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The Second Generation Abstract Expressionist Ed Clark

Ed Clark's approach is simple and straightforward, and he has not altered it much over the years.
I don't think he needs to.



Ed Clark, "Red" (1988), acrylic on canvas, 54 x 67 1/2 inches (all images courtesy Tilton Gallery)

Ed Clark had his first New York exhibition at the Brata Gallery in 1958, which is why his work is included in the eye-opening exhibition, *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965* at the Grey Art Gallery (January 10 - April 1, 2017), curated by Melissa Rachleff. This exhibition challenges many of the widely accepted, homogeneous views of postwar American art history that began to surface in the early 1960s, coinciding with the expansion of the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of Minimalism and Pop Art. It also contributes to a necessary rewriting of history.



Ed Clark, "Pink Top" (2003), acrylic on canvas, 71 1/2 x 56 3/4 inches

The reason I mention Clark's exhibition at Brata Gallery – where Al Held also showed – is because the exhibition *Action Precision: The New Direction in New York, 1955-1960*, organized by Paul Schimmel – a traveling show that was on tour from June 28, 1984, to February 23, 1986, with a stop at the Grey Art Gallery – did not include Clark. There were six artists in Schimmel's exhibition: Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg, Grace Hartigan, Al Held, Alfred Leslie, and Joan Mitchell. At one point or another, all of them were considered "Second Generation" Abstract Expressionists (or followers of Willem de Kooning) who were guilty of painting with a loaded brush, or what Clement Greenberg called the "Tenth Street Touch."

Clark, who was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1926, studied at the Art Institute of Chicago after World War II, where he met Joan Mitchell, and they became friends. He lived in Paris from 1953 until 1956. Like Norman Bluhm, who also lived in Paris, Clark moved to New York the year Jackson Pollock died. Clearly, Clark, who is black, was part of the "Second Generation" of Abstract Expressionists. Should a follow-up to Schimmel's show ever take place, it should include Ed Clark and would be remiss if it did not.

I mention all these details as an introduction to the exhibition *Ed Clark: Paintings* at the Tilton Gallery (January 10 – February 18, 2017), three years after his first show with the same gallery, *Ed Clark: Big Bang*, which was organized by David Hammons. For that exhibition, which I reviewed, Hammons chose eight large paintings that Clark did between 2001 and 2012, after the artist had turned seventy-five.

Hammons also included work by Joan Mitchell, Yayoi Kusama, who also showed at Brata,

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and Donald Judd, who organized a show for Clark in his loft in 1971, perhaps because he recognized that Clark was an early experimenter with shaped canvases (or “specific objects”), which preceded Frank Stella’s use of shaped supports. After that, Clark went missing for many years in New York.



Ed Clark, “Untitled” (2002), acrylic on canvas, 42 7/8 x 49 3/4 inches

The current exhibition focuses on paintings and works on paper that Clark did between the 1980s and the early 21st century, helping us get a better sense of Clark’s career. While in Paris, Clark saw the work of Nicolas de Stael, Pierre Soulages, and Jean Riopelle – artists who used a variety of instruments to apply patches and strokes of impasto paint to the canvas. Inspired by their boldness, as well as by the slow, visceral nature of thick paint, Clark began to use a broom to push acrylic across unprimed canvas, which has been laid on the floor. He wanted something that dried faster. He also stained the surface, added dry pigment into the acrylic, and splattered paint across the ground. In one work, he applied strips of tape, which he painted over, and later pulled up to make lines (or grooves).

Clark’s approach is simple and straightforward, and he has not altered it much over the years. I don’t think he needs to. I think what needs to happen is to bring together in an exhibition different examples of what he has done over the course of his career. He gets a lot to happen in his paintings and works on paper, and he has an

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exquisite sense of color, especially when it comes to pale blues and pinks, and black and white. Clark's colors can be dusty and muted as well as striated, with two hues in one broad broom stroke. The striations and the stacking of horizontal swaths of creamy paint evoke sky and landscape, calm and turbulence. When the upper and lower forms of a painting curve inward from the top and bottom edges, and exert pressure on a band horizontally bisecting the canvas, the shapes feel sculptural and soft – gentle billows of color.

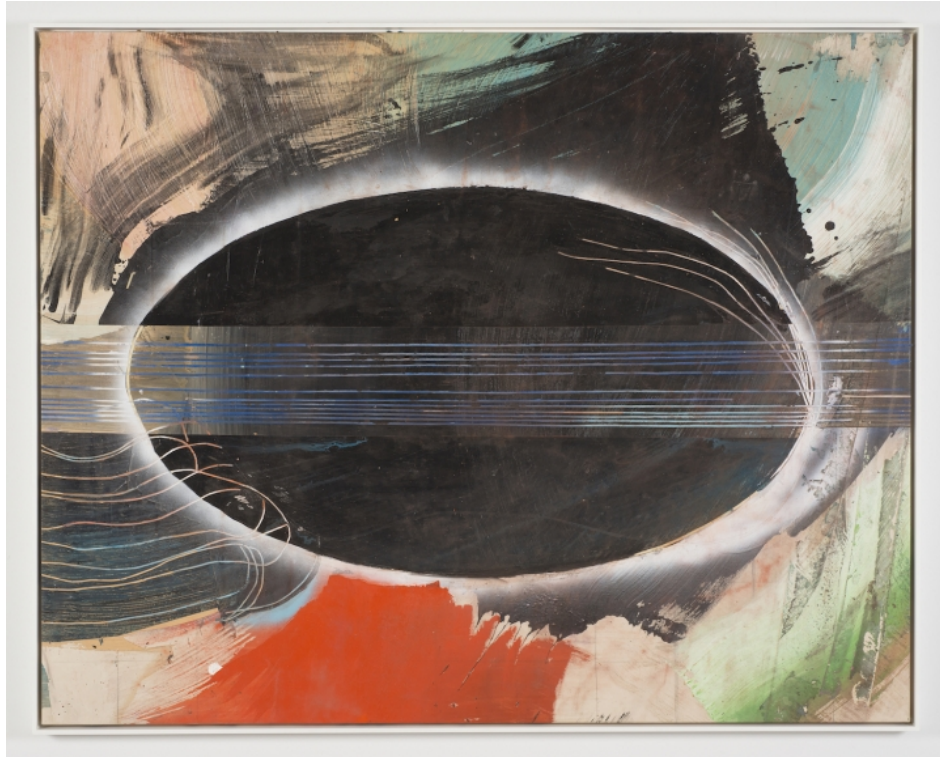


Ed Clark, "Untitled, January 1" (1985), dry pigment on paper, 37 1/2 x 50 inches

The striations can infuse the brushstrokes with volume, make them seem as if they are reflecting light, like a storm cloud passing overhead while the sun is setting on the horizon. When he applies dry pigment to a sheet of paper, as he does in "Untitled" (January 1, 1985), the muted pinks and blues come across as dusty and worn, like something that has been left out in the elements, infusing this abstract work with a soft tremolo of wistfulness. Done three years later, the forms in "Red" (1988) are undulating and grinding, with black dust squeezed between two rolling swaths of gray.

In the painting, "Untitled" (c. 1995), which is unlike anything else in the show, Clark mostly uses thin washes of paint. The clusters of lines seem to have been made by pulling up thin strips of tape after a more viscous layer paint had been pushed over them. The middle of the painting is occupied by a black, almond-shaped ellipse, with a corona of white flaring out from its circumference. Are we meant to look into the void? Can we do so when lines run across it?

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Ed Clark, "Untitled" (c. 1995), acrylic on canvas, 58 1/2 x 73 1/2 inches

In contrast to many other artists who were tarred with the term, "Second Generation," Clark's paintings are not full of agitated brushstrokes. Their languid undulations hint at the commotion lying just beneath the surface. If it is calm we are looking at, then it might be the kind that precedes the storm.

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