

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
September 1994

CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE

September 25, 1994 - January 10, 1995

The largest and most comprehensive survey ever held in the United States of the work of American abstract artist Cy Twombly (b. 1928) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on September 25, 1994. Organized by Kirk Varnedoe, Chief Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture, **CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE** comprises nearly 100 works, including paintings, sculptures, and works on paper, which reveal the panoramic range of subjects and emotions addressed in his art. The exhibition redefines Twombly's place as a singular master in postwar art, and establishes the critical role his work has played in the international development of contemporary art.

The exhibition, which remains on view through January 10, 1995, is generously supported by Lily Auchincloss. Additional support has been provided by Lufthansa German Airlines. An indemnity for the exhibition has been granted by the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities. The accompanying publication is made possible by a generous gift from Emily Fisher Landau. Public Programs in conjunction with the exhibition are made possible by a gift from Mrs. Gustavo Cisneros in memory of Thomas Ammann; and the exhibition brochure is made possible by a grant from Mr. and Mrs. Josef Froehlich, Stuttgart.

Installed chronologically in the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture galleries on the Museum's third floor, **CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE** ranges in date from 1946 through the present, and includes fifty paintings, thirty-seven works

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on paper, ten sculptures, and two prints. Only sixteen of these works were also shown in Twombly's previous American retrospective, in 1979 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. A number of works in the current exhibition are on view for the first time in this country; these include little-known early works, key masterpieces of monumental scale, and several recently completed paintings. In presenting the full range of Twombly's work, the exhibition demonstrates not only the consistent themes that mark the artist's oeuvre, but a variety and diversity that are perhaps unexpected in an artist who has been, until recently, more widely appreciated and exhibited in Europe than in his native country.

Unlike his contemporaries and friends Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, Twombly chose to cultivate the legacy of the Abstract Expressionists. He has pursued a form of painting that combines elements of gestural abstraction, drawing, and writing in a personal manner that is seemingly remote from the media-saturated world of contemporary culture. Suffused with references to poetry and the Mediterranean heritage that has surrounded him since his move to Italy in 1957, Twombly's art bridges literary and painterly sensibilities, and links contemporary art to a rich cultural past of antiquity and Romanticism.

In the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, Mr. Varnedoe writes, "For all the complex linguistic structure of [Twombly's] aesthetic and the rich web of his references, what his achievement may ultimately depend upon most heavily is the power he has drawn from within himself and from so many enabling traditions, to isolate in a particularly raw and unsettled fashion that primal electricity of communication in his apparently simplest acts of naming, marking, and painting."

CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE opens with assemblage sculptures from the late 1940s, which reveal the artist's early interest in Dada and Surrealism, and paintings and graphic works from the early 1950s. These include two major

paintings, *Tiznit* and *Volubilis*, made in 1953 following Twombly's return from the trip he made to Europe and North Africa with Rauschenberg. Named after North African villages, these pictures show Twombly scratching and scoring wet paint in order to create a scarred, bristling surface. His next body of works, such as *The Geeks*, *Free Wheeler*, and *Academy* (all of 1955), further blurred the distinction between painting and drawing, and show the deliberate, repetitive piling up of abstract scoring and partially legible letters and words that would become a hallmark of the artist's mature style.

Following Twombly's move to Rome in 1957, his work becomes less encrusted and less harshly striated. Examples like *Olympia* (1957) are characterized by a new space, light, and color that yield a canvas that is at once reticent and expressive. The letters and words that Twombly inscribed on the pale ground of *Olympia* place his work at the nexus of art, language, and writing.

In 1961 Twombly's paintings became grander in scale, more open in space, and more vividly colored. The exhibition includes an especially rich selection of these color paintings, such as *Triumph of Galatea*, *Empire of Flora*, and the slightly later *Leda and the Swan* (1962), an orgiastic fantasy of that fateful copulation. After this explosion of painterly intensity, however, Twombly's work slowed down and became more spare, until he launched an entirely new cycle of work, in white lines on gray backgrounds, in 1966. The period of the gray-ground canvases, including several which evoke the time-motion agitation of Futurist paintings and the maelstrom drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, continued into the early 1970s, and yielded two monumental, untitled canvases (shown in this country for the first time), which seem intent on reconceiving the legacy of Jackson Pollock.

Later in the 1970s, and throughout the 1980s, Twombly's art became more pastoral in its concerns, as his admiration for painters of nature, such as Claude Monet and J.M.W. Turner, became evident. *Hero and Leander* (1981, 1984), which deals with the classical legend of doomed love and tragic drowning, consists of a three-part sequence of liquid, melancholy seascapes that move from the turbulence of the fateful wave in the left panel through to mournfully still peace on the right. Also evident in this part of the exhibition is the theme of flowers, singly or in growing clumps, that has repeatedly attracted the artist in recent years.

CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE closes with a monumental new series, *The Four Seasons* (1993-1994). Twombly begins the series not with the promise of spring but with the heady wine harvests of autumn, in a canvas marked by deep reds and purples. *Winter* and *Spring*, the former bleak and chilly, the latter soaring and open, are both layered with lines of poetry by George Seferis. *Summer* evokes the warm shimmer of misty light on water.

After its New York showing, CY TWOMBLY: A RETROSPECTIVE travels to the Menil Collection, Houston (February 7 - March 20, 1995); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (April 9 - June 25, 1995); and the National Gallery, Berlin (September 2 - November 14, 1995).

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PUBLICATION *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, by Kirk Varnedoe. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. 180 pages. 94 color and 93 black-and-white illustrations. Hardbound, \$55.00, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, and paperbound, \$29.95; both available in The MoMA Book Store.