

## **MIDCENTURY ABSTRACTION: A CLOSER LOOK**

February 8, 2022, New Haven, Conn.—The Yale University Art Gallery is pleased to present *Midcentury Abstraction: A Closer Look*, an exhibition inspired by a recent gift of six paintings and drawings from the Seattle-based Friday Foundation honoring the legacy of Jane Lang Davis and Richard E. Lang. This important gift includes revelatory works by the celebrated painters Franz Kline (1910–1962) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970, HON. 1969). On view from February 25 through June 26, 2022, the exhibition highlights the breadth and variety of practices in abstract art that took place around the middle of the 20th century and provides a nuanced perspective on abstraction by looking beyond long-standing narratives about this moment in art history.

The six works by Kline and Rothko represent different phases of each artist’s career, highlighting both familiar and surprising aspects of their artistic development. Although Kline and Rothko have largely been seen as exemplifying two important movements within abstraction—action painting



Mark Rothko, *Untitled*, 1941–42. Oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of the Friday Foundation in honor of Richard E. Lang and Jane Lang Davis. © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

and Color Field painting, respectively—some of the works in the Friday Foundation gift have forms that are clearly representational. Kline’s *Portrait of Nijinsky* (1942), for instance, is one of the artist’s early depictions of the ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky as the puppet Petrushka, and an untitled painting that Rothko completed about the same time has figurative motifs, such as masklike human heads, plucked from Greco-Roman art and architecture. These early paintings show that both artists sustained an interest in figuration even while entering the period in which they began turning to abstraction.

In addition to Kline and Rothko, *Midcentury Abstraction* foregrounds a wide-ranging group of artists who freely moved between styles or blended their abstract approaches with traditional genres meant to represent the observable world, such as landscape painting, portraiture, and still life. Objects in a variety of media by Lee Bontecou (b. 1931), Dorothy Dehner (1901–1994), Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011, HON. 1981), Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), George Miyasaki (1935–2013), Louise Nevelson (1899–1988), and Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), among others, collectively present midcentury abstraction as a continuously changing process of exploration.

The exhibition offers an opportunity to see exceptional works from the Gallery’s collection that have rarely been on view, such as Sam Gilliam’s *Haystack* (1972). Gilliam created this painting at a time in which he first began to use thick, three-dimensional stretcher bars that lifted the painted canvas a few centimeters off the wall, marking an important transition between painting and the new genre of installation art. Gilliam’s work demonstrates how midcentury abstraction continued to spark formal innovations, even decades after its emergence as a recognizable style.

*Midcentury Abstraction* is organized by Elisabeth Hodermarsky, the Sutphin Family Curator of Prints and Drawings, and Keely Orgeman, the Seymour H. Knox, Jr., Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, with Gregor Quack, PH.D. candidate, Department of the History of Art.

### **Credits**

Exhibition made possible by the Joann and Gifford Phillips, Class of 1942, Fund.

### **Yale University Art Gallery**

Founded in 1832, the Yale University Art Gallery is the oldest college art museum in America. Today, it is a center for teaching, learning, and scholarship and a preeminent cultural asset for Yale University, the wider academic community, and the public. The museum collects, preserves, studies, and presents art in all media, from all regions of the globe and across time, with a collection numbering nearly 300,000 objects.

### **General Information**

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. For more information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at [artgallery.yale.edu](http://artgallery.yale.edu).

### **Press Contact**

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