THE LAST PAINTINGS

CY TWOMBLY

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GAGOSIAN GALLERY

BEVERLY HILLS · HONG KONG · LONDON · NEW YORK

Cy Twombly
April 25, 1928–July 5, 2011

ACHIM HOCHDÖRFER

HOW TO HOLD THE TENSION

Over lunch at the Miramare restaurant, near Gaeta, right on the beach in a broad bay on the Tyrrhenian coast, I peppered Cy Twombly with questions. He told me about his time at Black Mountain College, his encounters with Robert Motherwell and with Willem de Kooning, whom he had visited while the older artist was painting his *Women* pictures in 1951, his relationships with John Cage, Morton Feldman, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns. I was studying art history in Rome at the time—it must have been 1995 or 1996—and I was trying to find out as much about Twombly as I could: his favorite author, for instance (James Joyce, not so much Marcel Proust, as many would like to believe), or which of Rauschenberg's works he particularly admired (the early black-and-white silkscreens from 1962). Wholly unthinking, in an idle comment I expressed my doubts about Rauschenberg's late works, whereupon Twombly immediately brought me up short: "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to hold the tension over several decades?" He stood up and started pacing back and forth (which he always did when he was pensive), looked out the window at the open sea, then finally returned to our table. It was clear that that discussion was ended, and the rest of our conversation dealt with more innocuous matters.

In retrospect, not only do I have to acknowledge that I have revised my opinion of Rauschenberg's career, but it has also become particularly clear to me how intensely Twombly was struggling to position his own late work at the time. For given the swift pace of developments in art in the twentieth century, it was difficult to keep in step with the changes in style demanded by the logic of Modernism. There is virtually no major artist whose early work has not been played off against his later style. To continue to develop over decades, to prove oneself anew in changing social contexts—that was precisely what Twombly had managed to do most impressively, having started out with "Neo-Dadaist" scribbles in the shadow of Rauschenberg and Johns and then moved on to the Pop-Expressionist pictures of the early 1960s, to the "blackboard" paintings, to the Minimalist drawings with lines of script in the 1970s, and to Neo-Expressionist explosions of color in the 1980s. Unlike the proverbial poet who, oblivious of the every-day politics of his time, remains true to an artistic ideal thought to have been lost, Twombly produced his work in a constant interchange with the newest stylistic currents and trends: Neo-Dada, Pop art, Postminimalism, Conceptual art, and Neo-Expressionism all left their traces in his pictures and sculptures.[1] Yet his was by no means an indiscriminate eclecticism, but rather a complex process of appropriation, mixing attraction and rejection, irony and belief in his own intuition.

Twombly's artistic career took a curious, virtually "gauche" course; something like a detour. His move to Italy in the late 1950s was half exile, half a search for "splendid isolation." In any case, it tore him out of the context of current debate in the New York art scene and allowed him to produce work that would not have been possible—even barely conceivable—there. That ultimately led to a seemingly endless series of misunderstandings, some aggravating, some productive. Twombly was alternately classed

as a typical American artist or a European one; he was either attacking Mediterranean culture or reviving it; he was either devoted to Minimalism or parodying it. When he showed his *Nine Discourses on Commodus* at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1964, the truly antagonistic camps—the Minimalists and Modernists—allied themselves against him, and both Donald Judd and Michael Fried attacked the exhibition as irrelevant and decadent.[2] After that Twombly didn't paint a single canvas for a whole year, but then came back, in 1966, with a new series: the "blackboard" paintings. In the late 1970s, finally, as Postmodernism was gaining ground, the fact that Twombly was not easy to peg was a point in his favor. It was in large part the constant "displacements" in Twombly's work, his "subversive play" with existing categories, that Roland Barthes would analyze in his two magnificent essays on the artist.[3] Twombly's career was characterized by setbacks and comebacks, by phases of marginalization and belated success. Early on, to be sure, he was reputed to be an "artist's artist," yet widespread recognition of the kind that his friends Rauschenberg and Johns enjoyed was long denied him. The retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art curated by Kirk Varnedoe in 1994 finally confirmed Twombly's canonical status as one of the most important artists of Modernism.[4] The creation of his late work thus coincided with this late arrival of fame; indeed, it was virtually driven by a sudden growing interest in his work. The monumentality and expressiveness of his late work are perhaps indicative of this late triumph.

When I sat with Twombly at lunch in the Miramare again years later, I addressed the idea of his career having been filled with changes. But the term "career" set him off once again: he had worked hard his whole life, he said, led a normal, anything but eccentric life, ate in simple restaurants. "I never planned a *career*"— he dragged out the second syllable with a contemptuous tone—"or what sort of a career is this supposed to be, living in Lexington or in Gaeta?" End of discussion.

* * *

Programmatically, Twombly's late work begins with the *Quattro Stagioni,* a four-part cycle of 1993–94 (fig. 1). Produced for his Museum of Modern Art retrospective, the pictures not only reference the coming and going of the four seasons, but also expand on individual moments in Twombly's own artistic development: extending across all four canvases are his graffiti-like combination of writing and images, the loose juxtaposition of drawing and painting, and the decentralized composition with a drift from the bottom left to the upper right. Borrowing from Keats, Twombly associated the iconographic conventions of spring, summer, autumn, and winter with the four stages of a man's life: youth, adulthood, old age, and death.[5] The melancholy that pervades the *Quattro Stagioni* is due in part to his interweaving of individual history and the cycle of nature. Motifs such as flowers, ships, and phallus-like chariots refer to both the seasons and human existence. Twombly never thought of mythological themes, he assured me in conversation, as scholarly references; he was not an academic, but was concerned with the here and now of experience as allegorized in mythology.[6]

The elegiac tone of Twombly's *Quattro Stagioni* is heightened by the prevalence of long streaks of downward-flowing paint. He left the creation of form to "gravity," like the branches of weeping willows. In distinct contrast to Pollock-like markings, produced by paint falling on a canvas lying horizontally on the floor, Twombly's drips document the temporal aspect of his picture-making: the flowing pigment does not try to record an ever-immediate present (as the dripped paint might), but rather proves to be that of a gesture from the past. It presents itself as the trace of an action whose origin is shifted into uncertainty. To that degree the downward streaks are elegiac in temporal terms; the present is perceived in the mode of the past. Thus the *Quattro Stagioni* cycle functions as an allegory of mourning over the ever-withdrawn presence of the subject, the ever-lost moment.

Fig. 1
Quattro Stagioni (Primavera, Estate, Autunno, Inverno), 1993–94
Synthetic polymer paint, oil, house paint, pencil, and crayon on four canvases
Left to right: *Primavera*: 123 × 74 ¾ inches (312.5 × 190 cm); *Estate*: 123 ¾ × 79 ⅛ inches (314.5 × 201 cm); *Autunno*: 123 ½ × 74 ¾ inches (313.7 × 189.9 cm); *Inverno*: 123 ⅓ × 74 ¾ inches (313 × 190.1 cm)

Twombly could not help but relate the autumn picture, *Autunno*, to his own age—he was in his mid-sixties when he worked on the cycle. This may be why it is the most forceful of the four pictures. The scattered spots of lilac pigment suggest what is left of the flowers in the spring picture, *Primavera*, and recall a poem by Sapphos that Twombly quoted in a 1976 drawing: "Like a hyacinth / in the mountains, trampled / by shepherds / until only a purple stain / remains on the ground." In the center of the picture stand war chariots, with their regressive squiggles and smearings. Twombly once told me that in this picture he used the motif of the phallus for the last time—that he avoided its thematic aggressiveness and forward momentum in the late work he produced after this cycle, and that since then he had preferred directionless shapes hovering freely in the space of the picture.[7] It was as though in his depiction of autumn Twombly—with the New York retrospective in mind—wished to picture his own struggle for recognition and his related *insistence* on the idiosyncratic clumsiness and sensuality of his art.

Beginning with the *Quattro Stagioni*, Twombly's late work took two different but related directions. On the one hand there are the returns to specific motifs and styles from his early work (like loops and stains of color), and on the other there are the expansive, multipart cycles incorporating various themes and pictorial ideas. In part the late work is a reduction and honing—for example, in the *Bacchus* pictures (2005, fig. 2)—and in part an expansion and unfolding—as in the ten-part *Coronation of Sesostris* series (2000), the twelve-part *Lepanto* cycle (2001), and finally the pictures that Twombly painted for an exhibition at the Collection Lambert's late-Baroque palace in Avignon, called *Blooming* (2007). It appears as though Twombly kept wanting to probe even deeper into the fundamental conflicts that had dogged his work for decades. Again and again, for example, he visited that "zero degree" at which one makes a fundamental decision about the nature of the artwork as a material fact and its illusionistic potential. With an almost inexhaustible arsenal of nuances, he pictured in their utter literalness the expressive means employed; yet the spots, lines, and dripped pigments point to something beyond

themselves and are transformed into imaginative events. A simple spot of color can be reinterpreted over and over—as a flower, a vagina, feces, a gaping wound, the reflection of light on the sea, or a senseless scribble. George Didi-Huberman characterized this ambiguity as "refulgence" (*éclat*), in which the painting's inconsistencies, ambiguities, and indecisions, in short its "phantasms," are expressed.[8] Like virtually no other modern artist, Twombly exposed the terms of this paradox.

What strikes me as important in Twombly's late work is that it not only presents a further stylistic shift in his oeuvre, but stands on its own as a dramatic distillation of the essential conflicts established in his previous work. Consider one of the pictures from the *Bacchus* series, in which he laid bare the entire painting process: the swiftness of the brush strokes, the saturation with color, the pressure with which the brush struck the canvas. Each mark shows us precisely how it was made. Even the motif of downward-flowing pigment loses its elegiac sentimentality and is presented as simply the nature of the material substance. The more monumental Twombly became in his late work, the more regressively he insisted on the simple factualness of the expressive means he employed. What is more: Twombly mounted the canvas so low on the wall to work on it that the bottom edge lay on the floor and drips of pigment fell directly onto the horizontal surface as he painted. Rarely in Modernism has the duality of the vertical and horizontal, of the visual and the tactile, been presented so clearly in a picture in such a direct manner.

* * *

In his last studio, the factory-like atelier near Gaeta, Cy Twombly left behind a series of eight pictures. They were mostly painted in February 2011. Nicola Del Roscio reports that when Twombly worked on them he was already having trouble breathing: "He was in agony; but he did not want to give up. It was really his last effort." Twombly did not give them a title, but spoke of them in the same breath as the five *Camino Real* panels he had

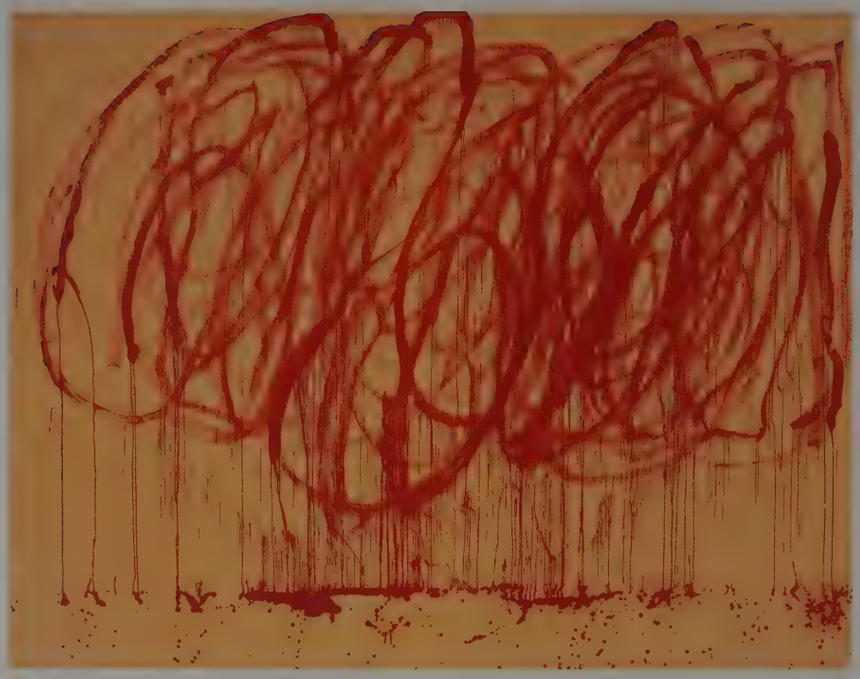

Fig. 2
Untitled (Bacchus), 2005
Acrylic on canvas
124 ½ × 159 inches (315.6 × 403.9 cm)

done a few months before.[9] Altogether, they comprise a series of thirteen pictures that are among the most imposing images Twombly produced in his more than sixty years of artistic development: red, yellow, and orange loops extend across the light green ground, forming glowing color harmonies. One is tempted to trace the individual lines—where they start and where they end, how they overlap and break off, staccato-like, and become fragmented. Every nuance of the painter's progress can be perceived and enjoyed. The rhythmic repetitions of circular movements generate a furious dynamism, an almost orchestral monumentality. They intensify and become more dense, fill the picture space to bursting, then again and again trail off into a helpless confusion.

The fifth of the *Camino Real* panels already hints at a change. As in the last set of pictures, the pigment is applied in a more fluid manner, so that the broad brushstrokes create interesting internal structures. Paint layers lie like veils above the lower sections. The panorama of expressive possibilities that Twombly achieved in the series, using the most reduced of means, is astonishing: the different sizes of the loops, the weighting of the color harmonies, and the reciprocal overlappings create wholly different moods and qualities. During the painting process, Twombly tied his broad brushes to long poles, thereby loosening the contact between artist and picture. His lines could no longer be as carefully controlled, but were left to themselves and developed their own whims. One sees precisely how Twombly applied his brush in some places, freshly dipped in pigment, how the color then flowed down in a thick layer, and how the gesture lost its strength as it continued. The individual loops are composed of multiple strokes, seem cut off, even out of breath—and in fact one has to wonder whether in these last pictures Twombly was trying to picture the physical strain of age itself.

The relationship between body and picture was central to his working process early on. In his 1955 painting *Academy* (fig. 3), for example, the gestural lines concentrate in the middle area and tend to thin out toward the top and the bottom. Twombly nailed the

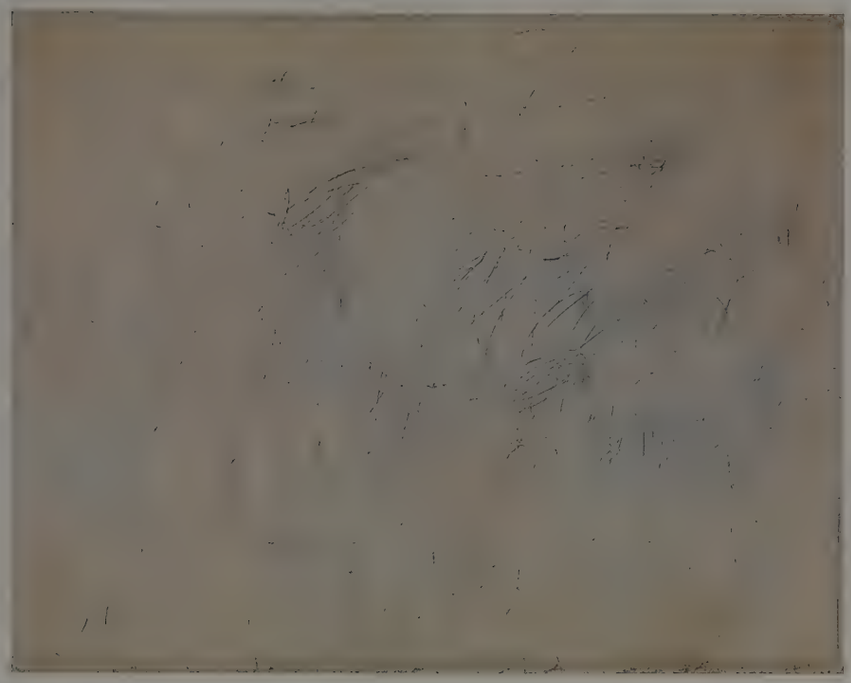

Fig. 3
Academy, 1955
Oil-based house paint, lead pencil, colored pencil, and pastel on canvas
75 ¼ × 94 ⅞ inches (191.1 × 241 cm)

canvas to the wall as he worked, so that he could not shift or lift it: to work on the various parts of the picture, he was required to constantly change his posture. The picture thus becomes a virtual confrontation, directly related to the upright pose of the artist standing in front of it. The short vertical strokes along the bottom edge reflect the restricted movement of his hand as he bent forward. The strokes at the top, by contrast, are wavelike, more horizontal sweeps that Twombly was clearly able to execute with his arm extended upward, as though he were insisting on letting his body's limitations, the constraints of the here and now, themselves become the picture. Each individual gesture in *Academy*, especially the way the scribbles are rendered in "italics," reveals that Twombly was right-handed. They attest to a virtually phenomenological recognition of his working process.

Given this earlier example, one is wholly justified in suspecting that Twombly made his aging body's limitations the subject matter of his last pictures. Even his decision to fasten his brushes to wooden poles could have been motivated by the fact that it had become increasingly arduous for him to use ladders and scaffolding. He explained that he still held his brush in his hand when painting the smaller pictures of the red *Bacchus* series, for example, standing on a ladder for the upper sections. He first tied his brush to a pole for the large *Bacchus* pictures—just as he did for the entire series of thirteen wood panels of *Camino Real*.[10] Given the dynamism of the expansive strokes, one almost has the impression that Twombly outsmarted his aging body, wishing to give it—as though with a prosthetic device—an expanded range of motion. The sheer physical effort, the struggle with age, the aesthetic triumph over physical limitations seem to have taken on form in these pictures. And yet even here Twombly followed an inner logic that had characterized his "gauche" use of line from the beginning. For in 1953, during his military service in Augusta, Georgia, he had drawn at night in the dark. There too—as Barthes explained—it was a matter of loosening the bond between hand and eye.[11] In painting, Twombly once told me in conversation, he had to physically "feel" whether the lines would make sense—if he lost that physical contact, he would immediately erase the whole thing.[12] The notion

of "feeling" cannot be equated simply with authentic intention; the drawn or painted line is not the result of a mental decision alone, but also reflects the limitations and idiosyncracies of the body. The working process is a complex interplay between action, contemplating what has already been painted, and making additions and corrections—a fluid blending of placement, overpainting, and erasure. From a certain perspective, the whole configuration of repeated loops seems a series of attempts to hit upon the "luck of chance.[13]"

It would be inappropriate to try to derive a "last word" from Twombly's final pictures. He died too unexpectedly, and still filled with new plans. Even so, it is remarkable that Twombly's career ended with a series of large-format panels filled with loops: loops over loops, repetitive gestures between writing and smearing, culture and deskilling.[14] It is as though Twombly wished to formulate the artistic act in its pure intensity, as though the passage of time were structured like breathing. A late work by the Italian composer Luigi Nono bears the title *No hay caminos, hay que caminar*, a medieval Spanish pilgrims' saying: "there is no path, there is only the moving on." And his last work, consisting of an alternation of sound and silence that doesn't want to end, is titled *Hay que caminar*—there is only the moving on.

1. For example, when the journal *Art News* coined the term "Neo-Dada" to characterize this new sensibility, Twombly was mentioned in the same breath as Johns, Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, and Ray Johnson. See the editorial in *Art News* 56 (January 1958).
2. Michael Fried, "New York Letter: Olitski, Jenkins, Thiebaud, Twombly" (1964), in Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 323; and Donald Judd, "Cy Twombly," *Arts Magazine*, 38; no. 8–9 (May–June 1964), p. 38. For an excellent interpretation of the *Commodus* paintings, see Gregor Stemmrich, "Talking about the essence of something: History, Discourse and Myth in Cy Twombly's Work" in *Cy Twombly: States of Mind*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Schirmer/Mosel, 2009), pp. 116–29
3. See Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly oder *Non multa sed multum*" and "*Die Weisheit der Kunst*" in Barthes, *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990). Both essays end with the sentence: "If one had to find a point of reference for this art [Cy Twombly's], one could only find it in the remote distance, outside painting, outside the West, outside the centuries of history, at the frontier of sense..."
4. Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994).
5. See the excellent survey of Twombly's references to the iconography of the seasons by Nicholas Cullinan, "Seasons and Cycles: *Quattro Stagioni*," in Nicholas Serota, ed., *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 2008), pp. 192–217.
6. Conversation with Cy Twombly, May 2003. For the ship motif in Twombly's work as a metaphor for existence, see Achim Hochdörfer, "'I voyaged quite alone in the silence of this magic sea': Some Remarks on the Ship Motif in Cy Twombly's Oeuvre," in Nicola Del Roscio, ed., *Writings on Cy Twombly* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002), pp. 288–96.
7. Conversation with Cy Twombly, May 2003.
8. George Didi-Huberman, *Die leibhaftige Malerei* (Munich: Fink Verlag, 2002), pp. 98ff.
9. Conversation with Nicola Del Roscio, spring 2012. See *Cy Twombly: Camino Real*, exh. cat. (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010).
10. Conversation with Cy Twombly, May 2006. Nicola Del Roscio reports that Twombly drew some of the loops in the upper parts of the "blackboard" paintings by sitting on his shoulders.
11. Barthes, "Cy Twombly oder *Non multa sed multum*," p. 171.
12. Conversation with Cy Twombly, Gaeta, April 2006.
13. Barthes, "Die Weisheit der Kunst," p. 191.
14. These panels include the thirteen paintings of *Camino Real* and three untitled pictures of 2008 (see *Cy Twombly: States of Mind*, pp. 275–79.)

PLATES

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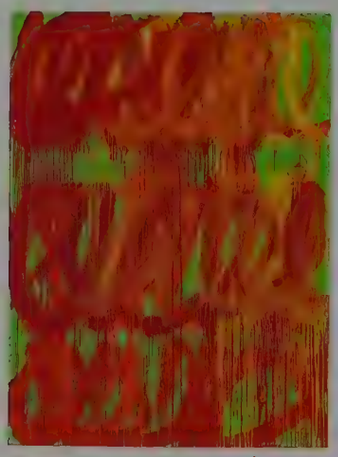

I
Untitled (Camino Real), 2011
Acrylic on wood panel
99 ½ × 73 ¾ inches
(252.5 × 187.2 cm)
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II
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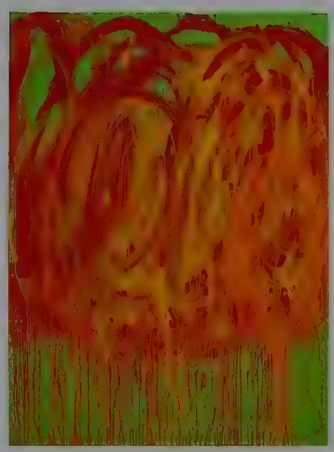


VIII
Untitled (Camino Real), 2011
Acrylic on wood panel
99 ½ × 73 ¾ inches
(252.5 × 187.2 cm)
Page 37

Yes, yes,
As sure as a poppy's
Green.

Archilochos[1]

The only clue we have to the title or the subject of Cy Twombly's last paintings is a leaf of paper with a few lines in Cy's hand, found among the collection of materials on one of his worktables in the studio in Gaeta.

Think of that first flawless moment over the lawn. Think of the difference it made.

The words are from a poem that has as its subject Icarus's flight toward the sun. Cy Twombly, characteristically, has taken only the words that he fancied and has written them out to appear as a fragment, as if these lines are the only remains. The source has been obscured, and a new scenario, more succinct and significant, has been created. The archeologist has chosen the relics that please him, and he has left the rest to dust.

Looking back now, it could be said that all of Cy Twombly's paintings after the jubilant explosion of *Bacchus* in 2005 are the artist's last paintings. *Bacchus* was a rambunctious and joyous celebration of youth and vitality, qualities that Cy Twombly certainly possessed at the age of seventy-seven. Robust as the paintings are, they refer tenderly to the once-radical "blackboard" paintings of the early 1970s. In fact, the first *Bacchus* painting bears an uncanny resemblance, in cadence and pulse, to the untitled painting of 1970 at the Cy Twombly Gallery in Houston. *Bacchus* is boastful; the paintings are recognition of the force and undiminished physical power of the painter. Those that follow are pensive and reflective.

The *Blooming* paintings, rapturous and glorifying, incorporating words from Kikaku, begin to angle for themes more personal to the artist. *From the heart of the peony a drunken bee.* They are big paintings with simple subjects, and the haiku are sufficient for Twombly in their austerity of words. The perfect balance of nature, poetry, and paint, these paintings are a springboard to the first *Rose* paintings, where suddenly the pitch changes to become more somber. This may be the beginning of Cy Twombly's last paintings. There is a sense behind the joy that there is a shortening of time ahead.

The first group of *Rose* paintings have excerpts of poems by Emily Dickinson, "*The soul has moments of Escape, when bursting all the doors, she dances like a bomb abroad, and swings upon the Hours*"; Rainer Maria Rilke's epitaph, which he composed himself, "*Rose, o pure contradiction, the desire to be no one's sleep under so many lids*" (Cy has changed the lids of the eyes to petals); T. S. Eliot, "*And all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well . . . and the fire and the rose are one . . . ,*" reminding us of the duet of paintings *Petals of Fire* (1989); Patricia Waters, "*Rose, brief in its beauty, but the scent better than fame . . . ,*"; and the most concise and compelling, Ingeborg Bachmann's "In the Storm of Roses":

Wherever we turn in the storm of roses,
the night is lit up by thorns, and the thunder
of leaves, once so quiet within the bushes,
rumbling at our heels.[2]

All of the poems have a view back; they are reflections. The big roses on the canvases, painted more like frosted cupcakes than garden roses, are grand symbols of life, powerful enough to carry the thrust and the meaning of the words. Twombly has collected all of his favorites, has favored the women whom he may have seen as neglected, and brought them all to bright life with his big blooms.

More roses blossom in 2008, made with pure abandon and the same joy of painting. Five new works, each titled *The Rose*, bear selections from Rilke's *Les roses*. Frantic with color, wildly vivacious, these paintings on wood panels feel somehow final. It seems that for the artist, all has been said that needs to be said, eloquently and boldly. In the last painting of the series, the roses are dark purple and black and the lines written are the last lines written by Cy Twombly on a painting.

Infinitely at ease
despite so many risks,
with no variation
of her usual routine,
the blooming rose is the omen
of her immeasurable endurance.

The stanza that follows was not chosen. Its absence is profound. We are left instead with a stillness, a sensory pause, a silent and firm punctuation.

Do we know how she survives?
No doubt one of her days
is all the earth and all
of our infinity.[3]

The written lines found on Cy's worktable in the studio may mean nothing, but curiously they are there. They are from a poem by Anne Sexton. It will never be known how or why he came to this poem, but the reference to Icarus "*pasting those sticky wings on, testing that strange little tug at his shoulder blade*" is intriguing, irresistible.

The last paintings convey an agitation, an impatient energy. The movement of color on the surface amplifies the background, suggesting that the subject may simply be that green, that happy green. Cy Twombly knew that these were his last paintings. They were finished weeks before his death. They have his enormous strength.

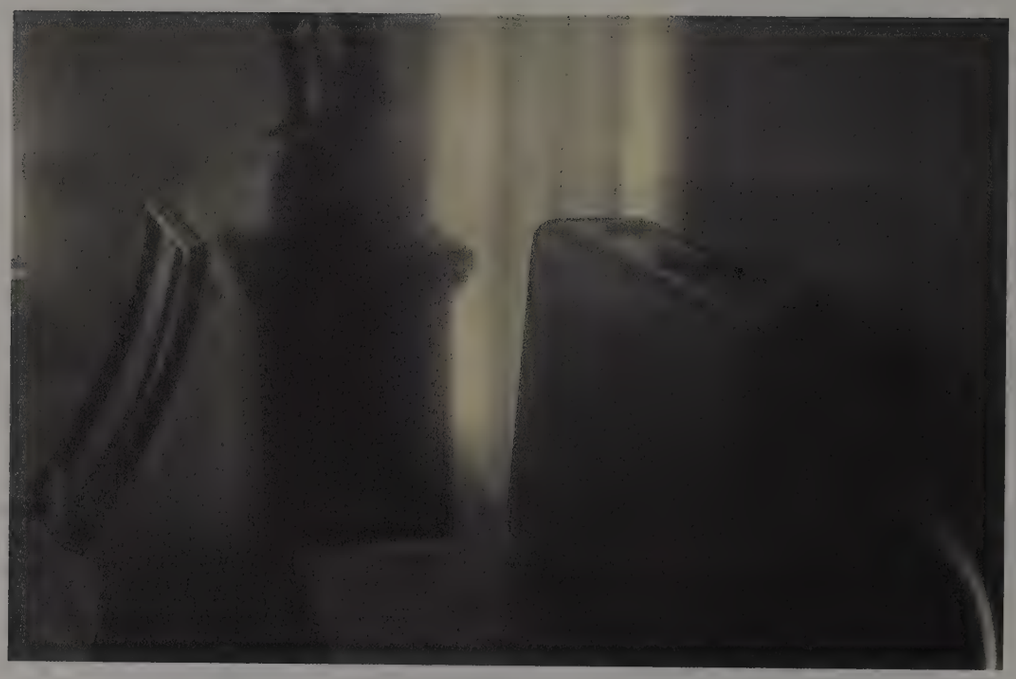
Imagine that these paintings, made with Cy's last painting breaths, are about soaring. From great heights and content with a glance at vibrant and perfect nature, it may be that the fresh green is the sure green of a gorgeous and lush garden of palms in Gaeta. *Think of the difference it made.*

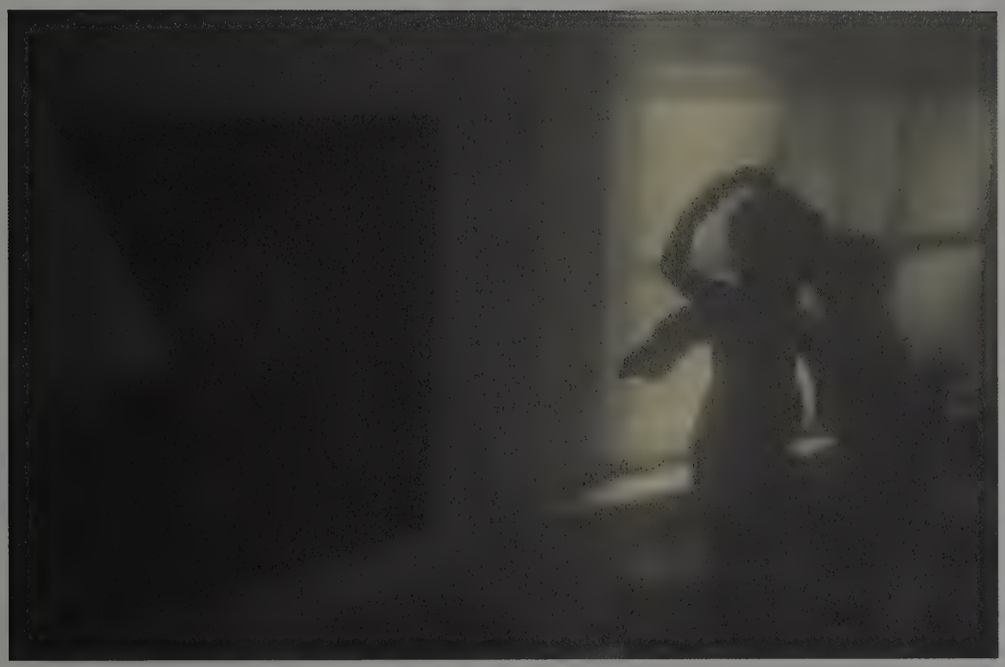
1. *Seven Greeks*, trans. Guy Davenport (New York: New Directions Books, 1995).
2. *Darkness Spoken: The Collected Poems of Ingeborg Bachmann*, trans. Peter Filkins (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2005).
3. "To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph," from *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton* (New York: Mariner Books, 1999).

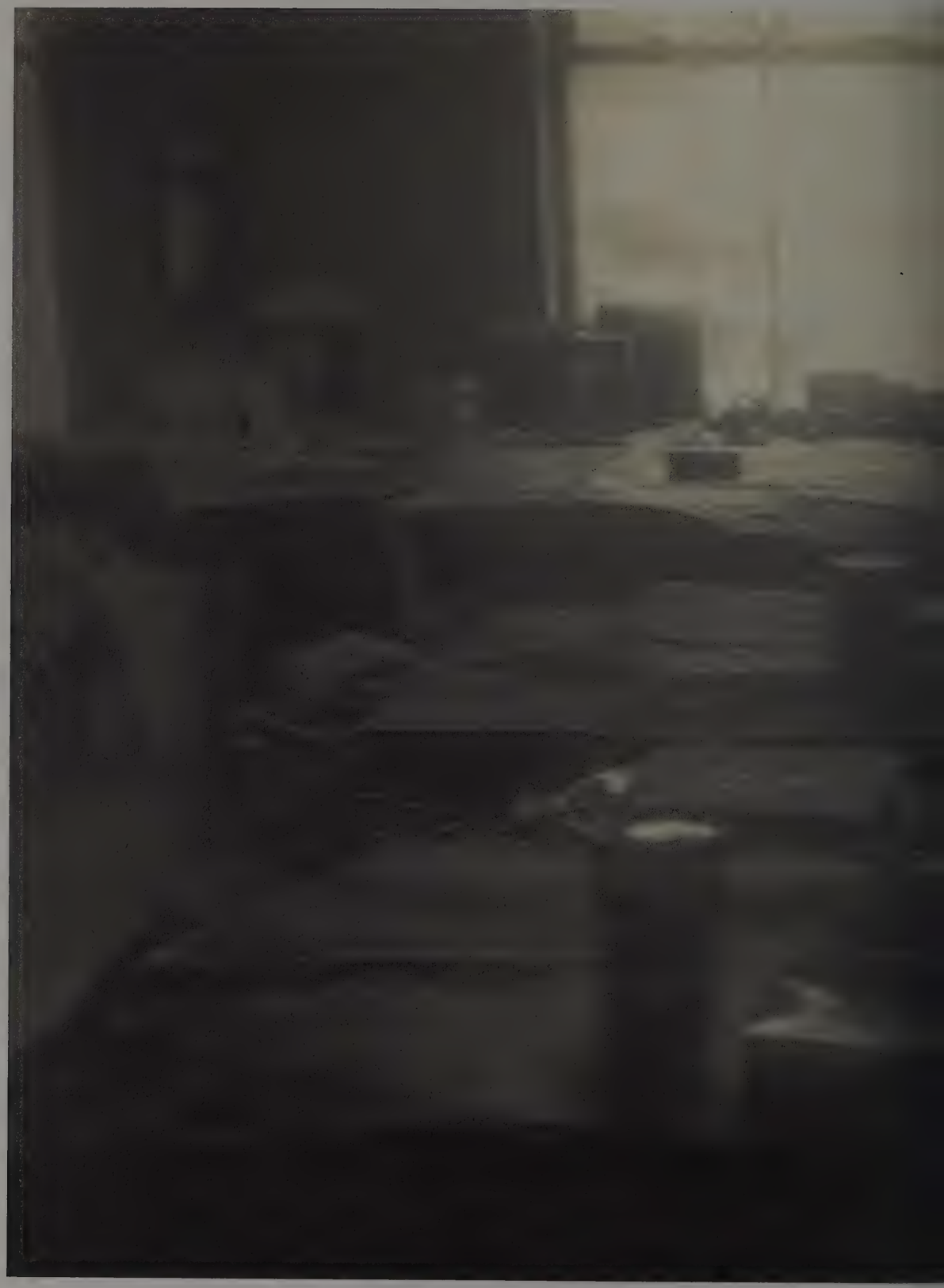
SALLY MANN

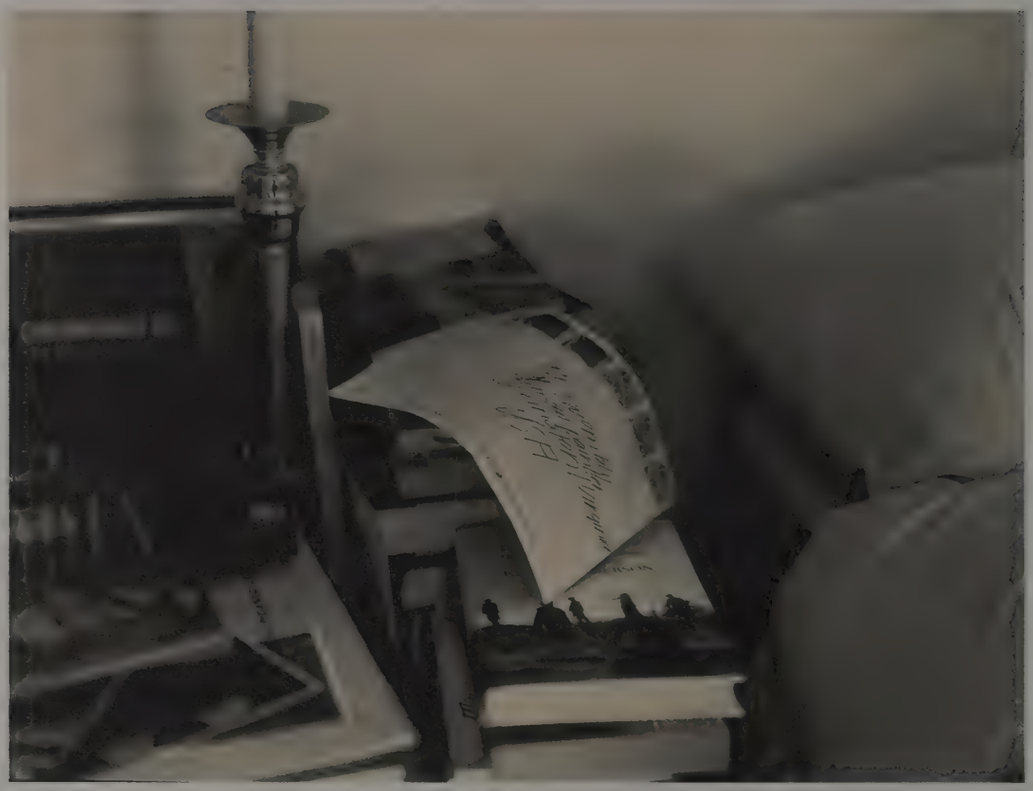
LEXINGTON · VA

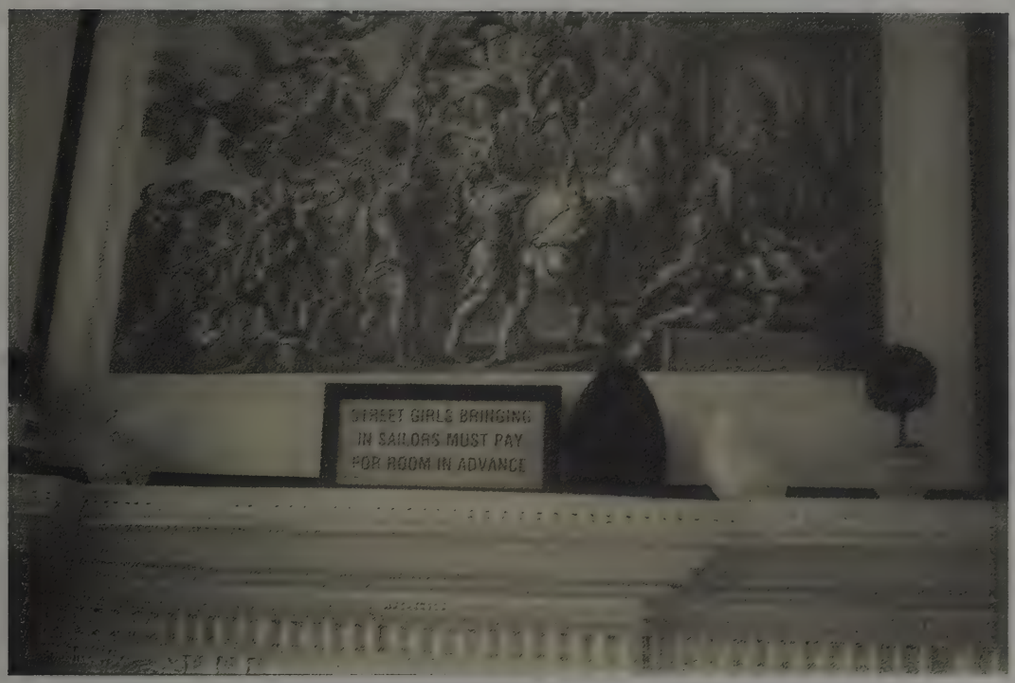
Cy Twombly's home and studio







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