

Ed Clark

Ed Clark

The Recognitions of Ed Clark

“There is strength that comes with movement.”

-Ed Clark

The quotation above comes from an interview with Clark by the artist, Jack Whitten. If motion and strength are central to Clark’s creative practice, as critics including John Yau have observed, so, too, is openness, an openness to chance that inherits as much from Marcel Duchamp or John Cage as it does from fellow American abstract painters like Pollock or Kline. Significantly, for Clark, the act of perception can also be understood as an act of creation in its own right; the recognition of a work as art could be contemporaneous with the its production, a process, characterised as much by careful observation as action. Clark discusses this phenomenon in relation to a canvas from later in his career, “Louisiana Red” (2004), in his interview with Whitten in the following way, “I let it paint itself ... I poured it and watched it,” Clark says. “I didn’t touch it, but I still created it.” Allowing paint to move with the vagaries of gravity and time perhaps provides a kind of counterpoint to the deep sense of presence one feels in a work like “Pink and Black” (2006), for example. The sheer physicality of the paint and the tension created by its materiality in “Pink and Black” speaks of the dynamics of pressure and resistance between painter and medium, but if movement connotes strength for Clark, perhaps knowing when to stand back and simply accept is a corollary of this position: creating via presence is as valid as creating by absence. Painterly intention can be expressed the act of becoming aware. If this marks a unique strain in Clark’s approach to abstraction, this is perhaps not surprising given an artistic lineage and personal biography that sets him apart from many other notable figures from the early history of American abstract painting.

Clark’s formative experiences in mid-twentieth century Paris provided him with a rich vocabulary of references ranging from icons like Matisse and Picasso to Nicolas de Staël, whose works Clark credits with profoundly influencing his approach to colour and the spatiality of the canvas. Speaking to Whitten, Clark laments that de Staël has fallen into semi-obscure, a fate that once seemed that Clark’s work might share. In his book, *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting*

1967-1975 (2006), Dawoud Bey observes that Clark has been scrupulously disappeared from the lineage of American abstract paintings for reasons that are perhaps only too predictable: the colour of a painter’s skin so often is a greater predictor of that artist’s alleged importance than the colours of an artist’s palate. Such erasure is a tragedy on a human level, but also an aesthetic level, as works like Clark’s “Untitled 1957” extended - literally - the reach of abstract painting. The painting overflows the rectilinear surface of the canvas, denying the supremacy of the picture plane via a purpose-built stretcher. This disregard for the predetermined boundaries of the canvas edge still feels like a rich seam that is under-explored by contemporary painters. One is left with melancholy speculations as to what a generation of art students encountering Clark as a part of the canon of abstract painting would have made of his sense of adventure and defiance had they been introduced to it.

Rarely do such narratives of exclusion have happy endings, but Clark’s own story at least continues. His longevity has permitted him the luxury of being both a historical painter and a contemporary one, and Clark’s work makes an easy case for its own continued relevance. The robust sensuality of Clark’s chromatic architectures is enthralling on its own terms; his remarkable use of pink has caught the eye of more than one writer, and his singular working methods, notably his use of the push-broom as his primary painterly tool, infuses his canvases with a familiarity, but also an otherness. The breadth of his broom’s aesthetic signature can be traced by contrasting the delicacy of works like “Untitled 1996-7”, or “Rainbow” (2003), which display Clark’s painterly hand at its most suggestive and allusive, and the rougher, more literal strokes of “New Orleans Series #1” (2012). Clark’s creative methodology has prompted critics, not least his frequent chronicler, Yau, to draw connections to the use of the broom in relatively unskilled manual labour positions - historically often filled in the US and Europe by people of African heritage - and the implications of this use of a supposedly quotidian tool in the creation of abstract art, a tradition known for its forbidding critical and discursive intellectual positioning. Clark himself has been somewhat reluctant to connect his work too directly to his cultural identity, but even without reading his choice of tools as a quasi-political statement, the sense of rupture between Clark’s canvases and those produced in more traditional ways is immediately visible. To truly engage his works is to reckon with the process of their creation. Whereas certain artists succeed by altering a viewer’s perception, Clark succeeds by unifying the viewer’s perception with his own. His works continue to move, and they continue to gain strength.

Franklin Sirmans

Ed and Me

By the time I started working for Ed Clark—sometime between the end of high school and the beginning of college—we knew each other from gatherings at art galleries like June Kelly, Peg Alston, and Cinque. My credentials were slim to none, but included growing up with a few of his paintings and drawings at home. So, the spirit of looking at his work had been some time coming. Of course, there was no need for more than that. I was a gopher at best, the term studio assistant would glorify the real tasks of the job. The actual studio was in Ed's large loft in the Flatiron district of New York City. It was huge. And, one of the things that, rightly or wrongly, signaled to me that art could be lucrative. And, in that loft, I learned that a life in art was undoubtedly fun, intellectually stimulating, and well lived. It could be fun in the most joyous and bohemian sense of living. That Ed is now 93 is proof of that. When I was working there he must have been in his early 60s.

Though the loft—a classic big rectangle with areas devoted to cooking, reading and living—was immaculate, the studio was a mess. That was my job. I know I cleaned up lots of receipts and tried to order them along with exhibition invitations, drawings, receipts for days among other things, but I don't remember accomplishing much in that way. I recall being there a few years later and it was all neat and clean. That would not have been because of me. I ran out to the store for things and talked with Ed and sometimes guests for meetings, friends, and others. It was like a graduate experience. Real life. Sometimes Ed's daughter Melanca would come by, and he would warn and jibe about something to the extent of "don't even think about it..." Ed was fiercely protective of Melanca. Her portrait, done by the great photographer James Van Der Zee hung near the kitchen. He was proud of her and always spoke of her so endearingly but with fatherly advice too. The photographer Adger Cowans might stop in. Or, the painter Bill Hutson. Eric Robertson owned a gallery of African art right down the street. Around that time he often had African sculptures mixed with the paintings of Norman Lewis and the openings would be jam packed with folks—collectors, artists, musicians, and the professionals who had jobs that would allow them to sit and have a glass of wine while philosophizing on a hot summer afternoon. There was a "very hot" restaurant on the same block called Lola, which was festive and the cuisine was Caribbean and Soul. Chelsea only had about two galleries at this point. Soho was the hot spot, but 22nd Street was jumping. This was the middle of NYC and it was happening, to say the least.

Ed talked about art and travel invariably and left an indelible impression on me for that. I left for Italy not long after working with Ed. He would go to France every year—not just Paris but of course, "the South of France." He met Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, and Al Held in Paris and then spent time with Mitchell over the years in France. Ed made the globe sound so appealing and life-affirming. He traveled the world and immersed himself into places and cultures in Brazil, Greece, Morocco, the Yucatan, Martinique, Nigeria, and China creating works that represented the feeling, mood, and palate of the places in which they were created.

Ed's remarkable biography begins in the early 1940s. Born in the Storyville district of New Orleans, he left as a youth for Chicago and later joined the military. Storyville has an illustrious history as a red light district, and Ed seemed to take on every bit of the myth, in his style, speech, and in his essence of the cool. He went to the Art Institute of Chicago from 1947 to 1951; left for Paris in 1952 and enrolled in art school, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, there. The paintings from just around this time were in the studio. They are phenomenal, painted in a realist style unlike everything he is known for as an artist. I never saw anything like those paintings in anyone else's home. Actually, the iconic self-portrait of his freckled face, big eyed with hair combed back looking dapper as all hell was made while he was a student in Chicago. Once he got to Paris where he was surrounded by all that art, he found his way. Gorgeous almost fauvist-like lozenges of color, architectural in form, come first and then give way to abstraction and the explosion of the frame that is such a characteristic part of Ed's mark and innovation in 1957, with the shaped canvases.

Growing up in New York City and Westchester, I saw Ed's work at so many people's homes: people like Reginald F. Lewis who was a big supporter of his work and had an airplane, the interiors of which were painted by Ed. But, also in the homes of teachers, artists, and civic employees who were not wealthy but managed to collect at least a work on paper of Ed Clark. There were push broom ellipses; horizontal waves and splashes; sunsets and sunrises that pushed abstraction into representational imagery. Sometimes the ellipses are cut by a big swath of paint across the middle. And, sometimes the ellipses turned bodily evoking the topology of a curvaceous body. Oftentimes, works on paper had visible footprints on them and multiple holes punched into the corners from where Ed must have pinned them to the walls of his studio. There were plenty of drawings that were signed in more than one corner, again alluding to the process of making, turning and

pining and returning again and again to a given composition. Sometimes the dates on these works are years apart, registering Ed's routine to keep going on a picture until all was in harmony or the right state of chaos to let it go, stop looking, working and returning to a single piece. Move on to the next. No matter how many paintings were stacked in the racks or how many drawings were in the storage drawers he was always creating more. He worked on different pictures at the same time but there always seemed to be a sense of seriality—he was exhausting different styles of work at the same time. I love the way now you can see the pictures in series and how the colors change according to where in the world he was... The burnt reds and ochres of the Ife series; the blues and greens and yellows inspired by his southern France trips.

I always think of Ed and have written small reviews here and there or just name dropped him as much as possible, like in a review of the 1996 show, Explorations in the City of Lights: African-American Artists in Paris, 1945-1965, which I saw at the Studio Museum in Harlem. But, in 2014, I got to do something significant and special for me and, I think, Ed. For the exhibition Prospect.3: Notes for Now, we talked and we looked at paintings together in the studio in 2012 and 2013. In the end, we included primarily works from the Louisiana and New Orleans series such as the magnificent New Orleans Series #4 (2012), rounded up with the help of dealers the likes of Peg Alston, George and Jumaane N' Namdi and New Orleans' own Stella Jones.

In 2015, the Peréz Art Museum was able to acquire Clark's 2006 painting Pink Wave. In October 2016 curator Tobias Ostrander, Jumaane N' Namdi, and I had the opportunity to speak to Ed Clark about his lifelong practice that was defined by his unequivocal independence and calm energy. Speaking about his work, Ed Clark described his work process, along with its gesture, as a something like a phenomenon: "All the colors of the spectrum, I used. I don't do it like a scientist. It's something that just comes. [...] I'm not thinking then, right. I just improvise right away. I see the pails of color—here where allover—you know, like that. And take that broom and sweep through it. The moment I take the broom that gives a different kind of energy. You don't have to have different kind of energy. You can be a great genius without doing it, but I had that, you know, you do that—sweep that big broom through it. But when I get into painting like that, you don't get into something you understand, you just let it go."



Pink and Black

2006

Acrylic on canvas

35 x 48 in

90 x 122 cm



Untitled

1978-80
Acrylic on canvas
66 x 77 in
168 x 195 cm



Untitled

1996-97

Acrylic on canvas

84,5 x 94,5 in

215 x 240 cm

Untitled - New York

1991
Acrylic on canvas
81,5 x 74 in
207 x 188 cm



Rainbow

2003

Acrylic on canvas

71 x 57 in

180 x 144 cm



In the Beginning

2013

Acrylic on canvas

63 x 50 in

160 x 126 cm





Untitled

2006

Acrylic on canvas

55 x 72 in

140 x 182 cm

New Orleans Series #1

2012

Acrylic on canvas

53 x 66 in

135 x 168 cm



Untitled (Mexican Series)

2001

Acrylic and dry
pigment on paper

30 x 22 in

76 x 56 cm



Untitled

2000

Acrylic and
dry pigment
on paper

22 x 30 in

56 x 76 cm



Biography

Ed Clark

Born 1926 in New Orleans.
Lives and works in New York.

Education

1953 L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris (France)
1955 The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago

Solo Exhibitions (selected)

2017 *Ed Clark*, Weiss Berlin, Berlin (Germany)
Edward Clark: Paintings, Tilton Gallery, New York
2016 *Ed Clark: Locomotion*, N' Namdi Contemporary, Miami
Ed Clark, N' Namdi Center for Contemporary Art, Detroit
2014 *Big Bang*, Tilton Gallery, New York
2013 *Ed Clark*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
Le Mouvement: The Ed Clark Retrospective, N' Namdi Contemporary, Miami
2012 *Louisiana Roots: Ed Clark Returns Home*, Stella Jones Gallery, New Orleans
2011 *The Search*, The N' Namdi Center for Contemporary Art, Detroit
2007 *For the Sake of the Search*, 60 Year Retrospective, Pensacola Museum of Art, Pensacola
2004 *Ed Clark: Recent Paris - New York Series*, Parish Gallery, Washington
2003 *Ed Clark, Paris/New York: Le Mouvement*, G.R. N' Namdi Gallery, Chicago
1998 *Edward Clark: From Sicily to Egypt*, Cinque Gallery, New York
1993 *Paris Series 1982 to 1992*, Alitash Kebede Fine Arts, Los Angeles
1991 *Ed Clark: Paris*, Galerie Resche, Paris (France)
1990 *Ed Clark*, Spiral Gallery, Brooklyn
Ed Clark, Isobel Neal Gallery, Chicago
1989 *Ed Clark*, Gallery Kesser-Bohbot, Hamburg (Germany)
1988 *Bahia Series*, Manhattan East Gallery of Fine Arts, New York
1987 *Ed Clark*, Alitash Kebede Fine Arts, Los Angeles
Ed Clark, Gallery 54, New York
1983 *Ed Clark*, Randall Gallery, New York
1982 *Ed Clark*, Jazzonia Gallery, Detroit
1981 *Edward Clark: Martinique Interlude, Paintings and Pastels*, Randall Gallery, New York
1980 *Ed Clark, A Complex Identity*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Ed Clark, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans
1979 *Ed Clark*, Randall Gallery, New York
1971 *Ed Clark*, Donald Judd's Loft, New York

1969 *Ed Clark*, American Embassy, Paris (France)
1966 *Clark*, Galerie R. Creuze, Paris (France)
1958 *Ed Clark*, Brata Gallery, New York
1955 *Clark: Peintures*, Galerie R. Creuze, Paris (France)
1951 *Ed Clark*, YMCA, Chicago

Group Exhibitions (Selected)

2019 *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn
2018 *The Long Run*, Museum of Modern Art, New York
Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville
2017 *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, Tate Modern, London (United Kingdom)
Inventing Downtown, Grey Art Gallery, New York
2014 *Prospect: Notes for Now*, Prospect New Orleans, New Orleans
A Thousand Lights of Sun, The Mistake Room, Los Angeles
2012 *Blues for Smoke*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Blues for Smoke, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
The Lure of Paris, Loretta Howard Gallery, New York
2011 *Beyond Black: Ed Clark, Eugene Martin, John T. Scott*, Shaw Center for the Arts, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge
2010 *African American Abstract Masters*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York
Flow, Rush Arts Gallery, New York
2009 *Masters for the First Family: Parish Gallery*, Parish Gallery, Washington
2007 *NeoIntegrity*, Derek Eller Gallery, New York
2004 *Something To Look Forward To*, The Phillips Museum of Art, Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster
2003 *A Century of Collecting: African American Art in the Art Institute of Chicago*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
2002 *Quiet As It's Kept*, Christine Koenig Gallery, Vienna (Austria)
No Greater Love: Abstraction, Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera Gallery, New York
1997 *Sweeps & Views: Clark & Cowans*, Rush Arts Gallery, New York
1996 *Explorations in the City of Light: African-American Artists in Paris, 1945-1965*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
1995 *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1994 *Symphony*, A.F.T.U./Bill Hodges Gallery, New York
1980 *Black Artists: Abstractions*, MoMA P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City
1973 *The Whitney Biennial*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York
1970 *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
1956 *Salon des Independants*, Paris (France)
1954 *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, Paris (France)
1952 *Société du Salon d'Automne*, Paris (France)

Prizes, Grants, and Residencies

2013	Legends and Legacy Award, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
2000	Featured Artist, Art for Life Gala, Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, East Hampton
1990	Honoree, 36th Annual Bal Africain, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
1988	Painters and Sculptors Grant Recipient, The Joan Mitchell Foundation, New York
1994	Congressional Achievement Award
1985	Award in Painting, National Endowment for the Arts
1981	Individual Support Grant, The Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, New York
1975	CAPS Grant, Creative Artists Program Services, New York State Council on the Arts
1972	Award in Painting, National Endowment for the Arts
1955	Prix d'Othon Friesz, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Musée du Louvre (Paris), France

Collections

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
California African American Museum, Los Angeles
Centro de Arte Moderno, Guadalajara (Mexico)
The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit
James E. Lewis Museum, Morgan State College, Baltimore
The John & Mable Ringling Museum, Sarasota
Louisiana State University, New Orleans
Museum of Modern Art, New York, United States
Museum of Modern Art, Salvador, Bahia (Brazil)
Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis
Perez Art Museum Miami, Miami
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture, Washington
Syracuse University, Syracuse
Brooklyn Museum, New York
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo

Bibliography

2017	Smith, Roberta, "MoMA Upends Its Collection to Celebrate Late Careers" <i>New York Times</i> December 28, 2017
	"Ed Clark at Weiss Berlin, Berlin" <i>Mousse Magazine</i> September 29, 2017
	Elderton, Louisa. "Ed Clark" <i>Artforum</i> September 22, 2017
	Kherbek, William. "Ed Clark/Weiss Gallery, Berlin" <i>Samizdat</i> September 24, 2017
	Scheder, Beate. "Die Farben fegen: Ed Clarks Malerei bei Weiss" <i>Taz. Die Tageszeitung</i> September 7, 2017
	John Yau, "The Second Generation Abstract Expressionist Ed Clark" <i>Hyperallergic</i> January 29, 2017
2014	Rachel L. Swarns, "As a Painter Grows Older, His Creativity Endures" <i>New York Times</i> February 23, 2014.
	Canavan, Gillian, "Ed Clark: Big Bang" <i>Spike Magazine</i> 2014.
	John Yau, "A History Waiting To Be Written: Ed Clark's High-Spirited, Abstract Paintings" <i>Hyperallergic</i> January 26, 2014
2013	Edwards, Jeff, "The Long Sweep. A Conversation with Ed Clark about His 60-Plus Years in the Art World" <i>Art Pulse Magazine</i> 2013
2012	Bond-Louden, Jenna, "Ed Clark: Master of Abstract Expressionism" <i>Ebony</i> July, 2012
2011	Bechet, Ron. "Artist on Artist: Ron Bechet on Ed Clark" <i>Pelican Bomb</i> 2011
2006	Siegel, Katy, "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967-1975" New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers 2006
2003	Hawkins, Margaret, <i>Art News</i> May 2003
2002	Jacques, Geoffrey, "Quiet as it's Kept," May, 2002
1997	Cavaliere, Barbara and George R. N'Namdi eds. "Edward Clark: For the Sake of the Search," Belleville Lake, MI: Belleville Lake Press, 1997
	Feldman, Anita, "Ed Clark and the Abstract Shaped Canvas: A Memoir From Edward Clark: for the Sake of the Search" 1997
	Joans, Ted, "Ed Clark and I," From Edward Clark: for the Sake of the Search, 1997
	Holg, Garret, "Ed Alert," <i>Chicago Sun Times</i> Sep 28, 1997
	Robins, Corinne, "Ed Clark: The Fulfillment of a 'Grand' Talent" 1997
1996	Mercer, Valerie, "Exploration in the City of Light" 1996
1990	Jones, Kellie, <i>Art Space Catalogue</i> 1990
1987	Loughery, John, "Review: Gallery Art 54" <i>Arts</i> April 1987
1981	Wilson, Judith, "Edward Clark: Directions" <i>Art in America</i> 1981
1980	Feldman, Anita, "Ed Clark: A Complex Identity," Feature article from Studio Museum Retrospective Catalogue, 1980
	Schmidt-Campbell, Mary, "Catalogue of Ed Clark's First Museum Retrospective" 1980
	Kingsley, April, "Edward Clark's Luminous Expanses" <i>American Rag</i> 1980
	Schneider, Pierre, "Trois Américains peintres et noirs" <i>L'Express</i> 1980
1978	Andrews, Benny, "Edward Clark: Still Sweeps Them off Their Feet" <i>Encore America & Worldwide News</i> 1978
1973	Robins, Corinne, "Edward Clark: Push-Broom and Canvas" <i>Art International</i> 1973
1972	Campbell, Lawrence, <i>Art News</i> 1972
1966	Kenedy, R.C., "Paris Letter" <i>Art International</i> 1966
1955	Conil-Lecoste, Michel, Galerie R. Creuze Catalogue, Paris, May 1955
1954	Conil-Lecoste, Michel, <i>Le Monde</i> Paris, March 12, 1954

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