Robert Motherwell
Monotypes
Robert Motherwell’s studio, showing wall of completed monotypes, 1973. Photograph by Renate Ponsold.
Robert Motherwell
Monotypes

March 23 - May 4, 2019

Introduction by Morgan Spangle
Essay by Jennifer Sudul Edwards, Ph.D.
Fig. 1

UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Etching Ink on Paper
29 3/8 x 23 3/8 inches
M74-3728
In 1974, as an art student in Chicago, I was introduced to the history and the process of monotypes – as it happened, right around the same time as Robert Motherwell started to explore monotypes in his studio in Greenwich, Connecticut. A professor and friend of mine, who had been trained in lithography, had a large litho press and several litho stones in his garage at home and he invited a few students over to play around with the monotype process for a weekend. I don’t remember making anything of interest but I do still remember the sensually smooth feel of the surface of the heavy, polished litho stone. The way the stone accepted ink or paint as I drew on it was enough to keep me interested; the subtle variations of results obtained with different pressures of the press, different papers, different inks and paints was exciting; and then having the ability to work on the result again, either sending it through the press or using the image as a base for a painting on top of it, was a revelation. After our workshop, I remember studying Degas’ monotypes in an art history class (he made some 400 of them) and following up on my interest in the medium by searching out other artists’ monotypes, from Prendergast to Klee, Picasso to Jasper Johns. I even went to the legendary Prints and Drawings Room at the Art Institute of Chicago under the direction of the late great Harold Joachim to see some monotypes in the collection first hand.

When I discovered about 15 years ago that Motherwell had created more than 80 monotypes, and, that in fact, there were a fair number of them in the Dedalus Foundation collection, I was quite excited to see them. A colleague and I pulled a selection of the Foundation’s monotypes out from storage and we took great pleasure in looking carefully at them. Motherwell had taken to the painterly monotype process quite naturally and the results are exquisitely “Motherwellian” – powerful abstract forms expressed directly by a masterful hand on the plate, exploiting and accepting the medium’s unpredictable nature after it is run through the press.

It is an infrequent pleasure to be able to revive a body of work that has lain dormant and unseen for a while and I am excited to be a part of this rare presentation of Motherwell’s monotypes at Jerald Melberg Gallery.

Morgan Spangle
Director
Dedalus Foundation, Inc.
Robert Motherwell’s Monotypes: Painting on the Plate

One of my compulsions is to leap before reflecting.
Robert Motherwell, 30 October 1982

I would like all my graphics to remain the graphics of a painter.
Robert Motherwell, 1974

Prints are magic. They can capture texture unattainable in painting, the ink nestling and cresting the subtle bumps and crevices of a heavy rag paper. Their color radiates more intensely than the results of any other two-dimensional technique. In printmaking Robert Motherwell favored the French ink Charbonnel; it contained a higher pigment content than commercially available oil paint and far exceeded the artificial plastics that make up acrylics. The brilliant halo resonating at the bottom of Untitled 1974 (Fig. 2); the crimson bursts exploding across Untitled 1974 (Fig. 5)—they glow with the refulgence of pure pigment. Monotypes have a unique place in printmaking: for they create a single, un reproducible image using mechanical reproductive techniques.

Color united with paper attracted Motherwell to printmaking. Tremendous pressure applied by the heavy roller meld the ink and paper as the print runs through the press: color and ground as one entity. Motherwell said of aquatint, though it is true of any printing method: What aquatint can do, for example, better than the other means of a painter, is to saturate certain mould-made papers with an intensity of hue that cannot be equaled (except perhaps by stained glass light). Other Abstract Expressionists experimented with a similar effect by staining unprimed canvases (Motherwell’s second wife, Helen Frankenthaler, became famous for it) or saturating paper with oil or ink, as Motherwell did with the ethereal Lyric Suite. Here, Motherwell whips or plops ink onto rice paper with sable brushes, and as the porous paper absorbs the ink, alchemy occurs. Sometimes, the ink coats passages; other times, the binding agent separates from the pigment, creating a nimbus of shaded tonalities emanating from the deepest black.

Motherwell did the Lyric Suite drawings during a six week period in April and May 1965. Though there are over 600 in the series, each composed a study of two of his favorite subjects—the materials (what Motherwell called “plasticity,” in the parlance of Modernism) and automatism (a Surrealist practice that Motherwell discovered in 1941, the year he decided to become an artist). Automatism explored the possibilities of “controlled accident,” a favorite phrase of Jerald Melberg’s to describe Motherwell’s composing technique. Motherwell intellectually understood how the ink should behave when it hit the paper and three decades of drawing had trained his wrist and arm. Yet, when he moved his brush over the paper, he tried to remove conscious intentionality:

I don’t know how to paint on purpose. So, after days or weeks of suffering, finally I just pick up a tool and make marks, then the internal dialectic takes over, and I can truthfully say that quite often I’m more astonished than anybody else could be at what comes out.

The happenstance movement of his arm and the mercurial seeping, staining, and separating of the ink contributed to the final result, a portrait of skill and serendipity.
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Bistre and Yellow Etching Ink with Black Acrylic on Arches Paper
40 1/4 x 25 3/4 inches
M74-3751
UNTITLED (PHOENICIAN BLACK) NO. 7  1974
Monotype with Brown and Black Acrylic with Oil and Ochre Touches of Magenta Red Acrylic on Arches Paper
41 1/4 x 29 1/2 inches
M74-2893
Monotypes contained the same “controlled accident” element. Motherwell applied paint to a plate, but when they went through the press, their movement and interaction with the paper could not be fully anticipated. Much as the Lyric Suites transformed as the ink became one with the paper, the monotype that appeared when the plate was printed retained the layered colors and directional lines of its original drawing, but in expanded form, as if it had taken a deep breath and the space around it shifted in unexpected ways to accommodate. With each time, each one—because monotypes are created only once—came a different surprise.

Motherwell did not transcribe studies into his final works; they were studies. He had honed his wrist, his elbow, his manipulation of the brush so that the ink and paint flowed or flicked precisely as he commanded, even if the movements were automatic, determined by some unconscious stimuli instead of premeditated. Each image composed visual metaphors. . . not illustration, but a series of explosions or fireworks or oppositely, a kind of restrained silence. This can be seen in Untitled 1974 (Fig. 5), where speckles of brilliant crimson disrupt stalwart passages of black or in Untitled 1974 (Fig. 8) where, conversely, a lilac miasma is disrupted by the quick, bravado strokes of black etching ink, swerving the composition slightly off-center, leaving the viewer off-balance. The purple haze provides the stability to reset the viewer.

Motherwell insisted that his monotypes, etchings, and lithographs be called “graphic works,” not “prints,” to maintain their relationship to the brush and their close relationship to his singular paintings and collages: I would like all my graphics to remain the graphics of a painter.

But unlike the lithographs and etchings that Motherwell made in editions of multiples, the monotypes are singular works on paper, more akin to drawings. The layering of color in Untitled (Phoenician Black) No. 7 (Fig. 3), the integration of acrylic and oil paint and printer’s ink, the combed surface of a housepainter’s brush—the action happens on this sheet of paper and here, alone, not to be repeated.

Each monotype is unique—there is only one, “mono.” After an image is painted onto the surface of a matrix (Motherwell preferred a copper plate), damp paper is carefully placed on top and it is run through the printing press. The heavy rollers exert so much pressure that the paper almost seems fused to the matrix, merging with the ink on its surface. The paper is then pulled away, revealing the transferred image and the resultant print. The matrix is then, generally, wiped clean, though sometimes, in the case of Motherwell, not completely, which resulted in traces of ghost colors haunting the dominant image—the yellow shadow in Untitled 1974 (Fig. 6) or the red staining in Untitled 1974 (Fig. 8).

Although he became most famous for his paintings, paper seduced Motherwell. He remembered, I have always been excited by the quality of various papers since childhood. He collected it, hoarded it, mused over it, fetishized it. This love led to his collage work, created in tandem with his paintings throughout his fifty-year career. The handmade paper didn’t just support his work, it constructed it. He chose the paper to go with the image and method. The pebbly Arches in Untitled 1974 (Fig. 1) and Untitled (Phoenician Black) No. 7 (Fig. 3) infuses the color with weight; the gesture feels
abrasive, as if we can feel the brush drag across the surface to trace the image. But then, in *Untitled No. 22* (Fig. 4) the fine granularity and brilliant radiance of Barcham Green’s F.J. Head paper elevates the image, imbuing this *Spanish Elegy* series with an ethereal effect worthy of its theme.\(^\text{10}\)

Motherwell chose his papers and his medium to maximize this merging effect. Ken Tyler, a master lithographer who worked with Motherwell from the 1970s, observed *After all, part of the ultimate nature of prints is that they are made with paper, and nobody can make good prints who is not highly sensitive to paper.*\(^\text{11}\) In *Untitled 1974* (Fig. 2), the ink shading the mottled texture of the heavy rag Arches paper emulates a blooming-flora effect similar to Max Ernst’s frottage technique. (It also resembles the texture achieved by applying tusche, the greasy liquid medium used in lithography, onto a zinc plate; in printmaking this is called *peau de crapaud*, literally, “skin of a toad.”) While Motherwell could have used a zinc plate to make this monotype, Catherine Mosley, his in-house printer from 1972 until his death, said he only used copper plates.)\(^\text{12}\) In *Untitled 1974* (Fig. 10), the media evokes fluidity but moves inconsistently with the blurred edges of charcoal or pastel, and the traces disappear without the tell-tale markings of crayons. They are not ink on paper drawings, but ink-*in-*paper drawings: a new manifestation of the painterly stroke. Time and gesture become arrested in the material like a scarab in amber.
The final graphic can either be kept or discarded. The plate cannot be reworked as in etchings—it is a one-time deal. There are examples of Motherwell working atop a monotype as in *Untitled* (Figure) (Fig. 13) where he wiped down a plate with violet ink to create the wavering metallic setting for the inked image expanding atop it or the sienna ground in *Untitled* (Figure) (Fig. 12) on which he paints his calligraphic swirls.

And this is the other key element of the monotypes: the press preserved Motherwell’s brushstroke. This is essential to Motherwell, as the passing of his brush conveyed so much sensation and experience—weight, equilibrium, imbalance.

Motherwell, unlike other Abstract Expressionists, explored graphics, but not like a traditional painter investigating the print medium. He eschewed printmaking tools—burins, needles, styluses. Motherwell never let go of the brush, his primary tool, and as a result, line does not exist, but gesture. He concluded, *I mean prints are essentially a form of drawing (rather than painting).* In this way, he continues the tradition associated with Abstract Expressionism—the expressive stroke of the artist—while exploring formal construction. How does shape hold space and articulate it? How does color push and recede when in visible layers, unlike Jackson Pollock’s webs or Willem de Kooning’s colliding passages of high-keyed color?

He would dip his brush into inks thinned to varying consistencies. Viscosity, fluidity, splatter-ready—the printmakers with whom he worked understood that he needed variety in the flow to achieve the layered tensions in his brushstrokes. One can follow the movement of the brush, watch as the liquid loses density as in *Untitled 1974* (Fig. 10) or see how the brush holding black acrylic drags traces of the sepia from another print through the tooth of bristles, as in *Untitled 1974* (Fig. 2). In these monotypes, as in the *Lyric Suite* drawings, we can trace and retrace Motherwell’s gesture, follow his movement as he tried to capture feeling in a paint stroke.

For, in the end, Motherwell sought to capture that in all of his works. The rush of the brush, the anxiety of its cuts and turns, the careful layering of color, the balance of shapes and bands—all were attempts to capture “feeling” in an image. A wordsmith as well as an image maker, Motherwell summed up this struggle in his last decade:

> With known criteria, the work of the artist is difficult enough; with no known criteria, with criteria instead in the process of becoming, the creative situation generates an anxiety close to madness; but also a strangely exhilarating and sane sense too, one of being free—free from dogma, from history, from the terrible load of the past; and above all, a sense of newness, of each moment focused and real, outside the reach of the past and the future, an immersion in newness that I think non-creative persons most commonly parallel in making passionate love under certain circumstances—or perhaps in their dreams where one knows there are meanings, but meanings so charged and so ambiguous, so transformed and cryptic that one is astounded by one’s own imaginativeness and richness of connections, and frightened too.

Pigment, paper, the passage of the brush, and controlled chance: these four elements defined Robert Motherwell’s artistic practice. Add the pressure of the press and the magic of the monotypes are manifest.

Jennifer Sudul Edwards, Ph.D.
Independent Curator
Fig. 5

UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Black Etching Ink with Dots of Scattered Faint Color
28 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches
M74-3738
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Catherine Mosley for sharing her recollections of Motherwell’s methods and studios, as well as her indomitable printmaking knowledge. I must also thank Jerald Melberg and Jordan Moore for their insights and hypotheses on these monotypes. It was wonderful spending afternoons studying the surfaces and wondering how it could have been. Thank you to the printmakers Maggie Wright, formerly of Harlan and Weaver in New York City and Erik Waterkotte, artist and Associate Professor at University of North Carolina at Charlotte, for reviewing my text.

3 Catherine Mosley, Motherwell’s in-house printer from 1973 until his death in 1991, explained: Because he was using high quality Charbonnel ink, the pigmentation is five times what you would find in a painting. Color is so much more intense than what you would get in a tube. Charbonnel ink glows back at you from the paper. Interview with the author, December 16, 2018.
5 Interview with David Hayman, July 12 and 13, 1988, cited in Collected Writings, 288.
6 Motherwell, in a letter to Andrew Hoyem, director of Arion Press in San Francisco, 1987, in Collected Writings, 283. Motherwell was in the middle of composing illustrations for James Joyce’s Ulysses, a book which loomed large not only in modern literature’s canon, but in Motherwell’s biography and imagination. While the quote referred specifically to illustrating poetry and text by others, it aptly summarized Motherwell’s relationship to his imagery.
7 Colsman-Freyberger, Art Journal.
9 Mosley said “We pick the papers to go with the image.” Prints of Robert Motherwell, 112.
10 It is hard to dismiss the paper’s watermark, Christ’s visage, as an intentional play by Motherwell for two reasons. This monotype belongs to the Spanish Elegy series, which Motherwell explored in paintings, drawings, collages, and graphics throughout his life. Initially, the series title referred to the Spanish Revolution, but it expanded in meaning over time. Motherwell said, I take an elegy to be a funeral lamentation or funeral song for something one cared about. The Spanish Elegies are not ‘political’ but my private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot. They are as eloquent as I could make them. But the pictures are also general metaphors of the contrast between life and death, and their interrelations. [Quote in Dore Ashton, “Robert Motherwell: The Painter and his Poets,” in Robert Motherwell. (New York: Abrams, 2nd edition, 1983), 10.] In all the images, black and white and columns and ovals contrast each other within a single field, representing the constant balance of life and death buttressing mortality. In the FJH watermark, the specter of Christ alludes to that responsibility: the abandoned morality, inherent in the violent strife of the Spanish Civil War and the conflicts that followed it.

The other allusion is the apocryphal story of Veronica’s veil, a frequent reference amongst artists who considered the story—Veronica meets with Christ on the road to Calvary and wipes the blood and sweat from his face with her veil and his imprint magically burns into the cloth—a metaphor for the artmaking process. The image also has an anti-war precedent in the George Rouault’s Le Miserere prints, with which Motherwell would have been familiar and may have seen in person when the Museum of Modern Art exhibited prints from the series in 1945 and 1953.
11 Ken Tyler in The Prints of Motherwell, 23.
12 Interview with author, December 16, 2018.
13 Mosley recalled: But his only tool, this is really important, was a brush. He never used an etching needle, never any printmaking tools. He never burnished anything. It just had to be a brush. Interview with the author, December 16, 2018.
14 Interview with Terenzio, December 28, 1979, The Prints of Motherwell, 68.
15 Motherwell often distinguished between “emotion” and “feeling.” If I had been a philosopher, my original contribution to philosophy might have been a distinction between emotion and feeling. Commonly people use the two words interchangeably, e.g., someone’s full of feeling, or he feels too much, or he’s too sensitive, or he’s too emotional, or conversely, he’s too cold. By the word feeling, I mean something very specific, which is difficult to say without being redundant. For example, the California sun on a clear day feels warm and radiant and makes your skin feel good, makes the air aromatic, etc. In one sense feeling is the objective response to what externally actually is. For me emotion is something that originates in oneself. In this context, one of my main problems in painting has been a swinging back and forth from expressionism, which I think is basically (as I’ve defined the word) an emotional thing, toward a modern classicism, like Miró or Matisse, which I think is a felt thing.
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Bistre and Yellow Etching Ink with Black Acrylic on Paper
40 x 25 1/2 inches
M74-3765
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Black Acrylic on Arches Paper
41 x 29 1/2 inches
M74-3764
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Black Etching Ink on Paper with Faint Dusting of Colors
29 3/4 x 29 1/2 inches
M74-3737
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Bistre Etching Ink with Touches of Color on Arches Paper
41 x 29 1/2 inches
M74-3763

Fig. 9
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Black Acrylic on Paper
35 1/4 x 23 1/4 inches
M74-3740
UNTITLED 1974  1974
Monotype; Black Acrylic on Paper with Touches of Color
41 1/4 x 29 1/2 inches
M74-3748
UNTITLED (FIGURE)  1976
Hand Painted Black Ink on Sienna Monotype Ground
30 x 22 1/4 inches
M76-2813
UNTITLED (FIGURE)  1976
Monotype of Black Ink on Pale Violet Monotype Ground
30 x 22 1/4 inches
M76-2817
Robert Motherwell is unquestionably one of the most significant American artists of the twentieth century. He came to New York in 1940 and joined Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and others who set out to change the face of American painting. These painters renounced the prevalent American style. Influenced by the Surrealists, these “Abstract Expressionists” sought to create essential images that revealed emotional truth and authenticity of feeling. Recognized both as an accomplished painter and print maker, Motherwell’s most celebrated body of work is a series of over 100 paintings entitled *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1948–90).

Renowned as one of the founders of Abstract Expressionism, Motherwell became an artist of international stature. His career encompassed more than five decades and he received virtually every honor accorded to an artist. His work has been exhibited extensively in the United States and abroad and is included in the permanent collections of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. The Complete Prints catalogue raisonné of over 500 prints was published in 2003. The catalogue raisonné of the collages, paintings and works on paper was published in 2012.
Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Robert Motherwell
Monotypes

March 23 - May 4, 2019

Jerald Melberg Gallery Inc.
625 South Sharon Amity Road
Charlotte, NC 28211
704.365.3000
gallery@jeraldmelberg.com
www.jeraldmelberg.com

Photography by Chris Clamp

Graphic Design by Gaybe Johnson
Printed by Boingo Graphics

All works Copyright © Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA, NY
Publication Copyright © 2019 Jerald Melberg Gallery Inc.
All Rights Reserved
