

ARTSEEN

John Walker: Drawings 1973–1975
by Dore Ashton

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"I never really abandon anything," John Walker said more than thirty years ago. This exhibition of drawings from 1973-1975 confirms it. Looking back with a treasury of images deposited in the mind's eye by all his work since then, we can see how powerful certain of Walker's impulses have been; how his quest for light brings him so often to a familiar place—a place that his imagination inhabits and in which he feels most at home. It is a place where other artists have dwelled, most of all Rembrandt, whom Max Beckmann always called "the Chief," and after him Goya, particularly in his aquatints with their grainy intimation of mystery. Of course, light in those old masters was always invented, and so it is with the light that Walker creates.



John Walker, *Untitled*, 1973, acrylic and dry pigment on paper, 40 ¾ x 28 inches. Courtesy of Knoedler & Company

In his catalogue foreword for this exhibition, the poet William Corbett astutely observes that "these drawings resist easy reading" and that they "might be rewards of troubled sleep." The sleep of reason? Well, that's there too. Walker has always declared his allegiance to "spiritual content," not flinching from the ambiguity of that locution. Only five years after these drawings emerged, Walker used the title *Numinous* for several works—a word that is deeply inflected with the idea of awe, that Walker has clearly experienced. I remember when another sensitive painter, Andrew Forge, talked about Walker's art. He spoke of its "gravity," a quality often associated with spiritual content.

Is it just the wonderful handling of chiaroscuro in these drawings that leads us to the light, so to speak? Redon, who made notable use of the depths of charcoal blacks, as does Walker, wrote that "the artist will always be a special emissary." I believe him. Walker, as his hand ranges over the light of the paper, is an emissary from the imagined world of light and shadow with its infinite gradations. I don't know if anyone has ever counted the number of gradations in the scale from black to white, but I believe Walker knows them intuitively. Within the two-year period represented here, the spectator can traverse many scales of black-to-white, but also, all the spaces they are meant to illuminate.

There again, one can read back from his more recent works to his earlier intimations of space in these drawings. Like many painters, Walker has an innate and entirely personal sense of space. He has often measured it out in readable sequences of levels, punctuated

by forms that in their very structure suggest the forces of nature that have worked upon them: The trapezoidal, rock-like form, for instance, that Walker carried with him for many years, and that he used, as is visible in some of the charcoal drawings here, as tangible markers in a resolutely intangible space. These entirely idiosyncratic shapes seem to be reflexive – things that commend themselves repeatedly to Walker as he draws, and are, indeed, as Forge remarked, presentations of gravitas.

Walker's art is an art full of suggestion in every sense. The rich grain of a heavy paper with its natural mounds and gullies certainly suggested to him some of the images we see here. Paper is expressive. Paper is not only a deep source of light, but also the bearer of shadows. In some of the most striking works in this show, Walker has chosen an extremely heavy paper with its own insistent structure, and over which Walker's charcoal can skip, producing a patterned foreplane that of course arrives in staccato rhythms from the depths of that wonderful paper.

When, on the other hand, Walker means to experience density, as he does in a group of drawings done with oil crayons and lead, he chooses a smooth grained paper. Its presence is entirely hidden by the luminous surface of grayed oil crayon. Impenetrable. The marks, seeming more or less incised, can barely penetrate the surface, although in several, the punctuation of his trapezoidal shapes suggests his usual use of many levels, and the sensation of levitation.

In a few larger works of 1975, Walker uses acrylic and dry pigment to create immensely atmospheric climates. They could be seen as interpretations of such phenomena as Northern Lights. Or, they could be seen as cosmic reflections. Or, they could be seen alternately as scratchboard drawings, or, in fact, paintings. Traditional hints are there, where he has recourse to the crosshatch he has never abandoned. And in all of them there is an insistent feeling of a central axis around which arcane events circulate. Walker, in these drawings, abandoned the white of the paper as the hidden source of light and suggests instead a pitch-black foundation. Over this he hangs, like a Veronica, a field on which his incisive white lines crackle like lightning. Although there is a hint of *sturm und drang* here, it is so well calibrated that the drawings take on an air of mastery. Now that he is seventy years old, we can call him an old master.

Finally, there is a group of small paintings in ink and pencil on handmade Japanese paper. Despite their delicate tonalities, these almost miniature landscape-like images have none of the vital thrust of the other drawings, and seem to me to be the equivalent of a poet's occasional poems. At a guess, Walker came across a cache of these Japanese papers, used, mostly, for woodcuts, and experimented with inks for a few days. He obviously enjoyed the occasional fringe-like edges that his fluid medium suggested; used his pencil only to enclose the compositions; and sought, in the dilution of his inks, a kind of diaphanous sensation.

A few years ago Walker had an exhibition at Knoedler that was given the overall title, "Changing Light." The current show indicates that Walker's quest has always been for the light at the end of the tunnel through which all true artists grope their way, with varying degrees of passion. Walker's has been eminently sustained.