

John Walker Collages, Elegant to Exuberant, Abducted by Politics

Ashton's Catalog Essay Insists That Juggernaut Commemorated Neruda

BY HILTON KRAMER

No one familiar with the recent paintings of John Walker will be surprised either by the scale of his new collages, which are very large, or by the exuberant energy of their painterly forms, which at times threaten to overflow the boundaries of their ample supports. It has long been a characteristic of Mr. Walker's art to display a certain impatience with the limits of his medium, which, unlike nature—the source of many of the artist's subjects—is neither unbounded nor capable of infinite extension.

Indeed, it may be said of Mr. Walker's paintings that their most inspired inventions derive from a resistance to

the very idea of limits—a resistance that seeks to appropriate the boundlessness of nature within the acknowledged limits of his medium. Many of the paintings re-enact a Sisyphian ordeal in which nature is at once an inspiration to be cultivated and a conundrum to be constantly struggled with.

Earlier on, in his work in the 1970's, Mr. Walker created a series of elegant collages that are smaller in scale and more orderly in execution: collages largely defined by their straight-edged forms. (These, too, are represented in the current show.) Within each of the straight-edged forms in these smaller collages there are signs of an Expressionist sensibility eager to be released from geometric confinement, but there's not yet even a glimpse of the kind of go-for-broke Expressionism that dominates the outsize collages in the current show. One would be tempted to describe these as fugitive examples of "Action Painting," if that term hadn't been so hopelessly compromised by an earlier generation of critics. Yet some such term is needed to convey a sense of the dynamic character of the new collages, in which the headlong trajectories of an overloaded paint

brush are combined with layered fragments of painted canvas to create an illusion of perpetual movement in essentially abstract compositions.

Is there also an oblique political message in these collages? I see no evidence of it, but we're assured by Dore Ashton, in her essay for the show's catalog, that there is indeed a political statement to be found in Mr. Walker's work. Her warrant for making heavy weather of this assumption is a single collage, *Juggernaut with Plume for P. Neruda* (1975). This is, of course, a reference to the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, who was a political radical.

For Ms. Ashton, this is reason enough to indulge her passion for dabbling in radical politics. Thus she says of the *Juggernaut* collage: "He painted this work in 1975, two years after Neruda's

death, and the horrors that had ensued in Chile on September 11, 1973, when Pinochet destroyed the government of Salvador Allende, and Allende himself, as well as thousands of others, many of them students and artists. Tragically, Neruda lived to see it, and died thirteen days later, September 23rd. Walker's painting [presumably the 1975 collage] is at once a commemoration and an utterance of his feelings."

A go-for-broke Expressionism dominates the outsize collages in the new show.

Opinions will inevitably differ as to whether this detour into Chilean politics does much to illuminate the current exhibition of Mr. Walker's new collages. But since Ms. Ashton has introduced the subject of political tyranny into her account of Mr. Walker's new work (which is devoid of political content), it should be pointed out for the record that Chile had the misfortune of enduring not one but two political tyrannies: first the Marxist tyranny of the Allende regime, then

they fled Allende's reign of terror. But the casualties of a Marxist regime are clearly of no interest to armchair radicals like Dore Ashton.

In the same catalog essay, Ms. Ashton displays her paranoia on the subject of "conservative critics," who, she claims, "breathed a sigh of relief" when Mr. Walker introduced identifiable landscape elements into his work. The clear implication is that such critics are somehow hostile to nonrepresentational art. I take this to be a reference

to what I've written about Mr. Walker's paintings of the Maine landscape (no other "conservative critic" that I know of has devoted serious attention to this aspect of his oeuvre).

Well, Ms. Ashton is dead wrong about this, too. Far from seeking "relief" from abstract art, I have devoted some years to writing a history of abstract art—a project that's still in progress. I must therefore conclude that the large number of bees in Ms. Ashton's political bonnet has once again muddled her comprehension.

Never mind. For anyone with a serious interest in modernist painting, *John Walker: Collage* is an exhibition not to be missed. It remains on view at Knoedler and Company, 19 East 70th Street, through March 19. And you don't have to have an interest in Chilean politics to enjoy the show.



Perpetual motion: John Walker's *Untitled*, 2004.

the fascist tyranny of Pinochet.

As it happens, I have friends—one of them a painter—who managed to find refuge in the United States when life under the Allende regime became intolerable. They lost everything when

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