Four works by Mark Rothko in the exhibition "Declaring Space," 2007. All installation photos Tom Jenkins, taken at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

View of Lucio Fontana’s room installation Spatial Concept, 1968, with Spatial Concept, Waiting, 1969, on left wall.
Spatial Overtures

Four masters of the postwar era are represented in an exhibition that examines the multifarious—and multimedium—evocations of space in American and European vanguard art.

BY FRANCES COLPITT

Celebrating its fifth anniversary in an elegant concrete building designed by Tadao Ando, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth fairly brims with the expansive canvases included in "Declaring Space" [on view through Jan. 6]. Works by Americans Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, Italy’s Lucio Fontana and France’s Yves Klein have been selected by chief curator Michael Auping to take advantage of the museum's generous upper galleries. The lighting is expertly controlled and the hanging sparse, encouraging quiet contemplation. Feeling bigger than the physical space it occupies, the exhibition brings to mind a phrase Donald Judd once used to describe a dynamic John Chamberlain sculpture: "voluminous beyond its structure." The title of the exhibition—derived from Newman’s assertion "I don't manipulate or play with space. I declare it”—aptly conveys the sense of immeasurable space created by the paintings' immense fields of color.

Auping is well credentialed in the area of postwar abstraction, having organized two major exhibitions accompanied by catalogues that have become essential reading on the topic. Originating at the Albright-Knox Museum (where Auping was chief curator before moving to Fort Worth), "Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments" opened in 1987, to be followed by "Abstraction, Geometry, Painting: Selected Geometric Abstract Painting in America Since 1945" in 1989. By focusing in this exhibition on the specific theme of space rather than on abstraction in postwar painting, Auping acknowledges the influential contributions of Fontana, who is represented by an environment as well as paintings, and Klein, whose works on canvas are augmented by a film of one of his painting performances.

While Rothko and Newman shared an interest in the real space around and in front of the large-scale canvas, Klein beckoned the viewer into the "void" created by his signature ultramarine blue paint, which he called International Klein Blue, or IKB. In another alternative to traditional surface illusionism, Fontana pierced the canvas, activating the space between the support and the wall behind it as a metaphor for infinity. For all his rhetoric about opening the canvas to space, however, Fontana’s preoccupation with the surface and the moderate scale of his canvases results in works that remain the closest to traditional pictures. Yet the presence of the astoundingly installation piece by Fontana mitigates even this minor reservation.

In the first and largest of the eight galleries devoted to the exhibition, with lights dimmed per the artist's original instructions for the display of his work, six large dark paintings by Rothko (1963-1970) provide a dramatic introduction to "Declaring Space." Invoking the painter’s brief flirtation with the stage as a fledgling actor in Portland in 1924 and the probable effect of that experience on his awareness of lighting effects, Auping’s essay contends that this group of works "sets the stage" for the exhibition, which as a whole functions as an abstract spatial theater.

The wide, moody Black on Dark Sienna on Purple (1960) anchors one end of the gallery, seeming to absorb what little ambient light there is and to subtly glow from within. From the following year, No. 267 (Red Over Dark Blue on Dark Gray) produces the classic Rothko effect of floating veils of color that hover in front of the picture plane. Over a velvety gray ground, the deep red and rich royal blue rectangles seem to expand and contract at a shared boundary. The darkly painted, unframed sides of Rothko's canvases, as Auping points out, are intended to merge with the shadows cast onto the walls. Thus united with the walls and activating the space of the gallery, the group of paintings produces a luminous environment. On one stormy late afternoon, the works were bathed in a cool gray light from a recessed clerestory window, practically invisible from the floor, recalling the similarly atmospheric illumination of the partially skylit interior of the Rothko Chapel in Houston.

Occupying two galleries, the six paintings and one slender sculpture, Here III (1965-66), by Newman (1905-1970) express a comparable seriousness. But where the Rothkos offer a dramatic shudder, the emphatic verticality of Newman’s pieces implies the potential for transcendence. All of the paintings are vertically split by his signature "zips," contrasting stripes that bisect or trisect the surface. The zip reinforces the painting’s frontality, authority and presence while echoing the spectator’s upright body. On a reddish black ground, the white and light blue zips placed a few inches apart and near the middle of The Promise (1949) propose the possibility of symmetry without actually imposing it. Expressing Newman’s refusal of resolution, a dynamic tension results from the difference between what we see before us and our simple expectation of balance and stability.

The installation of Newman’s paintings is bracketed by the tall, nearly black Abraham (1949) in one gallery and, facing it from the far wall of the neighboring gallery, the towering Ulysses (1952), which offers a tiny streak of white canvas exposed between two wavy blue vertical rectangles. The
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compositions of both paintings are based on subtle deviations from the Golden Mean and its harmonic proportion of approximately one-third to two-thirds. Like Rothko's, Newman's paintings have been deployed to create an environment that encompasses the space in front of the canvases into which the presence of the viewer is projected.

Compared to the works of Rothko and Newman, the efforts of Klein and Fontana are more likely to invoke the presence of their creators. Klein's involvement, whether directly represented in film and photography or implied as the instigator of painting performances called "Anthropometries," is palpable. As the wielder of the punch or Stanley knife that gouged and slashed the surfaces of his canvases, Fontana is represented by the aftermath of his actions.

Klein (1928-1962) was born in Nice and grew up at the rim of the Mediterranean. In the early 1950s, he studied Judo in Japan and familiarized himself with the classic texts of Zen Buddhism before establishing himself as an artist in Paris. His enduring concern with space is well represented by Auping's choice of 11 works and a documentary film depicting a variety of his sometimes antic processes. The painted "Anthropometries," for example, are the outcome of nude female models—whom Klein referred to as "live paint brushes"—covering their bodies with IKB before pressing against, rolling on or being dragged across paper or canvas. Several of the paintings suggest the blue bodies had flown through the air. Two public performances of the "Anthropometries," in 1960 and 1961, were captured on film; Klein produced approximately 200 paintings in this manner.

"Declaring Space" includes a photomural of the infamous Leap into the Void (1960), Klein's swan-diving body launched into space above a Paris street. This miraculous-seeming image is the result of two photographs being pieced together at an invisible horizontal seam. One includes Klein and a group of his fellow judokas with a tarp to catch the falling artist, while the other shows the same site with a lone bicyclist in the street. Leap into the Void shows Klein in the same upwardly arching pose as the image of the model in Untitled Anthropometry (ANT 109) of around the same time.

Inspired by the Zen Buddhist concept of the void, the space into which all this leaping and flying is directed is materialized in the gallery by two large rectangular expanses of IKB pigment. One is a sealike plane of dry pigment poured on the floor and inconspicuously held in place by wooden one-by-fours. Pure Pigment (1957) occupies an area of 684
square feet. Rather than creating an illusionistic emptiness, the uneven surface and horizontal orientation underscore the materiality of the work. Such a massive amount of pure unbound color is thrilling. Doubly bound, on the other hand, by a resin paint binder and a round-cornered muslin-on-panel support, is the pigment of *IKB 66 (California)*, 1961, an approximately 6-by-14-foot blue monochrome painting. Due to the density of the pigment and saturation of color, the viewer is unable to gauge his or her real distance from the painting's actual ground. Recalling one of James Turrell's luminous apertures cut into the wall, *IKB 66 (California)* opens onto an infinite and immeasurable space.

Born to an Italian father in Argentina, Fontana (1889-1968) moved between South America and Europe several times before settling in Italy, where he developed his concetti spaziali (spatial concepts) in the late 1940s. Circular compositions made of small holes pricked into squares of mounted paper and tin, the earliest works by Fontana in the exhibition take the night sky, galaxies and the cosmos as their inspiration. Evoking a star-studded sky, *Concetto spaziale (Spatial Concept)* of 1965 conceals an electric light source behind a dark blue monochrome field. The tagli (cuts), straight vertical slashes with their edges folded gently behind the canvas where a black backing is attached, take us into a less overtly referential realm. The space "through" the picture plane also concerned the Italian Renaissance inventors of perspective, much admired by Fontana, who opened it up through illusionistic rather than physical means.

A pioneer of installation art with his *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial Environment in Black Light) of 1949, an environment in which neon light illuminated a phosphorescent form, Fontana created the *Ambiente spaziale* (1968) for Documenta 4 in Kassel shortly before his death. Predating Bruce Nauman's corridors and Robert Irwin's scrim environments, it consists of a white floor and 10-foot-high walls that create a zigzag maze with small triangular roomlike areas. Reconstituted in Fort Worth, the 17-by-14½-foot labyrinth sits below a white scrim that filters the museum's lights. At the center of the installation is an 8-foot-high slit, carved into a block of smooth white plaster set seamlessly into a wall. The white space is dazzlingly luminous, disorienting in its isolation from the rest of the gallery and completely dependent on the viewer, rather than on any architectural clues, for a sense of scale. Fontana was encouraging an engagement with space by utilizing the mind, body and eye in ways that would become familiar in artworks only in the following decade.

A thoughtfully conceived exhibition, "Declaring Space" arranges a focused but generous intercontinental encounter that illuminates a key aspect of the history of postwar art. Due to its fragile contents, the show will not travel beyond Fort Worth, where it has been well appreciated by viewers.


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