Hans Namuth’s Photographs of Jackson Pollock as Art Historical Documentation

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Hans Namuth’s photographs and films of Jackson Pollock document the physical environment and painting technique of one of America’s most famous and controversial artists at the peak of his career: 1950 to 1956. Just as Daguerre’s famous 1839 view of a boulevard in Paris documents facts about early 19th-century chimney pots, roof carpentry, and shoeshine boys before it assumes its status as a turning point in Western visual culture, Namuth’s images of Pollock are visual records before they are works of art. What a photograph says in itself and what others can say about it produces a subtle triangulation between 1) the physical record of what light etched at a given moment on a given chemical emulsion, 2) the meaning of that data relative to an art historian’s inevitably selective and usually subjective purpose, and 3) the role of the image as a cultural “icon.” It is a tribute to the strength of Namuth’s technical and visual sensibility that his images of Jackson Pollock not only record the artist at work but, in certain instances, have come to symbolize the aesthetic roots of an entire school of American painting.

Namuth made two films and approximately 500 still photographs of Pollock between 1950 and the end of the artist’s life. Both films, and the great majority of the still photographs, show the artist in the act of painting. The remaining stills record the studio at East Hampton, several of Pollock’s most important exhibitions, and his changing appearance during the last years of his life.

About Pollock’s studio, the photographs tell us that it was a converted barn with numerous chinks between the wall boards. This primitive construction reduced painting, for Pollock, to a seasonal occupation, though he occasionally worked in winter, using dangerous kerosene stoves for heat. Only in the very last years of his life could he afford to insulate his studio for year-round work. Fortunately, at East Hampton the weather is relatively mild into the early winter and spring can be early. But painting was, for Pollock, in many ways determined by the cycle of nature.

The photographs also reveal that Pollock was constantly surrounded by his earlier work. As with insulation, there was no “stack” space built into the studio until late in his life. His life’s work lined the walls of the studio and was kept face up so he could engage in a constant visual dialogue with his origins and achievements.

Other photographs of 1951 show how many of his famous “black and white” paintings of that year were painted on long strips of canvas “in series”—to be cut apart and stretched later. These photographs will prove invaluable when someone comes to study Pollock’s “iconography” in terms of the juxtaposition of images revealed. The positioning of human heads next to less “representational” configurations will shed light on the meaning of such major works as Portrait and a Dream of 1953. One can also find in these photographs at least one “underpainting”—that for Number 1, 1952.

But above all else, Namuth’s photographs and films make explicit Pollock’s famous and seriously misunderstood painting technique. First of all, they reveal that when a very large painting was in process, its area reduced Pollock’s work space to just a few feet around its edge. The flat plane of the canvas—a literal re-creation of the uninhabited plain of Tanguy or Dali, or the empty plane of Miró—had to be reached without entering. The painting process therefore became an ongoing tension between the edges and the center of the canvas and Pollock’s gestures of bending, kneeling, stretching, and straddling corners constituted an intense and awkward struggle against relentless, self-imposed limits. After the very early stages of laying in the initial design, he could not step into the canvas; he was remanded to the periphery of the four sides of the canvas, painting toward the center in an intense, mandalic dance which is most dramatically revealed in the films.

The films also help to redefine what is commonly, and imprecisely, described as Pollock’s “drip” technique. He began to utilize this method in earnest in 1947 and developed endless variations on it over the years. While Pollock himself once spoke of preferring “dripping fluid paint,” and of how it is possible “to control the flow of the paint,” he never specifically characterized his technique. Unfortunately, the English language does not contain one word which comprehensively describes the full complexity of his famous method.

“To drip,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “to let [a liquid] fall in drops” and is totally unsuited to describe a process of painting which was intended to produce a predominantly linear effect. “To flow” is essentially an intransitive verb which attributes too much agency to the medium itself and implies a flooding, planar effect foreign to Pollock’s work. Other verbs, such as “to splatter,” “to splash,” “to dribble,” “to
trickle,” etc. connote a capriciousness of intention similar to the implications of “to drip.” The one word which comes closest to describing accurately both the artistic results and the kinetic realities of Pollock’s technique is the transitive verb “to pour.” The OED defines “to pour” as “to emit in a stream; to cause or allow [a liquid or granular substance] to flow out of a vessel or receptacle; to discharge or shed copiously.”

Pollock’s method ought, therefore, to be called the “pouring technique.” It must, however, be further defined in terms of the varied physical situations encountered in actually painting a picture—situations for which Namuth’s films constitute primary evidence.

In general, the films show liquid paint propelled across flat canvases of varying size. As the paint traverses the air it enters trajectories that are recorded instantly and accurately when the paint lands on the surface. Thus the paint, forming itself in space as it travels in time over a predetermined area, sets down an accurate picture of the force—either gentle or violent—which initially impelled it. As can be seen in Namuth’s color film of Pollock painting, the speed and rhythm of this process were functions of the size of the work and the complexity of its execution. Number 29, 1950, filmed from below as it was painted on glass, was slowly and carefully poured over collage elements. The other painting created on the ground in the color film (on canvas—and later destroyed by the artist), was poured out with a quicker weaving, tossing, rhythmic gesture required by its larger scale. The short black-and-white film, which reveals Pollock’s technique more explicitly than the color film, shows the artist beginning with a studied pouring out of an elegant black “drawing” over the entire surface of a long, narrow ground. He then proceeds to develop this initial drawing, carefully counterpointing its formal elements (some of which are suggestive of figures) with an ever more dense and complex interweaving of strands of paint. In doing so he picks up speed, entering into the momentum of the process until he is working furiously around the four sides of the painting. Thus, by speeding up or slowing down the pouring process, and by employing different kinesthetic gestures—a thrust of the arm, a flick of the wrist—varied effects are obtained: elegant delicacy, complex linearity, feathery calligraphy, intricate density. None of these\n\ndynamic effects are adequately described by the idea of “drip-ping”; all find either literal or figurative definition in the human process of “pouring out” which Namuth’s films so dramatically document.

Namuth’s photographs also record two of Pollock’s most important exhibitions—his 1950 and 1951 shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery. The photographs of the former help us to re-experience the overwhelming visual ambience created by the juxtaposition of masterpieces such as One, Autumn Rhythm, Lavender Mist and the black-and-white Number 32, at the time they were first exposed to the American public.

Finally, there is one photograph of Pollock painting which stands out among all these informative images as Namuth’s masterpiece (cover). It shows Pollock straddling the upper left corner of the unfinished Autumn Rhythm. Behind him hangs One. He is in motion, his right arm a blur, totally engaged in the painting process. Namuth has caught him in a beam of sunlight whose angle accentuates his movement. The sun’s glare and his own momentum cast his face into an uncanny resemblance to that of Charles Baudelaire as abstracted by Raymond Duchamp-Villon in his 1911 bronze bust of the poet-critic. The high brow, the deep-set eyes, the compressed lips—are all the same, and, for an instant, suggest an apt historical and cultural analogy. For the great French writer and the great American painter both understood the essential link between artistic and natural processes. That Pollock could assert pragmatically that “I am nature” places him at the conclusion of a “romantic” tradition which Baudelaire began by articulating the role of the artist as intermediary between the inner and outer worlds. Thus this powerful photograph, by means of the uncanny alchemy of light, identifies Pollock and his extraordinarily natural technique with one of his truly kindred predecessors. It leaves us to contemplate those correspondences of fact, fate and chance which transcend lenses, chemistry, history and scholarship to reaffirm the unity at the root of all authentic art.


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