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At the Edge of Land and Water: John Walker's Landscapes

by Wendy Gittler

John Walker: The Sea and The Brush at the New York Studio School

December 11, 2017 to January 21, 2018

8 West 8th Street, between 5th and 6th avenues

New York City, nyss.org



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, John Walker: The Sea and The Brush at the New York Studio School, including Move, 2007, center far wall. Courtesy of the New York Studio School.

At first glance, the bold patterns in John Walker's recent paintings and drawings appear to mark a change in direction from the large gritty paintings of tidal pools of Maine that were his last body of work. On further viewing, it becomes apparent that his familiar landscapes of mud, water, fire and tides have become compressed into signs or ideograms. These perhaps reflect time spent in Australia during the 1980s when he made a study of boriginal bark and cave paintings as well as the abstract lineage of modernism.

The intimate, explorative exhibition at the New York Studio School exposes his complex interaction with a particular place and its shifting transient nature. Walker has often spoken about rejecting the picturesque in favor of primordial nature as represented by mud, dirt and water. In the region of Maine's Seal Point and John's Bay, he has found these necessary elemental motifs. At the edge of land and water, he has become immersed in the visceral experience of light, space and motion. There he has sought to bridge the atmospheric, volumetric world of matter and its equivalence in signs. Landscape thus becomes an arena not only to view the fleeting nature of the elements with its seasonal and biological cycles but also a vessel for thought and process within the context of various pictorial languages.



In *Fire and Tide* and *Two Brush Fires*, some of his former complex spatial panoramas with their diverse vantage points and horizon lines remain. Walker, however, has often changed his viewing perspective. At times, he has vicariously crawled along the surface of the earth or seen things as a fish traversing water or as a bird from above or a combination of different vantage points in the same painting. In *Two Brush Fires* a vertical panoramic space is grounded by two trees uniting land, fire, water and sky seen both from above and at the horizon. By contrast, *John's Bay Pollution* reveals a flatter, condensed spatial world of water patterns containing floating interactive shapes. Viewed from above, a brown form hovers over incoming and outgoing tides acting as a magnifying glass revealing particles of pollution. This pivotal form compresses the action of the bird/fish and shield shapes reminiscent of the mapping of animal and water trails found in Australian aboriginal painting.

Sign language becomes even more evident in black and white drawings that evoke musical exercises with their motifs and recapitulations of the ebb and flow of tides: times of day amidst floating objects pulled by currents. Walker has stated that all his abbreviations of shapes and forms come from acute observation of particular sites. His drawings reflect these observations of a sea world with undulating patterns, horizontal and vertical lines that act as cross currents creating pulsating tensions. Fish, ice cakes, detritus, clam markings, and fragments of land intermesh with the tides.

Walker's quest to reassemble pictorial language from a diverse painting vocabulary is no easy task. Throughout his long career he has searched for ways to meld the painterly traditions of Goya, Constable, Turner and Abstract Expressionism

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John Walker, *Fire and Tide*, 2011-2014. Oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery, New York

with the more formal language of Matisse, Malevich and Ethnographic Art. Over the past decades he has been moving back and forth between both pictorial concepts, sometimes emphasizing his love of light and expressive painterly forms, other times using abbreviated signs, and sometimes managing to simultaneously employ both modes. In his painting series, "A Theater of Recollections" (about his father in the muddy trenches of World War I) he combined ideograms, patterns, and words from poems that interact with volumetric shapes and atmospheric moods. The Studio School show is a good introduction to his innovative merging of the physical tactile world with a formal language of signs, ideograms and pictographs, expanding the painter's language in this time.



John Walker, *John's Bay Pollution*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches. Courtesy of Alexandre Gallery, New York