

Is Robert Motherwell Poised to Catch Up to His Abstract Expressionist Peers?

Eileen Kinsella, Monday, May 4, 2015



Robert Motherwell, *The Big A* (1986-1987)
(Estimate: \$1-1.5 million). Image: Courtesy Christie's Images Ltd.

Marking the centenary of the birth of [Robert Motherwell](#), there are several major exhibitions this year of the work of the celebrated Abstract Expressionist painter. When art historians, dealers, and auction experts speak of Motherwell, especially those who knew and worked with him, it is always in reverential tones. The artist, who was born on January 24, 1915, and coined the term "The New York School," was a major influence on his peers and later generations of artists alike (see [artnet Asks Robert Motherwell Champion Bernard Jacobson and Motherwell Fetches \\$2.7 Million at Sotheby's Day Sale](#)).

The Dedalus Foundation, which Motherwell founded, has been an integral part of furthering the artist's legacy. It has published a catalogue raisonné, overseen product licensing, and provided authentication services—an activity many artist foundations have begun to abandon because of the increasing liability associated with the practice (see [Spanish Dealer Arrested for Role In Knoedler Forgery Scam](#) and [Knoedler Art Forgers Charged by US Attorney in Long Awaited Indictment](#)).

And while Motherwell's market has always excited serious collector interest, and growth has been robust and steady over the years, his auction roster lacks the type of blockbuster and headline-grabbing prices so often achieved at auction for works by his peers. While paintings by Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and [Jackson Pollock](#) frequently coast into the range of tens of millions of dollars at auction, the record at auction for a Motherwell painting is \$3.7 million.

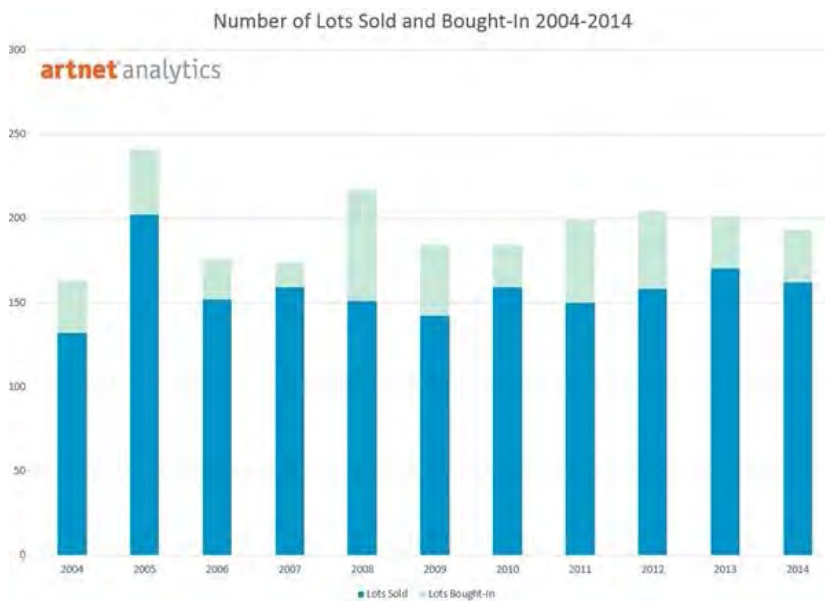


"Motherwell for a long time had reputation of being the intellectual among the Abstract Expressionists," Jennifer Yum, a vice president and head of the morning sale of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's, told artnet News over email. "He was the voice of the New York School where he acted as the bridge between the Surrealist expatriates such as Andre Breton and Matta living in New York and the fledgling new painting emerging at the same time. When you are considered the voice or spokesperson of a movement, I suppose you are perceived as more of an observer and less a participant, which, in reality, couldn't be farther from the truth."

Motherwell is best known for his *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, a series of works which are the most sought-after among collectors and not surprisingly account for the two highest prices at auction—*Elegy to the Spanish Republic #122* (1972) holds the record \$3.7 million, which was set at the contemporary evening auction at [Sotheby's New York](#) in November 2012 (on an estimate of \$2.8 million). *Elegy to the Spanish Republic no. 71* (1961) achieved the second-highest price, \$2.9 million,

when it was sold eight years earlier, also at a contemporary evening sale, at [Christie's New York](#) in November 2004.

Though that final price was far higher than the \$600–800,000 estimate, the fact that it remained unsurpassed for eight years—even as the broader contemporary art market soared and peaked before tumbling—is telling about how gradually the Motherwell market has moved.



"It's astonishing compared with these kinds of mega prices you see for his peers," said Scott Nussbaum, Sotheby's vice president and contemporary art specialist, to [artnet News](#). "I think the primary reason for that is there is pressure at the \$4 million level because there are so few master paintings available. There is a new breed of collector looking for the absolute best of best. We haven't seen [a Motherwell master painting] in a long time."

Noting the Spanish Elegy painting that sold in 2004, Nussbaum said it was "a real trophy of his oeuvre." He also noted the importance of that sale having been made a little over a decade ago: "In 2004 \$3 million was a substantial amount of money. The reason why we haven't seen a major price is because there haven't been any of those caliber works on the market. "

To date, just 15 of the more than 4,000 Motherwell works listed in the [artnet Price Database](#) have sold for \$1 million or more, and most of those auction prices were achieved in recent years. What is perhaps more surprising is the range of works that have sold in the top tier of the artists prices. The Spanish Elegies, while accounting for eight of the top 20 highest Motherwell prices are not as dominant as one would expect.

Yum says she is seeing "the continuing trend of the sale of his paintings performing beyond sale estimate ranges."

"The publication of the Motherwell catalogue raisonné of his paintings and collages in 2012," said Yum, "made collectors realize that many works are already in major museum and public collections that won't be available in the marketplace."

Last fall [Paul Kasmin Gallery](#) organized a show of Motherwell's [works on paper from 1951 to 1991](#) and in Brooklyn at the [Gallery at Industry City](#), a show of Motherwell prints opened on April 17, presented in conjunction with the Dedalus Foundation. For the second half of May

(May 15–31), the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown and the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM) (also working with the Dedalus Foundation), will host "Robert Motherwell: A Centennial Celebration," a two-week showcase of exhibitions, lectures, and workshops commemorating Motherwell's legacy in Provincetown (see the [comprehensive listing](#) at the Dedalus Foundation website).

On May 1, "[Robert Motherwell: Opens](#)," opened at Andrea Rosen. The show presents a comprehensive group of the vibrant abstract series he created starting in 1967 and continued making through the early 1980s. The works in the *Open* series are visually sparse and tranquil, usually three charcoal lines, or a charcoal rectangle, against a single-color background partly inspired by whitewashed facades of adobes.



Robert Motherwell, *Open No. 120* (1969). Acrylic on canvas.
Photo: Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery

Rosen hopes the show, which she has been working on for two-and-a-half years, will be a revelation for viewers. "While Motherwell has never been historically underrated," she told *artnet News*, "it's really interesting to see how people can revisit their interest in an artist. What I find to be particularly fascinating is how the more historically significant an artist is, the more narrow our reading of them is."

The show features a mix of small, medium, and large scale "Open" series paintings—about 15 in total—that are roughly split between those on loan and those available for sale at a price ranging from about \$500,000 to \$2.5 million.

Activity in the auction realm suggests momentum is gathering for this series. *artnet News* got an exclusive look at the works at Andrea Rosen just before the show opened, and they look extraordinarily fresh and

contemporary. It is not hard to imagine their intense appeal to both collectors of classic AbEx works and cutting edge contemporary art alike.

This past November in New York, Christie's sold *Open No. 23: In Blue with Variations of Ultramarine* (1968) for \$2.4 million, far higher than its presale estimate, which was \$800,000 to \$1.2 million. Yum said the "Open" series is attracting more interest. "I understand why it would appeal to current taste," she said. "It's minimal, yet has a very painted surface, the articulation of space."

Nussbaum confirmed that there's peaking interest. "We've seen a big jump in interest and prices," he said referring to the "Open" series works in the past few seasons, alone.

This month, several "Open" series works, as well as other Motherwell works, are coming on the auction block at Christie's, Sotheby's, and Phillips.



Robert Motherwell, *Open No. 164* (1970-1977) will be offered at Sotheby's May 13 contemporary day sale with an estimate of \$800,000-1.2 million. Property Sold To Benefit The Allen-Stevenson School, New York. Image: Courtesy Sotheby's.

Sotheby's is offering this Open series work (above), (as well as two other Motherwell paintings) at its May 13 contemporary art day sale, with an estimate of \$800,000 to \$1.2 million. The proceeds of the sale will benefit the Allen-Stevenson School, an independent, all-boys school on the upper east side of New York.

Christie's will offer the large scale Motherwell painting *The Big A* (1986-1987) at its May 14 contemporary day sale, with an estimate of \$1-\$1.5

million.

In late 2013, the Guggenheim Museum presented a show featuring yet another, lesser known, aspect of Motherwell's output—early collages and drawings, 60 works in all, that dated from 1941–1951. Yum says Motherwell demonstrated "a very keen and deep understanding of the act of collage and he really extended the formal qualities of this practice far beyond the Dada and Surrealists rendition of this form of art."

An untitled 1978 collage is on offer at Phillips contemporary day sale with an estimate of \$40,000 to \$60,000, seemingly a steal when compared to the major paintings.



Phillips will offer this untitled, 1978 collage by Robert Motherwell at its upcoming contemporary sales in New York. The work is expected to sell for between \$40–60,000.

Image: Courtesy Phillips.

"When significant artists make different bodies of work," Rosen said, perhaps presciently, about the growing attention to other areas of Motherwell's prolific output, "they're not always understood in their own time or acknowledged for their complexity or their significance."