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MILTON AVERY: ART FOR OUR SAKE

by Carter Ratcliff



Milton Avery, *Laguna Beach*, 1941, oil on canvas, 34 x 54 inches;

In 1929 Lloyd Goodrich—art historian and future director of the Whitney Museum of American Art—wrote, “A figure by Milton Avery, while rudimentary, has an arresting quality, giving an impression of undeveloped potentialities.” This was an astute assessment, though it’s doubtful that Goodrich foresaw the direction Avery’s development would take. In the decades before the Second World War, American modernists were provincial. With the capital of their world an ocean away, in Paris, they could establish their avant-garde credentials only by aligning themselves with one distant hero or another. Many chose Pablo Picasso, though Piet Mondrian also had clusters of devoted acolytes in New York. In the 1920s and ’30s, modernist painting in America recapitulated the evolution that led from Cubism to geometric abstraction. Linear form predominated, reducing color to the secondary place it has occupied from the earliest stages of Western art. Avery provides a notable exception to this rule. Taking guidance not from Picasso but from Henri Matisse, he built his images from color.

Never a thorough-going abstractionist, Avery always presents identifiable subjects—a figure, reading or playing a musical instrument, or a landscape composed of clouds and boulders, trees and expanses of rolling meadow. Thus there are, of necessity, outlines in Avery’s paintings, yet they don’t seem to contain his colors. His airy yellows and blues, his luminous greens find their shapes by expanding precisely as far as they must to make their figurative point. As color areas meet and mesh into an image, qualities of light generate the tranquility that fills all of Avery’s art. His art is serene and so was his life, despite his difficult early years.

Born in 1885, Avery grew up in a small town in upstate New York. When he was 14 years old, his father, a tanner, moved the family to the village of Wilson Station, Conn. Two years later, he got the first of several factory jobs in nearby Hartford. Having noticed a magazine ad for courses in lettering at the Connecticut Art Students League, he enrolled only to learn a month later that the course was being discontinued. However, Charles Noel Flagg, the founder of the League, suggested to the young man that he finish the term as a student in the life-drawing class. As Barbara Haskell wrote in the catalogue of the Avery retrospective she organized for the Whitney in 1982, “He began going to the league in the evenings after working an eight-hour factory shift. By 1911, when Avery was 26, his conversion to art was complete, for in that year he was listed in the Hartford City Directories as an artist.”

Though painting had become his vocation, it did not provide him with a living. Now the sole support of a large family, he worked nights as a file clerk at the Travelers Insurance Company and attended day classes at the school of the Hartford Art Society. There he won top honors in portrait painting and in drawing from the live model. During a summer visit to Gloucester, Mass., in 1924, he met Sally Michel, a young artist from Brooklyn. Within two years, they were married and settled in New York. A successful illustrator, Sally was able to provide for them both, allowing Avery to paint full time. Biographers uniformly report their marriage as a happy one. Both spouses worked at home and both were consistently productive. Rising at six o'clock in the morning, they would work through the day, until six in the evening.

Early in the 1950s, Avery told a writer for *Art Digest*, "I can't keep up with my ideas for pictures. Often I paint a big oil in the morning and another one in the afternoon." He had great facility, once he arrived at his mature style, yet his work never looks facile. Rather, one has the feeling that he found an unusually short route from perception to reflection to execution. One might say that, for Avery, to see was to paint, though of course his process was not an absolutely smooth continuum. He and Sally spent their summers in Gloucester, where he sketched from nature. These plein-air sessions provided him with the motifs he transformed, during the rest of the year, into finished works on canvas.

It is all the more remarkable, then, that his paintings have the look of fresh responses to the world's immediacies. Perhaps it makes sense to say that as he painted, Avery experienced the present moment as expansive, encompassing not only the subject he was bringing into view but his memory of it. Giorgio de Chirico, for example, also merges these regions of time, imbuing the present with the atmosphere of an uneasily remembered past. Thus he charges his art with the weight of Old World history. Avery does the opposite. As he brings the past into the present he creates as he works, his results look distinctly American.

Still working from lessons learned in a conservative art school, Avery was far from an adventurous painter in 1928. Nonetheless, he was invited by Bernard Karfiol to exhibit several paintings that year in a group show at the Opportunity Gallery, in New York. A former modernist, Karfiol had retreated to a quasi-academic style of figure painting. Among his other invitees was Mark Rothko. Though the Opportunity Gallery presented them as contemporaries—and equals—Avery was 18 years Rothko's senior. The older painter was sunny, the younger was saturnine, yet they were compatible, and soon Avery had become the younger artist's mentor. Other painters in Milton and Sally's circle included Adolph Gottlieb, John Graham, and Barnett Newman. Every week, Avery convened a drawing class, with a live model. Now and then, he would read the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens. Several decades after Avery's death, in 1965, Rothko wrote, "I cannot tell you what it meant for us to be made welcome" in his friend's studio, where "the walls were always covered with an endless and changing array of poetry and light."

That Avery's planes of color were important to Rothko as he developed his thoroughly abstract imagery is an art-historical commonplace. Not so well known is Avery's influence on Gottlieb, who said, "Since he was ten years my senior and an artist I respected, his attitude helped reinforce me in my chosen direction. I always regarded him as a brilliant colorist and draftsman, a solitary figure working against the stream." In the 1930s, when Avery began to exhibit his paintings regularly, the art scene was dominated by two warring factions. On the political right were Thomas Hart Benton and other Regionalists. Stridently pro-American, they condemned avant-garde art for European origins that made it alien in their eyes and possibly subversive. On the left were Social Realist painters who saw art as a vehicle for criticizing the economic system that had precipitated the Great Depression.

With no political message to convey and no aspirations to wide public acceptance, Avery was out of sync the American art scene of the '30s. Later, he was too much a figurative painter—and too old—to find a place among the Abstract Expressionists, even though their ranks included Rothko and other admirers. When Avery had his first Whitney retrospective, in 1960, the art world was poised to acknowledge Pop Art and Minimalism but not Avery's uncategorizable achievement. And so he remains, even now, an outlier, with a secure place neither in art history nor in art criticism's familiar

hierarchies. Avery's art finds its *raison d'être* in the vivid subtleties of his chromatic inventions. "Why talk when you can paint?" he once said. If he had not been so disinclined to theorize, he might have promulgated some variation on the aesthete's doctrine of art for art's sake. Yet he wasn't a "pure" aesthete in the mold of such 19th-century figures as Théophile Gautier or Walter Pater. His optimism suggests that he made art for our sake, in the hope of awakening us to the possibility of a fully focused experience of one another and the world we share.

By painting from sketches made outdoors, Avery put himself at a remove from nature. Because this detachment produced an intensified intimacy, there is a temptation to talk of paradox. Yet it is perhaps more helpful to suggest that he simply found a new path to an intimate relationship with his subjects. Rather than transfer minute detail from drawing to canvas, his brush was guided by a vision of the calm and self-assured life of his subjects. Over the decades, modeling disappeared from his forms almost completely and his color became progressively flatter. In late paintings of agitated seas, brushstrokes sometimes float free and writhe a bit. Spattered textures appear. Still, we feel no threat from untamed nature, no prospect of losing ourselves in the immensities of an overbearing sublime. Avery pictures the world as reliably welcoming and inhabitable.

In a review from 1957, Clement Greenberg wrote that in Avery's paintings, "Things exist only optically." This points in the right direction but does not go far enough. For nothing can be isolated in a purely optical state. Vision is entangled with the other senses, especially touch, which delivers us into the company of presences not only visible but also palpable. No matter how luminous, even weightless, the human figures in Avery's paintings appear to be, his hues fill them with an inward vitality we perceive as physical. And that vitality, in all its self-awareness, is shared between people and the objects that surround them. In his art, everything is quietly alive to everything else.