

Wadsworth Atheneum
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Bob Thompson
MATRIX 90



Bob Thompson in his Rivington St. Studio, 1964(?)
(Photo: Leroy McLucas, New York City)

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Bob Thompson's talents, intelligence and astonishing passions intrigued some of the important writers, musicians and artists of his time. His admirers included Sheila Jordan, Ornette Coleman, Allen Ginsberg, Jackie McLean, Meyer Schapiro, Amiri Baraka and Nina Simone. Thompson's early death in 1966, at the age of 28, turned his considerable reputation, already imbued with the respect and affectionate regard of others, into legend.

His paintings suggest a primordial incantation of life in the context of ambient trauma. The complexities and contradictions embodied in Bob Thompson's artistic vision are manifestly evident in the paintings that hang in this exhibition. The Afro-American music of his own time, full of sophisticated and improvisatory invention, was of enormous importance to him, as it was to many other visual artists then and now. Indeed, Thompson usually listened to jazz recordings (as well as the music of The Temptations, Stevie Wonder and others) while he painted.

His compositions also reflected his careful study of the European Old Masters. Over the years he eagerly immersed himself in well-known works by Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Cranach, Titian, Breughel, Poussin, Boucher, Goya, Manet, Gauguin and others. He first studied these artists in textbook reproductions. Later he spent several years in Europe enjoying access to the actual works. He was also greatly influenced by certain contemporary painters such as Jan Muller, Gandy Brodie and Milton Avery whose works offered viable alternatives to the hegemony of abstract expressionism current at the time he was a young art student. He

studied African art as well.

From all of these sources he selected strategies and devices which he used to express his own unique and turbulent view of things. Meaning in Thompson's paintings is intentionally open-ended, never programmatic. Large, broad flat areas of color in which few details are offered predominate. In part because of this avoidance of the particular the paintings seem to address universal concerns. Family Portrait (1963) or The Struggle (1963), for instance, are not simply anecdotal. As with most of Thompson's works, each can be variously and extensively interpreted like an evocative dream.

His compositions are usually classical in basic design, often with reference to earlier masterpieces. La Caprice (1962), for instance, is a direct reference to an image from Goya's Los Caprichos.

The scenes themselves are inhabited with both fanciful and malevolent creatures who cavort with human figures. The real and the surreal are readily mixed. Demons populate some canvases in which unspeakable tortures are administered to willing and unwilling victims.

Elsewhere, centaurs who wear hats (a la Lester Young but usually Thompson himself) rescue people at risk, and winged creatures fly to freedom (or into the arms of Death). Thompson's portrayals of women are varied. Sometimes they are alluring or nurturing. More frequently they loom over a scene, powerful and predatory, as in Tree (1962) and Flight from Spain (1963). A few, such as the memorable right-hand figure in Family Portrait, are anatomically abridged into Thompson's surreal configurations of their essential characteristics.



The Struggle, 1963

Certain figures are clearly portraits (as in Garden of Music, 1960). More often, facial features are indicated in shorthand or faces are left entirely blank (see Untitled [Blank Faces], 1961). Only occasionally figures are clearly designated "black" or "white." Instead, his entire body of work (painted during some of the most stormy and progressive years of the American civil rights movement) documents an ecumenical race of true "colored people." This appealing rainbow of complexions entices the viewer into Thompson's provocative fantasias.

Garden of Music was painted shortly after he moved from his hometown of Louisville to New York City when in his early twenties. It is an homage to the world of jazz. Featured are some of the musicians he admired: Ornette Coleman facing forward, with Don Cherry in profile to his right; John Coltrane (or perhaps Archie Shepp?) next to Cherry; Sonny

Rollins in the center facing ahead; Charlie Hayden receding into the background towards his bass; Teddy Gross, head only, in the bottom right corner. These are all "portraits" to some extent, as is Thompson's three-quarter portrayal of himself (wearing a hat, as he always does in his own paintings) in the lower right. Thompson included individual portraits less and less as his style developed and matured.

There is, even in this early painting, a level of complexity (of both revelry and foreboding) that becomes consistent in his work. Music is being played, but the stage is full of intrigue and mystery. Although the colors are vibrant and beautiful, it remains far from an idyllic scene. The tribute here is to those musicians whose distinction is their ability to be engaged in the moment and to interact in performance with each other in surprising and sometimes thrilling ways. Yet, it is a tableau of alienated



Garden of Music, 1960

individuals.

Thompson's Afro-American identity was critical to the pleasures and frustrations of his life and his work. The paintings reflect his close connection to jazz in their compositional embrace of bold rhythmic patterns and in their sometimes "hot" color schemes. But in his ardent fervor as painter he transcended his specific place and time. Thompson felt connected both to the artists of his own era and to those of various backgrounds over past centuries. That he sought to express his wonderment and pain in comprehensive terms rather than explicitly is part of what explains the achievement of this gifted young artist.

In his work, Thompson courageously embraced feelings and fears usually submerged. Viewing his paintings, we too recognize our own camouflaged vulnerabilities. Perhaps that is why his paintings seem to touch so many people so deeply. It is in this sense that his work

is often referred to as mythic.

Bob (Robert Louis) Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1937. He attended Boston University and the University of Louisville. He spent the summer of 1958 in Provincetown, and moved to New York City in 1959. With a Walter Gutman Foundation Fellowship and John Hay Whitney Fellowship, he travelled extensively in Europe from 1961 through 1963. Thompson returned to the United States at the end of 1963 and in the following two years, as a member of the Martha Jackson Gallery, enjoyed considerable success. He returned to Europe at the end of 1965. His health compromised by drug addiction, he died in Rome in the late Spring of 1966.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Curator of Contemporary Art



Photograph of Bob Thompson, 1966(?)
(Photographer unknown)

Works in MATRIX:

Red Cross, 1959, oil on incised wood panel, 15" x 18 1/2".
Lent by Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Garden of Music, 1960, oil on canvas, 79 1/2" x 143". Lent by the estate of the artist, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

The Bride, 1960, oil on wood, 7 3/4" x 6 3/4". Lent by Gunter & Maren Hensler, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Untitled, 1960, oil on wood panel, 6 1/4" x 11 5/8". Lent by Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Untitled (Blank Faces), 1961, oil on canvas, 23 1/2" x 20". Lent by Dollie and Jackie McLean, Hartford, Conn.

La Caprice, 1962, oil on canvas, 64" x 52". Lent by Carol Thompson, New York City.

Tree, 1962, oil on canvas, 78" x 108". Lent by the estate of the artist, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Flight from Spain, 1963, oil on canvas, 63" x 88". Lent by Dollie and Jackie McLean, Hartford, Conn.

The Struggle, 1963, oil on canvas, 58" x 78". Lent by the estate of the artist, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

The Struggle, 1963, gouache, 22" x 26". Lent by Carol Thompson, New York City.

Family Portrait, 1963, oil on canvas, 62" x 87". Lent by the estate of the artist, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Ascension to the Heavens, 1964, oil on canvas, 72" x 60". Lent by Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Bathers, 1964, oil on canvas board, 12" x 16". Lent by Dollie, Jackie and Melonae McLean, Hartford, Conn.

Untitled, (Unfinished last painting), 1966, oil on canvas, 55" x 63". Lent by the estate of the artist, courtesy of Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York City.

Study for Unfinished Last Painting, 1966, ink and pencil on paper, 13 5/8" x 13 3/4". Lent by Suzanne Vanderwoude, New York City.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Arts in Louisville, KY '58; Delancey Street Museum, NYC '60; Paula Johnson (now Cooper) Gallery, NYC '64; Richard Gray Gallery, Chicago '64, '65; New School Art Center, New School for Social Research, NYC '69; Donald Morris Gallery, Detroit '65, '70; J. B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville '71; University Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts at Amherst '74; National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. '76; Martha Jackson Gallery, NYC '63, '65, '68, '76; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC '78; Miami Dade Community College, FL (two-person, with Sam Gilliam) '85, also to Zimmerli Art Museum, State University of New Jersey at Rutgers; Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, NYC '83, '86.

Selected group exhibitions:
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven 7 Young Painters '64; The New School for Social Research, NYC Portraits in the American Art World '65; CORE Show, NYC '65; University of California at Los Angeles Art Gallery, The Negro in American Art '66 (travelled); The Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists/Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston '70; Rath Museum, Geneva Eight Afro-American Artists, (organized by The Brooklyn Museum) '71; Martha Jackson Gallery, NYC Concept and Content: Cage, Thompson, Tapes '72; University Art Museum, Berkeley Perceptions of the Spirit '78 (travelled); The Center Gallery, Bucknell University, PA Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art '84 (travelled); Fine Arts Museum of Long Island, NY Celebrating Contemporary American Black Artists

'84; Institute for Art and Urban Resources, NYC Underknown '85; Kenkeleba Galley, NYC Fetishes, Figures, and Fantasies '86.

Selected bibliography about Thompson:

Siegel, Jeanne. "Robert Thompson and the Old Masters," The Harvard Review (Winter '66), p. 10+.

Burton, Scott. "Bob Thompson," Art News vol. 67 no. 2 (April '68), p. 58.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "New York Letter," Art International vol. 13 no. 8 (October '69), p. 77.

Rose, Barbara. "Black Art in America," Art in America vol. 58 no. 5 (September/October '70), p. 54+.

Lansdell, Sarah. "Bob Thompson's Edens," The Courier-Journal and Times Magazine (Sunday, February 21, '71 Louisville, KY), p. 22+.

Ghent, Henri. "Notes to the Young Black Artist: Revolution or Evolution?" Art International (Incorporating the Lugano Review) vol. 15 no. 6 (Summer '71), p. 33+.

Bob Thompson 1937-1966, J. B. Speed Art Museum (Louisville, KY) '71. Brochure with tributes from friends, including Meyer Schapiro, Sheila Jordan, Allen Ginsberg, Emilio Cruz, organized by Fred F. Bond.

Jeffries, Rosalind R. (and others). Bob Thompson, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, '74.

Coker, Gylbert. The World of Bob Thompson, The Studio Museum of Harlem, Inc. (New York City), '78.

Hazlitt, Gordon J. "Bob Thompson," Art News vol. 82 no. 4 (April '83), p. 161+.

Wilson, Judith. "Myths and Memories: Bob Thompson," Art in America vol. 71 no. 5 (May '83), p. 139+.