This catalog accompanies curator Paul Schimmel’s exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA) focusing on “destruction as a mode of production in international painting of the post-World War II period through the early 1960s.” This “destruction” refers to artists ripping, cutting, burning, attaching objects to, and sometimes even shooting the two-dimensional support. There is no formal name for this practice, as it cut across (so to speak) unconnected schools and groups of the time, including France’s Nouveau Réalistes, Japan’s Gutai group, and artists as different as Italy’s Lucio Fontana and the United States’ Robert Rauschenberg, but the exhibition makes a convincing case for its importance.

Schimmel explains that the art evinced two contemporary issues: questioning the modernist tenet that painting needed to emphasize its flatness, a position held by the powerful American critic—and Jackson Pollock champion—Clement Greenberg; and confronting the void of meaning predicated in existential philosophy.

Despite the obvious challenges to Abstract Expressionism, the spirit of Pollock looms large upon much of the work in the exhibition, both in its performative aspect (Japan’s Shozo Shimamoto hurled paint-filled glass bottles onto unstretched canvases on the floor, and his colleague Kazuo Shiraga suspended himself from a rope to slide his paint-covered feet over his canvases), and in its inclination towards “allover,” non-relational compositions.

As for the existential aspect of the work, some of the artists—and many of the critics—explicitly acknowledge the effects of World War II on the aesthetic: Jean Fautrier, a French artist once arrested by the Gestapo, painted a series called “Hostages” that depict the faces of individuals tortured or killed; Alberto Burri, an Italian military physician, began painting as a prisoner of war, and his burned, ripped, and stitched works were compared by critics to “bleeding wounds and scarifications”; and the Japanese artists’ work was often interpreted to represent the atomic bomb’s rupture of the fabric of humanity.

The book itself is superb, with hundreds of exquisite, full-page, full-color plates, along with five scholarly essays. Schimmel offers a comprehensive summary of most of the artists in the show, while Schoichi Hirai, Astrid Handa-Gagnard, and Nicholas Cullinan tackle the Japanese, French, and Italian aspects of the movement respectively. The closing essay by Robert Storr offers an alternative overview to Schimmel’s that places the participants more firmly in their social and art-historical context, and sometimes gently questions the success of their intentions.

The catalog should appeal to a museum-going public and is recommended for collections in academic, museum, and public libraries.

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