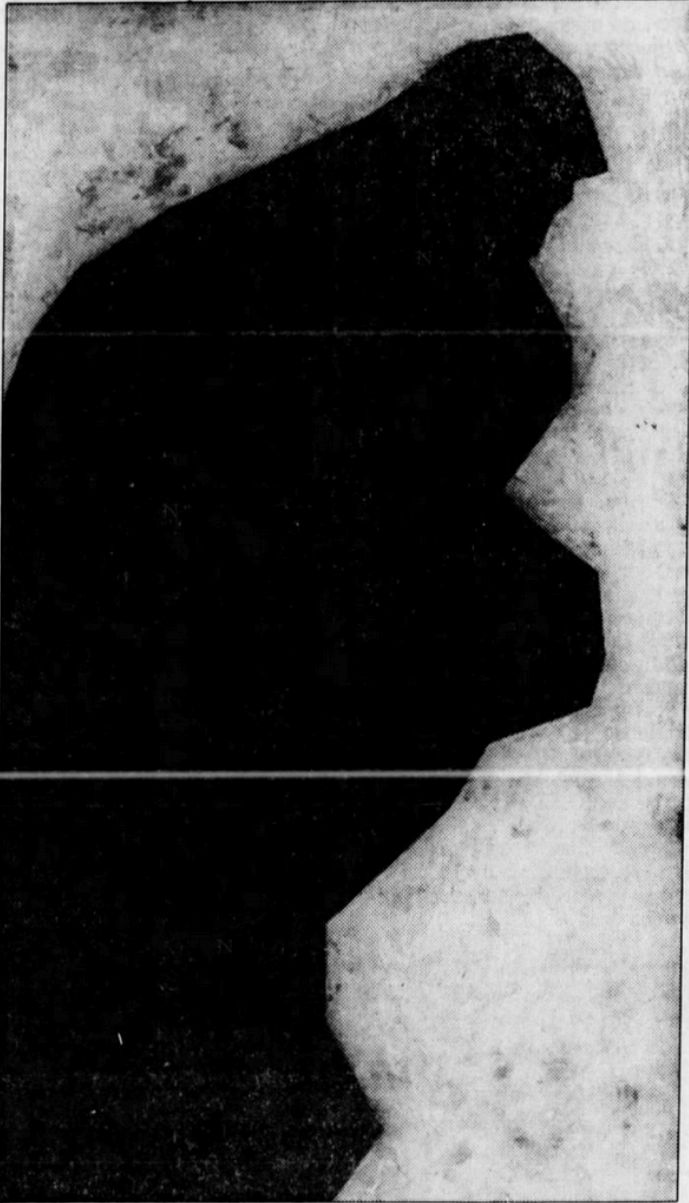


Art

Moskowitz: 30 years of synthesis



Robert Moskowitz's "Thinker," extracted from Rodin's sculpture of the same name, is among the works on exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington through Sept. 17.

By Edward J. Sozanski
Inquirer Art Critic

Washington — The dominant issue among artists in this century has been the competition between representation and abstraction. To the early modernists, abstraction, whether pure, as Kandinsky's, or derived from nature, as Picasso's, represented "progress." They considered representation, no matter how accomplished, retrograde.

The ascendancy of the abstract expressionist movement in the 1940s and '50s appeared to resolve this debate in the modernists' favor, but their victory proved to be only temporary. In the late 1950s, pop art introduced a revival of emphasis on image-based art that has continued in various forms for three decades.

Abstraction hasn't disappeared, however, because it cannot. Regardless of how it's defined, it's intrinsic to the nature of art. All art is abstract to some degree, although we tend to reserve the term for art that doesn't reproduce immediately recognizable images.

The question of where representation ends and abstraction begins is too complex to be settled by supplanting one aesthetic philosophy with another. In fact, it's an endlessly fascinating issue that perhaps will never be resolved; at least I hope it won't, because if it is, a fertile source of inspiration will dry up.

Robert Moskowitz has spent 30 years exploring the relationship between abstraction and representation. In doing so, he has also examined a corollary issue, the nature of content. His art is image-based, but it's also conceptual, in that he uses images to symbolically define the essence of pictorial reality.

The 54-year-old Moskowitz is the subject of a retrospective currently at the Hirshhorn Museum and
(See MOSKOWITZ on 6-J)

Three decades from of synthesis from Robert Moskowitz

MOSKOWITZ, from 1-J

Sculpture Garden here; it also will be seen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in February. It was organized by Ned Rifkin, the Hirshhorn's chief curator for exhibitions, and is composed of more than 90 paintings, collages and drawings dating from 1957, when Moskowitz was a student at Pratt Institute of Art in Brooklyn.

One is astonished to learn that this is the first major museum survey of Moskowitz's career. That is a surprise not only because his work is so intelligent and stimulating, but because Moskowitz represents a rare link between abstract expressionism and the so-called "new image" art of the 1970s.

The synthesis of these two seemingly divergent philosophies continues to manifest itself in his work in powerful paintings from the early 1960s such as *Thinker*, extracted from Rodin's sculpture of the same name, and *Iceberg*. Each is based on an image, but treats that image as the key factor in a formalist equation rather than as a narrative stimulus.

Moskowitz was born in Brooklyn, attended high school there and subsequently learned mechanical drafting at trade school. In 1954, he began working as a technical illustrator for Sperry Gyroscope Co., and two years later he began to study art at Pratt Institute at night.

One of his instructors was Adolph Gottlieb, a first-generation abstract expressionist who became his first important role model. In an interview in the exhibition catalogue, Moskowitz remembers Gottlieb as "a great teacher" who insisted that his students work abstractly in class. "He really thought that contemporary artists should do abstract work."

In 1964, Moskowitz married the daughter of Jack Tworkov, another abstract expressionist who also was well-known as a teacher. "He had his own ideas about abstract art that were different from mine," Moskowitz recalls. "Even though I was no longer working abstractly at that point, he helped me understand what I was doing."

What Moskowitz was doing was at-

A retrospective in Washington shows the artist to be a link between abstract and expressionism and representation.

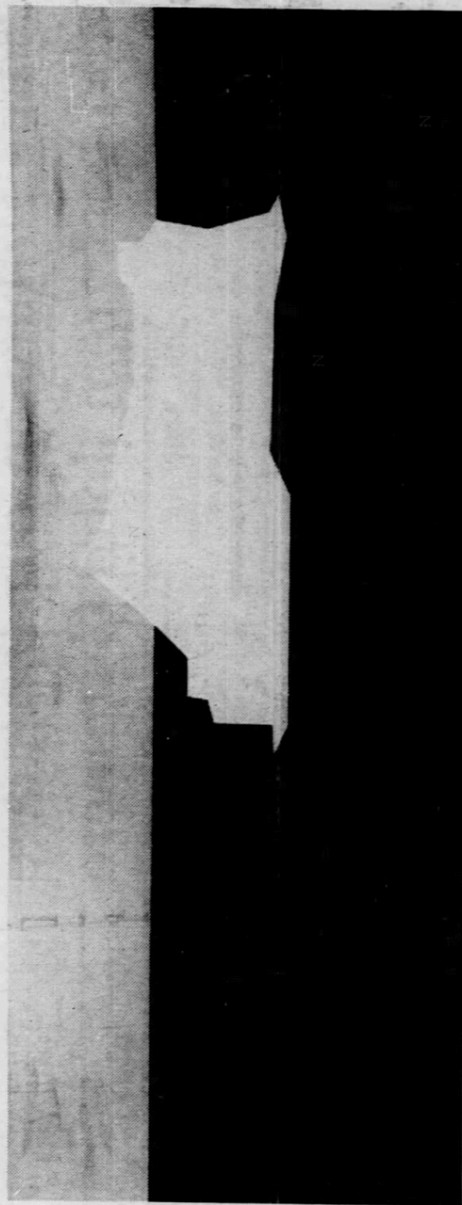
tempting to reconcile the psychological presence of specific objects with their material qualities, which had attracted him in the first place. He began with a series of collages made with old window shades, an idea that came to him during a year he spent living in an artists' community near London.

Though elemental, these window-shade collages are surprisingly evocative, and they directed Moskowitz's attention away from the formalism of abstract expressionism toward a concern with the image as idea. The shade functioned as an art material, but it also was an object that brought to the work certain associations — concealment, for instance.

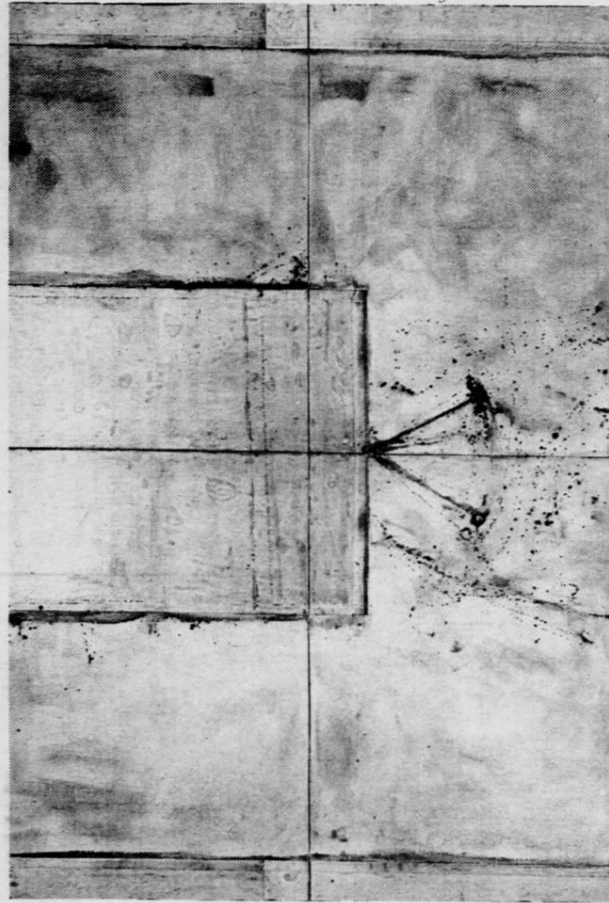
The shade collages brought Moskowitz to the attention of dealer Leo Castelli, whose hot properties at the time were Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Frank Stella. Moskowitz had a solo show with Castelli in 1962 and seemed to be on his way to fame and fortune, but several years later he left the gallery. Castelli was promoting pop, and Moskowitz was moving toward a style that looked more like minimalism.

He developed an austere signature image, the "corner painting," which re-created an illusionistic, empty space — the corner of a room defined by prominent architectural elements. He sequentially refined this monochromatic "image of absence" until it became a spatial abstraction, practically without definition.

Having reached the practical limits of representation as his palette moved from blue through gray into



"Iceberg," a 1984 painting in the Moskowitz retrospective, shows his melding of two seemingly divergent philosophies of art.



An untitled 1957 oil painting from the show, which is now at the Hirshhorn Museum.

black, Moskowitz began to reintroduce symbols and objects into his paintings, to establish a counterpoint between the picture surface and the mysterious void behind it.

These images — a duck's head, a tiny chair and a swastika — perturb the cool equanimity of the minimalist space. They're "mental images" — projections of the artist's imagination rather than depictions of real

things — that shatter the carefully crafted visual contrivance typified by the corner paintings.

(Perhaps reflecting Washington's current mood vis-a-vis controversial art, the Hirshhorn offers a disclaimer for the swastika painting, noting that the symbol, from a Sanskrit word meaning "well-being," is common to a number of cultures. Moskowitz wants to restore the sym-

for the view that representation and abstraction are, like matter and energy, simply different states of the same phenomenon.

Some of these paintings involve buildings, others geographical formations or familiar pieces of sculpture. All are resolutely flat, after the corner paintings, Moskowitz abandoned the idea of illusory space in favor of strong figure-ground interactions and emphasis on crisply defined negative space.

The large pastel called *Red Mill*, in which the smudges of facture have been retained as a kind of corona around the silhouette, is perhaps the quintessential Moskowitz image of the 1980s — a mental construct that projects itself so intensely as to seem truer than observed reality.

Moskowitz always has relied on minimal means to convey basic concepts. More significantly, he has maintained a viable link to abstract expressionism without attempting to perpetuate it in a pure form out of its original context, as Helen Frankenthaler does.

His art embodies the most admirable kind of historical continuity: It respects its roots while accommodating itself to experience and the concerns of the time in which it's being made. In 30 years, Moskowitz has grown appreciably as an artist without rejecting his past, in itself an unusual achievement.

The exhibition will continue at the Hirshhorn through Sept. 17, then travel to the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in California (Oct. 20 to Jan. 7). Dates at the Museum of Modern Art, its last venue, will be Feb. 9 to April 24.