

RED

Study Guide

Red by John Logan
Directed by Anders Cato
January 31 – February 26, 2012
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*Select articles courtesy of Goodman Theatre, Chicago, IL.
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Director's Notes

When reading about Mark Rothko's paintings, you often come upon language that art critics or art historians have borrowed from the theater. They are looking for a way to describe not only what is happening in the paintings, but also the process of looking at the paintings – what happens in the meeting between the painting and the viewer. Rothko himself, who in his youth had plans of becoming an actor, describes his paintings using terms from the theater. In his essay, "The Romantics Were Prompted," he writes:

I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers. They have been created from the need for a group of actors who are able to move dramatically without embarrassment and execute gestures without shame.

Neither the action nor the actors can be anticipated, or described in advance. They begin as an unknown adventure in an unknown space. It is at the moment of completion that in a flash of recognition, they are seen to have the quantity and function which was intended. Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur.

Rothko, who became increasingly reluctant to write about his own work, did not think that explanations or intellectual preparations were necessary to understand his paintings. He insisted all that was needed to appreciate his work was an open mind, a willingness to see. He tried to create an intimacy – a space where the viewer and the painting could meet freely and where the emotional response would occur spontaneously. Rothko said that his pictures were "involved with the scale of human feelings, the human drama, as much of it as I can express."

Just like Rothko's paintings, a performance begins as "an unknown adventure in an unknown space." The characters of a play are like Rothko's shapes of color – they need our participation to come alive. Their deepest secrets are ultimately a reflection of our secrets. Their tragedy is given depth and magnitude by our experience and it is through us they gain the courage to confront their loss and transcend their fears.

In my mind, Rothko's greatest achievement was opening up a space for the viewer to become a true collaborator in the creative process. Ultimately, Rothko found a form, which eliminated all the obstacles between himself and the viewer and created a new kind of painting in which the viewer's experience became a central component of its revelatory power (just like the audience member's experience is a central component of theater). As we enter his paintings, we enter a world that is not only uniquely his, but also uniquely our own. The paintings become a doorway to a new self that can perhaps only exist inside dreams and works of art, a self that is uncorrupted, free and somehow more true – the beginning of who we really are.

Rothko brought drama and theatrical revelation to the art of painting.

-Anders Cato, 2011, Director of GSP's Production of *Red* (also directed *Doubt*, *The Seafarer*, *Souvenir*, *Circle Mirror Transformation* and *I Am My Own Wife* at GSP).

Pictures as Dramas - The Work of Mark Rothko

By Erin Hogan

Mark Rothko was one of the artists who shaped a revolution in American painting that took place, historically speaking, in the blink of an eye. In the 1940s in New York, he and his cohorts—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Barnett Newman among the best known—absorbed and transformed the influence of European artists to forge a new visual language and form what many consider to be the first internationally recognized American avant-garde movement. They were called "Abstract Expressionists," but none of them had patience for the label. "Define Abstract Expressionism? I don't know what it means," Rothko said. "I don't get it and I don't think my work has anything to do with Expressionism, abstract or any other."

The artists resisted the label in part because it was vague, but primarily because their work could not have been more different and hardly formed a "school." Pollock and de Kooning favored an aggressive approach described by the critic Harold Rosenberg as "action painting." They were extremely physical with their canvases—de Kooning's nearly violent abrasions and scrapes, Pollock's paint-flinging dance across his compositions—and occupied the opposite end of the spectrum from the more cerebral Rothko and Newman. But the four artists are seen as the nucleus of the generation of American painters who digested the lessons in formal abstraction of Picasso and Kandinsky, passed it through the lens of Surrealism, and emerged on the other side with a monumental style based in color and line that reflected nothing less than the condition of being human.

Rothko's art education, like that of his fellow artists, came primarily from the Art Students League in New York, a loose and curriculum-free institution that provided teachers to artists for a nominal fee, functioning more as an adult education program than an art school in the traditional sense. Though the Art Students League had a wide variety of teachers, the education offered there was rooted in the Realist tradition, and this tradition shaped Rothko's early efforts as a painter. His first subjects were people—his family, groups of figures in urban settings, even the occasional self-portrait. One of these early Realist works, *Underground Fantasy [Subway]*, from 1940, depicts six people on a subway platform. Their bodies are elongated to match the structural columns of the subway station, and each figure occupies its own compartment, separated from each other by the columns. While the spatial treatment suggests a certain psychological component to the painting, the fact that Rothko was still depicting figures 15 years after his enrollment at the Art Students League shows how deeply Realism was entrenched in American artists.

Underground Fantasy [Subway] also reflects a burgeoning interest in the theories of the Surrealists, European artists who were beginning to arrive in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s as refugees from an increasingly intolerant and conflict-filled Europe. The Surrealists, led by André Breton, Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, introduced American artists to the belief that interior states—dreams, desires, repressed thoughts—deserved representation after centuries of paintings of the external world. They were well versed in the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and they plumbed the depths of their own psyches with spontaneous drawing games, word associations and outlandish behavior. In New York, they displayed their work in outrageous

exhibitions filled with miles of string and moving furniture. Deeply inspired by these artists, Rothko, as well as Pollock and Newman, filled their early sketchbooks and canvases with totemic figures, mythical subjects and dream imagery.

Rothko's works from the early 1940s show the prevalence of the Surrealist influence. He painted works with fantastical subjects and operatic titles—*The Syrian Bull* and *The Omen of the Eagle*—and drew directly from Surrealist imagery in works such as *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea*. Painted just four years after his isolating and claustrophobic subway platform, *Slow Swirl* demonstrates a definitive shift in Rothko's work as his human figures evolved into biomorphic creatures. Though the painting still clearly references a landscape with a legible foreground, middle ground and background, the composition is given over to two forms composed primarily of lines and suggestions of organs and bones, all organized into human shapes defined by necks and hips. Around them the landscape is punctuated by bursts of line and color, symbols that don't symbolize anything. *Slow Swirl at the Edge of the Sea* is the result of a figurative painter working his way through the Surrealist language.

Rothko's Surrealist phase was relatively brief, and he would spend the next few years slowly divesting his paintings of any suggestion of symbols or hints of figures to arrive at what we now recognize as his signature style, the idiom that occupied him until his death in 1970. And though he eliminated his explicit Surrealist-derived language, he retained the interest in psychological states that he initially explored through his early figurative work. "I'm not an Abstractionist," he would say later. "I'm not interested in the relationship of color to form, or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on. And if you are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!"

His paintings from 1948 until his death—the "Rothkos"—are large square or rectangular works in which loosely defined fields of color, also square or rectangular, emanate from a shallow background, creating the impression that these fields float or hover over the surface of the canvas. For the rest of his life Rothko would work with this same structure while introducing variations—in the colors themselves, the shape and number of the fields, and vertical or horizontal orientations. The paintings, mostly done in oil paint with late, brief excursions into acrylic, are rich and luminous, and descriptions of the paintings—"a loosely defined red square sits on top of a purple rectangle, all in front of a yellow background"—fall far short of the experience of standing in front of them.

Central to the experience is the size of the paintings. These mature works are quite large, compared by some art historians to doorways or large windows. For the artist, the size was used as a primary means to surround the viewer. "I paint large pictures because I want to create a state of intimacy," Rothko said. "To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside the experience. Paint the larger picture and you are in it. It takes you with it. It isn't something you control." To further shape the experience of the viewer, Rothko was meticulous about the presentation of his canvases, specifying down to the inch the height at which his paintings should be hung and the amount of space needed between his works and others. On more than one occasion, he even withdrew from exhibitions because his conditions were not met, and he felt his paintings were either not shown to their full advantage or were too close to those of another artist.

These conditions were of utmost importance to Rothko because he had a heightened sensitivity to the fate of his paintings. He spoke about them as if they were his children and fretted about their ability to survive outside the studio. "A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the observer," he explained. "It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world. How often it must be permanently impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruel." While he might not have been able to control who would look at his paintings—the unfeeling, the cruel—he certainly did his best to control the encounter they would have with his work. (This impulse reaches its most brilliant realization in the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, where 14 monumental paintings line the walls of a nondenominational sanctuary.)

Those who view Rothko's classic paintings in a spirit of companionship—contemplating them as the artist did when he would spend hours simply staring at an emerging canvas—become aware of a subtle action taking place on the canvas. "I think of my pictures as dramas; the shapes in the pictures are the performers," Rothko said. Like actors, the shapes create and resolve tension, bringing a painting equilibrium in the same way that a novelist or playwright sets characters in motion and eventually offers resolution. A large red square might emerge aggressively from the background and then be counterbalanced or reined in by a smaller but more color-saturated purple rectangle. In a different work, a dark square painted at the top edge of the composition might appear to hover over the surface of the canvas, tethered to the painting only by a counterbalanced shape at the bottom edge. The push/pull of the paintings occurs in every direction: across a two-dimensional axis of horizontal and vertical and across a suggested three-dimensional axis above and below the plane of the canvas. Encompassing the entire visual field, Rothko's paintings give the viewer the feeling of stepping into an alternate world, one without recognizable shapes or symbols but that nonetheless pulses with energy, movement and luminosity.

When Rothko was working, he would stare at his canvases for hours, never lifting a brush. It was his opportunity to arrange his performers and tell his story: Would there be two or three or four actors? How would they create tension? How would it be resolved? What is the mood of the performance—somber, bright, doomed, brash, troubled, lush? Rothko's power lay in his ability to create a maximum amount of incident and movement with a minimum of means, just colors and shapes. He would not have seen it that way, though. For him, colors and shapes were not minimal means; they were simply everything.

View Rothko's paintings online:

National Gallery of Art: <http://www.nga.gov/feature/rothko/>

Museum of Modern Art: http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=79687

Alienation and Artistry: The Life of Mark Rothko

By Neena Arndt

Widely considered one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, Mark Rothko was an Abstract Expressionist painter and a fiercely intellectual art theorist. In creating his artwork, Rothko drew from a deep emotional and intellectual well, proclaiming "the exhilarated tragic experience is for me the only source of art." A man of complexity and contradictions, Rothko was sometimes warm and generous but other times withdrawn, his mercurial personality resulting, perhaps, from his lifelong feelings of isolation and marginalization.

Born Marcus Rothkowitz in Dvinsk, Russia, in 1903, Rothko spent his early years studying the Talmud in a nation in which Jews suffered constant persecution. When he was 10 years old, his family immigrated to Portland, Oregon. There, Rothko rapidly learned English and excelled in school, and at 17 earned a scholarship to Yale University. He found himself to be an outsider in the Ivy League, then a bastion of elite WASP culture; while at Yale, he co-founded *The Yale Saturday Evening Post*, a satirical publication which lampooned the bourgeois attitudes he came to loathe. Disillusioned, he dropped out after two years and moved to New York.

In the early 1920s, New York's art culture lacked the vivacity of Paris', and was still focused primarily on Realism rather than on the avant-garde movements—such as Cubism, Surrealism and Dada—which had exploded in Europe in the early years of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, New York provided more exposure to art than Rothko had yet seen. While visiting a friend at the Art Students League, he saw students sketching a model, and decided to enroll in classes himself. Earning a living as an art teacher by day Rothko painted by night, joining with other artists to form a group called "The Ten," whose mission was "to protest against the reputed equivalence of American painting and literal painting." In a relatively brief time Rothko experienced significant success, especially after a well received one-man show in 1935 at the Contemporary Arts Gallery; but he still felt alienated from mainstream society, not only because of his cultural background but also because of his increasingly nontraditional approach to his art. It was during this period that he changed his name from the ethnically specific "Marcus Rothkowitz" to the bland yet enigmatic moniker "Mark Rothko," in part a response to the growing Nazi influence in Europe.

By the 1950s, Rothko's artistic success was unquestionable, but this accomplishment awakened in him a new anxiety: he feared that critics, curators and the public misunderstood his work and consumed it only because it had become fashionable, particularly after *Fortune* magazine touted his paintings as good investments. This anxiety famously erupted in 1958 when Rothko was commissioned to paint a series of murals for the new Four Seasons restaurant. Rothko finished the murals, but after touring the near-complete restaurant decided that the dining atmosphere smacked of pretension and snobbery, and refused to display his works there. In returning the commission money, Rothko rejected a culture which in his eyes had so long rejected him.

For the remainder of his life, Rothko continued to work, creating large paintings for the Rothko Chapel in the 1960s. The Chapel, located in Houston, Texas, is a holy space that is open to all faiths, but belongs to none—ultimately, in Rothko’s mind, a more suitable environment for his work than the Four Seasons restaurant.

In 1968, Rothko was diagnosed with a mild aortic aneurysm; despite this, he continued to smoke and drink heavily, and the resulting decline in his health affected his ability to create the large-scale canvases for which he had become known. This led to increasingly frequent bouts of depression and, in 1969, the disintegration of his marriage. A year later, a young assistant found him stretched out on his studio floor in a pool of blood, his arms slashed in an undisputable suicide. Rothko left no note for his wife and two children, but left the world a lasting legacy of awe-inspiring, emotionally raw paintings.

About the playwright

John Logan graduated from Northwestern University in 1983 before making his mark as a writer in the burgeoning 1980s Chicago theater scene. He received the Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critic Circle and Drama League awards for his play *RED*. This play premiered at the Donmar Warehouse in London and at the Golden Theatre on Broadway. He is the author of more than a dozen other plays including *NEVER THE SINNER* and *HAUPTMANN*. His adaptation of Ibsen's *THE MASTER BUILDER* premiered on the West End in 2003. As a screenwriter, Logan had three movies released in 2011: *HUGO*, *CORIOLANUS* and *RANGO*. Previous film work includes *SWEENEY TODD* (Golden Globe award); *THE AVIATOR* (Oscar, Golden Globe, BAFTA and WGA nominations); *GLADIATOR* (Oscar, Golden Globe, BAFTA and WGA nominations); *THE LAST SAMURAI*; *ANY GIVEN SUNDAY*, and *RKO 281* (WGA award, Emmy nomination).

A Conversation with John Logan

Q: What was the impetus for *Red*?

John Logan: My initial attraction was to the Seagram murals themselves. I was in London filming *Sweeney Todd*, so I was there for months on end, and one day I walked into the Tate Modern and went to the room with the Seagram murals. They had a very powerful effect on me. I knew very little about Mark Rothko, very little about Abstract Expressionism, but I found the paintings themselves profoundly moving and kinetic in a strange way. I went to the wall and read a little description about how he painted them originally for the Seagram Building and then decided to keep them and give the money back. And I thought, "Well, this is an interesting story." So I decided that I would read a little more about it, and the more I read the more I thought that it was a play. And I almost immediately thought it was a two-hander play with Rothko and a young assistant. The shape of the play came to me very early in the contemplation of the work.

Q: Do you have a background or training in visual art?

JL: No. None whatsoever. The great, daunting challenge of *Red* is that Mark Rothko is such an intellectually challenging artist and he knew where he belonged in the continuum of his art. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of painting and of artists, so I realized I would have to gain a significant understanding of art history. I started with Abstract Expressionism and Rothko, and then I realized I needed to go back to what inspired him, and then I had to go all the way back. I spent eight or nine months researching art history. Going to museums, looking at paintings, and trying to see which artists had inspired Rothko, how he fit into the tradition, and why and how he broke with tradition. In a way it was like learning a new language for me—the language of visual art. It was necessary because that language was Mark Rothko's frame of reference. Mark Rothko didn't go to the movies, he didn't read books, he didn't listen to radio, he didn't go to the theater, and he didn't go to the opera. He would listen to records, but his frame of reference, his world, was entirely that of painting. So before the character could speak about anything, I felt as though I had to have some facility in the visual arts and in the specifics of the language of art history.

Q: In what ways is Rothko important as an artist, or as an Abstract Expressionist?

JL: He's important because of his absolute, uncompromising purity. He deeply believed that art mattered. He felt that it should be like a religious experience, and his great dream was to create a space that was like a church. He wanted people to take art that seriously because he believed it was redemptive. He believed that it was important to the human spirit to create art, to experience art, to be open to art because he truly believed it allowed an exultation of the heart and the spirit. He was rigorous about exploring those themes in his work. I think he did something that no one else has quite done—particularly in Abstract Expressionism—and that is to create something that is profoundly simple and profoundly moving. There's no clutter, there's nothing unnecessary; his paintings are austere and savage. They're like Greek tragedies. They're not Racine, they're not Chekhov, they're not Ibsen—they're Aeschylus. They're that pure and that strong. And I think his contemporaries were influenced by other movements in art: Op Art, Pop Art, Impressionism. Rothko was too, of course, but he stayed the course on his vision, on single-mindedly doing what he believed he could do. He was never as popular as Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol, but he created art earnestly and completely and with his heart and soul. And I think for any artist that's admirable.

Q: Do you think Rothko's level of dedication to his art had anything to do with his relationship to religion or faith? He was not religious as an adult, but do you see vestiges of his Jewish upbringing in his work?

JL: Yes, I think there's a rabbinical streak to his work. And he brought a Talmudic seriousness and level of analysis to everything he did, while still letting it be pure and simple.

Q: In addition to needing to understand Rothko's work in the context of art history, you also faced the challenge of portraying an infamous historical person on stage. How did you approach that?

JL: Considering he's such a major artist there's not a whole lot of biographical information out there. There's one major biography, by James E.B. Breslin. It's very detailed and sensitively written, and it not only gives you an overview of his life, but also a lot of interpretation of Rothko's work. Rothko's own writings about art are also useful. He was a very important essayist on art and a very challenging thinker. It took me an incredible amount of time to work through the logic to understand them because his thoughts are so complex. So general biographical work, specific art history analysis and his own writings became the bedrock of understanding what his voice was going to be.

Q: And what about Rothko's young assistant in the play, Ken? Was he inspired by an actual person?

JL: No, he's not based on an actual assistant. I just wanted him to be an emotionally agile person who begins the play in a really vulnerable position: wanting a hero. The point about writing a two-person play is that it's a binary relationship. You have to let the characters respond to one another and segue back and forth. I knew that Rothko would have to be the prow of an ocean liner cutting through the ocean and Ken would have to be the wave that billows around it for most of the play.

Q: One of the major ideas in the play is the idea that the son has to eventually kill the father, metaphorically speaking. Is that something that comes directly from Rothko?

JL: No, that was entirely me. To me the play is really not about art at all, it's not about painting; it's about fathers and sons. I think people respond to the flamboyant grandeur and intensity of the character, but what

really moves them is the father-son relationship. I wanted to write a play about teachers and students, mentors and protégés, fathers and sons. To me the piece has always been very domestic. Rothko had an awareness of young artists and an awareness of responsibility to young artists, but he wasn't a teacher in any traditional sense. In fact, the relationship he has with Ken, his assistant, is not like the relationships he had with his actual assistants, which were very utilitarian. They were servants who did what he wanted them to do, but for the purposes of the play I allowed them to build a relationship.

Q: Why did you choose to tell this story on stage rather than on screen?

JL: I thought painting on stage would be really arresting and exciting. Movies are metaphorical by nature—things seem to be literal but they're not. But when two men prime a canvas on stage, you're seeing a real thing happen; the paint is really splattering over the actors. I wanted to do a work play, a play about all the things artists do. They're not sitting around talking about painting—they're painting. They're stretching canvases, washing brushes, eating, doing all the minutiae of what they do. And from the very beginning, I knew it was going to be a play about language. The characters talk, I hope, in an exciting, muscular, visceral way, but they're talking. And one thing cinema doesn't do, at least not for great stretches of time, is dialogue. It doesn't deal with the nuances of language. And since Rothko, as a man and as a character, is such a verbally dexterous person, everything about it said theater to me.

Q: You're very busy as a screenwriter, but do you also plan to write more plays?

JL: Yes. I started out writing plays, and theater has always been incredibly important to me. I have an active and satisfying career in screenwriting which I hope to continue for as long as I live. But the theater especially is something I'm drawn to. I always say, "Movies are my wife but theater is my mistress." With *Red*, I rediscovered what it's like to be a playwright and that was very fulfilling. As soon as *Red* was up and running, I started working on a new play because it's satisfying work. And I'm working on the book for a couple of musicals, so my plan is to keep stepping between both worlds. I hope my movie work will inform my stage work and my stage work will inform my movie work. I've only ever wanted to be one thing: a dramatist. Whether I'm writing lines that are going to be spoken on film or on stage or book scenes for musicals that will then segue into songs, it's still being a dramatist. People frequently ask me, "Is writing plays different from writing movies?" My answer is no, not at all. Every day I wake up to write lines for actors and I hope I will continue to be able to do that for many years, in many venues.

Rothko and the Four Seasons

By Steve Scott

When the Mies van der Rohe-designed Seagram Building was completed in 1958, it brought a bold new look to the New York skyline: lean, icily spare and unmistakably contemporary. Planned by designer Phyllis Lambert (the daughter of Seagram's director, Edgar Bronfman) and architect Philip Johnson, the imposing new structure housed what was intended to be Gotham's most opulent restaurant, the Four Seasons, which was elegantly nestled in a pavilion folding out of the Seagram's ground floor. Amid the restaurant's pools, foliage and sumptuous stone and metal fittings, Lambert and Johnson created space for the installation of art whose modernism matched the revolutionary feel of the building as a whole. Their choice to create that art? Mark Rothko; considered by many the preeminent Abstract Expressionist painter of his day.

Despite his well-known loathing of commercialism, Rothko apparently accepted the commission gladly, perhaps to trump the greater popular fame of contemporaries like Jackson Pollock. Journalist John Fischer, an acquaintance of Rothko's, offered a different motive: in a *Harper's* article published after the artist's death, Fischer wrote that Rothko's intent was characteristically subversive, hoping to offend the "richest bastards in New York" who would patronize the restaurant, famously declaring, "I hope to ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room." Indeed, Rothko's main aesthetic model for the room was Michelangelo's vestibule of the Laurentian Library in Florence, an environment that Rothko admired because it made viewers feel "that they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are bricked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall."

In order to replicate the room's space, Rothko leased a studio in the Bowery whose dimensions matched those of the Four Seasons and began work in late 1958. The assignment proved torturously difficult; the artist eventually created three different series of paintings for the room over a period of about eight months. Although given carte blanche for the project by Lambert and Johnson, Rothko eventually butted heads with them, especially over the height at which the paintings would be displayed; Johnson's intent that the paintings be hung high up on the wall so that the heads of diners would be below the works was antithetical to Rothko's insistence that his works should be hung no higher than four and a half feet off the ground. Completing work in the spring of 1959, Rothko and his family embarked on a European tour during which the Four Seasons project apparently continued to gnaw at him; upon his return to New York that summer, he dined with his wife in the newly opened restaurant, and that evening called a friend to say that he was sending back the commissioning fee and withdrawing his work. "Anybody who will eat that kind of food for those kinds of prices," he reportedly told his assistant, "will never look at a painting of mine."

Over a decade later, Rothko completed a series of lengthy negotiations with London's Tate Gallery for display of nine of the Four Seasons paintings, which he allowed only after assurances that they would be displayed in their own room. Ironically, the paintings arrived at the Tate on the morning of Rothko's suicide, on February 25, 1970. Today, some of the murals are still housed in the Tate's newest gallery building, the Tate Modern.

Questions for Discussion:

What does Rothko learn from Ken?

What does Ken learn from Rothko?

What is Rothko afraid of? What does the color black represent to him?

Why is Rothko so dismissive of the emerging pop artists, the generation of painters that Ken belongs to?

Why has Rothko accepted the commission to paint a series of murals for the Four Seasons restaurant?

The play includes a discussion of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* - a book which strongly influenced Rothko. What is the idea that Nietzsche presents in the book? Is there a Dionysian element in your life? And is there an Apollonian element in your life?

How do you respond to Rothko's paintings? Do you find that they evoke an emotional response from you?

What does Rothko ask of the viewer? What does he think is important when you look at art?