

CY TWOMBLY: IN THE STUDIO

WALL TEXTS

Introduction

With more than 200 works -paintings, sculptures, drawings, and photographs - from different creative periods, the Brandhorst Collection provides a unique overview of Cy Twombly's artistic development. This retrospective selection covers a spectrum from the early 1950s up to a picture from Twombly's very last series of works which he completed shortly before his death in 2011.

Born in 1928 in Lexington, Virginia, Cy Twombly is one of the most influential artists in modernity. Emerging from Abstract Expressionism he developed an idiosyncratic, gestural style of "gauche," writing-like characters which he enhanced to create monumental works on large-format canvases. No other 20th-century artist engaged so unconditionally with the "zero point" of modern art as Twombly. Children's writing exercises, scribbling while lost in thought, and graffiti on the walls of buildings gave him contemporary starting points to update the experiential content of mythical tales and to create a link to major themes in Mediterranean cultural history. Twombly's impressive late work is reminiscent of the painterly richness found in the oeuvre of William Turner and Claude Monet in their final years.

Throughout his life, each of the places he worked at was of central importance to Twombly. Numerous references to situations and objects - lemons from his garden, flower arrangements and snapshots of flea markets and shop window displays - which inspired his paintings can be found, especially in his photographs. The presentation of the different media in which Twombly worked since studying at the interdisciplinary Black Mountain College thus brings surprising constellations to light.

The Sculptures

Cy Twombly belongs to the tradition of "painter-sculptors" - Picasso, Duchamp, Rauschenberg - who significantly influenced the history of modern object art and assemblages. His sculptures are generally constructed of banal everyday items, bonded by wire, nails or plaster. The white, veil-like overpainting of the objets trouvés lends them a fragile classicism and enigmatic aura. Harald Szeeman described Twombly's sculptures as "never fully comprehensible transmitters of light, transmitters of silence, transmitters of poetry."

Twombly used objects from his immediate surroundings for his sculptures: a broomstick, a ruler, pieces of wine and olive oil barrels, a wooden "Johnnie Walker" whisky crate. Through these "base" materials Twombly calls to mind a whole panorama of traditions and positions in the history of art. References emerge ranging from archaic Kuroi and ancient inscriptions, Egyptian and Persian monuments, African fetish objects, and neo-Classicist figures, to modern art movements such as Dadaism and Arte Povera.

Lepanto

The monumental "Lepanto" series (2001) is one of Cy Twombly's major works. It comprises twelve pictures, for which the room where they are permanently displayed at the Museum Brandhorst was specifically created together with the artist. Exceptionally intense, almost daring color compositions covering a broad palette, with shades of yellow, red, turquoise, and aquamarine, determine the drama of the series of paintings which are based on one of the most symbol-laden naval battles in world history. On October 7, 1571, the "Holy League," a coalition of Spanish, Venetian, and Papal troops under the leadership of Don Juan de Austria, defeated the much larger fleet of the Ottoman Empire at Lepanto (present-day Nafpaktos) in the Gulf of Corinth, leading to the demise of Ottoman dominance in the Mediterranean.

The pictures form an alternating sequence of individual motifs and series. The first, fourth, eighth, and twelfth paintings look like images of hulls seen from a bird's eye view which, due to their coloration, awake the impression of flames or wounds at the same time. The three sequences of paintings in between suggest the dramatization of a battle: from the tense calm before the start of the conflict to the explosions of color in the middle and the red pigmented panels at the end. Without ever being illustrative, Twombly shows the naval battle as a supratemporal conflict, without taking sides, without defining friend or foe, time or place.

In 1985, when Twombly moved into a house on the coast of Gaeta, a small harbour town between Rome and Naples, seafaring became the central topic of his late work. Time and again the path followed by mankind has been reflected in seafaring terms since Antiquity: setting sail full of hope, journeys of discovery, storms at sea, odysseys, shipwrecks - in his 12-part battle cycle Twombly picks up on the whole panorama of this "metaphor of being" (Hans Blumenberg). Various moods fuse into a symbol for the passing of time, for the journey through life. The underlying melancholic tone is rhythmically interrupted by the motif of ships pushing their way forward. With their festive color compositions of red and yellow they seem to capture that promising spirit of optimism which Goethe expressed in a letter of 1776 from his youth: "I have now fairly embarked upon the waves of the world - fully intent to explore, to gain, to dispute, to fail, or to blow myself up with all the cargo."

The twelve paintings in this room were first shown at the Venice Biennale in 2001 before they were acquired for the Museum Brandhorst. The cycle is also a powerful homage to Venetian painting and the tradition emanating from it: of spontaneous painting rooted in color which, from Titian and Tintoretto to Rubens and Vélasquez ultimately leads to William Turner, Claude Monet, and Expressionist painting of the 20th century.

The Motif of the Ship in Cy Twombly's Late Work

The motif of the ship first appears programmatically in the three-part picture "Untitled" (1992), created for the major retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Occasional ships drift across the expansive void of the pictorial space with letters and fragments of poems in between. The motif of the ship calmly floating on the open sea becomes a symbol of melancholic retrospection: a moment in which the motioned abundance of being converges peacefully.

Another facet of ship imagery is illustrated in the work "Untitled" (1993). In many cultures -in Egypt as well as in Ancient Greece - the passage from life to death is described in terms of a gentle boat ride into the "realm of shadows." The semicircle of an Egyptian boat forms the center of the picture. The oars have been raised and, through their red coloration, are reminiscent of burning torches. Below the boat Twombly added a slightly altered fragment of a poem by Giorgios Seferis: "The light is a pulse / continually slower and slower / you think it is about to stop." The picture is dedicated to a friend and gallery owner, Lucio Amelio, who died as a result of AIDS. At the far end of the boat, very close to the stern, the inconspicuous dedication "to Lucio" can be discerned.

Roses

Deep blue, violet, pink, brilliant red, and bright yellow: the Roses cycle, which Cy Twombly created specifically for the central room in the Museum Brandhorst, is a celebration of color. Its enormous visual impact results not least of all as a result of the strict alignment of monumental roses around the walls of the room, like a phalanx of shields or commemorative plaques. Conceived as a counterpart to the expansive "Lepanto" history paintings, Twombly limited himself to one single form in his Roses - to the *ur*-form of a daub of paint, of an informal smear, tracing an arc from here to his "gauche" treatment of the line which he developed in the early 1950s.

In his late work Twombly seeks a dramatic exaggeration of the fundamental, conflicting elements established in his previous work. He clearly shows the means of expression he uses in all their materiality through a sheer inexhaustable arsenal of nuances: in some places one can distinctly see how Twombly applies his brush, having just dipped it in the paint, how the paint drips down in thick streaks and how the gesture loses strength further down. And yet the blobs, lines and dripping paint

transcend and transform themselves into imaginative events. In this way the monumental roses can assume completely different meanings and appear both as symbols of poetic beauty as well as the epitome of pain or bodily lust. This is referenced in particular by the poems of Ingeborg Bachmann, Patricia Waters, T.S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Emily Dickinson, which Twombly included - sometimes in altered form - on the pictures.

Photographs

Throughout his life the place where Twombly worked was always of central importance. In his photographs in particular, Twombly makes many allusions to the creative process and the special atmosphere while focussing on his pictures and sculptures. In his "Interiors" Twombly succeeds in elevating his living space to poetical places of the imagination in which nature and culture, banality and refined taste counteract. Paradigmatically, the monumental roses which Cy Twombly fashioned specifically for the central room on the upper level in the museum were therefore combined with photographs which reflect the context of their genesis: intimate scenes of his studio, lemons from his garden, pictures of the beach, brightly colored shots of candies and poetic flower arrangements. All these help illustrate the broad spectrum of Twombly's depictions of roses.

Ever since his interdisciplinary studies at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s, Cy Twombly created numerous photographic works in addition to his pictures and sculptures. Apart from floral still lifes and landscapes these primarily comprise studio views. The blurring and overexposure of many images is striking. However, the loss of a motif's clarity leads to an increased pictorial presence. Their duplication using the dryprint process lends the works an additional velvety, virtually imperceptible quality.

Bacchus

The two works subtitled "Bacchus", painted in 2005, are among the most intensive pictures Cy Twombly ever created: a panorama of gleaming red, sweeping loops and dripping veins of paint. We are invited to let our eyes trace the course of each line and establish where they begin, where they run out and how they overlap one another - every nuance of the painterly process is to be discerned and appreciated as a creative happening.

Twombly structured the painterly act as a bridled coincidence. Instead of guiding the brush with his hand, it was tied to a long stick, diminishing the interaction between artist and canvas. The lines can no longer be governed with precision and surrender to their own whims. As a result, a dynamic fury unfurls in the rhythmic repetition of circular movement. Not least of all the title "Bacchus" recalls Friedrich Nietzsche's Dionysian description: one believes one is looking at the excited exuberance of gestural painterly traces left to their own devices, at an intoxicated, regressive

delirium which is further heightened by the intensity of the red and its associations with wine and blood and fire.

Early Works from the 1950s and 1960s

In his early work Twombly already moved beyond the contrary polarization of fundamental art historical concepts: drawing and painting, line and colour, figure and background continuously change places. In this way Twombly playfully managed to interrelate different stylistic highlights and traditional lines with one another. With subtle irony he shifts between the trivial scrawl of a schoolchild and the timeless beauty of continuous lines lost within themselves, between the vulgarity of scribbles on toilet walls and classical elegance.

A central characteristic of Twombly's art is the color white. It allows a floating pictorial space to be generated which registers traces of the creative process. Characters, letters, and symbols are scattered across the surface like nervous snippets of thoughts: fleeting and impalpable, comparable to the walls of a public space covered with smears by an anonymous hand. "Every line," Twombly said, "is therefore an actual experience, each with its own history. It is not a form of illustration - it is the perception of its own materialization."