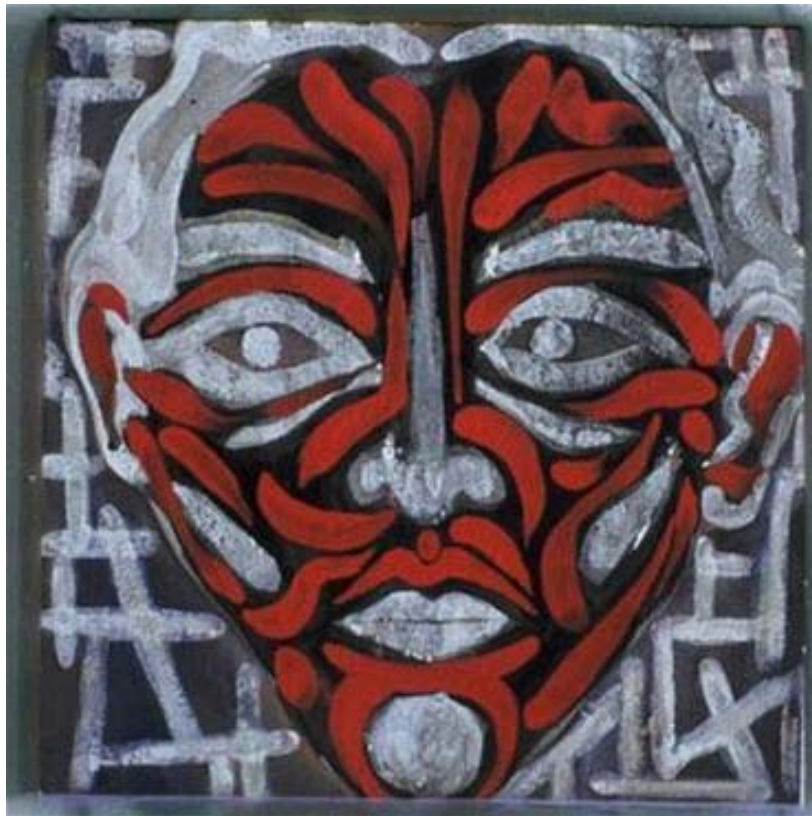


Blood and Stone



Paintings by Alan Clark

Blood and Stone: Paintings by Alan Clark

“ . . . gate of our being, awaken me, bring dawn,
grant that I see the face of the living day,
grant that I see the face of this live night,
everything speaks now, everything is transformed,
O arch of blood, bridge of our pulse beating,
carry me through to the far side of this night. . .
. . . I want to go on, to go beyond; I cannot;
the moment scatters itself in many things,
I have slept the dreams of the stone that never dreams
and deep among the dreams of years like stones
have heard the singing of my imprisoned blood,
with a premonition of light the sea sang,
and one by one the barriers give way. . . ”

*Excerpted from **Sun Stone** (1957), Octavio Paz*

My first encounter with Alan Clark was as a reader of his poetry. Enigmatic titles like “Words from a Dark Garden,” “Lazing on the Edge of a Volcano,” and “Can’t Not” lured me into new territories; the jagged, syncopated rhythms of his verse. With the lyricism of the finest Latin poets, and a frankness that is distinctly American, Clark’s poems are accessible and explicit. His words are the outpouring of what he knows, and what he is compelled to examine – the necessity of creation, and the eloquence of nature, desire, restlessness, and loss. In the heat of human contact, or the stony silence of isolation, he finds beauty in our physicality and spirituality, set against the seasons and the stars.

In “Sun and Ice,” he offers just a whisper of his inner world:

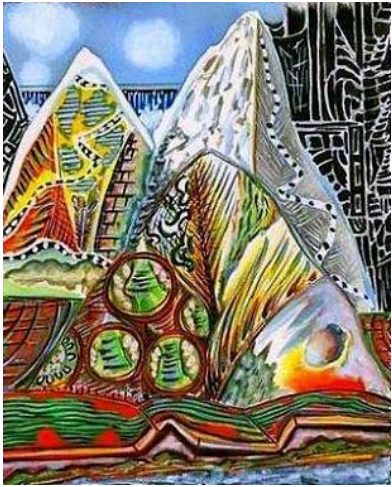
In the soft, still, cold quiet of a day like today,
my heart becomes a leaf inside an inside air;
whichever way it blows or doesn’t blow, is here.
Outside, a cold tree warms with sun
in an icy grace of clearness. . . my blood a sun,
my eyes, like the air, everywhere at once. . .

When I learned that Clark had been making his living as an artist for nearly three decades, I was intrigued. As a collector of twentieth century and contemporary art, I couldn’t help but wonder how his poetic voice would translate to a different sort of page, if his painting would be as luxurious, unexpected, and encompassing.

I was not disappointed.

What I discovered is the work of a mature, versatile, and self-assured artist. Clark’s creations are mesmerizing, visceral, and at times fierce. His compositions are alive with bold color and line, unanticipated angles and perspectives. The subject matter is expansive, and sometimes explosive. Its treatment is fearless and intelligent. He offers up a dizzying array of rivers and mountains, suns and moons, gods, idols, organs and the organic, forays inside the splendor of flower or bird, surgical cross-sections of everything - fascinating, disturbing, and revelatory.

As in his poetry, Clark uses titles to enhance and invite, each leading the viewer into his world. *Blood and Stone*, *Mago (The Wizard)*, *Alert Eruption*, *Black Beauty*, and *Everflower* are among the first of his paintings that I saw, a small sampling from the 1990s. This prolific period in Clark’s career is the focus of the most recent exhibition of his work, appearing at the Farnsworth Art museum in Rockland Maine, throughout Summer 2004.



Alert Eruption (1993)

The paintings on exhibit are characterized by Clark's boundless imagination, and include vivid, articulate compositions of diverse subjects, executed in surprisingly small size. Although he uses a variety of media, Clark frequently employs watercolor and gouache for their compatibility with his approach, as well as the intensity he achieves by plunging his brush directly into the tubes of pigment, then working and reworking with spontaneity and speed.

The result - jewel-toned creations of exuberant and energetic brush strokes, layered washes, saturated color, and impasto. Magnetic, each image is powerful enough to stand on its own, all the while forming a necessary part of Clark's larger story.

Alert Eruption (1993) is a glittering example of the vibrancy and animism that imbues so much of Clark's work - life at its origins, seething below the surface of rock, ocean, and earth. Mountains rise out of a stormy sea, newly formed of shifting strata depicted in red, green, and black.

Inside these towering formations, a stunning inner world is alive and in motion - ebullient strokes and patterning strafe the interiors, pathways snake upwards like meandering roots, or bloodstreams. A closer look beckons us into transparent spaces where interiors are partially exposed. Circular, portal-like forms provide a magnifying glass through which we peer into the very core of these structures. Views open onto other views, outside conventional reality. We see what may be a stalk, a spinal cord, the internal framework that holds everything together. A burst of fiery orange gives birth to a meteor, perhaps a planet. Boundaries exist, but deceptively so - sky enters mountain, mountain enters ocean, ocean enters earth. Lines define but do not separate, and certainly do not contain the life force that seems to course and churn inside everything.

From Clark's poem, "Painting a picture on paper in my lap:"

Making a mountain and the pathways up,
birds in the air, clouds at any level,
all the leaves in favor,
green, blue, reddish token buds,
tracks and scat that just appear,
woods and rocks with eyes that haunt me freely,
trails of old shadowlands lighted by fires,
no problem even if the clouds have broken
into a ten minute deluge forever,
a hut, a palace, the quick flag of a deer,
crying-out hares, squirrels for a rag of tail. . .
black pools at the bottom of a held back stream,
as many stars as perch clamoring
to bite and be reeled in obliviously
in this fever of endless more and more,
rockfest galaxies not spurning my dream. . .

Sparkling and powerful, the “unseen” plays an enormous role in Clark’s universe. We are encouraged to look beneath, between, inside. Magic is everywhere. Rendered in triptych-like planes, *Mago (The Wizard)* (1995) works his particular sorcery in the midst of evolving natural phenomena – celebrating, or perhaps, orchestrating the scene. Unexpected combinations enchant the viewer – golden clouds, a twist of smoke, leaves billowing up from ripe slices of earth, a man-made route jutting across the vertical plane. Bubbles of water or air spiral into an upwards shaft - conjuring of the shaman’s hand.

Center stage, the wizard is both barred from and traverses the dimensions that flank him. But in passing from one environment to the next, he is transformed. One ghostly forearm is pressed to his torso, a watch on the wrist. The other arm is raised in action. Patterns on the sleeve, at first random, form a face. The rest of his body glows in brilliant reds, yellows, and blues, highlighted by



Mago (The Wizard) (1995)



Little Winter God (1996)

black face and line. Inside his chest, the spinal cord is straight and white as bone; his heart pulsates like a sun, a volcano, an exploding star. The effect is jubilant, surreal, and mysterious. We enter his land of ritual and faith, where time and dimension are blended, and we breathe deeply — the birth of rock, water, and fire.

In *Little Winter God* (1996), deity and nature are furiously at work. A tiny idol, in a pose reminiscent of Christ on the cross, stands against a black and charcoal background of wild blizzard. Ice, light, and streaks of energy all radiate like a crown around his face; brush strokes braid through his raised arms, and line his delicate legs. Patterns of snow, circles, and eyes fly to every corner of the image. His interior exposed, we find an oasis of red, blue, gold, and softest green lighting up the painting’s center. We are compelled to lean in, to look, and to listen to the dance of musical notations warming the heart of winter.

The influence of Clark’s extended stays in Mexico is certainly felt in his depictions of deities, idols, and other representations of spirituality. It is even more evident in *Blood and Stone* (cover) and *Via Olmeca* (both 1996). These incisive paintings address man’s history as warrior, our legacy of blood spilled in courage, and brutality. Broad strokes and a loose background of hatch marks and crosses add to the fearsome quality of *Blood and Stone* as well as to the divinity of the face.

This is the portrait of essence of god, glory, mask, and flesh. With a resemblance to the stone heads of the Olmec civilization – vacant eyes, full lips - *Via Olmeca* is a bristling link to ancient heritage. Translucent, we see inside the skull, alive with dots and markings that enhance the simultaneous impression of life and death.

Frightening and beautiful, the intensity of these portrayals is heightened by almost exclusive use of red, blue, black, gray, and white, utilized in many of Clark’s paintings. These are colors of passion and life force, ocean and sky, idols and death, light and spirit.



Via Olmeca (1996)

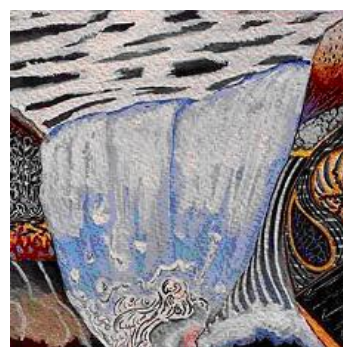
Exploring the capacity and contradictions of relationship, Clark's *Between Us* (1996) is a deliciously ambiguous piece. Its wry title suggests intimacy and distance; shared secrets. Two profiles, male and female, barely brush lips in a pose that suggests a kiss, or a heated exchange. As if to tease the viewer further, the faces are only partially depicted, from the bridge of the nose to the bottom of the chin.

The male profile is colored in luminous, impenetrable grays, while red and black are used to belie the female's emotions — the flush of passion, embarrassment, or anger. Small circles between the two sets of lips buzz with possibility, raining down like circulating eyes, or punctuation passed in the fervor of first words or a battle of the last. We are shown the complexity and variability of human interaction — passivity and power, fragility and strength, tenderness and rage. But we are given no answers. No single story. We must each fill in the blanks.

When asked about the contrasts that appear in so much of his work, Clark says, "I've always been struck by the simultaneity of things. We can feel many things at one time. These pictures are painted in that spirit — calm places and their opposite—hot with cold, fast with slow. Out of that you can make a cohesive picture. Ice and flame together."

It is not just the emotional and intellectual world of man and woman that Clark depicts. Unafraid to reflect the true nature of human being as a physical creature, the artist does not hide from the more controversial aspects of desire, love, and sexuality.

La Lengua (1994) paints a playful interpretation of man's preoccupation with sensuality and sexuality. An essential instrument of human pleasure, this tongue is created of waters crashing towards an unseen surface. Organic forms, like the earth herself, are scattered with suggestions of emotion and reproduction—a teardrop, a sperm, a cell, a leaf. Signs of life are planted everywhere, savored and nourished by this waterfall of sensation, watched over by a streaky, almost cellular sky.



La Lengua (1994)

Body of Obsession (1993) TAKES Clark's exploration of man's physicality in a different direction, daring us to look at his fearless examination of the human animal. Provocative and unapologetic, this painting stuns the viewer with its handling of need and gratification, the intersection of maleness and femaleness that collides, collaborates, and coexists in each of us. Without ascribing judgment, and as part of all that is natural, our sexuality is laid bare.



Black Beauty (1997)

Black Beauty (1997) makes erotic poetry of woman, her universality and her essence. She is seed, backbone, source of life. Supple and graceful, this dancer's body is coolly enticing. One nipple shines like an eye while the other sparkles, transformed into a small sun, an opening flower. In the background, soft clouds seem to float in a ruby sky — cells drift through blood, eggs make their own journey. Other images of fertility appear, as well as faces, one in black suggested by her form itself, and the other in white profile, uplifted. Light surrounds this beauty, and also divides her. Yet she remains intact, somehow miraculous, and exquisite.

Clark's body of work, both poetic and visual is filled with homage to women — a passion for their lush bodies, their fertility, their mystery, and their spirit.

As in all the artist's works, the symbols are many. But Clark is careful not to impose on the viewer. We are left to write our own story out of this contemplative scene, and to imagine the lives of Clark's women, who remain timeless, radiant, and tied to nature in all ways.

Clark's paintings of women are often filled with reverence, and also dedication. His dedications praise the sensual, also take verbal form, as in his poem, "Where they know:"

*Your fingers where they know where they're going,
my eyes on where they're going, my tongue on
the smooth crux of the story you allow me
sight to see (my love), vulnerable
to your own freedom, oiled up out of yourself
a silk lifetime (my heart is going crazy),
teaching me who you are, everything you are,
where the Goddesses are freest with the Gods,
who never plan, but give away desire,
like your oils, like your musks marry me
ringless as close as this, so far away,
something writing me, feeling good in my hand.*



And a Bird (1997)

In a pose not unlike the totems and icons of other Clark works, *And a Bird* (1997) offers the artist's perspective on another aspect of human experience. Against a background of vigorous jots and circles, this is the portrait of a man facing awareness of what lies ahead. His expression is somber; streaks under his eyes show signs of fatigue, and growing age. The chin resembles another eye. Three horizontal lines on his neck, step-like, echo a painting from fifteen years earlier, a pathway leading to an open window onto ocean and sky. Here, these lines direct us toward the large bird at rest, perched on the man's chest or perhaps hanging from the chain around his neck. Somehow, symbolically, we are linked to nature, to flight, and to the possibility of peace.

Yet over one shoulder, a skeletal figure hovers. On the other side, a face, mask-like, emerges from a background of curves, dots and dashes. The inevitability of the future is blended with the continuity of the past, and neither can be denied.

While his art exhibits tremendous breadth of feeling, scene, and subject matter, much of Clark's work overflows with joy. *Everflower* (1995) epitomizes the exuberance, elation, and freedom that he finds in life, and in the act of creation.

In this elegant painting, swirls and spirals dance inside the bosom of a nameless bloom. Energy shoots through its stem and leaves. In the interior, we discover vascular system, flame and wing, and at its heart, DNA. The rich earth in which this flower grows transforms into a cradling sea, lit with curls of blue and white, roving dots of seed against a bed of green. Speckled with the colors of light and sun, the viewer delights in the essence of every beginning — every flowering.

Raised in a household filled with music, Alan Clark attended Colby college during the tumultuous sixties, studying art and literature. He married young, became a parent, and later divorced. He shared in the raising of his daughter, Lyonelle, who spent much of her childhood with him, creating a special bond for them both. Clark is politically engaged and passionate in supporting causes

He considers important. He is a poet, a voracious reader, a dancer, devotee of jazz, blues, funk and Brahms, perhaps harkening back to his early upbringing. For the past sixteen years he's shared his life with his partner, Lola, to whom he attributes much of the joy he has known.



Everflower (1995)

It is from this passion, curiosity, and unbridled imagination that Clark's work emerged in the 1970s and continued to develop throughout the 1980s, and in the years since. *Errant Moon* (1983), *Everything Accessible* (1987), and *Anathor* (1993) illustrate the progression toward the kaleidoscopic reconstructions of reality that often characterize Clark's work of the 1990s — undulating pieces of ocean, sky, animal, and earth. Geometric dreamscapes, arresting and sensual portraits, witty collages, and remarkable, embryonic moments are captured on canvas and paper. And they direct us to celebrate the natural cycles of birth, growth, and death. Innocent, lucid, and at times haunting, whatever Clark has fractured, deconstructed, shattered, shifted, combined and reconfigured, the something “new” that is formed is always cohesive, creating new ways to see.



Errant Moon (1983)



Everything Accessible (1987)



Anathor (1993)

However many elements of imagination clamor for coexistence in his remarkable works, Clark's results are never chaotic. Describing his method as both spontaneous and deliberate, the artist does not approach the paper or canvas with specific intention, but he brings to it his urgency, and a need that begins with a spontaneous mark from which other marks, shapes, and composition unfold. Whatever emanates from his pencil or brush, he regards it as coming from beyond him, and part of him. He says: “It's not a choice that I'm making.”

When asked to elaborate on his work and its meaning, Clark goes on to explain: “My work is about the reality of imagination, growing from the soil (and weather) of the every day, a new world given expression out of gladness, elation, sadness, desire, the force of love, and the fertile space of stillness and silence. I open myself to the energies given me, with brush and pen, not to copy what already is, but to express exactly what I find in this letting go, knowing nature herself creates in a way not unlike this.”

Although he never fully discloses his purpose, we enter and experience our own connection to everything around us, and inside us.

*Come into a heart and listen and look:
a clock with rubies on a long chain,
an old dog howling, dead Mum in a dream
trying to see the stars on the church ceiling,
boxes of painted views, a child in an orchard,
dissolving into the air he was breathing in
just a moment ago, a hiss as the setting sun
takes him into itself, and the leaning grasses,
and the trees and sky, once and for all time.*

Alan Clark's virtuosity conjures images that are astonishing and eloquent. He challenges us to rethink our notions of boundaries and reality, and of what is beautiful, and natural. We linger under his spell. We may travel to the edges of the live day and the live night. Everything speaks. Everything is transformed. One by one, our barriers give way. We want to go on, to go beyond, and we find, in his universe, that we can.

*D. A. Wolf
Atlanta, Georgia
March 2004*