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REMEMBRANCES OF PLACES AND THINGS

When Cy Twombly was in his seventies, he began remastering decades old as well as newer photographs at the Fresson Atelier, just outside of Paris. The Fresson process transformed Twombly's seemingly casual snapshots into misty reveries. When you view the late artist's images—both the early ones printed in black and white and the later ones, in color—you feel as if you are looking through a scrim or a frosted window or your mind's eye. Like his paintings, they evoke times gone by and far away places. As his most representational works, they also arouse our senses. You can smell the flowers, hear the breeze through the trees, see the glare of the sun, touch the marble, taste the lemons.

Twombly began taking photographs early in his six decades-long career. During the summer of 1951, which the fledgling painter spent at Black Mountain College, Aaron Siskind became a mentor. Siskind, who had just been the only photographer to participate in the recent—and now legendary—9th Street show, also exhibited at the North Carolina school, forty black and white prints that verged on abstraction. His unusual compositions, not Franz Kline's slashing calligraphies that often are cited, inspired Twombly paintings of this period, including works exhibited in a solo show in Chicago that Siskind helped arrange.

Decades later, after he attained fame for his huge, multi-panel paintings, his minimally spare sculptures, and his astonishingly vibrant works on paper, Twombly became great friends with the photographer Sally Mann. She, too, was born and raised in Lexington, Virginia. In 2011, at MoMA's celebration of the life and work of Twombly, Mann said her older colleague "brought to his work a certain vulnerability, an ambivalence about the fleeting nature and mutability of beauty itself, a vexed awareness of mortality...but also Homeric scope, intensity, exultant joy, and a Proustian passion for the ephemeral."

The five photographs on display here certainly fit this bill. Though the European lemons from Gaeta appear monumental, they will soon perish and lose their freshness. The sun at Miramare is about to disappear for the evening. As for the roses from Gaeta, they, too, have a short life span, first giving up their scent and then, their petals. When Twombly photographed two bunches of flowers, he ignored their "artistic" arrangements; and a third group he scattered on a round table as if they were scientific specimens.

Twombly once aptly described his art as "kind of homemade looking." These photographs are also sophisticated, avant-garde, and filled with feeling.

Phyllis Tuchman

New York, November 2014



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MEMORY'S IMAGE

Cy Twombly used photography as a sketchbook, recording what was happening around him. He made snapshots of his instructors and fellow artists at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1951 and the following year photographed his own work and that of his fellow student Robert Rauschenberg in Rauschenberg's New York studio. The photographs were not meant to be exhibited or published.

Like many artists, Twombly immediately took to the Polaroid SX-70 when it came out in 1972. Smartly designed and inexpensive, it produced the first instant image, spitting out a picture at the touch of its red button. All the photographer had to do was watch and wait for the image to resolve itself. The SX-70 picture was three inches square and its colours reminded you of cotton candy or pop. Its jewel-like surface transformed the world into a private record, a permanent memory of something seen. Twombly recorded all his subjects -- the echoing rooms of his houses, the foliage beyond, sunsets, the lemons and flowers of Rome and Gaeta -- in a series of personal visions.

Like all colour photographs, the SX-70s were unstable. The colours shifted and faded. Perhaps it was for that reason that in 1998 Twombly took his SX-70 snapshots to the Fresson family in Savigny-sur-Orge outside Paris to have them rephotographed and printed in their proprietary process. A type of carbon print, Fresson doesn't use the light sensitivity of silver to produce an image but rather pigmented gelatin sensitized in such a way that when light hits, the gelatin hardens. What is left is then washed away leaving a positive print. Fresson is pigment based, unlike the dye-based processes usually used in colour photography; it is difficult to master -- the negative has to be contact printed four times in four different colours one on top of the other in perfect register -- as well as expensive to make: the family chooses carefully for whom it will print. But what it produces is a print that is permanent - no other colour photograph really is.

Twombly's Fresson prints turned his Polaroids, which snatched an object or scene from the fluid movement of time, into soft, grainy medium size images that captured the illusive nature of memory itself.

Marta Braun

Toronto, November 2014



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INTERVIEW: NICOLA DEL ROSCIO

James Barron: Your garden in Gaeta is so beautiful, with over 140 species of palm and hundreds of other plants from all over the world. Cy lived nearby. Tell me about history in your garden.

Nicola Del Roscio: The citron in my garden, for instance, have a fascinating history. Some were invented for the King of Naples, others were invented for the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Some have Baroque names like *Scompiglio di Venere*, which means “the confusion of Venus.” I later saw these citrons in Cy’s photos.

JB: Are the roses in *Light Flowers, Gaeta* from your garden?

NDR: Yes. Cy picked some ancient roses blooming during winter in my garden, for his home. When they died, rather than throw them away, he scattered them on a marble table in his studio and photographed them.

JB: Tell me about Cy and nature.

NDR: Cy especially loved trips on trains and buses because the seats were raised in respect to the road. He devoured the images from the countryside: mountains, ruins, architecture.

JB: That’s interesting because the vision in the photos is usually blurred. There is a dreamy quality like when you see a fleeting image from a train. Let’s talk about Cy’s use of Polaroid photography.

NDR: Cy never had the patience to follow technical details. He wanted a quick result. He liked the magic of watching the image come through on the SX-70. It was a great invention!

JB: Where did he keep the Polaroids?

NDR: He kept them in boxes in the studio in Lexington or Gaeta. He was always composing and sequencing from realistic to more evanescent.

JB: In “Sculpture Detail, Lexington” it is hard to see any sculpture.

NDR: The photographs of Twombly are not documentation. A spot of color to describe an emotion or a poetic state of mind. The characteristic of Cy’s photos is always pictorial.

James D. Barron
Rome, November 2014



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CY TWOMBLY PHOTOGRAPHS AND OTHER WORKS

"Remembrances of Places and Things" by Phyllis Tuchman
"Memory's Image" by Marta Braun
Interview: Nicola Del Roscio

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