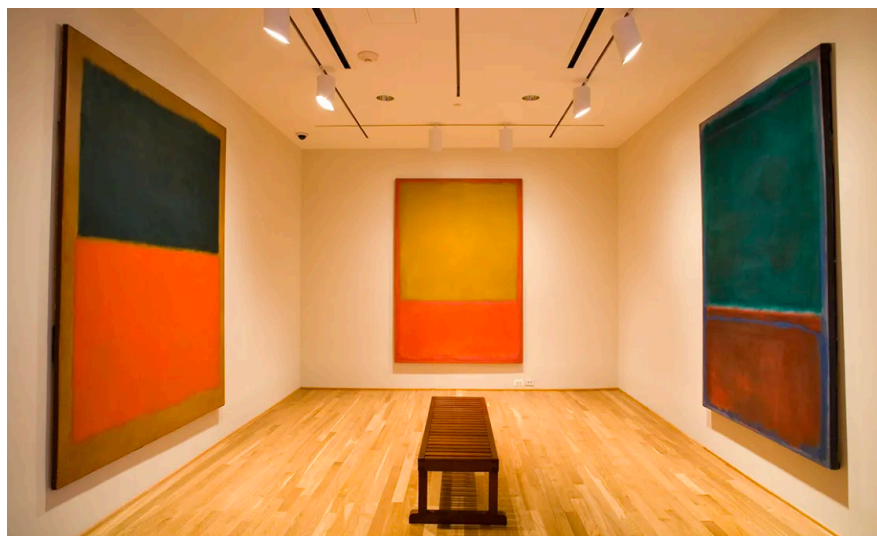


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A reflection on the art of Mark Rothko

By Ouattara Watts



View of the Rothko Room, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, 2006. From left: *Green and Tangerine on Red*, 1956; *Ochre and Red on Red*, 1954; *Green and Maroon*, 1953. Photo: Robert Lautman. © Kate Rothko Prizel and Christopher Rothko.

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THE FIRST ROTHKO PAINTING I saw in person was in the 1970s, while I was an art student at Beaux-Arts de Paris. It was one painting, hanging in the Centre Pompidou. Not a Rothko show, just a single painting, and it floored me. His work spoke to me immediately, and it still does, as it does to so many artists and so many people. The universality of Rothko's work is very powerful, and this is what resonates most for me.

Before I came to the United States, in the late 1980s, I had never seen more than one Rothko painting at a time. The first "room" I saw was in Washington, DC, at the Phillips Collection, and the reaction I had was even more intense than in Paris. Then, in the 2000s, I saw the murals Rothko originally made for the Four Seasons restaurant in the Seagram Building.

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the light change how we see and feel Rothko's paintings.



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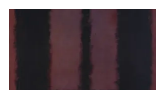
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Rothko describes the human experience in terms of color and light. Light is the most essential part of his work. In this way, he is very classical. Like so many painters throughout art history, Rothko was always searching for light, for how to paint something as ephemeral and spiritual as light. And yet his paintings are also about depth—their color is deep and so is their emotional content. This sense of depth is another part of what makes his paintings so relatable.

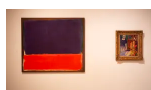
Rothko uses color in ways that seem to create space where there isn't any. To witness this kind of creation—a sense of volume and depth where we know there is really only flatness—is a kind of spiritual experience. Rothko's paintings envelop you. They come at you like a tornado. The colors just seem to wrap around you and can even make you dizzy. He is a master at putting together subtle but unexpected colors that vibrate in ways that cause physical sensations. I love that there is a physical side to his paintings as well as metaphysical exploration. His paintings are about mind and matter.

As told to Mara Hoberman.

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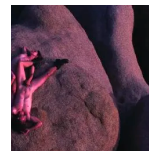
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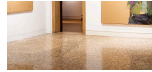
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