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FOREWORD

Christopher Rothko

We can understand the role of history much more concretely when we observe it fulfilling its most essential function. History is not something that sits in a box; it is not a static item that needs to be studied to be observed. Instead, history is a dynamic force, always in interplay with the current moment, informing those who would care to listen, and informing, in fact, even those who would not care to do so, albeit obliquely. By the same token, history takes on new meaning and relevance when refracted through the lens of the contemporary, seen not just anew but in different shades and shapes than it had manifested previously.

In the context of the present exhibition, *Artists and the Rothko Chapel: 50 Years of Inspiration*, history is directly observable as both an influencer and something re-created by what has come since. A reinstallation and re-contextualization of the historic exhibition *Marden, Novros, Rothko: Painting in the Age of Actuality* at the Rice University Institute for the Arts in 1975, the current exhibition at Rice's Moody Center for the Arts offers us a chance to perhaps recollect, and observe once more, an essential moment and how its impact has resonated through time. If Mark Rothko and the Rothko Chapel were already presences for Brice Marden and David Novros in 1975, then those presences were wholly recast in their own work as they took the next logical steps in their explorations of scale, color as language, and an experiential approach to art. Today, we hear not simply an echo of their work from that period, but the echo of the conversation between these three artists initiated by John and Dominique de Menil. And as we interact with the work of Sam Gilliam and Shirazeh Houshiary and Sheila Hicks and Byron Kim, we hear that echo—but as with all echoes, the message comes back shifted and transfigured, with different emphases and new priorities. These artists show us not only the richness of their own art, but how to look differently at the work we had seen before.

Nor should we lose sight of the *story* integral to the word *history*. For here we are not so much looking at a sequence of time in the history of art as we are looking at a broadening of narrative, hearing other important voices, two of them active at the time of the original exhibition and

Interior of the Rothko Chapel, Houston, 1971 (top) and 2020 (bottom)

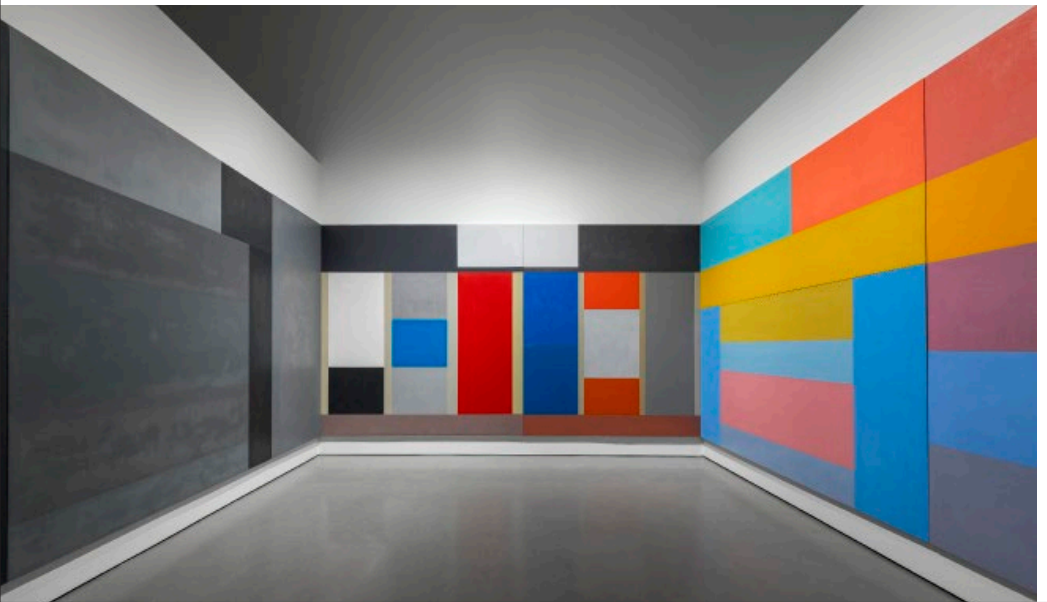
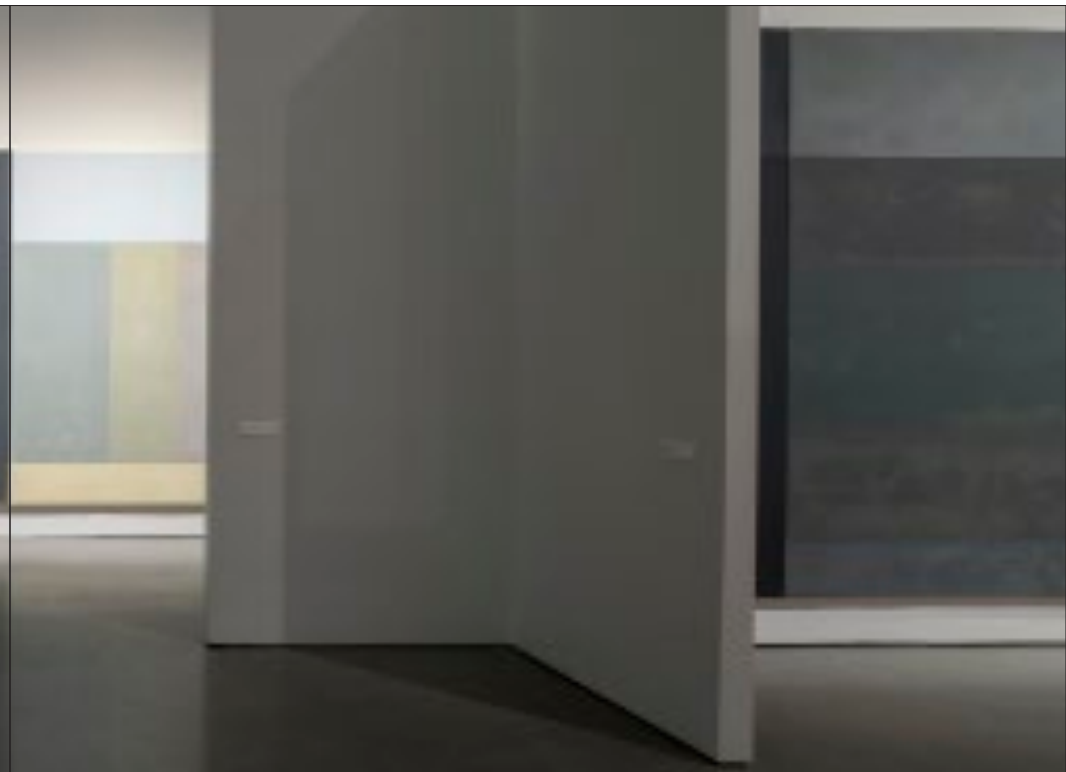
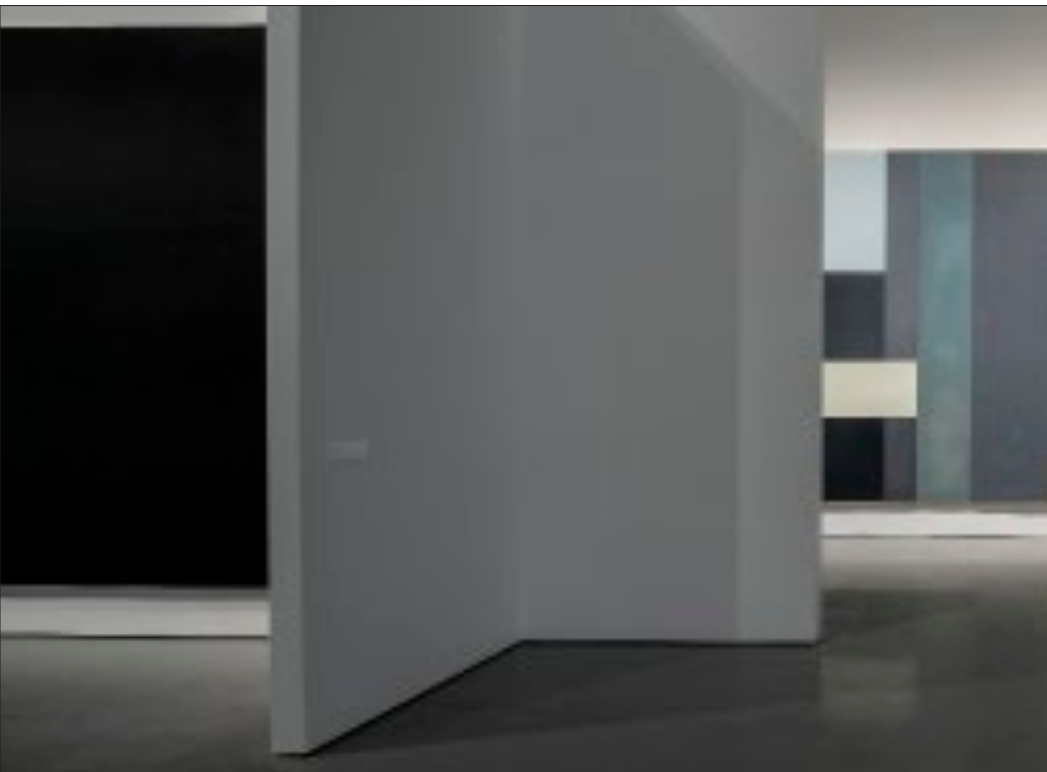


likely aware of its substance. The present exhibition is not simply about how we look at the work of Houshiary and Kim, Hicks and Gilliam, knowing that they are responding to the historic 1975 exhibition of Marden, Novros, and Rothko. It is equally about how we now look at the work of these three artists through the lens of forty-five years of art since that time, and through the lens of four artists responding specifically to their work and the Rothko Chapel. What do these “new” voices tell us about not only where we are now, but indeed, where we were nearly fifty years ago without even knowing it. It is not simply a broadening of perspective; it is a corrective, perhaps, or at least an amendment, to a blinkered view of the world.

These themes of how we look and how we learn could not be more central to the mission and spirit of the Rothko Chapel. It is a spiritual haven not for *any* faith, but explicitly for *all* faiths, in the belief that through interaction and sharing of values comes understanding and wisdom. Similarly, it is a place where we seek for all voices to be heard, so that our historical narrative becomes both richer and more accurate. It is in that spirit that this exhibition has come to fruition, with particular and distinctive delights in the work of each artist and, cumulatively, a deepening of our understanding of what it means to be human. This was the founding principle on which John and Dominique de Menil built their Chapel, and it was the central aspiration for all my father’s artwork.

Interior of the Rothko Chapel, 2020





SAM GILLIAM

in conversation with
Frauke V. Josenhans

Frauke V. Josenhans

What is your lasting impression of Rothko's paintings and the Rothko Chapel? Between the overall pictorial program, the scale of the paintings, the chromatic abstraction, and the whole display, what aspects of the experience have really stayed with you? And do you see the Chapel first and foremost as a place where Rothko's paintings are displayed, or more so as a spiritual place—or even as an engagement with human rights and social justice, which is perhaps one of its most important roles today?

Sam Gilliam

When I lived in Washington, D.C., I saw the installation of the Mark Rothko paintings at the Phillips Collection, and I understood that was an exhibition that Rothko liked. In fact, I saw them at their past installation—before a doorway was put in and light was in the room. You could see into the room and see the paintings. There seemed to be a mist or fog, and the paintings appeared out of the atmosphere. For artists locally, the Phillips was a nice place to go for contemplation.

View of the northwest, north, and northeast panels, Rothko Chapel, Houston

At the Rothko Chapel, the fact that the paintings were black gave you a chance to see them like a ship emerging from the fog. The individual object wasn't actually as present as the whole. Over the years, I listened to people who saw the Chapel and talked about it, and I conceived a different vision because of each individual. I can see those paintings even now.

I recall that later I saw Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* back at the Chapel, and it was really more dramatic. I still have that collective vision of the interior and the paintings as a whole, and I felt that was the spirit of it. There was unity, where the space, the light, and the atmosphere are connected. Seeing the paintings is a part of a whole experience and time—the individual times you see them, and even now, how you think about them. They always seemed like that massive ship emerging from the dark.

You're never outside of a painting. Whenever you enter the door, you're inside the work. It's interesting to see people stand in the



SHIRAZEH HOUSHIARY

BREATH

How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*

Science and art are the two wings of humanity for understanding the self and the world. As human beings, I believe we have a desire not only to reveal the knowledge and meaning of our surroundings but also to explore the reality of our feelings. The close cooperation between a precisely focused reasoning and undifferentiated intuition help to fulfill this desire, sometimes through a collective narrative and personal observation.

One can sense in Mark Rothko's paintings the impulse for both knowledge and sensation. His Color Field paintings reveal the space as void in correspondence with sensuality and emotional plasticity. The meeting of the two sides of this divide occurs on the edge between the floating rectangular fields of color. It is this edge that is the place of tension. Perhaps this is the same tension that gave rise to the dualist philosophy of the West and where science and art have become separate . . . a Cartesian partition that has taken hold of societies and politics alike since Descartes.

Yet the science of today supports the idea that the mind and matter are not two separate categories but are seen as representing



Shirazeh Houshiary, with Pip Horne, *East Window*, Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, 2008. Etched mouth-blown clear glass and shot peened stainless steel frame. Courtesy of the artist

complementary aspects of life; the dividing lines in the paintings seem to dissolve into fluid fields that pulsate with life. This idea of field can be seen as a web where both being and non-being blend and interweave into a wild dance of creation and destruction at the same time. We can now imagine our primary view of the world as movement and change and nothing more.

If abstraction is the compression of memory, feelings, ideas into a singularity of experience, then for me it is a dialogue between feelings as sensation and knowledge as wisdom.

We have to ask ourselves, what is life? Life for our species is just one breath. If we don't breathe, we are no more. It seems simple, but nature is devoted to the simple and complexity rises from it. Breath is nothing but the movement of air as expansion and contraction through the lungs. Its movement is a dance of complementary forces, the wild dance of creation and destruction. If the mind focuses on the dialectic of these forces, then perhaps it is possible to transcend the dualistic vision of our civilization.

So how are these ideas projected in a painting, and specifically in my works? To understand this, I describe the process of the making of a painting.

An aluminum panel with stretched canvas is prepared, and a pristine black or white surface is applied. The panel is laid flat on the