BY PATRICIA FAILING

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The Clyfford Still Museum opens a show of the innovative Abstract Expressionist's “replicas” of his own paintings.

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Inspired by a rare opportunity to acquire iconic Clyfford Still paintings, buyers made headlines in 2011 when Sotheby’s auctioned four Still canvases for $114 million, nearly twice the combined asking price. The most expensive paintings, 1949-A-No.1 and 1947-Y-No.2, sold for $61.6 million and $31.4 million respectively, well above the artist’s prior auction record of $21.2 million.

Proceeds from the Sotheby’s sale went to support the new Clyfford Still Museum, which opened in Denver a week after the auction. Few collectors were aware that the new museum’s holdings included a replica of 1949-A-No.1 or that the $21.2 million painting sold earlier was one of three versions of the same composition. 1947-Y-No.2 is a replica as well. The artist, one of Abstract Expressionism’s most celebrated innovators, is now known to have produced 59 sets of replicas. Several are owned by major U.S. museums.

Neal Benezra, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, published a catalogue essay in 2001 devoted to Still’s replicas, but Still’s practice of creating multiple versions of certain paintings remained little known. “Repeat/Recreate: Clyfford Still’s Replicas,” an exhibition on view through January 10 at the Clyfford Still Museum, could be a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for re-evaluating Still’s creative process. The show features 16 side-by-side juxtapositions of replicated paintings from the Clyfford Still Museum collection with canvases from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and private collections. The pairings date from 1925 to 1974 and are accompanied by related works in various mediums.

“The exhibition was on our wish list even before the museum opened,” Still Museum director Dean Sobel explained. “In many ways it is the most important show we could do about Clyfford Still’s work because of what it tells about the essence of his art.” Furthermore, he argues, elucidating Still’s artistic practice opens up the possibility of reshaping Abstract Expressionism’s historical profile. Still and his colleagues were “more traditional than many viewers might suspect,” Sobel said. “Replication turns out to be the basis for Abstract Expressionism as a whole.”

Still was far from reticent about acknowledging his replicas. He offered two primary justifications for these reiterations: to assemble a “personal record” of paintings that were sold, lost, or destroyed, and to produce additional versions when he believed “the importance of an idea or breakthrough merits survival on more than one stretch of canvas.” Although the replicas were “usually close to or extensions of the original,” he explained in a letter written in 1972, “each has its special and particular life and is not intended to be just a copy.”

Maintaining a “personal record” can be straightforward bureaucracy, but Still’s inventory was governed by his own logic. As a mature artist Still was notorious for insisting that his work be exhibited in sequences illustrating the evolution of his ideas. In his view, his visual production was equivalent to a life, a way of being in the world. Comprehending this life would ultimately require a setting in which his entire developmental progression could be on view, including visual records of certain works no longer in his possession. After his death, in 1980, Still’s estate retained almost 95 percent of his entire production. Before the opening of the Clyfford Still Museum, which is dedicated exclusively to the artist’s work, approximately 2,600 of his paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures had been under wraps for more than three decades. Given these circumstances, most of Still’s replicas, like many other facets of his art, were difficult to access and assess.

To evaluate the artist’s assertion that some of his ideas deserved “survival on more than one stretch of canvas” requires a deep dive into his complex vision of relationships between mind, hand, and painting as an “instrument.” The “Repeat/Recreate” exhibition was co-curated by Sobel and the museum’s senior consulting curator David Anfam, who is also director of the Clyfford Still Museum Research Center. In the exhibition’s catalogue and earlier publications, Anfam cites evidence that Still conceived “the real” from the vantage point of being.”
point of Platonic idealism, where “the visible world is but an imperfect replica of the realm of ideas…. It’s the idea that’s fundamental for Still,” he emphasizes. “The idea exists in the mind’s eye and in the imagination. Even if it springs from something observed in nature in the first sense, it lives within him on a metaphysical level. Physical printouts, as it were, can be done at will.”

As Still explained to his friend the collector Betty Freeman, when he was ready to paint a large canvas he made neither sketches nor studies, but had the image fully in mind before he began. The shaping struggle, he said, had already taken place before the canvas was approached. “It’s a matter of letting the images roll,” he told Freeman. “Sometimes the images were so alive I couldn’t sleep.” Replicas were independent attempts to clarify or sharpen his original vision, sometimes with only nuanced shifts in form, color, or scale.

Tracking a sequence of replicas within Still’s creative framework can lead historians down a labyrinthine rabbit hole. An example Anfam cites is the group of three “1951-T” paintings in the exhibition. There were initially four versions of this painting, which began as a physical replica, as it were, of Still’s original idea. The first version, 1951-T-No.4, was exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art’s “15 Americans” show in 1952 and was subsequently destroyed. Two years after the exhibition, MoMA asked to purchase this painting. Since Still had destroyed the original and sold its replica, 1951-T-No.2 (now in the Detroit Institute of Arts), to a private collector, the artist painted a third version for MoMA, 1951-T-No.3. A fourth, 1951-T-No.2, which belongs to the Still Museum, was painted sometime during this period as a record for Still’s own collection. The Detroit painting is described in his archives as the “parent” canvas and as a “serious version of the original.” MoMA’s painting, on the other hand, is listed as “deliberately inferior” and a “hastily made piece.”

When viewed side-by-side in the museum’s gallery, the Still Museum canvas is the most appealing of the three, perhaps because the color was better preserved while the painting was in storage. As with each of the juxtapositions in the exhibition, it’s not difficult to detect notable differences within the group, most evident in the renderings and textures of the right- and left-hand edges of each painting. None is clearly a copy or a literal repetition of another: the three replicas resolve themselves, as Anfam puts it, as “different maps of the same continent.”

Asked to speculate on what strategy Still might have employed to create his replicas, Anfam imagined him setting up the first version in his studio next to a blank canvas. “I think he wanted to demonstrate to himself, and ultimately to others, the rigor of his draftsmanship. I doubt there’s only one explanation of how he did it, technically. I’m pretty sure he drew in certain areas. Perhaps he cut out paper templates. But at the end of the day, it’s very much about hand and eye. Where the replicas differ, they differ deliberately. And in the case of 1943-A-No.1 and 1943-A-No.2, where the first version was actually created 31 years before the second, he’s also showing us how his art of the mind is trans-temporal.”

Although Still is celebrated as an upper-echelon Abstract Expressionist painter, these studio practices are clearly misaligned with the popular conception of “action painting” as painterly spontaneity inspired by existential angst. In his 2003 essay, reprinted in the “Repeat/Recreate” exhibition catalogue, Benezra argues that “by self-consciously and quite openly creating replicas of his own work, Still effectively challenged the essential nature of action painting and forced us to question the degree to which it actually underpins Abstract Expressionism.” Sobel makes a similar claim in his introduction to the catalogue. The action-painting cliché, and its identification with Abstract Expressionism, however, has been in contention ever since the phrase was introduced by critic Harold Rosenberg in his infamous 1952 essay in Art News, “The American Action Painters.”

Rosenberg himself complained about the misreading of his essay and resulting caricatures of the action painter. Action painting does not refer to a look or style and “is not a letting go, a surrender to instantaneity, except as a ruse,” he writes. “Painting that is an action is a struggle against limits, those within the artist himself, those which he finds in the situation of art, those which he deliberately sets up on canvas.” Invoking a Marxist model of creative dialectical interplay of ideas and materials, Rosenberg envisioned action painting as a serious political response to social crisis.
Unlike many subsequent critics, Still understood Rosenberg’s political agenda, and he did not approve. Shortly after the essay was published, Still sent Rosenberg a ferocious letter castigating him as a “stooge and front man for the mass assault on the individual” and complaining about his “patent psychological errors,” ignorance of even recent art history, and conspicuous dialectical slanting to collectivist principles.”

Other artists associated with Abstract Expressionism, among them Robert Motherwell, were more sympathetic with Rosenberg’s view of social crisis, but like several of his colleagues, Motherwell also made it clear that his own work was not simply the product of unpremeditated gestures. Most historians envisioned Jackson Pollock as the model for Rosenberg’s action painter, even though Rosenberg emphatically rejected this assumption. Perhaps surprisingly, the first-generation Abstract Expressionist whose work seems most clearly aligned with Rosenberg’s vision of action painting (and the one who may be the unnamed artist “B” quoted in Rosenberg’s essay) is Barnett Newman. “I am an intuitive painter. A direct painter,” Newman insisted in a 1962 interview with Dorothy Seckler. “I have never planned a painting, never ‘thought out’ a painting. . . . The content has to be determined the very moment the painting is being made.”

In support of his argument that “repetition is the basis of Abstract Expressionism as a whole,” Sobel cites the work of several artists who engaged in serial production, including Motherwell with his “Elegy to the Spanish Republic” series, and de Kooning and his “Women” series.

Newman also made serial paintings, beginning in 1948 with Onement I. In Still’s view, however, serial production was ultimately a matter of design problems to be solved, and was not compatible with his creative process. If his paintings are, as Still believed, an instrument of thought, a kind of tool for extending, renewing, or clarifying the artist’s ideas, more than one representation of an idea can qualify as a singular act of origination and invention. At this point in the evolution of Still scholarship, therefore, his “replications” appear to be a unique genre, and their relevance to Abstract Expressionism as a whole is not entirely clear.

In his catalogue essay, Anfam speculates that replicas Still executed as a mature painter may owe their special qualities to the disturbing psychic effects of doppelgängers, a phenomenon, like mirror images, long associated with dramatic foreboding and the uncanny. After the mid-1940s, Anfam writes, in many of Still’s paintings “there lurks the impression that we are beholding a ghost world in which nothing stands alone but is, rather, always accompanied by some spooky alter ego.” These spokes also haunt Still’s replicas, and perhaps account for the singular power he justifiably claimed for each of his replicated visions.

OPPOSITE: PH-27, ca. 1953 (left) and PH-244, 1953 (right). Above: PH-269, 1955 (left) and PH-923, 1955–74 (right).

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