Acknowledgments

It is an honor for the Baruch College Gallery to present a group of Bradley Walker Tomlin's magnificent paintings. The exhibition could not have been organized without the expertise and assistance of guest curator Jeanne Chenault Porter and the advice of Jack Tilton. For their special efforts we thank Sandy Summer, Miriam Allen, and Lenora Rock. Above all, we are grateful to the museums and collectors who generously lent their paintings.

Katherine B. Crum
Director
Baruch College Gallery

Introduction

In 1989, with its figurative painting and appropriated imagery, this exhibition might appropriately be given the subtitle "Looking Back at the Avant-Garde." The famous Abstract Expressionists who comprised the New York School of the late 1940s and 1950s are now our Old Masters. The group was never artistically homogenous but, in the words of Barnett Newman, consisted of "a collection of individual voices."

For many New Yorkers Bradley Walker Tomlin's name may bring to mind the huge monochromatic painting Number 20, (1949) which is perpetually on display at the Museum of Modern Art. The work is a masterpiece despite its restrained palette, which is exceptional and seemingly out of character. For like Philip Guston, who dedicated a painting to him in 1952, Tomlin was a colorist. Guston remembered above all "how Tomlin could take an old yellow and a dirty white and make them sing." Nevertheless, out of an apparent desire to be involved in the experimentation carried out by the painters of the New York School, he occasionally purged his paintings of all but black and white during the late 1940s, as seen in Tension by Moonlight of 1948.
Tomlin was an elder member of the Abstract Expressionist group and, as Rothko stated in his toast given at the dinner following Tomlin's funeral, "the first of our family to leave us." Prior to his death in 1953 Tomlin spent only eight years among avant-garde artists. A "painter's painter," he was highly regarded by his colleagues. In 1962 Hans Hofmann dedicated his Memoria in Aeternum to him and to four other deceased American artists, including Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Arshile Gorky and Arthur B. Carles. Robert Motherwell referred to Tomlin as an "elan into light, one of the rare joyous spirits in the Abstract Expressionist group." In 1956 Guston wrote about Tomlin:

As sometimes happens with artists, Bradley Walker Tomlin was very much like his paintings. Thinking of them, I remember how he would appear at his door or advancing toward you on the street -- not at all hesitant, firm, yet not presuming, wondering did he dare continue the already experienced or must he begin all over again?

Tomlin has been described as looking like an impoverished aristocrat. "One would have thought he was the son of an Anglican bishop," said Motherwell... (but) "he loved painters and painting, this is the essential fact about him." Tomlin's painting has inspired such adjectives as elegant, ethereal, and deeply playful. One critic referred to it as "eye-music."

Tomlin took great delight in debunking comparisons made between his painting and the music of Bach, brought to mind by the pervasive order which controls the whimsy.

Although he often displayed stodgy political and social conservatism, much to the amusement of his fellow painters, as an artist he was always open to change. After four trips to Europe Tomlin became receptive to both foreign and domestic influence. Among his earliest catalysts were Demuth and Cezanne. Around 1930 he emulated briefly the art of El Greco; during the 1930s after seeing an exhibition of Joan Miro, he completed the tiny abstract water colors which illustrate his interest in Surrealism. One of his trips to Europe, he met Gertrude Stein, to whom he dedicated a painting in 1949.

Many of the sources of inspiration frequently seen in the paintings of the New York School are immediately recognizable in Tomlin's work. Figurative Surrealism and the structure of cubism are juxtaposed in Outward Preoccupation (1939) and Reclining Figure (1940). The psychic improvisation (automatism) of Tomlin's Small Wind Disturbing a Bonfire (1948) is a reinterpretation of non-objective Surrealism. Adaptation of Far Eastern calligraphy (wild draft script) is evident in the bamboo pen and ink drawing of 1949.

Techniques of revival and experimentation were shared by members of the Abstract Expressionist group. There was great rivalry, usually amicable, among them, and some of the more vocal ones took credit for virtually all innovations. Although among the most erudite and eloquent, along with Newman and Motherwell, Tomlin was modest, more interested in painting than in self-promotion. A man of personal as well as artistic integrity, Tomlin remained objective about stylistic modes which were different from his own and, on a personal level, was as much a friend of Pollock as of Motherwell.
It is interesting to contemplate what direction Tomlin's painting might have taken had he lived longer. His one-man exhibitions, all in New York City, included two at the Montross Gallery in 1926 and 1927, two at the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery in 1931 and 1944, and two at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950 and 1953. As his toughest self-critic, Tomlin destroyed many of his paintings, particularly those from the 1920s and 1930s, in bonfires in his back yard in Woodstock. Since his death there have been retrospectives at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1957, and in 1975 at Hofstra University, a year-long exhibition which travelled to the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, The Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, the University of Nebraska, and the University of California at Berkeley.

Compared to the other Abstract Expressionists, Tomlin has received little attention. More than a decade has passed since the Hofstra show, and it is time, once again, to consider his art in its various phases of development. What emerges is an "individual voice" which can be mistaken for no other.

Jeanne Chenault Porter
Associate Professor of Art History
The Pennsylvania State University

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BRADLEY WALKER TOMLIN
Checklist of the exhibition

1. Untitled landscape
c. 1920
Oil on academy board. 8 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches
Susan Blakney

2. Fruit Basket
c. 1925
Oil on canvas. 12 1/2 x 17 5/8 inches
Collection Sid Deyne Gallery

3. Studio Window
c. 1927
Oil on canvas. 39 x 32 1/8 inches
The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania
Lambert Fund Purchase

4. Flowers
c. 1928
Oil on canvas. 23 x 19 inches
Collection John C. Parsons
5. Untitled  
c. 1937  
Collage. 12 x 14 inches  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Marsden London

6. Untitled  
c. 1937  
Watercolor on brown cardboard. 8 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches  
Collection Sid Deutsch Gallery

7. Outward Preoccupation  
1939  
Oil on canvas. 34 1/2 x 46 inches  
Collection Mrs. Jackson Burke

8. Reclining Figure  
c. 1940  
Oil on canvas. 22 x 34 inches  
Collection Mr. and Mrs. Marsden London

9. Music Rack  
1944  
Oil on canvas. 42 1/8 x 24 15/16 inches  
Collection of Cranbrook Academy of Art  
Museum Gift of the Cranbrook Foundation

10. Tension by Moonlight  
1948  
Oil on canvas. 32 x 44 inches  
Collection Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse  
Gift of Mrs. Kathleen Tomlin, 1978

11. Number 3  
1948  
Oil on canvas. 40 x 50 1/8 inches  
The Museum of Modern Art.  
Gift of John E. Hutchins in memory of  
Frances E. Marder Hutchins, 1960

12. Small Wind Disturbing a Bonfire  
1949  
Oil on canvas. 23 x 44 inches  
Collection Herbert Ferber

13. Untitled  
1949  
Oil on canvas. 19 1/2 x 35 inches  
Private collection, Chicago, Illinois

14. Untitled  
1949  
Bamboo pen drawing and brush on both sides  
of paper. 9 x 11 1/2 inches  
Collection Calvert Coggeshall
15. **Cadence in Stillness**  
1949  
Oil on canvas. 24 x 45 inches  
Collection Edward Diehl

16. **Number 3**  
Oil on canvas. 23 x 31 inches  
1950  
Collection Mrs. Rufus King

17. **Number 1**  
1950  
Oil on canvas. 70 x 42 inches  
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York  
Edward W. Root Bequest

18. **Number 7**  
1951  
Oil on canvas. 52 x 42 inches  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
F.M. Hall Collection

19. **Number 4**  
1952  
Oil on canvas. 61 3/4 x 50 inches  
Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York  
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller III

20. **Number 5**  
1952  
Oil on canvas. 79 x 45 inches  
Collection William Rayner

21. **Number 15**  
1913  
Oil on canvas. 46 x 76 inches  
Private collection