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Review of Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique

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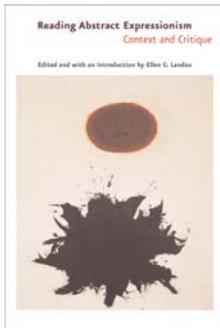
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READING ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM: CONTEXT AND CRITIQUE / Edited by Ellen G. Landau.--
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, April 2005.--624 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-300-10613-0: \$39.95.



Abstract Expressionism has fascinated both art enthusiasts and historians since it emerged in the mid-twentieth century. The controversial artwork, colorful characters, and lively debate surrounding the movement persist as the subject of scholarly discussion and contemporary film. The number of publications continues to grow with the increasing popularity of expressionist exhibitions. Artist monographs and selective anthologies have been readily available. Noteworthy contributions in the 1990s were David and Cecile Shapiro's *Abstract Expressionism: A Critical Record* (New York, NY:: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Clifford Ross's *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics: An Anthology* (New York, NY: H.N. Abrams, 1990). Despite the profusion of scholarly works, a comprehensive collection of key critical writings and significant primary documents by artists, critics, and scholars has been missing.

Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique is Landau's ambitious attempt to fill this void in the literature. The author carefully defines her objectives in the preface. Rather than simply recreate a chronological description of the development of the art itself, Landau seeks to construct an "examination of trends in writing about the critics, art, and artists." The book presents the major approaches and crucial arguments of the Abstract Expressionists while exploring the continuing impact of the critical controversy surrounding it.

Since the monograph is a study of the critical writings and their interpretations,, the artists represented are those most frequently commented upon in the existing literature. Not surprisingly, Landau uses her extensive knowledge of Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner as a catalyst for discussion. The author readily admits that while scholars may question her decision to exclude or minimize the role of certain artists regularly identified with the movement, the selection criteria was in part dictated by space considerations.

The content is well organized and thoroughly indexed. Landau's detailed and lengthy introduction provides the appropriate backdrop for delving into the subsequent selections. The introduction, readings, and bibliography are conveniently arranged by decade: 1940s: Mythologizing the Movement, 1950s: Establishing Authority, 1960s: Consolidating the Canon, 1970s: Emerging Contexts and Closer Readings, 1980s: Reading New Significations and 1990s: Redefining Abstract Expressions. Although relatively few in number, the black-and-white illustrations and color plates provide a broad sampling of the major artists examined.

The selection of readings features previously published materials in addition to original material from artists' papers and scrapbooks in the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. The diverse collection ranges from classic essays, interviews, critical commentaries, artist statements and radio transcripts.

This book is a dynamic contribution to the literature. It is recommended for academic, art and public libraries with significant holdings on twentieth-century art.

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