“I don’t like to put labels on my sculptures or my paintings . . . I hope my art puts people in a certain frame of mind . . . When you see the Grand Canyon or the ocean, you must feel a certain way. There are no labels for that.” The artist, quoted in Tucker, “Gerome Kamrowski *Surrealism*,” The-Artists.org, 2004

**Biography**

Gerome Kamrowski entered the St.Paul, Minnesota, School of Art in 1932. There he studied with Cameron Booth and Leroy Turner, both former Hans Hofmann students who were also associated with the *Abstraction-Création* group in Paris. It was Cameron Booth or Turner who introduced Kamrowski to a "kind of expressionist cubism."(1) By 1935, while employed by the WPA, Kamrowski was working in a Synthetic Cubist style, as evidenced by his mural for Northrup Auditorium at the University of Minnesota.

In 1937, Kamrowski left for Chicago to study under Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Archipenko at the New Bauhaus. There he was exposed to the role of nature in art and the "geometric basis of natural form."(2) Intrigued by Moholy's wit, Kamrowski commended him for being more than simply a "formalist-constructivist."(3) The following year, Kamrowski received a Guggenheim fellowship to attend Hans Hofmann's summer school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. From there, he went to New York, where he met William Baziotes, who was experimenting with Surrealism. Their growing friendship reinforced a fascination with Surrealism that had begun while Kamrowski was still a student in Minnesota. Before coming to New York, Kamrowski had read the Surrealist publication, *Minotaure,* and he had seen the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism,* when it toured to Minneapolis. With Baziotes he shared an interest in Surrealist automatic writing, and both explored its potential in theirpaintings.(4) Kamrowski was especially attracted by Surrealism's appeal to intuition rather than the intellect; Surrealists, he said, offered "a certain aspect of humanism … that brought out a more comprehensive scheme than just the narrow, professional attitude towards form which Hofmann would try to present."(5)

Kamrowski himself was interested in the energy generated by the act of painting. He believed his work to be "essentially process, instead of representing a high, spiritual state which nonobjective art aspires to." As apparent in *Spectral Images* of 1944, he sought a process that "binds all things together. . . a kind of cosmic rhythm," which Cubism seemed to restrict.(6) He used Surrealist motifs and forms as liberating elements in his painting, but at the same time he emphasized their abstract qualities.

In 1942, Surrealist artist Matta (Echaurren) attempted to form a group of artists to investigate new applications for Surrealist methods. He invited Kamrowski, along with William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, Peter Busa, and Robert Motherwell to join. Like Kamrowski, the others were more interested in process than in subject matter—the foundation of Matta's art—and the group soon dissolved.

Given the anti-Surrealist stance of the American Abstract Artists, Kamrowski seemed an unlikely member. Nevertheless, he joined the group in 1937 while working at the Chicago Bauhaus, and continued his membership for two years after moving to New York. In the group's exhibitions, he showed canvases inspired by Cubist principles, a style he continued to employ even after turning to Surrealism. Hilla Rebay, at the Museum of Non-objective Painting, provided support for Kamrowski based on these works. Realizing that Rebay would withdraw Kamrowski's much-needed financial assistance if she knew of his Surrealist inclinations, he continued to makeCubist paintings, and exhibited the Surrealist works anonymously. These were the paintings that subsequently brought him acclaim.(7) By 1950, his success with Surrealism prompted André Breton to remark: "Of all the young painters whose evolution I have been able to follow in New York during the last years of the war, Gerome Kamrowski is the one who has impressed me far the most by reason of the "quality" and sustained character of his research. Among all the newcomers there, he was the only one. . tunnelling in a new direction. . . ."(8)

During the 1950s and 1960s, Kamrowski's interest in Surrealism waned. Leaning towards abstraction, he began exploiting the expressive power of paint and the brilliant color and rich textures that are now the hallmarks of his style. A member of the faculty of the University of Michigan since 1946, Kamrowski continues to teach and to paint in Ann Arbor.

1. Quoted in Martica Sawin, "The Third Man," *Art Journal* 43, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 183.

2. Martica Sawin, "The Third Man," *Art Journal* 43, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 183 attributed Kamrowski's interest in natural form to his reading of D'Arcy Thompson's *On Growth and Form* (1917) while he was studying at the Chicago Bauhaus.

3. Martica Sawin, "The Third Man," *Art Journal* 43, no.3 (Fall 1988): 183.

4. Kamrowski subsequently described Baziotes, introducing Jackson Pollock to automatic writing in Kamrowski's studio. The three artists collaborated on a painting using automatic techniques. Both the painting and Kamrowski's letter describing the encounter are reproduced in Jeffrey Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art, 1931–1947* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977), pp. 55, 68.

5. See Kamrowski, interview with Evan M. Maurer and Jennifer L. Bayles, in *Gerome Kamrowski: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1983), p. 1.

6. Kamrowski, interview with Evan M. Maurer and Jennifer L. Bayles, in *Gerome Kamrowski: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1983), p. 2.

7. Martica Sawin, "The Third Man," *Art Journal* 43, no. 3 (Fall 1988): 183.

8. André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting,* trans. Simon Watson Tayler (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 226.

Virginia M. Mecklenburg *The Patricia and Phillip Frost Collection: American Abstraction 1930–1945* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Museum of American Art, 1989)