

IKON

Ikon Gallery
1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham B1 2HS
0121 248 0708 / ikon-gallery.org
Open Tuesday-Sunday & Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm / free entry
Registered charity no. 528892

John Walker *New Paintings*

4 December 2019 – 23 February 2020



John Walker, *Ripple* (2017)
Oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches.

Ikon presents a major exhibition of a selection of new paintings by Birmingham-born artist John Walker (b. 1939), recently described as "one of the standout abstract painters of the last 50 years" (Cate McQuaid, *Boston Globe*, 2014).

Having studied in Birmingham at the Moseley School of Art, and later the Birmingham College of Art, Walker was the first artist to show at Ikon Gallery when it moved in 1972 to new premises in the Birmingham Shopping Centre above New Street Station. Here he presented large chalk drawings on black-boards made in situ. In the same year he represented Britain at the Venice Biennale. Ikon's exhibition reveals an artist now at the height of his powers, featuring "anti-scenic" paintings inspired by the coastal landscapes of Maine where Walker now lives.

Walker's early work was inspired by abstract expressionism and post-painterly abstraction, often made with chalk, dry pigment or acrylic paint. As a young artist he enjoyed extraordinary international success and after dividing his time between the UK and New York he spent much of the 1980s in Australia. Here he developed a style, more in oils and "canvas collage", making reference not only to old masters such as Titian, Rembrandt, Goya, Cezanne and Matisse, but also indigenous Oceanic art. Walker then returned to the US, teaching in Boston and New York, living in Maine where he began to respond increasingly to the coastal landscape near his home with a less mediated vision:

I'm trying to get what's there. I'm not fudging it. It may not be there when you're there, but it's there when I'm there. I do paint in this place that we call "shitty cove", which is where all the rubbish comes in. I can't paint the scenic part. I'm anti-scenic. It took me about ten years before I could paint the place, even though I was living there. I found a place where it smells, and all the garbage comes in and that allowed me to paint, because it wasn't scenic.

Most of the time, when I work outdoors, it is this constant taking the paintings out, nailing them to the trees, basically. It is to authenticate the painting. It's like, "You're not right, until you're as good as that." Of course, you don't get that, but that is the ambition.

Such an aspiration to directness is remarkable in the output of an artist who could not be more steeped in the western tradition of fine art. The freedom with which he is now painting, and the edgy beauty he achieves as a result, give rise to an artistic experience of colours and graphic rhythms that are as fresh, and refreshing, as they are knowing. The works selected for this exhibition (2016-19), take his proposition a step further: "to get the essence, forms that propose a meaningful presence, something that create feelings":

Usually I can say that everything in a painting is something I've seen – not at once, but over a period of time – but with these paintings I didn't feel I had that responsibility, and that I could just be inventive, responding to the forms and shapes from previous paintings. So they are one or two steps removed from the act of looking at something.

Walker's preoccupation with the natural world, and his place in it, is absolutely engaging in its essentialism – capturing light, space and tidal movement – striking a rare balance between wisdom and a seeming inexhaustible sense of wonder: "It is the height of ambition, it seems to me, to be a painter. How do you do this: turn [paint] into air, or a piece of silk, or a piece of flesh? How does Cézanne tap, tap, tap this thing, and turn it into this? It is a magical thing — it is alchemy." Walker is turning paint into land, sea and sky on a coastline that beats to the sound of the Atlantic Ocean — a far cry from the industrial city where he was born and brought up. He left Birmingham more than fifty years ago to explore new landscapes, literally and artistically, and it is a privilege to have him back with us for a long-awaited homecoming.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with texts from American poet, editor and essayist William Corbett.

The exhibition is supported by the John Feeney Charitable Trust and the Owen Family Trust.

For more information, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small or Laura Jaunzems on 0121 248 0708 or email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or l.jaunzems@ikon-gallery.org

Social Media Handles -Instagram, Twitter and Facebook:
@ikongallery #IkonGallery #JohnWalker

Links: ikon-gallery.org
johnwalkerpainter.com

Note to Editors:

1. Ikon exhibition opening: Wednesday 4 December, 6-8pm.
2. John Walker (born 1939, Birmingham, England). Studied at Birmingham College of Art (1956-1960) and continued his studies at The British School in Rome (1960-1961) and Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris (1961-1963). A Gregory Fellow at Leeds University (1967-1969), he was awarded a Harkness Fellowship to the United States (1969-70) and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1981. Artist residencies followed at Oxford University (1977-78), and at Monash University, Melbourne (1980), and he represented England at the 1972 Venice Biennale. Walker has taught at the Royal College in London and at Yale University. In the 1980s he was Dean of Victoria College of Art in Melbourne, Australia. From 1993 to 2015, he taught at Boston University and is currently Professor Emeritus of Art and former head of the graduate program in Painting and Sculpture at Boston University School of Visual Arts. Walker's many solo exhibitions include presentations at Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC; Tate, London; Hayward Gallery, London; Kunstverein, Hamburg and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. His work can be found in museum collections worldwide.
3. Ikon is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art venue situated in central Birmingham. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon is an educational charity and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships

between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Through a variety of talks, tours, workshops and seminars, Ikon's Learning Team aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org

4. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am – 5pm. Admission is free. Ikon Gallery is supported using public funding from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council. For the latest news and events follow @ikongallery on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).
5. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. ACE support a range of activities across the arts, museums and libraries – from theatre to visual art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts to collections. Great art and culture inspires us, brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. In short, it makes life better. Between 2018 and 2022, ACE will invest £1.45 billion of public money from government and an estimated £860 million from the National Lottery to help create these experiences for as many people as possible across the country. arts council.org.uk



John Walker, *Tidal Change* (2017)
Oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches.

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John Walker, *John's Bay Pollution* (2017)
Oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches.



John Walker, *Place* (2018)
Oil on canvas, 84 x 66 inches.