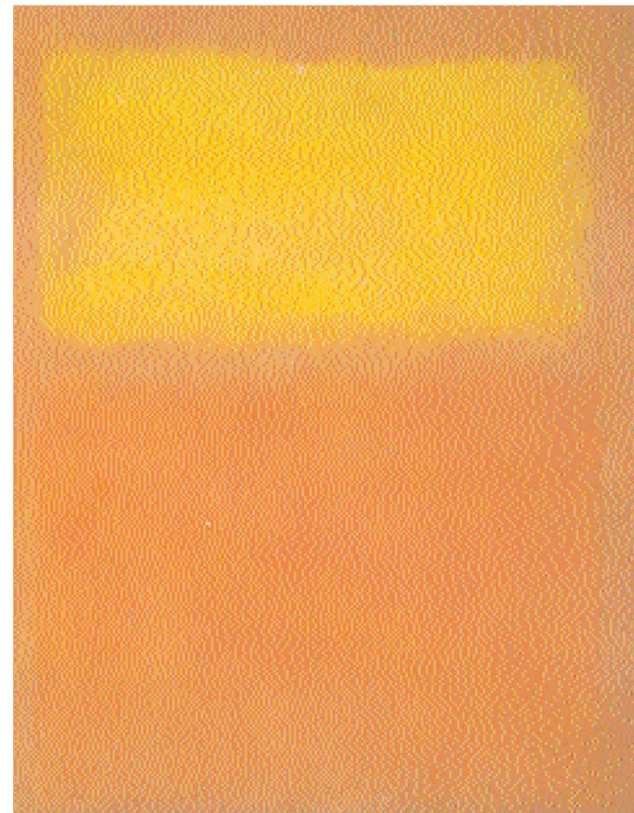


# An Abstract Contemplation

Art movements have frequently divided into opposing forces, one emphasizing line and another color, or one modernity and another history, or, as in the case of abstract painting in the 1960's, one camp embracing action and movement and another seeking to emphasize reflection and mood. At the forefront of this opposing dialogue was Abstract Expressionism, or "action painting," exemplified by the energetic and gestural application of paint. Its leading proponent was Jackson Pollock.

Some artists, in response to what they considered to be expressionist overkill, sought a more purified and reductive form. Through their extreme simplification of the canvas, these painters created images of serene abstract symbols, rather than a reflection or imitation of anything in nature or physical manifestations of the artists' activities. Through the application of large fields of color and isolated and simplified elements, these artists shifted their explorations and the viewers' experience from external actions to meditative pieces intended to act as launching points for individual contemplation. Like a stone in a Zen rock garden, it is not the image we are to interpret, but the fruits of our contemplations inspired by these works. This direction in 20th-century abstract art is commonly referred to as Color Field Painting.

One example of Color Field Painting can be seen in the work of Mark Rothko. Originally working in a deeply gestural manner, Rothko ultimately abandoned all suggestions of form and action in favor of superimposing two or three simplified shapes with cloudy, undefined edges. The resulting dream-like softness of his works is intended to aid us as we allow our minds to float in response to the canvas. He is not taking us along his dream, as the Surrealists did, but is instead encouraging our own dreams, his work being a mere catalyst for reflection.



Mark Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, oil on canvas



Lou Bermingham, *Red Wood*, 2006, acrylic on canvas

**Lou Bermingham** has one foot firmly placed in the traditions of Color Field Painting and the other stepping ever-so-lightly back into the realm of Abstract Expressionism. His works represent contemplation through action, and so bridges the gap between the two once opposing camps. *Red Wood* bathes our view with broad washes of earthy umber orange and deep receding blue, but it is dashed with energetic lines giving the work a sense of movement. Heaven and earth -- or the transcendent and the physical if you will -- meet and coalesce, ultimately eliminating such distinctions. It is as if we are invited to find ourselves in an amorphous harmony to ignite our internal reflections, but not daring to leave us stagnant, Bermingham nudges us along our way with the flowing movement of the lines. Like a spiraling glyph incised on the wall of a paleolithic shaman-cave, an endless tunnel-like hole interrupts both stasis field and movements, reminding us, as always, to look deeper.

~by Preston Metcalf