

**JOHN WALKER** | RECENT PAINTINGS

SEP 15, 2018 — MAR 30, 2019





## JOHN WALKER

John Walker's paintings cannot be categorized. His abstractions resonate with subtle references. At various times, his canvases have been loaded with elusive images, coded messages, symbolic forms, patterns, and on occasion, readable texts, conjured up with dense pigment, sensuous or gritty, and full-bodied color, brilliant or moody. We are attracted by the apparently abstract whole, then focus on suggestive shapes. If we imagine that we have deciphered a hard-to-grasp reference, we soon abandon the effort to interpret and return to contemplating Walker's unpredictable configurations, robust surfaces, energetic gestures, and saturated hues. Nonetheless, we remain convinced that his bold compositions are entirely specific, despite their deliberate ambiguities.

Walker, British-born and widely traveled, has long been based in the U.S. For about the last two decades, his dominant theme has been the coast of Maine where he lives, especially the unstable zone where land and sea meet. Given the evidence of his wide-ranging previous work, it's no surprise that while Walker's Maine paintings are intensely evocative of place, they are wholly unlike the images traditionally associated with that picturesque artists' haven. Despite the sense of the character of a rocky coastline with its mud flats and inlets, despite echoes of the restless motion of waves and wind-whipped water, and despite titles that sometimes provide clues to locations or events that might have triggered the works, Walker's efforts are never literal. He's uninterested in Winslow Homer's meteorological accuracy. Homer captures never-to-be-repeated moments, showing us exactly what the sea looked like at a particular time of day and season, in particular weather. Walker may allude obliquely to the physical characteristics of his region of coastal Maine but he doesn't depict them. Rather, he invents unexpected visual metaphors for his perceptions.

Homer, for all his painterly bravura, makes his medium disappear into his evocations of light-struck breaking waves and churning surf. Walker – as we expect of a modernist painter – celebrates paint. His lush surfaces and generous gestures remind us of the artifice of painting and of the presence of his hand in constructing the image. Walker clearly loves the juiciness of oil paint and relishes the act of moving it across the canvas. Rather than dissembling his medium in the service of illusionism, as traditional painters like Homer do, Walker makes the materiality of paint and the fiction of painting into abstract equivalents for his experience of place. He suggests not the appearance of the ocean shore, but its smells and temperature, its mutability,

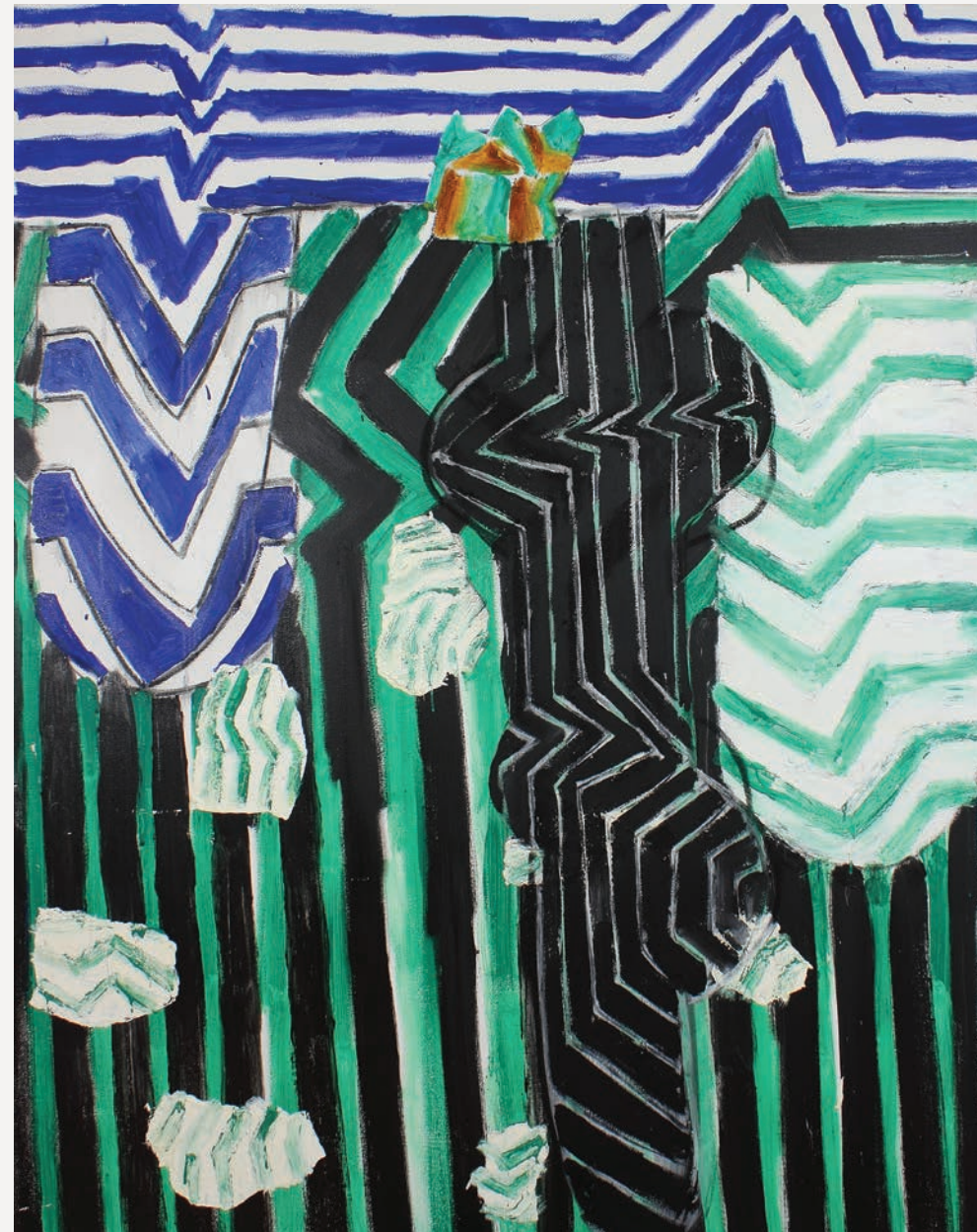


*John's Bay Pollution*, 2017, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches





*Swept In*, 2017, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches



*Champagne Day*, 2017, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches



## JOHN WALKER

the wind, and the sound of the surf, transubstantiated into an abstract language of paint. Walker's coast is not idealized. Recent paintings, according to their titles, were provoked by such vicissitudes as an algae bloom that created a red tide or the discoloration of pollution. These complex, chromatically modulated works are noticeably different than those in which crisp contrasts of blue and white become equivalents for bright seaside light. (It's worth noting that an earlier series, striking for rich but uningratiating color and aggressive surfaces, took as its point of departure neither Homer's translucent breakers, nor the sun-dappled sea punctuated by islands beloved of more recent painters such as John Marin or Fairfield Porter, nor the "pointed firs" itemized by writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett, but rather, bleak, wintry mudflats, patterned with the holes left by clam-diggers.)

The declarative stripes and zigzags that populate Walker's recent works, made with emphatic, nested strokes of a loaded brush, can be read in many ways. Their generous scale and unabashed geometry announce the abstractness of the picture, asserting its existence as a confrontational object. For anyone aware that Walker's history includes an extended sojourn in Australia, the patterns of the stripes and angles might provoke associations with Aboriginal or tribal art of the Pacific, which had repercussions in his earlier work. But these elements take on other meanings, in relation to coastal Maine. The insistent, irregular rhythms of the nested stripes can be seen as graphic versions of the changing rhythms of how the ocean meets the shore as waves or tide, while the dizzying repetitions of the strokes can be interpreted as distillations of the hypnotic effect of breakers. And more. Or less. Depending on our experience of working harbors and coastal New England, at different times of year and under different conditions, we will have different associations with Walker's recent paintings. We may read white patches as winter ice or associate a vertical grid with the dockside accouterments of commercial fishing. But Walker's recent works require no explication or explanation. They engage us and retain our interest with their powerful presence, their surprising structure, their intense color, and their fascinating rhythms. They address our emotions and our intellect, wordlessly. What else we bring to them is up to each of us.

Karen Wilkin  
New York, August 2018



*Stacked*, 2017, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

Cover: *Move,(detail)*, 2017, oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches

## **499** PARK AVENUE / The Lobby Gallery

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Gallery hours: Monday - Friday, 8:00am - 6:00pm

### **Acknowledgements**

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We thank the Alexandre Gallery for the loan of these paintings. For more information about this artist please contact Alexandre Gallery, 724 Fifth Avenue, 4th floor, New York, NY 10019, (T) 212.755.2828, [www.alexandregallery.com](http://www.alexandregallery.com).

CURATORS            Jay Grimm, Jay Grimm Art Advisory; Lenore Goldberg, Hines

ESSAY                Karen Wilkin

### **About Karen Wilkin**

Karen Wilkin is an independent curator and critic, the author of monographs on Stuart Davis, David Smith, Anthony Caro, Kenneth Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, Giorgio Morandi, Georges Braque, and Hans Hofmann, among others, and has organized exhibitions of their work internationally. The Contributing Editor for Art for the *Hudson Review* and a regular contributor to *The New Criterion* and the *Wall Street Journal*, she teaches in the New York Studio School's MFA program.

### **About Jay Grimm Art Advisory**

Jay Grimm is an independent arts professional with more than 25 years of experience in the New York gallery world. For more information about this program, please contact [Jay@jaygrimm.com](mailto:Jay@jaygrimm.com), (T): 917.690.0035.



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