exhibit its international influence during the Cold War. According to Kozloff, the US government used Abstract Expressionism as 'benevolent propaganda for foreign intelligentsia' to transmit to the world America's position as the new cultural empire.[14] As the US wished to display its own favourable post-World War II position to the countries that were devastated by the results of the war, Abstract Expressionism conveniently and subtly reflected America's core values, such as modernity, freedom of expression, individualism, and power. To aid this narrative Jackson Pollock, arguably the face of the movement, was cast as an 'American masculine cultural hero', a tough, tortured soul, a macho figure whose image served to dramatise the American search for freedom of expression against the restrictions of the totalitarian Soviet Union with Socialist Realism as its official national

13 Ibid., 24.

14 Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War," *Artforum* (May 1973): 2.

style.[15] The qualities of Pollock's art also began to be promoted as 'quintessentially American', such as their great scale, expansiveness, dynamism, ambition, confidence, and violence – again, all qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. [16]

The political climate of the late 1940s and its agendas can be detected in contemporary criticism, too. Returning to Greenberg, his joint review of Jean Dubuffet and Jackson Pollock's exhibitions in 1947 quite clearly juxtaposes the two artists, positioning the American one as the more noteworthy. While Greenberg acknowledges Dubuffet's work as sophisticated, charming, and pleasingly packaged, the critic establishes Pollock as 'rougher and more brutal', 'capable of more variety', 'riskier', exhibiting 'astounding force' and ultimately having 'more to say in the end', being 'completer', and 'more original'.[17] By doing this, Greenberg not only implies the desirability of masculine formal qualities over feminine ones in modern art, but he also proclaims the superiority of the American artist over the French one, thus announcing the triumph of innovative, virile American art over the by then outdated, effeminate European tradition. Thus, maleness and Americanness become intertwined according to this narrative, constructing Abstract Expressionism as a masculine form of expression with a covert political agenda which signals American dominance on the global scene. This rhetoric serves to simultaneously reinforce the fact that the art capital of the West had switched from Paris to New York, and to validate the United States as the most powerful country in the world.[18] It makes sense that the promotion of masculinity as a key feature of abstract expressionist art was necessary for the transmission of its country's image of economic, military, and cultural power.

French Existentialism and the Modern Man

So far, I have argued that Abstract Expressionism was constructed as

15 Gregory Minissale, "The Invisible Within: Dispersing Masculinity in Art," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 20, no. 1 (March 2015): 74.

16 Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, *Jackson Pollock* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1998), 74

17 Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 125.

18 Max Kozloff, "American Painting During the Cold War", 2.

masculine through the critical language, the institutional response, and the rhetoric of the Cold War. All of these dimensions relate to the reception of abstract expressionist art, and I will now consider its production, specifically focusing on the abstract expressionists' own involvement in the construction of the movement's masculine aura. Michael Leja argues that the primary reason for the New York School's construction of masculinity in their work was their susceptibility to the strong cultural and philosophic influences of their environment, specifically French Existentialism and the Modern Man discourse, which sought to make sense of the human mind in light of recent historical tragedies and turmoil. This existentialist anxiety was also seen as the product of a free society, the result of freedom of thought so to speak. Leja argues that a kind of Modern Man subjectivity was at the core of abstract expressionists' identities, influencing their artistic practices and manifesting in their personal behaviour and '*film noir* personas'.[19] This new emphasis on subjectivity made the artist see himself as a site for a heroic battle between reason and unreason, cultivated thoughts and primitive urges. This subjectivity was, unsurprisingly, gendered: it was the specifically male subject that became the site of complex internal tensions reflecting the struggles in the face of modernity.[20] The structural constitution of the Modern Man's subjectivity made it highly difficult for women to identify with the heroic, tortured subject. Within the internal tension between the conscious and the unconscious of the Modern Man, the unconscious was often personified as a woman – this can be seen in much of the in popular psychology, philosophy, *film noir*, and literature of the time. [21]

Male abstract expressionists, too, used women as personifications of their unconscious, primitive, violent, self-destructive impulses, as an irrational female *other* within a complex, anguished man. Willem de Kooning's 'Woman' series serves as perhaps the most obvious example of this, the unhinged women in his paintings reflecting his

19 Michael Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16. For a more detailed discussion of the influence of French Existentialism on abstract expressionists, see Chapter 6 "The Gesture Painters" in Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1970).

20 Ibid., 258.

21 Ibid.

own frenzied existential condition.[22] Thus, by casting the woman as an inner *other*, male abstract expressionists marginalised female artists within the movement by making it nearly impossible for them to identify with the Modern Man subject. Most crucially, this meant that men were afforded greater complexity and capacity for internal angst than women. Within the paradigm of Modern Man subjectivity, women were 'denied the same capacity for internal conflict' and robbed of the opportunity to explore their own tragic, fragmented identities within the realm of abstract expressionist art.[23] Existentialist musings on the disturbing realities of post-war life were 'reserved for men only', leaving female artists to assume the role of muse.[24] Anne Wagner explores the difficulties in reconciling the identity of being both an abstract expressionist artist and a woman in "Lee Krasner as L.K". She posits that Lee Krasner, Pollock's wife, struggled to 'establish an otherness to Pollock that would not be seen as an otherness of Woman', which resulted in her refusal to produce a self in her painting.[25] This tension would have been the case for most female abstractionists, regardless of their relationships to other male artists. Therefore, being influenced by existentialist ideas and the Modern Man discourse, male abstract expressionists constructed the movement as an archetypally masculine form of expression, perhaps unintentionally excluding their female counterparts from being able to fully participate in the movement.

Although it is unlikely that male artists intended to exclude women from the production of abstract expressionist art, it is evident that male abstract expressionists did intentionally exclude women from the movement more broadly. They constructed an aura of masculinity not only in their art, but also in their behaviour. Real-life accounts of male abstract expressionists comfirm this notion of a cultivated masculinity: Andy Warhol noted that the social milieu of Abstract Expressionism 'was very macho', and the painters 'were all hard-driving, two- fisted types who'd grab each other and say things like "I'll knock your

22 Irving Sandler, *The Triumph of American Painting*, 133.
23 Ibid., 259.
24 Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 22.
25 Anne M. Wagner, "Lee Krasner as L.K.," *Representations*, no. 25 (Winter 1989): 51.

fucking teeth out" and "I'll steal your girl"'.[26] According to Warhol, the machismo was part of the abstract expressionists' public image, and it accompanied their tortured, tormented art. On top of this, there are accounts of women being mistreated at the Cedar Bar, a popular hub for the bohemian milieu the artists frequented, and excluded from the Eighth Street Club, another meeting place for artists and intellectuals whose membership was initially restricted to men only.[27] The fact that some of the popular clubs amongst abstract expressionists were intended to exclude female members confirms the social marginalisation that women artists faced, which no doubt limited their engagement with the movement; evidently, this predictable misogyny was a factor in the process of constructing the movement's masculine image. Therefore, by cultivating macho personas and imposing an element of gendered cliquishness, male abstract expressionists intentionally solidified the movement's masculine aura.

A Male Iconography

In light of what I have discussed above, it is worth considering the famous *Irascibles* photo taken by Nina Leen in 1950 (Fig. 5), which features a single female artist who immediately stands out in her long black overcoat, surrounded by an imposing crowd of male abstract expressionists dressed in grey suits. As much as the original purpose of this photograph was merely practical – to protest the selection of juries at the Metropolitan Museum of Art rather than promote an image of the set abstract expressionist group – the gender ratio is still indicative of the movement's masculine hegemony, and the photograph now poses as a mythologised commemoration of Abstract Expressionism's gender bias. Hans Namuth's photographs of two famous abstract expressionist couples – Elaine and Willem de Kooning in 1953 (Fig. 6) and Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner in 1950 (Fig. 7) – also reveal the underlying gender dynamics within the realm of Abstract Expressionism. In both photographs, the male artists are positioned at the forefront of the composition, de Kooning standing upright and confidently staring into the camera while presenting his canvas, and Pollock deeply immersed in the action of his work. The female

26 Andy Warhol in Gregory Minissale, "The Invisible Within", 74.

27 Marter, *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 21.

artists, on the other hand, are passively perching in the background – Elaine looking away from the viewer and Lee fixedly observing her husband's process. Both photographs display a gendered occupation of space: the female abstract expressionists in these compositions do not act as independent artists of merit, but rather as passive accessories to their genius husbands, demonstrating their support for the men's talent and serving as fashionable appendages to elevate their spouses' status. What was intended to illustrate the unity of these artist couples on closer inspection reveals the imbalance in their positions as artists. According to the seminal feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir, 'the representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with absolute truth'.[28] In this light, Namuth's photographs of the artist couples not only reveal the gendered dynamics that were present between the spouses, but also indicate what the world wished female abstract expressionists to be: decorative additions to the tortured macho heroes, but not heroes in their own right. Although the *Irascibles* photograph was taken by a woman, the interpretation of its message still fell within the realm of broader masculine control. Leen's and Namuth's 1950s photographs can therefore be seen through a masculine hegemonic lens: acting as a powerful tool of forming the public perception of the movement and constructing its patriarchal cultural legacy. Ultimately, these representations produce a male iconography of Abstract Expressionism. All three photographs point to the secondary role of women in the movement, outnumbered and overshadowed by male artists who helped cultivate its gendered nature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have established four concrete ways in which Abstract Expressionism was constructed as a masculine form of expression. Firstly, in the language of the critics, who glorified those formal properties of abstract expressionist art that they perceived as masculine. Secondly, in the bias of art institutions, which offered exposure to predominantly male artists and prized aggressive artistic properties.

28 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010),196.

Thirdly, in the political rhetoric of the Cold War, which covertly promoted Abstract Expressionism as a quintessentially American style, emphasising its masculinity as a way of displaying power. Finally, in the male artists' internalisation of the fragmented Modern Man subjectivity and their cultivation of a macho image in public, which made a full participation in the movement inaccessible to female abstract expressionists. All of these aspects worked collaboratively to construct the movement's image as distinctly masculine, as well as to diminish the influence of female artists within the movement. The complex interplay between these dimensions is responsible for the persistent masculine aura of Abstract Expressionism.

Appendix

Figure 1 (above): Michael (Corinne) West, *Nihilism*, 1949. Oil, enamel, and sand on canvas, 53 1/8 x 40 ¼ in. Michael Borghi Fine Art, New Jersey. Figure 2 (below): Michael (Corinne) West, *Dagger of Light*, 1951. Oil, enamel, and sand on canvas, 55 x 35 in. Michael Borghi Fine Art, New Jersey.

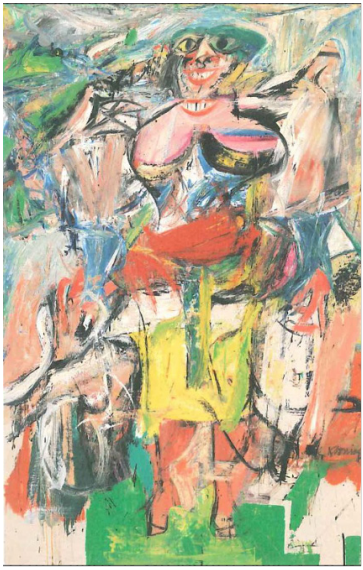

Figure 3: Willem de Kooning, *Woman and Bicycle*, 1952-1953. Oil, enamel, and charcoal on linen, 76 ½ x 49 1/8 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Figure 4: Jackson Pollock, *Convergence*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 93 ½ x 155 in. Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo.

Figure 5: Nina Leen, *The Irascibles*, 1950. Gelatin silver print, 13 15/16 x 11 1/8 in. MoMA, New York.

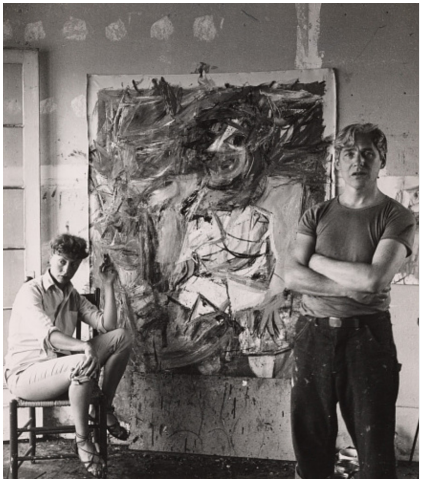

Figure 6: Hans Namuth, *Elaine and Willem de Kooning*, 1953. Gelatin silver print, 12 3/8 x 10 ¾ in. National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.

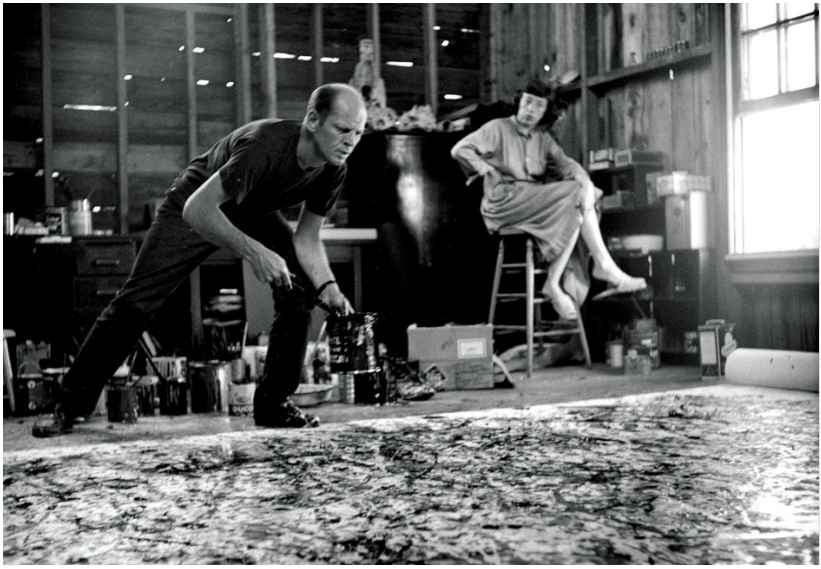

Figure 7: Hans Namuth, *Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner*, 1950. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 10 ¾ in. Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo.

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