

The Synapse of Color

1930 was a propitious year for American art. Jasper Johns was born then; so were Faith Ringgold and Robert Ryman, to name a few. Johns was born in Georgia and grew up in South Carolina. He later said, "In the place where I was a child, there were no artists and there was no art, so I really didn't know what that meant"—but from an early age, he knew that was what he wanted to be. He briefly attended the University of South Carolina and then, for a semester, Parsons School of Art, but his real education took place in New York's galleries and museums, and through his relationship with Robert Rauschenberg.

Ringgold, by contrast, was born and raised in Harlem, the epicenter of African-American creativity. When she entered the City College of New York she discovered that women were not allowed to major in fine art there, so she studied art education and became a teacher in the city's public school system. She considers that her mature style as an artist took form in 1963, and that only three years later, with her participation in a group show, did she have "her first real contact with black artists."

Like Johns, Ryman was a southerner—a native of Nashville. After serving in an Army reserve corps band, he arrived in New York hoping to make it as a jazz musician, and found a day job as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art; he became fascinated by what was on the walls and got to know some artists who were likewise working as guards. He began painting in his apartment, and gave up on the idea of a musical career—but his first one-man show came only after a decade of work, in 1967.

Also in 1930, the 25-year-old Barnett Newman was struggling to rescue his father's once-successful garment manufacturing business, which had been hit hard by the previous year's stock market crash. Later he would for years work as a substitute teacher of art appreciation—while consistently failing the test to qualify as a full-time art instructor. In the mid-1940s he became active as an essayist and polemicist on artistic matters and in 1947—age 42—he sold his first painting.

Ringgold and Ryman, like Newman, would be considered late bloomers by contemporary standards—unlike Johns, who set something of a pattern for the future with his early success. But all of them were, in a profound sense, essentially self-taught and self-directed as artists. These days, the shape of an artist's career seems much more predictable than back when life courses were apt to be formed by the vicissitudes of economic depression and then world war. But our new normal is something of an illusion. Mid-career practitioners as prominent as Maurizio Cattelan and elders as celebrated as Lawrence Weiner came into art by more lateral and unexpected paths than the expected lockstep academic route.

Robert Baras was yet another 1930 baby. Keeping this in mind, the diverse paths taken by his contemporaries and elders, his delayed commitment to painting hardly seems unusual. Like Newman, Baras was the son of immigrants, and like the great Abstract Expressionist, he put his artistic aspirations on hold to look after his family's business. Unlike Newman or his contemporaries Johns, Ringgold, and Ryman, however, Baras never pursued a public career as an artist, nor did he sell his work. He didn't need to. But he pursued the making of it with an admirable intensity.

About as much of an autodidact as any of the other artists I've mentioned—no less, but also no more—Baras taught himself what painting could be by painting and, clearly, by looking at painting. The impressive variety of his imagery may give the impression that he was an eclectic, a magpie seeking opportunistically for whatever he could use from the vocabularies of his contemporaries and their predecessors, from Matisse through the Abstract Expressionists and color field painters, to the "new image" painters who were coming into prominence around the time when he finally enrolled in art school—Lois Lane, Robert Moskowitz, and Susan Rothenberg among them. But look again, beyond the imagery to the matter of painting itself, and you'll soon see that Baras was no eclectic. The consistency of his work lies in the work's unswerving sensitivity to the haptic dimension of painting.

For this reason, the best way to understand what Baras was up to would not be to undertake an analysis of the symbolic or semantic content of his imagery, nor even to assess what he adopted and what he discarded from the work of the many artists whose work he'd evidently observed attentively, but rather to take note of how his imagery was always above all the support for an engagement with the materiality of painting. Not that the imagery is insignificant—but that its significance lies in the way it is bodied forth through the activity of painting it. Please note: I did not say, "bodied forth in paint." This is not about the brute physicality of the material. It is about the human effort to act with and through the material—something of which one is always reminded by the surfaces of Baras' works. It is always evident that the paint has been moved, that it has been carefully and deliberately worked into place. The trace of the artist's hand is evident, but so are the traces of the movements of his mind as he witnessed the paint gaining form.

As much as Baras clearly appreciated the Abstract Expressionists who came before him, his pictorial idiom was not based on the big, bold, spontaneous gesture beloved of so many of them; rather than release, the specific quality of movement conveyed by his paint evokes concentration. His color is always gathering its forces, and hesitant to spend them. But the haptic activation of Baras' paintings is not only a matter of surface vigor. Beyond that, the way he has handled his materials—touched the paint to the support and set it in purposeful motion—awakens in the viewer an inner sensation of manual involvement, even at a distance and through eyesight alone. (Thank your lucky mirror neurons.) And then there's another aspect of touch involved, perhaps a rarer one: a sense of how one color touches—or doesn't touch, but, as it were, reaches toward—another.

On my first exposure to Baras' work, this is what struck me as the most deeply personal note in it. I put it this way: This painter is all about the edge. That is, the build-up of each color area is not so much about arriving at a particular shape—let alone at a legible image—but more urgently about finding the place where one color comes into contact with another. That is where the urgency of the painting reveals itself most dramatically. And it is only superficially paradoxical, I think, to point out that this contact only takes place, in these paintings, across a gap—what you might call the synapse of color.

Looking through Baras' oeuvre, you'll notice how often it happens that one color area does not quite come right up to its neighbor; instead there is a slight interval between them, through which one can see an underlying layer of some third, often darker hue, acting as a sort of mediator. One does not experience this third color as an outline, but as a "reveal" of how the two color areas occur on the basis of another, mostly hidden one. The gap doesn't separate the colors but joins them together. And likewise, one could say, the distance between Baras and so many other artists of his time expresses their implicit commonality as seekers of contact through art.

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