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Cy Twombly's *Solar Barge of Sestrosis*: Human Life is Simpler Than It Seems



Cy Twombly, *Solar Barge of Sestrosis*, 1985-88. Acrylic, wax crayon, and graphite on paper, 58 3/4 x 51 3/4 inches (149.2 x 131.4 cm). Credit © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

Featured in the exhibition titled *Beautiful, Vivid, Self-contained* at the Hill Art Foundation, *Solar Barge of Sestrosis* is an abstract piece drawn by Cy Twombly. The simplicity of this piece may leave a viewer questioning the meaning, but once that is passed, various observations can lead to a good interpretation. Twombly's skilled use of mark-making, repetition, and smudging in *Solar Barge of Sestrosis* illustrates the idea of recurring events in human life and the cycle's insignificance as it ends.

There are many layers to looking at *Solar Barge of Sestrosis* like the tallies, smudging, and presentation. The general observations are the scale which allows you to focus on a specific area without it being too overwhelming, the gold frame complimenting the softer tone of white of the paper, and the

contrast of the piece being placed around much smaller paintings. There were many directions the display could have gone, but these seem like simpler choices. The negative space is the blank area surrounding the subject. The option to keep this the brightest and original color of the canvas is interesting because that brings attention to itself as well. Next is the smudged colors on the bottom half of the canvas. Various colors are used and there are more bumps to make it textured. It is more consistent than streaky and has a gray-blue tone. Above the smudge are orange tally-looking marks. It creates a sense of confusion around the placement and its purpose of presence all while guiding the eyes down to the other similar marks. How they are presented is strict, like there is one way they must look, and with a desire to keep it consistent. Lastly, the words which are not fully legible bring the thoughts on what it adds, and the fingerprints show imperfections.

Twombly's interesting style was inspired by many movements and artists like Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, and Jackson Pollock.¹ Born in Virginia, Twombly was an American artist that had a very unique style of gestural scribbles and marks that are connected and inspired by mythology, history, and literature. Most drawn pieces portray the death of heroes to humanify them more. Various of Twombly's pieces follow a cycle and story whether it is concerning each other or parts of the work.² Twombly seems to take a drastic approach to his drawing, vaguely mapping scenes through symbols as they are not very clear. Solare *Barge of Sestrosis* specifically, is based on the Sun God, "Ra's journey upon Atet symbolized the god's growth, decline, death, and resurrection."³ The tallies are the boats that Atet is using to provide light which also explains the brightness of the background. The way he drew this scene allowed him to affect generations to come and influence many other artists.⁴

¹ 1. The Art Story Contributors, "Cy Twombly Paintings, Bio, Ideas," The Art Story, 2014, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/twombly-cy/#:~:text=Yet%20although%20his%20continuous%20loops,does%20not%20create%20specific%20words>.

²1. Exhibit-E.com, "Biography," Biography - Cy Twombly Foundation, accessed July 25, 2023, <http://www.cytwombly.org/biography>.

³1. "Solar Barge of Sesostris," Cy Twombly (1928-2011), accessed July 25, 2023, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6283803>.

⁴1. Roberta Smith, "An Artist of Selective Abandon," The New York Times, July 6, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/07/arts/design/cy-twombly-an-art-who-emphasized-mark-making.html#:~:text=Ena%2FAssociated%20Press-,Mr.,difference%20between%20his%20two%20friends>.

The main factors of *Solar Barge of Sestrosis* are its mark-making, repetition, and smudging. Minimalism strips the importance of human life saying it is all about one thing and the scale of life does not matter. The tally marks are similar in style: strict, jagged, and drawn with frustration. The quality of life then diminishes like the style changes and becomes a blur taking away from human individuality. However, it does in the sense of reproduction, considering that is how the world thrives. Next, the repetition in the tallies represents the pattern of a human's purpose and how it is presented all over. This depicts how much of a routine the components of human life are and how it is done all over, consecutively, and simultaneously. The main theme is how said acts do not have meaning to them anymore. The normalization makes it an everyday occurrence which can relate to the smudging of the piece. The seamless fading into the background's texture highlights the recurrence and consequence of actions. The width is an indicator of how much has been affected and reinforces a similar idea to 'working till death' because it is not deemed important. The theme of cycles is constant in Twombly's work.

Although there are no specific details of how Twombly created the *Solar Barge of Sestrosis*, it is easy to think about his process. According to *The New York Times*, he makes "direct old-fashioned mark making, except that his feverish scribbles and calligraphic scrawls made that process seem new and electric."⁵ This is his unique style of art which he was influenced by. When looking closer, you can see circles that look like fingerprints. This gives the drawing a carefree atmosphere by allowing it to flow but also be a purposeful mistake that can alter the idea of this cycle. Maybe something that could've been avoided to make it better. Elsewhere, Twombly writes his name and title that are not easily noticeable. Why are they in the middle and not the side so it does not disrupt the drawing? It was an interesting

⁵ IBID

placement yet Twombly does it a lot, “sketching unidentifiable doodles and splotches or words directly onto the canvas.”⁶

It is impressive how wide the interpretations for something so abstract can be. It is refreshing to branch out and focus on a new style of art. Twombly did have a different vision: *The Sun Gods' Atets Journey*, in which his choices of tone or placement can be given true meaning. What makes it powerful is the wide array of emotions it emits and allows viewers to feel.

Twombly's *Solar Barge of Sestrosis* can have the interpretation of repetitiveness and the decrease of significance in human life. The skillful approach to drawing an abstract scene with nobody furthered the representation in this art. Looking at such a piece leaves so much to the eye and imagination. There is almost always never a wrong answer to art; there is free will to feel and become one with the art.

⁶1. The Art Story Contributors, “Cy Twombly Paintings, Bio, Ideas,” The Art Story, 2014, <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/twombly-cy/#:~:text=Yet%20although%20his%20continuous%20loops,does%20not%20create%20specific%20words.>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/07/arts/design/cy-twombly-an-art-who-emphasized-mark-making.html#:~:text=Ena%2FAssociated%20Press-,Mr.,difference%20between%20his%20two%20friends>.
5. Cy Twombly, *Solar Barge of Sesostris*, 1985-88. Acrylic, wax crayon, and graphite on paper, 58 3/4 x 51 3/4 inches (149.2 x 131.4 cm). Credit © Cy Twombly Foundation. Photo: Matthew Herrmann