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Modern Painters

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John Walker

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More successfully than almost any other living artist, John Walker makes palpable in his work the arduous task of the painter, especially when its subject, as so often with Walker, is some of history's more aesthetically unmanageable horrors from World War I. One reason for Walker's continued fascination with the Great War is that his father was wounded in it, and eleven other relatives were killed. Walker's unflinching honesty and pained awareness of the limits of art have a literary parallel in the similar awareness of the great British poet Geoffrey Hill, whose poems about war reveal a writer torn by the wish to remember, and by the wish to remind us that each remembrance may be watered-down when cast in lines of verse. Now as it happens, Walker in the past has oftentimes incorporated painted or inscribed lines of verse into his canvases – not Geoffrey Hill's; Walker's choices instead have been David Jones and Wilfred Owen, two British soldier-poets who were killed in World War I. (He has also borrowed the prose of his wife, the art historian Memory Holloway.) Whenever Walker has used the work of the war poets, it has been not just to help honour those who fought and died in the conflict, though this is certainly part of his motive. He has also helped underscore how bringing in even the most eloquent of voices won't make the nearly impossible translation from specific, historical sorrow into art any less, well, impossible. *Impossible Memory*, the title of a painting from the mid-1990s, would appear to describe not just the perplexing nature of memories, but the absurdity of trying to capture them with brushstrokes on canvas, especially when those memories concern war. To this refreshingly conscience-bound artist, even the most successful canvas must be only a partial victory.

Walker's extraordinary show at Knoedler, which contains some of his finest paintings yet, consists of five war paintings and seven landscapes. The new war paintings have, along with lines from Walker's old collaborators Jones and Owen, lines from a new poet, Rosanna Warren. In both *Remembrance I, for Rosanna Warren*, the picture with words from Warren's poem *Mud (for John Walker)*, and *Remembrance II*, which contains the opening of Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, an icon from Walker's recent past pointedly turns up: the uniformed figure with a sheep's-skull head, standing in part for his father, in part (or so it seems) for the painter himself. After years of having relied in the war paintings on images of hapless men, recalling those of Otto Dix, some of which had been (*à la* Goya) injured in some horrible way, Walker in the mid-1990s began to use this figure that seems to be taking in the horror, but also appears a little removed from the action. In the course of his career, Walker has returned to (obsessed over, is more like it) other iconic figures as well: Goya's *Duchess of Alba*, Aboriginal beads, canoes, forms borrowed from the tribal art of New Guinea, and the mudslide that seems

to represent not just the object in nature, but the painter's paint, as well. In Walker's paintings, the historical past, the art-historical past (in addition to Goya, there have been references to Velázquez and to his own work), the literary past and Walker's own individual past discordantly merge, resulting in dramas of creation that leave the painter unsatisfied enough, evidently, to want to undertake the whole business again, employing the same small universe of subject, forms and aesthetic approach.

The unresolved tensions found in the war paintings also turn up in the landscapes, a genre which, on the surface anyway, wouldn't seem to allow for such radical aesthetic questioning. But in fact the war between abstraction and representation that has always troubled Walker – a war far less dangerous than a real one, obviously, but which none the less can torment someone who appreciates the virtues of both ways of painting – is even more evident in the landscapes. Is the recurring tidal pool, which functions in these new landscapes the same way the repeated and transfigured Alba form did in paintings past, abstract or representational? Are the images in the lower right-hand corner of *Remembrance II* letters or abstract shapes? And hovering behind these unanswerable questions is Walker's own. The tidal pool that is transformed into a palette in *Fading Storm, Outgoing Tide* also suggests the painter's own attendant, dissatisfied consciousness as much as it does the area in Maine that was the painting's official source in nature. The war paintings contain these self-referential traces as well,

John Walker, *Fading Storm, Outgoing Tide*, 2000, oil on canvas, 213.4 × 167.6 cm

some explicit, some not: a figure that seems to be Walker at his easel emerges in *Remembrance II*, and the figure with the sheep's-skull head who, much like the painter himself, seems to stand apart, taking everything in.

Also serving to remind us of this ever-present unease is Walker's technique. The thickly-applied paint, the repainted surfaces, the expressive brushstrokes, and (my favourite) the smudging of figures and words, all seem further evidence of an artist in the throes of a fine aesthetic disquiet. Whenever one discerns in these paintings moments of formal elegance or grace, and there are a few, they should also be read in the context of their harder-to-like opposites. This battle too, of course, needs to be understood in light of the other dialectics at work in Walker's artistic universe, a dialectics involving all those untenable contraries of landscape and war, abstraction and representation, impersonal history and private, internal history. Judging from the evidence of Walker's long and fruitful career, these conflicts may never be resolved.

In her poem for John Walker, Rosanna Warren writes: 'The painter comes / too late', and 'three hundred dead: a sum: / a song'. Walker's understanding of the complexity of experience derives in part from his being, as Warren suggests in the first part of the quotation, an artistic latecomer, someone who has arrived at the point in our culture when every possible feeling has been explored by painters painting in every conceivable way. The second part of the quotation – 'three hundred dead: a sum: /a song' – goes, of course, to the heart of the thing that has exasperated responsible artists like Geoffrey Hill and John Walker: the likelihood that even the most conscientious artist or writer, taking human calamity as their subject, could end up turning it into little more than 'a sum: / a song'. That the art that results from this self-interrogation and self-doubt remains worthy of our closest attention is a matter for rejoicing.

'John Walker: Time and Tides', until 3 March, Knoedler & Co., New York.

John Walker, *Remembrance II*, 2000, oil on canvas, 200.7 × 467.4 cm