

ALEXANDRE

John Walker: Rivers and Sea

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JOHN WALKER'S DESIRE for artistic freedom has motivated him to pursue a singular trajectory for more than six decades. What distinguishes his trajectory from the ones taken by many of his contemporaries is his commitment to be open to, as well as address, what it means to be alive in time. For him, art is neither separate from life and nor does it offer you sanctuary from time. As a result, Walker has produced a diverse oeuvre inspired by many sources and nearly impossible to characterize. Beginning in the early 1960s, when many authorities and institutions proposed that painting was supposed to pursue its essential identity, he combined abstraction and representation. Later, he engaged directly with different artists, from Diego Velasquez and Francisco Goya to John Constable to Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich. While living and teaching in Melbourne, Australia, he was inspired by Aboriginal Australian bark painting and Oceanic sculpture. He is an abstract artist who paints plein air and a painter committed to drawing. In his explorations of a motif derived from Velasquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), which preoccupied him in the early '80s, he conjured a figural abstract form at once resolute and forlorn, eloquent and mute. He seemed to want to find the connection between self-protection and defenselessness. Walker's ability to articulate a visual paradox that resists any reductive reading is one of his great accomplishments.

Integral to Walker's love of art is a desire to understand his changing, complex environment. He has scrutinized the overlapping narratives of personal and world history; brought together the written and the visual; painted the elemental world he inhabits. His subjects have included his engagement with artists and art works, the multiple legacies of World War I, and different views from his property in Seal Point, Maine. In the 1960s, as a young artist working in a time when objectivity and literalism were widely considered the standards by which you measured the success of your work, Walker embraced his subjectivity without devolving into solipsism or anecdote. An abstract artist, he refused to banish the representational from his work. Working syncretically, his approach anticipated the ones taken by many painters who emerged during the 1980s and the "Return to Painting" and influenced generations of students.

For Walker, painting is about the changing bonds between sight and touch; and it is never purely optical. Refusing to reject either the gestural artists who are considered Abstract Expressionists, or codify their accomplishments, as so many of his generation did, he has characterized oil paint as "colored mud." Even in this description, you sense Walker carefully differentiating himself from Willem de Kooning, who famously claimed that "flesh was the reason oil paint was invented." Walker's association of oil paint with mud has led him to paint gritty, coarse views of a shore littered with detritus. It is not a coincidence that mud has been integral to two of Walker's great series. In the first series, "A Theater of Recollections" (1997-98), Walker examined the effect of World War I on his father and others of his generation (he lost 11 relatives in a single battle in 1916). What is the lasting toll of something you did not directly experience? What haunts any one of us?

In the second, ongoing body of work, which Walker started more than 20 years ago, he paints views of the river and shoreline near his house in coastal Maine. In these two very different groups, Walker's "colored mud" gains further resonance. Both the subjects and the settings underscore reality as a turbulent and dynamic process which cannot be controlled and is impossible to escape. Walker uses paint to conjure up and describe the indifference of history and nature, as well as expose his feelings, from vulnerability to rage to joy. Looking at a relentlessly changing world, in which dissipation and renewal are constant occurrences, he refuses to avert his eyes.

THERE ARE TWENTY-TWO WORKS in the exhibition, 18 paintings ranging between 24 x 18 inches and 84 x 66 inches, a size he has returned to throughout his career. Walker uses this scale, which echoes the breadth of his reach, to evoke the constantly changing states of weather, light, land, and water. In the large paintings, upright human scale meets nature's measureless expanse. By pushing the view up against the picture plane, he literally and metaphorically makes the ground he is standing on rise up to greet him. The writer and artist, Thomas Micchelli, astutely characterized these compressed, gnarly abstractions as "vertically tilted, crazily Cubistic landscape[s]." In addition to the paintings, there are four drawings done in ink and charcoal on rice paper, an absorbent surface in which the ink remains indelible and the charcoal is prone to smudging. Whether painting or drawing, the viewer does not feel that Walker uses these mediums to cover a surface. Rather, he uses them to touch the surface in different ways, to explore the relationship between physical form and dissolution.

For all of his urbane sophistication, Walker has remained in touch with the discordant in him and the world. This is one of the animating paradoxes of his work. Even as I have come to know the sources and inspirations of Walker's vocabulary, the paintings and drawings take over and always become more than the sum of their parts. This is what keeps me looking and thinking. A close observer of the weather and the tide, he has an intuitive grasp of the relationship between color, light, and the feelings they can stir up. When Walker was asked about the prevalent use of a deep cobalt blue in his recent paintings of the Pemaquid River and Seal Point, he responded, "joy." However, I would caution viewers not to make the obvious leap to Henri Matisse. Walker's views of water and shoreline are not arcadian. His juxtapositions are harsh; they clang with the disequilibrium informing his hyperawareness that life is sliding away, changing, and becoming something else. By using viscous paint, Walker is able to slow down and shape his own inescapable passage in time, while savoring the fleeting. But, as he knows, actual mud is impossible to shape.

Walker's studio is near the Pemaquid River, where, from late winter to early summer, eels return from the ocean to spawn. In these works, inspired by things seen and by Cézanne's *The Black Marble Clock* (1869–71), the intersection of linear and cyclical time—dissipation and renewal—is very much on the artist's mind. Meditating upon Cézanne's somber, disquieting painting, Walker contemplates mortality and fleeting moments of joy. Walker's meditations share something with Jasper Johns' use of a motif he saw in Edvard Munch's late painting, *Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed* (1940–43). For them, it was a way to connect to another artist while scrutinizing one's consciousness of solitude and mortality.

In *The Black Marble Clock*, Cézanne depicts an ormolou clock with a handleless face next to a large, ungainly seashell with a gaping red mouth. Using a palette dominated by black, gray and white, inflected by yellow and red, he brings together verticals and horizontals. Done before he began painting plein air with Camille Pissarro, *The Black Marble Clock* is a highly structured composition brimming with melancholic feelings. The gloom is pervasive.

I believe the relationship between structure and feeling, order and disorder, is one reason why Walker was drawn to Cézanne's *The Black Marble Clock*. What I think Walker saw and felt in Cézanne's painting was gloom and vulnerability. In his provocatively titled painting, *Embrace I* (2023), we see a black handleless clock on the right, near the painting's bottom right edge, sitting at a slight angle on a streaked, rectangular patch of gray paint. On the left side, situated slightly lower than the clock, we see the large ungainly shape of an off-white and brownish-yellow seashell with a slash of sharp red peering through its black mouth. Directly above the shell and clock, Walker has painted two sets of arcs, evocative of the nets used to fish the eels. Joined together, each set of arcs also suggests wings, and a sense of rising and falling. The arcs closest to the seashell and clock seem to be on the verge of embracing them. What are these nets/wings embracing? Are we caught in time? Or does time finally lift and release us?

In *Clock + Shell II, Riverview, Study for Clock + Shell III, and Study for Clock + Shell IV* (all dated 2023), Walker places the clock in a different place in each painting. In *Study for Clock + Shell II*, the clock's handleless face, now mostly green with a small section of white, is in the upper right-hand corner, against a deep blue band. By equating the moon with a handleless clock, Walker conflates celestial and human time, reminding viewers of the different ways we break down infinity in order to make it palatable. The handleless clock does not tell time; it epitomizes the present we are constantly leaving behind.

Walker makes his marks directly. If the paint begins to run out of the brush, he does not replenish it, but continues making a trail that is both ghostly and visceral. Walker's directness is simultaneously vulnerable and muscular. Integral to the way he has applied the paint, that trace of susceptibility adds a note of pathos to the painting. The pleasure of painting, of sensuously engaging with the everyday world, is mixed with a sense of unavoidable loss and time's dissipating effect. Historically speaking, Cézanne's disquieting oversized carapace is a precursor to the skulls he would focus on in his later paintings. In Walker's paintings, they are also things left by the receding tide.

In the paintings inspired by the Pemaquid River and Seal Point, Walker is a painter of place. I am reminded of Charles Olson, a longtime resident of the fishing town of Gloucester, Mass, who was also a poet of both place and history. In his poem, "Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 2," addressed to the town's citizens, Olson wrote:

he was right: people
don't change. They only stand more
revealed. I,
likewise

As Walker has gotten older, he seems ever more intent on standing revealed. Eschewing fashionable styles and purely formal art since he was a young man, I believe the goal he has doggedly pursued throughout his career is revelation. In three recent, predominantly blue paintings, *Solitude* (2021), *Catch I*, and *Catch II* (both 2022), Walker uses two motifs, the wing-like nets and a buoy with a post extending from it. Aside from wings, the overall shape of the nets and the buoy suggest other readings, starting with the latter's resemblance to a shield. What about the unpainted horizontal band near the top edge of *Catch I*? What are we to make of the purple circle placed above the horizon on the right side, and a larger, thinly painted umber lozenge that is placed below on the left side? Might this arrangement remind the viewer of a scale? Or is the line meant only to be seen as a horizon, with a planetary orb in the sky and a dry, sandy area on the shore, untouched by the tide? Out of these seen details, Walker seems to have made a mythic view that evokes our passage, judgements, and change. And yet, there is no narrative to the painting. He does not direct us on how to see the painting, because he does not claim to know the answers to these longstanding questions. Rather, he invites viewers to look in two directions, both outward and inward, to reflect upon them and to bore deep into one's self. This is what he shares with the great painters that he admires.

Some years ago, when I mentioned the parallels and differences between Richard Diebenkorn and Walker—both artists of place, color, and light—I did not know that they were friends and had gone to exhibitions and talked about art when they were both in New York. While both artists transformed the intersection of landscape and light into abstract paintings, they went about this in very different ways, starting with the ways they applied the paint. A quietly restless artist, Diebenkorn wrested every possible nuance out of the color relationships he explored through planar forms and tonal shifts. He was looking for ways to structure the soft pale light he experienced in Santa Monica, where he had moved to from Berkeley in 1967, and began working in a studio two blocks from the Pacific Ocean. Living on the coast of Maine, the cold light of the moon on a muddy shore where the tide has run out became one of Walker's subjects. In his plein air paintings of the littered, tide-marked shore, Walker applies the paint bluntly and directly, resisting stylishness, sensitivity, and the picturesque, while never losing either his exuberance or urgency.

At the same time—in these and other paintings in the group, including *Embrace* and the recent, *Study for Barge III* (2023)—the wing-like nets extend beyond the painting's right and left edges, calling attention to the incompleteness of our seeing. By using a vertical format, rather than a panoramic view, Walker recognizes that something will always remain hidden and beyond comprehension. The extreme way he pushes the river or horizon line up against the picture plane reminds me that we are impermanent presences and are always sliding towards chaos. And yet, as Walker states, the paintings are infused with joy, even in the case *Study for Barge I* and *Study for Barge II* (both 2023), where there is an ominous black, boat-like shape marked by red, floating just above the bottom edge. Is this rudderless shape a descendent of the boat used by Charon, the ferryman who carried the souls of the dead to Hades? What does Walker's barge carry? His ability to bring together different, contradictory states and feelings in his paintings is unrivaled. Rather than trying to fit everything together in a harmonious whole, he often abuts different colors and unnamable, patterned shapes without any of them becoming dominant.

In *Resurrection III* (2022), two wide bands vertically span the painting from the bottom to top edge. Pressing against the painting's right edge, the blue and vertical band slows down our reading. There are four black, outlined, buoy-like shapes visible within the white paint, some of which extend beyond its edges into the blue ground. A white band marked by horizontal and vertical blue brushstrokes spans the height of the painting, just left of the center. Two horizontal arms emerge from both sides until they intersect the painting's left edge and the band on the right. The title suggests that we read this abstract as a ladder, bringing to mind paintings of the Deposition, and the carrying of Christ down from the cross. However, Walker's use of a saturated blue ground deters us from seeing this work as a lamentation. The shield-like shapes of the four stacked buoys add another layer of possibility into our experience. Walker's paintings don't reveal themselves all at once. They are simultaneously immediate and slow, direct and dense with possibilities. The longer you look at them the more they give to you.

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