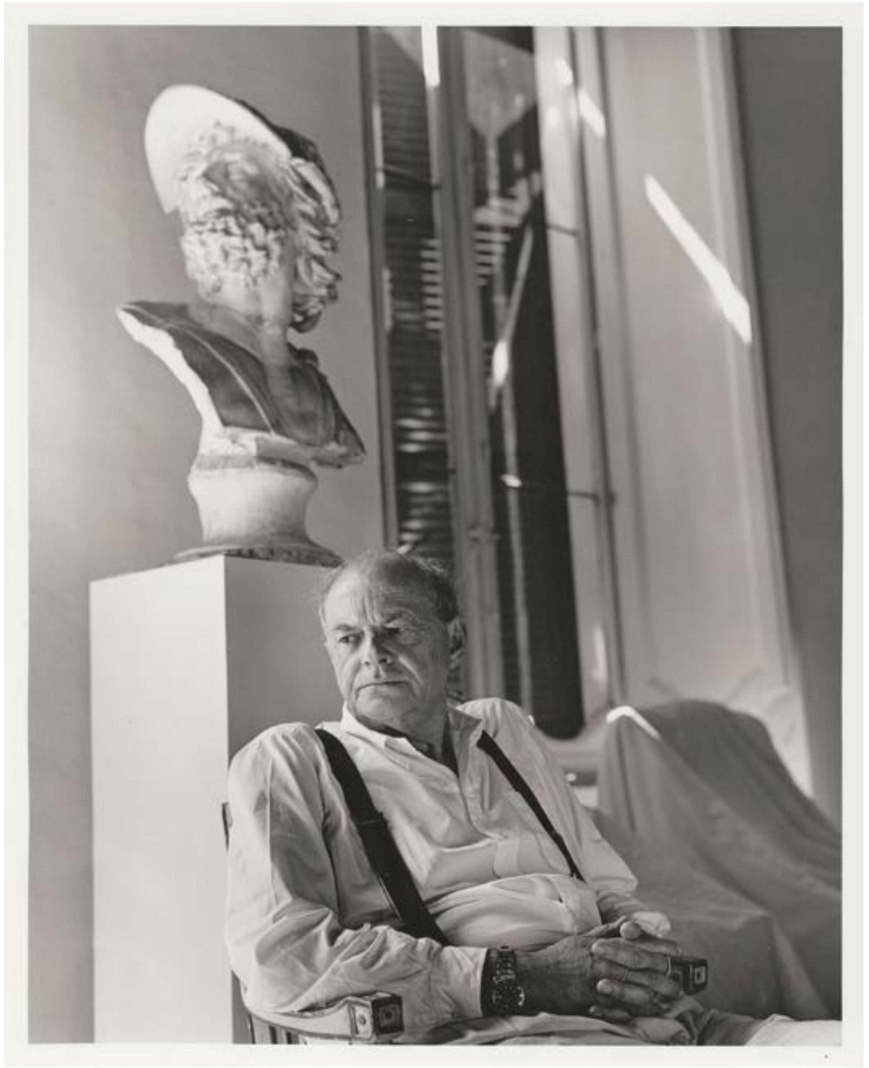
Cy Twombly

Edited by Jonas Storsve

SIEVEKING
VERLAG



Cy Twombly, Gaeta, 1994
Photo: Bruce Weber

Fig. 2
CY TWOMBLY
Untitled (Nicola as a Pisanello), 1969
Dry print on cardboard
28.9 × 19.2 cm
Fondazione Nicola Del Roscio

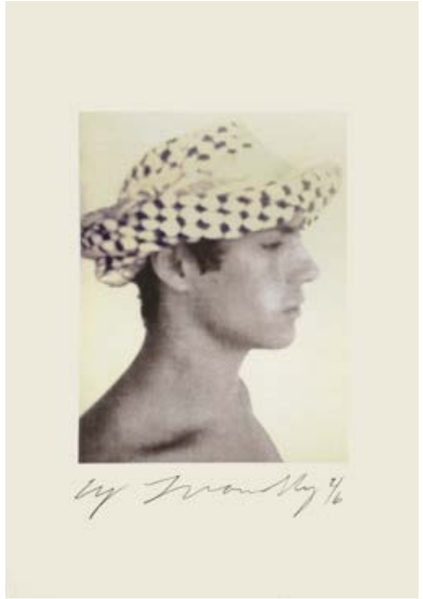


Fig. 3
Cy Twombly and his wife, Luisa Tatiana, taken in the apartment on Via di Monserrato in Rome, from a photo essay for *Vogue*, 1966
Photo: Horst P. Horst

tribute as much to Eadweard Muybridge as to Marcel Duchamp.

The vast, rich, and original culture that Cy Twombly acquired over the years is reflected in all of his output. His readings took him far: Goethe, Herodotus, Homer, Horace, Keats, Mallarmé, Ovid, Rilke, Sappho, Spenser, and Virgil are all cited in his works. References to other more unexpected authors appear more or less prominently as well; these include Lesley Blanch, Robert Burton, George Gissing, and the thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet Jalâl-al-Dîn Rûmî.

His rare, refined tastes also found sustenance in the field of painting. When Twombly painted the *School of Fontainebleau* in 1960 (cat. 45, p. 70), Mannerism, especially in its French version, dominated as it was by such figures as Rosso Fiorentino and Francesco Primaticcio, was hardly known outside a circle of initiates. Indeed, it was not until 1972 with Sylvie Béguin's *École de Fontainebleau* exhibition at the Grand Palais that this compelling period in European art history was given its rightful place. Twombly's love for Nicolas Poussin coincided, on the other hand, with the renewed interest of his contemporaries in the French painter. Indeed, a major Poussin exhibition was held at the Louvre (May–July 1960); it featured his 1630 masterpiece *The Empire of Flora* (number 20 in the exhibition catalogue), a composition that Twombly picked up the following year (cat. 47, p. 73). It was the very first time Poussin's painting had left its home in the Dresden museum, where it had been kept since the eighteenth century. Twombly's paintings around 1960 also included references to Hieronymus Bosch, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Joan Miró. Finally, the picture he took in 1969 of his close collaborator Nicola Del Roscio on Saint Martin island shows him in profile, wearing a hat created for the purpose of the photo, in the manner of a portrait by Pisanello (fig. 2), such as the 1449 portrait of Iñigo d'Avalos engraved on a medal.

The conception we have of Cy Twombly as a literary painter well-versed in classical Greece and ancient history is a true but partial image. Everything is actually much more complex than it seems. Sophisticated as his work most surely is, running through it is a constant attention to vernacular realities. This is more or less visible, but indubitably present. Cy Twombly had a delightfully twisted mind and did not shy from manifesting it at times. It nonetheless irritated him when Kirk Varnedoe discovered the four letters of the word "FUCK" written at the bottom of his painting *Academy* (1955; cat. 26, p. 47). The same four letters appear again before the word "Olympia" in the eponymous painting[5]—thus effecting quite a radical shift in meaning! In the same vein, Paul Winkler, former director of the Menil Collection in Houston, recalls standing with Twombly in front of *Apollo* (1963)[6]—which Winkler took to be a reference to the Greek world—and being surprised to hear the artist laconically remark: "Rachel and I loved to go dancing at the Apollo Theater in Harlem."[7] At another point in his career, Cy Twombly could not refrain from writing "Private Ejaculations"[8] on a whole series of drawings from 1981–82, knowing full well that the expression had an altogether different meaning in the seventeenth century. I can just picture him in front of these works with a sly smile at the corner of his lips!

We know today that photography played an important role both in his art—which we discovered only belatedly—and in his life.[9] Even though Twombly was a highly discreet, even secretive, person, he let himself be photographed all throughout his life. One of the most famous photo essays on the artist was done by Horst P. Horst for *Vogue*. It appeared in the November 1966 issue of the magazine with the article "Roman Classic Surprise," by Valentine Lawford. The spread,

which featured many photographs of his Rome apartment on Via di Monserrato (fig. 3), pictured him as a dandy living in a palazzo with his wife, Luisa Tatiana, an aristocrat with elaborate hairstyles, and their six-year-old son, Alessandro, dressed up as a Napoleonic general. As noted by Nicholas Cullinan,[10] this piece in *Vogue* did nothing to warm his chilly relations with the United States, which had reached an all-time low after the highly controversial showing of his *Nine Discourses on Commodus* cycle (see fig. 2, p. 80) two years prior at Leo Castelli in New York. He was said to be too chic, too sophisticated—in a word, too remote from the idea that America had of an American artist. The piece nevertheless

Cat. 27
Free Wheeler, 1955
Oil-based house paint, wax crayon,
colored pencil, graphite, and pastel on canvas
174 × 190 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie,
Marx Collection, Berlin

Cat. 28
Untitled (Rome), 1958
Oil-based house paint, wax crayon,
and graphite on canvas
133 × 159 cm
Collection Karsten Greve, St. Moritz

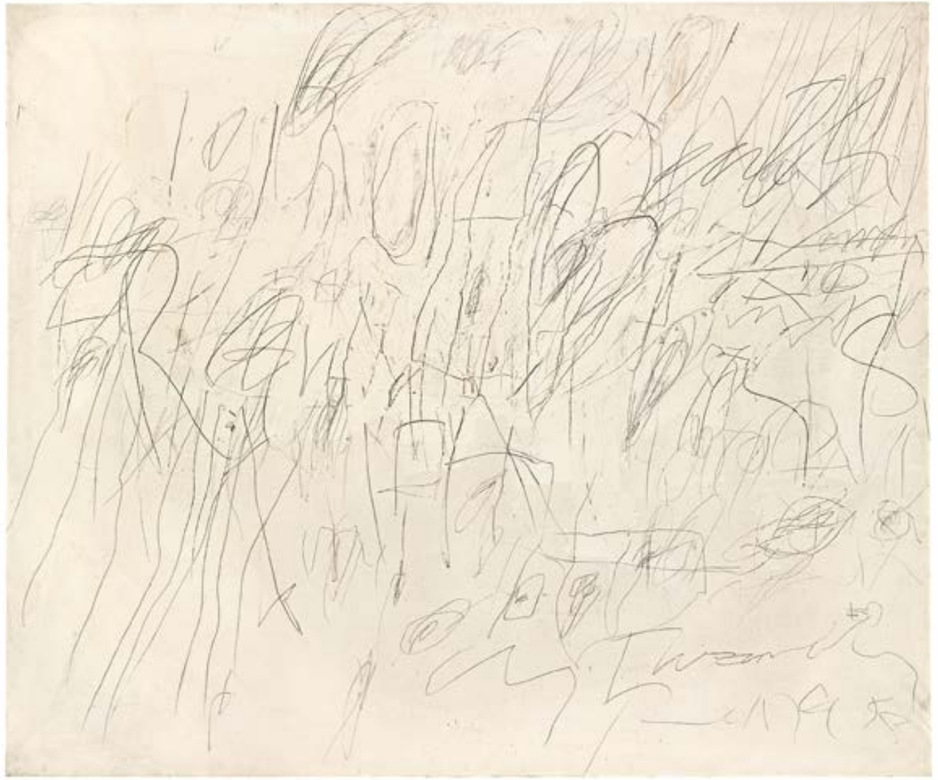


Fig. 1
Cy Twombly's Studio, Lexington, 2011–12
Photo: Sally Mann

(Lex)[1]

PAUL WINKLER

In 1959 Cy Twombly created a group of ten paintings that are the quietest and most evasive of all his work. They are known familiarly as the "Lexington paintings" after the name of his hometown, Lexington, Virginia, where he made them. Upon completing the paintings, he sent them to the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York for a one-person exhibition. This, however, did not take place. Instead, Castelli called Twombly and said that he could not show the paintings because "he did not know what they were." After that, the paintings were put into storage and remained unseen for over twenty-five years. Two later were given to friends and now are in the hands of private collectors. Eight remained with the artist, who selected five of them to form a permanent room in the Cy Twombly Gallery, at The Menil Collection, in Houston, which opened in 1995 (fig. 2). The other three are on view for the first time in this exhibition.

When one enters the room of Lexington paintings at the Cy Twombly Gallery, the first impression is of whiteness: a whiteness imbued with a neutral light. Not too warm, not too cold, this is the light found in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Although the paintings project a sense of calm and quiet, one soon detects a type of motion, almost a sense of floating, that defies gravity and is continuous from left to right. Adopting the same pictorial process he often used in this period, namely graphite markings in and on layers of oil-based house paint, Twombly created a unique atmosphere in these ten paintings, one that is very different from the scratchier works coming before and from the denser and more agitated paintings immediately following, made when he had moved to Rome.

The graphite marks in the Lexington paintings are both smaller in size and spaced farther apart than in his other works. While a few shapes are recognizable—three hearts, a form looking like peas in a pod, and perhaps genitalia—to a great extent they are gestures and markings that exist to form a presence and help create the atmospheric feeling of the work. Nor do the marks here point to the ciphers, notations, or symbols suggested by marks that appear in other work. While they may represent a personal iconography, the artist never revealed their meanings and stressed that they, like the lines from poetry and literature that he incorporated in later works, were not meant to be viewed or interpreted in any literal sense. The marks in his paintings are emotive rather than descriptive.

Twombly loved the qualities of oil-based house paint, which allowed for a free-flowing application while maintaining enough viscosity to accommodate his graphic intrusions. When thinned, it was a wonderful wash that provided a translucent ground upon which numerous layers of paint and markings could be added. Alternatively, the wash could form a diaphanous veil, both concealing and revealing previous markings and workings. This latter use is what gives such a magnificent spatial quality to the Lexington paintings, heightened both by the lateral movement of the markings and by their recession into the depths of the paint layers.

As such, the Lexington paintings evoke a feeling of freedom and lightness. Although self-contained within their frames, they appear boundless: one moves from painting to painting effortlessly, feeling a continuous energy within the movement that can be exhilarating. This owes much to

Cat. 46
School of Athens, 1961
Oil, oil-based house paint, colored pencil,
and graphite on canvas
190.3 × 200.5 cm
Private collection

Cat. 47
Empire of Flora, 1961
Oil, wax crayon, graphite,
and colored pencil on canvas
200 × 242 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie,
Marx Collection, Berlin

Fig. 1
ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG
Cy + Relics, Rome, 1952
Gelatin silver print, 38.1 × 38.1 cm

Cy Twombly's Antiquities

THIERRY GREUB

For Gottfried Boehm

1. Twombly's "Archaeology"

The world of archaeology forms the principal focus of Cy Twombly's artistic activity (fig. 1).[1] Even though in his early work he attempted to return to the "primitive," supposedly unsullied, and authentic origins of civilization,[2] and in his late work from 1980 onward[3] discovered the Near and later Far East as providers of impulses,[4] the world of Greco-Roman antiquity and its literary, historical, and mythological legacy remained his most important source of inspiration throughout his life.

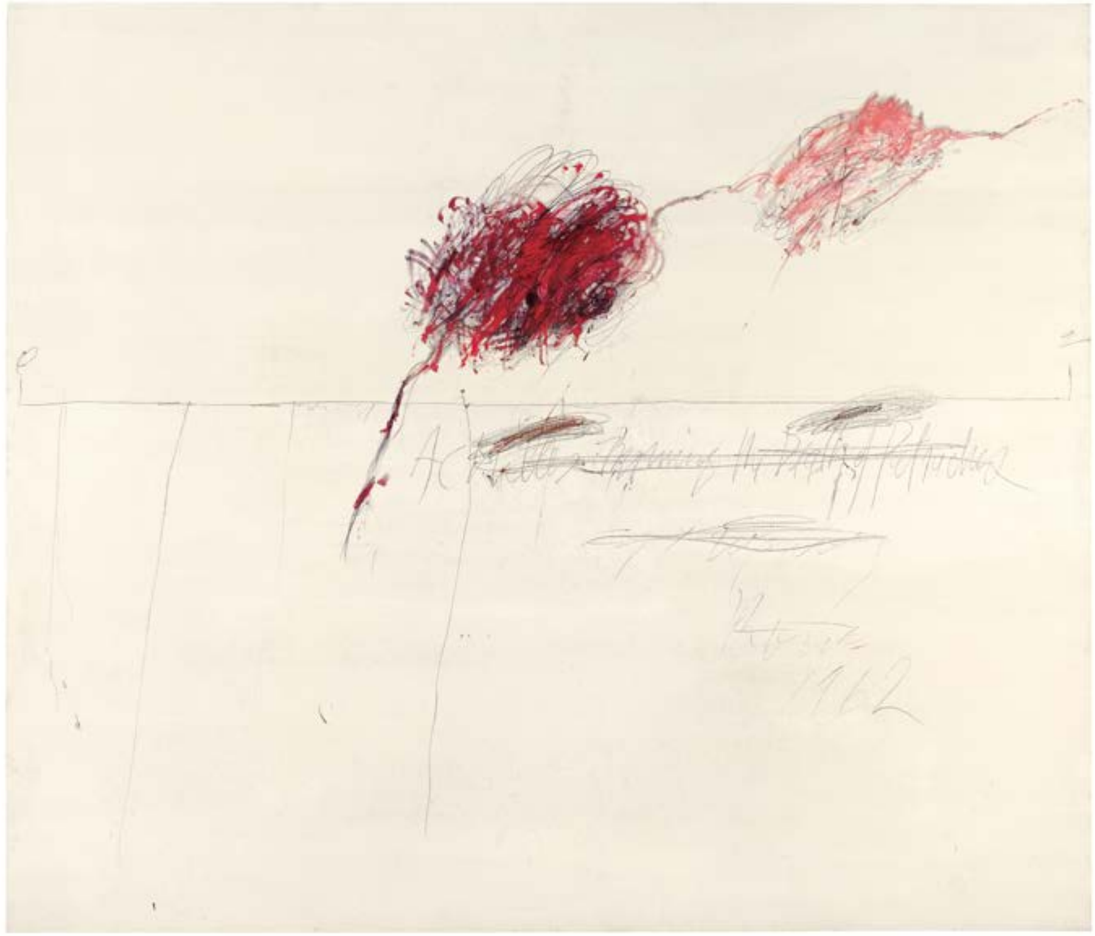
Twombly's interest in ancient Greece and Rome predated his permanent move from New York to Rome in 1957 and his marriage with Luisa Tatiana Franchetti, an Italian aristocrat. As early as 1952–53 he undertook a study trip with Robert Rauschenberg, in the course of which he visited archaeological excavations in Tangiers and did some digging of his own. The twenty-four-year-old Twombly enthusiastically described this shaping experience as follows: "I've just returned from digging at a Roman bath. . . . Northern Africa is covered with wonderful Roman cities and in this part they are just beginning in the last yr. to excavate. . . . My painting has changed a great deal. . . . I can't begin to say how Africa has affected my work (for the better I hope)."[5]

Twombly's works emerged in the course of applying countless layers of paint. The various stages of painting, painting over, crossing out, scribbling, blurring, blotching, writing, and inscribing were purposely obscured, by superimposing the separate working steps in a way that rendered them virtually impossible to reconstruct while leaving the earlier traces still visible. Twombly employed superimpositions and interpenetrations not only in a technical sense but in terms of motif, by usually exploring several themes in parallel. In Twombly's works with their sediment of uncounted formal and substantial strata, traces of painting, drawing and writing, "visual finds," and scattered "word fragments" are deposited in "stratigraphic" layers. These traces of meaning, which give rise to associations with relics, must as it were be excavated layer by layer by the viewer, prompting Roland Barthes to speak of a "perverse sort of palimpsest,"[6] and Charles Olson of an "inverted archaeology."[7]

This recourse to fragments of content from the past corresponds in Twombly's art to a formal recourse to gestures Barthes characterized as "childlike" or "awkward,"[8] a mode of purposely unadroit, unskilled, unsuccessful attempts, a forgetting of memories,[9] an infusion of subjective fascination. Yet Twombly always attempted to trace the past in terms of quite concrete references: "What I am trying to establish is—that Modern Art isn't dislocated, but something with roots, tradition and continuity. For myself the past is the source (for all art is vitally contemporary)."[10]

Cat. 60
The Vengeance of Achilles, 1962
Oil and graphite on canvas
300 × 175 cm
Kunsthaus Zürich, Zurich

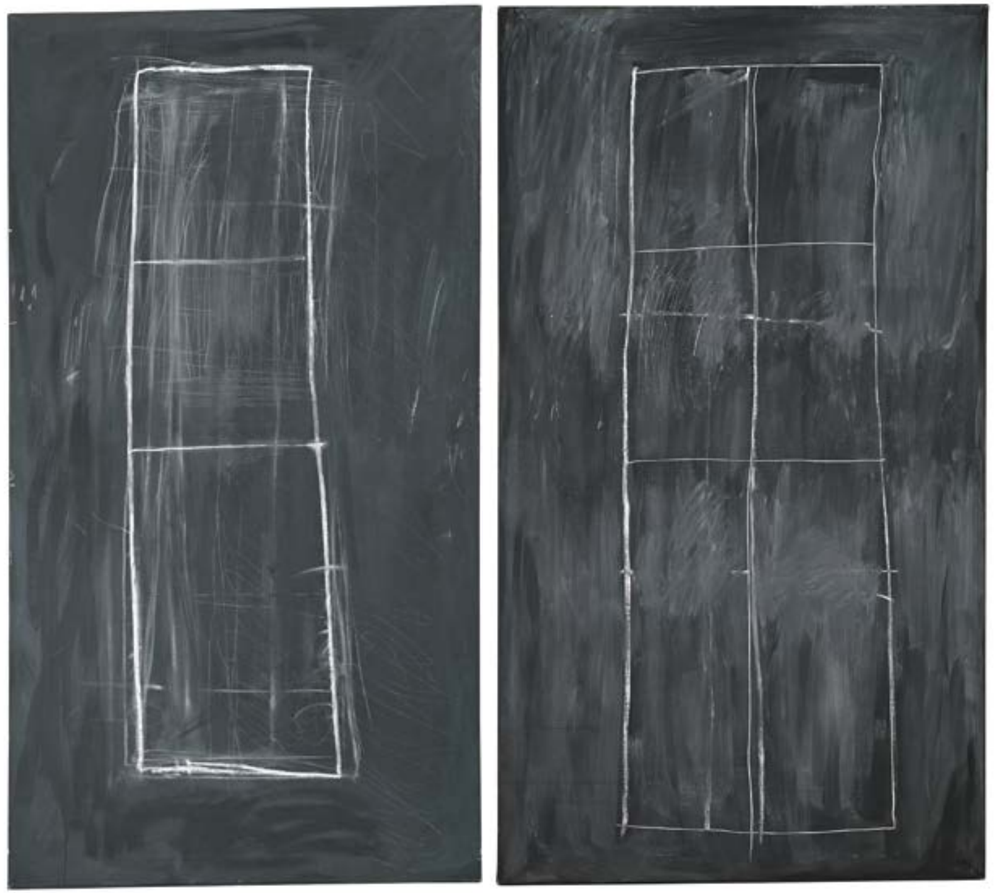
Cat. 61
Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus, 1962
Oil, crayon, and graphite on canvas
259 × 302 cm
Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, purchased with the support of the Fonds du patrimoine and the Société des amis du Musée national d'art moderne, 2005



Cat. 68
Fifty Days at Iliam: Acheans in Battle, 1978
Part IV: Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
299.7 × 379.7 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, gift (by exchange)
of Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White, 1989-90-4

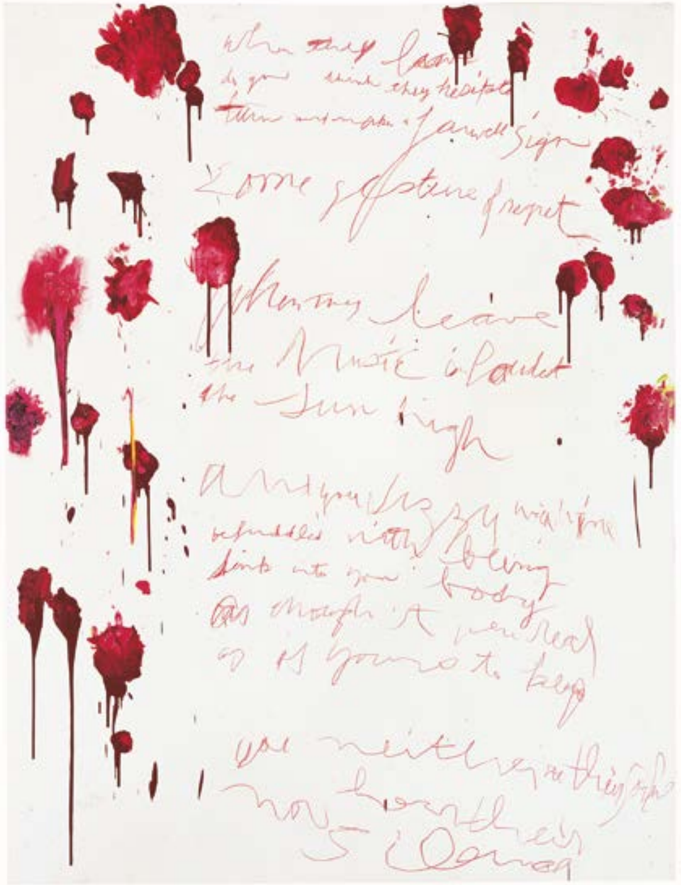
Cat. 69
Fifty Days at Iliam: The Fire that Consumes All Before It, 1978
Part V: Oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas
300 × 192 cm
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, gift (by exchange)
of Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White, 1989-90-5

Cat. 76–78
Problem I, II, III, 1966
Part I: Oil-based house paint and wax crayon on canvas, 200 × 108 cm
Part II: Oil-based house paint and wax crayon on canvas, 200 × 112 cm
Part III: Oil-based house paint and wax crayon on canvas, 200 × 112 cm
MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main,
formerly Karl Ströher collection, Darmstadt



Cat. 121
Coronation of Sesostris, 2000
Part V: Acrylic, crayon,
and graphite on canvas
206.1 × 156.5 cm
Pinault Collection

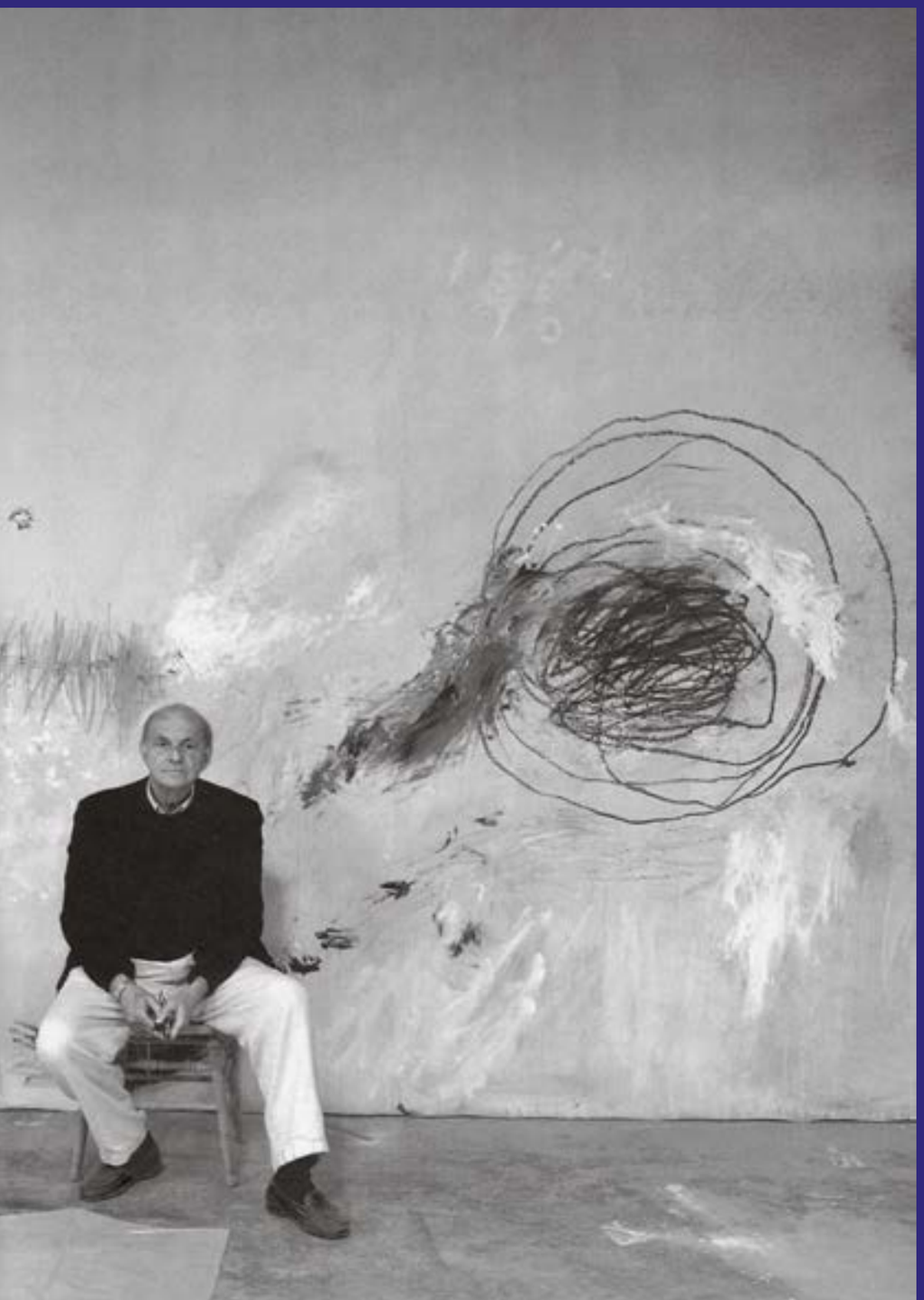
Cat. 122
Coronation of Sesostris, 2000
Part VI: Acrylic, oil stick, crayon,
and graphite on canvas
203.7 × 155.6 cm
Pinault Collection



Cat. 130
Untitled (A Gathering of Time), 2003
Acrylic on canvas
213.4 × 269.2 cm
Private collection, courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Cat. 131
Untitled (A Gathering of Time), 2003
Acrylic on canvas
215.3 × 265.4 cm
Museum Glenstone, Potomac

Cat. 173
Blooming, 2001–08
Acrylic and crayon on
ten wood panels
250 × 500 cm
Private collection



In the words of Nicola Del Roscio, a close collaborator of the artist, “Cy Twombly benefitted from the fact that he lived on both shores of the Atlantic and, in particular, on the Mediterranean. That made him not only an American or European artist but bestowed upon him one of the rarest gifts: the possibility to continuously renew his art in a creative way up until the end of his life. Moreover, he acquired through his wanderings between countries and cultures and constant reading a rare wealth of experience that he synthesized in his work.”

This central figure of twentieth-century art is the focus of the Centre Pompidou’s major retrospective and publication that traces all facets of his oeuvre. With over three hundred illustrations, including a few works presented here for the first time, this catalogue presents many different voices in the form of essays written by art historians, reflections by fellow artists, and a chronology that is studded with personal accounts penned by Nicola Del Roscio, allowing the reader to get to know not only the artist but also the man himself.

Edited by Jonas Storsve

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