

41st Ohio Governor's Youth Art Exhibition
2010 First Place Art Criticism Winner
Katie Malczewski, Notre Dame Academy

A Lily Pond, Collectively Speaking

"Art is the desire for man to express himself, to record the reactions of his personality to the world he lives in." *Amy Lowell*

Many artists use their work as a vehicle to convey their personal thoughts, desires, ideas, and beliefs, allowing art to encapsulate individuality as well as speak universally to viewers. Perhaps no art movement better captures this idea than Abstract Expressionism, a style that allowed artists to channel their inner thoughts as well as the ideas and symbols of the collective unconscious. In *Lily Pond*, Willem de Kooning showed these principles of Abstract Expressionism, in addition to creating a lively depiction of tangible energy. He accomplishes this expression through his ideas and his methods, evident in the details of the work.



Lily pond by Willem de Kooning, oil on canvas, 1970

De Kooning employed action painting to create *Lily Pond*, and this technique allowed him to show great emotion through the brush strokes and the thickness of the impasto. The layering of the paint allows parts of the composition to have a 3-dimensional effect, enhancing the energy felt from the painting. The movement used in the strokes also channels the Jungian ideals of psychology – the belief that certain ideas and themes recur periods, simply because of the fact that all of

humanity is part of the same race and shares the same hopes, dreams, desires, and ideas. These ideas come forth subconsciously, while the individual conscious rules day to day actions. Therefore, the action used to create *Lily Pond* expresses de Kooning's individual conscious, while the abstract nature and organic shapes created through the action capture the essence of the lily pond: the universal idea known to the collective unconscious. The artist did not want to portray the typical idea of a lily pond; rather, he created a momentary impression of the pond, a dynamic and energetic depiction. Despite the raucous energy felt emanating from the piece, the subject matter's connotations are typically calm and peaceful, giving the viewer a multi-faceted emotional experience. These peaceful feelings are also enhanced by the almost calligraphic brush strokes, which recall the influence of the *japonisme* style on later generations and combine a deliberate certainty with a light touch, promoting the ideals of harmony and inner peace.

In addition to the strokes, the color choice and placement give a unity to work. The use of complementary colors red and green draw the eye across the canvas in a circular fashion, inviting the viewer in through their contrast. In the same vein, de Kooning uses the analogous colors green and blue to create a flow for the viewer, this time through the similarity of the colors and their cool tones. The large areas of individual colors could appear to separate the composition and leave it disconnected. However, the artist also strategically splattered blue paint in a primarily white area and green paint in a primarily blue area to emphasize the painting's unity and flow despite vast expanses of a primarily singular colors.

Upon first glance, the painting may seem haphazard, simplistic, or unfinished. With further examination, though, it is evident that the piece has a definite harmony and an intentional placement of color and brush stroke. A message is not immediately clear from the painting's abstraction, but it can be gathered through the dissection of techniques and the somewhat philosophical ideas behind the abstraction. It is up to the viewer to formulate their own opinion about the message of the piece, and even more, to realize that each step the artist took in creating it was for the purpose of expressing his own ideas, for pushing the boundaries of art and human perception, and for channeling the collective unconscious, transcendent of time and cultural differences: unity embodied in art.

By Katie Malczewski, Grade 11
Susan Kozal, Teacher

Note: Katie's essay placed first among over 80 entries to the 2010 Art Criticism component of the Ohio Governor's Youth Art Exhibition. Juror was Dr. Terry Barrett, educator, author and artist. For program information, contact Nancy Pistone, nancy.pistone@ode.state.oh.us.