

MNUCHIN GALLERY



ALMA THOMAS: RESURRECTION

Curated by Sukanya Rajaratnam

September 10 – October 19, 2019

Mnuchin Gallery is proud to announce *Alma Thomas: Resurrection*, curated by Sukanya Rajaratnam. The exhibition will survey Thomas's singular career, featuring paintings and works on paper from 1959 through 1976. It will be Thomas's first solo exhibition on the Upper East Side since her 1976 show at Martha Jackson Gallery, and will be among her largest solo exhibitions to date. On view from September 10 through October 19, 2019, it will open with a public reception Tuesday, September 10 from 5-7pm. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue and comprises loans from private collections as well as institutions. Institutional lenders include George Washington University, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Howard University, the Miami-Dade County Art in Public Places Trust, and the Tampa Museum of Art.

Alma Thomas was a pioneering figure in American painting of the 1960s and 70s, whose ebullient, light-filled abstractions defy categorization. Her work has often been associated with the Washington Color School, given that she spent her adult life in Washington, D.C. and that she worked alongside Color Field painters such as Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis and Sam Gilliam. However, rather than using the pouring and staining techniques popular with her Color Field contemporaries, Thomas primed her canvases and applied her paint with a brush. In

fact, her dense paint application and expressive brushwork linked her to the preceding generation of Abstract Expressionists, although her short and repetitive brushstrokes also looked back to Pointillism while coinciding with some elements of Minimalist application. In the end, her style was deeply personal and her mode of expression profound, drawing on an almost spiritual inspiration. She explained, *“Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man’s inhumanity to man.”*

Born in Columbus, Georgia in 1891, Thomas and her family relocated to Washington, D.C. in 1907, seeking increased educational opportunities and a respite from racial tensions. A promising student with a penchant for math and a passion for architecture, Thomas began teaching kindergarten immediately following high school. Eventually she enrolled at Howard University, becoming its first student to graduate with a degree in fine arts in 1924. Always committed to children, she went on to teach art in the Washington, D.C. public schools for thirty-five years, while continuing to pursue her own education during evenings and summer vacations, earning a master’s degree in art education from Teachers College, Columbia University, and studying drawing and painting at American University. In 1960, at the age of 68, Thomas retired from her teaching career to devote herself fully to painting.

Thomas’s mature style is characterized by her staccato brushstrokes of vibrant colors laid over sometimes white, sometimes richly layered grounds. In some works, her marks are organized in rhythmic stripes or in mandala-like circular forms; in others, they billow in waves across the canvas like a galaxy across a night sky. Thomas’s imagery draws upon her close observation of the natural world: the arboretums and public parks of Washington, the carefully-tended garden of her family home, and the play of sunlight and wind on the holly tree outside her front window. Her fascination with science, technology, and space exploration—particularly her close following of the Apollo 12 space mission—also informed her paintings, which include depictions of rocket launches and landings as well as aerial views of the earth. She mused, *“When I paint space, I am with the astronauts.”*

Despite beginning her career as a full-time artist in her late sixties, Thomas swiftly achieved critical respect and institutional recognition. She exhibited at the Franz Bader Gallery in Washington and the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. In 1972, she became the first African-American woman to be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The museum acquired a painting, *Mars Dust*, 1972, from the exhibition and the *New York Times* reviewed the exhibition on three separate occasions. During her lifetime, she was also the subject of solo exhibitions at Howard University (1966) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1972), among other institutions.

Since her death in 1978, Thomas has been the subject of museum retrospectives at the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (1981); the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Indiana (1998; traveled to Tampa Museum of Art; New Jersey State Museum; Anacostia Community Museum, Smithsonian Institution; Columbus Museum, Georgia); and the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College (2016; traveled to The Studio Museum in Harlem). Recent solo gallery exhibitions include Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York (2015) and Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. (2017). A forthcoming retrospective is being organized by The Columbus Museum in Columbus, Georgia and the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia for 2021-2022.

Image: Alma Thomas working in her studio, c. 1968, Alma Thomas Papers, 1894-2000, bulk 1936-1982. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.