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*Fifty Days at Iliam*

*Fifty Days at Iliam*: A Visceral Experience

I consider myself to have a great love of art and to be very appreciative of visual aesthetics. I looked forward to having an excuse to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art in order to craft this essay and I eagerly set about on my journey. However, upon discovery of Cy Twonbly’s collection *Fifty Days of Iliam,* I was quite taken aback and I caught myself almost reacting with a laugh. His works are located in the Modern and Contemporary Art section of the museum which should have been a clue as to what I was about to find. I had been expecting to see paintings that depicted the Trojan War in a very realistic manner, typical of most paintings done under a military-style genre. Other visitors reacted in a similar manner: one in which they did not know quite how to react. This type of reaction is generally experienced when one encounters modern art. Should one laugh? Frown? Show confusion? Instead, I found that the answer was to take more time to gather my thoughts and to approach Twombly’s works from an intellectual manner before even attempting to react to them emotionally.

Twombly’s interpretation of Homer’s epic the *Iliad* is contained in ten canvases spatially arranged in such a manner that completely throws the audience into a full multi-dimensional experience that places them in the center of the action. Created with mediums such as oil, oil pastels, and graphite pencil, his collection is almost crudely simplistic. It is a flash of bright colors, a mess of shapes, and an assembly of roughly written names of characters taken directly from the Iliad in an attempt to capture the spirit and the atmosphere of the Trojan War. As stated, it is certainly a messy form of art that is not what I would consider to be aesthetically pleasing. It is not easy to look at, but the arrangement of the works is effective in drawing in an audience who is willing to spend some time with Twombly’s art in an effort to understand its meaning.

Shape and color are perhaps the most important elements of *Fifty Days at Iliam*. There is a prevalence of triangles scattered throughout Twombly’s canvases. They seem to symbolize both gods and important figures in the *Iliad* usually seen in the throes of battle. Another common shape is a sort of cloud form that perhaps resembles the soul or spirit of the figure that Twombly is attempting to portray. Some of these cloud forms are more circular in nature and may show a distinction between immortal gods and mortal man, as the shape of the circle is unbroken which could represent immortality. Finally, the prevalence of phallic symbols is almost impossible to ignore, usually placed within battle. This must be seen as a symbol for male aggression. Color also plays an incredibly important role. Red seems to me to be the most important color used, as it both portrays warrior Achilles and the Achaean army. Red is an angry color, depicting fire, blood, war, and rage.

Upon first reading the prompt for this essay, I found it interesting to note that Twombly’s works were created two years after the end of the Vietnam War. I wondered if Twombly’s interpretation of the Trojan War would reflect the anti-war sentiments that many expressed during the years of the Vietnam War. Upon close reflection of his art, I believe that my gut reaction may have been correct. It seems as if several important figures are missing from this collection: Helen, Chryseis, and Briseis. In other words, the cause of the Trojan War itself. The war that Twombly has created in his paintings reflects no explicit cause or apparent reason. The prevalence of the phallic symbol could show that war is a primal and almost animalistic urge. I believe that there is a distinct possibility that *Fifty Days at Iliam* could represent anti-war sentiments as expressed in an artistic manner by Twombly.

The analysis of this collection was both an intellectual stretch and a learning experience. Without prior knowledge of both Homer’s *Iliad* and an art background, I would have found an understanding of Twombly’s sentiments to be incredibly difficult. In order to be able to begin to comprehend the visceral emotions that can be experienced through close study and analysis of these works, it is vital to first approach this collection from an intellectual stand point and to abandon judgment that may come about upon first glance of these paintings. It is difficult to move past gut reactions and judgments that may occur from entering the gallery for the first time. However, with a certain amount of structure and intellectual background, it is possible to begin to appreciate this collection and what Twombly may have been hoping to accomplish in his artistic interpretation of the Trojan War.