

Church & Rothko: Sublime

Press Release

Mnuchin Gallery, in collaboration with Michael N. Altman and Christopher Rothko, is pleased to present *Church & Rothko: Sublime*, a landmark exhibition mounted in a digitized, online experience and available for limited viewings by appointment beginning September 30th and continuing through Saturday, December 12th, 2020. Illustrating a lineage of affective color tensions between the Hudson River School landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) and the Color Field canvases of Mark Rothko (1903-1970), *Church & Rothko: Sublime* explores the aesthetic force of two American artists who probed the formal boundaries of the sublime.

A preeminent painter in the nineteenth century, Frederic Edwin Church inscribed into his ethereal landscapes the astonishing spirituality inherent in the natural splendor of the Americas. He sought to express the rapture of the sublime in his paintings by reimagining and preserving the picturesque qualities of the natural world, during a time of rapid social change. Whether in the majestic presence of the Catskill mountains or the lush cradles of the South American tropics, Church articulated the sublime in his landscapes through delicately rendered details and divinely conceived expanses.

The evocative power of the sublime was further manifested in the twentieth century in Mark Rothko's abstract paintings. With a reconceived approach to the sublime following the destruction of the Second World War, Rothko purged from his works all representation and reference to the external world. He translated, instead, the awesome emotional potential at the core of the sublime into transcendent encounters with planes of bold, unburdened pigment. In deceptively simple overlays of gestured and expressive fields of color, Rothko conjures the sublime in physical and visual appeals to unmediated, emotional responses.

Although separated by nearly a century and working under vastly different social conditions, Church and Rothko converge within the timeless sublime. Each artist, painting at the vanguards of American art, discovered innovative and compelling formal strategies to imbue the picture plane with psychological and reactive force. Church, with a radiant and atmospheric palette, and

Rothko, with strikingly pure hues, both masterfully activate their compositions through intense, visually compelling interplays of color and form. The dynamic aesthetic and conceptual dialogues into which these two artists enter in *Church & Rothko: Sublime*, speaks to the enduring and resonating legacy of the sublime in American art history.

Church & Rothko: Sublime brings together stunning examples of each artist's engagement with the sublime at the height of their careers, including by Church, *Marine Sunset (The Black Sea)* (1881-82), *Above the Clouds at Sunrise* (1849), *Coast Scene, Mount Desert* (1852) and *Oil Study for Cotopaxi* (1861); and by Rothko, *No. 1* (1949), *Orange, Red, Yellow* (1956) and *No. 10* (1963). The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue authored by Dr. John Wilmerding, the storied art historian, scholar and collector, whose career has transcended time, crossed over a plethora of disciplines, and left an indelible mark on the places he tenured, the volumes of people he mentored, and the art history he penned and articulated. Dr. Wilmerding's accompanying essay has explored, defined, and made sense of this exhibition in a way only this great man could, and only his deep and combined knowledge of art history and his comprehension of the times in which it played out, made his explanation of this exhibit possible.