**Gerome Kamrowski**

**Though not as widely known as his contemporaries, American artist Gerome Kamrowski (1914–2004) was an important figure in American art's transitional phase into Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s.**

Between 1938 and 1946 he lived and worked in New York City, and like a few other up-and-coming young painters was drawn to the ideas of Surrealism, a significant art trend in Europe which failed to catch on across the Atlantic. Kamrowski and his friends, among them Jackson Pollock, borrowed some of Surrealism's tenets and out of these experiments a new, equally important movement that became known as American Abstract Expressionism would emerge. *New York Times* art critic Grace Glueck noted that over the years, Kamrowski's own work "has been variously labeled 'expressionist biomorphic' and 'abstract surrealist,' but whatever it's called, it shares the organic imagery and full-throttle energy of the movement then coming to bloom."

Kamrowski was born on January 29, 1914, in Warren, Minnesota, the son of Felix and Mary (Rizke) Kamrowski and the last of their eleven children. He grew up in St. Cloud, Minnesota, a city on the Mississippi River and where his parents ran a bakery. At the age of 19 he entered the St. Paul School of Art, in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area, and spent three years there. In 1937, he settled briefly in Chicago, where he studied under Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946) at the New Bauhaus, the art and architecture school that had just established itself in the city after having been forced to close by authorities in Nazi Germany.

Befriended Jackson Pollock

In 1938, Kamrowski was awarded a Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation fellowship that enabled him to spend the summer at a school in Provincetown, Massachusetts, run by Hans Hofmann (1880–1966). Hofmann was another who had fled the Nazi threat, and as an émigré teacher would become a serious influence on a generation of future Abstract Expressionists. After his stint in Province-town, Kamrowski settled in New York City and found steady work as a muralist with the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). This government-funded program hired artists to create and execute murals and other embellishments for newly constructed public facilities such as post offices. Through this line of work he met two other young artists, Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) and William Baziotes (1912–1963), who would emerge as leading Abstract Expressionist painters within a decade.

Kamrowski eventually left the job and found a well-heeled art collector baroness, another European émigré, and began painting works that were initially inspired by the Cubist movement. But he and his circle of painter friends were also drawn to Surrealism, a movement that had originated in Europe in the early 1920s and became centered in Paris under the leadership of André Breton (1896–1966). Writing in his Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, Breton defined the movement as "pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought."

The New York artists were particularly intrigued by the concept of "automatism," sought to express, via painting, writing, or music, the true subconscious mind, without self-censorship. With Pollock and Baziotes, Kamrowski began to experiment with the technique both jointly and in their own studios alone. They were guided, in part, by a Chilean-born member of the Surrealist group in Paris, Roberto Matta (1911–2002), who had settled in New York City; Kamrowski, Pollock, Baziotes, and others such as Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) met regularly at Matta's Greenwich Village studio to discuss automatism and other trends.

The Beginnings of Abstract Expressionism

One of the works that Kamrowski, Pollock, and Baziotes completed together was *Collaborative Painting* , from 1941, which was done in Kamrowski's studio. They used a type of commercial paint that dried quickly, and wanted to come up with "a freer way of applying paint to go further with the psychic automatism" suggested by Matta, wrote Phyllis Braff in the *New York Times* . "They tried dripping, pouring and flinging the loosely flowing material. The result is a dark surface bearing bold biomorphic shapes activated by overlapping lines of varying widths. Lines alternately strike a course, then swirl and loop unpredictably, inviting the eye through a maze of visual discovery. Where these energetic strands loop into the canvas's black areas, they eliminate the separation between image and background and suggest the shifting ambiguities that were so important to subsequent phases of abstraction."

The first years of the 1940s were a period of intense creativity and experimentation for Kamrowski. Even more artists fleeing the war in Europe—especially after the German invasion of France in 1940—added to the already rich artistic scene in and around Greenwich Village, and Kamrowski was eager to learn from them and apply the new ideas of what was becoming known as Abstract Surrealism to his own work. He constructed a series of shadow boxes, reminiscent of the work of American sculptor Joseph Cornell (1903–1972), and exhibited these as well as his paintings regularly at venues that included The Art of This Century Gallery, run by one of Surrealism's most enthusiastic collectors, American heiress Peggy Guggenheim (1898–1979).

Kamrowski's canvases were full of vibrating, otherworldly creatures and landscapes, painted in rich hues and sometimes bisected by dotted lines. "Kamrowski devised fantastic biomorphic forms that refer to animal anatomies and plant parts," wrote *Art in America* 's David Boudon. "His 1945 oil *Script for an Impossible Documentary: The Great Invisibles* , is a majestic portrait of two humanoid plants; a male figure (with broad multibranched torso) and a female creature (with wide pelvis and long wavy hair) have bulbous heads with cyclopean eyes." Another critic, Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* , described it as a work "hovering on the border between period piece and masterpiece."

Returned to Midwest

Kamrowski married Marianna Fargione in 1943, with whom he soon had a son, Felix. They lived in an artists' community in Georgia for a time, but returned to New York City where Fargione died of cancer less than two years after their wedding. Now the single parent of a one-year-old child, Kamrowski decided to take a job that offered a steadier income than the life of an artist, and joined the faculty of the University of Michigan in 1946; it was also a halfway point between New York and his family back in Minnesota. Writing in the *St. Petersburg Times* , Lennie Bennett termed his move "the best thing that could have happened to him artistically. Summers off gave him the opportunity to visit New York haunts and renew associations. But, by being away from New York, he was able to avoid the excesses of many of his peers, such as Jackson Pollock and resist the artistic influences that might have diluted his surrealist vision." Pollock died rather infamously in an alcohol-related car wreck on Long Island in 1956; and Baziotes also died at a relatively young age, still in his early 50s, seven years later.

During this period of his career, Kamrowski's work was singled out by Breton, who included him in a 1947 international Surrealist exhibition in Paris and three years later wrote of him in an essay. The formidable, somewhat autocratic Surrealist master heralded Kamrowski as "the one who has impressed me the most by reason of the quality and sustained character of his research," among the New York City-based American artists Breton had come to know over the previous decade, according to Kamrowski's profile on the website of the Weinstein Gallery. Over the next decade the artist participated in several other notable group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

In Michigan, Kamrowski taught several new generations of painters, and continued to work on his own projects as well out of a converted barn studio on the outskirts of Ann Arbor. At one point he created a series of panels for the interiors of a geodesic-dome project designed by visionary architect Buckminster Fuller (1895–1983). He later worked in glass mosaic shards, and was still active well into his eighties, showing regularly at the Joan T. Washburn Gallery in New York City. Art aficionados occasionally rediscovered his work in the infrequent museum surveys of American Surrealism. One of these shows was "Surrealism USA" at the National Academy Museum of New York City in 2005, a year after Kamrowski's death on March 27, 2004, in Ann Arbor. His *Collaborative Painting* , the only surviving work he did with Pollock and Baziotes and on loan from his family, was included, as was the 1945 canvas, *Script for an Impossible Documentary: The Great Invisibles* .

Periodicals

*Art in America* , December 1996; April 2005.

*New York Times* , May 2, 1986; April 15, 1990; June 30, 1996; October 4, 1996; March 31, 2005.

*St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, FL), September 12, 2002.

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