



ALMA W. THOMAS

Recent Paintings

October 10-November 12, 1971

Carl Van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts

Fisk University

Nashville, Tennessee

FOREWORD

Some forces of life are just as unpredictable today as they were when the Greeks and the Ethiopians of the ancient world paid lengthy visits on each other and along the way marvelled at the changes they saw revealed through time, space and the essence of things. In Columbus, Georgia, where Alma Thomas was born 77 years ago, there probably were few or no predictions that she would become a leading artist in the nation's capital and gain respect all over America for her contribution to the colorist tradition as advocated by the Washington School of Painters. She has braved the tide which often separates male and female in the world of art, treading on sacred ground normally reserved for the patriarchs of the business, claiming her own among names such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Nolan, Howard Mehring, Sam Gilliam and Gene Davis. She is a lady, lovely and youthful with a visit of age, contemporary with her imagery and vitally fresh with her use of medium.

She is a colorist artist at heart but her work is always based in the patterns of nature and a world full of change. Space exploration and the technological revolution we now witness are evident in her recent canvasses. Large linear movements of paint that are broken up into diverse forms floating in space, like the rockets and moon crafts they sometimes represent, dominate her recent works. (Examples being 26, SNOOPY SEES DAY BREAK ON EARTH, no. 28, SPLASH DOWN APOLLO 12, no. 30, LUNAR SURFACE and no. 32, BLAST OFF) There are times when the artist seems to ask, where on earth are the viewers? Then she explains, "Now, I'm way up there on the moon, I'm telling everyone—stay down here if you want to. I am long gone." She, to use the vernacular, is gone—"long gone," into the cosmic order where form, color and texture dominate, the like of which takes anyone by surprise. Here canvasses are full of surprises. Atmosphere, wind, flowers, a rustling breeze, all romantically tell us that Alma Thomas still paints from the heart.

Her youthful attitude about art and the world of images around her reveal to us how observant she is of the order of life in the 20th century. Very few things go unnoticed and unchallenged in her artistic experience. This is not a new phenomenon in the artist's work. She has been busy seeing Washington in a special way since she arrived there in 1907. She has lived at 1530 Fifteenth Street, N.W., a quaint home selected by her parents, since that time. She often jokes about "living in the heart of the ghetto and seeing a form of beauty that only the angels could see." In this regard, the artist explains away the fears of some of her friends who rebuke her for living in Washington's most densely populated black ghetto. "This house has an art tradition," she says, "and I do not plan to leave it."

The tradition of a life of culture and human understanding remains in her home. It is evident in her will to make art. She maintains no formal setting specifically called a studio. Perhaps her kitchen, which is full of windows allowing light to enter and foliage and flowers to be seen, comes closest to being her workshop. She reminisces that at the suggestion of her parents, who were at one time members of the faculty of Tuskegee Institute, she and her sister took off their shoes when they were about to cross the Potomac River in 1907, and knocked off the sand which reminded them of the racial conflicts of Columbus, Georgia. Their parents wanted them to know that they were entering into a new life. To Alma Thomas, it was a new life full of culture very much unlike the one she had known in Columbus. She absorbed all of it. She marvels in the fact that today, Columbus is a bustling city now moved into the 20th century in a manner which makes her proud to have been born there.

A special way of expressing form in her paintings is both interesting and revealing. Her canvasses eagerly anticipate the first colors of spring. "Forsythia comes on strong with thousands of starry yellow blossoms and I always look for the lovely circular beds of flowers in the little parks" says the artist. "You see those circles, those are the flower beds I see." She continues, "then come the cherry blossoms, pink, white—see the little green leaves barely peeping through. It is most interesting to me as to how light affects objects." She convinces everyone who talks with her that art is the greatest thing to happen to man.

She has exhibited in more than 70 group shows all over America and has been featured in 7 one-man shows, all having been well received by critics and public alike.

Commenting on a Retrospective of Miss Thomas' work assembled at the Gallery of Fine Arts, Howard University, in April 1966, this writer stated the following in the INTRODUCTION to the catalogue: "When one surveys the course of her development as a painter, outstanding among the findings revealed will be her love of life and new forms and an expression of joy with media. She has communicated all of this with a sincere desire to participate in things as she experiences the growth of vital forms."

This statement remains as true today as then—just as her new paintings continue to serve as a fresh revelation of the life of forms in a youthful art which happens to have been done by a charming little lady who is now 77 years young.

The Fisk University community welcomes this chance to see this colorful exhibition which is based in the joy of painting, the love of nature and an acknowledgement of the changes that make life so unpredictable, yet worth living.

DAVID C. DRISKELL
Professor and Chairman
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STATEMENT BY THE ARTIST

My Earth paintings are solely inspired from nature. The display of the designs formed by the leaves of a holly tree that covers the bay window in my home greets me each morning. These compositions are framed by the window panes with the aid of the wind as an active designer. The rays of the sunrise flickering through the leaves add joy to their display.

Man's highest inspirations come from nature. A world without color would seem dead. Color is life. Light is the mother of color. Light reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors.

Spring delivers her dynamic sermon to the world each year, drenching one's thoughts with its magnificent outburst of light hues of colors to darker ones as the weather grows warmer. Autumn, with the aid of Jack Frost, gives overwhelming, luscious, strong colors to the earth to enrich man's soul, seemingly relieving him of the hardships he encounters in life.

I have always enjoyed the progressive creativeness of the artist as he releases himself from the past. He gives new, exciting expressions through experiences from this rapidly changing world of science, economics, religion, society, and new materials, etc. I think that is the reason that I evolved to this type of statement in my present paintings. The irregular strokes give an interesting free pattern to the canvas, creating white intervals that punctuate the color stripes. There is a rhythmic movement obtained, too. I do not use masking tape. Sometimes a few pencil marks are employed to prohibit my becoming too involved in the stripes. The large circular canvasses, however, are freely designed.

My earth paintings are inspired by the display of azaleas at the Arboretum, the cherry blossoms, circular flower beds, the nurseries as seen from planes that are airborne, and by the foliage of trees in the fall.

My space paintings are expressed in the same color patterns as my earth paintings, with the white canvass forming intriguing motifs around and through the color composition.

I was born at the end of the 19th century, horse and buggy days, and experienced the phenominal changes of the 20th century machine and space age. Today not only can our great scientists send astronauts to and from the moon to photograph its surface and bring back samples of rocks and other materials, but through the medium of color television all can actually see and experience the thrill of these adventures. These phenomena set my creativity in motion. Although I was unable to experience the thrill of witnessing a blast-off at Cape Kennedy, the enthusiasm of my friend, Selma Stein who did, inspired the development of two of my paintings, "The Launching Pad" and "The Blast-Off."

When Apollo was put into orbit, Peanut's Charlie Brown left Snoopy spinning around to enjoy the unbelievable. This inspired the following 7 canvasses of the sun rising upon the world and Snoopy becoming aware of the planet Mars:

Snoopy Gets a Glimpse of Mars
Snoopy's Vision of Mars
Early Sun Display on Earth
Sunrise on Earth
Day Breaks on Earth
Sunrise Creeps on Earth
Earth Wrapped in the Sunset

With the success of Apollo 11, man accomplished his greatest achievement. Emerging from The Eagle, our astronauts were the first men to walk upon the surface of the moon. This motivated the paintings:

The Eagle Has Landed
The Lunar Surface
Man Walks On The Moon

Before selecting the site upon which to set the Yankee Clipper, Apollo 12, the broadcast of the astronauts describing what they saw induced my painting called "The Fantastic Sunset," and their return to earth inspired "Apollo 12 Splash Down."

As I watched the return to earth of Apollo 13 on the television, I was fascinated by the rescue procedures of the astronauts. Three parachutes lowered the space ship Odessy into the Indian Ocean at dawn. Frog men, swimming around the landed ship placed a collar around it to keep it afloat until the astronauts were hoisted up to the rescue helicopter. The painting "Splash Down of Apollo 13" was the result.

To conclude my Space Series, I painted the "Eclipse" which occurred March 8, 1970.