

# Thomas Chimes

*Early Works (1958–1965)*

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LOCKS GALLERY

THOMAS CHIMES



# The Temptation of Thomas Chimes

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The critical and historical reception of Thomas Chimes tends to characterize him as an artist who consistently worked outside the dominant strains of postwar artistic developments. But what would it mean to shift the terms of his reception and think of him instead as an artist who, from the very outset of his career, engaged one of the most galvanizing and challenging questions of his time? Certainly, from his 1953 decision to live and work in his hometown of Philadelphia rather than the New York of his Art Students League days to his subsequent devotion to the proto-surrealist 'pataphysical theories and lineage of the French symbolist Alfred Jarry rather than the intensifying orthodoxies of the neo-avant-garde, Chimes forthrightly established a practice at odds with the reigning conventions and concerns of each of the decades in which he worked.<sup>1</sup> And yet, if we look to his first major series of paintings in the late 1950s and early 1960s, works that earned him shows at the Bodley Gallery and a place in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, we see the emergence of a painterly practice, and with that, an aesthetic vision, that not only took on the implications of avant-garde practice for the postwar period, tarrying as he did with the legacy of surrealism, but grappled with an issue of utmost urgency to postwar culture and society, namely, the question, at once ethical and aesthetic, of the representation of human suffering.

Developing, in these formative paintings, a visual style indebted to the palette and compositional structures of such modernist forefathers as Marsden Hartley and Henri Matisse and emboldened by the stenographic proto-abstractions of such New York School predecessors as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Chimes systematically put forth a series of paintings that pressed such experimentations with the limits of figuration into the realm of the theological, the philosophical and the historical. For if there was one subject that united these early canvases, at once figurative and abstract, landscape and still-life, it was the crucifixion, the martyrdom of Christ. From his 1958 and 1959 landscapes, *Yellow with Cross* (fig. 1) and *Untitled* that coupled the loose, expressive facture of Vincent van Gogh and Nicolas de Stael with the disciplined geometry of Piet Mondrian to his pictographic paintings of the early to mid-1960s, culminating and concluding in the uncharacteristically monumental commissioned *Mural* of 1963-65, for the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida, Chimes pursued the motif of the cross, and with that, the subject of the crucifixion, with an increasingly intensive focus.

In 1961, Chimes read and identified deeply with the humanizing portrayal of Christ offered up in Nikos Kazantzakis's controversial novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*: this helps us to understand something of how and

why the artist pursued the subject of Christ on the cross with such urgency in that period, a subject that allowed him finally to assimilate and express the powerful aesthetic and emotional experience of his visit to Matisse's Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns at Vence nearly ten years prior, when in 1952 he traveled to France to see the recently consecrated chapel. That said, whatever the English translation of the Kazantzakis novel may have catalyzed for the Greek-American artist, allowing him to give more overtly symbolic form to the subject of martyrdom, it did so within the context of an artistic career already manifestly invested in that subject.<sup>2</sup> Further, in broader cultural terms, it is significant that the American publication of the Kazantzakis novel coincided with a historical moment in which the subject of the crucifixion and the sign of the cross had already taken hold of the pictorial imagination, with artists returning to this primal scene of martyrdom as they grappled with the demands of aesthetic representation in the aftermath of Auschwitz.

Of course, as a formal device within a history of modernist painting, the strict orthogonal orientation of the cross functioned as an insistent reminder of both the warp and weave of the canvas and the very structure of the stretcher. In taking up the motif of the cross, Chimes was but one in a long line of modern artists to explore and express the essence of painting by way of such a simple yet resonant sign. It is as a figurative element, however, that the cross, and with that, the crucifixion, emerged as a dis-



Fig. 1. *Yellow with Cross*, 1958, oil on canvas, 12 x 14 in.

tinctive and potent symbol and subject, the marker of martyrdoms religious, political or historical. Deep in its history, in, for example, Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793) or Goya's *Third of May 1808* (1814), we find images of revolutionary martyrdom drawing strength from the iconography of the crucifixion. By the first half of the twentieth century, the subject of the crucifixion receives its most

sustained treatment in the work of Marc Chagall, whose *Crucifixions* insist upon Christ's Jewishness as a means of figuring contemporary Jewish suffering, from the pogroms in his native Russia to the genocide in Europe. Later, it is Francis Bacon who relentlessly pursues the pictorial possibilities of the subject, his *Crucifixions* presenting an array of tortured, agonized figures. From his earliest and most literal depiction in 1933 to his 1944 *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, where bent and blindfolded surrealistic figures are as suggestive of contemporary prisoners as they are of the biblical martyr, to his works of the postwar period, *Fragment of a Crucifixion* (1950), *Three Studies for a Crucifixion* (1962), and, with their imagery of crucifixion, the screaming-pope paintings, Bacon produced picture after picture as at once open wound and resounding cry. Slaughtered figures, the tearing apart of bodies, human and animal, the portrait as a kind of sacrifice of the self, Bacon's pictures put forth suffering that is at once so particular and so generalized that it demands something of the iconic image it takes as its trace structure, if only to dismantle it in a ges-

ture of modernist iconoclasm.

But for many artists in the postwar period, even as the subject of the crucifixion allowed them to express the suffering and martyrdom of political and historical subjects, particularly that of the destruction of European Jewry, the very project of depicting the human figure became increasingly vexed; to express and engage violence against the human subject through aggressive line, dissonant color and distortions of the human form came to seem for many like a pictorial repetition of the historical act of violence itself. Mark Rothko, for example, whose early figurative work moved toward an increasingly stenographic style as he depicted such subjects as the crucifixions, the *pietà* and the entombment, came to renounce even those attenuated figures, ultimately finding the very idea of figuration morally repellent. As he later remarked, reflecting back on that period just after the end of the war, “It was with the utmost reluctance that I found that the figure could not serve my purposes. But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.”<sup>3</sup>

For some painters, then, abstraction became a means not only of grappling with the legacy of pictorial modernism, but with the legacy of modernity itself. Thus, within the idiom of abstraction, even as Rothko moved toward producing a set of canvases so dark that when hung in the ecumenical space of the chapel in Houston, they would induce a kind of spectatorial blindness, and Ad Reinhardt created his black cruciform paintings, pressing the surface of the canvas and the treatment of the sign toward a pictorial space of the numinous that, perhaps necessarily, verges on invisibility, the cross as a site of lost sight, we also have Barnett Newman producing obdurately abstract paintings that put forth a philosophical propo-

sition about the very ethics of representation in the postwar period, as is exemplified in his painterly cycle *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani* of 1958-66. These spare and reductive paintings pose the question “Lema sabachthani,” “Why hast thou forsaken me?” a titular, if not also pictorial inquiry, a cry from the cross that is repeated in the very structure of the canvas, in which Christian narrative is used to give morphology and meaning to a monumental cycle of modernist paintings. Devoid of vivid depictions of suffering or even its symbolism, Newman’s cycle puts forth nothing more and nothing less than black paint, white paint and raw canvas, devoid of any of the traditional markers of figurative representation, let alone representations of a body in pain, be that body, that subject, biblical or historical. Painting without color, painting without figure, Newman’s monumental cycle presents the Passion of Christ not as an image of suffering but as a suffering of the image, the very project of painting etiolated to the point of its effective disappearance. Paintings that refuse to depict the suffering to which they allude, Newman’s painterly cycle is a powerful refusal not just of figuration, but of an entire history of Judeo-Christian image-making, offering iconoclasm in the place of icons.<sup>4</sup>

But what does it mean to refuse that pictorial tradition entirely? What might it mean to find a way of pursuing the possibilities of painting, and, more to the point, the possibility of engaging urgent subjects in painting, without fully abnegating the figure and an entire figurative tradition? What might it mean, instead, to hold on to the figure, if only as stenographic form, if only as sign, even as one presses painting toward its undoing? What might it mean to hold on to the very pictorial genres – landscape,

still-life, portraiture – that have given way to the pursuit of pure abstraction, even as one assimilates the pictorial lessons of modernist painting?

It might mean that one paints like Thomas Chimes. It might mean that in 1961, one produces paintings like the *Untitleds*, landscape paintings with horizons so high they function also as something like all-over abstractions, with a cruciform figure only the most defined of a set of x-shaped forms that structure the surface, at once sandy soil and layers of light-brown paint. If as landscapes, the paintings refer back to the hill of the Calvary and the central figure of the crucified Christ, here the wilderness of dark mountains gives way to the light of the Mediterranean, the bright palette and azure seas beyond reminiscent more of the work of the Post-Impressionists than any preceding artistic movements or historical moments, even as the paintings insist upon their thematic grounding in that foundational Western pictorial tradition. But even as the genre of landscape organizes the pictorial composition, it cannot contain or control the pull of abstraction. For these paintings also offer up a pictorial field that is a terrain of pure color and form. Cross on a mountain, signs in a semantic space, pigment on a surface, the *Untitleds* move in and between the idioms of figuration and abstraction, the genre of landscape and its modernist evacuation into pure painterly presence.

Or, it might mean that in 1962, one produces a painting like *Crucifix I* (fig. 2), a painting that, like the prior *Untitleds*, offers up a fully figurative, if schematic, representation of Christ on the Cross. In a composition that now bears but a trace of the organizing horizon line of the landscape, azure sea and sky now replaced by irregular boxes of purple, yellow, white and green pigment, the fig-

ure of Christ dominates the pictorial space, both in its centrality and its scale. Rendered in black line, the figure of Christ, complete with loin-cloth, is isolated against a white background and framed by a rectilinear black frame that, for all the insistent verticality of the cross, also suggests the subsequent scene of the entombment, a chain of allusion all the more concrete in the contemporaneous painting *Untitled*, 1962 (p. 26), where the frame of black thickens against the white surround, creating a constant semiotic oscillation between night sky and earthen tomb. Here, however, in *Crucifix I*, the subject of the crucifixion gathers legibility for the presence of the ladder, just to the right of the figure. And if we had yet to understand that the x-shaped forms that have animated the prior and contemporaneous canvases were a sign of Christ, the Greek chi of a textual tradition, in *Crucifix I*, at the very base of the crucifix, Chimes has painted as well a tiny but legible x, his pictorial depiction of Christ buttressed by linguistic inscription, the letter of the name, which in turn gives semantic clarity to a recurrent pictorial sign.

Or, it might mean that one paints a picture like *Bread* (pp. 28-29) of 1962. For if *Bread* adheres to the genre of landscape in its assertion of the high line of the horizon and its deployment of a palette that evokes sea, sky and sand, its pictorial logic is also that of the modern still-life, a set of objects, pictorial signs, arranged on the table/tableau that is the canvas, surface as a site of semantic abundance. With its titular and visual invocation of that simple source of sustenance, *Bread* asserts its relation to the subjects that have structured a history of still-life images, from the domestic interiors of the Dutch and Spanish traditions to their modernist deconstruction in the collaged café-spaces of Cubism. A symbol of the



Fig. 2. *Crucifix 1*, 1962, oil on linen, 18 ½ x 22 ½ inches

Eucharist and an allusion to the miracle of loaves and fishes, *Bread* insists upon disinterring the religious symbolism that was always at play in the still-life, be it Calvinist or Catholic. With the crucifixion itself reduced to a tiny figure, now more of a surrealist hybrid than a literal depiction of Christ on the cross and with its surface dominated by Chimes' signature sign of the series, the bold black and white x-shaped cross, opened out here as if flayed, *Bread* offers a painterly field that is less a landscape than a memento mori of martyrdom. *Bread* dramatizes what many of the other Crucifixion Paintings will come to stage, namely, that the martyrdom of one has given way to that of many.

Understood as both a landscape and a still-life, as, indeed, a nature morte, *Bread* exposes more than the signifying logic of this series of paintings. *Bread* also exposes the truth of landscape painting, which is, ultimately, of course, the truth of painting, namely, that all painting is indeed nature morte, dead nature, that all painting mortifies its subject, stills its subject, transforming all that it renders into lifeless matter, a set of signs entombed on the surface of the canvas. Nature morte, dead nature, the death of the subject in and through painting, the Crucifixion Paintings both denote and enact the mortification of the subject that has been lived in both the eschatological time of Christian theology and in the secular time of human history.

Of course, unlike theology, history offers no redemption. And neither does painting. But painting does offer a means of working through the legacy of both religion and history, finding form for questions at once ethical and aesthetic. Stripped of affective or expressive dimensions, reduced to assemblages of pictographs and signs, Chimes

paints modern crucifixions that navigate the shoals of figuration and abstraction, refusing the drama and pathos of Bacon's portraits while at the same time, avoiding the renunciatory austerity of Newman's spare white canvases. At once landscape and still-life and yet also, neither landscape nor still-life, Chimes' early paintings pursue the subject of human suffering and sacrifice, as emblemized in the image of Christ on the cross, even as they resist the models of its traditional or modern depiction. That Chimes should turn away from painting subsequent to this series, producing in its aftermath a series of finely-crafted, hermetic metal boxes, does not mean that for him, painting is finished. Instead, for the rest of his career, Chimes will return to painting, first mining a history of photography, in a series of sepia-toned panel portraits, for all that its mimetic promise might offer to the depiction of the human subject, then, in his "white paintings," muting the fullness of figuration with the layered application of a spectral white scrim, as if painting itself were now entombed beneath a gauzy layer of fabric that is nothing other than a sign of painting itself, preserved in perpetuity, painting now both his subject and object.



#### NOTES

1. See Michael R. Taylor, *Thomas Chimes: Adventures in 'Pataphysics* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007).
2. It is Michael Taylor who establishes and explores more fully the importance of the Kazantzakis novel to Chimes in this period. See Taylor, "The Last Temptation of Christ," in *Thomas Chimes*, pp. 27-30.
3. As quoted in Anna Chave, *Mark Rothko: Subjects in Abstraction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 55.
4. See Lisa Saltzman, "Barnett Newman's Passion," in Marcia Kupfer, ed. *The Passion Story: From Visual Representation to Social Drama* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008), pp. 203-15.

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