



David Levine

## ROTHKO NEGATIVES

My dad took these pictures in Mark Rothko's studio.  
He called Rothko one of his dearest friends.

He left his wife and son and moved in here in 1969.

Rothko, I mean.

My dad left his wife and son and moved in 1973.

At this moment, though, my father is still married. At this moment, I haven't been born. Almost, though!



Outside, it seems like a bright day. Rothko's studio is on 69th Street between Lexington and Third, in a red-brick carriage house that looks beautiful in the sunlight. But you wouldn't know it from these photos.



#### ROTHKO NEGATIVES

What, exactly, is my father photographing? What's interesting here? The clean pot next to the sink? The fact that Rothko could actually keep a clean kitchen? Or is it the empty prescription bottles?

The pictures were taken either just before Rothko killed himself or just after. He took barbiturates and opened a vein on his arm with a razor; they found his body in a massive puddle of blood. There was no note.

The aesthetic ineptitude of these photos blows me away.

There's no focus on the paintings, or on the painter.

There's no specific point of interest.

They feel indifferent to composition. It looks like crime scene photography. It probably is crime scene photography.

What was he doing there?



Those are a lot of cigarettes for a man who just suffered an aneurysm. Is that a bronze baby shoe? Did Rothko take it with him when he left his wife and his son?

Is he lying dead on the floor in the other room?



There's a flea circus and a track set next to those soon-to-be famous "late" paintings, so I guess his son visits pretty regularly. His wife was an alcoholic; she died soon after him. Almost none of Rothko's friends attended her funeral. Whose bag is that?

Is my dad here alone?

There are matches on the floor. There are clothes on the fridge. I keep trying to find my dad's reflection in the toaster. He is nowhere to be found. Just like everyone else. Where is everyone? And if no one's here, then what is my dad doing here alone?



Here's a sculpture by Herbert Ferber, dentist-sculptor. Yes: he was both a sculptor and a dentist.

According to my mom, he had his wife committed to an insane asylum in order to marry his dental hygienist. No one would speak to him after that. Everybody in that crowd swears it was in their brownstone that Rothko called Ferber "Judas" to his face.

Strange, then, that Rothko would hold on to Ferber's mephitically ugly sculpture. It looks downright toxic. Is that an ear on the side of it? I thought it would have some kind of New York School-type name, like *Circe (4)* or something. But no. It's actually in MoMA's collection and it's called *He is Not a Man*.

I think of my Dad, wandering around this empty space, either alone or determined not to capture anyone else in the picture. Determined not to capture any art in the picture. He's just shooting hallways, corners, the leftovers of a thoroughly grim existence.

But that staircase looks like it leads to a gallows — perhaps for him.

He would be dead just ten years later, after being sued, and ruined, thanks to his friendship with Rothko. As he lay dying he had continuous morphine hallucinations, moaning about a “square of paranoia” which kept appearing across the room.

I inherited the camera. I recognize the dust-motes on the negatives.

David Levine

ROTHKO NEGATIVES

