Robert Motherwell’s *Interior with Pink Nude* (1951) resides in an uncertain space between figuration and abstraction. While the picture is a fairly straightforward composition, the multiple layers of paint on the surface and the obvious reworking and overpainting contribute to a general spatial and figural ambiguity. The two black-and-pink forms with multiple appendages are painted on a cloudy ochre ground that is unevenly applied and of varying thickness. With the title as a guide, it is not hard to imagine the pink, organic forms on the left as the bulbous limbs of a woman. A more ambitious reading might go so far as to suggest that the balloon-shaped black mass is her head thrown back, and the yellow mark on its dark surface is a reflection of light. Such an interpretation of this picture is undermined, however, by the small, black, five-pronged shape sitting above a pink rectangle to the right, which is even more difficult to identify. Numerous objects can come to mind: a bouquet on a shelf, a reflection in a mirror, perhaps a second figure set back in the distance. Moreover, the traces and marks of the layers that have been painted over or scraped off, notably on the right, where they suggest a box or doorlike form, contribute to the picture’s spatial indeterminacy, creating a sensation of interior depth. All of this suggests that the process of arriving at the painting’s endpoint was protracted and improvisational. As the work was painted in New York City in 1951, a moment when improvisation was particularly valorized in American art and literature, it is tempting to read *Interior with Pink Nude* as Motherwell’s effort to engage with the pervasive aesthetic of spontaneity. Doing so, however, would provide only a limited reading of what is in fact Motherwell’s fascinating, if conflicted, investigation into the dominant pictorial languages present in post-World War II America, including gestural abstraction, Surrealism, and the work of such influential modernists as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso.

In a well-known essay written for a group show in 1951, Motherwell attempted to define the methods and goals of what he termed *The New York School*, a loosely associated group of artists who painted in
an abstract, gestural style. He emphasized the bond between the artist’s individuality and the painterly gesture or mark, which he believed translated the private emotions and feelings of the artist directly onto the canvas. One of the defining aspects of the group, Motherwell stated, was a heightened commitment to the act of painting as an “authentic” record of that experience. “The process of painting,” he wrote, “is conceived of as an adventure, without preconceived ideas on the part of persons of intelligence, sensibility, and passion. Fidelity to what occurs between oneself and the canvas, no matter how unexpected, becomes central.”¹ Although he was attempting to distinguish what would become known as Abstract Expressionism from modern art in general and from geometric abstraction more particularly, Motherwell was also setting out his own objectives as an artist.² Indeed, one of Motherwell’s tenets, repeatedly stated in his writings and interviews, is the notion that the picture is the end result of a spontaneous process, the traces of which are left visible on the surface of the canvas. (As he would say ten years later, “The subject does not pre-exist. It emerges out of the interaction between the artist and the medium.”³)

Motherwell’s interest in the spontaneous act came out of Surrealist automatist techniques.⁴ He was less interested in revealing the imagery of the unconscious, however, than he was in emphasizing the act of creation itself as a generative process. For him, the picture and the artist’s identity were bound together by the material trace and the very act of painting: “painting and sculpture are not skills that can be taught in reference to preestablished criteria, whether academic or modern, but a process, whose content is found, subtle, and deeply felt…. [It] is only by giving oneself up completely to the painting medium that one finds oneself and one’s own style.”⁵ Motherwell’s insistence on the autographic nature

² Motherwell—who received his undergraduate education at Stanford, studied philosophy at Harvard University for one year, and began a Ph.D. program in art history at Columbia University with the art historian Meyer Schapiro—often published writings and gave public lectures about the objectives of The New York School. His rhetoric was essential to the dissemination of many of the ideas and assumptions about abstract art in the 1940s and 1950s. Although his position as the de facto speaker for this loosely knit group was often contested by his contemporaries, his writings remain important sources of information about the movement.
⁴ Motherwell practiced automatic drawing, a form of graphic free association used to bypass the conscious mind and open up new avenues for unexpected and unpredictable forms, off and on throughout his career, sometimes utilizing it directly in his painting and at other times mediating it through more controlled procedures, as is the case with Interior with Pink Nude.
⁵ Motherwell, preface, 83.
of the creative act, that painting was the outcome of a specific and often fraught individual experience, was bound up with theories of Existentialism, the philosophy that Jean-Paul Sartre had popularized in France during and after World War II and which had emerged by the late 1940s in the United States.

In both postwar America and Europe, the belief that the abstract gesture was a trace of an individualistic act of creation became conflated with a universalist and somewhat contradictory position that held that gestural abstraction was a particularly modern phenomenon and thus universally accessible to modern man. This position was commonly expressed in Motherwell’s writings and those of other Abstract Expressionist artists, critics, scholars, and the press. *Life* magazine’s 1948 “Round Table on Modern Art” is a case in point. Published after a meeting of high-profile scholars and critics—including Clement Greenberg, Meyer Schapiro, H. W. Janson, and various museum directors from the U.S. and Europe—at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the article concluded that “the troubles of modern art lead back into the troubles of the age…. The meaning of modern art is, that the artist of today is engaged in a tremendous individualistic struggle—a struggle to discover and to assert and to express himself.”

*Interior with Pink Nude* was made at the height of the art world’s conflation of this kind of discourse with gestural abstraction, yet the painting does not fit neatly within this trajectory. Although Motherwell considered abstraction to be the aesthetic form that most captured the qualities of the modern condition, he did not always practice pure abstraction. *Interior with Pink Nude* calls upon the venerable figurative tradition of a female nude in an interior, one which goes back as far as the Renaissance and was still present in the work of many of Motherwell’s contemporaries, notably Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. The work of the European avant-garde, many of whom were living in exile in the United States during and after World War II, was for many American high modernists something to engage with as the most important form of advanced art at the time, but also something to overcome.

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6 During and after World War II, a mixture of Existentialism, various forms of watered-down psychoanalytic theory, and anthropological discourse, often combined with a centrist political position, took hold in the United States and was popularized by the media. Art historian Michael Leja has called the resulting combination of a psychoanalytic reading of the internally fragmented condition of modern man with a more essentialist position of liberal optimism and universalism the “Modern Man discourse.” See Leja, *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).


8 The Museum of Modern Art in New York and its support of the European avant-garde was an extremely important reference point for many American artists. For instance, the Museum of Modern Art mounted retrospectives of both Picasso, in 1946, and Matisse, in 1951. Motherwell was well-versed in the work of these Europeans, and in their writings and manifestoes in particular; since 1944 he had edited the *Documents of Modern*
This painting, with the curving, ballooning forms of the woman and the bulbous, petal-like shapes of the black object set within a space that ever so slightly recedes into depth, engages with the work of the historical avant-garde, but filters it through ideological and aesthetic concerns that were particular to postwar America. Picasso’s slightly Surrealist depictions of the rounded forms of the sleeping Marie-Thérèse Walter from the 1930s and Matisse’s renderings of exotic nudes with still lifes of mirrors and bouquets, often with a window view to the exterior, seem particularly relevant here. Motherwell’s scumbling, or dry application of layers of opaque color, along with the small drips of pink and orange along the bottom edge of the nude, is evocative of Matisse’s vibrant canvases, which also often exhibit reworking and traces of the painting process. What Motherwell seems to have discovered in this painting was a way to come to terms with the weight of European tradition, while embracing a modern interest in material process. One might best think of the picture as a statement, unconscious or not, demonstrating both the artist’s debt to and mastery of historical models and his search for new artistic forms that speak to the condition of postwar America.