

MNUCHIN GALLERY

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3 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

‘Church & Rothko: Sublime’: *Mark Rothko and Frederic Edwin Church in a sublime pairing*

By Roberta Smith
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The world could use a little uplifting sublimity right now, and this astounding two-artist show delivers. It brings together 17 paintings by Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), exemplar of the Hudson River School, and 10 canvases by the Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko (1903-1970). They have been color-coordinated to delirious effect by the art historian Michael N. Altman and Christopher Rothko, Rothko’s son. Church, in particular, has rarely looked so good. Unburdened by representation, Rothko’s suspended blocks of autonomous color accentuate the strangeness of Church’s palette, especially the array of lavenders, pinks and yellows in his skies.

The show’s opening combination is breathtaking. On one wall Rothko’s “Browns and Blacks in Reds” (1957) presents a glowing stack in brown, red and black on a red ground. Adjacent is Church’s “Marine Sunset (The Black Sea),” from 1881-82, an expanse of shockingly deep red sky with a little sun peeping over a choppy black sea tossing a dark ship. The colors are as blunt as the Rothko’s.

The basis for this pairing begins with “The Abstract Sublime,” an influential article by the art historian Robert Rosenblum that appeared in ArtNews in 1961. Rosenblum proposed that the Abstract Expressionists’ distillations of light, color and space into expansive planes of color were the heirs to the sublime-evoking landscapes of the Northern Romantic painters from 19th-century Germany and England, later expanding his thesis into a book that included the American Hudson River School painters.

There was mutual benefit to this argument. It grounded Abstract Expressionism in art history and also in reality, increasing its credibility outside the art world. And the Hudson River School, which had only begun to attract attention from scholars and curators, gained contemporary relevance. It could be argued that Rothko’s works have less in common with Church’s realism and gleaming light than with the soft brushy views frequently found in the landscapes of the American painter George Inness (1825-1894). But that’s another exhibition.



Mark Rothko’s “Browns and Blacks in Reds” (1957) in the exhibition “Church & Rothko: Sublime.”
Credit: Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and Mnuchin Gallery



Frederic Edwin Church’s “Marine Sunset (The Black Sea),” from 1881-1882.
Credit: Frederic Edwin Church and Mnuchin Gallery