

## Barnett Newman's Figuration of Memory

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I am not questioning Barnett Newman's tremendous ability to endow his canvases with a palpable emotive power. However, I believe that many of his works take a step back from absolute abstraction despite the fact that they avoid any true representational imagery. This 'step back' comes in the form of the tangible titles he attaches to the paintings, some with great mythological/religious weight, such as *Adam* and *Eve*, *Abraham*, *Uriel*, the *Stations of the Cross*, others with reference to dramatic characters, such as *Ulysses* and the *Queen of the Night*, and still others with a place or aura, such as *Cathedra*, and *The Wild*. Although he named some of his works years after completing them, perhaps as a way of creating a path into the canvas for the uninitiated viewer, the names become inextricably associated with the image through *other images* from the memory of the viewer. In effect, the viewer is put into a position of juxtaposing *memories* of concrete representations suggested by the title (that would otherwise not be associated with the painting) with the retinal image that one is confronted with. This unique means of experiencing a work of art, whether intentional or not, lies in contrast with strictly representational art, in which the viewer experiences a transformation, or even a replacement, of their memory of an image. In effect there is less communication between the manner in which the viewer comes to a piece and the piece itself.

The question remains that had Newman retracted the bond between title and painting, and instead used non-objective *associations* with which to at best *catalogue* his works (as was the practice of his contemporary, Ad Reinhardt), would the experience of the viewer be substantially different?