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# A VISUAL ANALYSIS ESSAY:

## *FEMALE CORPSE, BACK VIEW* BY HYMAN BLOOM

MADLINE  
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Upon first glance, the bright colors and sensuous, swirling brushstrokes elicit awe from the harrowing technical beauty of Hyman Bloom's *Female Corpse, Back View*. Yet this ethereal beauty becomes almost violent in sight of the subject matter. The jarring contrast between Bloom's technical skill and the grotesque focus leave the viewer wondering, "why use an abstract expressionist approach to death?" However, the answer to this question must be situated within the cultural context of Bloom's Jewish upbringing and the development of his theosophy. Abstract expressionism is not meant to be realistic, it is meant to evoke the feelings of an experience, and in this instance, a new perception of death.

The composition of the painting is certainly one element that contributes to the expressionist depiction of death. *Female Corpse, Back View* (Bloom) stands at approximately five and a half feet tall, so that a viewer that walks up to the painting feels as if one could almost walk into it. This is complemented by the way that the corpse faces backwards with crossed legs, mimicking a position of movement. The background is a swirl of creamy green color and thin brown lines, enveloping the figure in a comforting form. The simple background can be looked at as perhaps a death shroud, but the depth of the colors and the relaxed waviness of form suggest something more dynamic and delicate, such as a reemergence of life or soul, yet nonetheless still comforting. I think that together, these are both possibilities, because of the abstract technique that Bloom uses. Thus, the background is not meant to stand alone but to help express the focus on the corpse at the center of the work. Bloom encloses the figure so as to draw attention to the fact that the viewer cannot avoid confrontation with the corpse. This figure is stripped of its identity and even sexuality, as the face and the front of the body are hidden, forcing the viewer to avoid the humanity of the figure and face the sheer subject of death in this simple yet elegant method. Therefore, by composing the painting this way, Bloom urges the viewer to adopt a new perspective of death, one that is not purely morbid.

The next element that contributes to the expressionism of *Female Corpse, Back View* (Bloom) is the lucid use of color that characterizes the corpse. The lurid jewel tones and churning strokes capture the viewer with the level of minute detail that flowers the body. But the colors become dark and muddled towards the bottom of the painting, especially around the legs, drawing the attention upwards and more towards the center of the body, where the colors are boldest. The red spots on the figure's bottom and the darkness of the legs indicate the process of decomposition, but also symbolize a sense of something more powerful, such as the smoldering of fire and ash that precede rejuvenation. The paint is also laid thickly on the canvas, addressing itself to the literal embellishment of the figure, adding another dimension of beauty. Although these techniques may strike the viewer as uncomfortable and out of place, I believe that this is Bloom's aim. He ushers the viewer towards a new perspective of death, one bridled by a simultaneous vision of new life. This forces the viewer to contemplate the beauty of the artwork and what it means to find beauty in death and beyond.

Upon a visit to a morgue, Bloom proclaimed in an epiphany, "I had the conviction of immortality, of being part of something permanent and ever-changing, of metamorphosis as the nature of being. Everything was intensely beautiful, and I had a sense of love for life that was greater than any I had ever had before" (Museum of Fine Arts). His new investment in Jewish mysticism becomes prominent in his series of corpse and autopsy paintings through his abstractionist technique. These paintings, although a depiction of the human body, are not meant to be copies of anatomical structures. Rather, it seems that Bloom desires to express a metamorphosis, and at the same time a marriage of the old and new, especially considering the context of his career. Bloom's family had emigrated from Latvia in 1920 out of fear of the looming prejudice and war (Holland). In his adult life, the horrific speculations finally materialized and infringed upon his strong Jewish identity as World War II progressed. Suddenly, the imminence of death felt closer than ever and spilled over into Bloom's work. The nameless, faceless victim (painted from Bloom's memory of autopsy rooms) in *Female Corpse, Back View* (Bloom) suddenly takes on an amorphous identity in light of the longstanding history of brutality against the Jewish culture. His interpretation of death and decay memorializes the dead but also speaks to the living. Bloom harkens back to his orthodox roots while

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incorporating his new attachment to Jewish mysticism and the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy in his expressions of death (Holland). *Female Corpse, Back View* (Bloom) is to be seen as a work of longing placed within a historical context, as of something that is lost that can never be regained but also as a work of hope and anticipation of something timeless.

Ultimately, I believe that the only way to truly express the experience of Bloom's theosophy of life and death is through a technique of wild color and bold application. Yes, death is to be mourned for, but Bloom hopes expressionism will show that death can also be an experience of beauty, however unnatural this tension may be. More time spent with *Female Corpse, Back View* (Bloom) lends to more appreciation of the composition, artistic skill, and sheer force of Bloom's voice that speaks through the work. This perspective of death is meant to be celebrated, and what better way to do so than through art?



### Works Cited

Bloom, Hyman. *Female Corpse, Back View*. 1947, Museum of Fine Arts.

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