

*Barnett Newman: The Late Work* is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Chief Conservator Bradford A. Epley and Curator Michelle White.

This exhibition is generously supported by The John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation; National Endowment for the Arts; Nancy and Mark Abendshein; Susanne and Bill Pritchard; Leslie and Shannon Sasser; Taub Foundation: Marcy Taub Wessel and Henry J.N. Taub II; Frost Bank; Suzanne Deal Booth; Janet and Paul Hobby; Gensler; Russell Reynolds Associates; and the City of Houston.

#### 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 Diaó, art historians Sarah K. Rich and Richard Schiff, 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.

Emile de Antonio's 1972 documentary film explores American painting through conversations with Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Barnett Newman, and other artists. Co-presented with the Rothko Chapel and Aurora Picture Show

#### BOOK

##### *Barnett Newman The Late Work, 1965–1970*

Bradford A. Epley and Michelle White, with a contribution by Sarah K. Rich

144 pages, 99 illus.; hardcover, \$55

Available at the Menil Bookstore

Cover: Barnett Newman, *The Way II*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 78 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 60 inches (198.5 x 152.5 cm). Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland, Beyeler Collection. Photo: Robert Bayer, Basel

All works by Barnett Newman © 2015 The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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# BARNETT NEWMAN

## The Late Work



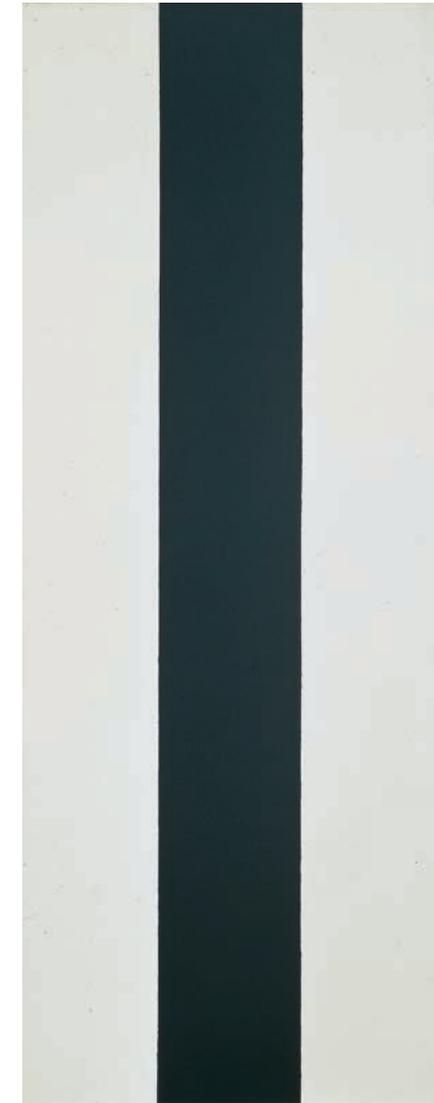
The Menil Collection

March 27–August 2, 2015

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 Sabachthani*, 1958–66, and completed twenty-two paintings and the majority of his sculptures, including *Here III*, 1965–66, on view in the gallery, and *Broken Obelisk*, 1963/67, 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, "Barney 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 1963 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



Barnett Newman, *Now II*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas, 132 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 50 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches (335.9 x 127.3 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston, Formerly in the collection of Christophe de Menil. Photo: Rick Gardner

accelerated rate. Concurrently, he and other artists, as well as commercial painters, were increasingly recognizing the extent 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



Barnett Newman, *Shimmer Bright*, 1968. Oil on canvas, 72 x 84¼ inches (182.9 x 214 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Annalee Newman, 1991. Digital Image © 2015 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, New York

“zips.” 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 finding meaning in a painting by Newman. Physically, he wanted the viewer to have an experience, in time, in front of his work. Metaphysically, he wanted that material encounter to transcend one’s expectation. Going beyond the visible, and beyond language, was what Newman wanted the work to *do*. Poet and curator Frank O’Hara, in a 1966 letter to Newman, affirmed the intended operation, writing that his paintings are “so moving, so eloquent, so right, that it’s almost impossible to talk about them—the best way to express one’s feelings is simply to burst into tears.”

The present is not only what Newman wanted the viewer to experience in front of his work but the place from which he painted. Describing his method as immediate and unplanned,

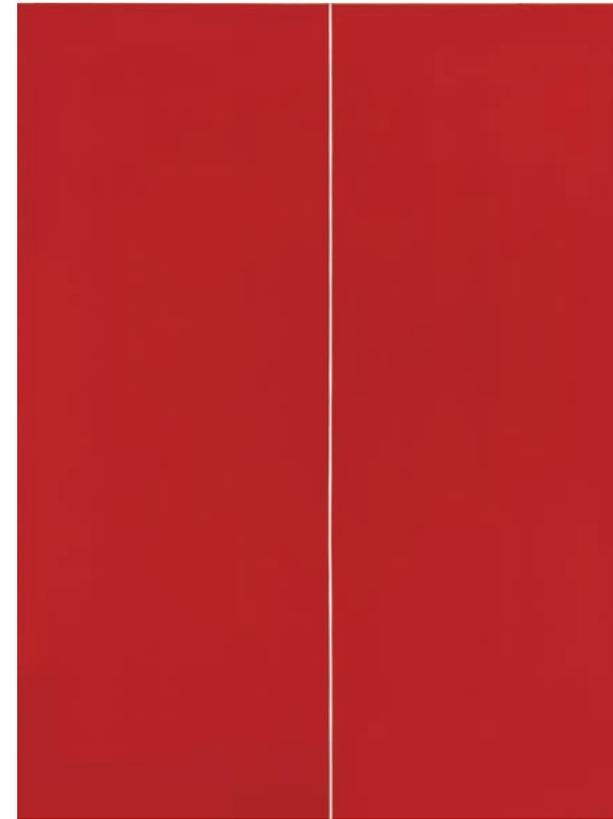
the artist did not develop paintings through drawings but rather worked intuitively, swiftly, and decisively. He remarked that “the content has to be determined at the very moment it is made.” Newman’s desire to eliminate traditional pictorial associations was reflected in his choice of materials, his adoption of new paint media and nontraditional tools. Titles too were tied to this yearning for vitality; they emerged after the formation of the work, often serving as an indication of, or metaphor for, his emotions while he was painting.

### 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 Mancusi-Ungaro 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 opportunities to study and restore incomplete or compromised artworks by the artist. These conservation projects have led to telling research and the exhibition of works previously considered unsuitable for display.

Of particular note is the restoration of *Be I*, 1949. The material investigations that ultimately led to this exhibition of Newman’s last paintings have their roots in the research into, and treatment of, this painting. *Be I* was the largest canvas in the artist’s first exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, in 1950. In 1959, while awaiting installation in Newman’s watershed exhibition at French and Company, New York, it fell and was significantly damaged. Although Newman had the painting restored, the results were not to his satisfaction and he never exhibited it again. *Be I* remained in storage until 1986 when Annalee Newman gave it to the Menil. The painting then hung in the galleries until 2001, when it was removed for testing, including pigment and media analysis and x-radiography, to determine a course of treatment.

*Be I* underwent a seven-year restoration to address both the original damage and the evidence of the subsequent repair. In this exhibition, *Be I* and *Be I (Second Version)*, 1970, are displayed together for the first time. Painted more than two decades apart, the two iterations bracket Newman’s mature career and demonstrate his gradual compression of the expressive movement of the brush into the still intensity and radiant color characteristic of the late paintings.



Barnett Newman, *Be I (Second Version)*, 1970. 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 Buhl Ford II Fund. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Library

### 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 1986 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. While the final state of these paintings remains unknowable, their context among the finished works left in the studio and their varying degrees of completion offer tantalizing indications of how the artist was experimenting and revisiting his past during this time.

The display of unfinished works after the death of an artist invites reflection about what such an act means. Neither Newman’s intentions nor his willingness to exhibit the paintings can be known for certain. Yet the study of unfinished works—the incomplete works of Renaissance artists Tintoretto and Titian, Schubert’s Symphony no. 8 in B Minor (often called the “Unfinished Symphony”), and Piet Mondrian’s painting *Victory Boogie Woogie*, which was in progress on an easel in his studio when he died in 1944—has generated undeniably productive conversations, stirring the imagination of scholars who have scrutinized and questioned objectives, analyzed degrees of finish, and speculated on the artists’ directions. By presenting 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 providing access to them, so that they can contribute to the ongoing conversation about this important figure and his art.

Bradford A. Epley and Michelle White, adapted from the accompanying publication, *Barnett Newman The Late Work, 1965–1970*



Barnett Newman’s studio after his death with the red-and-white unfinished painting, 1970. Photograph by Alexander Liberman. The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2000.R.19). Photo © 2015 J. Paul Getty Trust