

# Approaches to photographic art II: life imitates art

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In part one of this paper, “Approaches to Photographic Art I: Life Imitates Art”, previously published in *JOVIS* (1), I sought the sources of painterly technique in natural settings. By the comparison of my photographs to selected works of 19th century painters Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and Georges Seurat, I illustrated how these masters might have discerned in nature the templates that evolved into the impressionist brush techniques for which they became famous. In this installment, I propose to demonstrate how the 20th century abstract expressionists Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko might have observed natural elements in a manner similar to the 19th century artists and used them, within the context of their time (in which social and artistic norms, from the time leading up to World War I and extending to the present day, have undergone fragmentation and reconstitution into forms both disjointed and disruptive) to evolve their own unique styles of painting.

*Figure 1* is an image of the trunk of a rainbow eucalyptus tree taken with a 400 mm lens from a distance of about 8 feet, representing an area of just a few square inches. Compared to *Figure 2*, a painting by Clyfford Still [1904–1980], who was a post-World War II American abstract expressionist painter, this image shares common features, such as the fractal-like shapes and orientation of the sharply-defined color fields and their stark relationships to one another. There is a similar gestalt for each image. Perhaps Still had seen a pattern like this in nature which contributed to the inspiration for, and maturation of, his distinctive style of painting.

Similarly, *Figure 3* is a seascape looking west over the Pacific Ocean from Highway 1 in Big Sur, California. This image shows the sky, separated from the sea by a linear fog bank that can appear either light or dark, depending upon the time of day, the position of the clouds and the sun, and

the presence or absence of wind. The artist in me suggested that were I to rotate this image 90 degrees counterclockwise so that the lines became vertical, an otherwise ordinary seascape would transform itself into a pattern suggestive of work by Barnett Newman [1905–1970], another American abstract expressionist and color field painter. Newman’s broad, clearly-defined color fields as seen in *Figure 4*, divided by vertical lines of varying widths, tend to be geometrical compared to the sharply-defined irregularities seen in Still’s work and are evoked by mere rotation of the image.

*Figure 5* is a sunset taken at seaside from Highway 1 in the presence of a heavy cloud cover. A sudden and transitory break in the clouds revealed the pale blue sky tinted by the setting sun. This image suggested to me the work of Mark Rothko [1903–1970], an American abstract expressionist whose style frequently incorporated two or three broad, generally horizontal, color fields that bled into one another, unlike the sharp, complex shapes of interlocking fields by Still or the more geometric patterns of Newman (*Figure 6*).

## Conclusions

To assert that life imitates art presupposes that the artists I have discussed actually derived their visions of the world and the techniques with which to render them, either consciously or unconsciously, by keen observations of nature in the field. That this might be the case occurred to me through detailed study of my own photographic images in which evidence for the origins of painterly techniques came to my attention through the incredible detail provided by the full frame sensor and lenses that constitute my camera system. Assuming this to be true, once an artist applies techniques derived from observations of the natural world and creates a painting in either the traditional or modern



**Figure 1** Photograph of Rainbow Eucalyptus. 2015. Taken by the author.



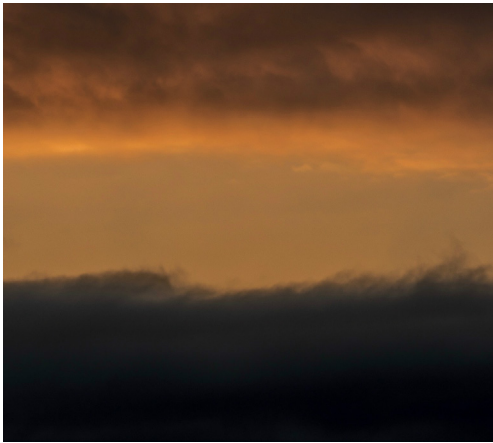
**Figure 2** Clyfford Still “1965 (PH-578)” 1965. Oil on canvas. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza/Scala. Image source: Art Resource, NY.



**Figure 3** Photograph of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur. 2016. Taken by the author, rotated 90 degrees counterclockwise to resemble a Barnett Newman painting.



**Figure 4** Barnett Newman “Concord 1949”. Oil and masking tape on canvas. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY.



**Figure 5** Photograph of the sunset at Big Sur, 2014. Taken by the author.

manner, one can say that life actually does imitate art, or, otherwise stated, provides the templates from which fine art is created. The genius of the masters was to have discovered these templates and from them, with their brushes, created a vocabulary of strokes to interpret what they had seen. That I have discerned the templates the painters have seen has resulted not only from the sophistication of my photographic equipment, but from my prior study in the arts that enabled me to anticipate, and recognize, the existence of such templates.

Once the artist has committed his vision to canvas, or the photographer has committed his vision to film or a digital medium, then it is not a huge leap to say how wonderfully art imitates life. This leads us back to the conclusion of part I of this paper—that it is up to both the artist and the observer to choose wherein lies the truth.

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**Figure 6** Mark Rothko “Untitled 1955” Oil on Canvas. Image source: Art Resource, NY.

### Acknowledgements

None.

### Footnote

*Conflicts of Interest:* The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

### References

1. Lee M. Approaches to photographic art I: life imitates art. *J Vis Surg* 2017;3:98.