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## Walter Compton (1941-1995)

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### BIOGRAPHY

*But what do these forms mean? Associations and a thousand affinities come into them but for me art essentially is my hand shaping edge and area. Meaning is in the hand and heart. Where else should it be?*

Walter Compton, January 1993

An especially rare mix of elements formed the biological and experiential DNA of Walter Compton. A true Midwesterner, he was raised along with his brother and three sisters to be self reliant, hard working and humble. His mother, Phoebe Emerson Compton, was a talented musician who eschewed a professional life to raise her children and manage her household. His father, Walter Ames Compton was a brilliant Harvard-trained physician who had returned to his native Elkhart, Indiana to work at Miles Laboratory, developing such products as *Alka Selzer* and *Clinitest*, and as CEO leading it to international expansion and acquisition by the Swiss pharmaceutical company, Bayer. Dr. Compton was also a passionate scholar who taught himself Japanese, amassed the largest and most comprehensive collection of Japanese ceremonial swords in the U.S.

The young Walter went to the local public school and experienced the mid-century mid-American influences. He explored the banks of the near-by St. Joseph River. He studied music. His mother's musical talents had passed on to him, and he was a gifted pianist who was also became adept at wind and brass instruments.

Much of his father's business and all of his collections were based in the family home. In the rarified environment of the collections room, Walter helped his father catalogue and curate exquisite objects with special names and functions. They spent hours studying the swords' thin edges and articulations, immersed in their beauty and danger. These forms trained young Walter's eye and his mind for a life in art.

At Northwestern University, Walter took a full range of course in the arts and humanities, ultimately majoring in Comparative Literature. The German poet-philosopher, Rainer Maria Rilke, kindle his own sense of the contemporary loss of a potent mythology. Rilke's words spoke to his soul and became the most pervasive influence on his life and art.

Walter's entry to Harvard University in autumn 1963 to begin a Ph.D. program in Fine Arts began an intense period of quest and study. For the first time he applied the full power of his intellect to academic life, discovering Boston's museums, spending unbroken evenings in the Fogg Library stacks, immersing himself in their riches, filling notebooks with important facts and associations, layer upon layer of influence. Later he distilled these notebooks into journals whose drawings and writings recorded the ongoing conversation between history, his own life, and his visual expressions of these elements. The journal drawings often became templates for large-scale paintings and series.

During the late 60's Walter also devoted himself to Hatha yoga, mastering its esoteric language, philosophy, and control of mind and body. Eventually he taught yoga at Harvard and also wrote and designed a yoga text that was published by Harper and Row in 1974.

While working on his dissertation, Walter began teaching art history at Massachusetts College of Art, filling each day with a complex schedule of research, writing, painting and yoga study. He lived alone. Shortly after completion of his thesis on Picasso in 1979 he received full tenure as a professor at Mass Art.

He taught art history with legendary skill, but Walter was quintessentially an artist himself. The schedule of the academic year provided him with long stretches of time when he could devote himself to his passion for painting. He moved, sequentially, to large lofts, the first one in Central Square, Cambridge, later to the Leather District on South Street in Boston. By his late 30s he was prepared to fully express his essence: his capacious mind, encyclopedic in its knowledge of history of art and music; his body, which he had trained to be extraordinarily lithe and powerful, and his spirit which found its deepest expression in paint.

Throughout the 1980's until his premature death from complications due to AIDS in 1995, Walter completed 12 major series of large-scale paintings, using over-sized house painters brushes and scrapers with acrylic paint on unprimed canvas which he varnished in polymer resin. All series are kinetic gestures in paint, abstract expressionistic representations of Compton's deepest responses to life. In these monumental works you might find subtle references to muddy river banks, primordial spirits, sharply articulated sword edges, soaring asanas, Bach fugues, Michelangelo, Pollack, Newman, Picasso, and untold mysteries.

Each canvas reflects his extraordinary sensibilities and the remarkable influences of his life. Rooted in the deepest myths of the human saga, rich with the pulse of life and rhythm of music, dramatic in form and line, passionately independent and expressive, yet balanced and meditative, each Compton canvas conveys the immediacy of an instant and the sweep of all human experience.

*Each canvas was determined by the condition of the day on which it was painted [Compton painted on his roof deck—en plein air] my condition or contact with air, sun and sky. From the beginning I knew I would make in Cantoria the visual song of my Angels, the Seed Eye Masks. The compositional format of the title would indicate affinity with Donatello's marble choir/organ loft for the Florence Cathedral with its ecstatic dance of angels derived—probably—from ancient sarcophagi. I would have 10 large canvases referring to Rilke's 10 elegies with their song for Linos in the last, referring to Homer, and 14 14" stroke panels, related to Osiris and Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross. What do all these references indicate?? Simply, traveling friends.*

Walter Compton, 1989, private correspondence

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