

CONFLICT IN COLOR

ART

NEWSWEEK

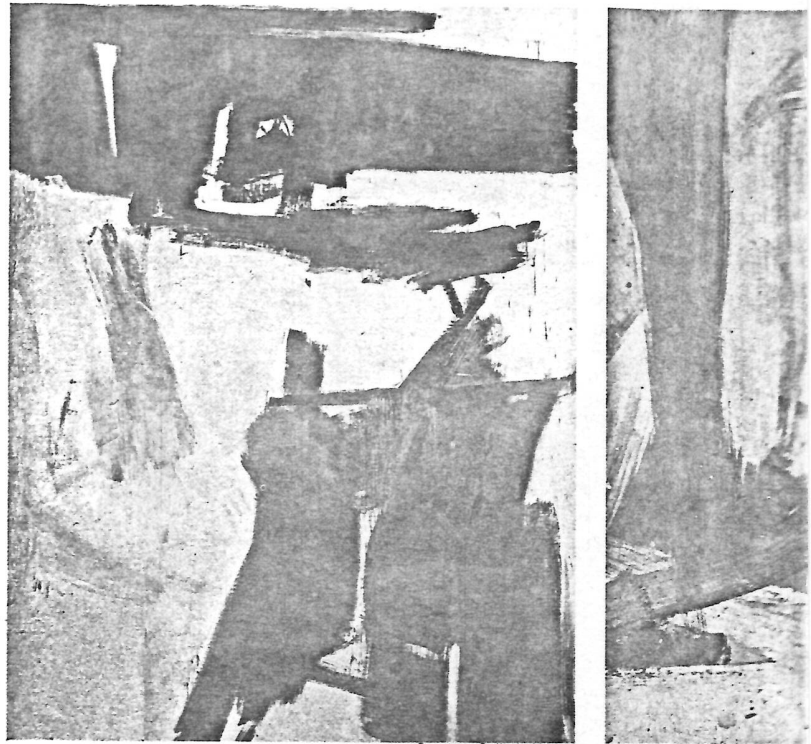
In the years following World War II, America's pioneering abstract expressionists embarked on a struggle to paint great and meaningful pictures free of European influence. They tended to work in stark black and white, not only as a way of making a fresh start, but also in unconscious response to an era that looked and felt black and white on TV, in the movies and newspapers and even in our cold-war politics, which presented black/white, either/or alternatives. The mood of that period was quintessentially expressed in the paintings of Franz Kline, and Kline used black and white so exclusively that he's been identified with it ever since. The exhibition "Franz Kline: The Color Abstractions" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, therefore, comes as something of a revelation.*

When it became known in the mid-'50s that Kline was trying to convert to color, the art world buzzed with the question Kline must have been asking himself: how could his violent, skeletal images, so right in simple black and white, be expressed in yellows and reds, purples and greens? That question has only now been answered. The Los Angeles show, organized by the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., proves that Kline's death in 1962 at the age of 51 cost us not only one of our finest "action painters" but one of our most distinctive colorists as well.

QUICKSILVER: Kline is probably the least exhibited major painter of his generation, with only one New York museum show in the past 30 years, and thus this retrospective rediscovers him not only for the heroic large abstractions that have become his trademark, but also for his quicksilver style on a small scale. The works range from a tiny all-white early painting of a door, through typically structured black and whites with areas of color such as "Orange and Black Wall," to all-color orchestrations like "Dahlia."

With or without color, Kline's gritty abstractions make you feel as though you're inside the chaotic grid of an unfinished skyscraper. The typical Kline is a powerhouse. Blacks or (in later works) streaks of color flash across a scarred white surface, screeching to a halt or narrowing suddenly as if darting into the distance. Swaths of pigment pivot and cantilever precariously, but nonetheless we remain perversely confident of their stability. For all the knife-edged aggression and random violence, something tender whispers along their tattered planes, like a softly lit scene of tenement

*The exhibition will travel to the Seattle Art Museum in September.



Courtesy Gallerie Maeght

'Mycenae' (1958) and 'Cage I' (1959): Knife-edged aggression with a touch of

domesticity glimpsed from a passing train.

For all his dynamism, Kline attacked his canvases knowing what he intended by each gesture. He was a deeply thoughtful artist, aware even of such "foreign" aspects of modernism as the constructivism of Malevich and Mondrian, as is obvious in the current show's "Yellow Square" and "Cage I." He made oblique references to both of those artists in conversation, while diverging dramatically from their foursquare stability in paint.

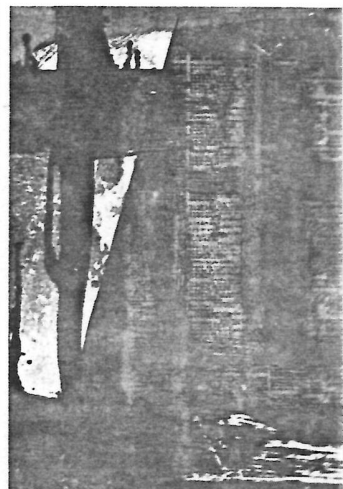
LOOK OF URGENCY: Kline deliberately played against his own structural certainty by going to the opposite extreme—shredding edges, souring color and slashing deep into the picture space in an attempt, sometimes overdone, to demolish the clarity that he seemed to achieve too easily. Nothing in abstract expressionism looks quite as raw as these Klines, partly because nothing is, and partly because we've seen the work of his contemporaries so much more often we have come to take them somewhat for granted. The Klines still have the look of urgency, as though painting them had been a matter of life and death.

Interestingly, Kline took most of his life to begin trusting his emotions to color and finally did so knowing that his enlarged heart, weakened by youthful rheumatic fever, would leave him only a short time more to paint. It was characteristic of him to resist giving up old loyalties until the last minute. His breakthrough leap into large-scale abstraction had come suddenly, after years of working in a wide range of representational styles that accorded with his enthusiasms of the moment. A natural draftsman, trained in caricature, he loved

Hokusai and Hogarth, Daumier, Toulouse-Lautrec; a romantic who liked to express his feelings in terms of chiaroscuro, he admired Rembrandt, Goya, Ryder and the music of Liszt, "Dahlia" and "Harley Red," which appeared in the Los Angeles issue from his room while his "Wall" paintings and small works belong to the draft.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., in 1921 to study art in Boston and later in New York, Kline formulated his insignia style in 1949 when he discovered his natural talent for enlarging small, austere derived sketches to huge dimensions, as other artists usually did. The intimacy and urgency of the small Napkin doodles, brush wipings

'Untitled' (1952): Gutsy grid



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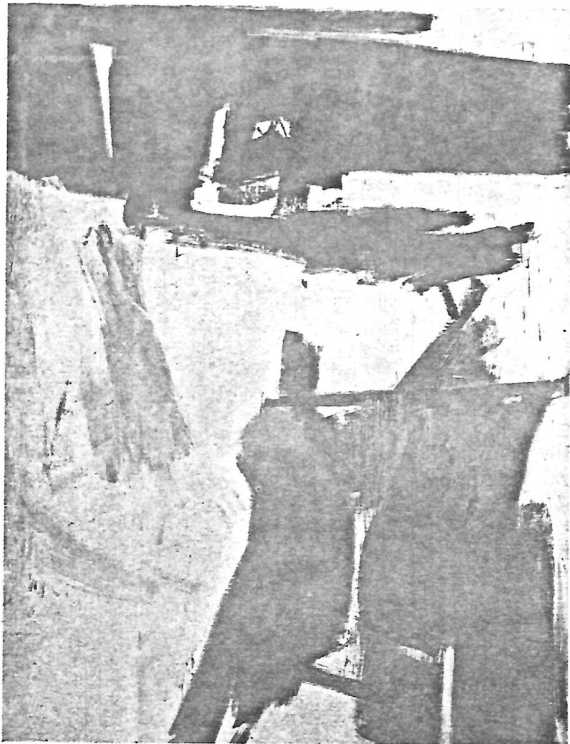
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Courtesy Gallerie Maeght



Private Collection, New York

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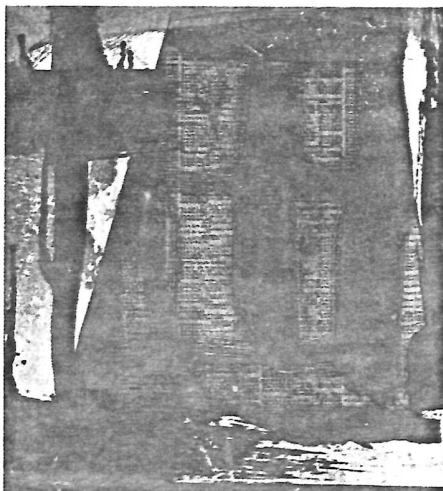
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Hokusai and Hogarth, Daumier and Toulouse-Lautrec; a romantic who learned early to express his feelings in the shadows of chiaroscuro, he admired Rembrandt, Goya, Ryder and the music of Wagner. "Dahlia" and "Harley Red," on view in Los Angeles, issue from his romantic side, while his "Wall" paintings and most of the small works belong to the draftsman side.

Born in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Kline left at 21 to study art in Boston and London. He formulated his insignia style in New York in 1949 when he discovered his unique talent for enlarging small, automatically derived sketches to huge dimensions without, as other artists usually did, losing the intimacy and urgency of the smaller works. Napkin doodles, brush wipings and other

'Untitled' (1952): Gutsy grid

Private Collection



uncensored marks as well as thoughtfully constructed studies all became material for his palette. His uncanny ability to "blow up" abstract sketches freehand has never been equaled. It's fascinating to make comparisons between the brusque, sparkling raw studies and the finished paintings Kline did from them. When he's successful, the personal is made public.

PURITANICAL: As the black and white postwar years gave way to the technicolor prosperity and ideological pluralism of the '60s, most of our best painters unconsciously responded with more optimistic, inclusive and colorful paintings, but none held on to the desperation of their earlier styles as tenaciously as Kline. Where de Kooning, Brooks, Motherwell and Hofmann threw themselves into full color hedonistically, accepting it as a gift from nature and

celebrating its potential for emotional expansion in glowing hues, Kline continued to use color in tensely circumscribed units of full-strength paint. It is almost as though he were puritanically wary of its joy-giving powers.

Kline's color is rarely sensuous. It is gutsy, specific and as abstract as Léger's. It often seems to have come straight from the tube and to have been applied in amounts you can measure. Even at its richest, it is rarely atmospherically diffused. At first, he spaced black and whites with it, as in "De Medici," or used it in place of black in an early-stage study such as "Untitled," a brush drawing done on a telephone-book page from 1952. Eventually, whole huge canvases came to be orchestrated in color, like "Mycenae" of 1958, without including any black at all. But something of the city's grime that was solidified in his blacks clings to most of his color throughout, lending it a disturbingly strange flavor, ranging from sour lime-yellows to cloyingly sweet grape-purples and magentas.

His color became increasingly evocative toward the end. In his last pictures, only a few intense hues, which Kline applied with Venetian painterly assurance, consume the entire surface. "Scudera" and "Red Painting" even verge on the iconic, religious territory that we usually associate with Rothko. They are so resonant with color one feels Titian himself would comprehend the emotion behind them despite the centuries-long gulf that separates the two painters. But, as Franz Kline once said, "If you meant it enough when you did it, it will mean that much."

APRIL KINGSLEY