

Art

Avec la main gauche

by James Panero

John Walker is a right-thinking painter in a gauche painter's world. His abstract collages from the mid-1970s, now on display at Knoedler, contain all the DNA of analytic cubism adapted to new climes.² The facets of Cubist chiaroscuro float to the surface of Walker's picture planes and settle into a marshland of canvas growth. Walker's surfaces undulate from scratchy to creamy to sticky, encrusted to smooth—a festering but living membrane. In his *New York Times* review from 1976, John Russell wrote:

Mr. Walker puts on his irregularly shaped pieces of canvas the way a medieval desperado puts on his armor: roughly and ferociously, as if the aim were not so much to create beauty as to fend off an imminent disaster.

Given the history of modern art, such armor might better suit a Quixote than a desperado. Walker's muted palettes of Seventies camouflage—taupe and tan—speak to the defensiveness in the hearts of these ten-foot-by-ten-foot blocks. In the saturated abstractions of two years later, such as *Ostraca I* (1977), battles flare up in the colors of the picture planes with the weight of Titans. These are Walker's most forceful and best works of the period.

Walker's father, a survivor of the Battle of the Somme, has become a recurring motif in his work, which has long grappled with the winners and losers of war. Compared to his landscapes of Maine, for example, here we can view landscapes of contention. Knoedler has paired Walker's large canvases with smaller, recent collages on paper—washy abstractions in blue, red, and black cut into curved shapes and reassembled. These results range from the exuberant to the menacing. The final, untitled work from 2004 removes bold colors once again and returns to a grid of shuttered gates, white and gray. The English-born painter, who now resides in Boston and Maine, makes another calculated retreat—not a political retreat, but an aesthetic one.

² "John Walker: Collage" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on February 3, and remains on view through March 19, 2005.