





The Big Sweep

Edward Clark, The Big Sweep

Ed Clark is like a sponge, absorbing every drop of life's experiences and processing them unconsciously into art. He goes on frequent working trips to distant, often exotic places to experience new sensations of light, atmosphere, and material substance. Clark knows that, without doing it purposely, his work will look different, feel different, and sometimes even be made by a different method as a result. He began making these trips in the 1970s after visiting fellow artist Jack Whitten on the island of Crete. In Greece, Clark could not find space to paint so he began using pastels. Upon returning to New York City he made the following observation:

I could see that there was no way I could have used these colors in New York or in Paris. I hadn't been thinking about it; it was a change I made unconsciously. It was the colors of Crete I was painting.¹

Clark lived in France from 1952 to 1956 and from 1966 to 1969. Since 1980 he has been spending his winters in New York City and his summers in Paris. He has worked in Ife (Nigeria), Yucatan (Mexico), Louisiana, Martinique, Taos (New Mexico), France (Brittany), Bahia (Brazil), Morocco, Sicily and China. The *Ife* paintings of the early 1970s probably make the strongest departure from his New York City and Paris works, for they blaze with a fiery African sun that radiates with heat. While in Mexico, the strong reds and greens of the native serapes affect his palette; in Taos setting sun-reddened clouds seem to scud through spaces so vast we imagine the earth's curvature opening up to us. Louisiana is lush with green and delicate pinks, and Bahia, where his studio was on water's edge, feels damp and hot, while Brittany feels cool and looks Barbizon School brown. China's precipitous gorges and bright lacquered hues seemed to have found their way into his *China Series* of 1999-2000.

The 1990s saw the breakup of the horizontal structuring that dominated Clark's paintings since the mid-1960s – generally his early works contain three horizontal units of acrylic paint, the central swath dominating the picture plane and when enclosed within an oval, these forms appear to be setting into a planet-like spin.

The linearity of the early 1970s, which created that spin, or, in the absence of an oval, a tremendous sense of speed, morphed into a tubular shape in the 1980s. This mostly affected the central unit, which thrust between the softer units positioned on the side. Sometimes the tube would divide at midpoint and curve up or down off the canvas as if it was gaining its independence. In one spectacular instance, the ten by nine foot painting, *Broken Rainbow* of 1987, tubes are raggedly broken apart, their splintery ends seeming to dive at one another as if engaging in battle. In his review of an exhibition featuring this painting, critic John Loughery called it "the most tumultuous painting in the show, a classic 'Action Painting'..." Noting that Clark had applied dry pigment with a wet broom, he described this methods as producing "The whirlwind motion of the paint, diving toward the bottom...on the right and sweeping upward from the left until it hits the frame at the top." ²

The tube becomes a wave in the new century, a giant wave that cuts a wide swath across the canvas stopping just before flying off its edge. At first, the new paintings were rather complex, for some areas appeared broom-brushed, while others seemed made of either paint or dry pigment. The action was multi-directional and unstable. Anything seemed possible. Vertical paintings began to appear in Clark's hitherto horizontal world. As a result, his formerly structured world seemed blown apart, literally in pieces. Solid looking tubes were yanked apart in one painting and separated by clouds of semi-transparent color in another. The vertical canvas was enclosed in parentheses, one red, the other green. For Clark, it was a time of searching. In 2004 he tried something quite unusual, and which was very successful, with the painting *Louisiana Red*. In this image, he split the red "wave" across the top of the painting into two sections separated delicately in the center. They float, above pale blue and white as though hovering in the sky. Below, at the very bottom, two black horizontal planes echo the red units above and imply earth masses. These works are immensely satisfying in terms of color, structure, vibrancy, and momentousness.

Generally speaking, the new century paintings are both freer and simpler than Clark's prior work. You have the sense that he's having an absolute ball painting away and enjoying life. His paintings have neither been gloomy nor overly estatic. Perhaps they seem more forceful, fast, and even explosive than his past works. However, the energy is not only still there, it is also more concentrated now. Three or more horizontal passes of paint comprised his earlier paintings, but now a painting might contain just a single sweep of paint or whatever he deems necessary.

Beginning in 1956, Clark began using a push broom to literally sweep the paint onto the canvas. He was painting canvases as big as he could. Clark thus needed what he calls "the big sweep" to cover large areas with a single stroke. It was important that the stroke be straight. Hand-wielded brooms made curves and he wanted a straight stroke. Clark describes his method of "the big sweep" as allowing him to:

...[cut] through something really fast; that's what the push broom gives you, speed. Maybe it's something psychological. It's like cutting through everything. It's also anger or something like it, to go through it in a big sweep.³

In his painting *Pink Wave* a single monster wave dominates the entire field. Red, black, and blue peek out beneath the overwhelming white-pink-gray sweep, on which two patches, green and black, surf. *Inertia* was completed while Clark was being filmed for an interview; there is a very exciting interaction between yin and yang waves, the lighter colored gray-pink-lemon swoop at the bottom with a brown and red mass loomin above it. (The crew was astounded at the speed with which he moved across the canvas.) In the *Locomotion* and *Pink Top* paintings there both created vertically with four to five stacked bandings. The pink, white and blue bands in *Pink Top* are very loosely shaped and atmospheric, while *Locomotion*'s colors are firmer. However, they both tend to confine themselves within the paintings parameters, not seeming to speed through them. The color pink provides the warmth in both images, as it does in much of Clark's work. It is to him what orange was to Cezanne and yellow to Van Gogh. Someone once said you can judge a painter by how well he or she handles pink. That person was probably thinking of Matisse, but might just as well have been talking about Ed Clark, who uses pink more than anyone around and handles it just beautifully.

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Notes:

1. Interview by Quincy Troupe in Edward Clark: For the Sake of the Search, Barbara Cavaliere and George R. N'Namdi eds. (Belleville Lake, MI: Belleville Lake Press, 1997), 24.
2. John Loughery, "Review: Gallery Art 54," Arts, April 1987, 108.
3. Troupe interview, 17-18.