Celebrating 175: Subject File, Still, Clyfford, 1954-1986

ists - a principal stipulation of his bequest. (In his essay, Greenberg wrote that he had not appreciated Still's paintings until he saw one hung separately in 1953.)

Still's attitude created animosity. Sims, of the Metropolitan, says, "I think just because he violated the expected power relationships in the art world, that's what makes him stand out in people's minds. He was just very adamant about things, and he did succeed in getting his own way."

In addition to disliking aspects of dealing with collectors, Still had problems with curators, dealers, critics and friends. Dorothy Miller, curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art from 1934 to 1969, says that she and her husband, Holger Cahill, who headed the paintings-and-sculpture section of the Work Projects Administration from 1935 until 1943, met Still in New York in the late '40s and often invited him to dinner at their house. She describes Still as a "fascinating talker, very eloquent and very emphatic. We both liked him very much." She adds, however, "He quarreled with every friend he ever had, including my husband and me."

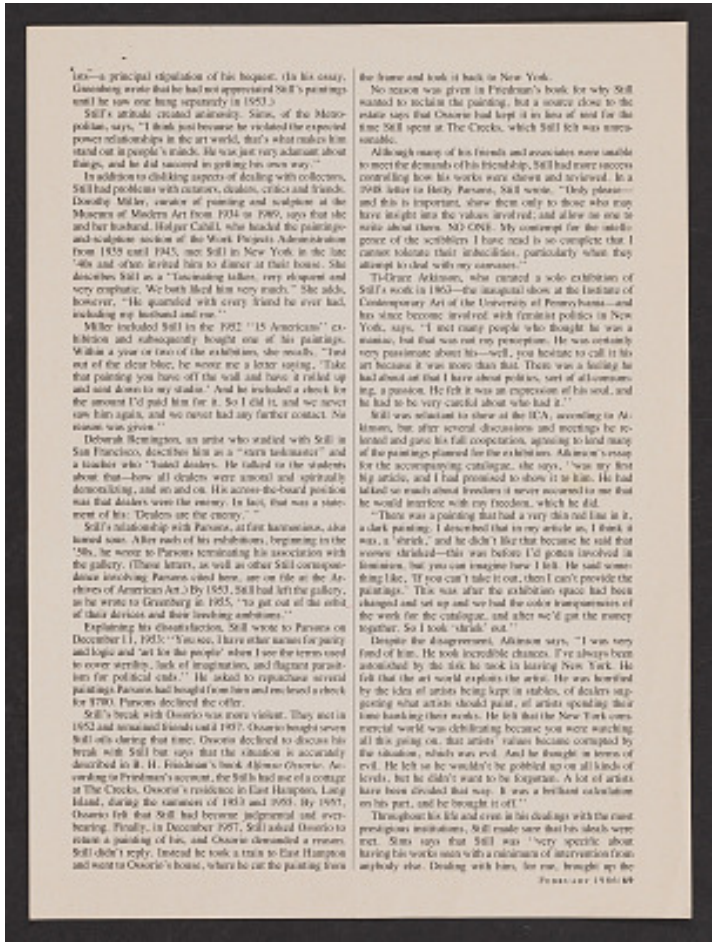
Miller included Still in the 1952 "15 Americans" exhibition and subsequently bought one of his paintings. Within a year or two of the exhibition, she recalls, "Just out of the clear blue, he wrote me a letter saying,'Take that painting you have off the wall and have it rolled up and sent down to my studio.' And he included a check for the amount I'd paid him for it. So I did it, and we never saw him again, and we never had any further contact. No reason was given."

Deborah Remington, an artist who studied with Still in San Francisco, describes him as a "stern taskmaster" and a teacher who "hated dealers. He talked to the students about that-how all dealers were amoral and spiritually demoralizing, and on and on. His across-the-board position was that dealers were the enemy. In fact, that was a statement of his: 'Dealers are the enemy.'"

Still's relationship with Parsons, at first harmonious, also turned sour. After each of his exhibitions, beginning in the '50s, he wrote to Parsons terminating his association with the gallery. (These letters, as well as other Still correspondence involving Parsons cited here, are on file at the Archives of American Art.) By 1953, Still had left the gallery, as he wrote to Greenberg in 1955, "to get out of the orbit of their devices and their leeching ambitions."

Explaining his dissatisfaction, Still wrote to Parsons on December 11, 1953: "You see, I have other names for purity and logic and 'art for the people' when I see the terms used to cover sterility, lack of imagination, and flagrant parasitism for political ends." He asked to repurchase several paintings Parsons had bought from him and enclosed a check for $700. Parsons declined the offer.

Still's break with Ossorio was more violent. They met in 1952 and remained friends until 1957. Ossorio bought seven Still oils during that time. Ossorio declined to discuss his break with Still but says that the situation is accurately described in B.H. Friedman's book Alfonso Ossorio. According to Friedman's account, the Stills had use of a cottage at the Creeks, Ossorio's residence in East Hampton, Long Island, during the summers of 1953 and 1955. By 1957, Ossorio felt that Still had become judgmental and overbearing. Finally in December



1957, Still asked Ossorio to return a painting of his, and Ossorio demanded a reason. Still didn't reply. Instead he took a train to East Hampton and went to Ossorio's house, where he cut the painting from the frame and took it back to New York.

No reason was given in Friedman's book for why Still wanted to reclaim the painting, but a source close to the estate says that Ossorio had kept it in lieu of rent for the time Still spent at The Creeks, which Still felt was unreasonable.

Although many of his friends and associates were unable to meet the demands of his friendship, Still had more success controlling how his works were shown and reviewed. In a 1948 letter to Betty Parsons, Still wrote, "Only please—and this is important, show them only to those who may have insight into the values involved; and allow no one to write about them. NO ONE. My contempt for the intelligence of the scribblers I have read is so complete that I cannot tolerate their imbecilities, particularly when they attempt to deal with my canvases."

Ti-Grace Atkinson, who curated a solo exhibition of Still's work in 1963-the inaugural show at the institute of Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania-and had since become involved with feminist politics in New York, says, "I met many people who thought he was a maniac, but that was not my perception. He was certainly very passionate about his—well, you hesitate to call it his art because it was more than that. There was a feeling he had about art that I have about politics, sort of all-consuming, a passion. He felt it was an expression of his soul, and he had to be very careful about who had it."

Still was reluctant to show at the ICA, according to Atkinson, but after several discussions and meetings he relented and gave his full cooperation, agreeing to lend many of the paintings planned for the exhibition. Atkinson's essay for the accompanying catalogue, she says, "was my first big article, and I had promised to show it to him. He had talked so much about freedom it never occurred to me that he would interfere with my freedom, which he did.

"There was a painting that had a very thin red line in it, a dark painting. I described that in my article as, I think it was, a 'shriek,' and he didn't like that because he said that women shrieked—this was before I'd gotten involved in feminism, but you can imagine how I felt. He said something like, 'If you can't take it out, then I can't provide the paintings.' This was after the exhibition space had been changed and set up and we had the color transparencies of the work for the catalogue, and after we'd got the money together. So I took 'shriek' out."

Despite the disagreement, Atkinson says, "I was very fond of him. He took incredible chances. I've always been astonished by the risk he took in leaving New York. He felt that the art world exploits the artist. He was horrified by the idea of artists being kept in stables, of dealers suggesting what artists should paint, of artists spending their time hawking their works. He felt that the New York commercial world was debilitating because you were watching all this going on, that artists' values became corrupted by the situation, which was evil. And he thought in terms of evil. He left so he wouldn't be gobbled up on all kinds of levels, but he didn't want to be forgotten. A lot of artists have been divided that way. It was brilliant calculation on his part, and he brought it off."

Throughout his life and even in his dealings with the most prestigious institutions, Still made sure that his ideals were met. Sims says that Still was "very specific about having his works seen with a minimum of intervention from anybody else. Dealing with him, for me, brought up the

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