“To Be a Filter of Life”
Paintings by Mark Tobey

Robert C. Morgan

Mark Tobey was an artist who focused on painting as a means for telling the truth. From his point of view, this was the essence of painting. For viewers spending time with the current exhibition, they are given an opportunity to enter Tobey’s private world not only to see his paintings, but possibly understand an artist who, decades earlier, had defiantly rejected large-scale expressionism that had emerged during the late forties and fifties. Although Tobey had managed to occupy the attention of serious collectors, his point of view toward his expressionist colleagues at mid-century was somewhat problematic, suggesting they were too distant in their focus and therefore unable to capture painting at its best. To some extent this implied Tobey’s own position of working primarily in isolation outside the realm of artists with whom he felt uncomfortable, the exception being Mark Rothko. Although Tobey had friends, very few of them agreed with his reluctance to embrace painters who were closely affiliated with the New York School. To put it blatantly, Tobey saw himself as a major artist who lived and worked steadily according to his own premises. This was true throughout his career.

To feel in isolation with one’s thoughts removed from the realm of a significant presence among artists in New York reflected Tobey’s mind-set. For a serious practitioner who spent his early years as a draughtsman even

before he understood art to be something more expansive than portraiture and commercial illustration. Tobey maintained a position utterly removed from the conformism among the artists of his time. In place of conformism, his mystical proclivity took over and eventually was substantiated through his involvement with *Baha'i*, an ecumenical movement based on spiritual teachings appropriated from various world religions.

Tobey wanted to discover meaning in art beyond the obvious, and therefore transform painting through his uncanny resilience. Painting, for Tobey, was inherently a matter of coming to terms with life through nature as he permitted it to become integrated within his sensorial domain. Furthermore, he wanted his paintings to project the utmost depth of feeling. Scale in painting was important, as was the relative refinement of color. Ultimately they would merge together, one in relation to the other.

Only an artist of Tobey's sensory cognition could perceive this. To come to terms uniformly with scale and color requires the artist to remove himself temporarily from both. In doing so, he produced a series of exceptional paintings, called "white writing," which continued to influence his work throughout his career. Signs of success were beginning to make their appearance through the support of the Willard Gallery in the fifties. This was accompanied by introductions to important critics, curators, and gallerists. These included William Seitz, John Russell, Sidney Janis, Juliet Thompson, and, belatedly, Clement Greenberg. Tobey wanted to move his work beyond the absence of success, even if he was uncertain as to how it would occur. Coincidentally, within a relatively short period of time, his reputation began to evolve in New York at the same time he was painting, at

the other end of the continent, in Seattle. It was not entirely clear to Tobey that New Yorkers would gradually, if not finally discover him.

Tobey understood himself as an artist who, early in his career, began working in solitude, ultimately removed from the conformity and repetition that virtually defined the work of artists who surrounded him. Rather than follow their hyper-intensive concepts and mannered stylizations, Tobey chose to live and work in a different way, namely "to be a filter of life" through art. This involved removing himself from painterly trends that functioned in contrast to his more intimate sources of creativity. Tobey's focus on intimacy meant relegating himself to painting in such a way that would alleviate the burden of determinacy. Even a large-scale painting, such as *Owl's Light* (1968), would retain a sense of intimacy through the artist's cautious manipulation of tonality that gave the surface a solemn feeling of unequivocal depth.

Tobey's meditative approach to painting was acquired through visits to China and Japan in 1934, which harkened the beginning of his exposure to oriental thought. This included the acquisition of calligraphy and sumi ink painting, primarily emanating from his exposure to Zen Buddhism in Japan. Although Tobey accepted these techniques as functioning on a level quite different from his own western approach to painting, he remained open to how he might integrate what he learned in East Asia within his work. In the current exhibition this oriental integration reveals itself between his last days in Seattle and his permanent relocation in Basel, Switzerland in 1960.

Paintings, such as *Golden Mountains* and *Cattails* (both 1953), are remarkable for their monochrome and calligraphic transformations of space. In fact, they are proverbially ahead of their time. Like other paintings in this exhibition, they are definitively rational, that is to say, a clear removal from the irrational approach that informed Breton's aesthetic modulations. What is striking about Tobey's late paintings is their scale and intimacy. In *Sharp Field* (1960), for example, the scale is further reduced, thus allowing the viewer to investigate the "overall" rhythm of the surface, which provides a sense of intimacy within harmony capable of holding an ultimate precision.

Making a definitive use of intimate scale, rigorously achieved by Tobey, the two paintings, *Pendulum* (1959) and *Indian Landscape* (1954), both provide the necessary grounding for their integral shapes to respond. The implied motion of each surface lends a convincing aspect to the shapes, thereby holding an abstract presence within each painting. In addition, they inadvertently reference images of scientific phenomena normally removed from a concrete visual display. This also occurs in another Tobey painting, *Between Time and Space* (1965), a painting that resonates with incumbent form under a host of unified colored dots that together recall the hyper-stellar universe of the French pointillist, Georges Seurat.

What makes Tobey paint? What gives his paintings their ineffable presence without loss or gain? One might argue they dismiss the obvious, and, in doing so, their presence is made without seeking affectation. Tobey is a major artist, largely due to the fact that he does not appropriate from other artists. His scale and color hold their space without duplicity. They define one another as abbreviated forms of accumulation. Tobey's decisions are

made based on what he knows and on what he feels. He opens doors of recognition in terms of both what a painting is and what it is not. His varied works reveal their fundaments in a manner that transforms material into art. Relative to *Baha'i*, Tobey paints in a manner that aspires to enlighten our existence to become who we are.

Robert C. Morgan is a painter, scholar, poet, educator, and critic. He holds an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a Ph.D. in Aesthetics from New York University. He is Professor Emeritus in Art History from the Rochester Institute of Technology and Adjunct Professor in the Graduate Fine Arts at Pratt Institute. He is a member of the European Academy of the Sciences and Arts in Salzburg and the first recipient of the Arcale award in art criticism from Salamanca, Spain. He has written many books dealing with the critical aspects of contemporary art, several of which are in translation. In addition to his critical writing, Morgan is a painter who, since 1967, has focused on geometric form, color, and the austerity of formal relationships in painting.