

# ALEXANDRE

## FIRST THINGS

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### JOHN WALKER AT ALEXANDRE GALLERY

by Maureen Mullarkey

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In *Painting and Reality*, Etienne Gilson argued that painting should be experienced on its own terms. That is to say, aesthetically. He insisted that audiences greet art without thinking of it as something to be understood, decoded, or interpreted. A painting is not an essay, not a set of propositions. Whatever literary, philosophical, or narrative content might be claimed for a work, the *art* of the thing lies elsewhere and exists to be welcomed for its own sake. To do otherwise, he wrote, is to turn a work of art into a book.

Painting, like music, requires no essential bond to either imitation of the real world nor readable content. The only ideas it is responsible for *as art*, are pictorial ones. British-born John Walker, an artist of singular power, echoes Gilson: "In all painting, it's not about how many ideas you have; it's about what you do with that idea." Significant subjects have come down to us as great paintings. But it is not subject matter that makes painting memorable.

Now into the fifth decade of an illustrious career, Walker is in full possession of his craft. This current exhibition, his first at New York's Alexandre Gallery, illustrates the reasons his work has been collected by major American museums and is in public collections worldwide from London to South Africa.

It illustrates, too, why my long-standing admiration for his work coincides with a certain tension between attraction and resistance. The gravitational pull tugs both ways at the same time. His painting is at once beautiful and combative. Scale is one of the determinants of mood. The larger his work, the more assertive its innate aggression, even pugnacity.

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On exhibit are seven new monumental paintings, a selection of mid-sized ones, and a lively medley of small oils on board. The appeal of them lies in their unapologetic materiality: the patterning of invented forms, balance of color, and robust laying in of paint. Before anything, painting is an earthly thing. (“Colored mud,” Walker likes to say.) The source of delight in Walker’s work is the characteristic physical richness of the surface, that furious complexity of encrusted layers of color.

Walker’s abiding pictorial idea draws from the light and landscape of Seal Island, Maine. Following the earlier American modernists Marsden Hartley and John Marin—both drawn to Maine settings—he abstracts from the landscape, fragmenting it to emphasize inherent rhythmic qualities over natural forms. The sea coast, with its outcroppings, mud flats, and swirling eddies is a resource mined for its wildness and movement, not scenic charm. Refusal of scenic clichés lends his painting a force appropriate to the advance of the sea. In the oversized canvases, Walker’s ambition to capture the assault of tidal currents on the shoreline can move you to back up, keep clear of the offensive.

Over decades, Walker has won his way through to an expressiveness capable of a broad diversity of performance. Here, his distillations of landscape shapes, mapped as if from an aerial view, owe their abstract patterning to the aboriginal bark paintings he fell in love with during his early years in Australia. In place of the linear refinement of Oceanic design, Walker substitutes a gestural bravado inherited from Abstract Expressionism.

The patterned rhythms and repetitions of Oceanic art anchor Walker’s exuberance of invention. The swagger of gesture is contained within an schematic architecture all his own. His appetite for the grand things of nature transmitted through the paint itself makes visible George Braque’s words: “A painting is completed when it has wiped out the idea.” In other words, when it exists for itself alone.

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