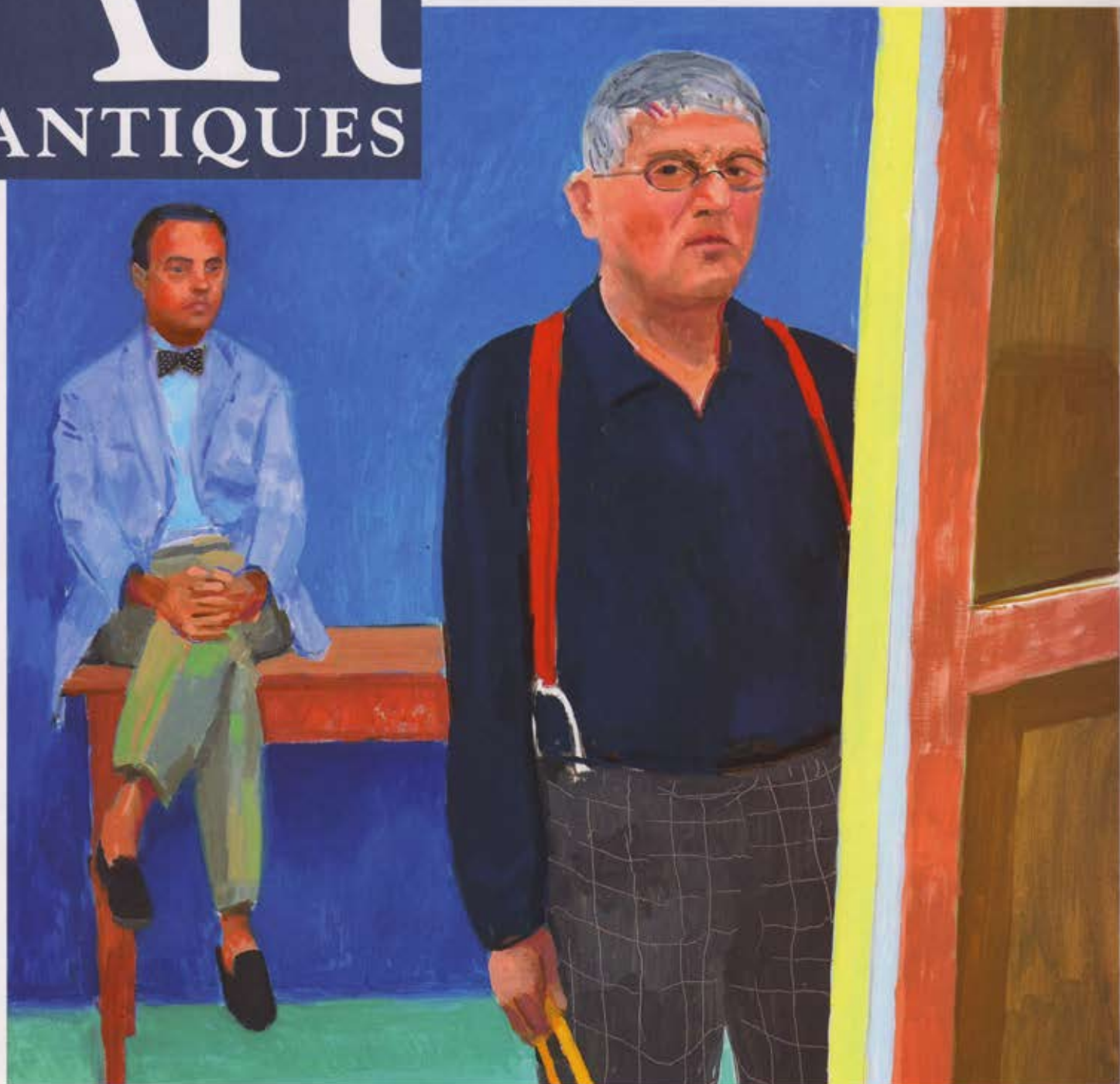


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DAVID HOCKNEY

The Unruffled Irascible

James Brooks saw his Abstract Expressionist painting as an extension of, rather than a break with, artistic tradition. **By Carter Ratcliff**





FOR THE JANUARY 15, 1951, ISSUE OF *Life* magazine, the photographer Nina Leen managed to herd 15 New York painters into a group portrait. Dubbed by the caption an “Irascible Group of Advanced Painters”—the “Irascibles,” for short—these militantly individual artists for the most part live up to the epithet. Jackson Pollock scowls. Willem de Kooning glares at the camera with startling intensity, and Richard Pousette-Dart’s expression hovers somewhere between anger and grim reproach. James Brooks, by comparison, looks almost serene. He is taking the occasion seriously but not letting himself be drawn into the prevailing mood.

Nor have his paintings ever displayed the aggression we see in de Kooning’s *Woman I*, (1950–52), or the rough, almost brutally roiled surfaces of certain canvases by Clyfford Still—who, by the way, may be the most irascible of all the sitters in Leen’s portrait. Brooks’s paintings are calm. They are harmonious and—dare one use the word?—beautiful. Yet by 1950 he had earned a secure place among the avant-garde luminaries of the New York art world. For he was among the “advanced painters” who had been ostentatiously excluded from *American Painting Today*, an exhibition presented by New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1950.

Offering the selections of five regional juries, the Met’s omnibus show was designed to placate every faction in the contemporary Amer-



Opposite: James Brooks, *Garamond*, 1958, oil on cotton duck, 37 x 50 inches. This page, clockwise from top: *Naran*, 1982, charcoal/acrylic on canvas, 26 x 22 inches; *Leen*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 28 1/2 x 36 inches; *Sull*, 1961, oil on canvas, 78 x 92 inches.

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ican art world except for one: the small band of innovators who came to be known as Abstract Expressionists. Working in the Met's backyard and arguably the only truly original artists America had ever produced, they were uniformly snubbed by the local jury. Infuriated, the artists wrote an open letter to Roland L. Redmond, the president of the Metropolitan, to denounce the show and, not so incidentally, to imply that the art establishment's leading authorities were blind as bats and unfit to assess flower arrangements, much less the state of painting in contemporary America.

Drafted by Adolph Gottlieb, a leading member of the group, with input from Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, the letter was signed by them and 15 other painters, including Brooks, de Kooning, Pollock and Mark Rothko. Among the 10 sculptors who signed were Louise Bourgeois and David Smith. Reprinted in *The New York Times*, this letter prompted the "Irascibles" portrait in *Life* magazine and gave the New York avant-garde something like official recognition. Yet public appreciation was still a long way off, and it would be nearly a decade before sophisticated collectors began to create a market for their work. In 1950, these painters had no audience but each another. It was a time when a breakthrough was intelligible to one's colleagues and nobody else, with the exception of Harold Rosenberg,

Clement Greenberg and a few other writers. There was, moreover, a rarely voiced suspicion that no breakthrough, however spectacular, could ever be entirely original. De Kooning's distinctive style was, after all, a gestural variation on Cubism. And not only the Surrealists but Hans Hofmann, a major figure on the New York scene, provided Pollock with precedents for his drip method. Then, in the summer of 1947, Brooks turned Pollock's dripped imagery into a precedent.

Up in Maine, away from his New York studio, Brooks splashed and pooled his pigments onto paper rather than canvas. Fearing that the results were a bit fragile, he decided to glue the paper sheets to lengths of Bemis cloth—a variety of burlap usually employed as sacking. Then, as he recalled several decades later, "I discovered from the back that very interesting things were happening." Colors were seeping through the cloth in unexpected configurations. Next he began working directly on Bemis cloth, never quite sure what would emerge. As he learned to guide this quasi-accidental process, Brooks provided himself with one fresh new possibility after another—initial images that he would then refine, working sometimes on the front of the cloth and sometimes on the back. Having discovered a method for liberating himself from habit, he was venturing time and again into "an unknown place."

As he told Dorothy Seckler of the Archives of American Art, this is "a kind of frightening situation, which you court."

Courting the unknown, Brooks became an archetypal avant-gardist, and thus he earned his place among the "Irascibles" of 1950. Seeing Brooks in that role when she interviewed him in 1965, Seckler was genuinely surprised when he told her that neither he



From top: *The Destroyer*, 1946, oil on canvas, 38 x 36 inches; *Untitled*, 1961, gouache on paper, 22 x 28 inches.

nor any of his New York colleagues thought of themselves “as doing anything revolutionary” in the late 1940s. They had no intention, he added, of dismissing the past. Seckler had a right to her reaction. For more than half a century American artists have joined with critics and historians in celebrating the Abstract Expressionists’ rejection of European models. The rejection was so decisive—and so productive—that in 1946 or possibly ’47, the capital of advanced art moved from Paris to New York. So goes the story that was already immune to challenge at the time of Seckler’s interview with Brooks. Yet there he was, calmly insisting that he and all his avant-garde friends had simply extended a tradition that they saw no reason to resist. Our art, he said, “didn’t seem like a break.”

Barnett Newman disagreed, declaring in 1948 that he and the other “Irascibles” “are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia.... The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.” Looking back to that time from the mid-1960s, Brooks saw himself and the rest of his generation as the heirs of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and the entire European avant-garde—including the Surrealists, whose invocation of the unconscious and accident was important not only to Brooks



From top: *U*, 1952, oil on Osnaburg canvas, 38 1/2 x 54 7/8 inches; *Dwar*, 1962, Rhoplex underpaint, oil on canvas, 48 x 42 inches.

but to Pollock, de Kooning and many others gathered under the Abstract Expressionist label. It’s not that Brooks was afflicted with the nostalgia that Newman denounced. Rather, he felt no need to deny connections that are obvious if one is willing to see them.

His differences with Newman and other anti-Europe polemicists—Rothko and Still prominent among them—is a matter less of historical fact than of temperament. Extremists trumpeted the triumph of willful break with the past. And a wide gulf does in fact separate Parisian sensibilities from those of postwar New York. Nonetheless, Brooks was able to prize the new and the unknown while acknowledging that, without the past, there can be no present. The moment’s most radical innovations are unthinkable without an acknowledgment of earlier achievements.

This nuanced view of history has a counterpart in Brooks’ paintings, which are at once freely improvised and elegantly composed. For he is an artist who reconciles qualities we usually see as antithetical. Unlike Pollock’s skeins of dripped paint, Brooks’ images on Bemis cloth do not chafe at the edges, implying an infinite expansion. This early work is expansive yet contained, and when he returned to canvas that subtle tension persisted. In paintings from the 1950s, the artist exchanged drips and spills for brushy gestures that often solidify into discrete forms. Just as often, they do not. The immediacy of his brushwork is preserved, generating an interplay between improvisation and deliberate composition.

Transparency plays off against opacity, darkness against luminosity, and we are drawn into an atmosphere that can be evoked only with the help of paradox. Brooks immerses us in roiling quietude, or perhaps we could characterize his paintings as calmly agitated. As the decades went by, his shapes became more consistently solid, even monumental. Color brightened, and sometimes he would deflect a large form with a line drawn across the surface with wiry authority. The increasing clarity of this imagery



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shows how powerfully he felt “the pull back toward Piero [della Francesca] or the Giottesque,” which he described as “a thing I love.” For Brooks was not merely willing to credit the European avant-garde with an important part in his development. He insisted, as well, that the art of the Renaissance was crucial. And thus he points us to his own early history, his life in art before he appeared as an “Irascible” in the pages of *Life* magazine.

Born in St. Louis in 1906, the son of a traveling salesman, he lived for short periods in many of the towns and cities of the West and Midwest. Though neither his father nor his mother had much interest in art, they never interfered with his drawing, which he remembered as constant from his earliest years. Enrolling at Southern Methodist University in 1923, he left before graduation to study drawing at the Dallas Art Institute. By 1926 he was in New York, taking a course in illustration at the Grand Central Art School. Brooks was a good student—in a sense, too good, for it wasn't long before he felt that an illustrator's job was “a little dull.” Transferring to the Art Students League, he studied with the generous but demanding Kimon Nicolaïdes and became fully conscious, for the first time, of the difference between commercial art and the



fine art of painting. Leaving the realm of visual dullness and routine for the uplands of artistic creativity, Brooks acquired ambition. He was now a serious painter.

Of course, he was still a novice. Moreover, there was no market for contemporary American painting. Working as a commercial letterer, Brooks was able to earn enough in six months to support him for the rest of the year as he studied traditional technique and caught up with the development of the European avant-garde. During the Depression he was awarded mural commissions by the Section of Painting and Sculpture, a New Deal agency run by the Treasury Department. Working in a figurative style lightly touched by Cubism, Brooks gathered his sense of a public scale from the Mexican muralists—José Clemente Orozco, in particular—and the art of Piero della Francesca. Tackling “Flight” and other con-



temporary themes, Brooks tried for “a kind of Renaissance organization” with some “modern stuff integrated with it somehow.” That “somehow” is misleading. Brooks was adept, early on, at integrating apparent incompatibilities.

The story of the American avant-garde is often told in extreme terms. Abstract Expressionism was an art of pure gesture, an explosion of pictorial energy that revealed the painter's primordial being. Color-field painting was an exercise in pure color divorced from line, tonal modulation, or any other aspect of the medium. Minimalism countered the essence of color with the essence of form. And so on. Accounts like these have an attractive simplicity, and yet we do well to remember the multiplicity of formal and thematic elements deployed with such finesse by Brooks—the unruffled “Irascible,” a painter who saw the history of his art as an intricately interwoven continuum and painting itself as an invitation to mirror in art the inexhaustible complexity of life. ■



From top: Q, 1952, oil and dry pigment on canvas, 31 x 37 inches, Z, 1954, oil and crayon on Osnaburg canvas;

Barabb, 1979, acrylic on canvas, 24 x 32 inches.