FRANZ KLINE'S COLOR ABSTRACTIONS: MEMORIES AND A FRESH LOOK

By Budd Hopkins

Franz Kline possessed one of the two or three most acute painting intelligences I've ever encountered, yet he was also endowed with a superb sense of humor, an unusual pair of assets in any artist. One of his favorite self-mocking stories involved a remark of his mother's around the time of his first show at the Egan Gallery. He had gone through twenty years of apprenticeship and struggle to arrive finally - and abruptly - at his classic black and white distillation. "Franz," his mother said, "I'm ashamed of you, trying to do it the easy way." He loved to tell this no-colors-no-problems story on himself; it lends an ironic edge to his feeling that, "To be right is the most terrific personal state that nobody (else) is interested in."

So now for the first time the Phillips Gallery has brought together some fifty of Kline's color abstractions, paintings in which, for his mother at least, he was trying it the hard way. Seeing these paintings en masse is an invaluable experience for many reasons. In his lifetim Kline always showed the color works intermixed with the black and white as if to cancel out the differences. His color abstractions are not particularly visible in public collections, either, since museums seem to feel that one Kline, usually black and white, is an adequate stand-in for all Klines, and on top of everything there is a shocking dearth of published material on his work. Sadly, this major exhibition will be seen in Houston, Los Angeles and Seattle but not New York.

I met Kline sometime around 1954 and saw many of these paintings in his studio and later when they were shown at the Sidney Janis Gallery. Seeing them again at the Phillips evoked both marvelous memories and new, hind-sight insights, the first of which has to do wit

classification. In his MOMA catalogue on Barnett Newman, Tom Hess made a distinction about the early fifties which was felt at the time but rarely articulated: that there were, among the abstract-expressionists, two distinct groups - the "uptown intellectuals", Rothko, Motherwell, Newman and Gottlieb, and the"downtown bohemians", Kline, Pollock and De Kooning. (In my recollection David Smith was a kind of shuttle-diplomat between the two groups). Hess linked the uptown intellectuals to apartments and analytical discourse; the bohemians belonged more to lofts, the Cedar Bar, and a cryptic, angst-ridden style of conversation. Though Hess did not call attention to it, the more basic connection was the linkage of their various styles. The uptown intellectuals were all more conceptual in approach, more specifically image-makers, while Kline, Pollock and DeKooning were more truly expressionist, creating primarily through gesture. These three painted, one could easily imagine, as if their very lives depended upon it, with no time to revise or ruminate. Spontaneity, velocity and an immediately apprehendable passion saturated their work.

The one other abex master who looks as spontaneous and gestural as Kline, DeKooning and Pollock is, of course, Hans Hofmann, but with Hofmann's paintings, no matter how free they may appear, one always senses in the background the quiet, reassuring hum of the machinery. The range of his imagery as it unfolded in his exhibitions at Kootz, had always the air of the well-crafted and the didactic. His paintings look happy and in full control within their ebullience, but never desperate. It is precisely this quality of desperation, of hanging on by the fingernails, that one feels instantly in the best work of the other three, and which isolates them somewhat from the rest of the New York School.

A few years ago I had a conversation with William Rubin in which he linked DeKooning and Kline as "late-cubist relational painters" but firmly separated Pollock from them by making Pollock's all-over, "non-relational" composition the decisive, central issue. I protested that this separation can be accomplished only at the cost of completely ignoring content. In the pre-Formalist fifties it was clear that each of these three artists identified primarily with the other two, and felt that what they shared amongst themselves far outweighed their differences; one thinks of Pollock's and DeKooning's simultaneous interest in figuration, and their four-way fascination - shared by Robert Motherwell- with the problems of black and white. Kline, DeKooning and Pollock each merged painting with drawing; each was committed to energy as expressive content, and each worked, between revisions, with extraordinary speed. All three exploited the liquid, physical properties of paint and relished the accidental, the inadvertent by-product of their methods. They lived by risk.

One has only to think of a typical Still or Newman or Gottlieb or Rothko to sense the contrast. This latter group is instantly more meditative, more iconic. Even Robert Motherwell and James Brooks, despite their gestural gifts, seem instinctively to create images which are more hallucinatory and inward. Hess talked about intellectuals and bohemians, but Kline hit the categories harder when he said, "Hell, half the world wants to be like Thoreau at Walden worrying about the noise of traffic on the way to Boston; the other half use up their lives being part of that noise. I like the second half, Right"?

Though Kline, Pollock and DeKooning share more with each other than with the painters of the "first half," there are interesting differences between Kline on the one hand and Pollock and De Kooning on the other, which the Phillips show makes clear. From the late forties to the middle fifties Pollock and DeKooning each created a kind of in-and-out-of-focus linear network. It is as if there is, in familiar works like Full Fathom Five and Gotham News, a surface-wide, indeterminate maitrix, a substance into which lines sink, lose focus, and then re-emerge elsewhere, clear and unscathed. Loops and edges dip down, become vague, and disappear in a shallow spatial game of obscure and reveal. By contrast Kline is always deliberately clear, even to the extent of suggesting an object-like contour in each painting. In fact, one of the most subtle tensions in his work is the sense we have of seeing a black *thing*, a specific image's silhouette, while at the same time reading each large, expressive stroke as an independant, self-sufficient gesture. Nothing else in abstract-expressionism gives us such massive and dramatic "wholes" made out of such powerful and individually compelling parts.

Kline's profound feeling for clarity was instinctive, and in consequence his paintings from 1950 on are resolutely abstract. DeKooning and Pollock on the other hand shared a willingness to embrace ambiguity, the indeterminate, even semi-figurative imagery. Titles,as usual, tell a lot: Pollock's Scent, Lavender Mist, Echo are almost Whistlerian. DeKooning's Woman as Landscape, Excavation, Woman, Wind and Window convey his multivalenced, transitional form-world. Kline's titles, when they are not merely descriptive (Red and Orange) run to the names of

specific people, places and things: <u>Thorpe</u>, <u>Washington Wall</u>, <u>Siegfried</u>. This abiding clarity of Kline's denotes a particular ancestry, though one would never have guessed it from his earlier work: he was, ultimately, a kind of latter-day Constructivist, or, as his friend Earl Kerkam put it one day, a drunken Mondrian. (This may be the place to put to rest some false ideas about Kline's health. He had had rheumatic fever as a child without knowing its severity, and it resulted in a massively enlarged heart. About 1960 the problem was discovered and, in those pre-transplant days his future was all too sadly clear. Drinking exacerbated the problem, but I remember long periods when Franz went on fish diets, low cholesterol, no beef or alcohol. It was all in vain, ~~and~~ with the death warrants sealed, why ~~not drink~~? In 1962, when it was all over for this marvelous man, his doctor said he'd never seen a larger heart.)

In the one absolutely essential piece of Kline's conversation that survives - Frank O'Hara's well-known *Franz Kline Talking* - he mentions two artists in succession, Malevich and Mondrian, and his descriptions are vivid with self-revelation. "With Mondrian, in a way you see that the condition is that he's a guy who solves his own problems illogically. He's done it with paint illogically to himself - which makes it logical to some other people." "Malevich is interesting to me. Maybe because you are able to transform through his motion the endless wonder of what painting could be, without describing an eye or a breast. That would be looking at things romantically, which painters won't do." One knows, immediately how the precise and reductive works of these two earlier artists must have affected him, and how their shared ideal of clarity

must have deflected Kline away from DeKooning's and Pollock's labrynthian ambiguities. In fact, a number of Kline's black and white paintings, like Wotan, Herald, Four-Square and Suspended, suggest specific precedents in Malevich and Mondrian; they also suggest that Kline looked at these paintings "romantically," which most artists, as he put it, wouldn't do.

When one comes to consider his use of color his quasi-constructivist thinking comes clearly to the fore, especially when seen against the attitudes of his closest contemporaries. DeKooning and Pollock both tended to use color in an essentially allusive way. DeKooning's reds and pinks and flesh tones always invoke the human figure on some level ("Flesh," he said, "is the reason oil paint was invented"), while Pollock's rusts and greens and silvers suggest landscape imagery (Autumn Rhythm, Summertime, etc.). Kline's choice of, and use of, color is closer overall to Malevich in 1915 than it is to either DeKooning or Pollock. Again, it is resolutely non-allusive and abstract. Robert Motherwell - and the complex relationship of his more imagistic work to Kline's I hope to treat another time - uses color in terms of personal associations, even refusing to use colors he has no particular feelings for or associations with. Kline's use of color is personal, too, but in the sense of "I like green and purple" rather than "Cerulean, to me, is the sky." Apparently he shared none of Motherwell's powerful, semi-symbolist intentions.

In almost all of his color abstractions - Scudera, his last work and Red Painting, 1961, are exceptions - color is used in what one might call specifically measured amounts. As in Leger or Mondrian, one feels there is just so much red, so much yellow, so much orange, etc. By contrast, if one attempts to calculate the various amounts of each color in a Pollock or

DeKooning one is instantly confused; specifics are swept away by complexity and ambiguity. Mark Rothko's environmental strategy is concerned with blurring the places where a color stops so that one feels, instead of a measureable amount, the presence of an indeterminate atmospheric mass. In different ways this all-enveloping, edgeless sense of color is also at work in Newman and Still. If Theo van Doesberg were to walk into a large 1959 abstract-expressionist show, he would, perhaps reluctantly, have to agree that Kline was the only painter whose use of color he found in any way familiar.

Kline's "baroque constructivism" seen in relation to Malevich and Mondrian invokes still another shared constant. Like the earlier two artists, Kline could upon occasion dispense with black and still paint powerful, typical works (Mycenae, Cage I, Green Horizontal, etc.), but white was another matter; it seemed essential. Red Painting, 1961 is the only later work I know of with not a trace of white, though its study contains a small, crucial patch. Kline never exhibited Red Painting in his lifetime, though he included the study in his last show. I was in his studio sometime late in 1961 or early in '62 and told him how much I liked the big red work which leaned casually against his painting wall. He told me that he still wasn't sure about it, and had deliberately dropped it from consideration for the current show.

When one considers Mondrian's oeuvre one finds that after 1921 he never produced a painting without using white, though once, in 1933, in Composition with Yellow Lines, he eliminated black. This work consists of two horizontal and two vertical yellow bands on a tipped-square format; the four yellows form an incomplete square

and create an interesting precedent for Kline's Yellow Square of 1952, a work I remember seeing and being disturbed by in his studio in 1955. Mondrian, late in life, again eliminated black from a few of the New York paintings, as did Malevich in a number of early Suprematist works. With the single exception of Kline's "unsatisfactory" Red Painting, there is not one mature Kline or Mondrian or Suprematist Malevich that I know of which gets by without using white. Outside of the DeStijl-Constructivist-Suprematist groups Franz Kline may be the only major painter who shares that particular need.

Kline's choice of particular colors is idiosyncratic and -oddly-most effective when it violates DeStijl dogma. Habitually he relies on the secondary hues, orange, purple and green, largely, I believe, because the primaries tend to accent the Mondrian connection. Often he deliberately muddies a hue and juxtaposes it with a pure tube color; this pairing creates a color parallel for his characteristically juxtaposed hard and soft edges, and further binds the color into his compositional structure. In almost every work he uses a few colors as if they were unmixed tube colors though they may in fact be quite personal invented hues; the pressure of Kline's structural clarity can force even the weirdest purple into functioning like a pure Mondrian blue.

The historical evolution of Kline's color, painting by painting from its marginal role in the early fifties to its position center-stage at the very end is gone into by Harry F. Gaugh in his catalogue note, so it will not be recapitulated here.* Mr. Gaugh is commendably thorough in his running down of biographical facts, but he is

~~woefully~~ inadequate when it comes to the paintings themselves. In addition he has an apparently uncontrollable habit of substituting adjectives for thought: Provincetown II is "well-stuffed, lethargic and incurably rhapsodic," and a particular hue is "as delicious as taffy flavored with chromium hydroxide." Oscar Wilde once said that "Every great man has his disciples, but why is it that Judas always writes the biography"? Instead of Judas, Kline ended up with a kind of berserk Walter Pater.

One is almost afraid to attempt any more particularized descriptions of individual paintings after Mr. Gaugh's numbing rain of adjectives and adverbs, yet certain works deserve special mention. A number of paintings in the Phillips exhibition are essentially black and white with color added, and so are of less concern here, but works like Yellow Orange and Purple, 1959, are completely successful in terms of color. My first reaction to this painting, and for that matter to the show as a whole, was to its extreme rawness. All of us who survived the sixties have grown used to seeing acres of ingratiating color-field painting; I even decided one day in 1969 that I hadn't seen a truly bad painting in three years of lyrical abstraction. But the Kline show really knocks the rose-colored glasses right off your nose. The rawness is not only the result of Kline's frequently jarring color choices but is also caused by his wham-bang paint handling. Each gesture seems to have two qualities simultaneously: it is rough, violent and muscular, yet precisely intended and specifically structural. The first qualities are, of course, impetuous and emotional, the latter calculated and intelligent; each gesture and color choice, then, is a microcosm

of Kline's baroque-constructivist temperament. His gritty color passages and his rough, "architectural" shapes invoke the city in its later, frantic, run-down stages, ~~in ways parallel~~ a way that was the counterpart to ~~that of the~~ optimistic machine imagery utilized forty years earlier by Leger and the Constructivists. But by 1960, we know, Leger's glowing urban dream world was beginning to turn into the South Bronx.

Frank O'Hara called Kline the Action Painter par excellence. He is also, along with Stuart Davis, our greatest urban painter. Even when he titles a painting _Provincetown_ we still feel we're in New York, and never do we feel we're out in the Hamptons with Brooks and Pollock and, later and inevitably, DeKooning. One of Kline's closest friends, the painter Herman Somberg, tells the story of Franz once being asked how he, a Pennsylvanian, liked living in New York. "If you've been here more than a year," he replied, "you're beyond answering that question one way or the other."

Although there are many smashingly successful small works in the exhibition, three large paintings stand out as completely victorious color statements: _Mycenae_, _Yellow Orange and Purple_, and _Harley Red_. The latter represents the reverse of an ingrained Kline habit; most often black and white would appear and cover up the color; in this work the color nearly obliterates the black and white, the thin partial split down the center red revealing a sliver of the subterranean black. This strong red-over-black image recalls Malevich's famous 1920's red-under-black "cross" painting, though Kline's wobbling shape also suggests an oddly touching, quasi-human physiognomy. _Mycenae_, 1958, is Kline's most powerful _lyrical_ abstraction, in white, pink, yellow, magenta and orange, and it suggests possibilities for future work that unfortunately he had

no time to explore. In the catalogue this painting is twice misdated 1950 which is no surprise in a compilation that must have set some kind of world's record for upside down reproductions. Many of the fifty-four color plates are excellent, and some, like that of <u>Harley Red,</u> are execrable. The show did not include certain great Klines like <u>Scudera</u>, <u>King Oliver</u> and <u>Torches Mauve</u>, but one can't, I suppose, have everything. <u>Provincetown II</u>, his weakest large color painting is, unfortunately, included instead, along with a few less than successful small works, but all in all it is a well selected and extraordinary exhibition which gives an accurate idea of his stature and range.

<u>Scudera</u>, which, though not shown, is reproduced, is apparently Kline's last painting. There is a low black bar, a squarish black box above, and a rising scarlet <u>accent</u> <u>grave</u> at the top, all against a resonant blue ground. It is a magical painting, an ascension which one can easily imagine inside the dome of a Borromini church. At the very end of his life the color and everything else came together for what may be his greatest painting, a work one can describe even in these positivist, hard-headed times, as spiritual. In his sceptical, ironic and self-mocking way he may have not been too displeased. I was talking to Mary Grand, one of his close friends, at a Kline memorial exhibition as we stood in front of a big colored Kline. Mary, who was not an artist, told me that she had said to him one day, "Franz, I think I like your colored paintings better than your black and whites." "Mary," he answered, "so does my mother." Time has blown away the issue and the difference, if, indeed, there ever was one.

Budd Hopkins

*He also attempts an analysis of the reciprocal influence of Kline and DeKooning in the late fifties. The issue is complex, but it seems to me that Kline's large scale and simplified forms influenced DeKooning beginning in '57, and within a year or two his color solutions had an influence on Kline.