

Cy Twombly

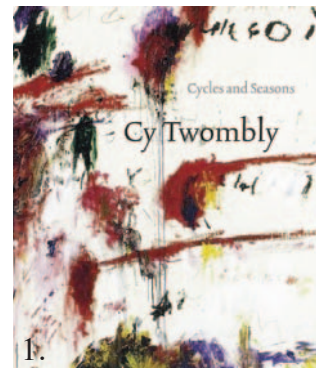
Cycles and Seasons - Tate Modern - June 19 - September 14 - 2008

Cy Twombly at 80 is the guardian of an embarrassment of riches. *Cycles and Seasons*, the current survey of his work at Tate Modern takes many of his riches and creates a show which results in a majestic achievement for both himself and the organisers. Critics however, can also be a bit of an embarrassment, often referring with the same knowing winks and nudges to Twombly's scribbles, splodges, graffiti, sexual and scatological imagery, classical reference and messy child-like painting as if trying to excuse the ramblings of an old man despite the fact that works which fit similar descriptions were done relatively early in his career.

There has always been a problem based around the perception of Cy Twombly by critics and public alike but it is not a problem which arises from particularly shocking or revolutionary work. Nor is it a problem of post - abstract- expressionism becoming more impenetrable than its parent. It is rather the result of an iconoclastic spirit shared with his peers Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns which, not for the first time in art history, seeks to use what we could call an "Arte Povera" impetus using the ephemeral and the discarded often in combination with the classical and ancient for dramatic contrast. Twombly's work could be dubbed "Arte Povera Elevato" as he seems to elevate the throwaway gesture, word, or phrase more successfully than anyone else.

Some complain of the deconstructive critical tendency among followers who over-analyse every pencilled word; but deconstruction is the name of the game both for Twombly and for many artists of his generation. To view an artists sketchbook is to look at a myriad of often disconnected notes, drawings and collaged bits and pieces on the same surface. A process of looking, mark making, thinking, recording, erasing, labelling, and above all self criticism sometimes with destructive results gives us a glimpse of the genesis and process of a Twombly painting. But we forget a rather simple concept seldom named by art critics and that is - play.

Play as a concept was described by the musician and painter Captain Beefheart, Don van Vliet, in 1971 ¹. When asked what his working day was like, he described it by the words - "I don't work, I Play!" Most artists know what he means, despite the conformity of some to a quasi-serious work ethic. The sketchbook is a place for play, think of musicians practising, improvising, playing. For Twombly, who has kept sketchbooks, taken photographs and made notes, throughout his career, the preparatory sketch has rarely been the way forward when working on a painting. (except right at the beginning and now in his later years) What led to the magnificent outpouring of inimitable work was his playing sketchbook games directly on canvas. An intellectual and emotional set of sensibilities is brought to bear before during and after the "play" has taken place. As opposed to the conceptually thin and random play of the child-ish seen in much early 21st Century work, the play may be child-



like, after all Picasso famously stated that it took him all his life to learn to paint like a child. An artist's desire for the fresh and innovative which results from spontaneity and improvisation is well documented. Fresh and innovative across the same space during the same session of painting can be a little more of a tour de force if it comes off. With Twombly it often does.

But what kind of artist is Twombly? He is talked of as a great painter and sculptor but surely he is a great conceptualist whose aim is to incorporate a love of poetry with changing ideas about picture space and subject matter. Although he loves nature as much as he loves poetry he is no dogged experimentalist teasing out a sense of self in relation to the overwhelming fact of nature; more a romantic symbolist entrepreneur attempting to stage a pyrotechnic display in some eighteenth century Italian garden in a hazy late summer dusk whilst handing out hastily scribbled directions and reflections to the gathered observers.

Twombly's paintings are at their most compelling when he really uses paint, (see "Untitled 1961"), to his "blackboard and chalk" pictures when he really draws, ("Untitled 1970") and when he paints and draws all over a surface, at the same time, with passion ("Quattro Stagioni" MoMA version). But he doesn't always produce passionate pictures and he sometimes produces downright mundane arrangements of forced intellectual art such as "Poems to the Sea" or both "Treatise on the Veil" paintings in the Tate show. However, Twombly has had over 60 years to do all of these things and he has edited out most of the dross; indeed in the 21st Century beginning with "Coronation of Sesostris", through "Lepanto" to "Blooming" he has rediscovered colour, figurative imagery and nature with the courage of a master. Not since his "Green" paintings of 1988, which get such a mixed reception, has he tackled nature in such a head on manner.

Why Twombly, why now? This is the "historiographical" question, among many others, according to the symposium "Cy Twombly - New Perspectives" held at the Tate on the opening day of the exhibition. I would suggest - because we have gone as far as we can without him.

Cy Twombly's art does not concern itself with the banal iconography of contemporary life - unlike, to varying degrees, the art of Rauschenberg and Johns. Looking to Twombly, we can see an arena saved for painting as sensitive play without resorting to contemporary cynicism or shock value.

A day talking about Twombly was interesting though hardly revealing; except when in the informal round table sessions comments such as his work is very Italian and he loves nature left one relieved but in no way enlightened. We all have an Italy, a France, or a personal "Arcadia" and we all love nature both green and red in tooth and claw. So what do we do with all this affection for an ageing artist? How can it be that after 60 years Cy Twombly is only now being held up as a major artist giving us sensitivity, beauty, poetry, antiquity, romanticism, classicism, sex and violence, the whole shooting match? Or am I overestimating the possible influences of this



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show? I don't think so. I am sure that within five years Twombly, and his influence, will be ubiquitous due to this show and I think that we still want painters to get their hands dirty and laugh and scribble passionately across their sketchbooks and their paintings.

What we are doing with this affection is finding a focus for it in an art which beckons us in, to where we fundamentally live, and points to it in a new and positively exuberant way. We do all live in Arcadia and although Twombly can be connected directly to Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego" he may not only be reminding us that death exists in Arcadia but also that Arcadia is where we all begin and end and that a good life is possible if a kind of spiritual simplicity is aspired to. Perhaps he chimes in perfectly with a world heading towards recession. His sculptures certainly stand as perfectly ironic memorials to consumerism gone mad. Place Twombly's "Untitled 1976" (two cardboard tubes, whitewashed) next to Damien Hirst's "For the Love of God" (Diamond encrusted skull) and I repeat, we have gone as far as we can without him.

Note: 1. Author Interview with Captain Beefheart 1971

Photographs

1. Exhibition catalogue
2. Twombly in Rome c.1960
3. Studio Rome
4. Michaelangelo Pistoletto "Venus and rags"
5. Don van Vliet
6. Cy Twombly
7. Untitled 1961
8. Untitled 1970
9. Quattro Stagione - Autumn
10. Poem to the Sea
11. Lepanto
12. Blooming
13. Damien Hirst "For the Love of God"
14. Untitled 1976

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