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While Maine art is most closely associated with landscape, portraiture is most deeply imbued with the ghosts of our broader cultural history. Unlike landscapes, portraits are familiar to most Americans – think Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa," van Gogh's self-portraits, Lincoln on the penny or Hamilton on the \$10 bill.

A show of Alan Clark's painting at Asymmetrick Arts reminded me that the portrait is a powerful component of modernism American art in particular. It becomes evident from the 37 paintings comprising "In This World" that Clark's default approach is the frontal portrait, as the encounter with the self-as-other.

Seeing it alone, it might not be obvious that a painting like "Center Black" is based in portraiture. It features a disk of thick black staccato brush strokes on an even ground of yellow, blue, red, black and white dots that play the role of colorful static. On one hand, it's a nod to Clark's past shows about "resisting entropy," but among dozens of uncoded portraits, the circle plays the role of the face in a standard portrait. (With apologies to Leibniz, once the title "Monad Lisa" came to me, I couldn't shake it.)

Most of Clark's images use the portrait structure, even when the painting purports to be something else. "This Isle" acts like a playfully stylized topographical look down on an island, but the head-shaped island is structured just like a frontal portrait. "A Lyric" is like a densely colored Miro portrait carved into cubism by Picasso. Alone, the knife-scraped skeins of red, blue, black, gray and orange in "Big Red Rising" might look more like a volcano, but the form is so insistently echoed that its clarion essentialism is unmistakable: It depicts a person from the neck up.

The modernist thread of portraiture to which Clark subscribes is powerful because it follows the fundament face-to-face human encounter to its spiritual conclusion. Jungians might read archetypes into this, and Lacanians the mirror stage, but self-awareness became hugely important to post-war art, and the American moment in particular. Soaring in popularity during the 1940's and '50's, existentialism offered a vocabulary for talking about modern art. Abstract expressionism became not only about alienation, trauma and anxiety, but also a vehicle for individual experience and subjectivity (following Kierkegaard), as opposed to the Hegelian notions of rationality and system that had prevailed in prewar Europe.

Existentialist discourse fit the American propensity for feeling over intellect. It watered the roots of our romantic individuality, celebrated by the likes of Thomas Jefferson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Horatio Alger and Winslow Homer.

Subjectivity, after all, not only sets up the van Gogh-styled myth of an artist as an alienated individual struggling in isolation with his materials to express his genius, but it also offers an anything-goes response to the viewer. (What you see is what you see.) With existentialism, however watered down, American art could stake a claim on authenticity, selfhood, freedom and choice – the very building blocks of societal ethics.

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Clark's movement between Mexico and Maine has allowed him to adopt a playful Mexican aesthetic but it is a foil for his soul-scraping search for self, and the carnivalesque palette never quite dominates his work. Even in the all-red painting "In the Key of Red," a mouth and then chin come in focus, and from there we can't help but see a face. Clark's color is never complete cover.

The few works that seem to see system over subject, like "This World is Veiled" or "Gentle Barricade," critique decorative aesthetic as incomplete – a point quite clear even in their titles.

Clark's work has achieved a sense of clarity since the Farnsworth's major 2004 show "Blood and Stone: Paintings by Alan Clark." While the critical self-analysis and dedication to encounter with self have become more pronounced, his work is less defined by the uncomfortable angst associated with the postwar movements like art brut. We see this in terms of Clark's incorporating decorative modes that allow his painting to (so to speak) bring along a friend. It is the Mexican sense of boldness, palette and clarity that Clark uses to answer the question aesthetic: Aesthetic is a vehicle for cultural communication. It is a way out of alienation and into society. Through aesthetic, Clark finds an individual's answer to the sometimes unbearable lightness of freedom: ethics and the social vehicle for morality. For Clark, aesthetic lights the path to being a good person in a society that values art and artists.

"Shield" is literally an emblematic painting. It reinforces Clark's centered compositional structure with bands that imply not only spiritual layers but even the structure of mandala-style paintings. While it is accessible in both traditional Western and abstract terms, for those drawn to Eastern meditational paintings, it's like a mystical welcome mat.

Bold clarity imbues Clark's paintings with a speedy immediacy, so our eyes pass over them quickly. But, while we associate spiritual content with the time-grinding slowness of quiet meditation, people inclined to this kind of visual experience often describe it as instant.

Clark's works tie many traditions of spiritually centered works together. "Black Ball in a Square," for example, has a witty title, but the nod to Malevich's mystical suprematism is clear. And the unironically essentialist portrait of "A Buddha" encourages a broad reading of Clark's work in general. Whether you see his work in existential or mystical terms – or otherwise – it is clear Clark is boldly tapping into fundamental facets of Western art and contemporary painting.

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