

## ***Ed Clark, Pioneering Abstract Painter, Dies at 93***

He used a broom for the sense of speed and monumentality it imparted to his paintings. He hit on the idea as young artist living hand-to-mouth in Paris.



Ed Clark at his home studio in Chelsea in 2014. Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

**By Roberta Smith and Neil Vigdor**

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Ed Clark, an African-American abstract painter who used a push broom and bold colors to allude to the natural world and at times to convey emotions about racial injustice, earning him belated international acclaim, died on Friday. He was 93 and lived in Detroit.



“Untitled,” acrylic on canvas, on display at the Mnuchin Gallery in Manhattan during a 2018 exhibit titled “Ed Clark, A Survey.” Agaton Strom for The New York Times

His death was announced by Hauser & Wirth, which represents Mr. Clark internationally and currently has an exhibition of his paintings from 2000 to 2013 on view in its Chelsea gallery through Oct. 26.

In a career that spanned seven decades, Mr. Clark became known for his experimentation with vibrant colors, paint application and medium — he was among the first painters in the postwar period to use a shaped canvas.

His stylistic signature was his technique of pushing a broom across the canvas, which allowed him to bring energy and movement to his work.



'Elevation,' painted in acrylic on canvas, was also among the works in the 2018 exhibit at the Mnuchin Gallery. Agaton Strom for The New York Times

Mr. Clark's paintings combined the emotionality of the Abstract Expressionists with the often cool factuality of the succeeding generation of Minimalist artists who emerged in the 1960s.

He is best known for his thick bands of buoyant colors spiked with white that were usually applied in broad horizontal swaths and sometimes conjured landscapes or architecture.

But his primary interests were in the materiality of paint, sense of speed and monumentality that the sweep of the broom imparted to his abstractions. He said he hit on this way of working when he was a young artist living hand-to-mouth in Paris and, in search of something wider than a painter's brush, picked up a janitor's boom.

He used it to push thick piles of paint across a canvas lying on the floor and it eventually became his preferred tool.

Mr. Clark emerged in New York in the late 1950s, after four years in Paris, and his work synthesized aspects of European and American postwar abstraction. Like many artists of his generation, he spoke admiringly of the work of Monet and Matisse, but he cited the galvanizing influence of his first encounter in

Paris in 1952 with the slab-like paint surfaces of the French Russian-born painter Nicolas de Staël.

Ed Clark was born on May 6, 1926, in New Orleans to Edward Clark and Merion (Hutchinson) Clark and was raised there and in Baton Rouge, La., attending a Roman Catholic grammar school. His father made some money gambling, worked various jobs and ultimately became a Pullman porter. When he was 7, the family moved to Chicago.

Mr. Clark, who drew from a young age, always knew he would be an artist and had a preternatural faith in his own talent. In 1944 he left high school and joined the Army Air Forces, serving in Guam for two years without seeing combat.

Upon his return he attended the Art Institute of Chicago on the G.I. Bill from 1947 to 1951, where his teacher Louis Rittman encouraged his painting.

In 1952, he went to Europe, also on the G.I. Bill. to study at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He became part of a group of African-American artists and writers who found, in Paris, inspiration and respite from discrimination that included Beauford Delaney, James Baldwin and Haywood Bill Rivers. But his friends also included white artists like Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, Al Held and George Sugarman.

Mr. Clark arrived in Paris working in a figurative style, but within a year developed a Cubist-inflected style of abstraction dotted with bright colors that reflected de Staël's influence.

As he had at the Art Institute, he conducted his education primarily by studying painting in museums, especially the Louvre, starting with Cézanne, although his palette also had a Renaissance lightness (a strong pink and a medium blue were favored hues).

In Paris he showed in several prestigious surveys, including the annual Salon d'Automne, and had his first solo shows at Galerie R. Creuze in 1955 and '56, the year he returned to New York.

There he joined the exploding 10th Street art scene in Greenwich Village, helping to found Brata, an influential artists' cooperative, in 1957.

That year, he exhibited a shaped painting in its Christmas group show that was closely studied by other artists. Shaped canvases would become an important

hallmark of Minimalist painting in the 1960s. At the time, Mr. Clark started using elliptical paintings because he felt the shape was truer to the human field of vision.

In Manhattan, he frequented the Cedar Tavern, a popular gathering place for abstract artists and beatnik writers in Greenwich Village, mingling with the likes of Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. His friends included Mr. Whitten, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Yayoi Kusama and Donald Judd.

Mr. Clark had his first New York solo show at Brata in 1958 but did not have another solo there until 1971, when he exhibited paintings on the ground floor of Judd's loft building in SoHo.

For years, it seemed, as he claimed to Mr. Whitten, no white dealers would exhibit his work, but he showed at galleries with nonwhite owners, like James Yu, Randall Gallery and G.R. N'Namdi and also in such New York nonprofits as the Lehman College Art Gallery and the Wilmer Jennings Gallery at Kenkeleba House. Throughout the years he exhibited widely abroad, including in Paris, where he had an exhibition at the American Embassy in 1969.

He traveled widely, returning to Paris for long intervals and also visiting Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba, Martinique, Mexico and China. Despite his devotion to abstraction, he felt that the light and space of each location affected his work unconsciously.

His art began to be more widely recognized in the United States in 2013, starting with a survey at the Art Institute of Chicago and an exhibition organized by the artist David Hammons at the Jack Tilton Gallery in New York that featured Mr. Clark's work with individual pieces by Ms. Kusama, Judd and Mitchell.

This was followed by solos at the Jack Tilton Gallery in 2014, Mnuchin in 2018, also in New York, and the current exhibition at Hauser & Wirth. His work is in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.

Mr. Clark disavowed any interest in what he called “black art,” situating himself in a field of abstraction nurtured by artists of all backgrounds. But his work had an unusual forcefulness, scale and autonomy that could convey an imperious pride and maybe something more. This possibility seems verified by a 1964 painting titled “Blacklash,” which, with a splatter of black paint that fanned against red and white, seems to signal racial anger.

Mr. Clark’s four marriages — to Muriel Nelson, Lola Owens, Hedy Durham and Liping An — ended in divorce. He is survived by Melanca Clark, his daughter with Hedy Clark, and two grandchildren.

He painted well into his later years, stopping only when his strength began to fail.

“No matter what I do,” Mr. Clark said in a 2014 interview with The Times, “there’s not a day that I’m not an artist.”

**Correction:** Oct. 19, 2019

*Earlier versions of two picture captions with this obituary misstated the year they were taken. It was 2018, not 2014.*

**Correction:** Oct. 21, 2019

*An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to Mr. Clark's father. It was not the case that he did not support his family. The earlier version also misstated the given name of Mr. Clark's daughter, who survives him. She is Melanca Clark, not Melcanca. In addition, an earlier version of the headline referred imprecisely to Mr. Clark's work. Although he was an abstract painter, his art was not Abstract Expressionist.*

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. [@robertasmithnyt](#)

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