Creative Process In Abstract Expressionism: Analysing The Works Of Jackson Pollock And Helen Frankenthaler

Chance has been a crucial creative strategy for many modern artists. Beginning largely with the Dada movement from late 1910's artists have involved elements of chance in their work by the methods they use in creation and the presentation of their work. In the wake of world war 1 the western world was torn apart and people had lost faith in civilisation at large. This is said to have inspired artists to embrace chance as well as new developments in fields like psychology; eastern philosophy and quantum physics. This flowed on and was integral to the later Abstract Expressionists who used Gestural Abstraction (or Action Painting), which made the viewer aware of the artists energy and movement like Jackson Pollocks drip paintings and Helen Frankenthaler's Colour field paintings.

Facets of Chance continued to appear in Art after world war 2 ended in 1945. 'Automatism' refers to creation of art without conscious thought, accessing material from the unconscious mind as part of the creative process. It is a term borrowed from physiology where bodily movement like breathing or sleeping are not consciously controlled. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud used free association and stream of consciousness drawing with his patients to explore the unconscious mind. Freuds ideas influenced the French poet Andre Breton (1896-1966) who launched the surrealist movement in 1924 with the Manifesto of Surrealism. He laid the foundation for the earliest automatism by writing as fast as possible without intervening consciously to guide the hand. Central to Surrealism was the potential of the subconscious to reveal itself though the exploration of chance. Surrealists in America were inspired by Carl Jung's Psychological views of a collective consciousness. Jung believed that symbols in dreams like the Sun were universal to all humans and therefore we were all connected.

This collective consciousness inspired by Jung were a way for the American surrealists to create works that spoke 'universally' and to the 'collective' after world war 2 had torn the world apart. By using the methods to view the subconscious, surrealists were trying to pull out the emotion and authentic nature of the artist.

Later automatism played a part in the abstract expressionism movement which was developed by American painters such as Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) in the 1940's and 1950's and is often characterised by the impression of spontaneity, gestural brush strokes and mark making. Pollock is known for his drip paintings which were formed by pouring liquid paint onto canvases set on the floor. This was an original, rule-breaking thing to do in American art and his work went on to inspire many artists and movements like the Colour Field painters.

'Blue Poles' by Pollock originally titled 'Number 11', painted in 1952 is one 2 of his greatest masterpieces. The first layer of paint was applied while the canvas was on the floor, was black and towards the edges thinning to a green. We know the canvas was on the floor because of his footprint in the top right corner where he has stepped in the wet paint. Mixed into the paint are glass fragments of the glass basting tubes that were used to apply this first layer of paint. After this the canvas was pinned up by the edges to the walls and white paint was applied and allowed to drip down. Returning it to the floor he then poured the paint from above using sticks, brushes and even syringes to apply the aluminium paints of orange and yellow. He would use

rapid movements of the wrist, arm and body use wild, gestural sweeping motions to let the paint fall in stringy, waving rhythms over the surface. This began the rhythmic tangled web of linear splash lines which he then dried to subsequently add the eight blue poles in white, black and blue, apparently using a length of timber as a straight edge. This added definitive forms in contrast to the chaos of the paint splatters and 3 drips. The poles have been likened to swaying masts of tall ships or even totem poles. After this he made very careful adjustments to the overall painting, in the left 4 edge of the canvas he delicately painted over a tiny white dripped line in black. So this painting is much like his earlier works of just drip paintings but it also has the vertical elements of the poles.

Pollock thought the best painting emptied itself from the history of painting. By using chance to create this artwork he could move away from illusionism, because there is no narrative or political undertones. There is a lack of figurative imagery and central focus because there is no subject. The frame has been taken away so the viewer becomes aware of the materiality of the paint. The poles are vertical cuts to the horizontal support of the canvas, he is aware of the shape of the canvas and its ability to show itself as an object. By movement and chance he is performing the act of creation. The process is the integral ingredient and creates the final result. His process is direct, painting on the floor he felt more a part of the painting, bring inside it. When he painted he had no final set out idea of what he is going to finish, only a general notion of what he is about as a person. Therefore there are no mistakes, no beginning and no ending, the painting has a life and he tries to let it live.

This process influenced another great artist that used chance in their work, American painter Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011). She stated that Pollock was the start of her excitement in painting. She also worked on the ground, and abandoned the traditional painting techniques of the past by not using brushes or regular paint. She used enamel and painted with her whole body, the gestural action and the performance of painting was important to her practice. In her atmospheric painting The Bay made in 1963, we see a colour-field type painting of a blue blob taking up much of the centre of the canvas, with a green and beige background. Instead of dripping or flicking the paint on like Pollock, she diluted acrylic paint and poured it onto the surface. The dilution made the paint a lower viscosity and enabled it to flow faster. She would lift areas of the canvas to let it run in different directions to, this was know as soak-stain painting. There is a natural sense of spontaneity by using this method and the viewer experiences it in a direct, fundamental way. She didn’t want to the colours to represent something particular but to have a more ambiguous notion for the viewer. She wanted to install the way humans universally responds to colour, the way we feel when we see a warm sunset, or how our body feels when we swim in cold water. Simplicity and pure emotions by the basic clarity of colour and form. In The Bay she is not trying to represent the landscape, but to be the landscape. Pouring on the paint has made it look like multiple viewpoints, is it an aerial view? Is it an internal view? Regardless it is expansive, sweeping and epic, the cool blue colour of the ocean, which all gives a feeling of being immersed.

The art critic Clement Greenberg who was also a close friend of Frankenthaler and Pollock believed that art made after the second world war would have to radically change and move in an abstract direction if it was going to visually communicate to the social consciousness of Americans. Frankenthaler stated that when we look at her work that it’s important for us not the be too encumbered by the context and speculation but to take from it what we will on our own terms. This seems to sum up the potential that chance in art can have on all humans wether there is a universal consciousness or not.