

**BLAKE
GOPNIK**
on art

AT MNUCHIN, MARK ROTHKO AND FREDERIC CHURCH
LOOK ALIKE—AND ARE UTTERLY DIFFERENT

By Blake Gopnik
December 28, 2020



THE DAILY PIC presents two works from “Church & Rothko: Sublime,” a show at Mnuchin Gallery in New York: Frederic Church’s “After the Rain Storm,” from 1875, and an untitled abstraction by Mark Rothko painted 93 years later.

I found the show fascinating — but not at all because of the similarity that other critics seem to find between the two artists’ works, or any “sublimity” they share. For me, the show illustrates a really fundamental change that occurred in how pictures were used and viewed in the century that separated the works. With Church, we’re dealing with what

I’ll call the “interpretative” model that has governed Western art for almost all its history: A work is about what you bring to it, as you try to winkle meanings out of all its various and very varied parts. It’s about sequential reading: sequential over time, as you look and try on one reading after another, and sequential across space, as you “read” each and every different area on the painting, with their very separate contents.

Whereas the Rothko came about in a “perceptualist” art world that existed for a few aberrant decades in the 20th century, where a work was about what it did to you, as an essentially passive perceiver: According to this model, a painting is a stimulus and the art experience takes place in your predictable, reliable, repeatable “response” to it — a response that actually demands, or permits, very little agency on the viewer’s part.

If you ask me which artist I prefer, Church or Rothko, I’d almost certainly choose the AbEx-er over the Hudson River School-er. But this exhibition has shown me that, as a model for art making and art looking, I far prefer interpretation to perception. (Rothko image courtesy Mnuchin Gallery, New York)

