

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



CY TWOMBLY *Sculpture*

by Anne Sherwood Pundyk

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Just over a month after the opening of Cy Twombly's exhibition of sculpture at MoMA, the artist died at age 83. Located in the museum's fourth floor foyer gallery, the collection overlooks the lush, bustling sculpture garden beyond the exterior glass wall. Illuminated primarily from the east with natural light reflecting off of white marble, the arrangement of eccentric whitewashed forms becomes a gently haunted tribute to a man whose aesthetic oeuvre is simultaneously enigmatic and monumental. The modest selection of seven sculptures, recently acquired by the museum, represents the span of his 60-year career. The show provides a vista of the artist's highly intuitive and rigorously uncompromising work, despite its modest size and singular focus (Twombly worked predominately in other media such as painting and drawing, as well as printmaking and photography).

The entirety of Twombly's internationally acclaimed life's work seems to coalesce and hover over the small exhibition, just as it appears to be patrolled from below by the helicopter suspended in the adjacent stairwell. Flashing back to the seedbed of post-World War II European modernism that Twombly thirsted after as early as his teens, the two selections from the mid '50s, "Untitled (Funerary Box for a Lime-Green Python)" (1954) and "Untitled" (1955), reflect Twombly's dual attraction to the expressive powers of primitive and classical art. After his formal training in the United States, a brief stint in the Army, and a crucial first trip to Europe with his close friend and artistic co-conspirator Robert Rauschenberg, these sculptures were made—all while the artist was poised at the threshold of his earliest mature work. Incorporating his early floral imagery, the two works reveal Twombly's interest in symmetrical fetish-like effects, often made from cast-off materials; Twombly intentionally used lowly means—roughly constructed wooden boxes, string, wire, and fabric—to achieve poised, gracefully resolved work.

In 1976, after a two-decade gap, Twombly resumed making sculpture. In the ensuing personally and artistically fruitful years, Twombly married Tatiana Franchetti, an Italian portrait painter with whom he had a son, and the new family moved to Rome. "Untitled" (1976), the upright, two-tiered tube assemblage made there, has humorous, erotic associations while simultaneously making a declarative statement of existence and identity, "I am." By the mid-'70s, Twombly had exhibited his paintings extensively in the United States and Europe. He had also firmly established a consistent pattern of relocation for producing his work, retracing a path that circled from his hometown in Lexington, Virginia to New York City, to Rauschenberg's home in Captiva Island, Florida to various places in Italy. The work locations he chose, taken as a whole, created an emotionally and aesthetically unified field. By moving several times each year, Twombly purposefully disrupted his environment in order to generate new work. As an isolated case this is even truer of his sculpture, indicating that at key junctures in his life, it served as a means of grounding through the handling of physical objects—the making of personal talismans to ensure safe psychic passage.

Increasingly integral to Twombly's painting at the time that he resumed making sculpture was a surge of specific written references to works of literature, especially Greek and Roman mythology

and epic accounts of heroic battles and voyages. Paired with his graceful scrawlings was a renewed and more expansive use of vibrant color, especially in reference to land, sky, and flower blooms. Simon Schama observed in his catalogue essay for *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper* at the Whitney in 2004, “what Twombly draws from archaic mythology is its poetic emphasis on the consolations of metamorphosis; cruelty, rape and death...transformed into the irrepressible burgeoning of nature. So Twombly lines up—literally—some of the victims along with their alter egos in flora and fauna.” Schama suggests that there is a psychological link between the stories of violent transgression located in the artist’s work and opposing narratives of renewal and rebirth told in the natural forms that comprise both his sculpture and painting.

Twombly made sculpture on a more regular basis during the last three decades of his life. In an interview with critic David Sylvester, on the occasion of the large exhibition of his sculpture at Basel’s Kunstmuseum in 2000, Twombly revealed that, for him, the demands of making sculpture were distinctly different from those required of painting. “[Sculpture is] a whole other state. And it’s a building thing. Whereas the painting is more fusing—fusing of ideas, fusing of feelings, fusing projected on atmosphere.” The distinction he makes in his approach to the two media points to the importance of the tangible, constructed qualities of three-dimensional form. While the modes of genesis for his sculpture and paintings were different, the four assemblages spanning the ’80s, ’90s, and ’00s have nautical and floral elements correlating to those in his paintings. Similarly, the artist’s script appears in blue pencil across the rudder-like element of “By the Ionian Sea” (1988). Another example of his handwritten text is located inside a cutout paper heart (a motif from the artist’s painting) attached to the lowest form of the totem, where below the painted buoy in “Untitled” (2005), the word “snafu” is written in pencil.

In Kirk Varnedoe’s catalogue essay for Twombly’s 1994/95 retrospective at MoMA, he recounts that, as a young man in his 20s, a year before making the earliest sculpture in the exhibition, Twombly stated, “[the main challenge of progressive art] lies in the complete expression of one’s own personality through every faculty available...and a feel for the irrational poetry latent in society’s most humble materials.” In 1993, Twombly took a house in Lexington, his birthplace and hometown. He made sculpture there for the next decade, including the most recent work in the exhibition. Twombly felt Virginia to be Mediterranean-like, returning regularly to the small historic college town surrounded by farmlands and low mountains. The artist was nicknamed after baseball legend Cy Young by his father, himself a former pitcher for the Chicago White Sox. From rural Southern roots, Twombly equipped himself with the tools to establish his place on the largest artistic stages of the world. Reading gesture as a record of intention, Twombly acquired the necessary finesse, strategy, and tolerance for risk. In the decade before his move back to Lexington, Twombly, then in his late ’50s, renovated a house and garden in the promontory Mediterranean coastal town of Gaeta, Italy, creating a garden of lemon trees that he conceived of as a collection of rooms. With this in mind, MoMA’s exhibition of the artist’s assemblages could be considered a symbolic garden, cultivated inside a room in which to contemplate Twombly’s life’s work, and to mourn his passing.