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The origin of image : the matte black paintings of Clyfford Still



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Abstract

This thesis seeks to address a gap in the literature on the artwork of the American Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still (1904-1980). Research on Still has been facilitated in recent years by the opening of the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, Colorado. However, few of the resultant publications have provided formal and phenomenological analysis of what may be Still's most challenging work: his paintings in predominantly matte black. The matte black paintings at the center of this research (reproduced in Figures 1-5) are paradigmatic of Still's conception of painting as an instrument of personal revelation and insight, rather than collective concern. As such, I take as primary sources Still's own diaries and personal library, in addition to articles and critiques written during the time when Still created these five matte black works (1944-1957). The resulting synthesis reveals Still's concern for the mechanics and conventions of sight, and more importantly, the paintings' wordless communication throughout time and to an expanding audience.

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