Lights up on Mark Rothko, the famous abstract expressionist painter of the 1960s. He stands stoically, examining one of his Seagram Murals. But to the audience, the painting itself is invisible. They see him looking directly at them. He contemplates them in a prolonged silence as he enters a mysterious yet intimate exchange with them—a communion. When Ken, his new assistant, walks in, Rothko immediately hushes him.

“What do you see?” Rothko asks (Logan 9).

After a moment Ken simply replies, “Red” (10). And we sense the passion suggested by the color, sense the life that will fuel Red’s inquiry into the profound interaction among the characters: the art, the audience, and the artist.

Playwright John Logan gives the actor playing Ken little direction about the moment in which he contemplates Rothko’s painting. When I first read the scene, I was at a loss. I could not imagine what was going through Ken’s head until I went to see a Rothko painting myself. On a rainy Sunday in early October, I spent an afternoon at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. I had heard that the MoMA did not have a Rothko painting, so I went without an agenda. And while other pieces sparked in me a range of emotions, I wanted to see a Rothko. So I asked the security guard if there were any.

“Nope,” she curtly replied, “We don’t have any.”

As I thanked her and walked away, she began to chase after me calling, “Wait! I think we do. I just remembered.”

She directed me to the very last piece I saw that day: No. 16 (Red, Brown, and Black)—the piece that still affects me.

Many in the crowded room walked straight past the enormous painting without a second thought, while others posed in front of it for a photo. But I decided to spend some time with No. 16 because I wanted to experience what the real Mark Rothko intended for me as a member of the audience. Yet as I stood before No. 16, the first thought that popped into my head was, “So?”
For the first few moments, I felt stale. It was not stirring me. I felt as if I had no relationship with it. We existed separately—almost as if I weren’t there.

In *Red*, we meet Rothko doing something that makes us uncomfortable. He stands in prolonged stillness giving his total attention to a painting, allowing it to “pulsate” and “work on [him]” and “wrap its arms around [him]” as he “engage[s] with it” (9). When I sat frustrated before *No. 16* that day at the Museum of Modern Art, I wondered how I might be able to find a similar connection, how I might “engage” with paint on a canvas. I did not know if I was supposed to act or if I would be acted upon. I just wanted to let the painting do its work. I, like Ken, had to learn to let Rothko’s work “pulsate” for me.

In her essay “Art Objects,” Jeanette Winterson grapples with learning to understand and interact with art, explaining that for her, at that moment of first encounter, art demands a new and unfamiliar language. She tells the story of being struck by a painting that “had more power to stop [her] than [she] had to walk on”; she found herself uncomfortable with the painting because it, like “all art . . . is a foreign city” with a different language and way of thought (89). She wants us to know that to understand art, we must adapt and learn about the world of the piece, separate from the world in which we live.

After sitting before *No. 16* for a few moments, I realized that I was unable to look away. Something foreign had happened to me and in me that I could not name. I had been affected by visual art before, but never so intensely. This piece was different from the others I had seen that day. Perhaps it was the genius of Rothko’s deceptive simplicity. Perhaps it was because I had gained some insight into the mind of Rothko through *Red*. There is no way to know. The only thing that mattered in that elongated moment was the painting’s powerful hold on me—an almost otherworldly hold. I was beginning to exist in the foreign city of *No. 16*. It felt as if another being were acting upon a part of me that I had not known existed. In a way, it was magical.

In her interview with *Time* about her career and craft, Tony-nominated actress Michelle Williams explains that some of what she experiences as she acts comes from an “unknown” place, and that it has an “element of magic.” As an actor, I long for the moments in which I am acted upon by a force outside myself that comes from that “unknown” place. This is, perhaps, why I found my moment with Rothko’s work so powerful and so cathartic. I was taken into the imaginary world of the painting where I experienced something that cannot be wholly nailed down. I cannot say what powerful force brought me there. There is no way to know.
My acting teacher tells us to “take each other in” so that we will not think about our actions but will allow them to flow freely. As I take in a scene partner, I want nothing. I expect nothing. I simply wait for something to strike me. While I need simply to be present to have a genuine interaction with my scene partner, I must usually be active when I look at a painting. I must fuel an interaction. And yet both kinds of “taking in” bring me out of this world into another. I am pulled into something so vivid and truthful that words fail me when I try to describe the sensation. The interaction is not of the mind but of the gut.

Sometimes, that gut reaction is not pretty or comfortable. In an early exercise, my partner and I were going back and forth until out of nowhere I shouted to her, “Shut up!” I did not realize what I had said until seconds after the sound left my mouth. The “Shut up!” had come from that same foreign place within myself that No. 16 had somehow reached, a place that sometimes brings out ugly, disturbing experiences. In Red, Rothko calls for a painting (like his own) that “[lets] out a silent howl of something feral and foul and primal and REAL. Not nice. Not fine. Real. A moan of rapture” (51-52).

Immersed in No. 16, I felt in the middle of my chest the beginnings of grief as if I had just lost a loved one. As the grief began to overtake me, sadness surfaced as well. I was unsure if these feelings were merely brought to the surface by the painting, or if they had been created by the art. My face began to feel red and hot as these emotions took hold of me. Tears welled in my eyes. Looking back, I still cannot pinpoint why I was moved so greatly. What I do know, however, is that this painting made me feel something truthful. Although the experience was not pleasant, it was satisfying. Cathartic. Beautiful. The art “worked on” me and I on it. This was also an experience I wanted. I was open to it. And although in the moment, the intense sadness was frightening, I was proud to have taken a step in my understanding of the work of art.

Logan’s Rothko calls the people who do this active work with art real “human being[s]” because they are in touch with the part of their humanity from which the artist created the art (10). They are fully alive because they are not shutting off pieces of themselves to hide from pain, discomfort, and anguish. Winterson explores what the audience must give to a painting and concludes that art demands “increasing discomfort,” “increasing distraction,” “increasing invention,” and “increasing irritation” for the sake of full comprehension and experience (91, 92). And if art is truly born of the human experience, it must demand from us things that we might not enjoy giving. In my acting training, we struggle to allow the unpleasant moments to affect us.
When our partner screams, “Go to Hell!” it causes us pain. But we must learn to take it in, if we are to create our art. For me to have that very personal moment with No. 16, I had to give myself over to the painting so that it could do its “work” on me, even if the process yielded pain. In the molding of No. 16, Rothko also shaped me. But he was only able to do this work on me because I gave myself permission to surrender, something I had not done before.

Rothko’s goal is to bring us together with the art, to create “[a] place of communion,” as he explains to Ken (17). Christians recognize the doctrine of communion as a coming together, a spiritual exchange. But for this exchange to happen, the supplicant must have faith. Growing up in the Christian church, I heard time and time again that all I had to do was believe to feel a connection with God. I know now that submitting to any great unknown can reap its own rewards even as our submission puts us at risk. Because I went into my exchange with No. 16 with faith that I could gain from it something new, I was more susceptible to its power. It did not necessarily mean that I would experience something profound, but faith created the possibility. I had to have faith in the art, faith that I was not being ridiculous as I stared at a painting alone for a prolonged period. Giving oneself over into another world is in and of itself an act of acknowledgement about the power of art.

When I stood to leave No. 16 I found it very difficult. I had to pull my eyes away. Even leaving MoMA, I could not shake the image or its effect. Through some kind of “magic,” we created a symbiotic need for one another.

John Berger speaks of symbiosis in his essay “Steps Toward a Small Theory of the Visible,” explaining that we look at paintings because they offer “us company . . . when the painted image is not a copy but the result of a dialogue, the painted thing speaks if we listen” (39). I craved that dialogue, faithful that it could occur even in a world that Berger notes is full of solitude. The comfort and hope that company can give fuels a great desire in us to commune with art. He compares this relationship between audience and art to the relationship between Heaven, a place whose existence is contingent upon faith, and earth. He notes that “the difference is infinite between heaven and earth, yet the distance is minimal” and so it is with art and the viewer (35). The viewer stands but a few feet from the painting; if she does not give herself over to the painting, the space between them is unbridgeable. Without the communion between Heaven and earth, art and audience, the “dialogue” is lost; symbiosis ceases.

In Red we learn that Rothko paints for the people. He does not paint for himself, just as the actor does not lose herself in a character for self-pleasure.
Rothko paints so that he might affect his world, the world from which he is physically separated, but with which he is in constant communion. He hopes that his Seagram Murals will be “inescapable and inexorable, like doom” so that those who come into communion with them will be forced to recognize their own place in the world (16). Ultimately, art—visual and performance—aims to affect its audience by showing them something about themselves they may not have known. Rothko stares out at us, at the painting that occupies the same place as our bodies, “invisible, unenterable but infinitely close” and he invites us in, asks for our faith and our participation so that we might be transformed (Berger 35).

WORKS CITED


