Exuberance, Awe and Panic

CLIVE JOINSON

Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons

NICHOLAS SEROTA (ED.)

Tate Publishing 2008 £35.99 $55.00
272 pp. Fully illustrated
ISBN 1-85437-787-6
UK dist. Tate Publishingwww.tate.org.uk/shop

On the eve of Cy Twombly's eightieth birthday, Tate Modern announced that it intended to bring together, for the first time, two of the artist's great painting series from the 1990s as part of a major exhibition of work, which opened on 19 June 2008. Comprising two sets of four enormous canvases, Tate united *The Four Seasons* 1994–5 from their own collection and *The Four Seasons* 1993–4 from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, their subject being the annual cycle of spring, summer, autumn and winter. Twombly began work on them in 1991 and painted both sets in his studios in the Italian towns of Bessano and Gaeta. Evoking the natural rhythms of death and rebirth often found in classical culture, the artist used a palette of colours largely inspired by the brilliant Mediterranean light. Both show and catalogue are welcome events – it has been more than 20 years since the last major retrospective of Twombly's work travelled across Europe (after London, this show travelled to the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome, where it will be from 4 March to 24 May 2009), and 15 years since his show at MoMA in New York, curated by the late Kirk Varnedoe, who wrote a catalogue introduction positioning Twombly as something of an artistic outcast.

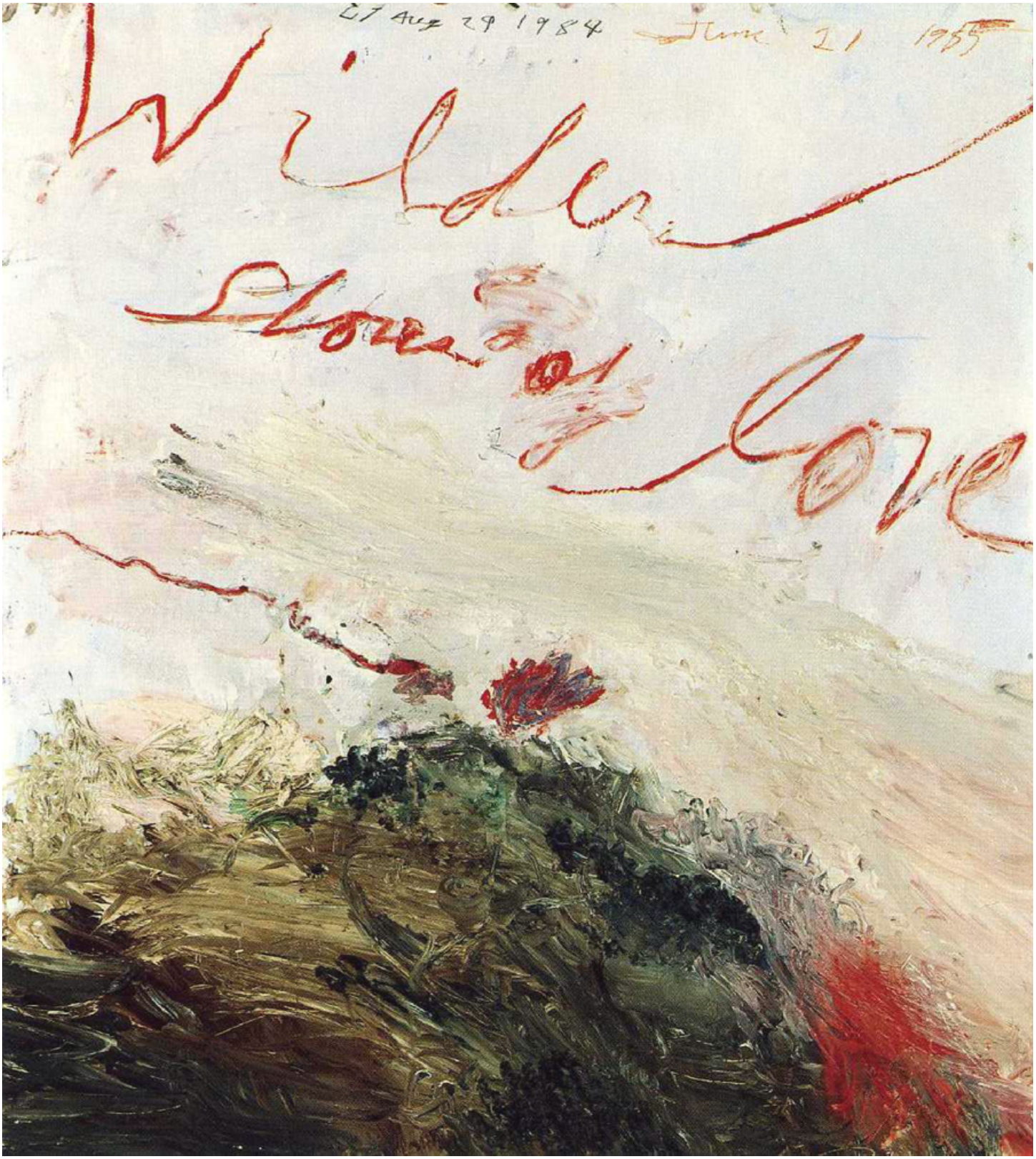
For the Tate catalogue, Richard Shiff, a professor of Art History at the University of Texas, has written an essay that eschews any overly simple reading of Twombly's art. For Shiff, Twombly's is an art that only grudgingly yields to the 'conventional modes of exegesis; biographical details, selective comparisons and an established history of Modernist art', these limiting, for Shiff, the interpretative vagaries that are called for in any interpretation of Twombly's work. Shiff's encounter with Twombly's art begins with an identification of a seemingly insignificant pictorial device found in the painting *Untitled*, from 1988. A smear of green paint on the field of the painting is in fact a pea-pod, a device Twombly had long interpreted as a sign of good luck, after originally purchasing a silver charm pea-pod whilst on his travels in Morocco. It somehow kept finding its way into his paintings, and drawings, as with *Sketch for Tiznit*, from 1953. This tiny pea-pod charm suggested itself to Shiff as an expression of tyché, meaning luck or chance, and the name given to the personification of chance in classical Hellenistic thought. Shiff employs this trope as a catalyst, one that sparks a mode of thought that weaves its way through the warp and weft of his essay, making for challenging and inventive evaluations of Twombly's art – psychoanalytic, poetic and philosophic.

Artist Tacita Dean offers a very different response, a panegyric to Twombly's art, a reverie praising his art whilst looking back to her travels in Greece as a student. A mixed feeling of 'exuberance and awe' came upon Dean whilst walking in the landscapes around Delphi, a feeling that she later learned is sometimes associated with the attendance of the mythical god Pan, the half-goat god of nature, embodying his spirit, his manic, frenzied presence, which can inspire fear and to which he gave his name: 'panic'. The Ancient Greeks perceived panic in nature because they saw Pan there – the ubiquitous, roaming god, a personification of nature. There is, as Dean says, a lot of Pan in Twombly, his art being saturated in the myths and literature of the Mediterranean. In Twombly's *Pan*, from 1975, PAN is spelt out in a smudged scrawl of pencilled capitals, with the word (PANIC) written, smaller and in parentheses, underneath. For Dean, Pan is in this smear, this encounter; *Pan* sparks her initial connection with Twombly's art.

Nicholas Cullinen has contributed no fewer that 13 short, scholarly essays to the catalogue. As an ensemble they represent a complex and interlocking interpretation of Twombly's art. Each essay begins with a quote or poem that introduces the essay's theme. The opening piece begins with a quote from Jackson Pollock, of whom Twombly was a protegé: 'And what is it that you do?', a quizzical Pollock enquires of the young artist, a question asked not once, but four times, in their meetings during 1956. Yet Twombly, Cullinen tells us, developed his own artistic path from the art of a 'floundering Pollock', Twombly creating lines that were as easily erased as traced, 'making a virtue out of stasis, inaction and refusal', and thus refuting the notion of 'the belligerence of Abstract Expressionism'. Twombly's early art is, according to Cullinen, a pre-emptive reposte, *avant la lettre*, to Pollock's question, 'And what is it that you do?' Cullinen's dozen other essays use various approaches to unearth new aspects of Twombly's *oeuvre*.

During September and December 2007, Nicholas Serota, tape recorder in hand, visited Twombly at his home in Via Monserrato, Rome, and there recorded two conversations with the artist. 'History behind the thought' is the result of this personal encounter. Twombly was born in Lexington, Virginia in 1928, and studied at Boston, and New York. He met Robert Rauschenberg at the Art Students' League in New York in 1950 and later attended that hot-bed of the American post-war avant-garde, Black Mountain College in North Carolina, which fuelled his interest in the calligraphic and automatic writing technique of the Surrealists. Twombly combined this with the expressive gestures of Jackson Pollock to create his highly recognisable graphic style. During the mid 1950s he shared a studio with, and worked alongside, Rauschenberg in Manhattan. Twombly's move to Italy in 1957 coincided with a shift away from Abstract Expressionism to a mature style inspired by poetry, mythology, the classics and European history and literature. In this rare interview, the frank and revealing way in which Twombly discusses his life and work makes it an important document that contributes a real understanding of the trajectory of his art.

Clearly, the Tate catalogue has a number of strengths. The depth and quality of the essays by Richard Shiff and Nicholas Cullinen are complemented by the more informal, intimate response to Twombly's art by artist Tacita Dean. Twombly, in granting Serota an interview, enables the reader to gain a unique insight into the central mystery of his art, while Cullinen's expansive chronology provides a context for all this material. You also get a physical experience of Twombly's art because, apart



CyTwombly, *Wilder Shores of Love (Bassano in Teverina)* (1985). CyTwombly Collection © Cy Twombly. From *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons* by Nicholas Serota (Ed.)

from the excellent quality of the printing, many of the artworks are reproduced as details, and in these plates the hand of the artist, it seems, is ever present. In some of these drawings and paintings you can almost feel and hear the scratch and velvet stroke of a hard or soft pencil on paper, and sense the bloom and buzzing of nature, its explosion and suffusion of colour. Collectively this makes for a sort of kaleidoscope of relations between the various aspects of Twombly's art, in which artist, writer and reader all play a part. Rather than offering us narratives that are fully present and intact, this montage tends to mirror the nature of Twombly's own art: an incomplete archive of impressions on to which we can project our own experience. As a curatorial strategy this is wholly in accord with the fragmentary traces of Twombly's own, often elusive, artistic practice.

CLIVE JOINSON
Art critic