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Illuminating the arts, style, people + ideas.

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spotlight

STILL'S SEARCH FOR THE SUBLIME

Striking new Denver museum honors the eccentric artist's wish that his monumental abstract works be housed in one place



Courtesy Clyfford Still Museum

Still's vision:
The violent swirl of black shapes on a crimson canvas, above, makes up Clyfford Still's massive painting "1949, No. 1" in Denver's Clyfford Still Museum. At right, an Albright-Knox Art Gallery visitor ponders Still's famous work "1957-D, No. 1."

News file photo



BY COLIN DABKOWSKI
NEWS ARTS CRITIC

DENVER — Coming face to face with Clyfford Still's monumental painting "1957-D, No. 1" for the first time, certain people experience something like a religious conversion.

For these worshipers at the altar of Still, there is something intoxicating about the scale of the canvas, which occupies a 9-by-13-foot stretch of wall space and dominates any room in which it happens to hang.

Viewers drink in its craggy yellow lines set against a background of deepest black and allow themselves to be shaken by Still's metaphysical intent. Some have claimed that the painting makes them physically dizzy, as if they might trip and tumble headlong into the canvas.

Works like this, the irascible artist once proclaimed, "are not paintings in the usual sense; they are life and death merging in fearful union."

That's all well and good.

See **Still** on Page F4



Jeremy Bittermann

A shrine to Still: Denver's new Clifford Still Museum, which sits in the shadow of the massive Denver Art Museum, was designed by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture. The exterior of the building, which opened Nov. 18, is made from concrete cast onsite, while the interior was designed to highlight Still's paintings.

Albright-Knox yields Still ranking to Denver

STILL • From F1

But when many visitors peer into the black and yellow canvas in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, they feel nothing. For them, it's an encrypted message with no cipher, a Magic Eye painting that refuses to come into focus. And all those reverent Stillgrims, standing before the canvas with eyes wide and jaws agape, seem like idolaters.

What's missing is connective tissue, something to bridge the gap between the Albright-Knox's extensive trove of mature paintings by Still, who lived from 1904 to 1980, and his half-mad desire to transmute oil paint and linen canvas into the very stuff of life and death.

What's missing is proof. For decades, that proof sat under lock and key in a Maryland warehouse, awaiting a temple. Now, at long last, that temple is complete, and the keys to unlock the long-hidden brilliance of Clyfford Still have been unearthed.

Still goes West

On a small patch of land in downtown Denver's bustling Civic Center Cultural Complex, a modest concrete building stands in the shadow of the Denver Art Museum, a massive piece of stainless-steel origami designed by Daniel Libeskind.

The Clyfford Still Museum, which opened to the public on Nov. 18, contains a stunning 94 percent of Still's existing work – nearly everything the artist ever painted or drew – along with most of his personal effects. That adds up to 825 paintings, 1,575 works on paper, Still's extensive libraries of books and music, even his crinkled old maps and weathered baseball gloves.

The opening of the museum ended the nearly 50-year reign of Buffalo's Albright-Knox as the largest museum repository of Still's works in the world, with 33 of the artist's paintings. The gallery now happily relinquishes that distinction to Denver.

The construction of the 28,500-square-foot Still Museum was the fulfillment of perhaps the oddest last will and testament in 20th century art. In it, Still stipulated that the bulk of his estate would go to an American city that would construct a museum dedicated solely to its study, exhibition and preservation.

That Still had the temerity to demand a permanent and exclusive shrine to his work is remarkable



Raul Garcia



Out of the shadows: Denver sunlight pours into the second-floor galleries of the Clifford Still Museum, above. One of Still's early paintings, from 1936, reflected his lifelong interest in painting about human struggle and aspiration.

enough. That he got almost exactly what he was after, 31 years after his death, is a testament to the artist's foresight, his legendary ego and his supreme confidence in the cultural value of his art.

The 2004 announcement that Denver would build the museum came after decades of speculation about whether the artist's wish would ever come to fruition.

"Unless a heretofore unnoticed City of Gold surfaces somewhere, Still's museum will not likely become a reality," News art critic Richard Huntington wrote on the occasion of a major Still exhibition in 1993. "Meanwhile, we must settle for miracles piecemeal."

What the Clyfford Still Museum promises are miracles wholesale, which Still acolytes and neophytes alike hope will bring the artist's reputation out of the shadows – in which he purposely hid it – and into the full light of recognition.

"It's the most important museum project of my generation," said Dean Sobel, the director of the new museum and former chief curator at the Milwaukee Art Museum, on a brilliantly sunny Denver morning in early December. Sobel, whose musings on Still hew to the academic rather than the metaphysical, has been saying that an awful lot lately. And with good reason.

"This isn't just a new wing to

put all this stuff in This is a whole life's work that has been sealed away, of one of the most important American artists ever," Sobel said. "And his role in abstract expressionism, which was probably the most important American art movement, was an unsung story that we're really anxious to tell."

That story begins to sing even as you approach the building, a gem of understated design by Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture. From outside and within, the building feels entirely of a piece, as if it had been chiseled out of a single block of concrete.

The outside of the museum is made of concrete cast at the construction site using a system of spaced boards. This created a series of ragged vertical lines that (whether intentionally or not) mimic the verticality of Still's paintings and cast beautifully rugged shadows in Denver's ethereal, high-altitude sunlight.

The first floor, which one enters through an unobtrusive door that does not announce itself (a bit like the Burchfield Penney Art Center's hidden entrance), is a simple space with a single retail cart, offices, a hallway of educational screens and vitrines, and a free-floating staircase ascending to the main galleries.

The real magic starts on the second floor, where morning light pours through high skylights, filtered by a concrete ceiling that looks like the inside of a cheese grater. As the sun rises and its light intensifies, the museum's overhead bulbs gradually dim and the natural light takes over. This allows visitors to see Still's canvases in vastly different lighting conditions, from the spotlighting of the bulbs to the all-over crispness of the Denver sun.

"This is really effective, to be able to see what I sometimes call the natural habitat, the way Still always intended his work to be seen," Sobel said. "Buffalo and San Francisco" – where another major Still collection resides – "were really kind of rehearsals or warm-ups for that."

The inaugural exhibition itself, co-curated by Sobel and Still scholar David Anfam, is a revelation from start to finish.

The story begins immediately upon entry to the museum, where visitors are likely to hear the disembodied voice of Albright-Knox Chief Curator Douglas Dreishpoon, who appears along with Sobel and Anfam in a series of excellent mini-documentaries on the life and work of the artist.

Along with glimpses into Still's personal collection of books, his pointed and sometimes vituperative correspondence and road maps for places like Buffalo and San Francisco, the first floor features an interactive timeline that places Still's work in the context of 20th century art and culture.

It's a sly way to get around Still's requirement that no other artist's work be shown in the museum: his will didn't explicitly rule out touch screens.

"This is actually a good screen, with Picasso and Hitler and 'The Wizard of Oz,'" Sobel said, pausing to run his finger across the digital timeline. "Still overlapped with some very un-Clyfford Still kinds of things: the Beatles or Bob Dylan, the Sex Pistols."

The exhibition proper begins with Still's early work, a great deal of which he painted while living in Alberta, Canada. Visitors immediately encounter two Turneresque landscapes of city and sky from the late 1920s, each one fractured by a supernatural vertical tear in the firmament.

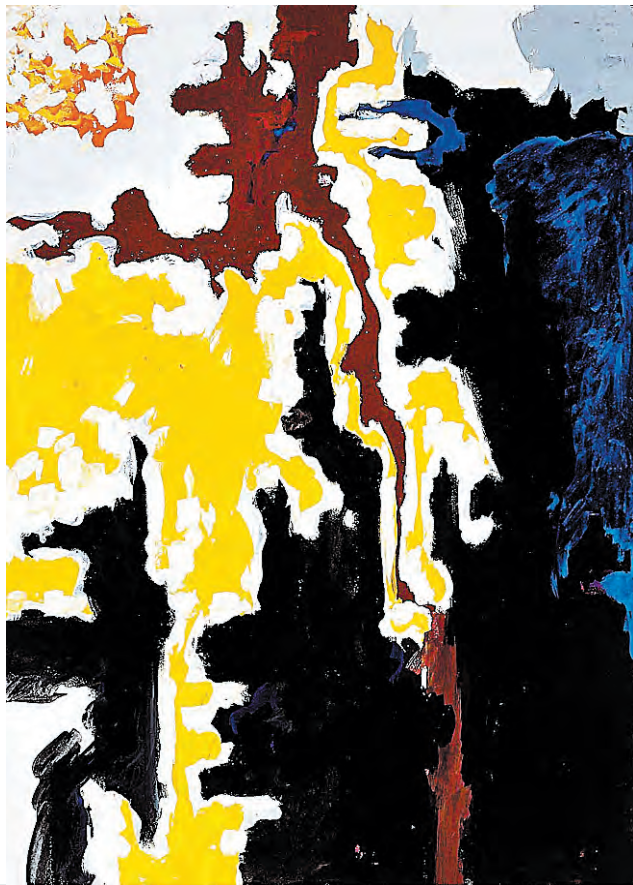
That jarring line running like a wound from God's jagged fingernail across the surface of the canvas seems to presage the vertical shapes that would appear in the monumental canvases that brought Still to prominence in the art world during the 1940s and '50s. It's easy to imagine that scar in the sky as the first rip through which the artist's genius would begin to trickle.

As the country struggled through the Great Depression in the 1930s, Still focused his attention on the human figure, painting skeletal portraits of farmers and their wives. As the decade wore on, these figures began to dissolve into increasingly abstract, expressionistic shapes. Still's work from this dark period sometimes juxtaposed man and machine, fusing images of gears and bones into vaguely frightening tableaux.

For me, these surprising and unexpected canvases – "Most people blindfolded and dropped into this room wouldn't know these were Clyfford Stills," Sobel said – called to mind a potent paragraph from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men," James Agee's famous chronicle of Southern sharecroppers during the '30s:

"If I could do it," Agee wrote, "I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech,

While looking at the paintings in the Albright-Knox collection alone might lead one to believe that Still was after something very dark, this exhibition reveals what may have been his true ambition: to capture the resilience and irrepressibility of human life against daunting odds.



Courtesy Clyfford Still Museum

Evolution of an artist: *As Still's vision expanded, his portrayal of the human figure, still obviously visible in the 1937 painting at left, began to dissolve into abstract shapes (the middle painting from 1942) and eventually to the vertical lines and blobs (the painting at right, from 1949) that would characterize his most famous work.*

Journey toward abstract

STILL • From F4

pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.”

The paintings that emerged from Still's formative years in the '30s were directed at the same goal. They strive toward the impossible task of representing even a small sliver of human life in the 20th century – in all its horror, triumph and need for redemption – through paint and canvas.

Still's journey away from the figure continued into the '40s, when his work took a sharp turn for the abstract. By then, his bodies – almost Baconian with their contorted shapes and absence of skin – transform into wispy vertical lines, mere suggestions of the human form that would eventually reference nothing but themselves.

It's at this point that Still signs the final papers in his fiery divorce from European modernism and really begins to find (that is, to lose) his footing. In paintings like “1944 N. No. 1,” a canvas layered thickly with black paint and traversed by a serpentine red line – what's left of those standing figures of the '30s – this man has struck out into the great unknown.

After that, all bets are off. Still's creativity, confidence and ego take him into the phenomenally inventive paintings of the late '40s, in which expertly rendered blotches of color create landscapes that, if you look long enough and try not to think too much about it, can start to feel as big and as frightening as the world.

Indeed, monumentality was one of Still's trademarks. His paintings exist on a scale meant to suggest the infinite, perhaps even to evoke the spiritual. Buffalo's great 1957 Still accomplishes this feeling of awe mixed with dread – at least for those who allow themselves to have it – as well as anything on view in this exhibition.

But the context the Clyfford Still Museum provides and the story it tells help newcomers to Still's work appreciate his work in entirely new ways. That sense is also on luminous display in paintings like “1949-No.1,” one of Sobel's favorites, a masterful swirl of phantasmal red shapes sailing across an impossibly rich background of thick, viscerally applied crimson paint. It's a painting to get lost in.

While looking at the paintings in the Albright-Knox collection alone might lead one to believe that Still was after something very dark, this exhibition reveals what may have been his true ambition: to capture



Later work: *In Clyfford Still's mature work, some theorize, the human figure often appeared as a simple vertical line or shape, as above in the snaking figure from his “1944-N, No. 1.” Still's compositions took on an even greater boldness and size in the '50s in works like “1957-J, No. 2.”*

the resilience and irrepressibility of human life against daunting odds.

“When faced with a massive will such as Still's, we figure it's him or us, that to give in to a relationship with him would be to invite a swallowing up,” wrote the curator T. Grace Sharpless in a 1963 exhibition catalog in the museum's airy study area. “We fear that he is about destruction, but he is not. He is about life.”

Still's grand quest forged ahead through the '50s, represented here by massive murals (close relatives of Buffalo's grand 1957 canvas) that tower over viewers and almost dare them to enter the canvas.

On he charged, through the '60s and '70s, his search for the sublime still tethered to the ground by that thin red line and other vertical reminders of the human figure in disguise, reaching ever upward: A sym-

bol, perhaps, of man's aspiration.

When the end of his career came, it came beautifully. One of his great, late paintings, from 1977, is mostly blank canvas dotted with jagged yellow wisps, with the odd spot of orange red and white.

This stunning painting, which when I saw it was being ogled by a large group of women who gazed at it speechless for an uncommon length of time, seems like Still's retreat back through that cosmic tear that appeared in his early paintings of Alberta.

It's a fitting, poetic cap to a self-assured career that ought to rank among the greatest in 20th century art. Now, thanks to this modest, magnificent museum, it is poised to do just that.

email: cdabkowski@buffnews.com

The will of Still

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI

In 1978, two years before his death, the abstract expressionist painter Clyfford Still put his signature on one of the most curious documents in 20th century art.

Still's last will and testament stated that the bulk of his work would go to an “American city that will agree to build or assign and maintain permanent quarters exclusively for these works of art and assure their physical survival with the explicit requirement that none of these works of art will be sold, given, or exchanged but are to be retained in the place described above exclusively assigned to them in perpetuity for exhibition and study.”

With that signature, Still effectively locked up his reputation in a Maryland warehouse. While the public's appreciation for Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko was skyrocketing, Still's own reputation remained paused in 1979, when a major retrospective of his work was mounted in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“In the '40s and '50s, Still was singled out by everybody as the man to be,” said Dean Sobel, director of the newly opened Clyfford Still Museum in Denver. “Pollock said, ‘Still makes the rest of us look academic.’ [Robert] Motherwell said, ‘Out of all of us, Still was the most original, a bolt out of the blue.’ Osorio said Still was the spark plug that got it all going. But something happened after that Met show, and what happened was nothing.”

That is, until 1999, when Curt Freed, a Denverite and nephew of Still's widow, Patricia, began to lobby the city to establish a museum to house the late artist's collection. Patricia Still rejected the overture because of concerns that the museum would merely be an outgrowth of the Denver Art Museum.

Four years later, Denver tried again, this time with the help of John Hickenlooper, the city's progressive mayor and an adherent of scholar Richard Florida's theories about creative cities and the creative class. Hickenlooper, who went on to become the governor of Colorado, helped shepherd the effort by promising that no taxpayer money would be used to build or fund the museum.



Clyfford Still in 1959, in a portrait by Hans Namuth.

This time, Patricia Still agreed. In 2005, the museum was officially formed as a nonprofit institution. Soon after, director Dean Sobel was hired, the land was purchased, the architect selected and the capital campaign to fund the \$29 million building launched.

Last year, in order to ensure that the museum would be able to sustain itself well into the future, the city of Denver made the controversial move of selling four of Still's paintings to raise money for the museum's endowment, a sale that brought in a head-spinning \$85 million to fund research activities and operations.

Its uncommonly large endowment means that the Clyfford Still Museum will not immediately face the same challenges as other single-artist museums, which sometimes struggle to keep things fresh. For Sobel, who sits comfortably at the helm of the brand-new museum, the primary goal is to keep the art and the spirit of Clyfford Still alive.

“The imperative of this museum ... is to promote the art of Clyfford Still and to do programs that extend that, but we will never be an institution that is going to tell us on the attendance to tell us whether or not we're doing a good job,” Sobel said. “There are a number of cultural destinations in this country or the world that are important and meaningful but don't necessarily set out to serve the whole audience. They even become kind of destinations. They could be ‘The Last Supper’ in Milan or it could be Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation.”

As the latest and perhaps most promising experiment in a string of single-artist institutions, it seems the Clyfford Still Museum is off to a running start.