

YVONNE THOMAS (1913–2009)

Thomas was born in Nice, France, in 1913, and arrived with her family in the United States in 1925. After first settling in Boston, the family moved to New York, where Thomas studied briefly at Cooper Union. When her parents could not afford her tuition due to the Great Depression, she turned to commercial work, supporting herself as a fashion illustrator.

In 1938, she chose to devote herself to art, enrolling at the Art Students League, where she studied with Vaclav Vytacil and took lessons in the figure and portraiture from the Russian painter Dmitri Romanovsky. She also attended the Ozenfant School of Fine Art, where the French Cubist emigrée Amadée Ozenfant introduced her to the modernist precepts to which she would be devoted throughout the rest of her career. In 1948, Patricia Matta, the wife of the artist Roberto Matta, provided Thomas with an introduction to the Subjects of the Artists School. Situated in a loft at 23 East 8th Street, the school consisted of participants who were considered “collaborators” rather than teacher-and-student. The artists in the school were leading figures in the American avant-garde, with whom Thomas interacted on an equal footing. They included William Baziotes, David Hare, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Adolph Gottlieb, Hans Hofmann, Lee Krasner, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Richard Pousette-Dart, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. At the Subjects of the Artists School, Thomas felt she had “finally come home.”¹

In 1950, Thomas studied with Hofmann at his school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She credits him with giving her the “courage of color.”² In the next year, she took part in the first of a series of annual exhibitions of abstract art, that became legendary.³ The first—the *Ninth Street Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture*—was held at 60 East 9th Street in Greenwich Village in May and June of 1951.⁴ The Stable Gallery on Seventh Avenue at Fifty-Eighth Street was the venue for the subsequent shows, held from 1953 to 1957. The exhibitions enabled women artists to exhibit abstract works for which they had few opportunities otherwise, whereas male colleagues, who had more representation, were gaining recognition more broadly. Thomas was one of few artists to be included in all five of the Ninth Street shows. She was also a member the exclusive Artist’s Club, a gathering of artists and intellectuals, which was only for male artists when it began in 1949.⁵

In the mid-1950s, Thomas loosened the Cubist structures she had used earlier, employing more gestural handling to create works that were more expressively free. The personal quality in these paintings was deemed “American” by Stuart Preston in a review of a three-artist show at Tanager Gallery in 1954, in which Thomas was included. Preston singled out the work of Thomas and Miriam Schapiro, calling both “talented” and “comparatively unknown” artists who distilled “non-specific emotional moods in a language of restless brushwork and fitful color.”⁶ Also reviewing the show, Dore Ashton observed the “landscape feeling” in Thomas’s oils and commented: “Hers is a delicate, very subtle intonation, adjusted to atmospheric rather than energetic forces in nature.”⁷ Thomas’s first solo exhibition occurred that year at Hendler Gallery in Philadelphia. In a review in *Art Digest*, Sam Feinstein noted that Thomas seemed “not at all concerned with the opposition of horizontals and verticals,” but instead created works consisting of “soft, curvilinear brushings harmonized into a pictorial lyricism.”⁸

In the following year, Thomas was one of eleven artists represented in a show at the Riverside Museum, New York, where her work was shown alongside that of Franz Kline, Milton Avery, Kenzo Okada, and Leon Polk Smith. In a review, Howard Devree gave recognition to Thomas’s “vigorous loose color arrangements.”⁹ In 1956, a solo show of her work was held at Tanager. *Art News* commented that the works on view were larger than those at the gallery two years earlier and demonstrated more control, in their “deliberately selected forms.”¹⁰ *Arts Magazine* observed that Thomas had succeeded in “establishing a really plastic tension and strength” in works such as *Aspen* and *By the Sea*.¹¹

In April 1960, after a year spent in Paris, Thomas had her second New York show, which was held at the Esther Stuttman Gallery in New York. It included some paintings rendered in Paris along with recent New York works. *Art News* stated that in her work Thomas did not “disguise who she is in her “personal color harmonies” and in imagery that was “not readily identifiable,” but “close to the free-form spirit of place.”¹² *The New York Times* commented: “Big, brave gestures with paint and color parade on energetic action paintings.”¹³ Of the works on view, *Arts* magazine observed that: “wide brush-strokes and sweeps of color glissade to the plane of the bare canvas” while

stating: “adept knowledge implements a personal, fresh, clear and uncomplicated lyricism—the kind one thinks of first, enjoyable, joyous, and a little pristine.”¹⁴ The show was sent on to Stuttman’s Gallery in Paris, located in the twelfth arrondissement. A reviewer in *Les Arts* observed that the forms in some of Thomas’s paintings surged forward while in others they were skillfully harmonized.¹⁵

When Thomas had another solo exhibition in 1961, held at Galerie Agnes Lefort in Montreal, a reviewer for the *Montreal Gazette* noted that Thomas was moving from action painting to a “more analytical observation of her wildly careening or stolid forms and receding planes in limitless space,” categorically denying the first impression made by a work.¹⁶ In 1962 through 1964, Thomas was featured in one-artist shows in New York; Aspen, Colorado; and East Hampton, New York. By the time her work was featured at the Rose Fried Gallery in May of 1965, she had developed the more geometric and structural approach of the art.

Thomas continued to paint and actively exhibit her art until the end of her life. A show of her “yellow paintings” was held in 2006 at Lohin Geluld Gallery in New York. She was featured in several group shows in 2008, a year before her death. In 2016, she was one of the artists included in *Women of Abstract Expressionism* exhibition catalogue, a traveling exhibition organized by the Denver Art Museum. The accompanying catalogue, consisting of essays by several scholars, celebrated “the special contributions of women to Abstract Expressionism,” providing an “essential corrective” to what has been the “unequal accounting of women’s contributions” to the movement.¹⁷ Like other women who embraced abstraction, Thomas did not gain renown equal to that of the male artists of her time. However, a consideration of her career reveals that the issues she addressed, the organizations in which she took part, and the zeitgeist of her art gave her a central role in the avant-garde movement that she embraced.

Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D.

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CV

1913, Born, Nice, France

1928 Cooper Union

1940 Art Students League

1942 Ozenfant School of Art

1948 - 1949 Subject of the Artist School

2009 Died, New York, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Hendler Gallery, Philadelphia, 1954.

Tanager Gallery, New York, 1956.

Esther Stuttman Gallery, New York, 1958.

Esther Stuttman Gallery, New York, 1960.

Agnes Lefort Gallery, Montreal, 1961.

Aspen School of Contemporary Art, Colorado, 1961.

Bleecker Gallery, New York, 1962.

Edward Cain Gallery, Aspen, 1962.

East Hampton Gallery, New York, 1962.

Art Association, Newport, Rhode Island, 1964.

Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1965.

Patricia Moore Gallery, Aspen, 1967.

University of Colorado, Boulder, 1968.

Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1973.

Green Mountain Gallery, New York, 1973.

Ericson Gallery, New York, 1978.

Elaine Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York, 1978.

Ericson Gallery, New York, 1981.

Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, Queenstown, Maryland, 1982.

Washington Art Association, Washington Depot, Connecticut, 1984.
Maison Francaise of Columbia University, New York, 1985.
The Living Room Gallery of St. Peter's Church, New York, 1986.
Wenger Gallery, Los Angeles, 1988.
Cyrus Gallery, New York, 1989.
Philippe Briet Gallery, New York, 1991.
Timothy Brown Fine Arts, Aspen, Colorado, 1991.
Aspen Art Museum, Colorado, 1993.
Floria Brown gallery, Woody Creek, Colorado, Drawings, 1993
Timothy Brown Fine Arts, Aspen, 1991.
Philippe Briet Gallery, New York, 1991.
Floria Brown Gallery, Woody Creek, Colorado, 1993.
Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, 1993.
Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York, 1999.
Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York, *Yvonne Thomas 'Early Works, 1955-1962'*, 2000.
Cornell DeWitt Gallery, New York, *Journeys: Part I (1950s – 1960s)*, 2001.
Cornell DeWitt Gallery, New York, *Journeys: Part II (Recent Work)*, 2001.
Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago, *New York Paintings from the 1950s*, 2002.
Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York, *The Yellow Paintings*, 2006.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Yvonne Thomas*, 2017.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Yvonne Thomas: Windows and Variations (Paintings 1963-1965)*, 2019.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Yvonne Thomas: Complexed Squares*, 2023.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1944.
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1945.
Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, 1946.
American Abstract Artists, New York, 1948.
Tanager Gallery, New York, 1948.
The Stable Gallery, New York, *New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, 1953.
Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1954.
The Stable Gallery, New York, *New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, 1954.
The Stable Gallery, New York, *New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, 1955.
Riverside Museum, New York, *Eleven Americans*, 1955.
Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1956.
The Stable Gallery, New York, *New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, 1956.
Watkins Gallery, Washington D.C., 1956.
The Stable Gallery, New York, *New York Painting and Sculpture Annual*, 1957.
Camino Gallery, New York, 1957.
March Gallery, New York, 1957.
March Gallery, New York, 1958.
Zabriskie Gallery, New York, 1958.
Amarillo, Texas, *U.S. Women Painters*, 1959
Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1960.
Silvermine Guild of Artists, Connecticut, 1960.
Roswell Museum of Art Center, New Mexico, 1962.
Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1962.
Bundy Art Gallery, Waitsfield, Vermont, 1964.
Rose Fried Gallery, New York, 1964.
Byron Gallery, New York, 1964.
Patricia Moore Gallery, Aspen, 1965.
New York Cultural Center, *Women in the Arts*, New York, 1973.
Women Interart Center, Inc., New York, 1973.
Women Interart Center, Inc., New York, 1974.

The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York, *Invitational*, 1974.
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1974.
Livingston Learmonth Gallery, New York, 1975.
Brooklyn Museum, New York, 1975.
Buecker and Harpsichords, New York, *40 Years of Collage*, 1976.
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, *Visual Artist's Coalition*, New York, 1976.
Xavier Fourcade Inc. Drawing Benefit, New York, 1976.
Noah Goldwsky, New York, 1976.
Women Interart Center, Inc. New York, 1976.
Women Interart Center, Inc. New York, 1977.
Bronx Museum, New York, *The Magic Circle*, 1977.
Pleiades Gallery, New York, 1977.
Parsons-Dreyfuss Gallery, New York, 1978.
Ericson Gallery, New York, *Group Show by Six Contemporary Artists*, 1979.
Aspen Center for the Visual Arts, Colorado, *Coloring Colorado*, 1980.
Summit Art Center, New York, *Collage Assemblage*, 1980.
Gallery 10, Aspen, 1980.
Ericson Gallery, New York, 1981.
Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1982.
Frank Marino Gallery, New York, 1982.
The First Women's Bank, New York, 1982.
A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 1983.
Kenkeleba House Inc., *The Gathering of the Avant-Garde: New York 1950-70*, 1985.
A.I.R. Gallery, New York, 1986.
The Aspen Institute, Aspen, Colorado, 1987.
The Aspen Institute, Aspen, 1989.
Cyrus Gallery, New York, 1988.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1989.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1992.
Timothy Brown Fine Arts, Aspen, 1992.
Cork Gallery, Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center, New York, 1992.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1993.
Christopher Leonard Gallery, New York, 1993.
Philippe Briet Gallery, New York, 1993.
David Floria Gallery, Woody Creek, Colorado, 1995.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York 1995.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1996.
Miami Dade, Florida, *Other Artists of the Fifties*, 1996.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, 1997.
The Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1997.
Woodward Gallery, New York, 1998.
Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, 1999.
The Work Space, New York, 1999.
Studio School, New York, 2001.
Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago, *Abstract Expressionism, Second to None: Six Artists of the New York School*, 2001.
Gary Snyder Fine Art, New York, *Abstract Expressionism: Expanding the Canon*, 2001.
Thomas McCormick Gallery, Chicago, *New York Paintings from the 1950*, 2002.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, *New York School Artists- Work of the 40's & 50's*, 2004.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, *Buffie Johnson and Friends*, 2007.
Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York, *Selections*, 2007.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, *Masters of Abstraction*, 2008.
Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, New York, *Yvonne Thomas: Memorial Exhibition-Paintings 1950s – 1960s*, 2009.
Janet Kurnatowski, Brooklyn, *Color Time Space*, 2009.

Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York, *Color Time Space*, 2009.
Anita Shapolsky Gallery, New York, *WONDER WOMAN*, 2009.
Berry Campbell Gallery, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2016.
Levis Fine Art, New York, *East End Artists 1949-1972, Hidden Gems of Post-War Abstraction*, 2017.
Berry Campbell Gallery, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2017.
Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, *Post-War Highlights*, 2017.
Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York, *GALLERY SELECTIONS*, 2018.
Cavalier Galleries, New York, *57th Street: America's Artistic Legacy, Part I*, 2018.
Berry Campbell Gallery, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2018.
Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf, Germany, *A Gesture of Conviction | Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 2018 - 2019.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Summer Selections*, 2019.
Art Students League, New York, *Postwar Women*, 2019.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Women of Abstract Expressionism: Inventory Highlights*, 2020. [online exhibition]
Berry Campbell, New York, *Artist's Choice: Interconnected*, 2020. [online exhibition]
Art Intelligence Global, Hong Kong, *Shatter: Color Field and the Women of Abstract Expressionism*, 2022.
Whitechapel Gallery, London, *Action/Gesture/Paint: A Global Story of the Women of Abstraction 1940 – 1970*, 2023. (traveling to Foundation Vincent van Gogh, Arles; Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Bielefeld).
Addison Gallery of American Art, Philips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, *Women and Abstraction: 1741-Now*, 2023.
Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, New York, *Collection Spotlight: Abstraction, 1950-1980*, 2023-2024.
Berry Campbell, New York, *Perseverance*, 2024.
Gazelli Art House, London, *Montagne*, 2024.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Atlantic Richfield, Los Angeles
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
Ciba-Geigy Collection, Greensboro, North Carolina
Femmes Artistes du Musée. Mougins, France
First Pennsylvania Bank, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Fonds National d'art Contemporain, Paris, France
The Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies
Metropolitan Insurance Company, New York
Grey Art Museum, New York University, New York
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
Riverside Museum, New York
Seattle Art Museum, Washington

¹ Thomas, quoted in Kingsley, p. [3].

² Ibid., p. [4].

³ Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018, p. 728n16).

⁴ Information on the exhibitions can be found in Marika Herskovic, ed., *New York School, Abstract Expressionists: Artists Choice by Artists* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New York School, 2000), pp. 8–39 and Joan Marter, "Missing in Action: Abstract Expressionist Women," in Joan Marter, ed., *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (Denver Art Museum in association with Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 18–21.

⁵ See Marter, p. 13 and *Yvonne Thomas (1913–2009): Memorial Exhibition*.

⁶ "Variety in the Shows, *New York Times*, May 2, 1954, p. X8.

⁷ "Tanager Group," *Art Digest* 28 (May 15, 1954), p. 26.

⁸ Sam Feinstein, "Philadelphia: Heart's Revolt Against Mind," *Art Digest*, May 15, 1954.

⁹ H[oward] D[evree], "Eleven Painters and a Sculptor Feature Group Show at Riverside Museum," *New York Times*, April 9, 1955, p.

¹⁰ L[awrence] C[ampbell], "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* 55 (October 1956), p. 9.

¹¹ G. L., "Yvonne Thomas," *Arts* 31 (November 1956), p. 74.

¹² H. C., "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* (March 1960), p. 14.

¹³ "Around the Galleries, *New York Times*, April 10, 1960, p. X13.

¹⁴ D. J. "Yvonne Thomas," *Arts Magazine* 34 (April 1960), p. 65.

¹⁵ "Yvonne Thomas," *Les Arts*, April 17, 1960.

¹⁶ *Montreal Gazette*, April 29, 1961.

¹⁷ Gwen F. Chanzit, "Introduction to the Exhibition," in Marter, ed., p. 10. ¹⁷ Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism," *Arts Magazine* 11 (Summer 1967), reprinted in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1968), p. 101.