



John Walker
Moments of Observation

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Sheldon Museum of Art
January 18–July 14, 2019

Introduction and *Beer With a Painter: John Walker*, Revisited by Jennifer Samet



John Walker's recent paintings are about a compression of energy: forms and patterns locked into one another. There is an urgency to his most recent paintings, a directness that is about that relationship between a person and a place, and the impulse to record that relationship through mark making. It is symbolized by how the forms lock into one another: the penetration of earth and shallow water. I think about the painting by Cezanne, *The Bay of Marseilles, Seen from L'Estaque*, which is also about water and shore locking into one another like mirroring, perfect jigsaw puzzle pieces.

For more than fifteen years, Walker has turned his attention and gaze to Seal Point, Maine, where he lives and works. But in the newest paintings, Walker pares down his formal vocabulary to elements like patterns of zigzag lines, painterly, irregular grids, oval-shaped forms and dots.

They are abstractions, but they are also landscape paintings that turn the genre on its head. They are oriented vertically, rather than the horizontal format we traditionally code as landscape. The horizon line is pushed to the uppermost portion of the canvas so that only a thin band of form suggests sky, clouds, sun or moon. Instead, Walker focuses on the patterns that form when earth and water meet. And in this area of Maine, the inlets and bays are as much about mud as they are about water. His point of reference is the tidal flat: a subject with which he has been engaged since 2000.

I interviewed Walker in 2013 for my column in *Hyperallergic*, "Beer with a Painter." He said, of his subject, "I paint in this place that we call 'shitty cove.' ... I found a place where it smells, and all the garbage comes in and that allowed me to paint, because it wasn't scenic." Walker is interested in the mud and the earth and the matter and the material. He privileges this over what he calls the scenic, but also over the intellectual, the idea, the impulse to beautify.

We don't read Walker's paintings; rather, the elements are communicated viscerally.

They are paintings about the paint itself and the experience of touch. When I look at Walker's paintings, I'm left with the feeling that is the irregularity of the patterns, the thick gobs of paint, the sensation of mud under my toes, rain, or snow, or tears falling down. We don't read Walker's paintings; rather, the elements are communicated viscerally. We sense the artist's process, as well: laying down colored forms onto the surface, canvases and pigments and paper exposed to the outdoors and held, turned over, and moved. There is a weight to his grids that conjures the feeling of a blanket being laid down on top of us.

Walker's admiration of Aboriginal Australian art is known (he lived in Australia for several years), and these paintings refer to indigenous art: the dots, the repetition of pattern, the interactions of simple forms. These forms, in native traditions, have known meanings; they are pictorial symbols, which are passed down, and not invented by the artist. Walker respects this approach. In particular, he has supported the work of Aboriginal women, which makes me consider ideas of gender in his painting. And while one could locate machismo in the brutal energy of this work, the reductive painterly vocabulary, and its dense facture, I also find aesthetic markers I associate with the feminine: the imperfect grids, the way forms suggest gravity, and the use of impasto paint to suggest earth and ooze and fluidity, rather than stoic permanence.

Walker has called Goya "[his] idol, the main player in [his] life," and the recent paintings still bear out this relationship. Walker's *Nomad I* feels connected to Goya's painting *Self-Portrait with Dr. Arrieta* (1820) in format and emotional suggestions. The area to the left, in Walker's painting, is ghostly, murky atmosphere, while on the right, black-and-white checkerboard forms push and melt into each other like the self-portrait of the weakened Goya in the arms of his physician.



Nomad I
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches



At this point I've done about seventy-five interviews for the ongoing column, "Beer with a Painter," and when asked what my favorite is, I usually say it's the one with Walker. It was early in the series, and I lucked out. Although I was traveling from New York to Boston for this purpose, our appointment was loose. Walker instructed me to find him in his Boston University studio sometime in the afternoon. Three days before our scheduled meeting, bombs were detonated in a terror attack at the Boston Marathon.

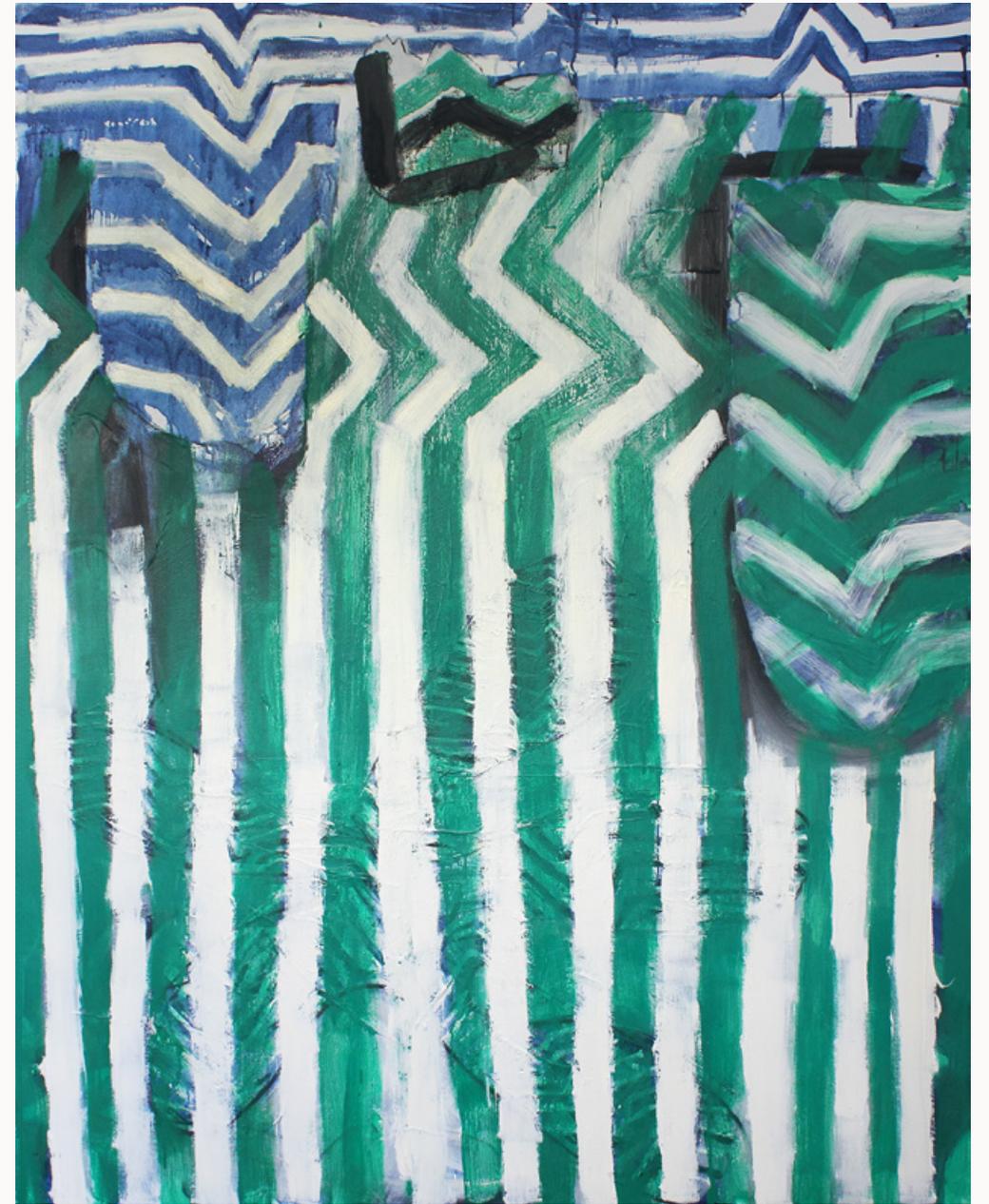
Walker and I never talked about this event. We talked about art and his background as a painter. I remember, afterwards, feeling like I hadn't needed to record the conversation. I could repeat his stories almost verbatim. They were direct, personal, and mesmerizing. They encapsulated the humanity of what it was to be in Boston that week. We didn't need to wrap words around it. The same is true for his paintings. The pictorial symbols and patterns and marks are not about the momentary; they are about holding onto something. They transcend personal identity and private tragedy into something universally understood.

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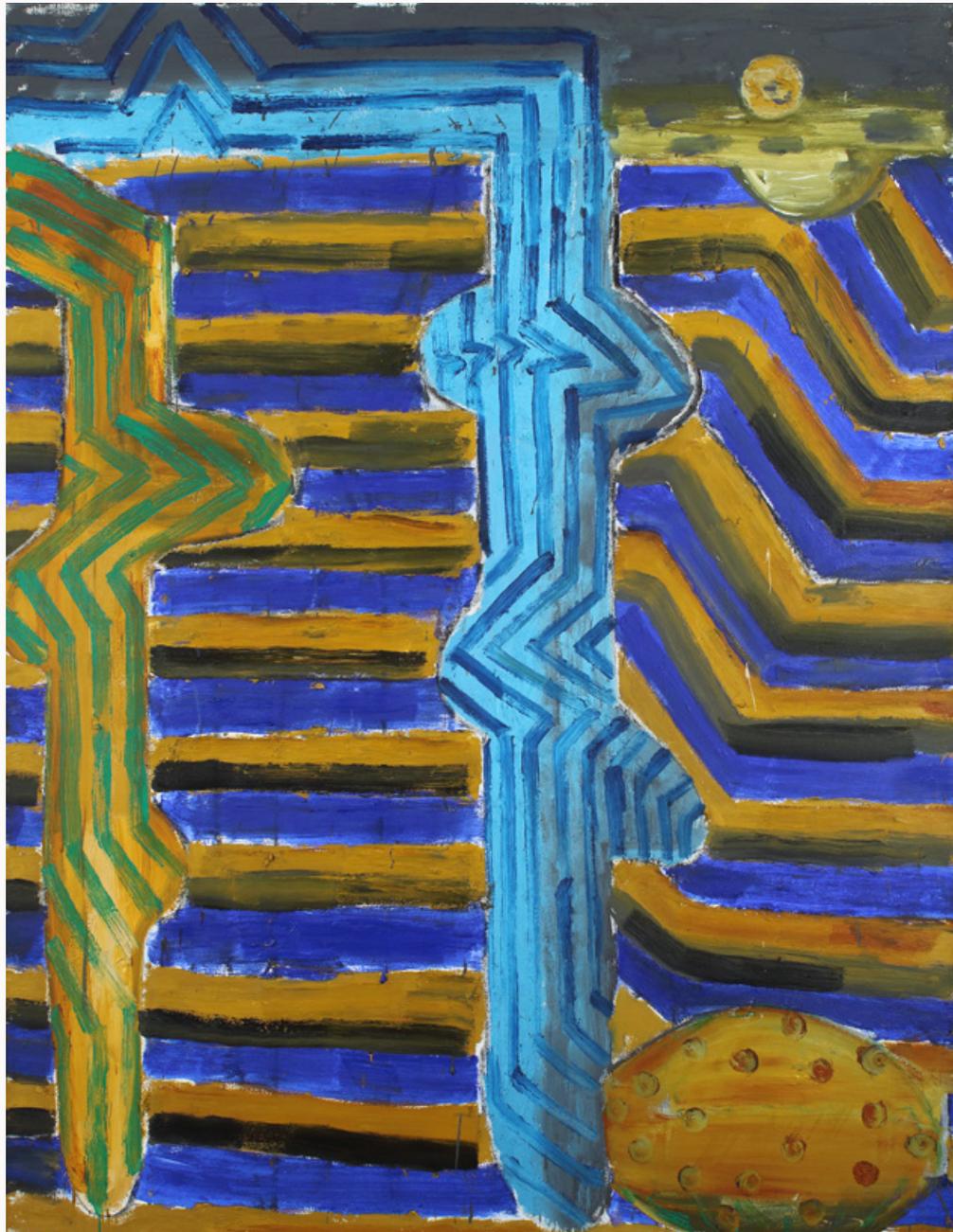
North Branch Light
Oil on canvas, 2007–2008
84 x 66 inches
Installation view



Tidal Touch VI (Coastal Touch I)
Oil on canvas, 2014
84 x 66 inches



Passage
Oil on canvas, 2015
84 x 66 inches



Hush
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches



Stern View
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches



Tidal Change
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches



Looking In
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches



Seal Point Series #V III
Oil on bingo card, 2007
7¼ x 5½ inches



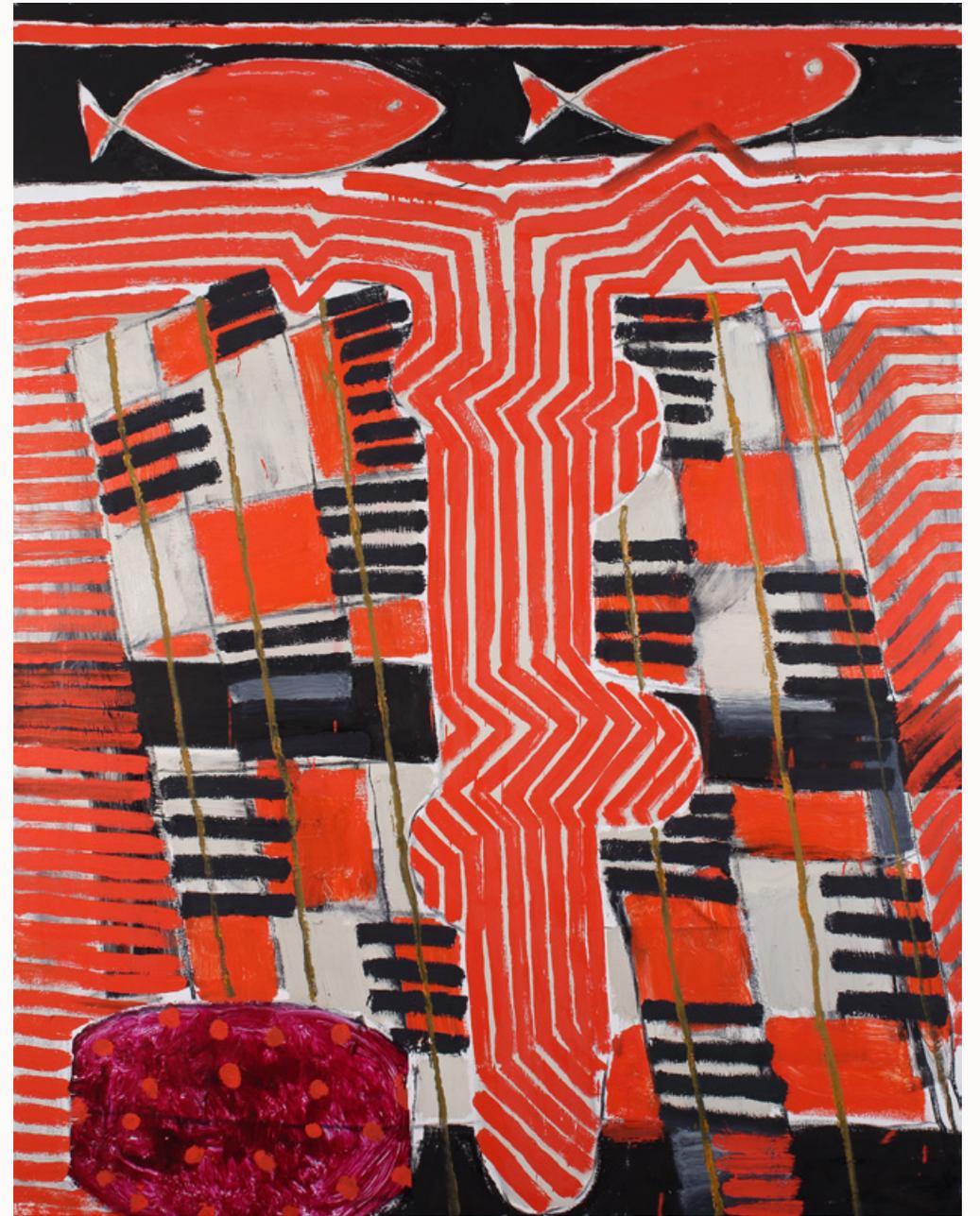
Seal Point Series #V VIII
Oil on bingo card, 2007
7¼ x 5½ inches



Ripple
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches



Still Life I
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches



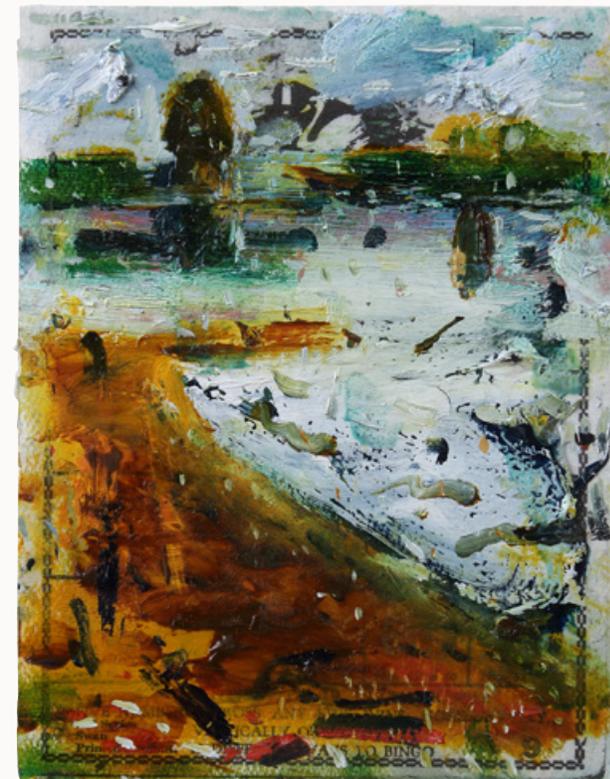
The Catch
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches



Nomad II
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches



Harrington Road Series #39
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



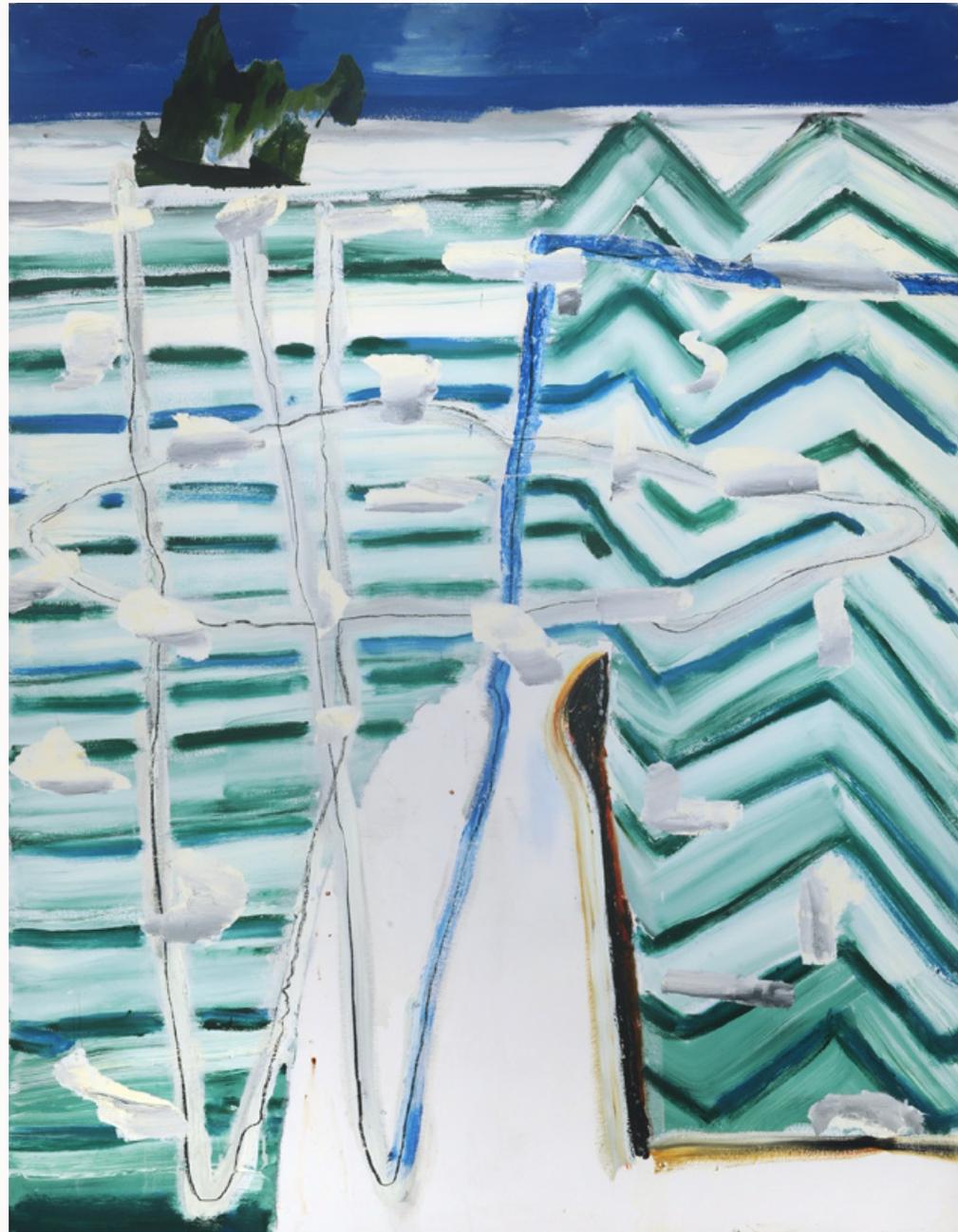
Untitled #1
Oil on bingo card, 2014
7¼ x 5½ inches



Evening Light Low Tide
Oil on canvas, 2000
84 x 66 inches



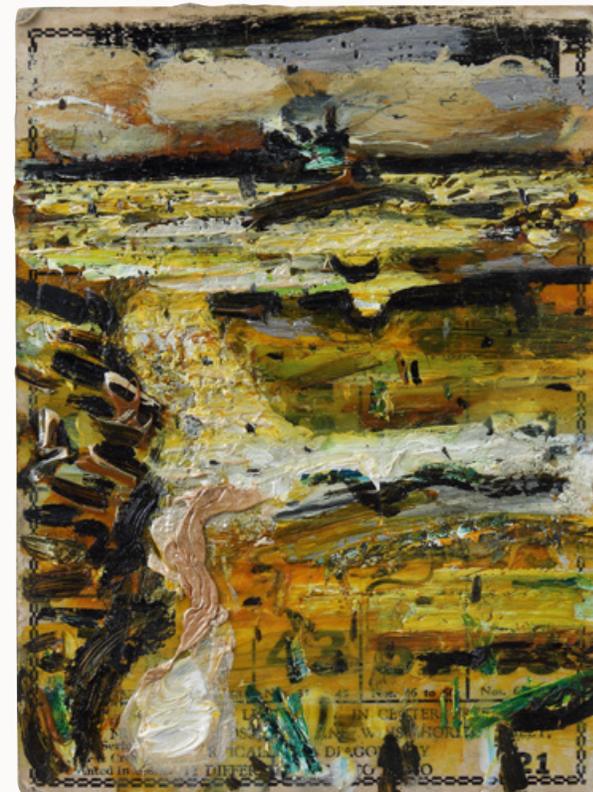
Place
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches



Wake
Oil on canvas, 2014
84 x 66 inches



Harrington Road Series #6
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



Harrington Road Series #10
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



Beer With a Painter: John Walker, Revisited
by Jennifer Samet

Jennifer Samet

Can you tell me about your early exposure to art and how growing up in England affected your painting? What was your family's relationship to art?

John Walker

I grew up in Birmingham, England, one of the most industrial cities anywhere. Through my brothers, I was introduced to the English countryside. They were recreational fishermen—perhaps in reaction to the Second World War. As a young boy, I followed them everywhere. Basically, though, I lived right in the middle of an industrial city.

I suppose my introduction to art was my mother, who was a fantastic woman. When she was twelve, her mother died in childbirth, and she had to leave school to look after her brothers, and a new baby. But somehow, she managed to educate herself. She was a supplier of knowledge; she took me to museums, showed me what a Constable looked like, read Shakespeare to us.

She was what you would call in those days a "street mother"—one of those women that society depended on, to function. If someone gave birth, she was there. If someone died, she'd wrap him up. And of course, I followed her everywhere, so I saw all that. She lived until she was 102. She was a life force.

My father had been very damaged in the First World War. And they met when she was an auxiliary nurse. They believed in that awful Victorian idea, fed by the ruling class, that work was a virtue, that it brought you close to godliness. My mother was a cleaning lady, and my father was a mailman. I always had a job. When I was eight, one of her jobs was cleaning the floors at the Woolworth's. In those days, you cleaned floors on your hands and knees, with a scrub brush. She would do one aisle, and I'd do the other. At the end of it, when we got on the bus to go home, she had in her bag some ink that she'd "knocked off the table." Drawing materials. She had a tough life, but there was always a way to get things done. When I said I wanted to be an artist, that was it; she never said no.

Jennifer Samet, PhD, is a New York-based art historian, writer, and curator. Her interview with John Walker was first published in her ongoing column in *Hyperallergic*, "Beer with a Painter," on May 18, 2013, and is used here with permission.

John Walker, 2018. Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York.

She said, "Have you ever thought of showing in New York?" And I said, "No, of course not."

Samet

You have lived in Australia and the United States. Why did you decide to leave England?

Walker

I had become very conscious of the power of American art. It looked amazing, and I couldn't find that kind of companionship in England. The English art world in the 1950s and 60s was very exclusive. It wasn't easy to meet real artists outside of the art schools. When I looked at all those famous photographs of the Cedar Bar it looked more democratic. I never really wanted to go to London.

I won some art prizes; I'd done one or two things that people were interested in. I set up a studio in the countryside, and I was driving a truck, making deliveries to docks. I would get up at 4 a.m., get back to my studio by noon, so I had the rest of the day to paint. I was living in a village called Blackwell, and one day this woman came up the stairs. She said she was visiting someone in the village, was told an artist lived here, and would I mind if she had a look around? I was painting these big paintings, at least 20 feet wide. There were thirty or forty paintings that size, and we went through them. She sat down, I gave her some tea, and she said, "Have you ever thought of showing in New York?" And I said, "No, of course not." She said, "Would you like to? We could show them in my gallery." It was Betty Parsons. We became very good friends. So I had a show with her in 1967. I came to New York once in that period. And then Lawrence Gowing suggested I apply for the Harkness Fellowship, which brought foreigners to New York. I went there with my family and we lived down on Grand Street. There were about three galleries down in SoHo at that time, like Betty Cunningham, whom I showed with. After that, I was invited to Australia on a fellowship.

Samet

How did living in Australia, and specifically, your exposure to Aboriginal art, impact your painting?

Walker

I became very interested in the Australian bark paintings, and bought a lot of them. I decided I wanted to go north, to the barrier reef. I was a kid from the slum in England, so I always wanted to go to the best places in the world. Then I found out that, in the interior, there are sites with these rock paintings. They are the real thing; it isn't contemporary art!

I returned to England, but then, Fred Williams, a great painter in Australia, asked me to come back and run the painting department at a school there. I said I would stay three years, but I ended up staying six. It gave me an opportunity, to love Australia, to love the artists. I had to put an art school together, and there were a lot of problems. So I got a couple of Aborigines to be professors there. And I found a lot of women whose husbands were very prominent in the art world, but who had always been in the background, continuing to paint, with no one caring about them. I invited them to teach, and they brought a lot of wisdom into the school. I had six wonderful years.

Change
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches
Installation view





Samet

You also collect African art. Can you tell me about your interest in African art?

Walker

It is about that kind of authenticity, which art is, at its best. It is digested over a long period of time, and that gives it real, human values. It is unapproachable for me, but I know it when I see it. It is consistent; it's not like the Western tradition, where you have to change all the time.

Also, as in all painting: it's not about how many ideas you have; it's what you do with that idea. There was a moment when Philip Guston used to come to my studio. I said, "Why do you come here? I only have one idea." And he said, "That's why I come here." It seems to me it isn't about very much. It's what you do with that little bit. If you think about Cézanne, he had a mountain, some apples.

Samet

This makes me think of your paintings of Seal Point, Maine. You made hundreds of small paintings of this single site. What inspired you to paint this motif repetitively?

Walker

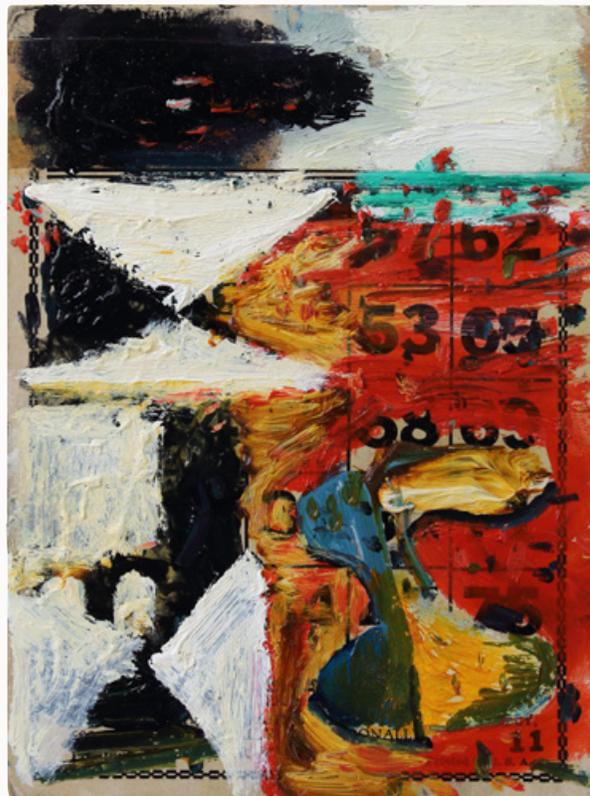
Subconsciously, I may have wanted to own something. When you look at Cézanne, whether it's the mountains, or a still life, you are looking at someone who is the world's expert, who knows more about it than anyone else. That is what Seal Point is to me. I painted too many pictures about it. But when I go there, I get really excited. I feel alive, and it doesn't matter how many people come there and look at it. They're not going to sit where I sit, or see it the way I see it.

You realize when you look at a Cézanne, he's seeing things that no one ever sees, nor ever will again. It is full of that moment of seeing. It's almost not about what's there; it's about capturing something no one else has seen. The viewer gets excited by that moment, that piece of blue being in the right place.

There is a Cézanne portrait in the Phillips Collection. It is like he's tapping away, building this solid form, this self-portrait. It is like building a church. You're painting away, and it's like bang, bang, bang. But it isn't until he put that stroke on the forehead—which is probably the last moment of the painting—that he rings the bell, so the people will come. The people are not going to come to the church unless the bell is rung. It is that moment, of visual illumination.



Unknown #35
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



Untitled
Oil on bingo card, 2011
7¼ x 5½ inches

Samet

In many of your paintings you combine text with image. You have spoken about how painting words is like touching them. Can you elaborate on this?

Walker

You have to touch them to write. You don't see them until you touch them. I was writing someone else's verse—from a Wilfred Owen poem—and it seemed to me I had to feel it through the brush for it to be meaningful. That's when the word is illuminated, through the touch of it, the pressure of it. Even in very early paintings, touch was always important to me: the sound of the touch of the brush. That is why I never paint with music on.

I try to tell my students not to listen to music while they are painting. They might be making terribly expressive paintings, or quiet paintings, but they've got this music pounding in their ear. I ask them what they are listening to, and it has nothing to do with what they are working on. I tell them they should listen to the sound of the brush. I'm sure Rembrandt did. Imagining the noise of a Rembrandt is a total explanation of what it is. The noise is the explanation for the paintings. He didn't have chamber music playing in the background. He had the noise of the painting, the noise of the brush. If you look at a Goya, you see these wonderful things. He knew how to kiss the surface, in the most sensuous way. And it's all to do with sound.

*Even in very early paintings,
touch was always important
to me: the sound of the touch
of the brush. That is why I
never paint with music on.*

Samet

Goya comes up a lot when discussing your work. The form that recurs in many of your paintings is called an Alba. Is this a reference to Goya?

Walker

The original painting that had that form, had nothing to do with Alba. It was given that name later. It was about me trying to find a form. As a young man, I had gone to Amsterdam to look at Van Gogh, actually. I saw the Rembrandts, including the painting that is still the most important painting to me — *The Jewish Bride*. It just touched me so. It is truly one of the great romantic paintings in the world.

I came out from the Rembrandt painting, and then I went to the Stedelijk. I'd been trained at that point just in figurative art. For the four years previously, I'd been in a life room. And I saw this painting, a white square on a white square. I didn't know what it was, but I got the same emotional take that I got from the Rembrandt. It blew me away, took me off balance. I turned away, came back. I had no way of dealing with it intellectually. I'd never been faced with avant-garde art. I didn't do anything about it. But several years later, I read that Malevich, when asked what his ambition was for painting, said it was to imbue the square with feeling. Well, that's what Rembrandt did. So the connection was immediate. Then I didn't have this problem of why I liked Rembrandt and why I liked certain contemporary art, why I grew to like Jackson Pollock. That is what they were doing: they were imbuing the square with feeling. I'd never read that, never heard of that, but it seemed to be right on.

At some point, I was still a figurative painter, and I was trying to paint pictures of my father, who had been injured in the war. And I exhausted it. I mean, how many times can you paint someone in agony or pain before it becomes cliché? So I thought, there's got to be another way to do this. I started to experiment; I did all kinds of things; I cut up paper to try to create three-dimensional forms. I never believed that abstract art should be merely frontal.

Why can't it have all the attributes that Titian has, or Rembrandt has? Why can't it have volume; why can't it have air? The major painting of the 1960s was all about flatness. Funnily enough, Clement Greenberg used to tell me that my paintings had too much stuff in them. Anyhow, I came up with this form. When I found it — this cut out piece, it was so simple, and it was like the whole world came alive. Everything was simplified. Of course..that feeling only lasted a moment, maybe a week.

This form could be male or female. Suddenly, my idol, the main player in my life — Goya — came back. I saw the references. I felt that if I could close this thing, I could give it an identity. So that's how the Goya reference came about: not immediately, but later. It was John Russell, I believe, who wrote that he couldn't understand whether it was an Alba form, or like looking through a keyhole in a door. He got it totally wrong both times, but the Alba name stuck.

Once I got this form, then I could look at Velázquez, Gainsborough. It was important, because my paintings had become about collage, and were very flat; they had no air. I wanted them to look like the side of an oil tanker. There are moments in your life, where you wonder, "What have I abandoned to get to this?" I felt like I had abandoned air. So once I had found a shape, then I could put air around it. I could have a conversation with Titian, with Cézanne, which I was losing.

This happens from time to time. I go somewhere too far, and think, "What I value is gone, and I have to bring it back." I am not an admirer of artists who take themselves where they can't see anymore. Sometimes painters become so extreme, that they can't just paint a landscape picture, or paint a dog! They almost become inarticulate. But Picasso could do it, Matisse could do it, Braque could do it. And all that argument about late Pollock, that he was going back to figuration. That was about seeing again. It was about, "I could expand my vision. Of course I could go here and do that." The artists who really achieve something do that.



Harrington Road Series #21
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



Harrington Road Series #30
Oil on bingo card, 2010
7¼ x 5½ inches



Tidal Touch I
Oil on canvas, 2013
84 x 66 inches

Samet

There is a very interesting conversation in your work between your studio practice and your landscape practice. Can you talk about that?

Walker

I love to teach, and I find one of the biggest problems I have with my students, is convincing them that you can do anything. They already feel locked into something. I think it is art history's fault. Art history makes it seem linear. It presents Picasso as going from this to that. But really, he was a mess, creatively. In 1922, in his studio, the late Cubist painting *The Three Musicians* was on one wall, and on the other wall was *Three Women at the Spring*. Creativity is a huge mess. It really is one of the big problems: how do you convince a student that it's a mess, because that is the last thing they want to hear. They want some sense of it all, from you or me. And I walk in and say, "No, it's not like that in the real world."

Most of the time, when I work outdoors, it is this constant taking the paintings out, nailing them to the trees, basically. It is to authenticate the painting. It's like, "You're not right, until you're as good as that." Of course, you don't get that, but that is the ambition.

Creativity is a huge mess.

If you accept that paint is colored mud, and you put it on a canvas, you realize it is only a genius, like Turner or Rembrandt, who can turn it into air.

Samet

And for you is it about trying to get the feeling of that place?

Walker

Well, no, I think it's more than that. I'm trying to get what's there. I'm not fudging it. It may not be there when you're there, but it's there when I'm there. I do paint in this place that we call "shitty cove," which is where all the rubbish comes in. I can't paint the scenic part. I'm anti-scenic. It took me about ten years before I could paint the place, even though I was living there. I found a place where it smells, and all the garbage comes in and that allowed me to paint, because it wasn't scenic.

Samet

It reminds me of how you refer to paint as "colored mud." Your paintings seem so much about the elements—paint becoming a signifier of earth, rather than just representations of the landscape. Do you agree?

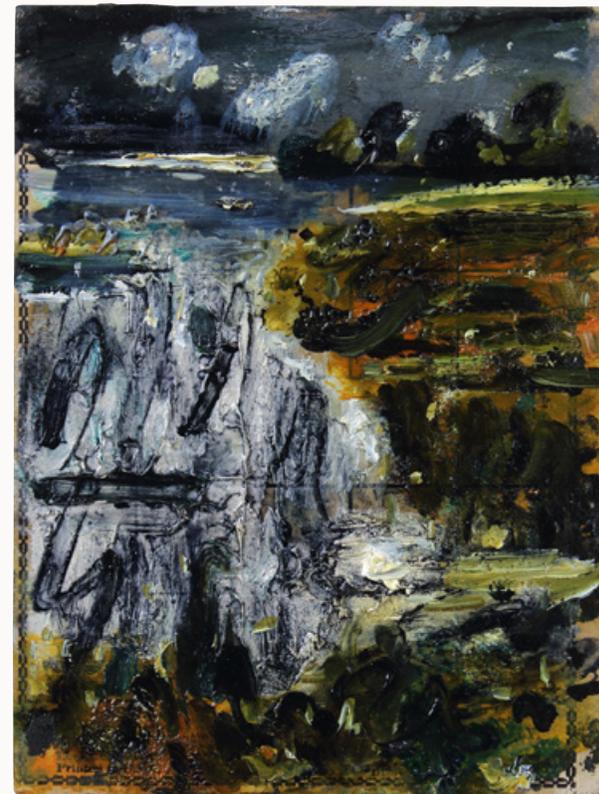
Walker

I still paint with my hands. I think Rembrandt did, so I do also. I can't see any way Rembrandt did the things he did unless he was touching the paintings all the time. The mud thing came out of my experience with Aboriginal art, understanding they were very involved with mud. The people make paint from the earth. Also, Guston referred to paint as shit, which Dore Ashton reminded me of. And, I had been painting a lot about my father, and every description of the First World War, every poem I read, was about mud, what they lived with.

It is this very ambitious idea. If you accept that paint is colored mud, and you put it on a canvas, you realize it is only a genius, like Turner or Rembrandt, who can turn it into air. It is the height of ambition, it seems to me, to be a painter. How do you do this: turn it into air, or a piece of silk, or a piece of flesh? How does Cézanne tap, tap, tap this thing, and turn it into this? It is a magical thing—it is alchemy. And it is your hands that do it.



Seal Point Series #KXII
Oil on bingo card, 2006
7¼ x 5½ inches



Seal Point Series #V II
Oil on bingo card, 2007
7¼ x 5½ inches



Luna + Point
Oil on linen, 2018
84 x 66 inches



The Gut, Bristol no. 1
Oil on canvas, 2018
84 x 66 inches

John Walker

Moments of Observation

January 18–July 14, 2019

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Cover

Change (detail)
Oil on canvas, 2017
84 x 66 inches

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