

GAGOSIAN



Cy Twombly's sculpture: rhapsodic, ramshackle and white *The great painter's sculptural works combine classicism with trash — and take centre stage in a London show*

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© Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

Living in Rome in the 1970s, American painter Cy Twombly, nearing 50, began to get restless. Already an acclaimed if controversial name in New York, he was a singular figure: the artist who had revitalised and extended American Expressionism by naturalising it within a classicised Mediterranean language. Now, recalls his companion Nicola del Roscio, “he was experiencing a frightening sense of intellectual isolation . . . and the end of his romance with the Italian way of life.

“He kept complaining more and more, adding that Italy had no interesting trash or abandoned objects in the streets like those he used to find in New York. The genes in his American cultural heritage were pushing, re-emerging”.

Sculpture was a way out of the impasse, and Twombly turned again to the quirky assemblages in humdrum materials, domestic-scale and constructed from fragments of wood, cardboard, twine and cloth, then washed in white paint, which he had occasionally made in the US in the 1950s. For decades he showed these new sculptures to no one, and even now they remain spectral presences at retrospectives concentrated on his celebrated paintings. Tate in 2008 and the Pompidou in 2016 included the driftwood choreographed into approximations of a prow and stern “Winter’s Passage Luxor” and “By the Ionian Sea” from the 1980s, but dedicated exhibitions are scarce.

Gagosian's forthcoming show *Cy Twombly Sculpture* is the first in the UK devoted to these enthralling, splendidly fresh, laconic yet exquisitely precise, poetically rhythmic works.



'A Time to Remain, A Time to Go Away', 1998–2001 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. 'Untitled', 2009 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

Rarities on display will start in 1977 with an untitled child's scooter with fragile little blue flags and conclude in the 2000s with a rough wooden box slathered in green on a plinth and topped by an alizarin crimson hat — a fez? an extravagant slice of confectionery? — called “Turkish Delight”, and a gleaming white tower of flapping cardboard boxes and string dedicated “To Apollinaire”, made in 2009, two years before Twombly's death.

Everywhere the fusion of the ramshackle and the rhapsodic recalls the skittering mix of painterly marks and graffiti casualness in the canvases, but in the sculpture the effect is more abrupt, condensed, calmer, yet whimsically peculiar.

A toy wagon stripped down, painted off-white, becomes “Chariot of Triumph”: the nursery crossed with the epic. Twombly experimented with this piece of pathos from 1990 to 1998, and the diminutive, simplified vehicle anticipates the childlike crayon sun morphing into a wheeled chariot of victory in the great cycle about the Egyptian warrior king, “Coronation of Sesostri”, in 2000.



'Chariot of Triumph', 1990–1998 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. 'Untitled (Humpty Dumpty)', 2004 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

Gagosian's grandest piece, also made in 1998, is the soaring, curving three-metre upended boat-like form in plywood, plaster and wire entitled "A Time to Remain, A Time to Go Away"; the title scrawled in pencil on wooden slabs recalls the broken lines of verse tapering down Twombly's canvases. He thought "saying goodbye to something and coming back on a boat" was "extremely beautiful": his abbreviated, ragged vessels with their long-stemmed oars/oarsmen denote the passage of time, journeys, exile, decline. Tragic in sensibility, this gleaming, white-painted construction is topped by a black panel like a tombstone, and connects to both the ships in "Sesostris" and, particularly, the white on black boats in the monotype series "Lepanto", from 1996.

Here, "A Time to Remain" is also in dialogue with some half-dozen precarious wooden or bronze columns, which del Roscio believes were "based partly on a metaphysical anguish concerning physical balance, stability and collapse in general". Their disruptions and disparate elements — paired stick-like forms, one erect, one willowy and bent, in "Untitled (St Sebastian)"; an untitled pillar, 2002, comprising a sycamore log and axe handle — are united by white paint, ranging from pristine to touches of Naples yellow and pink, and by turns sparkling, catching reflections, and achieving a distressed, fatigued look.

The unstable tiers, each about to topple from the edge of the one beneath, in a bronze tower, 2009, turn on gravity, solidity, but the white patina achieves an aura of weightlessness, of floating away. "White paint is my marble," Twombly said, and "the Mediterranean is always just white, white, white." He was surrounded alternately by Rome's columns and the sea at Gaeta, the small coastal fort north of Naples where he lived much of each year.

But the American impetus for the sculptures is integral: recollections of the white-painted slatted-wood houses, the vernacular of the South of his childhood, as well as New York's urban detritus in the bricolage, found-object aesthetic, subverting European classicism in the unruly combination of painting and collage. It was Twombly who painted the pillow on Robert Rauschenberg's early combine "Bed". In his own sculptures, he was after "a feel for the irrational poetry latent in society's most humble materials".



'Winter Passage Luxor', 1985 © Alamy

If his columns are architectural, they are also figural: conceived at human height, vulnerable, anti-heroic, sometimes comic — the jumble of flat/bulbous/vertical forms “Untitled (Humpty Dumpty)” — sometimes existential. A thrusting diagonal bronze pole, just shy of two metres, on a plinth, seems to abbreviate the movement and angle of Giacometti’s “Walking Man”. Twombly shares the Swiss sculptor’s elongations, uneven surfaces, archaic references: both looked at Etruscan models.

But the playful abstracting impulse and overall Mediterranean luminosity transform Twombly’s sculptural oeuvre into a world all its own, alluring both for its melancholy grace and enigmatic narrative, and its relationship to the paintings.

Picasso said that “sculpture is the best comment a painter can make on his paintings”. Twombly’s sculptures distil key aspects of his paintings: ambivalent, pared-down figuration; scavenged elements; mythic references; whiteness and eroded, antique-looking surfaces; and especially the elegiac theme. Gathered together, the sculptures have a pronounced flavour of archaeological remnants, funerary monuments, always implied, sometimes explicit. The boxy “Untitled (In Memory of Babur)” follows the form of the monument to the Mughal emperor in Kabul and Afghan tombs shaped as saddles. The squat, layered “Herat”, painted pink and gold, was inspired by the ramparts of Alexander the Great’s fort in the city Herat, damaged by Soviet bombs.



'Untitled', 2004 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. 'Untitled', 2002 © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian

Lyrical in their pitiful brutality, Twombly's sculptures are about time, remembrance and loss; they want nothing to do with contemporary sculpture's ubiquitous manner of dominating space and technical/engineering ingenuity, as trumpeted by conceptual giants from Richard Serra to Antony Gormley to Olafur Eliasson.

“I would like to think in the sculptures there is a tendency towards the fundamental principle in Homer's world that poetry belongs to the defeated and to the dead . . . of finding the memory of something that has vanished and left no trace of itself,” Twombly said. Magnificently and improbably, in a postwar diction of fragments shored against the ruins, he returned sculpture to its original memorial function: affecting, romantic, defiant.