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Sally Michel: The Other Avery

ROBERT HOBBS

It is a simple story, really, a tale of two American artists—Milton Avery, who was in his forties, and Sally Michel, then in her twenties, who forged a seemingly effortless American brand of high-style Modernism in the 1930s. The lightheartedness of their work differs from the earlier, more radically avant-garde American art of the Steiglitz Group and the Dadaist Circle. The Averys favored School of Paris art created by the Fauves Henri Matisse, Raoul Dufy, and André Derain, and the Nabis Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. They also were fascinated with American traditions that included Tonalism, 19th-century American folk art, and contemporary cartoon-like illustrations. Their art served as an antidote to the miseries of the Great Depression by focusing on familiar landscapes and intimate family scenes. They combined lush, high-keyed color with a frugal use of thin, transparent washes that may, in part, have been necessitated by the need then to be economical, and may also have been a result of Milton Avery's own character, for his Scot's blood and frugality were a family joke.¹ Both Milton and Sally took a simple world and transformed it into a playful semiabstract construct, thus humanizing abstraction and, by analogy, all the bureaucratic, scientific, and supra-human processes abstraction connotes. This couple, married for almost 40 years, turned landscapes into paintings, family scenes into compositions, people into types, faces into blank masks or caricatures; in short, they took their own personal environment and showed others how it could become abstract without being totally alienating, strangely distant and yet familiar, modern and still comforting.

Milton Avery has been credited with originating this style even though it appears in retrospect that Sally Michel played an important part in its formation. In the literature she is depicted as a stalwart ally who decided to create the free time necessary for Milton to establish himself as an artist. The collector Frederick Wight, for example, described the Averys' marriage as "a fusion of will and interests which seems at most to divide itself into complementary functions rather than two people. Avery had reserved for himself the essentials of painting. Sally Avery provided for everything else."²

When Milton met Sally, she was a recent high school graduate, an intermittent student at the Art Students

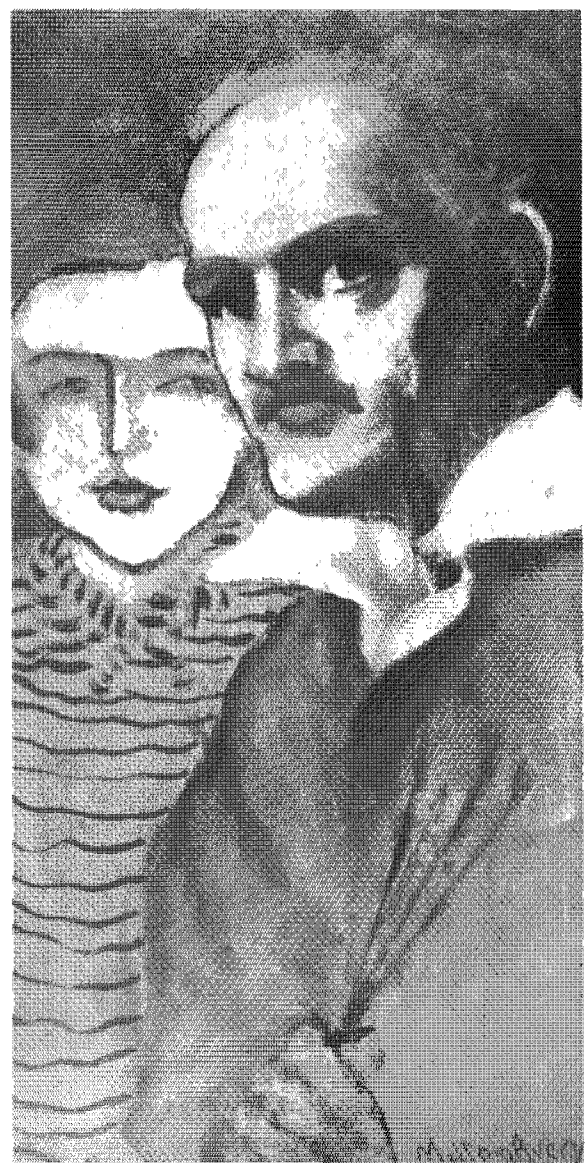


Fig. 1. Milton Avery, *The Artist and His Wife* (1928), oil on canvas, 28" x 14". Collection of Sally Michel.

League who had persuaded her parents to let her spend the summer painting in Gloucester, Massachusetts, with a girlfriend. Milton, Sally recalls, was impressed with her determination to be an artist:



Fig. 3. Milton Avery, *Woman Drawing* (1942), oil on canvas, 28" x 36". Collection of Sally Michel.

I think I was nineteen at the time, and I used to get up at six o'clock in the morning and go out sketching, with my paintbox on my back . . . and I'd set up my easel. Then I'd come back about twelve o'clock, all covered in paint. And I think [Milton] was very intrigued by this crazy youngster who did all these things, and we got acquainted naturally, because he lived next door.³

She also remembers vividly the first time she saw his art:

"Would you like to see what I'm doing?" he asked me one afternoon. He'd been waiting for me to return. I remember my first glimpse of his work. . . . "I should hang around this man," I thought, "and learn all he knows about painting." I didn't realize then that this would mean the next forty years of our lives.⁴

The year was 1924; Milton had not yet achieved maturity as an artist even though he was 39 years old and had been painting for over 15 years. Although Sally was impressed with his work, his art then was a mixture of 19th-century Tonalism and turn-of-the-century American Impressionism.⁵ Like Tonalist art, Avery's aimed to establish a gently nostalgic mood through low-keyed hues of the same value. At that time he was not an innovator; he was living in Connecticut and was unfamiliar with recent artistic trends in New York and Europe. Although he was committed to art, he had to take a variety of jobs to support himself, his mother, and various family members and thus could paint only part-time.

In order to make himself more attractive to Sally, Milton subtracted several years from his age.⁶ After the summer in Gloucester, he followed her to New York; they married two years later. The move and the marriage represented a permanent break with Avery's past (his mother died seven months after his marriage), and he was thus able to begin his personal and professional life anew. For whatever reason, Sally, who was only 21 in 1926, decided to support the 41-year-old Milton. While her resolve certainly stemmed from strength of character and belief in his art, family contacts also made it easier for her to gain employment:

My sister had a job as an editor of a trade newspaper [*Progressive Grocer*] and she could always give me some work . . . some drawing. I didn't make too much money, but we lived . . . we lived on nothing really. Then I began



Fig. 2. Milton Avery, *My Wife Sally* (1934), drypoint, 5 7/16" x 8 1/16". University of Iowa Museum of Art.

to get some work from Macy's. I did . . . institutional ads . . . charming drawings and things like that.

And then I got this job at the [New York] *Times* . . . our greatest patron, because they were my first really steady account. [Sally became illustrator for the "Child and Home" column.] I began to do drawings for the *Times Magazine* Section and I did them every week. . . . This went on for about twenty years. . . . While I got work from them, I also got other work. And sometimes we were doing pretty well, and sometimes we weren't.

And then Milton began to sell gradually. A few paintings here and a few paintings there. And in the thirties, the Valentine Gallery began buying a group of his paintings. . . . Originally, we sold them fifty paintings for fifteen hundred dollars.⁷

Milton's art did not really begin to find buyers until 1943, when Paul Rosenberg represented him,⁸ and his sales did not support the family until the 1950s.

Illustration work during the late 1920s enabled Sally to be at home, but she found little time to paint and only began to make art during the extended summer vacations, some lasting several months, that she and Milton started taking in the 1930s. They shared the same studio space from the beginning and would regularly critique each other's work. During these critiques, Milton's most frequent comment to Sally was "Do a lot of them." "He wasn't talkative," she later recalled. "We could be together the whole day without saying two words."⁹

Since both Averys soon became convinced that the first idea should be seized and quickly completed so as not to spoil its freshness and charm, they almost invariably had one or more finished works at the end of each day. Sally later said, apropos of their spontaneity, that "[Milton] could do a big canvas in two hours, but it took thirty years of thinking and all that experience with working to do that."¹⁰ He often finished three medium to small paintings in a day, "and sometimes he could do four big watercolors. I remember once, when we were on the Gaspé Peninsula, and . . . were preparing to go, . . . he found . . . four sheets of paper left. . . . He sat down and he did four watercolors. One, two, three."¹²

Although there was mutual respect and a joint commitment to making modern art out of familiar surroundings, Sally's work was smaller in scale than Milton's, and she painted for herself rather than for



Fig. 4. Milton Avery, *Sun Worshippers* (1931), oil on canvas, 26" x 33". Yares Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona.

a market. Milton was far more prodigious than Sally, possibly because she took on the responsibilities of organizing the household and caring for their daughter March, who was born in 1932. They also naturally assumed that of the two it would be Milton who would have the public career.

Milton's early double portrait, painted two years after their marriage, is interesting for the way he viewed their relationship (1928; Fig. 1). Showing himself with brushes in hand, Milton is clearly an artist, and his wife is closely connected to him even though she stands slightly behind. The painting suggests the Averys' closeness, a relationship with few parallels in the history of art. As in many self-portraits, Avery intently stares at a mirror, but it is not clear from the picture whether he is looking at himself or at his wife who studies his mirrored reflection. The faces are conceived in two slightly different styles: Milton's traditional, Sally's modern and schematic. Perhaps Milton intended to show Sally as the muse who guided him in a new direction, because that is exactly what she did. Later he reflected on the centrality of Sally to his life and art by making the revealing quip, "Everything in my paintings that isn't a cow is usually Sally."¹³

Among Milton's first mature works is a series of portraits of Sally writing at a round table: one is a drawing entitled *The Letterwriter* (1931); another the painting *Woman with a Green Face* (1932); and the third the etching *My Wife Sally* (1934; Fig. 2). The portraits reveal his remarkable growth as an artist since marriage and are far removed from the Tonalist reveries that had occupied him formerly. In *Woman with a Green Face*, Sally is pictured as an American counterpart to Matisse's famous Fauvist portrait of his wife, *The Green Line* of 1905, which features a green stripe running down Madame Matisse's face. Although he frequently complained that her features were too regular to allow him to create playful caricatures, this portrait of Sally resembles a cartoon that has been blown up and painted in order to be taken seriously. The work is a statement of the artist's right to use color arbitrarily and to resort to caricature in order to achieve concentration in the figure and thus underscore the subject's energy. It is a joke without a punch line, a cartoon that has the



Fig. 5. Sally Michel, *Umbrella by the Sea* (1936), gouache on black paper, 13" x 20". Collection of Artist.

calming effect of laughing off the absurd role human beings have been forced to accept in the 20th century and, in particular, the Great Depression. The painting continues a modern tradition initiated by Manet and then continued by Cézanne, the Fauves, and the Cubists, all of whom dramatized how modern human beings were fragments of their former selves. Sally apparently did not take offense at this caricature of herself, or if she did, she soon found a defense in Formalist aesthetics:

[Milton] painted me again and again, but I don't think of them as pictures of me—they're just paintings. He could have made me the ugliest woman—I didn't care—as long as it was a good painting.¹⁴

Milton's mature style owes much to Sally's influence. Incredibly optimistic, Sally never found life too onerous. Over the years she depended on humor to relieve the most difficult situations; she also was very practical. As a working illustrator, she had to consider art as craft and could not afford to paint in an aristocratic, out-of-date Tonalist style as Milton had. Her attitude may well have influenced Milton to take himself less seriously, to recognize the important role humor can play in art, and to understand art as a symbolic expression of daily life.¹⁵ When the Averys were first married, Milton read aloud to Sally all of Proust's novel, *Swann's Way*. Proust's fascination with the intricate details of daily life reinforced the Averys' emphasis on their daily life, even though they managed to avoid Proust's obsessiveness as they transformed their own lives into art.

In *My Wife Sally*, Avery seems to be crediting Sally with helping to create the Milton Avery style, for he has pictured her signing his name. Of course, he could also be claiming priority over her art by showing her only capable of inscribing his name, but such an approach is out of character with his usual generosity. Since the first work in this series is the drawing *The Letterwriter*, Avery may also have been commemorating Sally's managerial talents, which had taken him in tow and given him official status as an artist.

Milton was no doubt the leader in the Avery/Michel style, but his appreciation for Sally's art is apparent

in the number of paintings he made of her intensely drawing and painting, among them *Woman Drawing* (1943; Fig. 3), *Studious Sketcher* (1945), and *Outdoor Sketcher* (1957). *Woman Drawing*, like the earlier portraits, derives its whimsy and energy from the use of caricature.

In the early 1930s, Michel was still functioning in the traditional role as wife and muse, offering Milton the rewards of a closely knit family life. Milton made numerous drawings and paintings of March, and even entitled his first retrospective survey in 1947 "My Daughter, March." Avery's discoveries may have been nurtured by Michel, but they also were aided by the regular visits the two made to art galleries each Saturday. Avery's newly accrued knowledge of the Fauves and Cubists and his familiarity with the art of Albert Pinkham Ryder, Stuart Davis (an acquaintance from the 1920s), Eilshemius (whom he painted and who was a good friend), and Marsden Hartley (whom he also painted and who became a close friend in the late 1930s) were certainly important to his artistic development and to Michel's as well.

Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb became friends in the late 1920s, to be joined in the 1930s by Barnett Newman. Rothko's and Gottlieb's paintings of this period parallel the Averys' interest in subjects taken from daily life. In later years these three younger men acknowledged Milton's leadership. His role as mentor was strange, however, since he was usually taciturn and not given to theorizing about his art. "He always used to say," Sally recounted, "well, [painting] it's a fascinating pastime. . . . I don't know how to do anything else, so I have to keep painting. He wasn't very pontifical. . . . And I know some artists were very annoyed, because he would always sort of throw off these wisecracky things. . . . but actually, in his painting he was very serious."¹⁶ When asked how she was regarded by Gottlieb, Newman, and Rothko, Michel responded that she had no problems with them: they accepted her as a peer.¹⁷ She was, after all, the only one among them making a living as an artist, albeit a commercial one, but during the Depression the lines between fine and applied art were not clearly drawn.

Because Sally Michel's works have only recently been given titles and dates, it is difficult to trace the give-and-take between Avery's and Michel's art. Although Sally has a remarkable memory for times and places and frequently dates both Milton's and her own work on the basis of family vacations, it is still difficult to establish a definitive chronology for her art. Apparently Milton first took the lead, and Sally followed closely in his footsteps. This pattern may well have been true throughout their lives, for Avery's art exhibits a greater range of formal inventiveness than Michel's and assumed a buying public that necessitated that he paint larger-scaled pictures than Sally's. Her role in the formation and development of the Avery style appears to be a complex one: she was patron, muse, champion, student, confidante, and co-worker. Because the Averys' art was so clearly focused on the household, on family outings, and on friends who stopped by, it is apparent that Michel participated fully in creating a family atmosphere of optimism and well-being in which this art could flourish. She obviously kept Milton positive and protected and thus constructed the friendly and

gracious ambiance that became such an important element in their art. Indeed, she created the emotional landscape that Avery manifested in his mature work. But such situations are created by the spouses of many artists and cannot be considered artistic contributions even if they are key factors to that art. Sally must be recognized, then, on the basis of her own work.

A comparison of two works indicates one kind of interaction. In 1931 Avery painted his prescient *Sun Worshippers* (Fig. 4). Five years later Michel made a gouache of this subject (*Umbrella by the Sea*; Fig. 5). Milton's painting was inspired by bathers at Coney Island, while Sally's was made during a visit to Good Harbor Beach, Gloucester. The difference between the two works is evident mainly in the choice of materials: Milton paints on canvas, while Sally creates on black paper (as did Milton in the 1931 *Acrobats*). The theme of *Sun Worshippers* is repeated in Milton's *Coney Island*, painted two years later. Significantly, in the lower left corner of *Coney Island*, Avery pictures a fully-clothed figure of Michel intently working on a drawing or painting. Sally here becomes Milton's anima, his mirrored counterpart who repeats in the painting his act of making it.

Both *Sun Worshippers* and *Umbrella by the Sea* exude a gentle, knowing humor. One feels in these early works, as in countless others, that the artists can paint and draw in accepted academic terms but have chosen to be naive in order to be charming. In its charm their art correlates with Matisse's espoused belief that art should serve as a comfortable easy chair for businesspeople.

Sometimes their ideas evolved simultaneously. In 1938, while spending the summer at the Gaspé Peninsula, Canada, both arrived at important points in their development. The watercolors they produced at Gaspé are remarkable for two reasons. First, they both worked in the same mode at the same time with little difference in their art except for the prodigious number—200 watercolors—made by Milton.¹⁸ And second, they both constructed landscapes out of shorthand notations largely gleaned from the art of Dufy, although the end results differ greatly from Dufy's distinctly French renditions (Fig. 6 and inside back cover). The French ambiance of the Canadian province of Quebec may have inspired both Avery and Michel to employ a more graphic, Dufy-inspired shorthand than formerly relied upon. Ironically, in spite of the rugged isolation of the Gaspé region, the Averys' pictures of it are charming and urbane: they create the illusion that this world had been domesticated and turned into a delightful retreat for city dwellers. The effect is not unlike that created by Chinese and Japanese art, particularly the way they bracketed off nature so that it consists of codes familiar to urbanites.

The Gaspé series is an admission that the Averys' 20th-century view of nature is far removed from 19th-century American painting, particularly the sublime effects of the Hudson River School, the transcendental qualities of calm everyday scenes that the Luminists emphasized, and the yearning for a close contact with nature that characterizes Tonalism. The Averys represent a generation of Americans who used automobiles to provide them a few hours or days in the country, but who knew little or nothing about specific

flora and fauna. They enjoyed nature's lushness and regarded it as exotic. The Averys' Gaspé Peninsula Series signals a period in American history when people were beginning to have enough leisure to make brief excursions with their families. Occurring toward the end of the Depression, this series indicates a trend that would escalate in the 1940s, in spite of gas rationing, and achieve massive proportions in the 1950s. The Gaspé paintings are the first of many exotic landscapes recorded by the Averys, who made a policy of getting out of Manhattan each summer and venturing as far as California, Mexico, and even Europe. They frequently summered in New England, and many of their drawings, watercolors, and paintings picture one or two family members sketching or painting out-of-doors, for their daughter March at an early age joined them in making art.

In these works the Averys seek two essences: the overall feeling of a particular landscape and the formal limits of their medium. They attempt to obey two very different demands, and the art frequently allies itself with one or the other essence. Most frequently the paintings come across as paintings first and landscapes second, thus following the grand tradition of Modern art and perpetuating the disruption it manifests between human beings and nature.

Although the Averys' first mature works were made in the midst of the Great Depression, they artfully deal with the concept of play. They provide delightful scenes of relaxation and thus remind people of the simple joys and pleasures still available in the midst of financial upheaval. Sally obliquely confirmed this aspect of the Avery style when she reflected on the ultimate meaning of Milton's art:

I remember somebody saying . . . every color loves every other color in [Milton's] work. There's no anger. There's no hate. It's like a glimpse of heaven. And there's a tremendous sense of order in his work, and I think people respond to this. They need it. You know, they have enough of the other in their life, and they come to him like a refuge, because you can look at his things over and over again and they just get better, because they really work on the highest level.¹⁴

Because of their naiveté, these works suggest a continuation of American folk-art traditions that were only beginning to be appreciated in the 1920s when Electra Havemeyer Webb was putting together her impressive collection, and even earlier when visionary artist Eilshemius was being recognized by Marcel Duchamp for continuing American naive traditions and Florine Stetheimer was using them as a way to critique, through a liberal use of irony, the glamour then pervading the New York art world. In the 1930s American folk art also served as an important point of departure for Marsden Hartley.

It is important to recognize that the Avery style responds to Depression anxiety. Although far removed from the dehumanizing effects of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, where people are likened to insects, or to the photographs of Dorothea Lange and Ben Shahn, which dwell on the extreme deprivations people

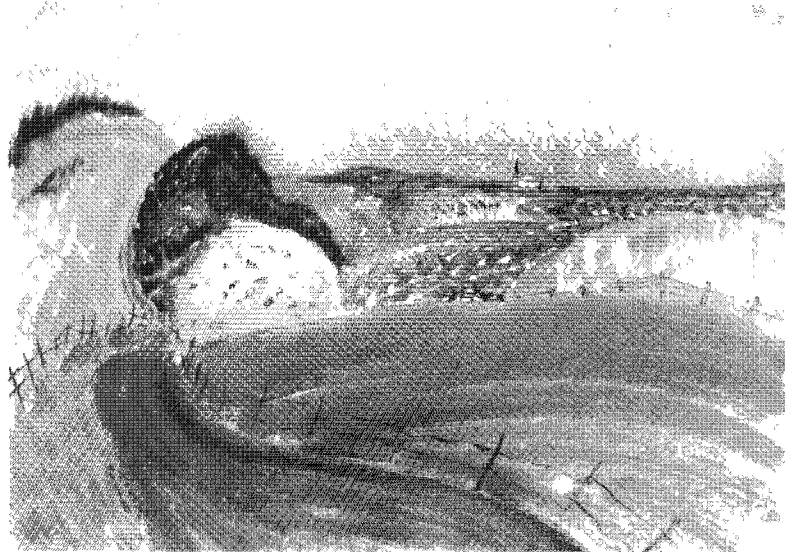


Fig. 6. Milton Avery, *Gaspé Landscape*, (1938), gouache on paper, 22" x 30". Private Collection. Photo: Sara Wellia.

were then suffering, it captures the intimacy and informality of Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, which began with the greeting "My Friends," the reliance on the family that developed out of adversity, and the new morality epitomized in Hollywood by the forming in 1933 of the National Legion of Decency. In short, the Averys' art represented a new emphasis on intimacy, family, warmth, and morality that was part of a 1930s reaction to the excesses of sex, sin, Flappers, bathtub gin, gangsterism, and the Lost Generation of the 1920s. They found a way to domesticate the high-style Modernism being featured at the recently formed Museum of Modern Art in New York City that served as the official style for the Rockefellers, major patrons of MoMA.

Surprisingly, the Averys' high-style Modernism did not find supporters in the 1930s because it was not considered glamorous enough for people like the Rockefellers, who bought European avant-garde art, works by Mexican muralists, American folk pieces, and tribal art. And the Avery style was too modern for people who delighted in the age-old rural virtues espoused by Midwestern Regionalists and too charming for the Social Realists, who demanded political trenchancy. Although the Averys did not belong to either of the favored groups, they shared a sense of lushness that characterized the work of many successful Depression-era painters who, knowingly or not, created metaphors of great harvests, either literally in farm and industrial scenes or metaphorically in abstract works containing rich displays of color and a profusion of geometric and biomorphic forms. This desire for a great harvest in the midst of enormous deprivation, for programmatic optimism in a depressed economy, is also strikingly evident in Thomas Wolfe's 1934 novel *Of Time and the River*, in which the fecundity of nature is paralleled by the rich language of Eugene Gant's daydreams about October as harvest time.

It is significant to note that Avery's and Michel's Modernism was retrograde in the 1930s—a fact recognized by Sally, who has stated emphatically that Milton "was not at all Bohemian."¹⁵ Their work denies the advances of late Synthetic Cubist art that developed

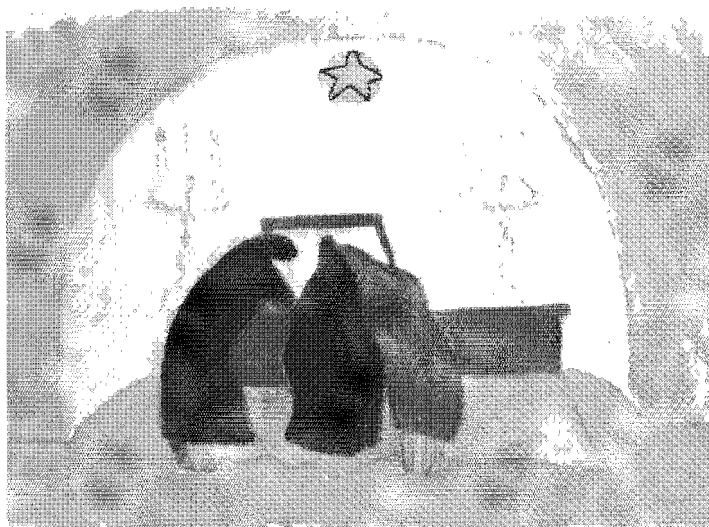


Fig. 7. Sally Michel, *Worshippers* (1946), watercolor, 11 1/4" x 15 1/2". Collection of Artist.

In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art in New York City devoted the largest exhibition since its inception to *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*. The exhibition challenged American artists to follow the lead of the Mexican muralists, who had already originated an indigenous form of modern art. Many Americans in the years following made pilgrimages to Mexico, including the Averys, but their stay did not result in a change in their art. Instead, it confirmed the direction they had already taken. Milton created far more works on this trip than Sally, and he also worked on a larger scale. Milton's *Crucifixion* (1946), stems from the same source as Sally's.

into Precisionism in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. They had little interest in a machine style or with formal inventions unrelated to their own life, and they insulated themselves against industrialization in their work. Theirs was a 20th-century counterpart to the refined intimacy that marks the art of Cecilia Beaux, Thomas Dewing, and Edmund Tarbell. Unlike these Tonalists, however, they did not retreat entirely from the world; rather they joined elements of Tonalism with the democracy and ebullency of the Ash Can School and combined the two with the grace and charm they found in Fauvist art. And they relied on the directness of illustration to create a new, urbane, and delightful view of the world that gently poked fun at its subjects and at themselves because they were involved in the whimsical, seemingly useless task of making art. Their style did not consciously respond to the social needs of the time. The Averys were largely unconcerned with politics; in fact, according to Sally, Milton never cast a single vote!²¹

Their intimate version of high-style Modernism felt right to them because it reflected their joy and their conviction that sentiment without sentimentality could play an important role in modern life. One feels that the paintings of people playing Chinese checkers, sitting in quirky Victorian chairs, or lolling on great overstuffed divans actually represented the Averys' own pastimes and surroundings. The art developed out of both life and art and not out of theory, even though it is premised on the concept of painting as a universal language capable of being understood by everyone.²²

When the Averys attached themselves to the modern tradition, however, they embraced a set of ideas alien to sentiment and, in fact, concerned with the disin-

tegration of self that has attended the modern era. This attitude toward abstraction goes back to Mallarmé, who believed that poetry is made with words not ideas, and to his friend Manet, who similarly thought that art is made with materials such as paint and is not concerned with illustrating narratives. Manet's landscape in *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (1863) looks like a flat theatrical backdrop that ambiguously opens up to accommodate a bathing woman. And Cézanne's landscapes oscillate between being two-dimensional constructs and painted illusions that only simulate depth, while his people are broken up into patterns that provide compositional structure at the same time that they dramatize how modern people have become two-dimensional versions of their former selves. Modern art, then, has become a series of codes or conventions for emphasizing the new distance that has developed between the world and nature, between people and their closest kin—an alienation that applies even to individuals and their ways of identifying with themselves. Whether they consciously recognized this aim or not, the Averys must be counted among the Modern artists who have presented this alienation from the world. No matter how charming and lighthearted their studies of nature might appear—and this seeming frivolity is their strength—their art embodies an important new epistemological view of the world. It dramatizes how distant they are



Fig. 8. Sally Michel, *Cigarette Smoking* (1955), oil on board, 24" x 18". Collection of Artist.

Sally's characterization of Milton captures the gentle charm of the Avery style, even though it is more realistic than Milton's self-portraits of the period, which are generally more humorous and abstract.

from themselves and nature, how they can conceive of it only as a set of culturally derived codes for representing trees, shrubs, hills, and water. They resemble a Saul Steinberg character attempting to describe nature in Old English script while spouting words in Futura type. This distance is borne out in Michel's account of Avery's early years as an artist in Hartford, Connecticut, when he said "nature was his great teacher, and . . . he would set himself problems. He would do a tender thing in the morning and try to do a strong thing, or he'd set himself a problem using all blues in one picture."²²

Once Avery began setting up artistic problems to solve, he started the process of translating nature into a set of painterly equivalents that served ironically to distance him from the world he was attempting to capture: in other words, he ended up creating pictures of painterly codes that only happen to be pictures of nature. The Averys' art is important for making this distance fascinating and reassuring. It brings to consciousness alienation and makes it bearable. Their art dramatizes the way a landscape can be familiar and strange at the same time. The comforting aspect of their art may develop out of their great love of nature, for they were constantly comparing painterly codes with natural elements and refining the former while learning about the latter. Never, however, did they paint nature; always they made works of art whose subject was nature. The distinction is important because it indicates how far Modern art had moved away from the romantic myth of communion with nature.

It is worth pointing out that the Avery style developed at a time when radio was achieving prominence as a form of family entertainment. The first radio stations were established in 1920, and by 1925 some 50 million Americans owned radios. Sally remembers that even in the early years of their marriage the radio was always on. "Milton always loved to listen to classical music,"²³ but he of course listened to other things as well. In the 1930s nationwide radio came of age with the talents of George Burns and Gracie Allen, Fibber McGee and Molly, Charlie McCarthy, Fred Allen, Jack Benny and Mary Livingston, and Kate Smith. Radio provided a great variety of entertainment, which ranged from drama to comedy, symphony to jazz, and game shows to special news features. When analyzing the Avery style with its emphasis on intimacy, soft ambient forms with blurred or indistinct facial characteristics, an alignment of foreground and background, and a blending of figures and fields whereby individuals become absorbed by their surroundings, the effects of radio listening may be discerned, for the radio environment created a new intimacy, a blending through sound of a group of people who formed the "at home" audience.

Although elements of this alliance of figure with field can be found in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, it achieves greater intimacy in the Averys' art, which also emphasizes peripheral seeing over focused scrutiny. This peripheral seeing is consistent with the aimless looking of families grouped together to listen to the radio, people who only subliminally feel their immediate surroundings because they are concentrating on listening to a



Fig. 9. Sally Michel, *Clergy* (1956), India Ink, 26" x 20". Collection of Artist.

In spite of the many years Sally earned a living as a commercial artist with her witty drawings or perhaps because of this, she made few "fine art" drawings. *Clergy*, which comes closer than most, pictures two religious men on a subway. The work indicates the sophistication of Michel's drawing skills.

particular program. Peripheral viewing is more closely related to the unconscious than to the conscious mind. Because it does not separate vision into figure/field relations, it produces the pleasant effects of being embraced by one's surroundings. And this reliance on intimacy and closeness, on being surrounded, is exactly the effect of the Averys' work. Instead of illustrating scenes of families listening to radios, then, the Averys created an art which presents, among other things, the widespread effect of this new medium, which changed seeing and reoriented family life. Strangely, this new form of entertainment, though it brought families together, also dominated their space and prevented their communicating with each other. Thus radio served to enforce alienation. Both radio and the Averys' art seem to promise integration but in the end they isolate human beings from each other.

In the 1940s, Sally Michel had more free time to make art: March was eight years old in 1940, and the cartoons Sally made for the *New York Times* took little time. Nevertheless, she rarely painted on canvas, and when she did, the paintings were small. She worked primarily with watercolor, gouache, or oil on paper, and, although

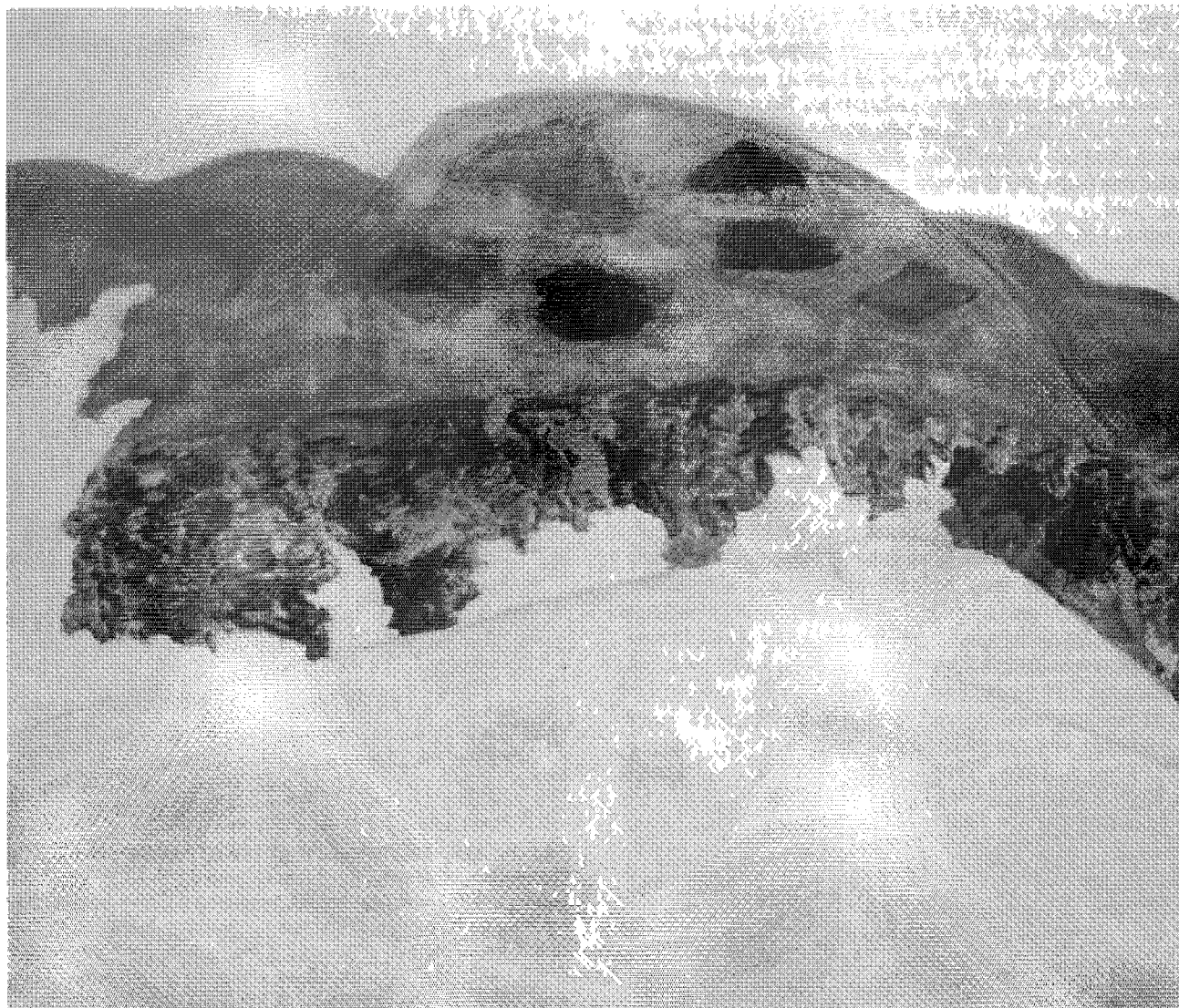


Fig. 10. Sally Michel, *Mountain and Meadows* (1976), oil on canvas, 40" x 50". Collection of Artist.

The scene is Wilson's State Park, Bearsville, New York; the time autumn; and the painting a work in the Avery style that has a source in the late landscape paintings made by Marsden Hartley, who summarized in them the tradition of European Modernism from Cézanne to the German Expressionists and then found a means of making them seem distinctly American—a mixture of folk art and continental abstraction that is profound and ingratiating.

many of these pieces are of high quality, she made no attempt to show or to sell them. At this time Milton Avery's art was not yet popular—he had only a few dedicated admirers, among them dealer Paul Rosenberg and collector Roy Neuberger—and so any reluctance for Sally or Milton to push her art can be explained, if not justified, as a need first to establish a reputation and market for Milton. Sally was supporting the family—Milton's works sold for \$35.00 each in 1936, an amount Sally matched in an hour of commercial work²⁵—and not showing her work publicly was one way of bolstering his confidence.

Sally became Milton's staunch defender and his manager. Milton frequently occupied himself when friends were around by painting and drawing them. The reserved Milton was protected by his art and by his wife's constant friendly patter. Sally's interpersonal and managerial skills were an asset to the Avery household: she worked with dealers and collectors and even titled and catalogued his art. Milton's dependency on her developed to such an extent that he would leave

all telephoning to her and would not even answer the phone when she was out.

One of Michel's more charming watercolors from the early 1940s is *Girl in Red* (1941; back cover).²⁶ Milton and March are hard at work sketching. The figures are as abstract as the land; in spite of March's gangling body and Milton's characteristic cowlick, the two figures are as abstract as the graphic notations Sally employs for trees, sketches, fields, and rocks. The watercolor is about the freshness, liquidity, and light available to the watercolor medium, and it pays only lip service to the uniqueness of the Vermont landscape. The act of taking hold of a vision is the real subject of this watercolor: the focus on nine-year-old March, her earnestness, and the bright red of her blouse underscore the subject of making a picture out of nature.

During this time both artists showed a marked interest in color. Although Sally has repeatedly pointed out that "Matisse was a hedonist and Milton was an ascetic,"²⁷ both Averys were fascinated with Matisse's

uses of saturated color, only their handling of it conformed to certain tenets of the American Tonalist tradition. While the Averys differed from the Tonalists in exploiting intense, saturated hues, frequently using untraditional color combinations such as ochres, pinks, and reds, they followed the Tonalists in making all colors approximately the same value, and thus their color combinations appear harmonious and serene. Combined with their choice of color is their distinctly American folk-art version of Parisian Modernism, with the result that the forms in their art look more archaic than Matisse's and exude a primitive charm in their slight awkwardness. The Averys' color is softer than Matisse's. This softness of color and its halo effect in particularly successful works in which each form becomes a glowing nimbus that surrounds other shapes that likewise radiate auras is a hallmark of the developed Avery style. The Averys' color choices were purely intuitive: "Each color," Sally affirmed, "dictated what the next color was going to be. . . . You see, every time you put down one color, it changes what else may happen. . . . So you can't really tell what's going to happen until it actually happens."²⁸ This halo quality is more evident in Milton's art than in Sally's; perhaps her need to deal with the quotidian aspects of the household made her images slightly more realistic.

When the Averys transform an ordinary world into a glowing abstract puzzle, they make secular elements transcendent. Besides distancing viewers from the real world, the Averys in the 1940s began to spiritualize their formal means, thus creating new icons of the present. The world is spiritualized, however, at great cost in the Averys' collaborative style, for the people in their paintings lose their reality and become blank masks, oftentimes caricatures. Frequently these beings are permitted only a characteristic silhouette. Their approach has a basis in Maurice Prendergast's art, but they make the anonymity of the people in his paintings more trenchant when they portray themselves as a faceless but not a nameless cast of characters to symbolize the disintegration of the self in the modern world. One might question this disintegration. Since the paintings are usually of Sally, Milton, and March, familiarity and repetition permits these artists great license. One knows the Averys through their gestures, their bodily proportions, the shape of their heads—and thus one does not need mere facial features in order to recognize them. One might also rationalize that these faceless beings permit viewers to project the features of their own loved ones on these bodies so that the Avery family comes to symbolize every American family. And such reasoning



Fig. 11. Sally Michel, *Curious Cows* (1977), oil on canvas, 18" x 24". Collection of Artist.

Both Milton and Sally made frequent studies of animals. Although *Curious Cows* was painted in the fall at Bearsville, it depends as much on Gauguin's painting *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* as it does on direct observation.

is true as far as it goes, only it fails to take into consideration the loss involved in the etherealization and formalization of the self, the destruction of reality this abstraction involves, and the lack of integration with the whole person it suggests. For better or worse, people in the Averys' art have become members of the faceless masses, and all the peculiarities of their silhouettes and gestures do not make up for the loss of their facial features.

This art, however, does not attempt to awaken us to the tragedy of the modern world; in fact, it does not even regard as tragic the overlay of sign systems that has replaced the natural world. These signs are calmly accepted as a new norm and are used to create an ingratiating art that lulls us into believing in a new Arcadian world. In the Avery style, then, cultural codes pose as elements of nature.

The Averys are not the only ones responsible for this new view of the universe; they continue a tradition almost a century old. Their contribution is to ground this system of acculturated signs firmly in their family life and to endow it with a naturalness, intimacy, familiarity, and charm that other artists only approximate. Thus they took up the banner of the dehumanization and fragmentation of the self without consciously knowing what they were doing, gave it a role in their family life, and made it nonthreatening because it seemed an inextricable part of a new natural order of the world.

Unlike Giacometti, who found alienation unnatural and horrifying, a case of the self being threatened with annihilation and overwhelmed by a great yawning void, the Averys discovered alienation to occur in even the closest-knit families and to be an inevitable fact of modern life. Their response was to accept it and to love it, to sublimate it into a new abstract counterpart of what life had once been and thus transcend its limits and terrors. That the Averys were able to develop their lyrical, collaborative style in the 1930s and 1940s, when the United States was undergoing extreme difficulties, is nothing short of remarkable and is certainly a testament to their strength. Not Pollyannas, they reacted to adversity by joining forces with each other and using the family as a bond, a shield, and a means of dealing with the changes people were then being subjected to. The influence of Milton Avery on Abstract Expressionists William Bazotes, Gottlieb, Newman, and Rothko has often been explained in formal terms, but the importance of the Avery style—that is, the art created by both Milton Avery and Sally Michel—can also be explained in psychological terms. Although the Averys do not appear to have been deeply impressed with Freud and Jung—their readings, for the most part, were limited to the classics which they read aloud to each other—they did find a semiabstract way to symbolize the “dwelling within” that so fascinated the Abstract Expressionists. The Averys' interest in unmasking the modern soul, which became a caricature or a blank face in the art, and their manner of situating this being in an atmosphere of soft, ambient forms provided a direction for the Abstract Expressionists when they were working out of their Surrealist-inspired biomorphic period and attempting to create an abstract art that plumbed the unconscious depths of modern culture and themselves. Similar to the Averys, they

wished to ground universal understandings in intimacy, but, unlike the Averys, they settled on large abstract wall paintings that literally surround viewers in order to be intimate.

In our culture modernist art has become so commodified and universalized that it is sometimes difficult to consider the role it has played in the lives of artists. Art allowed Sally and Milton a range of nonverbal communication rarely accessible to married couples. Their mutual style confirmed their respect and love for each other on a very deep level. It allowed them to mirror each other through portraits that memorialized good times and dignified ordinary life and gave them the opportunity to participate in a collaborative style that confirmed their optimism, gave a mutual direction to their lives, and permitted them a mode for expressing the intimacy and distance necessary in any shared existence. About this interaction Sally reflected: “Sometimes we’d sit around and talk a bit, but I would be doing most of the talking. . . . But I understood. I mean, [Milton] said enough to me in his paintings so that wasn’t necessary. He didn’t have to talk, because I knew what he was saying. You know, he did a beautiful painting, what more could you ask?”²⁰

In the late 1940s, when Milton became seriously ill, and then in 1949, when he suffered a major heart attack, Sally used her art to encourage him. “We spent the summer house-sitting a rambling Colonial furnished with American-empire pieces,” Sally remembers. “Milton hadn’t painted since his attack and I wanted to get him started again. I set up an easel in the barn and began to do some watercolors. He watched languidly at first, but soon joined me. The empire vases and pots intrigued him, and before long he was almost himself again, painting a painting a day.”²¹ During this period Sally’s output increased, as did the overall quality of her work. By this time Sally had been supporting Milton for almost 25 years. When March, then 18, entered college, Sally had even more time to paint and encouraged Milton to continue his work and to feel optimistic about his health and future. In the 1950s Sally began to find outside support for her own art. She was accepted as a resident at both the Yaddo and MacDowell Colonies as was Milton, she had a small show at a Provincetown gallery, and she and Milton teamed up for a husband/wife show at the Rudolph Gallery in Florida.

It is now difficult to understand how Sally Michel and other women of her generation could be committed artists without attempting to establish names for themselves. Particularly in our age of mass-professionalism, it is difficult to understand why Sally would work so hard to launch and maintain her husband’s career and do so little for her own. And yet she—and so many other women like her—worked quietly, regarding their art as an essential but private part of their lives. It is indicative of Sally’s approach that she would decide as a child not only to become a painter herself but also to confirm that identity by marrying an artist.²² When asked if she ever felt secondary to Milton’s painting, Sally responded:

You mean that I was second—that I had to take second place? No, I never felt that. . . . Milton was really . . . till the end of his life, he was really romantically in love with me. . . . So I never felt second fiddle, but . . . I was just as much in love with painting as he was. . . . I never said, you've got to choose between your painting and me. . . . That would be the most ridiculous thing in the world.³²

To her generation creativity was two-fold: it took into consideration the actual making of works of art, but it was also concerned with the creative role of the nurturing wife and mother. Women then promoted their husbands' careers; status was gained from being the wife of a successful man. Michel still has a hard time promoting herself, even though she demonstrates her determination to be an artist in her daily commitment to painting. She has stated:

Painting is a very peculiar thing. It's a very mysterious occupation. And it isn't purely intellectual, it isn't purely instinctive, and you never know what you're going to find. . . . You say, "even if I don't feel like painting," if you get up and start, and something happens . . . then you go on . . . like this maze, and at the end is maybe a glorious picture. Maybe there's nothing.³³

It may be that Michel's basic attitude toward art places primacy on making and considers exhibiting and selling to be less important, but that can also be construed as a feminine "cop out," or a device for survival in marriage.

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When I first visited Sally Michel Avery, I, like so many others, had come to look at her husband's art. As we sat and talked, I noticed stacks of recently painted works made in the Avery style but looking slightly different from Milton's. When I asked about them, she laughed shyly and mentioned that they were her paintings. I then asked to see them, but she politely and firmly turned the conversation toward Milton. I remembered then that a mutual friend, Lillian Kiesler, had remarked several years earlier that I ought to take a look at Sally Avery's work because she was actually a very good painter. When I recalled this remark to Michel, she smiled, thanked me for relaying these kind words, made several complimentary remarks about Lillian Kiesler, and again turned the subject back to Milton. I persevered; I was intrigued that an individual could be at the very center of the established New York art world for over a half a century and not be recognized. It took several more inquiries and visits before "Mrs. Avery" would allow Sally Michel to appear.

After at last being permitted to study her work, I asked why the art professionals who had come in great numbers to see Milton Avery's art had not looked at her work and asked to exhibit it. Sally mentioned a few dealers who over the years had shown her work, as well as a couple of museums and galleries that had featured art of the Avery family, which of course included March. Then she paused for a moment and said, "You know, many people sit in this studio, but

almost no one asks to see my art."³⁴ From my own experience I suspect that people have asked, but that Sally Avery has discounted the inquiries as mere courtesy. She has worked in relative isolation for so many years that she has entered into a conspiracy with herself whereby she keeps the work out of reach. She has been in such a habit of bracketing off her painting from her duties as manager of Milton Avery's affairs that she has ignored it when curators and dealers are around.

Despite her inability to develop a public for her art, Sally began shortly after Milton's death in 1965 to work in a larger scale. She painted on Milton's remaining 40" x 50" canvases, and then, as if by default, decided that her work no longer had to be more discreet than his. For the last two decades she has created large paintings that recall innovations made by the two of them when they worked side by side for almost 40 years.

Recognition of the collaboration between Sally Michel and Milton Avery in no way diminishes Milton's reputation; rather, it extends the idea of the Avery style and shows that its special quality developed out of a shared existence. The Avery family life can be considered analogous to Morisot's family life or to Monet's garden at Giverny, creations that provided a basis for a deeper understanding of the world. And Sally Michel's role can be considered in two ways: first, as the early Milton Avery self-portrait with Sally (Fig. 1) implies, she was his modernist muse. And second, as the drypoint *My Wife Sally* (Fig. 2) indicates, she played a crucial role in creating the distinctive artistic signature that Milton Avery's art represents.

As I worked on this project, I kept asking myself how Sally Michel's art compared with Milton Avery's. Was it as searching, as inventive, as playful as his? And although I at times had to respond negatively, I was frequently pleased to be completely convinced of its strength. Then I asked myself if Sally Michel's art could be considered separately from Milton Avery's, or if it were merely a codicil to his oeuvre. I wondered what exactly were her contributions besides humor, optimism, and a tendency to combine elements of caricature with avant-garde modernist painting, as if these contributions in and of themselves were not enough. Even though I suspect that some of the subjects originated with her, it is impossible to prove this because almost no Averys before 1943 are dated, and almost none of Michel's early paintings have been dated until recently. While Sally made the enormous contribution of being a sympathetic critic and constant source of encouragement, she definitely was more a collaborator in the formation of the Avery style than a mere reflector of it, although she certainly was the latter on a number of occasions. My answer to the Avery/Michel question has been the formulation of another question: Now that we know about Sally Michel's art, can we continue to look at Milton Avery's without acknowledging it?

The exhibit at the University of Iowa Museum of Art was conceived originally as a Michel-Avery show, the idea being that Sally's work could not stand alone. The more I looked at her work, the more I was convinced that, although they were collaborators, her body of work needed to be shown by itself, as has his in

innumerable exhibits in the years before and after his death. The 58 works on display span almost a half century of artistic activity. The earliest painting, the 1936 gouache *Umbrella by the Sea* (Fig. 5), was made ten years after Sally and Milton married, and the most recent, *Big Baby* (inside back cover), dates from 1985. In *Big Baby*, Michel has set up the formal problem of creating a balanced composition of her son-in-law's petite sister Ellie Cavanaugh and her huge baby. Her goal was to paint Cavanaugh's orange stockings as vividly as they had appeared on Christmas day when she made the initial sketch for this painting. She wanted the color orange to set up tensions that the rest of the composition would hold in check. To solve the problem successfully, though, Michel had to create a work that looked in its finished state as if it had been effortlessly made.

It is this quality of effortless grace coupled with whimsey, lyricism, and vivid color that marks this first retrospective exhibition of Sally Michel's art. Although it clearly participates in the Avery style, this art resembles the sibling of a well-known friend in which one is struck as much by the resemblances as the differences. Michel's individuality, then, depends on subtleties. Now in her 80s, Sally Michel Avery, the artist's widow so protective all these years of her husband's work and reputation, is finally being launched on her own. •

1. Sally has quipped that Milton "could make a tube of paint last longer than any man in captivity." See "The Reminiscences of Sally Michel Avery: Interviews with Louis Shaeffer" (Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1980), 20.
2. Frederick S. Wight, catalogue essay in "Milton Avery" (Baltimore Museum of Art, 1952), 8.
3. "Reminiscences," 5.
4. Sally Michel Avery, "A Family Album," *Art and Antiques* (January 1987), 63.
5. Tonalism, known also as American Barbizon painting, was practiced by such artists as Thomas Dewing, George Inness, John Twachtman, Cecilia Beaux, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. It received its first clear definition in 1972 when Wanda M. Corn organized "The Color of Mood: American Tonalism 1880-1910" at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum and the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco. Tonalism, as Corn clearly shows, is an art of reverie and sentiment. Conceived in subdued colors, the paintings are summations of subtle gradation, the artists employing hues of roughly the same value. Tonalist art, which is a late-Victorian style, embodies sweeping, embracing environments: atmospheres conceived as ambient fluids, everything in gentle flux.

The American Impressionists, among them Childe Hassam, Ernest Lawson, Theodore Robinson, and Lilla Cabot Perry—the latter two worked with Monet at Giverny—conveyed light and shadow in terms of pure color. Some Tonalists, such as Twachtman and Whistler, have also been considered

Impressionists, so the categories are not absolute, but related, with Tonalism emphasizing the use of one overriding value for an entire composition and Impressionism relying on interplays of color.

6. Barbara Haskell has carefully unraveled the history of Avery's changing birthdate by citing a census report of 1892, the Averys' marriage license, and critical literature on Milton Avery, which generally gives his birthdate in 1893. Haskell concludes from the various information that Milton Avery was born in 1885. See Haskell, catalogue essay in "Milton Avery" (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, September 16–December 5, 1982), 182.
7. "Reminiscences," 14–15.
8. *Ibid.*, 40.
9. Sally Michel, telephone conversation with the author, February 5, 1987.
10. "Reminiscences," 70.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Michel Avery, "A Family Album," 63.
14. *Ibid.*, 92.
15. Sally Michel has difficulty accepting the fact that her humor may have influenced her husband's art. She thinks of him as having a "delicious sense of humor" and a "natural wit" and feels these aspects of his character evolved naturally in his art. In fact, they did not become part of his art until several years after his marriage to Sally; Sally Michel, telephone conversation with the author, May 31, 1987.
16. "Reminiscences," 60.
17. Sally Michel, telephone conversation with the author, February 5, 1987.
18. Other paintings, or series of paintings, were also inspired by shared experiences. Her *Setting Sun* (1959; inside front cover) and his moonlight series began during the summer of 1957, after they spent evenings watching the moonlight being reflected in Provincetown Bay. See also Fig. 7 and commentary.
19. "Reminiscences," 29.
20. *Ibid.*, 26.
21. *Ibid.*, 115.
22. *Ibid.*, 85.
23. *Ibid.*, 12.
24. Sally Michel, telephone conversation with the author, May 31, 1987.
25. "Reminiscences," 21.
26. After this illustration, the text will not refer to specific works but to the work in general. Commentaries will appear under illustrations.
27. *Ibid.*, 22.
28. *Ibid.*, 108.
29. *Ibid.*, 80.
30. Michel Avery, "A Family Album," 93.
31. "Reminiscences," 3.
32. *Ibid.*, 33–34.
33. *Ibid.*, 25.
34. Sally Michel Avery, conversation with the author, New York City, December 6, 1985.

ROBERT HOBBS, author of articles on Louise Nevelson and Lee Krasner for *W&J*, was curator of the exhibition "Sally Michel: The Other Avery" for the University of Iowa Museum of Art. His monograph on Edward Hopper was recently published in Abrams's Library of American Art Series.