

An abstract painting by Thomas Sills, featuring a dense composition of overlapping, organic shapes in a rich palette of colors including teal, yellow, green, brown, and purple. The brushwork is visible, creating a textured, layered effect. The overall composition is non-representational and highly colorful.

THOMAS SILLS
VARIEGATIONS

Paintings from the 1950s-70s

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eric firestone gallery



Thomas Sills: Variegations

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by Jennifer Samet

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to present the exhibition *Thomas Sills: Variegations, Paintings from the 1950s-70s*, accompanied by a digital catalog and online viewing room. The gallery also announces exclusive representation of the Estate of Thomas Sills.

Thomas Sills (1914 - 2000) was a significant African-American artist who created a major body of abstract paintings that respond to process, natural phenomena and forces. The paintings, which have a delicate and unusual palette, synthesize the figure/ground relationship with optical equivalencies between colors, and free-flowing, outwardly-radiating patterns.

Sills, who grew up in Castalia, North Carolina in a large family, was not exposed to art or art-making in his youth or young adulthood. He began to paint – almost clandestinely – in his late 30s, and went on to be the subject of four well-received solo shows at Betty Parsons between 1955 and 1961. His work was also acquired by a long roster of significant museums across the country, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

At age 9 in North Carolina, Sills worked after school in a greenhouse – an experience he enjoyed and which he credits as influencing the color and light of his paintings. His boss encouraged him to move north, and at age 11, Sills arrived in Brooklyn to stay with an older brother. He spent the next twenty years working various jobs and starting a family with his first wife.

While working as a superintendent for a church in Greenwich Village and doing delivery for a neighborhood liquor shop, Sills met artist Jeanne Reynal

(1903 – 1983), the mosaicist, whose estate Eric Firestone Gallery also represents. Reynal and Sills became involved and married in 1953.

Reynal was a significant figure at the intersection of Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism – a patron as well as a radically innovative artist. Through her, Sills met a wide range of artists: from Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst, to Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko. Sills was also surrounded, in their West 11th Street home, by her collection of these artists' work.

In his first forays into painting, Sills applied magnesite plaster from Reynal's studio to discarded wood panels. Ideas about surrealist automatism and experimentation resonate in Sills's early work. He was encouraged by Reynal and by Willem de Kooning to keep painting without any formal study. Sills did not use brushes; instead, he applied paint with rags and cloths. This gives his work a unique softness. Colors meld into one another at the edges, lending the paintings tactility, space, and an inner light.

By 1955, Sills had developed a unified group of paintings with central forms suggesting birds, nests, apertures, nebulae and eyes. These works formed his first solo show at Betty Parsons. They have qualities associated with American visionary painter Arthur Dove. The critic Parker Tyler, in an *ARTnews* review, described them having “the terror of nightmares with desire and pleasure at their core.” By the mid-to-late 1950s, these allusions dissolved into abstraction. Still, the paintings have an energy at their center which generates movement and radiates outwards.

Sills discovered John Graham's book, “Systems and Dialectics of Art” in the early 1950s. Certain passages, like “The brushstroke ought to be

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THOMAS SILLS

PAINTINGS

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2.

a direct result of the phenomenon observed,” echo through Sills’s unique approach. As the work developed, Sills frequently employed a balance of two or three main colors in each painting. The main forms became bigger, more jagged and earthy. In the mid-1970s, he made a series of “White Paintings” – comprised of forms and shapes painted in beige, cream-tones, light gray, and white.

In addition to his exhibitions with Betty Parsons, Sills exhibited with Paul Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles; and had a two-person exhibition with Reynal at the New School for Social Research, New York. In the 1960s and early 70s, he showed with Bodley Gallery, New York. He was the subject of solo exhibitions at Creighton University, Omaha, NE; and the Art Association of Newport, RI. Sills was also included in several important historic exhibitions of African-American artists in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Lawrence Campbell was the critic of the period who wrote most consistently on Sills’s work. In a small monograph published by the William and Noma Copley Foundation in 1962, Campbell writes: “Sills’s paintings seem profoundly American. Out of them something tender and reassuring seems to be rising. It is like a voice from the people heard above the mass media of our time.”

Sills said of his process:

The main thing for me when I work is to say something worthwhile. My eyes must be open to see some of the good things. What I think about when I start painting is paint. A painter should paint only the way he wants to paint. There are no rules about it. I try not to destroy what comes out of my paintings. I don’t fight it but let whatever is there, come out.

1. Thomas Sills with paintings in his West 11th St. studio, 1956

2. Invitation card for *Thomas Sills: Paintings*, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY, 1959.





The Morning, 1954 | oil on canvas | 42h x 44w in.



Easter Holiday, 1955 | oil on canvas | 49h x 41w in.



Still Pond, 1956 | oil on canvas | 47h x 49w in.



Merry-Go-Round, 1958 | oil on canvas | 49h x 24w in.



Travel, 1958 | oil on canvas | 49h x 60w in.



Native Dancer, 1958 | oil on canvas | 45 1/2h x 69w in.



Untitled, 1958 | oil on canvas | 39h x 48w in.



Nilotic Waters, 1960 | oil on canvas | 84h x 68w in.



Grey Black, 1960 | oil on canvas | 47h x 50w in.



Mixed Earth, 1960 | oil on canvas | 46h x 48w in.



Earth, 1960 | oil on canvas | 44h x 44w in.



The Tree and the River, 1964 | oil on canvas | 68h x 69w in.



Arctic Weapon, 1965 | oil on canvas | 55h x 49w in.



Untitled, 1968 | oil on canvas | 50h x 50w in.



Red Hour, 1968 | oil on canvas | 40h x 44w in.



Mix Day, 1969 | oil on canvas | 49h x 50w in.



Untitled, 1970s | oil on canvas | 30 x 40"



Window, 1973 | oil on canvas | 40h x 30w in.



Untitled, 1973 | oil on canvas | 40h x 30w in.



Son Bright, 1975 | oil on canvas | 50h x 50w in.



Untitled, 1975 | oil on canvas | 30h x 40w in.



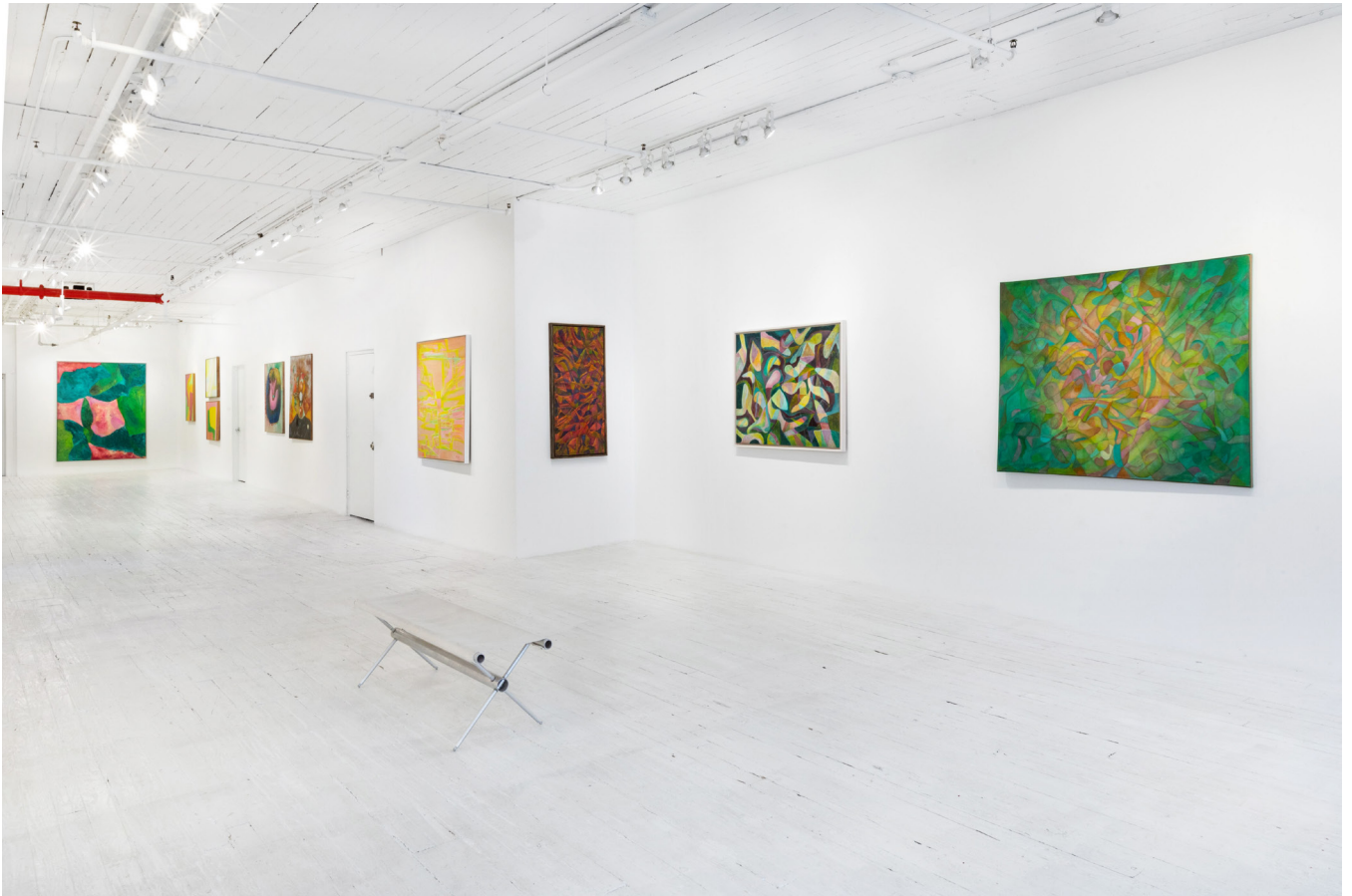
Untitled, 1975 | oil on canvas | 50h x 50w in.



Burnt Forest, 1975 | oil on canvas | 49h x 46w in.



Out, 1975 | oil on canvas | 49h x 50w in.





THOMAS ALBERT SILLS

- b. Castalia, NC, 1914
- d. New York, NY, 2000

SELECT SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2021-22 *Thomas Sills: Man of Color*, Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC
- 2008 *Art Couple: Work of the 1950's*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, NY
- 2005 *Thomas Sills Retrospective Exhibition*, Corcoran Fine Arts, Cleveland, OH
- 1980 *White Spring: Paintings by Thomas Sills*, Landmark Gallery, New York, NY
- 1979 The Roosevelt Public Library Art Workshop Gallery, Roosevelt, NY
- 1974 Bodley Gallery, New York, NY
- 1972 Bodley Gallery, New York, NY
The Cushing Gallery, Newport, RI
- 1970 Bodley Gallery, New York, NY
- 1967 Bodley Gallery, New York, NY
Creighton University, Fine Arts Gallery, Omaha, NE
- 1964 Bodley Gallery, New York, NY
- 1962 *Mosaics by Jeanne Reynal and Paintings by Thomas Sills*, New School, New York, NY
Paul Kantor Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
- 1961 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY
- 1959 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY
- 1957 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY
- 1955 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY

SELECT GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2021-22 *Afro-American Images 1971: The Vision of Percy Ricks*, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington
- 2021 *13 American Artists: A Celebration of Historic Work*, Eric Firestone Gallery, New York, NY
- 2020 *The Permanent Collection: Red*, Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, TX
- 2019-20 *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
- 2018 *A Johnson Publishing Story*, Stony Island Art Bank, Chicago, IL
- 2010 *African American Abstract Masters*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, NY
African American Abstract Masters, Wilmer Jennings Gallery, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York, NY
African American Abstract Masters, Opalka Gallery, The Sage Colleges, Albany, NY
- 2009-10 *Potpourri*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, NY
- 2008 *Masters of Abstraction*, Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, NY
- 2006 *Encore: Five Abstract Expressionists*, Sidney Mishkin Gallery, New York, NY
- 1991 *The Search for Freedom: African-American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975*, Kenkeleba Gallery, New York; The Cleveland Institute, OH; The State University of New York, New Paltz
- 1983 *Painting*, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, NY
- 1981 Landmark Gallery, New York, NY
CIRCAL, Staten Island Museum, Staten Island, NY
P.V.I Gallery, New York, NY
- 1980 *The 50th Anniversary of the Whitney Museum of American Art*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
- 1979 *Black Artists/South*. Huntsville Museum, AL; Oakland Museum, CA

- 1976 *Selected Works by Black Artists from the Collection of The Metropolitan Museum*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
- 1975 Buecker & Harpsichords, West Broadway, New York, NY
- 1974 *Art of Our Time*, Pascack Valley Hadassah, NJ
- 1972 *Whitney Museum of American Art Annual*, New York, NY
- 1971 Exhibition of Contemporary Paintings and Sculpture by Afro-American Artists, Wilmington, DE; Presented by Aesthetics Dynamics
Whitney Museum of American Art Annual, New York, NY
- 1970 *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
ALLUSIONS, Community Gallery, Brooklyn Museum, NY
SUMMERSCAPE, American Greetings Gallery, Ruder & Finn, New York, NY
- 1969 Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA
- 1969 *Afro-American Artists Exhibition*, Museum of Philadelphia Civic Center, Philadelphia, PA
Afro-American Artists: Since 1950, Student Center Art Gallery, Brooklyn College, New York, NY
Ten Afro-American Artists, Dwight Art Memorial, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA
The New American Painting and Sculpture, The First Generation, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
- 1968 *30 Contemporary Black Artists*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN
30 Contemporary Black Artists, Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY
Black Art, Wilson College, Chambersburg, PA
Dord Fitz Gallery, Amarillo, TX
Festival of Arts, Jewish Community Center of Fort Lee, NJ
Wilson College, Chambersburg, PA
- 1965 *Painting and Sculpture*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
- 1964 *Artists for Core: Third Annual Art Exhibition & Sale*, Gallery of American Federation of Arts, New York, NY
Fairleigh Dickinson University, Rutherford, NJ
Exhibition of Paintings, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
- 1963 *The Circle*, Staten Island Museum, NY
- 1962 Sidney Wolfson Gallery, Clinton Corners, NY
Betty Parson Private Collection, Finch College, New York, NY
Saint Paul's College, Lawrenceville, VA
The CIBA-Geigy Collection of Contemporary Paintings, University Art Museum, The University of Texas, Austin, TX
- 1960 Whitney Museum of American Art Annual, New York, NY
- 1959 Whitney Museum of American Art Annual, New York, NY
Exhibition of Paintings: 12th Annual Creative Arts Program, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
- 1956 *Artists Group*, Camino Gallery, New York, NY
- 1956 New School for Social Research, New York, NY
- 1955 *Artists Annual*, Stable Gallery, New York, NY
Painters of the Village, New School for Social Research, New York, NY

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AWARDS

1957 William and Norma Copley Foundation Award

SELECT PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Fordham University, New York, NY

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis College, Waltham, MA

Syracuse University Museum, Syracuse, NY

Sheldon Memorial Gallery, Lincoln, NE

Williams College Museum, Williamstown, MA

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA

Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign IL

Hofstra University, Nashville, TN

San Francisco Museum of Art, San Francisco, CA

Ciba-Geigy Collection, New York, NY

Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC

Johnson Publishing Company, Chicago, IL

Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, MS

Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC

The Brooklyn Museum, NY

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA

Trevor Arnet Library, Atlanta University, Atlanta, GA

University Art Museum, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

Corcoran Legacy Collection, American University Museum, Washington, D.C.

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Eric Firestone Press
4 Newtown Lane
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Eric Firestone Gallery

4 Great Jones Street, #3
New York, NY 10012
917.324.3386

40 Great Jones Street
New York, NY 10012
646.998.3727

4 Newtown Lane
East Hampton, NY 11937
631.641.2386

Principal: Eric Firestone
Director of Research: Jennifer Samet
Project Management: Kara Winters
Principal Photography: Jenny Gorman

