



Donald Sultan

Black Lemons May 20 1985, 1985

Charcoal on paper, 59¾ x 48

Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. F. Howard Walsh Jr.

Motherwell's Angus by Theodore Waddell

WHOSE CATTLE ARE THESE?

DEAN SOBEL

As a painter living in New York during the early 1960s, Theodore Waddell faced a predicament, not unlike one shared by other artists who emerged in the shadows of abstract expressionism as it was developed by towering figures like Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, and others more than a decade earlier.¹ This movement was so original it had become an albatross, a monkey on one's back. But by the start of the sixties, abstract expressionism had been reduced to a "style" so pervasive it was being taught in art schools and in the process, watered down to the point where it had none of the transformative

and humanistic qualities intended by its first generation of artists. This caused, alternately, a crisis in determining how painting should move forward but also a groundswell of potential in stimulating fresh ideas. Artist and critic Allan Kaprow, in his prophetic essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," described this condition concisely:

But *what do we do now?*²

Certainly pop art was the most evident movement to challenge the authority of abstract expressionism, but by the middle of the 1960s it became clear that pop would be short-lived and not of interest for most painters, including Waddell, who preferred "textures" (his term) and more earnest forms of art-making to the ironies of pop art and its reliance on low-culture appropriation and machine-created appearance.³ As pop's reign began to recede in the

late 1960s, many young artists, often referred to as post-minimalists, began to prune select elements from abstract expressionism—its concern for a timeless monumentality, attention to touch and process, and adherence to personal feeling—and graft them onto their practice. As a result, new and rejuvenated art forms that embraced—somewhat startlingly—a variety of narrative, representational, or human qualities began to emerge.⁴

It is within this context that Waddell's work should be considered. Having returned to his native Montana to continue his studies and teach (and ultimately establish residence), Waddell began working in various sculptural idioms throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s before returning to the easel, where he slowly developed a highly personal approach to painting in which the process, gesture, and touch

of abstract expressionism were joined with his—and the art world’s—new tolerance for images. Perhaps most important, Waddell began to instill aspects of his own autobiography into his works, which with the exception of his stays in New York and later Michigan for a graduate degree were indebted to his birthplace in the American West, particularly the western plains of Montana and Idaho. While his year in New York was significant—he speaks and writes about this time as being well spent—Waddell became increasingly drawn to the qualities and sensations (and scale) of the American western landscape, which he knew he could make uniquely his own. In doing so, he would establish a dialogue with not only abstract expressionist artists, but equally with the great artists who define the art history of the region, figures like Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Remington, and Charles Russell, whose subject matter and spirit he would reinterpret in contemporary terms.

By the early 1980s, Waddell had refined his working methods into what has become his signature approach—paintings in which he incorporated animals (cattle, horses, sheep, and, sometimes, dogs), into expressive, painterly, nearly abstract backgrounds that suggest the landscape. These backgrounds, which are composed of gestural, atmospheric passages of brilliantly applied paint, engulf whatever figural elements he has included to create allover patterns in which figure

and ground fuse in the shallow space of the picture plane.

In these ways, Waddell’s work, not entirely coincidentally, can be linked to a larger movement in American art developed by artists of his generation and often described as “new image” painting or “new figuration.” Artists working in this style include Susan Rothenberg and Donald Sultan, who similarly introduced, albeit tentatively, representational images into otherwise painterly, formalist surfaces.⁵ As a result, we can see these artists as a linchpin between the formal practices of the 1950s and 1960s and the more content-laden, imagistic tendencies of many movements of the last thirty years, including the international neo-expressionism movement of the 1980s but also the prevalence of representational art that marks so much of the art of the 1990s and beyond.⁶

Waddell’s *Motherwell’s Angus* (1994) represents the zenith of his mature approach. This large work (measuring roughly six feet square) includes suggestions of Waddell’s characteristic pasture animals, here cattle, rendered as bold, bulbous black ovals spread across the composition in a seemingly random pattern. These small black oblongs—it’s hard to describe them in more specific (i.e., representational) terms—are placed within a luminous, painterly field built up from off-white paints punctuated in small areas by whispers of subtle, nearly sky-blue. The background (a snow-swept landscape?) is rendered

with masterful, highly gestural strokes and palette-knife work, ranging from dabs and drips to long paint-passages and, in a few instances, near-sgraffito-like incisions made with hard tools, such as the end of his brush.

Motherwell’s Angus embodies perhaps Waddell’s most significant feature: an overall surface quality that seems to shimmer with his distinctive touch and gesture. Combined with his astute sense of tone, the effect of this painting is as much aligned with the work of late nineteenth-century European artists like Claude Monet and Pierre Bonnard as it is with that of Motherwell and the abstract expressionists, let alone Bierstadt or Russell.

The point of view in *Motherwell’s Angus* is ambiguous; the space of the painting is so shallow and flattened that it appears, initially, as if we’re seeing a pasture from an aerial perspective, from a plane that has just taken off. More likely, Waddell has upturned his perspective this severely so that the painting reads like the “allover” compositions of abstract expressionist painting (though it also recalls, subtly, the flattened, lateral space of classical Chinese landscape paintings). Like his New Image contemporaries, particularly Rothenberg, who would tether her horses and other subjects with lines and Xs to the edges of her compositions—thus snapping the figures toward frontal flatness—Waddell pulls his images flat against the picture plane

Susan Rothenberg

Black in Place, 1976

Synthetic polymer and tempera on canvas, 68¼ x 85½

The Museum of Modern Art, New York,

Gift of Edward R. Broida. ©2011 Susan

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Resource, New York





Theodore Waddell
Motherwell's Angus, 1994
 Oil on canvas, 72 x 72
 Denver Art Museum, Gift of Barbara J.
 and James R. Hartley, 1999.84

Claude Monet
Waterloo Bridge, 1903
 Oil on canvas, 25 x 383/4
 Denver Art Museum, Funds from
 Helen Dill bequest, 1935.15

Robert Motherwell
Elegy to the Spanish Republic #172 (With Blood),
 1989–90, Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120
 Denver Art Museum, Acquired in memory of Lewis
 W. Story through the generosity of the Dedalus
 Foundation and the following donors: Florence R.
 & Ralph L. Burgess Trust, Laurencin Deaccessions
 Fund, Vance Kirkland Acquisitions Fund, and the
 Marion G. Hendrie Fund, 1994.1134

as a means to retain the strict dictums of late modernist painting that, again, link him to a generation seasoned on the orthodoxy of art of the 1950s and Greenbergian flatness.⁷

It is significant that Waddell landed on Motherwell as a harbinger of potentiality. Like all the abstract expressionists, Motherwell created a unique, highly personal signature “image” that he used throughout his

career. For Motherwell, this was the large, swelling, bulbous forms most eloquently expressed in his ongoing (and best-known) “Elegy to the Spanish Republic” series. Though Motherwell worked in other important series (such as his very different “Je t’Aime,” “Summertime in Italy,” and “Open” series) it’s certainly the Elegies and related works that Waddell evokes through the arched, black shapes in his

Angus series of paintings, drawings, and prints.⁸ For both artists, bold black forms express a kind of timeless grandeur while adding visual power and “weight” to their compositions.

Motherwell frequently struggled when assigning titles to his non-objective works. In the Elegy series, he strove for a nomenclature that expressed his feelings about the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War, particularly as it

was described through the writings of Spanish poet/activist Federico García Lorca, a favorite of Motherwell's. Describing his choice of the word "elegy," Motherwell said that it was "an effort to symbolize a subjective image of modern Spain [in terms of] funeral pictures, laments, dirges, elegies—barbaric and austere."⁹ As one critic has observed, rather than represent Lorca the man in his *Elegies*, Motherwell chose to follow the dictum of symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, "to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces."¹⁰

Titles are vital for Waddell as well, as these verbal keys provide an opportunity for narrowing down meaning while provoking a deeper mental focus on the part of the viewer. In describing the Motherwell's *Angus* series, he explains that "except for the fact that the title implies Angus, hence subject matter, this painting could be considered totally abstract."¹¹ It's this desire to pull his work back from total abstraction that allows us to read Waddell's paintings in more specific ways. Beyond the many formalist considerations—color and tone, touch and gesture, perspective and spatial flatness, etc.—and the ways he pays homage to his sources and influences, it is important not to ignore the content of Waddell's painting. The cattle and other animal subjects that mark his career symbolize noble, isolated individuals—surrogates for humankind and possibly the artist himself. Like

virtually all the abstract expressionists who had disbanded and relocated to remote places like the Hamptons (Pollock, de Kooning), Maryland (Still), or Connecticut (Motherwell) after mid-career, Waddell has found strength in his relative isolation in Montana and Idaho, far removed from the centers of the art world. Perhaps above all else, *Motherwell's Angus*, among its many attributes and meanings, expresses—through simple paint on canvas—feelings of peace, solitude, pride, comfort, and harmony. This is perhaps the work's, and Waddell's, crowning achievement.

Notes

- 1 Waddell studied painting at the Brooklyn Museum Art School during 1962 and 1963.
- 2 Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," *ARTnews*, October 1958, 24–26.
- 3 Conversation with the artist, January 5, 2011.
- 4 See, for example, the work of Eva Hesse, who literalized abstract expressionist gestures into solid, new materials; Joel Shapiro, who crafted minimalist sculptures into simple house forms; Brice Marden, whose paintings of the late 1960s were scaled to human proportions and done in romantic earth tones evocative of particular places; and Jackie Winsor, who used the processes of wrapping, pounding, or carving as an end in themselves.
- 5 The term "New Image Painting" has its origins in the Whitney Museum of American Art's eponymous 1978 exhibition, curated by Richard Marshall. The term "New Figuration" was applied by Russell Bowman in his early

study of the New Image and neo-expressionism in his 1982 exhibition *New Figuration in America* at the Milwaukee Art Museum. As many chroniclers of the movement have observed, the abstract expressionist Philip Guston, who in the late 1960s abandoned his abstract style for figuration, was a model for this new approach to painting by a younger generation.

- 6 In my view, if anything defines the pluralistic art of the past two decades, it would be the tendency toward subject matter (oftentimes hard-hitting, such as death) and the desire, amid the cacophony of a hyperactive art world, for works that veer toward "spectacle." For a further discussion of these tendencies, see my "Above the Radar: The Logan Collection in Context," in *Radar: Selections from the Collection of Vicki and Kent Logan* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2006), 43–51.
- 7 Through a series of essays and reviews, art critic Clement Greenberg proposed, among many other ideas, that advanced painting had to acknowledge its inherent two-dimensionality. See, for example, his "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 7 (1940): 296–310.
- 8 According to the artist, there are twenty paintings in this series, as well as many related drawings and prints.
- 9 Quoted in Robert C. Hobbs, "Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*," in Jürgen Harten, *Robert Motherwell* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1976), 29–34.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Statement by the artist, on deposit in the object file at the Denver Art Museum.

