

For immediate release

Herbert Ferber | Mark Rothko

February 20–April 14, 2018

34 East 69th Street, New York

Opening reception: Tuesday, February 20, 6–8 PM



Mark Rothko and Herbert Ferber, 1947.
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Courtesy of Waqas Wajahat

David Zwirner is pleased to present an exhibition of work by Herbert Ferber (1906–1991) and Mark Rothko (1903–1970), on view at the gallery's 34 East 69th Street location in New York. This presentation will explore the decades-long artistic and personal dialogue between the two artists, focusing particularly on the Surrealist-inspired, biomorphic forms that they both employed in their work in the 1940s.

Ferber and Rothko were important members of the New York School, a loose conglomeration of American artists who pioneered Abstract Expressionism in the years following the Second World War. One of the leading Abstract Expressionist sculptors, Ferber first met Rothko in 1947, shortly after he joined the Betty Parsons Gallery, where Rothko was also showing at the time. Linked by shared beliefs in art and politics, the two quickly became close friends. Both artists professed an abiding interest in classical mythology and the unconscious and sought to explore archetypal and timeless forms in their work of this period. Speaking to these interests in 1947, Rothko characterized art as "an unknown adventure in an unknown space" that must provoke "a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need."¹

The thematic and formal similarities between Rothko's and Ferber's work were not merely the results of parallel aesthetic tracks, but also stemmed from the direct artistic, philosophical, and personal exchange between the two. In addition to their close friendship and extensive correspondence, Rothko and Ferber also exchanged works with one another, several of which will be on view in this exhibition.

At this time, Rothko was in the midst of what has been called his "decisive decade," during which he worked through a number of pioneering stylistic periods in rapid succession before arriving at his signature "classic" paintings at the beginning of the 1950s. Perhaps most significant among Rothko's achievements of the 1940s are his Surrealist paintings of the middle of the decade. These dramatic, mythic tableaux present frieze-like configurations of semi-abstracted figures; two notable examples, *Entombment I/The Entombment* (1944) and *Landscape* (1945), will be on view, both of which Ferber selected for his personal collection from Rothko's studio.

Concurrently, Ferber was creating dynamic, twisting sculptures in lead and bronze. For Ferber, sculpture operated as a kind of primal expression; as he described in a 1947 artist's statement: "The artist must actually crawl over every square inch of his work, touching, smearing, retouching, licking and spitting, expending himself over the whole thing and forcing it bit by bit to become, in an intimate and immediate way, himself."² The works from the 1940s, like *Dragon* (1947), are built on unresolved structural tensions, with antagonistic biomorphic forms contorting and combining around voids and negative spaces. As described by John B. Ravenal, at this time Ferber "was treating space itself as a more central and visible element. Rather than just emptiness around a mostly solid form, it appears throughout the work in parcels, each with its own contours, volume, and sense of mutability."³

¹ Mark Rothko, "The romantics were prompted," *Possibilities 1* (1947–1948), p. 84. Republished in Miguel López-Remiro, ed., *Writings on Art: Mark Rothko* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 58–59.

² Herbert Ferber, "The Artist's Point of View," artist's talk given at the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors Second Annual Forum, New York, April 23, 1947.

³ John B. Ravenal, "The Continuing Relevance of Herbert Ferber," in *Herbert Ferber: Space in Tension*. Exh. cat. (Coral Gables, Florida: Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, 2017), p. 8.

Another Rothko work from Ferber's personal collection, *No. 6* (1947) is a key example of the artist's "Multiform" paintings from the year that the two artists met. Rothko's first fully abstract paintings, the Multiforms represent the crucial fulcrum point of his career, functioning at once as a direct reckoning with his figurative work of the early 1940s and a bridge toward his later classic paintings.

Ferber and Rothko's fertile dialogue took place not only between the two artists, but also in public presentations of their work. Their work has been—and continues to be—frequently exhibited together, both in a number of contemporaneous and now historically significant group shows, as well as in recent large-scale retrospective studies of the New York School. Most notable among the former is the seminal 1952 exhibition *15 Americans* at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, which presented the work of Ferber and Rothko alongside that of Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, and other artists.

Ferber's personal dedication to Rothko extended beyond the latter's untimely death in 1970, as he served as the guardian of Rothko's daughter, Kate, and assisted directly in placing the artist's works and the stewardship of the Mark Rothko Foundation with the artist's children.

This exhibition is organized in collaboration with Waqas Wajahat and the Estate of Herbert Ferber.

Herbert Ferber (born Herbert Ferber Silvers; 1906–1991) was born in New York City. He studied dentistry at Columbia University Dental School, graduating in 1930, and pursued his independent studies of art with evening classes at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design and the National Academy of Design. During his lifetime, Ferber was the subject of major solo exhibitions, including those held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1961); Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (1962); and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1982). His work is held in many prominent collections, including the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. *Herbert Ferber: Space in Tension*, a traveling retrospective of the artist's work organized by the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, will be on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, from January 27 to July 29, 2018.

Mark Rothko (born Markus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz; 1903–1970) was born in Dvinsk in the Russian Empire (now Daugavpils, Latvia) and emigrated with his family to America in 1913. Major exhibitions of his work during his lifetime were held at the Art Institute of Chicago (1954); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1961, 1970); Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (1962, 1965); and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1963), among others. Important posthumous surveys and retrospectives of Rothko's work have been presented at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1979); Tate Gallery, London (1987); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (1988); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1998); and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2015). Important posthumous surveys and retrospectives of Rothko's work have been presented at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1979); Tate Gallery, London (1987); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (1988); National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (1998); and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2015).

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