

WADDINGTON GALLERIES

PRESS RELEASE

MILTON AVERY: WORKS ON PAPER

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Milton Avery's career extended from the 1930s until the early 1960s, and during that time he created a highly distinctive style founded on many of the premises of modern French art, those of Matisse in particular, and on the rich tradition of American folk art. He lived and worked in America and became an important artistic mentor for a new generation of painters such as Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, who, as Rothko later affirmed, were 'younger, questioning, and looking for an anchor.'

Avery's restraint and economy of means introduced the future abstract expressionists to the idea of laying on paint in a way that drew attention to the richness of the medium rather than to the brushwork. As the painter Hans Hofmann pointed out, Avery was one of the first of the American artists 'to relate colours in a plastic way', and in doing so exerted a strong influence on the way Rothko and Newman found their own ways of making colour evoke the sublime. 'I am not seeking pure abstraction', Avery wrote in 1951, 'rather the purity and essence of the idea - expressed in its simplest form.'

Avery's works on paper are among the most serene expressions of his search for the 'essence' of an idea, revealing what David Anfam, in his catalogue essay, calls a 'long-pondered pictorial synthesis' mapping the regions between subjective feeling and empirical observation. The oils on paper were begun in 1960 when Avery was recovering from his second heart attack and was forced to restrict his physical activities to leisurely strolls along the lakeside at Woodstock where he was spending the summer months. The empathy between the artist and nature is at its most striking in these works which, as Anfam points out, play on and renew the 'venerable tradition' of the pastoral in landscape painting. In his funeral oration, delivered four days after Avery's death in January 1965, Rothko paid tribute to his friend's natural lyrical gift: 'His is the poetry of sheer loveliness, of sheer beauty. Thanks to him this kind of poetry has been able to survive in our time...From the beginning there was nothing tentative about Avery. He always had that naturalness, that exactness and that inevitable completeness which can be achieved only by those born to sing.'

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