

## ON ROTHKO

*"Who, if I shouted, among the hierarchy of angels would hear me And supposing one of them took me suddenly to his heart, I would perish before his stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror we can just barely endure, and we admire it so because it calmly disdains to destroy us..."*

Rilke: The First Duino Elegy

For me, Art is no small matter. Rothko died for it; he committed suicide on February 25th, 1970. It is not a matter of a few pretty pictures; nor is it about intellectual posturing and clever dialectics and I despise those that would cheapen it for a quick dollar or out of the weakness of their own pretension.

Art is about an attempt at transcendence (one of Rothko's favourite words); trying to approach the heart of existence. To create a oneness with being, with 'Truth' if you like, that goes beyond any intellectual ability to describe. It is about the attempt to reach that state of 'Tao' where the mystery of Life seems to speak through one: "On me pense" is how Rimbaud put it and Klee talks of "Making the invisible visible". Nietzsche says of the artist that

*"he has already been released from the individual will and has become, as it were, the medium through which the only true existent subject celebrates his release in appearance"*

In an introduction to my own work I wrote

*"I believe being a painter is about refining one's craft and keeping one's experience alive in the hope of that one moment in which the work transcends its means and carries forward an eternal truth".*

In front of great art this is what happens; in its presence one feels the vibration of something eternal.

I feel it before a Rembrandt self-portrait

And I feel it in front of a Rothko

Of course, a Rothko reproduction is nothing; it is a 'Real Presence' (see George Steiner) and must be experienced as such: when I walked into the Rothko room in the Tate Gallery in London I felt their power.

But can so little do so much? Two small, blurred squares of colour against a background: where do I see it? How do I know that I am not being tricked?; I tend not to analyse that which speaks to me directly. I just enjoy the pictures, drink them in and let them work on me. I know that Rothko was a Russian Jew by origin with a strong spiritual sense and that he wanted to create work that had the power of the traditional Russian icon: a gateway to the spiritual world. I have heard the works called 'spiritual landscapes' with their ground, sky and horizon line. I have also heard them called 'doorways' to meditation- but I never wanted to anatomize them.

However, this weekend, by accident, I came across a monograph in someone's house and asked if I could borrow it. I learnt that Rothko loved and studied all that I love and study: T.S Eliot had a special place for him as did Rilke, Verlaine and Mallarmé. He studied Nietzsche closely and was inspired by Rembrandt and Corot.

Now, if I were to tell you that I felt all that from a few square meters of colour, would you believe me?

Can so little say so much?