

COLORFUL LANGUAGE: MORRIS LOUIS, FORMALIST
CRITICISM, AND MASCULINITY
IN POSTWAR AMERICA

By

Paul Vincent

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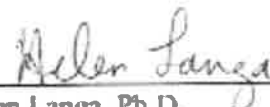
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Chair:


Helen Langa, Ph.D.


Andrea Pearson, Ph.D.


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To UNC-G professor Dr. Richard Gantt and my mother,
for their inspiration and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

American art at mid-century went through a pivotal shift when the dominant gestural style of Abstract Expressionism was criticized for its expressive painterly qualities in the 1950s. By 1960, critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried were already championing Color Field painting for its controlled use of color and flattened abstract forms. Morris Louis, whose art typifies this latter style, and the criticism written about his work provides a crucial insight into the socio-cultural implications behind this stylistic shift. An analysis of the formalist writing Greenberg used to promote Louis's work provides a better understanding of not only postwar American art but also the concepts of masculinity and gender hierarchy that factored into how it was discussed at the time.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

One of American art's major developments occurred during the middle of the twentieth century, near the end of the Second World War. As the United States emerged victorious from its fight with Germany, Italy, and Japan, the country also assumed an important international position with respect to modern art. America began to lead the way in avant-garde activity and experimentation. New York was touted as the new art capital of the world, a title that European cities formerly held for centuries. Abstract Expressionism became the premier style that epitomized modern art in the late 1940s and early 1950s, demonstrating America's rise generally as both a leading artistic center and a world power. Its chief practitioners were a group of artists collectively referred to as the New York School, which included Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. These artists worked in various manners within this particular style, and these were as notable and individualized as were the artists themselves.

Within the span of a decade, however, Abstract Expressionism's formal aesthetics were being debated: both artists and critics challenged the significance and integrity of this style. By 1960, Pollock's brand of abstraction, best exemplified through his widely-known "drip" paintings, was heavily criticized for its painterly qualities and expressive use of gesture. Around this time, another style was gaining recognition for its unmistakable attention to flattened forms of color. Color Field painting quickly rivaled Abstract Expressionism as the leading modern art style in the 1950s and 1960s, characterized by its expansive yet restrained use of hue and non-gestural applications of paint. New York School members Rothko, Newman, and Clyfford Still painted in this fashion, as did a loosely affiliated group of artists commonly referred to as the Washington Color School. Artists in the latter group were perhaps best known for their work in

Color Field painting. The Washington Color School, as the name suggests, based their practice in Washington, D.C., away from New York and the forefront of the latest artistic trends. One Washington painter arguably remains at the head of not only this group but also Color Field painting: Morris Louis.

The written criticism about Louis and his work, primarily during the artist's lifetime, makes for a unique case study in the critical shift from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting beginning in the 1950s, especially as they relate to the socio-cultural atmosphere of postwar America. The criticism written about the artist and his work exemplifies the kind of formalist writing that was prevalent at the time in this postwar period, written and promoted by such critics as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Greenberg's formal criticism played a pivotal role in this artistic shift that saw him championing painters such as Newman and Louis while denouncing the gestural abstraction exhibited in Pollock's work. The critic's strong influence in Louis's painting practice was based on his insistence in maintaining a high standard of value for modernist art that, as I argue, was closely linked to issues of gender. More specifically, problems regarding American masculinity and the degree of fear and anxiety that partially characterized the nation's perspective at this time affected this turn of events in the art world.

Aspects of postwar America, including its developing commercialism as well as its repressive and biased social climate, involved the complex contemporary issues of gender and anxiety, which, in turn, affected American art at mid-century. A substantial body of scholarly literature produced both during and after the war examined critically the subject of gender difference and concepts of appropriate masculinity and femininity, and the effects of the latter on the nation, both socially and culturally. Postwar art criticism, including that written on Louis and his painting, reveals insights into the kind of gender hierarchy that proliferated with the advance

of formalism. This formal criticism, much of which was guided by Greenberg's principles, is related to contemporary critical discourses that asserted the masculinization of modern art as well as the feminization of the country's consumer culture. By examining Louis's biography and his work, a better understanding of postwar American society and culture may be brought to light. Moreover, analyzing critical writings about that work exposes larger social and cultural trends that help to illuminate both the critical shift from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting and the ways in which perspectives on gender shaped, to a certain extent, the way art was discussed in the 1950s and 1960s.

CHAPTER 2

LOUIS'S LIFE AND ARTISTIC CAREER

Morris Louis is typically viewed as a major figure in mid-twentieth century art: his exploration of color and new technical practices have been described as advancing a new direction in American abstract modernism. This is an extraordinary status given that his nearly six hundred canvases that were painted over the course of a mere five years. Very few other artists have managed to create the breadth of work in such a short amount of time. It was only in 1953, nine years before his untimely death from lung cancer, that he was first introduced to the technique he would use to develop his mature body of work. In that time he expanded upon an original approach to painting that attracted critical attention, gaining notoriety for not only his own painting but also, by extension, for that of a group of D.C.-based artists whose inquiries into color and its relationships would come to be known as the Washington Color School.

Louis's experiments with applying the paint, by pouring rather than brushing it on and allowing it to saturate the unprimed canvas, helped take abstract painting in a new direction that departed from the kinds of subjective concerns that occupied Abstract Expressionism. By rejecting Action Painting's emphasis on emotion and gesture, Louis was able to focus more on the medium's formal properties, stimulating an attentiveness towards both color and the picture plane as a two-dimensional surface. Clement Greenberg, a well respected art critic and mentor to the artist, played no small part in articulating these principles in writing about Louis's work. Not only was he an effective advocate for Louis's style, in particular, but his writings also laid the foundations for the work of the Color Field painters who emerged in the 1950s and 60s. Conversely, Louis' influence on Greenberg's discourse was substantial; the Washington artist doubtless affected how the critic viewed the importance of his painting in the scope of modern

art. Greenberg declared the painter's significance, quoted in Diane Upright's monograph on Louis, as being "among the very few artists who approached the stature of the 'first wave' pioneers of Abstract Expressionism."¹

Louis was forty-nine years old when he succumbed to lung cancer. The details of his life remained little-known to the public at the time of his death. Upright describes him as "elusive" and "enigmatic," and despite his subsequent prominence as a leading painter of the Washington Color School, that reputation was only achieved at the end of his career. However, it is clear that Louis's interest in the fine arts began early; he was awarded a four-year scholarship to the Maryland Institute of Fine and Applied Arts in 1927. As a student he kept to himself and keenly pursued his artistic instruction; Upright characterized him as "a heavy smoker, a loner who had no other close friends, and a man totally committed to his art..."² He received his degree in 1932 and began a series of odd jobs to support himself and his art.

Intent on finding work, Louis moved to New York City in 1936 and participated in the Siqueiros Workshop, helping to create floats and posters for political rallies such as the May Day parade. Artists like Louis and Jackson Pollock, who also participated in the workshop's activities, were introduced to new techniques and materials with which they experimented during this time. However, as Klaus Kertess argues in his essay "Beauty's Stain," Louis's exposure to the kinds of working methods and mediums he encountered at the workshop did not immediately impact his own painting. He notes that "Louis's modest paintings from the 1930s suggest he had little interest in the industrial materials and techniques...so eagerly promoted by Siqueiros."³

¹ Diane Upright, *Morris Louis: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Abrams, 1985), 21.

² Upright, *Morris Louis*, 10.

³ Klaus Kertess, "Beauty's Stain," in *Morris Louis Now: An American Master Revisited*, ed. Klaus Kertess. (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2006), 10.

The innovative use of color that we see in his later, more mature paintings as well as his willingness to experiment is not evident at this point in his early career.

Louis was hired by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) at the end of 1938 and worked in their Easel Division, painting scenes of poverty, laborers, and the New England landscape. His palette, described by Upright as “muddy and dark,” changed little during the year-and-a-half that he painted for the WPA. The kind of experimental methods taught at the Siquieros Workshop did not initially influence the young Louis; his painting *Broken Bridge* (1939) [Fig. 1] supports this notion. The work, which was exhibited at the 1939 World’s Fair, exemplifies the artist’s interest in the German Expressionist aesthetic of Max Beckmann with its somber color, thick application of paint, and rough outlining. *Broken Bridge* is far removed from the flattened color abstractions that Louis would later create but, as Charles Millard suggests, Louis “worked with different artistic styles or ideas...in order to be free of them.”⁴

Millard’s idea makes all the more sense when placed in the context of Louis’s working method, for the artist treated a particular theme until he exhausted all of its possibilities before moving onto the next. Upright underpins Millard’s claim by quoting Charles Schucker; the fellow artist and friend of Louis’s at the Maryland Institute said that once “he’d get interested in something he’d practically wear it out. He had this ability to select something and stick to it.”⁵ Louis’s mature body of work is evidence of this particular practice and the hundreds of canvases he produced in series, including *Veil*, *Unfurled*, and *Stripe*, demonstrate his way of “working through” a theme. Louis’s self-distancing from New York, after his return to Baltimore and eventual move to D.C. also offers some insight into his artistic approach. In a December 21,

⁴ Charles W. Millard, “Morris Louis,” *The Hudson Review* 30 (1977): 253.

⁵ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 10.

1961 Washington Post article, Greenberg said of both Louis and his Washington Color School colleague, Kenneth Noland, that both “are curious about what goes on in New York...and have learned a lot there. But what they have learned mostly is what they do not want to do and how to recognize what they do not want to do.”⁶ The artist’s geographical remove from the hot bed of Abstract Expressionist activity assisted in his “working through” that gestural style.

Louis’s general reclusiveness was an important part of his personality as an artist. As stated above, his physical separation from New York and its artists allowed him the freedom to experiment with his painting on his own terms. Greenberg further comments on the benefit of this separation by stating that “from Washington you can keep in steady contact with the New York art scene without being subjected as constantly to its pressures to conform as you would be if you lived and worked in New York.”⁷ Moreover, details of the artist’s shunning the attention of museum directors and curators were publicized; Louis himself even claimed that the city “wouldn’t have me.”⁸ These statements suggest that his preference for seclusion was not only a simple personality trait but also part of a larger public image.

In 1943 the artist returned to his native Baltimore and lived with his parents while continuing to paint in the family basement; he received support from not only his mother and father but also his siblings. He married his former next-door neighbor, Marcella Siegel, in 1947 and moved into her apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside of Washington. The next year he began using a new paint medium developed by Leonard Bocour, with whom he had become friends during his stint in New York. The acrylic resin, known as Magna, was different from

⁶ Truitt, “Art-Arid D.C. Harbors Touted ‘New’ Painters,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1961, A20.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume Four: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O’Brian. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 95-96.

⁸ Truitt, “Art-Arid D.C. Harbors Touted ‘New’ Painters,” A20.

traditional oil paints in that it dried quicker and left no halo when diluted with a solvent like turpentine. Louis would use this acrylic resin paint for the rest of his career. This change in materials, however, did not immediately inspire him to take advantage of the new medium's inherent color capabilities for, as Kertess suggests, "Louis maintained his subdued palette and showed no inclination to capitalize on acrylic's transparency and potential vibrancy of hue."⁹

Louis kept up his painting into the 1950s and gradually began to look towards the Abstract Expressionist style for inspiration. A group of paintings he painted in 1951, known as the *Charred Journal* series [Fig. 2], show the strong influence that this style had on the artist. The works respond, in particular, to Pollock's black-and-white canvases, also from that year, with their calligraphic, "drawing-as-painting" technique devised by the latter artist. Pollock's works would also inspire Helen Frankenthaler, another Abstract Expressionist artist working in New York, to experiment with the action painter's staining technique, whose works soon after influenced Louis and Noland. The *Charred Journal* series, according to Kertess, is further evidence of the artist's restrained use of color, revealing his "somber palette with more metaphorical intent."¹⁰ Thus, Louis's expressive use of color, which underscores his mature paintings, was not something that occurred gradually, but a breakthrough that was only achieved after his trip to New York in 1953.

In 1952, the Louises moved from their suburban D.C. home to northwest Washington where Morris was hired to teach painting classes at the Washington Workshop Center of the Arts. Louis met Washington artists Leon Berkowitz, founder of the Washington Workshop, as well as Jacob Kainen, who helped him secure his teaching position there. Berkowitz described Louis,

⁹ Kertess, "Beauty's Stain," 10.

¹⁰ Kertess, "Beauty's Stain," 11.

quoted by Jean Cohen, as “a quiet person, with penetrating eyes the color of violets.”¹¹ It was also here that he met Ken Noland, a fellow instructor and artist who he would come to both respect and work with in his painting practice. Upright mentions how the two were “drawn together by their total commitment to painting and by their enthusiasm for the work of Pollock and Motherwell.”¹² He became the primary go-to artist with whom Louis spoke about his art.

A North Carolina native and twelve years younger than his colleague, Noland was an instrumental force in Louis’s artistic career. In spite of his age, Noland was more knowledgeable about the art world and its participants. He had studied with Ilya Bolotowsky and Ossip Zadkine, and was also friends with the sculptor David Smith, to whom he introduced Louis around this time. Smith was an influential figure for both artists in that he advised them to stock their materials in large quantities and educated the two on the benefits of working in series, ideas that would later become hallmarks of artists’ practices. In the spring of the following year, Noland invited his colleague to go with him to New York, to experience the bustling art scene there. It was on this trip in particular that Louis first met Greenberg, who lead the two Washington artists to Frankenthaler’s studio where her ground-breaking work *Mountains and Sea* (1953) [Fig. 3] would inspire them to take unconventional approaches to experimenting with color.

Louis was introduced to Greenberg during the artist’s visit to New York in April of 1953 with Ken Noland. In the first weekend of that month, the three men toured a number of galleries and artists’ studios, seeing works by the likes of Pollock, Frankenthaler, and Franz Kline. However, it was Frankenthaler’s *Mountains and Sea* that made the biggest impression on them;

¹¹ Jean Lawlor Cohen, “Making of the Color School: The 1950s,” in *Washington Art Matters: Art Life in the Capital, 1940-1990*, ed. Jean Lawlor Cohen et al. (Washington: Washington Arts Museum, 2013), 43.

¹² Upright, *Morris Louis*, 11.

this work particularly led the artists to rethink the ways in which paint could be applied to the picture plane. Cohen explains that Frankenthaler's "technique was to apply directly soft washes of oil pigment, thinned with turpentine, to unsized, raw cotton duck canvas...Greenberg believed that for Louis it was a revelation..."¹³ The two artists left New York with, above all, this new technique in mind. Shortly thereafter they replaced the techniques they practiced earlier for the kinds of effects to which they were introduced by Frankenthaler.

Louis and Noland's collaboration in the weeks that followed freed the artists of their previously held beliefs towards painting. According to Upright, in the wake of these "heady experimental work sessions with Noland, Louis began to come to terms with the multitude of important new work and ideas he had been exposed to in the course of a few weeks. He repudiated his conservative easel scale and tentative approach to new techniques."¹⁴ Louis continued to explore this new method of applying paint to the canvas surface when, at the start of 1954, he produced his first series of *Veil* paintings. This initial body of works, which numbers less than eighteen paintings, displays the artist's feeling for this recently acquired technique of staining the canvas that led him to experiment with the consistency and pouring of his paints. He painted sixteen canvases over a roughly six month span, a rather slow production rate that would clearly quicken with his later series. Although Greenberg suggested that he send some of these works to Pierre Matisse in New York, in hopes that the art dealer would represent him, they were not accepted.

The first series of Veils mark significant shifts in Louis's painting practice, most notably a growing willingness to experiment by using new painting techniques. Not only did he quickly

¹³ Cohen, "Making of the Color School: The 1950s," 43.

¹⁴ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 12.

adopt and elaborate upon Frankenthaler's method of application, but he also increased the size of his compositions. One example from the series *Iris* [Fig. 4] measures nearly seven by nine feet, a scale Louis most likely never attempted before. The larger dimensions of his Veils also altered the way in which he painted. Too cumbersome for an easel, Louis's canvases were mounted onto homemade supports, un-sized and un-prepared. Positioning the canvas at various angles on this support, he poured diluted paints across its surface, creating diaphanous veils of expansive, flowing color. These pours show the artist's use of gravity as an active parameter of his work, which was a further sign of the artist's willingness to experiment. Such changes to Louis's painting style occurred not long after his pivotal trip to New York and Upright mentions how nothing from his earlier period of work could prepare viewers for the 1954 Veils.¹⁵

These paintings also show Louis's resolve to challenge his own work by refusing to settle on a given style or format, over his career as a whole. His "ability to select something and stick to it" did not give in to a formulaic painting practice. In fact, as Upright states, Louis's "struggles did not culminate in a single, powerful conception, as in the work of Rothko, Newman, or Still...he continued to push himself, never willing to accept a single image as a definitive pictorial statement."¹⁶ His compositions do employ the same basic format for a given series, but each canvas is unique in the way the artist ordered the color arrangements: this is the most significant difference from one work to another. The dynamic aspect of Louis's oeuvre is emphasized in the way his intensive process of experimentation provided opportunities for him to express these color relationships in a multitude of variations. The period in which the artist experimented with Pollock's kind of expressive brushwork is telling of this process. Although

¹⁵ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 15.

¹⁶ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 16.

Louis ultimately rejected this style, it was one he found to be unsuitable to his artistic vision only after the fact.

Louis's subsequent works were further examples of his "working through" process. He moved away from the atmospheric forms of the Veils to explore a more painterly approach; it would be another three years before he returned to those original compositions for inspiration. In what was likely the artist's final effort to experiment with a gestural style, Kertess claims that "these paintings must have satisfied some need in Louis to further test and explore liquid gesturalities."¹⁷ However, he destroyed almost all of these works, some three hundred canvases, which he painted between 1955 and 1957; Greenberg's disapproval of them was partially responsible for that destruction.¹⁸ Works like *Number IV* (1957) [Fig. 5] attest to the powerful influence Abstract Expressionism had at this time but also Louis's difficulty in letting go of this style. Although his experiments with Abstract Expressionism were symptomatic of larger issues concerning postwar American society and culture, which will be addressed in the following chapters, Louis's reason for ultimately abandoning Action painting was perhaps best stated by fellow WCS painter Gene Davis, who explained that "the college art departments were grinding out little de Koonings and Pollocks...there was no place to go. It had been used up. And you had to go somewhere."¹⁹

Starting in 1958, Louis made the decision to pick up from where he left off with the 1954 Veils. Greenberg advised the artist to visit New York as often as possible in order to better understand the "weaknesses" of his paintings. These trips helped the artist to broaden his

¹⁷ Kertess, "Beauty's Stain," 13.

¹⁸ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 12.

¹⁹ Cohen, "Making of the Color School: The 1950s," 47.

approach he first began with those first Veils in 1954; it was at this point that Louis started his second series of Veils. He spent more than a year working on these paintings, producing them at an accelerated rate; the 1958-59 Veils number 126 compared to the 16 he made in 1954. Besides the contrast in the number of works from each group, some key differences separate these two series of Veils. One is the enlarged dimensions of the new canvases, which Louis increased from roughly seven-by-nine feet to eight-by-fourteen feet. A second is the change in their compositional layout; the pours are directed to taper toward the bottom of the image, creating a kind of cascading effect of color in which the forms resemble waterfalls. Another is the unique variations within this series that were identified and divided into five particular Veil types: Triadic, Split, Monadic, Vertical, and Italian. Furthermore, the new Veils caught Greenberg's attention; in the spring of 1959, he arranged a solo show of the artist's paintings at French & Company. As the artistic advisor to the New York gallery's new Contemporary Department, Greenberg gave Louis his first major one-man show with more than twenty works on exhibit. The exhibition received positive reviews and its overall success was due, in part, to both the department's ability to accommodate such large paintings and the fact that it followed Barnett Newman's first solo show in over ten years.²⁰

Louis's 1959 solo show marked an important milestone for his painting as the artist concluded work on the Veil series and set out to explore other themes. Between the summers of 1959 and 1960 he continued to work with various formats and compositional layouts in what Upright suggests was "a time of searching and experimentation rather than of resolution."²¹ Louis's readiness to experiment with the materials and techniques he had acquired thus far

²⁰ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 17.

²¹ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 20.

helped him to produce well over 100 canvases during this time, including his Floral and Column paintings. The artist's rejection of the figure/ground relationship, which he used for the 1958-59 Veils, in favor of an all-over composition type such as *Seal* (1959) [Fig. 6] defined his practice during this period. These works exemplify his study of color, gesture, and compositional unity. Greenberg selected 21 paintings from the 1959-60 period for the artist's second one-man show at French & Company in March of 1960.

That May, Greenberg's article "Louis and Noland," which championed the efforts of both painters and promoting their work on a global level, was published in *Art International*. This was one of the first instances in which Greenberg publicly stated the significance of Louis's approach of pouring paint directly onto the canvas and the effects that this technique produced. In his essay, he also credits the relative isolation of the Washington painters as a contributing factor to their artistic success; much of what Greenberg wrote here was later reprinted in the December 1961 Washington Post article cited above. The critic believed strongly in D.C. as a kind of artistic outpost, away from New York. Greenberg's respect for these Washington-based artists is further emphasized since he takes issue with New York's current artistic trends, i.e. Abstract Expressionism: "never before...has there been so much false and inflated painting and sculpture, never before so many false and inflated reputations."²²

Only a matter of months separated Greenberg's article from the start of Louis's Unfurled series of paintings. The increase in sales of his work allowed the artist to further stock greater quantities of paint, canvas, and other supplies, which no doubt helped Louis accomplish his most ambitious string of works. In addition, he received a special formula of Magna paint, which

²² Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 95.

Upright describes as “more fluid, like that of maple syrup,” from Bocour in April.²³ Unlike when he first began using Magna acrylics in the late 40s, Louis would experiment with the new consistency of this custom paint made especially for Noland and himself. He produced nearly 120 of these paintings in less than a year between 1960 and 1961. Some of these canvases were over twenty feet in length. The success of the Unfurleds was in integrating both the ground and the figure in a way that engaged and unified the entire compositional field, which consisted of two triangular ends of discrete color rivulets bracketing a large wedge of bare canvas. *Delta Theta* (1961) [Fig. 7] is an example from this series, by which Louis achieved the structural coherence he attempted in earlier experiments and created what Upright calls a “dynamic equilibrium” through the interlocking relationships of the three primary sections of the composition.

After French & Company closed its contemporary art wing in the spring of 1960, the André Emmerich Gallery soon began handling his work; he also received more prominent international recognition at this time, appearing in exhibitions in London, Paris, Milan, and Rome. He completed the Unfurled series in April of 1961, but not before he once again took his painting in a new direction. Working from a theme with which he first experimented in early 1960, Louis started painting what would be his last series: Stripes. The artist’s earlier work with his Column paintings, developed shortly before the Unfurleds, was what led him to create the Stripes series. Although the dimensions of these canvases are dramatically reduced when compared with those of the Unfurleds, the scale of Louis’s Stripes is by no means small. According to Upright, those that were exhibited during his first show at the Emmerich Gallery, in October 1961, measured up

²³ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 62.

to seven-and-a-half by five feet.²⁴ He completed nearly 250 of them between early 1961 and June of 1962, when lung cancer halted his practice altogether.

The earliest paintings in the series, known as Pillars, are almost as large as his 1954 Veils; over the course of the following year he began to narrow this format at Greenberg's suggestion. Not unlike his work with the Unfurleds, Louis used the bare canvas to activate and alter the paintings' compositional structure. Upright notes how "Louis utilized cropping as a crucial compositional element" by initiating an asymmetrical order to his Stripe paintings.²⁵ However, another, more practical reason for reducing the scale of these paintings was that most of his work was simply too large to be exhibited. The "narrow Stripe paintings" from 1962 include multiple variations in which the artist experimented with the relationships between the figure and the ground as well as the colors and widths of the stripes themselves. He also produced a group of horizontal Stripes that were completely encompassed by bare canvas. His final variation, painted that summer, are those in which the canvas was stretched across a square frame; the diagonally-angled, abstract bands of color speak to those earlier experiments in asymmetry he instituted with the Pillars.

Louis's debilitating illness kept him from painting any further in 1962. Years of exposure to the solvents with which he painted, in addition to being a life-long smoker, finally caught up to him in July when he was diagnosed. While the artist underwent treatment, he continued to write to Greenberg and Emmerich in preparation for his next show. He selected a group of Stripe paintings for the exhibition and, unable to travel to New York, detailed their stretching and framing requirements in Washington. He also placed orders with Bocour for more Magna paints,

²⁴ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 28.

²⁵ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 28.

suggesting that he intended to resume painting after a temporary hiatus to cure his cancer.

However, he would not recover and he died at his Washington home in early September. His second show at the Emmerich gallery opened the following month and would serve as a kind of memorial.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF POSTWAR AMERICAN ART

In order to better understand the importance of Louis's paintings, as well as the criticism of his work by Clement Greenberg and his followers, they must be situated within the social and cultural contexts of postwar America. In the time roughly between the Second World War and the assassination of President Kennedy, the nation went through a period of great change. Widespread feelings of optimism filtered through virtually all aspects of life as the country entered into a time of unbridled prosperity, beginning with its victory over the axis powers in 1945. The postwar economic boom that emerged by the 1950s became perhaps the greatest acknowledgement of America's success as a world superpower. Cultural habits changed as the public started to embrace the commercial trends that defined the country's thriving consumer society. Moreover, the purchasing power of American households became the chief indicator of this prosperity as Cécile Whiting suggests in her book *A Taste for Pop*. She explains that the statistical numbers "of homes, televisions, refrigerators...and packaged goods sold each year provided the ostensibly solid data for assessing the nation's well-being in the 1950s and 60s."²⁶ These postwar economic conditions, in turn, became the cornerstone upon which the American middle-class flourished, creating an entirely new way of life for millions of people.

While the nation reaped the benefits of this economic growth, escalating tensions at home and abroad were undermining certain aspects of success and well-being. Prejudices, for instance, against the African American community came to a head as many southern states continued to

²⁶ Cécile Whiting, "Wesselmann and Pop at Home," in *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender, and Consumer Culture*, ed. Cécile Whiting. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 53.

uphold their policies regarding racial segregation; demonstrations, protests, and even lunch counter sit-ins became all the more frequent as the Civil Rights Movement amassed considerable support across the U.S. during these years. The constant fear of nuclear attack by the Soviet Union during the Cold War weighed heavy on the minds of many Americans amid the country's progress as well. Russia's communist ideology and influence was believed to be just as destructive to America's capitalist and democratic values as their atomic arsenal. This particular threat was deemed such a serious issue that political witch hunts and blacklists were organized in order to condemn those suspected of harboring Soviet ties or sympathies. The socio-cultural implications of the country's product-saturated, consumerist economy and repressive, anti-communist government created a national conformist attitude that helped to characterize postwar America. It is within such a context that the work of Morris Louis is best examined.

The on-going social and cultural developments that impacted the country at mid-century undoubtedly affected the art world and its participants. Louis's most important work coincided with a period of time during which conservative values and attitudes, partially instilled through fear and anxiety, chiefly shaped and defined America's identity. One particular component of American culture that conveyed this post-war conservative climate was related to concerns about masculine identity. Michael Kimmel claims that "in the 1950s American men strained against two negative poles—the overconformist, a faceless, self-less nonentity, and the unpredictable, unreliable nonconformist."²⁷ Cécile Whiting argues that postwar artists and critics faced similar unease when the dominant, gestural style of Abstract Expressionism was called into question as to whether it truly "embodied a heroic performance of masculine transformation."²⁸ What she

²⁷ Michael Kimmel, "Temporary About Myself: White-Collar Conformists and Suburban Playboys, 1945-1960," in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, ed. Michael Kimmel. (New York: Oxford university Press, 2012), 170.

²⁸ Cécile Whiting, "Borrowed Spots: The Gendering of Comic Books, Lichtenstein's Paintings, and Dishwasher

calls a “crisis in masculinity” that emerged during these years was both problematic and devitalizing to artists and, as I will show, is undeniably linked to Kimmel’s argument concerning problems of aggression and conformity in postwar American masculinity. These socio-cultural aspects will further help to ground Louis’s work and criticism, especially in relation to issues of gender.

Many artists and critics considered Abstract Expressionism to be a sign of authentic masculinity during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Action painting, Whiting suggests, epitomized the artist’s transformative power and experience. It was understood “as a sign of modernism...valued over copying and mass-culture.”²⁹ Its emphasis on gesture was designated early on as the quintessential expression of a distinctly masculine experience; Whiting explains this relationship by turning to Jackson Pollock’s technical application of paint. She states that the “Abstract Expressionist brushstroke, as defined in the critical discourse initiated by Hans Namuth’s photographs of Jackson Pollock at work...and Harold Rosenberg’s writings on Action Painting, ostensibly recorded the individual expression of the creative artist.”³⁰ For critics like Rosenberg, Pollock’s drip technique best demonstrated those gestural qualities that represented the transformative and creative force in modernist art.

Rosenberg also argued that Pollock’s paintings were the products of his biography and psychological state of mind. In addition Whiting argues, the critical interpretation of Pollock’s work depended upon periodicals such as *Life* magazine that helped to produce “a popular

Detergent,” *American Art* 6 (1992): 21.

²⁹ Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 21.

³⁰ Harold Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51 (1952): 22-23, 48-50; cited in Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 22.

memory about Pollock as a tormented artist living on the edge of society.”³¹ In addition to his imputed identity as a troubled and isolated outsider, Pollock’s masculine presence, too, was publicized as an important aspect of his painting. Andrew Perchuk notes that for the *Art in America* article “Who was Jackson Pollock?” the painter’s close friends and colleagues discussed his physicality as if it was “a necessary component for understanding the significance of his work.”³² Critics soon connected these aspects of the artist’s character to what they saw his in painting practice and, as Whiting claims, “the gestural stroke of paint [that] indexed the transformative power and personal vision of the artist...in Pollock’s case, most obviously ‘embodied’ male presence as aggressive and tragic.”³³

Concepts about Pollock’s rebellious persona were united with an appreciation for his gestural style in a way that validated Action painting’s artistic transformation and creative authenticity, making it seem decidedly masculine to contemporary critics. However, the kind of masculine aggression that critics attributed to Pollock’s style was indicative of a broader social trend afflicting American masculinity at the time. Kimmel looks to anthropologist Margret Mead’s slightly earlier cultural study, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942), in which she argued that American masculinity was “a retaliatory and vindictive hedge against fears and threatened humiliation...”³⁴ Additional studies in the 1940s, like Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* (1942), emphasized “megaloid Momworship” or “Momism” as the reason for masculinity’s

³¹ Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 22.

³² Andrew Perchuk, “Pollock and Postwar Masculinity,” in *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*, ed. Andrew Perchuk et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 33.

³³ Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 23.

³⁴ Kimmel, “Temporary About Myself,” 165.

weak and distressing condition.³⁵ Sociologist Talcott Parsons believed that masculine aggression, and inadequacy, stemmed from both overbearing mothers and the absence of the father due to wartime enlistment. Thus, in his opinion, women could be blamed for the delinquency as well as the effeminacy of their sons. In this context, Action painting's aggressive masculine presence was a reaction against the idea of a growing feminine threat that left American men emasculated.

By the 1950s, the crisis worsened for Action painting and its initial associations of the style: a powerful expression of masculine transformation and presence began to lose its authority near the end of the decade. In addition, according to Whiting, "the wives of white-collar professionals began to bear the blame for unseating the male from his throne. Her crimes included foisting new domestic, economic, and sexual demands on her husband."³⁶ During this time, Abstract Expressionism started to be criticized as more of a more academic than an avant-garde practice. Its institutionalization as an artistic style that could be learned echoes Davis's perspective that, "all the college art departments were grinding out little Pollocks and de Koonings..."³⁷ Louis's last major experimentation with this style was also during this time, after which he subsequently destroyed those paintings and began his mature work. Critics claimed, Whiting states, that Action painting's demise was attributed to "an academy of second-rate Action painters..." Women would be singled out in Abstract Expressionism's decline as a style debased and "imitated by beginners and weaker painters."³⁸

³⁵ Philip Wylie, *A Generation of Vipers* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1942), 187-188; cited in Kimmel, "Temporary About Myself," 165.

³⁶ Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 25.

³⁷ Cohen, "Making of the Color School: The 1950s," 47.

³⁸ William Rubin, "Younger American Painters," *Art International* 4 (1960): 25-30; cited in Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 24.

When Action painting was no longer considered to exemplify a vanguard style, it ceased to embody the kind of masculine presence and aggression that many saw in works by first-generation artists like Pollock. This style, which initially symbolized an authentic masculine transformation, was soon taken up by those artists perceived as “weaker”: some critics to identified female artists as having contributed particularly to Abstract Expressionism’s losses. This notion helps to demonstrate that the masculine presence and aggression associated with Abstract Expressionism was a reaction, motivated by male insecurities, against feminine authority. Whiting points to William Rubin in particular, who, writing in *Art International*, “conceived of the decline from great to second-rate Action painting...as a passage from male to female artists...”³⁹ Other critics, including Greenberg, also conceived of a downturn in Abstract Expressionism in the late 1950s.

Greenberg was rather critical of those “second-rate artists” when he said of his colleague Rubin, “I still found him a little too kind toward many of the artists he discussed...but not one among the New York painters Mr. Rubin mentioned has quite succeeded in breaking out of the cycle of virtuosity which began with that school.”⁴⁰ Greenberg instead began to promote artists who exercised what Whiting calls a “detached control over their medium.”⁴¹ He supported the Color Field paintings of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman as well as those of Louis and Noland, declaring them to be Abstract Expressionism’s successors to modernist painting. The critic turned away from Action painting at the very time it became essentially an

³⁹ William Rubin, “The New York School—Then and Now,” pt. 1, *Art International* 2 (1958): 26; cited in Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 24.

⁴⁰ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 95.

⁴¹ Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 132.

artistic convention, when gesture no longer demonstrated the kind of masculine presence it was once described as embodying.

The slightly younger Color Field painters, championed by Greenberg as modernist painting's foremost artists with their "detached control," embodied a new form of masculinity that opposed the aggressive flare of Pollock's Action painting. They emphasized in their art, which the critic would later call "Post-Painterly Abstraction," what Whiting describes as a "commitment to the purity of the medium and the advancement of the avant-garde tradition toward flatness."⁴² This new style was characterized by the use of "control" and "discretion" in the artists' paintings rather than by passion and spontaneity; hence, their work was also referred to as "cool" abstraction. The division that Greenberg and like-minded critics created between the two styles separated them from each other in terms of artistic aesthetic and masculine presence. Just as Action painting was described as exhibiting the kind of aggression that Mead claimed of American masculinity in the 1940s, so, too, was Color Field painting described with traits that reflected the change in the concepts of the nature of American masculinity in the 1950s.

Modern man was beset by fear and anxiety in 1950s postwar America, still unable to make sense of his identity or his place in society. Kimmel perhaps best describes the condition of American men generally, when he states that "they had to achieve identities that weren't too conforming...lest they lose their souls; but they couldn't be too non-conforming lest they leave their family and workplace responsibilities behind..."⁴³ On the one hand, the "unpredictable, unreliable" male represented the man who was too rebellious and unruly. On the other hand, the "faceless, self-less" male represented the man who had no individuality whatsoever. In either

⁴² Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 26.

⁴³ Kimmel, "Temporary About Myself," 170.

case, they epitomized the man who failed to live up to his social obligations to his family and his work. Parsons' belief that the "absent" father and husband was partially responsible for the delinquency or effeminacy of his son was taken as evidence of his failure. Hence, men were essentially confined in expressing their masculinity within a social order that provided very little leeway.

The "cool" abstraction of the Color Field artists and the vocabulary used to discuss their paintings reflected the subdued character of 1950s postwar masculinity. This vocabulary, while used primarily to bolster their artwork, was still underscored by the fear and anxiety that troubled American masculinity during the decade. For example, Whiting explains that Greenberg, writing in the exhibition catalogue for Newman's one-man show at French & Company in 1959, "praised [his] art for its restraint and discretion while delivering an implicit criticism of the bravado of Action Painting..."⁴⁴ The critic downplayed the gestural, i.e. expressive, aspect of Abstract Expressionism by also stating how "fullness of content can be attained only through an execution that calls the least possible attention... We are not offered the dexterity of a hand."⁴⁵

Greenberg's remark about how this new abstraction was executed in a way that "calls the least possible attention" reflected the new expression of American masculinity in the 1950s. This notion is supported by Kimmel as he points to sociologist David Reisman in his psychological study on conformity, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Reisman, according to Kimmel, suggested that men were "animated by 'anxiety rather than pride' and engaged in 'veiled competition rather than openly rivalrous display.'"⁴⁶ The vocabulary that Greenberg used to

⁴⁴ Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 26.

⁴⁵ Clement Greenberg, *Barnett Newman* (New York: French and Company, 1959), n.p.; cited in Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 26.

⁴⁶ David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), 47; cited in Kimmel,

affirm the work of these Color Field artists was problematic because it also conveyed this sense of a suppressed postwar masculine presence. Greenberg used similar terms when discussing Louis's work. In "Louis and Noland," he explains that Color Field painting "requires a large format" and further states that "Louis is 'confined' to the huge canvas as inevitably as Clyfford Still is."⁴⁷

Greenberg's quote about Louis being "confined" to the "large format" canvas additionally highlights the delimiting qualities of those principles that govern Color Field painting. In his 1965 essay "Modernist Painting," published in *Art and Literature*, Greenberg describes those characteristics he believes best define modernist painting, the flatness of the picture plane being the medium's foremost fundamental quality. He says that these "limitations that constitute the medium of painting—the flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment—were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors...Modernist painting has come to regard these same limitations as positive factors to be acknowledged openly."⁴⁸ Greenberg describes the elements previously used in the service of illusionism or realism as "negative." However, in relation to modernist painting, he stresses them as "positive factors," where their essential traits are emphasized rather than applied to other ends like in the creation of an illusionistic, three-dimensional space.

Greenberg, in defining modernist painting by the "limitations" essential to its medium, also designated its boundaries. Greenberg explained that "the essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself—not in

"Temporary About Myself," 173.

⁴⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 97.

⁴⁸ Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art and Literature* 4 (1965): 193-201; cited in Paul F. Fabozzi, *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings In and Around American Art Since 1945* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 203.

order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”⁴⁹ Color Field painting, he insisted, “required a large format” and a given work’s level of success depended for him upon meeting such principles. The parameters that Greenberg outlined in his discourse on modernist painting were, to an extent, confining in themselves. Comments such as one by Helen Stern help to support this notion. Her remark about Gene Davis’s stripe paintings expressed a sentiment of displeasure that stemmed from the critic’s brand of formalism when, as noted by Jean Cohen, she “mused early on that, while one did not expect much from a monkey with paintbrushes, one did expect more from a man.”⁵⁰ Moreover, this discourse tends to share the same kind of limiting or confining qualities as the vocabulary Greenberg and other critics used to describe Color Field painting.

Greenberg explained that modernist painting’s defining principles, criticized as negative factors before, were beneficial to its practice because, as he stated, they would “guarantee...its standards of quality as well as...independence.”⁵¹ Even if these “limitations” meant to enhance the “purity” of the art being promoted they were still inhibiting to a degree and, as I will further illustrate in the following chapter, problematic for a number of reasons. I believe that this is comparable to the formalist vocabulary that critics employed to discuss such works. Terms, noted above, like “confined,” “control,” and “restraint,” which originally reflected a repressed 1950s postwar masculine presence and, therefore, carried negative connotations, were adapted in order to champion Color Field painting. As previously suggested, terms like these were used to

⁴⁹ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 193-201; cited in Fabozzi, *Artists, Critics, Context*, 202.

⁵⁰ Cohen, “Making of the Color School: The 1950s,” 47.

⁵¹ Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 193-201; cited in Fabozzi, *Artists, Critics, Context*, 203.

embody a new masculine presence while, at the same time, they underlined masculinity's subdued condition, further driving the "crisis."

So far I have attempted to explain the gradual shift from Abstract Expressionism to "cool" abstraction in post-war art through the lens of American masculinity, connecting the social tensions laid out in Kimmel's argument to Whiting's discussion of a masculine "crisis" in art at mid-century. The critical writings discussing each style in terms of masculine presence, either directly or indirectly, mirrored the general social makeup of American masculinity at the time. That is, the masculine aggression identified by critics in Pollock's Action painting of the 1940s or its subdued or reframed character, emphasized by Greenberg in the work of the Color Field painters, was reflected in the social research done by individuals like Margret Meade and David Reisman in the 1950s. I have also briefly attempted to explain the similarities between the formalist vocabulary used to discuss Color Field painting and those principles of modernist art laid out in Greenberg's discourse; both reveal qualities that reflect masculinity's redefined state in the 1950s.

I want to now return to the growing influence of feminine authority in America's postwar society with respect to the country's burgeoning consumer culture. The issue of the imputed role of female artists in Action painting's decline in the 1950s was expressed by critics such as William Rubin; women, in general, were particularly blamed for the anxiety men were feeling. The rise of American consumerism, and its association with a feminine presence, factors into the work of artists like Louis. Whiting states that "a number of critics in the 1950s feminized consumer culture."⁵² This notion, as I will show, ultimately affected Greenberg's writing as well as Louis's painting. The gender distinctions that associated consumerism with femininity and

⁵² Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 62.

the domestic realm were articulated, by critics like Greenberg, as being in opposition to “highbrow” tastes and modernist art, which were treated by those same critics as masculine. Furthermore, those that related consumer culture and femininity to each other essentially denigrated and discredited the value of both by linking them to middle-class conformity.

The critical validation of artistic styles like Abstract Expressionism and, later, Color Field painting was important because many believed they represented an authentic expression that was superior to the mass-produced and the commercial. The significance of Action painting was understood through the artist’s recognition of gesture as having a transformative power, which was unique and therefore “valued over copying and mass-culture.” Greenberg’s vindication of Color Field Painting was explained by the critic through the “self-critical” aspect of modernist art. In other words, those essential characteristics unique only to painting guaranteed the “purity” of the medium and its high standard of quality. High art, it was argued, required a kind of aesthetic judgment and “discrimination” that middle class tastes lacked. Critics, Whiting claims, “worried about the growth and impact of consumer culture, endorsed high-art modernism as a means to reaffirm standards of value and thereby counter the reputed brutalizing effects of consumer culture.”⁵³

Greenberg was an early proponent of this hierarchy, in which modernist art exemplified such high standards, opposing the lesser tastes and value he saw in consumerism. The critic’s 1939 essay entitled “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” published in the *Partisan Review*, conveyed these beliefs. The latter term he used, “Kitsch,” was to describe the products of what he called the “rear-guard.” According to Florence Rubenfeld in her biography on Greenberg, the critic “defined its American meaning as effortlessly consumed ‘junk’: ‘slick magazines, Norman

⁵³ Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 62.

Rockwell covers, poems by Eddie Guest.”⁵⁴ This kind of negative criticism regarding kitsch was undeniably linked to female consumers during the postwar period and many critics demonstrated their disdain for both the consumer culture as well as women in their writing. Sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, Whiting explains, helped to underline this relationship in their 1948 essay “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action” by stating that “these consumers were ‘women who are daily entranced for three or four hours by some twelve consecutive soap operas.’ [They] dismissed these women with a single damning phrase: They ‘exhibit an appalling lack of aesthetic judgement.’”⁵⁵

Middle-class female consumers were further berated by critics for the conformity that their tastes supposedly encouraged. Those like William H. Whyte Jr., who wrote *The Organization Man* (1954), believed that the American suburban landscape was awash with middle-class conformity managed by women. According to Whiting, Whyte “concluded that the suburbs were dominated by the female consumer and homemaker: She watched over family, home, and community...”⁵⁶ Moreover, Whyte’s research included analogies made by the residents themselves about the communities in which they lived, revealing “an association of suburbia with conformity and the female body...”⁵⁷ A number of those who believed that middle-class or “middlebrow” tastes “nurtured conformity,” arguing that women bore much of the responsibility for this problem. It was also suggested that the consumer culture was a major cause of masculine anxiety. Kimmel describes how the “impersonal forces of mass society” cared more about

⁵⁴ Florence Rubenfeld, *Clement Greenberg: A Life* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 54.

⁵⁵ Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. David Rosenberg et al. (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 466; cited in Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 62.

⁵⁶ Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 60-61.

⁵⁷ Whiting, *A Taste for Pop*, 61.

profits than the consumers who purchased their goods and services when he explains that “big capital...manipulated virtuous working people into blindly consuming things they neither needed nor wanted and kept middle-class men isolated and afraid.”⁵⁸

When critics such as Whyte and Greenberg feminized American consumerism, they strengthened the legitimacy of modernist art, which, for the latter critic, embodied a masculine presence. However, the hierarchy that those like Greenberg believed demonstrated modernist art’s cultural superiority over consumerism had to contend with the commercial implications of the former. These implications are, I believe, represented in the public reception of the New York School artists around the beginning of the 1950s. The kind of commercial success that resulted from the popular media’s treatment of Abstract Expressionist artists like Pollock in particular helped to reshape and redefine conventional attitudes towards art at mid-century. Such changes, explained in Bradford Collins’s article “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951*,” undermined and complicated this hierarchy by articulating the way in which art was being thought of and treated more as a business or career relative to the kind of vocation or “calling” that many considered it to be initially. According to Collins, the popularity and fame these artists obtained did not equate to “the crass, blatant form of merchandizing identified with Warhol and with many of today’s artists and dealers, but it was merchandizing nonetheless.”⁵⁹

The commercial success of these Abstract Expressionist artists did not entirely compromise their beliefs about their art’s potential. I agree with Collins when he writes that their “participation in the new machinery of success seemed to have had little effect on their art...as

⁵⁸ Kimmel, “Temporary About Myself,” 172-173.

⁵⁹ S. Naifeh and G.W. Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Crown, 1989), 763 and 901; cited in Bradford R. Collins, “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951: A Historiographic Study of a Late Bohemian Enterprise*,” *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 301.

artists, they apparently remained committed to the notion that art could elevate a spectator to a higher, finer realm of experience.”⁶⁰ However, this success, I argue, did play into Whiting’s “crisis” and Greenberg’s shift of his critical support from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting. The loss of Action painting’s authenticity in representing a masculine presence coincided with its commodification in the early 1950s. As that style became more of an academic practice by the end of the decade, it essentially took on the characteristics of kitsch; Greenberg stated how kitsch used “for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture...”⁶¹ In this sense, Abstract Expressionism, as a style that critics initially claimed embodied masculinity, was further discredited in its association with a “feminized” consumer culture. Abstract Expressionists who maintained a non-painterly approach, such as Rothko, Still, and Newman, were subsequently designated by Greenberg as part of the new Color Field movement.

Collins further supports the assertion that consumerism, to some extent, impacted the artists themselves. He notes that “Rothko privately referred to those paintings he turned out quickly as ‘merchandise’...”⁶² In referring to his rapidly produced canvases as “merchandise,” Rothko associated at least some of his work with commercial goods. He also quotes Mercedes Matter, daughter of artist Arthur B. Carles, who related the idea of art’s depreciation with its commercialization: “The minute success entered into the art world and it became a business, everything changed. It was all ruined.”⁶³ Furthermore, the author entertains the possibility that

⁶⁰ Collins, “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951*,” 303.

⁶¹ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” 6 *Partisan Review* (1939): 40.

⁶² Collins, “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951*,” 301.

⁶³ Naifeh and Smith, *Jackson Pollock*, 763; cited in Collins, “*Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951*,” 301.

the market demand for such work directly affected Pollock's artistic production. Collins points to Stephen Naifeh and Gregory Smith, in their book *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga*, as they argue that "throughout his mature period, Pollock made small paintings because they were more saleable than his large ones. Such concessions, however, do not seem to have fundamentally compromised his work..."⁶⁴

The evidence, however small, that Pollock painted to cater to a demanding market mirrors a similar situation with Louis's work in the early 1960s. By 1961, the artist began painting his Stripe paintings, which were as large as his 1954 Veils, six and a half by eight and a half feet; these were the smallest of Louis's works he had painted thus far. He had just completed painting his largest series of works, the Unfurleds, which were even larger than Pollock's canvases. Louis's works, Diane Upright explains, "the Veils and the Unfurleds, were simply too large to be exhibited in available gallery space. In, addition, collectors thought them to be too large for their homes."⁶⁵ This undoubtedly presented a problem in Louis's ability to exhibit his work as often as, say, his colleague Noland, whose works were much smaller by comparison. According to Upright, Greenberg wrote to the artist, expressing his opinion about the size of these recent canvases:

"I myself find that the smaller you paint lately, the more pungent your pictures get. This reaction has nothing to do with sales concerns on my part; it's a pure and simple reaction. Thus I noticed that leaving less bare canvas on either side of the Pillar form strengthened the picture and made it more emphatic...The last thing I want is for an artist of your stature to do violence to his art simply in order to sell it."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Collins, "Life Magazine and the Abstract Expressionists, 1948-1951," 303.

⁶⁵ Upright, *Morris Louis*, 27.

⁶⁶ Clement Greenberg, letter to Morris Louis, 3 May 1961, Morris Louis Archives; cited in Upright, *Morris Louis*, 27.

The size of Louis's paintings, which exemplified a key principle of Greenberg's discourse on modernist art, and the practical demands his work required at the time were at odds with one another. The critic wrote in the previous year, in "Louis and Noland," that Color Field painting "requires" a large format and that Louis was "confined" to the huge canvas, but, as Upright points out, his works were so big that there was no available space for their display in galleries or the homes of collectors. Greenberg was aware of this conflict and, I believe, had to reconcile the fact that the size of these works was important but also a hindrance; to reduce the dimensions of Louis's canvases would have meant doing "violence to his art simply in order to sell it." Hence, the critic had to explain this change in size, I suggest, in order to validate the works' modernist art values without implying that the reason for doing so was solely from a marketing perspective. Moreover, the importance of preserving modernist art's new embodiment of masculinity, argued in such paintings like Louis's, rested on maintaining the high-art values of these works rather than associating them with a "feminized" consumer culture.

CHAPTER 4

FORMALIST CRITICISM AND GENDER HIERARCHIES

The socio-cultural context of postwar America deeply influenced the art world of which Morris Louis and his work were a part. Issues of gender and, more specifically, efforts to define appropriate American masculinity and their significant impact on the stylistic shift from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting are noteworthy aspects within this context. The critical scholarship analyzing Louis's art, as I will show, reflects these aspects of America's postwar climate despite the fact that critics, including Clement Greenberg, attempted to disassociate external drives or meanings from his painting and modernist art in general. Greenberg's formalism essentially became the standard for evaluating art and its value in the late 1950s and 1960s; his own insistence upon an art whose primary preoccupation was with issues related specifically to its own medium, i.e. a "self-critical process," became part of the impetus for the abundance of formalist scholarship at the time. Since then a host of methodological approaches have been employed to discuss various aspects of Louis's work.

The earliest and most abundant scholarship dedicated to Louis's work, especially during the artist's lifetime, is virtually all formalist in its analysis and ignores alternative readings all together. The critics who composed these studies primarily examined the formal properties of the artist's painting with the aim of legitimizing it: they compared it to that of the non-painterly, "cool" abstraction of Mark Rothko, Clyfford Still, and Barnett Newman. Greenberg's essay titled "Louis and Noland" exemplifies this initial type of scholarly literature starting in the early 1960s. The critic posited that Pollock's enamel paintings of 1951 as well as the work Louis saw during his trip to New York in April of 1953, specifically Frankenthaler's *Mountains and Sea*, led him to change his direction abruptly. He further claimed that "the revelation he received

became an Impressionist revelation, and before he so much as caught a glimpse of anything by Still, Newman, or Rothko, he had aligned his art with theirs.”⁶⁷ Louis’s “Impressionist revelation” was but one way Greenberg defined what he saw as the artist’s rejection of Cubist-inspired painting in his art. Moreover, such a statement, made so matter-of-factly, expresses the kind of lineage that Greenberg sought to develop as his critical support shifted from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting.

Within his discourses on contemporary art, Greenberg highlighted the works of Rothko, Still, and Newman by emphasizing their “non-painterly” qualities, allowing the critic to bridge Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. By isolating Action painting and its primary practitioners, i.e. Pollock and de Kooning, from the non-painterly abstraction of this former group, Greenberg could reinterpret the masculine presence that critics initially associated with Abstract Expressionism. The new masculine presence he defined in the Color Field work of these three painters, whose art he states in his 1962 article “After Abstract Expressionism,” “could be called a synthesis of painterly and non-painterly, or, better, a transcending of the differences between the two.”⁶⁸ The critic created a kind of aesthetic ancestry that legitimized the initial importance of Abstract Expressionism, especially as a predecessor of Color Field painting, without necessarily negating his views about painterly abstraction. I believe that critics truly understood the significance of Pollock’s achievements with painterly abstraction, but they also felt that his gestural style had been compromised by weaker artists.

In his move to redefine the strengths of non-gestural abstract painting, Greenberg focused on Rothko, Still, and Newman in particular, as artists who embodied the same modernist art

⁶⁷ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 97.

⁶⁸ Clement Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” *Art International* 6 (October 1962): 29.

principles that he himself endorsed: “Still, Newman, and Rothko turn away from the painterliness of Abstract Expressionism as though to save the objects of painterliness—color and openness—from painterliness itself.”⁶⁹ He considered these three artists to be the “first serious abstract painters...to break with Cubism.” Greenberg further linked these three artists’ interests with that of Louis by explaining how the latter’s “revulsion against Cubism was a revulsion against the sculptural.”⁷⁰ In this way, Greenberg coordinated and strengthened what he took to be the stylistic priorities of all four men, in their move away from Cubist-inspired painting, and brought Abstract Expressionism closer in tune with Louis’s Color Field paintings. However, Greenberg’s grouping of work by these non-gestural Abstract Expressionists with Louis’s art would be questioned and challenged by critics not long after the Washington artist’s death.⁷¹

Other critics, too, conveyed this particular connection of Louis’s work to the “non-painterly” Abstract Expressionist artists in their writing. Robert Rosenblum, in writing an exhibition review of Louis’s work at the Guggenheim Museum in 1963, claimed that the artist’s paintings were best positioned among Rothko, Still, and Newman:

“Thus, as Lawrence Alloway persuasively suggests in his catalogue text, Louis is perhaps best aligned historically with, and not after, the first great generation of American abstract painters. If, indeed, he was able to paint a picture like *Intrigue* in 1954...then he was already an accomplished master whose work could be looked at as the equal, and not merely the promising reflection, of his more famous contemporaries. And if such a picture can hold its own next to a Rothko, Newman, or Still of the same year, as well as sharing the exhilarating impact of these masters’ sublime scale and immediacy, then Louis may well be situated more comfortably with these artists...”⁷²

⁶⁹ Greenberg, “After Abstract Expressionism,” 28-29.

⁷⁰ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 96.

⁷¹ Edward B. Henning, “Morris Louis, *Number 99*,” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 56 (February 1969): 84. Henning disputed prior claims suggesting that Louis’s work was wholly linked with that of Newman, Still, and Rothko, explaining that “the proposed alignment with Newman and Still is, to be brief and mild, debatable.”

⁷² Robert Rosenblum, “Morris Louis at the Guggenheim Museum,” *Art International* 7 (December 1963): 24.

Rosenblum, moreover, took this connection a step further by suggesting that the work of one of these three Abstract Expressionists had the most in common with Louis' painting. He stated that the artist's "strongest affinities are with Rothko, particularly in some of the enormous untitled canvases of 1958."⁷³ By comparing the "delicate layers of color" and similar atmospheric qualities he saw in the work of both artists, the critic bridged, formally, their styles, further strengthening this aesthetic relationship that Greenberg had previously put forth.

Greenberg's rejection of painterliness worked in tandem with his championing of Rothko, Still, and Newman. His criticism of painterly abstraction also reinforces the idea that Action painting's aesthetic reflected the social character of American masculinity asserted by the cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead in her research.⁷⁴ He further condemned Action painting by claiming that "painterliness in abstract art has degenerated almost everywhere into a thing of mannered and aggressive surfaces..."⁷⁵ Greenberg still acknowledges the "aggressive" characteristic of this painterly style, only now he considers it to be a negative trait rather than a positive one; moreover, he calls it "mannered." Such a statement is telling for it underscores his criticism of painterly abstraction as an academic practice. However, it appears that Greenberg never openly expressed the idea that female artists were to blame for gestural abstraction's demise; the critic William Rubin was much more transparent in suggesting that women were responsible for Action Painting's downfall. That Pollock's gestural style was later denounced as critics accused women of imitating it demonstrates the complexities of this criticism, which is very much a part of Whiting's "crisis."

⁷³ Rosenblum, "Morris Louis at the Guggenheim Museum," 24.

⁷⁴ Margaret Meade, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: Morrow, 1942), 68-69; cited in Kimmel, "Temporary About Myself," 165.

⁷⁵ Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, 99.

Additional examples of early formalist criticism that evaluate not only Louis's work but also that of similar Color Field painters, such as Noland, further reveal the kind of vocabulary and general rhetoric that Greenberg used to define "cool" abstraction, reflecting a suppressed masculine presence. Such criticism, for instance, is found in reviews of works by both artists written by the critic Michael Fried. Fried was a close colleague of Greenberg's who employed the latter critic's brand of formalism throughout the 1960s in order to help support the values in modern art that many argued were of a superior quality. His 1964 review of Noland's painting *Hover*, painted the previous year, contains passages describing the artist's use of color relationships as "not coercive in character but, on the contrary, remarkably reticent."⁷⁶ He also claims that the painting "tends to appear dark, subdued and perhaps uninteresting at first glance."⁷⁷ These passages are representative of what Greenberg once wrote about Newman's art as an example of Color Field painting in general, asserting that "fullness of content can be attained only through an execution that calls the least possible attention..."⁷⁸ The terms "reticent" and "subdued" as well as "subtle" and their contextualization within Fried's article are comparable to how Greenberg himself described the formal components of Color Field abstraction, using a similar set of terms that included overtones of a masculine presence that was itself subdued.

Fried's choice of terms is not the only way in which the younger critic's writing mirrors that of Greenberg's formalist discourse. His concluding statement about *Hover* and its creator also

⁷⁶ Michael Fried, "Hover by Kenneth Noland," *Acquisitions (Fogg Art Museum)* 1964 (1964): 62-63.

⁷⁷ Fried, "Hover by Kenneth Noland," 63.

⁷⁸ Greenberg, *Barnett Newman*, n.p.; cited in Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 26.

gives the impression that Noland maintains a degree of control over himself and his painting by way of modernist art's elevated ideals:

“Finally, the reticence remarked in *Hover* is an index of Noland's integrity as a painter—he is intransigent in his refusal to exploit obvious effects—and of a dimension of inwardness that has always characterized his work. Noland's paintings are declarative without being declamatory, lucid but never obvious. They are charged with feeling and possessed of an experimental richness far in excess of their visible means.”⁷⁹

Fried seems to be calling attention here to *Hover*'s high aesthetic value by emphasizing the complexities of Noland's objective as a painter and the painting itself. Even so, the critic's explanation comes across as intellectual, although it is also a bit confusing. Moreover, in paralleling Greenberg's views, Fried also champions Color Field painting by claiming that “the stain paintings of men like Louis, Noland, and Jules Olitski represent a strong reaction against the bravura technique and personalized handwriting characteristic of the work of Abstract Expressionists such as de Kooning.”⁸⁰

Perhaps the most pressing matter in formalist discourse is the inability to discuss or analyze anything external to the work itself. The critical literature that followed Greenberg's formalist analytical program rarely, if ever, acknowledged any extrinsic contexts, whether socio-political or cultural. The “self-critical” aspect of Color Field painting largely prevented critics in the 1950s and 1960s from discussing such contexts and still hinders some critics today. Of course, an art whose content solely addresses formal concerns is one that is largely limited to being discussed using a formal approach. Fineberg quotes Barbara Rose who, in a lecture she gave in 1967, said that “since modernist art emancipated itself from the demands of society, the history

⁷⁹ Fried, “*Hover* by Kenneth Noland, 63.

⁸⁰ Fried, “*Hover* by Kenneth Noland,” 62.

of forms has been self-referential and has evolved independently of the history of events.”⁸¹

Greenberg’s formalist criticism attempted to downplay or even renounce the role that exterior motives or the artist’s milieu played in the creative process; Rosenblum’s article describing the 1963 exhibition of Louis’s work at the Guggenheim Museum expresses just this kind of position. In his introduction, Rosenblum discusses the stylistic impressiveness of Louis’s work, asserting that because of the painting’s “sheer visual assault...matters of history, of influence, of better or worse instantly wither into pedantry.”⁸²

In the context of Greenberg’s 1965 essay on modernist art, it is the very painting itself, rendered “pure” by eliminating all that is not essential to its medium, which guarantees its quality. If the work is considered “pure” by the critic’s definition of modernist art, then these outside “matters” become trivial because they would have no effect on its quality. Thus, ideally, the artist’s adherence to Greenberg’s formal principles becomes the true standard by which a given work’s quality is insured. Through this reasoning, the identity of the individual who created the work, i.e. the artist’s biography, should not impact the painting’s high art value. According to Ann Gibson, in her article “Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics,” Greenberg began to omit these biographies because the “eviction of artists’ personal histories from the historical development of the meaning of the art they produced was an important part of [his] influential criticism...[He] believed that the difference between good and bad art rested on a distinction between ‘those values to be found only in art and the values which can be found elsewhere.’”⁸³

⁸¹ Barbara Rose, *Art Criticism in the Sixties: A Symposium of The Poses Institute of Fine Arts, Brandeis University* (New York: October House, 1967), unpaginated; cited in Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000), 154.

⁸² Rosenblum, “Morris Louis at the Guggenheim Museum,” 24.

⁸³ Ann Gibson, “Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics,” in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. by Francis

Although Greenberg claimed that modernist art's standard of quality was based on what he called "medium specificity," this self-critical element of the critic's discourse was not the great equalizer it should have been. This is because modernist art and its values were coded as masculine. Whenever this autonomy was threatened, as was the case with painterly abstraction, it was most often criticized and disregarded. Such a notion is clarified by Liza Saltzman, in her article "Reconsidering the Stain," as she explains that "when a threat to patriarchal society is perceived, an attempt is made to preserve the social order, to reconstitute boundaries and hierarchies."⁸⁴ The standard of quality in the "cool" abstraction of the Color Field artists was not entirely insured by the formalist principles that Greenberg helped to propagate; their work's high art values were further legitimized because they were men. That the critic's elimination of the artists' biographies from their work did not effect the quality of the art was partially due to this fact.

The way in which critics discussed Helen Frankenthaler and her work within this criticism helps to highlight the kinds of inconsistencies that made it a flawed discourse. Cécile Whiting shares a similar view, stating that "the masculine connotations of the formalist language selected to praise the abstractions of Newman and the younger artists Noland and Louis become clear when that language is compared to the terms with which critics described Helen Frankenthaler's paintings."⁸⁵ Frankenthaler's work was held to a double standard when compared to that of her contemporaries and was described with such terms as "sensitive," "thin," and "soft." Whiting points to one comparison, in particular, made by Donald Judd who "compared Frankenthaler's

Franscina. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 308.

⁸⁴ Liza Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's Painting," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 379.

⁸⁵ Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 26-27.

‘soft’ brevity of strokes, ‘lambent’ stains, and ‘allusive’ quality unfavorably to Pollock’s ‘cool,’ ‘tough,’ and ‘rigor.’”⁸⁶ Not only does Judd use the terms “tough” and “rigor,” which were meant to evoke masculine qualities, but also “cool” to illustrate the Action painter’s gestural style.

At the time Judd’s article was written, in 1960, the term “cool” could also have characterized the work of Color Field painting, painting that was described as being in sharp contrast to the painterly abstraction that Pollock represented. That he used this specific term to describe an artist, and his work, whose style had been essentially dismissed as academic shows the difficulty in such attempts to maintain a distinct gender hierarchy within the criticism. Furthermore, Judd’s labeling of Pollock’s work as “cool,” when compared with Frankenthaler’s painting, emphasizes a tactic, I believe, on the part of critics to recoup the former artist’s reputation as a pioneering member of Abstract Expressionism despite objections to his painterly style. Pollock’s style was criticized when likened to the work of the Color Field artists, but was defended when compared to that of Frankenthaler’s; Pollock’s gestural abstraction, to an extent, regained its masculine presence as it was discussed along side a woman’s practice.

The gender bias that largely characterized the complications within formalist art criticism during the 1950s and 1960s further reflected the social climate in America during that time. Michael Kimmel quotes historian William Chafe who asserted that “the effort to reinforce traditional norms seemed almost frantic...”⁸⁷ Hence, women artists and their work were written about in ways that usually posed them as artistically deficient when juxtaposed with their

⁸⁶ Donald Judd, “Helen Frankenthaler,” *Arts* 34 (March 1960): 55; cited in Whiting, “Borrowed Spots,” 27.

⁸⁷ William H. Chafe, “The Paradox of Change: American Society in the Postwar Years,” in *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, ed. William Chafe. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 119; cited in Kimmel, “Temporary About Myself,” 170.

masculine counterparts, even as they used similar, if not the same, artistic techniques. Whiting elaborates on this idea by looking at additional critiques of Frankenthaler's work:

"In the early 1960s, even as critics detected changes in her painting that brought them closer in line with the economy and control of the abstract canvases by Newman, Noland, and Louis, they tended to find her style lacking. Judd, for instance, concluded in 1963 that 'Frankenthaler's softness is fine but it would be more profound if it were also hard.' Schyler and Judd, joining other critics of the period in positioning Frankenthaler's painting as the feminine exemplar of Color Field painting, judged her painting practice less 'profound' than Post-Painterly Abstraction and less 'tough' than Abstract Expressionism."⁸⁸

Critics such as Judd and Schyler shortchanged Frankenthaler's artistic skill by criticizing her work for lack of certain qualities that they championed in the paintings of both gestural abstraction and Color Field painting. At the same time, Louis's work, which employed the same basic staining technique as Frankenthaler's, was explained in ways that, according to Saltzman, "could be constructed as supremely and singularly different, and ultimately, supremely and singularly masculine..."⁸⁹ Louis's process of staining the canvas, especially in his *Veil* and *Floral* series, produced "delicately fluid and watery surfaces" that were perhaps even more "feminine" than Frankenthaler's paintings. However, critics, Saltzman argues, suggested that if such works exhibited these "feminine" qualities, then they were the product of Louis's capability, as a male artist, of "enacting femininity, of taking its culturally coded trappings and representing them with admirable, if not superior, skill."⁹⁰ Claims such as this one further underline the kind of masculine authority and attempts by a primarily male-dominated art world to "reinforce traditional norms."

⁸⁸ Whiting, "Borrowed Spots," 27.

⁸⁹ Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain," 378.

⁹⁰ Saltzman, "Reconsidering the stain," 377. Saltzman quotes a passage from art historian Eugene Goossen's Article "Helen Frankenthaler" in the October 1961 issue of *Art International*, who sets her work against that of Arshile Gorky's. Goossen legitimizes what he sees as the feminine qualities of Gorky's pictures by explaining how they have a "feminine delicacy in the sensuous line that only a man could have produced."

Saltzman's analysis of the formalist writing that critics, such as Fried, composed to support Louis's work also shows the use of what she calls "formal dualities," which helped to justify the presence of these "feminine" qualities. Saltzman takes for instance a passage by Fried describing a 1954 painting from the artist's *Veil* series. She points out that the "formal dualities...acknowledged in Fried's treatment of *Intrigue*, a painting that is at once 'metallic and floral,' 'flame-like and mineral,' these elements of difference are ultimately leveled in the interest of establishing, for Louis, a certain conquest of the 'incidental felicities' of the stain..."⁹¹ Fried's use of these pairings, with each term implying either a feminine or masculine quality, are also found in Rosenblum's 1963 article. Commenting on the same painting, no less, the critic claims that "the gently expanding stains and quivering overlays of *Intrigue* create a fragile, organic image of uncommon beauty, as if we were examining a butterfly wing or a quartz deposit through the startling magnifications of a microscope..."⁹²

Fried's "formal dualities" paired together certain adjectives or, in Rosenblum's case, actual items and used their "culturally coded trappings" as a means to suggest the existence of the work's feminine and masculine qualities and that these former qualities were governed by Louis's proficiency as a male artist to produce them. "Metallic" and "quartz deposit" meant to imply "masculine" characteristics like "solid" or "hard," terms that also were used to describe Louis's painting.⁹³ By coupling these terms with ones such as "floral" or "butterfly wing," which were "delicate" and characteristically "feminine," critics suggested that Louis could exhibit both "masculine" and "feminine" traits within his canvases. According to Saltzman, the

⁹¹ Michael Fried, *Morris Louis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1971), 25-26; cited in Saltzman, "Reconsidering the stain," 378.

⁹² Rosenblum, "Morris Louis at the Guggenheim Museum," 24.

⁹³ Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain," 377.

way critics, specifically Fried, discussed Louis's "handling of the stain...in redeeming the feminine in the name of the masculine, is in the end altogether typical of an entire era of formalist criticism."⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain," 378.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have attempted to show that an analysis of the Color Field paintings of Morris Louis as well as both contemporary and later critical discussions of his work, exemplified in the writing of Clement Greenberg in particular, can offer a greater understanding of mid-century modern art by examining the role assumptions about American masculinity played in the criticism of the major styles of the period. Louis's work was produced during a time when artists as well as critics were responding to both the influential as well as problematic aspects of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, when a substantial shift in critical support passed from a more gestural style, practiced by artists such as Jackson Pollock, to the "cool" abstraction to which Louis's art belongs. The "crisis" that emerged under these circumstances directly involved issues of gender that were coded into the critical literature, thus, creating a hierarchical division that favored masculine qualities over those considered feminine. Moreover, these conditions were symptomatic of larger social and cultural trends in America that were analyzed and recorded, during as well as after World War Two.

The aggressive masculine presence that critics such as Harold Rosenberg imputed to Pollock's style of Action Painting reflected the kind of aggressive qualities of American masculinity that anthropologist Margret Meade discussed in her 1942 study. Based on her research, masculinity's aggressive character stemmed from its own societal insecurities and inadequacies; however, this anxiety and fear was chiefly aimed at yet blamed on women. Other studies from this time, by those such as Philip Wylie and Talcott Parsons, held women directly responsible the delinquency and/or effeminacy of their sons, further accusing them of undermining masculine power and authority. The terms "Momism" and "megaloid

Momworship” came to associate women as overbearing and over-protective mothers who were the cause of emasculating the post-war American man. In this particular socio-cultural context, gestural expressionism, which became the quintessential component of Action Painting, was initially asserted as being a signifier of a genuinely masculine transformation.

By the late 1950s, Action Painting essentially stagnated as it became academicized and, for many, lost the vital importance it once held as an example of avant-garde activity. That such a style was being taught by college art departments around the country at this time shows the extent of its influential power, which also prompted its undoing. Critics such as William Rubin wrongly condemned women as the culprits of Abstract Expressionism’s downturn, labeling them as the “weaker artists” who, by and large, led to its demise. Moreover, as the style began to lose its significance as an avant-garde art form, which critics claimed was mainly the fault of women, it also lost its association with masculine presence in the process. The kinds of accusations that critics made against female artists in this particular instance no doubt reflected the general socio-cultural attitudes against women in post-war America.

As Color Field Painting began to be promoted by critics such as Greenberg and Michael Fried, gradually succeeding Abstract Expressionism as the dominant modern art style, they also established a new form of masculine presence within their criticism. They applauded the kind of restrained and subdued qualities that artists such as Louis exhibited in their works while denouncing the highly energetic features of Action Painting. As the use of control replaced expressive gesture, the “self-referential” aspect of Greenberg’s modernist art discourse became the standard of quality for this new style, which was labeled as masculine. This new masculine presence, however, conveyed through both the formalist vocabulary as well as Greenberg’s

discourse, also reflected the kind of suppressed and subdued character that American masculinity faced in a time of fear, anxiety, and conforming tastes.

Finally, Greenberg's insistence on modernist art's high standard of quality sat in opposition to the lower values he placed on American commercialism, which quickly developed in years after the Second World War. Thus, Color Field Painting, as a fine art practice, was essentially "masculinized" and discussed in the positive while the consumer culture was "feminized" and discussed in the negative. The subtle gendering of these institutions presented problems, especially for the former, as female artists experimented with techniques that produced similar artistic results as their male colleagues. The formalist criticism discussing both Morris Louis's and Helen Frankenthaler's work exposes the challenges that critics faced in attempting to stabilize the kinds of gender hierarchies between male and female artists that existed, and were common, in 1950s and 60s post-war American art.

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