

JOHN WALKER, A SURVEY: PAINTINGS 1970–2008, INCLUDING WORK FROM THE EDWARD R. BROIDA TRUST

The Nielsen Gallery • Boston, MA • March 1–April 5, 2008

Kidder Smith Gallery • Boston, MA • March 1–March 29, 2008



John Walker, *Ostraca V*, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 120", 1977. Courtesy of Nielsen Gallery. Photo: Susan Byrne.

John Walker is a major American painter. The Nielsen's survey, filling two galleries, made this emphatic. Since 1993, when Walker began teaching at Boston University, Nielsen has given him numerous one-man shows. Because Walker is a serial painter who becomes fixated on a subject (the Maine coast, a memorial to World War I) or on scale (the *Seal Point Series* of landscapes on bingo cards), the flow of his work has obscured individual paintings. In honoring the late collector Edward R. Broida, a champion of Walker's art, Nielsen shuffled the Walker deck and dealt paintings out of sequence. Shazam! Walker's mastery of composition, image, and paint-handling shone as never before! The inclusion of three monumental collages, ten by eight feet, left this viewer stunned and giddy with pleasure.

English-born in 1939, Walker taught in London, New York, and Melbourne, Australia—with stops in between—before arriving at BU. There he followed, by some fifteen years, another painter Broida collected in depth: Philip Guston.

Walker's collages, dating from 1977 when he taught at Yale, are breakthrough works. *Ostraca V*, the one that floored me, nods to de

Kooning's 1950s Dutchman's-pants-blue and wheat-gold high-way/landscape paintings. Then Walker takes flight, balancing a quarter-circle, downward-pointing sail shapes, skull fragments, free drawing, and odd-shaped pieces of painted canvas. The picture is robust and stately—classical.

There is no visibly direct line from these works to the *Alba* and *Oceania* series, and on to the Maine series, but Walker's surge has begun. You feel that he is in all the way, in every painting—bold, bracingly ruthless, and ebullient. There are several signature elements. The open-door-with-slant-of-light shape appears in the *Alba* series and anchors one half-dozen or more paintings in this survey. The figure can be flesh, pierced by arrows in an *Oceania* painting, light from outdoors, or, perhaps, a view into a garden. Others have pointed out Walker's re-imagining Goya's

Duchess of Alba, and his appetite for Rembrandt's dark surrounds. To my eye, the figure lets Walker work astride the abstract/representational divide. Indeed, these paintings are bold enough to refuse either/or, and to accept both/and as their birthright. They are not argument, but inevitability.

But they are not so lofty as this may make them seem. These paintings are literally down to earth, as Walker loves to rub dirt on his canvases, especially on a new series that relates to a recent visit to China; they are idiosyncratic. His spider-legged figure with a cheese-grater head in the *Oceania* series, the lines of poetry on his pictures, the geeky-skulled man in his World War I pictures, and a sheep or two, are examples of the quirks he has not ironed out of his imagination. There are Walkers I find ugly, at least I did on first seeing them, and this is a risk only confident painters

accept. His images are personal, but they startle, and we connect with what startles us.

This leaves the Maine paintings, more tidescapes than landscapes—the rock and mud-skin Maine shoreline. Walker is not averse to gorgeous painting; impasto passages of richly blended colors abound. But in the Maine paintings, he lets himself go. These works pull the viewer's eyes up to tumultuous ocean storms, blue mornings, starry nights—weathers observed, then imagined. A shape, like the body of a guitar that could be a tidal pool, often grounds these paintings. One is pressed into the large expanse of foreground and the pull upwards is dizzying. Walker's recent dark, dirt-grimed landscapes have whitish/gray hairpin trails running up them like the trails that climb mountains in Chinese paintings. These may be the most physical of Walker's paintings in that the roughness of texture matches the roughness of image.

In the catalogue accompanying this show Walker goes unquoted. He prefers, it seems, to let his art speak for itself.

—William Corbett



John Walker, *Light and Forms*, oil on canvas, 66 x 84", not dated. Courtesy of Nielsen Gallery.