

HEMPHILL

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CONTACT:

Caitlin Berry
HEMPHILL Fine Arts
1515 14th Street NW
Washington, DC 20005
202.234.5601
caitlin@hemphillfinearts.com
www.hemphillfinearts.com

ALMA THOMAS: Thirteen Studies for Paintings
October 11 - December 20, 2014

Washington DC—HEMPHILL is pleased to announce the exhibition *Alma Thomas: Thirteen Studies for Paintings*, opening on Saturday, October 11, 2014, with a public reception from 6:00–8:00pm. The exhibition will remain on view through December 20, 2014.

We should be content to praise Alma Thomas for her achievements as an art educator. After her 35 years at Shaw Junior High School, thousands of students are richer for their experiences in her classroom. Undaunted by retirement, Thomas ventured into the nearly all-white male art world of abstract painting of the 1960s. Although early in her career she painted mostly representational works, she dared to take on abstraction in an art scene that was poised to dismiss her as a sweet older woman making pretty paintings. Additionally, abstract painting was viewed by many of her African American colleagues as out of sync with the racial politics of the times. Neither of these assumptions was true.

Today, many viewers tend to see Thomas as having worked intuitively, like the Abstract Expressionists who preceded her, or as a colorist among her contemporaries in the Color Field movement. There is no doubt that her dabs and dashes of bright color may suggest she was unconcerned with issues and concepts. As pretty as her work might seem, Thomas did not make airless, serene pictures. A persistent feeling of struggle is communicated in the roughness of her brushwork. Frequently, there is a sense that the background passages between the intervals of dabs and dashes will overtake a painting. These elements imply a narrative. A basic narrative that asks, “When will all be resolved?” Simultaneously, the work projects the potent hope for a triumphant outcome. Thomas chose not to illustrate the issues of the civil rights movement, but she did demonstrate a belief in the power of abstract painting to communicate the forces that encourage positive change.

The preparatory works in *Thirteen Studies for Paintings* reveal the thoroughly strategic planning behind Thomas’s work. Often, multiple sheets of paper are taped or pinned together with notations in the margins and on the reverse, allowing us to feel Thomas’ process of thinking through a painting’s structure. *Thirteen Studies for Paintings* is a vibrant display of the artist at the height of her aesthetic and intellectual powers. And, yes, this work is beautiful. The subject of beauty is an undeniable part of the content of her work. Beauty is so often disdained by the upper echelon of art critics. Criticism is something this artist did not fear. She understood that beauty is the thing we should struggle to achieve. It could be said that Alma Thomas never actually retired from teaching, as her paintings continue to do just that.

Alma W. Thomas (American, 1891- 1978) was born in Columbus, GA and moved to Washington, DC with her family in 1907. In 1924, she became the first graduate of the Art Department at Howard University, and in 1935 received a Master of Arts in art education from Columbia University. Her work is represented in the collections of The Columbus Museum of Art, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, The Baltimore Museum of Art, The National Gallery of Art, The Howard University Gallery of Art, The Phillips Collection, The Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum, and The Whitney Museum of American Art, among numerous other public, private, and university art collections.

GALLERY HOURS: Tuesday–Saturday, 10:00am–5:00pm, and by appointment.

Image: Alma Thomas, *Untitled, circa 1968, acrylic on paper, 18” x 52”*

IMAGES ARE AVAILABLE FOR REPRODUCTION.

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