

Subject Matter of the Artist:

Writings by Robert Goodnough, 1950–1965

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SOBERSCOVE PRESS
CHICAGO

Foreword

Robert Goodnough in the 1950s

In my survey of the New York School in the 1950s, I featured Robert Goodnough as one of the dozen or so of its leading younger artists.¹ Goodnough's painting was clearly rooted in his own personal vision. At the same time, it was related to the liveliest vanguard art, or as he put it, "what painting has become."²

Goodnough's vision was shaped by his familiarity with the avant-garde art of the late 1940s and 1950s, knowledge that he acquired by way of his friendship with leading artists. In 1949, Goodnough was a graduate student in the studio program at New York University, located in the School of Education along with nursing and health professions.³ The university evidently differentiated between curriculums based on academic subjects, such as art history, and those that focused on education and hands-on practice. Besides, the art historians in the School of Art and Science did not want to cohabit with artists. But the coupling of artmaking with nursing and the like did not lessen the reputation of NYU's studio program as one of the liveliest in New York. Accountable for

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1. Goodnough was included twice in *ARTnews's* annual selection of "Ten Best" one-person shows of the year, that is, in 1958 and 1959. B.H. Friedman's *School of New York: Some Younger Artists* was published in 1959. It featured eleven artists whose work exemplified the taste of the audience for advanced art at the time. In addition to Goodnough, they were Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Jasper Johns, Alfred Leslie, Joan Mitchell, Ray Parker, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, Jon Schueler and Richard Stankiewicz.
 2. "Is Today's Artist With or Against the Past," *ARTnews*, (Summer 1958): 42.
 3. Goodnough studied with Hans Hofmann in 1947.

the course's stature were professors Tony Smith, Hale Woodruff and William Baziotēs. They attracted remarkable students, among them Goodnough, Alfred Leslie, Larry Rivers and George Segal, all World War II veterans subsidized by the GI Bill.

In order to provide additional space for their students, Smith, Woodruff and educator Robert Iglehart rented a loft at 35 East 8th Street, a five-minute walk from the university, and named it Studio 35. The space had been occupied previously by The Subjects of the Artist School, whose faculty consisted of Robert Motherwell, William Baziotēs, Mark Rothko, David Hare and Barnett Newman. To broaden the course of study, other artists were invited to speak on Friday evenings. The sessions were open to the public and were attended by most everyone interested in avant-garde art, some 150 persons an evening.

Smith, Woodruff and Iglehart decided to continue the public lectures at Studio 35. The task of inviting artists and other organizational chores, such as renting chairs from a nearby funeral parlor, were assumed by Smith, who enlisted Goodnough's help. Indeed, Smith became the young artist's primary mentor and introduced him to friends who were leading Abstract Expressionists, notably Rothko, Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell. In preparation for his master's thesis, Goodnough interviewed these painters, among others. He also wrote a major article on Pollock for *ARTnews* in 1951.

In 1949, Goodnough was admitted into membership of The Club, a meeting place for the New York School. There he met another group of avant-garde artists, among them Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and attended the frequent panels and lectures. Particularly intrigued by Kline, he wrote an article on his work for *ARTnews* in 1952.

In 1950, at the suggestion of Goodnough, and organized by him, Studio 35 convened a three-day closed conference of twenty-five avant-garde artists. Among those included were Motherwell, who was the moderator on the first and third

day, Baziotes, Louise Bourgeois, de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Norman Lewis, Newman, Ad Reinhardt and David Smith, as well as Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art, who chaired the second day. Goodnough shaped and edited the transcript of these sessions, which was published in 1951 in *Modern Artists in America*, whose editorial associates were Motherwell and Reinhardt. The discourse at this conference summed up the thinking of its participants in the late 1940s, notably what they shared as artists. The Studio 35 roundtable was the most important early gathering of the avant-garde, and Goodnough's report turned out to be of exceptional art historical significance.

What did all of these activities contribute to Goodnough the painter? They gave rise to a lively avant-garde ferment in which he was introduced to the latest and most vital art and ideas, and all the fresh options in contemporary art. It was this exposure to avant-garde possibilities that influenced his own work.

In his article on Pollock, Goodnough dealt with the idea that avant-garde painting embodied "an experience of paint and canvas directly, without interference from the suggested forms and colors of existing objects."⁴ This idea was very much in the air. For example, Motherwell wrote in 1951, "The process of painting then is conceived of as an adventure, without preconceived ideas. [It] is only by giving oneself up completely to the painting medium that one finds oneself and one's own style."⁵ Goodnough's own painting was based on such free improvisation. However, he would add, "I also like to work . . . with discipline."⁶

Abstract Expressionist painters in the 1950s tended to rely more than they had in the previous decade on references to landscape

4. Robert Goodnough, "Pollock paints a picture," *ARTnews* (May 1951): 60.

5. Robert Motherwell, catalog for the exhibition, *The School of New York*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Perls Gallery, 1951): n.p.

6. Robert Goodnough, quoted in Martin H. Bush and Kenworth Moffett, *Goodnough* (Wichita, Kansas: University Art Museum, Wichita State University, 1973): 93.



Robert Goodnough, *Abstraction*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 53 x 53 inches. © Estate of Robert Goodnough



William Baziotes, *Moon Animal*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 43 x 36¼ inches. Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Festival of Arts Purchase Fund, 1951-6-1. Digital image courtesy of Krannert Art Museum.
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