

November 11, 2005

Kidnapped by his Talent

Maybe Bob Thompson's parents shouldn't have named him after Robert Louis Stevenson. Like his namesake, he became an artist and a wanderer, only at home in a swirl of cultures, the opposite of what his middle-class Kentucky family had wanted for him. But, according to memories of him (he died in 1966, at 29, in Rome), his was the kind of life force that would have had its way whatever he was called, and that was a lot of things: masterful African-American painter; jazzman with form, color and art's history; East Village bohemian, lover and leaver of women, heroin's willing victim.

Twenty-seven of his paintings and works on paper are on view at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, which also represents the Thompson estate, until Jan. 7. There are two presiding spirits. Carol Plenda Thompson, the artist's wife, died last year, and the show is dedicated to her, while critic Stanley Crouch has agreed to the use of his noted 1986 Village Voice essay on Thompson as the introduction to the catalogue.

Thompson got his colors (also his demons) from Matisse, Gauguin, Manet and Goya, his subjects often from Renaissance painting, and his symbolic depictions of a sort of unfettered global harmony from his thoughts on race, prejudice and integration. Crouch calls him a "meteor in a black hat," after his signature headgear. And after the strong, swift light still glowing even though he's gone.

24 W. 57th St., seventh floor. (212) 247-0082.

Celia McGee