

Drips of Pollock

Danh Cao

Art 1C

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**Fig. 1.** Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, 1950. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 7'3" x 9'10". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund).

#### Bibliography

Leja, Michael. 1990. "Jackson Pollock: Representing the Unconscious". *Art History*. 13, no. 4: 542-565.

Stuckey, Charles F. *Pollock: One: Number 31, 1950*. New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013. 47.

Toynton, Evelyn. *Jackson Pollock*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012. 143.

Jackson Pollock is an American painter born on January 28, 1912 in Cody, Wyoming, United States. In his early life, Pollock became influenced by two great modern artists, Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso, and was highly intrigued by Cubism. In the mid-1940s, Pollock began to develop a radical technique that resulted in his large scale abstract paintings. *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* is a particular example that demonstrated his signature style. Pollock explained in a radio interview with William Wright in 1950 that his brush never touches the surface of the canvas when he paints, nor does he rely on an easel. He described that his paintings were supported by the surface of the floor because the horizontality gave him a greater sense of control. Aside from the scale, his work can be easily recognized due to the apparent visibility of paint dribbles and splatters. This effect was done through the use of liquid paint and a lot of expressive physical movements. Pollock died on August 11, 1956 in a car crash due to the influence of alcohol. However, his highly influential artwork was displayed later at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Just like Pablo Picasso and other great European avant-garde, Pollock's radical style made him the leader of the American avant-garde.

#### Points of View

Jackson Pollock claimed that the source of his paintings comes from the unconscious. In 1990, the article titled "Jackson Pollock: Representing the Unconscious" written by Michael Leja made an attempt to understand Pollock's conception of the unconscious and establishing certain understanding of the unconscious in order to take his assertion more seriously. In the article, Leja states that "the idea of 'painting out of the unconscious' may have been a productive fiction for Pollock, but it won't suffice as an explanation for the forms of these paintings."<sup>1</sup> In addition,

Leja resorts to the studies of a few well known psychoanalysts and neurologists such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Carl Jung—in regards to the understanding of the unconscious—in order to provide more reasonable explanations for Pollock’s works. Leja presents his interpretation, based on the established models of the unconscious, that Pollock’s paintings were driven by his life experiences—among which are alcoholism and depression. Pollock also experienced artistic as well as emotional struggles during his lifetime, all of which Leja believes attributed to the manner of which Pollock composed his artworks. Leja regards to Pollock’s paintings as “*representing* the unconscious”<sup>2</sup> and relates this idea to the Jungian concepts of construction of an image—taking in the consideration of the four properties of consciousness: thinking, feeling, sensation, and intuition.<sup>3</sup> He asserts that “Pollock has assigned colours: red for emotion/feeling, green for sensation, blue for thinking, and yellow for intuition.”<sup>4</sup>

Evelyn Toynton, author of the book titled *Jackson Pollock*, emphasizes more heavily on the visual aspect of Pollock’s works. Toynton states in her book that “the lack of explicit narrative content makes the viewer more keenly aware of the paint itself.”<sup>5</sup> She also includes that Pollock’s paintings possesses immense power and explosive aliveness, following by the insertion of Greenberg’s quote: “Pollock’s superiority...lies in his ability to create genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing artistic control”<sup>6</sup> to support her argument. Toynton explains that Pollock has successfully contained something that seems uncontainable—this something may be interpreted as violence, madness, or wildness. Deriving from the words of Pollock himself, who stated that “the modern painter cannot express this age, the airplane, the atom bomb, the radio, in the old forms of the Renaissance or of any other past culture,”<sup>7</sup> Toynton believes that the form of which his works took was a product of his age. She also believes—regarding to the completion of Pollock’s abstract works which took place shortly after Hiroshima and Nagasaki

— that they confront the viewer with the impression of something “fragmenting”, “shattering”, and “*exploding*.”<sup>8</sup> She describes the artworks as the embodiment of the atomic of matter, and that they present the “realization that nothing in the material world is actually solid and impermeable, but instead made up of an unaccountably vast number of random particles.”<sup>9</sup> In addition, Toynton emphasizes the liveliness of Pollock’s paintings when she states “the drips paintings themselves seem to vibrate, emitting what feels like an electrical charge”<sup>10</sup>

According to Charles Stuckey, author of the book *Pollock: One: Number 31, 1950*, Pollock has “rejected every pictorial tradition and strategy except for the idea of painting a flat rectangular canvas for display on the wall.”<sup>11</sup> He explains that Pollock also broke away from the use of traditional art materials by using sticks and basters instead of brushes and quick-drying house paint instead of acrylic. Although his works contain mostly of paint drips and spatters, Pollock refused to work from a vertical surface to prevent the liquid paint from running down the canvas. As described by Stuckey, “when Pollock transposed his drip paintings for wall display, the spots and linear trails of paint appear to be suspended on the riotous surface by some galactic or oceanic current.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly to Toynton, Stuckey felt that Pollock’s paintings (**e.g. Fig. 1, 2**) lack narrative content. He states “Pollock’s drip paintings have no preconceived subject other than paint itself, which “represents” nothing but the self-referential actions of the painter painting.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, Pollock numbers his painting rather than giving them conventional titles. Stuckey provides an explanation for this purpose from Lee Krasner, Pollock’s wife, who is also an influential American abstract expressionist painter in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, who stated “Numbers are neutral. They make people look at a picture for what it is—pure painting.”<sup>14</sup> However, Stuckey believed that Pollock’s style of painting is a form of liberation — by literally setting the paint loose.

I like to look at Pollock's work as a performance. The celebration of movement in his work (**Fig.1, 2**) allows the viewer, myself particularly, to relive the moment of which the artwork was created. Pollock claimed that his paintings come from the unconscious, and that he never knows where his work will take him. However, by opposing to this claim, I genuinely believe that there is a level of consciousness involved — in fact he did experienced a period of unproductiveness because he couldn't accept what he was doing. The effects of Pollock's work cannot be easily adopted or mimicked because they hold a very special characteristic that only Pollock himself can express. Although many can mistakenly characterized his paintings as a collection of random gestures and paint marks on a canvas, there are certain areas in the painting where energy is emphasized. I had the opportunity to watch a recording of Pollock as he worked on one of his paintings. His process was not continuous but consists of occasional pauses as he previews his progress, select a new color, or switch to a completely different medium —sand and broken glass can often be found in his paintings. In addition, initial markings on the canvas seem to have consciously placed to create a visual balance.



**Fig. 2.** Jackson Pollock, *One: Number 31, 1950*. 1950. Oil and enamel on unprimed canvas, 8' 10" x 17' 5 5/8" (269.5 x 530.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection Fund (by exchange)

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Leja. 1990. "Jackson Pollock: Representing the Unconscious". *Art History*. 13, no. 4:

544.

<sup>2</sup> Leja, 545.

<sup>3</sup> Leja, 548.

<sup>4</sup> Leja, 548.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Toynton. *Jackson Pollock*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012. 52.

<sup>6</sup> Toynton, 52.

<sup>7</sup> Toynton, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Toynton, 54.

<sup>9</sup> Toynton, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Toynton, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Charles F. Stuckey. *Pollock: One: Number 31, 1950*. New York, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2013. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Stuckey, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Stuckey, 4-6.

<sup>14</sup> Stuckey, 6.