



**‘Clyfford Still  
cherished the truth  
of painting as a bodily  
act and experience  
rather than an idea’**

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## Clyfford Still

by Christopher Le Brun *PRA*

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into  
the wordless,

Away from books, away from art, the day  
erased, the lesson done,

Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing,  
pondering the themes thou lovest best,  
Night, sleep, death and the stars.

*A Clear Midnight*

Walt Whitman (1881)

Clyfford Still had the essential tendency of  
the great American artists towards the wordless,  
to what the literary critic Harold Bloom calls  
‘un-naming’. Still was aware of the false light  
that words can cast and the responsibility on the

artist not to undermine art’s natural subjectivity  
with the assimilation society seeks.

His paintings are huge in scale, their  
colour sombre and ecstatic. They are radiant  
with their core principles. They tend to  
singularities – described by Still as the ‘vertical  
necessity of life’ – that stand up in a confronting  
tall or wide surface plane spread with colour,  
co-existent with thresholds and borders.

‘Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible  
Sun within us,’ wrote the physician and essayist  
Sir Thomas Browne in 1658; these lapidary,  
timeless words are entirely appropriate for Still’s  
heroic ambition. His work constitutes an extreme  
of romanticism, possessing a nobility of purpose,  
dismissive of irony, quotation and the whole  
apparatus of art appreciation. It is today an attitude  
as rare and as mistrusted, yet as vital, as it was in  
the middle years of the 20th century.

Still cherished the central truth of painting  
as a bodily act and experience rather than an  
idea. Between the viewer and the embodied

enigma that is painting stands no interpretation,  
nothing to diminish or ingratiate. His  
paintings’ very silence lets their flame-  
like colour appear in and for itself, and as  
the product of the human imagination can no  
more be explained away than we can ourselves  
(*PH-4*, 1952, above). Difficulty alone does not  
deserve our interest, but difficulty achieved  
through conviction may satisfy the deepest and  
most inward categories of our questioning.

There is a reason these paintings are big,  
occasionally overpowering. They are to be  
felt, walked in front of, glimpsed, stared  
at, dwelt with. See how much the light and  
colour changes as we move, near, far; the  
rectangle of the painting is rarely orthogonal.  
Which is the true light in which the painting  
is to be seen? Which is the true colour? There  
is no such thing. A painting is not a screen  
upon which phantom presence is portrayed. It is  
an object steeped in thought made by a solitary  
hand. What inner light it has is mind made.