

TEACHERS' NOTES

Ed Clark

Without A Doubt

Hauser & Wirth London, 19 Jan - 20 Apr 2022



Ed Clark with 'Untitled', 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 304.2 x 614.7 cm

About Ed Clark

A pioneer of the New York School, the painter Ed Clark pushed the boundaries of abstraction beyond expressionism, with a focus on materiality, form and colour.

Born in New Orleans in 1926, Ed Clark studied at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1947 to 1951. Later in 1952 he went on to spend a highly formative period in Paris, studying at L'Académie de la Grande Chaumière before going back to New York in 1957, where he was part of the downtown art scene. In the late 1950s, using a technique described as 'the big sweep', Clark pioneered the use of a 48-inch push-broom to execute large, independent strokes of paint across the entire width of a sizeable canvas he placed on the floor. This technique gave birth to an entirely new type of stroke on an impressive scale that had previously been impossible using a conventional paintbrush.

In New York City he became a part of downtown life and co-founded the Brata Gallery, a cooperative, alongside other artists like Yayoi Kusama and Al Held. The gallery worked to change the way that art was seen and shown in modern society. After living in New York for almost a decade, he began to travel again in search of new locations where nature and its light could be painted. The depths of different colours and shades became a highlight in his work over time. Between Paris and New York, Clark utilised European Modernism and Abstract Expressionism in cultivating his own language.

Clark's first museum show, 'Ed Clark: A Complex Identity', was in 1980 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and his work is a part of museum collections: The Studio Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture to name a few. Clark's paintings are also a part of the powerful international show 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power'. Clark has won multiple awards, including the Legends and Legacy Award by the Art Institute of Chicago which highlights African American artists whose careers have sparked passion and inspiration for generations and are praised at a national level.



Ed Clark in the studio, 1992, Photo: Adger Cowans

What are the main themes in Ed Clark's work?

Colour

Clark felt that the colour of the paint was his main mode of communication. The identity of his works is rooted in the bold colours and how they represent the complexity of human emotions.

Experimentation

By using a work broom and shaping his own canvases, Clark wanted to create his individual style amongst other Black abstract artists. He wanted this style to stand out within the social and artistic world that he had historically been excluded from.

The 'seductive nature' of paint

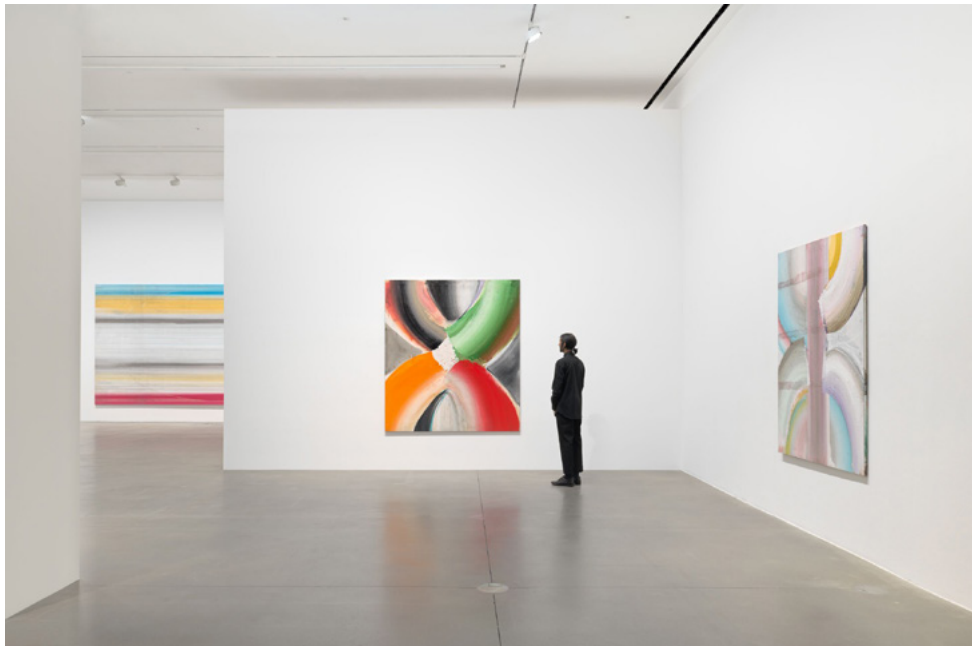
Clark wanted the paint that he used to be his main subject. He wanted the colour of the paint to be his main mode of communication. Paint for Clark was meant to translate light, earth, and sky, and create a style and an identity that was completely his own.

Structural Racism in American Society

Clark created work that responded to the violence against Black people in Harlem, and America in general. He responded to protests that began in Harlem in 1964 after an off-duty police officer murdered a Black male. Clark documented the vicious cycle of structural violence through broad brush strokes and splattered red paint.

What does the exhibition look like?

This exhibition is the artist's first ever solo presentation in the UK and follows his inclusion in the landmark touring exhibition 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963 – 1983'. The exhibition spans three decades of his career from the 1970s to the 1990s, providing insight into Clark's breakthroughs in abstract painting and the shift from controlled horizontal brushstrokes to a more loose and assertive style, as displayed in his Broken Rainbow series. Ed Clark's resolutely physical strokes create a remarkable sense of 'drive' and movement. As the artist explained: 'I began to believe that the real truth is in the stroke. For me, it is large, bold strokes that do not refer distinctly to seen nature. The paint is the subject. The motions of the strokes give the work life.'



Installation view, 'Ed Clark. Without a Doubt', Hauser & Wirth London, 2022. Photo: Alex Delfanne.

What is Clark's work about?

Ed Clark was interested in making the physical material of paint the center of his work, and he did this by creating an intimate relationship with colours and their hues. He was interested in discovering light and landscapes that influenced his abstract form. Clark's work also responded to the racial politics in America that were present throughout his whole life, especially throughout the protest era of the 1960s against police brutality.

Moving away from the human content of abstract painting, with a physical distance between Clark and the canvas created by the push broom, colour becomes a central part of the life of painting. Clark allows his vivid pigments, whilst being pushed across the canvas, to blend through one another without resolving into a new colour. This gave birth to an openness and richness in colour via ingenious methods devised by Clark. His process can be comprehended in relation to modern art's move away from expressions of a personal nature on the canvas towards a focus on the medium itself as the subject matter. Clark investigated the stroke as a discipline within itself, a complex enquiry into method and matter, and used the act of painting as an ongoing process of discovery and change.

How did Clark make his work?

While in Paris and New York, Clark wanted to further the definition of abstract painting by challenging traditional painting tools. The canvas and the paintbrush were elements of Clark's craft that he wanted to explore; he placed his canvases on the ground and pushed brooms across the surfaces for large strokes that created a bold and reverent effect. For Clark the push-broom allowed him to extend the stroke and create an openness of colour and intensity by combining pigments within singular path marks. He felt that the material of paint itself was the main subject of emotion being displayed in a work, and this subject was the heart of the language that he was pioneering. Clark stated, 'It struck me that if I paint a person – no matter how I do it – it is a lie. The truth is in the physical brushstroke and the subject of the painting is the paint itself.'

Clark is also considered one of the first artists to have begun experimenting with the shaped canvas, as early as 1957, marking an innovation in the history of abstract art. By 1968, whilst living at the home of friend and artist Joan Mitchell in Vétueil, France, he had begun making elliptically shaped paintings that mimicked the shape of the human eye. As Clark said, 'I'm interested in the expanding image, and the best way to expand an image is an ellipse'. In works such as 'Blue Umber' (1975), Clark defines an oval inside the painting's rectangular format by laying down a thin strip of tape to outline the oval, as well as rows of horizontal strips that run the length of the painting, making the lines look almost as if they have been etched into the surface. Clark also referred to these as 'integrated ovals' and the first example was exhibited at the 1973 Whitney Biennial.

His time spent in Paris during the 1980s and 1990s signalled a move away from purely horizontal lines as Clark began to create more curved brush strokes with the push-broom. This is visible in the Broken Rainbow works on display, also known as the Paris series, in which the big sweeps become arched, colours are expertly mixed and white paint lies at the centre of swathes of colour, so that the curves appear volumetric or tubular. This breakup of the horizontal line marked a greater act of freedom within his practice, as his tubular strokes were now diving and sweeping with a curved motion.



Ed Clark with 'Paris series #2', 1987. Acrylic on canvas, 221.3 x 285.8 cm

What inspired Clark?

Clark found a lot of inspiration through the different environments that he was in. For example, while in Paris during the 1950s, he explored museums like the Louvre and the work of older modernist masters. He also found inspiration from his global trips in search of new landscapes and light that he could capture through painting. His travels included Greece where he visited fellow artist Jack Whitten, and he took in the light that surrounded him on the Mediterranean and began to use pastel colours in his creations.

What other artists did his work relate to?

Once Clark moved to Paris in the 1950s, he was surrounded by many African American creatives like James Baldwin, Beauford Delaney, and Richard Wright. He was amongst a group of Black artists who were facing structural racism at home in the United States. Clark also connected to many white artists in Paris like Joan Mitchell, Nicolas de Staël, and Al Held. He especially took influence from de Staël's style of thickly painted slabs and his large-scale abstract forms. As time went on, Clark connected to other abstract artists of his time like Jack Whitten who was also pushing the boundaries of abstract painting.

Joan Mitchell (1925–1992) was an American painter and printmaker who was considered one of the most important artists in the post-war Abstract Expressionism movement.

[Jack Whitten](#) (1939–2018) was an American painter and sculptor. His work was a part of the Abstract Expressionism movement but later became known for the experimental elements of the materials and terrains in his paintings.

Nicolas de Staël (1914–1955) was a French painter with a Russian background who was known for his abstract landscape paintings.

Yayoi Kusama (born 1929) is a Japanese contemporary installation artist and sculptor. Her work also includes elements of video art, performance, painting, poetry, and fashion.

Al Held (1928–2005) was an American Abstract Expressionist painter. He was known for his large, hard-edged geometric paintings.

James Baldwin (1924–1987) was an American novelist, activist, and poet. His work seeks to reach the root of racial discrimination and unravels the tense intersection of race, class, gender and power in 20th-century America.

Richard Wright (1908–1960) was an American novelist and short-story writer whose work directly challenged the violent discrimination of African Americans by white individuals in 20th-century America.

Beauford Delaney (1901-1979) was an American modernist painter who created a lot of work throughout the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930's and 1940's. He began to create abstract expressionist paintings once he moved to Paris in the 1950's.



Ed Clark, Untitled, ca. 1996-97. Acrylic on canvas, 286.4 x 303.5 cm. Photo: Dan Bradica

Glossary

Abstract Expressionism

A post – World War II art movement that was created in New York City in the 1940's that is defined by intuition and spontaneity.

European Modernism

An art movement that reflected the shifts in culture and society when industrialism was redefining human movement and life.

African American Art

This describes visual art made by people who identify as African American (American with African roots).

BAM

Black Artists Movement is an artist/writer–led movement by African Americans in the 1960's and 70's that pushed for larger representation of Black artists in the creative industries.

'The Big Sweep'

This describes a technique used by Clark during the late 1950's where he used a domestic broom to create broad strokes of paint across a canvas.

'Shaped Canvas'

An innovation created by Clark where he physically reshapes the traditional rectangular canvas.

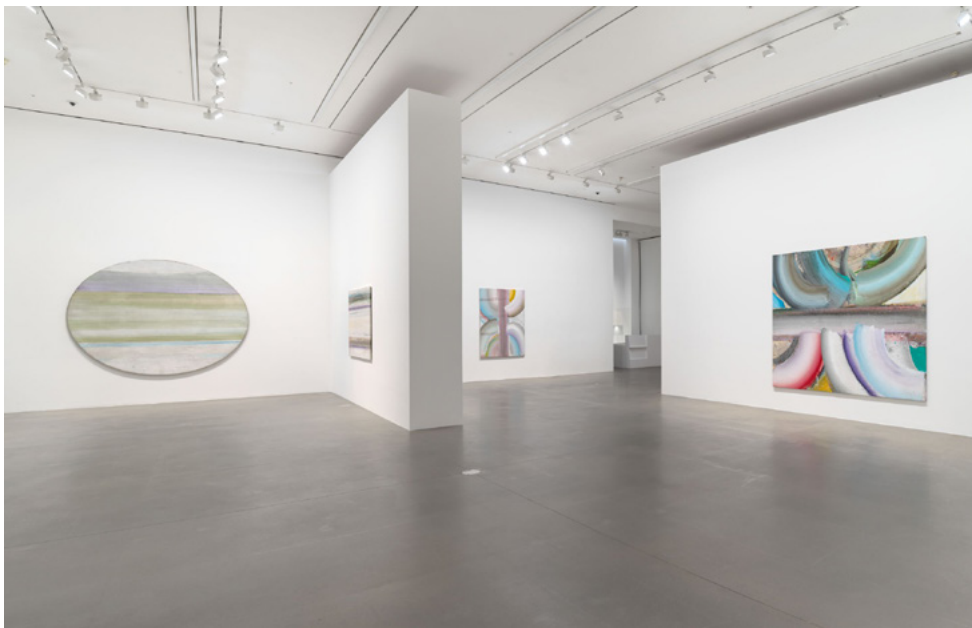
Structural Racism

A form of racism that is deeply interconnected with law and policy making in society. Structural racism can be found in areas like the criminal justice system, housing, employment, healthcare, and education.

Supplementary Research

[The Estate of Ed Clark](http://www.hauserwirth.com/artists/25334-ed-clark) www.hauserwirth.com/artists/25334-ed-clark

[Ed Clark Artist Website](http://www.artistedclark.com) www.artistedclark.com



Installation view, 'Ed Clark. Without a Doubt', Hauser & Wirth London, 2022. Photo: Alex Delfanne.