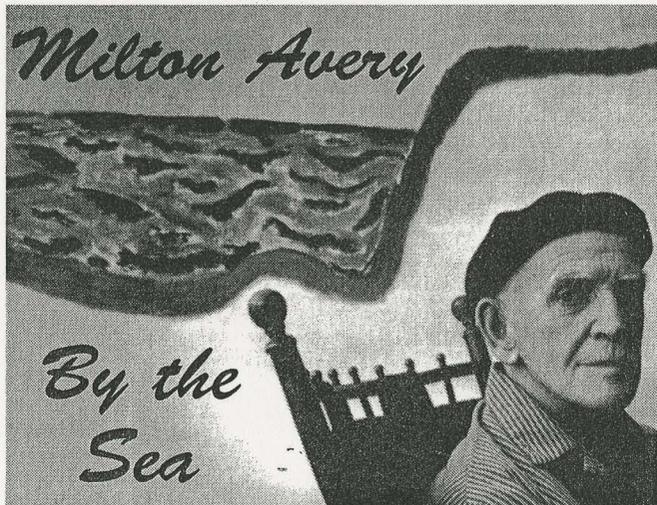


ay

POA

Portrait of an Artist

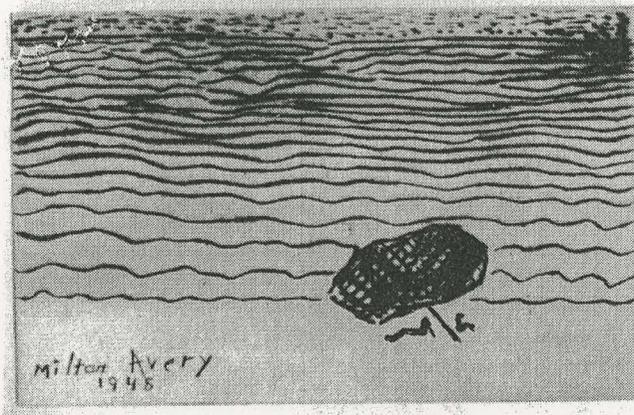
by Eileen Kennedy



"Provincetown and the Sea" - our theme for this issue - coincides with the annual "Masterworks" print show at the Julie Heller Gallery, where among the Provincetown inspired artists exhibited is American modernist Milton Avery (1885-1965) for whom The Sea was a recurrent motif.

Both a printmaker and painter, Avery lived in New York and summered for some years in Provincetown where his closeness to the sea was an inspiration for his work in canvases with titles like "Offshore Island," "Nude by the Sea," "Sea, Moon & Stars," "Green Sea," "Black Sea," "White Wave," "Sea Grasses and Blue Sea," and "Bridge to the Sea." According to at least one critic, he "saw the life force in the eternal rhythm of the waters...his subject manifested a kind of divine energy most easily apparent in those great sea-scapes...[where we feel the rhythmic] energy in the strokes of blue on blue, purple on purple, green on green..." depicted in an abstract representational style that became more and more simplified over the years. His constant and open longing to symbolize his spiritual affinity to the sea echoes Albert Ryder and a long tradition of American romanticism in art. Although never brooding like Ryder, Avery's "Sea, Moon & Stars" (1960), in particular, recalls the earlier artist's nocturnal seascapes in its lyricism and ability to convey the almost impossible to describe mercurial "solidity" of the sea.

Art critic Robert Hughes has said that Avery's pictorial construction was achieved almost entirely through color: The weight of a red, the brooding distension of a purplish sea against a blue headland thinly...painted in flat silhouettes with little interest in texture and almost no modeling. Avery was one of the first American painters, perhaps the first, to insist a painting should be flat and on one plane without photographic depth. Many critics concur that Avery grasped "Matisse's direct use of color and his treatment of...landscape as flat patterns with rhythmic contours..." and that Avery's ability to eliminate detail and to organ-



Umbrella by the Sea 1948

ize masses as flat areas of pure color, dividing the canvas into transparent yet brilliant zones...was an influence on color field painting as a whole, particularly Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Helen Frankenthaler - as well as the venerable Hans Hofmann. Many believe, in fact,

the idea of a field of color started with him.

Avery was an individualist. In 1945, the Abstract Expressionists dominated the New York art scene. Instead of conforming to their doctrine of the complete absence of figuration, Avery remained faithful to his own artistic vision as he had during the 1920s and 1930s, when the realist painters considered him too abstract. In the end, however, Milton Avery is considered by many critics to have created some of the most beautiful colors in the history of painting. Describing his painting, Barbara Haskell wrote, "Perhaps the most powerful Avery works are those that reveal his deep response to nature, for he was one of the finest American landscape painters of this century."

Avery's subject matter, described by Rothko as "domestic unheroic cast (of) his living room, the flight of birds, his wife Sally, the beaches...where they summered..." was also that of his prints, where the absence of pure color left Avery to make his statement with just the suggestion of contour and line. His lithograph "Grey Sea (1963), done only two years before his death and exhibited in this current show, has only three textures and two forms with curvilinear movements almost like the twirls made in learning to write...or a child's convention for clouds. His "Umbrella by the Sea" done in 1948 contains the barest indicator of people, beach and sea. Almost cartoon-like if not for the sure and subtle way Avery distinguishes between three different levels of movement in the sea - an observation that could only be made by someone who has long and lovingly observed its ever changing and contradictory nature.

"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 aroused in me..." by being by the sea.

Milton Avery's prints are part of the "Masterworks" exhibit at the Julie Heller Gallery, 2 Gosnold Street (across from Adams Pharmacy on Commercial Street) through August 3rd. Also included in the show are works of Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, Blanche Lazzell, Ethel Mars, Ross Moffett, Clare Leighton, Marguerite Zorach and others. Opening Reception Friday, 7/21 at 7:30 PM. Gallery open Daily 11 AM - 9 PM. Call 487-2169 for details.