Spirit in the (Monochromatic) Light

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

I

Often heralded as one of the most important and influential artists of the twentieth century, Mark Rothko would not live to celebrate the 1971 opening of the chapel in Houston bearing his name. Rothko's death by suicide in 1970 at the age of sixty-six sent shockwaves through an art world that he and his co-conspirators, in what became known as The New York School, had helped fundamentally to transform through their experimentations with abstract expressionism. Though he flirted with social realist aesthetics early in his career, Rothko became enamored by surrealism's explorations of the power and possibilities of the unconscious mind, especially for artmaking. Attendant concerns about faith, myth, and spirituality led him to develop a practice that would ultimately yield hundreds of iconic works that have become celebrated for the "atmosphere of piety and wonder" they tend to arouse.[1] "So seductive is the quality of Rothko's color, and so complete is its hold on our attention, that we experience its later descent into the shadows as a very emphatic and concrete emotion," *New York Times* art critic Hilton Kramer wrote in his review of the Guggenheim Museum's landmark 1978 exhibition, *Mark Rothko, 1903–1970: A Retrospective*, curated by Diane Waldman.[2] In addition to a nuanced engagement with color, Rothko's work is distinguished by its idiosyncratic play with shape, scale, and light. His color-field paintings, in particular, have become venerated for their uncanny capacity to elicit a surprising range of affective responses.

Rothko had already achieved international acclaim by the time two wealthy art collectors and patrons, John and Dominique de Menil, commissioned him to produce several site-specific works for a new chapel to be built in Houston on the campus of the University of St. Thomas. "For Rothko, the Chapel commission provided a long-sought opportunity to shape and control a total environment encompassing a group of paintings created for a specific space," Walter Hopps writes.[3] The de

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Menils initially tapped architect Philip Johnson to collaborate with Rothko on the design of the space. However, disagreements with Rothko led Johnson to withdraw from the project. In a 1971 essay published in *Art Journal*, Dominique de Menil described the clash between the two men as follows:

> The conflict which arose between the architect and the artist centered about the lighting of the paintings. Johnson had planned to cap the building with a truncated pyramid. It was to function as a kind of reversed funnel, diffusing the light on the walls. Rothko opposed the pyramid with quiet obstinacy. He wanted a skylight similar to the one he had in his studio. The paintings, he felt, should be seen in the same light in which they had been painted.[4]

Design issues were not the only thing that threatened to derail the project. As scholar Ryan Dohoney explains, "In the late 1960s, tensions between the de Menils and the Congregation of St. Basil reached a breaking point as their visions for the university diverged. The de Menils divested from the school and redirected their patronage to Rice University."[5] Seemingly at issue between the de Menils and the stewards of the University were concerns about whether the influence the couple exerted through their financial generosity was somehow diminishing the institution's Catholic identity. Consequently, what was initially conceived as an explicitly religious venue had to be reimagined as an ecumenical one. Houston-based architects Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry took over the design and construction of the space after Johnson's withdrawal. They worked closely with Rothko to ensure that the final design aligned with his vision for how the fourteen paintings that he excitedly created and selected for installation would be experienced by visitors. Prone to bouts of depression throughout much of his adult life, Rothko would never get to have that experience himself.

Rothko's death cast a pall over the chapel's dedication ceremony, which took place on February 27, 1971. So too did the fatal heart attack of fellow artist Barnett Newman, whose *Broken Obelisk* was positioned amid a reflecting pool near the chapel's main entrance. The de Menils dedicated the sculpture to the memory of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., whose assassination in 1968 also remained a lingering source of grief. Many notables from a variety of faiths and backgrounds gathered for the chapel's opening events. Among them was the avant-garde composer Morton Feldman, a longtime friend of Rothko and the de Menils. Feldman's attendance proved fortuitous because, as Dohoney writes, "Dominique and John de Menil asked Feldman to write music for their newly christened ecumenical center." Feldman, Dohoney continues, "happily obliged. He finished the score that summer, and it was premiered just over a year after the dedication on April 9, 1972."[6]

Reflecting on the creation of the composition, which he titled *Rothko Chapel*, in a 1976 interview for the art magazine *Studio International*, Feldman explained, "The Rothko Chapel piece was a very interesting commission because it was the only

score where other factors determined what kind of music it was going to be. For example, it leaned very heavily on me that the first time I met Rothko, which must have been around 1962, I remember him standing against the wall talking to me about Mendelssohn."[7] Feldman went on to note that the composition he created was, at its core, autobiographical and deeply informed by the form and content of both the chapel and Rothko's paintings. Striking about *Rothko Chapel*, which opens and closes with viola solos and includes parts for solo soprano, celesta, percussion, and a chorus, were the ways it at once captured and activated the spirit of contemplativeness evoked by the environment for which it was written. Alex Ross has described the piece as a "choral masterwork," asserting that it was Feldman's "most personal, affecting work."[8]

II

The Newark-born composer, conductor, multi-instrumentalist, and educator Tyshawn Sorey echoed these sentiments when discussing the origins of his *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, a composition the Park Avenue Armory, DACAMERA, and the Rothko Chapel co-commissioned to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the latter. "I happened upon Feldman's piece in my early twenties, and the music spoke to me in such a profound way," Sorey explained. "I wanted to construct a piece in dialogue both with Mark Rothko, whose 14 paintings I feel are synonymous with my music and of course my engagement with Feldman's. Further, I also wanted to tie it to other works influential to me, like Duke Ellington's sacred music, spirituals, and finally, the recent events and tragedies of the 21st century—the pandemic, Black Lives Matter, the war in Ukraine, the January 6th insurrections, mass shootings, isolation, loss, lockdown, and suffering," he continued.[9] A 2017 recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, among other accolades, Sorey has emerged in recent years as one of the most innovative and prolific composers of his generation. In 2021, *The New York Times* anointed him "composer of the year," noting that "the style for which he has been best known since his 2007 album *That/Not*, his debut release as a bandleader, owes much to Feldman: spare, spacious, glacially paced, often quiet yet often ominous, focusing the listener purely on the music's unfolding."[10] With *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, Sorey extends his commitment to using music to surface and explore some of the dissonances and resonances that add complexity to our everyday lives.

Of particular importance to Sorey in creating the piece was evoking the spirit of meditation that often absorbs those who sojourn to Rothko's chapel: "My music is synonymous with meditation in that it is intended to expand one's consciousness and fulfillment THROUGH the act of listening as well as giving the experiencer the opportunity to heighten their sense of awareness … my music perfectly aligns with the intention of the Chapel, which has always served as a place for meditation."[11] Sorey also intended for the piece, which mostly unfolds in the key of grief and mourning, to speak to the unique power of music to inspire new ways of being in and experiencing the world.

Monochromatic Light (Afterlife) at Park Avenue Armory in 2022. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography. Courtesy Park Avenue Armory.

Steven Schick, Sarah Rothenberg, and Tyshawn Sorey in *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)* in 2022. Photo: Stephanie Berger Photography. Courtesy Park Avenue Armory.

The premiere of the composition at Rothko's Chapel was postponed by nearly a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When the chapel did finally welcome guests to experience Sorey's music in February 2022, it both occasioned celebration and provided sanctuary to reckon and wrestle with some of the ugly feelings stirred by the cruelty and losses of recent years. Violist Kim Kashkashian, percussionist Steven Schick, pianist Sarah Rothenberg, bass-baritone Davóne Tines, and members of the Houston Chamber Choir joined Sorey for the premiere performance, which he also conducted. Positioned within the chapel's recently renovated octagonal confines and surrounded by Rothko's deeply hued, large-scale paintings, the artists activated the space anew, filling it with sounds that evoked the spirit of art, reflection, and humanity that had come to define the space over its first fifty years. In his review of the performance, Ross observed that "from the start, Sorey shapes his material so that it acquires a narrative momentum." He went on to add, "If Feldman looks back to a world that is gone, Sorey might be gesturing toward a tragedy that is ongoing."[12] With *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, Sorey prompted considerations of the ways we might transform ongoing tragedy into something poignant and perhaps even beautiful.

III

Notably, even as it was conceived as a site-specific project for the Rothko Chapel, Sorey imagined an afterlife for the composition from the beginning. As one of its co-commissioners, the Park Avenue Armory slotted an expanded version of the piece to be presented as a part of its season of public programming in October 2022. Sorey assembled a team of collaborators—director Peter Sellars, choreographer Reggie (Regg Roc) Gray, and visual artist Julie Mehretu, among them—to help him envision how best to present the piece in the Armory's much larger space and without Rothko's paintings providing an imposing backdrop. The resulting performance, which I experienced on the final night of its New York run, at once soothed and stirred fresh yearnings for more lush and abundant ways of being.

Much like Rothko's paintings, Sellars's multi-sensory, multidisciplinary staging managed to conjure an "atmosphere of piety and wonder," despite the coldness and cavernousness of the Park Avenue Armory's fifty-five-thousand-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall. Upon entering the performance space, audience members were guided through a maze of risers to get to their seats, which were arranged around a small stage positioned at the center. The edge of the space was bounded by a series of interconnected platforms perched several feet above the ground. The towering paintings that Mehretu created for the event stretched to the ceiling. Mehretu, who was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1970, has achieved acclaim in recent years for her artful interrogations of such urgent issues and themes as migration, diaspora, capitalism, and the climate crisis in her practice. Her multi-layered, abstract paintings were instrumental in endowing both the space and the evening with a sense of awe complementary to Sorey's music, while also providing a

dynamic setting for Sellars's ritualistic direction and Gray's improvisatory choreography to resonate with greater force.

The idea for the pieces came from a set of questions that surfaced for the artist in the wake of the violent attack that took place at the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021: "When I started work on my paintings for this production, they began as blurred images of the January 6th insurrection," Mehretu explained, adding, "these images—depicting the eruption of contagious violence, riotous dynamics, and passionate push for white supremacy—evoke people trying to uphold a form of violence and terror, living in a moment of deep untruths and echo chambers, denying reality, history, and time. So, how does one build, create, invent, continue in that space? Where does that possibility emerge?"[13] The depth brought to the paintings by James F. Ingalls's resplendent lighting and the expressive movement provided by an ensemble of dancers versed in the signature vocabularies and textures of the street dance form Flexn suggested that this possibility perhaps emerges most remarkably in and through acts of collaborative creation.

There was no doubt much that beckoned reverence and a spirit of lightness in the performance, including the calm demeanor Sorey maintained while journeying with Kashkashian, Rothenberg, Schick, Tines, and members of The Choir of Trinity Wall Street through the composition's evocative movements. Tines, in particular, cut an imposing and compelling figure for the duration of the performance. Dressed in a black tank top and jeans, he slowly stalked through the vast space, moving up and down its multiple levels while bringing thunder and verve to musical and lyrical phrases drawn and abstracted from the spiritual, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." While making his way around the upper platforms, he often paused near the dancers posted in front of Mehretu's paintings. Their movements would seemingly draw energy and inspiration from his rumbling incantations. Those incantations took on greater fervency when Tines found his way into the aisles, focusing his gaze on the hundreds of audience members. It was, indeed, in these more intimate moments that the performance achieved something akin to transcendence—full of light, spirit, and spirituals.

Spirituals, of course, have long served as powerful testaments to the ways African Americans have engaged music as a potent resource "for manifesting joy, registering grief, expressing faith, inspiring hope, and making sense and meaning."[14] By integrating elements of this rich musical legacy into *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, Sorey called audiences to contemplate the ways in which, like Rothko and Feldman before us, we too might make sense and meaning—art, too—out of everyday despair and calamities. In its best moments, the enveloping performance also served to underscore just how important doing so might be to our flourishing.

NOTES

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2. Kramer, "Rothko."

3. Walter Hopps, foreword to *The Rothko Chapel: An Act of Faith*, by Susan J. Barnes (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 13.

4. Dominique de Menil, "The Rothko Chapel," *Art Journal* 30, no. 3 (1971): 249.

5. Ryan Dohoney, *Saving Abstraction: Morton Feldman, the de Menils, and the Rothko Chapel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.

6. Dohoney, *Saving Abstraction*, 2.

7. Gavin Bryars and Fred Orton, "Morton Feldman Interview," *Studio International*, November/December 1976, 2.

8. Alex Ross, "American Sublime," *The New Yorker*, June 11, 2006, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/06/19/american-sublime.

9. Tyshawn Sorey, Peter Sellars, Julie Mehretu, and Reggie (Regg Roc) Gray, "A Conversation with the Creative Team," Program for *Monochromatic Light (Afterlife)*, Park Avenue Armory, 4.

10. Zachary Woolfe, "Tyshawn Sorey: The Busiest Composer of the Bleakest Year," *New York Times*, January 1, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/01/arts/music/tyshawn-sorey-music.html.

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12. Alex Ross, "Music Fills the Rothko Chapel," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/14/music-fills-the-rothko-chapel.

13. Sorey, et al., "A Conversation with the Creative Team."

14. Isaiah Matthew Wooden, "'Those Songs Were More than Just': Spirituals, Queer Reckonings, and Tarell Alvin McCraney's Choir Boy," in *Contemporary Black Theatre and Performance: Acts of Rebellion, Activism, and Solidarity*, ed. DeRon Williams, Khalid Y. Long, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers (London: Methuen Drama, 2023), 25.

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