

## GAGOSIAN HYPERALLERGIC

### Cy Twombly's Extravagant Synesthesia *Rosalind Krauss misreads Twombly in more ways than I can enumerate.*

John Yau



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, Collection Cy Twombly Foundation, © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagolian

In her essay, "Cy was here: Cy's up" (*ArtForum*, September 1994), Rosalind Krauss made this observation about Cy Twombly:

*Twombly "misreads" Pollock's mark as graffiti, as violent, as a type of antiform. And this misreading becomes the basis of all of Twombly's work. Thus he cannot write "Virgil" on a painting and mean it straight. "Virgil" is there as something a bored or exasperated school-child would carve into a desktop, a form of sniggering, a type of retaliation against the teacher's drone.*

This reading of Twombly fits in with the commonplace critical narrative that the past is dead, and that it is only good for appropriation and ironic commentary but not much else. Krauss's condescension towards Twombly is evident in her use of the descriptors, "bored or exasperated schoolchild." In her neat hierarchical construction — a negative way of thinking that is recurrent

in criticism and politics — Jackson Pollock resides at the top of the food chain while Twombly sits, at best, somewhere in the middle.

Krauss is not alone in her need to construct hierarchies. There are still lots of critics, curators, and artists content to ally themselves with established viewpoints as well as assert for the umpteenth time that painting and drawing are things that have been used up, that they are old threadbare coats that should be thrown out long ago. This is capitalist aesthetics in a nutshell — everything is disposable.



*Cy Twombly, "Untitled" (1954), gouache, wax crayon, and colored pencil on paper, 19 1/8 × 25 1/4 inches, Collection Cy Twombly Foundation, © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian*

I want to take issue with Krauss's misreading of Twombly for more reasons than I can enumerate. The reason she asserts that Twombly has to be "bored" when he writes "Virgil" on his painting is because, if the opposite were true, it would mean that he reads and cares about poetry. It seems to me that Krauss cannot wrap her head around that possibility. And yet, it is copiously clear to anyone who looks carefully at the first in-depth exhibition of the artist's drawings, *Cy Twombly: In Beauty It is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008*, at Gagosian (March 8 – April 25, 2018) that Twombly did care deeply about poetry, from the archaic Greek poet Sappho, whose work survives in fragments, to the 13th-century Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi, to the radical 19th-century Italian, Giacomo Leopardi, to the first modern poet, Charles Baudelaire. His passions and enthusiasms extended to paintings of all kinds, as well as to history, mythology, music, and much else, and he did not care if others did not share them. He was learned in a non-scholarly way. For him, culture was a living thing, not a box full of treasures to be plundered.

The Gagosian exhibition includes three bodies work done between 1951 and '54. During this brief but formative period, Twombly studied at Black Mountain College; traveled to North Africa and Italy with Robert Rauschenberg; served in the army as a cryptographer; and moved to New York. He begins this period by exploring primal forms and ends with a commitment to undo all that he has learned by drawing in the dark. This was a man for whom drawing was a passion, a necessity, and a challenge. It had nothing to do with misreading Pollock or, for that matter, Robert Motherwell or Franz Kline, both of whom he met at Black Mountain College. If anything, he took what needed from all of them as well as from others.

In 1951, most likely after he met the poet Charles Olson at Black Mountain College, Twombly started relentlessly drawing a group of similar abstract glyphs on index cards. The size of the drawings suggests that he is looking for a motif rather than making one. Two years later, while

traveling in North Africa and Italy, he made drawings of fetish objects at the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome. In the exhibition, “Untitled (North African Sketchbook)” (1953) is open to a page where he has made a sketch of a fetish object alongside a list of its materials, which includes velvet and feathers. In these works, Twombly is a devoted, engaged, ardent student. The following year, in a group of untitled pencil drawings, Twombly made a group of untitled pencil drawings in the dark as a way of interrupting the bond between hand and eye, of unlearning what he learned.



Cy Twombly, “Untitled” (1969), oil and wax crayon on paper, 27 5/8 × 34 1/4 inches, Collection Cy Twombly Foundation, © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

This exhibition of 90 works, some of which are ensembles, contains groupings I am not familiar with, as well as others that are recognizable to anyone who knows Twombly’s art. Technically speaking, the show begins with “Untitled” (1951), an album of 39 pencil drawings on index cards, and ends with “Untitled (In Beauty it is finished)” (1983-2002), a book of drawings done in acrylic, wax crayon, pencil, and pen on handmade paper.

In both the early and late work, the artist’s focus doesn’t seem to be on making work to display; there is something private about what he is up to. What *Cy Twombly: In Beauty It is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008* offers viewers is a visual diary of the artist’s preoccupations and infatuations. Rather than being “bored” or “sniggering,” Twombly happily embraced the more offensive sin of self-indulgence. Voluptuous seems to be the only word that comes close to characterizing some of the works in the show. But what prevents the best work from being merely self-indulgent is Twombly’s sense of form coupled with his sympathy for his subject, whether it is a wistful poem by Sappho or the travails of a minor Greek god.

When Twombly met Charles Olson, who had become the rector at Black Mountain, replacing Josef Albers, the latter had just spent six months in Mexico studying Mayan glyphs. Although Twombly was never a student of Olson’s, we know from a letter that Olson wrote to fellow poet Robert Creeley on November 29, 1951, that the two men had intense conversations “abt line.”

In 1950, Olson published his manifesto, “Projective Verse” in *Poetry* New York, in which he famously declared in all capital letters: “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.” In this statement, Olson rejects the concept of traditional verse, with its emphasis on form (the sonnet or other types of rhymed verse) as a vessel into which the poet pours and shapes the content. What Twombly would have gotten from Olson was the idea that a sensitivity to sound and syllable could instill a subject with lyric immediacy.



Cy Twombly, “Untitled (Gaeta)” (1989), acrylic and tempera on paper mounted on wooden panel, 80 × 58 5/8 inches, Private Collection, © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

For Olson, the poetic line was an organization of sounds — the closest, most accurate living record of the poet’s breath, body and being. Made of syllables, sounds, and letters, words were material things. It is useful to recall that in 1952, after leaving Black Mountain, Twombly titled two paintings “Solon” after the Athenian diplomat and poet. “Solon” also happens to be an anagram of Olson.

In his essay, “Human Universe” (1951), Olson wrote: “Art does not seek to describe but to enact.” In 1957, after he had moved to Italy, Twombly made the following statement in an interview that appeared in the magazine *L’Esperienza moderna*: “Each line is now the actual experience with its own innate history. It does not illustrate — it is the sensation of its own realization.” When Twombly incorporates a line of poetry into his drawing, it is not citation or illustration. Rather, the words and the drawing are both made of lines: they are both visible, inseparable actions packing a visceral immediacy, emphasized through his choice of materials, color, and drawing. And in these actions, Twombly thrusts the work into the present, in a way that is similar to reading a poem aloud.

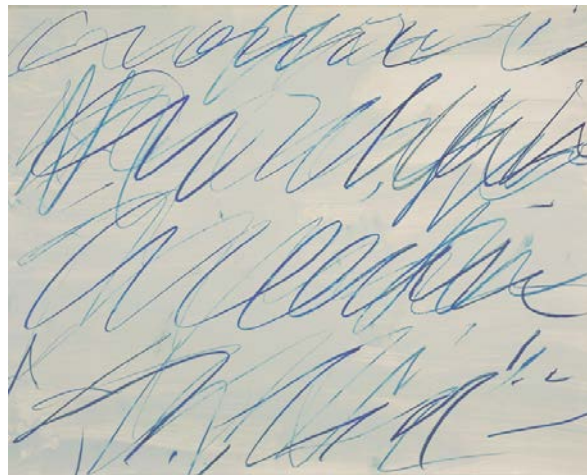
In the two works titled, “Untitled (To Sappho)” (1976), Twombly inscribes the poet’s line:

*Like a hyacinth in the mountains trampled by shepherds until only a purple stain remains on the ground.*

The line that Twombly has picked starts out visually (hyacinth), evokes the olfactory senses (the flower’s scent), moves to the tactile (crushed by the shepherds), and returns to the visual (the stain left behind). Sappho’s intensely nuanced fragment never reveals what was fleeting like the flower. We are immersed in a state of wistfulness, but we are not sure where, or to whom, those feelings are directed. There is a deep feeling of incompleteness at the core of these two drawings

that embodies Sappho's condensation of the senses, evoking a desire to experience the world more fully and intensely.

In addition to the written line, Twombly has drawn a smudged violet stain in wax crayon in one of the two drawings titled "Untitled (To Sappho)," and a blue stain in the other. Twombly's sensually smudged form and sinuous line compress sight, smell, and touch, and join it with the act of reading — the sound of words. The compression and distillation of the senses infuse the drawing with an erotic current — "the sensation of its own realization," to use Twombly's words. His incorporation of Sappho's line into his drawing suggests how closely he read poetry, how attuned he was to its gradations of feeling and meaning. His genius was being able to take that reading and turn it into art.



*Cy Twombly, "Untitled" (1970), oil and wax crayon on paper, 27 5/8 × 34 1/4 inches, Private Collection, © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian*

In Greek mythology, Zephyrus, the West Wind, was desirous of Hyacinth, a young man who was the lover of the god Apollo. In his jealousy, Zephyrus causes Apollo to accidentally kill Hyacinth. In his grief, Apollo turned Hyacinth's spilled blood into a flower, rather than let Hades claim him.

In his drawing, Twombly connects the purple stain (jealousy) and Sappho's line (pensive desire). The shepherds become a sign of an unthinking presence, a destroyer of beauty, whose existence is already all too brief. And yet, even as I suggest these possibilities, Twombly's drawings elude them. Rather, the drawings are about the awakening of the senses and the recognition of the transience of an erotic awakening. This compact state of intense sensory consciousness and its unavoidable dissipation are themes that few artists have ever expressed so precisely in their work.

In the two drawings "Untitled (Toilet of Venere)" (1988), Twombly turns his attention to the classical subject of Venus gazing into a mirror held by Cupid, thus linking beauty and erotic love. Artists who dealt with this subject include Titian, Diego Velasquez, Peter Paul Rubens, François Boucher, and Twombly's lifelong friend Robert Rauschenberg in the silkscreen "Persimmon" (1964), which incorporates Rubens' oil painting "Venus at the Mirror" (1615).

Instead of depicting Venus looking into a mirror, however, Twombly stapled a smaller sheet of drawing paper to a larger one, creating a rectangle within a rectangle, or mirror. Onto this sheet of drawing paper he wrote the work's title and the date. In the space between the edge of the stapled paper

and the larger sheet's border, Twombly has painted the linear outline of a flower — a flower that in some cases seems to have erased itself, leaving behind a lavish smudge. Don't the smudges suggest crushed flowers and scent? Along the bottom edge of the stapled sheet, Twombly depicts oversized versions of female sex organs in pinks, magentas, and fuchsias. Has Venus left behind this wet stain on a mirror? It evokes both sight and touch.

As in "Untitled (To Sappho)," Twombly compresses the visual (the mirror), the tactile (the opulent layer of paint), and the olfactory senses (the smudged flowers). The compression fills the drawing with erotic longing, a memory marked by presence and absence. Twombly's distilled compression is a form of synesthesia, the joining of two or more senses into one indivisible experience. In doing so, Twombly achieves a luscious vulgarity that is comparable to certain works of Pablo Picasso, but owe nothing to him. This is Twombly's inimitable gift: the simultaneous condensation and expansion of different senses, such as sight, touch, and smell. He contemplates brevity while gazing into an overflow of erotic desire. Everything in these works is heightened, on the cusp of the ecstatic. There has been no one like Twombly in American art. He was a self-indulgent hedonist of the highest order, which is to say a formally rigorous artist for whom line and color meant everything.