

EXHIBITION REVIEW

**ED CLARK, CURATED BY EMMA LEWIS**

Turner Contemporary, Margate, 25 May–1 September 2024

Reviewed by Alison Green, University of the Arts London

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Ed Clark (1926–2019) made innovative abstract works from the 1950s until the 2000s. Whilst he had been making and showing work at the margins of artistic centres with a sustained and ambitious practice, acknowledgement of his achievement has come only over the last decade or so. This recognition is deserved, and the Turner Contemporary show is testament to this. It is important however to acknowledge that critical tools are currently more attuned to consider the mechanisms of exclusion that prevented people from seeing Clark's work and the work of other artists of colour. What makes Clark's work interesting (to me) is the artistic language he created and developed over a 60-year career and his adherence to the potential for art to resist fixed meanings alongside the social experience he lived. This tension, or an unsettled resolution, between Clark's Black heritage and the communities of the white art world, underlies the exhibition as it sets a context for new audiences to see his work.

Several of the paintings in the show stopped me in my tracks. These include a series of works from the 1970s where Clark explored an ellipse or oval shape, as well as his colour-charged paintings that benefit from the light in the Turner Contemporary's galleries. *Untitled* (1970) is a shaped canvas, brushed horizontally with muted greens, whites, blues and purple. It is large enough to occupy a whole wall of the large room and seems magically to produce light despite its plain to see, slightly gritty, materiality. In other paintings in this room, the ellipse is scraped into the paint's surface, a shape settled elegantly within rectangles with horizontal sweeps of colour. These works ask you to move between here and there: flat surface and landscapes/place. A connection to the horizontal line between sky and sea, just on the other side of the museum's wall, feel important, like a closely held memory that the painting invites into one's body in the present moment. Clark's skill with paint, his colour transitions, doublings and the unwavering lines he incised into paint on works like *Ife Rose* (1974) and *Blue Umber* (1975) bring you to his place, his eyes and his capacity to compose this experience that travels over time.

Apart from one self-portrait (the earliest painting in the show, *Self Portrait* [1947–49]) all the works are abstract, nevertheless there are questions about how to handle this. Clark was insistent that his paintings were not made to signify in direct ways. He said, 'the paint is the subject' and 'the stroke is the subject'. Looking around the exhibition, from the dramatic and loose paintings from the 1950s and 1960s to the beautifully controlled rainbow paintings from the 1990s and 2000s, this is true in a literal way. His words also speak to the project he entered as an artist: to make space for art to be something other than representational, in the this-equals-that sense. In a video screened in the museum Clark recalls a story from his childhood that explains this well: asked at school to draw a tree, his effort was overlooked in favour of ones that looked most like the tree (Martin 2007). This was the task, but he knew his tree was 'the best'. Knowing his experience to be true helped him understand what art could be.

Is this stridency a position from a battle from another time? How do you hold this narrowing alongside other things that seem to be in play? For one, Clark travelled to many places in his life – Crete, Nigeria, Japan,

Egypt, Brazil, France and more – and these had their impact alongside his childhood in America’s South and his chosen home in New York City. There were the artists he learned from and grew up with (friends Sal Romano, Jack Whitten, Bob Shigeo, Joan Mitchell, Yayoi Kusama). We can listen to him explaining about the importance of jazz for Black American artists (Martin 2007). He foregrounded the importance of using a broom to paint with because it disables the wrist, which I read to mean it disrupts the skills learned to make controlled (and representational) gestures with paintbrushes. This framework for art to not represent was hard won in Clark’s generation. For us, does this foreclose alternate readings, or connect us to nature, or to experience? I think Clark’s paintings open us to experiences in terms that may be unfamiliar, and ask to be responded to with openness and flexibility.

As a result of painting with a broom, Clark made work on the floor, and I suspect this also impacted their large scale. In the late 1960s American critic Leo Steinberg parsed the difference between paintings for walls and paintings from floors as ‘a great shift’ that formed ‘an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience’ (1972: 85). He also called this a ‘transformation from nature to culture through a shift of ninety degrees’ (1972: 86). ‘Nature’ in this schema is the human centred painting that confirms verticality, which Steinberg linked to the Renaissance. ‘Culture’ is the ‘work-surface picture plane’ invoked by Robert Rauschenberg’s combines and Marcel Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915–23): although they may be displayed vertically or on the wall, the significant difference is a ‘psychic’ turning resolutely away from the figure (Steinberg 1972: 86). If this helps explain some of the excitement and radicality of Clark’s innovations, Steinberg’s definition of ‘culture’ is bracketed by invisible terms like ‘western’, ‘white’ and ‘male’ (Clark is not included in *Other Criteria*). Clark joked in the video that he was making ‘janitorial art’ (Martin 2007). I think this was to acknowledge the risk to him of being a Black American man with a broom, at the same time that he embraced the part of painting that is labour. These are reminders of what else is not addressed by Steinberg in his term ‘culture’.

The Turner Contemporary show includes archival material – pamphlets, photographs, exhibition invitations – that draw out some of the coordinates of the art-system that both did and did not support Clark. It is a rich story of community. One letter is worth considering: in 1973 Clark turned down an invitation to be included in an exhibition of African American art curated by the artist Charles Gaines. ‘I have nothing against showing with all black artists’, Clark wrote, ‘except to say that in my experience the results have always been negative’. There is no room here to do justice to how this eloquent act of refusal sits within efforts to make histories of art equitable. (I recommend the *Soul of a Nation* [Godfrey and Whitley 2017] exhibition catalogue which gathers essential material into one accessible place.) I may have wished that Turner Contemporary made a bit more of this debate present, between aesthetics and social identity; others, including Clark, may have seen it to be more important to show the work as they did, and let it set the terms otherwise.

Figure 1: Ed Clark, *Untitled*, 1970. Acrylic on canvas. 216 cm × 320 cm. Estate of Ed Clark. © Courtesy Turner Contemporary.

Figure 2: Ed Clark, installation view (2024). © Courtesy Turner Contemporary. Photograph: Thierry Bal.

## References

- Godfrey, Mark and Whitley, Zoé (2017), *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Modern, July–October, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, February–April 2018, and the Brooklyn Museum, September 2018–February 2019.
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- Steinberg, Leo (1972), *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*, London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

## Further reading

Anon. (2022), 'In conversation: Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley on Ed Clark', YouTube, 28 January, [https://youtu.be/WGGqImYXQ9M?si=Igg\\_36Ey\\_LBNIiC0](https://youtu.be/WGGqImYXQ9M?si=Igg_36Ey_LBNIiC0). Accessed 29 July 2024.

#### Contributor details

Dr Alison Green is a researcher-writer and curator with interests in the 1960s as a moment of social and aesthetic change, feminism and the histories and practices of exhibitions. She is the author of *When Artists Curate: Contemporary Art and the Exhibition as Medium* (Reaktion Books, 2018) and is working on book projects about curating and social practice and exhibitions and time. She is Reader in Arts, Curating and Culture at Central Saint Martins and leads the doctoral development programme at University of the Arts London.

Contact: Doctoral School, University of the Arts London, 272 High Holborn room 201, London, WC1Y 7EV, UK.

E-mail: [a.green@csm.arts.ac.uk](mailto:a.green@csm.arts.ac.uk)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7078-095X>