EDWARD CLARK'S LUMINOUS EXPANSES

by April Kingsley

Ed Clark was born in New Orleans where last winter's teaching gig located him once again, and where a major breakthrough happened in his art. It wasn't family reunited or roots rediscovered, but the light, the particular fluidity of the Louisiana light that reinspired him. He's sensitive to those factors, of course, but the ambient light of his surroundings is always the most crucial influence on his work. The Paris paintings have a different luminosity than the New York canvases and the African ones yet another strikingly altered light quality. The Louisiana light, as it is reflected in his recent canvases, is soft and liquid with a pearly luminescence that reminds me, for some unfathomable reason, of Chardin. The intimacy this comparison implies may seem absurd for Clark's large-scale paintings, but he, like Mark Rothko, seems now to be "painting large to be intimate."

There are quite a few concordances between these paintings and Rothko's hazy rectangles which in itself marks a fascinating shift in Clark's style. A direct heir to the Abstract Expressionist tradition (in the Cedar Bar, '50s, Brata Gallery, second-generation gestural manner) despite his long absence in Paris, Clark has, until now, been much closer to Pollock and Kline than to a more meditative painter like Rothko. He has been involved with horizontal bandings of one sort or another for over twenty years, but they have always been charged with enormous energy. They fly through the picture field so fast they make Kenneth Noland's stripes look as static as the little feet on Balls' dog. The quickened tempo of mid-twentieth century life lay behind de Kooning's whiplash line, Kline's thunderous swaths and Pollock's spun-wire drip. Clark invented a technique with an equivalent potential for speed in the early sixties when he began pushing acrylic pigment rapidly across the surface in one long swoop of a pushbroom. Splashes and splats of paint flew off on every side and were left there as mementos of the gesture's thrust. He had found that using a paintbrush, even the wide one of the housepainter, caused his hands to make short curving strokes whereas what he wanted was a single long sweep that could unify the canvas from side to side. The pushbroom's straight lines, and the straight path it cuts, made it the perfect tool for expressing the aggressive sexuality of his personal style —a kind of "macho" color-field. Abstract Expressionism.

But this year, his Louisiana period, things are changing. The long swoop is still there, running through the middle, but is isolated on the field now with a new hint of cylindricality to add to its potency. It is often highlighted like Leger's vertical poles and pipes and equally discordant, because it passes (like a giant ramrod) through matter of cloudlike softness to which it is in unique new contrast. Hard into soft, male and female, dynamism opposing stasis, active vs. passive, frontal "lock-on" to restrain sideways (horizontal) escape—new dualities break the unity he had always striven to maintain.

The reason for this dramatic shift in Clark's work didn't dawn on me when I was in his Chelsea studio last month to see the Louisiana paintings and the pastels that generated them, though it was staring me in the face. He had been using horizontal bands long before I first got to know his work in the late sixties following his return from Paris—a few bands in the early days concentrated in the central area which widened consistently during the decade until he achieved all-over striping in the New York and African canvases of the '70s. The stripes had always been contained by a curving round shape—at first a circle then an oval, and finally an ellipse—either physically in shaped canvases, or diagrammatically within curved outlines drawn on rectangular fields. The straight lines had always been trapped within curves and these restraints had suddenly disappeared!

The reason this didn't surprise me as much as it should have is that the new soft frontality, above and below the speeding lines of the hard-edged middle section, is actually fulfilling the role played previously by the ellipse. The softness is a "female" foil to the "male" rigidity of the central form and the frontality counters the tendency of the horizontal unit to shoot out of the picture space on either side.

The ellipse was broken in the pastels Clark was working on just before and early in his six months' Louisiana sojourn. It was cut in half horizontally and the two halves were reversed to converge on the center of the painting. The implication emerged that two ellipses were moving out of the field at top and bottom. Gradually as these arcs were made shallower, until nearly straightened out, Clark's innate tendency to the curve led him to use painterly stroking and rubbing gestures in the upper and lower section. He returned to "handpainting" by literally rubbing pulverized pastel pigment into paper—another innovatory technique discovered out of inner necessity, like the pushbroom stroke. The third contributing factor in this breakthrough was undoubtedly the Louisiana light, in that its slippery, quicksilver fluidity found its most appropriate response in a new thinned-paint technique that departs radically from the thickly swept-on pigment of prior years. There is a daring range of surface density in these recent paintings from encrusted spot to raw canvas which Clark never permitted before.

So, now we have eight- and ten-foot canvases where a hazy blue sky with pinkish corners edging in hovers above a swath of beige-shaped and modeled like a cylinder while a lightly modulated rectangle of rosy beige fills the lower third of the picture. Or, in another work, a pink "cloud" floats above a whitened "horizon" with flecks of baby blue peeking out beneath like light rays. The central passage in this painting is edged unevenly in black (really burnt umber, which he uses more or less uniformly in all his work to temper his hues) and more blue: these are left unadulterated by the same hand that has smudged the entire lower area into an unnameable brownish glow. Abutted edges in the interior crackle as though electricity were being sparked by their proximity—which is Rothko-like—while the outer peripheries are smoothed over gently.

The new paintings are more like landscapes than any of his abstractions has ever been, yet they retain some of the celestial allusions of before—spinning planets, Saturnian rings, shooting stars, Martian red skies, vapor rings, and the Milky Way. Leo Steinberg, speaking of the ways art accustoms us to new scientific concepts, could have been describing Clark's work when he stated that "modern painting inures us to the aspect of a world housing not discrete forms but trajectories and vectors, lines of tension and strain. Form in the sense of solid substance melts away and resolves itself into dynamic process. Instead of bodies powered by muscle, or by gravity, we get energy propagating itself in the void."

Clark accepts a scientific reading of his work, just as he does a variety of sexual, mechanical, or landscape connotations. Clark is too intelligent a painter not to sense their inevitability, but also not to care. His elliptical mind encompasses multiplicity like Walt Whitman's contains multitudes. His concerns are elsewhere—mainly with the light which no words can circumscribe and with conveying a true impression of the atmosphere surrounding him at any given location. He, the painter, is the medium absorbing that atmosphere, passing it through his body and brush to let it emerge in visual equivalents, tempered by his extensive comprehension of painterly tradition as well as current possibilities charged by chance and the force of his mood. The paintings that emerge stand on their own merits as complex, beautiful affirmations of life.