

Action / Abstraction: Pollock, De Kooning, and American Art, 1940-1976/ Edited by Norman L. Kleeblatt.—New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, in association with The Jewish Museum, New York, April 2008.—340 p.: ill.—ISBN 978-0-300-12215-2 (cl., alk. paper): \$65.00.



Thematic exhibitions are notoriously tricky business, and *Action/Abstraction...* has the difficulty of being a thematic show about two art critics, Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. Although it is possible to enjoy the show and its accompanying catalog without knowing anything about the theme—particularly because there are major works included from collections that are not located on either coast and it is a pleasure to know more about them—one can flip through the catalog and be completely unaware of its the unifying thread.. This is something important for librarians to note; because nothing in the title indicates that Rosenberg and Greenberg are the primary focuses of the publication, patrons could pass it by without realizing that it is the most recent treatment of these two critics' assessments of postwar painting in the United States.

I would have liked to have seen greater use of the critics' ideas rather than a tendency toward either/or comparisons between them that can become repetitive for a reader, working systematically through the entire catalog. That said, the essays, written by several curators and scholars, raise some interesting questions. For example, why did Greenberg's formalism become so important, either as an idea to adopt or refute, while Rosenberg's concept of action became so well integrated into the understanding of the paintings that it almost seems as though the designation had always existed and had no author? Is this why undergraduates learn more about Greenberg? If Greenberg had problems with Jasper Johns' targets, why did he have no trouble with Kenneth Noland's? If Barnett Newman can be seen as the primary painter of this group who associated himself with Jewish history and thought, then how do we read *The Stations of the Cross* with this understanding?

I greatly appreciated seeing women and African-Americans included, even though they were representative of "blind spots" in the critics' writings. The supporting materials, including period photographs and periodicals, are largely relegated to small reproductions on the catalog's timeline, a curious compendium that includes art historical and cultural tidbits but strangely no mention of World War II or the Korean War. The bibliography is comprehensive, including key titles published in the last several years. The catalog's reproductions are of good quality, but they are a bit duller than the originals. Newman's *White and Hot*, a stunning white and red-orange zip painting, almost vibrated off the gallery wall. Here, sadly, it is merely a red and white painting.

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