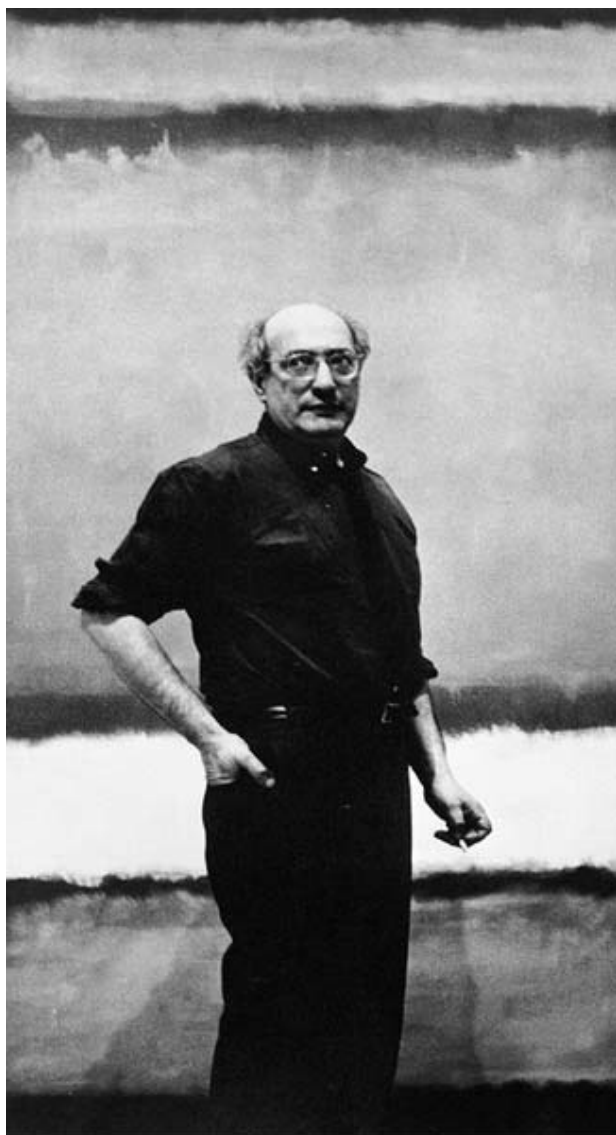


The Heroic Failure of Mark Rothko

Simon Sharma's brilliant TV series on *The Power of Art* was re-shown last week, and had its usual powerful effect on me. All the individual programmes in this series are excellent, but by far the most moving and powerful was the one dealing with the Russian-American painter **Mark Rothko**.



I have been to the Tate Gallery in London, and seen Rothko's truly remarkable set of paintings of almost hypnotic power, but Sharma's unique commentary, plus absolutely excellent acting, and the effective and meaningful filming of the works seemed to reveal a great deal more than I was able to elicit alone.

You certainly have to be tuned-in to Rothko's wavelength to get what it is that he was delivering, and walking into his room at that Gallery after visiting a whole series of other rooms "occupied" by much more self-aware and demonstrative artists, does set you up entirely inappropriately to take in exactly what Rothko is saying.

You can, quite easily, have your "formalising perception" still on "full", which looks for those more structural aspects when confronted with any art, but Rothko was never a Piet Mondrian or even an Anthony Caro, where such an approach could deliver meaningful results.

Most commentators, who do manage to *tune in*, feel strongly that they have to describe what Rothko is delivering as almost religious in its content. But, in fact, he seems to have taken painting in something like the same direction as in the very best of music: it arrives at human feeling of the strongest and most profound kind via abstraction *alone!*

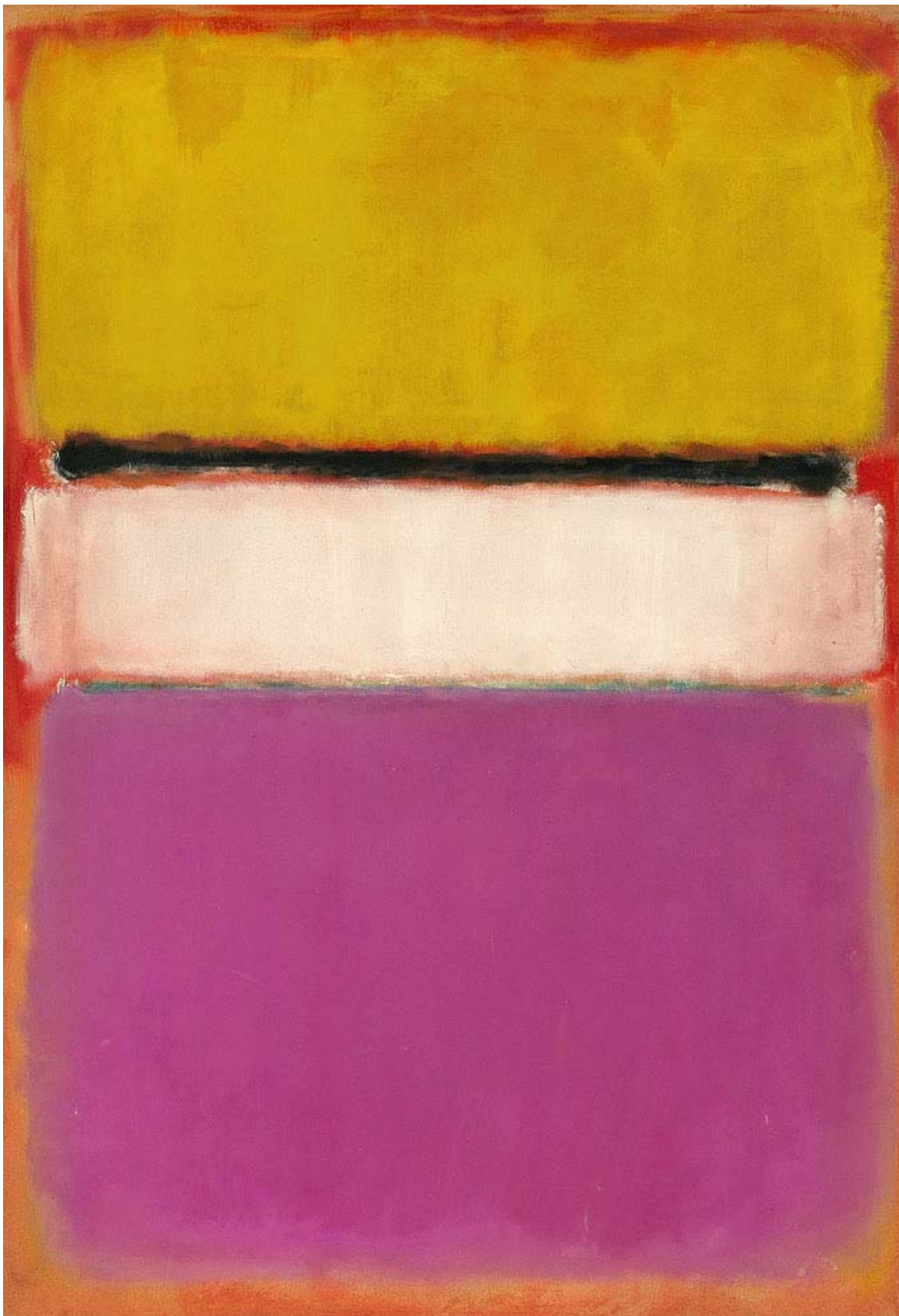
No figurative content is either discerned, or was intended, and though most people "see" windows and doors to **somewhere** (?) or even *nowhere*, the real content seems to reside in amazing texture and

meaningful "detail". The substance of the works seems to reside in the almost *furry* or "blurred" edges of his deceptively simple areas, which seem to articulate directly and sensitively into adjacent "new space", which is itself packed **full** of its own colour-based *activity*.

We seem to be directly discerning real and complex feelings by visual means alone.

Now Rothko was always being asked to "explain" his works, and he never liked such questions. He had spent his life slowly "perfecting" his communication directly with human beings on the most intimate of levels, and was quite naturally more than a little annoyed, when his superlative efforts seemed to deliver nothing *by themselves* to such observers, who really required some art-historian type to give them something to hang upon the seen but not understood images – some repeatable scaffolding that could demonstrate *their own* "profound understanding" of the seemingly inexplicable.

Rothko could only be amazed that such people were unable (?) to react to his, what to him was blatantly overt and effective communications. They must surely have turned their hearts permanently off, he decided.



But Rothko (as with Vincent) was bound to fail, and not only with his communication with his most probable audience, but most significantly for himself!

His wilful surrender to the expression of human feeling and emotion, though communicating and even resonating with many human beings, did not, and could not, resolve anything, and most importantly not for Rothko himself.

Indeed, his ascent of consummate delivery of such profound “responses” was not only bound to drain him almost completely, but also isolate him into the deepest solitary confinement.

He was not a prophet, or a committed social activist.

He was a painter.

And what possible role could there be for such an animal in our society. He held up an increasingly accurate mirror to our inner emotions, which we perversely refused to recognise, and hence could never act upon.

The more successful was his chosen role, the more it seemed a failure in having any real effect.

No Goya-like literal and evident things were illustrated for us to ally with and take sides – but only devastating pictures of our own innards. Only a resonating and luminous image of our own deepest weaknesses seemed to be delivered by this greatest of painters, and in the end no-one seemed to be listening.

The Seagram Commission (worth perhaps £2 million in today’s values), at the same time seemed to offer the greatest opportunities for his art, yet only as “décor” in a restaurant for the very rich. His bottomless pits of emotions could never impinge on some fat millionaire as he tucked into his Lobster Thermidor, or it may even upset his digestion somewhat, though most likely not even that!

Let us face it, there is no place for art such as Rothko’s in this World.

Those that can afford it have zero chance of ever really understanding what he was saying, and Rothko finally realised that his art was a failure.

It could not change the world.

He committed suicide.

Jim Schofield Feb 2010

(817 words)