

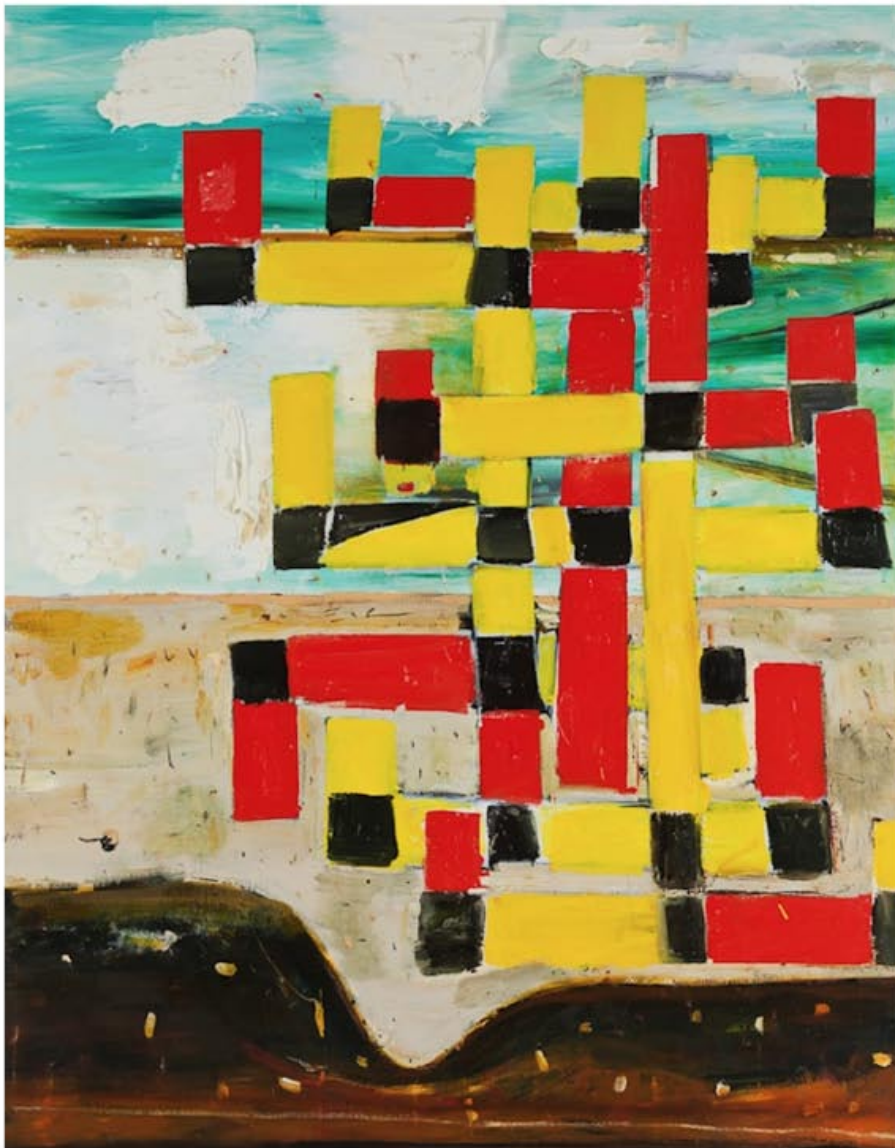
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HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Beer with a Painter: John Walker

by [Jennifer Samet](#) on May 18, 2013



John Walker, "Red Yellow Coastal Cross North Branch" (2011), oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

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I have long admired John Walker's work for its unique combination of tough materialism and romantic lyricism. I recently met him in his studio at Boston University, where he is the head of the MFA program. My visit with Walker happened to take place on the Thursday after the Boston Marathon tragedy, and I spent Friday's citywide lockdown with painters Gideon Bok and Meghan Brady.

In retrospect, my time with Walker feels like a complete experience, not exactly separate from the events, but certainly a place where painting can encapsulate and transmit the range of human drama and emotion. Walker's painting is about this faith, in the mark, in the hand, and in abstract form.

Walker was born in 1939 in Birmingham, England, and studied at the Birmingham College of Art and La Grande Chaumière in Paris. He was awarded the Harkness Fellowship in 1969 and began dividing his time between the United States and England during the 1970s, exhibiting in New York and becoming associated with post-war abstraction. He then lived and taught for several years in Australia, where he became interested in Oceanic Art. He taught at Cooper Union and Yale University before assuming his current position at Boston University. He has exhibited widely internationally, including representing England at the 1972 Venice Biennale, three solo exhibitions at the Phillips Collection, in 1978, 1982, and 2002, and in Beijing in 2010.

His major bodies of work have included "canvas collages": monumental collages that incorporate pieces of other paintings; the Alba paintings, which use an abstract, vertical form as an essential part of their painterly vocabulary; "text paintings" which juxtapose painted words with images; and small landscape-based paintings of Seal Point, Maine, where Walker has a residence.

* * *

Jennifer Samet: *Can you tell me about your early exposure to art and how growing up in England affected your painting? What was your family's relationship to art?*

John Walker: I grew up in Birmingham, England, one of the most industrial cities anywhere. Through my brothers, I was introduced to the English countryside. They were recreational fisherman — perhaps in reaction to the Second World War. As a young boy, I followed them everywhere. Basically, though, I lived right in the middle of an industrial city.

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John Walker, "Oceania 7" (1982), oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches (click to enlarge) (collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

I suppose my introduction to art was my mother, who was a fantastic woman. When she was twelve, her mother died in childbirth, and she had to leave school to look after her brothers, and a new baby. But somehow, she managed to educate herself. She was a supplier of knowledge; she took me to museums, showed me what a Constable looked like, read Shakespeare to us.

She was what you would call in those days a "street mother" — one of those women that society depended on, to function. If someone gave birth, she was there. If someone died, she'd wrap him up. And of course, I followed her everywhere, so I saw all that. She lived until she was 102. She was a life force.

My father had been very damaged in the First World War. And they met when she was an auxiliary nurse. They believed in that awful Victorian idea, fed by the ruling class, that work was a virtue, that it brought you close to godliness. My mother was a cleaning lady, and my father was a mailman. I always had a job. When I was eight, one of her jobs was cleaning the floors at the Woolworth's. In those days, you cleaned floors on your hands and knees, with a scrub brush. She would do one aisle, and I'd do the other. At the end of it, when we got on the bus to go home, she had in her bag some ink that she'd "knocked off the table." Drawing materials. She had a tough life, but there was always a way to get things done. When I said I wanted to be an artist, that was it; she never said no.

JS: *You have lived in Australia and the United States. Why did you decide to leave England?*

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JW: I had become very conscious of the power of American art. It looked amazing, and I couldn't find that kind of companionship in England. The English art world in the 1950s and 60s was very exclusive. It wasn't easy to meet real artists outside of the art schools. When I looked at all those famous photographs of the Cedar Bar it looked more democratic. I never really wanted to go to London.

I won some art prizes; I'd done one or two things that people were interested in. I set up a studio in the countryside, and I was driving a truck, making deliveries to docks. I would get up at 4 AM, get back to my studio by noon, so I had the rest of the day to paint. I was living in a village called Blackwell, and one day this woman came up the stairs. She said she was visiting someone in the village, was told an artist lived here, and would I mind if she had a look around? I was painting these big paintings, at least 20-feet wide. There were thirty or forty paintings that size, and we went through them. She sat down, I gave her some tea, and she said, "Have you ever thought of showing in New York?" And I said, "No. Of course not." She said, "Would you like to? We could show them in my gallery." It was Betty Parsons. We became very good friends. So I had a show with her in 1967. I came to New York once in that period. And then Lawrence Gowing suggested I apply for the Harkness Fellowship, which brought foreigners to New York. I went there with my family and we lived down on Grand Street. There were about three galleries down in SoHo at that time, like Betty Cuninghame, who I showed with. After that, I was invited to Australia on a fellowship.

JS: *How did living in Australia, and specifically, your exposure to Aboriginal art, impact your painting?*

JW: I became very interested in the Australian bark paintings, and bought a lot of them. I decided I wanted to go north, to the barrier reef. I was a kid from the slum in England, so I always wanted to go to the best places in the world. Then I found out that, in the interior, there are sites with these rock paintings. They are the real thing; it isn't contemporary art!

I returned to England, but then, Fred Williams, a great painter in Australia, asked me to come back and run the painting department at a school there. I said I would stay three years, but I ended up staying six. It gave me an opportunity, to love Australia, to love the artists. I had to put an art school together, and there were a lot of problems. So I got a couple of Aborigines to be professors there. And I found a lot of women whose husbands were very prominent in the art world, but who had always been in the background, continuing to paint, with no one caring about them. I invited them to teach, and they brought a lot of wisdom into the school. I had six wonderful years.

JS: *You also collect African art. Can you tell me about your interest in African art?*

JW: It is about that kind of authenticity, which art is, at its best. It is digested over a long period of time, and that gives it real, human values. It is unapproachable for me, but I know it when I see it. It is consistent; it's not like the Western tradition, where you have to change all the time.

Also, as in all painting: it's not about how many ideas you have; it's what you do with that idea. There was a moment when Philip Guston used to come to my studio. I said, "Why do you come here? I only have one idea." And he said, "That's why I come here." It seems to me it isn't about very much. It's what you do with that little bit. If you think about Cézanne, he had a mountain, some apples.

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John Walker, "Looking Out to Sea II" (2012), oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

JS: *This makes me think of your paintings of Seal Point, Maine. You made hundreds of small paintings of this single site. What inspired you to paint this motif repetitively?*

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JW: Subconsciously, I may have wanted to own something. When you look at Cézanne, whether it's the mountains, or a still life, you are looking at someone who is the world's expert, who knows more about it than anyone else. That is what Seal Point is to me. I painted too many pictures about it. But when I go there, I get really excited. I feel alive, and it doesn't matter how many people come there and look at it. They're not going to sit where I sit, or see it the way I see it.

You realize when you look at a Cézanne, he's seeing things that no one ever sees, nor ever will again. It is full of that moment of seeing. It's almost not about what's there; it's about capturing something no one else has seen. The viewer gets excited by that moment, that piece of blue being in the right place.

There is a Cézanne portrait in the Phillips Collection. It is like he's tapping away, building this solid form, this self-portrait. It is like building a church. You're painting away, and it's like bang, bang, bang. But it isn't until he put that stroke on the forehead—which is probably the last moment of the painting — that he rings the bell, so the people will come. The people are not going to come to the church unless the bell is rung. It is that moment, of visual illumination.

JS: *In many of your paintings you combine text with image. You have spoken about how painting words is like touching them. Can you elaborate on this?*

JW: You have to touch them to write. You don't see them until you touch them. I was writing someone else's verse — from a Wilfred Owen poem — and it seemed to me I had to feel it through the brush for it to be meaningful. That's when the word is illuminated, through the touch of it, the pressure of it. Even in very early paintings, touch was always important to me: the sound of the touch of the brush. That is why I never paint with music on.

I try to tell my students not to listen to music while they are painting. They might be making terribly expressive paintings, or quiet paintings, but they've got this music pounding in their ear. I ask them what they are listening to, and it has nothing to do with what they are working on. I tell them they should listen to the sound of the brush. I'm sure Rembrandt did. Imagining the noise of a Rembrandt is a total explanation of what it is. The noise is the explanation for the paintings. He didn't have chamber music playing in the background. He had the noise of the painting, the noise of the brush. If you look at a Goya, you see these wonderful things. He knew how to kiss the surface, in the most sensuous way. And it's all to do with sound.

JS: *Goya comes up a lot when discussing your work. The form that recurs in many of your paintings is called an Alba. Is this a reference to Goya?*

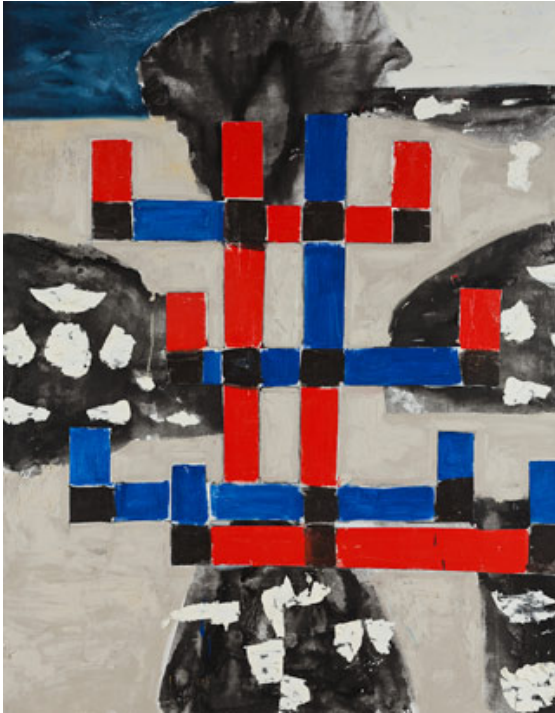
JW: The original painting that had that form, had nothing to do with Alba. It was given that name later. It was about me trying to find a form. As a young man, I had gone to Amsterdam to look at Van Gogh, actually. I saw the Rembrandts, including the painting that is still the most important painting to me — “The Jewish Bride.” It just touched me so. It is truly one of the great romantic paintings in the world.

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John Walker, "Coastal Cross North Branch" (2011),
oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches (click to enlarge)

I came out from the Rembrandt painting, and then I went to the Stedelijk. I'd been trained at that point just in figurative art. For the four years previously, I'd been in a life room. And I saw this painting, a white square on a white square. I didn't know what it was, but I got the same emotional take that I got from the Rembrandt. It blew me away, took me off balance. I turned away, came back. I had no way of dealing with it intellectually. I'd never been faced with avant-garde art. I didn't do anything about it. But several years later, I read that Malevich, when asked what his ambition was for painting, said it was to imbue the square with feeling. Well, that's what Rembrandt did. So the connection was immediate. Then I didn't have this problem of why I liked Rembrandt and why I liked certain contemporary art, why I grew to like Jackson Pollock. That is what they were doing: they were imbuing the square with feeling. I'd never read that, never heard of that, but it seemed to be right on.

At some point, I was still a figurative painter, and I was trying to paint pictures of my father, who had been injured in the war. And I exhausted it. I mean, how many times can you paint someone in agony or pain before it becomes cliché? So I thought, there's got to be another way to do this. I started to experiment; I did all kinds of things; I cut up paper to try to create three-dimensional forms. I never believed that abstract art should be merely frontal. Why can't it have all the attributes that Titian has, or Rembrandt has? Why can't it have volume; why can't it have air? The major painting of the 1960s was all about flatness. Funnily enough, Clement Greenberg used to tell me that my paintings had too much stuff in them. Anyhow, I came up with this form. When I found it — this cut out piece, it was so simple, and it was like the whole world came alive. Everything was simplified. Of course ... that feeling only lasted a moment, maybe a week.

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This form could be male or female. Suddenly, my idol, the main player in my life — Goya — came back. I saw the references. I felt that if I could close this thing, I could give it an identity. So that's how the Goya reference came about: not immediately, but later. It was John Russell, I believe, who wrote that he couldn't understand whether it was an Alba form, or like looking through a keyhole in a door. He got it totally wrong both times, but the Alba name stuck.

Once I got this form, then I could look at Velázquez, Gainsborough. It was important, because my paintings had become about collage, and were very flat; they had no air. I wanted them to look like the side of an oil tanker. There are moments in your life, where you wonder, "What have I abandoned to get to this?" I felt like I had abandoned air. So once I had found a shape, then I could put air around it. I could have a conversation with Titian, with Cézanne, which I was losing.

This happens from time to time. I go somewhere too far, and think, "What I value is gone, and I have to bring it back." I am not an admirer of artists who take themselves where they can't see anymore. Sometimes painters become so extreme, that they can't just paint a landscape picture, or paint a dog! They almost become inarticulate. But Picasso could do it, Matisse could do it, Braque could do it. And all that argument about late Pollock, that he was going back to figuration. That was about seeing again. It was about, "I could expand my vision. Of course I could go here and do that." The artists who really achieve something do that.

JS: *There is a very interesting conversation in your work between your studio practice and your landscape practice. Can you talk about that?*

JW: I love to teach, and I find one of the biggest problems I have with my students, is convincing them that you can do anything. They already feel locked into something. I think it is art history's fault. Art history makes it seem linear. It presents Picasso as going from this to that. But really, he was a mess, creatively. In 1922, in his studio, the late Cubist painting *The Three Musicians* was on one wall, and on the other wall was *Three Women at the Spring*. Creativity is a huge mess. It really is one of the big problems: how do you convince a student that it's a mess, because that is the last thing they want to hear. They want some sense of it all, from you or me. And I walk in and say, "No, it's not like that in the real world."

Most of the time, when I work outdoors, it is this constant taking the paintings out, nailing them to the trees, basically. It is to authenticate the painting. It's like, "You're not right, until you're as good as that." Of course, you don't get that, but that is the ambition.

JS: *And for you is it about trying to get the feeling of that place?*

JW: Well, no, I think it's more than that. I'm trying to get what's there. I'm not fudging it. It may not be there when you're there, but it's there when I'm there. I do paint in this place that we call "shitty cove," which is where all the rubbish comes in. I can't paint the scenic part. I'm anti-scenic. It took me about ten years before I could paint the place, even though I was living there. I found a place where it smells, and all the garbage comes in and that allowed me to paint, because it wasn't scenic.

JS: *It reminds me of how you refer to paint as "colored mud." Your paintings seem so much about the elements — paint becoming a signifier of earth, rather than just representations of the landscape. Do you agree?*

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John Walker, "Red Yellow and Blue, Coastal Cross North Branch" (2011), oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

JW: I still paint with my hands. I think Rembrandt did, so I do also. I can't see any way Rembrandt did the things he did unless he was touching the paintings all the time. The mud thing came out of my experience with Aboriginal art, understanding they were very involved

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with mud. The people make paint from the earth. Also, Guston referred to paint as shit, which Dore Ashton reminded me of. And, I had been painting a lot about my father, and every description of the First World War, every poem I read, was about mud, what they lived with.

It is this very ambitious idea. If you accept that paint is colored mud, and you put it on a canvas, you realize it is only a genius, like Turner or Rembrandt, who can turn it into air. It is the height of ambition, it seems to me, to be a painter. How do you do this: turn it into air, or a piece of silk, or a piece of flesh? How does Cézanne tap, tap, tap this thing, and turn it into this? It is a magical thing — it is alchemy. And it is your hands that do it.

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