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

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

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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

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theories.

If one cannot sense the quality and originality of Walker's art through the brilliant expressiveness of his paint-handling, then one must approach it intellectually, with an acute awareness of what the modernist "dialogue" is all about.

And yet that strikes me as an artificial and secondhand method of approaching his art. Words can only go so far - and that is particularly true in the case of Walker. It does little good, after all, to refer to the masterly fashion in which he engaged Cubist and Abstract-Expressionist ideas and brought them into the 1980s. Or to point out how shrewdly he appropriated certain themes and devices from Velazquez, Goya, and Manet, and translated them into startlingly effective and apparently "abstract" contemporary images. That's all very interesting, but does little, in itself, to communicate what Walker's art is ultimately all about.

No, his paintings are too actual, stark, and demanding, too overwhelmingly physical, to be so neatly disposed of and comprehended through verbal explanations. They must be experienced in all their physical actuality as controlled painterly explosions, as wonderfully tactile and coloristic events. For all their art-historical importance, they are, first and foremost, transmitters of feeling.

As such, they speak directly and effectively to our sensibilities through size (many are large, a few are huge), boldness of execution, a rich and sensuous painterliness, and sumptuous color. In addition, some also achieve a kind of somber elegance of the sort normally associated with the paintings of Motherwell and Braque.

Echoes of both artists - and a few others - can be found in Walker's paintings, but in a thoroughly assimilated and personalized manner. Even his occasional use of words, while vaguely reminiscent of the way Braque and Motherwell incorporated words into their paintings, is highly individual. He may use words structurally, to give gestural emphasis or to create formal ambiguities, but he also uses them to convey very specific messages to the viewer, and to give added resonances and meanings to his work.

Such verbal devices, however, are relatively rare in his work. He is much more likely to make his point by heightening the tensions between the stark physicality of paint and its ability to evoke real space and imaginary objects. By defining his paintings as both things unto themselves and arenas for reality - and by making that duality the real subject of his art - Walker presents us with a possible alternative to painting's current split into the two camps of "abstract" and "representational" art. In his world, painting is neither completely one nor the other, but a dynamic synthesis of the two at the point where each begins to resemble the other.

At least, that's my reading of his work. In a time when most of our major talents are going further toward one painterly extreme or another, Walker is concentrating on the center. He is trying to resolve the contradictions - apparent

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and real - that exist in painting today, and to offset the splintering that has overtaken painting in this century. In this, he has chosen an overwhelmingly difficult task, and he may not altogether succeed. But it's a measure of his talent and commitment that he appears capable of accomplishing it.

Walker is a big talent and a major voice - but not an easy artist to understand. This he shares with the early Clyfford Still and the de Kooning of the 1950s - to say nothing of Cezanne in his time.

And yet that's understandable, considering all he wants to do, and the wide range of ideas and realities he wants painting to once again encompass. There are few enough painters today willing to tackle so much, and even fewer who have the talent, intelligence, and creative intuition to do so. That Walker has all these qualities is very clearly indicated in this show.

At M. Knoedler & Co. through April 21.

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