

GAGOSIAN



CY TWOMBLY: Coronation of Sesostris & In Beauty It Is Finished: Drawings 1951-2008

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*Cy Twombly, Untitled, 2001. Acrylic, wax crayon, and cut-and-pasted paper on paper 48 1/8 × 38 3/4 inches. Private Collection
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Scheduled to coincide with what would have been Cy Twombly's ninetieth birthday, Gagosian's vast two-venue exhibition is an asymmetrical two-headed monster. The mega-gallery's uptown location is exhibiting the *Coronation of Sesostris*, a ten-part work from 2000, along with two smaller pieces from 1974 and 1985, and three inkjet prints of Twombly's studio by Sally Mann. Gagosian's Chelsea space, on the other hand, overwhelms and overflows with 94 drawings and works on paper along with several drawing books and a catalogue with an essay by art historian David Anfam. Uptown: a large-scale but tightly-focused spotlight on a single moment in Twombly's career. Downtown: a half-century survey of that career. The Sesostris paintings are one chapter in Twombly's artistic biography; the drawings are Twombly in full.

This city-wide dose of Twombly raises fundamental questions about who Edwin Parker "Cy" Twombly, Jr. was. Was he, like Henry James, Ezra Pound, or T.S. Eliot, someone who was born

in America but decided that his social and cultural identity lay in Europe? When Twombly moved permanently to Italy in 1957, did that geographical change mean an existential shift? The short answer is no: expatriation or self-exile places the individual in a bubble. They are not really part of the society in which they reside, but also remain distant from the society they abandoned and which is itself changing. The expatriate lives in a perpetual, illusory present. Twombly, by leaving the United States behind, ironically became the ultimate southerner, in full possession of a truncated past susceptible to mythologizing. In his early drawings from 1951-1952, he was committed to a formlessness that expresses a nostalgia for lost forms. The *Sesostris* paintings reveal a Twombly perpetually bedazzled by the spectacle of ancient cultures in their ruin, susceptible to his idiosyncratic resurrection.

Coronation of Sesostris (2000), which Twombly began in Gaeta, Italy and finished in his hometown, Lexington, Virginia, is a case in point. The apocryphal Twelfth Dynasty King of Egypt and conqueror of Europe, Sesostris was great man whose only defect was never to have existed. Why should Twombly make this pharaoh, about whom even Herodotus has doubts, the subject of a ten-panel apotheosis? Precisely because Sesostris is unreal, because his victories take place—malgré Herodotus—on the battlefields of myth, where men and gods coningle.

It isn't possible to "read" Twombly's painterly cycle in the way we might read a Gozzoli mural. There is no narrative here, only changes in shapes and color concentrations. Each painting is an icon, independent and isolated. Yet, when viewed as a totality, they form a metaphorical biography where each item constitutes an attribute of the pharaoh. He is, variously, the sun, an oar-driven warship, a god, a triumphant hero, a dead body. Twombly's flowers bleed because, like the gardens of Adonis, they are images of the mortality from which there is no rescue except art. Buried among the suns, ships, and flowers are two poetic quotations, as usual in Twombly's barely legible and partially effaced scribble. The first is by fellow southerner Patricia Waters, poet and archeologist, and commemorates the departure of the gods. Even the immortals suffer the death of oblivion, she tells us, if no mortal artist will save them. The second is from Sappho, about love as simultaneously sweet and bitter. Eros, like Twombly's flowers, is transient: love dies unless it is metamorphosed into art. Nothing of Sesostris could subsist without the artist's hand.

As breathtaking as the *Coronation of Sesostris* is eighteen years after its creation, the array of drawings in Gagosian's 21st street space is simply daunting. Fifty-seven years of artistic production, from 1951 to 2008, from the sparse pencil strokes combined with oil of the fifties; through the "blackboard" scribble paintings of the sixties; to the decadent colors of the Redon-like flowers and the cascading color of the *Naumachia* paintings of 1992. A naumachia is a staged naval battle, that is, war turned into art. Twombly includes no ships, just magnificent cascades of Homer's wine-dark sea. The common threads linking all Twombly's work—in the *Sesostris* paintings and here—are his affinities with the myths of classical culture and his southern roots. It is no coincidence that inscribed in one of the astonishing *Naumachia* works is a quotation by John Crowe Ransom, the unofficial leader of New Criticism, the southern-dominated art-for-art's sake school of literary criticism that dominated U.S. literary education until the 1960s (Ransom was among the "Twelve Southerners" who contributed to the 1930 manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, a defense of the South's agrarian past against industrial modernity).

The Crowe-Ransom quotation, from 1938, sums up Twombly's esthetic: "The image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness which ideas can never claim." Ideas are concentrations,

specific to a time, place, and subject, while images float free in the imagination. Ideas, like human beings, are mortal; images, floating signifiers inviting significance, are immortal. It took Twombly time to reach this conclusion. He had to pass through various apprenticeships. We see him adopt and transcend Franz Kline's jagged lines; we follow him into his graffiti scrawl and quasi-Palmer Penmanship exercises; we see his later partial return to the representation he learned with the Catalan modernist Pere Daura (1896-1976), with whom he studied as a boy in Virginia; and we see the triumph of color in his late work. Throughout his career Twombly mixes words with his scribbles, as if to provide the viewer with a touchstone or foothold for following him. Whether the messenger is Keats, or Rilke, or Sappho, the message remains the same: our poor mortality can only be salvaged from oblivion by means of art.