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Rhapsodic and Peculiar: 30 Years of Cy Twombly's Sculptures at Gagosian
Fragments that appear torn from boats and vessels are everywhere, as though charting a course through history and geography from one world into another

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Cy Twombly, 'Sculpture,' 2019, installation view. Courtesy: © Cy Twombly Foundation and Gagosian, London; photograph: Mike Bruce

'I wouldn't be surprised if one day, way down the line,' remarked the playwright Edward Albee, in the catalogue published to accompany a 2006 exhibition of the artist's work, 'Cy Twombly will be known as the great sculptor who also did some amazing paintings.' We're not quite there yet, but there's no doubt that Twombly developed, in parallel, a cohesive body of three-dimensional work with all the rhapsodic and peculiar scrawls of his painterly practice. A survey currently on show at Gagosian's Mayfair gallery is the first London exhibition dedicated exclusively to the artist's sculptures.

'Cy Twombly: Sculpture' features 23 works that range from late 1977 – the end of a 17-year sculpting hiatus – to 2009, two years before his death, including three bronzes and a homage to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire in cardboard. While it is a shame that no works from Twombly's time at Black Mountain College (1951–52) are shown, his youthful experiments are ever-present. The first iteration of *Untitled* (2002), one of a series of assemblages cast in bronze, was produced in 1955, soon after his return to New York following his travels around the Mediterranean with Robert Rauschenberg in the early 1950s. In north Africa and southern Europe, the two young men devoured ice-age finials and antique busts, and explored archaeological sites and formal gardens. *Untitled* recalls the spiked fetishes and totemic assemblages of the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography in Rome; its poise at once haptic and mystical.



Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 2002, plaster, wood, white paint, acrylic and sand, 65 × 25 × 21 cm. Courtesy: © Cy Twombly Foundation and Gagosian; photograph: Prudence Cuming Associates

All of the works on display – found objects, most of them, transformed by plaster – chime with what Twombly called the ‘white, white, white’ of the Mediterranean light that he saw each morning from his palatial home in Gaeta, Italy, towards the end of his life. Against the white-cube interior of Grosvenor Hill, however, on top of plinths that don’t truly contain the textures beneath their painted surfaces, these sculptures’ whiteness appears dirty, played with, seen through, spoiled. Writing on his fascination with white paint in the exhibition catalogue for ‘Cycles and Seasons’, his 2008 show at Tate Modern, Twombly noted: ‘I think, psychologically, it’s like there’s no beginning or end.’

There are exceptions to the preponderance of white, like the companion pieces *Herat* and *Batrachomyomachia* (both 1998) – respectively references to the Afghani town rebuilt by Alexander of Macedon and a mock epic poem on a ‘battle of frogs and mice’ attributed to an annoying Hellenistic poet – which look like fallen columns overlaid with magenta spray paint. Elsewhere, *Turkish Delight* (2000) resembles a brass urn transformed by confectionary wrappers to look sickly shiny.



Cy Twombly, ‘Sculpture,’ 2019, installation view. Courtesy: © Cy Twombly Foundation and Gagosian, London; photograph: Mike Bruce

On show are both sides of the Twombly enigma: the errant schoolboy, inclined to construct with wood, paint, cloth and nails a rudimentary toy shape, calling it *Chariot of Triumph* (1990–98), or naughtily tying pink bows to the sailor’s oar (*Untitled*, 2001); but also the erudite classicist,

recalling the heroic sea voyages of this life and the next, from Homer's *Iliad* (c.850 BCE) to Constantine P. Cavafy's *Ithaca* (1911), which so often enraptured his vast canvases. Fragments that appear torn from boats and vessels are everywhere: sails, rope, masts, treasure chests and nautical instruments seem to populate the gallery as though charting a course through history and geography from one world into another.

Like his most sculptural paintings, which heave with textured impasto, many of the works exhibited here look bent on breaking their own forms, as in *A Time to Remain, A Time to Go Away* (1998–2001), the show's most compelling sculpture. On wooden panels propped up against taut iron wire, the work's title is scrawled twice over, a palimpsest that recalls the ways in which Twombly treated sculptural practice as another surface to test the legibility of art.