



**YVONNE THOMAS**

WINDOWS AND VARIATIONS  
PAINTINGS | 1963–1965

SEPTEMBER 5 – OCTOBER 5, 2019





WINDOW NO. 1, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 39½ X 49½ IN.

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In 1963, a significant change occurred in the art of **YVONNE THOMAS** (1913–2009). Whereas in the 1950s, she had let her paintings lead her in the ways they evolved, following their logic, she now took control of them through a more consistent and systematic approach. The works she produced concur with the ethos of the abstract art of the time. In the view that the gesturalism of Abstract Expressionism had foreclosed the mental and preplanned methods that had been important in the art of the past, artists began to bring conceptual ideas back into their works. This sea change is reflected in a wide body of work, from the blackened squares of Ad Reinhardt, to the solidly colored panel paintings of Ellsworth Kelly, to the one-image chevrons of Kenneth Noland, to the fields of color with inflected color disks by Larry Poons, to the infinite repetition of Yayoi Kusama's mark-making, to the work of minimalist sculptors who chose to establish strict, self-imposed, modular systems.

The ideology of the time was articulated by critics. The main art theorist of the era, Clement Greenberg, argued in his promotion of Color Field painting in the catalogue for the 1964 exhibition, *Post-Painterly Abstraction* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), that Abstract Expressionism had degenerated into mannerism. He advocated that artists "move toward a physical openness of design or toward linear clarity, or toward both."<sup>1</sup> The influential writer and curator, Lawrence Alloway stated that a systematic approach could be just as creative and freeing as one that was existential and primal. Beyond that, Alloway argued that the artist's conceptual order, rather than being distant and detached, was actually personal and autographic, because it represented an artist's ideas and way of seeing the world. For Alloway, the use by an artist of a consistent system provided a point of reference by which he or she could move deeply into a subject and continue a train of thought, rather than starting anew in each work. He remarked in the introduction to the 1966 Guggenheim Museum exhibition, *Systemic Painting*: "The artist who uses a given form begins each painting further along, deeper into the process, than an expressionist, who is, in theory at least, lost in each beginning."<sup>2</sup>

These ideas clearly resonated with Thomas. As a participant in the intellectually oriented Subjects of the Artists School, founded by William Baziotis, David Hare, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell, she adhered to the emphasis in the school on the importance of the artist's selection of subjects, and a consideration of how they were arrived at,

over art that was impersonal and detached from what an artist felt and experienced.<sup>3</sup> Her transition to a more methodical approach was not a departure from this point of view. What it afforded her was a way of probing her ideas and feelings, beyond just expressing them. This, of course, involved color, which she called her "strongest joy and enigma."<sup>4</sup> Understanding the impact of color was Thomas's career-long aim.

In her paintings from 1963 to 1965, Thomas chose as her method of inquiry a repeating pattern of footprint-like rectangles or elongated lozenges that float in loose rows against grounds that are similar in tone, or reveal related tonal modulations. The choice of a design that has a textile look to it may have derived from Thomas's work during her early career as a fashion illustrator. The approach is not unlike that of Leon Polk Smith, who chose the stitching patterns on drawings of tennis balls, footballs, and basketballs as a means of suppressing modeling and textural variation. Some of the works in this exhibition belong to a series called *The Window*, implying more of the process of looking and having a sense of distance than the direct gesturalism of Abstract Expressionism. One of the paintings is entitled *Variations*, attesting to the seriality of the work.

The lozenges in these works are intriguing: some seem meant to be distinct shapes, gone over by the artist additively to define and clarify their contours; others are subtractive, consisting of scraped rectangles. Still others appear to consist just of direct strokes of paint applied with wide brushes. These forms derive from the more defined elements that began to emerge in Thomas's Abstract Expressionist work in the 1950s, but here she took what had been spontaneous marks and made them conscious and deliberate. This enabled her to consider the difference between just applying paint to canvas and working with it to create form more decisively. A similar considered quality is apparent in the grounds on which the lozenge-shapes are situated. In some instances, Thomas used the staining approach, pioneered by Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, to acknowledge the materiality of a work in the uniting of paint and support. In other instances, it appears that she laid down the shapes first and then painted around them, so that what seems to be ground is actually shape and surface itself. The works are thus ultimately about the process of creation as a constructive act by which an artist can do proactively what is needed for a painting rather than what is expected or expedient. The consistency of her formats enabled her to delve into this inquiry. The result is a sense of control, but not rigidity.

The paintings are also about the power of color. By emphasizing the unity of a work by the patterns that repeat across the entirety of a surface—even if they are not uniform—the images are meant to be read as totalities rather than compositions. Even when there are coloristic transitions, often occurring toward the middle of a work in a yin-yang effect, there is a wholeness to each image. The colors within them have a vibratory quality, as light seems to emanate from their depths as well as to be reflecting off of their surfaces. They keep the eye of the viewer engaged in their luminosity. It seems likely that Thomas was drawing on her memories of her early years in France, as the paintings are reminiscent of the experience of the stained-glass windows in French cathedrals through which sunlight is transformed into spiritualized color, while the windows in the dark walls of cathedrals, produce an overall shimmer of their own. At the same time, the vibrancy of the color in the paintings evokes the artist's early memories of her grandmother's Provençal garden, where she remembers being rocked in a cradle beneath "the cloud-yellow Mimosas, orange trees, and a pale green Eucalyptus."<sup>5</sup>

By limiting the colors in each of the paintings, Thomas makes color their subject, drawing the viewer into a consideration of how color is both associative and visceral. In seeing a group of these works together, this question becomes apparent. As viewers, we discover that certain works hold our attention more than others. If we respond more to a blue painting than a red-orange one, is



VARIATIONS, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 21½ X 24¾ IN.





UNTITLED, 1964, OIL ON CANVAS, 13½ X 34½ IN.

this because it reminds us of the sea, or something else to which we free-associate, or is it just the color itself to which we are innately drawn?

Thomas varied the format of some of her works beginning in 1964, incorporating geometric structures into her *Night Window* series, in which some of the squares include contrasts with the ground while others are absorbed into it.<sup>6</sup> Of her May 1965 exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery in New York, a critic for *Art News* observed: "All areas of the canvas are functioning and vital, with no neutralized spaces. These may be ideologically related to [Hans] Hofmann, but they are sufficiently different from his absolute squares of color to achieve uniqueness."<sup>7</sup> A reviewer for the *New York Herald Tribune* commented on Thomas's "handsome abstractions in which the manipulation of the square is the predominant theme. These appear on the canvas like some clearly articulated piano fugues which stress color more than technique."<sup>8</sup> The reference to piano fugues, with their contrapuntal compositions, expresses the essence of Thomas's paintings of 1963 to 1965, when she used repetition and reoccurrence not to limit her art but to broaden it.

#### ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Yvonne 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 Václav Vytačil 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 Hoffmann, Lee Krāsner, 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."<sup>9</sup>

In 1950, Thomas studied with Hofmann at his school in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She credits him with giving her the "courage of

color."<sup>10</sup> In the next year, she took part in a series of annual exhibitions of abstract art, that became legendary.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. 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.<sup>13</sup>

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."<sup>14</sup> Also reviewing the show, Dore Ashton observed the "landscape feeling"



UNTITLED, 1964, OIL ON CANVAS, 19½ X 24 IN.



in Thomas's oils and commented: "Hers is a delicate, very subtle intonation, adjusted to atmospheric rather than energetic forces in nature."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup> 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."<sup>18</sup> *Arts Magazine* observed that Thomas had succeeded in "establishing a really plastic tension and strength" in works such as *Aspen* and *By the Sea*.<sup>19</sup>

In April 1960, after a year spent in Paris, Thomas had her second New York show, which was held at the Esther Stuttmann 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.'"<sup>20</sup> The *New York Times* commented: "Big, brave gestures with paint and color parade on energetic action paintings."<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> The show was sent on to Stuttmann'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.<sup>23</sup>

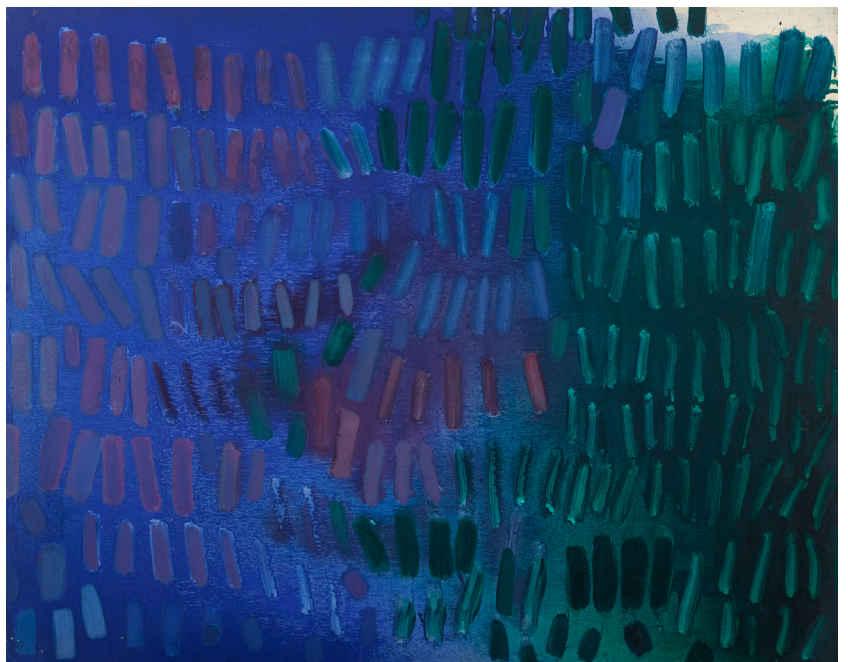
When Thomas had another solo exhibition in 1961, held at Galerie Agnes Lefort in Montreal, a reviewer for the *Montreal Gazette* noted that Thomas was moving from action painting to a "more analytical observation of her wildly careening or stolid forms and receding planes in limitless space," categorically denying the first impression made by a work.<sup>24</sup> In 1962 through 1964, Thomas was featured in one-artist shows in New York; Aspen, Colorado; and East Hampton, New York. When her work was featured at the Rose Fried Gallery in May of 1965, she was showing the more geometric and structural approach of the art in the current exhibition.

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 Geduld 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*, the catalogue for 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.

## NOTES

1. Clement Greenberg, "Introduction," *Post-Painterly Abstraction*, exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1964, quoted in Lawrence Alloway, "Systemic Painting," introductory essay from the exhibition catalogue *Systemic Painting*, Guggenheim Museum, New York. Reprinted in Babcock, p. 48.
2. Alloway, "Systemic Painting," in Babcock, p. 56.
3. Information on the school can be found in *Subjects of the Artist: New York Painting, 1941–1947*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown Branch).
4. Yvonne Thomas, quoted in *Yvonne Thomas, 1955–1963: Paintings*, exh. cat. (New York: Ericson Gallery, 1981).
5. Quoted in April Kingsley, "Yvonne Thomas: 'I have an urge to enclose the world,'" in *Yvonne Thomas: Recent Paintings*, exh. cat. (New York: Cyrus Gallery, 1989, p. [4].
6. Amy Goldin, "Yvonne Thomas," *Arts Magazine* 39 (September/October 1965), p. 6.
7. K. L., "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* 64 (May 1965), p. 14.
8. "The Galleries: Yvonne Thomas," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 22, 1965.
9. Thomas, quoted in Kingsley, p. [3].
10. *Ibid.*, p. [4].
11. Seventy-two artists were included in the exhibition, although only sixty-one were listed on the poster that served as its announcement. Thomas's inclusion is noted in several sources including *Yvonne Thomas (1913–2009): Memorial Exhibition* (New York: Katharina Rich Perlow Gallery, 2009) and Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018, p. 728n16).
12. 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.
13. See Marter, p. 13 and *Yvonne Thomas (1913–2009): Memorial Exhibition*.
14. "Variety in the Shows," *New York Times*, May 2, 1954, p. X8.
15. "Tanager Group," *Art Digest* 28 (May 15, 1954), p. 26.
16. Sam Feinstein, "Philadelphia: Heart's Revolt Against Mind," *Art Digest*, May 15, 1954.
17. H[oward] D[evree], "Eleven Painters and a Sculptor Feature Group Show at Riverside Museum," *New York Times*, April 9, 1955, p. 11.
18. L[awrence] C[ampbell], "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* 55 (October 1956), p. 9.
19. G. L., "Yvonne Thomas," *Arts* 31 (November 1956), p. 74.
20. H. C., "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* (March 1960), p. 14.
21. "Around the Galleries," *New York Times*, April 10, 1960, p. X13.
22. D. J. "Yvonne Thomas," *Arts Magazine* 34 (April 1960), p. 65.
23. "Yvonne Thomas," *Les Arts*, April 17, 1960.
24. *Montreal Gazette*, April 29, 1961.
25. Gwen F. Chanzit, "Introduction to the Exhibition," in Marter, ed., p. 10. 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.



THE WINDOW, 1964, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 X 50 IN.



COVER: *BLUE GREEN NO. II (DETAIL)*, 1963, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 X 50 IN.



*THE GARDEN*, 1963, OIL ON LINEN, 32 $\frac{3}{4}$  X 40 $\frac{1}{2}$  IN.

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530 WEST 24TH STREET  
NEW YORK, NY 10011  
INFO@BERRYCAMPBELL.COM

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