A Light of His Own

An exhibition at the Clyfford Still Museum explores the artist’s retreats to Yaddo

Through September 9
Clyfford Still Museum
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In the summers of 1934 and 1935, abstract expressionist Clyfford Still found his way to Yaddo—the famous artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York—and experimented with his already experimental work. During the two stays, he created 19 small paintings on window shade fragments, an inexpensive material he discovered during the Great Depression.

Through September 9, the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver has organized *A Light of His Own: Clyfford Still at Yaddo*. The exhibition is based on the 19 small paintings Still created as a 29-year-old graduate student and teaching assistant at Washington State College. While there, Still met writer and painter Peter Neagoe, a colleague of Constantin Brancusi and publisher of Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. The friendship would last more than a decade.

Much of Still's Yaddo work comprised of farming scenes and rural landscapes from the area around the retreat. The work is also some of Still's first attempts at pulling away from direct observation to a more inward and abstracted approach to art.

"As the metaphorical content of these post-Yaddo compositions begins to intertwine and grow, figures merge, fragment and dissolve," says curator Patricia Failing, professor emerita, division of art history, University of Washington-Seattle. "Still's time at Yaddo ignited visual energies that ultimately inspire Clyfford Still to create some of the mid-20th century's most unprecedented modernist paintings."

As a young painter, Yaddo allowed Still the chance to commune with other artists in a friendly and non-competitive way. Still had already expressed his unhappiness with the competitive nature of the New York Art Scene and in a letter to a friend wrote that "Yaddo has given me friends to paint for." Still's experience at Yaddo also gave him the freedom to experiment with various styles and mediums. As he wrote in his journal at the time, "I want to speak as directly, as simply, as honestly as I can. Whatever is necessary to accomplish this end I justify. Paint, paper, wood, any material, any method—abstraction, realism, singly or combined in any way necessary to accomplish the function I consider valid."

*A Light of His Own* also includes ephemera from the Clyfford Still Archives as well as 12 later works from Denver's collection, as well as a hand/head study by Still on loan from the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York. The Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, Colorado, opened in the fall of 2011 and houses over 3,000 works by Still.