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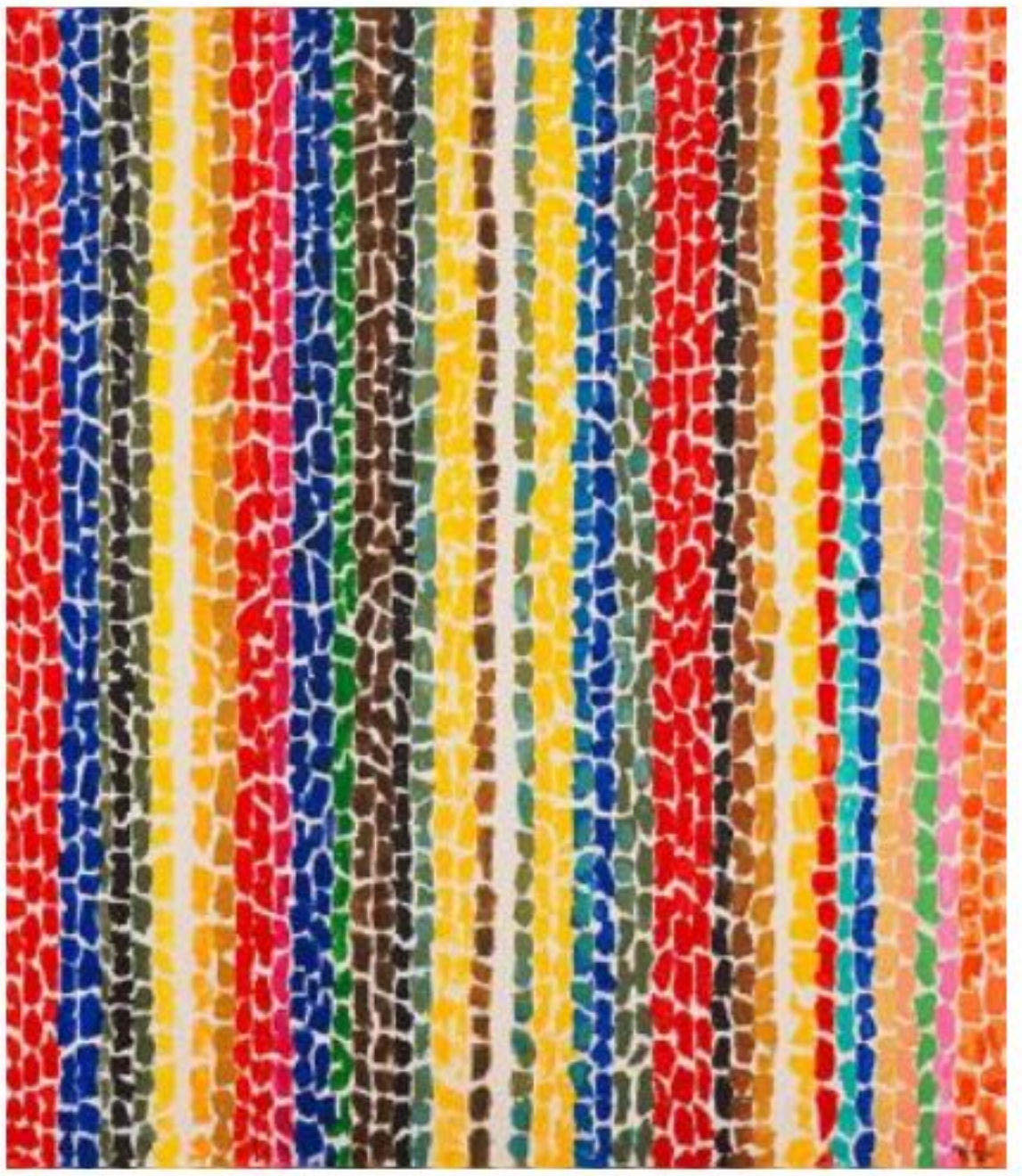
ALMA THOMAS'S LATE BLOOMS

Howard University's first graduate in fine arts and the first black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney, Thomas did her best work in her last years.

By Peter Schjeldahl

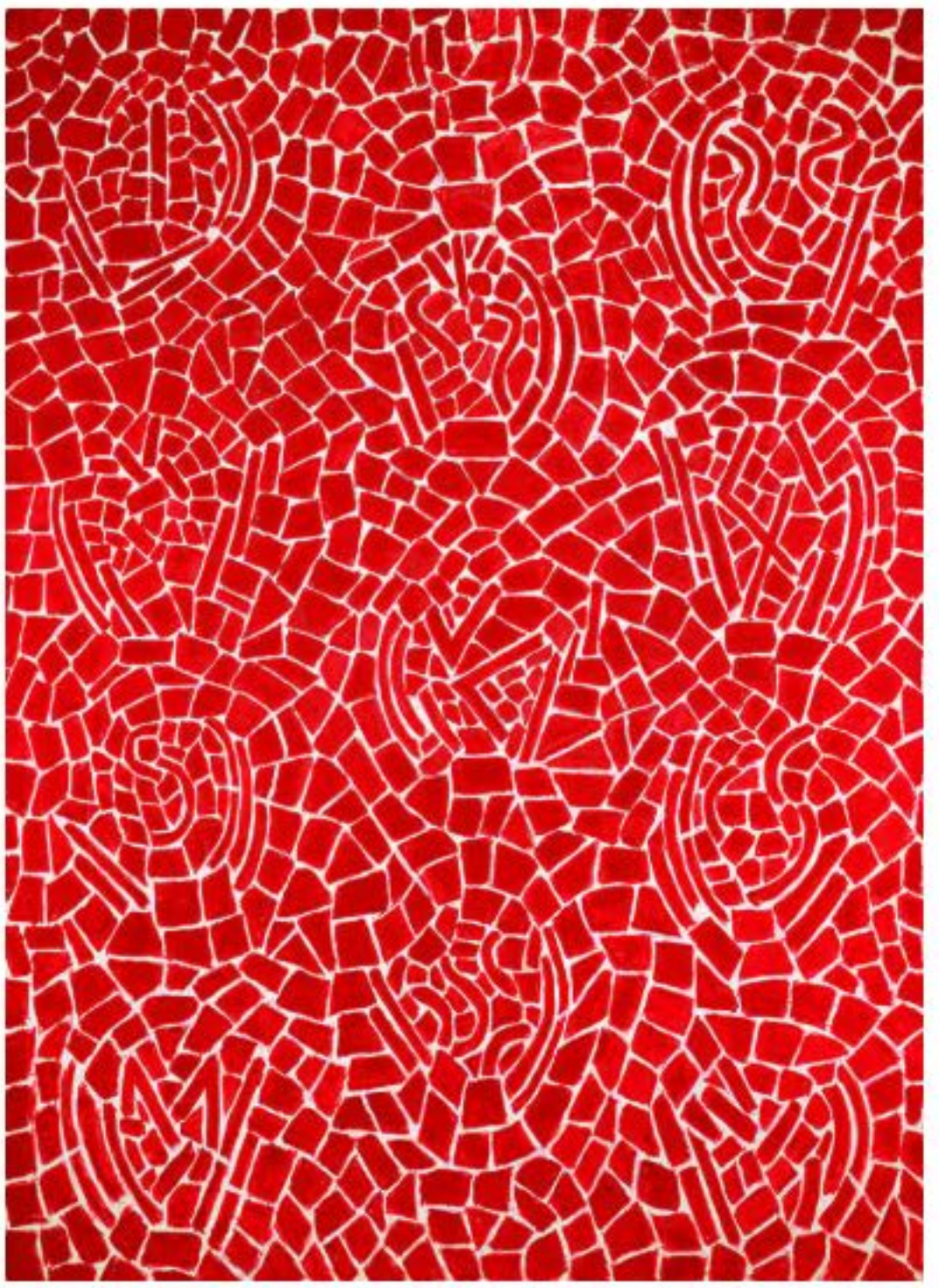
A small but wondrous Alma Thomas retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem put me in mind of a desert plant that spends all year as an innocent cactus and then, in the middle of the night, blooms. Thomas, who died in 1978, at the age of eighty-six, was a junior-high-school art teacher in Washington, D.C., whose own paintings were modernist and sophisticated but of no special note until she retired from teaching, in 1960, and took up color-intensive abstraction. Her best acrylics and watercolors of loosely gridded, wristy daubs are among the most satisfying feats (and my personal favorites) of the Washington Color School, a group that included Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and others associated with the prescriptive aesthetics of the critic Clement Greenberg: painting shorn of imagery, the illusion of depth, and rhetorical gesture. Wielding brushes, Thomas eschewed the group's signal technique of working strictly with stains of liquid paint on raw canvas, proving it inessential to an ordered glory of plangent hues. She seemed to absorb in a gulp the mode's ideas—rational means, hedonistic appeals—and to add, with no loss of formal integrity, a heterodox lyricism inspired by nature. The boldly experimental work of her last years suggests the alacrity of a young master, but it harvested the resources of a lifetime.



Thomas's "Breeze Rustling Through Fall Flowers" (1968).

COURTESY THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION; PHOTOGRAPH BY ARTHUR EVANS

Thomas, who was African-American, was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1891. Her father was a businessman, her mother a dressmaker. She had three younger sisters. In 1907, the family moved to Washington and took a house in a prosperous neighborhood, in which she lived for the rest of her life. She concentrated on math in high school, and dreamed of becoming an architect. Unsurprisingly, given the time's odds against her race and her sex, in 1914 she found herself teaching kindergarten. In 1921, she enrolled at Howard University as a home-economics student, but gravitated to the art department, newly founded by the black Impressionist painter James V. Herring, and became the school's first graduate in fine arts. Later, she earned a master's degree from Columbia University's Teachers College and studied painting at American University, where she encountered Greenberg's doctrines.



VIEW FULL SCREEN

"Scarlet Sage Dancing a Whirling Dervish" (1976).

COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY

Though she initially hung back from a studio career, Thomas was active in Washington's cultural circles, including a "little Paris salon" of black artists, in the late nineteen-forties, which was organized by the educator and artist Lois Mailou Jones. Thomas's modern-art influences included Vassily Kandinsky and Henri Matisse, especially after she saw a show of his paper cutouts at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1961. Recognition came slowly but steadily. When she became the first black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum, in 1972, she told the *Times*, "One of the things we couldn't do was go into museums, let alone think of hanging our pictures there." She added, "Look at me now."

Thomas said that she was moved to paint abstractions after studying the shapes of a holly tree in her garden, and that she based her color harmonies on her flower beds—or on the way she imagined them looking from the air. Space exploration fascinated her. A painting of a disk in reds, oranges, and yellows is titled "Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset" (1970)—a whimsy that seems meant to deflect any hint of mysticism. Thomas was not sentimental. Nor, after painting some semi-abstract, resonant oil sketches of the 1963 March on Washington, was she political. She said, in 1970, "Through color, I have sought to concentrate on beauty and happiness, rather than on man's inhumanity to man." She did so with panache in such works as "Wind, Sunshine, and Flowers" (1968), which deploys touches of hot, warm, and drenchingly cool colors in vertical columns. Intervals of white canvas align here and there to form horizontally curving fissures: wind evoked with droll economy.

Thomas suffered increasing health problems, but her work developed apace. She closed the gaps between her surface strokes with underlying colors in the darkling "Stars and Their Display" (1972) and in the shimmering "Arboretum Presents White Dogwood" (1972). A startling late work, "Hydrangeas Spring Song" (1976), heralds a new style, with swift patches, squiggles, and glyphs (crosses, crescents) in two blues, energetically scattered on white. It feels quite as up-to-date, for its moment, as anything being painted then in New York or Cologne, where abstraction was sprouting representational marks and references on the way to revived figurative styles. The uncompleted arc of her talent makes her a perennial artist's artist, consulted by young abstract painters even now. Thomas didn't change art history, but she gave it a twist that merits attention, respect, and something very like love.