

Mark Rothko: Tate Modern, London

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Abstract painting is often compared to music. If that's so, then Mark Rothko's paintings are the big ballads of art. They cry it out and carry you away, and they way they go is like *Lady in R-e-e-e-e-e-e-d*, or *I can't L-I-I-I-I-VE, if living is without you-u-u-u*, or any of those surging numbers with their transparent designs on our emotions.

Of course, it seems weird to say this. Mark Rothko may be quite a popular modern artist, but he's not popular like that. And if you go to the major exhibition of his late works that opens on Friday at Tate Modern, this is probably not the kind of experience you'll be expecting.

Rothko stands an old master, as perhaps the richest and grandest of the group of post-war American artists known as Abstract Expressionists. And the pictures he painted are now hung in special rooms and galleries, places that people visit as if they were shrines or temples.

His huge canvases are seen are solemn and tragic and religious. They're the statements of a deeply serious and tormented and ultimately suicidal individual – found in his studio, in an enormous pool of blood, in 1970, aged 66.

So if you were seeking a musical equivalent for Rothko, surely it ought to be something classical and grave and massive. Brückner, perhaps? At any rate, it ought to be a bit more elevated and sophisticated than '*Cos I am your lad-y-y-y-y, and you are my m-a-a-a-a-n* or *And I-a-a-a-a-a-a-I-I-I-I-I-I-I will always love you-u-u-oo-u-u-u...*

But put aside reputation and presupposition. Ask yourself, how do these paintings actually work? Work they certainly do. Rothko made a real discovery when he found that, by using a very restricted language, a few bars and panes and rectangular frames of strong colour, blurry-edged and set in simple arrangements, he could stir in the viewer a powerful empathetic and emotional response. I'm not denying his ability to move you.

No, and I don't deny this ability to Mariah Carey or Harry Nilsson either. They can be powerfully moving too. My point is that their songs, and Rothko's paintings, deliver their impact in much the same way. There is technical term for this. It's an expression very familiar when we talk about popular music, but almost never used in connection with art: *the hook*.

For the benefit of hard-core arties, here's a standard definition of the hook: "a musical idea, often a short riff, passage, or phrase, either melodic or rhythmic, that is used to make a song appealing, to catch the ear of the listener." And the thing about hooks is, they have an almost neurological effect. They do something to you. They get to you. They push your buttons in a way that's hard to withstand.

It's a pity that useful words like "hook" and "riff" don't find their way more into the discussion of art, because there's some art they can help us to understand. Take that definition of "hook" just provided, and change musical to pictorial. It could be description of a painting by Rothko. A Rothko work is all hook, it's designed as a simple, strong visual catch; one riff, writ very large.

You stand. You stare. And the canvas, with its fields and layers of paint, does its sensational work on you. Areas seem to expand and contract, come towards you or sink away. Shapes look positive (a bar) and then negative (a slot). Edges of colours meet in burns or bleeds. Big contrasts provoke hovering after-images. Voids open and deepen. Forms swell and spread and rise.

And if you're in the mood the whole thing takes you with it, like one of those songs with their catching pauses and lurching key shifts. It's not like classical music at all, with its structural theme-and-development stuff. It's working at a simple, basic level. But then, as Lionel Richie once put it, explaining the secret of the ballad: "When you find yourself saying *I can't write that, it's too simple* - that's the right one". Rothko knew Richie's lesson already. He kept it simple, and hit the "right one" often enough.

It can be powerful all right, which is something – but not necessarily all that much. For example, I'm irresistibly and consistently moved to tears by four films: *The Sound of Music*, *E.T.*, Rossellini's *Rome Open City* and Pasolini's *The Gospel According to St Matthew*. I gladly watch any of them. But only the last two are really

worth looking at.

What makes them worthwhile is that they want to do *more* than open my tear ducts. They're not wholly focussed on their viewers' responses. They're not consumerist, in that sense. Mark Rothko's tragedy was that, though a very high-minded man, he was stuck, like many of his contemporaries, with an essentially consumerist idea of art. Art for him was an instrument for delivering feelings to its audience.

True, the particular feelings that Rothko wanted to incite were far from trivial, worlds away from the repertoire of Whitney Houston or Celine Dion. And the works in the Tate Modern show, from the last decade of his life, reveal him at his very gravest. These paintings have renounced the wow and the lift of Rothko's earlier gorgeously multi-coloured abstracts. Their hues are dark. The lighting of the galleries too is often low. The atmosphere is sombre.

You may know some of these works already. The largest gallery here includes those deep red, purple and flaring orange pictures, the Seagram Murals, that the Tate normally shows in its dedicated Rothko room - appearing now alongside a lot more from the same series. There are others that are almost black on black. They gloom and glimmer and engulf. Their mood is deeply serious.

But their method isn't. And Rothko gave away his whole consumerist approach in a lecture he once gave, where he offered "the recipe of a work of art – its ingredients – how to make it – the formula." A numbered list follows. It begins "1. There must be a clear preoccupation with death – intimations of mortality – tragic art, romantic art etc deals with the knowledge of death" and ends "7. Hope. 10%, to make the tragic concept more endurable."

It's ridiculous - and it's hard to tell if it's meant to be a funny, or at least a humorous way of saying something important. But taken along with the paintings themselves, it reads like a horribly accurate satire of Rothko's practice. His canvases are precisely that: formulas for big feelings. "I measure these ingredients very carefully... Art is a shrewdly contrived article containing seven ingredients combined for the utmost power and concreteness." In other words, this is somebody who has got art totally wrong.

The irony of Mark Rothko's fame is that many people now look back on him and his generation as the last stand for artistic seriousness. These artists saw art as a high and passionate calling. After that came a great fall. Art became jokey, smart, cerebral, cynical, pretty, fun, rude, silly. (Pop, Conceptual, Minimal, Po-Mo, Britart etc.) They hark back to the Rothko hour as the point from which – if art is to recover its seriousness – we might start again.

A mistake. Rothko's art may have "heavy" ingredients, but it has no density. It offers us big tragic riffs, but they're no more valuable than any other riffs. It's too focussed on the hit it will give its audience. It simply doesn't have enough *world* in it to be worthwhile art, enough complication, contingency, resistance, negotiation, argument – and abstract art can have these things as much as any other. But by all means go along, and be really moved. It's just a pity you can't buy the LP.