

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ARTFORUM

Cy Twombly

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Despite the temptation, I cannot easily say of the eight great untitled paintings in this show—looping ovals of glowing orange, yellow, and red upon bright apple-green fields that were made shortly before the artist's death in July 2011 at the age of eighty-three—that they represent a life summation. That term, so readily at hand at this valedictorian moment, suggests knowledge of where Twombly was going as well as of from where he was coming. Yet such hyper-privileged information is nowhere to be found; no more greatly revered a contemporary master has blown more dust into the eye of both critic and historian than this reticent southerner—for all the glamorous array of authors whose names emblazon the many serious studies of Twombly's work and the by-now five volumes of his catalogue raisonné. There is no infantile trauma, no Rosebud—such as we know of—that set the artist on his path from life in small-town Lexington, Virginia, to that of a Roman prince.

I know a bit whereof I speak. The first retrospective exhibition of Twombly's work took place in 1968 at the Milwaukee Art Museum, then directed by the alert Tracy Atkinson (and named Milwaukee Art Center). The essay for that catalogue, "Learning to Write," was written by a critic of small account—me. My working friendship with Twombly dates to that moment. I mention this odd biographical detail not out of vanity—though there is a touch of that—but because it was there, in that essay, that an oft-repeated, always uncredited detail of the painter's life first appeared: "Twombly recalls . . . that [while still in the army as a cryptographer] he often drew at night, with lights out, perfecting a kind of meandering and imprecise graphology for which he would shortly be esteemed." This odd bit of memory perfectly keyed into the painting of an outlander captivated by what then seemed little more than latrine or telephone-booth scrawl.

By 1968—following the uncomprehending thud of the reception of Twombly's *Nine Discourses on Commodus*, 1963, shown in 1964 at Castelli Gallery in New York—the artist had already edged away from the fluid, multivalent graffiti compositions of the 1950s to the more purposive Blackboard Paintings of the later '60s. And here the lost stitch between then and now is repurled. Broadly and fearlessly expanded and plangently colored, these "Last Paintings" revive the parallel spirals of



Cy Twombly, *Untitled*  
(*Camino Real*), 2011,  
acrylic on plywood,  
99 3/8 x 72 1/8".

the "Camino Real" series, 2010, to which the works here, dating to circa February 2011, relate. "He was in agony," recalled Nicola Del Roscio, the painter's ever-vigilant amanuensis-companion. "It was really his last effort." These words were quoted in the essay by Achim Hochdörfer that accompanies this poignant display. For all the inescapable diminution of physical prowess innate to senescence, these magnificent paintings show that Twombly died at a moment of sovereign pictorial strength.

the Blackboard group—those registers of unspooling and dropped loops first executed in 1967.

One is tempted now to speak of Twombly's *alter Stil*, the style of the older artist who no longer fears the constraints imposed by an earlier life. Amplified ambition and tragic emotion have replaced the fear of risk and failure. Adventitious similarities to the other things out there in the world fall away. Beethoven, Verdi, Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, and de Kooning all produced textbook examples of "old-age style." And this is true of Twombly, with his "Last Paintings," as well. In the exhibition "Cy Twombly, Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things," held at Gagosian in 2007, one easily found premonitory manifestations of the painter's autographic, ovaling broad brushwork vaguely spelling out not quite decipherable words.

This development continued into

—Robert Pincus-Witten