

# The New York Times

## *As a Painter Grows Older, His Creativity Endures*

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Ed Clark, 87, is a nationally acclaimed abstract expressionist painter.  
Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

last week, as he sank slowly into his easy chair. “That’s just the body getting old. It’s telling me, ‘You won’t be here for long.’”

Then he grinned: “But I don’t intend to go.”

Mr. Clark is a nationally acclaimed abstract expressionist and a force of nature, vital and charming, witty and profane. In a city that prides itself on its creative community, he offers an intimate glimpse of how such creativity can evolve and endure, even in the sunset of an artistic life.

He was a member of a generation of African-American artists who in Paris found inspiration and respite from discrimination after World War II. He participated in the 10th Street art scene in New York City in the 1950s, where he frequented the Cedar Tavern, a hangout popular among the creative set, and was a founding member and exhibitor at the Brata Gallery, the influential artist cooperative.

He mixed and mingled with the likes of Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, who are now far better known in the art world than he. Joan Mitchell and Donald Judd were dear friends. He has outlived them all. And the past six months have brought renewed attention to his work.

In October, the Art Institute of Chicago presented him with its Legends and Legacy Award, which honors African-American artists who have achieved national recognition with careers spanning more than 50 years.

Ed Clark stood silently before the canvas on the floor of his studio. He considered the muted morning light, the paint and its promise. Then he pushed a broom across the surface, capturing the hues of daybreak and twilight with each stroke.

He leaned on his personal assistant, who steadied Mr. Clark’s aging body. There was a time when it seemed that nothing could stop him from painting with his push broom, one of his signature innovations. But he is 87 now. After about three hours, he was physically spent.

“When you get older, what you’ve done when you were younger, you can’t do anymore,” Mr. Clark said

This month, the Tilton Gallery in New York celebrated his work in an exhibit titled “Edward Clark: Big Bang,” which paired nine of his large, vibrant canvases with the works of his famous friends, Judd, Mitchell and Yayoi Kusama.

He painted all but one when he was in his 70s or 80s.

In some of the paintings, the colors seem to jump off the canvas with explosions of energy, sweep and movement. Others feel quieter, like gurgling waterfalls of grays, greens and blues.

“I love to know that Ed Clark is still on the planet and that he’s still painting,” said Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African-American History and Culture.

Last year, her museum acquired his 1968 painting “The Big Egg,” which features a shaped canvas, another of his innovations.

In his armchair in his Chelsea apartment, Mr. Clark brushes away questions about his age and his mortality, though he is keenly aware of them. (“Don’t get old,” he likes to joke. “There’s no future in it.”)

Born in New Orleans and raised in Chicago, he is still dapper in his button-down shirts and black corduroys and has never lost his appreciative eye for the ladies. (“I’ve painted a lot of nude women,” he said slyly. “And some of them tempted me to stop painting.”)

But the truth is that he has changed. For decades, he used the push broom to achieve the powerful sweeps of color that are his hallmark. These days, though, he struggles to stand for long and the forceful strokes of the broom have given way to softer, more fluid movements.

He sometimes works from his chair now, most recently to paint a portrait of his daughter, Melanca. He is hard of hearing and suffers from gout, which makes it difficult at times to walk. But he has never lost his sense of humor. He has simply adapted the tempo of his work to the rhythms of his aging frame.

“Give me the magnifying glass; this old fool needs it,” he said, chuckling as he opened a book that chronicled his years in Paris.

He was a struggling artist then, an Air Force veteran attending art school on the G.I. Bill, but there was greatness all around him. He saw Picasso strolling by a sidewalk cafe one day. One of the nude models he painted also posed for Matisse.

It was in Paris that he discovered his lifelong love of abstract art. And it is that passion for color and light, texture and movement that keeps him going.

“No matter what I do,” Mr. Clark said, “there’s not a day that I’m not an artist.”