

# Carola Clift

## A FUSION OF CREATIVE ENERGY



3 April, 2003

*I am not a photographer who also paints, or a painter who also photographs. I am both a painter and a photographer. And for me, they are essentially the same thing.*

*Carola Clift*



*Downstairs, 1999*

*by Michael More*

**C**arola Clift will tell you that her black-and-white photographs and her colorful, intensely charged abstract paintings are more alike than distinct.

Looking at her watercolors, pastels and acrylics, you see at first their abstract qualities, the fluid, sensuous colors. But if you can settle down and take them in, the show starts within seconds. You'll find places to explore—immediately. There'll be others a year from now.

Looking at the photographs, you see the object at once: Rodin's hands (page 11), swirling water (above), the sturdy steps that stride upward on their own (page 12). But hold on a minute and the "real" subjects comes to life. Communion in The Cathedral. The nearly invisible sheet of air hovering over the churning sea. The hem of a folded blanket, a wall of glowing coals.

This potent vitality—this gift of energy—distinguishes Clift's work.

### **The real thing**

A firm handshake and an openly cheerful countenance combine with a piercing intelligence to create the impression of someone who is both very bright and very happy. While I was preparing this piece, three people used the phrase "lights up the room."

Other points came up over and over. Yes, she's very young to be so acclaimed. Yes, she often stays up most of the night painting, only to spend all the next day in the darkroom. Yes, she's a perfectionist's perfectionist.

Yes, she navigates by her own global-positioning system. Yes, these pictures touch you deep down inside. Yes. She's only 29.

And not least, as gallery owner Candace Perich says, "Carola is as radiant as her paintings."

None of that matters if the work doesn't make it. The world is full of great people who give it everything they've got, and pictures that look good at first, then deflate.

Going through a box of 50 photos to select a few for this piece, one is struck by their abundant variety, and their consistent quality. There is no way to prove the claims one hears that she's one of the best black-and-white printers around, but nothing in the pile could be used in evidence against it. A photograph on the wall for a long time seems to have only begun to reveal itself.

Each painting becomes an alternative form of transportation. Every color has a distinct transparent or opaque hue. Lines, patterns, and textures compress and expand within their own spatial structures. Each shape wrestles, rhymes, or dances with the arrays of light surrounding it. The eye can't help but pick up speed.

Carola Clift is the real thing. On the following pages is a portfolio of her work. ■

*Note: The images of paintings in this article were made from color transparency copies.*



*Swirling Water, 1999*

*When Carola Clift's portfolio "Water," a sequence of ten lyrical black-and-white prints, won the New Mexico Council of Photography's 2003 Willard Van Dyke Award, it signaled an enormous achievement. We grant the annual award to an emerging photographer for a themed portfolio of ten photographs. Each year the quality gets better, the ten finalists had all mastered their craft. Each one was worthy of its own exhibition.*

*Clift's photographs were clearly the best. The quality of the prints was extraordinary. But technical proficiency is never enough. The best photographs compel and hold your attention and later viewings reveal details you missed the first time. You never tire of looking at such pictures.*

*Abigail Adler, President  
New Mexico Council on Photography*

*Carola is very young to have mastered the process of black-and-white printing. Few people imagine the commitment of skill, time, and judgment required to make prints of such delicacy.*

*I would call her work ecstatic. It results from perception beyond contemplation. It "defines" the subject in an ultimate way.*

*What "was" at the moment it was photographed, now "is" and lives in the print. There is something of Edward Weston in her prints, something of Josef Sudek in the images. Few people have ever made such radiant prints.*

*Candace Perich  
Candace Perich Gallery  
New York*

*The way I work in both media is very active: I'm participating in what is 'becoming' in front of me—whether it is a watercolor or the way the elements in the view finder change in relation to one another. It's like a dance. I do not calculate or contrive, I'm not even really trying to 'capture' what I see, but rather to give visual form to the dance. I give it what it needs to evolve, to live and breathe on its own.*

*Carola Clift*

Carola Clift's photographs and paintings invite comparison, but deflect any conventional assumption that the viewer might make regarding the similarities or differences inherent in their respective media. Instead, these images shift the viewer's focus from restrictive definitions to the process of attentive looking that should attend both nature and culture—real, imagined, and mediated.

Some of the formally rigorous photographs have a high degree of sublimated emotion that is accentuated by an absence, and by a feeling of arrested animation—like a still-frame isolated from a motion picture that could continue at any moment. Some of the calligraphically expressionistic paintings have an internal sense of order—pushing (but not breaking) boundaries, and sounding numerous notes without dissolving into dissonance.

It is difficult to say which is more powerful—passion sublimated or passion unleashed—but these tone poems and fantasias, recorded by a sensitized observer, serve as visual equivalents for a spectrum of perceived and felt emotions that permeate our internal and external worlds.

Timothy Anglin Burgard  
Curator of American Art  
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



**Hands (Rodin's "Le Cathedrale"), 1997**



Earlier this year I recommended Carola for the Robert Mac-Namara Foundation Fellowship, which grants an artist six weeks in Maine to do new work. I was not surprised when she received it. We've been exhibiting her paintings in this gallery since 2000. All artists her age are still developing, but she is one to watch."

Nat Owings  
Owings-Dewey Fine Art  
Santa Fe

I have been in quiet appreciation of Carola Clift's photographs for some time now. Her work is informed by an intelligence of composition and spirit of insight that is truly remarkable. After recently seeing her new acrylic paintings in New York City this fall, my suspicions were confirmed—she is one of the most impressive artists under 30 working today. All work should be as penetrating as hers.

Darius Himes  
Editor, Photo-eye Booklist

**Autumn Night, 2000**



7 December, 2001

*Carola's youthful innocence (which I see in her paintings) carries a mature intent toward the idea of discovery. I see an emotion emanating from her interaction with her paint and the inspiration she draws from nature to assist this playful discovery.*

*Paul Caponigro*

*My hope is that the viewer will be able to relate to my work directly, on multiple levels, without supplementary information. Subject matter is relevant, but the art should not end there. The ultimate subject, for me, is the piece itself.*

*It is the totality of the experience that interests me. Consider the eating of an apple: begin with its shape and size, the anticipation of holding it in my hand, the color and smell. Then, with the first bite, it may be mealy or crisp and juicy, sweet or tart. All of these aspects matter. Subtle differences that few people would be conscious of can nevertheless have a profound effect. This is why, in my photography, the quality of the print is so important. But in art, the experience can go even beyond subject matter and physical properties. Music provides a useful analogy. Music is composed of notes, sounds, rhythms. But the music itself—that which really affects us—is not contained in any one note, or even in the sum of these elements. It lives among them and through them. For me, this is where the ultimate value lies.*

*Carola Clift*



*Girl on the Beach, 1996*

*There is an ambiguity in many of the pieces: they resist being reduced to a single, predictable conclusion. They ask questions, rather than stating answers, and in so doing, engage the viewer to look further.*

*Carola Clift*

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