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BOB THOMPSON

THELMA GOLDEN

WITH AN ESSAY BY JUDITH WILSON
AND COMMENTARIES BY SHAMIM MOMIN

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Frontispiece: Thompson in his studio on Rivington Street, New York, c. 1964. Photo © Charles Rotmil

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INTRODUCTION

...in a twisted sort of way I am doomed to be buried alive in cadmium orange, red, yellow light with flowers on my grave of magenta violet, and my casket being the canvas for forcefully having to wrap, walk, and slide into it everyday like the wan [P]russian blue shore and the shore the tree the leaf the wind the end.

— BOB THOMPSON¹

Ten years ago, Judith Wilson described Bob Thompson as “the man in the middle.” This exhibition seeks to insert Bob Thompson in the middle of a number of discourses, above all, in the discourses he established himself. Thompson’s fame (and infamy) during his lifetime, combined with his early death, have created a mythology distinct from the discussion of his artistic achievements. But it is the work itself which must be seen in the context of a newly formed understanding of certain parallel aesthetic histories of the 1950s and 1960s. Thompson was a “black” painter in a time still dominated by the “Negro” artist. In other ways, too, he defied expectations: he was an appropriator before this term would be used positively to describe an aesthetic impulse, and he was a figurative painter working in the midst of Abstract Expressionism. Perhaps it is only in our present day of cultural and aesthetic diversity that an individualist like Thompson can finally be understood.

Like many who die young, Thompson remains fixed in a moment of youthful exuberance. His death at twenty-nine seemed to many untimely, although, given his fast-paced lifestyle and heroin addiction, ultimately unavoidable. Thompson’s fame evolved from his art and his persona; both can be described

as ardent, irrepressible, larger-than-life. He was like a force of nature—sweeping in, then sweeping out, leaving an indelible memory on all who encountered him. Thompson’s art, too, was intense and emotional—figurative expressionism is the term often used (inadequately) to classify it. He was a narrative painter, enamored of images, real and imagined, but equally enthralled by the freedom, the painterliness, and the aesthetic bravado of Abstract Expressionism, not to mention the unfettered palette of the German Expressionists. At his most developed, Thompson melded abstraction into his figuration. It was an inspired synthesis, the creation of a style to serve his unique vision of a new contemporary art.

Robert Louis Thompson was born in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1937. His father owned the state’s only black-run dry-cleaning plant and his mother held a degree from Kentucky State Normal School. Bob and his sisters were encouraged and expected to attend college and train for professional careers. Thompson graduated from high school and entered Boston University with the intention of pursuing premedical studies, but his grades and lack of interest brought this venture to a halt after a year.

Returning to Kentucky, Thompson entered the University of Louisville in the fall of 1957 to study art and to immerse himself in the city’s active literary, theater, music, and art scenes. In the summer of 1958, he traveled to Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he met many of the artists who would become his peers in New York. After a solo exhibition at the Arts in Louisville Gallery in the winter of 1959, Thompson moved to Manhattan’s Lower East Side. In 1960 he had his first show in New York at the Delancey Street Museum and married Carol Plenda.

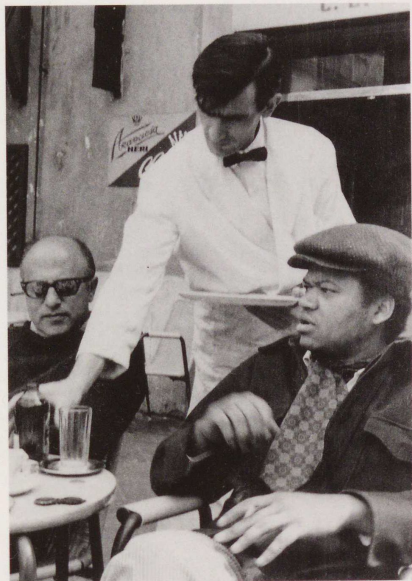
4. Thompson in Ibiza, Fall 1962.

That spring, after receiving a grant, the Thompsons left for Paris. The effect of this first European trip and the others that followed was profound. After studying European painting in books, Thompson, visiting the museums every day, was now able to experience the works firsthand. The Thompsons stayed in Paris for two years, then went to the Spanish island of Ibiza; they remained in Europe until 1963 with the help of a Whitney Opportunity Fellowship (Fig. 4).

Back in New York, Thompson embarked on an impressive exhibition career. He had a one-artist exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in 1963. In 1964 he showed with the Paula Johnson (now Paula Cooper) Gallery in New York and the Richard Gray Gallery in Chicago. The following year he again exhibited with Martha Jackson and Richard Gray and had his first exhibition in Detroit with the Donald Morris Gallery. He was also included in several group exhibitions and his work was being actively acquired by public and private collections.

After his 1965 Martha Jackson exhibition, the Thompsons returned to Europe. In Rome, Thompson continued to paint while studying the Renaissance masterworks all around him. Up to this point, his victories and his vices had been intertwined. But now hard living, heroin addiction, and a voracious appetite for excitement began to take a physical toll on the twenty-eight-year-old. Ignoring doctors and friends, who advised rest and moderation after a gall bladder operation in March 1966, Thompson remained immoderate in every way. Two months later, on May 30, 1966, he died in Rome of a drug overdose.

The story could have ended there. Though Thompson had achieved some degree of renown during his life, the American art world that he would have returned to was growing indifferent to figurative painting. After his death and a few memorial exhibitions, most notably the exhibitions organized by The New School in 1969 and in his hometown at the J.B. Speed Art Museum in 1971,² only a few true believers



5. Thompson and a friend at a café in Rome, Easter, 1966.

kept his memory alive. His biography became the stuff of legend: the young artist who lived hard and played hard; the black man in the center of a newly formed interracial Beat scene; the artist-expatriate who returned home triumphantly. Nevertheless, it was a decade before Thompson's art came up for reconsideration. In recent years, he has been labeled "ripe for rediscovery."³ He is not simply in need of rediscovery, however, but of serious evaluation, one that will finally establish his place with his contemporaries and in the larger story of American art.

This task was begun valiantly by several institutions. An important exhibition was mounted by the National Collection of Fine Arts in 1975.⁴ In 1978, Gylbert Coker organized an impressive retrospective of Thompson's work at The Studio Museum in Harlem, then under the direction of Mary Schmidt Campbell.⁵ In the heady days of the late 1960s, when many museums of African-American art were formed, reclamation was the primary focus: the research, presentation, and preservation of African-

American art in order to expand the discourse around American art in general. Given the exhibition programs of most museums during this era, which in the best cases were simply oblivious and in the worst willfully exclusionary, institutions like The Studio Museum had a vast gap to fill. Like many retrospectives mounted at that time at The Studio Museum, this one was based on a few critical facts and more than a few unstated ideals.

Thompson was a perfect candidate for such a retrospective because he had pioneered a new identity for the African-American artist: he espoused neither the philosophy of the earlier figurative African-American artists who depicted the black experience nor that of the later abstract painters whose desires encompassed universality. He was a figurative painter who referenced the Western tradition, creating appropriations that were multicolored, but not entirely or essentially racialized—the ironies and horrors of racism are apparent in Thompson's work only if read through his biography and the burgeoning civil rights movement. Coker's catalogue essay not only provided data about Thompson's life, but also began to create an inspired framework through which the work could be understood.

In 1987, Thompson's art was again brought to public attention in the one-artist show organized by Kellie Jones and Judith Wilson at the Jamaica Arts Center. The following year, one section of "The Figurative Fifties" exhibition at the Newport Harbor Art Museum was devoted to Thompson's painting, and in 1990 he had a joint exhibition with William H. Johnson in Los Angeles. These three exhibitions created the crucial foundation for the present project.⁶

Two other enterprises are significant in the evolution of Thompson's critical fortunes. The first is the steady movement of his works into private and, more important, public collections. Since 1966, the Thompson estate has been represented by a number of galleries, all of which have sought to place his art

in the public domain.⁷ Their efforts and the burgeoning appreciation for Thompson have made him well represented in the nation's major museums and, if not immediately recognizable, at least somewhat familiar to museum audiences.

Most important, however, is Judith Wilson's research on Thompson, which resulted in a Ph.D. dissertation and the text in this volume. Wilson's work, her many lectures, shorter essays, and talks, laid the groundwork for the current reinvestigation of Thompson. Her approach is to contextualize Thompson within an art historical, cultural, and biographical matrix. The present exhibition, inspired and focused by Wilson's studies, is designed to provide a variety of experiences for different viewers. For those familiar with Thompson's work, it will serve as an occasion for reacquaintance. There will be some surprises even for the most ardent Thompson supporter, because a number of the exhibited works have not been seen publicly in more than thirty years. For those unfamiliar with the artist but knowledgeable about the era, the show illuminates 1950s figurative art. For those with an interest in African-American art, this project further expands the efforts to define the field. Whatever the viewer's vantage, it will emerge that Thompson's vision, though in some ways analogous to that of his peers and mentors—including artists Jan Müller, Christopher Lane, Jay Milder, Emilio Cruz, and Red Grooms, to name a few—was ultimately unique.

This exhibition also seeks to establish not only the artists who inspired Thompson—Poussin, Piero della Francesca, Bosch, Goya, etc.—but those whom he inspired. In the latter case, it is hard not to think about the painter Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) when considering Bob Thompson. It cannot be documented that Basquiat knew of Thompson, but such acquaintance is not impossible. On the day Basquiat died in August 1988, many, like myself, were stunned. Not only for the loss of Basquiat, but for the earlier

loss it recalled. Those a bit older, wiser, and/or wearier understood that history always repeats itself and the signs are usually clear. The similarities in the two lives are eerie: practices, personas, victories, and vices.

For viewers new to Thompson's work, the exhibition offers an intensive introduction to a highly talented mid-century artist who reads as clearly today as he did in his time. What makes this work seem fresh is Thompson's prescient concern for what we now refer to as issues. His interest in the past, his appropriative tendencies, and insistence on narrative all have analogues in contemporary practice.

This exhibition methodically presents Thompson's engaging career. Between 1959, the year of his first one-artist show, until his death in 1966, Thompson worked prodigiously, rushing, it would seem, to get it all down. He made many, many works; most very good, many truly great.⁸ The more than one hundred works presented provide a visual parallel to Wilson's art historical and biographical narrative. Thompson's seven-year career falls into three phases that correspond not only to his natural growth as a young artist, but also to the expanding vision he gained during his travels. The pictures range in size from the truly miniature to the monumental. The exhibition focuses primarily on painting, with manifestations that lean toward drawings, other types of work on paper, and even a two-sided work which is slightly sculptural. There is a comprehensive selection of small paintings, many of them studies for the larger paintings on view. These smaller paintings almost form an exhibition within the exhibition.

The retrospective is organized chronologically, which allows an examination of the three phases in Thompson's development. The first phase is the formative period of 1959–62, a moment that coincides with Thompson's moves from Louisville to Provincetown to New York and then to Paris. This journey marks the metaphoric transition in

Thompson's life away from his ancestral home to his life as an artist. These early canvases are unruly and full of raw emotion. The compositions are slightly distorted, the rendering of forms cryptic, and the depictions of the body and nature abbreviated. In all, the works of this period attest to Thompson's early attempts at a personal approach to figuration in relation to other artists of the day. These works rely on geometry and color to make their point; they rush, fast and hard, and set out a large terrain that Thompson would revisit for the rest of his career.

Thompson's first sojourn in Europe began in 1961, and his unbridled enthusiasm for the European paintings he encountered produced not only obvious references to these works, but also a painterliness indebted to the influence of his mentor, Jan Müller. Müller represented a group of artists that Thompson encountered in Provincetown who were committed to the idea that there were possibilities for innovation in figurative painting. The dissonant color and distorted drawing which characterize Müller's paintings had a profound effect on Thompson and inform his early paintings. *Le Poignarder (The Stab)* of 1959 (Fig. 47) centers around three frontal, flat figures, the most prominent being the pink, nude female torso and legs in the foreground. On the opposite side is another, less decipherable figure marked by a prominent yellow patch that reads as hair. The scene takes place outdoors, the background of the canvas filled with a blue patch of sky, a white patch of clouds, three stiff trees, and an expanse of green ground. The space is compressed, the perspective illogical. The title is ambiguous. Does it refer to some impending violence or perhaps a sly, crude sexual innuendo? In the middle of the picture is a black-hatted figure, an apparition that will appear and reappear throughout Thompson's career. The figure represents Thompson himself—not a self-portrait but a coded mark of his presence in and on the periphery of his pictures.

Le Poignarder also begins to exhibit a composi-

tional depth. The picture is divided between the foreground action and the background, which stretches into an undefinable region—a “someplace else” that is often signaled in Thompson's work by an unending path, a far-off mountain range or, as in this case, the hint of a distant forest.

An untitled painting from the next year exhibits a more sophisticated approach and exemplifies Thompson's increasing use of direct appropriation as a pictorial device (Fig. 61). The two seated nude women are lifted directly from Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Again with a broad hand, Thompson depicts these two and other nude females, along with fully clothed men, in a forestlike setting made psychedelic by his use of color. As in *Le Poignarder*, he begins with naturalistic definitions of color—the bodies approximate white flesh, the grass is green—but at the same time he veers into the unnatural. Distinct to this picture is the inclusion of a figure at the center who appears neither human nor animal. In a photograph of Thompson published in *The Studio Museum catalogue*,⁹ he appears in front of a shelf featuring a wooden African sculpture that was clearly the source for the depicted figure (Fig. 6). Its presence in the painting suggests an ironic comment on the historic relationship between the primitive and the West, and on the appropriation of African art by modern artists, a dialectic which inevitably informs Thompson's work. Thompson's interest in African art was not widely documented or remembered, but he, like many African-American artists of his time, must have been curious about the burgeoning black nationalist advocacy of Africa and things African. He was aware of the attempts to characterize him as a primitive, a naïf, and he was also aware of those aspects of primitivism which critically informed modern art. Thus any reference to primitivism by Thompson carries a two-tiered meaning: it is both ancestral and aesthetic, with an edge of complicity and critique.



6. Thompson and Ornette Coleman in Thompson's studio on Rivington Street, New York, 1965. On the shelf behind them is the African sculpture that was the source for the central figure in *Untitled*, 1960 (Fig. 61).

Along with visiting museums and voraciously reading art books, Thompson was a regular and enthusiastic patron of jazz clubs and a fan and friend of many of the major players of the day. The connection between his Abstract Expressionist peers and jazz musicians has been well documented. Abstract Expressionists found the freedom of jazz liberating and instructive and created its corollary in visual form. As Wilson discusses below, Thompson was equally, although differently, affected by the music. In the ability of these musicians to take a standard song and make it their own, he saw a direct relation to his working process of appropriation or interpretation. He embodied the “hot” and the “cool” of the music of this era. And just as jazz musicians strove to find their own voice, their “sound,” Thompson sought self-expression through the visual vocabulary he was developing.

Ornette of 1960–61 (Fig. 69) is a portrait of the jazz musician and composer Ornette Coleman. Coleman was a friend of Thompson's, and they admired each other's work. Thompson here depicts Coleman in the center of the canvas from four vantage points—one frontal view, two in profile, left and right,



7. Ornette Coleman and Carol Thompson in Thompson's studio on Rivington Street, 1965.

and one in bird's-eye perspective. Ringing the canvas are vignettes depicting female figures in a variety of poses—reclining, sitting, in groups and alone, perhaps copied from images in books. The picture, with its peculiar circular sequencing, suggests that Thompson wanted to create a visual form analogous to the complex, nonlinear music Coleman was creating. Thompson uses this same compositional device in a later painting, *Cathedral* (1963; Fig. 92), where he recreates the vertiginous effect of viewing stained-glass windows by placing the figures in a circular fashion around a brilliant sunburst in the middle of the canvas.

Christ and *L'Exécution*, both of 1961 (Figs. 73, 74), are loaded images of death and martyrdom. *L'Exécution* shows a black, blindfolded body hanging from a tree while a group of people look on. Though the title is general, the image itself recalls a lynching, an act which still consumed the thoughts of many African-Americans. *Christ* appropriates the classic Christian composition of the *Lamentation* and is one of the many works in Thompson's oeuvre that features traditional Christian iconography. The idea of redemption, as expounded in Christian dogma, seemed to fascinate

Thompson. At a moment when many of his contemporaries were rejecting conventional religious beliefs, he seemed to exploit them—not so much as an act of faith but for the narrative potential he saw in sacred art.

The 1962 canvas *Tree* (Fig. 83) exemplifies the second phase of Thompson's career (1962–64), which is marked by a formal evolution and intensification of thematic concerns. Thompson now typically established the composition with large, flat areas of color that delineate figures or abstract shapes. In *Tree*, a monumental 9-foot-wide canvas, a red-haired, winged woman grasps the trunk of a tree; a red humanoid creature to the right struggles with a white animal who is being attacked by a brown creature emerging from the bottom of the canvas. The painting is full of psychosexual drama. The bestial couplings can be read as carnal as well as brutal. Thompson, whose depictions of sex are always coupled with violence, is obsessed with the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious. The paintings are the realization of the hallucinations and emotions that consumed him. In his work, passion and fear are corollary emotions.

The paintings of 1963, made toward the end of the second phase, represent a decisive shift in Thompson's vocabulary. At this point, he and his wife, Carol, had returned to New York, and he had again set up a studio on the Lower East Side. The compositions of this year became more abbreviated and focused on a single central action or idea. As Thompson's narrative sensibility developed, he gave the faces clearer suggestions of emotional expressiveness, perhaps as a nod to portraiture, but certainly in order to intensify the narrative. The action in *Descent from the Cross* (Fig. 93) takes place in an indeterminate space. The cross is a gnarled, tree-like form surrounded by bird and female creatures. Elsewhere in this volume, Shamim Momin reads the omission of the male mourners traditionally included in the *Descent* scene and the dominant presence of three

female figures as a reflection of Thompson's complicated relationship with women.

Among the other figures in *Descent from the Cross* is a blue-bodied, green-winged Christ who has just been taken down from the cross. The added wings help transform the familiar iconographic moment of descent into a proleptic ascent: Thompson was always attracted to stories that implied the possibility of physical and psychological freedom. The visual emphasis on wings throughout the canvas also reminds us that flight—undertaken to escape fear or seek freedom—is a constant theme in Thompson's art.

The setting of *The Spinning, Spinning, Turning, Directing* (Fig. 108), also of 1963, is spatially ambiguous: the tree seen through an archway reads as background, but the space in front of it cannot be logically calibrated. The figures are taken from three different plates in Goya's *Los Caprichos*, a pessimistic series of etchings published in 1799 that presents a turbulent world of debased, barely human creatures. Thompson's interest in the fantastical component of Goya's work is evident. The flying bird and the tumbling woman inhabit a nightmarish nether region. Here also we can see that Thompson was obsessed with making sense of all he saw in Europe, working feverishly to capture as much of it as possible on canvas. In his energetic mind, the processes of looking, thinking, and making collided as he synthesized older imagery with his own thoughts and fears.

From 1964 on, in what we can consider the final phase of Thompson's work, the artist thoroughly combines the appropriated and the imagined. These paintings, even more intensely hued than before, show a more complex, definitive figurative thrust and a new coherence of Thompson's Old Master sources and thematic concerns: mythology and religion, death, and sex and passion.

Massacre of the Innocents (Fig. 122) is thematically

inspired by the standard Old Master image depicting Herod's slaughter of the male infants of Bethlehem after Christ's birth. Thompson's version insinuates the narrative's sense of violence and horror through garish reds, yellows, and oranges and the frenzied brushstrokes of the sky. In the *Adoration of the Magi* (After Poussin), Thompson punctuates the canvas with the same intensely warm hues (Fig. 99). The figures, assembled in procession across the canvas, adore not a traditional Christ Child, but a blue bird perched on the lap of a yellow woman. It is a striking substitution which demands to be read as an indication of the deeply personal (though sometimes inexplicable) narrative currents which drift through Thompson's work.

Two images of this period testify to Thompson's working process. *Sacrament of Baptism* (Poussin) and the *Saving of Pyrrhus* (Poussin) are both drawings on canvas (Figs. 127, 129). Using felt-tip pen, ink, and pencil, Thompson traced out the original compositions and then placed them in an imagined landscape of his own design. Seen in black-and-white reproduction, they merely seem to document Thompson's close study of compositional conventions of European art. When viewed in relation to the larger body of Thompson's work, as they are in this exhibition, they make clear how reliant Thompson was on color. It is with color that Thompson made his most critical interventions, using it to introduce his personal mark, to make the real dreamlike, the pious perverse. In *Mars and Venus* (Fig. 121), the mythological lovers lie in sensual repose. Venus is blue, Mars a brilliant red. They sit against multicolored trees in a multicolored sky. Even Thompson's treatment of the sky includes colors from the composition below mixed in with the white clouds.

Much has been made of Thompson's multicolored people. They are often read, perhaps misguidedly, as a purely nonracial statement. But it is more

complex than that. Thompson was working in the years when civil rights leaders were advocating the use of the word "black" instead of "colored" to describe African-Americans. Another artist might have substituted black figures for the white Europeans of his sources as an expression of racial politics (as Robert Colescott did two decades later). Thompson, however, through his wild chromatics, rejected such racial coding, choosing instead to play on the very word "color."

Personal symbolism, which had been developed in Thompson's earlier work, also informs these late paintings. The ever-present bird imagery now becomes a dominant motif. If the hatted man is Thompson "in the flesh," the birds represent him in spirit. Birds abound in most of these paintings, and they are crazed, caught creatures. *Bird Party* (Fig. 75) features them in a sensual dance with the female figures. In a small untitled painting of 1963, the bird is an attacker, slaying the human figure on the ground. In both versions of *The Death of Camilla* (Figs. 116, 117), birds are held aloft in the solemn procession, denied the freedom to fly. (The pictorial source of Thompson's paintings is unknown. The reference in the title is to Camilla, a maiden in pre-Roman Italy whose story is told in Virgil's *Aeneid*.) In the *Saving of Pyrrhus* (Poussin), birds hover in the foreground, their spread wings echoed in the spanned arms of the procession of people at center. Thompson uses birds to personify human emotions and act out the emotional content of the paintings. It is easy to read Thompson in these dynamic birds, in their violence, their captivity, their beauty, their menace.

Although Thompson was consumed by the Old Master art through which he expressed his inner life, he was no less engaged in the world beyond his studio. In New York and in Europe, he and his wife were part of the wide-ranging Beat community. *LeRoi Jones and His Family* and *Portrait of Allen* (Figs. 151, 152) document two of Thompson's Beat friends.

Thompson himself was in many ways a quintessential Beat. When Lisa Phillips described the Beat experience as "the ecstatic, the horrific, the beatific and the beaten,"¹⁰ she could also have been describing Thompson's work and life. *LeRoi Jones and His Family* portrays Jones and his wife, Hettie, also a writer, as serious and direct. The subdued tones and unfettered brushstrokes represent a style that Thompson reserved for these portraits. The Jones' young daughters, Kellie and Lisa, are portrayed less precisely, with Kellie as a small figure, similar to some of the angels in earlier pictures, and Lisa as a green-swaddled creature at lower right. Allen Ginsberg was painted when he was visiting Thompson's studio. The background is akin to the more calculated abstraction that Thompson was incorporating into the backgrounds of the late landscapes. Ginsberg, a Buddhist, is portrayed sitting on a chair in the lotus position with a sheaf of papers (perhaps something he brought to read to Thompson) scattered on the floor in front of him. These two paintings, in which Thompson leaves the imaginary to document those in the intensely creative world around him, mark a small, but important part of his oeuvre.

Two last works speak directly to Thompson's mental state at the end of his life. *Untitled (The Operation)*, a small crayon-on-paper drawing of 1966 that appropriates classic *Creation of Eve* iconography, depicts an attenuated, anguished body (Fig. 156). The picture testifies to Thompson's use of Old Master themes to document his own experiences and emotions. The abdomen is sliced open, the gash bloodied—an obvious reference to Thompson's gall bladder operation, which, according to Carol Thompson, he had postponed for a long time. The picture insinuates that Thompson was overwhelmed by his physical deterioration as well as his fear of death. *View from Hospital* (Fig. 157) is a careful line drawing of the view outside his Italian hospital window. Inside the window frame, in the hospital room, there was a small

arrangement of flowers which Thompson depicts in color. The rest of the scene—the window and the outside view—is drawn in black-and-white.

Thompson's time in the hospital undoubtedly made him reckon with his own mortality. Contemporary accounts from friends suggest that, while sobered by his condition, Thompson was eager to get back to working and living at his former frenetic pace. The barely begun canvas which Carol Thompson identifies as her husband's last work shows him returning to art in his typical style and scale (Fig. 158). It is a large composition that only went as far as the colored outline underdrawing, leaving us to imagine what would have been.

A chronological view of Thompson's work, such as that just presented, tells only one story—and it is a flawed one. Thompson's peripatetic movement and far-ranging mind indicate that he did not work in a linear fashion. Like the jazz musicians he admired, he seemed to be constantly improvising on himself—moving around similar compositions, emphasizing a different aspect in each new statement. Stylistic devices and scale keep shifting and the themes appear and reappear.

There is also the issue of appropriation, which, when considered outside the iconographic readings of the paintings, is vexing. In current parlance, Thompson would be considered an appropriator. But that definition narrowly and perhaps inaccurately describes the more complex thrust of this act in his working method. Appropriation now often implies a critique which was not a part of Thompson's project. And there are many in the field who belittle Thompson as simply a copyist. And still others say that these adaptations of Western art were an assimilationist tactic. In a bizarre, minority approach, some observers divide the works into two categories: those in which Thompson was trying to paint like an acceptable "white" painter and those in which he was painting

as his true, authentic "black" self. This division, however, denies that Thompson was in fact a curious mix of both.

Perhaps Thompson can be best understood in the present—but from a vantage that turns to the past. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has brilliantly defined the concept of "signifyin'" as a cultural construction, which perhaps begins to describe the aesthetic attitude that Thompson worked in or around. Signifyin' is a black vernacular language structure in which meaning is inscribed through revision, repetition, and conscious misappropriation. The first chapter of Gates' book *The Signifying Monkey* begins with an epigraph quoting Frederick Douglass. Gates uses the Douglass quote to speak to the political, cultural, and ideological tradition of copying in African-American culture.

I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meetinghouse every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.¹¹

So the act of copying, in this context, becomes a surreptitious claim to power and equality, or rather to the power that can be gained through equality. It is about what is given and what must be taken or claimed. This is Douglass' implication. Like Douglass, Thompson understood the power of the works he used and their place in the history of art. Western art

offered him something which he assumed was his right to use freely. He also was clear about his desire to make these works his own: inflect their vocabulary with his grammar; infuse the agreed-upon meanings with his intention. To claim them. To signify. He says: "Why are all these people running around trying to be original when they should go ahead and be themselves and that's the originality of it all just to be yourself."¹² Thompson's art lay not simply in the restatement, but in the revision and replacement of these familiar passages—a philosophy that brings him into a direct affinity with his jazz musician contemporaries as well as with an entire generation of African-American artists who followed his strategy.

Today, Thompson's most direct and frequently cited heir is the painter Robert Colescott. For over twenty years, Colescott has been creating a body of work that comments on and critiques art history while exploring attitudes about race and gender. His restatements are biting and funny in their unrelenting honesty. Thompson's influence can also be seen

in the works of other artists who take on art historical traditions and the idea of ownership, for example, Fred Wilson's methodological investigations into culture and art. Thompson's approach to narrative has a contemporary peer in Kara Walker's silhouettes, which reimagine American history, and in Glenn Ligon's text paintings, where narrative is literally reduced to text, and process to the copying of that text.

Thompson worked fast and furious in his short eight years, and it is clear that he was trying to create something new. Given his early demise, and the iconographic approach other historians have taken toward his life and work, conjecture about where Thompson would have ended up artistically had he lived seems like a huge leap—a leap one shouldn't make, given his formidable achievement staring us right in the eye. That he lived and changed the ways in which we look at figuration, Abstract Expressionism, bebop, the whole cool world through vibrant, violent, yet considered images is enough.

1. Bob Thompson, undated letter to his family, quoted in Michael Rosenfeld, *Bob Thompson: Heroes, Martyrs and Spectres*, exh. cat. (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1997), p. 3.
2. New School for Social Research, New School Art Center, Wollman Hall, "Bob Thompson (1937-1966)," 1969, and J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, "Bob Thompson 1937-1966: Memorial Exhibit," 1971.
3. Ann Landi, "Ripe for Discovery," *Art News*, 95 (November 1996), p. 118.
4. National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., "Bob Thompson: 1937-1966," 1975.

5. The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, "The World of Bob Thompson," 1978.

6. Jamaica Arts Center, New York, "Bob Thompson," 1987; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California, "The Figurative Fifties: New York Figurative Expressionism," 1988; and California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles, "Novae: William H. Johnson and Bob Thompson," 1990.

7. In addition to Martha Jackson and Donald Morris, Thompson was represented during his life by Richard Gray and then posthumously by Vanderwoude Tananbaum. The estate is now represented by the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

8. Some estimate that Thompson created more than a thousand works in various media during his career.

9. *The World of Bob Thompson*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978), p. 2.

10. Lisa Phillips, "Beat Culture: America Revisited," in *Beat Culture and the New America 1950-1965*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995), p. 33.

11. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.

12. *The World of Bob Thompson*, p. 19.