

Van Horne, Greenberg, Pollock and Others

The other day I watched *Pollock* on a DVD, a movie I had seen when it was released several years ago. My interest had been revived by reading *A Complicated Marriage*, the autobiography of Janice Van Horne, a young Bennington graduate who fell into the art world in the mid-1950s through her marriage to the critic Clement Greenberg. This brought her into contact with nearly all of the principals depicted in the movie-- Jackson Pollock, his wife, Lee Krasner, his brothers, the painter/collector Alfonso Ossorio, to a limited extent May and Harold Rosenberg, Franz Kline, Elaine and Willem de Kooning and Peggy Guggenheim. A cultivated woman and a competent writer, Van Horne's interests fell closer to literature than painting and sculpture, and the discussions her husband undertook with painters who later became famous often bored her. Endless conversations about flatness and "the integrity of the pictured plane," the disappearance of subject matter, abstraction versus representation were topics that did not attract her. A trip to Europe with her husband in 1959 included a visit with an English novelist, Sybille Bedford, and offered a brief respite from the discussions of the fine arts. Although Bedford seemed affected, her interests and friendships, which included Isherwood, Auden, Spender, and Kingsly Amis, easily held the attention of Greenberg and Van Horne. "By 1959," she laments, referring to her endless hours with New York painters, "I was an expert on what was boring."

The movie of course focuses not on Greenberg and his wife but on Pollock and his, and tells in abbreviated form a familiar story of post-war American painting, a narrative I described in my review of John Updike's novel *Seek My Face*. American

artists, partly under the influence of surrealist painters driven to the United States by Nazi Germany--Max Ernst, Andre Breton, Andre Masson, Roberto Matta, and many others--gradually left behind the art of representation, the social realism of the Depression, and began to produce abstract art. The imperious Peggy Guggenheim, briefly married to Ernst, returned to the U.S. in the summer of 1941 after years of European expatriation, and shortly thereafter presented her private collection (and other work) in a gallery on 57th Street named Art of This Century. The facility brought younger American painters, including Pollock, Motherwell and Rothko, out of their secluded studios and into the world of critics, museum officials and the collecting public, small as it was at the time. Howard Putzel, a Los Angeles art dealer who appears in several scenes in *Pollock*, was instrumental in persuading Guggenheim to pay more attention to the war-time productions of the American painters who later became titans of the art world. After Guggenheim returned to Europe in late 1946 and closed her gallery, Betty Parsons opened her own a few doors away, exhibiting the American artists that Guggenheim left behind when she and her galaxy of stars returned to Europe.

Pollock and Lee Krasner left the city a year before Guggenheim did. Instead of going to Venice, however, they went to Springs, a small hamlet on the eastern edge of Long Island. The decision is said to have been made by Pollock, who wanted a quieter milieu in which to paint. The farmstead they bought was remote and also exceedingly uncomfortable, lacking indoor plumbing and anything more than a small stove that required constant tending and produced heat that quickly dissipated. The couple's first winter in Springs is said to have been especially severe. Not until the late 1940s, when his work began to sell, was Pollock able to renovate the property and make it what people

today would consider acceptable. The eastern end of Long Island had attracted artists for decades; Winslow Homer and less-well-known painters had lived in the area in the past, reportedly because of the quality of the "northern light." With time, Harold Rosenberg and his wife became distant neighbors, and as the decades passed, development set in and the area became a summer retreat for those who could afford a second home.

After the war ended, a critical line-up began to take shape that saw Clement Greenberg emerge as an important critic and Pollock's foremost champion, while Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess threw their considerable prestige behind Willem de Kooning, who remained in Greenwich Village. By the mid-1950s, however, tension beset relations between Pollock and Greenberg, though historians dispute the cause. Pollock biographers, and Krasner herself, claim that the artist's return to representational painting alienated Greenberg, a view the movie adopts. In a scene about two-thirds through the film, Pollock responds to an unfavorable review Greenberg penned of his show in 1954. However, the critic's biographer, Florence Rubenfeld, argues that Greenberg was not offended by the return to the figure, and there is some documentary evidence to support this. Not a dispute over aesthetics, she says, but rather a social confrontation at an exhibition in Bennington in 1951, induced by Pollock's drinking, provoked the breakdown. But Greenberg's essays from the fifties indicate dissatisfaction with the work Pollock was doing near the end of his career. "The references to the human form in Pollock's latest paintings," he wrote in a review from 1952, "are symptoms of a new phase but not of a reversal of direction. Like some older masters. . . he develops according to a double rhythm in which each beat harks back to the one before the last." But in "American-Style Painting," a well-known piece from early 1955, Greenberg

claims that the Pollock show from 1954 "was the first to contain pictures that were forced, pumped, dressed up," and represented a clear falling off from the work offered to the public in earlier exhibitions. In an interview with Jeffrey Potter, reproduced in *To a Violent Grave*, an early Pollock biography, Greenberg says that "In '51, with the black and white show, [Pollock] was still good, but in '52 he began to wobble." He adds that Pollock "had his ten-year run," which would have begun in the early 1940s. "What happens with painters, poets, composers," he says to Potter, "you have this run, you somehow know what you can do next, but then the inspiration is false." In the movie, the screenwriters employ this interview material nearly verbatim.

The experience seems characteristic of the art world of the forties and fifties, because of the confusing new forms and the trouble dealers and the public had with interpreting them. The anxiety extended to the artists themselves, dependent on critics, dealers, museums and collectors to support them emotionally and also financially. Greenberg accepted fees from groups of painters living outside of New York who sought his opinion of their work, and his rival, Harold Rosenberg, apparently did the same. Saul Bellow, in the short story "What Kind of Day Did You Have?", offers this description of the art critic Harold Rosenberg, disguised as Victor Wulpy. Katrina, Victor's mistress, is spending a moment alone with an older man who has come east to renew contact with Victor:

"Victor was one of those writers who took command of a lot of painters, told them what they were doing, what they should do. Society didn't care about art anyway, it was busy with other things, and art became the plaything of intellectuals. Real painters, real painting, those are very rare. There are masses of educated people, and they'll tell you that they're all for poetry, philosophy, or painting, but they don't know them, don't do them, don't really care about them, sacrifice nothing for them, and really can't spare them

the time of day--can't read, can't see, and can't hear. Their real interests are commercial, professional, political, sexual, financial. They don't live by art, with art, through art. But they're willing in a way to be imposed upon, and that's what the pundits do. They do it to the artists as well. The brush people are led by the word people. It's like some General Booth with a big brass band leading artists to an abstract heaven."

Janice Van Horne, who of course was married to a famous critic, Greenberg, is unhappy with the portrait of her husband in *Pollock*. Jeffrey Tambor, who makes a try at depicting him, is a mere caricature, Van Horne claims, offering the image of a hostile, imperial critic who "sneers" and "pontificates." "Very un-Clem," Van Horne says. Marcia Gay Harden, who claimed an Oscar for her role as Lee Krasner, also leaves her cold. But Ed Harris, who directed the film and plays the leading figure, is "extraordinary" and "right on target." A few months after viewing the movie with a small audience and the cast, Van Horne found herself sharing a bus with some women while making her way to her home in Washington Heights. The other women had recently seen *Pollock* and were sympathetic for Krasner, whom they were persuaded to believe had sacrificed her life and career for her husband. "I was itching to interrupt them," Van Horne writes. "*No, you don't get it. Not only did she choose that life, she had been on the prowl for years, and when she found him, she got him in her sights and bagged him.*" A page later she adds, "I couldn't find the Lee that I knew in the movie. Marcia Gay Harden reduced the story to the overbearing man and the beaten-down woman. As I had never seen the soft underbelly of Lee, most of that would have ended up on the cutting-room floor. In my movie I would have portrayed a perfectly matched, toe-to-toe marriage."

I have to dispute her assessment of the movie. In the opening scene of the movie, a drunken Jackson Pollock is lugged up the stairs by his brother, with whom he is living. It establishes our impression that Pollock was unable to either live alone or take care of himself. The biographical accounts that I have read emphasize--as does the movie--Pollock's emotional fragility and susceptibility to alcohol, his propensity for muttering, casting vacant stares at his wife, fighting with others, or crying. Outside of his studio, in the social world, Harris presents a Pollock who is often lost, drunk and unable to observe basic conventions and engage other people around him. The scene where Pollock turns his back on revelers and urinates in the fireplace at Peggy Guggenheim's New Year's Eve party is a well-entrenched element of the Pollock legend. I don't see how the couple could really have been "perfectly matched," because the child-like Pollock needed a caretaker willing and able to promote his work, as Krasner does in the movie and apparently did (chiefly for her own benefit) after Pollock died. It required subordinating herself in the marriage, but--on the other hand--it did not preclude Krasner from developing a career of her own. And Van Horne herself concedes the difficulty women painters had in the 1930s, when three women she later knew--Krasner, Elaine de Kooning and the less-well-known Mercedes Matter--were students at Hans Hofmann's art school in New York. "They were all good painters," Van Horne writes, and "savvy to the near impossibility of a woman's getting recognition in those years. It wouldn't have been enough for our trio to hook up with any artist; he would have to be the greatest painter in New York." If this interpretation is correct, all of the wives would have had to exploit the hoped-for celebrity of their spouses as a way of maintaining their own careers.

The crash scene at the end of the movie is a somewhat prolonged moment as the camera follows Pollock and his terrified passengers careening down a country road. Van Horne describes the event as the ghastly culmination of what had been planned as a formal evening. She, Greenberg and others had gone to a piano recital at the home of Ossorio, the collector; Pollock, Kligman and Metzger were supposed to join them. During an intermission in the recital, Ossorio learned of the accident and informed Greenberg. A number of people, including Greenberg and Van Horne, immediately drove to the scene, only to find it blocked off by the police and an ambulance. At their home later that night, they contacted Lee Krasner, then lodging at a Paris hotel. Within a day, she returned to New York, and quarreled with Greenberg over the eulogy she expected him to deliver. The critic, as disturbed by Pollock's willingness to kill the innocent young woman from the city as he was to kill himself, resolved to mention her in his remarks. This offended Krasner, who wanted the service to center exclusively on her now-dead husband. I suppose few would blame her, under the circumstances, for not taking a balanced or fair-minded approach to the matter. She quickly ended any discussion of the subject, and at the service the next day, a eulogy was delivered by a local minister "who dryly summarized the highlights of Jackson's career." He cannot have known much about them. A suit was later brought by Kligman and Edith Metzger's family, and, according to Van Horne, "each were awarded the token sum of \$10,000 by the widow." At the trial, Van Horne reports that "Ruth testified that Jackson had not been drunk and had driven slowly on the way home," testimony entirely at odds with the accident scene, which was on a stretch of road near his home familiar to Pollock and everyone else living in the area. Van Horne considers the account inexplicably

duplicitous. In the months before Pollock's death, his dealer had offered *Autumn Mist*, one of his paintings, to the Museum of Modern Art for \$8,000; after the accident, Krasner insisted on \$30,000. The painting soon was acquired by the Metropolitan at Krasner's price.

References

Adams, Henry. *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009.

Greenberg, Clement. *Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, vol. 3. Ed. John O'Brien. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1993.

Harris, Ed, director. *Pollock*. 2001.

Potter, Jeffrey. *To a Violent Grave*. New York: Putnam's Sons, 1985.

Rubinfeld, Florence. *Clement Greenberg: A Life*. New York: Scribner, 1997.

Van Horne, Janice. *A Complicated Marriage: My Life with Clement Greenberg*. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012.