Cy Twombly: [brochure] a retrospective
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[text, Amelia Arenas]

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Twombly, Cy, 1928-2011

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index of participating artists.
Traditionally, looking at paintings has been an act of cultivated self-deception. In front of an old still life, for example, we forget that we are looking at an artifice and lose ourselves in the images conjured up by the artist’s hand. But our pleasures rarely end there. Coming closer to the surface of the picture to admire the droplets of moisture on a bunch of grapes, we may see the illusion dissolve in the smear of a swift brush, or a little lump of dry paint, reminding us of something no less moving—that a specific person, on a specific day, left a sign of his presence there.

By the time Cy Twombly, still in his teens, discovered art in the 1940s in Lexington, Virginia, some artists in New York had already taken this obvious but extraordinary fact to be the most meaningful revelation that art could offer. These artists, the Abstract Expressionists, had picked up on a fundamental notion in European modern art: that centuries of naturalism and academic refinement had robbed Western art of something vital, something still alive in the animistic use of the materials of “tribal” art, the drawings of children, and even the street’s graffiti.

To recover some of that lost power, artists such as Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Willem de Kooning took to unforeseen extremes a whole range of improvisatory techniques first developed by the Surrealists. The Abstract Expressionists worked quickly, in order to elude the censorship of reason and the niceties of the painter’s craft. Eventually, some of these artists came to abandon traditional materials and tools entirely. Pollock, for example, flung house paint directly on a canvas laid on the floor—which is the most vivid instance of what came to be known as “action painting.”

No matter how far we step back from an Abstract Expressionist painting, the paint refuses to dissolve into a convincing illusion of “things in the world.” Rather than representing anything in particular, the arresting materiality of these pictures presents a vivid record of the actions of an artist at work.

Twombly’s Tiznit (fig. 1), painted in 1953, is that kind of picture. On its rough surface, you can see layer upon layer of marks—a curtain of house-paint drips and slashing brushstrokes, over a thick crust of paint. The principal images in Tiznit—its primitive “personages”—are drawn in black with a few continuous brushstrokes, which are dry and harsh in some places, while in others they leave behind an inky trickle. Twombly lacerates the surface with insistent, thinner strokes of crayon.

1. Tiznit. 1953. White lead, house paint, crayon, and pencil on canvas, 53\(\frac{3}{8}\)" x 62\(\frac{1}{8}\)" (135.9 x 189.2 cm). Private collection
In the works he made from 1953 to 1957, Twombly gradually broke away from his first influences. We notice, initially, a progressive dismantling of the forces that had organized pictures for centuries, including the pictures of the Abstract Expressionists. Twombly resists eloquent brushstrokes and dramatic color contrasts—and, especially, anything resembling "composition." In place of the loaded surfaces of the early fifties we see continuous fields of rich, pale color, loosely covered with fine but incisive pencil and crayon lines that sometimes turn on themselves to create something that approximates handwriting. More and more, Twombly would use house paint to veil or even "erase" the lines, spreading over them a fresh layer to be marked, scratched, eroded.

In Blue Room (fig. 2), of 1957, the repertoire of marks ranges from loose strokes to hesitant letters and repetitive, knotted lines, such as those one would make on the edge of a notebook to get a pen to work. The colors of some of the crayon strokes—red, orange, and yellow—as well as the now brighter and smoother field underneath, recall the impulsive, territorial scribbles that young children leave on the walls of hallways.
What confronts us in *Blue Room* and other works of this period is not the exotic appeal of "tribal" art, still alive in paintings such as *Tiznit*. This is a less encumbered sort of "primitivism," and a more complicated one to respond to, precisely because in the raw marks of these pictures we find something of our own. The familiarity of these idioms—the memories they evoke of the scribbles of children, or a grown-up's doodles—makes these pictures more concrete than those of the Abstract Expressionists, but also more ambiguous. The layering of the marks, and the way most of them slant in the same direction, create the illusion of threads gently tossed into the air. While they show no influence in the conventional art-historical sense, these paintings bring to mind the lacerated surfaces of the ancient monuments of Rome, a city Twombly visited many times during those years, and where he would eventually settle in 1957.

The new concreteness that had come into Twombly's work was so pronounced by the early sixties that describing a work such as *The Italians* (fig. 3) as an "abstract painting" seems inaccurate.

Of all the signs that can be found in *The Italians*, the only ones whose reference can be read with certainty are those documenting the making of the picture—the title near the top, and, to the right, the artist's signature and the date and place where the picture was made: Rome, January 1961. Even the band of black crayon lines pushed to the left-hand edge of the picture, and the two triangular forms aligned with the right-hand edge, urge us to become aware of the picture's physical specificity, if only by pointing at the painting's boundaries.

Instead of the tumble of loose lines in *Blue Room*, the surface of *The Italians* is covered with clusters of marks, sometimes conspicuously framed by pencil marks or circled with crayon, sometimes concealed or wiped out completely with paint. Often, Twombly rubbed off the crayon lines vigorously with his fingertips, or built up small areas with several layers of crayon, pencil, and pasty oil paint, as in the square that crowns the pyramidal grid in the center. In the uneasy concert of these marks, it is easy to miss the robust globs and lumps of oil paint that seem to cling precariously to the surface, especially since Twombly carefully matched their tone to the hue of the canvas, thus avoiding the expressive effect of dramatic contrasts.

To an even greater degree than *Blue Room*, *The Italians* recalls the anonymous histories inscribed on the walls of public places. The smeared

It is one of many paradoxes in Cy Twombly’s career that he would choose to move to Rome in 1957—precisely when many ambitious artists were staying in New York. The international success of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s had turned New York into the new mecca for artists. In the 1960s, Pop art’s ironic appropriations of mass-media imagery, on the one hand, and the matter-of-fact art of the Minimalists, on the other, would eventually eclipse Abstract Expressionism. In this new context, Twombly’s work didn’t seem to fit in anywhere. If anything, the paintings he made immediately after The Italians appeared to revert to the rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism.

In marked contrast with pictures like The Italians, where the tender wax colors dominate, paint and the vaguely organic forms we find here and there might even bring to mind the walls of elementary schools, where small children rub candy off their hands and doodle crude versions of the graffiti they will make in high school.

Together with these signs, we find another idiom as well, one that recalls, rather, the fluidity of an adult’s notes. These signs include number sequences and sketchy graphs and elevations, like the calculations left by a carpenter on the underside of a piece of furniture, or by a master mason on the walls of a construction site. These sediments of a rational system seem to bring into the picture a will to order—an impulse that is kept in check by the fact that we see these signs, literally, on the same plane as the childlike scribbles and allusive smears of paint.

Thus, in pictures such as The Italians, we see a meditation on the contradictory impulses behind language and a poetry of the commonplace. Pollock and his circle had resorted to improvisation in order to counteract the artful resources of the painter’s craft, but by the early 1960s the spontaneity of the Abstract Expressionists had become another artful habit. Twombly’s works lay bare instead an effort to resist the expressive trappings of improvisation. Far from being spontaneous, the signs in works like The Italians are a self-conscious rehearsal of familiar marks. In the immediacy of those pencil lines and finger smears, even in their seemingly random array on the surface of the picture, we see the arresting poetry of anonymous traces emerge from the grand individualism of Abstract Expressionist art. Twombly’s struggle with Abstract Expressionism reached a climax during the period immediately following The Italians.
and the pale lumps of oil paint are camouflaged in the hues of the canvas, the emphatic materiality of the paint, and the vivid reds and browns in the Ferragosto series recall the aftermath of a rapturous carnage. In paintings such as Ferragosto IV (fig. 4), handfuls of paint are rubbed onto the canvas, creating heavy, phallic forms that leap upward against a cascade of nervous, looser marks. As with the earlier pictures, though, our inclination to read this action as a narrative taking place in space is kept in check by Twombly’s handling of the paint—the fact that we see the traces of his fingers everywhere and, most significantly, his handprint in the middle of the picture.

The link with art-historical sources in the paintings of these years goes even further back than Abstract Expressionism. Some of the titles of Twombly’s works from this period—The Empire of Flora, Leda and the Swan—seem to claim their membership in the ranks of the Old Master tradition. Perhaps the violent flamboyance of these paintings carries within it the anthology of murders, rapes, and battle scenes that makes up a large part of art history’s repertoire of subjects. But, as usual, our tendency to indulge in generalization is frustrated—in the case of the Ferragosto series by the title itself, which points specifically to the time when Twombly made the pictures. In Italian, Ferragosto refers to the mid-August holiday, a time of oppressive heat in Rome, when everyone has left for the summer.

In 1969, responding in a very different way to high art, Twombly made a number of collages using pages from a facsimile of Leonardo’s notebooks. Here, the diagrammatic marks we first saw in The Italians, as well as its vague organic forms, respond to the imagery and the obsessiveness of Leonardo’s own scientific idiom. In one of these collages, we see Leonardo’s rendering of a cross-section of human genitalia during intercourse. As if growing out of Leonardo’s meticulous lines, Twombly’s own lines become increasingly crude as they meander downward, creating flaccid, pendular forms that suggest amorphous versions of the organs in Leonardo’s anatomical drawing.

The Leonardo collages lead us into some of the more reflective work that Twombly did in the seventies. The diagrammatic language of the earlier pictures—the numbers, graphs, and cross-sections—became increasingly prominent and eloquent, losing its humbler associations with the artisanal and acquiring the graphic assertiveness (and sometimes the elegance) of an architect’s working sketches. In some of these paintings, his organic signs lose their resemblance to children’s marks (and their incipient obscenity), to become abstract forms arrayed across the picture, amid abundant but obscure notations that suggest the specifics of function and scale.

The tone of address in these pictures is more public, even expository, especially in the gray-ground paintings. Some of them, like Untitled (fig. 5), are continuous fields of patterns that recall Pollock’s “all-over” paintings. But in place of the splashes and stains of enamel paint on Pollock’s canvases, we find a web of crayon zigzags, in some areas already rubbed off by the artist’s hand. And in contrast with the ritual dance conjured up by the idea of Pollock walking around the canvas and flinging paint, we are put in mind of something more familiar, like the image of a teacher at the blackboard.
5. Untitled. 1970. House paint and crayon on canvas, 13' 3" x 21'" (405 x 640.3 cm). Private collection. On loan to the Kunstmuseum, Bonn

If Twombly's painting seems at first like a cosmic expanse, the image of stardust quickly turns into a memory of chalk dust on our hands. The effect of the picture is hypnotic, as the buzz of the pattern brings us into a state of introspection, like a mantra.

In the more eclectic atmosphere of the seventies, the critical reception of Twombly's work took a turn. The very qualities that had made Twombly's work so hard to pin down in the sixties were precisely what made it attractive in the seventies, as younger artists applied the strategies of Minimalism, Conceptual art, and Abstract Expressionism to works that were deeply engaged with the subjective and the bodily.

Beginning in the early eighties, Twombly's production slowed down considerably. A new fascination with nature characterized his work of these years, as he adapted the encyclopedia of human traces he had been developing since the mid-fifties to the traditional genre of landscape painting. Now we see the mature Twombly reclaiming the Nature of the Romantics and of the Late Impressionists—even the pastoral Nature of the Old Masters.

In Untitled (cover), completed in 1984, Twombly's caressing hand creates veils of pastel color lit up with sizzling carmine daubs, which bring back the evanescence of Monet's late work. Yet, under the translucent clouds of paint, we find again the edgy handwriting and abrupt crayon marks of Twombly's earlier pictures, and we realize that this lyrical painting masks another one, which Twombly made in 1964.

It is in the context of this tense relationship with his own idiom that we should see pictures such as Hero and Leander (1981), where the turbulence and tenderness of the classical tale of fateful love and tragic drowning is related in a sequence of abstract seascapes. Looking at these pictures, it is as if The Italians had never been painted. If it were not for
the name “Leandro” written beside the cresting wave on the first of the pictures, the subtly graded colors and the cohesiveness of the brushwork in Hero and Leander would carry us away in their reminiscence of rolling water and placid sea foam. But Twombly’s lust for concreteness, his insistence on reminding us of the physical nature of image-making, is still present in other works from this period, for example, in the aggressive beauty of crayon drawings such as Naxos and Suma, where forms burst forth convulsively from seismic strokes and wound-up lines.

The last four pictures in our installation are Twombly’s contribution to a subject that has attracted Western painters for centuries—The Four Seasons.

_Autumn_ (fig. 6), far from evoking the tender melancholy associated with this season, seems to pound with energy. Twombly rubs thick globs of red, black, and purple paint on the canvas, often circling the resulting areas with insistent crayon strokes and with very liquid black paint, which runs freely, as if squeezed out of the forms by the artist’s hand.

For all its celebratory exuberance, Autumn carries within it some morbid undertones. Twombly’s tentative handwriting spells out the title of the series in Italian, along with fragments of a poem by Georges Seferis that speaks of transience. In the center, we read the words of a well-known Latin epitaph (et inArcadia ego), reminding us that death dwells even in the happiest places. Below, we can also read the names of two gods associated with the riotous festivities of the autumn harvest: Bacchus, the young god of wine, and the old drunkard Silenus, his counterpart.

The Four Seasons were painted in Twombly’s country homes, on the Mediterranean shores of Gaeta and in the wine country of Bassano. Though the pastoral atmosphere of his home in Bassano seems to have inspired the rustic flavor of his Autumn, the private resonance of these pictures goes beyond what the familiar landscapes might have brought to this ancient subject. Traditionally, the cycles of nature have offered painters an opportunity to contemplate the passage of human life—a theme that seems especially apt to the reflections of a mature artist. Autumn might just be such a picture.

We can also see in Autumn the embodiment of the principal themes in Twombly’s career. Here again he contemplates the intimate but tenuous relationship between the self and the world, between the impulses of the body and the imperatives of language. In fact, this grand painting might return us to what Cy Twombly sees in the gravity of ancient Roman monuments and in the ferocious imprint that anonymous hands have left on their surfaces—an intuition that the eternal lives only in the urgency of ephemeral things.

Amelia Arenas
Department of Education
Cy Twombly (Edwin Parker Twombly, Jr.) was born in 1928 in Lexington, Virginia. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1947-49) and, after moving to New York City in 1950, at The Art Students League (1950-51) and Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1951 and 1952). He traveled to Europe and North Africa during 1952 and 1953, and on his return, was drafted into the Army. In 1955 and 1956, he returned to Virginia to teach at Southern Seminary and Junior College.

Twombly traveled to Italy several times, settling in Rome, where he has lived and worked since 1957. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Twombly also worked in his country residences at Bassano in Teverina, and, more recently, in the port town of Gaeta.

Synthetic polymer paint, oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas, 10'3½" x 6'2½" (313.7 x 189.9 cm).
Private collection

Cy Twombly: A Retrospective has been organized by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.


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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Tuesday, October 4, 8:00 P.M.
Cy Twombly: An Artist's Artist
A panel discussion with artists Richard Serra, Brice Marden, and Francesco Clemente
Moderated by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Tuesday, October 11, 8:00 P.M.
Rethinking Cy Twombly
A lecture by Kirk Varnedoe

Tuesday, October 25, 8:00 P.M.
The Latin Class
A lecture by Rosalind Krauss, Professor of Art History, Columbia University, New York

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 1
Tickets: $8.00; members $7.00; students $5.00

Tickets are available at the Lobby Information Desk. For more information, please call the Department of Education at 212-708-9795.

These programs have been made possible by a gift from Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros in memory of Thomas Ammann.

FLOOR PLAN

E Entrance


3 1959: Austere works in the United States and beginning of “pictographic” signs in Italian work.

4 1961: Advent of vivid color and new “landscape” space.

5 1966–71: Gray-ground paintings, Leonardo collages, and “Bolsena” works.

6 1980s: Pastoral and atmospheric works.

7 Flowers.

8 Recent work: The Four Seasons.

Cover. Untitled. 1964, 1984. Oil, pencil, and crayon on canvas, 6'8½" x 8'2½" (204 x 249.5 cm).
Collection Emily Fisher Landau, New York