

The New Criterion

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“Mark Tobey: Threading Light” at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection

by Mario Naves

There are numerous ironies hovering around “Mark Tobey: Threading Light,” not least of which is that it’s been mounted concurrently with the 2017 edition of The Venice Biennale. The Biennale is, of course, the glitziest event of the international scene, an efflorescence of hype, ego, showmanship and, yes, art. Tobey’s paintings and drawings are, in marked contrast, the anti-glitz: they’re subtle, self-effacing, intricate, and, on the whole, modest in scale. Given the tenor of Tobey’s work—reiterated by the stately installation in Peggy Guggenheim’s jewel box galleries—one can’t help but wonder what an art audience inured to Hollywood-budgeted tech-savvy spectacles will make of it. Tobey’s whiplash calligraphies—gleaned from, as the artist had it, “avenues of meditation”—can seem foreboding or hermetic. Art is (or should be) about invitation and engagement. Tobey’s art fits the bill, but its rhythms require a level of attention increasingly at odds with much of contemporary life and, in particular, that bewildering subset of culture known as the art world.

Venice figured prominently for Tobey during his own lifetime. He was awarded first prize for painting at the 1958 Biennale, the event’s highest accolade. This was some kind of honor: the previous U.S. painter to win the distinction was the expatriate James Abbott McNeill Whistler some sixty-three years earlier. Tobey’s award was a nod on the part of the international arts community to the primacy of American painting in the post-war era; it was also a pointed, off-topic choice. The chest-thumping verities of The New York School made a noise heard ‘round the globe; the noise made by Tobey was decidedly more muted. Tobey’s art shares pivotal commonalities with Abstract Expressionism—a basis in Surrealism, all-over compositional strategies, and gestural mark-making (albeit on a miniaturist scale). It’s worth noting, however, that Tobey had been around the block long before The New York School experienced its triumph. He was thirteen years older than Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock’s senior by twenty-two years. How many Action Painters had experienced the Armory Show of 1913 first-hand?

Writing in the catalogue, curator Debra Bricker Balken, who organized “Threading Light” in conjunction with the Addison Gallery of American Art, is at pains to separate Tobey from the

“assertive,” “nationalistic,” and “homogenous” American avant-garde. Keying into the nomadic arc of his life—born in Centerville, Wisconsin, Tobey traveled widely and lived in an array of places, spending his last days in Switzerland—Balken posits Tobey’s “fierce independence” as an exemplar of globalism-before-the-fact, as well as a flouting of “American ethnocentrism.” Tobey’s abiding fascination with non-Western cultures is a selling point—as it should be. His signature style, the self-described “white writing,” owes as much, and probably more, to Chinese, Japanese and Islamic art than it does to, say, the Automatism of Andre Masson. Tobey’s conversion to the Bahai Faith at age twenty-seven was the beginning of lifelong interest in spiritual pursuits found the world over. Did he succeed at seamlessly meshing “East and West”? Not long before his death in 1976 at the age of eighty-five, Tobey admitted, with palpable chagrin, to be a Westerner through-and-through. Balken won’t have it: Tobey’s embrace of the East endowed his art with “international, rather than local, meaning.”



Mark Tobey, The Way, 1944, Tempera on paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, on display at The Peggy Guggenheim Collection

Forget for a moment that any work of art worth its salt—whether it be by Veronese, Andrei Rublev, El Anatsui or the peripatetic Tobey—inherently accrues local and international meaning. Critical brickbats lobbed against the trendy cant of catalogue essays shouldn’t obtrude on Balken’s real achievement: “Threading Light” is a superb exhibition. Sensitively paced and keenly selected, the exhibition underscores painterly and metaphorical continuities, all the while tracing a development that, though not without hiccups, is streamlined and, until the end anyway, utterly organic. Tobey’s exquisite tracteries of light are evident early on in *Fog in the Market* (1943), a compartmentalized accumulation of cartoonish grotesques. Hanging directly across the way is the stunning *The Void Devouring the Gadget Era* (1942), wherein ghostly blurs of pigment both obscure and reveal a clatter of pictographic forms. Tobey’s linear networks, with their grounds of earthy

color and charged staccato rhythms, initially coalesce around observed phenomena—New York City, Gothic churches, and what looks to be a crowded beach—then move on to more philosophical concerns. Titles underline the shift—*Universal Field*, *Space Intangibles*, *The Way*, like that—but Tobey never forsook the concrete. Out-and-out abstractions like *New York Tablet* (1946) and *Edge of August* (1953) are rooted in the specifics of place and time.

Tobey spent many years in Seattle—not for nothing did *Life* magazine dub him a “mystic painter of the Northwest”—but his reputation was made in Manhattan. The Upper East Side art dealer Marian Willard recognized Tobey’s gifts when he was working for the WPA and went on to represent the work, eventually egging him on to work larger. The latter directive came in response to the expansive scale employed, with significant notoriety, by The New York School. Tobey was no admirer of the group—he dismissed their work as “decor”—but grew anxious when he learned that Biennale organizers were going to juxtapose his diminutive pictures with Rothko’s more sizable images. Tobey made the leap to larger formats, forsaking his beloved tempera and switching to oils—a medium more conducive to encompassing swaths of canvas. The switch wasn’t fortuitous: the dutiful regularity of the resulting work makes for dull going. (Talk about decor.) Still, if the exhibition ends on a deflationary note, the ride up to it is galvanizing and, ultimately, that’s what lingers in the memory. Tobey’s crystalline accumulations of sensation give body to free-ranging metaphysics, bringing flexibility and focus to often contradictory sources of inspiration. It’s a shame that a New York museum hasn’t seen fit to host Balken’s effort—Tobey is a painter who deserves a broader audience. Which isn’t at all intended to gainsay the delicate and rigorous beauty of this superlative exhibition.

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