The New York Times

February 9, 1990
MICHAEL BRENSON Review/Art

# Good Humor and Doom From Robert Moskowitz

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The last gallery in the show includes paintings from 1986 to the present that suggest the continuity within Mr. Moskowitz's work. There are red and white crosses that evoke the Red Cross and crucifixions and sympathy for early abstract painters like Kasimir Malevich. In "Moon Dog (for Helen)," which brings to mind both Chinese painting and European modernism, a dog howls through a black night at the full moon. In the most recent painting, which ends the exhibition, a black bird soars beneath a white sun hanging in an airless, yellow, overheated sky.

One of the surprises of this show is its narrative quality. It is like an ongoing parable in which a Kafkaesque sense of punishment and guilt is being tempered but never entirely relieved by a sense of possibility and lightness. However quick, inventive and uninhibited the work is, it is pervaded by the weight of a sentence that will never be repealed or even understood. It is not that something will happen in these paintings. Something has happened, and we are left trying to figure out what.

Throughout the show, there is a sense of absence and threat. For years, Mr. Moskowitz painted corners that are like rooms for meditation and prison cells. Like such early American modernists as John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe, Mr. Moskowitz has been drawn to American technological wonders like skyscrapers and automobiles and to the vast expanse of the American West. But his skyscraper can suggest a gigantic insect, his Cadillac a hearse, and the lurid sky around his World Trade Center the apocalypse.

In Mr. Moskowitz's world, lights are always in danger of being extinguished, and even the largest, stoniest monuments seem to be struggling against disappearance. There is a sense of emergency that he shares with other New Image painters like Neil Jenney and Susan Rothenberg. In the work here, the sense of crisis seems both political and biblical.

Mr. Moskowitz, who was born in Brooklyn in 1935, came of age at a moment when the expansive spaces of Abstract Expressionism were shrinking. The darkness Andy Warhol saw in the 1960's, Mr. Moskowitz saw too. One of his small works from 1964 is an airplane with its nose in the ground,

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looking like it is awaiting execution. It hasn't crashed - if it had, it would be in pieces - it just cannot fly. "Untitled (for JFK)," painted after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, sets an actual miniature rocking chair in front of a blue sky that is no longer the great beyond but a space of loss.

"Big Picture," from 1979-80, is the largest painting in the show (8 feet tall and 19 feet wide). It was done, Mr. Moskowitz has said, "looking at America, and is like my flag in a way." On the black left panel, representing the West Coast, are two icy and disembodied beams from Hollywood searchlights. On the right, representing the East Coast, is a European abstraction featuring a large, impenetrable black block. In between is a third panel, blacker than either side. The scale is Abstract Expressionist but the sublime and transcendental are gone.

If there is something muffled, restrained and hermetic in Mr. Moskowitz's artistic sensibility, there are also constant good humor, experimentation and play. A 1974 painting with the white outline of a duck's head in a black room is one of several works that suggest sign language and children's games. Even in Mr. Moskowitz's best-known painting, the 1977 "Swimmer," in which someone alone in the water seems in danger of drowning, the gesture of the swimmer's arm suggests choreography and shadow play.

Throughout the show, there are hints of chess, a game adored by Marcel Duchamp, whose influence on Mr. Moskowitz is apparent. In the 1974 "Skyline," in which the New York City skyline sprouts within one of the artist's black rooms, the buildings seem like chess pieces. In a 1982 Moskowitz, Rodin's "Thinker" looks like a man deliberating over a chess board; in black silhouette, he also suggests the figure of Death, engaging mortals in a chess game they cannot win, in Ingmar Bergman's parable "The Seventh Seal."

The way Mr. Moskowitz shifts contexts is continually amusing and surprising. For example, that ominous black bird in the most recent landscape is also the frame of the comfortable chair in a 1964 drawing. After painting Myron's "Discobolus" so that the Greek figure looks like a bowler about to release the ball, Mr. Moskowitz made an actual bowling painting in which the pins have just been scattered. With all his sense of entrapment, Mr. Moskowitz has a good time.

The tone of the paintings is rarely simple. Like his thin surfaces, the works seem both highly personal and anonymous. His paintings inspired by Brancusi, Rodin and Giacometti preserve the monumentality and personality of their sculptures, but there is considerable violence in the way sculpture is flattened, almost steamrolled into a two-dimensional plane.

These paintings are statements of respect, but they are also a struggle against the authority and distinctions of modernism and an attempt to create a hybrid of painting, sculpture and photography. These paintings of sculptures were inspired by photographs. In the way they revere and suspend the sculptures, they almost seem like photographs. But they are clearly paintings, with the memory of sculpture built into them. The results are images that vanish and loom at the same time.

The exhibition was organized by Ned Rifkin of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington. It was installed at the Modern by Mr. Moskowitz and Linda Shearer, formerly a curator at the museum and now the director of the Williams College Museum of Art.

This is a show that may change the perception of contemplative painting. Mr. Moskowitz encourages viewers to settle down with his work and experience pleasure and wonder. But his work is rarely reassuring, it is often emotionally daring, and it has an edge. What the viewer is left with after contemplation is not harmony and stability, but a sense of the problems of American size and speed, and a feeling for the uncertainty and unease that are conditions of American art now.

The Robert Moskowitz retrospective opens tomorrow at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, and continues through May 1. It was partly financed by the Bohen Foundation.

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