

## ROY NEWELL      HALF CENTURY

Roy Newell ( b. 1914 – d. 2006) was one of the original New York painters to emerge in the late 1940's under the now fully digested term "abstract expressionists." Born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he was the son of immigrants from Eastern Europe. He grew up in poverty with three siblings and an abusive father, and was raised by his illiterate mother who worked odd jobs to support the family. Roy attended school only briefly. In his teens he was forced to join the Civilian Civil Camps making \$1 a day fixing roads and bridges in order to feed his family. He escaped from all of this by withdrawing into poetry and art, and was largely self taught, spending hours immersing himself in the Art Reference room of the New York Public Library.

The Art Reference room was a popular place for artists and thinkers in the 1940s, and it was there that Roy would meet by chance his two closest friends of that time, Willem de Kooning and Nikola Tesla. A bit later on Roy was to develop a strong and lasting relationship with Franz Kline. He had few other close friends, although he gathered regularly (as a member) at the 8<sup>th</sup> street Artist's Club, for serious dialogue, and at the Cedar Tavern, for serious drinking. Largely because of de Kooning, he knew everybody at that time. "Make no enemies, only friends" he told him. But Roy had difficulty masking his emotions. One drunken episode at the Cedar Tavern involved a knock out punch delivered to Jackson Pollock after hours of Pollock bullying the much smaller Franz Kline. Like Pollock, Roy had size, muscle, and an aversion to social graces. De Kooning and Roy drank heavily together with mixed results. One summer day, they traveled together to Provincetown, R.I. and ended up in jail, having been arrested, dangerously drunk, while skinny dipping and nearly drowning in the dead of night. Hans Hoffman bailed them out.

Roy exhibited regularly, and with positive results, in the early 1950s. His work was included in the 1951 exhibition Contemporary American Painting at the City Art Museum St. Louis, and in the 1953 Whitney Annual of Contemporary American Painting. He was represented by the prestigious J. B. Neumann Gallery, and also had well received exhibitions at the Hacker Gallery ( 1951, 1953). His work was included in important group shows at Gallery 99 (a three person show with Louise Nevelson and Harry Mathes), The Stable Gallery ( 1953, 1954) and Charles Egan Gallery (1951,1953). At that time, he enjoyed an enthusiastic critical response in numerous art publications, was reviewed in The New York Times, and was the subject of a full-length profile in The New Yorker in March of 1957.

However, Roy was yet to develop his mature style, and was moving away from gestural abstraction as the AbEx tide was rising. It didn't help that his best friends were de Kooning and Kline. Their stratospheric climbs were becoming increasingly difficult for Roy to process. One particularly revealing episode involved Kline driving up one day to

Riker's, a local soup counter (where they met regularly for a 25 cent chicken pot pie) in a newly minted Ferrari; traded to a cash strapped collector for a painting.

His paintings got smaller as everybody else's got bigger. He fell off the map for a few years and reemerged in the early 1960s, style fully formed, in the stable of the Amel Gallery with a small group of artists including, tellingly, Eva Hesse. He cultivated his mature style out of the rigid tenets of Mondrian, and informed that reductive tendency with the subtle brushwork and opulent color of Bonnard, Vuillard and the Nabis. In many ways, Roy's mature style presaged the fundamental elements of Post Minimal Painting. It adopted unconditionally the structure of the grid, and used the construct not as an impediment, but as a liberation. His paintings were infused with personal and poetic narrative, touch, and emotion; and also engaged scale in a radical way (it's almost impossible to tell the size of a Newell in reproduction). His small, box-like supports also read like objects; a sculptural form asserting itself in dialectical opposition to the delicacy of his surfaces. He also often built a small frame around his primed panels and incorporated (long before Howard Hodgkin) that structural border into the painting's surface; an assertion of the picture as object, and the object as picture.

If Roy's work was out of step with that of his peers, it was completely out of sync with what was to come next. Pop and Minimalism's cool detachment dominated the 60s and 70s, and conceptual and performance based practices were incomprehensible to Roy. It was not until many years later that the Post Minimal painters began to gain recognition-Blinky Palermo and Imi Knoebel in Europe; Robert Ryman, Brice Marden, Dorothea Rockburne, Mary Heilmann, Robert Mangold and others in the U.S. By that time, it was too late for Roy. He had fallen into a deep alcoholism in the mid 60s and was nearly killed one night while working as an elevator operator in an after hours club. He was stabbed in the back and almost bled to death laying in the dark for hours until he was discovered. He barely escaped addiction with his life, and surely would have died if it weren't for his wife and lifelong companion, Anne Cohen, who supported him throughout his life, both emotionally and financially.

Even sober, Roy was rough and contentious. Dealers stayed away even if they secretly admired his work. He was impossible to work with, and had only periodic relations with galleries. He also had few friends. Two decades of isolation had taken its toll. Those of his older friends who were still alive kept their distance. Although, Bill and Elaine de Kooning continued to champion and support his work throughout. They collected his works, and also made a gift of a major Newell to the Guggenheim Museum in 1983. His self imposed isolation was due, in large measure, to his working method. He was working, and reworking, endlessly. Works that he began in the 1960s were still being tuned when I met him in 1994.

He was 84 when I met him and I was in my early 20s. He let me into his studio from time to time to see his paintings. For me, Roy was a window into a time long gone by. We would eat Chinese and discuss random things: mail order catalogs, Puvis de Chevannes, fishing, Guston. He loved the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder, and spoke of it often. In the fourteen years I knew him, he never started a new painting. He repainted his small works

endlessly. One month I would come by to see a room full of spectacular blues and violets, only to return a month later to the same works in ruddy browns and oranges. It frustrated me. However, I came back often (and enough) to see them evolving, and to begin to understand their importance both to him and to painting in general. He was endlessly fine tuning, and they were developing incrementally, almost imperceptibly, like mineral deposits, into distillations of his intentions.

After decades of re workings, around 2004, Roy began to finish many of his paintings. He stopped working on most of them and concentrated on a small group that were still unresolved. To my knowledge, these finished works represent one of the most extreme examples of sustained attention in the history of painting. Each small painting has thousands of hours imbedded in it. They are compressions of both time and emotion. A lifetime of shifting daily moods and inspirations both buried and revealed in color and touch.

Despite Roy's very limited exhibition history, whenever he did show, he received great critical response. In a 1986 half page New York Times Review titled "When a Period Lasts a Lifetime", the art critic Helen Harrison wrote, "The long-term, single minded pursuit of a narrow, self imposed esthetic discipline is rare among visual artists, most of whom undergo the periodic changes in style or viewpoint that we associate with a developing career. Those uncommon few who commit themselves to an approach at once so clearly defined and so personal that it seems to exist outside of time exert a special fascination, especially on the imaginations of their fellow artists. As Morandi represents the ideal "painter's painter" for the gestural realists, so we might think of Roy Newell as a paragon for the geometric abstractionists."

Roy's next show, twelve years later in 1998, was also reviewed in The Times. Holland Cotter wrote, "'Mr. Newell's palette is bright but complicated and holds some audacious surprises: passages of brown and flesh-pink, for instance, carry anatomical associations of a kind found in the work of certain younger abstract painters today.'"

With this installation, eleven years since the last Newell show, I have chosen to emphasize the compression of time in Roy's painting. It begins with a work from 1950 and ends with one completed just before his death in 2006. In many ways, these two works are the same one. The collapse of five decades of art making into a single small presentation would be impossible with almost any artist other than Roy Newell. Perhaps one could accomplish this with On Kawara, but in terms of painting, it would be nearly impossible. I hope this installation will awaken a larger audience to the art and life of Roy Newell, and will serve as a guide for future artists. RIP, Roy.

Richard Dupont 2009