Abstract expressionist is Still the one, times two

By Ray Mark Rinaldi  The Denver Post

Clyfford Still fans are used to his namesake museum coming up with innovative ways to present the abstract expressionist’s enigmatic works, but when Still expert David Anfam describes a new show as something that has “never happened before and will never happen again in our lifetimes,” you know something special is going on.

To be sure, “Repeat/Recreate” is not the usual rearrangement of Still’s jagged lines and cryptic shapes. It’s the most ambitious exhibit in the museum’s nearly four-year history, and perhaps the best glimpse into both the man and the artist we’ve seen.
Clyfford Still had a habit of repainting ideas he did not get right the first time. 

Provided by the Clyfford Still Museum

**STILL**

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It's also, notably, the most fun. The show explores Still's infrequent habit of painting the same image twice. Side-by-side, we get works that look nearly identical.

For example, the 1944 painting "PH-235," with its black background and jagged, red line shooting in from the right and turning sharply south, hangs next to the 1944 "PH-671," with its own black background and jagged, red line shooting in from the right and angling down.

Replicas? Not quite. Still adjusts the angles just a few degrees between the paintings, although a few minutes of examination are needed to see that. It's like that kids' game where you have to spot the differences between two similar drawings.

Of course, the exhibit is a serious effort and features prime examples of Still's work. "PH-1074" and "PH-225," both dating back to 1956, are brilliant splashes of yellow, orange and red, showing the painter's skills with bright color. They are almost the same, except for a few compositional adjustments Still made on his second go-round.

There are earlier, less-abstract works in the show, as well. "PH-553" and "PH-938," both from 1937, each show what appears to be a seated figure, although the latter is a little more refined. This is Still's transitional period in its prime.

Getting these works in the same room wasn't easy. For the first time, the museum has borrowed paintings for a major show, with selections coming from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and other places.

The loans are significant for several reasons. Museums don't send multimillion-dollar paintings off to just anyone; they show that the Still has earned the respect of important peers in a few short years.

They're also generous since the Still doesn't lend works itself. Its strict operating charter, mandated by the late artist, doesn't allow it — at least that's the current interpretation of Still's wishes. The language isn't quite clear, and one hopes that evolves for the sake of museumgoers in other cities.

The borrowed works here are crucial to the success of "Repeat/Recreate" because they illuminate just how particular Still was in getting things right. The tiny little shifts from blotches of red to yellow or from orange to white that are set in the rich ruby backgrounds of 1949's "PH-338" and "PH-385" prove he was a painter with persnickety inclinations.

Still observers already know this — sort of. As writer and curator Neal Benezra reminds us in his terrific essay in the show's catalog, Still wrote frequently about his work habits and dressed the part, always neat and tidy in a shirt and tie in his studio portraits.

But his paintings, especially the later abstract objects that Still is famous for, makes us forget. They feel free and easy, abrupt, fresh and full of action, quickly turned out, and they were. He was a fast painter.

It was Still's ideas that took time. He edited a way of seeing things and edited it again, reducing images to solo strokes, paring human spirits into single life lines that streak upward, often from the bottoms of his canvas to the tops. Or it could be down.

We're never quite sure what we are looking at with Still. His trusted his vision, and his works — with those unhelpful alpha-numeric titles — will always be the mystery he intended them to be.

This show, curated by Anfam and Dean Sobel, is remarkable, in part, because of what we don't know. For example, we don't even know for certain which of the paintings in each pair was the final product and which was the rough draft. In only a few cases did Still leave word on the order, and since most are from the same year, it's another guessing game.

But it's a rewarding one, trying to determine which painting is more finessed or worked, more "Clyfford Still."

You win even if you get it wrong because you come to understand that the painter had purpose, and that he labored incessantly toward clarity. You respect the man and cherish his struggle.

Ray Mark Rinaldi: 303-954-1540, rrinaldi@denverpost.com or @rayrinaldi