

MNUCHIN GALLERY

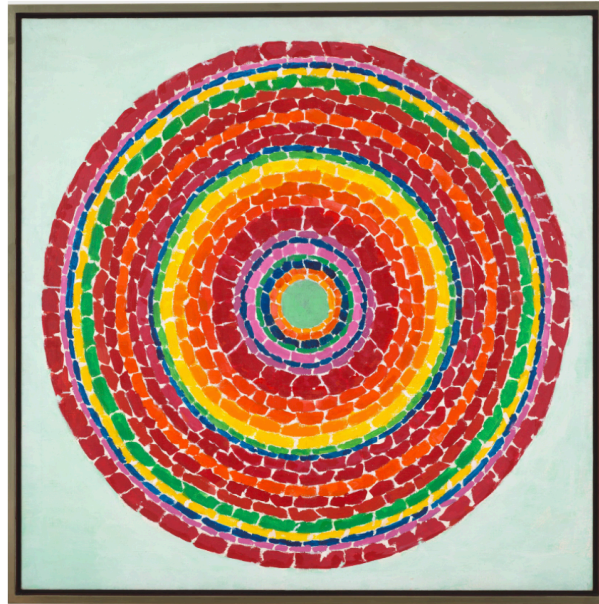
The New York Times

ART REVIEWS

Oct. 9, 2019

Alma Thomas

Through Oct. 19. Mnuchin Gallery, 45 East 78th Street, Manhattan; 212-861-0020, mnuchingallery.com.



Alma Thomas's "Springtime in Washington," from 1971, at Mnuchin Gallery. Tom Powel Imaging

Alma Thomas's multihued abstract paintings are so vibrant and human, it's hard not to get from them an infectious joy. But upon seeing her exhibition, "Resurrection," at Mnuchin Gallery, I was struck by a duality of sorts: It's both a perfect and an anachronistic moment for her work.

Perfect because the mainstream art world has been catching up to her. Ms. Thomas (1891-1978) was the subject of a traveling retrospective in 2016 and will be featured in another one planned for 2020. What's more, abstraction by African-American artists like Ms. Thomas has finally begun to receive long-overdue attention.

At the same time, her tessellated processions of color are all about beauty — a quality that seems almost archaic today as a measure of worth for art. Basking in the hypnotizing, rainbow-like concentric circles of “Springtime in Washington” (1971) can feel like a guilty pleasure. But for Ms. Thomas, an art teacher who took up painting full time after retiring in 1960 —and was the first black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum, when she was 80 — the pleasure of transmuting the world into saturated, carefully patterned brush strokes was hard-won. Working in decades rife with political and social upheaval, beauty may have seemed in short supply. Her rebellion was to never lose sight of it. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*