

A Reflection on Clyfford Still's Painting. 1944-N
by Alain Kirili

After several visits to The Museum of Modern Art to see Clyfford Still's Painting. 1944-N from the Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection, I could not resist finding out more about it and making a few notes. The attraction was so powerful that I had to understand where it had its source. For me, an artist myself, an act has to be related to a need that goes beyond formalism and, like for any human being, the need an artist experiences in his work operates on the unconscious as well as on the conscious level. Still wrote: "Painting must be an extension of the man, of his blood, a confrontation with himself. Only thus can a valid instrument of individual freedom be created." We sense, in this passage, that unbridled ideological freedom which is no less evident in the wielding of his brush. Clyfford Still never allowed a constricting ideological interpretation to be put on his pictorial research and he refused to be framed by any group or movement. Standing before a Still painting, in 1943, Andre Breton related that he felt it to be "without precedent." Yet, when he visited the artist's studio in the fall of 1945, Breton regretted the fact that Still spurned the use of titles that might have given the viewer a key to their meaning. In a diary he kept Still noted that Breton recognized, during that visit, that he had no use for his surrealist theology.

What I like in Painting. 1944-N is a high tension of color, all over the canvas, which is not, as in the case of Pollock, conveyed with spidery lines, but, instead, through the application of a fringe, apparent not only near the picture's edges but, in a most unexpected way, sweeping across from top to bottom. No pre-determined drawing divides the surface. The word "vibration" has an unfortunate optical connotation and I therefore prefer to refer to it as "movement of color." Nor has the painting anything in common with the art of the impressionists, as some would have it, since Still's is not an "art of light" or a form of illusionism. Every inch of Painting. 1944-N is a testimonial to the intrinsically coloristic and color divides the picture space with no reference whatsoever to reflection or atmospheric effects. Clyfford Still is, first of all, a painter given to specifics in the sense Cézanne was given to specifics: he never puts anything into his paintings that is not part of the property of color.

It is stimulating to stand before a painting by an artist unafraid of colors and able to cope with the difficult task of making those colors interact with each other. Even a large expanse of blackness is never mechanical or uniform. On a black surface the brushwork is even more apparent, revealing long and short strokes, some times predictably

straight and at others unexpectedly curved, varying from flat to impastoed. Still never repeats himself in the way he paints a picture. He has written to that effect: "Each painting is an episode in a personal life history, an entry in a journal," and "I fight in myself any tendency to accept a fixed, sensually appealing, recognizable style." Again, we encounter Cézanne! The quality of Painting. 1944-N's chromatic surface demonstrates this artist's strongly personal approach to the making of art and it has, therefore, to be read as a journal.