MUSEUMS

A Black Woman Stands Out Among the Washington Color School Artists

Alma Thomas was the sole black female artist in what became known as the Washington Color School, and the current exhibition reveals some of the complexity of her art.

Seph Rodney | 3 days ago

Alma Thomas, "Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses" (1969) Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50 in. National Museum of Women in the Arts; gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay (All photos courtesy of the Studio Museum in Harlem)

One of the first things you might notice when you approach one of Alma Thomas' paintings in her current exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem is that the gauzy petals of acrylic paint almost lift off the canvas to create a feathery visual effect. I approached the work "Iris, Tulips, Jonquils, and Crocuses" (1973) thinking that it consisted of paper that was wafting off its foundation, but then realized when I was closer that Thomas had achieved this effect by carefully layering the thickness of her signature hash marks to form a kind of painterly mosaic. This is a lovely and charming effect, though the glamour of it

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the glamour of it wore off by the second time I visited the show — which is fine because Thomas had other things to say.

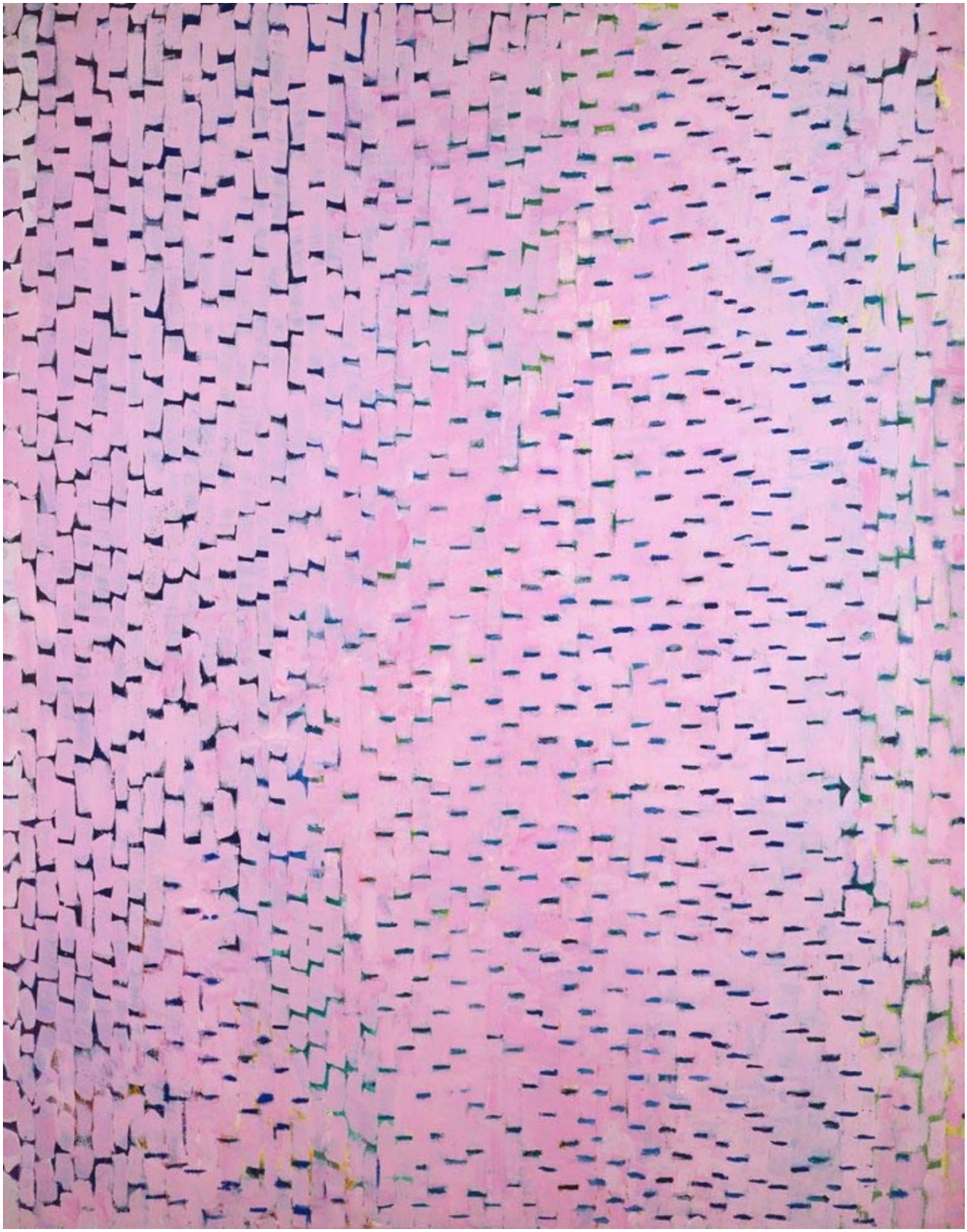
'Alma Thomas' (installation view with "Starry Night and Astronauts" on the left) The Studio Museum in Harlem, July 14–October 30, 2016 (Photo: Adam Reich)

"Starry Night and the Astronauts" (1972) introduces schemes of higher contrast that are vivid on the canvas, drawing my eye between the two areas Thomas demarcated: one light and dark blue with white highlights peeking out between the dark masses, and the other, a lone color saturated asteroid in that cold darkness of space. I can't help but compare the size, tonality, brightness, and hues of that lone interloper: the one odd object in an otherwise stark landscape of opposites. There is something in this painting that works at the level of metaphor: adventurers, heroic astronauts, clearly not *of* the context they find themselves *in*, yet poised and serene — present. This painting among the many others here illustrate what has always been enticing to me about Color Field work: its measured pacing of a visual experience that invites the viewer to be contemplative. It's amazing to me how this work manipulates attention by creating visual turmoil through its small, subtle shifts to a suddenly tonally and geometrically inconsistent shape in an otherwise cohesive geometric pattern.

'Alma Thomas' (installation view) The Studio Museum in Harlem (Photo: Adam Reich)

You can read about Thomas' associated with a group of artists based in Washington, DC in the 1960s, collectively called the Washington Color School, which originally consisted of six painters brought together in a 1965 exhibition at the Washington Gallery of Art. The group is considered significant in the art history canon because of their formal innovations, and their development of another art center, besides the overdetermined scene in nearby New York. Thomas distinguished herself in this circle that included Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, and later becoming the first woman of color to have work placed in the White House art collection. This is impressive, and her restless exploration of what to do next, which is shown clearly in this exhibition, makes this achievement make sense. Several of her early works show figuration that teeters on the edge of abstraction ("March on Washington 1964"), while some large paintings demonstrate the brick-like pattern morph into a mosaic ("Cherry Blossom Symphony," 1973), and then there are her many watercolors that give us insight into her process.

Alma Thomas is a comforting show, and a critical one. There is something of the artist's position in the discourse on mid-century Color Field art that has been left out of the conversation that this exhibition quietly but determinedly puts back: it celebrates a black woman that has until recently been ignored by the modernist canon, one woman of color who ventured out into the oblique indifference of conceptual painting space and showed that yes, an object of color can make us think differently about the entire game.



Alma Thomas “Cherry Blossom Symphony” (1973) Acrylic on canvas, 69 × 54 in. (Collection halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York, NY)

Alma Thomas, “White Roses Sing and Sing” (1976) Acrylic on canvas, 72 1/2 × 52 3/8 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum; Bequest of the artist

Alma Thomas *continues at The Studio Museum in Harlem (144 West 125th Street, Harlem, Manhattan) until*