

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

NEW YORK

Cy Twombly GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The big surprise of Cy Twombly's recent show at Gagosian Gallery was his newfound sense of scale. First, although the eight paintings in "Bacchus, Psilax, Mainomenos" are individual works, their perfect fit in the large, squarish gallery made them an environmental piece: If not executed precisely for the space, these horizontal tan canvases covered with swirling red loops were obviously created with it in mind. One sculpture (polychromed, oddly, in red and Granny Smith green) stood like a sentry in the corridor outside the main gallery, but once past the threshold, one was submerged in a sea of red. There was the rich, fully saturated red of Twombly's painted marks, as well as the more subdued, diffuse red of their reflection in the shiny wooden floor. No one has painted redness this way since Barnett Newman in *Anna's Light*, 1968.

That's for the external scale—but there is also something particular about the internal scale of these bacchanals. For years Twombly's painterly strategy was to stretch the proportional relationship between the size of the marks and that of the canvas to the point of an irreconcilable contradiction. We could either come close and graze the surface of a mural-size work as if it were a miniature, reading its diminutive inscriptions but forgoing our desire to grasp it whole, or we could stand back to get the overall effect, thereby missing the details of the rich graffiti. True, this changed with the so-called Blackboard paintings of the mid-'60s to mid-'70s, but not entirely: In those large works Twombly still courted the intimate space of drawing-as-handwriting, a space to which he fully returned in the mid-'70s and to which he remained faithful until now.

The current works set the clock back to the moment when Twombly bade farewell to the absurd loops of the gray paintings and envision for them a new progeny, one in which squiggling is no longer tied to the limited spread of handwriting. The jump in scale (such that internal and external scale now match) is enhanced by the reduced palette and Twombly's banishment of the quasi-atmospheric modulations engendered by the smudgy erasures in the gray paintings. (Here *pentimenti* are unhesitant: When dissatisfied with a particular mark, Twombly painted it over with a flat coat of ground color.) We immediately intuit that the huge span of the loops involved the whole body, an athleticism unprecedented in Twombly's entire career and, for that

matter, rarely seen in the history of twentieth-century art. One thinks of Matisse sketching the composition of his *Barnes Dance* of 1933 with a piece of charcoal affixed to a long bamboo stick, but here Twombly is doodling loops sometimes as tall as the paintings themselves (some of which reach a height of nearly eleven feet)—all with brushes between two and four inches thick, laden with heavy liquid paint. How does one do that, really, and with so much control?

Perhaps control is not exactly the right word—it has too much de Kooning-esque baggage. What is absolutely mesmerizing in these paintings is not simply the sheer quantity of the vertical runoffs—as in particularly bloody medieval representations of the Man of Sorrow—but the fact that their gravitational pull does not freeze the gestures, even though in one pair of canvases Twombly lets us know this was a possibility. Here is how: As he painted them, six of the canvases were firmly tacked on the wall down to the floor line, but two were hung low enough that a foot or so of the fabric continued onto the studio floor. This caused the bottom of the canvas itself to receive horizontally the red drips from Twombly's overflowing brush, which collected in pools over a tan "margin." Once stretched, these canvases foreclose any sense of wild abandon, because one can see the connection between the thick pools of paint and the dripping loops above them, a bit like Renaissance architectural diagrams in which the ground plan of a building corresponds point by point to an elevation drawn immediately above it. But Twombly's space has nothing to do with that of the Renaissance. A system of coordinates does organize the paintings (the horizontal direction of the semicontinuous curlicues from left to right, the vertical parallel lines of the runoffs), but this serves only to heighten the dynamic tilt of the loops themselves.

I usually ignore Twombly's much discussed fascination with Greco-Roman mythology, but I liked the comparison that Malcolm Bull makes in the show's catalogue between the drunken madness of Bacchus and the rage of Achilles, who, having avenged the death of his best friend Patroclus by killing Hector, dragged the body for twelve days behind his chariot. Twombly must have gotten dizzy while painting these huge works like a whirling dervish.

—Yve-Alain Bois



Cy Twombly,
Untitled, 2005,
acrylic on canvas,
10' 4½" x 13' 3".