

“ELEGY TO MODERN PAINTING:
Chasing Shadows with Michael Davidson”

By Donald Brackett

“We are gazing at the solemn geography of human limits.”

Paul Eluard

There once was a place called America. It was an entirely conceptual country, a grand idea which had been superimposed over an immense continent. Eventually the new country realized that anything it did not already possess it could literally invent out of thin air, American air, which formed an atmosphere most conducive to experimentation.

This was somewhat ironic, considering the fact that the founders of the new conceptual country themselves were very conservative by nature, however they were utterly committed to *newness* in all respects. And a new world needs new myths. So they invented a totally new kind of abstract painting, based on the actions taken and the emotions expressed. It was sheer visual music, an American breed of brilliance which only they could have fashioned from the exported seeds of those great European avant-gardeners.

Though visual abstract music is seen, as in the works of de Kooning, Still, or Kline for instance, and aural abstract music is heard, as in the works of Parker, Miles or Coltrane, it is also possible to contemplate a state of mind in which one can *watch* a Thelonious Monk solo and *listen* to a Robert Motherwell painting. For that is the creative state known as *flow*, the state in which they were all created.

Michael Davidson has been listening carefully to Motherwell paintings, and having discerned that abstraction's demise was illusory, just as the second, third and fourth generations of reiterated jazz proved *its* creative longevity, he is dedicated to the proposition that there is still so much more to be explored through a continued dedication to the program of abstract painting.

The whole point of toiling down in the mines of painting is to assume that later diggers will be following your tracks to the underground. That's the way it worked with all the best diggers, from Giotto, to Caravaggio, to Degas, to Cezanne, to Picasso, to Klein, and so on. It's almost as if that overflowing river of the avant-garde in Europe actually seems to end in America, pooling up in the Alps of a new mind.

Fitting perhaps, since the most experimental painting in the world originated in Europe but only later matured and finally reached its grand apotheosis in post-war Manhattan. But it doesn't even end there, it can't. Which is why Canadian painter Michael Davidson is examining one of the late logos of a modernist brand name, Robert Motherwell's "Elegy" series and reiterating its pertinent message for today's eyes, today's heart, and today's mind.

American modern painting drew up a new visual map, one for the mind of the twentieth century. And as Davidson points out, it also affected any and all trajectories after its ascent. This is indeed evidenced by what he refers to as his own *formal vocabulary*. And that is why his *American Elegy* painting is a classical ode. It has the nerve to touch the interior of a reliquary containing modernism's bones.

Surprisingly, the actual distance between one of the painterly icons such as Motherwell, and one of his inheritors such as Davidson, is not all that vast visually, since it is more of a psychological distance than a physical one. Motherwell painted about 170 elegy pieces, dedicated to locations that resonated for him such as Spain, Ireland, Mexico, and New England, but never an elegy to the American Republic. Since in his time it was still largely on the ascent. So this inheritor had to produce that contribution personally, since in our time, the conceptual country we admire so strenuously has slid somewhat from its prior lofty position.

Could the Motherwell elegy series be continued in light of the present day, Davidson wondered, not seeking to imitate or emulate, but rather perhaps to evoke a spirit and sensibility, the modern, which was hastened to its conclusion culturally but never artistically. He reflected: “As one of the most important and iconic images of the last century in painting, I wondered if it could be brought forward to the present day, reflecting perhaps the dissolution of that conceptual country, at least as we know it.”

This was more than mere aesthetic admiration, though it does intellectually explore the possibility of a visual icon becoming a fetish, but focuses more on recognition of the impact on our collective interior of what the artist calls Motherwell’s “heartfelt heartbreak”. And just as there is in the ecological movement, there is such a thing as sustainability in the modernist credo, and the purpose of a contemporary artists such as Michael Davidson is to show us all that its fuel is far from being exhausted.

On the contrary, modernism was so forward thinking that it built-in its own transformation in its later stages, to its mature state, that which is mistakenly referred to as post-modernism. But look very closely and carefully, pay no attention to those men behind the curtain operating all the switches and dials.

Davidson's take on the Motherwell elegy ethos is not dissimilar from one jazz player interpreting another's composition by doing a new solo within its structure. His meditation on the mortality of modernism also seems to concur with the French critic Phillippe Sergeant's characterization of how best to deal with a grandly iconic image, through the use of a musical notion called the *appoggiatura*.

"One can only accompany a work," Sergeant clarifies, "This accompaniment is a mode by which the work can appear. The gaze is a kind of appoggiatura. The work is the real note, and the gaze is the ornamental note that precedes the real note at a tiny interval of awareness. Everything occurs in that interval, that synapse-gap, when the appoggiatura accentuates the work of art, filling and intensifying the interval which separates that which appears and that which understands. The appoggiatura might be the only way to speak about a work of art: not to replace it, or decompose it, or criticize it, but to accompany it."

With respect to Motherwell's *Elegy*, and to Davidson's contemporary interpretation, it is therefore clear that there are two or three kinds of appoggiaturas we can consider here: his own gaze in reconfiguring the icon is the first appoggiatura, the viewer's gaze in accompanying both images is the second appoggiatura, and my gaze in writing about it, thereby accompanying it further in another medium, is the third appoggiatura.

Each of us collaborates in a sustained moment of contemplation, after coming to a tacit agreement that certain things are well worth looking at again. The whys and wherefores are almost as simple, yet just powerful as the two artists' paintings themselves. Things worth looking at again are also worth looking longer than the first time, they might even be worth echoing in a new work: informed by the first and inspiring the second.

The only thing after modernism is more modernism. And that is the concise message of a painting such as Michael Davidson's "Elegy to The American Republic". More than a mere observation of an imperial power in aesthetic decline, or a worshipful glance towards a great master painter of the recent past, by extension it is also a touching elegy to modern painting itself. It is art of the recent future.

