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psychiatry in pictures

Mark Rothko (1903–1970)

Text by Alexandra Pitman

Mark Rothko's darker works began in 1957 as he entered the final decade of his life. The current Rothko exhibition at Tate Modern in London focuses on five series of works produced between 1958 and 1970, the most significant being a commission for the Four Seasons Restaurant in Manhattan's Seagram Building. In this exhibition the Seagram murals are hung in a cathedral-like space, in keeping with the artist's stringent specifications over positioning and environment. These images, most notably *Red on Maroon Mural Section 4* (1959), exemplify his signature brooding multiforms and their ability to convey atmospheres. Rothko became unhappy about the prospect of his murals hanging in a buzzing restaurant where there was little scope for any participation with them. He dismissed the idea as mere interior design for the rich and decided to pull out of the commission, later donating a selection to the Tate to be viewed in a dedicated Rothko Room. The paintings arrived in London on the day of his suicide in February 1970.

The panels of colour and ragged borders so recognisable in these works are grimly echoed in his death. Rothko's body was found on the floor of his studio the morning after his overdose, having also severed his brachial arteries. Around his body blood had formed a rectangular pool approximately the size of one of his canvases. In his final years the *Black-Form* paintings (1964), the *Brown on Grey* works (1969) and the *Black on Gray* series (1969–70) expressed his failing health and hopes. Drinking and smoking heavily and afflicted by gout, shingles, liver cirrhosis, bronchitis and another failed marriage, Rothko's work showed an increasing prominence of what he described as 'the tragic ingredient'. Although there is a tendency to turgid analysis of Rothko's work there is one thing on which most agree: that the paintings of his last 2 years reflect an intensifying preoccupation with dissolution and with death.

Rothko is at Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 9TG, UK until 1 February 2009.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/markrothko/>

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