

ASTONISHMENT: THE PAINTINGS OF BARNETT NEWMAN

Submitted by

Margaret Ann Sharkoffmadrid

Art Department

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring, 1984

In his treatise, "On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions", Benedict de Spinoza, the 17th century Dutch philosopher defined Desire, Joy, and Sorrow as the three primitive or primary emotions. He went on to define Astonishment as a derivative of those three, as "the imagination of an object in which the mind remains fixed because this particular imagination has no connection with others."¹ In this theoretical abstraction, or elimination of excess mental baggage, lies the meaning of the zip paintings of Barnett Newman. Newman spoke to our very most primal sources and called on us to awaken internally. To be totally caught up in one of these works is not to be captured by the physical object itself, but instead to be deliciously absorbed by that which is most essential - our own inner realizations and beliefs. Consequently simple visual observation leaves a viewer with very little. There is a direct communication coming from Newman's source and in order to tap into this, a decisive mental commitment is required from the viewer.

Newman was not an abstract painter, although he worked in what is referred to as an abstract manner. Unlike the "traditional" abstractionists, Newman had no desire to begin his works in the real, known world and work into the abstracted or symbolic. Rather, Newman's works came out of the chaos of pure, intangible emotions. He was dedicated to painting from his world of pure idea and concept, and thus,

1. Benedict de Spinoza, Ethics and on the Improvement of the Understanding, (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1949), p. 175.

this became his subject matter. It is through his great conviction and understanding that these intangibles were manifested. Therefore it is subject matter rather than object matter which became his content.

Newman was a self-appointed spokesman and author for himself and other painters such as Clyfford Still, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko. He was constantly defining and defending the contemporary painting of his time. As a rebuttal to a philosopher's statement on the symbolic nature of current American painting, Newman came up with the analogy "aesthetics is for artists like ornithology is for the birds".² This phrase gives birds a critical intelligence - the essential knowledge of their own songs. It is this same attribute of being in the optimum spot for clearest perception, which Newman felt he himself had for defining and communicating about his art.

For Newman, painting was the resulting act of a deep internal meditation. This attitude drove him to study the primitive arts for a better understanding of the essentials of mankind. In 1944 Newman wrote:

The many primitive art traditions are prized because they stand apart as aesthetic accomplishments that flourished without benefit of European history ... while we transcend time and place to participate in the spiritual life of a forgotten people, their art by the same magic illuminates the work of our time. So great is the reciprocal power of this art that while giving us greater understanding of the people who produced it, it gives meaning to the strivings of our own artists.³

2. Barnett Newman, quoted in Barnett Newman. (New York: Walker and Co., 1969), p.20.

3. Barnett Newman, quoted in The Triumph of American Painting. (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 69.

Newman found similarities between the primitive works and his own, most significantly the simple expression of complex thought. In his essay for the exhibition "The Ideographic Picture" he wrote, "to the Kwakiutl artist a shape was a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex ... a carrier of the awesome feelings he felt before the terror of the unknowable".⁴ Newman seemed intent on portraying this same timeless content - but in his own unique new way. For him, direct confrontation of the basic truths of human life had too long been ignored.

"An adequate knowledge of the essence of things" is how Spinoza defined God and significantly, how Newman defined art. This immediate, intuitive knowledge of Spinoza's is not the Romantic's flash of inspiration nor the mystic's hallucinated vision; rather it involves the action of a rational mind so balanced and disciplined that it speeds to its conclusions unhampered by the mechanics of a preconceived dogma or system - not logical, but rational.⁵ Newman was fascinated by this hairline distinction and saw an analogy in God's creation of the earth. Newman felt this was rational but not logical, as the world in the beginning was created but was void. This became Newman's clue to human perception, what he felt painting should be all about.

Newman had difficult decisions to make concerning the manifestation of his metaphysical concepts, however this creation was of crucial importance. It is much akin to the theory that the nature of philosophy can only be determined through actually experiencing it. His paintings

4. Barnett Newman, The Ideographic Picture. (New York: Betty Parsons Gallery, 1947), p. ____.

5. Thomas Hess, Barnett Newman. (New York: Walker and Co., 1969), p.13.

then became the realization of the living idea and the reflection upon this idea, action, and result all in one.⁶ In going beyond the visible and known world, he became involved with the actual act of discovery. He possessed the very living quality of creation which originally inspired him.

Newman's choice of object to communicate this amassing of concepts was a flatly applied area of even color. Because of the smoothness of this large area materiality seemed to be further negated, while the spiritual implications were reinforced. Through this area ran what he referred to as the zip. Newman chose the term zip because it implied motion down or across, a dividing action. To simply call them stripes suggested mere shape, static among other shapes.

In January 1948, he covered a small canvas with Indian Red, then attached a length of tape from top to bottom down the center... He brushed on a thick layer of orange over the tape, then looked at the results; then looked carefully; then studied it for 8 months. "Suddenly I realized that I had been emptying space instead of filling it, and that now my line made the whole area come to life". It was a revelation. The orange element cut the red in two equal sections, which were independent, but part of the whole. the orange as neither a shape nor a division, but a 2-edge drawing that held the reds together and pushed them apart. And the background was cancelled. He called this painting Onement and it is now known as Onement I.⁷

Newman's zips were almost always vertical and the fields they defined were relatively large. As Robert Rosenblum wrote:

"The viewer is undoubtedly awed by the sheer magnitude of the sight before him. At the same time, his breath is held by the dizzy drop to the pit of abyss, and then shuddering,

6. Karl Jaspers, Way to Wisdom. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 12-13.

7. Hess, p. 31.

he can only look up with what senses are left him, and gasp before something akin to divinity."⁸

Newman's zips aimed at nothing short of God's full powers. They were a visual metaphor for divine Creation, symbolic of God-given intelligence and reason - the uprightness of man. When viewing them it is as if one is witnessing the first day of Creation, the coming of order into the chaos; the gesture God traced in the void when separating light from darkness. The line, defined against its field, can be thought of as the first man arising out of the primal ooze. Because the viewer can only intuit and never fully grasp the import of the zips, a submission is required, an act of faithful absorption.

Newman's zips may have had some subconscious ties to the sculptures of Giacometti. After seeing these works in 1948 Newman wrote, "He made sculptures that look as if they were made out of spit - new things with no form, no texture, but somehow filled; I took off my hat to him."⁹ Surely Newman could have had this in the back of his mind during the time he studied that orange paint on Onement I. There is a similarity in the spontaneous, uneven directness. It is not that Newman was painting Giacometti's sculpture, but that they both could have had the same forceful drive, the same inner push towards depicting the primal aspects of humanity.

Initially, Newman's works were met with great scorn and misunderstanding. A particularly shallow-minded review appeared in Art News in 1950:

8. Robert Rosenblum, quoted in New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1969), p. 351.

9. Hess, p. 39.

These are large canvasses painted in one even layer of color and on which runs a vertical line of white or contrasting hue. There were some terrific optical illusions if you stared closely at the big red painting with the thin white stripe, its bottom seemed to shoot out at your ankles and the rectangular canvas itself appeared wildly distorted. It is quite like what happens to a hen when its beak is put on the ground and a chalk line drawn away from it on the floor. However, very few spectators actually became hypnotized. But then there was almost no interest here for the average spectator. Newman is out to shock, but he is not out to shock the bourgeoisie - that has been done. He likes to shock other artists.¹⁰

Newman's paintings were often seen as "nothing but a stripe down the middle", as evidenced by the following anecdote:

Franz Kline and Elaine de Kooning were sitting at the Cedar Bar when a collector Franz knew came up to them in a state of fury. He had just come from Newman's first one-man show. "How simple can an artist be and get away with it?" he sputtered. "There was nothing, absolutely nothing there!"

"Nothing?" asked Franz, beaming. "How many canvasses were in the show?"

"Oh maybe ten or twelve - but all exactly the same - just one stripe down the center, that's all!"

"All the same size?" Franz asked.

"Well, no; there were different sizes; you know, from about three to seven feet."

"Oh, three to seven feet, I see; and all the same color?" Franz went on.

"No, different colors, you know; red and yellow and green ... but each picture painted on flat color - you know, like a house painter would do it, and then this stripe down the center."

"All the stripes the same color?"

"No."

"Were they the same width?"

The man began to think a little. "Let's see. No. I guess not. Some were maybe an inch wide and some maybe four inches, and some in between."

"And all upright pictures?"

"Oh, no; there were some horizontals."

"With vertical stripes?"

"Uh, no, I think there were some horizontal stripes, maybe."

"And were the stripes darker or lighter than the background?"

10. "Reviews and Previews", Art News. March 1950, p.49.

"Well, I guess they were darker, but there was one white stripe, or maybe more ..."

"Was the stripe painted on top of the background color or was the background color painted around the stripe?"

The man began to get a bit uneasy. "I'm not sure," he said, "I think it might have been done either way, or both ways maybe ..."

"Well, I don't know," said Franz. "It all sounds damned complicated to me."¹¹

Sometime later, critic Harold Rosenberg admitted to finally realizing the impact of Newman's works. In 1975 he wrote:

Newman's paintings ... are found to possess depth and an aura of majesty; in addition, they had enaугerated a new handling of the picture plane. Emily Genauer, hard-cruſted foe of expressive abstraction, was plunged by a Newman retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art into a "sea of vivid, resonant color" by which she might, she imagined, have been swept away had it not been for the lifelines provided by Newman's vertical bands. To come close to drowning at the Museum of Modern Art is a rare ordeal, which probably threatens only those who have lived too long in the driest deserts of the imagination.¹²

Newman seemed to address the same issues in his writings as he did in his paintings. He wrote an essay entitled "The Sublime is Now" which was printed in The Tiger's Eye, a small art and literature magazine. In his essay, Newman sought to define the abstract sublime which seemed inherent in his and others' paintings of the day. For his background on the sublime, Newman studied the philosophy and writings of Longinus and Burke. This study proved to be both a catalyst for and a confirmation of some of Newman's own ideas. Longinus distinguishes between soul and body, and elevates the creative mind and its thoughts far above techniques and manners. His example of a sublime utterance must have pleased Newman, for it is from Genesis, "And God said, let there be

11. "Barnett Newman, American Artist," Vogue, November 1, 1971, p. 124.

12. Harold Rosenberg, Art on the Edge. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 50.

light". Burke must have also seemed a great reinforcer of Newman's own values. He writes:

If the object is both simple and vast, the eye and therefore the mind does not arrive readily at its bounds, and has no rest, since the image is everywhere the same. Hence the impression of an artificial infinite is created by a large and unified object which throws the retina into tension and impresses itself so vividly on the mind that an idea of the sublime is suggested.¹³

For both Longinus and Burke, the sublime - the confrontation of obscure, boundless infinity - was the highest order of art.

For Newman, painting was not just a way of communicating the sublime, but actually practicing it. Specifically Newman used color to evoke the sublime directly. The scale of this color surrounds the viewer; left to right peripherally one is stunned - numbed into a state of detachment from one's everyday attachments. Furthermore, Newman would be in favor of his works being seen in small rooms. The viewer would be prohibited from backing away, and thus the mind would be completely filled with the image; it could not distinguish it from any other. One would be committed at quite an intimate, inspirational level.

Newman's ultimate goal was to create an absolute, timeless, intrapersonal art which stemmed from the pure idea. Spinoza wrote:

To the question whether I have as clear an idea of God as I have a triangle, I answer in the affirmative. But if you ask me whether I have as clear a mental image of God as I have of the triangle, I shall answer no.¹⁴ For we cannot imagine God, but we can indeed conceive him.

13. Hess, p. 38.

14. Benedict de Spinoza, quoted in The Great Philosophers. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Wold, Inc., 1966), p. 293.

It is a nice distinction: image or idea, imagination or conception. For Newman, this was a wise and valuable realization. To the viewer, so are Newman's works, for the effects of them upon the human body will persist in the mind even after the disappearance of them.

For as Newman said, "It is only the pure idea that has meaning. Everything else has everything else."¹⁵

15. Barnett Newman, quoted in The Anxious Object. (New York: Horizon Press, 1964) p. 169.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alloway, Lawrence. Barnett Newman: The Stations of the Cross. New York, Soloman R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1966.
- "Barnett Newman, American Artist", Vogue. __:__, November 1, 1971.
- Geldzahler, Henry. New York Painting and Sculpture 1940-1970. New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1969.
- Gutmann, James, ed.. Ethics and On the Improvement of the Understanding. New York, Hafner Publishing Co., 1949.
- Hess, Thomas. Barnett Newman. New York, Walker and Co., 1969.
- Jaspers, Karl. The Great Philosophers. New York, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1966.
- Jaspers, Karl. Way to Wisdom. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954.
- Lipman, Jean and Helen M. Franc. Bright Stars. New York, E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1976.
- Newman, Barnett. The Ideographic Picture. New York, Betty Parsons Gallery, 1947.
- "Reviews and Previews", Art News. 49:49, March, 1950.
- Rosenberg, Harold. Art on the Edge. New York, MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975.
- Sandler, Irving. The Triumph of American Painting. New York, Harper and Row Publishers, 1970.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. The Philosophy of Spinoza. New York, Meridian Books, Inc., 1934.