

Barnett Newman

19 September 2002 – 5 January 2003

Teacher and group leaders' kit

Information and practical ideas
for group visits

Written by Richard Stemp

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Introduction and Structuring your Visit

The artistic act is man's personal birthright. Barnett Newman, 1947

Welcome to Tate Modern and the Barnett Newman exhibition.

This kit is a resource which aims to help you carry out a successful visit to the exhibition.

The exhibition presents a broadly chronological survey of Newman's career, and includes both paintings and sculpture. Although he is not as well known as his contemporaries Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman was one of the most important members of the Abstract Expressionist movement, and perhaps even more than the others helped to define its aims not just through his art but also through his writing. However, any visit to an art gallery should be primarily concerned with looking, and we will explore Newman's ideas in relationship to the visual evidence in the exhibition, rather than through texts.

The kit includes factual information concerning Newman and his career, together with a 'Ways of Looking' sheet which can be adapted to apply to the majority of works in the exhibition. There is also a sheet on cross-curricular links, together with a more thorough discussion of some of the themes raised by the exhibition which we hope will help you to adapt your gallery visit to relate to projects you might be covering in school. There is also practical information about structuring your visit, including ways in which the exhibition links to Tate's own collection, as well as information on booking your tickets. There is an exhibition guide and three colour postcards.

Visiting the Exhibition

Tickets are available in advance from Tate Ticketing, tel 020 7887 3959, school and group bookings line. Price: £3 per head.

Please ask Tate Ticketing if you would like to book locker and lunch space for your group (there is a limited amount available).

As the exhibition may be busy, please do not lecture to groups of more than six people. We suggest instead that you divide your class into small groups and follow the suggestions in this kit (see below).

Tate Modern's approach to learning

Tate Modern's approach to learning encourages students to think not of one correct reading or interpretation of an artwork, but of plural readings. These will depend on who the viewer is, and when, where and how he or she encounters a work of art. To construct meanings, therefore, the viewer needs to be aware of the experiences they bring to looking, as well as the information an artwork holds. The questions and activity ideas in this kit, particularly in the 'Ways of Looking' sheet, stem from this approach to thinking about art.

How to structure your visit

We suggest you introduce the exhibition to your group in one of the concourse spaces, the Turbine Hall or the Clore Education Centre. Work in small groups when you are in the exhibition. Use the thematic sheets to prepare tasks and discussion sheets for students, or hand them out as they are to older students. You can later get back together as a whole class and let each group share their ideas.

Barnett Newman's paintings are deceptively simple. Although they can be 'seen' very quickly it takes time to appreciate their subtlety. The effects of scale and variety of surface quality cannot be appreciated in reproduction, and the impact of standing close to them for a period of time should not be underestimated. While this demands patience from any student, the effects that the paintings rely on,

including the retinal images of the 'zip's' which then scan across the colour fields, are worth waiting for.

Links with other artists and displays.

With Anish Kapoor, in the Turbine Hall (from 9 October), think about:

- Scale: how the size of the works affects the way we see and interact with them
- Setting: how do the works affect the way we perceive the space we are in?
- Colour: why are these colours used, and what do they mean to us?

With Tate's Collection 2002, think about:

History/Memory/Society

- Abstract art, particularly in reference to Mondrian: what are the similarities and differences between Barnett Newman's paintings and those of other abstract artists?

Nude/Action/Body

- Compare the apparent simplicity of Newman with the Minimalist artworks on display in the *Perceiving Body* room. Think about their relationship to human scale, and the personal/impersonal nature of their production.
- Compare Newman's sculptures to those by Giacometti, made around the same time: can you find any connections?

Landscape/Matter/Environment

- Compare the scale and appearance of Newman's works to those of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock and Clyfford Still in the *Nature into Art* room
- Are there similarities of attitude between Newman's *The Stations of the Cross* and Rothko's *Seagram Murals*?
 - Newman's early work was influenced by the Surrealists. Look at the works of Ernst and Miro in the *Inner Worlds* room and consider the extent to which they were planned in advance or improvised from the chance application of paint.

- Immerse yourself in Monet's *Water-Lilies*, in the *Long and Monet* room (until 9 December), and discuss whether you think Monet and Newman create the atmosphere of a place or idea within an abstract work.

Still Life/Object/Real Life

- Consider scale, again, in relation to Claes Oldenbergs' *Giant 3-Way Plug Scale 2/3* (on display outside the Still Life suite).
- Compare the personal, expressive brushwork of Newman with the impersonal style of Lichtenstein and the other artists in the *Ways of Seeing* room. Also compare these works with Newman's later paintings, in the last room of the exhibition, and consider how his style has shifted towards a flatter and more mechanical approach.

Events

Education Private View

A private view of the exhibition for teachers and group leaders.

Monday 30 September
18.30-21.00

Free

Please call Tate Ticketing on 020 7887 8888 to book tickets.

Barnett Newman: The Facts

Where and when?

- Barnett Newman was one of the leading members of the Abstract Expressionist movement
- He was born in 1905 in New York, the son of Polish immigrants.
- He died in 1970, not having achieved recognition until reaching his 50s.

Early career

- In 1922 he studied at the Arts Students League, and from 1923-27 at the City College of New York, but for the following decade worked as a partner in his father's clothing manufacturing company
- Between 1929 and 1930 he returned to the Arts Students League.
- The Depression of the 1930s ruined his father's business
- Newman taught art in High Schools, but never managed to pass his drawing exams to become a fully-fledged teacher.

End of the road?

- By some time in 1939-1940 Newman had stopped painting, and destroyed all of the work he had made up until that time. He didn't start again until 1944.
- In 1948 he painted *Onement I*, which he considered a breakthrough. It was this first work he felt existed as an entity in its own right, rather than representing objects outside the canvas. It was also the first work that contained his trademark 'zip' – a vertical line or band - in its fully realised form.

Hard work

- In 1949 Newman painted his first 'wall-sized' painting – he was one of the pioneers of the large format for which the Abstract Expressionists were renowned
- His first one-man show in 1950 was not well received – neither was the second in 1951. Although he did not exhibit again for several years, he continued to paint.

- After completing a very large work, *Uriel*, in 1955, he stopped painting for over two years.
- Newman was hospitalised in November 1957 as a result of a heart attack. In 1958 he started to paint again, and completed the first two paintings in the series that became known as *The Stations of the Cross*.

Recognition

- Newman had his first retrospective exhibition in 1958, at the age of 53. In the following year paintings were finally purchased by museums, and his work was well received by younger artists.
- *The Stations of the Cross* were exhibited in 1966, and the exhibition was well attended: Newman received widespread recognition.
- In 1968 Newman painted his largest work, *Anna's Light*, named after his mother. It was exhibited the following year as part of his first one-man show in a gallery for 10 years. In the same year (1969) the first book about Barnett Newman was written by Thomas Hess.

Ways of Looking

Ulysses 1952 (Room 6)

POSTCARD

You can adapt this sequence of activities and questions to the majority of paintings in this exhibition – and, with appropriate changes, to the sculptures as well.

You don't need a great deal of knowledge about the works because the questions will help students to work with you to create their own responses and to decide what aspects they need to research further. Prompts, or suggested answers, are in brackets.

A personal approach – what do I bring?

- What are your first reactions to the work? Why do you think it makes you feel or think like that?
- Does the painting make you think of anything? (students might suggest the sea or the sky) – is there anything that stops it looking like that? (Perhaps the vertical format.)

Looking at the object – what do I see?

- What is the work's scale? In what way would a smaller scale affect the work's impact?
- How does the work relate to the other paintings in the room? (Does it dominate the space, is it part of a series of works, are there other works of the same colour or structure?)
- How has the work been made? (It is a painting, oil on canvas.)
- What kind of marks can you make out on the canvas?
- Could it have been made mechanically, or is there evidence of human intervention? (Brush strokes and variety of surface finish, density of colour etc – there is little that is 'mechanical' about the surface.)
- How did the artist make the dividing line? (Newman's 'zips' were made with masking tape, used in different ways.)

Looking at the subject – what is it about?

(Although Newman's paintings are considered to be abstract, he was always keen to stress that his work embodied meaning that was beyond the formal qualities of colour, composition and texture.)

- What colours does the artist use?
- What does this colour mean to you?

- In what ways are the colours varied across the painting?
- What mood does the painting evoke? Are there different moods between the left and the right of the painting?
- How would the painting change if you swapped the colours? Or hung the painting horizontally?
- What is the painting called? Why has the artist given it that name? (Ulysses, also known as Odysseus, was a Greek hero, the 'star' of the Odyssey. His travels brought him in contact with many remarkable creatures including the Cyclops – or one-eyed giant – Polyphemus.) Is there anything 'heroic' about this painting?

Looking at the context – relating the work in the gallery to the outside world

Researching the context within which a work was produced (for example the political climate, social history and culture of the time) will tell us more. It is also interesting to compare the work to others created throughout the artist's career, or to works by other contemporary artists. (Some suggestions for other works to which you might like to make links are included under 'Links with other artists and displays'.)

- Look at other works in the exhibition. How does this work compare to the earlier works? And later works? To which is it more similar?
- How old was Newman when this work was painted? At what point in his career was it painted?
- Where did the artist come from? (America) Is there anything about his homeland that is reflected in the painting? (For example the sheer scale of the work is often seen to evoke the expanse of the American landscape.)
- The main body of Newman's work was made during the period after the Second World War. At this time many artists were concerned with finding new ways of making art as they felt they couldn't continue with old traditions after the horrors of wartime. Try to consider Newman's work in this light and list the various ways he attempts to start anew (also see the thematic sheets that follow and the History section of the 'Links across the Curriculum' sheet).
- What is the earliest dated painting in the exhibition? Did he really start painting at such a late age? (Newman destroyed all the work he created before 1940, and didn't start painting again until 1944.)

Links across the Curriculum

Almost any work of art can be used to illustrate any number of subjects on the school curriculum. In this section we explore how works in this exhibition can be used as a starting point for the discussion of a number of problems.

1. History e.g. *Pagan Void* 1946 (room 1)

What is the earliest dated painting in the exhibition? (1944) How old was Newman at this point? (He was born in 1905.) There are no earlier paintings, as Newman stopped painting some time around 1939-40, and destroyed his work. What was happening at this time that might have inspired this negativity? (He believed that the 'world historical crisis' had meant that traditional ways of painting had become inappropriate).

When he started painting again in 1944, he was strongly influenced by the Surrealists. Many artists had arrived in the United States from Europe during the 1930s and early 1940s – what had happened to make them leave their homes? (Many artists had been declared 'Degenerate' by the Nazis, and fled first Germany and then Europe both before and during the Second World War.)

Look at the works in this room – what do they have in common? Many of these early works, including *Pagan Void* use seed-like shapes, ideas of germination and growth. In what ways might this reflect historical events?

2. English Writing

Newman's works are inherently poetic, and as such could be the inspiration for poetry based on the mood they inspire, but a number of other writing exercises could also be developed:

a) Writing to imagine, explore, entertain

The paintings have very specific titles, many of which are drawn from different religious or mythological traditions. Students could write a narrative relating to the title, drawing on the moods, colours and even

'incidents' of the paintings. Do the 'zips' refer to specific events, or imply a certain rhythm to the painting? Are they 'fast' or 'slow'?

b) Writing to inform, explain, describe

Write a caption or wall text for one of the works or rooms, aimed at the non-specialist viewer.

Captions

A caption is the short piece of explanatory text that hangs near to certain works of art. Students can research the work using information that is available in the reading space for the exhibition and in the Clore Information Room on level 1. This activity could be differentiated by inviting students to convey alternative styles of writing in the caption – for example formal (writing as a curator), or informal (writing for a friend). Discuss what sort of voice seems the most appropriate for the gallery context.

Wall Texts

A wall text is the introduction to the theme of a room or a display. Invite students to look at the works in one of the rooms, noting down any links between the works (for example, size, colour, date), and to write a wall text indicating what they consider to be the most significant aspects of the work in the room.

c) Writing to persuade, argue, advise

Below are two scenarios – but you and your students could undoubtedly think of more.

- A newspaper critic has stated that all of Barnett Newman's works are basically the same – single colours with vertical stripes. Write a letter to prove how little this critic knows, explaining exactly how varied they are.
- Your headmaster will not let you visit the exhibition as you could look at the pictures in a book at school. Write a letter to him explaining why a full appreciation of Newman's work can only be achieved by seeing the paintings themselves.

d) Writing to analyse, review, comment

Invite students to write a review of this exhibition, or of a particular work, for a chosen form of media such as a newspaper, the internet, radio or television.

3. Art and Design

There are a variety of suggestions for follow-up activities included in the thematic sheets.

4. Science

Science impinges on the work of Barnett Newman in a number of ways. For example, in terms of maths, you can consider the issue of balance and symmetry: are the paintings symmetrical? If not, how does he achieve balance?

For the sculptures, balance is again important, although this is perhaps more closely allied to mechanics, engineering and balanced forces.

The paintings could even be used to develop a number of calculations – the scale is so remarkable a huge amount of paint must have been used. You could try estimating the height and width of the canvas (or even check it in the catalogue) and so work out the surface area of the painting. You could then estimate the thickness of a paint layer and work out how much paint had been used.

4 Religious Studies

Several of the works have titles which refer to Jewish or Christian ideas, including the paintings *Genesis – The Break, Adam, Eve* and the series of paintings *The Stations of the Cross*. The titles will affect your interpretation of the works. Newman however often titled his paintings retrospectively.

You could use these paintings as the starting point for discussions relating to religious stories – in what way do the paintings ‘represent’ the characters or narratives involved? What do the original characters or narratives represent in relation to the message their story is intended to convey? Are Newman’s

paintings representational or metaphorical illustrations of these ideas?

See also Thematic Sheet A: Creation and Creativity.

5. Classical Studies

As above, a number of paintings have titles from classical mythology, often studied either for ‘The Greeks’ or ‘The Romans’ – such paintings include *Dionysius, Ulysses* and *Achilles* for example. You could think about these paintings in relationship to the original myths in the same way as for the ‘Religious Studies’ section above.

An Art Historical Context: Abstract Expressionism

Barnett Newman was one of the leading members of a group of artists called the Abstract Expressionists, which is often considered to have been the most important artistic movement of the late 1940s and 1950s. Although the artists had different styles of painting, their works have several features in common. Below is a checklist which describes some of the qualities embodied by an Abstract Expressionist painting. In which rooms in the exhibition would you consider that Newman's work is 'Abstract Expressionist'? And how well do you think he fits into this category? In the Tate Collections you could use this list to see how he compares to other Abstract Expressionists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. Also, you could think about whether these categories are separate from one another, or if they are different ways of expressing the same idea.

1. Size:

One of the outstanding features of Abstract Expressionism is the sense of grandeur created by paintings which are very large. Is this true of Newman's work? Are all the works equally large? Given the evidence of the exhibition, was there a particular period when he was more or less interested in making his paintings big?

2. All-over painting:

No part of the painting is more important than any other – all parts should be given equal attention. In any particular painting could you say that any one bit is more important than the other? Is there a particular focus in the painting? If there is, where is it? Do any parts of the painting appear to be closer or further away than the others? Would you say that any part of the painting is the foreground or the background?

3. Surface qualities:

The personal, hand-made nature of the painting was very important. As such, the way in which paint was applied was carefully considered. Compare two or more different paintings in the same room (for

example, *The Stations of the Cross* sequence). Were they painted in the same way? Can you see the brush strokes? How many types of brush stroke are there? Might the paint have been applied without a brush? Newman sometimes applied paint with a palette knife, and for a very few works he actually sprayed the paint on – can you tell which? Is the paint all equally thick or thin? Are the lines all defined in the same way? (Especially with *The Stations of the Cross*.) How many different ways does Newman define the lines? What words would you use to describe these? (e.g. sharp, soft, feathery etc.).

4. The importance of painting:

Although Abstract expressionism was an avant-garde movement it used what is basically an old-fashioned technique – painting on canvas. Do Newman's works need to be painted? Do his printed works have the same impact? Does it affect your appreciation of the larger works to know that they were all painted by one person, rather than having been created mechanically? Is the act of painting (i.e. applying the paint to the canvas by hand) important for the works?

5. Abstraction paintings should convey meaning:

Abstract painting, concerned with colour, shape, line and texture but without recognisable 'objects', developed in the early 20th century. Often artists had used abstraction to explore the purely formal qualities of painting – the shapes and colours themselves – without necessarily wanting to convey any other ideas. The Abstract Expressionists wanted to convey different ideas, often to do with the heroic possibilities of human endeavour and depth of feeling and thought. Choose three or four paintings which you think convey different emotions - are there some which are happier or sadder for example, or which are more energetic or calmer? How does the painting convey these ideas or feelings?

6. The individuality of the artist:

The Abstract Expressionists thought of the artist as a single creative genius, and as such his particular energy and ideas were of prime importance. Each artist should be different – and indeed they are. What particular features mark out a work by Barnett Newman? Choose a room (preferably not Rooms 1 or 2) – can you devise a set of four 'rules' which could

describe the production or appearance of a Newman painting? But could somebody else do this, and if they did, would the paintings look the same? (You might want to think about handwriting – get different members of the group to write down the same sentence and see if all the sentences ‘look’ the same even if they have the same words in.)

Back at School

Some, if not all, of these ideas can be explored through practical work in the classroom. Large-scale works could be difficult unless executed as a group activity (this clearly contradicts the idea of individuality though). However, you could try creating versions of the same idea on a small and medium scale, and see how the impact differs.

You could create works which either focus on one part of the surface or have an ‘all-over’ approach. In order to explore the implications of the latter try placing the paper on top of a protective surface so that brush strokes can continue over the edge of the paper, therefore not giving the edges too much significance. Alternatively, encourage the students to try and extend the colour to the edge of the paper without an apparent change in the brush-strokes or marks made.

The painterly nature of Abstract Expressionism is hugely important – experiment with different brushes, different brush strokes and with different densities of paint, using the same paint but applying one or more layers for example.

Newman’s signature element is the ‘zip’. He created these by using masking tape to create a division on the canvas and painting over it. If the tape is pressed hard against the support a sharp line will result. If the tape is not pressed down completely paint will bleed underneath the tape to create a rough edge.

Thematic sheet A: Creation

Barnett Newman was born in 1905 – look around Room 1 and find out the date of the earliest work in the exhibition. By the end of the 1930s he thought that traditional ideas about painting were not suitable for modern times, and were not suitable to deal with the horrors of life as exemplified by the Second World War. In response to this crisis he destroyed all of his early work, and did not paint again for another four or five years.

When he did start again his work was concerned with just that – starting again, and new beginnings, and this can be seen in the subjects and forms he paints: people have often suggested that the early paintings appear to have seed-like forms, and things starting to grow for example.

In Room 1, look at *Genesis – The Break*.

At the beginning of the book of Genesis God created the heaven and earth, which were in darkness, and then he created light. The Break was a second title for this work, and refers to God's separation of the day from the night – the light from the dark.

- How does the painting refer to this idea? Why is light important to an artist? Would we be able to see the paintings without it?
- In the book of Genesis, God goes on to create the sun, moon and stars, plants and animals. Do the forms in this painting represent any or all of these things? How would you describe the shapes and lines that have been painted? Is he using more vertical or horizontal forms? Is there a reason for this preference?

Again in Room 1, look at *Pagan Void*.

The use of the word 'Pagan' implies that this is not connected to Jewish or Christian stories.

- Are there any notable similarities with or

differences from *Genesis – The Break*? Are any of the shapes the same? Does it appear to be more or less organised? Do the shapes remind you of anything? Does anything appear to be happening? (The work has been variously interpreted as representing imagery from nature, alluding to the depths of the Universe, or evoking a laboratory petri dish and a theme of science and experimentation.)

In Room 3, look at *The Command*.

- The title of this painting refers to God's first statement in the book of Genesis, 'Let there be light'. How is this idea expressed in the painting? Are there any similarities between this painting and the two we have looked at in Room 1? To which is it more similar? Is there anything in the painting which expresses the idea of the 'break' between night and day? And does any element of the painting convey the idea of light more than any others?

Again in Room 3, look at *Onement III*.

In colour and composition it is similar to an earlier work, *Onement I*, although the size and proportions of the canvas are different. The original work was considered by Newman to be the first in which he used his trademark 'zip' as the defining structure of the painting rather than just one of several elements. This was the starting point for all later developments. The title implies unity – he considered that the zip was just as much a part of the painting as the overall colour, that it did not separate the canvas but effectively held it together – the whole painting is 'one' thing – hence the title. The title is also derived from the idea of atonement – the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur is the holiest day in the Jewish year. On this day Jews repent of their sins, and start afresh. This painting therefore refers to a new start in a number of ways.

- How does it relate to the other works we have looked at? Are there any elements which are similar from earlier works? Is anything notably different?

In Room 6 look at *Adam and Eve*. **POSTCARD**

This pair of works were created within a couple of years of each other. Here, Newman continues to develop the imagery of his trademark zip, which in this context, can be seen to allude to the creation of man, and woman. Moreover Newman may have been linking the colours he used with the notion of the Creation. He was well aware that in Hebrew the word Adam suggests several meanings – ‘man’, ‘earth’ and ‘red’ – emphasising the biblical idea of Adam being created from the earth. (See also ‘Narrative’ thematic sheet.)

Look at some of Barnett Newman’s later paintings and consider how his work has developed from his earlier ideas. Which shapes does he continue to use, and which does he abandon? Which ideas continue to be important to him? Can you find these shapes and ideas in later works in the exhibition?

Newman’s work continued to develop from ideas he was working on – the colours of one painting would suggest another painting to him for example. In later rooms can you find two or more paintings with the same colour or structure? Do these relate to each other in any different ways (look at the title, for example)?

Back at School

In order to break his ‘deadlock’ in creativity Newman adopted the Surrealist practice of automatic writing. Basically this would involve drawing or scribbling something at random on a piece of paper (or canvas) and then developing the ideas. Often when we doodle we use a similar process – continuing a pattern we have started or turning it into a recognisable shape, for example. This can be done easily in the classroom – get the students to draw some random markings, then think about them, developing the more interesting ideas, echoing shapes or colours or seeing if they look like anything and developing them into that.

After painting *Onement I* in 1948 Newman stopped painting for a few months and considered the implications of this work. On a shorter timescale you could ask the students to devise a simple image – a line or shape, for example – towards the end of a class, and ask them to think about it before the next class. You could then see how they might use this image to develop another work.

Thematic sheet B: The Sublime

In 1948 Barnett Newman wrote an article entitled 'The Sublime is Now'. The idea of the 'Sublime' goes back to ancient Rome, when it was thought of as an overpowering form of beauty. The idea was developed much further by philosophers in Europe in the eighteenth century, and referred to anything in nature that might inspire awe – this often referred to the wildness of nature, and elements of the sublime might include vastness, terror and darkness, for example. It became particularly applied to certain aspects of painting, later embodied by artists such as J.W.M. Turner and John Martin. In his article Newman suggested that it was in the art of the Abstract Expressionists that the 'Sublime' found its true home.

Newman's paintings are often made on a vast scale, which usually evokes a strong notion of the sublime. However his smaller works (such as *Joshua* in room 4) can also create a perhaps unexpectedly striking and powerful impression on the viewer.

Look around Room 4.

- Which do you think is the most powerful and awe-inspiring painting? What is it about the painting that makes it powerful? Is it size, or colour, or both? Which painting do you like most? If it is not the one you think is the most powerful, why do you prefer this one?

Look at *Joshua*, also in Room 4.

In this painting the artist's fingerprint is just visible in the upper edge of the red zip, the paint of which has been applied very thickly with a palette knife. An element of the human being, in terms of both the title and scale of the work as well as the trace that has been manifestly left behind by the artist, is apparent here.

- Does this painting have a strong impact? Is it a particularly large painting? How would you describe the colours used? Are they intense, wishy-washy or

strong, for example? Is there a strong contrast between them?

Now look at *Tundra* in the same room.

- What are the differences between this and *Joshua*? Is it smaller or larger? Does this make it more or less impressive? Are the colours more or less intense? How does this affect the mood of the painting? Comparing these two paintings would you say that colour or size are more important for Newman's work, or are both equally important?

- How does the title, *Tundra*, affect your interpretation of the piece?

In Room 7 look at the painting *Uriel*. **POSTCARD**

In an early exhibition Newman recommended standing close to his paintings – we tend to stand back so that we can see them all in one glance.

- Try looking at *Uriel* from different distances (try not to bump into other gallery visitors!). First look at it from the other side of the room. What impact does it make from a distance? Now stand quite close to the painting, so that it takes your whole field of vision (everything you can see in one glance). Is the impact different? Does this depend on which part of the painting you are standing in front of? Compare the effect of standing in front of the left of the painting (pale aqua) to standing in front of the right (chocolate brown). If you could jump into the painting – please don't! – which side would you prefer to be in?

- Go back to the other side of the room – do you feel differently about the painting now? How do the people in between you and the picture affect how you see it? Are any of them close enough to look like they are part of the painting?

Compare *Uriel* to another work in this room, *The Gate*.

- What are the similarities and differences between the works? Are the colours exactly the same? (It is

important to remember that our eyes see colours in relationship to other colours - a dark colour will make the adjacent colour seem lighter, for example.) How do the different proportions of the colours change the feelings you get from the paintings? Which do you prefer, and why? Again, what is the relative importance of size and colour for these works?

Look at *18 Cantos* in Room 9.

- How does *Uriel* and *The Gate* compare to these works? A 'Canto' is a verse of a poem, and relates to the idea of a song. If each of these lithographs (a type of print) is a verse, and the whole group a song, to what kind of music would you compare one of the paintings?

In Room 10 look at *Anna's Light*.

This is Barnett Newman's largest painting and is named after the artist's mother, Anna Steinberg Newman, who died in 1965 – three years before this work was painted. The red colour was applied in multiple coats with first a roller then a brush to create dense, saturated colour, the intensity and magnitude of which remains unsurpassed in Newman's work.

- How would you describe the colour of this painting? Is it particularly saturated? (If a colour is saturated, it means that there is a lot of the basic colour in the paint – it is not mixed with white, to make it lighter, for example, and the paint is usually fairly thick, so you cannot see the canvas or other colours through the paint.)

- What effect does the two white bands of differing widths give the whole painting? (It acts as a framing device for the intense red colour.)

Back at School

In the classroom, experiments with scale, as suggested above, can probably only be limited to the difference of impact between small and medium

scale works. However, you could try painting sheets of paper with all-over washes of different colours to compare their impact. For example, using any simple water-based paint, compare washes made by using first the basic paint, then by diluting it a little, and finally by diluting it further. You could also compare the basic all-over wash to washes made by adding different amounts of white paint. The two sequences can be used to compare the different effects of intensity and saturation of colour.

In terms of art historical links you could compare Newman's work to that of other artists interested in the idea of the sublime – for example J.W.M Turner and John Martin, or members of the American Sublime school, such as Frederic Edwin Church, Thomas Cole or Thomas Moran. Do they approach the idea in a similar way? One simple difference is that these artists paint small characters within large settings, whereas Newman makes the situation more immediate – his audience is made to look small in front of the large paintings.

It might be interesting to compare Newman's work to photographs of American, Canadian or South American landscapes, helping students to ground the work in the notion of a vast and open terrain.

Thematic sheet C: Narrative and Meaning

One of Newman's basic beliefs was that abstract painting – painting using colour, composition, texture and line, without recognisable objects – should not just be geometrical arrangements without meaning. Colour, composition, texture and line are therefore used to convey meaning, although this may not be a specific situation or narrative, and the meaning which is read may be different for each onlooker. None of the paintings in this exhibition are intended to 'tell a story', although a possible reading may link to the titles Newman gave the works and elements of the drama inherent in the stories the titles refer to. It must be remembered however that he titled the works retrospectively.

A discussion about narrative and meaning could be had around any of the works in the exhibition but the ideas below will form a good starting point.

In Room 4 look at *Joshua* and *Covenant*.

- What are the similarities and differences between the two works? Think about symmetry and balance, for example. Also, how many elements are there in each? What colours do they use? How do the two paintings make you feel, and why?
- In the Bible Joshua was the successor to Moses, and successfully led the Israelites back to their homeland. This involved besieging the city of Jericho, and the destruction of its walls. Joshua was just a single person, and yet was a powerful man. How are these ideas expressed in the size, colour and composition of the painting?
- A covenant is an agreement between two people. Newman is referring in part to the covenant between God and the Israelites. How many 'zips' are there in *Covenant*? Are they the same? Is each one equally important? Is the number of elements relevant to the meaning of the two paintings (*Joshua* and *Covenant*)? Which painting is more balanced and symmetrical? Which has the 'warmer' colour? Does

either painting seem more 'accepting' or 'comfortable'? Does either seem more 'dramatic'? In what ways does the difference in appearance of the two paintings reflect the difference in their subject matter?

In Room 13 there is a painting called *Jericho*, the name of the city Joshua successfully captured. Can you find any connection between this and the painting *Joshua*?

In Room 6 look at *Adam and Eve*.

When interviewed in Brazil in 1965, Newman said: "The first man was called Adam. 'Adam' means earth but it also means 'red'. And I bring this up for a real reason... my work, although it's abstract... is involved in man."

Adam and Eve were the first people created by God. According to the Bible, Adam was created from the earth, while Eve was created from Adam's rib, and was part of him.

- How are these ideas expressed in the two paintings? Does Newman's statement about Adam help to explain the painting's appearance? How would you describe the colours that are used? What are the differences and similarities between the two paintings?

The zips in Newman's paintings are often seen as embodying an element of the figurative or human dimension and in particular manifesting the existentialist notion of the individual faced with the choices of his future. For this reason Newman is sometimes compared to Giacometti and indeed has recently been shown alongside this artist in a display at Tate Modern (see also Links section above).

In Room 8 there are three works – one painting and two sculptures.

- What is the relationship between the painting, *Black Fire I*, and the sculptures? Are any of the elements of the sculpture equivalent to elements of

the painting? Do you think it matters where the sculptures are placed? Is it important that they are against a white wall? Do the walls themselves relate to the paintings in any way?

- Newman wanted his sculptures to have a similar impact to the paintings. Is he successful? What helps to make them impressive? How heavy do you think they are? Is it obvious how the sculptures are supported? Do they look stable?
- The sculptures in this room are called *Here II* and *Here III* (you can see *Here I* in Room 5), because he wanted to emphasize their physical presence – they are here, and so, as the onlooker, are you. Is being in the same space as the paintings equally important?

In Room 11, look at *The Stations of the Cross* – a sequence of fourteen paintings.

The title comes from the Catholic Church, and originally each station would have depicted one of the events which was believed to have happened to Christ as he carried the cross in preparation for his crucifixion. In the narrative, then, each scene was effectively separate, but part of the same story.

- Is that true of this series of paintings? In what ways are they similar? And how are they different? In terms of a 'narrative' or 'story' do any of the paintings seem more dramatic? Are any calmer, or more energetic? Or are any more exciting, or more contemplative? If there are differences, how does Newman achieve them?

The ordeal of Jesus Christ can also be seen as a symbol of the universal suffering of mankind, particularly in response to both the aftermath of the Second World War and the emerging conflict in Vietnam. Newman stated many times that *The Stations of the Cross* represented the 'cry of the human condition', again hinting at an element of the human in a seemingly abstract set of works.

In 1957 Newman suffered a heart attack. He acknowledged that paintings made shortly afterwards such as *Outcry* and *The Stations of the Cross* were, in part, responses to this aspect of his personal life.

Back at School

Discuss the differences between colours and their meanings. For example, list a series of colours and ask the students to write down how they make them feel, or what they make them think of (e.g. 'blue' might make them feel calm, or sad, or might remind them of the sky, or water). Vary this by thinking of different types of the colours (for example 'sky blue' might give a sense of happiness, 'dark blue' of sadness). The varied responses of the students should make it clear that there is no 'meaning dictionary' for an abstract painting – although Newman refers to the fact that in Hebrew 'Adam' means 'man', 'red' and 'earth' he uses different reds in different circumstances (for example in *Anna's Light*, the predominant colour is red, although it is named after his mother - a woman).

You could also experiment with the effects created by simply dividing a sheet of paper using verticals – the different effects of placing one line centrally or to the side, of placing two lines close together, far apart, symmetrically or not, etc.

These two exercises could then be combined to reflect combinations of different moods and energy.

You could also break down a story in a sequence of events, think about a mood and energy for each of the events, and invite each student to devise an abstract painting which might evoke that part of the narrative.