An abstract painting by Clyfford Still, featuring bold, vertical brushstrokes in vibrant orange, yellow, and dark blue-grey against a light beige background. The composition is dynamic and expressive, with the colors bleeding into each other and the edges of the strokes being soft and irregular.

It's intolerable to be stopped
by a frame's edge

Clyfford Still

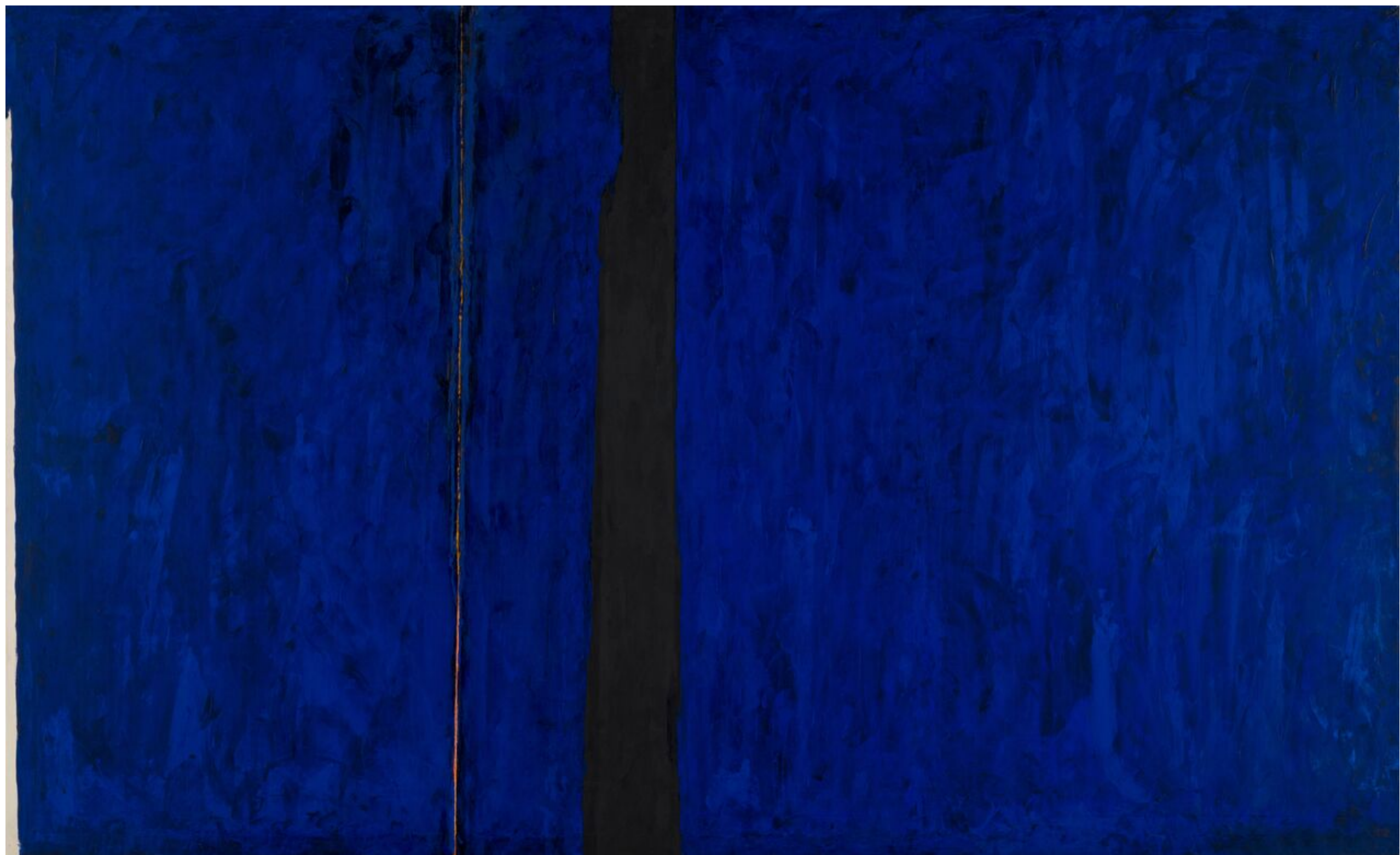
LIFELINE

LOGLINE

Fiercely independent, irascible and iconic. A portrait of the American painter Clyfford Still, who through his life and art defied classification.

SYNOPSIS

Jackson Pollock said, “he makes the rest of us look academic”, Mark Rothko acknowledged him as a “myth-maker” and Clement Greenberg called him “a highly influential maverick and an independent genius.” Clyfford Still, one of the strongest, most original contributors to abstract expressionism, walked away from the commercial art world at the height of his career. Extremely disciplined, principled, and prolific, Still left behind a treasure trove of works like no other major artist in history. With a wonderful mosaic of archival material, found footage and audio recorded by the artist himself, *Lifeline* paints a picture of a modern icon, his uncompromising creative journey and the price of independence. Featuring the painter’s surviving daughters, painters Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Julian Schnabel, SFMOMA director Neal Benezra, Clyfford Still museum director Dean Sobel, award winning architect Brad Cloepfil, Colorado governor John Hickenlooper, art historian David Anfam, art collector Jeffrey Loria, museum director James Demetrion, art critic Jerry Saltz, and writer Tom Healy.



In *The Birth of Tragedy*, written in 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that great classic art was predicated on the balance of Apollonian and Dionysian impulses - "Apollonian" after the sun god Apollo, with his "measured restraint, the freedom from the wilder emotions, that calm of the sculptor god"; and "Dionysian" after Apollo's brother Dionysus, the god of wine, with "the blissful ecstasy that wells from the innermost depths of man, indeed of nature...brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication." "Wherever the Dionysian prevailed," Nietzsche wrote, "the Apollonian was checked and destroyed...Wherever the first Dionysian onslaught was successfully withstood, the authority and majesty of the Delphic god Apollo exhibited itself as more rigid and menacing than ever."

It can be argued that the last development in abstract painting, abstract expressionism, which flourished in the 1940s in New York, was a Nietzschean act in the visual arts. The development of a pure, non-representational visual language which seems to oscillate between two polarities of painterly expression: the niceties of drawing, the decorative graces of color, the dynamics of composition and a presence of jagged, shredded, opaque forms, sodden colors and agitated surfaces which are convulsive in their internal movements, and awesomely still in their totality.

No artist represents this aspect of American painting better than abstract expressionist Clyfford Still, a fact that was emphasized in Rothko's catalogue introduction to Still's first New York show at Peggy Guggenheim's: "It is significant that Still, working out West and alone, has arrived at pictorial conclusions so allied to those of the small band of Myth Makers who have emerged here during the war. The fact that his is a completely new facet of this idea, using unprecedented forms and completely personal methods, attests further to the vitality of this movements...Still expresses the tragic-religious drama which is generic to all Myths, at all times, no matter where they occur."

Still was recognized by his peers as an important leader, artistically, and became the spokesman for the group of so-called "color field" painters in the early fifties, a group that included Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt. All were influenced directly in their public attitudes and indirectly in their art expressions by Still's uncompromising moral stance, prophetic posturing and cultural extremism.

Yet today, Clyfford Still, one of the greatest American abstract expressionist painters and a forefather of the movement is practically unknown. In 1951, at the height of his success, Still famously withdrew his work from public exhibition. For the rest of his life, and until his death in 1980, Still refused to exhibit, sell or loan any of his paintings, often resorting in extreme actions in order to protect himself and his art from what he felt was the predatory, decadent and commercial nature of art museums, dealers and critics. In Still's own words: "It was a journey that one must make, walking straight and alone. No respite or shortcuts were permitted. And one's will had to hold against every challenge of triumph or failure or the praise of Vanity Fair."

Today, Abstract Expressionism or Ab Ex as it is known, is synonymous with artists Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning. All three of these artists have been the subject of major, reputation-creating museum retrospectives around the world after they died. In comparison, only about 150 paintings of Clyfford Still are in museums most of them in New York, Washington, San Francisco and Buffalo and about 40 of them in private collections. This represents only a small fraction of the artists output which includes approximately 900 canvas paintings and 1,600 works on paper. 94% of Still's creative output has remained hidden away from public view until 2011 when the city of Denver took on the monumental task of creating a museum exclusively devoted to the study and exhibition of his work.

Lifeline was produced in collaboration with the **Clyfford Still Museum (CSM)** in Denver, featuring archival material from the CSM collection, interviews by Clyfford Still's surviving daughters, painters Julie Mehretu, Mark Bradford, Julian Schnabel, CSM museum director Dean Sobel, award winning architect Brad Cloepfil, Colorado governor John Hickenlooper, art historian David Anfam, art collector Jeffrey Loria, museum director James Demetrion, and art critic Jerry Saltz. Part history, part biography, part psychological study, ***Lifeline*** is a feature length documentary about the original, mysterious and ultimately uncompromising creative journey of Clyfford Still.

DIRECTED BY

Dennis Scholl

PRODUCED BY

Dennis Scholl, Marlon Johnson, Konstantia Kontaxis

EDITED BY

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CINEMATOGRAPHY

Ed Talavera

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Shelton G Berg

Jake Hartmann

ARCHIVAL PRODUCER

Prudence Arndt

FEATURING

Mark Bradford

Sandra Still Campbell

Brad Cloepfil

Jim Demetrion

Edith Devaney

Curt Freed

Tom Healy

Ben Heller

The Honorable John Hickenlooper

Bernard Jacobson

Diane Still Knox

Christopher Le Brun

Jeffrey Loria

Julie Mehretu

Jerry Saltz

Julian Schnabel

Dean Sobel

A profile shot of Mark Bradford, a Black man with glasses, looking towards a large abstract painting with vibrant red and white brushstrokes.

MARK BRADFORD

Clyfford Still pushes back against intimacy.

Julian Schnabel, a man with a beard and glasses, stands in an art gallery, pointing at a large abstract painting on the wall. The gallery has white walls and a dark floor.

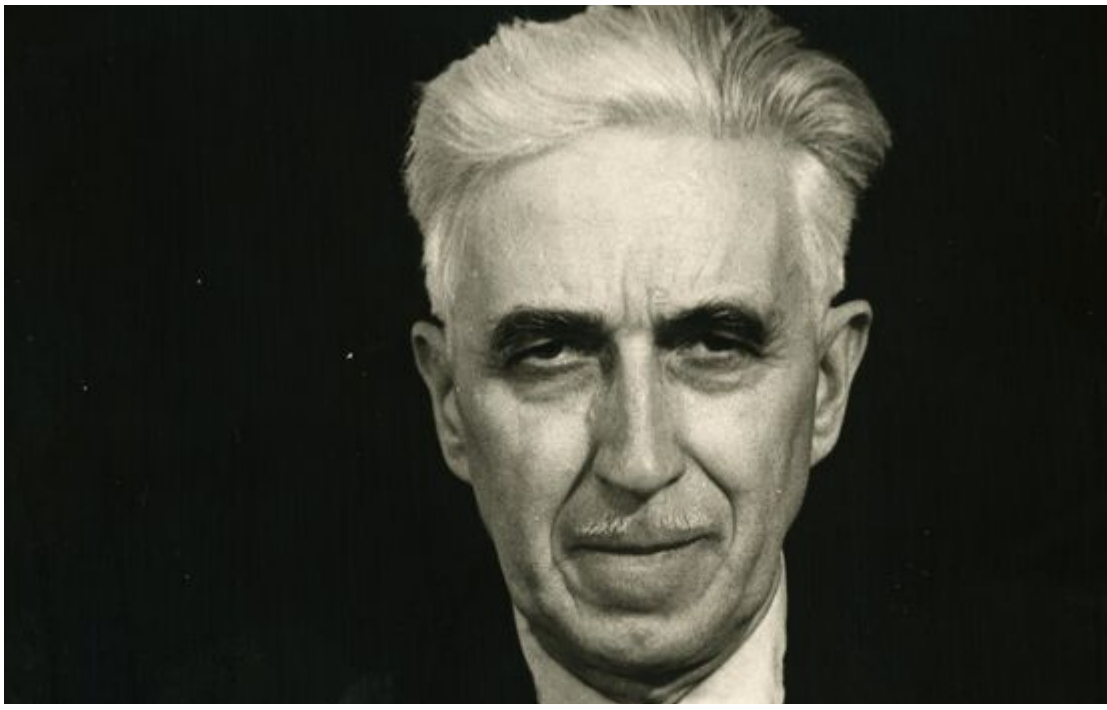
JULIAN SCHNABEL

He opted out of the game and stepped into eternity.

Julie Mehretu, a woman with curly hair, is shown from the chest up, gesturing with her hands while speaking. In the background, there are out-of-focus city lights and a plant with white flowers.

JULIE MEHRETU

He was interested in this slow, time-based experience with painting that goes past life.



CLYFFORD STILL

Clyfford Still, (born November 30, 1904, Grandin, North Dakota, U.S.—died June 23, 1980, Baltimore, Maryland), American artist, associated with the New York school, whose large-scale abstract paintings belong to the tradition of the romantic sublime. Still painted large abstract canvases meant to evoke the mystery of human existence through pure colour and form. Like many other Abstract Expressionists, Still saw the act of painting as a heroic assertion of being and freedom in an age still recovering from the impact of World War II (1939–45).

Still was interested in art even as a child. While in high school he was awarded an art scholarship to Spokane University in Washington, from which he graduated in 1933. His style evolved from a type of regionalism to a presentation of a Western landscape that was dominated by gigantic figures and enigmatic rock formations. Gradually the pictorial elements in his pictures became more abstract, although they always retained their organic shapes and colours. After eight years of teaching at Washington State College (now Washington State University) in Pullman, Still moved to California, where he worked in the shipbuilding and aircraft industries during the war years. He taught at the Richmond (Virginia) Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University) in 1943–45 and lived for a year in New York City. After returning to California in 1946, he taught at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), where he stayed until 1950. He lived again for a time in New York City and in 1961 acquired a 22-acre (9-hectare) farm near Westminster, Maryland, where he kept a studio until his death.

Still's mature paintings from the late 1940s on consist of interlocking jagged shapes in a dense, highly-worked surface that he applied with a palette knife. He gradually increased the size of the shapes and also the size of his canvases, intending the large indeterminate space of the picture to envelop viewers in a field of pure sensation. Still was interested in conveying awe before the unknowable—the sublime—that many artists throughout history have sought to evoke. His work influenced many artists, including Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, as well as other colour-field painters.

Distrustful of dealers, collectors, and curators, Still bequeathed only two bodies of work—one to the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo in 1964 and the other to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1975. In his will he stipulated that the remainder of his estate, which constituted more than 2,000 works at his death, would be available to the public in any American city that devoted a museum exclusively to his art. The city of Denver eventually accepted the challenge, and the Clyfford Still Museum opened there in 2011, more than 30 years after Still's death.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR:

DENNIS SCHOLL



Dennis Scholl is an award-winning documentary filmmaker focusing on arts and culture. His interview subjects have included Robert Redford, Frank Gehry, Wynton Marsalis, Ai Wei Wei and Theaster Gates. He is co-director of the feature documentary *The Last Resort*, which won the Miami Jewish Film Festival Audience Award, received a national theatrical release and is currently available on Netflix. He co-produced and directed his first feature documentary, *Deep City: The Birth of the Miami Sound*, with Marlon Johnson and Chad Tingle. The film premiered at the SXSW International Film Festival, screened at film festivals all over the world and was acquired by public broadcast station, WLRN, for international distribution. His second feature documentary, *Queen of Thursdays*, which he co-wrote and produced with noted Cuban filmmaker Orlando Rojas, had its world premiere at the Miami International Film Festival and was named Best Documentary.

He has also produced and directed *Symphony in D*, the story of America's first crowd sourced symphony which was performed by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. He co-produced *Sweet Dillard*, about the national champion Dillard High School jazz orchestra and their journey to the Essentially Ellington competition at Jazz at Lincoln Center. His latest film *Singular* on Grammy Award-winning jazz singer Cecile McLorin Salvant premiered at the 2019 Miami International Film Festival. He has received 13 regional Emmys from the National Academy of Television Arts and Science, all for documentaries on art and artists.

He is the executive producer of a dozen films with the Miami-based Borscht Film Collective, including six short films that debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and *Yearbook*, the winner of the 2014 Animated Short category at Sundance. Most recently, he helped produce the animated short, *The Sun Like a Big Dark Animal*, which premiered at Sundance, along with *Glove*, which also premiered at Sundance and won Best Animated Short at SXSW. He also produced the experimental film *Hearts of Palm* and was executive producer of *Namour*.

His short film, *Sunday's Best*, won Best Documentary Short at the South Dakota Film Festival. His film, *Dancing with the Trees*, won the Audience Choice Award at the Magnolia Film Festival. Most recently, his film, *Everyone has a Place*, about Wynton Marsalis' Abyssinian Mass concert tour was named Best Documentary Short at the Capital Cities Black Film Festival and is currently screening on public television stations across America.

He and his wife, Debra, received the National Service to the Arts award from the Anderson Ranch Arts Center. Dennis is the President and CEO of Oolite Arts (formerly ArtCenter/South Florida).

Filmography: Sunday's Best (2009), Dancing with the Trees (2012), Theaster Gates (2013), Nicholas Hlobo: Intethe (2014), Angel Without You (2014), Deep City: The Birth of the Miami Sound (2014), Everyone Has a Place (2014), Yearbook (2014) Sweet Dillard (2015), Boniato (2015), The Sun Like a Big Dark Animal (2015), Glove (2016), Namour (2016), Queen of Thursdays (2016), The Tools of the Game (2017), Symphony In D (2017), The Last Resort (2018)