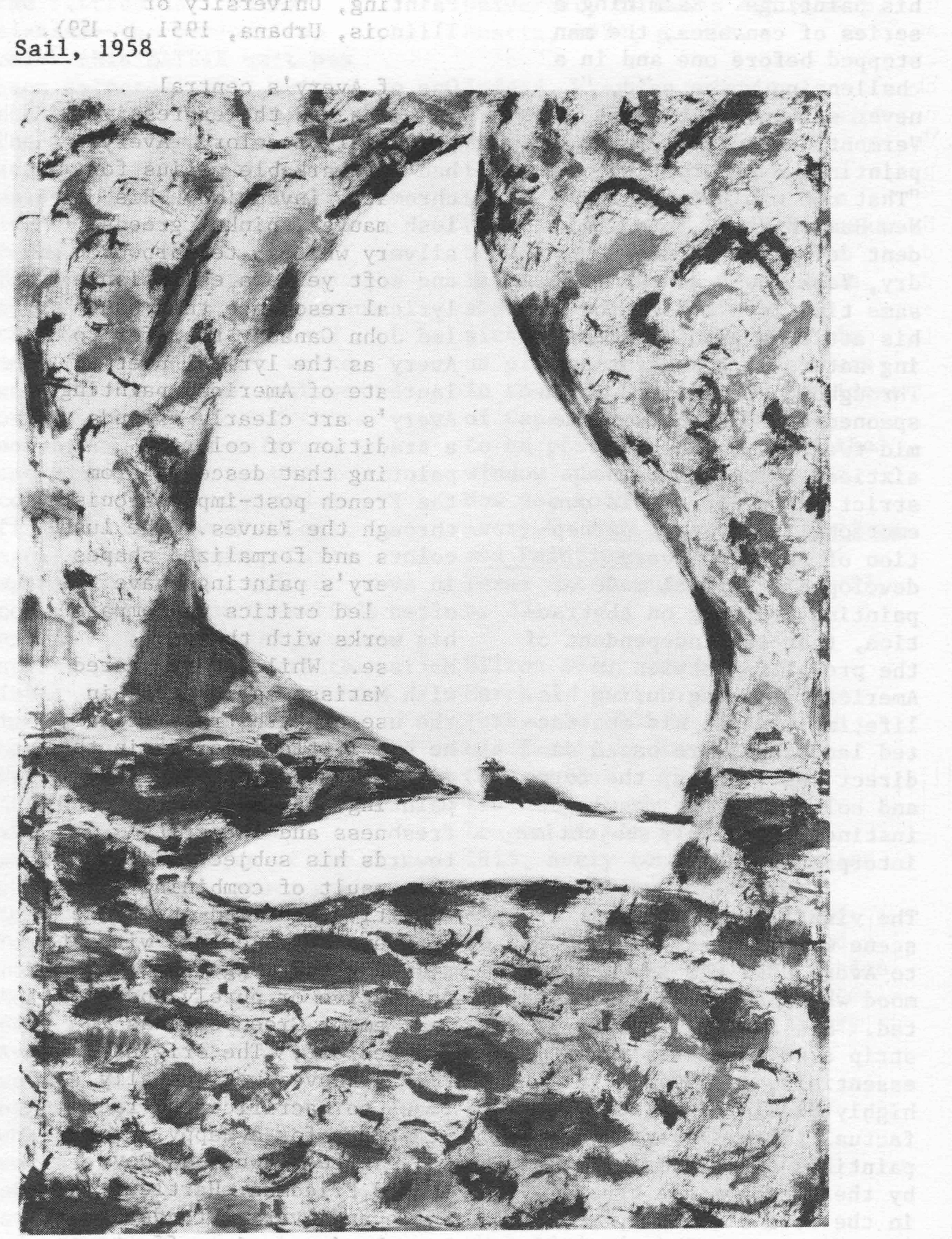
Milton Avery
MATRIX/BERKELEY 34

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University Art Museum March - May 1980



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In his forward to the exhibition catalog Milton Avery: American/1893-1965 (Joan Whitney Payson Gallery of Art), Martin Dibner relates a story in which, after a summer of painting in Vermont, Milton Avery was visited in his Greenwhich Village walk-up by the head of a large corporation interested in buying one of his paintings. Examining a series of canvases, the man stopped before one and in a challenging voice said, "I never saw a blue tree in Vermont." Looking at the painting, Avery replied, "That one was painted in New Hampshire." This incident demonstrates Avery's dry, Yankee wit and at the same time is a reflection of his attitude about representing nature in his paintings. Throughout his career, which spanned the period from the mid-twenties to the midsixties, Avery maintained strict adherence to his own emotional and visual perception of nature. Avery developed a lyrical mode of painting, verging on abstraction, that was independent of the prevailing styles in American painting during his lifetime. While his abstracted landscapes are based on direct observation, the forms and colors are the result of instinct and highly subjective interpretation.

The visual particulars of a scene were of less interest to Avery than the essence or mood which the scene projected. His approach was to strip a scene to its bare essentials, arriving at a highly distilled yet basically factual image. Avery's paintings are characterized by their economical brushwork in the form of simple, broad and lightly applied areas of color. Avery said of his

art, "I work on two levels.
I try to construct a picture
in which shapes, spaces,
colors form a set of unique
relationships, independent
of any subject matter. At
the same time I try to
capture and translate the
excitement and emotion
aroused in me by the impact
with the original idea."
(Contemporary American
Painting, University of
Illinois, Urbana, 1951, p. 159).

One of Avery's central concerns was the expressive potential of color. Avery had a remarkable genius for chromatic invention. His lush mauves, pinks, greens, silvery whites, tea browns and soft yellows establish a lyrical resonance that has led John Canaday to refer to Avery as the lyrical poet laureate of American painting. Avery's art clearly extends a tradition of colorist painting that descends from the French post-impressionists through the Fauves. The lush colors and formalized shapes in Avery's paintings have often led critics to compare his works with those of Matisse. While Avery shared with Matisse an interest in the use of "arbitrary" color, he had little interest in the decorative potential of painting. Avery achieved a freshness and integrity towards his subject that is the result of combining a reductive, unified structure with evocative color, without allowing the image to become decorative or purely abstract. As Clement Greenberg has pointed out, "The original French Fauves were usually ready to sacrifice the facts of nature for a happy decorative effect; whereas Dove, Arnold Friedman, Hartley, Marin and Avery...tended to let the decorative effects go when it threatened to depart

too much from the facts. It was in the facts primarily that they found inspiration... the truth of their own personal experience; Avery especially maintains the local nameable identity of his subject." ("Milton Avery" Art and Culture, Boston, 1961, p. 198).

It is in the paintings of the fifties and early sixties--the period from which this MATRIX unit has been selected--that Avery achieved his mature style. The landscapes and seascapes of the fifties were painted in response to the scenery around Woodstock, Vermont and the sea at Provincetown, on Cape Cod. Avery insisted on a rigorous study of his subject, and most of these mature works were the result of sketches or drawings made with color notations, later enlarged and simplified into watercolor or oil crayon and finally translated to oil applied in luminous, thin washes of closely valued colors overlaid with swiftly applied expressionist brushstrokes. Avery's characteristic method of dividing his images into simplified, horizontal bands of color based on a division of the landscape into land, sea and sky, became a dominant aspect of the works of the fifties. These mature works influenced a number of New York color abstractionists, most notably Mark Rothko and Adolf Gottlieb, both of whom paid frequent visits to Avery's studio. The close valued, horizontal rectangles of thinly washed color that characterize Rothko's mature works are a natural extension of Avery's abstracted landscapes. Gottlieb has said of Avery: "I have always thought he was a great artist. When Social Realism and the American Scene were considered the important thing, he took an aesthetic stand as opposed to regional subject matter... His attitude helped reinforce me in my chosen direction. I always regarded him as a brilliant colorist and draftsman, a solitary figure working against the stream." (Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings, University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, 1977, p. 36).

Indeed, Avery's paintings represent a singular expression that transcends the time of their making or the specific subject they represent. The balance achieved in these works between abstraction, plastic illusion and mood establishes a powerfully contemplative pictorial space, one which is as provocative today as it was in the fifties. As one resident of Cape Cod noted, "It used to be possible to look out the window and see dunes and sea. Now you look out and see an Avery." (Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings, University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, 1977, p. 32).

Milton Avery was born on March 7, 1893 in Altmar, New York. In 1905 he moved with his family to Hartford, Connecticut. After brief training at the Connecticut League of Art Students in 1915, Avery continued painting on his own developing an independent style. He moved to New York in 1925, and had his first one-person exhibition at the Valentine Gallery, New York in 1933. In 1960, Avery was given a retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Milton Avery died in New York City on January 3, 1965.

Michael Auping Associate Curator Works in MATRIX:

Seven White Cows, 1953, oil on canvas, 28" x 43". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco. his subject." (Hilton Avery" always regarded him as a

Sea and Dunes I, 1958, instilled and Dunes I, 1958, oil on canvas, 54" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim,
San Francisco. sixties--the period from . Austin, 1977, p. 36).

Sail, 1958, oil on canvas, 72" x 50". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco. subject they represent. The

entire every more of the former making or many for it Speedboat's Wake, 1959, oil on canvas, 54½" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Figures by the Sea, 1960, oil on canvas, 50" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Sea, Moon and Stars, 1960, oil on canvas, 50" x 60". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan.

Figure by the Sea, 1960, oil on paper, 5 1/2" x 12 1/2" Private Collection, San Francisco. ar sinsbuit tra to sugse.

Selected one-person exhibited one to new York color abstractionists. Curt Valentin Glalery, NYC '35, and regularly to '41; Paul Rosenberg and Co., NYC '43 and regularly to '50; Grace Borgenicht Gallery, NYC '51 and regularly to '62; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD '52; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston '52; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston '56; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC (retrospec-

tive) '60; Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan '64 and '67; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '65; National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. '69. to vitinable aldsemso isoci

Selected bibliography about Avery: . sivis stud beveides

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Greenberg, Clement. Art and Culture (Boston: Beacon Press '61).

Kramer, Hilton. Milton Avery: Paintings 1930-1960 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff Inc. (62).

Geldzahler, Henry. American Painting in the Twentieth Century (New York: New York Graphic Society '65).

Sandler, Irving. The Triumph of American Painting (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc. '70).

Numerous catalogs, articles and reviews have been written about Milton Avery and his work. For a comprehensive bibliography on Avery we refer the reader to: Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings (Austin: University of Texas Art Museum '77).

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by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.