MOTHERWELL

FIRST RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

OPENING APRIL 24 - 8 P. M. APRIL 24 - MAY 23, 1959

IN

THE NEW GALLERY

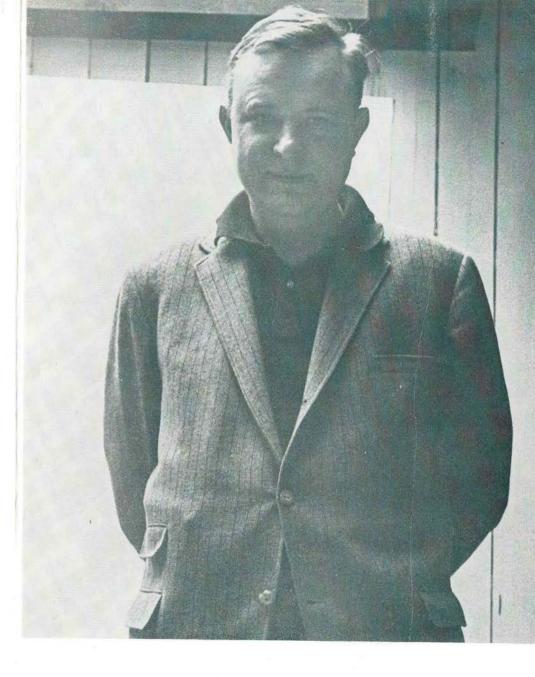
BENNINGTON COLLEGE

BENN NGTON COLLEGE LIBRARY A retrospective exhibition of an artist's work lands you in the position of Alice before the Looking Glass. The painter and his public are in luck. This vague dream which is our life in time rarely offers an occasion for the simultaneous biographical vision. Who else beside the artist can assemble pieces of himself in one room, unveiling twenty years with a glance? The exposure, of course,, is merciless and the step through the Looking Glass may discover the true blood of the poet, —or not.

In the present instance there can be no doubt about the true blood. Motherwell, though ten years younger than the generation of painters with whom he is usually identified, is solidly established as one of the major American painters of the post-War decade. His bright leap to honor among his contemporaries seems to have occurred overnight; from university student to full-fledged painter took the space of perhaps two years, no more. But that is the way of art. The moment the brush is taken in hand you are responsible for all its history and its creations. As E. M. Forster put it, Pegasus must be captured with one throw of the rope.

Too often, of course, youth is capable of what age is not. Again, there is no doubt about Motherwell. Though certainly not aged, he is mature, in his forties, and proving year by year that a real retrospective is decades away. Yet the present retrospective is not premature. The trajectory is clearly plotted if one does not conceive it more explicit than that a fine artist is on his way. Prolific variety coupled to a strong personal manner proves the promise. And, I should add, the depth of vision.

Motherwell feels that the painting of his adopted generation is the "first tragic art since the baroque". One may perhaps associate that observation with another in which he says that his colleagues "are most intelligent artists



ROBERT MOTHERWELL

this he means, I take it, not I. Q. so much as the ability to use the head in a time when mind seems derelict in a Sargasso Sea of dangerous conventions, and when art must be made out of "worst possible values". In this connection one might note that most of the best contemporary painting is expressionist, which to the larger public often appears savage and irrational, just as Delacroix' and Van Gogh's work did to the publics of their eras. Yet one need only think of the Journal and the Letters to realize that great painting is as much a matter of the head as of the heart. One could say that in art the difference between the tragic and the maudlin is intelligence.

The depth of Motherwell's vision comes across best in his least complicated images, the black balls and verticals of the "Elegies" and in the recently emerging lozenge-shaped window. In these he arrives immediately at his epiphany, the telling coagulation of components sometimes brutally, but always compassionately, exposed in a brilliance of light as cathartic as it is tragic. Unlike literature, where the progress is forward toward revelation, in Motherwell's art ihe progress is from epiphany back into the realities of its composition. The time sequence is reversed. (This is always true of pictorial art, but never quite so much as in some recent painting, particularly the Motherwell "Elegies").

By realities of composition I do not suggest simply the means to the forms, the organization and the technique, nor probably even the forms themselves, but rather the way the conception realized itself in a gradual series of imperfections until, composed of its own kind of flaws, it rose to the instant of illumination. The history of these uncertainties, these hesitations so entirely natural in the face of the "worst possible values", somehow to be reconciled while recorded, is exactly Motherwell's picture. Thus the very beauty of the forms is pathetic and lies in the flaws they must accept as the condition of life. They know that to be awkward and ugly and anxious is their only chance of survival.

Just so the revelations in this retrospective. From the black interloper in the prophetic "Little Spanish Prison" to the impossible "Views" from the lozenge window we have stepped through the Looking Glass into the history of our times written in paint by a real man. "If I wasn't real, Alice said — half laughing through her tears, it seemed so ridiculous — "I shouldn't be able to cry."

-E. C. Goossen

CATALOGUE

1	ENGRAVING	1941
	Collection Mme. Pierre Chareau	
2	MEXICAN PORTRAIT	1941
3	WHITE PAINTING	1941
4	THE LITTLE SPANISH PRISON	1941
5	COLLAGE	1942
	Collection Mmc. Pierre Charcan	
6	DRAWING WITH PINK	1945
7	COLLAGE	1946
	Collection Paul Peters	
8	BLACK AND OCHRE PAINTING Collection J. Patrick Lannan	1947
9	PAINTING	1948-9

Collection Myron Simons

10	ORANGE COLLAGE	1948	
Collection Mark Rothko			
11	THE HOMELY PROTESTANT	1948	
12	THE ELEGY	1948	
Collection The Fogg Museum, Cambridge			
13	PAINTING	1952	
14	PREGNANT NUDE HOLDING CHILD	1953	
15	JE T'AIME, DRAWING	1955	
16	JE T'AIME	1955	
17	ELEGY FOR THE SPANISH REPUBLIC Collection Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo Gift of Scymour Knox	1954-58	
18	ASH WEDNESDAY	1957	
19	FOCKINK	1958	
20	IBERIA NO. 1	1958	
21	IBERIA NO. 2	1958	
22	SPANISH PICTURE WITH THE FACE OF A DOG	1958	
23	VIEW NO. 2	1958	
24	MADRID NO. 4	1958	
25	AFTERNOON IN BARCELONA Collection Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Maremount	1958	
26	BLACK PAINTING Collection Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ross	1958	
27	HELEN'S COLLAGE	1958	
28	VIEW	1959	
29	TWO FIGURES	1959	