

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Cy Twombly, Redefined by His Drawings

Roberta Smith



Cy Twombly's "Untitled," from 1954, is among the more than 90 works included in the Gagosian exhibition "In Beauty It Is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008." Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagosian

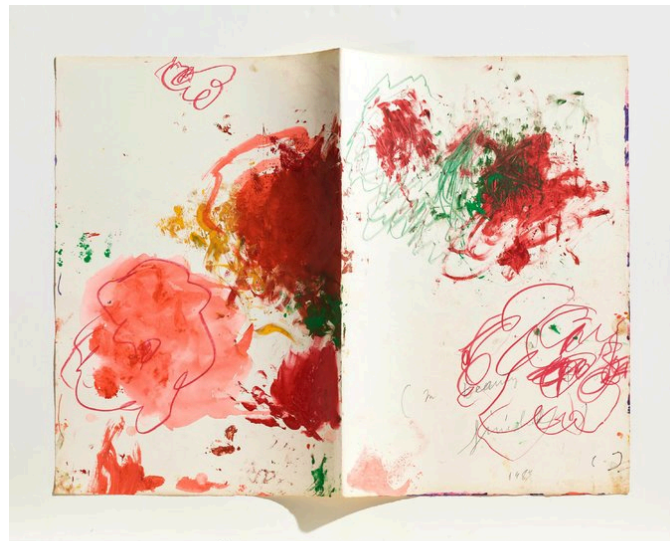
Once upon a time the Gagosian Gallery produced museum-quality shows at an unmatched rate — at least once a year. Then it seemed to cede this role to the well-oiled machine that is David Zwirner's gallery.

But now Gagosian is back, with "Cy Twombly: In Beauty It Is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008," a ravishing, revelatory and compressed overview of this great postwar career that more than makes up for lost time. Comprising over 90 drawings, collages and the occasional painting on paper at the West 21st Street gallery, this concentrated presentation spans over five decades and gives Twombly's art a new pace and immediacy. No matter how well we may think we understand his achievement, it introduces an artist we haven't quite seen before.

The show has been selected and organized by Mark Francis of Gagosian, with the help of Nicola Del Roscio from the Cy Twombly Foundation; its title is from a Navajo night chant that Twombly used in the title of a voluptuous unbound book of 36 paintings on paper (1983-2002) in the final gallery here. The exhibition, celebrating the publication of the eighth and final volume of the catalogue raisonné of his drawings, coincides with a presentation of his "Coronation of Sesostris," a 10-part painting from 2000 at Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery, in commemoration of what would have been his 90 birthday on April 25.



An installation view of the Twombly exhibition “In Beauty It Is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008.” Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagosian



CY TWOMBLY *Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)*, 1983–2002 (detail) Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil and pen on handmade paper in unbound handmade book, 36 pages. Each page: 22 3/8 × 15 3/4 inches (56.8 × 40 cm)

GAGOSIAN

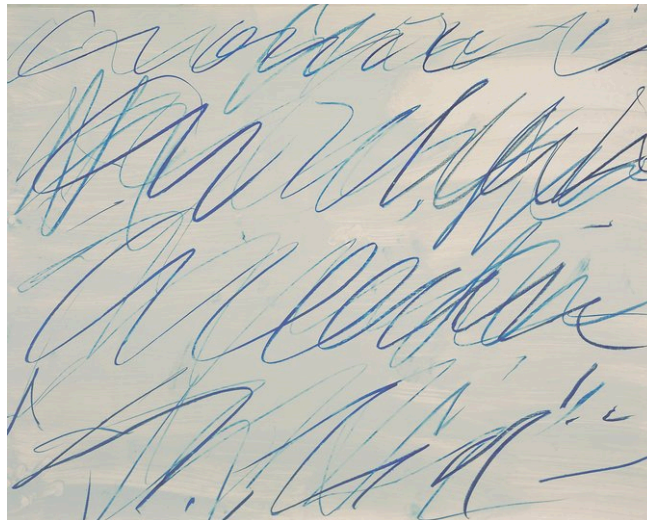
A detail of an unbound book of 36 paintings on paper from 1983-2002. Its title, “Untitled (In Beauty it is finished),” is from a Navajo night chant. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagosian

The gathering of works in Chelsea reconfigures the general sense of Twombly (1928-2011) as a lanky, slow-moving, ever-relaxed Southerner who worked in fits and starts and soaked up the good life on Italy’s Amalfi Coast or in Lexington, Va. — his birthplace, to which he returned in his later years. In its stead is a man driven by an almost demonic energy, who never stopped pushing and testing his aesthetic engine, drawing, making it ever bigger and more encompassing.

Paraphrasing Shakespeare, this show could be said to ask, “What’s in a line?” Everything: drawing, painting, language from vulgate to Olympian, mathematics, pictographs, architecture, writing in tongues, the body, the war between the sexes, myth and history, and nature, especially the sea.



An installation view of works from the early 1970s. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagolian



"Untitled," 1970. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagolian

The show is densely installed and has an immersive feeling that becomes oceanic as the rhythms of Twombly's hand expand. It begins with a startling vitrine of 39 drawings, which are being exhibited for the first time: tiny scraps mounted on index cards made in 1951. They show a range of quasi-abstract motifs resembling trees, fences, rows of flowers and — strangely — little sketches for Wiener Werkstatte broaches. They are about as precise as Twombly gets; the motif turns shambling in four larger oil paint drawings nearby.

Twombly's signature line, nervous and diagonally adrift, makes a tentative appearance, faintly penciled, suggesting a sloping hill in six drawings near the entrance. Then it shortens, gathering in flocks on four postcard-size works from 1955, evoking illegible scribbblings. On the opposite wall, the lines cluster into thatches of electric crayon color — seaweed, waves, electricity, brain synapses. Classicism, Romanticism, numbers and pornographic sgraffito pop up in a drawing titled "See Naples + Die," with the outline of a possible temple, a quote from Keats and crude, sputtering gunlike shapes that evoke Claes Oldenburg's early sculpture.



An installation view of the Gagosian show, which includes a vitrine of 39 drawings that are being exhibited for the first time: tiny scraps mounted on index cards made in 1951. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagosian

It's 1960, you're still in the first gallery but Twombly has indicated most of the directions his work will take. From here his lines thicken and become frazzled like unraveling wool. He draws in white wax crayon on paper covered with wet chalkboard gray paint — a favorite wet-dry technique — to creating wobbly spirals, tumbling figure eights and lasso-y loops that suggest an artist working on a tightrope. Line is expanded geometrically into narrow planes that cascade noisily through four drawings summoning Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" paintings.

At some point toward the middle of the show oil paint settles in to stay, along with subjects like flowers and buds. Twombly is at his most free. In the largest work in the show, "Untitled (Gaeta)" from 1989, he paints mostly with his fingers, creating a small mountain of blacks and violets mixed with white. Their opulence is gorgeous, funny and not a little scatological.



"Untitled," 2001. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagosian



Twombly's "Untitled (Gaeta)," from 1989, is the largest work in the show. He mostly used his fingers to paint it, creating a small mountain of blacks and violets mixed with white. Credit Cy Twombly Foundation, via Gagolian

The self-contained arc of this show separates Twombly from the two artists with whom he is often affiliated, usually to his detriment: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Also Southerners, they set the stage for postwar art by choosing images and objects from everyday life. They became consummate appropriators of things — souvenirs that signified their times or private lives — frequently erasing the boundary between painting and sculpture.

Twombly was more traditional and more European, and not much of an appropriator, except in his sculpture. He also was not an urban artist, but a pastoral, romantic one — a lyric poet often inspired by nature who read omnivorously, breaking his experiences down, releasing them as a kind of visual music through the seismographic vibrations of his hand. He seems less drawn to transgressing the physical boundaries of media — although he does combine drawing and painting — than in expanding art's capacity for direct emotional expression and radical vulnerability. It reverberates throughout this sumptuous show.