In his forward to the exhibition catalog Milton Avery: American/1893–1965 (Joan Whitney Payson Gallery of Art), Martin Dibner relates a story in which, after a summer of painting in Vermont, Milton Avery was visited in his Greenwhich Village studio by the head of a large corporation interested in buying one of his paintings. Examining a series of canvases, the man stopped before one and in a challenging sound said, "I never saw a blue tree in Vermont." Looking at the painting, Avery replied, "That one was painted in New Hampshire." This incident demonstrates Avery's dry, Yankee wit and at the same time is a reflection of his attitude about representing nature in his paintings. Throughout his career, which spanned the period from the mid-twentieth century to the mid-sixties, Avery maintained strict adherence to his own emotional and visual perception of nature. Avery developed a lyrical mode of painting, verging on abstraction, that was independent of the prevailing styles in American painting during his lifetime. While his abstracted landscapes are based on direct observation, the forms and colors are the result of instinct and highly subjective interpretation.

The visual particulars of a scene were of less interest to Avery than the essence or mood which the scene projected. His approach was to strip a scene to its bare essentials, arriving at a highly distilled yet basically factual image. Avery's paintings are characterized by their economical brushwork in the form of simple, broad and lightly applied areas of color. Avery said of his art, "I work on two levels. I try to construct a picture in which shapes, spaces, colors form a set of unique relationships, independent of any subject matter. At the same time I try to capture and translate the excitement and emotion caused in me by the working with the original idea."

(Contemporary American Painting, University of Illinois, Urbana, 1951, p. 159).

One of Avery's central concerns was the expressive potential of color. Avery had a remarkable genius for chromatic inventions. Bislush mauves, pinks, greens, silverly whites, tea browns and soft yellows establish a lyrical resonance that has led John Canaday to refer to Avery as the lyrical poet laureate of American painting. Avery's art clearly extends a tradition of the mid-sixties. Avery maintained strict adherence to his own emotional and visual perception of nature.

Avery developed a lyrical mode of painting, verging on abstraction, that was independent of the prevailing styles in American painting during his lifetime. While his abstracted landscapes are based on direct observation, the forms and colors are the result of instinct and highly subjective interpretation.

When Social Realism and the American Scene were considered the important thing, he took an aesthetic stand as opposed to regional subject matter... His attitude helped reinforce me in my chosen direction. I always regarded him as a brilliant colorist and draftsman... His work was working against the stream."

(Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings, University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, 1977, p. 36).

Indeed, Avery's paintings represent a singular expression that transcends the time of their making or the specific subject they represent. The balance achieved in these works between abstraction, plastic illusion and mood establishes a powerfully contemplative pictorial space, one which is as provocative today as it was in the fifties. As one resident of Cape Cod noted, "It used to be possible to look out the window and see dunes and sea. Now you look out and see an Avery." (Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings, University of Texas Art Museum, Austin, 1977, p. 32).


Michael Auping
Associate Curator
Works in MATRIX:

Seven White Cows, 1953, oil on canvas, 28" x 43". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Sea and Dunes I, 1958, oil on canvas, 54" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Sail, 1958, oil on canvas, 72" x 50". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Speedboat's Wake, 1959, oil on canvas, 54½" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Figures by the Sea, 1960, oil on canvas, 50" x 72". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Galerie Paule Anglim, San Francisco.

Sea, Moon and Stars, 1960, oil on canvas, 50" x 60". Lent by Mrs. Milton Avery; courtesy Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan.

Figure by the Sea, 1960, oil on paper, 5 1/2" x 12 1/2". Private Collection, San Francisco.

Selected bibliography about Avery:

Greenberg, Clement. Art and Culture (Boston: Beacon Press '61).


Numerous catalogs, articles and reviews have been written about Milton Avery and his work. For a comprehensive bibliography on Avery we refer the reader to: Milton Avery, Drawings and Paintings (Austin: University of Texas Art Museum '77).

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Curt Valentin Gallery, NYC '35, and regularly to '41; Paul Rosenberg and Co., NYC '43 and regularly to '50; Grace Borgenicht Gallery, NYC '51 and regularly to '62; Baltimore Museum of Art, MD '52; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston '52; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston '56; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC (retrospec-

cative) '60; Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan '64 and '67; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '65; National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. '69.