

LOOKING AT THE WORK OF CLYFFORD STILL

Shown here are several key elements of Clyfford Still's visual language to look for in his paintings.



PH-414, 1934-35

THE FIGURE

The figure is an important element in Still's work. In the early works, such as in the first gallery, human figures are recognizable. As you move through the galleries, and into galleries 3 & 4, you can see how Still began to simplify and dismantle the figure. What were once full figures may now only be referenced by shapes that look like they could be hands, hair, muscles, ribcages, or thin, snaking vertical lines that resemble the outline of a figure. At one time in his life Still remarked, "the figure stands behind all my work." As you walk through the galleries, consider, how is the figure "behind" even Still's abstract paintings?



1942-No 2. (PH-85), 1942

VERTICALITY

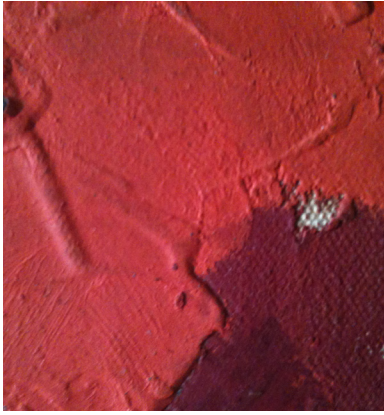
As Clyfford Still began to simplify his subject matter, figures and landscape became carefully executed arrangements of line, color, and interlocking shapes. Still's work took on a certain verticality. Still used this sense of verticality to represent the intangible essence of the human condition and of living things—that people stand vertical when alive, and upright to work and toil, that alive things like trees and plants remain vertical when living, and horizontal when they die.



1944-J (PH-67) 1944

LIFELINES

In concert with the verticality of Still's work, many of the canvases show serpentine lines that snake upwards, and sometimes downwards, from the edges of his canvases. Still called these "lifelines," and they are a motif that can be found in early and late works. Consider: what other essential aspects of life could these lines represent?



PH-272, 1950
Detail

SURFACE

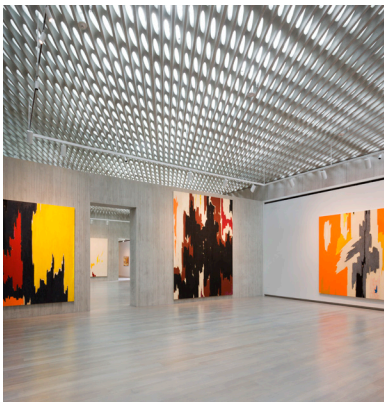
The surfaces of Still's artwork show variation in texture, color, and touch of the trowel. In some places Still chose to leave the canvas bare. In other places, the canvases are densely layered and worked. You can often see the trowel marks on the canvas and imagine the direction of the artist's hand, or how he laid the paint on the canvas. Consider: How do the surfaces of the work evoke the timeless and intangible qualities of life and existence that the artist may have been interested in?



1957-J-No.2

COMPOSITIONS OF COLOR AND SHAPE

Still used a variety of bold and expressive colors. He also experimented with a variety of compositions, densely "locking-in" the shapes to cover most of the canvas, or leaving many spaces bare. Still used the bare canvas as an expressive device in the same manner as paint. The use of bare canvas is shown in tiny patches as well as large expanses. Consider: How does the arrangement of the colors and shapes effect the composition? How does a fully "locked-in" piece compare to one that is more empty?



Clyfford Still Museum Installation View, 2011.
Photo: Raul Garcia.

ENVIRONMENTS & EXPERIENCE

Abstract Expressionist artists were interested in creating environments with their work. They wanted the viewer to be able to focus entirely on their paintings, to be in the all-over compositions, to experience, not just see, the artworks. Still took this idea even further, wanting his paintings to be shown in groups together, without the distractions of other artists, creating a complete Still environment. The new museum fulfills the artist's vision for the exhibition of his works. Consider: How does seeing Still's works together without the works of other artists shape your experience?