The Poetics of Memory: Cy Twombly's Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings

Justine Marie McCullough
THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF VISUAL ARTS, THEATRE AND DANCE

THE POETICS OF MEMORY:
CY TWOMBLY’S ROSES AND PEONY BLOSSOM PAINTINGS

By
JUSTINE MARIE MCCULLOUGH

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Art History
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2011
The members of the committee approve the thesis of Justine McCullough, defended on April 4, 2011.

Lauren S. Weingarden  
Professor Directing Thesis

Roald Nasgaard  
Committee Member

Adam Jolles  
Committee Member

Approved:

Adam Jolles, Chair, Department of Art History

Sally E. McRorie, Dean, College of Visual Arts, Theatre and Dance

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to acknowledge the members of my thesis committee, Drs. Lauren S. Weingarden, Roald Nasgaard, and Adam Jolles, without all of whom this thesis would not have been possible. I would like to recognize my thesis director, Dr. Lauren Weingarden, whose patience, encouragement, and thorough edits have kept me on track. I am thankful for her enthusiastic guidance of this project, her mentorship throughout my graduate studies, and her continuing support of my academic endeavors.

Thanks are also in order to Dr. Michael Carrasco, for the useful thoughts and suggestions he shared with me as I began my research, and to Drs. Richard Shiff (The University of Texas at Austin) and Véronique Plesch (Colby College) for their bibliographical suggestions.

I am thankful for the generosity of the Penelope E. Mason Bequest, which enabled me to conduct research for this thesis at the Museum Brandhorst (Munich, Germany) and the Cy Twombly Gallery and Menil Collection (Houston, Texas). I would like to thank Eric Wolf, head librarian at the Menil, for his assistance during my research visit.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all of the members of Florida State University’s art history department. I am thankful to the faculty, a group of individuals who have been instrumental in my development as a scholar. I am especially thankful to Dr. Robert Neuman for his consistent support of my graduate studies. I am also grateful to Kathy Braun and to Jean Hudson, each of whom has helped me navigate my course of study throughout the past two years.

Finally, but certainly not least, I would like to acknowledge my parents, David and DeAnn McCullough—my first teachers and ever-unwavering supporters.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ v  
Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. ix  

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................ 1  
CHAPTER ONE: WRITING AND MEMORY .............................................................................................. 11  
CHAPTER TWO: *THE ROSES* .................................................................................................................. 25  
CHAPTER THREE: *PEONY BLOSSOM PAINTINGS* ................................................................................. 41  
CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................................................... 54  
APPENDIX: FIGURES .............................................................................................................................. 56  
BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................................................... 81  
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ....................................................................................................................... 89
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Red and Green Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Red and Yellow Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Yellow Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Blue Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Blue Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. (Detail) Cy Twombly, <em>Untitled (Magenta Roses)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.). ................. 63

Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.). .................... 63

Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.). .................... 63

Gagosian Gallery, Britannia Street, London ........................................ 64

Acrylic, wax crayon, and pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 3/16 x 217 5/16 in.).
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Marron, New York ................. 64

23. (Detail) Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007 .......... 65

24. (Detail) Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007 .......... 65


Acrylic, wax crayon, colored pencil on wood. Museum Brandhorst, Munich.
Author’s photo ................................................................. 66

27. (Detail) Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2006-07 .......... 66

Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in.).
The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica .......................................... 67

29. (Detail) Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007 ............ 67

30. Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon,
pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in.). Private collection .......... 68

on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in.).
Private collection, Atherton, California ............................................ 68

32. Cy Twombly, *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon,
pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in.). Private collection .......... 69
Acrylic, pencil on canvas. 307 x 151 cm (121 x 59 ¾ in.).
Collection of Maja Hoffmann. 69

Acrylic, pencil on canvas. 300 x 380 cm (118 x 149 ½ in.).
Collection of Maja Hoffmann. 69

Acrylic, pencil on canvas. 307 x 151 cm (121 x 59 ¾ in.).
Collection of Frank III and Jill Fertitta. 70

Acrylic, pencil on canvas. 300 x 380 cm (118 x 149 ½ in.).
Collection of Frank III and Jill Fertitta. 70

Acrylic, pencil on wood in artist’s frame. 266 x 201 cm (104 ¾ x 79 in.).
Private collection. 70

Acrylic, pencil on wood in artist’s frame. 266 x 201 cm (104 ¾ x 79 in.).
Private collection. 70

From a series of five. Oil-based house paint, oil paint, wax crayon on canvas mounted on wood panel. 245 ½ x 160 ½ cm (96 5/8 x 63 3/16 in.).
Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston. 71

Industrial paint, colored and lead pencil, crayon, pastel on canvas.
174 x 190 cm (68 ½ x 74 ¾ in.). Marx collection, Berlin. 71

Industrial paint, colored and lead pencil, pastel on canvas. 191 x 241 cm (75 ¼ x 94 7/8 in.). Museum of Modern Art, New York. 72

Oil, pencil, crayon on canvas. 190.5 x 200 cm (75 x 78 ¾ in.).
Museum of Modern Art, New York. 72

Chalk, crayon, pencil on canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich.
Author’s photo. 73

44. Detail: Cy Twombly, *Nini’s Painting*, 1971. 73
45. Funerary monument of Lucius Munatius Plancus.
Monte Orlando, Gaeta, Italy..............................................................74

46. (Detail) Inscription of funerary monument of Lucius Munatius Plancus...........74

47. Inscription at Turk’s Grotto. Monte Orlando, Gaeta, Italy........................74

Wood, synthetic resin paint, pencil, synthetic resin putty.
Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.......................................75

49. (Detail) Cy Twombly, "Untitled (In Memory of Álvaro de Campos), 2002......75

Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.......................................76

Acrylic on canvas. 317.5 x 421.6 cm (125 x 166 in.).
Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.......................................76

52. Photograph of paintbrushes attached to long poles in Twombly’s studio in Gaeta,
Italy, summer 2008. Photo courtesy of Xavier Salomon, reprinted in Cullinan and
Serota........................................................................................................77

Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston...............................................................77

54. Folding Screen, c. 1800-1820.
Rimpa School, Edo Period. 170 x 30 cm (66.9 x 145.7 in.)...........................78

55. Cy Twombly, "Note III, from the series III Notes from Salalah, 2005-07.
Acrylic on wood panel. 243.8 x 365.8 cm (96 x 144 in.). Private collection....78

56. Cy Twombly, "Untitled (Blackboard Paintings), 1966-72.
Oil based house paint, wax crayon, graphite on canvas.
254 2/3 x 434 1/3 cm (100 ¼ x 171 in.).
Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston...............................................................79

57. Ikeno Taiga, "Chuang-tzu and the Butterfly............................................79

Collection Lambert, Avignon, France......................................................80
ABSTRACT

My thesis seeks to examine three painting cycles by Cy Twombly (b. 1928)—The Roses and Untitled (Roses) of 2008 and Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings) of 2007—as sites of memory. Each series consists of large-scale wood panels upon which painted flower forms co-exist with handwritten lines of poetry appropriated from stanzas penned by various Western poets as well as Japanese haikus. Scholarship dedicated to these paintings mostly ignores the textual components, which, as I argue, contain significant parallels to the painted elements. The poems and haikus provide additional layers of meaning to each work, compelling viewers to make multiple connections and simultaneous associations in a manner that is similar to the construction of memory.

I begin by surveying Twombly’s writing practice and presenting theories that validate how forms of writing construct cultural memory. Twombly has marked his canvases with written symbols since the early 1950s, but in later years, as evidenced by Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings, the artist’s word evocations have become more cohesive, and now include entire lines of handwritten poetry. Next I utilize secondary literary sources to scrutinize the poems and haikus in order to suggest a more nuanced understanding of these paintings. Throughout the course of my textual discussion I connect the poetic forms to the layered painted representations. The visual parallels between the words and images, and the spatial dimensions among the two, evoke a shifting sense of meaning in the same way that memory is constructed.
INTRODUCTION

My thesis seeks to examine three painting cycles by Cy Twombly (b. 1928)—*Untitled (Roses)* and *The Roses* of 2008 and *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)* of 2007—as sites of memory. The three series consist of large-scale wood panels upon which painted flowers are juxtaposed with scrawled text appropriated from various poems and haikus. As I argue, the physical (painted) and thematic (poetic) layers coexist to create a complex viewing experience that can best be understood as the construction of memory.

*Untitled (Roses)* and *The Roses* were executed in the same year, although they technically comprise two separate series (Figs. 1-14, 15-21). The inscriptions of *Roses* are from Rainer Maria Rilke’s (1875-1926) collection of poetry of the same title. *Untitled (Roses)* contains poetic excerpts from Rilke, T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), Emily Dickinson (1830-86), Ingeborg Bachmann (1926-73), and contemporary American poet Patricia Waters. Each painting from *Untitled (Roses)* is comprised of a pale peach background upon which four vibrantly-colored flower blossoms coexist with handwritten lines of poetry. One of the compositions consists of painted blossoms of red and green, as well as the following poetic inscription, an excerpt from Eliot’s “Little Gidding”:

And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall
be well
When the tongues of flame
are un-folded
onto the crowned knot
of Fire
and the fire and the Rose
are One (Figs. 1, 2).¹

Inscribed with a yellow wax crayon, the poetic excerpt is positioned upon a large painted rose of red and green. Located second from the left in a horizontal line of four blossoms, this rose is the only one that is inscribed. The flower consists of a translucent red layer that covers, yet still

¹ “Little Gidding” is included as part of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets.*
reveals, a series of green swirled forms beneath. The red and green areas, applied with thin paint, drip down the canvas. This spatial network of form, color, multiple layers, and dripping paint seems to indicate a simultaneous state of blossom and decay, a result of the multiple layers and dripping paint. The inscribed poem provides at least two more layers to the painted rose—a visual layer to the composition, as well as a layer of semantic meaning implied by word symbols.

*Peony Blossom Paintings* include Japanese haiku by Matsuo Bashõ (1644-94) and one of his students, Takarai Kikaku (1661-1707) (Figs. 22-32). One of the panels consists of a vivid light green background upon which a series of five white, dripping forms are positioned horizontally (Fig. 22). Two white forms hover above, visually bordered by the top of the panel. At the far right is a green form that is similar in shape and size to the five white, floating structures. Ostensibly a white peony existed here before being painted over with green.

Beginning at the left side of the canvas, we see a haiku by Bashõ:

```
The white peony
at the moon
one evening
crumbled
and
fell
```

The next haiku, which hovers above the second peony from the left, is also by Bashõ and reads as follows:

```
The peony falls
spilling out
yesterday’s
rain
```

Moving farther to the right of the canvas, the haiku continues with two separate sections of writing (Figs. 23-24):

```
From the heart
Of the Peony
a drunken
bee

The Peony
Quivers
```

Finally, the far right side of the panel contains a haiku by Kikaku (Fig. 25):
Like the *Roses* painting discussed above, the layers of visual and textual representation infuse this painting with multiple points of departure. The title of the series and the floral-inspired haikus identify the otherwise abstract white forms as peonies. Juxtaposed with descriptive poetry, the forms take on further meaning. For example, the dripping forms parallel the phrase “the peony falls” and the notion of descending rain. Furthermore, the blossoms are organized in such a way that recalls the ordered structure of a haiku.\(^2\) Visually and textually, the entire composition contains multiple views and the potential for numerous interpretations.

The red and green *Roses* composition and the green *Peony Blossom Painting*, like the rest of the works in the series, contain spatial networks of form, color, dripping paint, and written inscriptions. The layered qualities of each panel create a palimpsest effect that is heightened by the multitudinous evocations available to viewers. Scholarly treatment of these series has not adequately examined the similarities between the written and painted formal elements, which affect the complexity of viewing these paintings. Rather, scholarship tends to discuss the subject matter of roses and peonies in order to connect the works to flower symbolism and, in the case of *Peony Blossom Paintings*, notions of imperial Japan. In this thesis I scrutinize each painting, arguing that the combination of word and image symbols and layered formal elements force the viewer to make constant connections and associations in much the same way that memory develops. In addition I connect the palimpsest appearance and function of writing in these paintings to inscriptions found on funerary monuments and sculptures by Twombly.

The overarching questions directing my thesis include the following: How does the palimpsest appearance of layered paint and words affect viewing experience? How do these paintings interact with works from the artist’s earlier oeuvre? How might a closer examination of textual inclusion, such as Western poetry and haiku, affect an understanding of Twombly’s paintings? What do the painterly style and vibrant color reveal about the chosen words, and vice

\(^2\) In the third chapter I discuss these visual and textual parallels in more detail.
versa? How does the poetic meter and structure relate to the overall pictorial structure of each composition?

**State of the question**

Written symbols have appeared in Twombly’s work since the 1950s. Juxtaposed with often abstract painted forms, these letters, words, ideograms and pictograms provide points of reference. In later years Twombly’s word evocations have become more cohesive, in the form of lines of handwritten poetry as seen in *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings*. To be sure, the inclusion of poetry is not a new practice for Twombly, but the juxtaposition of descriptive poetry about flowers with painted representations of blossoms has not been discussed in any great detail in the art historical literature, and would benefit from a project of this scope.

These paintings are a continuation of the artist’s long practice of depicting literary, mythological, historical, and artistic culture within his artwork, both textually and visually. The unique feature of *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* is the juxtaposition of relatively recognizable images (flowers) with poems that distinctly cite the botanical varieties depicted. To be sure, Twombly has depicted flower poems in earlier work; *Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair* (1985) contains poetry adjacent to abstract forms we might read as flower forms due to the title of the series (Fig. 39). But unlike *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings*, only two of the five canvases in *Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair* contain the word “rose,” and the inscriptions are significantly more difficult to read. *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* contain a more distinct relationship between words and images, providing a sound departure point for viewer associations. In *Peony Blossom Paintings*, for instance, flower forms are juxtaposed with five separate haiku. One of the haiku passages, which we have seen on the green composition, also exists with the magenta blossoms:

```
AH! The Peonies
For which
Kusunoki
Took off his ARMOUR (Figs. 25, 29).
```

Indicating the peony’s sway over a powerful samurai, the poem is a testament to the supremacy of flowers. But what is more important, I think, is the way that the haikus transmit meaning to these otherwise abstract forms; in short, identifying them as peonies. In this case, the written haikus transmit meaning for the abstract forms—identifying them as peonies—and also function as a cultural referent. Essentially, after reading the haikus and then associating the painted forms
as peonies, it is difficult not to imagine broader associations with Japanese culture. For this reason, I think it is difficult to deny that the word-described peony images provide a starting point for a larger dialogue.

**State of the literature**

Much ink has been spilled on the subject of Twombly’s writing, or, as Simon Schama has dubbed it, “proto-calligraphy.”\(^3\) Although it may be tempting to iconographically link symbols in Twombly’s work to abstract themes, this method cannot address the often disconnected relationship between form and subject in Twombly’s work, particularly in his earlier paintings.\(^4\) A purely iconographical approach, by definition, interprets images as representations of literary themes. In Twombly’s case, such an approach fails to account for non-descriptive gestures and abstract, painterly marks.

Roland Barthes has discussed the oppositional relationship of marks and form in three essays dedicated to Twombly’s work. The earliest, from 1976, defines Twombly’s works as scenes of gestural writing. Barthes draws a connection between Twombly’s gesture and the Zen Buddhist notion of *satori*, a spontaneous awareness or moment of enlightenment: “I think of Twombly’s ‘graphisms’ as so many little *satoris*.\(^5\) Two years later Barthes alludes to the poetics of Twombly’s inscriptions in two separate essays. In “The Wisdom of Art” Barthes connects the *materia prima*, materials such as pencils and paint that connote meaning, to the construction of literary (and thus poetic) style through word structure and sentence arrangement. Twombly’s selection of certain words provides another avenue for Barthes. Titles like *The Italians*, Barthes says, imply subject matter, although it is not physically represented within the painting; therefore, we should not look for the Italians anywhere “except, precisely, in their name.”\(^6\) Thus

---

3 Schama also refers to Twombly’s script as “drawing blind” and “reductively simple yet cumulatively mysterious.” Simon Schama, “Cy Twombly,” in *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*, 15-22 (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2004), 16, 19.


the frustrated viewer finds nothing but “the canvas itself.” What Twombly’s work does produce, however, is an “effect.” In “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper” Barthes explores many of the same themes, and refers to Twombly’s oeuvre as “a work of language,” although the gesture, rather than the product, is of utmost importance.

Two decades later Rosalind Krauss labeled Twombly a graffitist in her book The Optical Unconscious as well as an Artforum article written on the eve of a major Twombly retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. Using adjectives that connote violence, Krauss describes Twombly’s process as defacement rather than creation. I do not accept Krauss’s assertions at face value—Twombly does not, in Krauss’s words, “ravage” and “maul” his canvases, particularly in these recent works. However, I do acknowledge a similarity to graffiti through the act of writing on a flat surface. In 1968 Robert Pincus-Witten described Twombly’s script as “surrogate graffiti,” a script that should be relegated neither to “telephone booth of toilet scrawl” nor “more elevated and esthetic than mere script,” but something in between.

**Methodology**

In identifying Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings as sites of memory, I employ a word and image methodology and theories of the construction of cultural memory. My argument is built on formal analyses of image and text, in which I examine both the painted elements created by Twombly and the poetic structure and evocations set forth by modern poets and writers of haiku. In this case, I utilize literary critics as a guide to interpreting the poetry.

Visual analyses reveal that each composition consists of floral subject matter, physical layers of paint and text, and thematic layers of poetic meaning. I connect this multiplicity to the construction of cultural memory, as set forth by Pierre Nora in “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” Nora distinguishes the realm of history from memory, which he argues

---

7 Ibid., 184.
8 Ibid., 185.
permutates constantly, maintaining a “permanent evolution.”¹³ Unlike history, which merely represents past events, memory bonds humans to “the eternal present.”¹⁴ According to Nora’s definition, memory instills the past with a sense of the present, essentially creating a completely new experience. Nora identifies physical monuments that convey the past and present as “sites of memory.” I connect this definition to *Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings*, which are constructed with multiple layers of paint and written symbols. The concurrent existence of marks and symbols allows the viewer to experience each simultaneously, an experience that parallels how memories appear and coexist in one’s mind. As sites of memory, *Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings* work in three distinctive ways. First, the multiplicity of formal elements, such as layers of paint and writing, allow the viewer to make multiple associations. Second, the paintings engage with culture-specific memory; specifically, the works contain floral subject matter and poems and haikus that convey classical themes and references to Japanese culture. Finally, when considering the thematic elements of the paintings we should consider the experience and memories of the artist. Twombly has included classical themes in his art for a half century, and he has expressed an interest in the culture and object of Japan, which I will discuss further in the final chapter. In this way, the paintings become infused with his own artistic and personal inclinations. In addition to Nora’s discussion, I utilize the work of art historian Véronique Plesch, who links the act and appearance of graffiti writing to the creation of memory. She also demonstrates that writing layered atop previously-inscribed messages creates a more profound and accurate meaning.¹⁵ *Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings* display the phenomenon of cultural memory in their multilayered, palimpsest appearance and the myriad interpretations that may be garnered from each poem.

The word and image methodology I employ follows the models set forth by a number of scholars. The nature of word and image methodology generally accepts that words and images are not independent units; rather, as Leo H. Hoek demonstrates, they signal a discursive relationship in which each entity can be “read” using codes from separate sign systems.¹⁶ As such, the encounter of words and pictorial symbols in *Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings*

¹³ Ibid., 7.
¹⁴ Ibid.
signals a dialogical relationship that is neither simple nor one-dimensional. To identify the relationship between these symbols and how they affect one another, I utilize A. Kibedi Varga’s terms “coexistence,” “interreference,” and “coreference.”\(^\text{17}\) In my discussion of the effect created by the combination of word and image symbols I discuss W.J.T. Mitchell’s conception of “visible language,” which describes an intermingling of sight, sound, image and speech.\(^\text{18}\) According to Mitchell, artists such as Twombly, who investigate sensory interactions, create “‘composite art,’” a combination of words and images that affect the senses concurrently.\(^\text{19}\)

In tandem with my discussions of cultural memory and word and image relations I consider how the active performance of writing implies a memory or experience. Here I will discuss the typographical appearance of the words and return to the notion of graffiti. To be sure, I do not accept at face value Krauss’s linking of Twombly’s script to violent graffiti. Yet I do believe that various technical aspects of graffiti, such as the act of writing on a flat, vertical surface, are at play here. By nature, graffiti is an act of layering, an additional, palimpsest-like inscription that sometimes covers or obscures previous images and words. Twombly’s words function in a similar way, often layering over images and painterly gestures. As I stated before, various levels of gestures and word and pictorial symbols correspond to the simultaneous layers of memory.

To support my contention that *Peony Blossom Paintings* and *Roses* contain both written and visual poetics that together convey a broader meaning, I discuss the work of art historians Ann Gibson and Richard Shiff, each of whom has investigated poetics and the function of writing within Abstract Expressionism. Gibson has convincingly demonstrated that Abstract Expressionism often contains poetic suggestions including symbol, metaphor, icon, oxymoron, and allegory. Her discussion of Robert Motherwell and Stéphane Mallarmé are particularly useful for this project. Mallarmé, the French symbolist and poet, stated that poetry represents not a subject itself, but a produced effect. The same can be true for visual art, as Motherwell maintained that his painting *Mallarmé’s Swan* (1944) produced the same evocations as

\(^{19}\) Ibid. Mitchell discusses William Blake as an artist who investigates sensory interactions.
Mallarmé’s poetics. Shiff identifies an indexical correlation between the artist’s physical movement and the marks on canvas, describing a relationship that is physical and evocative. In his discussion of the performative aspects of Abstract Expressionism, he maintains that the mark-making techniques of the artist produce an indexical representation on canvas. The relationship Shiff describes is important for this discussion of Twombly, whose writing is always handwritten, and, as Barthes reminds us, intrinsically gestural.

**Synopsis of chapters**

In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, my thesis comprises three chapters: Chapter 1: Writing and Memory; Chapter 2: The Roses; Chapter 3: Peony Blossom Paintings.

Chapter 1: Writing and Memory traces Twombly’s inclusion of writing in his paintings since the mid-1950s. I elucidate the artist’s gradual movement from fragmented textual messages in the forms of letters and the occasional word to a more cohesive use of language with poetic verses, as seen in Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings. The consistent layering of writing and pictorial symbols is not unlike the inscriptions and graffiti of ancient funerary monuments, with which I suggest Twombly is familiar.

Chapter 2: The Roses investigates the visual and textual aspects of each Roses painting. I discuss historical and literary symbolism of roses in order to connect the two series to Twombly’s long history of evoking classical themes and to identify potential associations a viewer may create during the viewing experience. Drawing upon critical literary analyses of the poems inscribed on each canvas, I provide a detailed description of text and image relations within each painting. Finally I suggest ways in which the paintings might be perceived as a result of sequential display.

Chapter 3: Peony Blossom Paintings utilizes an approach similar to that of the previous chapter. I discuss how haikus and peonies evoke Japanese history, an association compounded by the fact that Twombly has discussed his own memories of Japan and owns a venerable collection of decorative arts from the country. I identify structural similarities between the poems

---


and paintings, which intensifies the effect of both. Additionally, haiku’s briefness and ambiguity force the viewer to supply alternate images and to make associations, thus heightening the experiential sensations of the larger paintings and providing a parallel to the construction of memory.
CHAPTER ONE
WRITING AND MEMORY

Handwriting has appeared in Twombly’s paintings since the early 1950s. Consistently blurring the boundary between writing and drawing, the artist’s script is sometimes unreadable, yet infused with an artistic elegance, and always provocative. Sometimes the inscriptions are hastily scratched onto bare canvas, and then disappear beneath a splotch of paint only to appear again. Often the forms bear only a trace of resemblance to words, blending with gestural marks that are similar in shape and executed with the same utensil. While it could be argued that any painting emits information through visual signs, such as gestural brushwork, it is Twombly’s writing that provides a crucial layer to his paintings, undoubtedly complicating the surrounding visual images and infusing them with another layer of meaning. The curious aspect of Twombly’s inscriptions is their seemingly straightforward nature—poems about roses, written out more or less legibly on top of painted flowers. But the following questions are far from easy to answer: What does the inscription mean? How do the words function when proximal images are taken into account? How do they affect, and how are they affected by, surrounding images and gestures? Is the inscription merely a caption? Does it exist separately from the surrounding pictorial elements? Perhaps more significantly, is the script able to exist separately from proximal images?

In this chapter I elucidate the connection between inscriptions and the construction of cultural memory in Twombly’s paintings. Whereas the following chapters investigate phenomena specific to the flower paintings, in this chapter I want to look at works from a broader sampling of the artist’s oeuvre in order to establish how inscriptions document an idea or individual, and are capable of producing a host of evocations. I argue that the layered, palimpsest effect of the poetic inscriptions and painted forms of *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* creates a multisensory experience that is commemorative in nature. A similar effect is also transmitted by ancient funerary monuments with text, of which Twombly is undoubtedly aware, and which he channels into some of his recent sculptures. I contend that the sensations emitted by written verse are like graffito inscriptions that encapsulate, and thus commemorate, information that is then transmitted through visual signs. Ultimately we can view Twombly’s writing as a commemorative activity that records, encapsulates, and evokes cultural phenomena and memory.
Origins of writing

Since the early 1950s Twombly’s paintings have included fragments of word symbols, which add an additional layer of meaning to each canvas. In some paintings from his early career, such as Free Wheeler (1955), intersecting lines of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal orientation form the shape of a T, X, or A (Fig. 40). It is impossible to discern, however, whether the supposed symbols result from chance or the artist’s intention. Academy (1955) displays a more deliberate use of language symbols (Fig. 41). The repetition of the expletive “FUCK,” which appears at least three times, indicates that the symbols seen here are undeniably intentional. This canvas contains a complete, and not to mention strongly denotative word, so we must consider the word’s implications for the rest of the composition. As the work is titled Academy, one might wonder if Twombly is making a statement about academic techniques and critics. The notion seems particularly probable following the exhibit of 1953 at Eleanor Ward’s Stable Gallery, which showed Twombly’s work alongside that of Robert Rauschenberg. The show caused a scandal among critics and the public—not a single work was sold, and Ward was forced to remove the visitor’s log due to the overwhelming criticism written in it.\(^\text{22}\) Regardless of the artist’s reason for juxtaposing the written expletive and the title, the written word and the title affect one another as well as subsequent interpretations of the painting.

The negatively-received exhibition at the Stable Gallery provides an opportunity to view Twombly’s early work within the context of second-generation Abstract Expressionism, and, in particular, alongside the output of Rauschenberg. Certainly the artistic employment of writing and the amalgamation of various symbols are not unique to Twombly. For instance, one is reminded of Rauschenberg’s combines, which contain text as well as numerous, and sometimes disparate, objects. Here I want to acknowledge the artistic arena in which Twombly was working in the early 1950s. In this thesis, however, I want to make clear that I am interested in how Twombly’s physical layering of painted forms and inscriptions, in addition to the meaning of textual references, affects our reading of his late flower paintings.

Following Twombly’s earliest forms of writing, as seen in Free Wheeler and Academy, the artist’s canvases increasingly include letters, words, ideograms and pictograms that provide points of reference, albeit fragmented. For instance, Leda and the Swan (1962) contains just a few figural elements—a window-shaped drawing situated at the top right of the canvas, and

haphazard hearts located throughout the composition (Fig. 42). The rest of the abstract canvas consists of a diamond-shaped composition of dark violet and black gestures, punctuated by red crayon and orange paint. On the right side, bold black scrawls seem to point to the bottom of the canvas, where large (apparently graphite) letters spell, “Leda + the SWAN,” a reference to the Greek myth in which Zeus seduced Leda after transforming himself into a swan. In *Leda and the Swan* the writing functions as a reference, producing an effect rather than a tangible signification, a phenomenon Roland Barthes has dubbed “nominalist glory.” Other scholars, such as curator Heiner Bastian and critic Roberta Smith, would argue that the words give meaning to the surrounding elements that are otherwise abstract.

Paintings exhibiting shorthand that blends into the surrounding abstract, gestural marks, similar to *Free Wheeler*, continue to appear into the 1970s. These works, such as *Nini’s Painting* (1971), complicate the relationship between writing, drawing and painting (Fig. 43). In the midst of marks of pastel, in various earth tones, appears the trace of the artist’s signature, “Cy,” in grayish-blue on the far left side of the painting (Fig. 44). Words and gesture are difficult to distinguish, implying, as art historian Richard Leeman points out in his monograph on Twombly, that the transitiveness of handwritten symbols may not be separated from the intransitive nature of gestural qualities. Leeman differentiates between “a pure, nondelineating orthography, a trace of a mark acting on the surface where it is placed or on the plan that it helps to constitute” (intransitive sign) and “the sign of something,” which can include a pictogram or an ideogram (transitive sign). In terms of Leeman’s discussion we can consider *Free Wheeler* and *Nini’s Painting* as examples of the intransitive, as both contain abstract, gestural marks. Paintings like *Leda and the Swan* fall under the transitive category, as evidenced by recognizable signs such as heart shapes.

---

26 Ibid. Leeman’s differentiation is extracted from Jean Laude’s remarks on the art of Paul Klee. See Leeman, *Monograph*, 309, endnote 3.
27 Leeman’s discussion suggests that the mark defines its surface. Furthermore, the gesture is an independent event, and thus unchangeable. Here it is important to note semiological thinking, which indicates that signs are subject to change. In effect, they are, as Leeman’s terms indicate, “transient.” See Barthes, “Myth Today,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 109-59.
Graffiti evocations

As the first scholar to discuss Twombly’s handwriting in detail, Robert Pincus-Witten uses the word “graffiti” to describe Twombly’s inscriptions from the 1950s and 1960s, thus positioning the artist’s practice as a technique more similar to writing than painting. Pincus-Witten states that the artist used writing as a surrogate practice in response to the technique of painting. Specifically, he understands Twombly’s use of writing as an attempt to avoid academic techniques, an act “of erasing the Baroque culmination of the painting of the early 1960’s.”

Alfred Barr, art historian and first director of the Museum of Modern Art, is thought to have expressed a more alarmed response: “[Twombly] wants to destroy painting!”

A few decades later art historian Kirk Varnedoe, writing in 1994 on the occasion of the first Twombly retrospective in America, stated, “Twombly all but abandoned the paintbrush in order to elide—with the pencil point, a broader graphite-rubbing stroke, and wax crayon—any remaining distinction between painting and drawing.”

As the critical and art historical responses indicate, Twombly’s early writing practice embraced inscribing rather than a painterly technique. In terms of writing, Pincus-Witten describes Twombly’s inscriptions as “more elevated and esthetic than mere script,” and “a special category of calligraphy.” Furthermore, he suggests that viewing these marks as artistic production rather than mere shorthand requires that we label it “surrogate graffiti.” Evidently mindful of the contemporary negative associations linked to the term “graffiti,” however, Pincus-Witten states that we should view Twombly’s script as “writing ‘pure and simple.’”

Whereas Pincus-Witten only cautiously suggests a connection to graffiti, Rosalind Krauss pejoratively utilizes the identification as part of her criticism of Twombly’s writing on canvas.

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 See Rosalind Krauss, “Cy was Here; Cy’s Up,” Artforum 33:1 (September, 1994): 118; and The Optical Unconscious (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993).
Krauss opposes the stances taken by curator Heiner Bastian and critic Roberta Smith, who discuss Twombly’s canvases using an iconographical approach. According to Krauss, the two scholars focus too narrowly on analogy in an attempt to explain every mark. For Krauss, who prizes the canvas as a surface for traditional painting, 1955 was the year that Twombly “stopped making paintings with the expressionist’s loaded brush and had started using the sharp points of pencils to scar and maul and ravage the creamy stuccoed surface of his canvases instead.”

To contextualize Krauss’s commentary, we must recall that the year 1955 includes *Free Wheeler* and *Academy*, which I have discussed above (Figs. 39-40). Using adjectives that connote violence, Krauss describes Twombly’s process, which starts with these paintings, as defacement rather than creation. Furthermore, she contends that the graffiti marks are “always an invasion of a space that is not the marker’s own.”

Two questions arise: first, do we take Krauss’s statements at face value, and second, if Pincus-Witten is cautious to christen the marks as graffiti, then why does he use the term in the first place? To answer this question, perhaps we can consider Twombly’s thoughts on the matter: the artist denies that his art contains any parallels to graffiti. In a 2008 interview, Tate director Nicholas Serota asked Twombly, “So does it irritate you when people talk about graffiti in relation to your work?” Twombly replied, “Yeah, I don’t think of graffiti and I don’t think of toilets…. it doesn’t have that rough crudeness about it.” Despite this aversion to graffiti, in the same interview Twombly stated, “I like the idea of scratching and biting into the canvas.” It must be noted that the activities of scratching and biting, or otherwise “mauling” (to use Krauss’s term) indicates a form of defacement that is connected to graffiti.

---

37 Krauss, “Cy was Here; Cy’s Up,” 118. It is important to note here that Krauss writes on the eve of the major Twombly retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1994. The show mostly included works in which writing is disguised by gestural marking; furthermore, Krauss focuses on works from Twombly’s earlier career, which, as I demonstrate, are fundamentally more involved with drawing than those of the later paintings.
In another attempt to reconcile the discrepancies between the arguments of Pincus-Witten and Krauss and determine how Twombly’s inscriptions function in terms of graffiti, I think it is most useful to consider the most basic definition of the term. Graffiti is defined as marks written on a surface that originally was not meant to include it. That said, I do not believe Twombly’s graphisms can be relegated to graffiti in the accepted sense, particularly when considering the work of earlier modern artists, such as George Grosz, whose work also includes writing and graffiti marks.\footnote{George Grosz comes to mind with his observance of Berlin public toilets as his “drawing academy.” There is also Jean Dubuffet and Brassai, who used graffiti marks as both signifiers of the primitive and the end of a traditional process of mark-making in the 1940s. See Buchloh, “Ego in Arcadia,” 26. We might also consider the work of Lucio Fontana, which includes canvases ripped by a sharp utensil, a mark that literally destroys the canvas.} I do think, however, that certain aspects of graffiti are at stake here, particularly when considering Barthes’s definition of graffiti in regard to Twombly’s paintings. According to Barthes the term has less to do with the inscription than the surface upon which it is written. His explanation is worthy of quoting at length here:

We know that what constitutes graffiti is in fact neither the inscription nor its message but the wall, the background, the surface (the desktop); it is because the background exists fully, as an object which has already \textit{lived}, that such writing always comes to it as an enigmatic surplus: what is in \textit{excess}, supernumerary, out of place—that is what disturbs the order of things; or again: it is insofar as the background is not clean that it is unsuitable to thought (contrary to the philosopher’s blank sheet of paper) and therefore very suitable to everything that remains (art, indolence, pulsion, sensuality, irony, taste: everything the intellect can experience as so many aesthetic catastrophes).\footnote{Barthes, “Cy Twombly: Works on Paper,” 167.}

For Barthes, it is clear that the essence of graffiti exists in signs and marks layered upon a background; significantly, the background remains separate from the top layers, although the juxtaposition of symbol and surface causes them to interact with and affect one another. By nature, graffiti is an act of layering, which constitutes an additional, palimpsest-like inscription on top of a surface and sometimes covers or obscures previous images and words. Viewing all of the layers simultaneously leads to multiple evocations and sensations, or, to quote Barthes, “everything the intellect can experience.”\footnote{Ibid.} Technical aspects of graffiti, such as the act of writing on a flat surface, and superimposing images upon layers of paint and materials that differ from the writing tool certainly appear in \textit{Roses} and \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings}, the subjects of the next two chapters. In one panel from \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings}, graphite and pastel-inscribed
haiku and white splotches of paint cover a light green background. In some places the written words superimpose the white areas (Figs. 23-25). *Roses* dynamically display this relationship, with their networks of swirling painted forms often containing inscriptions as a top layer (Fig. 2). Yet sometimes the painted forms cover painted words, indicating a further complication of defining writing and painting (Fig. 14).

Despite its negative connotations, graffiti may be less reprehensible than Krauss and even Pincus-Witten argue. Art historian Véronique Plesch has convincingly argued that graffiti (in the traditional sense, that is, illicit symbols inscribed on a surface that was not intended to display such signs) can be read as an important addition to the surfaces it covers.\(^43\) In multiple studies of the meaning of medieval graffiti at religious sites, Plesch establishes that graffiti-like marks are not always detrimental to the surface upon which they are inscribed. Instead, Plesch demonstrates that graffiti physically inscribes objects with cultural and geographic sentiments that become the focus of memory. From an inscription, she states, we can garner valuable information from the inscriber as well as the cultural arena in which he or she lived, a result of the presence of the marks and the story they tell.\(^44\) Likewise, social anthropologist Paul Connerton demonstrates that the practice of inscribing not only records, but also encapsulates information. Writing’s impact, furthermore, depends on its fixed messages.\(^45\) To apply Plesch’s discussion to Twombly’s work, look no further than the “Gaeta” inscriptions accompanying the poetic inscriptions on the *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings*. On each panel, usually in close proximity to the artist’s initials, is a series of letters that spell out “Gaeta,” the location in Italy where the paintings were executed. Gaeta, a Mediterranean town on the eastern coast of Italy, has become a home for Twombly. The artist has lived and kept a studio there since the 1950s, and each of the *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* were completed in his Gaeta residence. On the pink rose in the Brandhorst series, this inscription is located on the top right corner (Fig. 12). The green *Peony Blossom Painting* contains a similar inscription on the top left corner (Fig. 22). Essentially the “Gaeta” inscriptions infuse the paintings with an essence of the place, serving as a

---


reminder of the location’s importance to the artist’s life and work, as well as a reference to the creation of the series.

**Graffiti, funerary monuments, and the construction of memory**

The appearance of “Gaeta” on *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* resembles the writing on ancient monuments and funerary shrines, both of which contain writing symbols that evoke sentiments and ideas in a process similar to how memory is constructed. In “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” Nora distinguishes memory from the realm of history. According to Nora, memory permutates constantly, maintaining a “permanent evolution,” whereas history, an oppositional nature, is the incomplete reconstruction of the past.\(^{46}\) History is merely a representation of past events, but memory links humans to “the eternal present.”\(^{47}\) According to Nora’s definition, memory’s function is to imbue past experiences with a sense of the present, essentially creating a new experience altogether. I think we can view much of Twombly’s work as “sites of memory,” which Nora identifies as locations “where memory crystallizes and secretes itself.”\(^{48}\) Viewing Twombly’s paintings in this light reveals their identity as serial studies of the transitory effects of mortality, as well as a reference to classical mythology and literature that has appeared in the artist’s work for decades. Identifying Twombly’s paintings as sites of memory is even more logical when considering the artist’s interest in ancient monuments and his recent sculptural practice, which I will discuss later in this chapter. As sites of memory, *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* evoke the hand of the artist and the words of the poet, serving as reminders of the presence of each.

It is not a stretch to suggest Twombly’s awareness of ancient monuments and funerary shrines. The artist’s enthusiasm for ancient artifacts is evident as early as January 1952, when he applied for a travel scholarship from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. In his application, Twombly wrote of his desire to “study the prehistoric cave drawings of Lascaux (the first great art of Western civilization) … and Roman ruins.” He continued, “Such experience will provide energy and material for my work. It will broaden my own knowledge and concepts, not only for

---

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
\(^{48}\) Ibid.
the painting I intend to do there, but for a lifetime of work.” In May 1952 he earned the fellowship, then sailed for Italy in late August.

After one month in Rome Twombly was joined by fellow artist and colleague from Black Mountain College, Robert Rauschenberg (1925-2008). The pair journeyed to Florence, Siena, and Assisi, where Twombly explored Roman ruins and old Etruscan civilizations. They also stayed for a short stint in North Africa, where Twombly examined Roman ruins in Tangier. These experiences profoundly inspired the young artist, who wrote in 1953, “I will always be able to find energy and excitement to work with from these times. I see clearer and even more the things I left. It’s been like one enormous awakening of finding many wonderful rooms in a house that you never knew existed.” In the midst of these excursions, Twombly also acquired several collectible antiquities, which he likely purchased as tokens of inspiration. Following his travels, Twombly moved to Italy permanently in 1959, and has remained there, aside from yearly trips to his other home in Lexington, Virginia. Certainly his long habitation in Italy has affected his output, which is so laden with mythological and historical themes.

In addition to ancient and medieval graffiti, Twombly’s inscriptions parallel those included on funerary monuments. In addition to the mythological influence of Italy on Twombly’s writing, we should consider the influence of inscribed funerary monuments with which he may be familiar. These structures contain inscriptions memorializing honorable individuals by recording their worthy qualities in stone, and thus recording their memory. In a study documenting funerary monuments, historian Armando Petrucci discusses manifold examples of these structures. One of these memorials exists on Monte Orlando, near the Italian town of Gaeta where Twombly has lived and kept a studio for numerous years (Fig. 45). The structure consists of a circular mausoleum with a large inscription over the entrance that contains six lines of text utilizing distinctive letter sizes (Fig. 46). The inscription memorializes Lucius Munatius Plancus, the Roman consul and governor who was a friend and patron of several

---

49 Varnedoe, Cy Twombly: A Retrospective, 56.
50 The fellowship award consisted of a $150 stipend paid each month for one year. Ibid.
51 Ibid., 16-17.
53 Ibid., 17.
literary figures, including Horace.\textsuperscript{54} The letters of varying sizes provides a visual parallel to \textit{Roses} and \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings} (Fig. 25), the inscriptions of which also fluctuate in size. Another notable Gaeta monument is Turk’s Grotto, which includes graffiti marks in addition to an inscription (Fig. 47). The layers of both graffiti marks and inscription indicates the presence of multiple individuals and sentiments. Similarly, the alteration of the original text through the addition of graffiti creates a more multifaceted meaning, analogous to memory.\textsuperscript{55}

A funereal quality also appears in sculptures that Twombly produced around the same time as \textit{Roses} and \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings}. \textit{Untitled (In Memory of Álvaro de Campos)} (2002), a wood and plaster sculpture, resembles a funerary monument in both shape and text (Fig. 48). The small monument consists of a trapezoidal base that supports, from bottom to top, a rectangular structure, another trapezoidal form, and finally a flat rectangular surface containing an inscription that faces the viewer. Painted stark white, as are most of Twombly’s sculptures, the monument bears the following inscription on its uppermost level: “IN MEmORY OF ALVARO de CAMPOS.” The varying letter sizes visually parallel the funerary inscriptions described by Petrucci. The trapezoidal structure located below reads: “(to feel all things in all Ways).” The name “Álvaro de Campos” alludes to a heteronym used by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935); the inscription refers to the motto adopted by the personality referred to as “Álvaro de Campos”: “to feel all things in all ways.”\textsuperscript{56} The inscribed sculpture thus functions as a monument to the late poet; however, other factors are at work here as well. The essence of handwriting evokes the artist’s hand and his experience of writing. As the viewer, we experience associations of remembrance stimulated by the phrase “In Memory of.” Furthermore, any knowledge we may possess of this literary figure is similarly summoned.

Closer inspection reveals that Twombly’s writing process here is similar to the layered appearance of words and gestural marks in \textit{Roses} and \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings}. On the uppermost register of Álvaro de Campos, the top spatial layer consists of the memorial ode written in graphite. Underneath the same phrase appears again, covered by a thin layer of white

\textsuperscript{54} Matthew Bunson, \textit{A Dictionary of the Roman Empire} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 330.
\textsuperscript{55} Salvatore Ferraro, \textit{Memorie religiose e civili della città di Gaeta} (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 264.
\textsuperscript{56} Richard Zenith, ed. \textit{Fernando Pessoa & Co.: Selected Poems} (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 141. Fernando Pessoa wrote under three pseudonyms, or, as he called them, heteronyms: Álvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro and Ricardo Reis. The fictional biography of Álvaro de Campos describes an absinthe-drinking, opium-smoking naval engineer and poet who studied in Glasgow, traveled to Asia, and lived in London. See Zenith, \textit{Fernando Pessoa & Co.}, 2-3, 141.
paint that allows the form of the letters to be visible (Fig. 49). More layers are suggested by both a prominent drip of light brown paint that extends the length of the left side and the faint traces of colored paint around the edges of the register. The plaster drip on the top left corner adds another physical layer to the structure. We see a similar phenomenon in Untitled (In Memory of Babur) (2000), an ode to the Muslim conqueror from central Asia known for his artistic and literary influence (Fig. 50).

What can be garnered from Twombly’s inscriptions on both sculpture and painting is a strong sense of something else, something not always visually represented by word or image, but rather evoked by the appearance of gestures. As art historian and curator Harald Szeemann stated about Twombly’s art, “It is the collective memory moving amid all those shifting focuses of free association that make up the knowledge of eternal recurrence.” More specifically, I would argue that it is mark making and multiple physical and thematic layers that contain a commemorative element with the intent of remembrance. An example includes Nini’s Painting, which I have discussed previously for its written qualities (Figs. 43-44). Twombly created the work as a tribute to his late friend Nini Parandello, who owned a gallery in Rome with her husband and often showed Twombly’s work. The canvas consists of an all-over arrangement of gestural marks executed in various hues of pastel. The varying shades of dark and light cause certain marks to recede while others project, visually paralleling the way in which memory is often initially accompanied by sharp emotion, prior to fading into the recesses of the mind and then sometimes reoccurring. The rhythmic, circular forms remind us of the passage of time and indicate a process, such as grieving, and the marks seem to be imbued with a sense of elegy. Interestingly, in the midst of gestural scrawls, we see the name “Cy” rather than “Nini” (Fig. 44). As such, this canvas memorializing Twombly’s friend takes on another layer of meaning, as we are reminded of the artist who has executed each mark, and whose work Nini supported.

59 The appearance of the artist’s name on Nini’s Painting may be an instance of a “conditioned reflex” in one’s arm, to which artist Robert Motherwell (1915-91) referred when discussing his own Calligraphic Studies, a series of so-called abstract compositions that undeniably form the shape of the letter “M.” Motherwell explains, “When you’ve done something a lot, it gets built into your arm and wrist and just comes out—in the way you might use a certain phrase habitually, though in wholly different contexts.” See David Rosand, “‘My I’: Toward an Iconography of the Self,” in Robert Motherwell on Paper: Drawings, Prints, Collages (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 21-27.
Gestures and writing

Prior to the proceeding chapters, where I discuss the painted marks that construct rose and peony representations, here I want to elucidate the connection between gestures and writing. As Twombly’s career has progressed, the writing has become increasingly separated from pictorial elements. For the most part, the words exist independently, exuding a message that sometimes competes with and at other times complements the semantics of surrounding components. The word evocations are now more cohesive, including entire lines of handwritten poetry appropriated from various sources; we see this especially in Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings. As Pincus-Witten observes in his essay accompanying the Blooming exhibition, the marks of Peony Blossom Paintings “no longer exemplify the graffiti abstractions” of Twombly’s early career.  

Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings seem to maintain a separation between words and writings; for instance, the blossoms are painted while the words are scrawled more or less legibly in crayon and pastel. A contemporaneous series, Untitled (Bacchus) (2005-08), implores closer examination of the nature of word symbols in Twombly’s work (Fig. 51). Twombly’s discussion of his Untitled (Bacchus) paintings reveal his current working method, a technique that results in the magnified gestures seen in both Roses series. Painted almost synonymously with the flower paintings, the eight monumental Bacchus canvases consist of a peach-colored ground upon which vibrantly-hued vermilion brushstrokes gallantly and deliberately loop from bottom to top of each canvas. In an article devoted to the Bacchus paintings, Nicholas Cullinan and Nicholas Serota reveal that the amplified gestures were executed with brushes attached to long poles, a technique also utilized by Monet in his later years (Fig. 52). The significance of long-handled brushes is not that they enable the artist to work with large-scale canvases; Twombly has worked on large compositions intermittently for the past half-century. Rather, the tool enables the artist to produce the colossal gestures of Bacchus as well as Roses. Furthermore, the long brushes facilitate additional distance between canvas and artist. As a result, the artist relinquishes a

Motherwell was one of Twombly’s instructors at Black Mountain College in the late 1940s; this artistic relationship surely affected Twombly’s output.


degree of control. Such abandonment leads to mark making that is more frenetic, automatic and accidental than drawing with a pencil, which allows the artist to be closer to the canvas and thus more in command of deliberate mark making. Although the artist has not discussed his working method in *Roses*, their visual similarities and proximal dating to *Bacchus* indicate Twombly probably implemented comparable techniques in their productions.

The gestures of *Bacchus* and *Roses*, unlike the smaller graphisms of his earlier works, are gigantic. The increase in size has amplified rather than undermined the gestural quality of the marks, leading art critic Alastair Sooke to refer to *Roses* as a “tour de force.” Sooke’s observation of the creative achievement of the similar *Bacchus* paintings is poignant, particularly when considering Twombly’s own discussion of the creation of the series. The artist reveals that the paintings were completed as part of a “very physical” process. Twombly has admitted that the backgrounds of his canvases are now painted by studio assistants who follow the artist’s planned instructions. The gestural mark-making and handwriting, however, are done entirely by the artist himself, who considers his working method to be a creative and instantaneous process. Twombly implies the immediacy of these paintings, explaining, “I tried to do one since then, but it didn’t work. It was the sensation of the moment.” Here one is reminded of the performative aspects of Abstract Expressionism. To be certain, physical immediacy is evident in these paintings, as both the *Roses* series contain many layers, additions, corrections, and erasures.

As evidenced by the organic loops and painterly swirls that indicate flower petals, the artist’s presence is still at play here. Specifically, we see the indexical correlation between the artist’s physical movement and the marks on canvas. Such a relationship is important for this discussion of Twombly, whose writing is always handwritten, and, as Barthes has established, intrinsically gestural. Certainly, Twombly’s gestural marks owe much to Abstract

---

64 Serota, “Cy Twombly: History Behind the Thought,” 49.
65 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 95.
Expressionism, which reminds us that handwriting and gestural marks convey an indexical reminder of the artist. In his discussion of the performative aspects of Abstract Expressionism, art historian Richard Shiff maintains that the mark-making techniques of the artist produce an indexical representation on canvas. Describing a relationship that is physical and evocative, Shiff identifies an indexical correlation between the artist’s physical movement and the marks on canvas. Upon closer inspection of Twombly’s writing we can see instances in which his penmanship becomes hurried, and in other places where it trails off, the action completed (See Figs. 2, 4, 8, 17). Additionally, looking at Twombly’s handwriting reminds us of the artistic gesture as well as the artist’s hand and his presence.

The thought, or perhaps the evocation, lingers. We can read the words and deduce their syntactic organization, which invokes an experience captained by the connotative and denotative message exuded by each word. These inscriptions refer to a specific moment—the moment of artistic gesture—and also introduce a stream of associations linked to the words themselves. As these examples suggest, words also preserve individuals and occurrences. I think we can recognize a dialogue between *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* and sculptures like *Alvaro de Campos* due to similar scriptural appearances, as well their chronological proximity to each other. This likeness indicates that we might read the poems and haiku of *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* as more than physical records of poetic verse; the inscriptions refer to the artist’s experience of reading and then inscribing, the original writers themselves, and the poems’ evocations. The proceeding chapters will each treat the two series separately, examining the meaning of the poems and their visual and textual relationship to the images with which they share space.

---

CHAPTER TWO

THE ROSES

Paintings from the earliest period of Cy Twombly’s career are imbued with a deep connection to the mythical and historical past, a trope that continues to the artist’s current output. In 2008 Twombly completed two monumental painting cycles that depict painted flower forms juxtaposed with handwritten excerpts of poetry whose subject is roses. Drawing heavily upon the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, but including other modern poets as well, these paintings also combine Twombly’s long history of writing words on canvas with his relatively recent embrace of a more painterly style. The mixture of word and pictorial symbols creates a multi-layered viewing experience, which is intensified by visual layers of inscriptions, swirls and drips combined in palimpsest arrangements. The resulting experiential sensations are heightened by each panel’s monumentality and their sequential display. The simultaneous existence of word and image symbols creates a palimpsest appearance that evokes a sense of shifting, ephemeral memory. The notion of memory is echoed in the appearance of the dripping blossoms, the practice of writing, the themes of the written poems, and their evocations.

In this chapter I want to discuss the two Roses series within the scope of the artist’s continual engagement with history, demonstrating that each provides an experiential viewing experience laden with memory as well as connections to the past and the artist’s larger oeuvre. Although Twombly’s working process has fundamentally changed, the works remain instilled with a strong sense of history evoked by poetic symbolism and the palimpsest appearance of the composition. The following questions remain: what do the paintings mean? What do they evoke? How do the words of poets affect Twombly’s paintings? The experiential qualities vary from viewer to viewer, but I will provide a history of rose symbolism and explications of the poems in order to answer these questions.

The Roses

Twombly’s eleven large-scale Roses paintings comprise two separate series. One of the cycles, which I will refer to as the Gagosian paintings, consists of five wooden panels. On each composition, handwritten excerpts from Rilke’s poetry series “The Roses” and painted flower forms coexist upon light blue backgrounds (Figs. 15-21). Each painted wood panel is divided
visually into four separate quadrants; poetry covers the far right quadrant of each work while the other three sections contain oversized, colorful blossoms that swirl in circular blooms. Executed in thin acrylic, the paint has streamed down the canvas in flowing, colorful torrents.

The cycle was introduced to the public at London’s Gagosian Gallery between 12 February and 9 May 2009 in an exhibition titled The Rose.\(^70\) The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue including spectacular reproductions of the five paintings and a succinct essay by Jonathan Jones, art critic for The Guardian and previous jury member for the Turner Prize.\(^71\) In The Guardian’s art blog Jones compared Twombly’s floral achievements to the sixteenth-century Venetian master Titian, connecting Twombly’s “pressing and smearing” process to Titian’s spontaneous, sensual paint handling.\(^72\) Art critic Charles Spencer, who once referred to Twombly as “the contemporary artist who has always annoyed me most,” showered the exhibition with praise.\(^73\) Spencer describes being “enchanted” by a newspaper reproduction of the paintings and maintains, “They are better still in the flesh.”\(^74\) The paintings have instigated analogies to well-known artists, with many commentators comparing the series to Andy Warhol’s flower silkscreens, Henri Matisse’s paper cut-outs, and Claude Monet’s Nymphéas (Water Lilies).\(^75\) Despite praise from art critics, no lengthy academic study of the series currently exists.

The other series, formally referred to as Untitled (Roses) and which I will refer to as the Brandhorst cycle, is virtually unknown outside of its permanent location at the Museum

---

\(^70\) The series was shown later at London’s Royal Academy Summer Show from June to August 2009. Currently the Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica, CA, owns one painting, and the rest are scattered throughout various private collections.

\(^71\) Mark Francis, ed. The Rose (London: Gagosian Gallery, 2009).


\(^73\) Charles Spencer, “Cy Twombly at the Tate: How my admiration for Cy the scribbler blossomed,” The Telegraph, February 23, 2009.

\(^74\) Ibid.

Brandhorst in Munich, Germany (Figs. 1-14). Although produced in the same year as the Gagosian series, the six-panel Brandhorst *Roses* contain nuanced differences. Unlike the Gagosian works, each Brandhorst composition consists of four roses rather than three, and the poetic inscriptions appear on various sections of the panel instead of covering the far right quadrant. One composition also includes a painted inscription that is just barely visible within the blossoms of a rose, in such a way that the painted words become blossoms themselves (Fig. 14). As in the Gagosian series, the words of Rilke appear, but on just one composition. The other paintings include lines of poetry selected from Ingeborg Bachmann, whose words appear on two separate works, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, and contemporary American poet Patricia Waters.

**Rose symbolism**

It may be difficult to imagine a symbol more evocative than the rose, which is immortalized in literature spanning ancient poetry to modern prose. In his essay accompanying the 2009 Gagosian *Roses* exhibition, Jones observes that Twombly’s paintings depict not just botanical blossoms, but also the deeply symbolic meaning of “The Rose,” which is complex and diverse. For instance, when viewing these paintings Jones is reminded of “the heraldic bloom of the Tudor dynasty in Renaissance England,” a token of monarchical strength that evokes the War of the Roses and is represented on portrait miniatures and ceiling vault sculptures of royal English cathedrals. Certainly there is more at stake here, and, as Jones would probably agree, it is unlikely that Twombly intended the Tudors to be referenced in the Gagosian cycle, particularly considering that the poems were penned by Rilke, a German poet. The point here is that the symbol of the rose possesses a deeply evocative nature that can reference myriad topics.

I think one of the most important references provided by the rose, at least within the context of Twombly’s body of work, is classical mythology, which appears so often and explicitly in the artist’s early paintings. Thus this evocation provides a substantial connection between the *Roses* and the artist’s early work. For instance, roses are an important symbol for Bacchus, an entity Twombly has suggested numerous times throughout the years (Fig. 51). Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and pleasure, was traditionally honored with roses either laden

---

76 The cycle was executed specifically on behalf of the Udo and Annette Brandhorst Foundation for display in the Museum Brandhorst. Owning over sixty artworks spanning more than fifty years of Twombly’s career, the Museum Brandhorst contains the most comprehensive European collection of the artist’s works.


78 Ibid.
on tables or worn as head wreaths. The Greek poet Anacreon immortalized the connection between roses and Dionysus, as Bacchus was known to the Greeks, with the following poem: “In thy dark wine-cup mingle summer snows,/ And wreath the temples with the blushing rose.”

With the Bacchanal myth in mind, the deep magenta blossoms of the Brandhorst series (Fig. 10), the vibrant burgundy *Rose IV* (Fig. 19) and especially the deep black and burgundy petals of *Rose V* (Fig. 20) become images of wine and ecstasy, and thus Bacchus. The swirls and loops of each painting contain the liveliness of a Bacchanalian procession and the energy of war, also associated with Bacchus. At the same time the paintings indicate Twombly’s other Bacchus paintings and his long history of painting mythological subjects. In each panel the variances of blossoms remind us, however, of the permutable meanings of poetry and painting. *Rose V*, for instance, might illustrate a less joyous subject. The third panel from the left contains a deep purple, almost black layer, which is superimposed by dripping swirls of green and maroon, the latter of which is the color of wine and blood. Moving to the left, the next blossom is similar in appearance, although the appearance of gray drips is more pronounced. The far left blossom consists of a deep grayish purple punctuated at its apex by a darker colored area of dripping paint. The bloom has lost all semblance of color. Its black and gray drips imply perhaps the end of Bacchanalia, or the rose whose petals have fallen to the ground. The accompanying poem includes a similar sense of a persisting, yet precarious symbol. The lines, “the blooming Rose/ is the omen of her/ immeasurable/ endurance,” indicate infinite fortitude, yet also call to mind a more sinister, or at least transitory, sense of existence.

**Memory: The Roses’s multi-layered palimpsests**

The layered forms, varied representations, and conjurations of poems projected by these paintings vary and shift, resulting in a phenomena that can best be understood as the construction of cultural memory. Memory’s role in these paintings can be explained by Pierre Nora’s discussion as introduced in the previous chapter.

Like all abundances of nature, roses die and their petals fall, but the symbolism of the rose has been alive for centuries. Contemplating an uncut rose reveals a sense of youthful blooming, an observation tempered by the knowledge that roses eventually wither with age. The

---

pink Brandhorst *Rose*, which I have discussed previously, contains a poetic reminder of this transitory state (Fig. 13):

```
Rose
brief
brief in its beauty
but the
scent
better than Fame
```

The words by American poet Patricia Waters, transcribed atop bright yellow and vibrant pink blossoms, simultaneously exemplify the flower’s fleetingness as well as its persisting existence through memory. Beauty, although brief, is not forgotten. The pleasing scent remains within a reminiscence, and the imagined aroma is capable of producing images of roses and reminders of past experiences. Thus an explication of this poem implies a multi-sensory experience that is available to viewers looking at this painting.

The poem above and Nora’s description of memory involve the utilization of multiple senses and the construction of a multi-layered view of the past and present, both of which are paralleled by the palimpsest layering of painting and writing in each canvas from the two series. By definition a palimpsest describes a multi-layered writing surface upon which traces of marks maintain visibility in the midst of elements transcribed later. The past is inscribed literally in the present, evoking memory. In these panels painted layers reveal themselves beneath coverings of drips, and lackadaisical swirls cover, but do not obscure, the forms beneath. Twombly’s use of acrylic paint, a medium he adopted during the late 1970s and early 1980s after using oils almost exclusively, increases the possibility of layering. Acrylic is easy to manipulate and can be applied transparently, or thinly, so that it runs down the canvas. Like the painted forms, writing maintains a similar layered existence, sometimes slipping beneath painted forms only to appear again, and sometimes inscribed on top of multiple colored layers.

Four of the Gagosian roses contain layered writing, a palimpsest that signifies multiple events, including the artist in the act of writing, and remembering portions of a past reading. *The Rose (II)* contains writing in red and yellow pastel (Figs. 16-17). Written in Twombly’s

---

81 It seems pertinent to mention the etymology of the term “palimpsest,” which is Greek, and thus provides another allusion to Twombly’s penchant for representing the Classical.
82 My definition relies on the entry in the Oxford English Dictionary.
characteristic scrawl, words and letters overlap. Although the writing is mostly discernible, the method of reading is complicated due to the coinciding symbols and colors. Furthermore, the reader is reminded constantly that two separate thoughts, signified by the dual colors, coexist. The following is a transcription of the poems. The column at left represents the words written in red, and the right column represents the yellow words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All alone</th>
<th>O abundant flower</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You create your space</td>
<td>you create your space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You stare at yourself in a mirror</td>
<td>yourself mirror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of odor</td>
<td>odor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your fragrance swirls</td>
<td>swirls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More petals</td>
<td>petals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Around your teeming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calypso</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rilke</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading the colors as two separate columns reveals that the red words constitute the poem in more complete form. The yellow words, lighter in color and lacking terms that are otherwise written in red, exist as a palimpsest ghost, the fragments of a poetic memory.

The pink rose at the Brandhorst contains two separate areas of writing, which is unique to the rest of the two series and produces an equally unique palimpsest. The inscription, written in red pastel, is located on the third panel from the left, atop a peach-colored plane that covers part of a blossom (Fig. 13). The other, more unprecedented, inscription is executed in yellow paint and peeks out beneath the pink blossoms of the rose located at far left (Fig. 14). Covered by swirls and drips, the inscription is nearly invisible. As I discuss in the next section, this palimpsest shows the connection between the painted rose and the written rose—the same idea executed by the same tool, yet with two separate colors and symbol systems.

**Relationship of word and image symbols**

In addition to signaling the simultaneous existence of past and present, the pink Brandhorst rose also displays a connection between writing and painting, which is so important in Twombly’s body of work. The differentiation between word and pictorial symbols, both of which are at stake in each *Roses* series, is often ambiguous. To elucidate the relationship
between layered words and images in these paintings, I turn now to W.J.T. Mitchell’s important collection of essays on visual and verbal representation.

In Mitchell’s discussion of visual language, he asks, how does one say what he or she sees, and how does the reader see? To answer this question, Mitchell introduces what he calls “visible language,” defining the term as a blend of sight, sound, image and speech. Artists who investigate sensory interactions create “composite art,” a combination of words and images that affect the senses simultaneously. As we have seen, the pink rose painting’s inscription evokes the aroma of a rose with the word “scent.” The word and image combination is often complicated when, in Mitchell’s words, “Writing is caught between two othernesses, voice and vision, the speaking and the seeing subject.” Along these lines, we can read Twombly’s rose paintings as examples of a composite art that contains a visible language in which word and image symbols simultaneously interact with one another as well as the viewer/reader. Specifically, the handwritten poetry and their arrangement and location on each panel interact with the painted roses. The similarities between the two seemingly disparate symbols complicate reading and viewing, forcing simultaneous considerations of both, and resulting in multi-faceted evocations and interpretations.

Writing, as Mitchell states, is “caught between…voice and vision, the speaking and seeing.” The stanzas of the Gagosian Roses embody this phenomenon quite accurately (Figs. 15-20). The panels are arranged in quadrants. Reading logically from left to right, the three panels to the left contain painted rose forms, while the right-most quadrant contains a written poem. Located within a sequential progression and covering approximately the same amount of space, the poems embody a similar arrangement as their pictorial counterparts. Pictorially, another resemblance appears in the color of each excerpt, which on every panel mimics the blossoms’ hue. Written multiple times on top of one another in various colors, the inscriptions from Roses I-IV physically emulate the multi-colored, swirling flower patterns. Location and physicality of the inscriptions from the Brandhorst Roses vary to a greater degree, but contain

---

84 Ibid. Mitchell adds that “visual language” is counterbalanced by a strong collective ambivalence toward “the lure of visibility,” which privileges a distinction between word and image symbols.
85 Ibid. Mitchell discusses William Blake as an artist who investigates sensory interactions.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
examples that similarly complicate the nature of word and image symbols (Figs. 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12). Here, each of the four panels contains venerable rose images, and the inscriptions appear in various positions on the margins or written on top of painted blossoms. However, as noted above, the pink composition displays a unique treatment of written symbols (Fig. 14). In addition to an inscription that appears on the second panel from the right, more words appear on the far-left quadrant. Written in paint beneath swirling rose forms, the words “but the scent/ better than Fame” project from the lower layers, as though tucked within the flower blossoms. Importantly, this inscription is painted rather than written (all other poems are scrawled in crayon and pastel), resulting in material and visual unity with the image.

**Sequential display and its effect on memory**

In response to the *The Rose* exhibit at the Gagosian, critic Anthony Byrt aptly described the curatorial arrangement of paintings as follows: “Evenly spaced around the room, [the paintings] repeat themselves with slight, perfectly pitched variations, the flowers seeming to pulsate as rhythmically as the poetry next to them” (Fig. 21). Byrt’s account alludes to the environment constructed by the serial exhibition of these paintings. As they hang in proximity to one another, the painted images and word arrangements of each work coalesce with others in the cycle, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the series and heightening the viewing experience of the paintings. Shown as a unified set, the paintings coalesce into an interconnected surrounding that quite literally enfolds the viewer, given the monumentality of the works. This corporeal quality produces a sensory experience for the viewer. In essence, the sequential arrangement of each painting results in an experiential environment that heightens the sense of time and the memory of each painting.

Significantly, Twombly has alluded that within his painting cycles, each canvas is connected inherently to others in the series. In a 2008 interview, following a question regarding his recent habit of producing serial images, Twombly replied, “Yes, I don’t know why I started that—it’s like you can’t get everything in one painting. I don’t know why I do that—maybe they’re pages in a book.” We can view both the Gagosian and Brandhorst *Roses* series

---

89 Serota, “Cy Twombly: History Behind the Thought,” 52.
similarly, particularly considering that each cycle was initially exhibited as a whole.\textsuperscript{90}
Considering the paintings as individual leaves of a larger manuscript, we can thus read \textit{Roses} as bound to one another, both physically and thematically. Reading them as a book implies a systematic engagement with the paintings as a set, meant to be read one after another. As a result, previously-read poems affect a viewer’s later experience.

Similar to the arrangement of the London Gagosian exhibition, the Brandhorst \textit{Roses} are displayed sequentially in their own gallery, an environment that allows the viewer to make connections between compositions.\textsuperscript{91} The space, one of the largest in the museum, contains the six paintings on three separate walls. The remaining wall contains panels with typed copies of each inscription and literary citations that provide each poem’s original author and title.\textsuperscript{92} The following example demonstrates how the sequential arrangement affects viewing and interpretation. Entering the \textit{Roses} room from the main stairwell at the Museum Brandhorst brings a viewer first to the white and yellow rose, inscribed with an excerpt from “The Soul Has Bandaged Moments” by Emily Dickinson (Figs. 5, 6):

\begin{quote}
The soul has  
Moments of Escape  
When twisting all the doors  
She dances  
like a Bomb  
abroad  
and swings  
upon  
the Hours.\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{90} The cycle at the Museum Brandhorst currently hangs together in its own gallery. The earlier series, which was originally shown at the Gagosian, has been separated and now exists in various collections.

\textsuperscript{91} When Udo and Annette Brandhorst commissioned \textit{Roses}, they stipulated that the paintings would be located in a specific gallery. \textit{Peony Blossom Paintings}, the subjects of the next chapter of this thesis, also were produced for a specific architectural space. Twombly executed that particular series for the Collection Lambert in Avignon, France, the site of the exhibition of 2007 entitled \textit{Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things}.

\textsuperscript{92} As I discovered firsthand while viewing paintings at the Museum Brandhorst (Munich, Germany) and the Cy Twombly Gallery (Houston, Texas), Twombly’s scrawled handwriting is difficult to read, even under close scrutiny.

\textsuperscript{93} This painting is the sole example from each series that does not contain the word “rose.” Although it is not physically included on the painting, the next stanza reveals a reference to the flower. Separated by Dickinson’s characteristic dashes, the poem continues:

\begin{quote}
As do the Bee—delirious borne—  
Long Dungeoned from his Rose—  
Touch Liberty—then know no more,  
But Noon, and Paradise—
\end{quote}

Despite Twombly’s omission of the word “rose,” the subject of the rose in this poem relates to the painted blossoms through the relationship of \textit{coreference}, A. Kibedi Varga’s term that describes the association of the verbal and the visual when they are not present visually on the same plane. See Varga, “Criteria for Describing Word and Image...
Dickinson’s words imply numerous interpretations. We can read the desire to “Escape” as a sense of entrapment, a feeling of freedom, and the passage of time. Literary research indicates that the poem implies enduring a crisis in order to understand one’s vocational calling. With all of these evocations in mind, we move to the next composition, which contains red roses with yellow centers (Figs. 3, 4). The inscription is by Rilke:

Rose,
O pure
Contradiction,
the desire
to be no one’s
Sleep
under so many petals.

Reading Rilke’s words undeniably call to mind “sleep,” but perhaps death as well. What is the contradiction, we might ask? With Dickinson’s poem in our recent memory, we may again wonder about the “contradictory” notions of freedom and entrapment. This is just one example that shows how these serial arrangements are bound to one another. The complication, of course, is that the paintings are unnumbered and thus provide no sense of an implied starting point. To return to Rilke’s poem, which I will discuss again, imagine the viewer’s reaction upon reading the informational panel, which reveals that the poem is actually the poet’s self-penned epitaph. Undeniably this knowledge calls to mind death and the memorial nature of tombstones. Or perhaps the viewer had read the wall label first. Regardless, here again the paintings imply an infinite, circling sense of memory, capable of multiple readings and interpretations.

The poetics of Roses

The final portion of this chapter continues my discussion of Rilke’s epitaph, then investigates the remainder of the Rose paintings. I continue my discussion of potential evocations

---

94 Marcella Bernadette Taylor, “Shaman Motifs in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson,” Dickinson Studies 38 (1980): 1-11. Taylor’s article discusses the notion of a shaman, or one who receives his or her vocation following a tragedy. The article provides multiple examples of Dickinson’s poetry that seem to relate to shamanism, citing “The Soul has Bandaged Moments” as an example.

95 The Gagosian Roses, however, are numbered and thus imply a sequential viewing pattern. Exhibition views, however, indicate that the paintings were not displayed in numerical order. See Fig. 21.
and also suggest how an understanding of the poets and the poems affect the reading of Twombly’s paintings as sites of memory.

The red Brandhorst rose is the sole instance in this series in which Rilke appears (Figs. 3, 4). Considering the poet’s preoccupation with mortality, it seems fitting that he penned his own epitaph. It must be stated that Rilke’s work contains a strong concept of mortality, fitting with the themes of transience and remembrance evoked by this passage. The poet was born in 1875 in Prague, where he developed an interest in cemeteries and gravestones. In a letter to German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), dated 5 November 1900, Rilke reveals that until at least the age of sixteen, he spent each All Souls’ Day in cemeteries, visiting the graves of both relatives and strangers. In the letter he states that during this period he became increasingly aware of life’s fleetingness: “every hour we live is an hour of death for someone,” and adds, “there are probably even more hours of death than hours of living. Death has a dial with infinitely many figures.”

An epitaph implies death, but Rilke’s is highly enigmatic, describing the rose as a contradiction. As Beatrice Susanne Bullock-Kimball inquires in her dissertation about the symbolism and metaphors of Rilke’s roses, does the epitaph describe a marginal introvert who welcomes death, or does it exist as a blissful confirmation at the end of a well-lived life? Bullock-Kimball continues, asking, “Was it the expression of one resigned to the inevitability of death, which ends us, or the prayer of the mystic? Was it the resolute perception of the existential thinker, or the expression of the poet, who speaks in riddles?” These questions are rightfully posed, and they are complicated further here since they have been extracted from their original use and inscribed onto a painting. Further indicating Twombly’s use of artistic license, the final word of the original text is “lids,” which the artist has replaced with “petals.” Does the passage, in essence, become Twombly’s epitaph? Or do the words cease to contain any funereal element now that they exist on a painted surface?

Rilke was certainly preoccupied with death, but in no way should the Roses poems be relegated to themes of the morose. Rather, Rilke was interested in broader themes of existence,

---

98 Ibid.
leading multiple scholars, including philosophers Martin Heidegger and Otto F. Bollnow, to
describe him as a philosophical poet.\(^{99}\) As Käte Hamburger established in 1966, philosophers
have good reason for their interest in Rilke. Hamburger argues that Rilke’s poetry avoids
“explicitly conceptual forms,” thus enabling itself to respond individually to philosophical
stances.\(^{100}\) In this way, Rilke’s poetry reveals a relationship between the duty of the philosopher
(in search of truth) and the duty of the poet (in search of beauty).\(^{101}\)

Serving as a dedication to the poet who has so greatly affected Twombly’s work, each of
the five paintings from the Gagosian Roses set contains a citation-like inscription of Rilke’s
name. The German poet has been a significant and recurring literary (and perhaps philosophical)
source for Twombly throughout most of the artist’s career. Twombly says he writes the words of
poets “because I can find a condensed phrase … My greatest one to use was Rilke.”\(^{102}\) The
artist’s preference for the poet’s work is further illuminated by Untitled (A Painting in Nine
Parts) (1988), a series of nine that honors the poet (Fig. 53). This cycle is a meditation on
Rilke’s pond poems, with two of the nine paintings including inscriptions illustrating Twombly’s
predilection to Rilke. The first canvas in the series bears a dedication: “to Rilke (with
OBSESSION),” and the second includes a date and the brief dedication: “(Ponds) to Rilke.” The
Gagosian Roses function in much the same way, honoring Rilke with inscriptions of his name.

Aside from the homage, the Rilke inscriptions call to mind remembrances of the poet.
This elegiac sentiment is pictorially and textually imparted by The Rose (V) (Fig. 20):

```
Infinitely at ease
Despite so many risks
With no variation
Of her visual routine
The blooming Rose
Is the omen of her
Immeasurable
Endurance
Rilke
```

\(^{99}\) For a more comprehensive list see Paul Bishop, “Rilke: Thought and Mysticism,” in The Cambridge Companion
\(^{100}\) Käte Hamburger, “Die phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes,” in Philosophie der Dichter: Novalis,
Schiller, Rilke (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1966), 179; quoted in Anthony Phelan, “Rilke and His Philosophical
University Press, 2010), 174.
\(^{101}\) Bishop, “Rilke: Thought and Mysticism,” 159.
\(^{102}\) Serota, “Cy Twombly: History Behind the Thought,” 50.
Previously, I discussed *The Rose (V)* in terms of its connections to Bacchus. I think we can read the image as a solemn ode to Rilke as well. The overall impression of this work is starker than the others, a stoic reminder of the poet, the transitory, and the artist’s interest in and creation of funerary monuments. The roses are executed in deep violet that is nearly black, a hue that implies death or an ending. The bloom to the far left is covered in a chalky wash, as though stripped of any color to signify a void. Its neighboring roses become slightly larger as they progress to the far right, where at the final panel a poem is written resolutely in dark pastel. Pictorially, the word size alters as they stretch across the panel to cover the space, an example of how words and images imitate each other, as described by Mitchell. The words are clear and deliberate, much more so than other inscriptions in the series, with few erasures and layers. As a result, the words are easier to interpret, and seem to be transcribed here as though part of a monument or a memorial, much like Twombly’s sculpture *Untitled (In Memory of Álvaro de Campos)* (Fig. 48).

Like other poems from both series, the verse of *The Rose (V)* is contradictory, indicated here by the term “despite” and the juxtaposition of “ease” in the midst of “risks.” Likewise, the words “infinitely,” “no variation,” “immeasurable” and “endurance” traverse the notion of a “blooming Rose.” Rather than boundless eternity, the blossoming of a flower is a process that suggests a beginning and an end. In fact, the poem describes the rose as the “omen” to immeasurable endurance, indicating not only an end, but also the curious implication that even the infinite may be overtaken. Again, poetic opposition and the vacillating effects of time are multi-dimensional, palimpsest effects that identify these paintings as sites of memory.

As the inscribed words originated with individuals other than Twombly, how are we to read them? To explore this question I move to the two Brandhorst *Roses* that contain poetic excerpts by Austrian poet and novelist Ingeborg Bachmann (Figs. 7 and 10). As her words are inscribed here, Bachmann inevitably becomes part of the memory sequence exuded by the painting. The burgundy rose is inscribed with a poem from Bachmann’s collection entitled *Invocation of the Great Bear* (Fig. 11):

```
Shadows Roses Shadows
under an alien sky
Shadows Roses Shadows
on an
alien earth
```
between Roses and Shadows

Scholars have established that Bachmann’s literary career was profoundly affected by her upbringing and education during World War II and the postwar era. Born in 1926 in Klagenfurt, Austria, Bachmann’s childhood hometown was occupied by Nazi forces in 1938. According to Nancy C. Erickson, a German language and literature scholar, “Ingeborg Bachmann had neither models nor references for her search. What she wrote, she created out of a storage of images and impressions that she had recorded during her forty-five years as daughter, schoolgirl, victim of Nazi oppression, lover, companion, friend, political activist, literary scholar, lecturer and woman.” Connecting Bachmann’s biography to her poetry, it must be noted that some of her core themes are social repression, genocide, and male and female relationships; therefore, an informed reading of the painting is bound to connect “alien earth” and “alien sky” to, perhaps, xenophobia, prejudice, or misunderstanding. Correspondingly, “Shadows” and “Roses” could represent opposing units, or, considering Twombly’s minuscule representation of the word “and” that separates the terms on the last line, perhaps “Shadows” and “Roses” should be read as a cohesive unit. Moving to the painted roses, the painterly treatment of each is similarly polarized. The rose at far left, composed of thin red swirls, is a sparse ghost of the three voluminous and multi-colored blooms to the right.

Bachmann’s other poem appears on the blue Brandhorst roses, the composition of which contains a two-columned excerpt from *Borrowed Time* (Figs. 8-9):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the Storm of Roses</th>
<th>The night is lit up by thorns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wherever we turn in the Storm of Roses</td>
<td>and thunder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rumbling at our heels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an essay about Bachmann’s use of remembrance, author Andrea Stoll states, “Remembrance and experience of history cannot be separated from one another in the works of Bachmann.”

---


As I showed with the previous example, knowledge of Bachmann’s biography becomes part of this painting; however, the vibrant blues and purples of these roses should not be ignored. Botanically, the blue rose is an anomaly not found in nature, existing only as the result of genetic engineering. Metaphorically, the blue and purple might represent a tempestuous sky promising a storm. Removing the color from the context of the poems, however, art historian Nicholas Cullinan is reminded of Yves Klein’s patented International Klein Blue. Another rose at the Brandhorst contains petals of red and chartreuse (Figs. 1, 2). The poetic addition is an excerpt from “Little Gidding,” a poem from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*:

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of things shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are unfolded
> onto the crowned knot of Fire
> and the fire and the Rose are One.

Written in future tense, the poem is anticipatory in nature. The narrator appears to foresee an ending to strife and the beginning of a utopia. This simultaneous ending and beginning is echoed by the complementary colors of the two outside blossoms, one of which is primarily red, and the other is green. Described as “the grand recapitulation of the whole of the *Quartets,*” the poem focuses on the promise of salvation. Anticipating salvation, time is relegated to the future tense. The two central roses, alike in appearance and color, seem to float at the core of the panel as though exemplifying deliverance. Perhaps it is here in which, to use Nora’s words, “memory crystallizes and secretes itself.”

**Conclusion**

---

108 The conception of time in T.S. Eliot’s poetry is sometimes understood as a derivation of the thinking of Heraclitus, thus providing another allusion to Twombly’s artistic history of evoking the Classics. Weitz conceives Eliot’s theory of time as neo-Platonic rather than Heraclitean, but the allusion to Classicism remains. See Weitz, “T.S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation,” 139, 142.
As sites of memory, the *Roses* serve as memorials to a host of ideas, sentiments, and individuals. In these paintings we see a visual combination of brushstrokes, smudges, drips and finger painting, the variety of which coheres into colossal blossoms. These signs, in addition to the themes exuded by the written poems, metaphorically allude to Nora’s definition of memory’s shifting, evolutionary permanence. The monumental panels, particularly when viewed as a cycle, create a visual environment that is enhanced by the simultaneous interaction between painted and written roses as well as the painterly technique and indexical relationship with the artist and poets. This sense of simultaneity results in a complicated viewing and reading experience. At once serving as a reminder of the fleetingness of artistic performance and life itself, the physical painting appears to be more enduring and functions as a site of memory.

Regarding Rilke’s mature rose poems, Bullock-Kimball states the following: “Rilke’s late roses are circles that guard a center, but it is an empty center, giving rise to a complexity of interpretations, which may be true all at once.” So, too, are Twombly’s late *Roses*, both visually and figuratively. Each bloom is ultimately symbolic, yet various types and levels of interpretation occur simultaneously as a result of the open-ended poems and multi-faceted palimpsest paintings. The result is a shifting sense of time and the effect of memory, which always contains fluctuating levels of awareness and remembrance. As such, we can view Twombly’s *Roses* as elaborate meditations on the symbol of the rose and the vacillating passage of time, which unfolds just like a blossom slowly blooms.

---

CHAPTER THREE

PEONY BLOSSOM PAINTINGS

Long before Twombly devised Peony Blossom Paintings (2007), Roland Barthes made a generalized connection between the artist’s practice and Japanese aesthetics. Barthes writes, “Twombly fills his rectangle according to the principle of the Rare… of spacing. This notion is crucial in Japanese aesthetics, which does not acknowledge the Kantian categories of space and time, but the subtler one of interval (in Japanese: Ma). The Japanese Ma, basically, is the Latin Rarus, and it is Twombly’s art.”\(^{111}\) Barthes compares Twombly’s vast compositions, upon which considerable areas of bare canvas emerge beneath isolated smudges of paint, to the “‘void’ of Oriental compositions, merely accentuated here and there by some calligraphy.”\(^{112}\) Barthes continues his description, this time using words from Paul Valéry that recount a state of immense emptiness in which time ceases to exist, and the mind is forced to reconcile the space.\(^{113}\) Writing in 1979, Barthes references Twombly’s earlier canvases, but I think his meditation holds true for Peony Blossom Paintings as well. Within these canvases pictorial and calligraphic symbols float upon a background space, providing opportunities for a viewer to experience multiple meanings and sensations.

In this chapter I demonstrate how Peony Blossom Paintings generate a multilayered experience that is similar to that of the Roses. In Peony Blossom Paintings the arrangement of word and pictorial symbols and the evocations produced by handwritten haiku result in a palimpsest appearance that is best described as the construction of memory. I also suggest that Twombly’s interest in Japan and its decorative arts reinforce these paintings as sites of memory.

**Peony Blossom Paintings**

Peony Blossom Paintings consist of six large-scale wood panels that were first exhibited as part of a show titled Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things at the Collection Lambert in Avignon, France, in 2007. The exhibition traveled to the Gagosian Gallery in New York City later that year. Three of the Peony Blossom Paintings resemble Roses in that each


\(^{112}\) Ibid., 182-83.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 183.
contains painted flower forms juxtaposed with lines of poetry (Figs. 22-29). All but one of the poetic inscriptions are haikus penned by Matsuo Bashō; the one other haiku is the creation of one of Bashō’s students, Takarai Kikaku. Three other paintings display similar pictorial arrangements, although text is not included (Figs. 30-32). In an essay written for the exhibition catalogue accompanying the Blooming exhibit at the Gagosian, Robert Pincus-Witten draws comparisons between Peony Blossom Paintings and “French decorative art and architecture, Japanese history and poetry, German Romanticism, the élan vital of Twombly’s own original Abstract Expressionism, and the human implications” of an artist fully enamored with late style.\(^\text{114}\) The textual inscriptions within this “potent brew,” according to Pincus-Witten, also pay homage to the Symbolist poetry and painting of Stéphane Mallarmé and Odilon Redon, respectively.\(^\text{115}\)

The exhibition also included seven other works that complemented the series (Figs. 33-38). These paintings also do not include text, although, as I argue, the pictorial forms induce the appearance of a writing system and visually echo the poetic structure of haikus seen on the paintings that include text.

**Peony symbolism**

As the previous chapter elucidated the connection between roses and Twombly’s engagement with classical themes, the symbol of the peony similarly evokes mythological tropes. In Greek mythology the peony is named for Paeon, who was the pupil of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing.\(^\text{116}\) According to the legend, Asclepius became so envious of his bright student that Zeus intervened and saved Paeon from a potentially disastrous end by transforming the young scholar into a peony flower.

Peonies are perhaps more often associated with Japan, where the peony is an imperial symbol of royalty. Botanically, the flower has been cultivated for centuries at Zen temples by monk gardeners. Representations of the flower appear in Japanese decorative arts, including calligraphy, brush painting, and folding screens. Significantly, decorative screens share similar proportions and the six-panel format as Peony Blossom Paintings. A decorative screen from the


\(^{115}\) Ibid., 1-2.

\(^{116}\) Paeon is sometimes spelled “Paean.”
Japanese Edo period consists of six vertical sections upon which a concentration of floral motifs begins on the right-most section and then scatters upon the rest of the composition (Fig. 54). We see a similar arrangement in *Peony Blossom Paintings*, specifically in the green composition (Fig. 22). Five white peonies and a green ghost of a sixth on the far right form a linear organization of six separate sections, transforming the monumental painting into a vision of an Edo screen. The dripping lines of paint and accompanying inscriptions assist in the division of six entities. This example demonstrates how the art object itself, rather than simply the pictorial elements, evokes decorative arts of Japan.

**Memory and Haiku: The multilayered palimpsests of *Peony Blossom Paintings***

In the previous chapter I discussed how *Roses* evoked a sense of cultural memory through poetic connotations as well as layered paint and writing. *Peony Blossom Paintings* contain a similarly shifting sense of consciousness that is best described as the construction of cultural memory; as such, we can view these paintings as “sites of memory,” according to Pierre Nora’s definition. In this section I suggest how an understanding of Bashô, Kikaku and the nature of haiku affect the reading of Twombly’s paintings as sites of memory.

With one exception, all of the haiku inscriptions were originally penned by Bashô.\(^{117}\) As the best-known Japanese writer in both his native country and the West, Bashô is known as a *haisei*, a saint of haiku, and he was canonized as a deity on the one-hundredth anniversary of his death. During his lifetime Bashô published only one book, *The Shell Game* (*Kai Ōi*), although his disciples created anthologies and similar collections of his poems and teachings. The haiku poet’s legacy has transcended time and geography; locations he allegedly visited four hundred years ago have become tourist destinations, marked by stone monuments and pieces of paper bearing poems he is thought to have written at the site. Bashô’s fame and importance to Japanese culture provide another layer of meaning to *Peony Blossom Paintings*. His words, which are inscribed on Twombly’s paintings, align these works with a principal Japanese art form and its ostensible master.

\(^{117}\) Due to Twombly’s inclusion of Bashô’s haikus, I focus on this aspect of the poet’s output in my analysis. However, it is pertinent to note the poet’s celebrated literary prose, the theme of which can be described as a journey through time, nature, spirituality, and life itself. See David Landis Barnhill, trans., *Bashô’s Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Bashô* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).
The literal and metaphorical multiplicity of these paintings invokes the layers of cultural memory, and is compounded by Twombly’s confirmed interest in the decorative arts of Japan. Specifically, the artist’s interest in Japanese culture and its objects adds another layer of meaning to *Peony Blossom Paintings*. In an essay that accompanied the Avignon exhibit, Éric Mézil provides a detailed discussion of Twombly’s home and studio in Gaeta, Italy, where *Peony Blossom Paintings* were created. Mézil describes “an abundance of richly brocaded *kimonos* and *obi* on an 18th century sofa in one of the living rooms…. abandoned and open as if a Japanese courtesan was resting in a nearby room.”\(^{118}\) He then recounts the artist’s explanation: “You know I have a real collection, I adored Japan, the textiles, motifs and colours.”\(^ {119}\) In essence, Twombly’s awareness of these objects and designs likely infuses *Peony Blossom Paintings* with a legitimate sense of his own memories and interests in Japan. As Mézil states, “the *kimono* thrown almost innocently in the master’s house at Gaeta, give the keys to understanding the peonies painted in the studio.”\(^ {120}\) That is to say that the inscriptions and floral motifs of the paintings can be read as distinct references to the artist’s own interests, in addition to abstract allusions to Japanese culture garnered from their appearance.

The conception of memory in *Peony Blossom Paintings* is evoked further by the characteristics of haiku. Jane Reichhold, an expert on haiku and an authority on Bashô, describes haiku as the “search for the essence, the very being, of even the smallest, most common things. One of the goals of poetry is to penetrate this essence, to grab hold of it in words and pass it on to the reader, so purely that the writer as author disappears. Only by stepping aside, by relinquishing the importance of being the author, can one capture and transmit the essence—the very is-ness—of a thing.”\(^ {121}\) As the acquisition of memory requires the simultaneous reconciliation of multiple sensations and thoughts, haiku’s concise brevity necessitates similar cerebral activity. Reichhold explains haiku’s reliance on memory as follows: “It is an accepted truth that reading great writers draws forth one’s own greatness. This is even truer for haiku because part of the writing is done by the reader. Haiku are so short, succinct, and ambiguous that the reader must supply his own images and make leaps and connections out of acquired

---

119 Ibid.
120 Ibid., 185.
experiences to realize the complete poem.”¹²² As Reichhold elucidates, reader participation is a crucial aspect for garnering meaning from a haiku. The same can be said for substantiating the texts and images that appear on *Peony Blossom Paintings* and *Roses*, as both series rely on viewer interaction and the reconciliation of juxtaposed word and image symbols. Furthermore, multiple layers of paint and written symbols cover and reveal one another, simultaneously existing and affecting one another. The monumental paintings are impossible to experience in an instant, inviting viewers to linger and experience the works over a period of time.

Despite similarities between the essence of haiku and the way in which readers become authors when reading haiku, it is important that Twombly, unlike Bashō, never completely disappears from the viewing experience. In spite of the links and associations made by the viewer, Twombly’s presence remains as a result of his inscribed initials and the location and date of creation. On the green *Peony* painting, words on the top left corner read: “IV HAIKU,” beneath which are written Twombly’s initials and “Gaeta,” the location of where the paintings were created (Fig. 22). The artist’s signature is reminiscent of his presence during the painting’s execution, and the location functions as a sort of marker or memorial.

**The poetics of *Peony Blossom Paintings***

Like *Roses*, *Peony Blossom Paintings* are stylized ideograms that project their floral identification through title and accompanying poems. In this section I continue to suggest sensations emitted by the paintings. I also identify parallels between word and image symbols and comparable pictorial and poetic structures, which result in a multilayered viewing experience that is similar to the construction of memory.

The botanical nature of peony flowers aligns with the ephemeral that was discussed previously in terms of rose blossoms. Of all the *Peony* paintings with text, the green panel provides the most poignant meditation on transience. The following excerpts from Bashō are located on the left side of the painting:

> The white peony
> at the moon
> one evening
> crumbled
> and
> fell

¹²² Ibid., 8.
The peony falls
spilling out
yesterday’s
rain

Scratched with graphite upon the pale green ground, many aspects of this haiku demonstrate the peony’s inevitable submission to the realm of time. The haiku describes how the bloom “crumbled/ and/ fell” following a time of supposed vitality. Connotations of the words “moon” and “evening” similarly provide a sense of an end, and also describe the closing of the day as well as night, which is often associated with death. Similarly, “Yesterday’s” is reminiscent of the past. Reading the poem allows the viewer to imagine a once-vibrant peony, now drooping with age, straining against its stem as gravity and time summon the bloom. Pictorially, the painting illustrates the descent through the streaming drips that exude from each flower. The drips may also be read as the figurative representations of “yesterday’s/ rain” “spilling out” from between the petals of the peony as it falls. The essence of falling rain, which sometimes falls in sheets, provides yet another interpretative layer to this painting. Sheets of rain, like the layered paint on Twombly’s paintings, create multiple spatial dimensions among the drips and the spaces between them.

Moving farther to the right of the canvas, the haiku continues with two separate sections of writing (Figs. 23, 24):

From the heart
Of the Peony
a drunken
bee

The Peony
Quivers

If we are to read the four sections of haiku in succession from left to right, this pair of inscriptions projects a poetic foil to the previous two. Here, a “bee” emerges “From the heart” of the supposedly dying or dead flower. This juxtaposition of the living bee and the dead peony is reminiscent of nature’s life cycle, in which life and death coexist and emerge from one another. Of course, memory is evoked by the simultaneity of vitality and eternal rest. Within the painting the notion of eternal rest seems to manifest itself in the flat green void on the far right, where a
peony ostensibly existed prior to a green layer of paint or, in metaphorical terms, death (Fig. 22). After death, a person is remembered; the same can be said for a peony, which lives on in visual and textual representations such as Bashō’s poetry and Twombly’s paintings. Finally, in relation to Twombly’s continual engagement with history, we can read a nod to Bacchus in “a drunken/bee,” which adds yet another layer of recognition to these words.

In Japanese, the word for peony is “hanabi,” which translates to “firework” or “fire flower.” The term also refers to chrysanthemums, a flower that is similar in appearance. The literal definition implies a tactile, sensorial element associated with heat, touch, and passion. The powerful qualities of the flower are implied in a poem by Kikaku, which is inscribed on each of the green and magenta Peony paintings (Figs. 25, 29):

```
AH! the Peonies
For which
K U S U N O K I
took off his
A R M O U R
(KiKAKU)
```

This haiku is written about the fourteenth-century samurai Kusunoki Masashige (1294-1336), who by legend is an example of samurai loyalty. The haiku describes Kusunoki as disarming himself simply for a flower. Both of the inscriptions, particularly that of the magenta Peony, represents the first “R” of “ARMOUR” in a much smaller scale. The inclusion of the letter appears as though it were an afterthought, a later addition to the word “AMOUR.” Regardless of the artist’s intentions, the varying scale of the letters draws attention to the word play, which juxtaposes themes of love and war. On the latter painting, an energetic yellow background is superimposed by deep magenta paint strokes that swirl into the forms of peony blossoms. The flowers are of various sizes and transparencies, as evidenced by the translucent blossom at top left and much smaller blossom at bottom right, which projects a hasty splotched and dripped appearance. The ten flowers that constitute areas around the outer perimeter run off the edges of the panel, implying a greater sense of space as well as alluding to traditional Japanese compositions, which rely on flatness and cropping devices.

The placement of flowers on each Peony Blossom Painting demonstrates an organized arrangement much like the poetic structure of the haikus. In the magenta Peonies, the flowers seem to float within the yellow void (Fig. 28). Other than the paint drips that have traveled from
one blossom to another, each bloom maintains its own alienation from its floral counterparts, much like the brief stanzas and free-standing words of haikus, such as “Peonies,” “Kusunoki,” and “Armour.” Despite the autonomy of each term, however, each flows together within the poetic unit. Pictorially, this arrangement exists in the paint drips that connect each flower form.

The green *Peonies* contain a more linear organization than the magenta. Upon the light mint background rests a series of five white blossoms of varying size. Two incomplete peonies are positioned at the top edge. The far right side of the panel contains a flat green area, from which a cascade of green and white drips flows to the bottom of the panel. The drips relay the notion that a sixth blossom ostensibly existed here. Defining the white, dripping, circular forms as peonies relies on the words inscribed on the painting. Viewing the painting from left to right, one notices a series of haiku fragments that accompany the first four blossoms. Each inscription is written as a short stanza, the visual shape of which echoes the adjacent flower. A graphite-inscribed haiku by Kikaku, which was previously discussed as part of the magenta *Peony*, hovers slightly above and between the no-longer extant peony and the blossom to its left.

The final *Peony Blossom Painting* consists of a yellow background with vibrant red flower forms (Figs. 26, 27). The inscription, again by Bashô, is as follows:

```
The pistil
of the Peony
gushes
out
into the noonday
Sunlight

From the heart
of the Peony
a drunken
bee.
```

The second part of the inscription also appears on the green *Peony*. On the green composition, the familiar inscription is paired with “The Peony/ Quivers.” The phallic implication of both passages is not uncommon to Twombly’s body of work, which often borders on erotic imagery. Upon this canvas, the vibrant yellows and reds combine with similarly energetic words: “gushes,” “Sunlight,” and “drunken/bee,” which we can imagine flying from the center of the peony, as does the pistil.

**“And Other Things”: the relationship of word and image symbols**
As the above visual analyses demonstrate, the painted peonies and the written haikus contain structural similarities, reminding us of the simultaneously comparable and disparate relationship between word and image symbols. An examination of the other paintings—“Other Things,” to borrow from the title of the Avignon exhibition—exhibited with the peony and text paintings reveals that although legible text may not exist in each painting, the abstract gestures uphold a script-like appearance. In my previous discussions of the painted marks that constructed the Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings, I have shown that both series maintain a separation between words and writings; for instance, the blossoms are painted while the words are scrawled more or less legibly in crayon and pastel. Some of the other paintings in the series complicate a lucid distinction between the two symbol systems.

Two of the paintings from “Other Things” consist of a white canvas ground upon which deep blue gestures extend horizontally, much like a handwritten text (Figs. 33, 35). The visible brushstrokes in some places and the flowing, vertical drips remind the viewer of the tactile, gestural quality that appears in all the paintings from both Roses and Peony Blossom Paintings. Identifying these marks as ostensibly tied to written script is justified by Twombly’s discussion of “pseudo-writing” in his work. In an interview with Nicholas Serota, the artist describes a contemporaneous series entitled Notes from Salalah (2005-07) as “a take-off on Arabic” (Fig. 55). Produced around the same time as Peony Blossom Paintings, this series of three works contains vertical and horizontal daubs of green that are worked over with white and gray calligraphic strokes. The lighter-colored marks on the top layer are produced by thin acrylic that drips down the panel, upon which revisions and additions produce erasures. The marks of Notes from Salalah loop and intertwine and the blue gestural paintings extend horizontally across the canvas. Ostensibly tied to writing through appearance, these gestural marks cannot be read as word symbols, yet they contain visual similarities to written script.

This writing motif is hardly a new development in Twombly’s practice, as evidenced by an untitled series from the late sixties and early seventies commonly referred to as “blackboard paintings” (Fig. 56). This body of work consists of gray painted backgrounds upon which white crayon marks swirl and loop in forms that beg to be interpreted as writing. Notes from Salalah (2005-07), created around the same time as Peony Blossom Paintings, exude a similar effect.

123 Serota, “Cy Twombly: History Behind the Thought,” 53.
124 Ibid.
(Fig. 55). Notes from Salalah and the blackboard paintings both contain gestural marks that are script-like in appearance, and also become decorative; this is particularly true for Notes from Salalah, as Twombly has indicated their connection to Arabic writing.\textsuperscript{125} It is also important to note that the title Salalah, taking its name from the capital of the southern province Dhofar in Oman, imbues this series with a sense of location and history. Such a connection is created in a comparable manner to which peony haikus are reminiscent of Japan.

In addition to containing the appearance of writing, the blue gestural paintings can be linked to the structure of haiku and various Japanese pictorial forms as well. Traditional Japanese haikus consist of one line of seventeen syllables, and in this way are as brief as the sketched gestures of the blue paintings.\textsuperscript{126} Initially called hokku, which translates to “verse that presents” or “verse that breaks out,” haiku is described by Zen master Robert Aitken as encapsulating “the vital experience” of its subject.\textsuperscript{127} Connecting Twombly’s painting to writing is legitimized when considering that Bashô’s poetic practice also has been linked to Japanese pictorial forms, specifically the haiga. This term describes paintings juxtaposed with a seventeen-syllable verse that is usually inscribed on the painting and relates to the content.\textsuperscript{128} Ikeno Taiga’s Chuang-tzu and the Butterfly is an example of the haiga (Fig. 57). The translated calligraphy reads: “If there were a voice/ The man might be awakened/ Flying butterfly.”\textsuperscript{129} The colors of the haiga typically are muted, or the hues are relegated to monochrome, and usually the style is truncated. Most importantly when considering the genre in the context of Peony Blossom Paintings, the overall appearance of the haiga mimics the poetic structure it complements.

**Exhibition display and its effect on memory**

Considering the exhibition display of Peony Blossom Paintings allows for further discussion of how each work might be understood within the construction of cultural memory. In a publication that accompanied Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things art

\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.\textsuperscript{126} The common understanding that a haiku consists of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables describes American haiku. Traditional Japanese haiku also contains three separate parts of five, seven, and five syllables, but the seventeen total are arranged together on one line. See Robert Aitken, A Zen Wave: Bashô’s Haiku and Zen (New York: Weatherhill, Inc., 1995), 21.\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.\textsuperscript{128} See Joan O’Mara, “Bashô and the Haiga,” in Matsuo Bashô’s Poetic Spaces: Exploring Haikai Intersections, ed. Eleanor Kerkham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 201-15.\textsuperscript{129} Robert Aitken provides this translation. See Aitken, A Zen Wave, 118.
historian Éric Mézil provides an important account of the exhibition, drawing upon his experiences with the artist throughout the planning of the show to elucidate the carefully calculated display (Figs. 58-61). The exhibition in Avignon opened in 2007 during the month of June. The month is notable, as it celebrated the peony flower during the Japanese Heian period. Although subtle, the reference indicates Japanese culture and history.

The exhibition space was similarly deliberate. The show resulted from purposeful contemplation by the artist, who considered “the very specific light of Provence and the aura of the hôtel particulier transformed into a museum.” Hosting the exhibition within a hôtel particulier, a private, urban space, infuses the works with an aura of regality in much the same way that peonies remind one of Imperial Japan. The space in Avignon consisted of a central salon, from which exhibition rooms spread out symmetrically. In order to remain as true as possible to the original spatial organization and to promote a more seamless movement of visitors, Twombly arranged for the removal of a dividing wall that had disrupted the traditional hôtel particulier entrance. Large French doors permitted views of the outdoors, the natural world that is pictorially evoked by the blossoming panels.

The arrangement of artwork is crucial in understanding some of the more abstract paintings as floral evocations of Japan and memory. In addition to Peony Blossom Paintings, works on paper depicting floral motifs were displayed throughout the exhibition; by association both groups lend meaning to other paintings that may not immediately project floral subject matter. For example, two of the untitled paintings (Figs. 34, 36) contain white backgrounds upon which purple circular forms float in tandem. Juxtaposed with Peony Blossom Paintings, which are inscribed with haikus about peonies, these images become ideograms of flowers as well. Here, writing and image merge. A similar conclusion can be made about two more untitled paintings (Figs. 37, 38), which are reminiscent of the Bacchus paintings that have been discussed previously. Some of Twombly’s contemporary plaster and bronze sculptures were positioned throughout the exhibition space as well (Figs. 58-61). Mézil connects the sculptures to Greek Nikes, Giacometti’s figures, Brancusi’s towers, and Picasso’s Cubist compositions. This

---

130 Mézil does not indicate whether Twombly was aware of the significance of the month to the Heian period, only that the artist “expressly wished to begin his exhibition during June.” Mézil, “Fire Flowers,” 178.
131 Ibid., 172.
132 Ibid., 175.
133 Mézil, “Fire Flowers,” 176.
observation alludes to Twombly’s long interest with evoking the classical; furthermore, by referencing works by modern masters Twombly is situated within the trajectory of canonical art history.

**Conclusion**

Like the multilayered compositions of *Peony Blossom Paintings*, the nature of haiku allows for multiple interpretations while maintaining a sense of the eternal. In her discussion of Bashō, Reichhold states, “While Bashō’s work is definitely a product of time and place, his ability to capture and convey universal aspects of humanity and our world makes his poems timeless.”

A final haiku by Bashō alludes to the multisensory possibilities of floral symbols. This haiku’s subject is cherry blossoms; although the verse is not used by Twombly, its structural similarity and overarching meaning provide a useful parallel to my discussion of *Peony Blossom Paintings*:

> How many, many things
> They bring to mind——
> Cherry blossoms!  

The poem exemplifies how associations are triggered by a single thought or object, which in this case is the cherry blossom. The resulting connections thus construct memory; with Bashō as the narrator, we can imagine Bashō encountering a cherry blossom, which in turn reminds him of past cherry-blossom festivals that were popular in his native Japan.

Aitken utilizes this haiku to elucidate the aspect of Japanese thought that connects the transience of human life and a mindset of nonattachment to cherry blossoms, which he describes as “Blooming for so short a time, and then casting loose in a shower of lovely petals in the early April wind.”

Through image and inscription, *Peony Blossom Paintings* capture and immortalize a sense of Japanese culture while simultaneously projecting a multilayered palimpsest of writing, memories and sensations. During the *Blooming* exhibition in Avignon, one visitor was so overcome by the works that she passionately kissed one of the paintings, leaving behind a red

---

136 Cherry-blossom time constitutes a significant event for the Japanese. For the few days when the flowers are in full bloom, people make a point to visit cherry blossom groves and enjoy picnics beneath the flowered trees.
lipstick stain. The woman was arrested by French police upon her exit from the show, but the trace of her lips remained, existing as yet another layer upon a vibrant canvas.¹³⁸

CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated, Twombly’s *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* can be understood as sites of memory. Each painting consists of multiple layers of paint and poetic traces. The overlapping of paint, handwritten scrawls that are sometimes difficult to discern, and spatial networks of form and symbols exist simultaneously, providing a shifting sense of reality that is similar to the eternally permutable and fluctuating characteristic of memory. I have examined the palimpsest organization and manifold poetic evocations of each series in order to make a connection to the construction of cultural memory. The simultaneous presence of painted images and handwritten text facilitates multiple interpretations, some of which I have revealed through analyzing the formal pictorial elements and the poetic structures and evocations of the inscriptions. I have connected these paintings to examples of Twombly’s earlier writing, themes alluding to the classics elsewhere in the artist’s oeuvre and inscribed funerary monuments with which he may be familiar.

My discussion of writing and memory in the first chapter identifies the artistic arena of the 1950s in which Twombly emerged, which connects *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* to his earlier works that are dependent on writing. I suggest that handwritten inscriptions on a flat plane convey layers of meaning that are compounded by surrounding pictorial elements. Connecting the practice of inscribing and layering to the effects of graffiti and the construction of cultural memory, I set up a vocabulary for discussing *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings*.

My deliberation of *Roses* demonstrates the complex experience of viewing these paintings, positioning them as sites of memory. The gestural, painted qualities infuse the paintings with an indexical reminder, or memory, of the artist. Similarly, the denotative and connotative messages set forth by the symbols of roses and written inscriptions provide additional and simultaneous meanings, such as references to the classical themes that Twombly has employed throughout his career.

Finally I discuss *Peony Blossom Paintings* as sites of memory. Peonies, as indicated by painted forms, titles, and descriptive haikus, infuse these works with a sense of Japanese culture. This notion is compounded by evidence that Twombly has visited the country and owns a
collection of decorative art objects from Japan. In essence, Twombly has instilled the paintings with his own memories, which become ours throughout the course of our viewing experience.

My visual and textual readings of the paintings provide a more nuanced examination than offered by previous scholarship, which has ignored secondary sources pertaining to the poems inscribed by Twombly. As I have demonstrated, the pictorial and textual components contain myriad parallels. For this reason, one must discuss both in tandem. Additionally, such a framework might be useful in other studies pertaining to artists who utilize a similar combination of painting and appropriated text in their artwork. My word and image study of *Roses* and *Peony Blossom Paintings* thus contributes to a more complete understanding of the works and demonstrates the myriad interpretations possible when viewing these paintings.
Figure 1: *Untitled (Red and Green Roses)*, 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 2: (Detail) *Untitled (Red and Green Roses)*, 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.
Figure 3. *Untitled (Red and Yellow Roses)*, 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 4: (Detail) *Untitled (Red and Yellow Roses)*, 2008. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Photo by the author.
Figure 5: *Untitled (Yellow Roses)*, 2008.
Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 6: (Detail) *Untitled (Yellow Roses)*, 2008.
Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.
Figure 7: *Untitled (Roses)*, 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 8: (Detail) *Untitled (Blue Roses)*, 2008.

Figure 9: (Detail) *Untitled (Blue Roses)*, 2008.
Figure 10: Untitled (Magenta Roses), 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 11: (Detail) Untitled (Magenta Roses), 2008.
Figure 12: *Untitled (Pink Roses)*, 2008. Acrylic on plywood and canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 13: (Detail) *Untitled (Pink Roses)*, 2008.

Figure 14: (Detail) *Untitled (Pink Roses)*, 2008.
Figure 15: *The Rose I*, 2008. Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.).

Figure 16: *The Rose II*, 2008. Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.).

Figure 17: (Detail) *The Rose II*, 2008.
Figure 18: *The Rose III*, 2008. Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.).

Figure 19: *The Rose IV*, 2008. Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.).

Figure 20: *The Rose V*, 2008. Acrylic on wood panel. 252 x 740 cm (99 ¼ x 291 ¼ in.).
Figure 21: (Exhibition view) *The Roses*, 2009. Gagosian Gallery, Britannia Street, London.

Figure 22: *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon, and pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 3/16 x 217 5/16 in.). Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Donald B. Marron, New York.
Figure 23: (Detail) *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007.

Figure 24: (Detail) *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007.

Figure 25: (Detail) *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007.
Figure 26: *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2006-07.
Acrylic, wax crayon, colored pencil on wood. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 27: (Detail) *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2006-07.
Figure 28: *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007.
Acrylic, wax crayon, colored pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 3/16 x 217 5/16 in).
The Broad Art Foundation, Santa Monica.

Figure 29: (Detail) *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007.
Figure 30: *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in). Private collection.

Figure 31: *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in). Private collection, Atherton, California.
Figure 32. *Untitled (Peony Blossom Paintings)*, 2007. Acrylic, wax crayon, pencil on wood. 252 x 552 cm (99 ¼ x 217 ¼ in). Private collection.


Figures 37 and 38: *Untitled (Gaeta)*, 2007. Acrylic, pencil on wood in artist’s frame. Each 266 x 201 cm (104 ¾ x 79 in). Private collections.
Figure 39: *Untitled (Analysis of the Rose as Sentimental Despair)*, 1985. From a series of five. Oil-based house paint, oil paint, wax crayon on canvas mounted on wood panel. 245 ½ x 160 ½ cm (96 5/8 x 63 3/16 in). Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston.

Figure 40: *Free Wheeler*, 1955. Industrial paint, colored and lead pencil, crayon, pastel on canvas. 174 x 190 cm (68 ½ x 74 ¾ in.). Marx collection, Berlin.
Figure 41. *Academy*, 1955. Industrial paint, colored and lead pencil, pastel on canvas. 191 x 241 cm (75 ¼ x 94 7/8 in). Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 42: *Leda and the Swan*, 1962. Oil, pencil, crayon on canvas. 190.5 x 200 cm (75 x 78 ¾ in). Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Figure 43: *Nini’s Painting*, 1971. Chalk, crayon, pencil on canvas. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 44: (Detail) *Nini’s Painting*, 1971.
Figure 45: Funerary monument of Lucius Munatius Plancus. Monte Orlando, Gaeta, Italy.

Figure 46: (Detail) Inscription of funerary monument of Lucius Munatius Plancus.

Figure 47: Inscription at Turk’s Grotto. Monte Orlando, Gaeta, Italy.
Figure 48: *Untitled (In Memory of Alvaro de Campos)*, 2002.
Wood, synthetic resin paint, pencil, synthetic resin putty.
Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 49: (Detail) *Untitled (In Memory of Alvaro de Campos)*, 2002.
Figure 50: *Untitled (In Memory of Babur)*, 2000. Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.

Figure 51: *Untitled (Bacchus)*, 2005. From a series of 8. Acrylic on canvas. 317.5 x 421.6 cm (125 x 166 in.). Museum Brandhorst, Munich. Author’s photo.
Figure 52: Photograph of paintbrushes attached to long poles in Twombly’s studio in Gaeta, Italy, summer 2008. Photograph courtesy of Xavier Salomon, reprinted in Cullinan and Serota.

Figure 53: Untitled (A Painting in Nine Parts), 1988. Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston.
Figure 54: Folding Screen, c. 1800-1820.
Rimpa School, Edo Period. 170 x 370 cm (66.9 x 145.7 in.).

Figure 55: Note III, from the series III Notes from Salalah, 2005-07. Acrylic on wood panel. 243.8 x 365.8 cm (96 x 144 in.). Private collection.
Figure 56. *Untitled (Blackboard Paintings)*, 1967. Oil based house paint, wax crayon, graphite on canvas. 254 2/3 x 434 1/3 cm (100 ¼ x 171 in.). Cy Twombly Gallery, Houston.

Figure 57: Ikeno Taiga, *Chuang-tzu and the Butterfly*. The calligraphy reads: “If there were a voice/ The man might be awakened/ Flying butterfly.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


_______. “Cy was Here; Cy’s Up.” *Artforum* 33:1 (September, 1994): 118.


87


Wilson, Audrey V. “The Developing Concept of Death in Rilke’s Prose and Poetry.” PhD diss., Florida State University, 1972.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Justine McCullough is a candidate for a Master of Arts degree in art history from Florida State University (Tallahassee, Florida). This thesis is part of the completion of her master’s degree.

Justine earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in May 2008 from The College of Wooster (Wooster, Ohio), with a major in art history and a minor in English. In fall 2011, she will begin coursework at Sotheby’s Institute of Art in New York City.