

JACKSON POLLOCK: A BIOGRAPHY
Deborah Solomon/Simon and Schuster/\$19.95

Eric Gibson

Because they can indulge a desire to look for the meaning of the artist's work outside the work itself rather than within it, artist's biographies present problems those of other prominent individuals do not. Moreover, with certain artists, a biography may present further obstacles by concentrating on lurid details and scandalous episodes, all at the expense of the person's art, which is then reduced to a visual chronicle of a pathological condition. Any biographer of Jackson Pollock faces all these hazards, yet they haven't been much of a deterrent, as the publication of Deborah Solomon's life of the artist—the fifth to date—attests.

Pollock continues to fascinate, and for obvious reasons. His saturnine temperament and his role in bringing American art into the modernist mainstream combined to elevate him above the ranks of his fellows, conferring on him near-mythic status. He embodied the two major archetypes of the modern artist, the artist-visionary and the *peintre maudit*.

Eric Gibson writes on art for the New Criterion.

In addition, there is about Pollock a central, enduring enigma that more than anything else explains his continuing appeal to biographers. Pollock's life and his art were each so extreme, and so polarized, that together they pose the question: how could this person, who had so much against him psychologically, and who as apprentice artist showed no particular aptitude for his vocation, have evolved to produce in his celebrated drip paintings work which seemed to exist at the very limit of what art could be, and which was of such pivotal importance to artists of his own and later generations? In her new biography, Solomon steers clear of sensationalism, but she never quite answers the central question. We come to the end of the book feeling something is missing. She gives us the life, but misses the man.

Pollock's achievement was to complete the task American art had set for itself a generation earlier, namely to originate an abstract pictorial language the equal of, yet free from overt allegiance to, the forms of European modernism. For Pollock, this involved a lengthy process of fusing European and

American idioms: the recourse to the unconscious; Miro's "allover" composition; American Indian pictographs; and the scale and sweep of the murals painted by the Mexicans Siquieros and Orozco in the thirties. His efforts culminated in the celebrated paintings of the late forties in which, with broad sweeps of his arm, he poured paint from a can directly onto large canvases laid out on the floor. The resulting "gestural" style elevated American art to a new level of abstraction. It broke free of Surrealist imagery and Cubist construction, the dominant influences of the day, dissolving form in a dense, allover web of line that made no overt reference to nature.

The notion that interlaced and clotted skeins of paint could of themselves carry as high art was one of modernism's boldest gambits. Yet they do. Once past the haze of formalist criticism, which sees Pollock's pictures solely in terms of exploding the conventions of easel painting, and untransfigured pigment affirming the flatness of the material support, the viewer has access to the pictures' larger meaning. Like much modern painting, their "beauty" lies in the associative charges they unleash, rather than in anything they attempt to depict. The endlessly looping threads of paint set up a sustained, repetitive rhythm which serves alternately to focus and diffuse, build up and contain an explosive inner force that speaks to the deepest reaches of our psyche. Its pulsing, mesmeric character has something in common with tribal ceremony, a quality accurately reflective of Pollock's own view of painting as a ritualistic, almost shamanistic act. Yet while gesture was the new idiom Pollock bequeathed to artists of his and later generations, a manner, or rather an approach to painting, was all that could be learned from him. The animating spirit was embodied in the artist himself, making imitation an impossibility. There could be no "drip school" of any consequence as there had been, for example, a Cubist school in the wake of Picasso and Braque.

Yet one can imagine no less likely candidate than Pollock for such a crucial role in American art. All his life he was so shy and wracked by feelings of inadequacy as to be all but unable to express himself, either verbally or in paint. When he finally did manage to do something on canvas, he doubted the value of his efforts. His response was to compensate with arrogance, denigrating everyone's work, from his fellow art students' to that of masters such as Klee and Rubens. Worse, he sought relief in drinking, which unleashed a barely contained impulse

toward self-destructiveness, an impulse that finally achieved its goal in 1956, when a car he was driving went off the road, killing him instantly.

All this made Pollock utterly unsuited for the public role he was called upon to play as the first artist-celebrity of the postwar era. The critic Clement Greenberg singled him out as the finest American artist of the century, thus setting him apart within his circle of artists. Then in 1949, *Life* made him a household word with a story "Is Jackson Pollock the Greatest Living Painter in the United States?", the title a wry dig at Greenberg's lavish encomiums. For someone of Pollock's troubled temper, the pressures, expectations, and misunderstandings brought on by his sudden move into the spotlight only made matters worse, isolating him from himself and others and fueling his urge to seek refuge in drink.

As if this weren't enough, a number of cruel ironies informed this newfound status. First, even as they publicized Pollock and the new art in their feature stories, *Time* and *Life* responded to the work with reviews that were openly philistine in their outlook (as, at root, were the features themselves). Second, in spite of his celebrity and the growing acceptance of his art among critics in the late forties and early fifties, Pollock was not made materially better off, since sales of his work were virtually non-existent. And finally, by the early fifties, Pollock had exhausted the possibilities of his drip technique and felt dead-ended, uncertain of what direction to go in and sensitive to criticism that in his last pictures, which restore figurative motifs, he was retreating from the vanguard. He stopped painting for long periods, drank more heavily than ever, and began to deteriorate physically and mentally. Under the circumstances, it is hard to imagine Pollock lasting much past his fiftieth birthday (he was forty-four when he died) even without the fatal car crash, which in any event was not his first.

Solomon gives us all of this information in her book. But hers is a facts-only approach that screens out almost all color or insight, leaving us a largely monochrome portrait of the artist. This may be because her background is in journalism, rather than art history or criticism, making her inclined to report rather than probe. There are some moments of analysis, but they don't go very deep. Moreover, fatal for a "life," her journalist's training has taught her to suppress any individual literary voice or point of view, the very thing that brings a subject to life, so that all incidents are given equal weight and told in an uninflected monotone. The effect is to remove Pollock from us, as if behind a mesh screen. The



artist is present, but intangible.

But there is a deeper problem. To grasp Pollock as a unified whole, to reconcile the polarities between his life and his art, something beyond a simple chronicle is needed. This the art critic Brian O'Doherty attempted in his 1974 essay on Pollock, one of eight that appeared in his book *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth in Modern Art*. Accepting the necessary link between life and art, O'Doherty sought to plumb the meaning of both by situating them in the American historical and cultural landscapes. It worked, and produced some arresting insights. Solomon recounts the story of Pollock's changing a title from *Moby Dick* to *Pasiphae* at the suggestion of James Johnson Sweeney, then director of the department of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, who thought it a "cliché." For Solomon, the incident proves Pollock's titles are interchangeable, "outright misleading." But O'Doherty sees things differently:

Pollock's career itself makes a kind of picture not unlike his own: "A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet was there a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what the marvellous painting meant." This is a description of the picture that hung in the Spouter Inn, the picture that stood for Ahab's quest. *Moby Dick*, Lee Krasner reports, was one of Pollock's favorite books—he even called his dog "Ahab."

Solomon can't make a many-layered connection like that because her viewpoint is too shallow and constricted, and because at root she possesses no real feeling for art or for the creative process. Her descriptions of Pollock's paintings all read like good answers to an Introduction to Art History exam, no more, no less, suggesting she's read about but not really looked at the pictures, or that she possesses no real framework to understand them if she has. It all makes one wonder why she undertook the project to begin with. Why is a journalist writing about an artist, particularly Pollock? We never really find out. Solomon herself doesn't tell us, and there's no outside reason, like an exhibition, an anniversary, or the discovery of fresh material to prompt a new study of Pollock. Nor does she tell us anything novel about her subject. This in fact turns out to be the book's greatest drawback. Solomon never persuades us of the necessity of writing another Pollock biography. And with a subject as well documented and complex as this one, that's death to a "life." □

VEIL: THE SECRET WARS OF THE CIA 1981-1987

Bob Woodward/Simon and Schuster/\$21.95

Albert Jolis

*You cannot hope to bribe or twist,
Thank God! the British journalist.
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.*
—Humbert Wolfe

Bob Woodward's book, already extensively reviewed, has generated considerable skepticism as to its accuracy. While purporting to be a history of the CIA during William J. Casey's tenure, a serious history it is not. A slick work of titillating journalism it is. It reads like a gossip column, as if Miss Rona Barrett suddenly became fascinated with issues of our national security.

The focus, of course, is William Casey himself. How do we explain the intense public controversy that swirled around his head during his tenure at the CIA? It was not just the Iran-contra affair, for it started from the moment he was appointed by the President. No other Director of Intelligence—Dulles, McCone, Helms, Colby, Schlesinger, Bush, Turner—excited such passions. It is my contention that Casey was controversial not only because he understood the true nature of the Soviet global threat—after all, others understand this too—but more significantly, because he showed every indication of succeeding in turning that knowledge to our advantage.

Casey knew that with the rise in the twentieth century of Marxism-Leninism, refined through seventy years of Soviet Communist rule, the nature of warfare radically changed. The Soviets have wisely chosen to advance their interests by deploying a revolutionary weapon: a vast global edifice of political subversion, manipulation of public opinion, disinformation, agents of influence, and front organizations—in a word, Active Measures. The masterful use of this weapon has indirectly enabled the Soviets to achieve victories that would have seemed dazzling forty years ago: the capture of Cuba and the scuttling of the Monroe Doctrine; the loss of America's preeminent position in Southeast Asia; the Soviet colonization of Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia; the invasion of Afghanistan;

Albert Jolis is the executive director of the American Foundation for Resistance International.

and most recently, the establishment of a Soviet beachhead on the American mainland.

It is against this backdrop that Casey's tenure at the CIA, and *Veil* itself, must be viewed; for his part, Bob Woodward seems remarkably untroubled by it all. In this respect, Woodward's treatment of one of Casey's early actions—ordering a study from the agency appraising Soviet Active Measures—is illuminating. Casey wanted a wide hearing for the report, Woodward tells us, and so downgraded it from "Top Secret" to "Secret," and had about three thousand copies circulated. The thirty-page study covered Soviet actions in various parts of the world, including manipulation of United Nations organizations and the mobilization of opposition to the U.S. plan to build a neutron bomb.

Woodward writes: "These active measures, which seemed to include everything the Soviets did, were, according to the report, 'one of the major instruments of Soviet foreign policy.'" Deputy Director Bobby Inman, according to Woodward, concluded that Casey was "in overdrive, using the active measures study for some ideological grinding. . . ." Later he adds: "But Inman judged most of the elements of the CIA study essentially accurate, based on good human sources." Now, inasmuch as Inman was hardly regarded as a Casey supporter, one might suppose his testimony would lead Woodward to discuss the importance, or lack thereof, of Active Measures. But no. Woodward limits his comment to an irrelevancy:

The study's wide circulation was designed to raise consciousness and to suggest CIA action to counter the Soviets. But to Casey's disappointment, the CIA had been unable to calculate what these measures cost the Soviets. . . . The CIA study said merely: "The scale of the Soviet effort can be gauged by analogy. We calculate that, if the U.S. government were to undertake a campaign of the magnitude of the Soviet 'neutron bomb campaign,' it would cost over \$100 million." Casey called such numbers "flaky."

Subsequently President Reagan told reporters, "We have information that the Soviet Union spent about \$100 million in Western Europe alone a few

years ago when the announcement was first made of the invention of the neutron warhead, and I don't know how much they're spending now, but they're starting the same kind of propaganda drive." Woodward buries the issue thus: "The record was never corrected. Inman felt that it served no purpose for the President of the United States to spread misinformation, but Casey wasn't particularly bothered. The Soviets lied all the time, and the CIA estimate was probably about right."

So there we have it. The reader is left with the impression that the entire subject of Soviet Active Measures was blown out of proportion by a Casey in "ideological overdrive," allowing the President to spread misinformation.

Edward Epstein, reviewing the book in the *Washington Times*, makes a telling point in this connection. "What this book omits, revealingly enough," he writes, "is any discussion of Soviet intentions and strategy. . . . The KGB is hardly mentioned, except to exonerate it from any involvement in terrorism or the shooting of the Pope. This absence suggests that the CIA that spoke so freely to Mr. Woodward no longer sees the Soviets as a potential enemy."

Woodward's leftward tilt, though deftly handled, is ever present. Feigning an Olympian detachment when describing arguments between hard- and soft-liners on foreign policy, Woodward in fact leaves the reader

GIANT HEAVY DUTY INFLATABLE BOATS

2 MAN	\$45
3 MAN	\$57
4 MAN	\$73

Call Free
Before Midnight For The Next 30 Days

As part of an advertising test, Dunlap Boat Mfg. will send any of the above size boats to anyone who reads and responds to this test before the next 30 days. Each Boat Lot No. (Z-26PVC) is constructed of tough high density fabric (resistant to abrasions, sunlight, salt & oil), electronically welded embossed seams, nylon safety line grommets all around, heavy duty oar locks, 3 separate air chambers for extra safety (4 air chambers in 4-man), self-locking safety valves, bow lifting & towing handle are recommended for marine, ocean and fresh water recreation, camping, fishing or a family fun boat. Each boat will be accompanied with a LIFETIME guarantee that it must perform 100% or it will be replaced free. Add \$7 handling & crating for each boat requested. Dunlap Boat Mfg. pays all shipping. If your order is received within the next ten days you will receive FREE a combined hand/foot inflator/deflator bellows style pump for each boat requested. Should you wish to return your boat you may do so for a refund. Any letter postmarked after 30 days will be returned. LIMIT three (3) boats per address, no exceptions. Send appropriate sum together with your name and address to: Boat Dept. #203-B, Dunlap Boat Mfg., 2554 Lincoln Blvd., #122, Marina Del Rey, CA 90291. Or for fastest service from any part of the country call 1-800-255-3298 for Boat Dept. #203-B (CA residents call collect 213-397-1772), before midnight seven days a week. Have credit card ready.