

Sale Info William Anastasi

## AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM ANASTASI

By Kathleen Massara

The elevator chugs upward and abruptly stops. As I walk toward a formidable black door directly in front of me, in a nondescript building on Manhattan's Upper West Side, a tall, handsome gentleman opens the door to greet me: It's [William Anastasi](#). The 81-year-old artist shakes my hand, then arranges two austere chairs across from each other in the middle of a large room, which is filled with his canvases.

He is currently working on a new series inspired by the longest word in *Finnegans Wake*, he explains, James Joyce's "frightening beast" of an experimental novel. At the end of the series, which is one-third completed, fifty paintings (at roughly two letters each) will spell the sound of the thunderclap expelling Adam and Eve from Eden. The word in question is: "*Bababadalgharaghta kamminaronkonbronntonneronntuonnthu nntrovarrhounawnskauntoohooordenenthurnuk.*"



WILLIAM ANASTASI (B. 1933)  
*Two Hours with Crayon and Graphite on Paper*

Like Joyce, his self-professed literary hero, Anastasi is a master of accretion. Layer upon layer of pencil, ink, and paint find their way onto various surfaces in ecstatic, frenzied motions. In *Two Hours with Crayon and Graphite on Paper*, a 1996 work on paper included in our [Post-War and Contemporary online auction at Christie's](#), there emerges a portrait of the artist as a meditative presence. His timed drawing on a canvas seven and a half feet long is a serendipitous homage to free, unscripted movement. "I think of it as the movement doing the drawing," Anastasi says. "I'm trying my best not to let my aesthetic prejudice of the moment get involved."

*Two Hours* is impressively large and oddly calming, like many of Anastasi's works. There is stillness within the seemingly chaotic looped lines emanating from multiple directions — lacunas of unconscious memories expressed in yellow and black. In a surface read of the image, the lines appear aggressive, but they eschew the machismo present in earlier works by the Abstract Expressionist set. Upon closer inspection, the drawing reveals an active subconscious at play, a curious mind experimenting with its own eradication.

"I do a meditation practice every morning which involves looking at the floor with my eyes open and paying attention to my out breath -- the Shambhala method. And I pretty much do the same thing on the subway, except in my hand is this," he says, gesturing to a pencil. *Two Hours with a Yellow Crayon on Black Paper* has echoes of [Anastasi's famous subway drawings](#), where the artist dons a pair of heavy black headphones and heads underground, performing automatic drawings on a sheet of white paper while riding the 1 line downtown. "I wear sunglasses so people don't think I'm crazy," he says.

At 12, Anastasi attended his first art class at a school in Philadelphia for disadvantaged youth with creative leanings; on the first day, his drawing was chosen as the best picture of the day. "I just floated home because all I had ever wanted to do was draw," he said. That next week, his picture wasn't chosen, and he was devastated. Indignant, "I just turned and said, 'Don't you know who I am?'" Anastasi laughs, then jokes he should one day publish a book entitled, *Don't You Know Who I Am?*

Indeed, his influence on contemporary art to date has been significant, but is often overlooked. Although in recent years there has been interest from Europe, in New York, he says, "I'm still relatively invisible." But this might not be the case for long. As the artist and critic William Powhida wrote in a 2006 review in *The Brooklyn Rail*: "[There is no question that Anastasi is a pioneer of conceptualism, and that he is deserving of recognition, however belatedly.](#)"

Anastasi is humorous and charming, with the remains of childlike wonder embedded deep within him, along with childhood insecurities. When he was young, his mother, who hailed from Sicily by way of Algeria, would say, "Of course, the best thing anyone could be in this life was an artist," Anastasi says. "She just had that idea, and therefore I was sure I wasn't one."

These insecurities have served him well over the years, as he continues to explore the boundaries of art with the same enthusiasm he had in his youth. To wit, his influence can be traced among works by some of the most celebrated post-war and contemporary artists. His curved sculptures predate Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipses*, and his 1965 piece, *Beethoven's Fifth Symphony*, was arguably an influence on Eva Hesse's work. His double-printed puzzles came decades before Urs Fischer wallpapered the New Museum with an image of its own wall, and his 1977 piece, *World's Greatest Music* — featuring three portable record players playing the ends of LPs in a loop — came years before [Christian Marclay's aural experiments](#) and arrived decades before [Richard Garet used a marble rolling on a record platter in his 2012 piece, Before Me, at MoMA.](#)

Now in his eighties, Anastasi is keenly aware of his age, as well as the fact his artwork might sell better after he's gone. When I initially told him I was writing about him for Christie's, he deadpanned, "The best thing you can do is say, 'He just died.'" And yet, he's not ready to submit to old age just yet. In fact, he's annoyed when young commuters offer him a seat on the subway. "I want to say, 'You want to go to the next stop, I'll race you three miles.'"

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