

early works by
Bob Thompson
and friends

Bob Thompson



I Am Myself

Lester Johnson Emilio Cruz Bill Barrell Jan Muller Gandy Brodie Red Grooms Mimi Gross



October 23 - December 7
opening reception Wednesday,
October 23, 6 - 8 pm

Emilio Cruz

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I am Myself

Early Works by Bob Thompson and Friends

A Black artist working in a white art world in Jim Crow America during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Bob Thompson stood out. He is often cast as an outsider, but Thompson was, in fact, “part of a larger group of figurative expressionist painters of the late 1950s with whom he worked, played, and exhibited” in Provincetown and New York City.¹ Emilio Cruz, Jay Milder, Mimi Gross, Red Grooms, and Bill Barrell were young like Thompson and experimenting with imagery and techniques as they sought their individual paths. Older artists Gandy Brodie, Lester Johnson, Robert Beauchamp, and the paintings of deceased Jan Müller affirmed and aided the younger ones on their creative journeys. They attest to Thompson’s unique persona, which set him apart from the group, and was rooted in his charisma, humor, and deep feeling; his natural artistic gifts; and his passions propelled by his supranatural energy.²

Bob Thompson was born in Louisville, KY on June 26, 1937 into a middle-class family. In the mid-20th century, Kentucky was an “oasis of civility” in the American South, and Louisville was a nexus for trends in contemporary literature,

¹ Childs, Adrienne L. “Variations and Old Master Narratives: Bob Thompson in the Wake of Art History, Bob Thompson, This House is Mine, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME, New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press, 2021, p. 61.

² For interviews with Bob Thompson’s friends see “Bob Thompson, His Life and Friendships,” Artist and Influence, Hatch Billops Collection, Inc., 1985, pages 107- 136.

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jazz, and art.³ Thompson's mother Bessie was a school teacher, and his father Cecil owned a dry-cleaning business. When Bob was thirteen, his father, to whom he was extremely close, was killed in a car crash. After he developed various ailments, his mother sent him to live with his sister Cecile and her husband Robert Holmes, an artist who worked as a cartographer. Holmes urged his younger brother-in-law, who had been painting since he was a child, to continue.

After graduating from high school and to satisfy his mother's wishes, Bob enrolled in a pre-med program in Boston where his sister Phyllis lived. However, a year later, he returned to Louisville and, with the encouragement of his brother-in-law, enrolled in the University of Louisville, Department of Fine Art, now called the Hite Art Institute, in the fall of 1957.

The University of Louisville provided the young art student with a well-rounded education in the humanities, music, literature, art, and aesthetics.⁴ Ulfert Wilke, one of Thompson's professors, was a German emigree who painted calligraphic abstractions and introduced the younger artist to German Expressionism, French Fauvism, contemporary abstraction, and art from non-Western cultures. Thompson worked very closely with Wilke as his teaching assistant. Louisville native and

³ Golden, Thelma and Judith Wilson. *Bob Thompson*, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1998, page 31.

⁴ For a detailed look at the curriculum and professors at the University of Louisville's Department of Fine Art. Begley, John and Slade Stumbo. *Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue / Object*, KY: Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville, 2012, pages 3-4.

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Thompson's professor of drawing John Frank had studied with Robert Motherwell in New York, and he was friends with Philip Guston and Franz Kline. Frank befriended the student artist and provided a direct link to the New York school of abstraction.

There are no early artworks that can be attributed to a specific art class except for Thompson's monoprint *The Family*. He made it in Professor Mary Spencer Hay's class on design and lithography and exhibited it in the Louisville Art Center Annual in spring 1958. Hay's personal style was biomorphic abstraction and likely influenced Thompson's biomorphic "adaptation of a traditional theme of Western art."⁵ *The Family* also exemplifies an early example of Thompson's penchant for lifting motifs from art historical sources.⁶

At the end of his first year, Professor Hay advised Thompson to enroll in a summer art program in Provincetown. John Frank, too, was going to Provincetown to teach at the Seong Moy School of Painting and Graphics and arranged a scholarship for Thompson.⁷ Because few white people would rent to a Black man, Frank also solved Thompson's living situation when he found a shack for rent behind a Black

⁵ Ibid p. 12

⁶ Golden, Thelma and Judith Wilson. *Bob Thompson*, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1998, page 36.

⁷ Seong Moy (1921-2013) was a Chinese American painter and print maker whose lyrical abstract landscapes employed biomorphic forms and cubist space.

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man's house.

Many artists congregated in Provincetown during the summer. They studied at Moy's school or with the renowned abstract painter, Hans Hofmann or simply enjoyed camaraderie in the bohemian freedom found in the quaint seaside town.

The Sun Gallery was the artistic heart for the young expressionists who were turning away from abstraction for figuration. It was home to two older painters, Lester Johnson and Jan Müller, whose figurative styles centered the younger artists' explorations. Johnson's expressionism was considered more mainstream in its "poetic abstraction" than recently deceased Jan Müller's literary expressionism.⁸

One of the first paintings Thompson made in Provincetown was *Jan Müller's Funeral*. Müller had died six months earlier so Thompson only met the artist through the paintings he saw at the Sun Gallery and at his widow Dody Müller's home. Thompson's studies with Ulfert Wilke and his exposure to German Expressionism primed him to see in Müller's art a new path away from abstraction to a figurative expressionism rooted in traditional western European painting. Müller's expressive brushstrokes, colors, and literary themes "would inform the tenor of Bob Thompson's variations" on Old Master compositions, which Dody

⁸ Golden, Thelma and Judith Wilson. *Bob Thompson*, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1998, page 42.

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urged him to study.⁹

Another strong influence on Bob Thompson in Provincetown was Gandy Brodie, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist, whose everyday subjects were marked out against a background of thick paint. According to Emilio Cruz, Thompson painted his first figurative paintings after meeting Brodie.¹⁰ Thompson's palette of brown and gray tones, his division of the canvas into large rectangles of light and dark, and the masklike treatment of faces can be attributed to Gandy's influence.

Using the body and nature as his themes, Thompson attempted a personal approach to figuration in relation to the other artists of the day who were doing the same. He mixed imagery and techniques which he borrowed from the contemporary artists around him, but he relied on geometry and color to make his point.¹¹ Thompson was developing his own visual vocabulary.

At the Provincetown Art Festival Thompson exhibited thirteen works, and collector Walter Chrysler bought them all. Thompson now had some money and a patron.

⁹ Childs, Adrienne L. "Variations and Old Master Narratives: Bob Thompson in the Wake of Art History, Bob Thompson, This House is Mine, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME, New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press, 2021, p. 61.

¹⁰ Golden, Thelma and Judith Wilson. Bob Thompson, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art and University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1998, page 38.

¹¹ Ibid. page 18.

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But more importantly he had enjoyed artistic and personal freedom with a new community of artists who became lifelong friends. He was also committed to figuration. Thompson's Provincetown summer in 1958 was the bridge between his school days and his successful career in New York and Europe.

Thompson returned for his second academic year at the University of Louisville in fall 1958 and continued his studies as a figurative painter. In early 1959 Thompson painted *The Wilting Flower*. It shows a woman seated at a table between two chairs and cradling a dying red flower. There is a lamp and a book on the table. The woman's face is masklike; the painting's palette is subtle; and the contrast of dark and light tones show the young artist has absorbed Gandy Brodie's influence. Yet, its meaning is enigmatic. As Thompson said, "My whole problem is trying to convey without the detail."¹²

Thompson's brother-in-law Robert Holmes joined Gallery Enterprises, an artist-run space started by Sam Gilliam in 1958 to counter discrimination and give opportunities to Black artists. Gilliam modeled it after Beat poet Ted Joans, who lived in Louisville between 1947-51 and painted murals in bars and restaurants. Again, Holmes set an example for his younger brother-in-law who would join artist-run spaces when he moved to New York City. After Thompson had his first show in downtown Louisville in 1959, one of the only Black artists to do so, he

¹² Tuite, Diana. "This House is Mine: Bob Thompson's Private Allegories", Bob Thompson, This House is Mine, Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME, New Haven, CT: University of Yale Press, 2021, p. 39.

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was ready to make his move.

Thompson gave up his scholarship and moved to New York in late spring 1959. He felt confident after his sales to Chrysler in Provincetown last summer and his recent show in Louisville. He also had the support of a community of like-minded artist friends waiting for him. When he arrived, he lived with Jay Milder in the Village and then with Red Grooms. The artists were nicknamed “The Three Musketeers” because they shared studios, made art together, and traveled. Later, he shared a studio with Emilio Cruz and Christopher Lane.

New York was a center of Beat culture in the late 1950s. Thompson embraced the Beats and became friends with poets Allen Ginsburg and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and jazz musicians Charlie Haden, Ornette Coleman, and others. He also developed a substance abuse problem. For a young artist, it was a very rich period. Red Grooms started the Delancey Street Museum and staged happenings in which Milder, Thompson, and others participated in.

Thompson married Carol Plenda, a white woman, in 1960. This was seven years before Loving v. Virginia, and sex across the color line was dangerous. Thompson reflected this reality in dreamlike paintings where equestrian figures, nudes, and monstrous animals romp under lollipop trees in candy-colored landscapes. It was a unique figurative style that already possessed the qualities of danger, ambiguity, and intimacy of his later mature work.

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In 1961 Thompson received two grants which enabled Carol and him to travel to Europe for two years. They lived in London, Paris, and Ibiza. Bill Barrell was also living in Ibiza with his wife Irene. The two artists spent a lot of time painting together, even collaborating. As Thompson's formal evolution developed, his color intensified into flat areas delineating featureless figures and abstract shapes in paintings that riffed on the monstrous themes and compositions of *Los Caprichos* by Spanish master Francisco Goya.¹³

The Thompson's returned to the U.S. in 1963 for his exhibition in New York followed by gallery shows in Detroit and Chicago. From this point on Thompson exhibited regularly. His style matured into a combination of appropriation and imagination in complex compositions that he lifted from Old Masters. His themes were about mythology and religion, sex and death.

In the summer of 1965, Thompson returned to Provincetown where he made a series of drawings of Nina Simone performing live. He also reunited with Gandy Brodie and painted his portrait.

Thompson and his wife went to Rome in 1966 so he could study Italian Renaissance painting. However, years of fast living took its toll, and he had gall bladder and appendix surgeries in March. Although he was still recovering,

¹³ The University of Louisville owned a set of Goya's *Los Caprichos* which Thompson was likely familiar with as a student.

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Thompson continued his fast-paced lifestyle and died suddenly two months later. It was a painful and abrupt ending to a stellar career that lasted only 8 years.

Bob Thompson's devotion to his private allegories was evident in his earliest paintings, like *The Wilting Flower*. Sheila Milder tells a touching story that before Thompson died, "he called his sister and told her about a dream he had about a beautiful flower dying while it was still in bloom, rather than when it was old and withered."¹⁴

¹⁴ Sheila Milder, "Bob Thompson, His Life and Friendships," Artist and Influence, Hatch Billops Collection, Inc., 1985, page 136.

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Selected works from *I am myself*,
early works by Bob Thompson and Friends



Bob Thompson

Wilting Flower (The Rose)

oil on canvas

46h x 67w in

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Bob Thompson

The Family, 1958

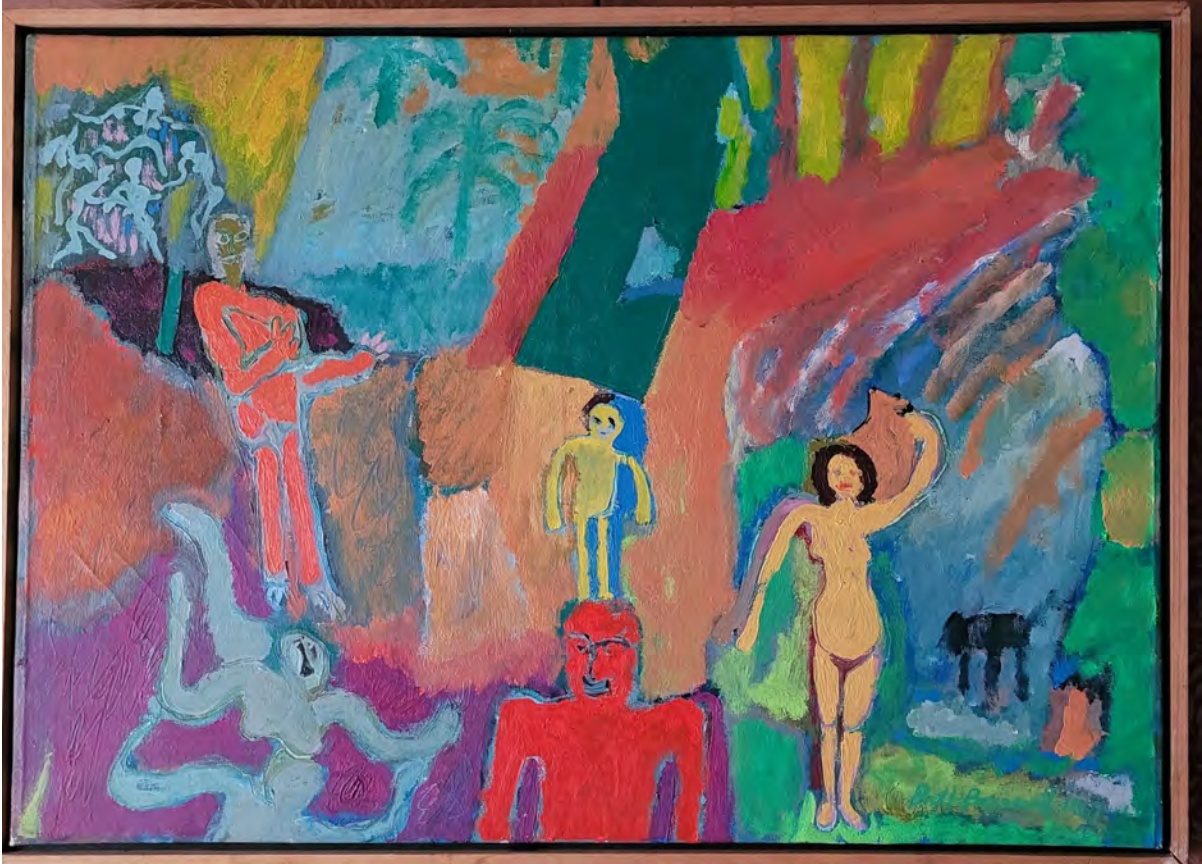
monotype, 22h x 5w in

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Bill Barrell

Summer Pleasures, 1967

oil on canvas

20h x 28w in

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Gandy Brodie

Boat in the Bay, 1957

oil on masonite

58h x 42w in

shfap



Emilio Cruz

Kneeling Nude, 1966
oil pastel on paper
19h x 24 3/4w in

shfap



Red Grooms

Eric Satie

oil on wood and on cardboard assemblage

38 1/8h x 26 1/4w x 4 1/2d in

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Jan Müller

The Great Hanging Piece, 1957
oil on eight wood panels
80 5/8h x 24w in

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Mimi Gross
Good Government, 1962
oil on wood, recto/verso
21h x 62w in