



## **MICHAEL CORINNE WEST (1908-1991)**

### **The Day After**

Signed lower right, "Michael West," and inscribed verso, "Michael West Nov. 1963"  
oil on canvas

85 1/4 x 50 1/8 in. (86 7/8 x 51 5/8 x 2 in.)

216.54 x 127.32 x 2.54 cm (220.66 x 131.13 x 5.08 cm)

1963

15147.b

### **PROVENANCE:**

Private Collection, New York

Private Collection

Michael Corinne West's story is a significant one. A prolific painter and poet at the forefront of the Abstract Expressionist movement, West is the artist least likely to be acknowledged as standing among the first generation with the core group of male artists. Placed in a confrontational role as one of the few women defying a male-dominated mythology, she shifted to gestural painting in the mid-1940s, often laying the canvases on the floor and working like Jackson Pollock. Her earliest work in black and white predates Franz Kline's by several years. It included "*Black and White*" of 1947, which impressed Clement Greenberg, who was never inclined to dish a gratuitous compliment. Despite the changing tides of art and fashion, her devotion to mysticism, inner emotional states, and the subconscious as they relate to Abstract Expressionism continued unfazed and steady.

"*The Day After*," painted in 1963, is West's visceral, abstract response to a pivotal moment in American history — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The overlapping layers of saturated blood-red tones clashing with forceful strokes of black suggest the rupture in the national consciousness and evoke feelings of disruption and confusion, embodying the artist's internalized grief. West transformed the event into a deeply personal expression of mourning, capturing the weight of a nation's sorrow in a form that defies literal representation yet speaks volumes emotionally.

Michael Corinne West (1908-1991) is considered one of the unsung pioneers of Abstract Expressionism. She was born as Corinne Michelle West in Chicago and spent most of her formative years in Ohio. She enrolled in the Cincinnati Art Academy in 1925, and in 1932 she moved to New York to continue her education at the Art Students League. West was a member of Hans Hofmann's first class at the League alongside Mercedes Matter, Harry Holtzman, Betty Parsons, and Louise Nevelson, amongst others. Hoffman's emphasis on the "inner eye," the ability to apprehend the essence of things, had a lasting impact on the artist and her spiritual approach to abstraction. However, she also found Hoffman to be an oppressive teacher and left his class after six months. She was not alone in her critiques of Hofmann's manner, Lee Krasner also voiced concerns on his treatment of female artists.

Around this same time, West developed a romantic relationship with artist Arshile Gorky who introduced her to European Surrealism. Their intellectual and personal relationship was central to the development of both artists. Gorky is said to have proposed to West six times, and six times she refused him to preserve her independence as a woman and artist. It was Gorky who encouraged West to change

her name from Corinne to Michael, claiming that the former sounded more like a “debutante’s daughter” than a serious painter. West began using the name “Mikael” and by 1941 had officially adopted the professional and personal moniker of “Michael West” and began to dress in “male” attire.

West’s paintings from the early and mid-1940’s demonstrate cubist influence and infrastructure, however, after World War II her work became much more abstract and guided by the social, spiritual, and philosophical changes in the world. In 1946, West became active in the burgeoning post-war art culture of New York City, exhibiting alongside Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko, amongst others, at the Pinacotheca Gallery. In 1948 she married avant-garde filmmaker and photographer, Francis Lee. Through Lee, West made the acquaintance of fellow artist Jackson Pollock, with whom she shared an emphasis on the painterly process as well as the assertion of the spiritual nature within the language of abstraction. She was technically driven by the direct approach of “action painting,” a style popularized by Pollock. To achieve a thickly raised, rough surface, she frequently used a palette knife and painted directly from the tube, adding found objects and sand. She utilized her thick paint application to create what she called “a material awareness of spirit.” On occasion she painted over older canvases, building upon that manifested spiritual awareness.

In 1953, West exhibited alongside Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline at the prestigious Stable Gallery. She maintained friendships with Richard Pousette-Dart and sculptor Isamu Noguchi and was influenced in the 1950’s by the calligraphic approaches of Zen Buddhism and European Art Informel. Throughout her artistic career, West was also a noted poet and essayist whose writings on art outlined contemporary and individual theories on modernism. In her later years, West expressed, “No more shows—I just want to paint in peace—As this drive to paint forces me on.”

Despite her name-change, West struggled for recognition at a time when the attention of post-war American art critics was focused on a hyper-masculine prototype of the “artist.” While her groundbreaking contributions propelled American Abstract Expressionism forward, she was written out of the narrative due to the gender bias of 20th century art historians and critics. Like many of her female Abstract Expressionist contemporaries, West’s work is the subject of growing interest and acclaim. Soon after her death in 1991, the Pollock-Krasner Foundation mounted an acclaimed retrospective of her work, titled: “Michael West: Painter-Poet,” and in 2019, New York’s Hollis Taggart gallery made a compelling case for West by exhibiting her work alongside her peers Arshile Gorky, Hans Hoffman, Richard Pousette-Dart, and Franz Kline. These exhibitions re-positioned West as a seminal artist of the Abstract Expressionist movement and began to remedy the lack of recognition West failed to receive in her lifetime, but deserved.

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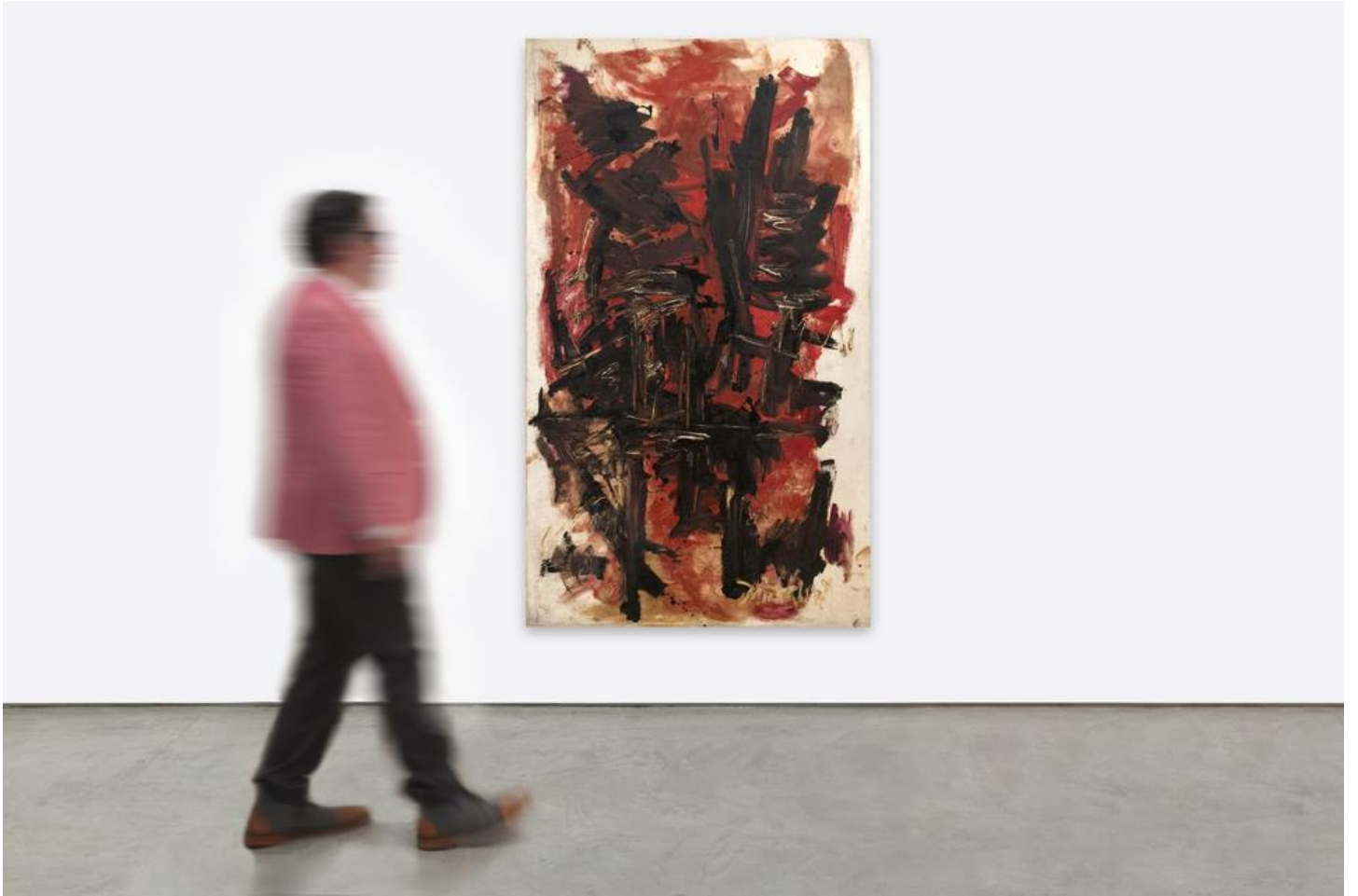




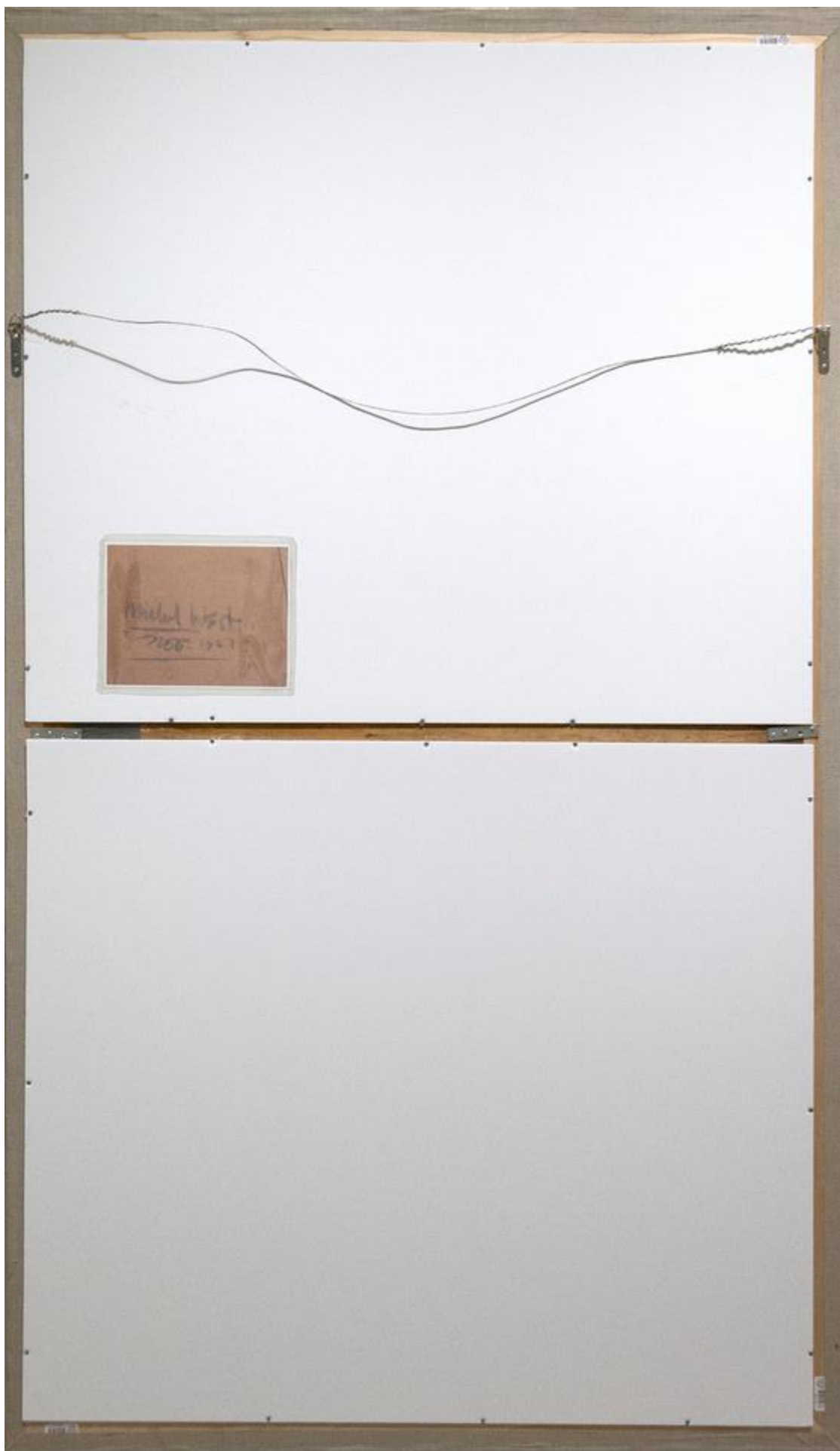












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