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Cy Twombly at the Pompidou Centre: out of time and ahead of it
The American artist's first posthumous retrospective sensationally captures his greatness

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'Coronation of Sesostris Part V' (2000) Pinault Collection © Cy Twombly Foundation

“Twombly! But he’s trying to kill painting!” exclaimed Alfred Barr, MoMA’s director of collections, when asked in the 1950s why the New York museum would not show the young American. In fact, Cy Twombly was reinventing the medium, but who knew? Majestic, mysterious, messy, languid, blunt, erudite, obscene, both out of time and ahead of it, Twombly as revealed in the Pompidou Centre’s new exhibition is the most unexpected, original painter of the later 20th and early 21st centuries.

This show is a rollercoaster of high feeling and frenetic lines just held within a classical wall of restraint. From the bubbles and clots, finger smears of raw colour and tracteries of letters with which Twombly suggests the moment of life ebbing away in 1962’s “Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus”, to the translucent turquoise seascape surging with white blotches, maybe waves or patterns of reflected light but really resembling ejaculatory stains, in 2003’s “Untitled

(A Gathering of Time)”, Twombly builds tight, disciplined compositions out of allusion and ambiguity, smudging and slippage.

Based near Rome for much of his life, Twombly talked a European language of ruins and decadence at American scale and scope. He tethered abstraction to narrative, and ragged, elemental mark-making to poetry with calligraphic scrawls and titles such as “Wilder Shores of Love” and “Say Goodbye, Catullus, to the Shores of Asia Minor”. His singular exalted/debased aesthetic unfolds across the Pompidou’s airy light top floor, with views commanding all Paris, in a weighty, triumphal show which is triply successful.

As the first retrospective since the artist’s death in 2011, its immediate achievement is to define Twombly’s evolution with crystalline, nuanced understanding. Stellar examples demonstrate that early works which look like graffiti codas to Abstract Expressionism — the austere white lead and oil abstractions “Quarzazat” and “Volubiis” made on a trip to Italy and north Africa with his lover Robert Rauschenberg in 1953; the dribbles, scratches and graphic signs of the 1961 steamy-night Roman paintings “Empire of Flora” and “School of Athens” — are foundations of later lyrical, opulent cycles such as “The Four Seasons” (1993-95).

Gestural dramas of mutability bathed in Mediterranean white light and wine-dark harmonies, these recall the architectonic classical landscape painters. “I would have liked to be Poussin, if I’d had a choice, in another time,” Twombly told Tate director Nicholas Serota in 2008.

Second, as a statement of painting’s contemporary possibilities, this selection is exhilarating. Among the most potent works are the latest and freest: crashing red and gold chords looping across verdant green in “Camino Real”, 2010-11; five metres of flowers blossoming, waning, dying in “Blooming”, 2001-08. Late, sparkling white-painted wood and plaster assemblage sculptures, constructed from boxes and discarded offcuts, are another delight: dilapidated but calm, authoritative, archaeological in manner, they offset the nerviness of the paintings while sharing their elegiac tone.

Third, and significant beyond art-world reputations, Paris, which feels itself the now besieged capital of western culture, co-opts Twombly as old-world history painter. The show is structured around his three great series, the Roman “Nine Discourses on Commodus”, the Greek “Fifty Days at Iliam”, and the Egyptian “Coronation of Sesostris”. Each renews ancient tradition, risking big themes of love, war, death, through postmodern fragments and erotic play.

Each is key to Twombly’s development, but none were loaned for Tate’s 2008 retrospective. Seen together for the first time, the grouping confers on Twombly a grandeur and seriousness resonant with the modernist splendours of the Pompidou and Paris.

Produced during winter 1963 in Rome, “Commodus” references one historic assassination, of emperor Aurelius Commodus, at the time of another — President Kennedy. Against a grey backdrop outlined with grids and graphs, perhaps implying Roman ideals of order, whorls, spurts and scabs of conflicting white-red impasto masses bleed like wounds on the canvas, intensifying until the eighth panel, then vanishing into trickles down a long empty vertical space in the last one. Commodus was cruel and mad; chaos and dissolution win.

The same year 1963-64 Rauschenberg made his name with his all-American silkscreens, also referencing Kennedy. The coincidence of the Pompidou’s show with Tate’s Rauschenberg

retrospective gives a once-in-a-generation chance to compare these overlapping careers. It is Twombly who scribbled on the pillow of Rauschenberg's "Bed". Racing ahead with radical, conceptually inclined Combines, Rauschenberg was the hare, but his work dwindled after 1970. Twombly the tortoise, by contrast, got better and deeper.

It was, nevertheless, more than a decade before another ambitious historical cycle. "Fifty Days at Ilium" (1978) visits Europe from the Philadelphia Museum for the first time. Through 10 panels of gestural handwriting, vortices of dense paint and diagrammatic doodles, Twombly recounts the Trojan war. The Greeks, vehement and aggressive, are characterised by thrusting triangles of large crimson letters A — Achilles, Archaens — and bloody hues. The Trojans, evoked in wan blue and grey scrawls, are melancholic and contemplative, with "House of Priam" little more than a list of its inhabitants, dominated by the scratchy capitals of hopeless prophetess Cassandra.

Seventies minimalism meets timeless epic here as Twombly seems to be in conversation with Homer. The opening piece, "Shield of Achilles", particularly is a radiant, layered spiral returning pictorially to the ekphrasis of the text where the Greek poet lavishly describes the shield's visual artistry.

"Sesostris", the trophy series belonging to Paris collector François Pinault, similarly begins with a sphere, a wobbly sun drawn in red crayon as if by a child: a statement as provocatively infantile as the Homeric reference is complex. But the sun, acquiring wheels, joins a gondola-like boat departing for oblivion. Its oarsmen are long-stemmed flowers blossoming and dripping paint until they turn into a coruscating purple-orange Venetian sunset, reminiscent of Turner. Finally, only the black barge of night and death remains. These last panels, drained of colour, contain a barely legible classical poem: "Eros weaver of myth/Eros sweet and bitter/Eros bringer of pain".

Archaic as old eroded surfaces, steeped in memory, but contemporary in its broken, punkish diction, word and image crossover and easy collapse of abstract/figurative borders, "Sesostris" was produced in 2000. Like many of Twombly's late works in this enthralling show, for beauty and expressive depth it has yet to be rivalled by any painting in the 21st century.