**Luke Elwes discusses Robert Motherwell’s work with Sam Cornish**

**LE**

I think for many it is ‘Elegy to the Spanish Republic’, that monumental series begun in 1949, which defines Motherwell’s place in the modernist canon. So it is refreshing to revisit him on a smaller scale in this show (the first dedicated to his work on paper in this country), and to see, beneath the shadow of his most iconic images, something more rapid, visceral and intuitive going on. You explore the role of automatism in your catalogue essay and his adherence to the unmediated mark is consistent throughout his work (with the possible exception of the ‘Open’ series, to which we might return) and reaches a daring crescendo in the ‘Lyric Suite’.

**SC**

Mark-making vs image is very much a chicken vs egg question. I am not sure we can really separate the two. The joy of Motherwell’s drawing (particularly the overtly gestural ones such as the Lyric Suite or Blue Gesture Series No. 3) is that gesture arrives as an image.

His marks are not simply traces (like the wear on a door knob or footprints in the sand) but at their best achieve something much more definite and I think much more compelling, in that they arrive as a structure, as a thing that exists with certainty in space. This simultaneous arrival of gesture and image means that I sort of shy away from the word process. Nearby in Cork Street there is an Ian Davenport exhibition. This seems to me to work in a completely different way to Motherwell. The freedom given to abstract painting by open facture and an amplification of the physical properties of paint becomes pointless and leaden despite their jaunty colours – with Davenport we really see painting as process. With Motherwell mark making is not presented literally but with illusion, as a component of an image and made much more potent because of this.  
When looking at the relation between the drawings and the final paintings perhaps I would like to stress a kind of mutual reinforcement (or perhaps rather a mutual destabilisation or antagonism). Spontaneous mark making, which Motherwell also called doodling or artful scribbling, was both a way of arriving at fresh motifs and also of returning to those which were old, and already established, of ensuring that these did not stagnate. The famous array of black and white blocks and ovoids of the Elegy series originated in a hasty drawing Motherwell did for a magazine cover; sensing that this image had power he returned again and again to it. Drawing played a vital in this return. As he explained in a 1977 monograph, each Elegy started as a hasty and tentative (perhaps automatic) set of lines. He would then add to these black blocks of colour responding to the relations his doodled lines suggested and working toward (or back toward) the distinctive elements of an Elegy. Though the originating doodles (which he often preserved) seem just as characteristically ‘Motherwell’, the relation between these lines and an Elegy is not very clear; this in a sense is the point. The original hasty scrawl is a kind of misdirection, something that prevents the final large scale Elegy being too complacent; the scrawl prevents the return being a repetition. How much he had an image of an Elegy in his mind (or in his hand) when he made the doodle is difficult to say; what is more important is to stress a circular movement, a process of making and breaking, creation and re-creation. This is vital to Motherwell’s art.

**LE**

Yes, I take your point. It was for him a kind of intuited space that involved both spontaneity and correction, where marks are simultaneously made and observed. By contrast the repeated process of pouring paint employed by Davenport owes more to Minimalism, the clinical control he exercises at odds with Motherwell’s use of accident – particularly in the Lyric Suite – to make the image. If he resists repetition he nevertheless returns to particular motifs: the ovoid, trapezoid or triangle, or the spare linear openings in his Open series.

However the five examples from the Open series in this show appear more formally controlled, less dynamic and more premeditated. They appear to mark a departure from the gestural action of the Lyric Suite and a return of another kind, to the austere refinement of Matisse‘s windows of 1914-16. They were made at the same time, in the late 60s and early 70s, as Diebenkorn’s Ocean Park series (themselves strongly influenced by Matisse’s ‘Piano Lesson’). They share the same fields of colour and what Motherwell talked about as the ‘stark beauty of dividing a flat solid plane’ (an interest he perhaps shares with Davenport). Do you think he was looking back – in a way that some at the time regarded as ‘too French’ – or looking around him, at emerging ‘colour field’ painters in the US like Noland and Frankenthaler?

**SC**

Motherwell said of the Open series: ‘It is not commonly understood that the linear so-called ‘window’ shapes of the Open series are as much of a one-shot throw of the dice, in execution, as my more gestural works… the lines in the Opens are not measured or mathematically proportioned but purely intuitional and immediate’.  
With this sort of statement, Motherwell makes it hard for us to pin him down. Are the Opens really as intuitional and immediate as the Lyric Suite or the Drunk with Turpentine series? And if they are does this mean the Opens are more a ‘one-shot throw of the dice’ than they at first appear or that the Lyric Suite / Drunk with Turpentine are less? Both seem possible to me (maybe it is simply a question of speed – as intuition / inspiration can gradually take shape during a period of hurried working and suddenly arrive during periods of reflection or inactivity).

When writing the text I found these questions unavoidable but also very hard to answer – a bit of a headache even. Yet though my head spins when I step back to think about these things, when looking at the works themselves these qualities of permeability or shifting boundaries appear as unambiguous (or do I mean ambiguous?) positives. I can see order, a sort of logic of formal decision underlying the Lyric Suite as much as the (best of the) Opens appear to me to each stand fresh, as having just been made: despite the clear differences between the works they do not appear as contradictions or riddles.

Yet of course it would be difficult not to acknowledge that the Opens are more controlled, starker than the Lyric Suite, and concerned with the division of the surface more than with the assertion of gesture (though gesture in the Suite also serves to divide the page; and many of the straight-lines in the Opens are not actually straight but twist or curve, some even being extremely attenuated serpentines – these subtle twists or curves characterize the spaces within the Opens as much as distance of the lines from each other or from the canvas’ edge). Matisse is certainly one of the influences behind the Opens and was one of the first and the most long-lasting of Motherwell’s painterly obsessions. Motherwell spoke about his Phoenician Red Studio (in which the Open motif fences off two calligraphic marks from a vast red field) as a simplification of Matisse’s Red Studio (in MOMA). Like Matisse, Motherwell uses a few lines like scaffolding to give an approximation (that is also intended as an intensification) of the feeling of space, though one which clearly figures this space within the terms of the rectangle and literal surface of the picture.

As well as looking back Motherwell was also looking around him: in 1967 (when he began the Opens) he wrote about the ‘brilliant individuals between the “old” and the “new”, such as Frankenthaler, Johns, Kelly, Noland, Stella and others’. Frankenthaler (who Motherwell was married to between 1958 and 1970) was surely an influence on the expansion of Motherwell’s colour in the sixties as well as specifically on the Lyric Suite, on its lyricism in general, on some of the specific arrangements he employed, and on the way in which he manipulated the soaking of ink into paper (though Motherwell would remain fundamentally a graphic artist, where Frankenthaler was an out and out painter). The comparison between the Opens and Louis is an interesting one, in that they share some similar means (large empty expanses, lines) but to very different effects. Again we could say that Motherwell is a more graphic artist than Louis, and is interested more in structuring an image in space, where Louis’s prime goal is the release of colour, to the functioning of which space is a necessary adjunct. Though in the Opens Motherwell is still invested in the hand-made mark, perhaps it was the example of painters like Louis which caused the relative downgrading of gesture in the series (something which Motherwell was to turn against in the mid-seventies)

**LE**

I agree that the graphic impulse, whether fast or slow, is fundamental. In many of Motherwell’s drawings, where black ink is rapidly and rhythmically brushed onto white paper, there is also a calligraphic quality which suggests he was looking to the East as much as the West. He talks of ‘the hand taking off by itself’, animating an empty space that he likened to the metaphysical void, and more than once he voiced an affinity to ‘Oriental – especially Japanese Zen – painting’. He owned a 17th century Japanese calligraphic scroll and would surely have known about Suzuki’s teaching in America. Yet he was careful to resist direct comparison with their pictographic language and later in life came to refute it, particularly in relation to the Lyric Suite and his use of Japanese rice paper. His unease is interesting, given that artists like John Cage and Brice Marden were openly embracing it by then.

**SC**

When you mention his resistance to the comparison to Oriental calligraphy in regard to the Lyric Suite, are you referring to the statement he wrote in 1970, five years after the Suite’s completion? In it he explained his choice of materials in some detail (with a care that seems relevant to the difference between spontaneity / planning that was alluded to earlier: does the obvious thought with which he selected his materials suggest that the work was actually essentially pre-planned or could it not be the case that it was only through exercising this forethought that the truly spontaneous aspects of his art could be released?). Anyway, he wrote: ‘No Japanese brushes, no Japanese ink. Was already using ink and Japanese paper, so no calligraphy either. No fake Oriental work for me.’ This does not seem to me a rejection of ‘Oriental work’, more that of something that was ‘fake’, and, more particularly that he felt it important that the impact of Zen painting did not result in imitation but rather to add it to whole range of other examples against which he measured his art, or which give it permission.  
There are also later references to Eastern works of art: Motherwell wrote in 1977 that he regretted ‘the Occidental prejudice against painting on paper, which is to me the most sympathetic of all painting surfaces’ (are the Lyric Suite then painting or drawing – or here is the distinction meaningless?) And the Samurai series, which reference Japanese painting both in their form and in their title, continued at least into the eighties (in the current exhibition Gesture Series A of 1969 is the closest to the Samurai).

Writing about Miro (whose line can most clearly be seen in this exhibition in the Drunk with Turpentine series, as well as in the earlier group of works shown in the corridor between the front and the back gallery spaces) Motherwell listed other artists as ‘sensitive to the ground of the picture at the beginning of the painting-process’ (that word again!); ‘Klee, the cubist collage, Cezanne watercolours, Rothko come to mind, and the Orient, with which he otherwise has no affinity.’ It is as part of a list of this kind that Eastern painting should be considered. What Motherwell took from Eastern painting had to be incorporated within the whole range of his art, there to be given its own particular character (in 1950 Motherwell believed that to the Occidental art the Abstract Expressionists added ‘the energy and the substantiality, the sexuality and the heaviness of occidental art ‘: though perhaps these are qualities – excepting the sex – more fully realised in his large scale paintings rather than his drawings and works on paper).

Japanese painting offered as you say a link between brush and hand and a sense of gesture being structured in the void. It also offered a certain refinement, a reverence for the materials of paint and paper and a fusion of writing and drawing (a comment on a blog I read recently attacked Motherwell as an artist who just needed to sign his canvases – this is hugely blinkered but like lots of harsh criticism contained a germ of truth. Look at the coincidence between Motherwell’s drawings and the signatures that sit in their corners; in some drawings they fulfil a compositional role whilst in others the signatures often seem to mirror parts of the drawings, with lines inflecting at strangely coincident angles to those of the familiar R and M). But to take on its pictorial language too directly could only have been to the detriment of Motherwell’s own language. As the exhibition makes clear this language depended on the ability to make and re-make itself, to resist both stagnation and interpretation and to remain adaptable, oblique and enigmatic.