

Cy Twombly:
Camino Real (V),
2010, acrylic on
wood panel, 99¾
by 72¾ inches.
Fondation Louis
Vuitton, Paris.

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Foundation. Courtesy
Archives Nicola Del
Roscio.

THE HERE AND THEN

**A Cy Twombly retrospective in Paris
reveals the artist's lifelong fascination with personal
and historical memory.**

by Richard Kalina

"THE STRENGTH OF memory that is left behind." Those, I was told by a witness, were Cy Twombly's last words. Enigmatic, evocative, open-ended, forceful yet melancholy, they seem to be a fitting subtext and coda for the work of a great postwar painter's painter.

Twombly, who died in 2011, is the subject of a thorough and sensitive retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, curated by Jonas Storsve, with the support of the Cy Twombly Foundation, its president, Nicola Del Roscio, and Twombly's son, Alessandro. The 140 or so paintings, drawings, sculptures, and photographs on view hit the major developments and periods in the artist's career, even if the show does not contain all of his best works. The quality level is consistently high, easily convincing viewers that Twombly's reputation as a perplexing but indispensable marker of our time is well deserved.

The exhibition will not travel, largely because many of the loans were nearly impossible to obtain. That difficulty parallels a particular aspect of Twombly's work. You have to make an effort to come to this art. It doesn't reach out to meet you. A certain state of absence, openness, recession, and whiteness (verging on erasure) is key to the enterprise.

Twombly himself could be hard to pin down. Born in Lexington, Virginia, in 1928, he studied in Boston and Lexington, at the Art Students League in New York, and at Black Mountain College in North Carolina during its heyday in the early 1950s.¹ He lived at various times in New York, and early on became part of a group of artists that included Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. He joined the Leo Castelli Gallery in 1958 and had his first show there in 1960. He returned to the city frequently, both to visit and to work.

By the late '50s Twombly had settled in Italy, having married an Italian artist, Baroness Luisa Tatiana Franchetti; they bought a palazzo on the Via di Monserrato in Rome. He stayed in Rome for the most part but also lived and worked in a host of other Italian locales. His periods of fixed residency were regularly punctuated by travel to Morocco, Egypt, the Sudan, Yemen, Iran, Turkey, Greece, Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and in the winter months to various tropical islands. Del Roscio told me that Twombly was not the kind of artist who got up every morning and spent eight hours in the studio no matter what. His works were nearly formed in his mind before he sat down to paint. Thinking, reading, traveling, remembering, and more thinking—not tortuously finding the image, obliterating it, and then refinding it—was the way he came to his art. That method makes for a kind of contemplative serenity and a feeling of remove, of distanced engagement with the work. It serves to set Twombly apart from the Abstract Expressionists, to whose work his bears some resemblance, aligning him instead with his friends Johns and Rauschenberg. (Rauschenberg, whom he met at the Art Students League in 1950, was perhaps his oldest and closest artist friend.) However, more than Johns or Rauschenberg, Twombly was simultaneously able to move beyond and to hold on to Abstract Expressionism, inserting outside references into his paintings, yet retaining an obdurate core of abstraction.

His mixing of gestural abstraction and wide-ranging reference (not the least of which were the many varieties of handwriting) puts Twombly at the center of debates around painting today. He was both antecedent to and elder contemporary of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Julian Schnabel, Brice Marden, Christopher Wool, Chris Martin, Amy Sillman, Jonathan Lasker,

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Cy Twombly," at the
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Volubilis, 1953,
white lead, oil-based
house paint, and
crayon on canvas,
55 by 76 inches.
Menil Collection,
Houston.



Suzanne McClelland, and Dona Nelson, among others, who create semiotically and formally complex, layered canvases often featuring script and large areas of open space. Furthermore, Twombly's seemingly casual and unaggressive approach allies him with younger informal abstractionists like Richard Tuttle, Mary Heilmann, Harriet Korman, and Raoul De Keyser.

THE POMPIDOU SHOW highlighted three cycles of work, each given its own room: "Nine Discourses on Commodus" (1963), "Fifty Days at Iliam" (1978), and "Coronation of Sesostri" (2000). These groups of paintings, executed at what the curator considers to be key points in the artist's career, do not necessarily comprise Twombly's most important individual works, but they provide an opportunity to study his development as an artist.

The exhibition starts with four large, roughly surfaced, muscularly gestural black and white paintings from the early '50s. The last two, *Quarzazat* and *Volubilis* (both 1953), were produced after Twombly returned from a trip to Morocco with Rauschenberg and the writer Paul Bowles.² The paintings are bold and harsh, with strong linear elements that suggest primitive architectural constructions. Twombly soon moved away from this assertive, form-creating mark-making, embracing instead quieter compositions with considerably less tonal contrast. But the big emphatic gesture—not something we

normally associate with Twombly—never really went away. The artist employed it at various times, for example in the "Nine Discourses on Commodus" series; in the 1993–95 "Quattro Stagioni," a group of paintings based on Nicolas Poussin's "Four Seasons" (executed at the end of the French artist's life); and in Twombly's own powerfully graphic final works, the "Camino Real" series (2010–11). These suites add considerable variety and depth to our understanding of his oeuvre.

Twombly's more characteristic work—open, loosely sprung, with large, lightly inhabited, mostly white areas interspersed with scrawled or incised linear elements—began in earnest in the mid-'50s. One of the pictorial assumptions that he (along with many other painters) inherited from the Abstract Expressionists was that scale mattered. Size was especially important for Twombly, since it rescued his work from the impression of delicacy and tentativeness. His paintings were big from the beginning, allowing for the accumulations of hand gestures to have both breathing room and a sense of purpose—even if that purpose was not immediately evident. These elements could be seen in the white, nearly empty "Lexington" paintings from 1959, which were rejected by Castelli because "he did not know what they were,"³ as well as in the considerably more exuberant, colorful, and sensual (body parts abound) *School of Fontainebleau* (1960), *Empire of Flora*, and *School of Athens* (both 1961). The last



School of Athens, 1961, oil, oil-based house paint, colored pencil, and graphite on canvas, 75 by 79 inches. Private collection.

three works were painted in Rome, and their titles pay homage to Rosso Fiorentino, Francesco Primaticcio, Poussin, and Raphael. The paintings seem to echo the large, baroque spaces of the city Twombly inhabited. Living abroad, working in spacious studios and surrounded by a complex, historically rich Mediterranean culture allowed Twombly the freedom he needed for his art.

Importantly, the scale of Twombly's paintings removed his abbreviated calligraphic markings, which included handwriting, scribbled depictions, and pure abstraction, from the realm of drawing, with its implicit acknowledgement of the paper's edges, and shifted them to the arena of all-over painting. He used script to great and varied effect. Writing, as a manifestation of language, has the ability to move freely between different levels of abstraction. Twombly played with this, just as he negotiated the elision between legible and illegible script, exploiting the many ways that handwriting can be regarded as a thing in itself—the slant and spacing of the letters, the tilt of the word line, the

script's forcefulness or shakiness, its lightness or darkness, and the degree to which it is visible or obscured by erasure, superimposition, or overlay.

THE EXTREMELY WELL-READ Twombly often employed literary and historical references in his works. He was very keen on poetry, and lines and passages from John Keats, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stéphane Mallarmé, C.P. Cavafy, Giorgos Seferis, and Octavio Paz (among many others) regularly appear in them. But what seemed to resonate most with Twombly was the world of ancient Greece and Rome. (His mother once said that when he was in kindergarten he repeatedly mentioned that he wished to go to Rome.) To involve yourself deeply in the past is to position your art in the realm of memory, and with that come the distortions, lapses, and unexpected connections that memory is prone to. Memory is a sort of collage, and plumbing its potential was a key element of Twombly's working method.



“Nine Discourses on Commodus” reflects the attention that Twombly paid to Bacon’s work and to the writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet.

While the artist’s classical references often impart an elegiac or lyrical sense to the paintings, this is not the case with “Nine Discourses on Commodus.” Painted in the distressing period immediately after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, the series is named after an especially megalomaniacal and bloodthirsty second-century Roman emperor. Commodus’s twelve-year reign was a disaster—marked by coups, assassinations, massive corruption, and bloody gladiatorial combats. His misadventures caused serious military and territorial losses for the empire and contributed to its decline.

The nine equally sized vertical paintings, executed on monochrome, medium-gray grounds, replete with smears and drips of yellow, white, and (most prominently) red, call to mind flayed flesh and seem, Francis Bacon-like, to capture a scream or the unfolding of a psychotic break. They are a powerful commentary on a world that seemed to be teetering on the brink of chaos.

Before and during the time he worked on this series, Twombly paid a good deal of attention to Bacon’s work and to the writing of French author Alain Robbe-Grillet (creator of the screenplay for the slow and uncanny 1961 film *Last Year at Marienbad*). The influence of Robbe-Grillet’s measured, granular, repetitive, systematic, and disjunctive narration can be found throughout the “Nine Discourses.”

Forceful as these paintings are, their debut at Castelli in 1964 proved to be a commercial and critical fiasco. Minimalism and Pop were riding high, and the exhibition came at a bad time for work with an Abstract Expressionist flavor. The reviews were generally poor, but Donald Judd’s review in *Arts Magazine* was especially contemptuous and dismissive. For Twombly, however, the impact of the show’s reception was not entirely negative, although it did move him away from current developments in American art. He felt liberated—able to enjoy his solid European reputation without having to worry



View of the series
“Nine Discourses on
Commodus,” 1963,
oil, wax crayon, and
graphite on canvas,
each approx. 80%
by 52¾ inches; at
the Guggenheim
Museum, Bilbao.

about what people back home thought. He said that he “was the happiest painter around for a couple of years: no one gave a damn what I did.”⁴

He returned to Castelli in 1967 with the first of two relatively austere series that became known as the Blackboard paintings—white wax crayon on grounds of gray industrial paint. Some of the works feature looping and Slinky-like scrawls, others trace out complex mathematical or drafting diagrams. All in all, the works were well received. They were a better fit with the art of that time, and the often-reproduced paintings continue to look fresh. While they remain among Twombly’s most popular and highly valued canvases, in the context of the Pompidou show, they feel a bit like outliers.

THE TEN-PAINTING SERIES “Fifty Days at Iliam” finds Twombly back in the world of the Greeks. Begun in the summer of 1977, it is a meditation on the Trojan War as recounted in Alexander Pope’s early eighteenth-century English translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. The canvases are immense, with the largest, *Shades of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector*, measuring about 10 by 16 feet. That painting, while being an integral part of the cycle, is relatively simple and

quite effective on its own. It consists of three quatrefoil-like shapes rendered in oil paint, oil crayon, and pencil and set on a glowing white ground. Each shape is about a third the height of the canvas and the three are centered horizontally just above its midpoint. The shield forms are (from left to right) crimson red for Achilles, purpled gray for Achilles’s beloved (and slain) companion Patroclus, and a ghostly white for the Trojan Hector. The color in the shields is a bit sullied and the paint application—especially in the Achilles and Patroclus emblems—feels pressured and frenetic, the overall forms barely keeping the marks contained. The heroes’ names are penciled in on a diagonal just outside the upper left quadrant of each quatrefoil, and there is enough coarse shading, again most prominent in the Achilles and Patroclus sections, to give the shapes weight and presence. More than the other paintings in the group, we sense an emptied-out, funerary quality—a formal, cadenced memorializing, an archaic drumbeat of sorts.

Twombly repeated the quatrefoil form, which he then overlaid with a square, in three untitled 1985 oil-and-acrylic works on shaped panels. The crisply edged (and completely symmetrical) painting surfaces allow for a more densely filled

*Quattro Stagioni:
Inverno, 1993–95*
acrylic, oil, and
graphite on canvas,
123½ by 87 inches.
Tate, London.



image, and these paintings, executed in shades of deep sap green cut with creamy white, are among Twombly's most pictorial works. They recall the late Monet of the *Water Lilies* or Joan Mitchell's assertive and melancholy paintings from the early '60s, with their large, rounded, dark green forms. There is not the usual empty space in these paintings, and yet there is an abundance of cool light and shade, depth and air. They may depart from Twombly's typical work, but in this show they act as a kind of self-assured resting place.

Overt landscape references recur in Twombly's series "Quattro Stagioni." These four luscious, roughly ten-foot-high canvases are painterly and colorful, especially the green-black, yellow, and white *Inverno* (winter) and *Autunno*, with its juicy, dripping reds and purples. (Twombly would likely have had in mind the annual winegrowers' festival in Bassano in Teverina, the municipal region north of Rome where he had a studio and painted these works.)

The ten-painting "Coronation of Sesostri" (2000) is the last major series anchoring the exhibition, although to my mind the later "Bacchus" or "Camino Real" series would have worked as well. According to Thierry Greub, Twombly based the paintings on the rising and setting of the sun, inspired both by the story of the Egyptian king Sesostri and the mythical journey of the Egyptian sun god Ra across the skies in his divine boat.⁵ Incorporating verses from Sappho and quotations from American poet Patricia Waters that contemplate the death of the ancient gods, the "Coronation" series is more overtly narrative than most of Twombly's works, dealing explicitly with the cycle of birth and death.

It is fitting that a man in his seventies would give some serious thought to the arc of his life and the possibility both of its end and of its continuation. It also makes emotional sense that "Coronation" was started in Italy but shipped to and



finished in a studio that Twombly had set up in his childhood hometown of Lexington.

Twombly's work did not flag as he aged. Nor did it decrease in scale or ambition. Of particular note are the "Bacchus" paintings (2006-08), which were done during the Iraq War and feature blood- and wine-red coiling scrawls, and the final works of the "Camino Real" series, where the loops from the Blackboard paintings and the "Bacchus" paintings are made even bigger and more graphically and chromatically harsh with vehement swirls of red, orange, and yellow bleeding out against a field of acid green acrylic.

The title for the "Camino Real" series was taken from Tennessee Williams's 1953 play set in a dead-end town—a mix of Latin America and New Orleans—which contrasts the high-mindedness to which we aspire with the shabby reality we are forced to inhabit. We can certainly imagine that Twombly, who was ill at the time and near the end of his life, took this potentially tragic dichotomy to heart.

SCULPTURE CLEARLY engaged Twombly, even though he did not produce any of it between 1959 and 1976. Modestly scaled for the most part (some are quite tall), his sculptures are white-painted or plastered assemblages of what seems like the detritus of ordinary life—studio sweepings, wood scraps of all sizes, dried or artificial flowers, cardboard

boxes, bits of metal, electrical boxes. The works' whiteness unifies the disparate materials, causing the forms to appear to float, but also obscures the materials—pushes them away from reference and comprehension. As Twombly said, "White is my marble." Marble it might be, but not the smoothly carved stone of the Roman busts he collected. Twombly's white feels bleached out, fugitive. The hue was important for the artist in all of his work. He said in a late interview, "Whiteness can be the classic state of the intellect, or a neo-romantic area of remembrance—or as the symbolic whiteness of Mallarmé."⁶ Whiteness for Twombly signified a kind of potential, like blank paper, or John Cage's⁷ seemingly silent composition, or Rauschenberg's early white paintings.⁸

A connection to archaic sculpture—a number of Twombly's three-dimensional works evoke draped cloth or simplified kouros figures—is clear. Also apparent is the link to another area of his collecting: African art. Del Roscio confirmed to me Twombly's long-standing interest in African fetishes and their importance to his sculpture. The fetish reference, however, is downplayed, with no obvious summoning of the ritualistic power of such objects. This reticence, reinforced by the sculptures' white color (black would have a completely different feel) allows the force of the African art invoked to come upon the viewer more slowly and more subtly, and to lift the works out of the realm of the expected.

Fifty Days at Ilium: Shades of Achilles, Patroclus and Hector, 1978, oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas, approx. 10 by 16 feet. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Untitled (Formia),
1981, wood, iron
wire, nails, string,
and white paint,
59% by 34% by 13¼
inches.



The Pompidou's dramatic and effective installation of Twombly's sculpture—a group of sixteen pieces set on a low, white, stepped pedestal in a room whose wall of windows opens onto a spectacular view of the Paris skyline—adds to the power of the works. It imparts a sense of clustering and reiteration, creating charged spaces between the separate objects. While recalling a display of anthropological artifacts, the Pompidou installation also brings to mind images of Brancusi's studio, and cements the sculptures' affinity to important developmental lines of modernist work.

Twombly is an acquired taste, a bit of a dandy, a bit of a flâneur, and not American in the same way as Johns and Rauschenberg. He lived for the most part in Italy, yet his artist friends were Americans, and he had limited connections with the Italian art of his day.

Other American artists have spent time abroad, but not quite like Twombly. He lived in Italy for nearly sixty years and was, somewhat unrelated to art, integrated into its society. But he also kept his distance and his independence. Being an American, visiting his native country—often for extended periods—but neither living there nor acknowledging his expatriate status, gave him a kind of freedom from assumptions about what his art ought to be. In many ways, his peripatetic existence anticipated the lives of artists today.

Twombly's artistic stubbornness, his avoidance of certainty, brings weight and resistance to his art. As Clement Greenberg said in Emile de Antonio's 1973 film, *Painters*

Painting (not in relation to Twombly, but it fits), "The best art of our time or any art since Corot, not just since Manet, makes you a little more uncomfortable at first, challenges you more. It doesn't come that far to meet your taste or meet the established taste of the market." Twombly's art always seems to be slipping away. Its ambiguities and uncertainties are baked into it, which quite possibly points to the reason for its continuing and now rapidly growing appeal.

In a time of doubt and anxiety, many yearn for belief and assurance, for comfortable and irrefutable ideology, while others are willing to let go and be fruitfully unrooted. Rauschenberg's seemingly straightforward yet deeply enigmatic statement for the catalogue of Dorothy Miller's landmark 1959 Museum of Modern Art show, "Sixteen Americans," applies perhaps even more directly to Twombly. Rauschenberg said, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in that gap between the two.)" Twombly has certainly left something behind, something to fill the gap—the strength of memory is probably as good a description as any.⁹ ○

1. Although he was born and raised in the South, Twombly's parents were originally from New England. His father was a coach and the athletic director at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and had played professional baseball for a time. The young Twombly (born Edwin Parker Twombly Jr.) inherited his nickname Cy from his father, who was called that after the well-known pitcher Cy "Cyclone" Young. The Twombly family was a cultured and happy one, and the young man's artistic pursuits were encouraged.
2. That formative voyage came during the two artists' eight-month stay in Europe and North Africa. Twombly had gotten a travel grant from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond and invited Rauschenberg along.
3. Paul Winkler "Lex," in *Cy Twombly*, exh. cat., ed. Jonas Storsve, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, p. 54. This comes from a conversation between Winkler and Twombly discussing Leo Castelli's initial response to the paintings.
4. Nicholas Cullinan, "Nine Discourses on Commodus, or Cy Twombly's Beautiful 'Fiasco'," in *Cy Twombly*, note 45, p. 87, citing Kirk Varnedoe's conversation with Twombly.
5. Thierry Greub, "Cy Twombly's Antiquities," in *Cy Twombly*, p. 104.
6. Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, ed. Nicola Del Roscio, Munich, 2002, p. 27.
7. Cage composed *4'33"* in 1952. He was a teacher at Black Mountain when Twombly was there, and served as an inspiration to him.
8. In a letter from Rauschenberg to Twombly (the text is written in caps) Rauschenberg refers to the creation of the white paintings:

IF ONLY TIME WERE OURS TO SPEND, AGAIN. TO HAVE
OUR LIVES. I PAINTED THE 4-PANNEL [sic] PAINTING
A VERY EXPENSIVE FLAT WHITE TONIGHT AND IT IS
DRYING
NOW LIKE WHITE AIR FROZEN IN ITS STUBBORNNESS [sic]
... I WANTED YOU TO BE WITH ME SO MUCH
WHILE I WAS DOING THE PAINTING AND THOUGHT OF
BLK. MT. IN THAT FUNNY LITTLE ROOM WHEN WE
PAINTED THEM THE FIRST TIME.

Apr. 15, 1954, Archives of the Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio, Gaeta.

9. At the very end, Twombly was hallucinating due to his deteriorating condition and the lack of oxygen in his brain. And yet there was an underlying and poetic rationality to it all. He spoke continually of art, asking, for example, that a small Picasso that he owned be brought to his bedside. His last thoughts were about his art: "I let it inside to create, to regenerate, to make it stronger rather than let it go out all at once like a flash in the eye. I made art that regenerates itself. I enjoyed making it so much. Oh! I loved it so much." Then after a long pause: "The strength of memory that is left behind." From conversations with Nicola Del Roscio, and *Cy Twombly: Catalogue Raisonné of Drawings, vol. II, 1956–1960*, Munich, Schirmer Mosel, 2012, pp. 5–6.



*Crowning of
Sesostris, Part V,*
2000, acrylic,
crayon, and graphite
on canvas, 81½ by
61½ inches. Pinault
Collection.