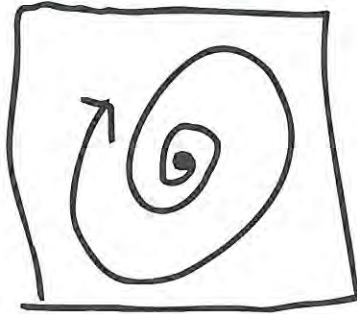


MILDRED

THOMPSON:



MILDRED
THOMPSON:



DEEP
SPACE

THE JACKSONVILLE MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

September 13 - November 9, 1997

With Thanks To Our Exhibition Sponsor:
BARNETT BANK, N.A., JACKSONVILLE



!! THOMPSON IS

READING BELIEVER

foreword

The Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art and Mildred Thompson made contact in the spring of 1995. It was during an exhibition entitled *African American Works On Paper* that Mildred Thompson delivered a powerful and inspirational lecture at the museum. The audience was mesmerized as her rich and colorful vocabulary penetrated our senses. It was during this talk that a number of people came to the conclusion "we've got to do something with Mildred!"

For many of us, the richness of Mildred's experiences transcend time and space, striking sensitive cords within us. Listening to her was like traveling with her, and the thought of what an entire exhibition of her work would comprise truly dazzled one's imagination. Some months later I visited Mildred's studio in Atlanta, Georgia, in the dead of winter. Occupying a huge warehouse space of some 8,000 square feet with no heat and the breath of our conversation clearly visible throughout our discussion, we moved painting after painting and prowled through this enormous loft like a couple of polar bears.

Inspired by celestial experiences and held together as if musical compositions, the work of Mildred Thompson is complex, diverse and exciting. She has the unique ability to move in and around and through many mediums, as exemplified in this exhibition entitled *Mildred Thompson: Deep Space*. This is the largest exhibition ever assembled of her work and as such, it reveals a remarkable artist in the prime of her artistic achievement.

In her most recent series of paintings, *Music of the Spheres*, Thompson embarks upon a truly remarkable body of new work. Panel paintings 12 feet wide and eight feet high explode from all directions and expose the viewer to a vast and complex color-field universe, challenging our imagination and probing our senses.

Henry Flood Robert, Jr.

Executive Director

introduction

BY KATHRAN SIEGEL

In the early spring of 1995, The Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art mounted an exhibition titled African-American Works on Paper. It consisted of a comprehensive body of mainly contemporary prints from the collection of Wes and Missy Cochran of Le Grange, Georgia. It was during the course of this exhibition that Mildred Thompson came to speak at the museum. A series of her etchings, titled *The Five Mysteries*, was included in this show. Her lecture that afternoon was my introduction to this artist, to her work and to her life.

As I sat and listened to her speak about herself, I felt a personal connection to her words and to their meaning for her. Thompson described this opportunity to view her work in our museum as a "homecoming" of sorts. She had been born and raised in Jacksonville, though she had not lived here since her graduation from Stanton High School in 1953. One had the sense that her relationship with our city was an emotionally mixed one. From the numbers of family and friends who attended her talk it was certain, however, that she still maintains

abundant warm feelings towards many of the people living here.

As she described herself to us, it was clear that here was someone whose life was entirely wrapped up in the work of making art. Thompson has had some scattered recognition of her work, though not of sustaining duration. Thus the acknowledgments have not erased the struggle which she shares in common with those of us who are driven by this "calling," as she names it, to embrace the often isolated life of being an artist.

Still, Thompson spoke graciously about the life she has lived. Upon graduating from Howard University in Washington, D.C., Thompson studied at Hamburg Hochschule fur Bildende Kunst in Germany. She has since lived many years of her life in Germany, spread over various periods. Thompson returned to the United States briefly in the early 60's when she lived in the East Village of New York City. At that time she had some fast success. A number of her prints were purchased for the permanent collections at both the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan and

at the Brooklyn Museum. However, she subsequently became discouraged by the lack of opportunity for a young black woman. Dismayed also by the popularity of the growing non-violent movement in the face of horrible violence and racially motivated injustice around her, Thompson returned to Germany in 1963. In Germany she felt welcomed and there she was able to live a comfortable life as an artist/educator.

Once again in the mid 70's, Thompson returned to the United States to serve as Artist-In-Residence for the City of Tampa, Florida. This was followed by a year as Artist-In-Residence at her alma mater, Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Then, after a second year living in the District of Columbia, Thompson met a young French filmmaker for whom she worked as a photographer. This partnership took her to New York City and then, shortly thereafter, back to Europe, this time to France, where she would spend the next seven years of her life.

In 1986, Thompson was invited to come to Spellman College in Atlanta, Georgia, as Artist-In-Residence. When her term ended, she decided to remain in the United States despite all of the problems she associated with being an artist in this country and despite the additional burdens related to race and gender. It was time to return home to make her contribution, whether this

country was ready for her or not.

Thompson has invested herself in her community of Atlanta, where she has been living for about 10 years. She is an associate editor for *Art Papers*, a journal of art criticism which circulates nationally out of Atlanta. She teaches at the Atlanta College of the Arts on an ongoing, adjunct basis. She works with young children in the city through a program sponsored by the Boys and Girls Club of Atlanta.

When I had my first personal meeting with Thompson, she was working in a large industrial warehouse space which she subsequently lost. Nothing will deter her spirit to make art, however. She has moved on to find other ways of working and new media which lend themselves to her present, more limited, space. She has been composing musical pieces and just this summer has begun a new series of works on paper.

Many things that Mildred Thompson had to say about herself that afternoon in 1995 struck a chord in me. I was moved by her determined single-mindedness, by her generosity of spirit and by the struggle to stay clear and to be positive, which I heard in her deep and vibrato voice as much as in the words she spoke. Her journey across continents has now become a journey of the soul. Her travels are to some place where she



figure 1
Heliocentric 12, 1994
Oil on canvas
70" x 48"
Collection of artist

finds a peacefulness whenever she enters into her work. Thompson feels that one place is as good as another for her to live in this country. She feels fortunate to have been able to trade some work to a young doctor, who was pleased to make the exchange for a sunlit and spacious two-story home on a handsome neighborhood street in Atlanta.

For myself, the idea of mounting an exhibition of the work of Mildred Thompson at our Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art became very significant. I knew that it would be breathtaking. But beyond that, I felt that Thompson was a person whom the city should celebrate. That by acknowledging and by honoring the contribution she continues to make on behalf of all that she is, her humanity, she could help our city's movement forward.

As I listened to Thompson speak, I was reminded of a larger world where people are engaged in matters of personal struggle and cultural exchange close to my heart. I found her journey inspiring. By bringing Mildred Thompson home to Jacksonville, if only for the brief time of her exhibition, it is my hope that the energy so present in her work will stretch new boundaries here.

approaching the work

Exuberance emanates from Mildred Thompson's art. Her paintings call up our emotions. These are powerfully executed, active works which ask to be experienced, not just seen.

Thompson's work falls outside the mainstream of today's art world. Nor is her work part of that genre identified as African-American and, as such, designated to a place along the margins of mainstream art. Thompson is a crusading believer in the superiority of abstraction and its ability to resonate with meaning. While her artistic roots can be traced back to the Suprematists of the earliest part of this century, her voice is decidedly contemporary.

Though Thompson's paintings consist of clusters of calligraphic shapes, hers are not paintings of colorful patterns or of graffiti images. Nor are these lyrical abstractions. They are more like symphonies than songs. Although Thompson's two-dimensional compositions are full of formal relationships, these are not formalist works which can be explained away in terms of what is observable on the surface. These are not color-field paintings,

though they are about space. Their fields are deep and penetrated spaces, with distinctly figural elements present within them. Her atmospheres have a pictorial feel about them.

The scale of Thompson's paintings invite us to enter into them. These are not cool renderings of celestial bodies separated from our human existence. They are more like the heavens opened up, in the biblical sense, with trumpets blasting and elaborate fanfare (**figures 1,2**). They are personal recordings, filled with improvisation. They are gutsy in the way in which they are painted. And they suggest to us a gutsy single-mindedness on the part of this artist. Thompson's paintings are spiritual works, visual poems which stand as metaphors of harmony in the Universe. They are metaphors of that Unity or Oneness which results from a complex of relationships where each interpretation is as "true" and as necessary as the next.

Some might object to Thompson's body of work on the grounds that it reflects the artist's choice to ignore the political climate she finds

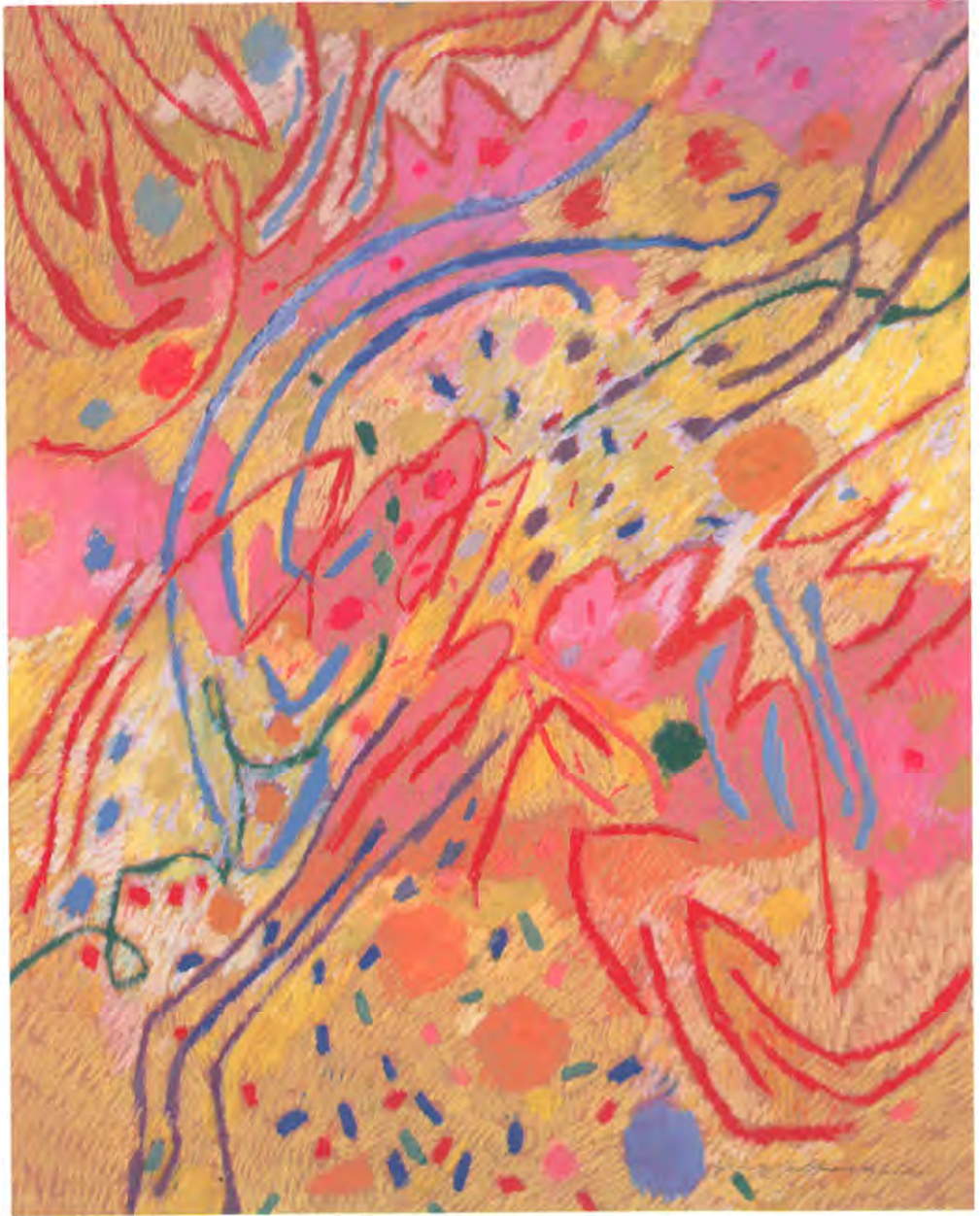


figure 2
Hysteresis XII, 1991
Oil pastel
43" x 35"
Collection of artist

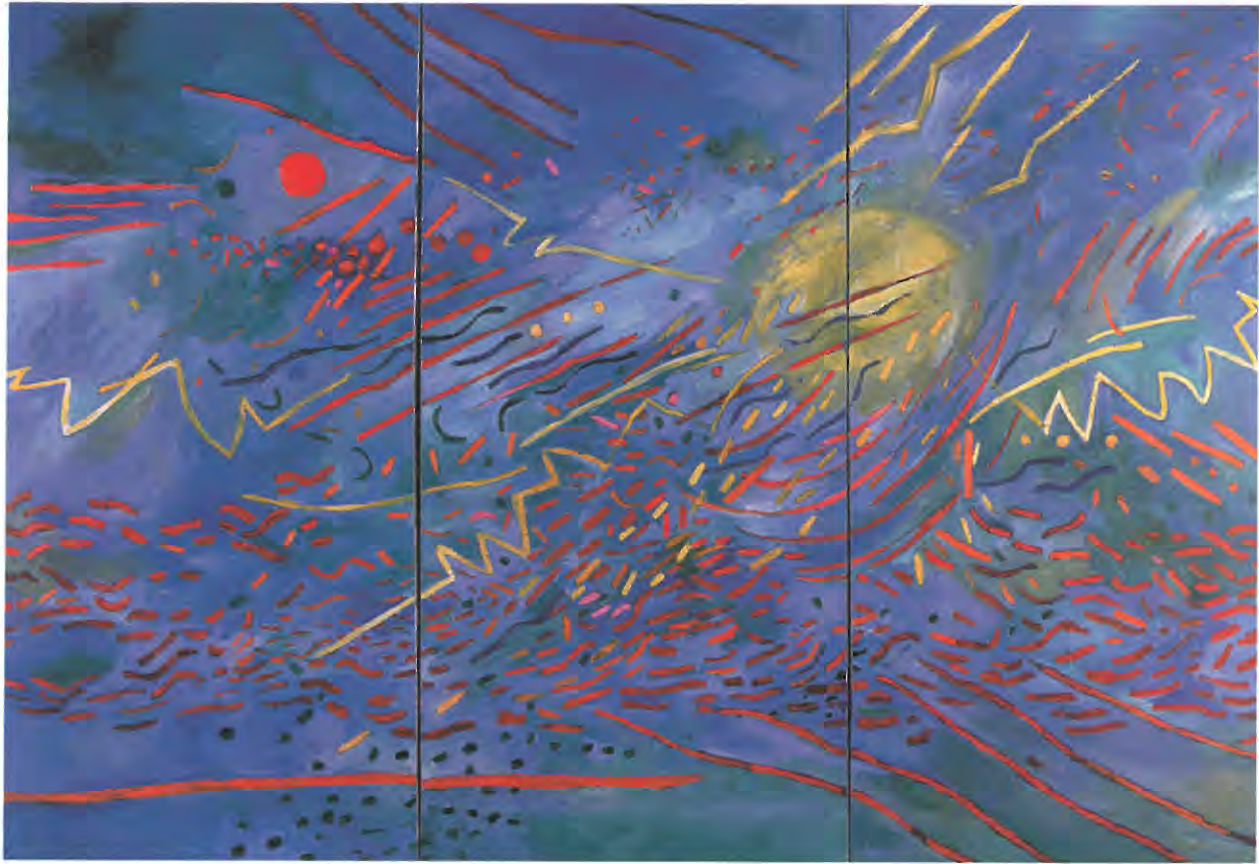


figure 3

Radiation Explorations 6, 1994

Oil on canvas

98" x 144"

(3 panels: each 98" x 48")

Collection of artist

herself living within. Therefore, let us consider the contemporary relevance of this body of work by Mildred Thompson. Thompson has made the deliberate choice to keep her work unencumbered by the day-to-day struggles of this life. This is not to say that she is unaffected by these challenges. Simply, she believes in the artist as a shaman or a visionary; as someone who responds to that calling which is to offer society a healing remedy. Her work is her personal healing as well.

Most art that we would call contemporary is highly personal and confrontational. Other painters who deal with cosmic imagery, such as Vija Celmins, do so in a painstaking manner which conveys a distanced intimacy.

Thompson's body of work reflects this artist's very deliberate decision to make work which will stand as an affirmation of our connection with all that is good in the Universe (**figure 3**). Reflecting upon our humanity, these works suggest that when we stay centered and opened and able to listen, we sound and move in unison with all else that is moving and sounding around us.

the paintings

For close to 10 years and up until March of this year, Mildred Thompson worked in 8,000 square feet of open space with over 20-foot ceilings and a full wall of windows at each end. Although some earlier work was moving in her present direction, this industrial warehouse workspace inspired large and boldly powerful paintings which culminated in the most recent series, *Music Of The Spheres* (figures 4,5,6,7). Paintings spanning three panels, placed side by side covering 12-feet across and each 8 feet high, were easily managed in this workspace from all directions. Series of 12-foot paintings could be considered in clear view of each other. Such a vast enclosed and naturally lit space was uplifting to be inside, perfect for the contemplative work of the artist.

Each of Thompson's works is the record of a sequence of events. When we step back far enough, we read the entire journey as one movement in space. Thompson's paintings contain storms of moving elements within a tonally colored atmosphere. Some paintings, especially among

the yellow colored *Magnetic Fields*, are reminiscent of Native American sand painting particularly in their organization and iconographic marks (figure 8). These personal markings in their atmospheric space are also reminiscent of paintings by Paul Klee, an artist from the time of the early Bauhaus. Thompson's works are comprised of showering particles moving in circular motion around a center. A family of marks may move in a cluster towards or away from the center.

Later, as this body of work develops, the deeper colored atmospheres contain more mass. There are spinning planets, soft clouds or halos of some unknown gas, swords of color, star bursts, floating slabs, vibrating waves which strut across the canvas and forms swirling into their own interiors. Each element is found with others of its kind. Or perhaps each impression is the repetition of a single sounding form as it moves from one point to another across the painted space. Seen in this large scale, the elements are choreographed and appear to be moving. Each character suggests a different



figure 4

Music of the Spheres: Mars, 1996
Oil on panel
96" x 144"
(3 panels: each 96" x 48")
Collection of artist



figure 5

Music of the Spheres: Jupiter, 1996

Oil on panel

96" x 144"

(3 panels: each 96" x 48")

Collection of artist



figure 6

Music of the Spheres: Venus, 1996
Oil on panel
96" x 144"
(3 panels: each 96" x 48")
Collection of artist

rhythm or velocity. There is no sense of conflict here. There is force, but not forcefulness. Though there is a dominant theme when one views the entire painting from a distance, up close each painting is comprised of many differing voices. Because the main action seems to spill over the edges on all four sides, these works move out into the architectural space surrounding them in the room. Their imagery often suggests an explosion followed by a movement away and eventually outside of the bounds of the picture plane (figure 9,10).

My first encounter with Mildred Thompson's paintings and sculpture occurred in the late spring of 1996. At that time I was able to see a comprehensive body of work all at once, such was the enormity of her work space. A year later I returned to find everything in storage. This time the open space was barely wide enough to stand a three-panel piece side to side. It was here that I made my selections for this exhibition. As it turned out, what I had expected to be a hindrance was a fortunate assist. I was forced to view these works from inside of them, so to speak. My attention was drawn towards how they were made. It was pure pleasure to travel around her marks, seeing one relationship, then another, as if I were visiting an infinite series of smaller universes. I had my camera with me to record each work for later reference. I found myself

clicking away at one detail and then another, like an unabashed tourist who has journeyed to another part of the world. It was difficult to return a painting to the stack. There was so much still to explore.

Thompson's process is highly intuitive. Nothing is planned beforehand on paper. There is a decision about key, or sonority. Because Thompson works in series, often this decision is already locked in. Thus, she knows beforehand generally what colors she will be using. (Magnetic fields are yellow, she says. Radiation is blue.) There is a decision about the distance from which the painted imagery will appear to be recorded. For example, one work may be a panorama, another might zoom-in on a small area of activity. The next painting may suggest that its subject is part of a larger vista. Each of the four paintings which comprise the series *Music Of The Spheres* describes an event from a different perspective. *Venus*, the yellow painting of this series, is painted as if it is a small area seen at a close distance. *Mars*, the magenta painting, is viewed through a slightly wider angle lens, enabling us to see more of the action all at once. The green *Mercury* focuses on a small area of what we sense to be part of a large and active atmosphere. Our view suggests that we are looking through a high powered telescope (figure 7a). Thompson is conscious of sometimes thinking she is looking through a camera's lens.



figure 7
Music of the Spheres: Mercury, 1996
Oil on panel
96" x 144"
(3 panels: each 96" x 48")
Collection of artist



figure 7a

Music of the Spheres: Mercury, 1996 (Detail)

Oil on panel

96" x 144"

(3 panels: each 96" x 48")

Collection of artist

Indeed, she is an accomplished photographer as well.

A painting begins with some sense about where the main action will take place. It is at this point of highest energy that Thompson will begin. A neutral ground has already been prepared and is the first coat of paint applied to the canvas. This primer is never a stark white surface, but rather is related to the color key in which Thompson has planned to paint. If the painting is in the key of red, for example, then the primary coat of paint could be an Indian red or a warm brown. A favorite starting field is yellow ochre.

Working out of this active center in every direction, she creates both figure and ground simultaneously. Because no colors are premixed, when Thompson is working with a color which she knows will be repeated throughout her composition, she will place it around on her surface in advance of actually "getting there." In this way there is a consistency of color throughout the space she plans to travel. Some placements may in the end have

landed wrong, but these can always be erased. In this way of working, the future as well as the past influences the present. This method of working all at once, corresponds to ideas about time in the "new physics" to which Thompson's work makes reference. It is a form of creative process reported clearly in the history of art. The Surrealists were first to explore levels of consciousness in art-making. These artists often used found objects and employed various means of free association to assist their thinking as they worked.



figure 8

Magnetic Fields 107, 1991

Oil on canvas

63" x 51"

Collection of artist



figure 10

Radiation Explorations 12, 1994

Oil on canvas

96" x 96"

(2 panels: each 96" x 48")

Collection of artist

Thompson's creative journey proceeds from point to point. With the help of stacked crates to make a scaffolding when needed, Thompson can stay on a particular level where she needs to be working and make her way across the painting surface. When she needs to check a particular place in relationship to the whole, she steps back. These are the decision-making pauses. She may wash out or paint over an area on occasion, though from the look of these works, most marks stay fresh. Nothing looks labored. Color is applied generously. Her painting surfaces not only create the illusion of layers of space, they also consist of layers of paint applied thickly, usually revealing their process in each brush or palette stroke of color. Marks appear to have been made as the hand writes and indeed most of them were.

the sculpture

The sculpture series called *Cosmic Progressions* consists of 15 individual variations. Thompson affably refers to these structures as "cranes." This series was completed alongside her last group of paintings. Thompson's reference to the crane is very apropos. The crane is a bird that dances. The bird is a creature generally associated with flight. The bird is born by bursting forth from an egg. There is plenty of rich association. Remembering her strong commitment to abstraction, however, it is not surprising that this reference was an afterthought.

Thompson's earlier sculptures were vertical and solemn. They stood straight (**figure 11**). Now, for the first time, she has ventured out into space. This decision to break away from the vertical explains how the crane series came into being. Earlier sculptures make reference to musical forms with such titles as *Vespers*, *Baroque Suite*, and *Allegro in Spruce*. These works are comprised of invented forms reminiscent of elongated piano hammers. Thompson's cranes are assembled out of these same hammer forms, but that is where the similarity ends.

This hammer form is the most literal reference to music in any of Thompson's visual works. However, as soon as the vertical has been broken, this form jettisons. Figurative reference to the crane allows us to identify bending legs. Entire torsos, down to the feet in some cases, bend in ways which we can mimic with our own bodies. Looking at them we feel the dance in ourselves. Thompson relates the story of a time, early in their creation, when she showed some slides to a group of people at The Atlanta College of Art. A man in her audience observed that these creatures appeared to be doing the Sataki, a Middle Eastern dance based upon the movement of the cranes. This association remained in her mind. Particularly when viewed as a flock, their gestures form relationships, one with the next. The excitement of the dance is unmistakable when we view all 15 sculptures together.

In the small room where I did the work of cataloguing, my relationship with each crane was intimate. From this perspective, back inside the form, my excitement was over the visible joinery

which recreated the process of their making. Each crane has a center, a belly, (figure 12) out of which the form takes off in every direction. As with Thompson's paintings, this is her point of origin; the original burst of energy which begins the entire adventure. Here gestural lines, built out of elongated hammer shapes, become legs, others necks, heads, wings, feet. It is no surprise to find the "belly" of these forms working as their centers, or generators. From this center comes the creation of the entire form, just as the belly is the center of musical, spiritual and creative power in Asian religious thinking.

The construction of these three-dimensional pieces is as fresh as Thompson's application of paint on a canvas. Just as with her two-dimensional work, nothing has been planned in advance. There is a general idea, perhaps a notion about the direction of the movement she would like to create, but no more. The material is a commercial furring strip. Thompson often finds herself short of funding for supplies. Friends fortuitously appear with cast-aways that become her impetus for a next series of work.

In the case of her *Cosmic Progressions*, using a saber saw, glue and nails, Thompson developed a method for stability and grace within each line of movement. Thus she invented a sort of lap joint which allowed her to add length. This joint supports the next length of line in much the same way as two acrobats

might place their hands, one overlapping the other across the palm to create both strength and support as one raises himself over the head of the other. Sometimes an extension is held inside a cupped form cut out of the first limb. At other times, a hinge-like construction is designed, like a bracing support, around a change in directional line (figure 13). These joints create visually pleasing pauses. They are placed where the line changes timbre as it bends ever so slightly reaching towards its next turn. Each break creates a moment's pause in the movement, much as a large dance step might break down into a series of smaller steps. As drawings in space, which these birds are first of all, the construction adds to the quality of the drawn line. Like the brush stroke, the exposed joinery retells an aspect of the creative process to us.



figure 12

figure 13

a convergence of the arts and the spiritual

Artists in this country have been taught to choose their discipline, either painting, or sculpture, or printmaking, photography, performance or something else. It is not considered professional to move around from one medium to the next. While this has been more true at other times than it is now, still it is more the rule than not. While some art schools understand the disservice of declaring a major (thought and activity divided by medium), in most cases an art student is required to select one area of concentration and exploration. Thompson felt the effects of these restrictions early in her art studies. She notes the different European attitude which she encountered while studying in Hamburg in the late 1950's. There she was encouraged and taught to work in a great many art disciplines. Thompson has said that she never suffers from artist's block. She credits this to the fact that she is comfortable working in a great many ways. In her mind, each form reveals an aspect of the whole.

She is a painter, but also a sculptor, a printmaker, a photographer, a draftsman, a writer, and now, a composer.

When Thompson was forced to give up her magnificent work space last spring, she stopped painting and started to compose music. A synthesizer and a computer program gave her an assortment of sounds and a method of composing out of these and of recording her work. This process of composing at the computer allows Thompson to combine two realms into one. The computer monitor allows her to begin with some visible spatial organizations made up of clusters of sounds. This is similar to the way a series of invented forms might read in a painting or drawing. She can begin with any series of notes and continue to develop her composition on the screen. At some point the sound takes over. But there is always this interplay.

Thompson's music creates another view of the same universe revealed in her paintings.

Different groups of sound create a variety of textures and pitches. It is no surprise that words which describe musical sounds are also used to describe the visual experience. We know what is sharp or blunt in either medium, also staccato or elongated, shrill or dull, dark, heavy or light, long or short and on and on. Rhythm carries across the disciplines as well as color. It is natural to "hear" a painting. It is easy to listen to this music and to "see" these sounds as they form relationships, one to the next, as they move through space. We know that space itself takes on different characteristics in one piece of music or another. Just as we speak of atmospheric space in a painting, we can also recognize these quality differences in the space out of which a particular music sounds. For example, baroque music has a clarity which romantic music does not. The atmosphere of the latter is much thicker than the former.

It is Kandinsky whom we usually associate with this idea of painting as the bearer of musical sounds. In his book, *Concerning The Spiritual In Art*, much is made of this convergence. Kandinsky speaks of rhythm in painting as coming from repeated notes of color or of color set in motion. Kandinsky writes, "Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another,

to cause vibrations in the soul."¹ Kandinsky believed that painting should strive to make music. Music, he believed, was the most spiritual of all the arts and the most capable of expressing man's inner soul. It was abstraction, Kandinsky believed, that could best enter the realm of music and partake of the spiritual. In her early studies in Germany, Thompson was influenced by the thoughts of Kandinsky and other early Bauhaus artists, particularly Paul Klee. For these artists making art was a spiritual activity. It is a spiritual journey for Thompson as well.

the work in context

Thompson's work bears a relationship with the thinking of certain abstract expressionist artists working in New York City in the 1950's and early 60's when Thompson lived in New York. Mark Rothko claimed his paintings were "not pictures." Rothko was also determined to make music sing out from his paintings. He strove to create music from fields of color and to provide his viewer with a transcendent experience. He built spiritual atmospheres out of color. The paintings of Jackson Pollock also bear some relationship. Pollock placed himself inside his painting. He was not a painter of a painting in the traditional sense of rendering something from outside of it. Much has been made of Pollock's dance as he would paint. He sought to be a physical presence inside his imagery. His paintings were a record of his having created them. There is some similarity in this thinking as well. Thompson described to me how she locks into the activity of painting. Occasionally she will step away from her canvas to have a look and, for the first time, notice that the painting is finished. She was unaware of

any passage of time.

Tremendous artistic growth has sprung from abstraction over the course of this century. Despite having begun so closely connected with the spiritual, abstract art today seeks to avoid the kind of deep readings which would align it with metaphysical ideas. Such explanations are passé in most intellectual circles today. But is spirituality necessarily metaphysical? Can there be an art today which addresses the spiritual vacuum existing within our culture? If so, can this be an art which fits within the parameters of contemporary aesthetics? Thompson's work addresses this issue, although it must be said that she herself is not troubled by what is or is not accepted anywhere.

Beginning with Einstein's theory of relativity and now, as quantum physics finds explanations which do not correspond with our ordinary experiences, it would appear that in many ways there is a meeting of minds between mysticism ages old and contemporary scientific thought. Mystical concepts correlate with actual physical

occurrences as these are now being scientifically explained. Bell's theorem of 1964, for example, states that in order to be compatible with quantum theory, we cannot assume that spatially separate events are independent of one another. Asian sages of long ago told us that "Nothing in the cosmos, however wide its boundaries may be, is separate from anything else. Everything is one."² Quantum theories have generated new meanings for past, present, and future, cause and effect (simply that these are an illusion, according to Einstein). This is like the Zen idea that time stays where it is. That there is no passage of time. Today, scientists are speaking of parallel universes, suggesting that the existence of this world that we inhabit is entirely dependent upon our perception of it. Such ideas are pointing to new ways of thinking about consciousness. Thompson refers to the "new physics" as providing the inspiration for much of her imagery. This is clear in titles for her work such as *Particle Theory* and *Magnetic Fields*.

Thompson refers to scientific theories, beginning as early as Pythagoras', which explain the relationships between the planets in terms of the octave and of harmonics. The octave is the first note and the largest interval in the harmonic series. Planetary frequencies are based upon orbiting times. By multiplying planetary frequencies by a number

large enough to bring them into audible range, we have discovered that each planet has a unique sound. Together each of the six visible planets including Earth make a sound spectrum covering eight octaves. These are almost identical to the human hearing range. Colors also resonate at certain frequencies, hence each planet is identified with a color. Earth's color is orange-red, for example. Harmonic relationships have been described as existing throughout the natural world including within our biological selves. And so it is possible to understand the "music of the spheres" as a scientific phenomenon. But does this make it any less mysterious?

Thompson believes that the fact of our existence makes us part of this harmony. In order to experience what this means, however, each of us has to make his own connection, or discover his own "way." She believes that one can find a passageway through the experiencing of Art. Then Mildred Thompson's work is a good place to begin.

As we are about to enter the next millennium, our thinking is opening up to meet the challenges in front of us. Our cultural perspective is undergoing a major shift. As our scientific view of our universe has defied the old logic; as what is "true" seems to be far less predictable and singular than we had thought not so long ago, so our perspective of

ourselves and how and where we fit is also undergoing radical change. There are new psychologies which address those revelations uncovered by the "new physics." There are new technologies yet in front of us which hold the promise of greatly increasing what is knowable and what can become familiar.

Our planet has become very small. What were once many world views have already begun to merge. Perhaps out of this fermentation a group of artists, Mildred Thompson among them, will come into focus who are already addressing this shift in perspective. Abstraction and its non-objective offshoot were born of our 20th Century search for a common language and meaning across man-made boundaries. These could carry the search for a universal vision forward. We see signs of East meeting West, of increased cultural and racial mixture, of science and the spiritual realm rediscovering common ground, all with potentially cosmic consequences.

*Kathran Siegel,
Guest Curator*

footnotes

¹ Kandinsky, Wassily, CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART, Dover Publications, Inc., translated by M.T.H. Sadler, "The Psychological Working of Colour," pg. 25.

² Berendt, Joachim-Ernst, NADA BRAHMA, THE WORLD IS SOUND, CHAPTER 6, "Sound Is More Certain than Time and Matter," Destiny Books, 1987.

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about mildred thompson

1936

Born in Jacksonville, FL. 458 Bridier Street. Eighth and last child of Dr. E.W. Thompson, pharmacist, and Ruth Vaught Thompson, teacher in the Jacksonville/Duval County School System.

1942

Begins first grade at Oakland Elementary School. After a few weeks, transfers to Long Branch Elementary where mother teaches. Interest in art expressed and encouraged by parents and teachers. Illustrates fairy tales, decorates blackboards throughout school with seasonal motifs.

1947

Begins sixth grade at Boylan-Haven School for Girls. Takes private piano lessons, sings in Glee Club with Miss Mary Morgan, develops interest in poetry and literature with Norma Littlejohn.

1950

Transfers to Stanton High School in the tenth grade. Classes in mechanical drawing with I.E. Bryan, learns to play bell lyre and French horn with Kermit McFarlin. Performs in school's band. Learns photography and darkroom procedures with I.E. Bryan. President of photography club.

1953

Graduates from Stanton and enters Howard University in Washington, D.C. Elected to freshman Steering Committee.

1954

Declares major in Painting, minor in Art History. First formal, traditional, and academic training under James Porter (Dept. Chairman), Mai Lou Jones and James Wells. Develops an appreciation and love for Greek myths and literature.

1955

Porter assigns a private, on campus, barrack studio. First serious attempts in abstraction. Non-objective and abstract works encouraged by Porter.

1956

Father demands second minor in Art Education. Begins classes in preparation for teaching. Receives scholarship for summer study at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Studies with Isabel Bishop, Sid Simon. Bishop encourages drawing. Introduced to David Smith and Zorach. Continues to experiment with abstraction. Work supported by faculty and peers.

1957

Practice teaching at Brown Jr. High in Washington, D.C. Graduates from Howard University; B.A. degree in Painting, Art History and Art Education. Receives Beckman Scholarship to study at the Brooklyn Museum School. Painting with Reuben Tam, Sculpture with William King. Teaches evenings at a Police Athletic League Center in Brooklyn.

1958

First New York juried exhibitions: The Drawing Shop, The Whythe Gallery, New York City Center. Painting accepted in the Madison Square Garden's national exhibition Art USA:58. Leaves for Germany late September. Enrolls at Hamburg Hochschule fur Bildende Kunst. Studies painting with Emil Schumacher and print making (etching and lithography) with Paul Wunderlich.

1959

Paintings non-representational encouraged and supported by Schumacher, faculty and peers. Drawings and prints representational, styles and techniques influenced by friend and mentor Horst Janseen. Receives scholarship from the school for tuition and supplies. Actor in CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF Hamburg Kammer Theatre. Movie roll in KISS IN THE NIGHT, German Movie Industry. Travels to Paris and Brussels. Sets up studio in Altona. Visits Lubeck, Bremen, Worpswede. Writes and illustrates children's book, "The Gilly Willies," printed by the Art School.

1960

Invited by Cress Crosby to Roccasinibaldi, Italy, for summer. Produces over-sized woodcuts based on fairy tales. First solo exhibition at Galerie Sander, Hamburg Museum permanent collection. Begins study of classical guitar. Begins "Psychological Studies" in etching and lithography. Illustrations from Dylan Thomas.

1961

Returns to U.S.A. Studio on Lower Eastside Manhattan. New York State Teaching Certificate. Teaches as permanent substitute in Brooklyn. Fellowship (three months) to the Edward MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, NY, drawing and painting. Permanent collections (drawing and prints), the Museum of Modern Art, NY, and the Brooklyn Museum, NY.

1962

Second three-month MacDowell Colony fellowship. Series of pen and ink drawings and painting. Returns to Jacksonville, Florida, for father's funeral. Begins two-dimensional wood pieces.

1964

Returns to Germany. Enrolls at Art Academy in Munich. Visits friend in Duren before classes begin. Sets up shop outside of Duren in Konzendorf. Cancels study in Munich. Exhibits at Hoesch Museum. Solo exhibition at Kunststruhe, Duren.

1965

Solo exhibition Kunststruhe, Duren. Exhibits at Hoesch Museum. Begins teaching Madchen Gymnasium, Duren. Purchases Brisch and Rau etching press. Opens studio in Eiffelstr, Duren. Visits Paris and Brussels.

1966

Teaches Natur Wissenschaftlicher Gymnasium, Eschweiler; continues teaching in Duren. Travels to Freiburg, Basel, Zurich.

1967

Travels to Athens, Greece. Develops two-dimensional wood works, devotes year to sculpture. Studies Old Testament, King James and Martin Luther Bibles. Searches for roots of fairy tales.

1968

Travels to Prague. Travels to Greece, Thesoloniki, Lebos, Alexandropolis. Solo Exhibition Kline Galerie, Aachen and Ferbes in Duren. Begins collection of musical instruments.

1969

Returns to Jacksonville for mother's funeral. Travels to Greece, Crete, Ios, Santorini. Moves to Haus Merberich in Langewehe, near Duren. Sets up studio with etching press. Solo exhibition Bodo Glaub, Cologne (painting, drawings, and prints). Solo exhibition Bodo Glaub, Cologne (sculpture, wood works). Visits West Berlin's Jazz Festival.

1970

Group show, "German Artist of the Avant Garde." Group show, "Aachen Artist," Musee St. Denis, Reims, France.

1971

Haus Merberich burns. One year leave of absence from teaching and travels throughout Europe, the Near East and Northern Africa. Travels and camps in van.

1972

Resumes teaching in Duren. Sets up studio in house on Tivolistr, Duren's center. Experiments with techniques in etching. Develops series, "Architectural Studies." Pencil drawings, "The Gas Mask," "Group Exhibition, Kolner Kunst Kleidische," Cologne. Studies Rudolph Steiner and visits the Anthroposophical Centers in Switzerland.

1973

Solo exhibition Neu Galerie Sammlung Ludwig, (The Gas Mask), Aachen.

1974

Solo exhibition Galerie Kunsthausle, Singen, Germany. Returns to USA after ten-year absence; culture shock. Receives National Endowment for the Arts Grant. Expansion Arts grant as Artist-in-Residence for Tampa/Hillsborough County, Florida. Teaches classes at Tampa Bay Arts Center, designs and conducts courses for "first time artists," classes composed of senior citizens and elementary school children. Directs Public Mural Project at the New Place, Ybor City, Tampa. Begins study of Oupensky.

1975

Artist-in-Residence Grant extended. Solo exhibition Tampa Bay Arts Center. Sculpture, "Allegro in Spruce," two-dimensional "Wood Works," paintings and drawings. Teaches classes at Hillsborough Community College, Tampa Bay Arts Center. Moves to Ybor City Seventh Avenue. Creates an open-to-the-community studio. Experiments with acrylics, "Open Window Series." Accepts young students in a studio apprentice program arranged through Tampa's Public Schools. Learns to play the African Kilimba. Discovers Theosophy.

1976

Artist-in-Residence Grant extended. Teach in Alpha Kappa Alpha's cultural program, "Saturday's Children." Solo Exhibition Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Exhibits and lectures throughout state of Florida.

1977

Artist-in-Residence Grant extended. First trip to Nigeria. Exhibits at F.E.S.T.A.C. with American delegation. Receives Artist-in-Residence Grant at Howard University, Washington, D.C. Teaches etching. Produces series of five etchings; "Death and Orgasm." Solo Exhibition, Howard University. Smithsonian Institute 20th Century Collection acquires "Death and Orgasm" for permanent collection.

1978

Researches the role of females in the tales. Writes and illustrates lecture, "Females, Fairy Tales, and Fantasy." Discovers MacDonald works (fairy tales). Continues wood sculpture. "Vanity Series." Travels to University of Chicago, University of Washington in Seattle, and Baltimore School for the Arts to lecture on fairy tales. Oil pastels, "THE CHILD GODDESS." Oil paintings, "THE PIGEON PROJECT."

1979

Receives Hereward Lester Cooke Mid-Career Grant. Establishes Bladensburg Road Washington Studio. Solo exhibition Premiere Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland. Designs and directs Public Mural Project at Glenn Echo National Park, Glenn Echo, Maryland. Exhibits in American Drawings II, Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition. National Bar Association Achievement Award. Photographer with film crew, "FROM CUXA to MANHATTAN," (the story of the Cloisters Museum, New York.) directed by Marie-Genevieve Ripeau. Joins film crew in Paris and traveled throughout the South of France.

1980

Solo Exhibition Franz Bader Gallery, Washington D.C. Moves to Paris, France. Completes Cloister film. Begins translations of Paula Modersohn-Becker's journals and diary for Ripeau's next film. Travels to Germany. Solo Exhibition Bodo Glaub, Cologne, Germany. Solo exhibition Julich, Germany. Begins study of physics. Watercolors, "THE OCTAVE" Paintings, "The Birth of Light." Discovers Evelyn Underhill's "MYSTICISM."

1981

Mid-Career Grant from the D.C. Arts Council for the Arts and Humanities. Sets up Paris studio. Works as photographer for film and stage. Teaches private art classes. Solo Exhibition Hasle, Avenue Niel, Paris. Visits Cannes Film Festival, Film Festival San Mirano, Italy. Travels to Worpswede, Bremen, Recklinhausen, Germany, for Paula Modersohn-Becker film.

1982

Abandons representational imagery in all work. Collages, drawings based on physics. Researches the properties of visible and invisible rays. Studies Einstein and others. Discovers quantum physics.

1983

Completes photography studies and binds into books, "The Third Eye." Begins writing and illustrating children's books. Develops characters.

1984

Completes four children's books: "CAMI," "ROBBIE RABBIT," revised, "THE GILLY WILLIES," and "T.T. TANGO TWO."

1985

Returns to the USA. Moves to Los Angeles. Receives Artist-in-Residence Grant for Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia. Teaches classes in drawing. Founds student organization "ART LOVERS LEAGUE" for Atlanta University students. Solo Exhibition Spelman College, Atlanta. Collages, "THE BIRTH OF LIGHT."

1986

Teaches art survey courses at Morehouse College, Atlanta. Solo exhibition Goethe Institute, Atlanta, GA. Set up home/studio Georgia Ave., Atlanta.

1987

Begins teaching drawing at the Atlanta College of Art. Teaches Contemporary Issues, Drawing, Print Making, and Painting at Agnes Scott College, Dekalb College. Produces "THE FIVE MYSTERIES," (etchings).

1988

Moves to Cherokee home/studio. Solo exhibition Agnes Scot College, Atlanta. Associate editor for *Art Papers*, first interview Richard Avedon. Begins oil paintings, "MAGNETIC FIELDS." Designs and teaches courses incorporating the sciences, "MAKING THE INVISIBLE," for the Atlanta College of Art. Sets up Grant Street Studio, Atlanta.

1989

Collaborates with Wayne Kline, Rolling Stone Press. Lithography, "QUAVER." Travels to Germany. Solo exhibition Peter Hennes Music Marketing Service, Cologne, Germany.

1989 Artist Award, Georgia Business Commission for the Arts.

Travels to West Berlin for *Art Papers*. Interviews artists, Minister of Culture and others. Meets the Dali Lama. Continues to paint and sculpt. Photographs the end of the Berlin Wall and Germany in transition.

1990

Solo Exhibition Hammon House, Atlanta. Travels to Germany. Solo exhibition Deutsche Rote Kruz, Duren. Visits West Berlin, Frankfurt, Cologne photographing. Solo exhibition of photographs, German Consulate first year anniversary of German reunification.

1992

Travels to Dakar, Senegal Bienale (Group exhibition). Solo exhibition Brenau College, Gainesville, Georgia. Collaborates with Harvey Littleton's Vitreography Studio, Spruce Pine, North Carolina. Collaborates with Bob Blackburn's Graphic Workshop, New York. (Etchings).

1993

Travels to East Germany. Teaches printmaking workshops. Art Academy Halle. Printmaking Center Neubrnadenbur. Solo exhibition Halle. Lectures on Art and the Sciences. Visits Bach's home. Visits East and West Berlin. Continues to paint and sculpt.

1994

Travels to Germany. Lectures and workshops Bauhaus, Dessau, Germany. Teaches at Burg Gymnasium, Wettin and Gymnasium at Halle. Print Workshop Neubrandenburg. Oil paintings, "HELIOCENTRIC." Research into sound.

1995

Group exhibition Kenkelaba House, New York. Begins oil paintings, "MUSIC of the SPHERES." Begins "Cosmic Progressions," wood sculptures based on the crane. Develops course on the history of western music as an introduction to abstraction for the Atlanta College of Art. Begins composing electronic music based on "Music of the Spheres."

1996

Solo exhibition, "Forty Years of Printmaking," Rolling Stone Press, Atlanta. Group exhibition, "NINE GEORGIA WOMEN," Washington Women's Museum, Washington, D.C., Gallery Fonda del Sol, Washington, D.C., Close Grant Street Studio. Revives Cherokee Avenue Studio.

1997

Georgia State Governor's Award. Group Exhibition Kenkelaba House, New York. Begins teaching Warren, Jones, Carver Centers of the Boys and Girls Club, Atlanta. Begins 50 x 50 paintings. Solo exhibition Jacksonville Museum of Contemporary Art, Jacksonville, Florida. Group exhibition Spelman College, Atlanta, GA.

mildred thompson: deep space

exhibition dates: september 13 - november 9, 1997

Paintings

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | Music of the Spheres: Mercury, 1996
Oil on panel
96 x 144 (3 panels:each 96 x 48) | 8 | Magnetic Fields 105, 1991
Oil on canvas
49 x 63 |
| 2 | Music of the Spheres: Mars, 1996
Oil on panel
96 x 144 (3 panels:each 96 x 48) | 9 | Magnetic Fields 106, 1991
Oil on canvas
62 x 48 |
| 3 | Music of the Spheres: Venus, 1996
Oil on panel
96 x 144 (3 panels:each 96 x 48) | 10 | Magnetic Fields 107, 1991
Oil on canvas
63 x 51 |
| 4 | Music of the Spheres: Jupiter, 1996
Oil on panel
96 x 144 (3 panels:each 96 x 48) | 11 | Magnetic Fields 108, 1991
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 |
| 5 | Magnetic Fields 101, 1991
Oil on canvas
62 x 48 | 12 | Magnetic Fields 109, 1991
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 |
| 6 | Magnetic Fields 103, 1991
Oil on canvas
62 x 48 | 13 | Magnetic Fields 110, 1990
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 |
| 7 | Magnetic Fields 104, 1991
Oil on canvas
62 x 48 | 14 | Magnetic Fields 111, 1991
Oil on canvas
62 x 48 |

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 15 | Magnetic Fields 113, 1991
Oil on canvas
70 x 50 | 25 | Radiation Explorations 9, 1994
Oil on canvas
73-1/2 x 101 (2 panels: each 73-1/2 x 50-1/2) |
| 16 | Hysteresis, 1991
Oil pastel
40 x 34 | 26 | Radiation Explorations 12, 1994
Oil
96 x 96 (2 panels: each 96 x 48) |
| 17 | Magnetic Field III, 1991
Gouache and oil pastel
32 x 45 | 27 | Radiation Explorations 14, 1994
Oil on board
36 x 52 (2 panels: each 36 x 26) |
| 18 | Magnetic Field V, 1991
Gouache and oil pastel
32 x 46 | 28 | Heliocentric 12, 1994
Oil on canvas
70 x 48 |
| 19 | Magnetic Field II, 1991
Gouache and oil pastel
32 x 48 | 29 | Heliocentric 14, 1994
Oil on canvas
79-1/2 x 48 |
| 20 | Hysteresis XII, 1991
Oil pastel
43 x 35 | 30 | Heliocentric 15, 1994
Oil on canvas
79-3/4 x 47-3/4 |
| 21 | Hysteresis X, 1991
Oil pastel
40 x 35 | 31 | Heliocentric 16, 1994
Oil on canvas
73-1/2 x 45-3/4 |
| 22 | Radiation Explorations 6, 1994
Oil on canvas
98 x 144 (3 panels: each 98 x 48) | 32 | Heliocentric 17, 1994
Oil on canvas
73-1/2 x 48 |
| 23 | Radiation Explorations 7, 1994
Oil on canvas
81 x 120 (3 panels: each 81 x 40) | 33 | Heliocentric 19, 1994
Oil on canvas
73 x 55 |
| 24 | Radiation Explorations 8, 1994
Oil on canvas
87 x 111 (2 panels: each 87 x 55-1/2) | | |

works on paper

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|--|
| 1 | Birth of Light 6, 1986
Collage, canson paper on particle board
32 x 42 | 10 | Analogues 1, 1996
Graphite on Strathmore paper
18 x 24 |
| 2 | Birth of Light 10, 1986
Collage, canson paper on particle board
42 x 32 | 11 | Analogues 2, 1996
Graphite on Strathmore paper
18 x 24 |
| 3 | Birth of Light 11, 1986
Collage, canson paper on particle board
50 x 50 | 12 | Analogues 3, 1996
Graphite on Strathmore paper
18 x 24 |
| 4 | Crescendo III, 1988
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
9 x 11 | 13 | Analogues 4, 1996
Graphite on Strathmore paper
18 x 24 |
| 5 | Crescendo V, 1988
Colored pencil and graphite on paper
14 x 11 | 14 | Untitled , 1997.
Pen and ink
11 x 14 |
| 6 | Untitled, 1989
Watercolor on paper
27 x 19-1/2 | 15 | Sky Space #2, 1989.
Monotype
30-1/2 x 25-1/2 |
| 7 | Untitled, 1989
Watercolor on paper
27 x 19-1/2 | 16 | Sky Space #3, 1989
Monotype
30-1/2 x 25-1/2 |
| 8 | Untitled, 1989
Watercolor on paper
28 x 22 | 17 | Gravitational Fields, 1996
Pen and ink hand-colored drawing
8-1/2 x 11 |
| 9 | Untitled, 1989
Watercolor on paper
27 x 19-1/2 | 18 | Gravitational Fields, 1996
Pen and ink hand-colored drawing
8-1/2 x 11 |

s c u l p t u r e

- | | | | |
|----|--|---|--|
| 19 | Gravitational Fields, 1996
Pen and ink hand-colored drawing
8-1/2 x 11 | 1 | Cosmic Progressions 1, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
64 x 54 x 8 |
| 20 | Gravitational Fields, 1996
Pen and ink hand-colored drawing
8-1/2 x 11 | 2 | Cosmic Progressions 2, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
101 x 35 x 6 |
| 21 | Gravitational Fields, 1996
Pen and ink hand-colored drawing
8-1/2 x 11 | 3 | Cosmic Progressions 3, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
87 x 55 x 5 |
| 22 | Frequencies 1, 1995
Monoprint with colored pencil
28 x 22 | 4 | Cosmic Progressions 4, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
102 x 30 x 6 |
| 23 | Frequencies 2, 1995
Monoprint with colored pencil
28 x 22 | 5 | Cosmic Progressions 5, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
105 x 36 x 7 |
| 24 | Frequencies 3, 1995
Monoprint with colored pencil
28 x 22 | 6 | Cosmic Progressions 6, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
131 x 33 x 10 |
| 25 | Frequencies 4, 1995
Monoprint with colored pencil
28 x 22 | 7 | Cosmic Progressions 7, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
88-1/2 x 36 x 7 |
| 26 | Frequencies 5, 1995
Monoprint with colored pencil
28 x 22 | 8 | Cosmic Progressions 8, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
101 x 80 x 5-1/2 |
| 27 | Wall 2, 1983
Graphite
25 x 19-3/4 | 9 | Cosmic Progressions 9, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
90 x 32 x 8 |

- 10 Cosmic Progressions 10, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
120 x 60 x 8

- 11 Cosmic Progressions 11, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
88 x 35 x 7

- 12 Cosmic Progressions 12, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
100 x 58 x 8

- 13 Cosmic Progressions 13, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
91 x 63 x 9

- 14 Cosmic Progressions 14, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
103 x 43 x 5-3/4

- 15 Cosmic Progressions 15, 1996
Wood, nails, glue
84 x 65 x 8

- 16 Vespers, 1992
Wood
Site-specific installation; dimensions vary

wood
construction
reliefs

- 1 Zylo-Probe 4, 1975
Wood construction, mounted on plywood
42 x 36

- 2 Zylo-Probe 5, 1975
Wood construction, mounted on plywood
33 x 24

- 3 Zylo-Probe 6, 1975
Wood construction, mounted on plywood
48 x 43

- 4 Zylo-Probe 8, 1975
Wood construction, mounted on plywood
38-1/2 x 49-1/2

- 5 Zylo-Probe 9, 1975
Wood construction, mounted on plywood
34 x 48

TO KESO

MEANING!!



acknowledgments

Like all exhibitions of this scope, it would not have been possible without the extraordinary dedication of museum staff and friends. As such, a number of people deserve special acknowledgment. Kathran Siegel, our guest curator, has spent countless hours selecting the exhibition in addition to representing Mildred's interests in numerous planning meetings. Her insightful and sensitive essay attests to her enthusiasm for Mildred's work as well as her approach to life. An artist in her own right, Kathran put her own projects "on hold" to see this exhibition come to fruition.

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Henry Flood Robert, Jr.

Executive Director

ARTIST DEDICATION AND THANKS

To my grandfather, the Reverend Capers Michael Vaught, Jacksonville City Councilman, 1887 and founder/pastor of St. Johns Baptist Church; my parents, Dr. E.W. Thompson and Ruth Thompson; and the extended Thompson family for their profound contributions to the Jacksonville, Florida and Duval County communities.

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Mildred Thompson

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Henry Flood Robert, Jr., Executive Director

Curated By Kathran Siegel

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