

# HYPERALLERGIC

Art | Reviews

## The Visionary From Antigua

The sense of isolation, of being alone in the natural world, is pervasive in Frank Walter's art, and yet one can also sense a muted calm.

John Yau July 20, 2022

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Frank Walter, "Untitled (Pinkish-Red-And-Grey Tree)" (n.d.), oil on card, 9 x 7 7/8 inches (© Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner)

The exhibition *By Land, Air, Home, and Sea: The World of Frank Walter* at David Zwirner (June 2–July 29, 2022), curated by Hilton Als, is an incomplete introduction to the brilliant biracial Antiguan artist and writer Francis Archibald Wentworth Walter (1926–2009). Beseated with visions, Walter chose to spend the last 15 years of his life in seclusion, living in a home he designed and built on a hill in Antigua, surrounded by his writing and art.

For those who wish to know more about Walter, I recommend checking out the website of Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh, Scotland, which gave Walter his first exhibition, as well as getting the highly informative catalogue *Frank Walter: The Last Universal Man* (Radius, 2017) by Barbara Paca, his most articulate champion. The catalogue was published for his exhibition in the national pavilion of Antigua and Barbuda at the 2017 Venice Biennale, which was the first time the country was represented in this important international venue. It was at the Venice Biennale that Als first became aware of Walter's work, as he tells us in his curatorial essay.

*By Land, Air, Home, and Sea* includes more than 30 small landscapes and portraits done in pencil and oil paint on found and discarded materials, such as photographs, cardboard, Polaroid film cartridge boxes, and photographic paper (for a brief time Walter ran a makeshift photo studio in St. John's, Antigua's capital).



Frank Walter, "Untitled" (n.d.), oil on paper, 6 1/8 x 9 3/4 inches (© Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner)

Walter's landscapes are unpeopled, or the people are seen at a distance, and are usually obscured by a layer of paint. The sense of isolation, of being alone in the natural world, is pervasive. And yet, one can also sense a muted calm, as in "Untitled (Pinkish-Red-And-Grey Tree)" and "Untitled (Pink Sky, Green Field)" (all works undated). In "Untitled (Pinkish-Red-And-Grey Tree)," two large boulders rise about a third of the way up from the bottom edge. Emerging from behind the right side of one boulder is a green tree trunk topped by pinkish-red smudges. Beyond the tree is a dark green band signifying a field. A cluster of gray smudges, cropped by the painting's right edge, is visible on the horizon; the sky is a blend of green and white. The boulders make this more than a painting of a tree. What are we standing on, and how will we climb over these obstacles? We can see the tree, but it is unlikely that we can reach it.

Feelings of distance and separation infuse a number of paintings, including "Untitled (View of sea through trees)," "Untitled (Craggy Mountain With Meandering White Path)," and "Untitled (Mountain View Through Tree Branches)." Although the works are modest in scale, the moodily luminous views suggest that you are alone in the unpeopled landscape, hidden from view. Often the sky is dark, evoking evening or night. The solitude is not simply that of an individual in a landscape. Rather, the sea and sky made me think that Walter — aware that he was alone in the universe — was focusing on palpable things, even if they were unreachable. Yet this is only one part of his diverse oeuvre.



Frank Walter, "Untitled (Man in Profile)" (n.d.), pencil on pressboard, 6 1/2 x 5 1/4 inches (© Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner)



Frank Walter, "Untitled (Pink Sky, Green Field)" (n.d.), oil on cardstock, 5 1/4 x 7 1/4 inches (© Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts, courtesy Kenneth M. Milton Fine Arts and David Zwirner)

One of his landscapes, "Untitled (Scottish Tree)," reflects his time in Scotland, part of an eight-year tour of the UK and Europe to study new technologies for his job at the Antiguan Sugar Syndicate. The show also features two line drawings done in pencil on pressboard and cardboard. As with the paintings, nothing seems to be reworked — it is as if each piece drew or painted itself without being adjusted, revised, or fussed over. In two other works, the painting "Untitled (Red Hibiscus Flower)" and the line drawing "Untitled (Palm Tree)," Walter focuses on a single subject.

The largest work and the exhibition's one outlier is "The Right Side of The Milky Way Galaxy." Prominently installed above a marble fireplace, the painting depicts a tubular symmetrical form that is swollen on the left side and tapers to a point on the right edge. The volumetric form, with its black, teardrop opening, feels as if it has squeezed inside the rectangular format. A series of lines extend from the point. I found this work mysterious, mesmerizing, and completely convincing; it was something that Walter saw in his mind's eye. This is what should clue us in that Walter was a visionary and, in that regard, shares something with Forest Bess, who copied down what he saw when he closed his eyes. The difference is that Bess was fixated on a single subject, immortality, while Walter cast a wider net.



Installation view of *By Land, Air, Home, and Sea: The World of Frank Walter* at David Zwirner, New York, June 2–July 29, 2022 (courtesy David Zwirner)

By focusing on Walter's landscapes and not including more of his works involved with cosmology, his inquiries into his biracial genealogy, which he could trace back 12 generations, to the mid-16th century, not to mention his sculptures and writing (over 25,000 pages), Zwirner gives a partial view of an extremely interesting and complex artist, whose subjects included the ancient history of Antigua and the Arawaks, the island's original inhabitants, class and race, family history signets, and real and imagined portraits. As satisfying as this show was, it also whetted my appetite for more.

*By Land, Air, Home, and Sea: The World of Frank Walter continues at David Zwirner Gallery (34 East 69th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through July 29. The exhibition was curated by Hilton Als.*