

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

### *Cy Twombly: The Natural World, Selected Works, 2000-2007*

by Terry R. Myers

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No painter since Pollock has refused to separate landscape and language more than Cy Twombly. His work is at its best when “no” withstands “yes,” when all of the things that make it beautiful to look at in the affirmative are never left to their so-called natural devices. Even if most of the works brought together in this lean-and-mean exhibition demonstrate that he has tipped the balance of his recent work more toward landscape than language, it remains very clear that Twombly hasn’t abandoned his pro-visual denial of any pre-verbal wilderness. When curator James Rondeau notes in his catalogue text that “Neither landscape nor language is, after all, a truly natural phenomenon,” he reminds us that Twombly’s paintings live or die based upon their ability to contest Pollock’s “I am nature” claim, asking us something much more in line with Morrissey’s lyrical taunt: “Nature is a language; can’t you read?”



Cy Twombly. Untitled (detail), 2007. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Marron, New York. © Cy Twombly. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery.

The installation of the exhibition reinforces much of the above. In the first of four consecutive rooms, five sculptures from 2000-2004 are bordered by seven works on paper from 2001, transforming the space into a formal garden, in plan if not in practice.

None of the twelve works are large-scale, and it is their consistent lack of monumentality that keeps the sculptures grounded in the pictorial rather than the literal. For example, it could be argued that *Untitled, Lexington* (2001) is the most in-the-round of the sculptures: a simple box topped by a trapezoidal platform, both of which are covered in what looks like white household paint (“my marble,” says the artist), and upon which have been deposited several color-soaked and wadded-up paint rags. The object mimics a flowerbed while alluding to the exuberant picture-making in the works on paper that surround it, which were produced by Twombly in Gaeta, the small seaside town in Italy that is one of his current residences, the other being Lexington, Virginia, his childhood home cited in the titles of the sculptures.

Thick blobs and thin rivulets of paint (in every primary and secondary color except green), pencil and wax crayon scribbles, leaf-shaped pieces of collaged paper, and, again, the occasional paint-soaked wadded tissue come together in the works on paper as more lexicon than landscape, pages torn from Twombly’s thesaurus as much as his guidebook. In context, their abundance balances the restraint of the sculptures, but up against the much larger paintings that fill the remaining rooms of the exhibition, they emerge as the least resistant works present.

In the larger—yet still human-scale—pictures Twombly shows himself to be more often than not able to deliver late work that joins his best work. Two horizontal paintings from the series *A Gathering of Time* (2003) share the next room with four vertical ones from the series *Untitled (Winter Pictures)* (2004). The paintings from the first series are identified as seascapes, made during a trip to the Caribbean. Predominately turquoise with numerous small, paintball-like splotches of white, it’s likely they would come across as very energetic if they hadn’t been grouped with the paintings from the second series. Made in Gaeta, their rapid-fire, muddy brown, winter-inspired splotches raise them to a level of pastiche characteristic of Twombly’s most effective paintings. (It is a mistake to take everything too seriously.) Upon closer examination, however, such an explosive reading doesn’t add up: the paint itself seems slower, less worked, and, it must be said, far less physically attractive than at first glance. Rondeau informs us that Twombly’s

procedure was anything but expressionistic: using (again) a wadded up cloth soaked with white paint to place the splotch, he then squeezed its mass to release the liquid excess. Placement, more than painterliness, is key.

Another vital feature of all of the paintings from 2003-07 is that they have been painted on adjoining wood panels of the same proportions as the windows in Twombly's studios. These architectural underpinnings manage to restrain even the largest horizontal paintings in this exhibition—three from the series *Peony Blossom Paintings* (2007)—from their potentially overblown poetic ends. In addition, their all-over compositions work much better than the same-sized paintings I saw earlier this year at Gagosian in London from the series, *The Rose* (2008), in which a few super-blossoms were lined up more like supergraphics. In the end, it seems that blown-up words are worth more (or at least work better) than pictures: the three paintings made in Lexington from the series */// Notes from Salalah* (2005-07) enlarge Twombly's trademark "pseudo-writing" from the late 1960s and early 1970s to dizzying yet somehow still readable (rather than translatable, given their Arabic source) results—reinforcing yet again that nature, like painting, is itself a language.