

bernard jacobson gallery

Robert Motherwell

Five Great Opens

15th October – 22nd November 2008

From 15th October Bernard Jacobson Gallery will stage the most significant exhibition of Robert Motherwell's work in England since his 1978 Royal Academy retrospective, organised by Norman Rosenthal. The show will feature five rarely seen key works from the late abstract expressionist's Open series and marks the first part of a major two part exhibition on the series. The second part will follow in June 2009.

Started in 1967, the Open paintings represent one of the two major series on which Motherwell worked over the course of his career. Consisting of planes of colour, broken up by minimally rendered lines in loosely rectangular configurations, the five canvasses on show exemplify the startling effectiveness with which Motherwell worked through the possible permutations of such reduced means. At once painterly and austere, these highly affective works set up a play between the dualities of content and absence, spatial recession and the assertion of surface, whilst providing an arena for the artist to work through what he described as more, 'strictly artistic problems, in the viscosity of paint, of colour fields, of the skin of the world highly abstracted'.

Motherwell had a rare intellectual ability, which not only underpinned his work as a painter but also led him to become one of the leading writers, theorists and advocates of the post-war movement, which he named the New York School. Through his interest in philosophy, literature and poetry, Motherwell was able to forge close friendships with the surrealists and thus, through his art and writing, establish a bridge between the pre-war European avant-garde and the post-war Americans. In so doing, he proved pivotal in establishing key concepts such as automatism and psychoanalysis at the heart of the discourse surrounding American abstraction. The Open series, firmly grounded in the artist's linguistic and philosophical concerns comprises one of the major contributions to this process.

On Motherwell's death in 1991, Clement Greenberg, the great champion of the New York School, left in little doubt his esteem for the artist, commenting that, "although he is underrated today, in my opinion he was the very best of the Abstract Expressionist painters".

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The five works in this exhibition reveal Motherwell in such a light, standing, as they do, shoulder to shoulder with the great works of Pollock, Rothko and de Kooning.

A definitive book on the Open paintings, with extended essays by John Yau, Matthew Collings, Robert Hobbs, Robert Matteson, Donald Kuspit, Mel Gooding and Saul Ostrow, is due to be released by 21 publishing in June 2009, to coincide with the second part of the exhibition.