**BARNETT NEWMAN**

**The Late Work**

**WHEN AMERICAN ARTIST BARNETT NEWMAN died on July 4, 1970, at the age of sixty-five, he was immersed in one of the most experimental periods of his career. Hailed as audacious and daring, an exhibition of his recent work the previous year had declared a new chapter for the aging artist, who seemingly was defying his Abstract Expressionist roots. While the late paintings maintain Newman’s well-known language of narrow lines traversing planes of color, they are distinctly more uniform in terms of paint application, more luminous in color, and among the largest that he ever created. In these works, his earlier palette of earth tones is replaced by bright colors that collide in crisp lines that visually amplify their high contrast. Barnett Newman: The Late Work examines a selection of the extraordinary paintings that the artist produced from 1965 through 1970, during these innovative years. The distinctive features of these works are highlighted by earlier paintings from the Menil’s holdings that provide an opportunity to see subtle changes in Newman’s touch, color, and scale through the arc of his career.

During the late 1960s, Newman’s painterly refinements were matched by an increase in output. Over the course of his relatively short career (he dated the start of his mature oeuvre to 1948, when he was forty-three), he produced a relatively small body of work, only one hundred and seventeen paintings and eight sculptures. But in the last five and a half years of his life he finished the fourteen-painting series The Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachtani, 1958–66, and completed twenty-two paintings and the majority of his sculptures, including Broken Obelisk, 1965–67, on view in the gallery, and Broken Obelisk, 1965–67, outside the nearby Rothko Chapel.

In his last six months alone he finished four paintings and was working on three more. This zeal was matched by his active involvement with the contemporary art scene; he loved studio visits and gallery openings and was close friends with many younger artists involved with Pop Art and Minimalism. Andy Warhol famously commented, “Barnet went to more parties than I did.”

Newman’s productivity in the studio was in part boosted by his adoption of acrylic emulsion paints, which he used almost exclusively at the end of his life. In 1958 a readily available form of these paints created specifically for artists was introduced, resulting in enthusiastic, and widespread experimentation, both by Newman and his contemporaries, such as Robert Motherwell and Mark Rothko, and by younger artists, including Helen Frankenthaler. These waterborne paints dried in a fraction of the time of oil paints, permitting Newman to realize paintings at an accelerated rate. Concurrently, he and other artists, as well as commercial painters, were heavily interpreting the aesthetics to which rollers were ideally suited to applying acrylic paints to create uniform fields.

What did not change during this era was the formal vocabulary that Newman had developed at the start of his mature career. Based on a consistent adherence to certain structures, most of his paintings continued to be vertical in orientation with alternating planes of color and thinner bands of paint known as

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**PUBLIC PROGRAMS**

**Barnett Newman: The Late Paintings in Context**

Friday, April 10, 6:00 p.m.

In this culmination of a two-day scholarly symposium, artist David Zwirner, art historians Sarah K. Rich and Richard Shiff, and the exhibition curators present their unique perspectives on the material, aesthetic, and philosophical issues at the heart of the exhibition’s presentation of Newman’s late and unfinished paintings.

**Painters Painting**

Rothko Chapel Plaza

Wednesday, June 3, 8:00 p.m.


**BOOK**

Barnett Newman: The Late Paintings in Context

Bradford A. Epley and Michelle White, with a contribution by Barnett Newman, and other artists. Co-presented with the Rothko Chapel and Aurora Picture Show.

**The Menil Collection**

March 27–August 2, 2015

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This compositional device both dissects and unifies the paintings while eliminating the distinction between figure and ground, the traditional dichotomy in a representational picture. Instead of being a window onto the world, the paintings open up space entirely, enveloping the viewer. The artist often remarked that his work was intended to be physical and metaphysical. Something of a convergence of the tangible and intangible, the beguiling equation suggests the difficulty of understanding or explaining in a painting what the artist wanted to convey. Physically, he wanted that material encounter to transcend the ordinary and metaphysical. That his work was intended to be physical and metaphysical.

Newman and the Menil

The Menil Collection has a long-standing history with the work of Barnett Newman. The relationships of John and Dominique de Menil, former director Walter Hopps, and former chief conservator Carol Marcus-Ungars with the artist and his wife, Annalee Newman, along with the Menil’s commitment to acquiring and exhibiting Newman’s work, have resulted in several conservation projects. These conservation projects have led to accessing these three unfinished works in a discrete gallery, we aim to acknowledge the distinction between these canvases and Newman’s finished work, while at the same time preserving access to them, so that they can contribute to the ongoing conversation about this important figure and his art.

The unfinished works

The exhibition concludes with three unfinished works, on view for the first time, from a group of seven that were on Newman’s studio walls when he died. Categorized as unfinished in the 2004 catalogue raisonné, they were given to the Menil Collection by Annalee Newman between 1966 and 1990. The group comprises a triangular painting nicknamed “The Sail,” a thinly primed and stretched blank canvas that is the least finished of the three works; a blue-and-brown painting; and a red-and-white painting that, at eighteen feet wide, would have been one of Newman’s largest. The brown wall color in the gallery approximates the Kraft paper with which Newman surrounded the canvases while he worked. The artist’s practice was very private, and these unfinished paintings, complemented by a selection of brushes, rollers, and other objects from Newman’s studio, offer a unique glimpse into his evolving technique and latent evidence of, in the words of critic and curator Thomas Hess, the “surprising and daring” direction his work was taking at the end of his life.


Barnett Newman, IX (Second Version), 1966. Acrylic on canvas, 111½ x 84 inches (283.2 x 213.4 cm). Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, W. Hawkins Ferry Fund and Mr. and Mrs. Walter Beck Ford Fund. Photo: The Detroit Institute of Arts.


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