FORM FOLLOWS FEELING

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JONATHAN WIGGS

Walker, in his studio: "I always wanted abstract painting to have feeling. The idea is to have a form of abstraction that could be imbued with feeling. Otherwise it's just decorative."

After making his mark in abstraction, painter and BU professor John Walker turns to figures and text to explore family history and the killing fields of WWI

By Cate McQuaid
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

God made Adam from the earth. And so to the earth he returned, as shall we all.

John Walker knows the generative qualities of the earth. He also knows its dangers.

"What is paint?" the British artist asks, wandering through his exhibition "A Theater of Recollection," up at the Boston University Art Gallery through Oct. 19. "It's just colored mud." (A second exhibit of his paintings is up at the Nielsen Gallery through Oct. 11.)

He stops in front of "The Somme (July 1, 1916)." In it, a blizzard of white text from a poem by the British writer David Jones rushes over shifting vessels and cruciforms. Over the text, a small, hunched figure sits in the uniform of a British soldier. His head is the bare skull of a sheep. He is solitary amid the chaos of battle and death.

Walker squints at the painting. "The greatest challenge is to take this mud and put it up there and make light and air and form," he reflects. "Turning it from inert [stuff] into a stimulating, evocative object."

The artist, a professor at BU since 1993 (and the only one to hold the title professor of painting), has wrestled with that challenge since his days at Birmingham College of Art in England in the late '50s. Right after he graduated he tackled the topic of World War I, in which his father was a soldier.

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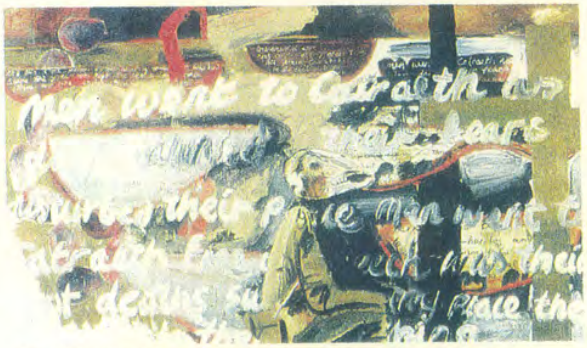

In "The Somme (July 1, 1916)," a blizzard of text rushes over vessels and cruciforms.

THE BOSTON GLOBE • FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1997

Walker explores the art in war

■ WALKER
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"It was about trying to have a relationship with my father," Walker remembers. At 58, he's a thoughtful man, with sharp features and mournful eyes. He was the youngest of his father's six sons, born more than 20 years after the end of the Great War.

"He hated them," Walker says of the early paintings, circumspect. "I destroyed most of them, but I've always had the nagging idea that I would paint these eventually."

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Toward figuration

Walker had another path to walk first. He made his name in the '60s, painting large fields of color in which a single biomorphic object floated. Over the years, he developed a lexicon of forms that pushed his abstraction toward figuration: beads and vessels, inspired by gifts from an Aboriginal woman during the years he spent in Australia in the '80s; a skewed, rectangular hourglass shape drawn from Goya's portrait of the duchess of Alba.

"I always wanted abstract painting to have feeling," Walker explains. "The idea is to have a form of abstraction that could be imbued with feeling. Otherwise it's just decorative."

In "A Theater of Recollection," Walker includes many forms he's used in his abstract paintings, the past murmuring its way into the present. They provide a backdrop to the galvanizing figure of the sheep-headed soldier.

Walker smiles. "It's a great relief to put a figure into my work."

For this classically trained artist, these paintings are a journey home: back to the figure, as well as to the minefield of his own life, and that of his father before him.

The sobering, vivid exhibition features paintings and prints about the Great War. The soldier with the sheep's skull stands in for the artist's father, John Henry Walker, nicknamed Harry by his mates in the regiment because another John Walker was called by that name.

"I asked him what happened to John Walker," recalls the artist, whose young son Harry is named for the artist's father. "He said, 'His head fell in my lap.' "

The elder Walker, who died in 1974, didn't like to talk about the war. "He was a shy, quiet, loving man, and gentle," Walker remembers. "The conversation I always instigated was out of not believing this kind of person was involved in this horrible thing."

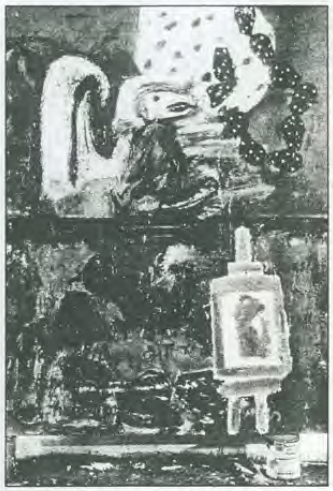
Why the sheep's skull?

"Soldiers went to their slaughter like lambs to the abattoir," he says.

When the painter first began to see his material as colored mud in the early '90s, he knew the time had come to return to his father's war experience.

In the gallery, Walker turns toward "Passchendaele I," named for the battle in Belgium in which his father was wounded. It's a bloody mess, with the Aboriginal beads and vessels hovering around a river of mud that runs down the middle of the canvas. The text scrawled inside the boundaries of each earthen vessel quotes from Wilfred Owen's 1918 poem "The Last Laugh":

'Oh! Jesus Christ! I'm hit,' he said; and died.
Whether he vainly cursed or prayed indeed,
The Bullets chirped – In vain, vain, vain!...
Love – Languid seemed his mood,
Till slowly lowered, his whole face kissed the mud.



In "Father and Son I" (above) and "Passchendaele I" (below), Walker makes a journey home: to figuration and to the minefield of his own and his father's lives.

'It's a great relief to put a figure into my work.'
JOHN WALKER

"A couple of buckets of this stuff, painted with my hands," Walker muses. "What one does with mud."

He turns back, his eyes sharp. "They lived and died and drowned in mud. The fear was not to die from a wound, but that you'd be wounded and sink and die in mud. My father was wounded and sinking, and he could hear people dying all around him."

Verse flies over Walker's paintings like an incantation for the dead. Often, he repeats the same verse over and over in a single painting. He paints each word like a gesture, making it his own. Whether the viewer can read it does not matter.

"When you paint, it's like repetition, reinforcing the emotional load you're trying to get into the painting," Walker reflects. He lifts his arm and starts batting deftly at an imaginary canvas. "You're hitting, hitting, hitting the painting in hope that a form will appear. This is like that. Repeating words is a painterly way of using the poetry."

"This is one of the most commanding new painting exhibitions we've seen for many years," says Patrick McCaughey, director of the Yale Center for British Art, in New Haven, where "A Theater of Recollection" will eventually travel.

"What a struggle those paintings are!" he declares in a phone interview. "Ungainly, roughhewn. Everything given to sincerity. The rawer the paintings are, the greater the feeling."

These works are multileveled and slathered with thick paint. They read like palimpsests with glimpses of what was written beneath peeking through. In their thickness, they follow a great tradition, from Tintoretto to Philip Guston.

Ask Walker about his influences, though, and his answer is immediate.

"Always Goya," he declares. "He seems to be the complete artist, from decorative to profound, troubling things. He makes beautiful images out of the most awful things."

Walker treads down a similar path. His work takes on the deluge of the Great War and the intricacies of a son's relationship with his father. It is, says dealer Nina Nielsen, "heroic." McCaughey agrees.

"It takes great courage to paint like that now," he says. "We live in an era when painting has become increasingly timid. Painting is embattled because everyone is trying to look cool. John is completely different. His paintings are a true voice of feeling. To meditate on personal circumstances and remember a great historical undertaking – nobody could say it's cool."

Two other figures bring the emotional narrative from the world scale of the Great War to the more intimate realms of family and studio.

In "Generations (Homage to My Father)," Walker breaks the vertical picture plane into two stacked horizontal images. In the top half, the forlorn soldier sits. Below, a fanged, horned creature drawn in a child's hand and haloed in garish green erupts off the canvas. The dragon was inspired by the artist's son Harry and has come to represent him.

"We were in Italy, and he asked me what I was drawing," recalls Walker, whose son, now nearly 7, was 5 years old. "I said, 'I'm trying to draw a sheep's skull.' And he picked up a pen and drew this spectacular dragonlike sheep."

Walker shakes his head. "I knew I was in the position Picasso's father must have felt."

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Portrait of the artist

Walker's stand-in for himself appears in "The Studio." Here, an easel, surrounded by carefully defined forms like stacked canvases, is in the top half of the painting. The lone soldier sits in a gray haze, his ocher uniform glowing, in the bottom half.

The easel refers to Rembrandt's small "Portrait of an Artist," presumed to be a self-portrait. It's hard to see what the artist in the painting has sketched onto the canvas. In Walker's case, the easel holds a painting with the outline of his Alba form, the vessel for feeling and the feminine.

"In 'The Studio,' the thing I'm thinking about ...," Walker says, and pauses, regarding the painting. "Is my contribution as great as his contribution was? Has the child done as well as the father?"

It's a natural question. But does Walker see the irony of it, given what he has just said about his own son?

He shrugs. His eyes light up again at the mention of Harry. "Picasso's father was a painter, and he thought he was a good one," Walker explains. "And Harry insists that when he grows up he'll be a painter, like his dad."

The Christian Science Monitor - CSMonitor.com

The triumph of artist John Walker; Matching wits with the modernist masters

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By Theodore F. Wolff / April 5, 1983 at 12:04 pm EST

New York

The art of Cezanne and of the other modernist masters is very much alive today. Not a day passes but that dozens of excellent painters put brush to canvas with Picasso, Nolde, Mondrian, Miro, Pollock, or Johns in mind. Or that a young sculptor shapes his own vision of art in the light of the theories of Brancusi, Gonzalez, or Caro.

This modernist dialogue will continue as long as modernism remains dynamic and there are creators who care enough about it to define their own art according to its ideals. It is of particular importance to that small handful of artists in every generation whose art embodies modernist ideals for their generation, and whose destiny appears to be the redirection of those ideals.

It is not an easy task to match talent and wits with the modernist masters, and to try to carry their ideals one step further. To do so requires a profound understanding of modernist history, realities, and goals, and a level of determination that is very close to heroic.

The number of artists who have these qualities is very small. For every Gorky , Pollock, Diebenkorn, and Johns, we have dozens of creators whose art may be excellent but whose modernist contribution is minimal. And yet, such dynamic figures always somehow seem to emerge.

One of the latest and best is John Walker, an English painter whose European successes are now beginning to be matched in the United States. His recent paintings are the subject of a major exhibition at M. Knoedler & Co. here.

Walker is a "painter's painter," meaning that his importance will probably be best understood by those who also paint. In this, he is in good company. Velazquez, Manet, Braque, and de Kooning are also respected most highly by painters.

Partly because of this, and partly because of his extraordinarily intimate interaction with the art of the recent and not-so-recent past, it is extremely difficult to discuss Walker's art in nontechnical terms. His blunt, aggressive, and often brutal paint-handling demands an understanding of what paint can and cannot do - and a perception of what it means truly to engage modernist