

# Nothing more and nothing less?

## Mark Rothko at Tate Modern

December/January 2008–9

Cian O'Neill

If human beings show their capacity for love also through their love of colours, Mark Rothko was about the most romantic painter of the mid-20th century and his work bears out the truth that while language defines the world, the world came first and sometimes language doesn't quite match it for beauty. Good art, if it has a physical form like painting, comes somewhere between language and the world and when a painting of a lily is as beautiful as an actual lily it is usually because the painting has the simplicity of the happily functional – saying well what it needs to, and no more.

► This show does not do that. It gives neither the range of Rothko's moods, nor many works in which they are well-communicated. Crucially, all the work in these nine rooms of the Tate Monolith is late. Not on publicity materials, not on the website but inside the first room of the gallery is to be seen the subtitle – 'Late Works'. 'Trading' and 'standards' are not two words which should be used in polite society, yet one has to wonder how the Tate think people will repute the place when they think they are attending a Rothko retrospective and get instead but the latter third of his career and have no way of knowing until the entrance monies have already been pocketed. With none of the seminal, vibrant primaries of his less gloomy days [c1949–58] on show here, one does not get the full picture.

Rothko's brighter work is famously demanding of the curator for reasons of its fairly large scale and closely modulated colour-tones. Any darkly tinted oil painting is, frankly, going to be a much more difficult proposition. Sheen and shadow hang around like so many goblins, trying to obscure the work. When such a painting is made with unspecified mixed media [not just traditional oil paint and medium] and is the size of a barn door, the job of making sure that the painting is sufficiently but not excessively

illuminated becomes Sisyphean. Then one must remember that 'selling' such an exhibition to the public is difficult as not many people will pay to be run through an emotional wringer. In the plain light of day, gaud is actually much more depressing than truly-made and truly well-made art which happens not to smile like a Cole Porter melody. But you try selling that one to the weekend culture supplements crowd.

Perhaps, also, the misleading nomenclature may be forgiven because, 'Rothko: Even More Depressing Than Normal', doesn't have the same zing as the title of your average Drury Lane musical. Few of the paintings were not perfectly lit, which is a credit to the gallery technicians.

What, though, of the layout and display? It starts cheerfully enough, if oddly. Upon entry, one is confronted with a maquette showing how nine canvases from the celebrated Seagram Building series – for some, the artist's magnum opus – were to be housed in the Tate, to which the artist donated them in 1969. The maquette doesn't tell us anything about the work, however, and the small paper works on surrounding walls give no sense of the process. There are no notes from the artist. There are no useful notes from the curator. This is trivia. The next room is very small and houses but one painting ['Four Darks in Red', 1958], as was perhaps intended to provide some sort of link between the stacked boxes of the middle period work and the looser, calligraphic lines of the Seagram work. It is not one of his better canvases, however, and the narrative does not convince. The visitor then goes back out, via the first room, to get to the third and so ends up wandering into sight of the Seagram work without preparation or context. There one looks, across an expanse of neat wooden floor, and finds the perspective occluded by several great pillars in the centre of the room. Granted that engineering demands deference from any rational person, was this really the best solution available? Big paintings demand big open spaces and to deny the viewer that proper and uninterrupted perspective as the work requires is to reduce the experience. One does not house a colossus in a pigeon coop.

Howsoever the collective view of them is impaired; one can enjoy the canvases individually. They are oceanic studies in form and colour hung in a prism of deeply subtle craft and nothing about them is simple. Making a painting of a rectangle within a rectangle visually compelling is high-wire work because without the normal tricks of distraction through the provision of visual information etc., the painter is stripped bare and deeply exposed, with only his purest understanding of form and colour to make art out of. No cannon, no lions and no clowns. Just a painting of nothing that either means just that, or something else entirely – a beautiful act



though it has its good points, e.g. room four which has one informative display on his technique and spectral analysis thereof. Overall, there is not enough, and some of the work just isn't that strong, e.g. 'Untitled' [1964], a red canvas that so resembles a Barnett Newman, your reviewer almost had out his Stanley knife. Also, most of the Seagram works have been seen before as Tate was left several of them by the artist in 1969. In room six is found the best of all this – the 'Black Form' series from the early 1960s. Think Goya's black

paintings but without the human presence. It is deeply odd and affecting, lacking all hope but having great beauty of colour – that damson again, this time darker, with burnt umber and cocoa. Unfortunately, there follow rooms of dashed-off late pieces that little merit sight or discussion. The failing of the powers is always sad, yet sadder still in great artists and that this very weak work is included makes it more obvious that this exhibition is a grab-bag of mixed quality, cobbled together rather than presented rationally and with sufficient context. The fan will still benefit from it. What thinks the dispassionate viewer who stands before one of the Seagram or

'Black Form' paintings in this Tate show may depend greatly upon their pain threshold for bad curatorial work, yet also how much gravity / absurdity they would allow in art. There isn't that much to 'get', and some may not get it at all. For these are gag-free visual metaphors about the transcendence, beauty and futility of art. Art being the better part of life, they are also musings on the nature of life and death; nothing more, and nothing less. Rothko's major work speaks of these things, and so very well indeed, that this weak exhibition shall not mar his fame. ■

of audacity, high up on a wire over a beckoning deep of absurdity. Well, it is faintly daft, painting squares of colour within rectangles of other colours. Then again, so, in a world dictated to by hedge funds and oligarchs, is voting. Thoreau called that a, '[S]ort of gaming [...] with a slight moral twinge to it'. Despite taking more risks with his work than many artists would ever contemplate, this painter was no gung-ho pioneer, like Picasso, say. There is more than a twinge of the moral to Rothko.

A deeply unhappy man all his life, he drank too much and thought much more, which seldom aids anyone's sleep. Born the youngest son in a poor but highly-intellectually achieved Russian Jewish family in what is now Latvia, Marcus arrived in New York at the age of ten. Having been partly-educated in a traditional Jewish primary school or cheder, back in the East, he had consequently studied the Talmud from early childhood and was an active member of a local Jewish community centre by his teens. Passionate about workers' and women's rights, he was politically sensate well before going to Yale on scholarship at the age of seventeen. He was literate in Jung, Nietzsche and Kant and wrote lucidly. He also killed himself at the age of 66, despite success and reputation. So, there is a lot of weight being carried up there on that tight-rope: painting theory, fascination with death, fear of God and worse than this, the fear of there being no God to speak of.

It is then a pity that such challenging work is neither fulsomely represented nor properly presented in this show,



Seagram

