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WEEKEND FINE ARTS/ LEISURE

ART IN REVIEW

Alma W. Thomas **'Phantasmagoria: Major Paintings From the 1970's'**

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
24 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through Nov. 3

Even though Alma W. Thomas died nearly a quarter of a century ago, her work gets better all the time. That is, with each new showing, her paintings look fresher and livelier, their totally abstract vocabulary of color markings conveying the spirit of a vibrant inner life.

Thomas (1891-1978) didn't begin her real career as an artist until she was 71, after decades of teaching art in Washington public schools, but she was more than ready. She had studied painting as a student at Howard University in the 1920's and had done still lifes, made ceramic sculptures and staged puppet shows.

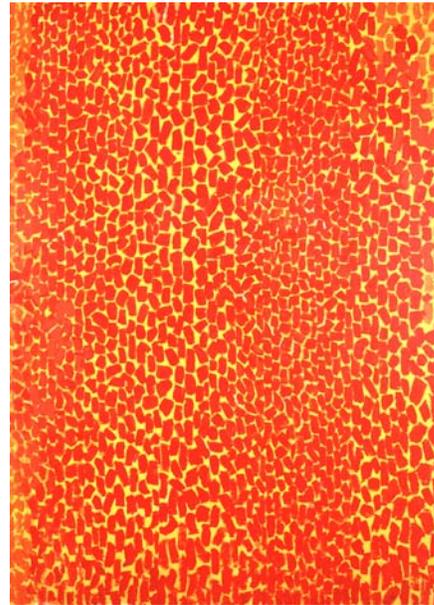
Then in 1955, at 64, she began classes at American University with the artist Jacob Kainen. Helped by him and by exposure to colorists like Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, participants in what was known as the Washington Color School, she began to discover her own skills as a color painter while moving away from tight realist brushwork.

By the mid-1960's, after honing her skills in watercolors that played with textures, patterns and rhythms drawn from observation of nature, she had pared down her painting style to geometric, mosaic-like dabs and patches of high-energy hues. Laid down in irregular allover patterns on solid grounds that show through in webs and networks, they are sophisticated color structures that still reveal a debt to the natural world.

This show, presenting major works from the last phase of her career, includes such dazzlers as "Oriental Sunset" (1973), a shimmering curtain of

orange red dabs on an orangy-red ground; "Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish" (1976), a maze of brick-red irregular polygons that dance and flow on papery white, forming circular islands here and there; and "Hydrangeas Spring Song" (1976), a sea of black and blue-black markings floating on an expansive white ground. Joy may be in short supply elsewhere, but it resonates in these paintings.

GRACE GLUECK



Alma Thomas (1891-1978)
Oriental Sunset, 1973
acrylic on canvas
72" x 52", signed.

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