



205 Robert Motherwell

1915 – 1991 American

August Sea #5

acrylic and charcoal on canvas, initialed and dated 1972 and on verso signed, titled, dated and inscribed with stock #138169 on the Dunkelmann gallery label
72 x 48 in, 182.9 x 121.9 cm

PROVENANCE

Lawrence Rubin Gallery, New York, 1972
Dunkelman Gallery, Toronto
The Joan Stewart Clarke Collection, Vancouver

LITERATURE

Jack Flam, Katy Rogers and Tim Clifford, *Robert Motherwell Paintings and Collages: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1941 - 1991, Volume 2: Paintings on Canvas and Panel*, 2012, reproduced page 342, catalogue #P671

EXHIBITED

Lawrence Rubin Gallery, New York, *Robert Motherwell*, October 21 – November 8, 1972, catalogue #2

ROBERT MOTHERWELL WAS one of the giants of American Abstract Expressionism (AbEx), itself arguably the most significant distinctively American art movement of the twentieth century. In the hands of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, Motherwell and others, AbEx, or “New York School” painting, was the centre of international art world interest in the 1940s and 1950s.

The movement is often subdivided in terms of a painting’s genesis and appearance. Artists, curators, critics and academics speak of the optically energized “colour field” approach of Rothko, for example, and contrast it with the more painterly and physically exuberant surfaces typical of Willem de Kooning and of Pollock (often titled “action painting”). While Motherwell produced memorable work in both modes—his immense, painterly canvases in the series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (begun in 1948) are prime examples of the more overtly expressive approach, while his later, expansive and richly hued works such as *August Sea #5* helped to define abstract colour-field painting—he also bridged what was and remains a rather artificial divide between these procedures and aesthetic goals.

Perhaps this is because, more than any of the many prominent artists of this generation, Motherwell was aware of art history (he studied with the famed Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University) and the contributions of AbEx’s various modes and innovations to this history. In addition to and entwined with his elite artistic work and in kinship with the pioneering generation of abstractionists, especially Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, he was a tremendously generative art theorist, writer, editor and publisher of artists’ writings (most notably, the Documents of Modern Art series, renamed the Documents of Twentieth-Century Art).

Motherwell was an experimenter in the idioms of abstract painting. Keenly aware of the art and art history being made around him, he became expert in styles of painting that stemmed from, but also superseded, AbEx. In the exquisitely elegant



Portrait of a group of American abstract artists, collectively known as “The Irascibles”, New York, November 24, 1950
FRONT ROW: Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James Brooks, Mark Rothko
MIDDLE ROW: Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziotos, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin
BACK ROW: Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne
Photo: Nina Leen / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images



Robert Motherwell on the balcony of his home, East Hamptons, New York, 1965
 Photo: Robert R. McElroy / Getty Images

August Sea #5, he perfects what critic Clement Greenberg extolled in 1964 as “Post-painterly abstraction,” a style that eschewed what Greenberg and others had come to see as the self-indulgent excesses of some of AbEx’s surface painterliness and the dogma of expressing oneself. Exemplified by artists such as Kenneth Noland from the USA and Canada’s Jack Bush, Post-painterly abstraction took a cooler emotional approach that featured saturated colour and subtle gesture. Even without its referential title, *August Sea #5* has an appealing liquidity. On the surface we see more than a reflection of the colour and surfaces of the sea and sky; instead, the work enacts these qualities in hue and touch.

Abstraction’s evolving capabilities and relevance were key motivators for Motherwell. Writing on Mondrian in 1942 (when the master was living in New York City), Motherwell stated, “as Meyer Schapiro had remarked of modern art in general, Mondrian’s art has the value of a *demonstration*...”¹ On the generalized plane of implication that abstract art in Motherwell’s hands sought, an individual work can demonstrate the ongoing perceptual and emotional potency of abstract art in general.

August Sea #5 can also be related to Mondrian in a more specific way. We can assume that Motherwell was more than passingly familiar with the Dutch painter’s breakthrough *Pier and Ocean* series, undertaken circa 1915 in his response to Cubism. Here Mondrian deployed his signature orthogonal forms to suggest the subtle exchange of energy between water and pier. In charcoal, Motherwell boldly inscribes just one diagonal and one nearly vertical line; this passage is Mondrian simplified, but it is also independent, as Mondrian famously insisted on exact right-angle geometries in this series, whereas Motherwell’s upright line playfully tilts to the diagonal. Mondrian sometimes emphasized the ebb and flow of ocean against structure with abundant light pigment on the surface, overlaying his grid structure—for example, in *Pier and Ocean 5 (Sea and Starry Sky)*, 1915, collection of MoMA (figure 1). Again, Motherwell is more subtle than Mondrian while retaining the allusion and illusion. To the right of the vertical line in *August Sea #5*, the blue paint is inflected with lighter and darker patches that suggest how waves encounter a pier and then ruffle the surfaces of the water. Below the horizontal line we see a much



FIGURE 1: **PIET MONDRIAN**
Pier and Ocean 5 (Sea and Starry Sky)
 charcoal and watercolor on paper, 1915
 34 3/4 x 44 in, 87.9 x 111.7 cm
 Museum of Modern Art, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund
 Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Not for sale with this lot

bolder version of this demonstration, allowing us to imagine that the dark blue perturbation of the surface is a wave breaking against a breakwater.

Yet another aspect of Motherwell’s painting engages with one of Mondrian’s preoccupations: edges and boundaries. The Dutch artist’s autograph Neoplastic paintings of the 1920s and 1930s embody numerous subtle stops, beginnings and intersections of orthogonal lines, both across the surface and especially at its edges (whether the canvas is framed or not). Motherwell’s assertive horizontal line all but touches the work’s reveal on the left side yet holds back, forming an imperfect right angle. His slightly tapered vertical line, however, resists the magnetic pull of the frame completely, touching neither the nearby black line nor the perfect border established by the top reveal.

August Sea #5 enjoys one advantage of the best abstract art: to be simultaneously specific and universalizing. The painting demonstrates what abstraction can do after Mondrian and after AbEx but in specific terms. Motherwell spent summers on the ocean in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Colour and mood in this

painting are thus local, specific. He wrote of the sky in this locale as being “August blue”;² the blues here are indeed unique. At the same time, the painting is evocative of many people’s experiences of intense colour and movement around water, to this universal equipoise in nature.

We thank Mark Cheetham, Professor of Art History at the University of Toronto, for contributing the above essay. Cheetham is the author of two books on abstract art: *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* and *Abstract Art Against Autonomy: Infection, Resistance, and Cure since the 60s*.

1. “Notes on Mondrian and de Chirico,” in *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, by Robert Motherwell, ed. Dore Ashton and Joan Banach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 16.
2. Quoted in *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, 62.

ESTIMATE: \$2,000,000 – 2,500,000