

## BAY AREA ABSTRACTION 1945-1965

**THE BEARER OF ITS PASSION.** *Locus* is Latin for “place”—“where it’s happening,” in English—as in: “By the early 1950s, New York had emerged as the locus of Postwar abstraction.” In his introduction to *50 West Coast Artists*, published three decades later (1981) by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, its director framed “the question of local designation” as an abiding problem for art history as well as for artists and the art world: “It seems to emerge from the unspoken and challenged tendency on the part of New York writers to assume that artists living and working within a hundred-mile radius of New York City represent the mainstream of American art and therefore don’t require a ‘New York’ designation. Such a title as *American Painting for the 80s*, a recent exhibition selected by Barbara Rose almost exclusively from artists working in New York, is not only misleading but harmful.” It’s ironic that SFMOMA’s *50 West Coast Artists* did not include even one of the artists on view in the current *Bay Area Abstraction 1945-1965* at David Richard Contemporary, featuring artists who shared in common their creative genesis at the San Francisco Art Institute (then the California School of Fine Arts). And two days before the opening last month of *Bay Area Abstraction*, *The New York Times* article on that day’s Sotheby auction (“Fortune Smiles on Abstract Art,” Nov. 9, 2011) reported that abstractionism was “propelled to a new level” with the evening’s blockbuster sales of abstract art, led by two paintings by Clyfford Still totaling \$93 million. Still’s *1949-A-No. 1* alone sold for almost \$62 million. What goes around...

Clyfford Still (1904-1980) is the *genius loci* of *Bay Area Abstraction*. A major figure in the first generation of the New

York School, Still’s influence was felt firsthand through his teaching at the former California School of Fine Arts (now SFAI) which followed his first solo exhibition in the winter of 1946 at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century Gallery. The list of artists in *Bay Area Abstraction* reads like a biblical genealogy traceable to SFAI and Still’s tenure there in the late 1940s. Along with Edward Dugmore, Jack Jefferson, and Frank Lobdell were Still’s students, with whom, in turn, Charles Strong would study. While at CSFA Strong was influenced also by Hassel Smith, who is represented in *Bay Area Abstraction* by his own work and that of several of his former students: Madeleine Dimond, Lilly Fenichel, James Kelly, and Deborah Remington. Robert McChesney was also on the CSFA faculty during this formative period (1945-50) for West Coast abstraction.

The paintings in *Bay Area Abstraction* share in the signature formal traits of the New York School’s Action Painting: large-scale formats of bold, primordial shapes or pictographic figures rendered with scabrous gestural brushstrokes merging figure and ground into holistic compositions—variously expansive, allusive, monumental, and sublime. Absent the Postwar malaise, Existentialist angst, and Surrealist bent that shaped the cultural context of Action Painting for the New York School, the uniquely American reference of landscape in Abstract Expressionism is perhaps more visible on the West Coast, especially in the work of Jack Jefferson, Frank Lobdell, and Charles Strong, the artists most heavily represented in the show.

The mythic American landscape—long held to subtend the movement’s biomorphic shapes and totemic figures floating or swirling in dense tonalities of iconic color fields—assumed

an Alexandrian cast in the West. The explicitly urban and local references of Bay Area abstraction centered at CSFA—Jefferson’s paintings titled with street names, Lobdell’s agrarian aerial views, Strong’s topographies of *Bolinas Peninsula*, *Wharf Road*, and *Harrison Street*—have the feel of Theocritan idylls in some inverse metonymy evoking the great plains, high desert, and mountain ranges of the vanishing West. Notwithstanding Still’s ambivalence about any linkage of his imagery to the Dakota plains of his early youth, it is perhaps no anomaly for Bay Area abstraction that Still’s impact at CSFA in the late 1940s coincided with Ansel Adams’ tenure as the founder of the school’s department of photography.

That said, Abstract Expressionism is *sui generis*. For all the allusive quality of Charles Strong’s *Wharf Road*, its large scale, bold outlines, and swirling shapes belie a rich chromatic composition that—together with his *Wharf Road: Marin Verde*—evokes the decorative harmony of an arabesque by Matisse. Yet while the authenticity of the paintings in *Bay Area Abstraction* is a testament to their achievement, in their own ways they confirm what Irving Sandler identified as “a feeling of America in Still’s painting,” with his abstractions “replacing the American West as the open frontier.” Sandler rightly traces this conception of a “mythic terrain” to one locus, surely—Still’s own writings about the new abstraction (1959): “It was a journey that one must make, walking straight and alone. ... Until one had crossed the darkened and wasted valleys and come at last into clear air and could stand on a high and limitless plain. Imagination ... became as one with Vision. And the Act, intrinsic and absolute, was its meaning, and the bearer of its passion.”

—RICHARD TOBIN



Charles Strong, *Wharf Road*, oil on canvas, 91 1/4" x 132 1/2", 1966