

Sound Thoughts on Art – Season 1, Episode 5
Kamala Sankaram and Mark Rothko's *Untitled*
National Gallery of Art

[MUSIC PLAYING]

CELESTE HEADLEE: Welcome to *Sound Thoughts On Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art. I'm your host Celeste Headlee.

Art can engage all of our senses. We hear music. We see a photo.

We walk around a sculpture. We taste fine food. Standing close to a favorite painting, we can even smell the wood or oil paint.

But it's when our senses work together that things get really interesting. When we listen, what do we see in our mind's eye? When we stand in front of a painting, what do we hear?

This podcast lives in that convergence. In every episode, you'll learn about a work in the National Gallery's collection from someone who knows the art and its context. You'll also hear a musician respond to that work through sound, creating a dialogue between the visual art and music. *Sound Thoughts On Art* tells the stories of how we experience art and how it connects us.

A brief glance can tell you a lot. Think about all the quick looks we give our environment over the course of the day. What's the weather like? Is there a car in your blind spot? Is the stove still on?

Our brains are wired to take the shortest of stimuli, from a glance, to a snippet of song, to a smell wafting by, and then use that information to make connections. Most of the time, that's a really helpful tool.

But in the art world, a brief glance can often be deceptive. If you just skim a painting with your eyes, you might see a splatter or a human figure or stripes. And if you stopped there, you'd miss the fine details or the ebb and flow of color or your emotional connection to the work. Sometimes art demands our attention.

In this episode of *Sound Thoughts On Art*, you'll meet Kamala Sankaram. She's a composer. And during a dark, difficult period of her life, a Mark Rothko painting at the National Gallery caught her attention and held it and changed the way she thought about music.

The Rothko piece in question is an untitled work on canvas. And it makes quite the first impression. We'll let Kamala take it from here.

KAMALA SANKARAM: So you go into the tower. And you're surrounded by these Rothkos. And the sense of the color is intense.

It fills the space. That's something else that you don't get looking at it online, is what is it like to actually walk into that room and be surrounded by these paintings. But I think that even more than that is the ability to sit with the painting. You start to feel, I don't know, almost as if there's this aura or something inside the painting.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Rothko's signature format, that is the blocks of color for which he's now famous, is polarizing, to say the least. But if you understand the artist's process and his intention, it's easier to place Rothko in the canon of fine American art.

For more, let's hear from Adam Greenhalgh, an associate curator at the gallery. He's leading the Gallery's effort to make a complete catalog of Mark Rothko's works.

So describe this particular piece for me. And I wonder if you would describe the experience of being in the room with it, because that's quite different than seeing a photo of it.

ADAM GREENHALGH: Yeah. Rothko paintings do not reproduce well. They're apparently very difficult to photograph. So this one is pretty big. It's about 6 feet 4 inches tall by 5 feet 7 inches wide, so bigger than a tall human.

It's a vertical rectangular canvas divided into three horizontal passages. The topmost one is a sort of violet color, purply-pink. Below that is a larger rectangular field of black. And below the black, there's a kind of strip, or thin band of bright orange. All of these forms float against, or hover against, a uniform background of bluish-gray.

So you know, superficially, you've got a canvas divided into a violet, a black, and an orange. But when you stand in front of it, you realize that there's nothing sort of geometric or simple about these forms. There's not a right angle or a straight line in the mix.

Rothko built up these paintings using many layers of thin, diluted oil paint. If you look closely at the violet field, you can see orange poking through. You can see where the brush work is more active. It's thinner.

It all conveys a sort of a sense of dynamism, of motion, of action. These are not still. They're not flat. They sort of pulse and glow as though illuminated from within.

Rothko demanded what he called a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. It wasn't just passive looking. He wanted you to fully engage.

CELESTE HEADLEE: What drew you to this piece?

KAMALA SANKARAM: Well, there's a story there. And it's funny because I never really got into Rothko until this particular moment.

So in 2019, I had been invited to create music for an adaptation of the *Oresteia* that the Shakespeare Theater Company was doing. This is an adaptation by the playwright Ellen McLaughlin. And it was Michael Kahn's last play. So he wanted to have underscoring through the whole piece, which is not

typical for a play. And that's why he hired an opera composer rather than somebody that usually works in theater.

But the other part of that is that he wanted me to be in DC for the entire rehearsal process, which was longer than normal—it was a two-month rehearsal process. And so I basically was living in DC for two months.

And during that time, my sister Sheila had a reemergence of ovarian cancer. She had had a bout of cancer two years before and had had surgery, and we thought she was in the clear. And then November 2018, they found a lesion on her colon. And so she had to go back to the Netherlands where she was a resident to get treatment there.

So I was in DC by myself. And Sheila was supposed to have a surgery to remove the tumor in April while I was in DC. And they discovered that the cancer had spread. And it was inoperable.

So, again, I was by myself. I didn't know what to do. And Sheila and I, what we used to do is we would go see art together. So I decided to go and see the Andy Goldsworthy at the National Gallery, because that was one of our favorite artists.

And while I was there, I went up and decided I should see the Rothko because I was there. And I don't know. It was different.

CELESTE HEADLEE: OK. So take me to that moment. And you're approaching the Rothko. And at some point, you have an emotional reaction to it.

KAMALA SANKARAM: So I walk up the stairs, and I walk into the tower. I was drawn to this painting because of the intensity of the colors and the darkness of it, which is different than a lot of the other Rothkos. It felt like what I was feeling in that moment.

And I decided to sit there. And even though there was this sort of storm of emotions that I was going through, in knowing that my sister was dying, and I was alone, I felt calm. And so I stayed there a very long time.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Interesting to me how strong emotion of almost any kind can do that to us, can make us more sensitive, almost as though it puts our feelers up. If we're in an extreme state of joy or sorrow, it can open us up in a vulnerable way to art. And Rothko can be difficult for people. But I also hear that once people have that sort of emotional connection with a Rothko piece, it sort of never loses its power.

KAMALA SANKARAM: I think that's true. You know, because even looking at pictures of it online, since I can't go in person right now, I still feel that connection that I felt when I was sitting with the painting. What you want from a great piece of art is that it shifts your way of seeing the world. But also, if your world has shifted, it can change the way you see the art. So there's this sort of symbiotic relationship between the two that I think that I didn't understand until that moment.

CELESTE HEADLEE: It's interesting that, as you describe this, I wanted to read you something that Rothko actually said about his own works. And he said, "Small pictures since the Renaissance are like novels. Large pictures are like dramas in which one participates in a direct way."

And that's so clearly the experience that you had. Obviously, it led you back to this music that you'd written for the theater because it was happening at the same time. But you're also pointing us toward a specific moment in that music when we hear a violin solo. Can you tell me a little bit about this melody?

KAMALA SANKARAM: So Ellen's adaptation of the *Oresteia* condenses these three plays into one play. If you're not familiar with the *Oresteia*, it's this Greek tragedy that details the fall of the House of Atreus due to this curse that goes back to the King Agamemnon, who is trying to get to the Trojan War.

And he has this whole fleet of ships, and none of them can sail—there's no wind. And so he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia in order to make the gods happy and get the wind to blow so that he can get to the battle. And all of this happens before the beginning of the play.

So this trilogy is, after he comes back, his wife who, of course, is not happy that he murdered their daughter—and also not happy that he brings back Cassandra, who is his concubine now—she kills both of them at the end of the first play. And then the rest of it is the cycle of vengeance in the second play. And then the third play is the servants of the house decide, "Should we kill him and keep the cycle going, or should we find some other way to have justice?" And that's the beginning of the court trial system.

It's all about vengeance. But it's about grief, really, at the heart of it. And I think that that's something that Ellen really intuited. And her adaptation includes a flashback of Iphigenia, and Iphigenia is present throughout the whole first act.

I knew that grief was what drove the action. And I knew that the music should be based around the character of Iphigenia. And so the string melody, the violin, is a theme that I wrote for her.

And there's this pivotal moment in the play where the ghost of Iphigenia comes back and talks about her sacrifice. And I couldn't get it right in the rehearsal.

I had written this string quartet, which was very nice and very baroque.

So I was trying to figure out how to fix it. And then, in the experience of this painting, my own, now personal experience of what that kind of a raw grief feels like, I knew that it had to be hazier. It had to feel unmoored in a way.

And so I took the string quartet, and I processed it electronically. I made the strings sound like not real instruments anymore. And that led to going back through the whole piece and adding more sounds like that.

[MUSIC - KAMALA SANKARAM, "THE ORESTEIA"]

Like, processed temple bells, Tibetan bowls, all of these sounds that are harmonically rich, but also kind of otherworldly. And all of that only happened because I now connected with the material in a way that I hadn't before—and because I also had felt this calm feeling that the purple of the Rothko was sort of analogous to the space around Iphigenia.

CELESTE HEADLEE: The score that Kamala wrote for the Shakespeare Theater Company's *Oresteia* revolves around a melody played on strings. That melody is tied, in the play, to the doomed character of Iphigenia. In Greek mythology, her name is synonymous with the notion of a sacrificial lamb.

She was a child, and in most versions of the story, she was sacrificed by her own father to win the gods' favor in battle. She delivers a monologue that we've recreated for you with Kamala's music. Here, Iphigenia is performed by actor and *Oresteia* playwright Ellen McLaughlin.

[MUSIC - KAMALA SANKARAM, "THE ORESTEIA"]

IPHIGENIA: I used to sing to them, the men who killed me. Late in the evening, when they were in their cups, I would enter: my hair braided back, my square brow and girl's direct gaze, my pure voice spooling up to cool the smoky room. An admonishment, I suppose.

So when the last moment came to me, I lay there on the block, my bare neck spiced by the morning air. And I thought, perhaps I am to die for my own excellence. Perhaps if I had just sung less well, looked more ordinary, I might have been spared this.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Once you wrote the piece, and then you go back to the Rothko to look at it, has your review of the Rothko changed?

KAMALA SANKARAM: It feels less dark to me now.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Less dark?

KAMALA SANKARAM: Less dark, in a way—in that, before, I focused on, sort of, the black. I don't know. And maybe this is the way that grief changes over time, also.

But now, there is the darkness. But there's also this beautiful, intense color. So the darkness is there. But the color is, too.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Rothko is so associated with color. And it's as though his use of color evolved as he aged.

ADAM GREENHALGH: Rothko was, sort of from the very beginning, very interested in expressive colors. The '50s are, for the most part, characterized by bright colors, sunny colors: pinks, yellows, oranges, reds, apple greens, these kinds of things. He's really becoming a successful painting these brightly colored abstract paintings.

And some people start to suggest that it's too easy. I think he begins to think that everyone just likes these happy bright colors. And his palette starts to darken, from about 1957.

He starts to paint in a palette of crimsons and, eventually, in the '60s, sort of blacks on black. And then, by the end of the '60s, he does an entire series of black and gray paintings—so almost wringing color out of the equation.

But there is one thing I should say. He was irked by people who thought he was only interested in color relationships. Color for him was a sort of a tool.

He said, and this is in 1956 in an interview with the art critic Selden Rodman, "You might as well get one thing straight. I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationships of color form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on."

"And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures show that I communicate those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you were moved only by their color relationships, then you missed the point." So it's about color, but color as a vehicle for expressing this kind of existential essence of what it means to be a human.

CELESTE HEADLEE: You do write a lot of opera. You sing. And I wonder whether you see connections between the experience of this Rothko piece in person and the experience of, say, an opera?

KAMALA SANKARAM: I do. I mean, I think that art is best experienced in the way in which it was intended to be experienced. And most opera is meant for you to be there in the room with the singers. There is something amazing about a classically trained voice, that such power can come from one person. And to listen to a recording flattens it.

So I do think that it's important to be able to go in person. And I hope that we're able to do that soon.

CELESTE HEADLEE: I wonder, do you even subconsciously connect melodies or tunes to pieces of art?

[MUSIC - KAMALA SANKARAM, "THE ORESTEIA"]

KAMALA SANKARAM: I get inspiration from many different things. It's not often from visual art. Usually, it's reading about some kind of astrophysical concept, like the orbital resonance patterns of planets or other very out there, nerdy things.

But also, just as often, stories that I think would resonate with a modern audience, stories of social justice. It's very important to me to put people on stage that haven't been there historically. And so a lot of the subjects that I tend to gravitate towards for the pieces that I write feature women and people of color and the intersections of the two, even if it's just making sure that I have singers from a variety of backgrounds and putting them on stage.

I'm responding to sort of the environment around me. And it's not often that I take that inspiration from visual art. So it's interesting to think about.

CELESTE HEADLEE: The purpose of this podcast is to help people experience art using all of their senses. And that's not easy always. And I wondered if you had any advice to people on how to make themselves vulnerable to art.

KAMALA SANKARAM: I think that we all have this instinct for vulnerability, to allow ourselves to be childlike. But we let go of it because we're afraid of what other people are going to think. But I think art is personal.

You know, like I said, I never had a reaction to Rothko before this moment. Because it wasn't the right moment until then. And I think that art meets you where you are. So you just have to be open and prepared. That maybe the thing that everyone says you are supposed to have a response to is not the thing that you're going to respond to.

CELESTE HEADLEE: Here's Kamala Sankaram's melody from the *Oresteia*, uninterrupted.

[MUSIC - KAMALA SANKARAM, "THE ORESTEIA"]

Thanks once again to Kamala Sankaram for joining us. And thanks also to Ellen McLaughlin, for delivering a monologue for us from her adaptation of the *Oresteia*.

Sound Thoughts On Art is a production of the National Gallery of Art music department. The show was created by Danielle DeSwert Hahn, the National Gallery's head of music programs and mixed and produced by Maura Currie. You can find more information about everything in today's episode at the National Gallery's website, NGA.gov/podcast.

If you enjoyed this episode of *Sound Thoughts On Art*, we would love for you to subscribe. Also, leave us a review, wherever you're listening. I'm Celeste Headlee. Until next time, be well.