

Cy Twombly's Immobilization of the Natural Cycles

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Cy Twombly, Untitled, 1997. Bronze, 27 1/2 × 14 1/8 × 14 1/8 inches (70 × 36 × 36 cm). Agnes Gund Collection, New York. © Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of the Agnes Gund Collection, New York.

Cy Twombly's "Untitled" 1997 depicts a flower jutting out of a crumpled sphere, balancing on a pyramid like, hollow structure. The material is bronze, splattered with paint and discolored in various areas, creating the impression of rust and the sculpture being worn away. The composition is triangular, allowing the viewer's eye to travel from the large base, up the thin stem, to reach the bulb at the very top. The stem forms a rigid line, countering the organic way in which a flower usually flows. These elements of texture, composition, and line help to establish an industrial recreation of a natural form. An effort is made to immortalize a fleeting beauty and to make permanent an element of the natural world.

Throughout most of Twombly's sculptures, he commonly would coat the entire piece with a wash of white house paint. As Twombly stated himself, "White paint is my marble."¹ This elemental design choice can be seen in *Untitled, 1997*, where white paint splashes areas of the piece. However, what separates this piece from many of his others is the break in the color white and the sight of a darker metal. The white paint, a color Twombly believed was beautiful and "would give unity to sculpture" is minimal, fading into the darker colors of the metal.² This reflects the natural cycle of living flowers and the decline of their beauty. From afar, the flower placed on top resembles that of a common dandelion. However, as one moves closer to the sculpture, the apex begins to resemble less of a flower and more an assembly of assorted nails and drips of paint. One sees the cycles unfold as they move closer to the flower. The flower's beauty is most prominent from far away and then loses this beauty as one moves closer.

Edwin Parker Twombly was born in Lexington, Virginia, on April 25th to parents Mary Velma Richardson and Edwin Parker Twombly Sr. His father was a professional baseball player, which earned young Twombly the nickname Cy after player Cylone Young. Twombly was interested in the arts from a young age. He would attend lectures in High School and later attend art school, consistently focused on European art. He is known best for his paintings, characterized by repeating loops. However, sculpting remained a parallel area of interest throughout his career. Twombly was heavily inspired by Greco-Roman art, a likely result from spending the majority of his life in Rome and had an "admiration for painters of nature"³. His minimalist sculpture designs emphasize form over color. The pieces are entirely white, yet their surfaces are often jagged and rough, therefore classic in design yet contemporary in their messages, as they appear to be defying the concept of perfection.

¹ Francis Mark, *Sculpture Cy Twombly* (Gagosian London: Pureprint Group, 2019), 3

² Francis, *Sculpture*, 3

³ MOMA, *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*

In an interview between Nicola Del Roscio, Nicholas Serota, and Mark Francis, it was revealed that “The poets that [Cy Twombly] admired often dealt with either nature or death.” *Untitled*, 1997, deals with both. His recreation of a flower, cast in bronze, defies death and the natural cycle of nature. On a trip to Russia, Twombly was faced with the disturbing experience of viewing a cluster of bodies hung from trees, seen out the window of his bus. Nicola Del Roscio, who was with him at the time, described that “under the hanging bodies, there were these festive soldiers who were very friendly when they saw [them]. It was such a contrast. And in the barrel of the gun, they had—a rose. It was supring, repulsive, and astonishing.”⁴ Following this, Del Roscio shares he “strongly believes that there are [Twombly] sculptures in particular inspired by that trip.” *Untitled* reflects how he transformed experiences into art, in this case depicting a coexistence of death and beauty, a gun and a rose, or metal and a flower.

Twombly’s *Sculpture* is a recreation made in an effort to immobilize beauty. It captures the changing of seasons and the cycles in nature and death: two ideas Twombly was drawn to. A subtle warning is made. The piece is chaotic and harsh, far from what a natural flower would look like. The natural subject is juxtaposed with the very unnatural materials, creating the unsettling effect of a purposeful attempt at a recreation of beauty. Therefore, it can be surmised that the piece represents the attempted correction of anthropogenic destruction on nature, and how recreations don’t measure up to the actual matter that was destroyed. It urges the viewer to preserve our environment as it is now, as future efforts of mitigation will never make up for what was lost; human actions are irreversible. To the reader, Twombly imparts: efforts of preservation

⁴ Francis, *Sculpture*, 5

will do little to keep nature's beauty once it reaches the point of no return.

Bibliography

Francis Mark, *Sculpture Cy Twombly* (Gagosian London: Pureprint Group, 2019), 3

MOMA, Cy Twombly: A Retrospective: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/435>