

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

## A History Waiting To Be Written: Ed Clark's High-Spirited, Abstract Paintings

by John Yau on January 26, 2014



Ed Clark, *Untitled*, 2005

David Hammons' thoughtful curation of the exhibition, *Ed Clark: Big Bang*, currently at the Tilton Gallery (January 14–February 22, 2014) helps establish a much needed context for an important artist of the New York School, who, now in his late 80s, continues to make boldly exuberant paintings. By including single works by Clark's friends and supporters — Yayoi Kusama, Joan Mitchell, and Donald Judd — Hammons reminds us that he had the respect of astute, tough-minded contemporaries, even as curators and critics have repeatedly neglected to acknowledge his contribution over the years.

Clark's inclusion in the traveling exhibition, *Blues for Smoke*, curated by Bennet Simpson, which was at the Whitney Museum of American Art (February 7–April 28, 2013), was certainly a step in the right direction. For, as Corinne Robins pointed out in a review from 1997, even the seemingly inclusive chronicler and art historian, Irving Sandler failed to mention "Ed Clark or any other artist of color" in his book, *The New York School* (1978). The history that Robins alludes to — which is occult and largely kept alive by artists

and poets — needs to be brought further into the light, particularly in New York. I say this because when I first saw work by Clark at the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum and, after that, a particularly memorable, shaped painting from 1957 at the Art Institute of Chicago, I wondered why I had never heard of him before, and what had happened to him. It was as if Clark had been present and active in the late '50s and then mysteriously, he was gone. This, of course, wasn't the case.

Later, I learned that Nicholas Krushenick included Clark, along with Al Held, George Sugarman, Yayoi Kusama, Ronald Bladen, and himself, in the first 1957 Christmas show at the Brata Gallery. A few small pockets of the art world, it seems, were multicultural long before that word entered the discourse. In a 1972 *Art News* article, Lawrence Campbell described Clark's shaped painting in the Brata exhibition as the first of its kind. In retrospect, it seems that with the rise of Minimalism, Pop Art, Painterly Realism and Color Field painting, and the far reaching influence of formalist criticism, Clark, whose roots are in Abstract Expressionism, got left out, both at the time and in every retelling of what has come to be known as the "Second Generation." Here, it's worth remembering that Donald Judd gave Clark a show in his loft in 1971.

The larger problem is that decades have gone by with few calling attention to Clark's absence, as if everyone — including dealers, curators, collectors and critics — had gotten the history right the first time. Self-satisfaction is only one of the art world's Achilles heels. While very few people in New York from the early 1960s on seemed to be paying much attention, particularly to painting that owes something to Abstract Expressionism, Clark continued making bold, innovative work. More importantly — as I hope to make clear — his work subverts a number of commonplace assumptions about Abstract Expressionism, beginning with the long held charge that it is elitist. It also enlarges our understanding of what various artists did with this loosely defined approach to painting. Like his friend, Joan Mitchell, Clark never succumbed to the pressures of Minimalism and Pop Art to reject the materiality of paint and a human touch, as did another contemporary, Al Held.

Moreover, contrary to those who claimed Abstract Expressionism was a purely American development, Clark has openly acknowledged being influenced by Nicolas de Stael's interlocking slabs of impasto paint, which he applied with a palette knife. However, instead of troweling cement-like, slow-drying oil paint, Clark paints on the floor, using a broom to push acrylic paint whose consistency ranges

from a watery medium to a creamy paste, in colors that go from white to primaries and secondaries, often mixed with white. Against the unprimed, often slightly dirty canvas, Clark's thick swaths of white paint evoke crème fraiche floating on vichyssoise. There is something innocent and indecent about their pillowy surfaces.



Ed Clark, *Paris*, 2009

American practitioners, whose work ranges across time and style — from Norman Lewis and Alma Thomas to Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell, Stanley Whitney and Jack Whitten. It is a rich, complex and little-known history that requires further research and scholarship, not to mention exhibitions and monographs.

Hammons selected eight large paintings that Clark did between 2001 and 2012. They were all done after the artist turned seventy-five. What an eye-popping revelation and joy to see them hung in three spacious rooms of an Upper East Side townhouse. Their enthusiasm is unrivaled and catching.

Ed Clark: Big Bang continues at Tilton Gallery (8 East 76 Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through February 22.

It is one thing to paint like a bricklayer, as an artist I know once said disparagingly of Milton Resnick, but it is quite another to transform a janitorial activity into a high-minded lyricism, which is exactly what Clark has done and more. Clark's bonding of janitorial services and Abstract Expressionist painting challenges the widely received art historical view that it wasn't until Minimalism (Frank Stella's use of a house painter's brushes) and Pop Art (Andy Warhol's silk screens of movie stars and disasters) that artists mixed labor, commercial tools, the everyday and art. Clark's paintings are performative, while his lush, hybrid forms are simultaneously sculptural and painterly, buoyant and even witty.

By drawing in paint with a broom — and really this should be considered an innovation — it is clear that Clark possesses a remarkable amount of control and possibility with an ungainly instrument. This is most apparent in "Paris" (2009), in which he stacked a series of distinct gestural forms on an unprimed canvas. The variously colored forms, which seem simultaneously solid and liquid, frozen and moving, manmade and lava-like, evoke an adagio act, stones precariously balanced on each other, an abstract totem and a veiled dancer in constant movement. In "Paris," it is clear that Clark has absorbed as well as transformed the Surrealism of Max Ernst and Joan Miro into something all his own.

Clark's oeuvre is as distinctive and particular, and, in that regard, comparable to the work of other artists who belong to the so-called "Second Generation" — Joan Mitchell, Sam Francis, and Norman Bluhm, for example. He is certainly due the close attention that Mitchell and Francis have received. Clark is an important figure in the history of postwar abstract art, a history that includes African