SCULPTURE

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The pity is that an important American artist who spent nearly a decade in England has never gained full recognition there. The exhibition Mark Tobey: Threading Light at the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover (to 11th March 2018), and previously at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice (closed 10th September), where this reviewer saw it, further highlights this shortsightedness. Among the reasons for Tobey’s wider neglect are, firstly, that his affinities gravitated towards the West coast of the United States and the Far East. Secondly, the Abstract Expressionist heavyweights eclipsed him. Tobey painted small – a fatal gambit during the period when large prevailed. Lastly, Clement Greenberg traduced the artist by denying his documented influence on Pollock. This exhibition provides an excellent chance to reassess Tobey’s stature.

Given its majestic site on the Grand Canal, Venice’s sparkling light and the unique atmosphere of its former owner’s palazzo, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection offers a superb setting for almost any art. However, its temporary exhibition areas – at the bottom of the garden, as it were – pose one challenge. They are windowless. In Tobey’s case this became an advantage, lending concentration to his intimate facture, enhanced by subdued lighting and the compact galleries. And yet a little Tobey goes a long way. At moments, this big assembly of small paintings gave the impression that more was less. Notwithstanding that, the project finely maps Tobey’s many strengths and occasional weaknesses. Paradoxically, he comes across as both a limited creator and a most resourceful one.

The exhibition’s subtitle, ‘Threading Light’, conveys the heart of Tobey’s craft: its artisanal tenor. Taken from the title of a 1942 composition (cat. no.1; Fig.80), Tobey’s ‘threading’ lineation suggests the close-up, repetitive and perfectionist movements of some master fabric weaver. The attractive catalogue’s solid scholarship reveals that his father was a carpenter and that he always remembered the hooked rugs and domestic crafts that preoccupied his mother. The young Tobey also drew caricatures, as did a remarkable number of his mainstream counterparts, including Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Yves Kline, Ad Reinhardt and David Smith. Cartoons of course use line to reduce their subjects to essentials. All levity gone, calligraphy would remain Tobey’s fundamental tool.

The first room in Venice held a surprise: Middle West (American landscape) (no.16; Fig.79). Despite Tobey’s tender memories of a Wisconsin childhood and the Mississippi, he never revisited these roots. It is easy to see why. This bleak quasi-Precisionist vista epitomises the Midwest as dystopia: empty, blockish and conflicted. Tobey came to hymn its antitheses: horror vacui, cat’s cradle filaments and auratic oneness. As an inveterate god-seeker, we might say he replaced the Bible Belt religiosity of his upbringing with the Bahá’í Faith that he first encountered around 1926. If the heavy ‘X’ marks a meaningful spot in the 1929 canvas, then Tobey’s eventual faith in ethereal universal meanings was its flip side. As he remarked in 1955, his ‘subject matter changed from the Middle West (where I lived long ago) to the microscopic worlds’. Accordingly, Tobey belongs to a roll call of Americans who left native drabness for headier destinations,
whether of geography or the spirit.

The mature Tobey triangulated the bustling city (as opposed to the heartland), humanity’s multitudinous tide (rather than subjective isolation) and transcendence (over time-bound specifics) – the last aspiration articulated through a radical spatiality as crowded as the Midwest is often deemed vacant. For Greenberg, writing in 1944, Tobey’s paintings were already a trifle too dense, leaving its maker scant leeway to expand into other idioms. Such criticism held a grain of truth; Tobey himself later had some doubts about pursuing his ‘white writing’ ad libitum. In other words, was it too gossamer to stretch far and wide?

By contrast, the next rooms proved Tobey’s dexterity, able to ring changes upon what was at root a more or less micrographic mode. For example, The void devouring the gadget era (1942; no.2) mixes semi-legible forms with an engulfing grey vapour, casting a backward nod to Paul Klee and ahead to Roberto Matta’s sci-fi fantasies. From the same year, White night (no.3) instead approached complete abstraction. Likewise, to the minute rectilinear grid comprising Untitled (1944; no.15) Tobey opposed the zigzags in Universal field (1945; no.22) and the recognisable arcs powering Gothic (1943; no.10). The quality that does tend to tire is grissaille, beguiling as its lambent glow can be. The dilemma inhered in Tobey’s means, since by definition disegno admits color only with difficulty. The one cleaves to contours, the other requires planes. Indeed, in the few instances when Tobey introduced more assertive hues – witness Happy yellow (1945; no.19) and the blue Fragments in time and space (1956; no.59) – they look a bit arbitrary. Chromophobia suited his asceticism.

The catalogue seeks to differentiate Tobey from Abstract Expressionism, perhaps to stress his singularity. This raises questions. Was not Tobey’s spiritual universalism on a par with that espoused by, say, Richard Pousette-Dart, Mark Rothko and Clifford Still? (Maybe tellingly, the first gets no mention in the curator’s essay.) Similarly, his ardour for the city echoed Kline’s, while the Ford Still? (Maybe tellingly, the first gets no mention in the curator’s essay.) Similarly, his ardour for the city echoed Kline’s, while the Ferrari writing’ to describe such palimpsests may be obscure insofar as it was not Tobey’s (and perhaps stemmed from his Willard Gallery exhibition in New York in 1944), although he liked it. Nevertheless, the catalogue misses the obvious conclusion. That is, a derivation from the phrase ‘The Great White Way’ – which Tobey’s Broadway neon pictures confirm (no.34). These neon pictures continue a direction (unacknowledged here) begun by Joseph Stella’s Battleground of America (1942; no.70) and ink-on-paper works in the East-Asian literati or sumi-e style (nos.66 and 67). Centred on a wall in the final gallery, the largest piece in the show, Unknown journey (1966; Centre Pompidou, Paris; no.81) read like a swansong. The poignant title resembles an epitaph for a genuine visionary. If perhaps Tobey stopped just short of great- ness, he never failed to go it alone into the white nights where East meets West.


82. Threading light, by Mark Tobey. 1944. Tempera on board, 74.3 by 50.2 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; exh. Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover).