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NATIONAL REVIEW

Mnuchin Gallery and Hirschl & Adler prove once more that dealers often do art better than art historians.

Franz Kline, Harleman, 1960, oil on canvas. (Photo courtesy of the Mnuchin Gallery)

It’s not often that I write about exhibitions at commercial galleries. That’s not because the art is for sale — sometimes it’s not — or because the galleries are a business. I’m all for making money, and certainly a museum like the Met will do anything for a buck. And it’s not because they’re less scholarly or less intriguing or less beautiful than a museum show. Often, gallery shows are better, on all counts and, these days, less whiny and earnest. Many museum curators think they’re social workers or, worse, seem bored with art. Dealers seem to understand art for art’s sake and naturally empathize with art and artists. It’s just that there are so many gallery shows in Manhattan, and they tend to have short runs, so they come and go quickly.

Galleries often do great shows that museums won’t touch. I can’t remember the last time I saw a painting by the great Franz Kline (1910–1962) in a museum exhibition, though I see Klines in permanent-collection galleries. Tough, raw, inscrutable, and black-and-white, Kline’s art is of the slasher variety. Among his fellow Abstract Expressionists, Rothko’s work is gauzy and romantic, de Kooning’s is fluid and chromatic, Pollock’s, well, it’s all over the canvas and drippy. Barnett Newman’s zips echo Old Testament mystery, like the gossamer flames from God’s burning bush. Kline does totemic and megalithic, and no one does it better, or with more athleticism.

Kline, dear readers, isn’t Norman Rockwell. He’s not Renoir. He’s not Edward Hopper. He’s hardcore Ab Ex but looking at his work is always rewarding.

Mnuchin Gallery on E. 78th Street as well as Hirschl & Adler in the Fuller Building on E. 57th Street are

doing Kline shows that, taken together, cover most of his career. *Franz Kline* at Mnuchin displays around 25 Kline paintings and works on paper from his peak Abstract Expressionist years, from 1950 to his death in 1962. It's on view until June 21. *Prelude: The Early Work of Franz Kline*, at Hirschl & Adler, open through June 13, treats Kline in the 1940s, not strictly "Kline before he was Kline" but Kline on the reductive, daring cusp.

"I don't paint a given object like a figure or a table, I paint an organization that becomes a painting," he said. "I'm painting emotion." His work isn't one Rorschach test after another, either. Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning's wife but, more to the point, a Kline decoder, thought that Kline depicted an inchoate threat, aggression, brutality, and forthright feeling. She called his shapes "personages," looming but also sometimes lost.

I've always looked at Kline's work as architectural fantasy, like Piranesi's *Imaginary Prisons* print series from around 1750. Piranesi's labyrinths, set in packed interiors, are linear, and his aesthetic is a mix of Italian rococo and neoclassicism, but Kline's illogic and power owe something to him. Kline's forms sometimes teeter a bit. At Mnuchin, shapes that look like struts in *Chief*, from 1950, are so delicate that they can't possibly support the massive, curving passage above them. *Painting Number 7*, from 1952, with nine verticals, horizontals, and right angles, looks like an oddball dance. Piranesi's catwalks and stairways sometimes don't go anywhere. His *Imaginary Prisons* oppress and leave us uneasy. They foreshadow the worlds of Kafka or Orwell. Kline looks back to Stonehenge. His work at Mnuchin seems pagan.

Left: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Imaginary Prisons, plate V: The Lion Bas-Reliefs (Le Carceri d'Invenzione, plate V: The Lion Bas-Reliefs)*, 1761, etching. **Right**: Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Imaginary Prisons, plate VII: The Drawbridge (Le Carceri d'Invenzione, plate VII: The Drawbridge)*, 1761, etching. *(Public domain/via Wikimedia)*

Both exhibitions are very good, and both have catalogues. I'm not sure there was any coordination between the two galleries, but *Prelude* and *Franz Kline* complement each other. *Prelude* is mostly about Kline's early paintings and the support he got early in his career from David Orr (1904–1997), who owned a box factory in New York and bought his first Kline in 1939 at an art fair in Washington Square Park, where Kline, very much a struggling young artist, sold his work. Through the 1940s, Orr bought dozens of Kline's paintings, many on view and all for sale.

Kline was born in Pennsylvania's coal country, in Wilkes-Barre, at the peak of the anthracite mining boom. Manmade mountains of coal fragments, trestle bridges and train tracks, coal-breaker buildings, and storage towers were ubiquitous. Kline studied art at Boston University and the Heatherley School of Fine Arts in London, married a British ballet dancer, and, in 1939, moved to New York to work as an artist, painting murals for bars and clubhouses. *Prelude* shows us his Ashcan School sensibility, long after its zenith, in gritty New York street scenes and Lehigh Valley landscapes. Two interiors of his studio from 1946 emphasize doors and windows, big shapes, roughly painted. His figure contours grow thicker and blacker.

Kline's a good colorist, I was surprised to see, and, in those early days, unwedded to black and white.

Kline is famous as an Abstract Expressionist, but he's a superb draftsman and very good at representational, classicized drawings. They're not in *Prelude*, but, rest assured, he knew his stuff. Part of de Kooning's big circle, Kline moved slowly but surely toward abstraction in the late 1940s. His pivot came when he visited de Kooning's studio and, using a Bell-Opticon projector, projected a small ink sketch of a rocking chair onto a wall. His black ink lines grew to be gigantic, eradicating the image and expanding into powerful, boisterous shapes. A new style and a new star were born. His first one-man show was in 1950.

Left: Franz Kline, *Chatham Square*, 1948, oil on canvas. **Right**: Franz Kline, *Gloria*, 1947, oil on board. *(Photos courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Galleries)*

Mnuchin Gallery is in a grand old townhouse with spacious, spare, museum-quality galleries. *Franz Kline* is on two floors and looks fantastic. There's no interpretation, which is fine. The art reigns supreme. In the first gallery hang *Chief*, borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art, and *Painting Number 7*, from the Guggenheim. Commercial gallery shows sometimes borrow from museums, though registrars balk over security and humidity, but Mnuchin is a serious place. It's done Kline shows before. Kline insisted that his pictures weren't representational, but that doesn't mean they're not evocative. Though living in New York, he visited his old haunts in the Lehigh Valley often and loved coal country for its memories and, I think, its shapes. It's a rough-hewn place, but coal means power. Half the work in the exhibition has a Lehigh name.

Installation view of pieces by Franz Kline. *(Photo courtesy of the Mnuchin Gallery)*

Kline often worked in a big format. Eight-footers aren't rare. They're powerful, but so are Kline's smaller paintings. They scale well, with even the small things having a Grand Canyon presence. *Untitled*, from 1957 or so, looks like a worker in silhouette, flexing his biceps. Blacks aren't pure black, and neither are

his whites pure white. Black paint sometimes thins to show white or gray underneath. *Black Star*, from 1959 is gorgeous. Passages of burnt orange, mustard yellow, and blue green make it seem completely abstract. The Mnuchin show is mostly black-and-white work. I would have shown more of his color abstract work, which evokes spontaneous combustion rather than the messiness of mining and industry. These are less about power than sheer beauty.

Kline did black-and-white paintings mostly, but that doesn't mean they're black on white, since white is integral and, sometimes, domineering, especially when black elements are wispy. In *Harleman*, from 1960, black might dominate per square inch but white paint seems to give its black counterpart a good shove. In *Pittston*, from 1958, big wedges of white appear to chew at the blacks until they're strips.

Kline is a New York School superstar, even 60 years after his death, but the dearth of critical love might stem from the fact that his style, once it emerged around 1950, didn't change much. That doesn't make it any less potent. Kline's auction prices are strong, but Pop Art, Color Field painting, the Pictures Generation, and feminist art, among other big movements from the 1960s into the '80s, might make him a curiosity rather than a player. For lovers of pure painting, though, he ought to be considered a master.

It's a bracing, high-end exhibition. I would have put cushy sofas and easy chairs in the galleries both to soften the work and to promote long contemplation. A glance won't do and diminishes Kline's art. The catalogue, with one essay by Carter Ratcliff and one by Robert Mattison, is very good. Everything's illustrated.

Hirschl & Adler is a distinguished gallery with deep roots in the art world via historic and modern American art. It has been renowned over many decades for its colonial and Federal flat art and decorative art, but its specialists know a lot about everything.

Mnuchin is a hub for postwar American art and, yes, Steven Mnuchin, once the secretary of the Treasury, is the owner's son. They're both very blue-chip. Like all the best dealers, they're salesmen, scholars, and connoisseurs.