Art history: modern and contemporary
Abstract Expressionism in New York 1

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Now I'm going to meet Dore Ashton who as a writer on art, began her career in the late 1940's, has written for the New York Times in the fifties and sixties, and has published numerous books and articles on artists associated with abstract expressionism. I hope to find out how her relationship with artists likes Rothko, Motherwell and Guston shaped her understanding of the development of the New York School, and what she thinks the main issues were that confronted these artists as they went from near obscurity in the 1940's to international celebrity by the 1960's.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
You were very good friends with, with Mark Rothko, with Robert Motherwell and Philip Guston, erm…

DORE ASHTON:
And Franz.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And Franz Kline. Okay, tell us a little bit about how you met them and how their friendships developed.

DORE ASHTON:
Mainly I met them because they were all clustered in the same part of the city and so I sought them out.

DORE ASHTON:
One of the most intelligent men I've ever known was Willem de Kooning really, really intelligent.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Let's hear some more about him.

DORE ASHTON:
Well, one day I called, I was out there in East Hampton and one of the assistants said that he's busy, he can't receive you today, and five minutes later Bill called me and said come over, come over. So I came over and we sat, and he had these two very big chairs, I guess you've seen them in photographs, yeah, and we talked for hours about good bad painters or bad good painters. We talked about Derain, and a few others like that and we had such a good time.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And er what about Franz Kline?

DORE ASHTON:
Franz was a wonderful raconteur and he was fun. At parties he would dance. He'd take two steps and then his leg would shoot out, just the way those lines shot out in the painting, really, truly.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
The worlds of journalism and the worlds of art came together at that wonderful occasion known as the 'opening' or, as you would say in Great Britain, the 'private view'. This is where artists, collectors, journalists, poets as well, very important part of the scene, would mingle, get to know each other. After the

openings they would go out to the bars and restaurants around the galleries and continue their conversations well into the night. Intellectually it gives people an opportunity to have many, many informal discussions in unguarded moments, and talk frankly to each other, lubricated by alcohol, surely, and the situation, and in fact the art becomes much more human, and the writing about it has a quality that's, that's very different as well.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And what about Mark Rothko?

DORE ASHTON:
Well, Rothko's a different story. I went to the Betty Parsons gallery and she had a Rothko show and it was, I, I just was er totally – what would be the word? – moved, I think is the word, by that exhibition. So then I found out he lived then on West 56th Street, right near MOMA. We had er pastrami sandwiches on Sixth Avenue and then when he'd looked me over 'cos he was a very suspicious kind of guy; he invited me to come up and look at the work.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
What did they expect from writing about their work?

DORE ASHTON:
They didn't know. Just a lot of space if possible! Some, the ones that I had really personal relationships as human beings were interested, and then we would sometimes continue the conversation based on something that I had said.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Were they aiming not to, er let's say Rothko, was he aiming not to pin something down but just trying to find something that would grab the viewer and create that attentiveness and, and so on?

DORE ASHTON:
You know I don't like to say 'they'.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Yeah.

DORE ASHTON:
I mean I knew everybody except, I didn't know Pollock well but I knew all the rest of them quite well, and each one had different drives and different satisfactions and, you know, it, I wouldn't like to generalise.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
At the famous round, the artists' round table, (yes), that took place in 1950 the er transcript ended with erm de Kooning responding to the question 'well what do we call ourselves?' And everybody sort of made some suggestions then de Kooning said 'it's always a disaster to name yourself'.

DORE ASHTON:
Yes. True enough, true enough because if you think of it individually, they were each so different from the other. They had nothing technical or visual in common.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
How would a student of art approach that multiplicity? You know, what, what do they need to know? Is it possible to just look at one individual after the next? What would you say?

DORE ASHTON:

Well, a lot had to do with the war being over, so the city was flourishing, and there were studios still that were cheap to rent, plus there had never been so many art galleries. You know when I started there were fifty. When I left there were 600 so it was a, the beginning of a boom.

DORE ASHTON:
And New York had been for quite a while, had been where, where the action was as they used to say, and they were drawn to the city so it sort of appeared er practical to be a group.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Do you find the, the, just the label 'abstract expressionism' to be….?

DORE ASHTON:
Oh, ridiculous.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
…difficult?

DORE ASHTON:
Of course…

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And erm…

DORE ASHTON:
That's why I called my own book *The New York School*.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Right, but even with that you spent quite a lot of time in, in that book, er with sort of a disclaimer about what it meant to call something, call this *The New York School* – what exactly you were talking about. Could you talk a little bit more about that just rehearse that somewhat?

DORE ASHTON:
Yes, because, er because they, having been isolated for four years, five years really during the Second World War, they had to fall upon each other, and there was no longer that two-way street to Paris.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Prior to World War II it was quite common for American artists, Modernist artists, to spend some time in Paris soaking up the atmosphere, er often taking lessons with French artists and in general becoming familiar with Cubism and Surrealism firsthand. By the time of World War II this was no longer possible and the few American artists that had some prior knowledge of French art found themselves relatively isolated in New York. They wanted to break out of the influence of Cubism and Surrealism and yet they didn't know particularly how to do that, so they had this very ambiguous relationship to the foundation of French culture and the school of Paris.

DORE ASHTON:
I always felt that er they had one foot here and one foot, they wished, in Paris. And on the one hand they, they had the macho verve, you know, we're Americans and all that, and on the other hand they had, some of them did some very serious reading. I'd see these books around in the studio and think aha, you know you come on with it, you're having fist fights and being macho drunk at four o'clock in the morning, but you're reading these books, you know, but I never challenged anybody on that.

MICHAEL CORRIS:

You mentioned in some previous conversations we've had of the importance of existentialism to some of these artists. Would you like to discuss that point?

DORE ASHTON:
Yes I, I got the impression that the, the ones that were inclined to read and follow what was going in the world were extremely interested, and I never was able to find out, but you remember Jean Paul Sartre gave a lecture at the New School. I was still away at school so I wasn't there. I never was able to find out if they flocked to it but I bet they did, I bet they did – at least the ones that were thinking did.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
There's also this idea that the shift to abstraction for these artists was really fraught in a way that it wasn't easy.

DORE ASHTON:
No.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And it was in a, tremendously freighted with a lot of expectations and a lot of anxieties?

DORE ASHTON:
Yes there's certainly, you're right about that, Michael. There, there certainly was a high range of anxiety and whenever I went to anybody's studio, and I don't know what to make of that but they were really keen to see my response when I came to the studio, which always put me on the spot 'cos I never talked in front of paintings ever and I thought oh god, you know.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
What about erm the ethical communalities?

DORE ASHTON:
My impression was, and I can't be sure, they worried.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
They worried?

DORE ASHTON:
It worried them, yes.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
What did they worry about?

DORE ASHTON:
They didn't want to be as they used to say co-opted by capitalist America. Simple.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
The abstract expressionists prided themselves on their outsider status with respect to American culture, dominant American culture. One of the risks that accompanied becoming more widely known as artists and celebrated was that they would be co-opted by the very establishment that they were opposing.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And did they understand the ambiguity of their position?

DORE ASHTON:

Some did, I think certainly Philip Guston was very aware of that. He was very, very intelligent and a curious man.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Do you think that awareness contributed to the shift that he made in the late sixties and the show that he did in 1970?

DORE ASHTON:
You know, I never made up my mind about that.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Philip Guston begins his career doing highly political social realist paintings. By the late 1940's he adopts this abstract style, these very agitated fields of extremely lush colour. By the mid 1960's in private he's well-known for doing a number of satirical cartoons that relate to the Nixon administration prompted by the war in Vietnam, and in 1970 he shows for the first time these cartoon-like paintings with figures that look like Ku Klux Klan figures, hooded figures, er dismembered body parts, and all sorts of violence happening in a kind of a quasi-comic fashion. This causes a scandal in the art world where people say that he has betrayed all of his principles as an abstract expressionist, has overturned abstract painting to go back to some kind of realist painting.

DORE ASHTON:
My own attitude, I have to say, once I was moved by any artist, I went wherever they went and I didn't withhold my approval, and actually I think I was maybe the only one, me and Bill De Kooning were the only ones who defended Philip when he made the big move and had the first show of that work.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
I mean you, you do point out that for you 1960 was the end, so…

DORE ASHTON:
Well then Rauschenberg and Johns moved in and that was a whole, not that other, but other.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Were your friends talking about them, the older artists, or did they…?

DORE ASHTON:
The older artists were bitter.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
Were they?

DORE ASHTON:
Oh yeah. Mark certainly was.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
And he had so much; he actually did have some success if you look at…

DORE ASHTON:
Oh my, lots of success.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
…tremendous success, he was not a poor artist.

DORE ASHTON:
But you see it's that the, the, the worldly success to almost any of those people wasn't the success that they sought.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
What were they looking for?

DORE ASHTON:
They wanted to be in art history, which you can't do in your own lifetime, and that's one of the things I really liked about them, you know.

MICHAEL CORRIS:
What Dore shows us with her account of her experiences in the art world in the 1950's and 1960's is the great revolution that has happened in the structure of the art world in New York since the end of World War II. Here we see the emergence of a fully-fledged, interconnected system of institutions of the press, of the art market, of avant garde galleries feeding into more established galleries, the divide between uptown and downtown and the infusion of art across the, the public consciousness. This is the great transition that happens between the end of World War II and about 1960, and this is where Dore is actually showing us the birth of the modern international art centre, the cosmopolitan centre of art.