Purity:
The Cleansing of the Arts
in Postwar America

by Rebecca Fisher
Introduction

At the closing of the Second World War, new developments emerged in the realm of art. Artists in Europe and America yearned to, in a sense, purify or cleanse this world from all the evil that had taken place in the Holocaust. They sought an art form that could be totally stripped of meaning and that liberated the artist and the viewer from the natural world.¹ A search for a universal art form was especially felt among many American artists who emphasized this idea through abstract painting. Abstract Expressionism emerged in America during this time. Artists involved in this new art abandoned the traditional conventions seen in realistic painting.

Art of Painting

Clement Greenberg proposed, in his essay, *Modernist Painting*, that such rejection was necessary for painting itself to reach a state of purity.² In his definition on Modernism, Greenberg stated that purism, focused on the identity of each art.³ To distinguish between the various arts, each art had to define itself through the limitations of its own medium. He claimed that in the art of painting, the materials of paint applied to a two dimensional flat surface of a support separated painting from the other arts.⁴

Alongside this idea of purity, Greenberg also explained the technical changes that occurred in painting over time. In his critical theory on Formalism, Greenberg talked extensively about the formal elements of painting: line, shape, color, texture, form, value, and space. He believed that these elements held superiority over subjectivity. According to Greenberg, the reduction of a painting to the formal elements brought the art of painting closer to a state of perfection.⁵ He drew these

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³ Greenberg, 774.

⁴ Ibid., 775.

conclusions from observing work by artists, like Jackson Pollock. Pollock, a first generation Abstract
Expressionist painter, emphasized the visual qualities of painting as he excluded literary content from
his art. He also avoided a hierarchical structuring of the elements. Pollock’s painting, Number 1
(1950), for example, emphasized the flatness of the picture plane. The dispersal of the formal
elements across the support appeared to be broken up into equal or balanced parts, which allowed
the eye to view the work in its entirety. In other words, no one element held the spotlight. There
appeared to be no focal point, which separated this type of painting from that of representational
artwork.

Greenberg further discussed the evolution of painting over time to explain the emergence of
the abstract art in the twentieth century. He claimed that abstract painting developed out of the art
movements of the past. His critical analysis of this new and pure art revolved around paintings
produced by artists referred to as Formalist painters, e.g., Pollock. Even though Joan Mitchell was
not considered a Formalist painter, her Abstract Expressionist painting, City Landscape (1955),
exposed the unique qualities associated with the art of painting.

Abstract Expressionist Painting: City Landscape

City Landscape depicts a nonrepresentational scene. A sense of entrapment (or a means of
escape) is felt as the applied and colorful paint appears to leak out from the central part of the
support. Loosely constructed geometric shapes recall a rock-like surface, which enclose and frame
the color within and assist the eye inward toward the colorful scene. Excess paint drippings, seen in
various colors, move downward crossing over patches of stained and solid color, while the rock-like
structures are once again emphasized with the intrusion of the colorful drippings.

Separation of the Arts

The emphasis placed on the formal element of color in City Landscape forces the viewer to

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6 Varnedoe, 4.
7 Greenberg, 778.
focus strictly on the material used in painting. The lack of subject matter especially separates this painting from the art of literature. According to Greenberg, literature dominated the art of painting in the past. Renaissance painters like Giovanni Bellini, for example, transformed narratives into visual stories. The subject matter contained in paintings, like *Saint Jerome Reading in a Landscape* (1505), placed the art of painting in a subservient position as the inclusion of literature distracted the viewer from focusing on the unique qualities attached to painting. The avoidance of rendering recognizable objects therefore became one of the major characteristics portrayed in this new art.

**The New Illusion**

The elimination of subject matter not only liberated painting from the art of literature, but it freed painting from the art of sculpture as well. The element of space as seen in *City Landscape* differs dramatically from the illusionistic space used in paintings of the past. The three dimensional space in paintings like *Saint Jerome Reading in a Landscape*, for example, combined the art of painting with the art of sculpture as Bellini created three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface. The arrangement of space and color in *City Landscape*, however, creates a new type of illusion.

The composition itself is setup in such a way that places all the action and all the color in the center of the support. The vibrant colors radiate from the center to the outer vertical edges of the canvas. They are bound together through splashes of paint that intertwine and result in additional layers of color. These built up layers of paint combine the indefinite colorful shapes into one whole mass of color. This mass of color appears to advance forward beyond the neutral background and seems to communicate an illusion of depth. At the same time, the neutral rocky surrounding appears to be closing in on the color. This tug-of-war between the neutral surrounding area and the mass of color prevents the viewer’s eye from moving beyond the surface of the picture plane. The layers of color combined with the neutral surrounding draw the eye back to the surface, creating a purely optical illusion.

Greenberg claimed that this new optical illusion encouraged only the eye to travel through

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the painting. Such a journey differs from the experience felt when observing paintings that contain three dimensional illusionistic space. As Greenberg stated, this sculptural illusion, or trompe-l’oeil, employed in paintings of the Renaissance period, for instance, encourages the viewer to experience a more tactile and bodily engagement. The viewer may feel as if he or she could walk through such works of art.

**Freedom of the Artist**

This separation between the arts encouraged artists, like Mitchell, to explore in the medium itself. The various lines seen in *City Landscape* reveal this new freedom of the artist. The lines used in the neutral pictorial space, which composes the rock-like structures, appear to have been intentionally made. The artist employed detached, disconnected, straight, horizontal, vertical, and controlled lines. Such lines echo the physical hardness and sharpness of rock-like structures. The colorful lines revealed in the drippings, on the other hand, expose wavy and uncontrolled lines. These lines reveal the artist’s embrace for spontaneity as Mitchell allowed the paint to fall without the manipulation of a brush. The free flowing lines also seem to extend beyond the canvas suggesting, as Greenberg claimed, the continuity of the image moving beyond the frame.

The absence of subject matter further reinforced this felt sense of timelessness. Paintings, like *City Landscape*, distanced the viewer from placing such work in an historical, a political, or a social context. Such paintings not only separated the art of painting from that of the other arts, but they also seemed to have disconnected art from life. Such a detachment occurred through this exploitation of line.

Line, according to Greenberg, held much significance to the avant-garde artists in this new art movement. This element failed to exist in nature. Therefore, line became viewed as one of the

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10 Greenberg, 777.

11 Ibid.

12 Hopkins, 28.
most abstract elements in painting.\(^{13}\) The organization of line in *City Landscape* seems to make reference to block-like forms viewed in real life. Yet, the quick and choppy rendering of the lines makes such shapes appear ambiguous, as they remain flat and incomplete in form. Mitchell deliberately avoided the use of shaded modeling and chiaroscuro. Such traditional techniques imitated the art of sculpture as they exposed three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface.

The flatness of the forms in *City Landscape* also helps the viewer maintain focus on the two-dimensional surface quality of the support. The simple, geometric, and flat shapes coincide with the square-like shape and flatness of the canvas. Such a reduction of form exposes, according to Greenberg, the simplicity of the medium itself.\(^ {14}\)

**Nature Revealed in *City Landscape***

Greenberg’s belief that art was to remain separate from life brought the art of painting one step closer to a puritanical state. This belief seems to have manifested in Abstract Expressionist paintings, like *City Landscape*. Yet, the birth of *City Landscape* contradicts Greenberg’s view to some degree as the painting stemmed from natural objects experienced in Mitchell’s everyday life.

The title, *City Landscape*, makes reference to a setting experienced in the natural world even though the painting is abstract. The title further connects art with life as the city, which is composed of human life, is surrounded by nonhuman elements. Such elements are exemplified in the rock-like structures contained in the painting. Their formation also gives insight into the artist’s awareness of environmental objects. The central dark line, from which the color emerges, along with the other lines used in the outer forms vary in thickness. The variations in line help separate one form from the next and mimics the shadowy spaces that pierce through cracks found in rocks.

The various colors used also recall the major colors seen throughout city life. Splashes of red and yellow paint reflect the artificial lighting in the streets of New York, while the mixed and muddy appearance of the paint drips seem to resemble colors seen in nature.

\(^{13}\) Greenberg, 566.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
Over all, the visually graphic appearance of *City Landscape* reflects the violence seen in city life. The white background, according to Mitchell, references death.\(^\text{15}\) The blood-stained webs of color, in contrast, swim around in such a lyrical and lively way, but because of the figure-ground ambiguity, the color communicates a “push and pull” effect.\(^\text{16}\) The color seems like it wants to escape. Yet, it appears to be pulled back into the rock-like structures from which it emerged. This “push and pull” effect not only reflects the struggles that Mitchell experienced during the creative process, but it also symbolizes, to a larger extent, the plight of human life.

**Mitchell’s Method and Creative Process**

Mitchell used color and movement to express the external world without literally translating it in *City Landscape*. Her inspiration for such work stemmed from her memory and feelings of nature, which always preceded her creative process.\(^\text{17}\)

Mitchell’s method of working involved a prolonged period of contemplation of a memory or feeling, which triggered the physical act of painting.\(^\text{18}\) For her, the sense of sight helped her capture images of things observed in real life. The mental pictures were then abandoned, while the emotion remained intact and guided her to create.

During the creative process, she listened to music to escape from the consciousness of her own existence. She believed this lack of consciousness was necessary to be totally engaged in the act of painting.\(^\text{19}\) She abandoned easel painting like other Abstract Expressionists. Such traditional ways of painting limited the space within the canvas and restricted the movement of both the brush and the body.\(^\text{20}\) Still, her canvases remained in vertical positions as they were placed on the wall during

\(^{15}\) Bernstock, 39.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{18}\) Ibid, 34.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 33.

Mitchell especially placed heavy emphasis on plastic space. Such a preoccupation with this element came from the lack of space experienced in city life, which crowded her physical and emotional state of being. She, therefore, worked on large scale canvases to expand the space and to experience more freedom of movement with the brush and within herself.

The arm length brushstrokes seen in City Landscape express this new freedom of movement. The elongated strokes combined with the splashes of color serve as a record of the gestures and emotions that Mitchell experienced during the process of painting. In this sense, her work is closely related to the action paintings of the first generation Abstract Expressionist artists. The free-drip painting technique revealed in City Landscape especially connects her work to that of Jackson Pollock’s action paintings.

Mitchell’s knowledge of the drip painting technique came from her experience in New York in the later 1940’s. Around this time, the New York School began to teach the drip painting technique to art students. Artists who trained in the techniques created by the first generation Abstract Expressionists came to be known as the second generation Abstract Expressionist painters. Mitchell’s imitation of the drip painting technique contributed to her placement in this latter group.

The idea of self-exploration employed by the first generation artists also influenced the second generation Abstract Expressionist painters, like Mitchell. As Douglas MacAgy, an instructor at the California School of Fine Arts once stated: “I do not want other artists to imitate my work....but only my example for freedom and independence from all the external decadent and

21 Bernstock, 46.
22 Ibid, 35.
24 Bernstock, 46.
corrupting influences.”

It was this type of mentality that encouraged artists like Mitchell to reject the traditional practices of painting, which revolved around copying techniques from master artists. She instead embarked on a more personal journey within herself and used the method of self-exploration as a vehicle to guide her.

**Mitchell’s Influences**

In addition to Pollock, other external sources profoundly impacted Mitchell’s expression on the canvas. Her desire to reduce the natural world to color and movement as seen in *City Landscape* resulted from a long line of art styles that Mitchell practiced early in her artistic career.

She first became interested in art through her father. Her father, an amateur artist, exposed his daughter to great art of the past. Yet, his domineering disposition and anti-Semitic attitude, turned Mitchell off to him early in life. She personally stated that through abstract art she would be freed from his control forever. At the same time, her mother’s success as a poet greatly affected Mitchell’s movement on the canvas. She especially liked poetry for its “feeling of sound and silence.” In observation of her work, there seems to be a rhythmic quality that resembles the flowing sound of a poem.

Unfortunately, Mitchell’s mother suffered from an illness and a loss of hearing. Her mother’s illness led the young child down a path of isolation, which she initially experienced in the secluded world of her mother. Alongside her feelings of isolation existed a fear of death as the streets of Chicago were heavily induced with crime. Her anxiety over the unknown coupled with her isolated self manifested into an obsession with death and the concept of “aloneness.”

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25 Ibid., 35.
26 Kertess, 11.
27 Bernstock, 13.
28 Ibid., 13.
29 Ibid., 15.
30 Ibid.
On a brighter note, Mitchell held fond memories of the natural environment that surrounded her. The ever-changing surface of water especially fascinated her and helped her create an internal landscape, which she carried with her throughout her life.31

The landscape has always been a means of escape for Mitchell. She first delved deep in a *plein air* manner. She painted in the open air visually documenting the external environment in an Impressionistic style. Yet, her exposure to Cezanne’s work, while attending the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1940’s, influenced her to simplify form to blocks of color, which resulted in a more abstract and “cubed up” appearance in her landscapes.32 At the same time, she continued to practice her perceptual skills, but soon abandoned her figurative background and replaced it with abstraction. Her exposure to Franz Kline’s black and white paintings, which hung on a brick wall along with Willem De Kooning’s Abstract Expressionist cityscapes influenced the method and content used in her Abstract Expressionist paintings, like *City Landscape*.33

De Kooning’s work especially impacted Mitchell. His crude treatment of the medium reflected the violent nature experienced in urban life, which Mitchell connected to on a personal level.34 Yet, his all-over treatment of the medium differed from Mitchell’s unique style. In addition to *City Landscape*, Mitchell produced other centralized work, like *Hemlock* (1956) and *Hudson River Day Line* (1955), which contained color in the center surrounded by a white field.35 This white field recalled Mitchell’s obsession with death as she associated the color white with death.

Mitchell’s unique style and indirect reference to nature further separated her paintings from that of the first generation Abstract Expressionist painters. Greenberg noted in a generalized statement, in regards to the second generation Abstract Expressionist artists, that such artists moved

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 17.

33 Ibid., 21.

34 Sandler, 2.

35 Bernstock, 30.
more toward an openness of design, which differed from the compressed images of the first
generation Abstract Expressionists. He also claimed that their compositions appeared more clear
and linear in format than the first generation Abstract Expressionist paintings. The loose designs
revealed a disinterest in the expressivity of the brushwork employed in the work of the first
generation Abstract Expressionist painters. Artists, like Mitchell, preserved broad areas, which lacked
a variation in color. The extension of the color across the central part of the picture plane in City
Landscape also reinforces the linearity that Greenberg discussed. This new sense of freshness and
linearity carried over in many of Mitchell’s centralized paintings despite all the colorful chaos.

In addition to this linear format, Mitchell employed the “push and pull” effect in her
centralized paintings: City landscape, Hemlock, and Hudson River Day Line. The interwoven color in such
work appears to pulsate on the surface. The color, especially in Hemlock, seems to move back and
forth or in and out of each other as it moves across the picture plane. This “push and pull” effect
stemmed from Mitchell’s brief exposure to Hans Hofmann’s instruction in New York.

At the time, Hofmann taught at the Art Students League in New York. He later established
his own Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts. Mitchell attended one of Hofmann’s classes, which
exposed her to his ideas. Hofmann’s main concern involved exposing surface tension-in-depth on
the picture plane through the process of coloring. His use of color emphasized the literal flatness of
the picture plane and produced a “push and pull” effect. The color utilized in his work, The Gate
(1960), for example, appears to advance forward and, at the same time, seems to recede spatially.
This tension, or “push and pull” effect, is also exemplified in the arrangement of color seen in
Mitchell’s work.

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37 Arnason, 411.
38 Bernstock, 17.
39 Stangos, 177.
40 Arnason, 411.
Hofmann further emphasized the need for color and form unity.\textsuperscript{41} This sense of unity can be seen in the order and structure of Mitchell’s paintings as well. Her images are very controlled and structured, which resulted from her slow method of working. During the creative process, Mitchell would literally step back, examine her work, and decide where to place the next mark. Her overall focus was to balance the elements of form, space, color, and line on the picture plane so that no one element appeared in a hierarchical position. According to Mitchell, this interdependence and balance of the elements resulted in a completed painting.\textsuperscript{42}

Mitchell’s break down of subject matter over time reveals two facts. The break down demonstrates Greenberg’s claim that Modernist art developed out of the past and that the avant-garde artist had to travel through the existing art movements, in order to arrive at completely abstract, or nonobjective art.\textsuperscript{43} Mitchell’s reduction of form also seemed to reveal her own longing to reach a state of purity within herself. All the influences that stemmed from her father, other artists, and the external world contaminated her mind. Gestural painting served as a way for her to engage in a transcendental experience where she could, in a sense, ascend from this world into the unknown.\textsuperscript{44} This type of painting also elevated the viewer as the separation of the arts prevented the viewer from making any connections with the images displayed in paintings, like \textit{City Landscape}.

\textbf{Conclusion}

This thought of freeing the artist and the viewer from the natural world through the cleansing of the arts seems to have been derived from both World Wars in the twentieth century. Greenberg’s specific terminology of purifying the arts recalls, in some way, the systematic process that was devised to cleanse Germany from all those who posed a threat to Nazism in WWII. Whether or not this idea of purification in the arts came about as a direct result from the Holocaust

\textsuperscript{41} Stangos, 174.

\textsuperscript{42} Bernstock, 34.

\textsuperscript{43} Greenberg, 541, 778.

\textsuperscript{44} Bernstock, 33.
remains a mystery. Yet, artists, like Mitchell, were greatly affected by the devastation caused by the war. Her trip to Paris in 1948 exposed her to the brutal reality of that whole time period. It was in this time that marked the death of her figurative work and the birth of her abstract art and her most notably acclaimed Abstract Expressionist paintings.
Bibliography


