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Press Release

The God that Failed: Louise Bourgeois, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko

Curated by Philip Larratt-Smith

Hauser & Wirth Zurich, Bahnhofstrasse
9 June – 16 September 2023



'My work has to do with the testing of authority (emotional authority symbolized by geometry). The god that failed.'

– Louise Bourgeois

'What is the explanation of the seemingly insane drive of man to be painter and poet if it is not an act of defiance against man's fall and an assertion that he return to the Garden of Eden?'

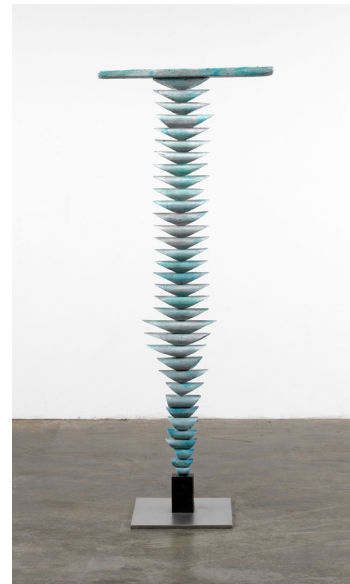
– Barnett Newman

'I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, emotion, doom, and so on.'

– Mark Rothko

The God that Failed explores the thematic and formal links among three important artists from the New York School: Louise Bourgeois, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Bourgeois's Personages from 1946 to 1954 are placed in dialogue with paintings and drawings by Newman and Rothko from the same period. All three artists knew each other, showed together and participated in talks and panels in the 1940s and 1950s. All three would make the pivot in their work from biomorphic figuration to abstraction and geometry. The title of the exhibition refers to a crisis in the concept of authority, be it the father figure, abstraction, psychoanalysis, the sublime or the emancipatory promise of radical politics, and more generally to the postwar atmosphere of existential angst.

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Bourgeois, Newman and Rothko arrived at artistic maturity after having absorbed the impact of Primitivism and Surrealism. This led to groundbreaking formal inventions – Newman’s zips, Rothko’s floating rectangles, and Bourgeois’s radical installation of her sculptures. For all three artists, the relationship to space (both real and symbolic) and architecture was crucial in that it foregrounded the experiential nature of art, the range of meanings produced through the viewer’s interactions with it. The pictorial elements in the paintings of Newman and Rothko show affinities with the way in which Bourgeois’s sculptures were exhibited as environmental installations at the Peridot Gallery in 1949 and 1950. The distance between things – between the Personages dispersed in a given arrangement, or blocks of colour hovering over one another or skinny zips separated by a vast expanse of colour – distills the tragedy of the human condition. At the same time, it creates a space for the construction of a new order out of the wreckage of the old. A shared biomorphic iconography – plant forms, flowers, seeds and pods, found in works such as Newman’s ‘Genetic Moment’, Rothko’s drawing ‘Untitled’, or Bourgeois’s ‘Spring’ – bears witness to this possibility of rebirth.



If Newman and Rothko (both of whom were Jewish) felt they were making art about man’s spiritual nature, Bourgeois was more concerned with her unconscious processes. Her forms retain vestiges of the body and often have subtle sexual connotations. Newman and Rothko were preoccupied with the ‘metaphysical secrets’ that lie beyond the visible. To them art was an attempt to attain to the transcendent and the sublime; to her it was a form of acting out. Bourgeois’s monolithic Personages and Newman’s zips affirm the primacy of the vertical, perhaps an expression of the fragile and isolated individual alienated from her surroundings. Her segmented Personages, which are more purely abstract and geometric than the monoliths, align with Rothko’s stacking of rectilinear stains. In this subgroup of Personages, Bourgeois’s organization of discrete segmented elements into a whole bespeaks a desire to reconcile the individual with the collective – a desire she shared with Newman and Rothko.

The exhibition includes major works by Newman and Rothko from museum and private collections, including Newman’s ‘Untitled 1, 1955’ (1955) and Rothko’s ‘No. 40 (Blue Penumbra)’ (1957).

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Opening hours:

Tue – Fri, 10 am – 6pm

Sat, 11 am – 5 pm

www.hauserwirth.com

Caption and courtesy info:

Barnett Newman
Untitled
1960
Brush and ink on paper
35.6 x 25.4 cm / 14 x 10 in
© The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / 2023,
ProLitteris, Zurich
Courtesy Jack Shear
Photo: Ellsworth Kelly Studio

Louise Bourgeois
Untitled
1947-1949
Bronze, painted white and blue, and stainless steel
167.6 x 30.5 x 30.5 cm / 66 x 12 x 12 in
© The Easton Foundation / 2023, ProLitteris, Zurich
Photo: Christopher Burke

Mark Rothko
No. 40 (Blue Penumbra)
1957
Oil on canvas
176 x 111 cm / 69 1/4 x 43 3/4 in
© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko /
2023, ProLitteris, Zurich
Courtesy: Daros Collection, Switzerland

Barnett Newman
Untitled 1, 1955
1955
Oil on canvas
45.7 x 17.8 cm / 18 x 7 in
The Jewish Museum, New York, USA. Gift of The
Barnett and Annalee Newman Foundation
© The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / 2023,
ProLitteris, Zurich
Photo: The Jewish Museum/Art Resource/Scala,
Florence 2023

Mark Rothko
Untitled (White, Yellow, Red on Yellow)
1953
Oil on canvas
231 x 180 cm / 91 x 70 7/8 in
© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko /
2023, ProLitteris, Zurich
Private Collection

Louise Bourgeois
Untitled
1954
Painted bronze and stainless steel
141 x 55.2 x 30.5 cm / 55 1/2 x 21 3/4 x 12 in
© The Easton Foundation / 2023, ProLitteris, Zurich
Photo: Christopher Burke

Barnett Newman
Genetic Moment
1947
Oil on canvas
96.5 x 71 cm / 38 x 28 in
Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler Collection.
Gift of Annalee Newman, New York.
© The Barnett Newman Foundation, New York / 2023,
ProLitteris, Zurich
Photo: Cantz Medienmanagement, Ostfildern

Mark Rothko
Untitled
1944
Chalk, watercolor, pen and ink on paper
66 x 99.1 cm / 26 x 39 in
© 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko /
2023, ProLitteris, Zurich
Private Collection