

FINANCIAL TIMES

JULY 18, 2022

MILTON AVERY, ROYAL ACADEMY REVIEW — SUMMERY DELIGHT FROM A POSTWAR MASTER PAINTER

by Jackie Wullschläger



'Husband and Wife' (1945) © 2022 Milton Avery Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London 2022

Space is airy and open, the cast list domestic and unheroic, a piercing sun or subdued lamplight in cosy interiors bathes everything in a warm atmosphere, and although without grandeur or extravagance, each living thing is imbued with a surge of optimism and individuality at the Royal Academy's delightful summery new exhibition *Milton Avery: American Colourist*.

In "Oyster Catcher" the pink-legged bird passes fleet as a dart: a determined, dynamic cut-out, startling above a slate grey sea. Huge feathers pasted against low hills in "Blue Trees" shimmer into a translucent forest, vast yet delicate. In "Swimmers and Sunbathers", solid static figures interlocked with the lilac sand watch flecks of orange limbs sweep through dark water: a perfect balance of stillness and fluidity.

You feel at once that you are in America here, but which America? Floating across "Sea and Sand Dunes", flat blurry silhouettes blending lavender to mauve to purple in a muffled luminosity evoke the ocean at moments when everything shimmers into a bright haze — and also recall Rothko's weightless shapes. Stark as a poster, the girls in swimsuits and sunhats in "Two Figures", leaning on balcony railings, sharp against the midday light, could have walked off an Alex Katz canvas. But "The Dessert", a supper party of five eager heads with different flesh tones conversing across slices of cake, has a quotidian intimacy reminiscent of Alice Neel.

Milton Avery's influence is better known than Milton Avery. Among the first Americans to paint flat, defining his compositions through simplified blocks of saturated hues, Avery became a bridge from prewar loose representational modes to postwar colour field painting. Rothko built on his glowing areas of colour to run to full abstraction, but Alfred Barr of MoMA laughed out loud when Rothko asserted that Avery was America's greatest painter. For most modernist judges, Avery was too restrained, did not push far enough. Clement Greenberg was backhanded: "The painting is almost faultless within its limitation." In 1999, the Whitney's *The American Century* omitted Avery completely.

The RA's is Avery's first UK retrospective. It celebrates an artist who slips categories, avoided the

spectacular and dramatic in favour of what felt real, and was deaf to politics and theory.

A wonderful “Self-portrait” (1941), rugged and frowning as the artist concentrates on his likeness in a bathroom mirror, introduces this unfamiliar presence. Pressed close against the picture plane, facing the viewer, the figure is entirely without airs, but quirky: bright red ears, sapphire eyes, a black gash outlining the jaw, scraggy hair. The expression is nervy, whereas the work, especially from the 1940s on, is calm and ordered — tranquillity hard-won.

Born in Altmar, New York in 1885, the son of a tanner, Avery was a factory labourer supporting his family until his thirties, when he went to art college, took night jobs and painted by day. In 1926, his lucky break was to marry a young student, Sally Michel, so seduced by him and his talent that she worked as an illustrator to free him from drudgery. Avery never had a studio; he and Michel drew and painted side by side in the living room of their one-bedroom flat in Manhattan.

His crisply delineated forms owe something to her commercial style, and he made a virtue of thrift, boasting that he could make a tube of paint last longer than anyone else. Laying down pigment in thin washes and stains diluted with turpentine, he achieved a low-key lyricism in the 1920s and 1930s with a distinctive palette of sombre reds, pinks muted with white, mustardy yellows, rusty browns. He was a tender yet unsentimental pastoralist — “Moody Landscape”, “Fall in Vermont”, “Rolling Hills” — and in urban scenes such as “City” and “Coney Island” he softened smoky industrial structures and ungainly figures.

These are compassionate, Depression-era chronicles; they also anticipate the limpidly abbreviated compositions and stylised angular figures which became his hallmark in the 1940s. The comedy “Seaside” (1931) is the most compelling herald: five gawky women on the beach stand, recline, squat like idiosyncratic sandcastles. Then in 1944, a thoughtful adolescent in a headscarf, Avery’s daughter, becomes an arrangement of triangles — torso, face, neat fringe — in “March in Babushka”. In “Husband and Wife” (1945), an orange-faced man, leaning back, smoking a pipe, powerful and complacent, is anchored by the taut forms of a woman in shades of blue; mere outlines of facial features are scratched in, wet-on-wet.

By “Two Figures on Beach” (1950), sunbathers and landscape are magisterially deconstructed into simplified passages of colour within compressed, shallow pictorial space. “I like to seize one sharp instant in nature, imprison it by means of ordered shapes and space relationship,” Avery said. “To this end, I eliminate and simplify, leaving apparently nothing but colour and pattern. I am not seeking pure abstraction; rather the purity and essence of the idea — expressed in its simplest form.”

This process of refinement and distillation led to comparisons with Matisse, which irritated Avery. He was the opposite of a classicist, never edging out his figure’s odd individual shapes and awkward contours, and had neither Matisse’s suave linearity or abstracting idealism. And he is a much drier painter, almost an anti-voluptuary, as if the early hardships never let him go. Even the large blocky “Reclining Blonde”, a dazzle of whites, beiges, creams, pale skin on pale sheets, is more geometric than sensual.

And yet, as the impressive concluding gallery unveils, Avery did finally loosen up, letting rip with calligraphic mark-making, squiggles, staccato dashes on a large scale, and enormous zones of pure colour. Declaring in 1958, now in his seventies, that he wanted to paint “like the abstract boys”, he proceeded to do so in his own way. “Speedboat in a Choppy Sea” (1960) is a wobbly grid of blues and browns lit by a streaking white line. “Boathouse by the Sea” (1959) is a strip of sand as night falls, held between bands of orange, turquoise and encroaching black. “Sails in Sunset Sea” (1960), a painting of nearly two metres, has the improvisatory dash of a drawing, hot pink scribbles on candy pink ground, and at the centre a curving pale triangle and oval that cohere into sailing boats.

“One does not manipulate a subject, one meets it,” Avery said. The expressive economy and stripping to essentials of the late works built on a lifetime’s painstaking honesty to observation. “His is the poetry of sheer loveliness,” Rothko summed up. This show’s broad arc, of an individualist sticking to yet evolving his vision, despite poverty, critical neglect and changing fashion, is heartening, refreshing and joyful.