

Clyfford Still: Self Portrait as Ubermensch

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In trying to understand the art of Clyfford Still, one might do well to ponder the text of his life as a whole: his behavior and thinking as well as his painting and sculpture. His life represented the fullness of the “overflow” of the self, not the rationalist Enlightenment of Western philosophies. For Still, the endgame was neither comfort in the world nor sheer survival. Power was his goal, the power to create and live on his own terms, the power of self-sovereignty and the plenitude of self. For him, those were the measures of existence. He believed that self-sovereignty would redeem humanity, not psychoanalysis, not Marxism, and not liberal politics. As Still saw it, acted it, and painted it, life was that of the self-determining and self-creating individual. He said he was ultimately “less concerned with finding out about himself than with creating himself.”ⁱ Still’s notorious contrary nature, his independence and his refusal to cooperate with scholars, dealers, and critics had an impact on everything in his life. In his art, Still’s shamanic earth rooting and sky journeying led to imagery that represented monumental, ever expanding, shamanic power.ⁱⁱ (His so-called abstractions are based on rugged Monument Valley buttes that are considered muscular and supernatural by local folk.) Still sought to dominate art and all that surround him. Undoubtedly, he began with touches of modernism (fig.

1) as can be seen in his borrowings from Pablo Picasso (fig. 2) and

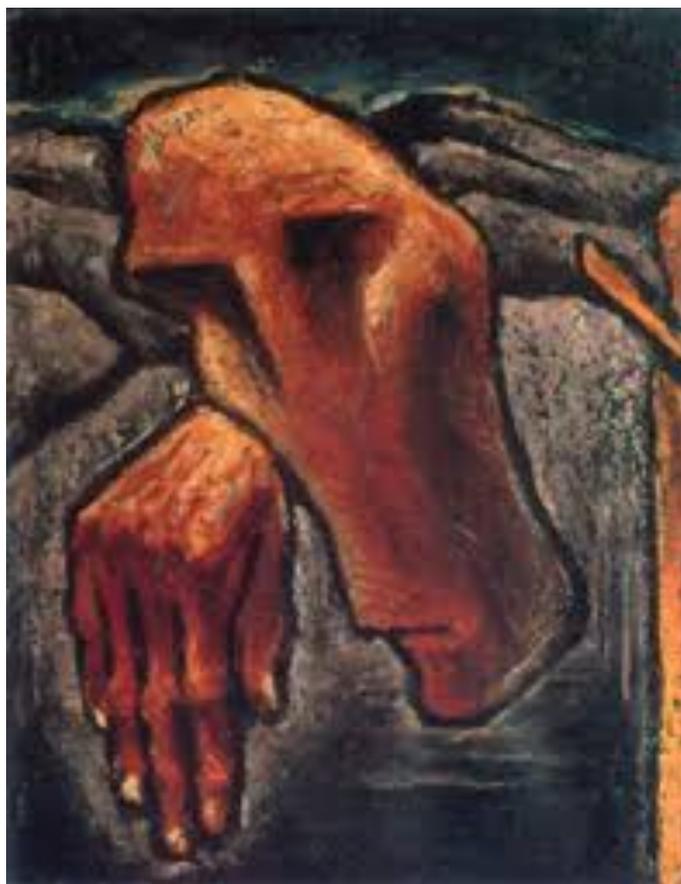


Fig. 1. PH-215, 1935.



Fig. 2. Pablo Picasso, *Untitled*, 1928-9.

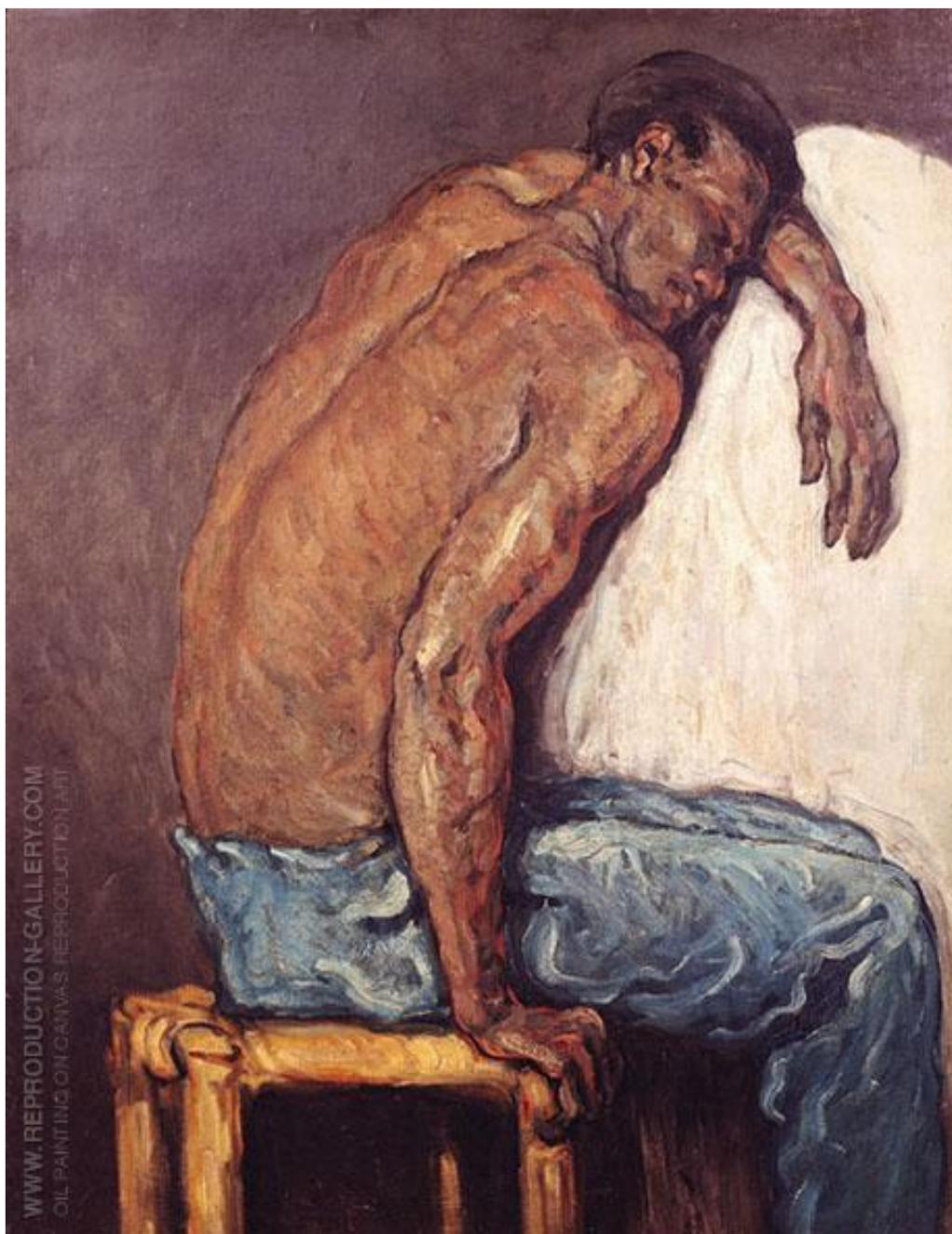


Fig. 3. Paul Cezanne, *The Negro Scipio*, 1867.

Paul Cezanne (fig.3), but Still always took an approach that transcended art to embrace the whole of existence.

From his Regionalism to his “abstractions,” Still sought to create a new force and a new personality that he felt Western society needed. In light of this, we can see that the shamanic figures in his work are connected to the past and draw upon the imagination, not reason. These images were empowered not by elements of mass society and the machine age – represented by Western science and reason popular in the 1930s – but by their very opposite, nature and the spirits. Still’s critique and his notion of inwardness were culturally based. He truly wanted his new “personality writ large,” a classic formulation of the 1930s. In other words, his new healing and transformative self, if multiplied, would make the world anew. Still declared that “he the artist is the image and sole source of imagery.”ⁱⁱⁱ He even stated “all of his work was one subject:”^{iv} “painting must be an extension of the man, of his blood, a confrontation with himself. Only thus can art be a valid instrument of individual freedom.”^v Still’s work represents the artist as a personage of nature and mythic power, a creative self new in the world.

Still tried to enlarge himself as the most forceful, even shamanic being because, as Michael Harner has noted, “in shamanism, the maintenance of one’s personal power is fundamental to well-being.”^{vi} But Clyfford Still was more than a person of artistic empowerment; he was distinctive in how he lived and acted. He was a sovereign self who refused common beliefs and dismissed ideas that were passed down in the world at large. Instead, he engaged with the world in a self-directed

intellectual exploration. From his earliest work, Still's life was a will-to-power, and power meant a striving and pressing onward, as a man , an heroic, striving force with spatulate, atavistic hands (fig. 4).

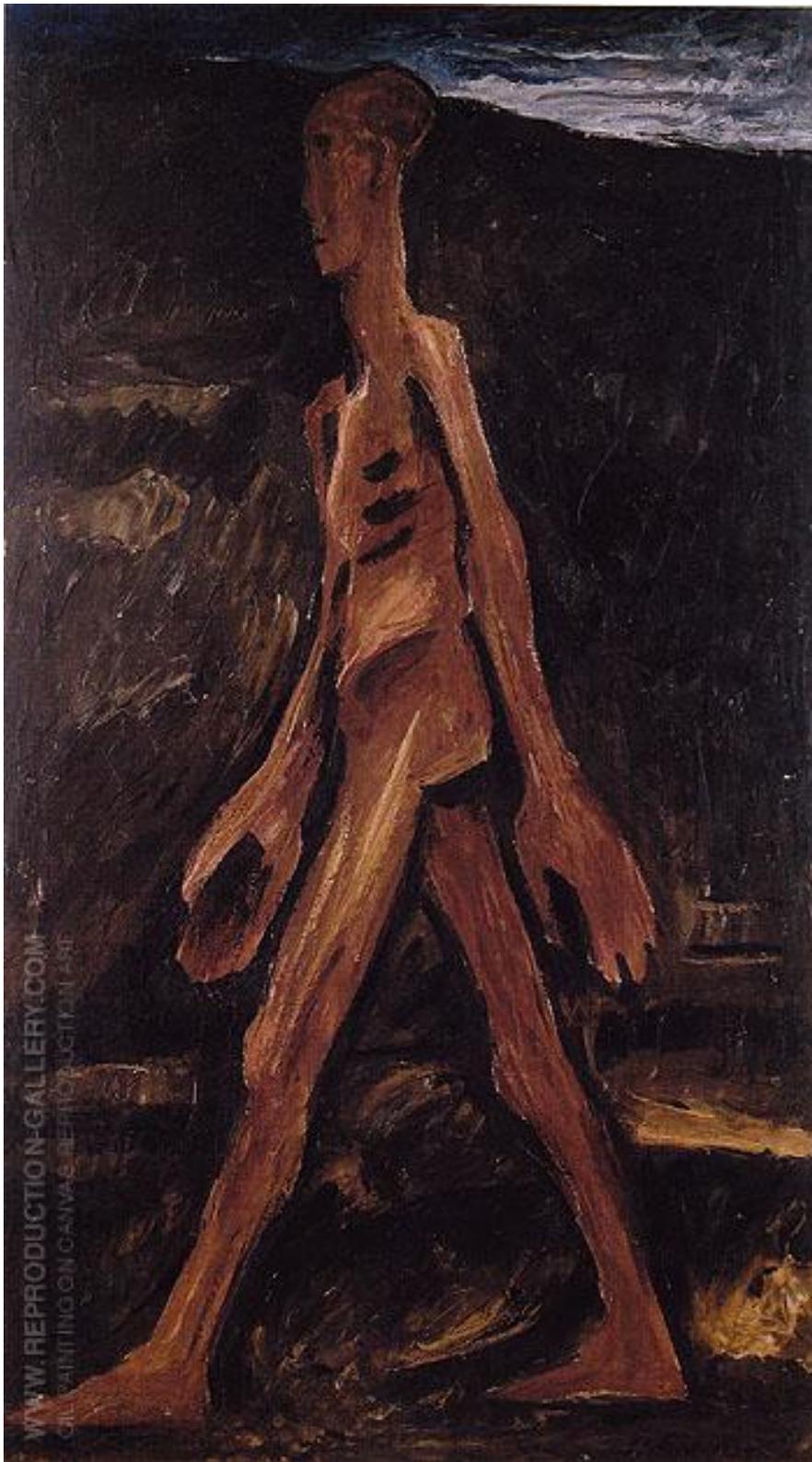


Fig. 4. *Untitled*, (PH-323), 1934.

To achieve this, he chose shamanic ritual symbols of empowerment, but shamanism entailed the artistic expressionism of an even deeper commitment – to the Nietzschean *Übermensch* – and Still's art behavior and life were the embodiment of that belief.

I have written of Still's commitment to Nietzsche in his conceptions and in his language.^{vii} In his library at the archive at the Clyfford Still Museum (CSM), Still had a copy of Thomas Common's translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, an English rendition of Nietzsche's book that was published between the wars. (Still probably knew more of Nietzsche's writings.) Common's translation was rather Darwinian, emphasizing the survival of the fittest. In his critique of modern society, Still was committed to Nietzsche's ideas: in terms of philosophy, as a guide to personal behavior, as conceptions of the modern world, as the language of intercourse, and as the future artistic *Übermensch*.^{viii}

Friedrich Nietzsche had gained recognition in Europe by the 1880s,^{ix} and in 1892, his ideas became known in America when *Liberty* magazine published some of his work in English. Nietzsche argued that the beliefs cherished by modern Western culture, that is, God, truth, universal morality and Christian spirituality were mere fictions that had no basis in the real world. Between the wars, Nietzsche's claim that values needed to be transformed resonated with many. He scoffed at

capitalism, democratic culture and the cult of equality. For many, Nietzsche represented the “modern” in modern culture, even though the very definition of the modern was up for grabs as it was a conceptual rather than just a temporal idea. Nonetheless, Nietzsche emphasized the unfettered ego as the source of human progress and culture, positing the *self* alone as the means of deliverance and redemption.

Nietzsche not only rejected humanism and Christian limitations, he saw himself as the lawgiver, the creator and the singular genius who was above movements. In this regard, self-definition and self-sovereignty were the ultimate goal. He argued that the authority of enlightened reason, science, God and Truth as anchors of the self had failed, leading merely to the common “herd.” What mattered were distinguished men, men who command from above and do not obey. For Nietzsche, man’s grandeur and individual expansive vision of life put him at odds with what he felt to be the weak modern personality and all that it propagated. What mattered was a culture and personality of the self-created. Through his belligerent, muscular language and behavior, he argued for health as regards physiological vigor and psychic well-being. As he claimed, better callused palms from manual labor than the neuraesthetic of prissy intellectualism (fig. 5).^x The inner life of the individual is what mattered, the titanic self.



Fig. 5. *Untitled*, PH-77, 1936.

In this world view, the individual is not disturbed nor is the self plunged into chaos and pessimism. For Nietzsche, there should be no love for the damaged man, the increasing archetype of modernity, the World Wars and most Abstract Expressionism. Although many Abstract Expressionists interpreted social and inward problems through the modern psychology of pain and anguish, Nietzsche -- and Still -- did not.

The Nietzschean self creates, in Common's terms, the *Übermensch*, the "beyond" man, who rejected the slave morality of bourgeois urban life, the iconoclastic and authentic self that attacks the modern world. To do that, he is composed of raw earth: that is, the earth creates him and he is infinite. The *Übermensch* is the expression of the earth:

“Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers . . . Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth . . . out of you, who [have] chosen yourself there shall grow a chosen people – and out of the over man. Verily, the earth shall yet become a site of recovery.”^{xi}

Nietzsche thus fused romanticized naturalism and shamanic ritual with a quest for power. There are no limitations; the self is raw and immeasurable. For Nietzsche, modern romance was the romance of self-realization. One must be hard and conflict inevitably occurs with the self as much as with society. In short, the self must grow -- as expressed by the expansive figure that reaches to the edges of *1947-8-W - # 2* (fig. 6) and many other paintings.



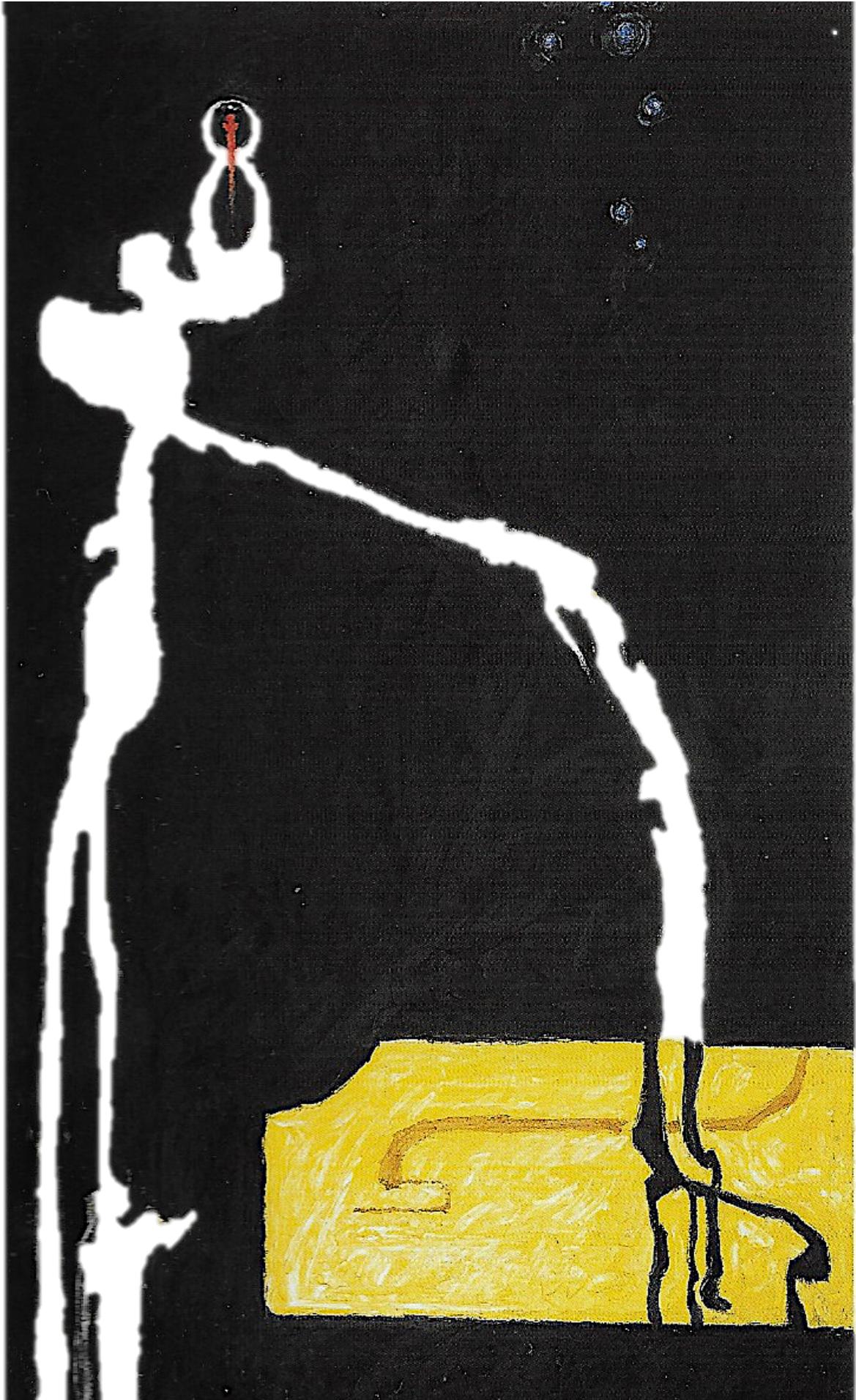
Fig. 6. *Untitled*, 1947-8-W-# 2.

With his famous rough, palette-knife surfaces, Still made it clear that his action, materials and colors were of the earth. As we see, his work first depicted gathering crops from the earth as a farmer working in

the manner of well-known images by Millet, then he went on to include the earth in his palette-knife has a virtual cosmic eye and as a bearded (goateed) countenance in profile, which represents Still himself, surfaces, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s when he began using more earth tones.

Still depicted and played a Nietzschean shaman, a figure of every expanding mythic power that stood at the center of his own making. Who is this persona? Still himself. One might argue that Clyfford Still's work from the 1930s onward is the portrait of himself as this mythic, shamanic, Nietzschean power. At first he appeared as the above monumental squarish, hand-raised mass and force like a mesa. Then, became the "life line," which could be within another shape or stand alone as a self-sustained figure. ("Life line" [of which I have written in 1991] is a Native American regional, Columbia Plateau concept for a rising, vertical or horizontal, primal, x-ray-like skeletal, renewing life force and form.)^{xiii}

Still's work consists of portraits of himself transformed by the powers mentioned above: the power to grow, rise, self-create, self-rule and dominate. His color (field) oeuvre is not abstract, but represent his own self-image. As he said, he and he alone is the subject of his painting. In Still's oeuvre, there are even overt self-portraits, as his self-image appears in various ways in many of his paintings. For example, the "life-line" skeletal work *PH-233* of 1945 was entitled *Self-Portrait* (fig. 7)



at one time.

Still's self-portraiture can also be seen as a "head" in his self-declared "head" picture, *1950-B* (fig. 8) which is in the Duncan Phillips Collection^{xiii} It features a virtual cosmic eye and a bearded (goateed) countenance in profile

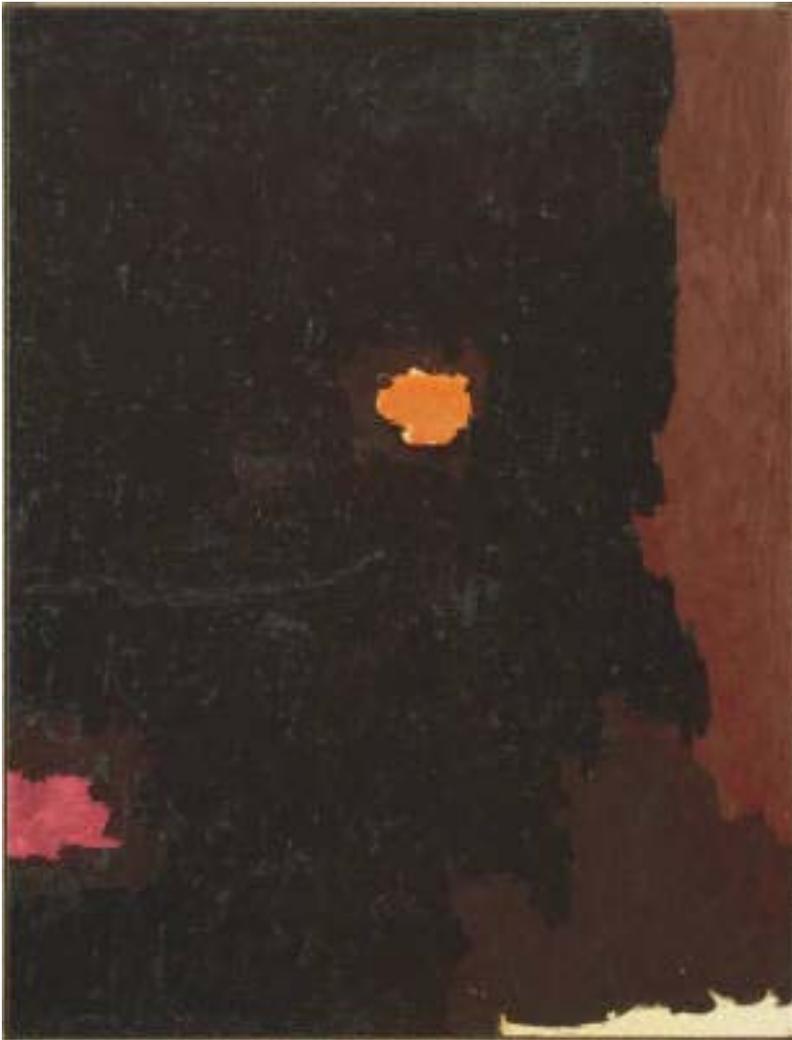


Fig. 8. *Untitled* (1950-B).

which is Still himself in what has been described as a color "field." Later we see further expansions of this "head" picture into "abstract " color shapes (figs. 10-11)

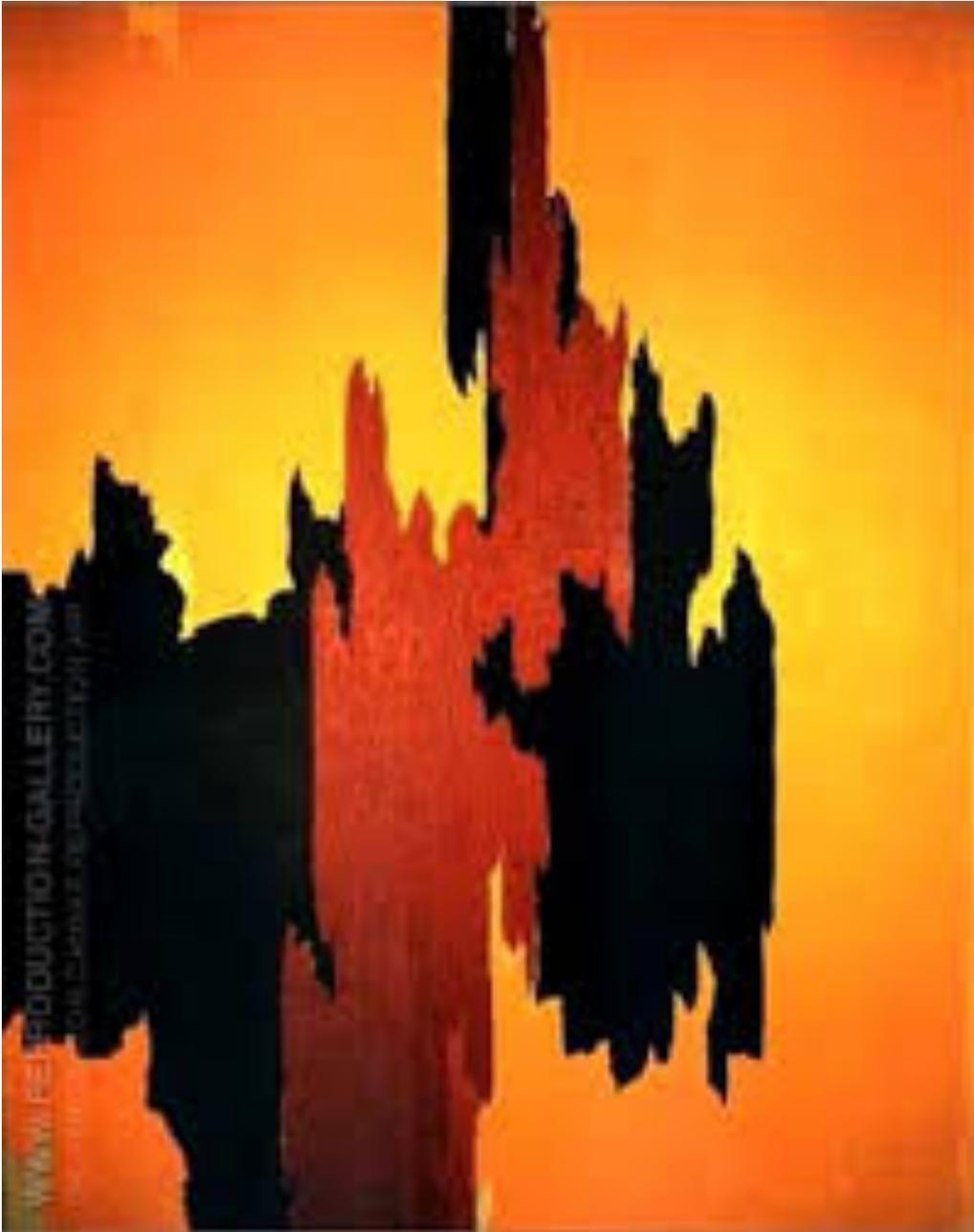


Fig. 10, *Untitled*, PH-964, 1954



Fig. 11, *Untitled*, PH-4, 1952.

Some of those heads are combined with his “life line” which also physically and conceptually resembles a lightning bolt (fig.12-13).

Lightning is a fertility symbol for several tribes, for lightning leads to rain and rain to growth.



Fig. 12. *Untitled*, PH-803, 1950.



Fig. 13. *Untitled*, 1957-J-#2

Furthermore, in general, photographs of Still's head show it as oval yet with an almost pointed beard (fig. 14)



Fig. 14. Clyfford Still

Depending on the photo, his face may have as sharp nose, resulting in an extended shape with a pointed end. Such an image extended and seemingly “abstract” appears frequently in Still’s early works, such as *PH-282* of 1944 and *PH-235*. In *1944-N- # 1 (PH-235)* of 1944 (fig.15) in



Fig. 15. *Untitled, 1944-N- # 1 (PH-235)* .

in which a thin, pointed shape tops a “life line” which becomes an elongated “skeleton.” Another is *PH-123* from 1947 in which a head with a short “life line” confronts a red “life line” white bone (?) figure with the characteristic raised arm (fig. 16).

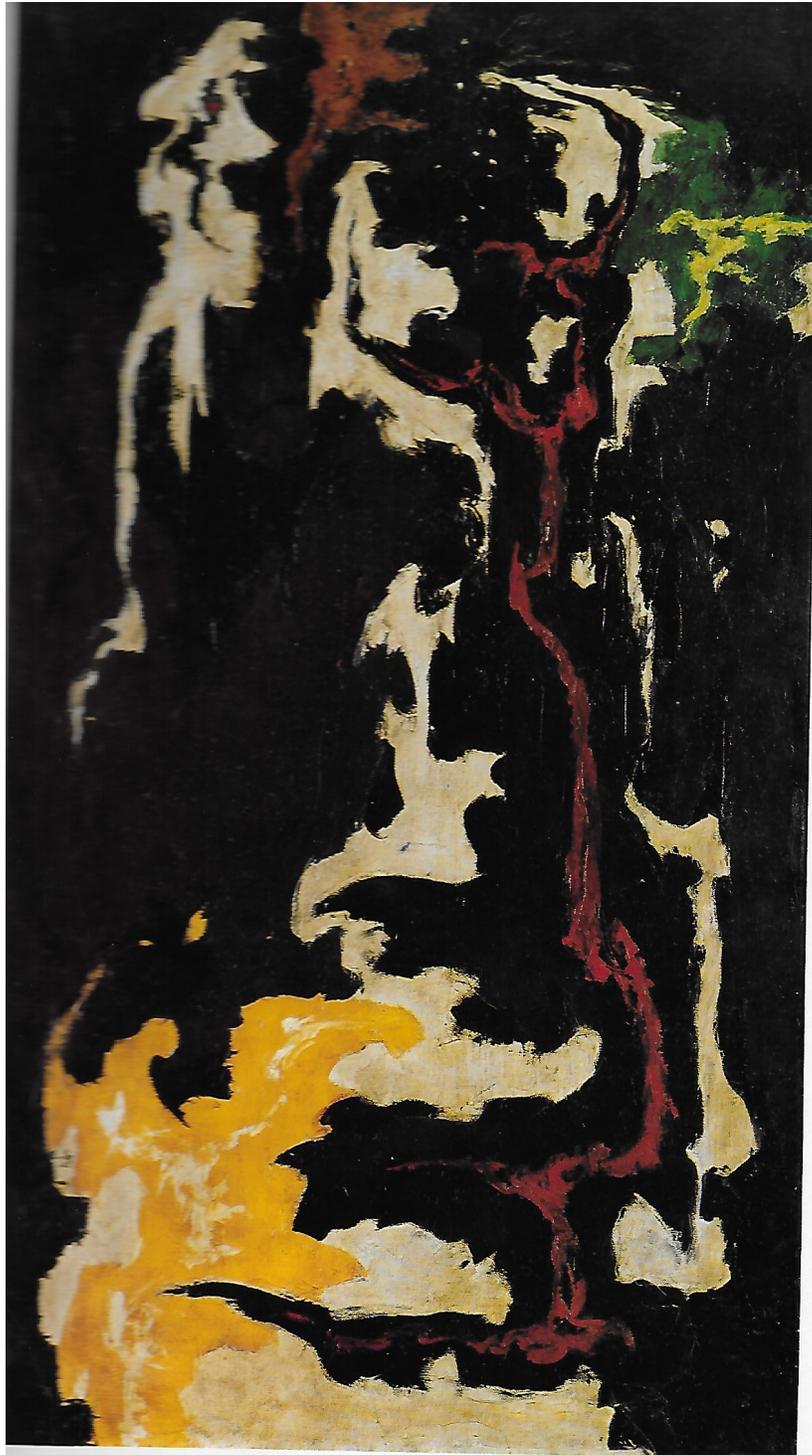


Fig. 16. *Untitled*, (Ph-123), 1947.

The painting *PH--945* of 1946 (fig. 17) consists of a yellow half or crescent moon head among other forms, including the “life-line” persona.



Fig. 17. *Untitled (PH-945)*, 1946

The painting *PH-968* (fig. 18) enlarges a confrontation of “heads,”



as does *PH-350* of 1943. These and other images from the 1940s and 1950s show evolved self-portraits at the end of his shapes and they resemble occurrences in nature such as the famous “Old Man of the Mountain” in New Hampshire, which recently collapsed (fig. 19).



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Fig. 19. “Old Man of the Mountain,” New Hampshire.

Indeed. Still’s paintings have that “Old Man of the Mountain” feel. One can see or at least speculate on the enlarged heads, monumental expanding bodies, and flying, shamanic reaching “figures” (*PH-272*). Most of his color “figures,” evolutions of the basic “figures” described above and in my other writings on Still, appear in various forms as mythic mesas and buttes and carry out shamanic tasks.

Still even repeated this self-portrait in a sculpture to carry on the themes further. Executed in wood, *PS-1* of 1943 (fig. 20) consists of a typical physical realization of a rising rock with a raised arm, and a



profile at the top right.

Fig. 20, *Untitled*, (PS-1), 1943

The profile has a strong nose and a slit mouth, much like photos (fig. 21) of the artist.



PS-1 is the physical realization of Still, as is all of his work.

Still presents himself as a shaman totem, an image of the expanding force of the earth and sky, and the profile of a vast, towering, and mythic Nietzschean power. As with all of his portraits, we have a

Nietzschean metaphoric “promontory stretching out over the abysmal gulfs [where] we dare look Creation and Annihilation full in the face.”^{xiv}

Still’s self creates a new inner being in light of the script of his era. Redoing civilization also meant redoing the man of civilization; this was to be the “personality writ large” that would renew the world amidst two world wars and replace those who brought them about (mass man). (Likewise Pollock had a similar emphasis on this new psycho-cultural personality that countered mass man).^{xv} In those times the world abounded with such “new men”: the Soviet man, the Nazi Aryan, the American hero, and unconscious-incorporating, surrealist man. The Clyfford Still Museum with its newly revealed collections shows us that Still saw himself as a self-sovereign who was dedicated to leading his own life and heroically striving to free himself from the constraints of his day and age. Clyfford Still was a Nietzschean shaman, acting in and upon the world.

Illustrations (All by Clyfford Still in the Clyfford Still Museum unless otherwise noted)

Fig. 1. *PH-215*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 32 ¼ x 26 in. Clyfford Still Museum. City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 2. Pablo Picasso, *Untitled*, 1928-9. Oil on canvas, Private Collection

Fig. 3. Paul Cezanne, *The Negro Scipio*, 1867. Oil on canvas, 42 1/10 x 32 7/10 in., Museu de San Psulo, Brazil.

Fig. 4. *PH-323*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 57 3/8 x 31 5/8 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 5. *PH-77*, 1936. Oil on canvas, 43 ¼ x 56 in.. Clyfford Still Museum. City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 6. *1947-8-W-#2*. Oil on canvas, 108 ½ x 88 in. Albright-Knox Gallery, Gift of Clyfford Still, 1964.

Fig. 7. *PH-233* (formerly *Self-Portrait*), 1945. Oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 42 in., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

Fig. 8. *1950-B*. Oil on canvas, 84 x 67 in., The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 9. Jose Clemente *Gods of the Modern World*, “Epic of American Civilization,” 1934-36. Fresco, Dartmouth College, Hanover New



Hampshire.

(fig.9)

Fig. 10. *PH-964*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 117 x 93 in., Frederick R. Weisman Foundation, Los Angeles.

Fig. 11. *PH-4*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 118 x 91½ in.. Clyfford Still Museum, City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 12. *PH-803*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 112 x 169 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Clyfford Still.

Fig. 13. *PH--971*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 113 x 148 in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 14. Photo, Clyfford Still Archive, Clyfford Still Museum.

Fig. 15. *1944-N-#2*. (*Ph-671*) Oil on canvas 104 1/4 x 87 1/4 in. The Museum of Modern Art, Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection.

Fig. 16. *PH-123*, 1947. Oil on canvas, 70 x 39 ½.. Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Fig. 17. *PH-945*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 53 ½ x 43 in. Clyfford Still

Museum. City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 18. *PH-968*, 1951-52. Oil on canvas, 113 3/8 x 156 in. Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

Fig. 19. Old Man of the Mountain, New Hampshire.

Fig. 20. *PS-1*, 1943. Carved Wood, 28 ½ in. Clyfford Still Museum. City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Fig. 21. Photo of the artist. Clyfford Still Museum. City of Denver, Gift of the Artist.

Endnotes

ⁱ Still, in Katherine Kuhn, "Clyfford Still, the Enigma," *Vogue* 155 (February 1970): 218.

ⁱⁱ For a discussion of Still's identification as a shaman, see Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 91-116, and Stephen Polcari, "Ritual Artist," in AEsenseandmeaning.net

ⁱⁱⁱ B. J. Townsend, "An Interview with Clyfford Still," *Gallery Notes* (Buffalo, Albright-Knox Gallery of Art), 24 (Summer 1961).

^{iv} Still, quoted by E.A. Carmean, Jr. in the introduction to *American Art at MidCentury: The Subjects of the Artist* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1978) 41, n. 56.

^v Still, quoted in Ti-Grace Sharpless, *Clyfford Still* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1963) unpaginated.

vi. Michael Harner, *The Way Of the Shaman* (New York: Harper One, 1980, 1990), xxi.

vii See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*, 114-5.

viii For a discussion of Still's *modus vividi*, see *ibid.*, 91-116.

ix. See Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

x *Ibid.*

xi Freiderich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra..* trans. Thomas Common, (*Pacific Publishing Studio, 2011*), 46.

xii See Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience*.

xiii Ernest Briggs, personal communication, May 18, 1977.

Briggs was a well-known painter who began as a student of Still in California. For Nietzsche, art was the greatest means of the self, the artist, a sovereign who stands at the center of his own making. He is the supreme force, or in Nietzschean terms, Dionysian, and he is best as an artist. As a competitor for creation and knowledge, universities produced –“knowers” – scholars but not thinkers. They may *think* they think, but they merely hold the “dry bones of knowledge.”

The fact that this idea was widespread between the wars one need only mention its most well-known example- - Jose Clemente Orozco's mural “The Epic of American Civilization” at Dartmouth College. In that mural, academics regimented



(Fig.9)

students to a virtual pre-zombie state while professors are also portrayed as zombie monsters standardized in a row, giving birth only to stillborn knowledge (fig . 9)

Although it has not been discussed much in scholarly writing, the ideas of Nietzsche helped inspire Orozco's imagery and thought. Orozco was well-acquainted with Nietzsche's work. Interestingly, Jackson Pollock famously and repeatedly utilized Orozco's stillborn child image, too, but not to condemn the knowledge industry, as had Nietzsche, Orozco and Still, but as a symbol of a dualistic child who dies and is reborn in his shamanic cycle (see, for example, Pollock's *She-Wolf* of 1943.)

^{xiv} See Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*.

^{xv} See Stephen Polcari, *Jackson Pollock Et Le Chamanism*. Paris: Pinacothèque de Paris, 2008 reprinted as Jackson Pollock, "Jackson Pollock and Shamanism," in aesenseandmeaning.net.