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Tell Me: with Bill Corbett

by **Noah Dillon**

I've been visiting — with artists, writers, curators, dealers, and others in the art world — to look at an artwork of my guest's choice. We have a one-on-one conversation about the artwork, what they find interesting in it and why it's important to them. In this edition, I went to the Museum of Modern Art with the poet and critic Bill Corbett, publisher of Pressed Wafer Books and author of Philip Guston's Late Work: A Memoir *(1998). Corbett wrote a suite of poems about Franz Kline, and took me to see Kline's* Painting Number 2 *(1954).*

Franz Kline, Painting Number 2, 1954. Oil on canvas, 80 1/2 inches x 105 inches. Museum of Modern Art (© 2013 The Franz Kline Estate / Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York)

NOAH DILLON: Would you begin by orienting us in Kline's career when this was made, and what this painting is indicative of in that era?

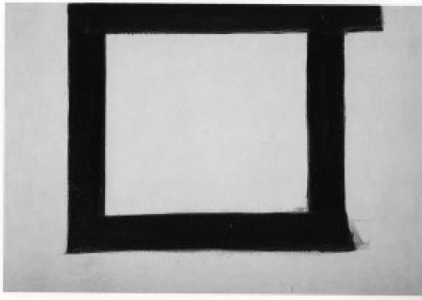
WILLIAM CORBETT: It's 1954. He'd been an abstract painter for six or seven years, with a number of successful shows. He was a regular at the Cedar Bar, where he spoke in that Kline-ese that Frank O'Hara caught so beautifully in "Franz Kline Talking" (1958). He'd moved around, possibly rivaling Hokusai's 734 addresses. When you see photographs of his homes, you see why Kline once said, "Bohemia is a place where a dog would go to die."

This is a pretty big painting, at this time, but he was to paint bigger pictures. He was dead in 1962, but now he's in his late 40s, maybe at the top of his game, though the money hadn't yet come to him.

Let me go back: I said coming up here that one of my interests in Kline is extra-aesthetic. My early childhood was in East Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, which isn't far from Lehighton, where Kline grew up. I was 12 in 1954 and didn't know anything about him. But when I learned about him and saw his work in the early 1960s, I immediately recognized the landscape elements. I responded to those as if I'd come home in a way. Here you can find the train tracks he saw up and down the Lehigh River. I'm not saying he was trying to abstractly paint a landscape. I'm saying those things were so deep within him that they naturally came out when he picked up a brush.

This has associations with buildings, with timber and with scaffolding. A number of his pictures can be read that way. But I'm now seeing something I haven't seen before: he has a number of paintings, such as *Wotan* (1950), where there's an off or wobbly square. It's starting to emerge here, and that will be a central image. He'll clean this up in many cases, all that wonderful stuff, all that ideogrammatic stuff. He always said, "I don't know anything about ideograms"; he liked to disassociate himself with that. And I believe him.

There's also another quality that I associate with New York: the billboard size that he was moving toward, just like most of his contemporaries. Those guys went to the movies. They began to get a sense of scale. We know he worked from small things and blew them up with a Bell-Opticon projector. Imagine that he's starting with intimate drawings —



Franz Kline, Wotan, 1950. Oil on canvas over masonite, 55 x 80 inches.

covering his studio floor, drawn on telephone book pages. And he's blowing them up.

I think he was after the dream of the abstract painters, which was to make drawing and painting one. For these guys — for him, Philip Guston, Willem de Kooning — it was to get the immediacy of drawing, to locate the viewer in that immediacy, and then to make it happen in paint. A work like this, it seems to me, is absolutely recognizable, because it's a clear, firsthand apprehension of a reality. That communicates to me.

These men, and the few women, liked to remind you that they were at work; you see the uncleaned drips. For Harold Rosenberg this was Action Painting. Alright, I get that, and I think that's probably right. With Kline it's a little bit different, because when you know the Bell-Opticon, the action's over! But he's doing something else. I think it's like when I would first go to openings, in the early 1960s, the painters would come in with their clothes and their shoes all paint-stained. And, man, it always looked so hip.

It sends a message.

But I think there's more: he wants to show that the work he put into this is part of his aesthetic. Not that he's going to be praised as, "Oh, Franz, what a hard worker," but for his notion of what could come at the end of a brush. It could be a splatter, or incomplete lines where the paint has run out of the brush. He also, I think, wanted to give a sense of the moment, make you feel present. As you pointed out, he used house paint and the image is now getting lost: it's cracking, yellowing, it's a conservator's nightmare. In a way, I think it's too bad that conservators feel compelled to restore this painting to what it was.

How's that?

Well, just like de Kooning, he used house paint because he couldn't then afford fine paint. But it means this painting is for the here and now. And I think that in the back of his mind he may have had the idea that it would change and move into a new here and now.

I think of Auden going back to his poems and second-guessing them, even famous ones like "September 1, 1939" (1939), changing lines because he thought better of them. I'm ambivalent about that. Did he think there would be a perfect poem? What about the poem in its moment? Didn't it have the right to be there? I think we lose something by taking Kline's paintings away from that original impulse. But I wrote a sequence of poems about Kline, and when I opened it again recently, and began to read again, I did an Audening and made a few corrections.

I remember these paintings fresh and new, and I've watched them age over time. I can hold that all in my mind. But if you think of the bohemian guy, living the life he did, painting in one studio after another, using house paint, it seems to be part of his aesthetic. It would age, absolutely — needing a kind of footnoting. Those footnotes would be a little like restoring this.

Still from The Sweet Smell of Success, 1957, dir. by Alexander Mackendrick. TRT: 96 minutes. Courtesy of United Artists.

I think that about a lot: it's hard to pull the former context up with you, and it's hard to pull the present back into the past.

Absolutely, and it's going to be hard. That's part of the great pleasure of looking at art. Does it take us back there? This certainly takes me back to what was, after all, a black-and-white world: the photographs, the movies. You can imagine this being an aerial shot of the city in *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). It has the life of that moment.

I'm curious about the painting's development, because some marks (such as the drips) reveal that it was turned upside down. Do you have any thoughts about why that is, or how that works in the image itself?

Well, I wonder where this was in his studio. As soon as you said that, I thought, OK, he didn't frame this. This is probably by Robert Kulicke, as you can see by the small gap you see all around the edge. It's modest, and it certainly puts the painting forward.

This looks like color in the center, some gray, which is unusual for him at this time. He didn't come back to color until very late. And some of those paintings I find the least compelling. Or I'm torn. I can't tell: is it because he didn't know how to use color? Or is it because I'm so used to the moves he makes and want to see them in new combinations and permutations?

Now that we're being more formal, I'm thinking that this is a spur-of-the-moment picture; but he got to an underpinning. That's why the Opticon is so important. I think many people imagine that Kline pulled out the canvas and the brush and just whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! But you don't see much under this, which is where the Bell-Opticon is. The casualness, the spontaneity, isn't mocked, it's not parodied, but he sees it as a start with a different ending. It's not like de Kooning, where the approach is first to get it right and then fuck it up.

He also talked about the whites being as important and the blacks, which you can see in how they're laid on with the white dripping out over the black at the top, or vice versa along the left edge. There're also formal echoes between the white fields and black marks in places.

It's the blacks that I always remember, but I wouldn't see them without the whites, so they're at least as important in that way. Form's gotta have a ground. He's right. We can't

Willem de Kooning, Easter Monday, 1955-56. Oil and newspaper transfer on canvas, 96 x 74 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ignore the great things he did on phone book pages. It's obviously an issue of not having any money and using the materials at hand. And it's black on shitty paper and over phone numbers. It's a little bit like those monotypes that show up on de Koonings, like *Easter Monday* (1955-56), where the pictures on the newspaper are transferred into the paint. It's another aspect of him that de Kooning influenced, and that touched everybody. De Kooning caught all that was going on in New York so profoundly that it was hard to look at it. People were drawn to those painters. I can't think of too many painters that came out of Kline.

Well, Brice Marden perhaps, Christopher Wool, Jonathan Lasker — painters who work at that synthesis of painting and drawing you talked about earlier. I think you could describe them as being indebted to Kline.

Yes, indebted, but indebted for what? What kind of effect did these have? I think that part of the reason why they didn't follow him is that he takes care of all the possibilities he opens for the viewer. What you're inspired to with this painting is that, Jesus Christ, if he can do that then I'll do exactly what I can do. I'll feel free. Because, again, in a world of color, he's reminding us that black and white are colors. In a world of Action Painting, he's putting the word "action" in quotes. This is more radical in some ways. And radical art, of course, can spawn any number of minions.

And think of the one-of-a-kind things he did: no one's gonna come up with a phone book page after Kline, unless you're using it ironically, or you're doing it in such a way that it becomes part of the work.

Right, that it's *for* Kline or it's quoting him very directly.

We've touched on this a little already, but I wonder if you could talk about how this space affects the painting or how you feel the painting affects the surrounding space.

Franz Kline, Untitled II, ca. 1952. Ink and oil on cut-and-pasted telephone book pages on paper on board, 11 x 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Modern Art.

I'm aware of the room. I've been coming to the Modern since about 1959. I was young and knew very little, and I got educated here. I believed the story, and then I began to discover that it's just a story. Maybe it's a necessary narrative. Walking in it now is like picking up the books of poets I've loved: I've read them so much, but at times I'm a little tired of them. Other times I want that pang, want to be back there. And every once in awhile something knocks me out.

I usually don't look at them as long as I'm looking at this. And this painting, as so often, is growing on me. This is across from a Barnett Newman and you have Helen Frankenthaler here, and near Mark Rothko, de Kooning — all people he knew. Rather than being frozen, this is part of a bigger story.

I wonder what this looked like in Kline's studio, or in a home, what it first looked like in a gallery. Now it's ensconced. Has it lost something because of that? Inevitably. I'm sure it affects you. But that's what a museum does. And in this case I'm standing with this at my left and the Newman at my right; that might not happen in another place.

I wonder how his art — or this painting in particular — finds its way into the work that you do.

I wrote that sequence of poems about Kline and I know a lot about him. I have the background of Lehighton. The paintings are in my head, and I like writing documentary poems. It was fun. There were so many words that kept coming up: suave, and the black of the tuxedo's lapel. I also wrote a suite, around the same time, to de Kooning. I keep on wondering if I'll get another one out of somebody. Joan Mitchell keeps coming up. So first of all, there's the viewer literally inspired by an attempt to get some of that from it. For me, as somebody who loves paintings without knowing why he loves them, and still loves them and the study of them, and wants to know more about the artist, it's their example, in every way.

One of the things I always like to know, and is a dream for me, is how you get the compositional elements — all that flurry and hurry and bustle — into something that can come up just in the sound of words or the juxtaposition of images. Words seem to insist upon a kind of linear meaning, especially if that poetry comes through the ear as well as the eye. As I wrote about Kline and his work, it often came through finding something that got me writing about art in the beginning. James Schuyler very modestly said, "I just wanted to know what it was like to use words to describe things." I want that, too. And this gives us new possibilities. We thought of the railroad tracks, the city aspects, the calligraphy, the scaffolding. Those become words, and it's not just what's there, it's what's here, inside you. For the reader, it's something to give them the sense of standing here now, the delight I feel in talking about it at this minute. But it also opens it up, so that they could internalize that.

I guess that there's something else, too. I've certainly spent more hours seeing movies, and now television, than I have looking at paintings. What's the difference? Well, there is a hand involved in this and I'm always aware of it. We're aware of it from the drips. I can see a person here; I can imaging those studios.

You can see the motion of the hand and the gestures it's making.

Absolutely. There's also something here that's generational, I guess: the first painting I saw that really said to me "This could be yours" was an abstract picture. It pissed my parents off, just like listening to jazz did. It certainly separated me from the world I grew up in. But it turned me on in ways I couldn't figure out. There are things that choose you

Franz Kline mixing paint in his studio. Date and author unknown.

just as much as you choose them.

As a poet and an art writer, you hope it's still out there, and that you don't get to bottom of it. The stuff you get to the bottom of never finds its way into your work. And if it does, you've gotta get over it and get out of it.

One of the things I miss in this picture and that I really love is his signature. Kline had one of the great signatures, that blocky, stick-fingered print. It always moves me. I wonder why he didn't sign it…

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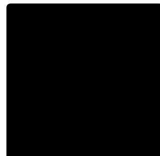

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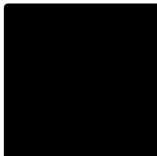

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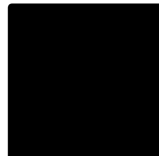

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