

Like a Fire That Consumes All Before It:

Cy Twombly's Dionysian Scribbles in A. S. King's *Still Life with Tornado*

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A. S. King's *Still Life with Tornado* is a novel deeply invested in and connected to the visual arts. "I'm a surrealist," says King in a 2020 interview (Gallagher, para. 9), aligning herself with artists such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. In his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" in 1924, André Breton writes, "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (1969, p. 14). King embraces dreamlike elements that depart from everyday logic, weaving together a *surreality* in which figurative language takes on a reality all its own.

Still Life's surrealism manifests in past and future versions of the protagonist, a sixteen-year-old artist named Sarah, converging on the same stretch of time. Ten-year-old Sarah (known as 10), twenty-three-year-old Sarah (23), and forty-year-old Sarah (40, of course) have come to help Sarah navigate an existential crisis. In the hands of another writer, this would be presented as metaphor or as possible symptoms of psychosis. For King, "[i]t's not a puzzle.... It's exactly as it is" (personal communication, February 17, 2021). Sarah's mother and brother, as well as the rest of the characters in the book, all interact with the Sarahs, confirming their corporeality.

Beyond the surrealist elements and the protagonist's identification as artist, the presence of specific works of art in the novel signifies the connection. Early in the novel, Sarah and 10 visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art. They come across Roy Lichtenstein's *Sleeping Girl* and discuss visiting the museum's permanent exhibit of works by American artist Cy Twombly. Ten declares that she "hates the Twombly room. 'It's all scribbling,' she says" (King, 2016, p. 31). By the time of their second museum trip at novel's end—accompanied by the whole family—*Sleeping Girl* is gone, Dalí's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* gets attention, and they finally make it to see Twombly's *50 Days at Iliam*. Any one of these works provides an interesting point

of entry into *Still Life*'s meaning-making apparatus. Twombly, however, does much more. Aside from his specific presence during the museum trips that bookend the novel, echoes of Twombly resound in the scribbled tornado on the cover, in a scene midway through after a visit to a fortune teller, and in the boundary-transgressing, time-conflating transformative energy that drives the story. Through these encounters with Twombly, Sarah's story becomes an epic of transformation and healing.

The Wall: Dissociative Trauma Response

Within Sarah's psyche, the plot trajectory begins *in medias res* when Sarah suddenly loses the ability to make art. Sarah the unreliable narrator begins with her art teacher Miss Smith telling her "there is no such things as an original idea" (King, 2016, p. 1), but this is not the spark that lights the fire. The real story—Sarah's initial trauma—occurred six years prior when Sarah witnessed her father brutally beating her older brother Bruce on a family vacation in Mexico. Sarah responds to the trauma with a coping mechanism called dissociation, "a disconnection between a person's memories, feelings, behaviors, perceptions, and/or sense of self" (Hartney, 2020, para. 1). In Sarah's case, she has been unable to recall the incident she witnessed in Mexico and unable to perceive ongoing abuse of her mother Helen by her father Chet. It is as though walls have been built around events of a specific class. Dissociation protects Sarah from confronting realities she is not yet ready to face.

By the time the reader meets Sarah, she has recently been retraumatized by events at school—primarily, the destruction of her prized art-object headpiece she had hoped to place in a school art show. There is one other factor that seems to be pertinent. In Mexico, Bruce tells her that their mother plans to divorce their abusive father but is holding off "[b]ecause of you. They're waiting until you go to college" (King, 2016, p. 102). Now, at sixteen, adults are

beginning to ask and Sarah is beginning to think about college. The convergence of the two triggers breaks something in Sarah's dissociative walls. She responds by quitting school and wandering aimlessly (more or less) around Philadelphia.

The Tornado as Dionysian Agent

If Sarah's dissociation recalls the wall around Troy in Homer's epic *The Iliad*, King's titular tornado is the rage of Achilles. Here is Twombly's first appearance in the novel—the cover, depicting a tornado drawn by Sarah's friend Carmen (see Appendix 1). The resemblance of Carmen's tornado to Cy Twombly's set of paintings from 2006 to 2008, called *Untitled (Bacchus)* (see Appendix 2), is instructive. The two share what art critics Cullinan and Serota refer to as “spirals that furiously unfurl” (2010, p. 616). In Twombly's paintings, the spirals “... explore the conjoined opposites of ecstasy and rage” (Cullinan & Serota, 2010, p. 613). Tying the novel and the paintings together are the Dionysian¹ forces inherent in art and life. In the present context, the Dionysian represents the chaotic, the irrational, the destructive principle necessary for clearing out structures that have outlived their usefulness. It stands against boundaries, borders, individual identity; it transgresses and violates, but it also transforms. Twombly explores the Dionysian explicitly in the *Bacchus* paintings (Bacchus is the Roman version of the Greek god Dionysos). Its manifestation in *Still Life* is more subtle, apparent in the tornado's obscuring, destruction, and transformation of psychic structures.

Carmen's tornado, Sarah tells the reader in the beginning, is in fact “not a tornado, but everything it contained” (King, 2016, p. 1). This idea that there is more than meets the eye, that what presents on the surface contains and obscures disparate tributary details and underlying

¹ Dionysian as opposed to Apollonian is a concept developed most famously by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). My personal introduction to it was through Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* (1990). The definition used here is simplified and taken from the atmosphere surrounding these and other works, as it were, and not from any specific work.

trauma, defines the first aspect of the tornado. The primary secret Sarah withholds from herself is the physically violent and abusive nature of her father.

Tornado-as-process assumes the destructive function to rid Sarah's psyche of illusions about her father so that she may see the truth. When Sarah draws a comic-strip tornado striking her family (King, 2016, p. 88), she indicates the destruction of her *idea* of her family. Her assumptions about a harmonious relationship between her parents blind her to the course of action she must take. They rob her of presence. "The *now* was always feeling like something was wrong, only I didn't know what. The *now* is one of Carmen's tornadoes" (King, 2016, p. 232). To reclaim the *now*, she must achieve clarity. When Chet is finally confronted and becomes violent, breaking objects inside the house, destroying Sarah's ceramic owl and favorite umbrella (read: the destruction of her dissociative shield), Sarah refers to her father as a tornado (King, 2016, p. 255).

A Scribble in Time

Literally surrounded as she is by her past and future, Sarah's primary problem is her inability to see her father as he is: she cannot see the present. A little more than halfway through the novel, Helen and Sarah visit Tiffany the fortune teller on a whim. The first words Tiffany speaks to Sarah: "You need to know your present" (King, 2016, p. 195). After the reading, the two are transformed: "We are a scribble—two people stuck in a dark scribble of black magic—walking home to eat a snack. We are not ourselves. Tiffany just changed us" (King, 2016, p. 198).

The scribble is another connection to Twombly. Writing of an earlier but very similar series of Bacchus paintings, art critic Jon Bird points to Twombly's use of "the scribble as both a trace of the body's rhythm and as the origination of an intentional marking of surface and

delineation of figure/ground relationships” (2007, p. 503). What could be more indicative of the *now* than a mark that records “a trace of the body’s rhythm” for its own sake? Sarah-as-scribble marks her own present with intent and separates figure (herself) from ground (her environment)—stepping back to see her life clearly.

The scribble as obliteration of borders shows how the Dionysian effaces the boundaries between points on a linear timeline. And yet, each of Sarah’s other selves come from a specific rather than a random point: 10 comes from the initial trauma in Mexico; 23 from the point at which Sarah “stopped caring about things being original” (King, 2016, p. 5); 40 from a time when trauma has been substantially resolved. Each of their experiences is necessary to bring Sarah through her crisis.

At the novel’s end, all of the Sarahs along with Helen and Bruce visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art, finally making it to the Twombly room. Sarah points “to the writing at the bottom of my favorite piece in the collection. It says: *Like a fire that consumes all before it*” (King, 2016, p. 292) (see Appendix 3). Described by art historian Linnea West as “a giant fireball of red-orange that seems to have exploded” (2019, para. 3), the painting borrows a line from Alexander Pope’s translation of *The Iliad* for its title, but it has come to mean something more personal to Sarah. “We are so consumed by all before it we don’t see the others leave us. We are suddenly three. Three relaxed people” (King, 2016, p. 293). The tornado-as-fire has run its course, transforming everyone who was caught in it. Sarah’s divided self is integrated and at least on track to wholeness. Earlier, upon learning the disturbing facts about her father, Sarah says,

I like making things because when I was born, everything I was born into was already made for me. Art let me surround myself with something different. Something new.

Something real. Something that was mine. ... I believe this is a side effect of being born into ruins—this need for construction. (King, 2016, p. 231)

She is once again, or perhaps for the first time, a true artist.

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Appendix 1: *Still Life with Tornado* cover art

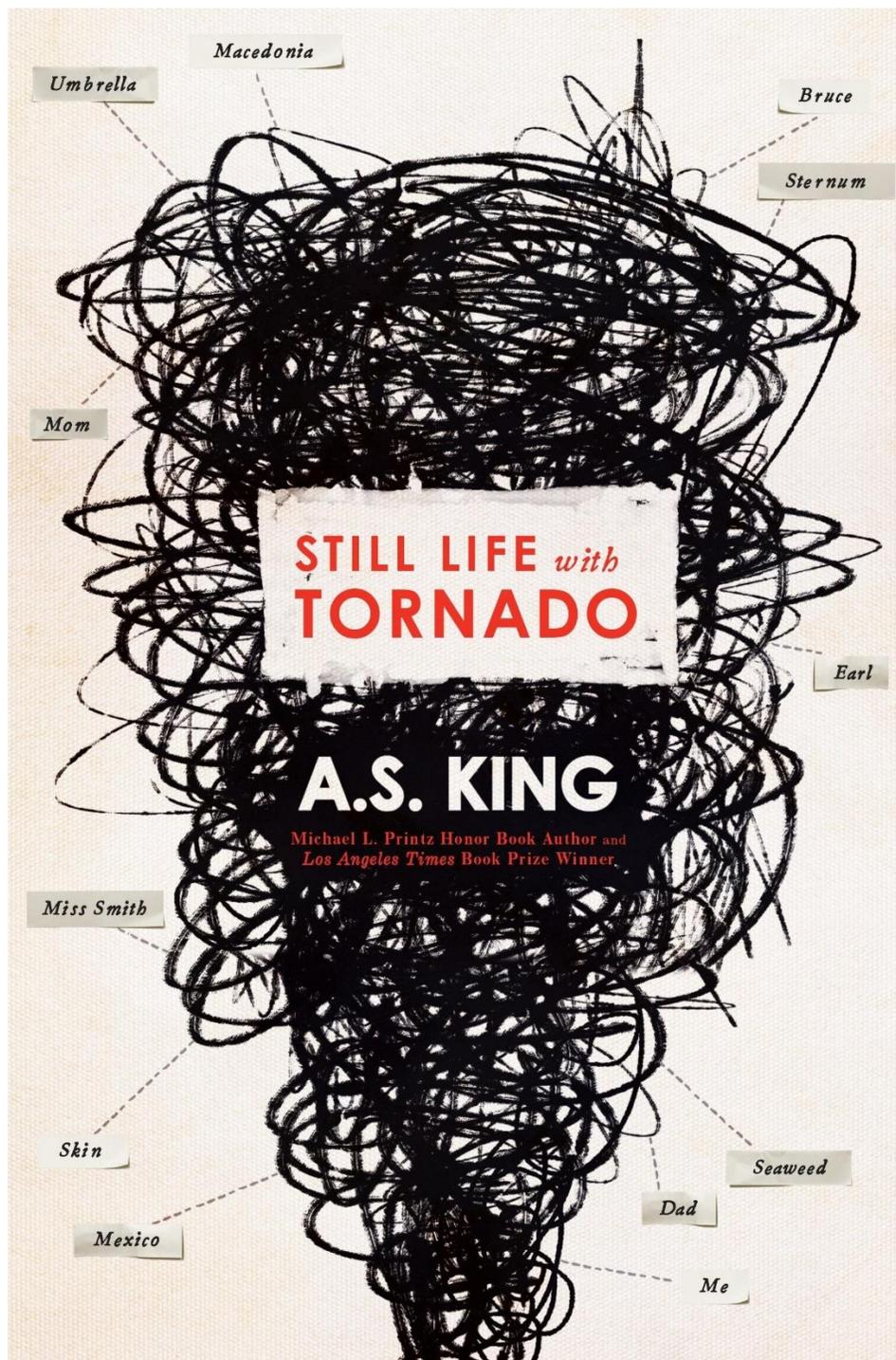


Figure 1. Cover design for *Still Life with Tornado* by Samira Iravani

Appendix 2: *Untitled (Bacchus) 2008*



Figure 2. Untitled (Bacchus) 2008 by Cy Twombly, acrylic on canvas

Appendix 3: *The Fire That Consumes All Before It*



Figure 3. *The Fire That Consumes All Before It* by Cy Twombly (1978), oil, oil crayon, and graphite on canvas