

GAGOSIAN

BROOKLYN RAIL

Cy Twombly

Alfred Mac Adam



Cy Twombly, Untitled (Souvenir of D'Arros), 1990. Acrylic on handmade paper, 30 1/4 x 22 1/8 inches. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Maris Hutchinson.

Did Cy Twombly really die on July 5, 2011, at the age of eighty-three? How is it possible in 2025 that this (more or less) five-part show of the work he produced between 1968 and 1990 looks as fresh as it did in the last century? The secret to the success of Gagosian's exhibition is that it presents Twombly in small doses, enabling us to isolate specific moments in his production and not have them swamped in some retrospective extravaganza. Yes, Twombly is an artist best enjoyed in short spurts where we can see the diversity of his creative powers.

The first group of seven paintings, all untitled, was created between 1968 and 1971: Twombly's blackboard series. Incoherent scribbles in white on a black surface, these graffiti-style works evoke the artist's first attempts at mark-making. The child standing before the school blackboard, letting his fancy run free because whatever he does will succumb to the felt eraser. At the same time, the liberation of the hand inevitably recalls the experiments in automatic writing perpetrated by the Surrealists, the idea that true human expression resides in the unconscious and can be liberated in the liminal moments between dreaming and wakefulness. Twombly's blackboard works combine all these elements: liberated fancy, attempts to discipline the hand using the Palmer penmanship technique, and a desire to leave behind a mark, a first step in the quest for artistic immortality. *Untitled* (1968), a 71 by 80-inch house paint and wax crayon on canvas piece, is a superb enactment of this esthetic impulse: we begin on the left with controlled "o's"—again, the writing exercise—but soon the discipline gives way to unleashed exuberance and the "o's" blossom into wild swirls.

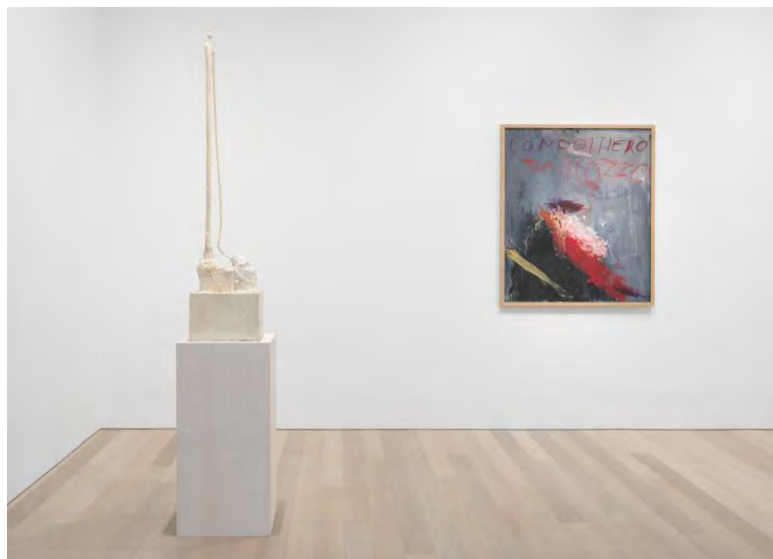


Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1971. Oil-based house paint and wax crayon on canvas, 80 x 134 5/8 inches. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Maris Hutchinson.

Included with these blackboard pieces is an untitled nine-paneled work from 1971, vertical rectangles, each 101 by 33 inches. This is not a graffiti piece, but an exercise in what we might call lyrical Minimalism. There is a gradual progress from left to right, the extreme left panel completely black and, slowly but surely, the incursion of wispy white onto the black surface as the

eye moves to the right. A kind of mural of artistic optimism, as if Twombly saw the blackness as a void he was obliged to conquer. While related to the blackboard paintings, this work has a different intention, not a point of departure but an affirmation of artistic power.

The next four pieces, all untitled and all from 1990, are acrylic flower paintings. These are crudely modelled images of flowers and introduce an elegiac note into the show. The Greeks, so dear to Twombly, would assemble “gardens of Adonis,” gardens of cut flowers that would immediately begin to wilt, just as the seasonal god was born in the spring and dead in the fall. These child-like drawings, dazzling in their deployment of bright color, commemorate the loss of youth, another chapter in the artist’s constant attempt to escape his own mortality. A poignant continuation of these mournful flowers is the sculpture on the gallery’s lower floor, an untitled, painted bronze work from 1983, fifty-six inches high, representing an erect stem, broken, with its flower resting on the ground. A complex image combining a meditation on mortality and on the fleeting nature of erotic passion, the all-too-phallic stem broken at its apogee.



Installation view: Cy Twombly, Gagosian, New York, 2025. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Maris Hutchinson.

Hanging in Gagosian’s lower gallery are three untitled oil and acrylic on wood panel pieces. These, together with a painting on wood panel, *Condottiero Testa di Cozzo* (1987), introduce the matter of strife and war present in so much of Twombly’s work. The painting mocks the tradition of Paolo Uccello’s funerary fresco for Sir John Hawkwood: here the “condottiere” is a “testa di cazzo,” or asshole, even if the flash of bright red paint dominating the panel recalls the blood such warlords spilled. The wooden wall pieces are stylized shields, a quatrefoil imposed on a square, perhaps suggesting the moral justification for war, given the religious connotations of the quatrefoil in traditional church decoration. At the same time, because of the clashing black, dark green, and white on their surfaces, these shields constitute an introduction to the next group of works, six landscapes.

All painted between 1981 and 1986, these untitled panels (two are simply called *Paesaggio*, or landscape) carry forward the patterns painted on the wooden shields. It is as if Twombly, in a

Nicolas Poussin-esque mood, needed an escape from struggle. Nature, reduced to a play between darkness and light, is simultaneously a conflict and, paradoxically, a resolution. This double vision is remarkably represented in a curious two-part work from 1981: a 60 by 42-inch painting with a black oval 11 by 17-inch pendant hung below it. Twombly seems to be saying that the light only acquires meaning juxtaposed with the darkness, that true harmony is a disciplined yoking together of warring passions.



Cy Twombly, Paesaggio, 1986. Oil and acrylic on wood panel, 69 1/4 x 50 1/2 inches. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Maris Hutchinson.



Installation view: Cy Twombly, Gagosian, New York, 2025. Courtesy Gagosian. Photo: Owen Conway.

The final sequence in this magnificent show is a fourteen-piece suite commemorating Twombly's travels in Russia, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Originally presented at the 39th Biennale di Venezia in 1980, these drawings have not been shown together in over forty years. The overall title to the collection is "Five Day Wait at Jiayuguan," as if Twombly had to make a stop at this small industrial city in the northwestern province of Gansu, where the fourteenth-century Great Wall of China ends. The decaying wall and the desert landscape are key elements here, along with the mixture of emotions the artist feels, emotions of his own, unrelated to the setting. A poignant piece, a superb evocation of the traveler's sense of dislocation, is *Part 4, Longing of Fire* (1980), "wax crayon and pencil on paper wand lined paper, with staples." Just three wax crayon vertical dashes in red to evoke a recalled passion to which Twombly adds a memorable verbal pendant by the eighth-century Iraqi poet Abbas Ibn al-Ahnaf:

When I visit you and the moon
Isn't around to show me the way,
Comets of longing set my heart
So much ablaze, the earth is lit
By the holocaust under my ribs.

This is immortality.