

"Untitled", Cy Twombly, American, 1970,
#73:12; G373

Medium: Painting. Oil and crayon on canvas

Culture: North America, US

Physical description: Abstraction

Life Dates: American, 1928 – 2011

submitted by James Allen



Questions:

1. What can you see here? People right away mention blackboard, caulk writing.
2. How many lines do you see? 5
3. What can you say about what is written? Can't read it. then a discussion begins about whether it is real writing in a language that we don't understand or non-sense. Could it be Arabic? Chinese?

4. What else can you see? People might find that it looks as if there had been other writing that was erased. This can get into discussions on the passage of time, of memory, fading memory, history, etc. Memory is impermanent, a reminder of death? Like a memento mori.
5. What do you think is written? Could it be a letter to a friend or lover? could it be history? Perhaps history rewritten over and over, with each earlier version fainter as if fading from memory.
6. Looking at the Walker exercise (see below) what contemporary elements do we find in this picture? Time certainly. Appropriation – the image of a blackboard with caulk is appropriated. Possibly even performance – the act of creating the swirls on the blackboard.
7. What can you say about how it would *feel* to make these scrawling loops on a picture or a blackboard?

Key Points:

1. Between 1967 and 1971 Twombly developed a style called the “Blackboard paintings” and ‘gray paintings’ characterized by a lyrical colorless scrawl on a gray background. Often tense, they were ‘reminiscent of chalk on a blackboard, that form no actual words. Twombly sometimes made these works using an unusual technique: he sat on the shoulders of a friend, who shuttled back and forth along the length of the canvas, thus allowing the artist to create his fluid, continuous lines.’
2. “Cy Twombly's work can be understood as one vast engagement with cultural memory. His paintings, drawings and sculptures on mythological subjects have come to form a significant part of that memory. [Much of his work draws] on the most familiar gods and heroes, he restricts himself to just a few, relatively well-known episodes, as narrated by poet-historians, given visible shape by artists and repeatedly reinterpreted in the literature and visual art of later centuries.....” Katharina Schmidt.
3. His special medium is writing. Starting out from purely graphic marks, he developed a kind of meta-script in which abbreviated signs, hatchings, loops, numbers and the simplest of pictographs spread throughout the picture plane in a process of incessant movement, repeatedly subverted by erasures. Eventually, this metamorphosed into script itself.” Katharina Schmidt, in an essay in the catalogue to the 2011 Dulwich exhibition (see below).
4. In a short essay in an Italian art journal in 1957, Twombly said that each line he made was “the actual experience’ of making the line,

- adding: "It does not illustrate. It is the sensation of its own realization." Years later he described this more plainly. "It's more like I'm having an experience than making a picture." After completing a work, in a kind of ecstatic state, it was as if the painting existed and he barely did anymore. "I usually have to go to bed for a couple of days."
5. The critic Arthur Danto had this theory of the meaning of the blackboard pictures: Cy had been harshly censored by critic Donald Judd after an exhibition on the painting "Nine Discourses on Commodus". Could these pictures be a reaction to the rebuke? "Being sent to the blackboard haunts all our memories as a traumatic occurrence in the schoolroom, where we stand exposed to the ridicule of teacher and classmates. The blackboard painting, I argued, were the errant pupil's atonement."
 6. The book "Modern Art" called Twombly's works a jumbled composite of painting and drawing synthesizing "aspects of Expressionism, Surrealist automatism, and postwar Action Painting". "The nervous scribbles .. are like diaristic reminiscences. Handwriting acts as a half-way house between an identifiable imagery and geometric or biomorphic abstraction" (like Jackson Pollock).
 7. "The abstract nature of the work and the apparent spontaneity with which it was executed were indebted to Abstract Expressionism." Roni Feinstein.

Artist biography

His real name is Edwin Parker Twombly, Jr. Both he and his father went by the nickname Cy after their baseball hero Cy Young*. Born in Lexington, Virginia, he began studying art at age 12. His education continued at several prominent art schools and he worked with prominent artists: Franz Kline, Robert Motherwell, Ben Shahn, and John Cage. He traveled and studied in North Africa, Spain, Italy, and France. He taught at the Southern Seminary and Junior College in Buena Vista, Virginia. In 1957 he moved to Gaeta, a small town outside of Rome, and married artist and sister of a patron, Baroness Tatiana Franchetti (i.e., he married well). He later was estranged from Tatiana and entered into a long-term relationship with an Italian, Nicola Del Roscio. He died at age 88. His son Cyrus Alessandro Twombly, also a painter, lives in Rome.



Early in his career, in NYC, he was strongly influenced by the New York School and abandoned representational art for abstract expressionism and Surrealism. In Italy he experimented more with references to classical sources such as Leda and the Swan and The Birth of Venus. He painted Leda and the Swan six times.

In a 1994 curator Kirk Varnedoe thought it necessary to defend Twombly's seemingly random marks and splashes of paint against the criticism that "This is just scribbles - my kid could do it".

"One could say that any child could make a drawing like Twombly only in the sense that any fool with a hammer could fragment sculptures as Rodin did, or any house painter could spatter paint as well as Pollock. In none of these cases would it be true. In each case the art lies not so much in the finesse of the individual mark, but in the orchestration of a previously uncodified set of personal "rules" about where to act and where not, how far to go and when to stop, in such a way as the cumulative courtship of seeming chaos defines an original, hybrid kind of order, which in turn illuminates a complex sense of human experience not voiced or left marginal in previous art."

He has had exhibitions in New York, Amsterdam, Rome, Paris, Zurich, Berlin, and London. Also the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern art in New York, the Tate Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago. He is the recipient of numerous awards. In 1971 an untitled blackboard painting sold for \$5.5 million and in 2011 another went for \$15.2 million.

Phaedrus Incident

On July 19, 2007, police arrested Cambodian-French artist Rindy Sam after she kissed one panel of Twombly's triptych *Phaedrus*. The panel, an all-white canvas, was smudged by Sam's red lipstick. She was tried in a court in Avignon for "voluntary degradation of a work of art".

"It was just a kiss, a loving gesture. I kissed it without thinking; I thought the artist would understand.... It was an artistic act provoked by the power of Art".

The art work, which is worth an estimated \$2 million, was on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Avignon. In November 2007 Sam was convicted and ordered to pay €1,000 to the painting's owner, €500 to the Avignon gallery that showed it, and €1 to the painter.

Some thoughts on Post- Modern Art

from the Walker Art Center website

In very broad strokes we can divide art into:

- Pre-modern – characterized by attempts towards realism, perspective, and conveyance of ideas about the subject – usually figures, still lifes, or landscapes. Unity balance and harmony.
- Modern Art – from the 1850's to 1970's. Artists still use line, color, and shape, but often to express feelings, emotions, concepts and ideas without any reference to any real subject matter.
- Postmodern Art – from the end of the 1900's to now. widely diverse styles and concerns about making art. What unifies postmodern art, if anything, is a reaction to modernism—at times destroying or debunking traditionally held rules or canons of modern art; at other times copying masterworks of the past in new ways. Generally, meaning in art became more ambiguous and contradictory. The traditional elements and principles of art, and their use in the art of the past, often seem beside the point or purposefully set aside in the work of postmodern artists.
- Contemporary Art – art being created now – perhaps a subset of Postmodern Art. the content or meaning is more important than the materials or forms used to make it. Instead of engaging viewers with subject matter by use of traditional elements and principles, the artist engages through ideas and issues. The 'elements (line, color, shape) may not be present and if they are may not give a clue to understanding the art.

To understand contemporary art we may need new tools beyond line, color, shape. The Walker Art Center suggests five new elements for contemporary art: appropriation, time, performance, space, and hybridity. When looking at contemporary art see if you can find any of these tactics to help you get a start into understanding the piece.

- Appropriation means to borrow from the past. taking a preexisting image from another source—art history books, advertisements, the media—and transforming or combining it with new ones. Ask: *What is the source of the image or object that has been appropriated? Why has the artist chosen this source for images?*
- Time - how these artists have documented and/or manipulated time.
- Performance – an actual performance is in the art or describes artists' explorations of the processes, motions, and actions they use to create art.
- Space – is real space, a room, the sky, virtual space of the internet.
- Hybridity - Combinations of still image, moving image, sound, digital media, and found objects can create new hybrid art forms that are beyond what traditional artists have ever imagined. One approach to understanding art today involves identifying what media and materials the artists chose and considering why they chose to work with them.

for more about the five elements of Contemporary Art see <http://schools.walkerart.org/arttoday/index.wac?id=2135>

Cy Young

*In deference to the Sports Show, here is a brief bio of Cy Young from Wikipedia:

Denton True "Cy" Young (March 29, 1867 – November 4, 1955) was an American Major League Baseball pitcher. During his 22-year baseball career (1890-1911), he pitched for five different teams. Young was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1937. One year after Young's death, the Cy Young Award was created to honor the previous season's best pitcher.

Young established numerous pitching records, some of which have stood for a century. Young compiled 511 wins, 94 ahead of Walter Johnson, who is second on the list of most wins in Major League history.

In addition to wins, Young still holds the Major League records for most career innings pitched (7,355), most career games started (815), and most complete games (749). He also retired with 316 losses, the most in MLB history. Young's 76 career shutouts are fourth all-time. He also won at least 30 games in a season five times, with ten other seasons of 20 or more wins. In addition, Young pitched three no-hitters, including the third perfect game in baseball history, first in baseball's "modern era".

Sources:

Cy Twombly's eloquent Voice by Roni Feinstein

Cy Twombly: An artist's artist by Kirk Varnedoe, Autumn, 1995, pp 163 – 179

Your Kid could Not Do This and Other reflections on Cy Twombly by Kirk
Varnedoe, MoMA, No. 18
Walker Art Center website (suggested by Allison Thiel)
Comments from my esteemed mentor, Merritt Nequette