

Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE | ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
| WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND *Emily Stamey*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,

Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,

AND *Robert Silberman*

PHOTO-ESSAY BY *Larry Schwarm*

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Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University
1845 Fairmount Street
Wichita, KS 67260-0046
www.ulrich.wichita.edu

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II *Boats in Yellow Sea*

1944

Gouache on paper, 22 1/2 x 31 in.

Gift of Sally Avery and Mr. and Mrs. Floyd T. Amsden

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Avery's landscapes and seascapes undoubtedly constitute his sublime achievement, and there is nothing in current painting to which one might profitably compare them.

Hilton Kramer¹

THE CRITIC HILTON KRAMER'S PRAISE FOR MILTON AVERY'S SUCCESSFUL PURSUIT OF HIS TWO CHIEF MOTIFS, LANDSCAPES AND SEASCAPES, reflects the artist's importance among American painters and critics near the end of his life. Yet earlier in Avery's career, the forms of his work were dismissed, first, as radically abstract and later, when abstract expressionism held sway, as too representational. Both reactions were misplaced, however, because form – whether representational or abstract – was of secondary concern to Avery. It was color that primarily inspired him, defined his images, and ultimately secured his reputation.

In the spirit of the French artist Henri Matisse, Avery used color relationships to convey emotion, spatial depth, light, and movement. The water surrounding the trio of small vessels in *Boats in Yellow Sea* is an unlikely yellow-tan that gently contrasts with the grayish purples of the boats. Diluted pink and brown-red accents complete the palette. The muted colors convey a sense of quiet and calm. One can easily imagine little waves gently jostling the moored crafts on a cloudy but peaceful day.

Inspired not only by Matisse but also, perhaps, by Japanese prints, children's drawings, and folk art, Avery preferred to create nearly abstract imagery with flat areas of color rather than the precise shapes of the objects or the illusion of three-dimensional space. For example, the two small boats look out of scale in relation to the larger vessel in the foreground, and all three are simple cutout forms, barely shaded. In addition, the wooden dock in the background unrealistically appears to hover above the scene.

Like Matisse, Avery felt free to push aside rules of perspective and drawing that had guided artists since the Renaissance. Yet the fact that his paintings are never wholly divorced from representational subject matter separated him from his abstract expressionist peers. Yet several of them, especially his friends Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, appreciated Avery's lyrical sense of color and inventive patterning of flat forms.

Timothy R. Rodgers

1. Hilton Kramer, *Milton Avery: Paintings, 1930–1960* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1962), 19.



About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (2000), *Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s* (2002), and *The Old, Weird America* (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include *Marsden Hartley: American Modern* (1997), *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (2002), and *Painting Berlin Stories* (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Book Review*. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, *Living to Tell* (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, *Bound*, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former *New York Times* photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series *American Photography: A Century of Images*.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, *On Fire: Larry Schwarm*, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.

Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of *Jolan Gross-Bettelheim: The American Prints* (2001) and *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968–2005* (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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