

Adolph Gottlieb, *Castle*, 1950. Oil and smalts on canvas, 30 x 38".
Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

Adolph Gottlieb was in a tough position in the early 1950s. He had turned fifty himself in 1953, and he'd been painting and exhibiting since the Twenties. It wasn't the first time he'd hit such a crisis point, but the last time—1939-1941—he'd been among the pioneers of a spanking new style, namely Abstract Expressionism. Now he was a "pro," as Tom Hess put it, linked in everyone's mind with the established, "uptown," intellectual branch of the movement. Even though he often went to The Club, he wasn't really a part of the "downtown," Cedar Bar, macho male scene. He didn't drink to destruction like Pollock or talk in a jocular, elliptical style the way Kline did. Gottlieb was New York City street-smart, not cowboy rough 'n ready. The big moves he had made in the 1940s were respected by the emerging second Abstract-Expressionist generation, but Pollock was the role model of choice, and Kline and de Kooning had the styles it was "in" to imitate. Aligning himself with the downtown set, John Gruen said, "We always thought of Adolph Gottlieb as a painter apart from the art world of the fifties. He seemed so dapper, so well groomed. He just didn't seem to fit in. His appearance was always that of a businessman or someone totally removed from and even unsympathetic toward the dynamics of abstract expressionism."¹

But Gottlieb realized, as few of his peers did at the time, that it was crucial for them to evolve at this point, that their individual styles could readily become cages for which they'd lost their keys. At the Studio 35 roundtable sessions, Gottlieb, in his typically level-headed manner, condensed the situation they faced at mid-century into two problems: (1) existing as men, and (2) growth in their work. "Different times require different images," he had said the year before in *Tiger's Eye*, and the Fifties see him struggling to find the new images he needed to continue being a vital part of America's first internationally important art movement.

To get a sense of Gottlieb in the Fifties, we must see it as a period of consolidation and expansion linking the developments in abstraction made during the Forties with those to come in the Sixties. Gottlieb is crucial to that transition. He had made his first major breakthrough into the all-over, multiple-foci Pictographs so early (1941) that they were practically considered old hat by the time the rest of his generation made theirs (1947-48). At least that is the way it has been read by a number of historians of the period. Making 1947 and 1948 the turning point years also deceptively but effectively cuts off crucial 1949-50 developments from consideration.

Barnett Newman saw these two years as the most crucial and the larger framework of 1947-52 as the pivotal period for the New York

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB IN THE FIFTIES: "DIFFERENT TIMES REQUIRE DIFFERENT IMAGES"

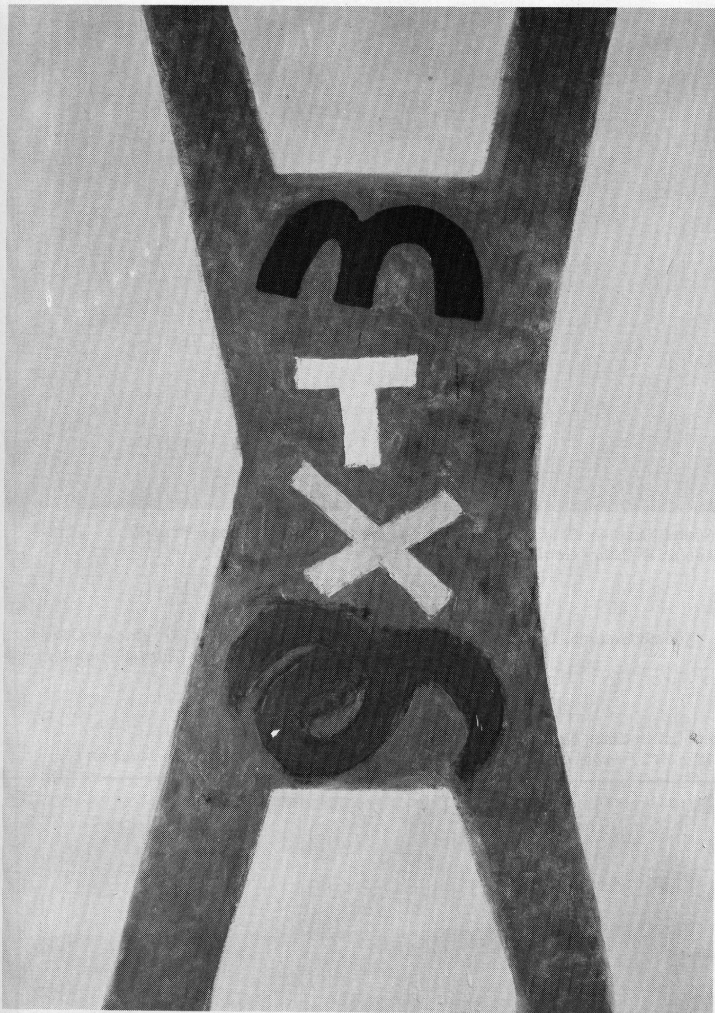
APRIL KINGSLEY

Already a "pro" in the early 1950s, Adolph Gottlieb's personal and professional styles were as anomalous as they were exemplary among the abstract painters of the period. His distinctive interest in the School of Paris melded with his American style but isolated him from others advocating abstract painting.

School, and I tend to agree with him.² Those five years see the jump in size from largish to huge paintings, and, even more importantly, the jump in scale from small, atomized fragments distributed more or less evenly over the surface to large, arm's-length gestures sweeping across the length and breadth of a canvas (Kline) and huge units that fill the canvas space (Newman and Rothko). This all occurs at the very center of the century. Gottlieb's paintings of the early Fifties reflect the expanded size and scale of the late Forties, but it isn't until 1957 that he finds what has become his "signature" image—the Burst. The iconic immediacy of these monolithic, high-impact paintings is his major gift to the Sixties. Newman's paintings begin to gain acceptance at this time as well, and thus, with Rothko, these three members of the first generation of New York School abstraction have a direct effect on the development of Sixties hard-edge, color-field, and Minimalist painting.

Gottlieb developed three new signature images in the Fifties: the *Unstill Life*, the *Imaginary Landscape*, and the *Burst*, and he painted a number of Pollock-inspired *Labyrinths*. Each new image involved a more or less radical manipulation of the grid, each affected the others, and each had precedents in his early work. By 1948, in *Sounds at Night*, Gottlieb was experimenting with phasing out the grid except as infrastructure, and was working on larger sized canvases (about 4 by 5 feet) with larger-than-usual-scale units. (These were the paintings that influenced his friend Tomlin to break out of late Cubism and into all-over, ideographic imagery.) And, the next year, Gottlieb was trying out large monster-, body-, or table-like black forms (*Black Silhouette*, for instance) as containers other than the grid for the cryptic imagery of the Pictographs that would be equally frontal and flat.

Castle (1950) is one of such hybrids making a transition to the *Unstill*

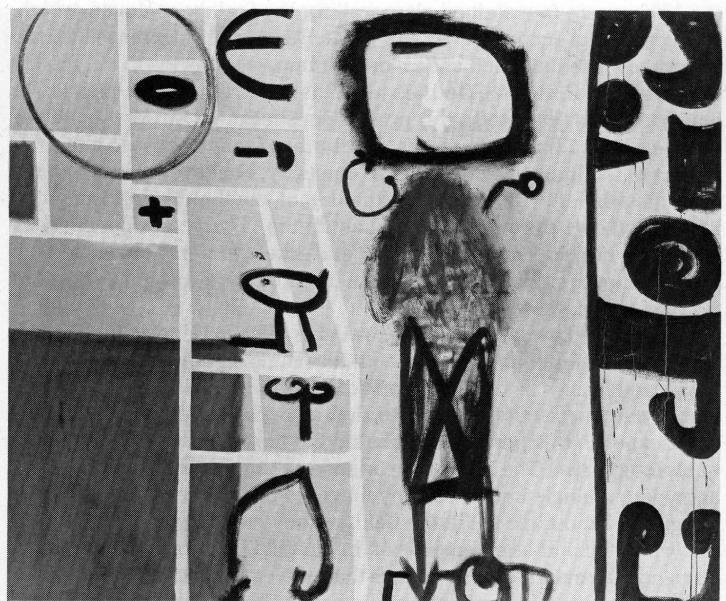


Adolph Gottlieb, *Monolith (Female)*, 1956. Oil and enamel on canvas, 72 x 50'. Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

Lives of 1951 which are essentially tables tipped up so that their surfaces are congruent with the canvas surface. The thick black bands tying the central area to the edge of the canvas grew out of the Pictograph grid, but may, nevertheless, owe something to the powerful black bars of Kline's 1950 paintings as well. There is certainly a shared aggressiveness. (Incidentally, many of the forms on the "table" appear in his Forties Pictographs and his late Thirties Arizona and "boxed" still lifes. These same shapes recur in magnified, essentialized form in the Bursts. "There is a definite relationship," he told Martin Friedman, "[between] the disc forms that I use now and the shapes of gourds which were ovoid shapes."³)

Sentinel of 1951, also fairly large, turns out to have been prophetic of developments to come at the end of the decade with its large ovoid form floating above a tangle of bent grid and pictographic forms. A few other paintings, oddballs at the time, were transitional for the Bursts: *Ancestral Image* (1950), which was reproduced a great deal but which was subsequently destroyed in a fire; *W* (1954), and *Monolith (Female)* of 1956. They negotiate a passage between the Pictographs and the Unstill Lives that leads to the holistic paintings of the late Fifties. Their figural implications are subsumed in the Bursts, though we continue to respond to them subconsciously, as icons of sorts—a head and body; the sun and the earth.

For the most part, however, the first half of the Fifties sees still more grid structures enclosing pictographic elements, despite repeated criticism since 1947—particularly by Greenberg, but voiced by many—that the mode was stale. In 1947 Greenberg had written that the work was timid, formulaic, decorative, limited and safe, adding that there was "something half-baked and revivalist" about the "metaphysical" school



Adolph Gottlieb, *Symbols and a Woman*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 60 x 72'. Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

of Gottlieb, Still, Newman, and Rothko (some of the very artists he was to laud a decade later).⁴ But Gottlieb didn't feel he had exhausted the Pictograph quite yet, though he was beginning to alter it dramatically.

They say that great jazz musicians play clearer and better than they ever have just before they die, and something like that happens to the statements Gottlieb made in each of his sets of imagery shortly before he moved on to the next one. It certainly happens to the Pictographs in those years just before they disappear. No longer always cryptically fragmented, some of the figures hitherto merely hinted at in such titles as *Sorcerer* or *Alchemist* emerge practically whole for us to see. An entire figure appears in *Symbols and a Woman* (1951); but during this period of reevaluation he was also intensely involved with plans for the huge stained-glass facade of the Milton Steinberg House on New York's Upper East Side, which was forcing him to think in terms of concrete symbols. Tracing such an "X"-outlined body back through the Forties to identify other figures can lead to misreadings of the earlier work, where no such specificity was intended.

Male and Female (1950), with the "female's" dependent double-curving breasts, split-semicircle head, double-"V" legs and roundish anus-vagina (adjacent to the male's curved-arrow and double ball genitals), likewise seems to provide clues to some of the more obscure Pictographs, even though he wasn't thinking in terms of such readable, flattened, centrally focused imagery in the 1940s. In the lower right corner of *Male and Female*, circle and triangle are opposed in an emblematic condensation of Gottlieb's essential symbolic duality—round to rectilinear, soft to hard, female to male, floating to earthbound, unstable to stable, breast or vagina to penis, yin to yang. This duality achieves its fullest expression, of course, in the Bursts.

Two other things happen to the grids. Sometimes they stand practically empty, as if visually satisfying in themselves; at other times they seem to go berserk, as in *Labyrinth #3* (1954), interlacing and entangling themselves in their own trajectories. At this point the straight lines of the grids intersect with the residual curves of the pictographs to create an imaginary, indecipherable alphabet. *Labyrinth #3* is also a huge picture (7 by 16 feet) painted in the first studio he had with that large a wall. Newman's and Pollock's mural-size pictures, Miró's stay with him while he was working on the Cincinnati mural in 1947, even Tomlin's elegant spin-offs of Gottlieb's own paintings, may all have inspired him to try his hand at the big picture in the early Fifties. But for the most part Gottlieb felt uncomfortable in rooms where the pictures overwhelmed him and didn't want them to surround the viewer, pressing in close, the way Rothko's did. He was also working at this time on

the 1200-square-foot stained-glass wall for the Steinberg House, which, along with his memories of the great European "machines" in the Louvre, dwarfed all such endeavors for him.

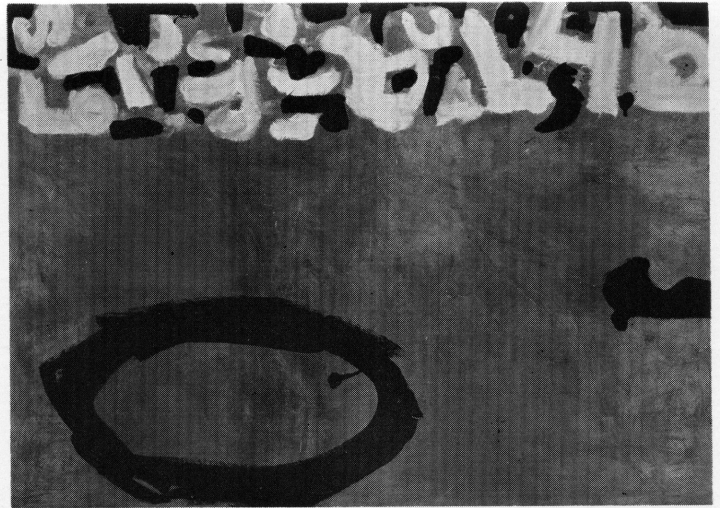
Overall, the Fifties see Gottlieb jump his scale rather than his size. He had said in his (and Rothko's) now-famous letter to Edward Jewell at *The New York Times* that he was "for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal," and he (correctly, I believe) seems to have been dissatisfied with the large expanses of small units uniformly distributed all over the surface in the Labyrinths. "I had carried it as far as I wanted," he told Martin Friedman, "and other painters had carried the idea of all-over painting to quite great lengths, and I wanted to develop my idea in a different direction."⁵

Lawrence Alloway criticized Gottlieb's 1968 Whitney-Guggenheim retrospective for doubling up at both museums on the work of 1951-56, the period he saw as Gottlieb's weakest.⁶ But in addition to the important developments cited above, Gottlieb also discovered the "Imaginary Landscape" in this period, to my mind the most fertile and interesting of his long career. The Bursts can be seen as simply condensing that imagery into a single image, as if by magnifying a vertical section of the Imaginary Landscape to fill the field, or they can be seen (as I have already pointed out) as extensions of the Unstill Life into vertical, vaguely humanoid forms which also resolve themselves into the Burst imagery.

Sometime in 1951, perhaps as Alloway suggests, "legitimately bored with ten years concentration and restraint,"⁷ Gottlieb seems simply to have overpainted the top half of a grid in *The Frozen Sounds, Number I* (1951) with white and then floated two spheres, two hemispheres, and a rectangle in a line across that field. In actual fact, however, he had decided upon the basic composition ahead of time: "The most extreme thing I could think of doing at that time was to divide the canvas in half," he said to Dorothy Seckler.⁸ Precedents for such a split abound in his earlier work, for instance in a small Pictograph of 1948, going all the way back to the lonely figures he had painted "standing on the beach with a very heavy, metallic kind of sea,"⁹ for his Dudensing Gallery show in 1930.

Some works he'd seen around recently, like Rothko's paintings and Newman's *Horizon Light*, may have recalled two other things from the distant past at this time as well: a wonderful little 1919 painting by Milton Avery entitled *Moon Over the Marsh* which he undoubtedly saw in Avery's house, and a John Graham exhibition (titled, surprisingly, *Minimalism*) which he saw in 1929 at the Dudensing Gallery. This show consisted of Graham's paintings in enamels, all divided horizontally in half, the upper half white and the lower part brown, for example, as Gottlieb recalled in May 1968 while talking with Andrew Hudson. Graham was a good friend of his, and he thought the show very radical, but remembers that "it fell sort of flat."¹⁰ (It may be relevant to note here that Gottlieb's reaction to Newman's controversial exhibition in 1950 of equally radical paintings was apparently not as negative as most.) Then, too, there is the constant presence of Miró hovering in the background of all of Gottlieb's moves (until, at some point in the Fifties or Sixties, one senses that Gottlieb has become a presence Miró is taking notice of). *Person Throwing a Stone at a Bird* is only one such painting by Miró with a sharp horizontal division.

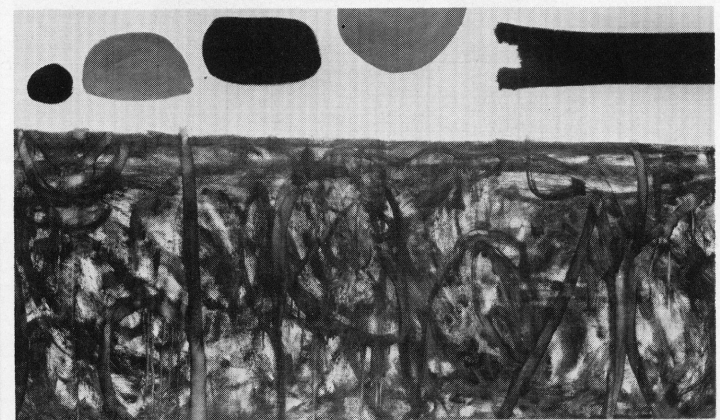
What Gottlieb was after in the Imaginary Landscapes was quite simple, however. He wanted to get away from all-overness and to concentrate instead on focal points. "Actually, I never thought of them as landscapes," he told Friedman. "My intention was to divide the canvas roughly into two areas and in the lower part I would have some active, linear winds or shapes working . . . and then in the upper part I would have roughly round or oval shapes which were completely separate and floating. In a sense they stemmed from the pictographs in that the painting was still compartmentalized. . . ."¹¹ He did call them "Imaginary Landscapes," and thus that remains their common reading, but many of them are titled to indicate a seascape instead. There is an element in their construction—the high horizon, the density of the pigment or the intensity of the color above the horizon, or, perhaps, the very restlessness of the movement in the lower section in contrast to the relative stillness above—that often seems more like the sea, particularly as it is experienced in a little boat. (Gottlieb loved sailing almost as much as he loved painting. When he wasn't doing the one, he did the other, especially in the summers in Provincetown in the late Forties and the Fifties, and later in Easthampton where he bought a house.) Viewed this way, a painting like *Nadir* (1952) takes on a quality of the vastness, the sub-



Adolph Gottlieb, *Blue at Night*, 1957. Oil and enamel on canvas, 42 x 60'. Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.

Adolph Gottlieb, *Transfiguration #4*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 65 x 40'. Private Collection, New York. Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation. ▶

Adolph Gottlieb, *Nadir*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 42 x 72'. Private Collection, New York. Adolph & Esther Gottlieb Foundation.



limity, if you will, of Hudson River School landscape painting when it seems most like that of the German Romantics. One is reminded of John Kensett's Luminist seascapes, divided finitely in half across an unbroken horizon, or of Albert Pinkham Ryder's *Constance* with the boat nestled into a lead-heavy sea. Viewed as a landscape, it somehow doesn't seem as vast or as elemental.

Because of the automatic identification of the roundish forms at the top of the Imaginary Landscapes with celestial bodies or cloud forms, and the horizon line with the visual limit of land or sea, one carries that identification over to the Bursts without needing the horizon line. The calligraphic jumble of writhing pigment seems to have given birth to the floating blob above, like a pod to a seed, an exploding rocket launch to Sputnik, or more poetically, the chaos of pre-creation to the heavens. We see it both as ordered object out of disorder and as release out of constriction. Having traversed the maze, we are led by Ariadne's string to freedom; having suffered imprisonment in the cage of the grid, the artist's imagery is flung free in the picture space. Donald Kuspit suggests in a footnote to his article on the "Symbolic Pregnancy in Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still" that many of the shapes in Rothko's c. 1950 paintings are "disguised reminiscences of the famous mushroom shape of the atomic cloud," an idea which he carries over into the notion of "libidinous discharge."¹²

An extension to Gottlieb's imagery is not unlikely, and either a Jungian or a Freudian interpretation of the Pictographs of the Forties would certainly reinforce such a reading of the later Bursts. Interestingly, a number of the new images in 1957 were titled "Blasts," which



does connote a somewhat more mechanical kind of explosion rather than an organic or physical "Burst." According to Gottlieb, "The Bursts express a feeling of release and freedom and a kind of sense of expansion."¹³ Other titles of the time, such as *Solitary* or *Compression*, reinforce contradictory sensations and still others are merely descriptive, usually of the color.

Gottlieb tended to title his paintings in groups when they had to leave the studio, or at the end of the year, so one can't hold him to them very tightly. He was, however, an intellectual, up on and stirred by the current ideas and issues of the day; he was, in essence, a symbolizer and image-maker throughout his life. He often spoke of his work in terms of conceptual form: "I attach a great deal of importance to the thought process and a kind of intellectual approach to painting."¹⁴ When he's left all the pictographic symbols behind "in the Labyrinth," his titles become banal and generally descriptive—*Side Pull*, *Hot Horizon*, *Blue at Night*, and so forth—as if to underscore the formality which then characterizes his style. Clement Greenberg had begun supporting Gottlieb's work, writing a short and somewhat grudging catalogue introduction for his Bennington College exhibition in 1954; citing him as the "least tired of all the abstract expressionists" in the 1955 *Partisan Review* article, "American-Type Painting," where he abandons Pollock in favor of Still; and, by the time he writes the catalogue introduction for Gottlieb's 1957 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, calling him the "most adventurous painter in America."

Clearly myth was out, formalism was in, but that undoubtedly had little effect on Gottlieb. He was too hard-nosed, self-confident, and inde-

pendent to let Greenberg control him. However, he must have responded positively to Greenberg's description of the spatial organization of the Imaginary Landscapes as "too difficult for eyes trained on late Cubism," since he had been very involved with developing a new kind of flat space in them. "It was a return to a focal point . . . without the kind of space that had existed in traditional painting," as he told Dorothy Seckler.¹⁵ Also, beginning in 1951-52, Gottlieb made a crucial transition from painting on the wall or easel to painting horizontally in order to produce the disc shapes. He began to lay the canvas down on trestles and to use new tools like spatulas and squeegees to fling the now more fluid, viscous paint in a spinning, centrifugal motion out from the center of the disc. In doing so he got to the "alla prima" kind of painting that he often said was the height of achievement in any painting style. He abandoned the tools as well as the orientation of easel painting at this time. Using a brush, like employing half-tones, was, he now felt, tied to figure painting and traditional space which he completely avoided as of the Fifties, a fact which could hardly have been lost on Greenberg.

When Gottlieb goes to large scale, at the end of the Fifties, the paintings have a Matissean sense of freedom and expansion, a spontaneity and physicality of paint which transmutes emotion directly through the full, uninhibited sensation of color. He seems to have fused what he learned about color intensities from his work on the Steinberg House at the beginning of the decade with a renewed interest in the atmospheric effects of various color densities. He had always been a highly sophisticated colorist, with a masterly ease at handling materials, but it isn't until the Fifties that his skills are so readily apparent. The Bursts have something of Matisse's perfect sense of placement, of the balance of incident to field that one feels in *The Bather*. The scale is in absolute adjustment with the style of the image and its import. Its simplicity is full and satisfying because of the largeness of the units. They are just large enough to make you relate to them in a body-like way so that you lose awareness of the painting edge. This is what gives them their iconic force and impact.

Matisse's importance for Gottlieb dates from the Thirties, but it was undoubtedly reinforced in the Fifties by the extended exposure he had at the time. Gottlieb loved *The Piano Lesson* and *The Goldfish*, but he didn't like the "cut-outs" because they weren't paint on canvas—for him, the *sine qua non* of art. A man who says "I am continuously discarding baggage, I try to be poor," in reference to his painting style, however, surely responded to their bold simplifications. When Gottlieb says that he wants to "explore a simple thing profoundly,"¹⁶ he means it conceptually, emotionally, and technically. Like Matisse, Gottlieb felt that great colorists used only a few colors and great draftsmen only a few lines, and he wanted his own work to be succinct and to the point. In the Bursts he achieved what he saw as the nature of abstract thought: a reduction to a simple object or two that embody great complexity.

Gottlieb was, in essence, as his doodles reveal, a painter of objects, unlike Pollock, who painted force lines and energy fields; unlike de Kooning, who embedded fragments of matter in a maelstrom; unlike Kline, who painted non-objectively; unlike Rothko, Newman, and Still who painted sublimities; and unlike most of the other Abstract Expressionists—but very much like the School of Paris painters he always admired: Miró, Matisse, Picasso, and Léger. His achievement was to do so on an American scale, with American color, flatness, breadth, and impact—in other words, in an American style—all of which he accomplished fully for the first time in the Fifties.

1. John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 254.
2. Barnett Newman, "The New York School Question," *Art News*, September 1965, pp. 38-41, 55-56.
3. Interview with Martin Friedman, August 1962, tape 2B, in Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Archives.
4. Clement Greenberg, "Art," *The Nation*, 165, December 6, 1947, p. 629.
5. Friedman interview, tape 2B.
6. Lawrence Alloway, "Melpomene and Graffiti," *Art International*, 12, April 1968, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Interview with Dorothy Seckler, October 1967, p. 22, in Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Archives.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
10. Interview with Andrew Hudson, May 1968, in Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Archives.
11. Friedman interview, tape 2A.
12. Donald Kuspit, "Symbolic Pregnancy in Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still," *Arts Magazine* (March 1978), p. 125.
13. Friedman interview, tape 2A.
14. *Ibid.*, tape 2B.
15. Seckler interview, p. 26.
16. Friedman interview, tape 2A.