

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Twombly Swirls Create One of Tate's Best Shows: Martin Gayford

Review by Martin Gayford



June 19 (Bloomberg) -- Scribble, dollops of hand-smearred paint, doodles, drips, barely legible words, incorrect mathematical calculations, an occasional line of scrawled poetry.

The list of components in [Cy Twombly](#)'s paintings isn't immediately appealing. When I add that these works sometimes take him only a couple of hours to complete, and are worth millions of dollars, the more skeptical reader may formulate a sentence containing the words "pretentious" and "confidence trick."

Well, I'm going to go on and make that feeling worse. I think "Cycles and Seasons," the new Twombly exhibition at [Tate Modern](#) in London, is a triumph, the best show there in years.

This isn't precisely a Twombly retrospective, more a look in depth at particular groups of work and moments in his career. It is still the fullest view of his art ever shown in the U.K. As an experience it's both mind-expanding and glorious to look at.

Why? Because Twombly has invented not just one new way to paint a picture, but several. The paint-your-own-Twombly formula in the first sentence above is missing a few items. To manufacture one at home, you also require the sensibility of Whistler or Monet and the daring of a [Jackson Pollock](#).

Twombly, born 80 years ago in Lexington, Virginia, belongs to the generation of American painters who came along immediately after the giants of Abstract Expressionism such as Pollock, Rothko and De Kooning. He and his contemporaries took the innovations of all-over design, messy gestural use of paint, then thought about where they could go from there.

## Word Tributes

Words are an ingredient in many Twombly pieces. The beautiful series entitled "Nini's Paintings" from 1971. The tributes to a dead friend look like enormous pages of writing paper which have been used and used again.

Layers of marks cover others half erased, as in an ancient manuscript. None is quite legible. While the paintings have the swirling energy of a Pollock, they suggest something quite different: the murmuring of numerous voices.

His work has changed greatly over the years, and is seldom truly abstract. The earlier paintings, such as "Arcadia," look like scratchings on an old, stained plaster wall. Rather than being tough and raw, the effect is delicate, like a Whistler etching.

In contrast, the most recent pictures, a series from 2005, are the freest and wildest he's ever done: coils of red paint like blood, spattered and dripping down the canvas. The theme is the ecstasy and insanity of Bacchus, god of wine. The underlying subject, perhaps, is war.

## Seaside View

Some of Twombly's other work from recent decades is surprisingly figurative. For years he's lived partly in Italy, where his studio has a view of the sea. He spends hours staring at the Mediterranean, which has got into certain pictures.

The four-part "Hero and Leandro" (1981-4) resembles a Monet seascape, except it's seen from the point of view of Leandro (or Leander), who drowned trying to swim across the Hellespont for a tryst. The last part is a sheet on which Twombly has jotted a line of Keats, "He's gone: up bubbles all his amorous breath."

So this is a painting of water, as seen by somebody sinking. A lot of Twombly seems connected with fluidity. When you look at his pictures, you seem to be drifting along amid all manner of floating associations. His sculptures, which have a weathered look like an object found in an ancient tomb, often concern boats.

Part of the knack of looking at his paintings, as with swimming, is just to relax. Then Twombly's art, far from being dauntingly avant-garde, is very easy to enjoy.

([Martin Gayford](#) is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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