Review: Artist as Author: Action and Intent in Late-Modernist American Painting


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In The Artist as Author, Christa Noel Robbins explores painters’ authorial agency within the rupture of modern art, focusing on the 1950s New York School and on 1960s post-painterly abstraction.

The bewildering nature of mid-twentieth century art (think: happenings seemingly designed to irk audiences) gave rise to simplistic art criticism. Robbins strives to fill the void by unpacking artists’ sophistication, evident in their purposeful use of ambiguity. She explains that self-aware artists like Jack Tworkov, Arshile Gorky, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, Sam Gilliam, and Agnes Martin infused ambiguity by consciously masking meaning while emphasizing making. Meaning can be found in nuanced traces of the self. For example, while in exile in the United States, Arshile Gorky made paintings ranging from a self-portrait memorializing his Armenian mother in their native country of Turkey, that took twenty years to complete, to a non-representational work with a title referencing an experimental publication by existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard, in which two supposedly pseudonymous writers quibble over the authorship of a diary. The concept of authorship dovetailing with art emerged mid-century and is addressed here at the point that almost all of the featured artists are deceased.

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Included are color and black and white images, some notably from the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, where Robbins is assistant professor of art history; endnotes; a bibliography of archival and unpublished sources; and an index. Robbins’ research extends to in-depth contact with Gilliam, the only living artist from the aforementioned key players; as Gilliam is Black, this helps round out disparities in art historical research traditionally favoring white artists—especially the concept of the creative genius. She writes about Gilliam in a way that accounts for race but doesn’t essentialize the artist. The chapter on him has a fascinating opening about a crossed-out statement of Gilliam’s concerning his experience of the Washington, DC riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

This scholarly monograph is recommended for museum and university library collections. The ideal readers are graduate students with foundational knowledge in this area and more seasoned scholars, as the combination of elusive subject matter and advanced diction can at times be abstruse, to borrow a term used by the author. Undergraduate students and lay readers have an entry point when Robbins moves beyond the analysis of works, for example, by outlining biographical details and the role of publishing and exhibitions in promoting or holding back artists. At the same time, Robbins’ evocative descriptions of works—whether Helen Frankenthaler’s smudge of crotch, Sam Gilliam’s Kelly green stammering across the surface of a polychromatic work, or Agnes Martin dragging a pencil to make repetitive marks—are satisfying in compelling the reader to look deeply.