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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

On "Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper" at the Whitney Museum; "John Walker: Collage" at Knoedler & Company & "George McNeil: Paintings" at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries.

Cy Twombly has made a lifetime of study out of the incautious line, the art-historical stammer, the naughtiness that comes from the privilege of aesthetic inheritance. He began as an Abstract Expressionist and coasted through conceptualism and serialism and whatever came his way to become a blue-chip artist with a troubling price-to-earnings ratio, all the while producing a product in traditional media with canonical themes. But Cy Twombly, now seventy-six, made a Faustian bargain to become That Painter Who Survived Postmodernism: He had to paint a lifetime of Cy Twomblys.

Now on view at The Whitney Museum is "Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper."[1] Julie Sylvester, the associate curator of contemporary art at The State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where this show originated, wrote that "Cy Twombly is my hero and has been for a long time." Why would a good person make bad art? Oscar Wilde quipped that "The fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose. The domestic virtues are not the true basis of art." In the opening essay of the Whitney catalogue, the Columbia historian Simon Schama offered his own answer:

> Insofar as he limns antiquity it is not the hard-edged discipline of celestial geometry; but the deeper, darker, Dionysiac archaisms of an Arcadia where Eros and Thanatos are the closest of chums and where the spilling of blood and semen blossoms into Bacchic horticulture.

Hmm… .

Roland Barthes followed on in a reprint of his 1976 essay "Non Multa Sed Multum":

> English colleges, Latin verses, desks, notations in finely written pencil. This is what culture is for [Twombly]: an indulgence, a memory, an irony, a posture, the gesture of a dandy… . If his graphisms and compositions present themselves as *gauche*, that's tantamount to relegating [Twombly] to the circle of the excluded, the marginated, where, to be sure, he is to find himself in the company of children and invalids.

“Barthes” is a name that can cause grad-student palpitations, but “gauche” it is. Just as parody must be rooted in sincerity while exhibiting an absence of the sincere, so too is Twombly’s parodistic line at once a line and a joke made at the line’s expense. Barthes continues: “His works don’t require that we refute the world of culture (since man’s spontaneity is his culture) but they do require that we displace these words, distance ourselves from them, and see them in a different light.”

Due to the coincidence of two shows exhibiting at once, Twombly has been compared recently to Rubens, which is something of a joke in itself. The two draftsmen, or in the case of Twombly that would be “draftsman,” could not be more dissimilar, for reasons that go beyond style. In Rubens the line leads to representation internal to the work. The Twombly line directs us to an external idea. What this idea might be requires further investigation, but the answer is something quite apart from the examples set in abstract modernism; though arriving at results resembling Twombly’s, these painters followed a course of aesthetic consideration that shared more in common with Rubens.

Twombly is something else altogether—an attitude and a socioeconomic standard-bearer for the parvenu. Twombly relies on the idioms of youth: manic scribbles (*Untitled* [1954]), boy’s room doodles (*Untitled*, [1961/1963]), notes from math class (*Bolsena* [1969]), fun with the chalkboard (the many examples of white wax crayon on black from the late 1960s and early 1970s). Even graph paper from geometry homework makes an appearance (*Untitled* [1974]). But these jottings, not to mention his use of ball-point pen and crayon and other media from the grammar-school cubbyhole, as well as an interest in bad penmanship, speak less to childhood innocence than the mannered carelessness of an adolescent. Ennui and class consciousness at once mock the hard-working elder while enjoying the fruits of another’s labor. Twombly satarizes the canon while cashing in on the painterly trust fund.

The lofty themes that recur within the Twombly scribble—basic words from Greek and Roman mythology, fragments of poetry, the notes from exotic junkets— locate him in ways that can seem, well, gauche. Upon entering a large room of Twombly’s mythological work from the mid-1970s, with the chicken-scratch words of “Venus” and “Aphrodite,” et cetera, all around, one encounters the visual equivalent of “The Waste Land” as read by Anthony Blanche: “Enacted on this same d-divan or b-bed,/ I who have sat by Thebes below the wall/ And walked among the l-l-lowest of the dead.” The following passage from Waugh might well serve as a description of the Twombly experience:

> From the moment he arrived the newcomer took charge, talking in a luxurious, self-taught stammer; teasing; caricaturing the guests at his previous luncheon; telling lubricious anecdotes of Paris and Berlin; and doing more than entertaining—transfiguring the party, shedding a vivid, false light of eccentricity upon everyone so that the three prosaic Etonians seemed suddenly to become creatures of his fantasy.

The end result of gaucherie is safety for the gauche—an insulation from criticism. The greatest letdown of Twombly's drawings is that in fifty years, through all the gestures of risk, this artist dared very little. There are no failures in Twombly's oeuvre, no worse periods, just as there are no big successes. The most incautious of draftsmen has been the safest of artists. In the bargain of fame, this painter's fate has been never to paint a great painting.

John Walker is a right-thinking painter in a gauche painter's world. His abstract collages from the mid-1970s, now on display at Knoedler, contain all the DNA of analytic cubism adapted to new climes.[2] The facets of Cubist chiaroscuro float to the surface of Walker's picture planes and settle into a marshland of canvas growth. Walker's surfaces undulate from scratchy to creamy to sticky, encrusted to smooth—a festering but living membrane. In his *New York Times* review from 1976, John Russell wrote:

> Mr. Walker puts on his irregularly shaped pieces of canvas the way a medieval desperado puts on his armor: roughly and ferociously, as if the aim were not so much to create beauty as to fend off an imminent disaster.

Given the history of modern art, such armor might better suit a Quixote than a desperado. Walker's muted palettes of Seventies camouflage—taupe and tan—speak to the defensiveness in the hearts of these ten-foot-by-ten-foot blocks. In the saturated abstractions of two years later, such as *Ostraca I* (1977), battles flare up in the colors of the picture planes with the weight of Titans. These are Walker's most forceful and best works of the period.

Walker's father, a survivor of the Battle of the Somme, has become a recurring motif in his work, which has long grappled with the winners and losers of war. Compared to his landscapes of Maine, for example, here we can view landscapes of contention. Knoedler has paired Walker's large canvases with smaller, recent colleges on paper—washy abstractions in blue, red, and black cut into curved shapes and reassembled. These results range from the exuberant to the menacing. The final, untitled work from 2004 removes bold colors once again and returns to a grid of shuttered gates, white and gray. The English-born painter, who now resides in Boston and Maine, makes another calculated retreat—not a political retreat, but an aesthetic one.

George McNeil (1908–1995) was an abstract painter when he exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair, a figurative artist in the 1960s and 1970s, and in the 1980s and 1990s … well, debatable. What is not up for discussion is the aesthetic and popular success McNeil found in the style of his later years. Some likened him to the neo-Expressionists and Jean-Michel Basquiat—that is, if the neo-Expressionists and Jean-Michel Basquiat had studied with Hans Hofmann.

In February, Salander-O'Reilly exhibited "George McNeil: Paintings," a pairing of late work with earlier examples that revealed not a departure from early to late but the steady broadening of modernist practice.[3] In *Now Street #1* (1990), the alphabet-block colors and "push-pull" architecture of the Hofmann School become the burlesque of a reclining woman in fish-net stockings and high-heeled shoes. The poet Richard Howard in his catalogue entry wrote that "In George McNeil's rapturous art, we can look *everywhere*." The ubiquity of inviting widgets and snaking limbs draws our gaze away from McNeil's central figures to all corners of his canvas. Also, these paintings have legs.

Never one to confuse high-modernism with high-seriousness, McNeil exhibited a flair for the bawdy even in his early compositions. In the 1980s and 1990s he really worked out the kinks. Of course McNeil found precedent for sexualized themes in German expressionism. One can just about see McNeil's fish-nets high-kicking it out of an Otto Dix. But

McNeil took the idiom of the bawdy and removed from it the grotesque, all while incorporating his themes into a New York School palette. The results are comical and ready for prime-time. Who wouldn't like a painting about a man with a shoe problem (*He Likes Shoes* [1991])? *In the Palm of his Hand* (1991), McNeil's grandest painting and something of the punchline of the show, contained all the wild colors and painterly gifts one might expect from his mature toyshop. And just what was "In the Palm"? You guessed it: a lady's shoe. Rarely do paintings exercise the eyes as can these late compositions. Rarer still does one find humor in the engine under the hood.

Does humor belong in serious painting? George McNeil made a good case for it. He was a serious artist who painted in a humorous way. Cy Twombly operates in the opposite mode: a parodistic artist who would have us take his body of work seriously. *Manu sinistra*, fame may favor the left-handed, but a painter always paints *avec la main droite*.

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Notes

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1. "Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper" opened at the Whitney Museum, New York, on January 27 and remains on view through May 8, 2005. A catalogue of the exhibition has been published by the Whitney Museum of American Art and Schirmer/Mosel (160 pages, $75). Go back to the text.
2. "John Walker: Collage" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on February 3 and remains on view through March 19, 2005. Go back to the text.
3. "George McNeil: Paintings" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, from February 8 to February 26, 2005. Go back to the text.

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