
ART

are mixed with keen observations of life for a New Yorker, dedication to painting, and, for better and worse, her unyielding belief in the genius of her own work. Still believed in his talent so much that he held on to 95 percent of his lifetime output, fearing it would fall into the hands of people who didn’t appreciate its importance. He proved no worse.

Campbell inherited that reverence for Still’s giant canvases when the painter died in 1988 and today, at 75 years old, she has dutifully accepted a familial obligation to protect it just as he did. The paintings may be held now by Donor’s Cliffy Still Museum, but Campbell keeps an eye on them.

She backs the bulk of the management team’s efforts to expand knowledge about Still’s life and enhances his legacy. But there are times, she says, when she disagrees with what they are doing and is compelled to say so in direct terms.

“T hoy had me confrontations,” said Campbell, who sits on the museum’s board where she has no special standing as a member — other than the fact that she is Still’s daughter and the other 16 directors aren’t.

“I’ve been had on them a little a few times.”

There’s no bad blood. In fact, she museum has recognized her unique role as a guardian of the public by throwing her a 70th birthday party.

Stillfield added color scientists to many paintings. This is a “Fish & 373” from 1998, Provided by the Cliffy Still Museum.

by Ray Mark Rinaldi

The Denver Post

To hear Sandra Still Campbell tell it, there are both ups and downs to being the daughter of one of the most revered painters in American art. And both are enchanting. Sure, she got to know her father, Cliffy Still, in a way that few people could have, and yet, she did have a front-row seat to his history-making efforts as a pioneer of abstract expressionism. Perhaps best of all, she is fortunate to have some of Still’s paintings hanging about for her, a rarity since so few of his works are in private collections — they’re probably worth millions.

But, readily acknowledged, he wasn’t the paintampion around, especially in her younger years. He put his art before his children, disappearing frequently and for long periods of time, showing up “just when we were ready to put him aside and forget him,” she says in the podcast that accompanies “A Daughter’s Eye/A Daughter’s Voice,” the exhibition she curated at the Cliffy Still Museum.

“We just learned not to expect what kids want and needed,” she said. “We just weren’t gonna get it.”

The relationship improved as Campbell got older and still made peace with his personal life and grew closer to his family. Her memories of neglect

T he story is still very personal and still a bit too close to home for comfort, a reminder of the pain and suffering that can come with artistic greatness.

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On top of this, the museum’s visitors are using to see a lot of big, manufactured greens, blues and yellows. Campbell’s show is marked by warm colors and organic brown. It is surprisingly eerie — not a shade more painterly with Still. Campbell also chose paintings that showcase Still’s penchant for black, a color he saw as warm and organic, rather than dark and mysterious. Still grew up in rural Alberta, Canada. His palette was inspired, at its core, by “the earth and big skies,” she believes.

In addition, Campbell focuses on Still’s habit of leaving large portions of canvas unprimed. It’s not unusual to see these blank spaces framed at the Still Museum, but this show takes it to extremes, remarkable in its attention to space and surfaces.

“Just because those spaces aren’t covered in paint, it doesn’t mean they’re not important,” she said in an interview last week. “They are.”

Underlying Campbell’s selections is an attempt to show how her father’s repeated similar patterns and shapes during the years he focused on abstraction, some of Still’s innovations — the layered fields of color, the “dribbles” as they are referred to, that seem to emerge like leaves from the bottom of his canvases — might seem repetitious to some, a cheat. pulled out of his bag of painter’s tricks. But Campbell wants us to see them as a language still develop ed over time symbols that are defined and employed to tell his stories.

What do these stories say? Well, she isn’t exactly sure. She said, but she still never told her precisely what her paintings mean. She’s interested in how young girls interpret his work, but as much in the dark as the scholar, curator, spectators and fans who will never truly know why Still puts colors where he did.

Campbell pushed the museum hard when she made her choices. The museum itself is not retraced and stretched all of the selected paintings and paintings that officially assumed from the Still family in 2005. Campbell’s selections, pulled often from her memory of seeing them in a dialogue, includes several works that were in the vanguard; two-thirds of the paintings in the show have never before been exhibited and some have not been stretched since Still painted them.

For Campbell, “A Daughter’s Eye/A Daughter’s Voice” is one more way of inserting herself into her father’s legacy, of pushing her personal belief in the way she should be remembered into the dialogue. It’s an extension of her advocacy into the action of the museum. She knows she can come off as a “cranky grandmother” offering her opinions on how the works are shown, feels a particular responsibility.

Still didn’t want his paintings exhibited by other painters and he expressly wanted them kept together as a body of work with an essential, inter-related narrative. With few exceptions — she backed the bid for the sale of some works to London’s Royal Academy of Arts in 2006 — Campbell opposed loaning the works to other institutions, an idea that comes up naturally as the museum looks for new ways of introducing Still to a broader public.

It’s not what the city of Denver accorded to, at least in spirit, when it accepted the collection with severe restrictions. It’s also not in the best interest of the precious objects themselves, the believes. “They’re not blocks of color or brown. They are fragile and vulnerable to the environment,” she said.

She disagrees with the idea that Still’s legacy is best served if the paintings travel. If people want to see them, they can come to Denver. “Let them hop on a bus,” she said. “That’s not difficult.”

She’s not radical in her defense of Still’s legacy or his physical works. She plans to remain protagonist to chief for as long as she’s around.

“When I’m gone I’m not going to have a say in any of this,” she said.