LOVE MEANS NEVER HAVING TO SAY YOU’RE BORING

With an eye to Valentine’s Day, floral designer Lindsey Taylor channels Abstract Expressionist painter Clyfford Still for an edgy alternative to a dozen predictable roses.

THE IDEA FOR this Valentine’s Day bouquet came to me while re-watching “The Eye Has to Travel,” the 2011 documentary about Diana Vreeland, the compulsively original fashion editor of Harper’s Bazaar until 1963, when she became the top dog at Vogue. Ms. Vreeland’s brassy confidence extended to the décor scheme in her living room, a full-throttle rush of reds-upon-reds, from the crimson carpet to the ornate scarlet chintz on the walls. Inspired by this gutsy flouting of traditional taste, I set out to avoid a commercialized version of “love”—which a dozen red roses has come to represent—and create an arrangement that captures real passion.

Around the same time Ms. Vreeland began issuing her radical style imperatives (“Why don’t you paint a map of the world on all four walls of your boys’ nursery so they won’t grow up with a provincial point of view?”), the artist Clyfford Still was similarly challenging the conventions of painting. A member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, Mr. Still used jagged, monumental swaths of vivid color that were anything but trite. Like Ms. Vreeland’s living room, Mr. Still’s 1950 canvas, PH-272, was created with layered shades of red, albeit mixed with small splotches of brown, black and yellow paint.

For the arrangement, I started with a matte black geometric-shaped vessel, the sort I tend to avoid because the straight sides don’t encourage flowers to spill and cascade. Spurred on by Mr. Still’s example, I embraced the vase’s masculine quality as a foil to the flowers’ intrinsic romance. I began to layer in blooms, a collection of moody, oxblood amaryllis; single-petal tulips in a brighter, lively shade; ruffled crimson carnations; and, in a nod to tradition, a couple of red garden roses. To give my arrangement the restless asymmetry of Mr. Still’s painting, I cut the stems at different lengths to create an irregular form, positioning them to evoke the conflicts I see in Mr. Still’s work—power and melancholy, love and anger—an effect, I hope, that is closer to the messiness of passion than the feeling a standard vase of a dozen roses conveys.

THE INSPIRATION

Clyfford Still’s 1950 painting ‘PH-272,’ above, inspired an unconventional, layered Valentine’s Day arrangement of oxblood amaryllis, single-petal red tulips, crimson carnations and a couple of red garden roses.

THE ARRANGEMENT

Matte Black Ceramic Cube Vase, from $9, jamaligarden.com

Stephen Kent Johnson for The Wall Street Journal, Styling by Lindsey Taylor (arrangement); Ben Blackwell/Clyfford Still Museum © city and County of Denver (Inspiration)