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SEEKING BOB THOMPSON: DIALOGUE/OBJECT

By

Slade Stumbo

B.A. The University of Louisville, 2011

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December, 2013

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A Thesis Approved on

December 3, 2013

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Judith Wilson-Pates

on whose scholarship of Bob Thompson all others, including myself
are indebted

and

My grandmothers, Lilian Hall, Liza Jane Wells, and Violet Stumbo
who shared with me their love of flowers and in so doing
ignited my passion for all things aesthetic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank hallie harrisburg, Michael Rosenfeld and the staff of the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, art dealer Martha Henry, the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, and all who lent works for the exhibition. Their generous participation and support made *Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/ Object* possible. I would also like to thank my Thesis Committee members, especially my mentors: John Begley and Peter Morrin, for their guidance and support. I would like to again thank Judith Wilson-Pates for her generous consultation, as well as everyone else who contributed to my research, including the Speed Art Museum, the Art Department of Western Kentucky University, the Logan County Historical Society, The Logan County Library, Karen Shafts of the Boston Public Library, Gail Gilbert of the Margaret Bridwell Art Library, and the friends and family of Bob Thompson. Additionally, I would like to thank the Hite's chairman Yin Kit Chan, Secretary Renée Murphy, Business Manager Linda Rowley, and the Cressman's Exhibition Assistant Claire Pope. Their contributions were vital to the successful production of *Seeking Bob Thompson*. Finally, I would like to thank my mother Pamela Wells Reavley for giving me Janson's *History of Art* before I was old enough to read all the words. She nurtured in me a love for the arts that continues to guide my destiny.

ABSTRACT

SEEKING BOB THOMPSON: DIALOGUE/OBJECT

Slade Stumbo

December 3, 2013

This thesis documents the research, development, and implementation of the exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson*. The exhibition portion of this curatorial project was completed in the fall of 2012 using work in the Hite Art Institute collection as well as works borrowed from commercial galleries, art centers, and private collections throughout the United States. Intended to re-expose and reveal the well-known but little exhibited in his hometown, Louisville artist, Bob Thompson, the project focused on delineating reoccurring themes in Thompson's oeuvre that were pertinent to his own process of establishing and defining his artistic identity with particular attention to his appropriations of Old Master compositions. The exhibition provided the opportunity to make use of the university's archive on Thompson, the university's art collection, and its other resources and to extend access to these resources to the region. The exhibition fulfilled the three primary missions of the Hite Galleries: to showcase the artworks of university students and faculty, to present the university's art collection to the wider public, and to provide an exposure of significant art to the university's students and the local community. Both the written and visual components of this thesis project express a view of Thompson as driven by his pursuit and expression of his sense of freedom and his commitment to art history.

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INTRODUCTION

The exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson* is so named in order to express the nature of the show as an attempt to reintroduce the artist and his works to his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. The use of the word “seeking” is a double entendre intended to express the exhibition’s aims to further the exposure and scholarship of Thompson’s oeuvre and, through an examination of his works, to display the artist’s own search for self, freedom, and, ultimately, his position within the canon of Western art history. As a student-led project, the exhibition demonstrates the curriculum of the Curatorial Studies program of the Hite Art Institute in action, as does the text that follows. This thesis serves as documentation of the curatorial process as demonstrated in the presentation of *Seeking Bob Thompson*, which was held at the Cressman Center for Visual Art, October 20th—November 24th, 2013. The exhibition was curated by this paper’s author, Slade Stumbo, under the tutelage of co-curator John Begley, the director of the Hite Galleries. The exhibition provided the opportunity to make use of the university’s archive on Thompson, the university’s art collection, and its other resources and to extend access to these resources to the region. The exhibition fulfilled the three primary missions of the Hite Galleries: to showcase the artworks of university students and faculty, to present the university’s art collection to the wider public, and to provide an exposure of significant art to the university’s students and the local community.

The University of Louisville houses a small but important archive on Bob Thompson in the Margaret Bridwell Memorial Library, which includes personal items donated by the artist's family such as letters, exhibition announcements, photographs, clippings from periodicals, documents relating to shows and galleries where his works were exhibited, and various assorted mementos, as well as a drawing of Thompson by his friend Bill Barrell. There are two drawings by Thompson in the archive: a graphite portrait of his mother and an ink sketch that appears to be a study of an Old Master composition, as the general arrangement and inclusion of cherubs suggest that it may be based on a Renaissance or Baroque original, although to date its source has not been identified as a particular work. Thompson also illustrated several of his letters and postcards in the archives.

The University of Louisville Art Collection includes four works by Thompson: two paintings and two drawings. Thomas H. Milner donated two works to the university in 1992: a small oil on Masonite still life, c. 1957-58, as well as a pen and ink portrait of himself, *Portrait of Tom*, 1958. Don and Judy Fiene donated *Partly Morbid*, 1957, oil on panel, to the university in 2006. The Donald M. Fiene Papers, housed in the Special Collections of the Ekstrom Library at the University of Louisville, include a photograph of *Partly Morbid* and a memorial letter that Fiene wrote about his friend, Bob Thompson, in which Fiene recounts the way in which Thompson gave the painting to him. An excerpt of the letter was published in the catalogue of the 1971 Thompson Memorial exhibition at the Speed Museum. In 1988, the university purchased an untitled and undated brushed ink on paper tondo that is based on *Cutting the Stone*, c. 1494, by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516). In addition to published scholarship on Thompson, these three repositories of information housed at the University of Louisville were the sources of the preparatory research for

Seeking Bob Thompson: The Thompson Papers at the Hite's Margaret Bridwell Art Library, the University of Louisville Art Collection, and the Ekstrom Library's Special Collections.

From the beginning, it was hoped that a Thompson exhibition would allow the university to showcase some of its collection. But with only four works by Thompson housed at the university (six if one includes the two sketches in the archive), it was obvious from the beginning that the majority of the works presented in the exhibition would need to be borrowed. It is likely that at one time there were many works by Thompson in Louisville. If such works could be located, it would afford the opportunity to present a show from a uniquely local perspective and to present works that may have rarely, if ever, been on public view. A search of the list of lenders to the 1971 Speed Museum exhibition yielded several leads. Unfortunately, apart from four works now owned by Thompson's nephew, Robert Holmes Jr., most of the works that are known to have been in Louisville at one time have been sold or otherwise dispersed. The spike in value of Thompson works that occurred after the Whitney retrospective of 1998 only exacerbated the flow of works from the Louisville area to New York and other major centers of the art market. At the same time, the increased cost of purchasing a work by Thompson is among the factors that have discouraged local institutions from collecting his works. This movement of works by Thompson away from rather than to Louisville is evidence of Thompson's relatively greater profile in most major American cities as opposed to his hometown and reinforced the need for a local exhibition of the artist's works. It was hoped that such an exhibition might temporarily fill a void in the local discussion of Thompson and provoke a more overt discussion as to why a list of cities that house major collections of his works would not include his hometown of Louisville.

Robert Motherwell writes, “the leading insight of the 20th century [is that] all thought and feeling is relative to man, he does not reflect the world but invents it. Man is his own invention; every artist’s problem is to invent himself” (Motherwell vii). In the discussions that follow, Thompson’s own process of self-invention will be revealed through an examination of the artist’s works, events in his life, and influences that contributed to his development as an artist. In his brief career, Thompson developed a charismatic persona and a marquee personal style. Although Thompson is best known for his appropriations of Old Master works, he imbued them with a remarkable degree of autobiography and his own self-expression while also using them to make cogent and relevant contemporary social commentary that is highly accessible to diverse audiences.

This essay presents the findings of the research that guided the development of the exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson*. Although a variety of resources were employed in preparation for the exhibition, one letter from Thompson to his family proved particularly telling. In it, he stated:

The monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams; the horses are there the dancing nudes and the little man with the pie shaped hat and the earth, the earth sometimes green, purple, blue, violet, the trees orange, yellow, green, red everything my imagination tells me. I feel free— can you hear me free! To such an extent that madness is but a 3-letter toy with 4 arms 16 feet and funny noises that the children would enjoy.

(Letter published 1971 Speed Catalog)

Thompson’s mention of his major leitmotifs, his expression of freedom, his fascination with color, and his use of dream imagery as source material for his compositions, concisely outlines some of the most important aspects of Thompson’s oeuvre. This statement by the artist was central to the development of the exhibition and the issues it raises are those that will be examined in greater detail in this thesis. Beginning with a discussion of Thompson’s early years as an art student at the University of Louisville, with special attention to the

influences of the Hite Faculty and how they affected Thompson's artistic development, what follows will first attempt to identify nascent tendencies and preoccupations in his student works that persist in his mature phase. Next, the discussion turns to an examination of the influences that Thompson employed to express his artistic vision, the iconography that he developed, and his appropriation of Old Master works.

Bob Thompson was a figurative expressionist artist who appropriated Old Master compositions to explore and challenge boundaries and express his unique artistic vision. Despite his preoccupation with European art history, the research reveals that Thompson's sense of his racial identity as an African American and his reaction to the way in which race factored into American life of the mid-Twentieth Century are integral elements of his artistic production. Indeed, rather than pandering to whiteness (as some have claimed), Thompson positions himself, and thus a Black presence, within the context of Western culture and art history; he thereby challenges the temporal and social boundaries that otherwise cloister the "greatness" of European heritage and relegate people of color to the position of mere recipients of Western wisdom. Thompson not only received an education in Western art; he daringly revised the works of its masters, thus positioning his own vision and narratives as being on par with theirs.

Following these discussions, documentation of the way in which these findings were presented to the public in the form of an exhibition is provided, including a description of the arrangements by which the works were exhibited, a checklist and images of exhibited works, and the text labels that were used to engage the audience and encourage contemplation and discussion of the topics and views visually presented and implied in Thompson's art.

THE MAKING OF AN ARTIST

Louisville

Robert Louis Thompson was born on June 6th, 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky to Cecil Dewitt and Bessie S. Thompson. The Thompsons were an educated, middle-class, entrepreneurial family. Bob and his father Cecil were very close. Within the family, the elder Thompson was known as “Big Shot” and his son Bob as “Shot” (Wilson 29). Bob, or Bubba, as he was also known to his family, was considered a smaller version of his father, with whom he was inseparable. This close bond was tragically broken in 1950 when Cecil Thompson was killed in an automobile accident. This was the single most traumatic event in Thompson’s life. At the beginning of puberty, Thompson lost his masculine role model, an emotional anchor, and an extension of himself. It was a devastating blow for the young Bob Thompson. Soon thereafter, Bob began to be plagued by a series of illnesses, likely precipitated by the trauma of losing his father. This early and intimate confrontation with death is a likely source of Thompson’s fascination with mortality, which has been noted by various scholars. Fearing for the boy’s health, his mother sent him to live with his sister Cecile and her husband Robert Holmes, in Louisville, where he would remain through his high school graduation in 1955 (Wilson 29-30).

Bob Thompson began his formal training in the fine arts upon returning to his hometown of Louisville in 1956 after a disappointing year in Boston as a pre-med student. At this point, his abiding but un-acted upon interest in art took on a larger part in his life

when he became involved in the city's art scene and enrolled in art classes at the Louisville Art Center Association School, now called the Louisville Visual Art Association.

On April 8, 1957, *Life* magazine published an article entitled "Culture's New Kentucky Home" that celebrated Louisville's emergence as an urban center of art and culture.

Louisville, which for years got by adequately enough by marketing bourbon, burley tobacco, baseball bats, and the Kentucky Derby, is now producing (and hugely consuming) a new product —the lively arts in all varieties. Once described as a city full of "moth-eaten moribund 'charm' " and virtually devoid of intellectual life, Louisville is caught up in a civic cultural renaissance that is without parallel in the country.

(125)

In addition to the prerequisite markers of cultural refinement mentioned in the *Life* article, such as opera, symphony, the fine arts, and the theatre, Louisville also offered a thriving nightlife. Jazz, of which Bob Thompson was an avid fan, thrived in Louisville, with artists such as Wes Montgomery and Cannonball Adderley appearing at the Arts in Louisville House, where Thompson would later hold his first solo exhibition, and at other clubs such as Joe's Palm Room. The Brown Derby became a hangout, mini-gallery, and salon for African American student artists that included Sam Gilliam, Fred Bond, Ken Young, Robert Douglas, and Bob Carter as well as Thompson.

It was during this renaissance in Louisville that Thompson took his first steps on the path to becoming an important figure in American art of the twentieth century. Indeed, within the pages of the *Life* article, Thompson made his national (although anonymous) debut. In a photograph of a talk on Shakespearian Theatre, the young Thompson is pictured sitting in the front row. The event was presented as part of the University of Louisville's continuing education programming and was held in the university's new library, a building that would later become Schneider Hall, the headquarters of the university's Hite Art

Institute. After studying at the Art Center School as a non-degree student, Thompson formally enrolled as a student of the Hite Art Institute in the spring semester of 1957, according to the records of the registrar. Thompson's aspirational shift from medicine to fine arts was not entirely out of the blue; in a 1965 interview with Jeanne Siegel, he stated:

I painted a lot from the age of 8 until about 12, but then my mother wanted me to be a doctor. But before that, I had a brother-in-law [Robert Holmes] who was in my life very early and he was a painter. So I was very attached to him, like a brother, and I started drawing with his instructions. Painting a lot, I used to get bawled out by my mother because at the time we had to use old canvas— old window shades, and I stole all the window shades in the house. And I was working on them and painting scenes out of books and I also painted some abstract pictures then too...

(qtd. in Siegel 12)

Judith Wilson, in the catalog for Thompson's 1998 Whitney retrospective, also affirms this incipient interest in art when she states that Thompson was a 'closet artist' at Central High School" (Wilson 31).

Despite Louisville's geographical distance from the international centers of art and culture, Thompson's education at the Hite had a decidedly international flair. There was at the time an especially strong German presence due to several refugees on the university's faculty. The German influence on the Department of Fine Arts, which would later become the Hite Art Institute, can be traced to the program's inception with the hiring of Richard Krautheimer, who had been dismissed from the University of Marburg in 1933 during the Nazi purge of Jewish intellectuals from German academia. He promptly fled Germany for Rome where he had been working on his *Corpus Basilicarum Christianarum Romanae*, an ambitious and influential study of early Christian churches. Krautheimer championed an iconographic, contextual approach to the study of architecture opposed to the prevailing formalist approach, as he outlined in the influential 1942 article, "Introduction to an Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture." He left Europe in 1935 to accept a position at the

University of Louisville where he was charged with building a new department in art history, which was formally established in 1937. Krautheimer remained at the university for only two years before accepting a position at Vassar, but he left a legacy that is felt to this day. One of Krautheimer's most important contributions to what would become the Hite Art Institute was the acquisition of the first artworks in the University of Louisville Art Collection in 1937. At Krautheimer's request, the Carnegie Corporation of New York presented 104 original prints to the department, including a complete edition of Goya's *Los Caprichos*, selections from which are included in this exhibition (Adams et. al 4-7,115-121).

1937 saw another of Krautheimer's most important contributions to the University of Louisville, the hiring of his friend Justus Bier, who would succeed him as Department Chair, a position Bier held until 1961 when he was appointed to be the director of the North Carolina Museum of Art. Like Krautheimer, Bier's career in Germany was cut short by the Nazi purge of Jewish intellectuals. Bier was the leading authority on 15th century sculptor, Tilman Reimnschneider. Although the bulk of Bier's research was on gothic and renaissance architecture and sculpture, he also published articles on modern architecture and was an avid proponent of contemporary art. He was friends with architect Mies van der Rohe and many other artists associated with the Bauhaus and he collected the works of Paul Klee, Oskar Schlemmer, and Lyonel Feininger. Bier was a curator at the Kestner Society of Hanover where he presented works by artists such as Erich Heckel, August Macke, Gerhard Marcks, and Christian Rohlf, all of whom would be banned by the Nazis and featured in the notorious 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition in Munich (Kestnergesellschaft history).

As a connoisseur and scholar of gothic and renaissance art as well as modern art, Justus Bier certainly seems to have introduced his interests to his student, Bob Thompson, who in his turn adopted them. Through Bier, Thompson was at only one remove from earlier avant-

gardists of the twentieth century, including the German Expressionists whose influence on Thompson has been noted. Anne Tabachnick recalls, “Bob’s two biggest influences while he was in school [at the University of Louisville] were two German refugees who were teaching there: one was an art history teacher whom [sic], it was said, was Bob’s closest friend and biggest influence and the other was a German refugee sculptor. So Bob really comes to his German Expressionism, not through Jan Müller only... but through his early education in Louisville” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 140). Through the passage of time, Tabachnick appears to have conflated some of the details about the two (or more) Hite faculty members. There was a German sculptor on the faculty, Romuald Kraus, but he died in 1954, before Thompson enrolled at the university. Thompson may have seen his works in a 1955 exhibition at the university. The more likely identities of these Germans are Ulfert Wilke, a painter and calligraphist, and Justus Bier, an art historian who specialized in sculpture and taught Thompson a course on sculpture. Senta Bier, wife of Justus, wrote a brief but positive review of a 1959 Thompson solo exhibition. If as Wilson states, “Arts in Louisville [where Thompson’s exhibition was held] shows went unnoted by the local press,” then it was likely through her husband that Mrs. Bier was aware of Thompson (Wilson 37).

At the Art Center and the Hite, Thompson was introduced in some depth and sophistication to the current trends in contemporary art. Of his time as an art student in Louisville, Thompson said, “... I had a beautiful education there. I worked in my own studio. Eugene [Leake], the director of the [Maryland Institute College of Art], helped me with drawing...” (qtd. in Siegel 12). Leake later left Louisville and returned to Yale to complete his BFA and MFA before accepting his position in Maryland.

It was another German member of the Hite faculty who likely had the most direct influence on Thompson’s artistic development, the expressionist painter and calligraphist

Ulfert Wilke. Wilke taught at the Hite from 1948 until 1964, after fleeing Hitler's Germany like several other Hite faculty members, such as Justus Bier and Richard Krautheimer before him. Wilke and the other German refugees on the university's faculty may have felt a particular affinity with their African American students since they too had been marked as other, had experienced abjection and dispossession, and knew how thin the line could be between a civil and tolerant society and one that was murderously oppressive. More generally, America, and in particular, American youth, offered an optimistic counterpoint to Europe, which had imploded and answered thousands of years of cultural achievement with near total destruction. Of Krautheimer, James Ackerman notes, "Like other German colleagues in this country, he [Krautheimer] also found virtue in the philosophical innocence of young American students, believing that it might lead to a better world than Europeans had created" (Adams et. al 5). Judith Wilson writes, "[Wilke's] extraordinary range of knowledge, taste, and social references was irresistibly attractive to Bob Thompson." However, Wilson also suggests that Wilke had an ambivalent relationship with Thompson. She notes that Thompson is mentioned in only three brief entries in Wilke's diary, none of which offers any praise of Thompson's artistic abilities. Wilson quotes an entry in which Wilke refers to the work Thompson produced as Wilke's studio assistant: "[T]he best he did in our studio; alone only little things developed" (qtd. in Wilson 32). Robert Douglas, a classmate of Thompson's at the time who later went on to complete a Doctorate in Pan African Studies, indicates that Wilke and Thompson were closer than these entries might suggest, noting that Thompson sometimes babysat for the Wilkes (Douglas Interview). In a letter of condolence to Thompson's mother, written upon learning of Bob Thompson's death, Wilke refers to his deceased student as "... one of my favoured art students at the University of Louisville and who was — at the same time a friend." Certainly, a letter of

condolence is unlikely to contain harsh criticism. However, Wilke continues tenderly but with some candor, “Your son was a true artist and from the very beginning when he studied with me it was clear to me that he was an artist. He tried to comply with academic life as best as he could but his heart was all in painting.” While Wilke must have been sensitive to the fact that he was writing to a grieving mother, his candor in mentioning Thompson’s lackluster academic performance indicates that he was attempting a balanced assessment of his deceased student and not mealy praising the dead. Wilke concludes his letter with a mention of a painting that Thompson presented as a gift to his teacher after returning from a summer (1958) in Provincetown:

I have a small painting by Bob which he gave to me. It shows a man, perhaps himself trying to catch a seagull. He spoke about this experience he had in Provincetown. — In a way it was a true self-portrait, aiming and reaching for something. Maybe in his short life he found already to some extent for what he reached. — His art stays in my memory.

(Wilke Letter)

The small painting that Thompson gave to Wilke is evidence of the respect, if not amity, that he had for his teacher, a sentiment that was reciprocated by Wilke through the painting’s inclusion in a 1975 exhibition of Wilke’s collection at the University of Iowa Art Museum titled *An Artist Collects: Ulfert Wilke: Selections from Five Continents* (Wilke, *An Artist Collects* 146). Wilke saw in this painting an artist reaching. Thompson’s gift to his teacher was an act of reaching as well... asking to be understood and stating that he himself understood something of what it was to be an artist and wanting his elder to see that in him in turn. It was an amicable declaration of independence, a statement by Thompson that he had found his path and would leave those who had thus far helped him behind, not as a rejection but as an act of yearning for the fragile freedom that the birds that populate his canvasses so represented for him. As well as being a document of Thompson’s stay in

Provincetown, this painting is representative of two pivotal departures in Thompson's career: his move from Louisville to New York and his shift from abstract to figurative art.

Thompson, like many young artists, emulated the styles and techniques of his instructors in his early years. Notably among the few known surviving works from Thompson's early abstract period is a pastel and ink drawing on paper (figure 1), c. 1956-1959, in the possession of art dealer, Francis Frost. Black markings across the lower portion of the page bear a remarkable resemblance to Wilke's calligraphic abstractions. Even in this early abstract work, Thompson's concern with a strong horizontal division of the visual plane and, in the form of a moon-like motif in the upper left corner, his fascination with birds and flight and the movement between the terrestrial and heavenly spheres are evident.

Thompson would return to the University of Louisville for the fall semester of 1958. In 1959, Thompson relinquished his Hite Scholarship, formally withdrew from the university and moved to New York, where he rejoined many of the young artists whom he had met in Provincetown. It is unclear how much of Thompson's student work survives. Two 1957 works are in the University of Louisville Art Collection, *Partly Morbid*, an abstract depiction of potted flowers, and a small still life. Another work from Thompson's student years, *The Family*, 1958, is in the collection of his nephew, Robert Holmes, Jr. *The Family*, a monoprint likely made as part of Thompson's coursework in Mary Spencer Nay's Design and Lithography class during the spring semester of 1958, is an early example of Thompson's adaptation of traditional themes of Western art. In its biomorphic abstraction, Thompson may have been emulating the style of his teacher. *The Family* was one of four works Thompson exhibited alongside the works of several of his teachers in the 1958 Louisville Art Center Annual (Wilson 32). Of the works presented in *Seeking Bob Thompson*, the still life, *Partly Morbid*, and *The Family* are the earliest and most easily attributed as examples of

Thompson's student works. The one student work in the university's collection that was not selected for inclusion in the exhibition was the drawing *Portrait of Tom*, 1958. According to Don Fiene, Thompson carried a notebook with him most of the time and would draw portraits of his friends or whoever happened to be at particular gatherings. The paper on which *Portrait of Tom* is drawn has three holes for a ring-binder, indicating that it is likely one of the portraits to which Fiene referred. Although the portrait could have provided evidence of Thompson's commitment to practicing his craft, the conventional concern for modeling is anomalous in comparison to the other works in the exhibition and tangential to the exhibition's goal of presenting early works that demonstrate the nascent concerns that he later develops.

Thompson's university years were a time of significant transformation, when young adults who had grown up under segregation were interacting in a newly racially integrated system. Bob Thompson graduated from Central High School just prior to the racial integration of Louisville Public Schools. Louisville Public Schools were desegregated in 1956 with relative ease, garnering national attention as a model of how desegregation could occur. President Eisenhower invited Superintendent Omer Carmichael to the White House in recognition of the peaceful integration of Louisville Public Schools (Morrison 41-44). Although Louisville did not erupt in the sort of violent clashes that occurred in other American cities, North and South, congratulatory statements of the city's racial harmony oversimplify complex social interactions and efface the sometimes covert but deeply rooted racial prejudice.

Thompson's friend at the University of Louisville, Judy Fiene recalls, "At the university many of us were negotiating our first personal friendships with persons of a different race. The African American students were a small minority. Most of us had

attended segregated high schools. Mentors are always important to students, particularly in the arts. I think that Bob, Sam [Gilliam], and Bob Douglas (who can speak for himself) looked to some of the older painters in the African American community. One of these mentors I remember is G.C. Coxe” (Fiene Interview). G. Caliman Coxe was among the first group of African American students to graduate with a degree in the fine arts from the University of Louisville. He, like Thompson after him, was awarded the Allen R. Hite Art Scholarship. Coxe would often return to the university even after he earned his degree and was something of an elder-statesman for the young African American artists of Thompson’s generation (Douglas Interview).

Bob Thompson was one of several talented young African American artists who studied at the University of Louisville in the 1950s. Thompson and Robert L. Douglas, both graduates of Central High School, were reunited in 1956 when they were taking classes part-time at the Art Center Association. Sam Gilliam, who had also graduated from Central High School and who completed his undergraduate degree at the Hite in 1955 and then returned for a graduate degree after two years in the service, approached Douglas with the proposition of forming a black artists’ group, hoping “...that if they worked together, they could change the discrimination that worked against them” (Douglas, Louisville Art 2). Douglas and Gilliam founded Gallery Enterprises in 1958. In addition to Douglas and Gilliam, the group included Bob Carter, Kenneth Young, Bob Thompson, and Thompson’s brother-in-law, Robert Holmes. In addition to this core group, other artists would make occasional appearances and G. C. Coxe, Fred Bond, and Eugenia Dunn would later join. The group would meet at the Brown Derby nightclub where they began to draw considerable crowds. Douglas recalls, “There were the usual ‘hangers-on’ and dilettantes as well as those aspiring to achieve what they were sure we already had. Aside from the critique

sessions, there were poetry readings and even short theatrical readings done by John Wise. Wise was a theater major who hung out with us after he joined the Arts Students League. He was our only white comrade who stayed the course, although one or two others came to some of the first meetings” (Douglas, Louisville Art 6). Gallery Enterprises lasted for only three years but was the precursor for the Louisville Art Workshop. Gallery Enterprises and the efforts of its participants are evidence of the increasingly assertive and self-empowered presence of African American artists working in Louisville in the late 50s and early 60s.

Provincetown

After the end of his third semester at the Hite, in the summer of 1958, Thompson and John Frank loaded their art supplies and belongings into Frank’s car and headed to Provincetown, Massachusetts. John Frank, a student of Robert Motherwell, taught at the Hite as a temporary replacement for Ulfert Wilke, who was on sabbatical. Thompson and Frank packed to its capacity an old station wagon that was on its last legs. (Frank Interview) Thompson had received a scholarship to study at the Seong Moy School, where Frank taught, in Provincetown. Thompson studied drawing there under Frank, but Frank’s assistance extended beyond the classroom. He helped Thompson find a place to live, a small shack owned by a reclusive older black man who was blind. Emilio Cruz, who was one of several young artists whom Thompson met in Provincetown, remembers:

It was difficult then to rent a place in Provincetown; only rare individuals would rent to you if you were black... Everything was arranged for him by one John Frank, who was then Bob’s teacher at the University of Louisville. Things had to be arranged quite precisely or Bob’s existence in Provincetown would have become quite difficult. John Frank was a sensitive and talented man who loved Bob and was proud of him as his best student. John wasn’t a foolish man. He understood the realities of the present social arrangement and realized how harsh and cruel [they] could be... I, who had no one to fulfill these obligations, can testify to that fact...

(“B.T. Life and Friendship” 112)

Thompson's shack would be the site of a number of parties and informal gatherings for a group of young artists whom Thompson met that summer, many of whom would become major influences and close friends. Among them were Jay Milder, Red Grooms, Bill Barrell, Emilio Cruz, Lester Johnson, Christopher Lane, Mimi Gross, and Anne Tabachnick.

Many of the young artists whom Thompson met that summer were students of the abstract expressionist painter, Hans Hofmann. It was one of Hofmann's students, Jan Müller, who is credited with inspiring Thompson's turn to figurative expressionism, although the two never met as Müller died the summer before Thompson's first visit to Provincetown (Wilson 43). Müller had a close relationship with Hofmann, but artistically, there would be an "Oedipal clash between the two artists" and Müller would turn to a "figurative mode and literary content that Hofmann's pedagogy had repressed," as Judith Wilson notes (Wilson 41). Müller's turn to figurative expressionism inspired Thompson to similarly break free from his instructors' influence and the domination of Abstract Expressionism. It was another Provincetown artist, Jan Müller's wife, Dody Müller, who advised Thompson, "Don't ever look for your solutions from contemporaries--- look at Old Masters" (qtd. in Wilson 39). However, it is important to note that Thompson did not arrive in Provincetown a blank slate, as some have mistakenly assumed; rather, his experiences there affirmed his abiding interests and posed new ways to apply his education and influences. In Provincetown, Thompson found his kindreds, but he was determined to be his own.

Thompson exhibited 13 works at the Provincetown Art Festival that summer, all of which were purchased by Walter P. Chrysler (Carter). The personal and artistic freedom that Thompson experienced that summer as well as the sense of belonging to a community of other young figurative artists who were also rebelling against the domination of Abstract Expressionism precipitated Thompson's withdrawal from the University of Louisville after

the fall 1958 semester. He moved to New York where he lived first with Jay Milder and then with Red Grooms before finding a studio of his own.

In Provincetown, Thompson found a group of young people with whom he connected and among whom he could flourish. It was there that he encountered the works of the Abstract Expressionists who held such sway over attitudes about what great contemporary art should be, and though he admired them, he realized that their project was not entirely his own. In this coastal town, at the edge of the continent, he found the frontier of his own experiences and tasted the possibilities that pushing these boundaries could offer him. Provincetown provided the freedom that Thompson sought. Fortuitously, this sense of freedom was coupled with affirmation of his vision through the patronage of Walter P. Chrysler., which emboldened the young artist as his identity as an artist began to crystalize. By leaving Kentucky for the summer, Thompson found the freedom that his previous move to Massachusetts had not provided and it emboldened him to stray even further from the comforts and connections of home. However, this was not so much a move *from* but *to* --- New York, the unrivaled center of American art and culture. Whereas his previous move to Boston had proven unfruitful, his move to New York was an act of self-assertion and self-determination through which he positioned himself among a group of similarly minded artists among whom he would flourish and gain the recognition he desired.

Thompson thrived in the Bohemian enclave that was New York's Lower East Side. Within a few short years he achieved remarkable recognition and success. Thompson's ascent, however, was cut short by his untimely death. Thompson lived life voraciously. He exuded charisma and vivacity in his charming persona and the vivid hues of his brightly colored canvasses. Unfortunately, Thompson's insatiable appetite included substance abuse. His addiction to heroine contributed to his untimely death. He died in Rome on May 30,

1966, a month shy of his 29th birthday. Due to the brilliance that Thompson exhibited and the brevity of his life, writer and critic Stanley Crouch referred to Thompson as a “Meteor in a Black Hat” (Crouch 9-18).

TAKING FLIGHT

Back in Louisville, in February of 1959, likely not long before his move to New York, Thompson's works were exhibited in his first solo show presented by Leo Zimmerman at The Arts in Louisville Gallery. The article announcing the exhibition in Zimmerman's publication the *Gazette of Arts in Louisville* was titled "Academic Strait Jacket: Disdainful Thompson" in an apparent play on the idiom "doubting Thomas." In it, Thompson states his manifesto:

I cannot find a place nor category in which to put my paintings, nor a name to call them, provoked by a feeling of disdain for the gallery going public's notion of what a painting should be. If I consider the gallery going public's long prevailing conception of what constitutes good painting, I am immediately fitted with an academic strait-jacket. Therefore it is necessary for me to utterly repudiate so called good painting in order to be free to express that which is visually true to me.

The important thing is to transfer the image to the canvas as it appears to me; to modify the would be fallacious. Therefore I must accept it on appearance. My painting has no style—it constantly changes—simply different images. My criterion is the integrity of the projection.

I love all things that look the way I feel.

(Thompson *Gazette* I)

This Manifesto is expressive of Thompson's attitude as he decided to leave Louisville and make his way in New York. Thompson's statements are, in part, the product of youthful bravado, but they express his early and abiding commitment to achieving and expressing personal and artistic freedom, to his conception of truth, and to his particular vision. In only a few years after formal racial integration and at a time when, according to Robert Douglas, few black artists were exhibited downtown, Thompson was remarkably confident and self-

assertive in an arena dominated by whites. Through taking on the establishment, he positions himself as a counter-cultural figure, a commentator and critic, and, most significantly, as a truth-teller.

Winged Creatures

Thompson explored boundaries in his art as a way of working through them. It was an active demand for and expression of freedom, one that was most overtly expressed through the birds and winged creatures that populate so many of his compositions. Birds and winged figures and forms enter Thompson's iconography at least as early as 1958 when he chased seagulls along the beach in Provincetown Massachusetts. The addition of birds and wings in his paintings are collectively among the most significant and abundant of Thompson's alterations of Old Master compositions. In *Descent from the Cross*, 1963, Thompson adds wings to the Christ figure in addition to depicting various winged creatures that hover above the scene. Of this painting, Thelma Golden writes, "The added wings help transform the familiar iconographic moment of descent into a proleptic ascent: Thompson was always attracted to stories that implied the possibility of physical and psychological freedom. The visual emphasis on wings throughout the canvas also reminds us that flight — undertaken to escape fear or seek freedom — is a constant theme in Thompson's art" (Golden 21.) Thompson himself said that birds represented freedom:

I had a dream once where the birds sort of went like that, and swept up everything, including me, and took me away. The wind was so strong and powerful and yet they were so free and soaring... You know how birds are. They fly. They have a certain gentleness about them and delicacy about them. Like the eagle. I think they primarily mean freedom. That force... that fantastic thing to fly!

(Siegel 14)

Thompson's mentions of "strong and powerful wind" and the "gentleness and delicacy" of birds indicate an intuitive recognition of forces greater than himself and the sensitivity that

would be required of him as an artist, perhaps even a fragility that he rarely overtly expressed. Since the scene he describes is from a dream, the wind and the birds may represent opposing aspects of the artist's own psyche, a reservoir of deep inspiration and insight, a source of great creativity as well as potential self-destruction. The fact that the birds carry Thompson (and everything else) away, in his dream, is evocative of the notion of "being carried away," which is an expression of excess, although Thompson is, admittedly, quoted as using the word "take" rather than "carry." Thompson was prone to excess in his pursuits of pleasure and his approach to his art. Indeed, Thompson employed terms of addiction to express his passion for painting, referring to himself as an "aesthetic junkie" who was "hooked on pigment."

Due to their ability to fly, birds are a commonplace, if not universal symbol of freedom. Additionally, specific birds have served as symbols of various other attributes; for example, the eagle represents power and nobility and the white dove symbolizes peace and purity. The cardinal, which appears in Thompson's *Bather with Red Bird* (figure 25), 1960, is a beloved emblem of the Commonwealth of Kentucky and the mascot of the University of Louisville. However, Thompson's iconography of birds and winged figures is more complicated and diverse than these mostly celebratory connotations. Thompson mentions the fragility of birds and in some of his paintings, especially those lifted from Goya's *Los Caprichos*, they appear to express a mild degree of menace.

Thompson's fascination with the power and fragility of flight takes a form different from the usual birds and winged figures in an untitled watercolor completed in 1958 (figure 13), based on a still from the 1956 French short film, *The Red Balloon*, written and directed by Albert Lamorisse. Importantly, this painting is one of the more overt testaments of Thompson's engagement with popular culture instead of art history. In the film, a boy is

confronted with an illogical reversal of natural order when a red balloon follows him. This inversion of the real and the animistic portrayal of the inanimate balloon as a creature of will, would have appealed to Thompson who explored similar themes through the course of his artistic production. In Thompson's rendition of the scene, he conveys a sense of yearning in the boy, despite the fact that the figure does not face the viewer. The boy's right hand reaches, almost tentatively, for the balloon. This subtle touch of human frailty implies a degree of empathy between the artist and his subject. However, Thompson's uncanny shadowy figure is also a representation of monstrosity; with a lobster claw for a left hand and pointy vampiric fingers on the right, it is uncertain what one would encounter if the figure were to turn to face his audience. The boy is exemplary of Thompson's rather sympathetic treatment of monstrosity throughout his oeuvre. The paradox of the situation is that if the boy were to reach the balloon, which he seeks, his piercing fingers would pop it. Thompson paints desire and loss as inextricably bound.

In his watercolor, Thompson blends the red hues of the balloon in the airy background as well as the body of the shadowy figure, suggesting a potential union of the figure and the balloon. This union is, however, complicated by the fact that the balloon is only partially depicted. It rises beyond the top of the frame, suggesting that the balloon may drift beyond reach. Thompson's watercolor may be interpreted as a depiction of two aspects of the self: the grounded bestial self, which is a figure of want, in form of the boy; and the balloon as the transcendent self which, although superior to the former in terms of intelligence and spirit, is fragile and amorphous. This reading supports Thelma Golden's claim that Thompson was obsessed with the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious (Golden 20). *The Red Balloon* may have appealed to Thompson as subject matter for his own art because of the protagonist's isolation and eventual deliverance in the

form of an ascent. Although Thompson was by all accounts quite popular he, like many other African American youths who suddenly entered a white world at the end of the segregationist period, would have been aware of a sense of isolation and otherness similar to that expressed in *The Red Balloon*. In the film's final sequence, after bullies destroy the boy's red balloon, a swarm of multicolored balloons descend upon the boy and carry him away. The film's finale is reminiscent of Thompson's dream of being carried away by birds. Thompson's deep yearning for deliverance, escape, or, perhaps, apotheosis emerges from his unconscious and his search for this elusive goal is recorded in his works. However, it is not a scene of transcendence or deliverance that Thompson depicts in this watercolor; rather it is the perilous process of becoming, one in which self-fulfillment lies perilously close to self-destruction.

Coloring the Boundaries of Freedom

Thompson's use of the bird as a symbol of freedom reflects the complicated way in which freedom would have been experienced for an African American of his time.

Although nominally free under the law since the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, the degree to which African Americans live and are treated as free and equal citizens remains a matter of debate to this day. Louisville Public Schools were desegregated in 1956 with relative ease, garnering national attention as a model of how racial integration could occur (Morrison 41-44). However, Louisville was not free of racial strife.

In 1954, less than a week before the ruling on *Brown versus The Board of Education* mandated an end to segregated schools, local activists Anne and Carl Braden purchased a home for the Wade family, who were black, in the Louisville suburb of Shively. The Wade family endured verbal harassment, a cross-burning, and shot-out windows, but moved when

the house was bombed and the level of threat to their lives was made painfully clear. For their part, the Bradens were arrested on charges of Sedition. Mr. Braden was convicted and sentenced to fifteen years in prison, of which he served eight months before the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his conviction (Fosl 135-174). The much publicized case is unlikely to have escaped Thompson's notice and is evidence of the societal forces that curtail personal freedom and the repercussions against those who defy normative social conventions. The following year, 1955, two other events occurred that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement and brought into focus the nation's racial divide: Rosa Parks sat in the section of a bus reserved for white passengers in Montgomery, Alabama and Emmett Till, a fourteen year old African American boy, was lynched in Money, Mississippi (Hudson-Weems 179-188).

Molefi Asante, founder of the doctoral program in African American Studies at Temple University, recalls, "The Emmett Till Case was the most awesome event that occurred in my childhood because it revealed to me in the most profound manner how fragile I was as a Black boy in America" (qtd. in Hudson-Weems 185). Thompson, who was in his first semester at Boston University at the Time of Till's murder, may have similarly empathized with Till and recognized the constraints of his own freedoms that the case signified. The alleged offense for which Till was murdered was whistling at a white woman. Under such extreme racist prohibitions against miscegenation Thompson himself would have been a candidate for such victimization. Thompson did not shy from interracial sex and married a white woman, Carol Plenda, in 1960. Although there is no indication that Thompson personally encountered such violent racism, he must have, on some level, realized the threat to his own safety.

The subject of lynching made its way into popular culture as early as 1939 when Billie Holliday recorded the song *Strange Fruit*, which was written by Abel Meeropole. The song, which metaphorically refers to the victims of lynching as “strange fruit” that grows from Southern trees, became a classic of the Jazz scene, of which Thompson was an avid fan. Nina Simone, one of Thompson’s favorite singers, recorded a rendition of the song in 1965. In that same year, Thompson painted *Homage to Nina Simone*. It is notable that in contrast to Thompson’s multicolored figures that generally defy racial coding, *L’Execution*, 1961, depicts a black figure hanging from a tree as a paler figure beats him with a bloodied club in a scene that evokes the horror and brutality of lynching.

Thelma Golden, curator of the Whitney’s 1998 Thompson retrospective, states, “*Christ* and *L’Execution*, both of 1961, are loaded images of death and martyrdom” (Golden 20). She notes that *Christ* “is one of the many works in Thompson’s oeuvre that features traditional Christian iconography” and that “The idea of redemption, as expounded in Christian dogma, seemed to fascinate Thompson.” (ibid.) Golden makes valid points, but there is a more basic connection between these two paintings and many others in Thompson’s oeuvre that bears noting: beyond the concepts that images of Christ may represent, the body of Christ is the locus of violent action perpetrated by a dominant other. Christ himself was the victim of a sort of lynching whose life was taken and whose body was penetrated by nails, a lance, and a crown of thorns as a display of the ultimate superiority of Roman rule and order over a noncompliant Jew. It is likely that from the Roman perspective Christ’s heretical reforms of the Jewish faith would have been of little concern. Christ’s paramount offense to the Roman state was the idea of Jesus as “King of the Jews” or worse yet, “King of Kings,” and the potential usurpation of imperial authority that such monikers may imply. It is this crime that the crown of thorns represents. Beyond the

symbol of the crown itself, the wounds inflicted by it serve as a corporeal inscription of Christ's crimes. Similarly, Emmett Till's eyes were gouged out by his assailants as retribution for and as an inscription of his transgression of looking at a white woman.

In addition to works by Thompson that contain obvious references to martyrdom, many other works portray bodies being acted upon by others with varying degrees of violence. An untitled and undated tondo (Figure 16) in the University of Louisville Art Collection is Thompson's rendition of the *Stone of Folly* (figure 17), c. 1494, attributed to Hieronymus Bosch. Larry Silver writes, "The central conceit of this image is a quack operation on an imaginary part of the human body, the 'stone of folly,' believed in popular lore to be a site of stupidity or madness" (Silver 648). Thompson's *The Dentist*, 1963, presents an orgiastic tangle of birds and nudes inside a dark cavern. A nude on the left of the composition sits atop one bird and thrusts her hand into the mouth of another. Images of bird-beaks correspond with neat triangles of pubic hair and formally unite the devices and locations of bodily penetration, a concept further accentuated by the setting, a well-populated cave.

Sex, especially conventional notions of heterosexual intercourse predicated upon female passivity and male activity, may also be viewed as a situation in which the female's body is acted upon (penetrated) by the male. Golden notes, "Thompson, whose depictions of sex are always coupled with violence, is obsessed with the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious. The paintings are the realization of the hallucinations and emotions that consumed him. In his work, passion and fear are corollary emotions" (Golden 20). Thompson's awareness of his own black body and its potential to be both the object and location of violent acts perpetrated by a dominant other must certainly have informed such emotional and hallucinatory impulses that manifest themselves on his canvases. In addition

to being a potential victim of violence, in racist ideology, Thompson's blackness would have made him a probable suspect as a perpetrator of violent crimes and sexual predation.

Thompson's awareness of such suspicions is the likely source of at least some of the many monsters that populate his canvasses, especially those accompanying female nudes. Indeed the artist himself may have been aware of, if not the source of, this reading of his monsters; his friend, Kenneth Young, in a letter of remembrance published in the 1971 catalog for the Speed Museum exhibition quotes Thompson as saying, "'Ken, we have two of the finest Black women in town.' ...Sea demons chasing white nudes across the sand dunes" (Speed Catalog). Here Thompson takes racist notions of black monstrosity and cathartically refashions them into whimsical scenes of sexual adventure.

Judith Wilson notes, "Bob Thompson was loath to relinquish a mythic 'universalism' that has had special force for academically trained black practitioners of the visual arts" (69). While Thompson's wife, Carol, and many of his closest friends were white, he did not simply enter the white world and check his African heritage at the door. His was a project of synthesis and self-assertion on the canvas as well as in the diverse social scenes he inhabited. Mimi Gross recalls, "[Thompson] was obsessed with his blackness. He was obsessed with other people's whiteness. But, he wasn't obsessed in the sense that if you didn't understand it he was unkind. It was just something that was always with him" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 119).

Thompson's multicolored figures have been interpreted as an attempt by the artist to complicate the rigid racial divisions of 20th century American culture. Indeed, this is a cogent observation but oversimplifies one of Thompson's complex revisions of multiple aspects of Western art history. The multicolored figures that inhabit Thompson's canvasses are but one of many interventions that Thompson makes into Western art through his

appropriations of Old Master compositions. Mimi Gross comments, “This is something Bob had — a kind of symbolism of colored characters — that even related to the fact that he was colored” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 119). Hettie Jones, who was married to LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) at the time, states, “I always felt that what he was painting was us, our world. The colors he used were those of a new world that was coming. Everybody was a different color and that was the way it was going to be” (qtd. in Richard 59). Jones’ interpretation, like Gross’, acknowledges a racial reading of Thompson’s use of color, but Jones implies that he was expressing the diversity within his Bohemian circle in the Lower East Side and the particular zeitgeist thereof, beyond race, thus acknowledging a world comprising many individuals — and Thompson was certainly concerned with developing and expressing his own individuality. The complexity of Thompson’s psyche and his deliberate use of multiple sources, transposed color, and dream imagery suggest that he had overlapping and multiple metaphors in mind as he built his work. Painter and collector Edward Levine confirms Thompson’s expressive and symbolic use of color when he recalls. “I said to him [Thompson] and I’ll never forget it, ‘Well,... it’s funny, I had a sense of the great Dürer altarpiece with the apostles. It’s like you stripped off those gorgeous robes and you painted the apostles in the color of the intensity of their belief.’ We were friends from that moment on” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 126).

Color, for Thompson, was also a means of expressing a different sort of tonality, a tool in synthesizing two of his great passions: painting and jazz. Bill Barrel states that Thompson explored “achieving the same rhythmic energy in painting that jazz did in music, and how mood could be created through the use of certain shapes, forms, and colors. He would try to match colors to the sounds of different instruments” (qtd. in Richard 59). The multicolored figures that inhabit Thompson’s canvasses are comments on his contemporary

situation but they are also the means by which he conveyed emotional tone, intertextually transposed jazz rhythms to his canvasses. He employed them as a compositional tool beyond the formal placement of particular images. Thompson's images are organized on mathematical structures like the musician's counting of beats.

Mimi Gross states, "I have letters and letters about his looking at Piero's paintings with a sense of confusion, trying to figure out their mathematical properties" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 120-121). One means through which Thompson studied these compositions was through quoting the general formal arrangements but then displacing the focus through his use of color. For instance, in *The Entombment* (figure 32), based on a work (figure 33) by Deiric Bouts the Elder (c. 1415-1475), Thompson paints the body of Christ in yellow. Behind the Christ figure, directly above his loincloth, Thompson paints a female mourner in yellow as well, although of a slightly different hue. Thus, he creates, or reveals, a relationship between the two figures that in Bout's work is not immediately discernible, while keeping Bout's formal arrangement intact. As Frances Richard asserts, "Thompson staked out an investigation of composition as expression, a synthesis of form and feeling in which, ultimately, the explicit content becomes less than central" (Richard 59). Thompson's ecstatic use of color is signal to his personal style that, when painted over the Old Master compositions that he appropriates, effectively writes his signature on to the original, claiming it as his own and placing his name alongside the masters.

THE POWER OF APPROPRIATION

"All art is a memory of age-old things, dark things, whose fragments live on in the artist."

— Paul Klee

The discussion that follows examines the varied influences on Thompson's work, focusing primarily on his adaptation of the canon of Western art history and his appropriations thereof to express his unique artistic vision. Context is further provided to elucidate a reading of Thompson's iconography, which was largely drawn from his dreams. Selected works, primarily those included in the exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson*, are analyzed in terms of how the artist employed specific motifs and symbols to further the diverse themes and multivalency typical of his oeuvre. Although Thompson himself described his practice as "copying," notions of Thompson's works as derivative will be refuted to reveal the way in which the artist utilized forms, techniques, and compositional arrangements lifted from art history, as well as popular culture, to create expressive and highly original works.

Jay Milder remembers Bob Thompson:

I knew him as a very spirited, spiritual, transcendent figure. I knew him as the messenger, the mercurial man. He used different compositions. He was very involved with the twentieth century. Not only did he use old masters, but he used Franz Kline and de Kooning. He understood Cubism; he understood the African true cubism and, vice versa, understood Jungian dream concepts. These are things we always talked about. We used to drive around in cars and invent operas. Bob mainly started it.

("B.T. Life and Friendship" 131)

Thompson employed a diverse range of influences to express his unique artistic vision. He looked to the works of other artists (visual and otherwise) to take his own aesthetic pleasure, to take part in the intellectual discourses they provoked, and to discover the methods by which they were created and the thoughts and feelings they might convey. He was not, however, beholden to follow whatever rules he might discover through his observations nor did he merely replicate the narratives and themes of his source materials. Instead his was often a project of collage and synthesis in which he chose elements from aesthetic culture and combined them to see what new things might emerge. In *Expulsion and Nativity*, 1960, for instance, Thompson combines his renditions of Masaccio's *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1425, and Piero's *The Nativity*, 1470 (Siegel 10-11).

Jay Milder notes Thompson's ability to understand and draw from diverse influences: "He learned from Goya and he learned from Franz Kline, but he also learned from Ornette Coleman. I think he even learned from Shostakovich. He understood paradigms. He was like Paul Klee[;] understanding certain kinds of mindsets he could get into them just like a great actor" (B.T. Life and Friendship 132). Thompson regularly visited museums and attended concerts and he was known to carefully study slides and images from art history texts. Thompson painted his act of viewing. It was a dialogic process in which he sought to express the way that he received the works he viewed. As he worked out his relationship to the works he appropriated and the methods and modes he adopted, he extended that dialogue to his audience, not only expressing himself, but proposing new ways of viewing art. Thompson freely synthesized his impressions of seemingly disparate sources from the visual arts as well as music. Thompson would take certain aspects of a particular artist and then imbue them with traces of another. Indeed, the influence of Gauguin can be seen in Thompson's flattened colorful figures. The yellow body of Christ in Thompson's *The*

Entombment, 1964, after a work by the fifteenth century painter, Dieric the Elder Bouts, also refers to Gauguin's *Yellow Christ*, 1889.

In 1965, Jeanne Siegel noted "There are, unquestionably, stylistic influences of Gauguin and his contemporaries on Bob Thompson's work, but there is another aspect of his paintings, not as easily discernible, that is far more significant. That is the fact that Thompson draws his themes from paintings by old European masters" (Siegel 10). In the time that has passed since Siegel published her article, Thompson's appropriation of works by European masters has been accepted as one of the artist's central undertakings. In adapting and employing themes, styles, and compositions from artists before him, Thompson was doing nothing radically new. As Siegel points out, "Until cubism revolutionized spatial concepts and representational modes of expression gave way to more automatic and intuitive ones, emulating older painters was an accepted practice" (Siegel 12). Thompson expressed his reasons for his appropriations:

My God, I look at Poussin, and he's got it all there. Why are all these people running around trying to be original when they should just go ahead and be themselves and that's the originality of it all, just being yourself. Now you can't do anything. You can't draw a new form. You can't draw a new form. The form has already been drawn. You see? ...that total human figure almost encompasses every form there is. You know? ...it hit me that why don't I work with those things that are already there... because that is what I respond to most of all.

(qtd. in Siegel 12)

Thompson characterizes his appropriation as almost a matter of necessity. Since some of what he sought to do had already been achieved, it was logical that he should quote these accomplishments and employ them to his own ends. Thompson's use of themes, compositions, and techniques devised by others was not merely a matter of convenience; it was also a means of processing the cultural productions that confronted him. Thompson, who carefully viewed and studied the works of European masters, accepted those images

into his internal world. The temporal distance between these artifacts and the artist's own time is of no import except that it may have increased the mystery and allure of these objects. Through attempting to replicate the compositional structures of old master works, he was, in some regards, following formulas that he judged effective. It was also an attempt to understand the works and their ability to convey meaning. Through painting his own versions of Old Master works that he admired, Thompson's appropriations are more than copies; he documents his act of viewing.

Through the process of appropriation, Thompson is enacting a ritual, assuming the role of the artists he admired as a form of communion, without shying from asserting his own vision. Painter Edward Levine, a friend and collector of Thompson's, had an epiphany revelatory of Thompson's relationship to the Old Masters while the pair were touring the Metropolitan Museum of Art together. While listening to Thompson describe particular works they were viewing, Levine came to this realization:

That he was talking about Bob Thompson —because I think that Bob saw himself as an extension of his heroes. I think that was a real, valid aspect of this very intensely spiritual man. I think that Charlie Parker and Lester Young and John Coltrane and Piero della Francesca, Miles Davis and Van Dyke, Goya (particularly) — these were all parts and extensions. He was an extension of them, they were an extension of him. He saw himself in that role. That was a purpose in life. He saw that, very clearly... he saw himself as an historical figure. He saw his role; it was very clearly defined to him.
(“B.T. Life and Friendship” 127)

Of Thompson's appropriations, critic Frank Bowling writes, “But then one looks hard and... what we thought was Piero disappears and we have a Thompson. A rich, sumptuous, and undeniably complex painting generating its own personal heat, comparable only to a Picasso's use of tribal sculpture or a Van Gogh's use of Japanese prints” (qtd. in Wilson 64). Bowling's comments express the unique quality and style of Thompson's works and his ability to employ the influences of others to create something new and distinctively

his own, but more intriguingly they raise a problematic question; are Western appropriations and adaptations of the art of other cultures and ethnic groups somehow more acceptable than the other way around?

Thompson's used his empathetic personality to gain friends and allies and as a tool for negotiating the contradictions of the New York social scene and the art market. Thompson's charm brought him the affection that he needed and afforded him the opportunity for self-assertion and self-promotion that would bring him notice. Crouch asserts, "Though known for his generosity, Thompson was also a charmer and manipulator, a thorough and quick reader of character who could always don the necessary mask. The painter radiated charisma in two worlds by juxtaposing cultural references--- springing existentialist concepts on his pool-room buddies, then trumpeting *motherfuckers* and *bitches* among Caucasian aesthetes and Bohemians hungry for social spice. Or some lunthead he hung around with to the despair of his friends would turn out to be the son of a rich collector who he was stalking" (Crouch 12.) This multiplicity in Thompson's character or his donning of "necessary masks," was, in part, a form of evasive action. In *The Fight*, on the 1974 boxing match between Muhammad Ali and George Forman in Zaire, Norman Mailer writes, "Champions were great liars. They had to be. Once you knew what they thought, you could hit them. So their personalities became masterpieces of concealment" (Mailer 41). The phantom adversary that Thompson sought to avoid was not so much another person as it was the potential for his identity to be constructed by anyone other than himself. Emilio Cruz states, "Bob was a man of unique, contagious character —an extreme extrovert possessing a powerful will. The moment you met him, you understood his sense of self-possession. With this, there was no compromise. Everything about him said, 'I am myself and no other shall I be'" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 113-114). Mimi Gross echoes Cruz's

assessment: “[Thompson] was a man totally in possession of himself, even when he was incredibly young” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 119). To be pigeon-holed or categorized by another would be to surrender some of his power of self, setting external standards and boundaries that would limit his personal and expressive freedom, in short, to accept the sort of “mental straightjacket,” which was his life’s project to cast off.

Despite Thompson’s personal charm and his ability to move between diverse circles, black artists did not universally hail his success. His use of traditional European themes and his appropriations of the old masters may be viewed as pandering to a white audience and reproducing the hegemonic, white supremacist, order. One artist complained, “He didn’t have any problems with white people and he didn’t present any challenges in his art, because all of his forms came from European masters. That made white people comfortable” (qtd. in Crouch 16). This comment seems to imply that Thompson failed to challenge and thus supported the status quo. To the contrary, Emilio Cruz strongly asserts, “Bob was perhaps the only black man I ever met who was totally intolerant of the notion of inferiority... Bob Thompson said in his life and his work, ‘I will not be a slave.’ In some of his paintings, he punctured the terrible nightmare of American life” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 114). It is not entirely clear whether Crouch’s words are a direct quotation of a statement made by a particular, though anonymous, person or whether they are his summation of a particular line of criticism leveled against Thompson. Whatever the case may be, as stated, the comment keeps intact racial categories as monolithic singularities with discreet and rigid boundaries and perpetuates a definitive notion of race against which Thompson rebelled. Crouch states, “The anger of certain black artists [toward Thompson] is worth recording, if only because we can better understand the complex of hostility that knows no racial limitations” (Crouch 16).

Although Thompson's use of European old masters as source material affirms their place in the Western cultural canon, Thompson's paintings are neither mere reproductions nor simple homages. In Thompson's revisions he often disrupts the original narrative, reducing the compositions to formal arrangements that he exploits for his own purposes and infuses with personal dream imagery. Thompson's appropriation of the Old Masters is a significant intervention into the analysis and reception of Western art, one in which he boldly asserts his presence and thus a black presence in the highest sanctum of Western (white) cultural achievement. Thompson's paintings have been compared to Jazz with which he was a deeply involved through friends, at various nightclubs (especially The Five Spot), and in his alternative space activities at the Delancey Street Museum, where fellow artist and friend Marcia Marcus once staged a happening, *A Garden*, ca. 1960, for which Thompson played music (Marcus Interview, Coker 18-21, Crouch 14). Thompson also produced a work with "garden" in the title, *Garden of Music*, 1960, which Frances Richard describes as, "One of his [Thompson's] most important early works. A group portrait of Jazz greats including [Ornette] Coleman, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and bassist Charlie Haden, *The Garden of Music* places the musicians in a polychromatic Eden of their own making" (Richard 69). While the concept of the "garden" is a reference to an "Eden of their own making," it also serves as a metaphor of artist as propagator of the intermedial cross-pollination between music and visual art as seemingly discreet subjects, methods, and modes of creative expression that Thompson and his wider circle explored to find what new things could be created.

As Jazz musicians improvise their music based on pop standards, Thompson used old masters as the standards upon which he painted his improvisations, twisting and manipulating them as he explored their potential to convey multiple meanings, pulling them

from the rarified and distant confines of art history and bringing them into the world as he saw it. Crouch writes, “Where the Cubists were sophisticates inspired by the distortions and rhythmic power of primitive art, exploiting it for decorative purposes or for fresher and more powerful expression, Thompson’s decision to shoot primitive energy through the classical models that attracted him reversed this process. The gall of it was that Thompson placed his own work next to that of the masters he loved most, encouraging comparison with the greatest painters of all time” (Crouch 14).

As a black artist who grew up in the segregated South, Thompson may be viewed as a postcolonial subject. In the act of claiming personal identity, he took from the traditions of the colonizer (Western art history) and claimed them as his own. In doing so, he reversed the colonizing project, which was to subjugate the colonized and in the case of African slaves to declare not only the superiority of the white colonizer but total ownership of the slaves, their bodies, their labor, and all of their productions. Thompson’s appropriations of Old Master works may thus be viewed as a rescue trope through which emancipatory aspirations are achieved. In view of America’s history of slavery, the very term “Old Master” has much more insidious connotations than the honorific usage of the term in art history. Although Thompson undoubtedly admired the great artists of the Western canon, their position as *Masters* and the concomitant implication of slavery must have provoked in him a degree of revolt. Robert Douglas notes, “Real power for anyone comes from the right and imperative to explore, develop, and create in their own self-interest, to take what is yours and make it mine” (Douglas interview). Douglas credits this concept as developing from his reading of Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Similarly, Thelma Golden, curator of the 1998 Thompson retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, writes:

So the act of copying becomes a surreptitious claim to power and equality, or rather to power that can be gained through equality. It is about what is given and what must be taken or claimed. This is [Frederick] Douglass' implication. Like Douglass, Thompson understood the power of the works he used and their place in the history of art. Western art offered him something which he assumed was his right to use freely. He also was clear about his desire to make these works their own: inflect their vocabulary with his grammar; infuse the agreed upon meanings with his intention. To claim them. To signify.

(Golden, 23-24)

Informed by "The Signifying Monkey" by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Frances Richard also refers to Thompson's appropriations as a form of "signifying." She explains, "To signify means to make meaning; in the African-American vernacular it means to make meaning in a particular way, to lay claim to the present through a conscious appropriation of the past constructed through revision, repetition, critique, and homage" (Richard 58). In choosing particular works and artists to be appropriated for the production of his own creation, Thompson selectively and consciously created his own genealogy, positioning himself as both student and heir of the Old Masters. He borrowed not only their compositions, but also the cultural currency that had, through the centuries, grown up around them. However, this claim to power was not the sole objective of his appropriations. Had it been so then one might expect to see *Mona Lisas*, *David's*, or *Water Lilies* on his canvases. Instead, Thompson chose the artists and works that most resonated with him and that were most useful to his project so that even the act of selection becomes a mode of self-expression and a key element of his craft.

Piero and the True Cross

The works of Piero della Francesca (c. 1415-1492) provided the inspiration for many of the works of Bob Thompson. As has been stated before, Thompson viewed Piero as a

master of composition. The works of Piero had captivated Thompson since his days as a student at the University of Louisville, where he wrote a term paper on the quattrocento artist. Thompson is not alone in his admiration of Piero. Of Piero, Harry Abrams writes, “Contemporary painters claim him as an aesthetic kinsman.” He continues:

In response to the mass adulation of Piero, already apparent in the 1930s, the critic Bernard Berenson expressed shock. His contemporaries, he insisted, were merely ‘culture-snobs’ who did not understand the true universality of Piero’s wordless poems. They were merely seeking justification from the past for their own worship of Cezanne. Berenson, of course, was referring to the many ties that seem to bring these two artists together: suppression of emotion, emphasis on geometric shapes, and an overriding concern for the flatness of the picture plane. Visually, Piero and Cezanne were seen as soul mates, although since Cezanne never went to Italy, no one tried to link them historically. But Piero was taken as the one Renaissance painter who, centuries earlier, had forecast the values of Post-Impressionist art and thereby proved its validity.”

(Abrams7)

Abrams’ and Berenson’s comments on the connections between Cezanne and Piero help to elucidate the relationship between Thompson’s style, which has been compared to various Post-Impressionists (especially Gauguin) and their contemporaries, and his fascination with and appropriations of Piero. Thompson was particularly drawn to Piero’s frescoes at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy. Thompson’s friend, musician Richard Tietelbaum, was with the artist when he first viewed the frescoes in person and recalls:

It was very inspirational because I had never seen anyone respond to art with such intensity. It was the most visceral experience I had ever witnessed. He was awed, angered, and challenged. He loved this work, it intimidated him, and he vowed to equal what he saw. It was beyond shaking one’s fist at fate; Thompson was shaking his fist at the weight of history, art history, a history he understood intimately and clearly, so well that his responses to it were physical and vocal. It was almost frightening to watch.

(qtd. in Crouch 17)

Tietelbaum's observations indicate that Thompson's engagement with the Old Masters whom he appropriated went much deeper than an exercise in copying. Thompson was placing himself in direct competition with the artists he most admired and yet this struggle was not an attempt to vanquish, to be rid of, those who attracted him so much as it was one to find common cause, communion, and equality, which necessitated his connecting to that mythic primal force as well as careful study. Thompson's appropriations were acts of both struggle and collaboration, albeit with artists from whom he was separated by time, space, and the hierarchical connotations of greatness itself. Indeed, those rifts constituted the obstacles that he sought to overcome, obstacles that were so great that they required an intensity of Thompson which is the source that generates the considerable heat for which Thompson's paintings are known. Similarly, of Jazz and painting, Ralph Ellison states:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself, for true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity, as individual, as member of the collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.

(qtd. in Richard 58-59)

Thus, Jazz is a tool to understanding not only Thompson's rhythm's, color, and improvisations but also one that reveals his complicated and sometimes conflicted relationship with the Old Masters. That Thompson was so ambitious, so audacious, as to contest and claim a place among artists of mythic import may be, in part, a product of his upbringing. Emilio Cruz states, "Bob was trained to believe that he was special —a young prince among men" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 113). Anne Tabachnick similarly casts Thompson in a princely role when she describes his self-assertion into both the New York art scene and art history: "Bob Thompson stepped into his heritage as a painter in the

Western world like a prince to the manor born” (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 137). Art is where Thompson found himself, where he could connect with the world and forge his identity, and so when it came time for him to prove himself worthy and to take his place, to claim his inheritance, it was the kings of the art world against whom he sparred, the Old Masters.

An untitled work, painted by Thompson in 1963 (figure 34) is based on Piero’s *The Proofing of the Cross*, 1460, (figure 35) from *The Legend of the True Cross* cycle of frescoes, 1452-1465, in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy. Piero’s fresco depicts a Christian legend in which the cross of Christ is found in the Holy Land and its status as a holy relic is confirmed by St. Helena, Roman empress and mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, praying before it. While Piero’s depiction of the Christian story stresses the reality of the scene in humanist, Renaissance form, Thompson’s appropriation of Piero’s composition reverses the process, challenging notions of reality and suggesting unseen, unconscious truths.

To impress the reality and immediacy of the depicted legend and to reinforce the role of the church, Piero placed his figures in front of a basilica and other representation of contemporary architecture of his day. In Thompson’s revision of the scene, he all but obliterates Piero’s architectural references. However, Thompson does include shapes and forms based on elements of Piero’s architecture, though much transformed. The only example of which Thompson retains a sense of the architectural is the red and pink arcs in the upper right hand side of the composition. These arcs of color are based on the arched windows of a building in Piero’s fresco, which does not wholly appear in Thompson’s painting. The right side of Thompson’s composition is framed by a double-trunked tree, or two trees whose canopies have fused into one. The lines of these trunks correspond to the

corners of two buildings that do not appear in Thompson's revision. The bird-like forms that loom behind the central action are Thompson's reinterpretation of the arcade of Piero's basilica. In life, birds take on such positions, with wings down but slightly outspread, as a form of posturing and protection, to puff up and make themselves appear larger so as to ward off predators and to provide refuge for their young under their wings.

Although Thompson keeps Piero's general arrangement of figures intact, he disrupts the original narrative; where Piero depicts the proofing of the cross as an actual event, Thompson presents an image of a mysterious ritual. Indeed, in Thompson's rendition, the very subject of the legend, the cross of Christ, is transfigured as a stiff pink female nude. St. Helena, whom Piero depicts wearing a conical hat, is depicted by Thompson without any variation of color, tone, or line that would distinguish her head from her hat so that she is distorted into a strange alien form. The brown and rust-colored figures in the foreground appear to be rooted to the earth. Thompson attaches a bird beak to the brown figure and a man on the right side of the composition appears as a purple penguin. Thompson's distortion of natural form and his transgressions of category, such as human and animal, destabilize notions of the real and evoke a sense of a dream state which is furthered by the fantastic setting that is void of reference to any actual place.

Thompson's overarching theme in this work becomes the movement between realms, metamorphosis. The two figures in the foreground emerge from the earth and behind them the strange ritual is enacted. The morphology continues its ascent into the spiritual realm in the overlapping birdlike forms in the background. They progress in size with the largest of them resembling a mountain range as much as a bird. Its wings (or summits) extend beyond the top of the canvas. This suggestion of visual excess impregnates the composition with the very notion of the world beyond the frame, the unseen and the

ineffable, perhaps unattainable, truth, which Thompson sought to discover and convey. It is a notation of all representation as a form of fracture by which only portions may ever be at one time presented, divided and cut from the whole. By beginning the progression in the foreground with figures that are rooted or grounded, Thompson impresses the idea of the worldly and then through repetition and mutation of form, moving upward, reaches for the heavenly.

On the left side of Thompson's painting, a pale blue curving stream ambles down from a gap in the deep blue mountains of the background (figure 36). The stream culminates in two parallel horizontal lines that look like a blue = sign located in the middle of the left hand side of the painting. The bend of the stream that would unite these two parallel segments is not depicted but would be located somewhere to the left of the painting, outside the frame. Other portions of the stream are also obscured behind the bird-like mounds. This stream is not present in Piero's fresco. Rather, it appears to be based on the form of a crack, which has since been restored. This is remarkable because it indicates that Thompson was accepting incidental and accidental markings on the fresco as inspiration as much as he was looking to Piero's formal arrangements. Thus, time and nature are afforded authorship as well as Thompson and Piero. Water, as a liquid, is the physical state of matter between the gaseous and solid states. Metaphorically, the stream represents the movement between the celestial and earthly spheres. Formally, it indicates a vertical (though winding) movement and unites the background and upper portions of the composition with the mid-ground, where the action occurs, while echoing the curvature that Thompson so sumptuously employs throughout. Based on a crack, the stream is quite literally representative of the stream of consciousness, the free-association that Thompson employs throughout his adaptation of Piero's fresco. In the religious tradition of several African

cultures, particularly the Yoruba and those located in the Congo region, rivers are associated with spirituality and the watery world of the ancestors, a place of union of life and death. In the Book of Revelation of the Christian Bible, Paradise is described as containing “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Bible King James Rev. 22:1-2). Thompson’s stream is also coupled with a tree, a thin bare tree that divides into a trinity of limbs at the upper left side of the canvas. That Thompson’s tree is denuded of its healing leaves may indicate a social injury or injustice.

The barren tree is a reinterpretation of a cross depicted in Piero’s fresco, actually a remnant from a different sequence, *Finding of the Cross*, which Thompson keeps in his version of *Proofing of the Cross*. In both instances in which the subject matter (the true cross) of Piero’s fresco appear, Thompson transforms them in ways barely recognizable as to their source: on the left, as a thin bare tree and on the right, as a pink female nude. Interestingly, these two transformations of the cross, the tree and the female nude, are linked in Thompson’s iconography and he often pairs them as markers of sexuality. He states, “I paint a woman that is real fine, and has got a lot of groovy things about her, and then I am going to put her right beside a tree and I relate her to the sensuality of the tree and the mountain and, you know, all that. That’s the way it is going in my mind when I work...” (qtd. in Siegel 11). That Thompson should imbue a work with a spiritual theme with sexuality should be of little surprise. Here, Golden’s observation bears repeating: “Thompson, whose depictions of sex are always coupled with violence, is obsessed with the struggle between the conscious and the unconscious” (Golden 20). The violence to which

Golden refers is here represented by the cross, which among numerous Christian and secular connotations is a symbol of Christ's murder. By replacing the cross with emblems of sensuality, Thompson examines the divide and movement between the profane and the sacred, which corresponds to the worldly and celestial, the conscious and unconscious. Thompson, though a libidinous man, sought a deeper connection than casual sex offered him, as he expresses in a letter written before his marriage to Carol Plenda. In it, he writes, "It was always a reverse situation. You would be attracted and approached from a mental standpoint and you would arrive at a physical relationship and that would be all" (qtd. in Wilson 59). In this painting, Thompson explores both the corporeal and spiritual aspects of desire.

Wilson notes Thompson's practice of "integrating forms by rhyming their contours," specifically, he echoed curvature of a woman's buttocks with that of a horse (Wilson 58). In *Untitled*, 1963, the pink of the nude who was a cross is repeated in a high pink arc directly above her buttocks, reiterating and accentuating their form. Above and slightly to the center from the pink arc, Thompson places a red arc with a purple interior. Another example of Thompson's visual rhyming in the composition is that of St. Helena's conical head with the bird beaks of the brown and purple figures. While St. Helena's conical head points upward, the beaks of the brown and purple figures, though of different heights, point toward each other, thus emphasizing the pink nude which is positioned between them. The most prominent example of formal rhyme, however, is that of the curvature of the heads and shoulders of the figures with that of the ever-expanding bird-like forms behind them. This curvature is also echoed by the red and pink arcs on the right and the bends of the stream on the left.

Although one would be hard pressed to identify Thompson's *Untitled*, 1963, as in any way based on the Christian legend of the true cross without knowledge of Piero's fresco on which it was based, Thompson does not altogether displace Piero's central theme. Beyond the specific details of the story, Piero depicts contact between humanity and the divine. According to the legend, the means by which the cross was authenticated or proofed was by touching the cross to the corpse of a recently deceased youth who miraculously regained life upon contact. Curiously, and perhaps part of what intrigued Thompson, Piero off-centers his depiction of this climatic moment. In Thompson's rendition, the youth appears as the yellow long-haired figure seated in the lower right side of the painting, beneath the pink nude. Although the cross is not directly represented in Thompson's painting as it is in Piero's fresco, there is a suggested cross, in the shape of an X, at the very center of the composition formed by the intersection of St. Helena's conical head and the overlapping wings of the bird-like forms. Nonetheless, Thompson does not rely on an actual realistic appearance of a cross so much as he imbues the entire work with the concept of divine contact and movement between the realms. Thompson's significant revisions should not be read as a rejection of Piero's message and methods, but instead they suggest a much deeper engagement, an attempt to equal, perhaps best, an artist he intensely admired. Thompson was not solely interested in Piero's mathematics; he, like Piero, was attempting to express the spiritual through physical means, through paint, and so looked to and expounded upon the method of a master for employing form to convey meaning.

In anthropology, liminality is most often discussed as an intermediate phase in ritual, after the ritual has begun, but before the reordering of category that the ritual ostensibly achieves. In *Untitled*, 1963, Thompson employs some reordering through transmutation: people become birds, crosses become nudes and trees, etc. However, the categorization of

the birdlike forms, great triumvirates of amorphous lumps, seems to retain their liminality (as does the fantastic setting itself), existing somewhere between building, bird, and mountain. Although, birdlike forms abound throughout Thompson's oeuvre, the birdlike forms that hover behind the scene in *Untitled*, 1963, are most similar to one he places in *Expulsion and Nativity*, 1964. Again, the birdlike form is based on architecture, the stable, in Piero's *The Nativity*, 1470-1475. In keeping with Thompson's theme of communication between the realms, both instances of Piero's architecture, which Thompson transforms, are buildings associated with the divine; the basilica is God's earthly dwelling, and the stable, as the site of Christ's birth, is the place where God was made flesh. Thompson doubles the notion of movement between realms in *Expulsion and Nativity* by pairing *The Expulsion*, 1426-1427, by Masaccio, 1401-1428, with Piero's *The Nativity*. Both paintings depict a movement between the realms: Adam and Eve's movement from grace and Eden into shame and the worldly and God made flesh in the form of the Christ child.

The cross is a contradictory symbol. It is formed through the intersection of two lines and as such is a literal representation of union. However, it is also formed through division, such as by dividing a square into four smaller squares. In Christianity, the cross is a symbol of the covenant between God and humanity, their intersection, while at the same time representing a schism between the two through Christ's crucifixion. That schism of the cross echoed the original rupture between God and his creation when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, a theme of other works by Thompson. Similarly, the setting of *The Legend of the True Cross*, the Holy Land, is positioned at the crossroads of the Old World, where Asia, Europe, and Africa meet. It is a place where people, things, and ideas converge and blend, but it is also a dangerous frontier land, a suspicious conduit of pollution and invasion prone to erupt in violent conflict. In

1963, Jerusalem was a city contentiously divided between Israel and Jordan. Borders, especially those that divide extreme categories, whether physical or figurative, are liminal spaces, places in between. Thompson mines the liminal as a source of creative energy. For Thompson, creativity was a form of divine contact, as is expressed in *Untitled*, 1963. Art as divinely inspired is a very ancient notion, because to create is a godly (potentially usurpacious) act, one that still survives today in the idea of being visited by the muse. *Untitled*, 1963, is a rhapsodic study of continuous interplay and transmutation in which Thompson destabilizes fixed categories, searches for the union of seemingly discreet or oppositional concepts, things and forces, and in so doing paints his approach to art both as a viewer and a painter. Thompson reaches for divine wisdom and power, and through ritualistic repeated gestures, he gives them form; in Promethean fashion, he wrests fire from the heavens and brings it into life.

The rust-colored figure, located in the lower left hand side of *Untitled*, 1963, wearing an elongated headdress is reminiscent of North African costuming and may indicate an attempt to imbue a bit of Africa in a scene drawn from European tradition. Whether this was an intentional choice by the artist, or whether it was merely a coincidence, a result of Thompson's flattening of forms, erasure of detail, and the monochrome palate of each figure and form represented, the region seems to have been on Thompson's mind at the time. In the same year, Thompson painted *North African Dream*, 1963. In that year, North Africa was at the height of decolonization. Algeria had won independence from France in the previous year after a bloody revolt and was admitted to the United Nations as an independent country in 1963. Thompson was likely more aware than most Americans of the deep tear in French nationhood inflicted by the Algerian War; he was in Paris in 1962 during one of his two sojourns to Europe to see in person the Old Master works in collections

there. The conflicts in North Africa were well documented in the world media and stirred imaginations and popular culture as evidenced by the occurrence of a story titled “Oasis of Fury,” 1963, in the comic book *Commando*. Not surprisingly, that graphic story portrayed the peril of a group of white soldiers in a hostile desert land, rather than focusing on Africans struggling to free themselves of their colonial yokes. Conversely, Thompson expresses an African presence devoid of explicit reference to conflict between Black and White. To have done otherwise would have kept such racial categories intact and discreet in contrast to Thompson’s project. On the other hand, the overthrow of colonial rule in North Africa was in some ways parallel to Thompson’s own rebellions and self-assertions, which occurred at roughly the same time: his oedipal struggles with his own teachers and his attempts to equal the Old Masters whom he admired.

The Sleep of Reason

Francisco de Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (figure 5), plate 43 from *Los Caprichos*, 1798, depicts the dreaming artist slumped over his work as winged nightmares rise from his unconscious. This etching, originally intended to be the frontispiece of the series, was moved prior to publication to the series’ center where it marks the shift from the human follies depicted in the first 43 plates to the supernatural images that follow it. In *Los Caprichos*, Goya questions the primacy of reason in the Enlightenment and expresses the limited applications of Enlightenment principles in eighteenth century Spain, where reason was rooted out by the Inquisition. Miroslav Micko describes Goya’s Spain as “a country of the most extreme social contrasts, where two thirds of the arable land belonged to the nobility and to the Church, where there were more aristocrats than artisans, where the large number of the clergy was far surpassed by the number of beggars, where the luxury and

pride of the privileged classes contrasted with the misery and destitution of the people; a country full of absurdities, of medieval survivals and superstitions, stagnation and ignorance, where the educated were only a very small proportion of a nation that was almost completely illiterate” (Mićko 14). The incongruities and social ills of Goya’s Spain provided the artist an opportunity to assert his own philosophical position and, through his art, to help cast the role of the artist as social commentator. He serves as a connector between Enlightenment ideals and those of the emergent Romanticism. Goya provides commentary for *The Sleep of Reason*: “fantasy abandoned by reason begets impossible monsters; united with it, it is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels” (qtd. in Mićko 37).

Roberta Alford, suggests that *Los Caprichos* were created not only as social commentary but also as a means for the artist to approach the absurdities and contradictions he saw around him. Alford writes, “His bats and owls are unpleasant but not nightmarish; one can only believe that they are not the actualization of his own personal fears, but of the fears of his forefathers and of his more superstitious contemporaries, for him cooled down to the point where they could be readily handled.”(Alford 491-492) While Goya may have been exorcising societal rather than personal demons, the often highly biographical content of Thompson’s works indicate that he was doing both. Thompson attempted to grapple with his own nightmares and, like Goya, the absurdities and contradictions of his own time through his artistic production. Like those in *Los Caprichos*, the monsters that so often inhabit Thompson’s canvasses are cooled down and approachable. As has been mentioned previously, Thompson presents his monsters in a sympathetic manner. To a degree, he seems to identify with them and to express his sense of otherness through them. The monster may be an overt example of a sense of animism that pervades his works, an aspect that Emilio Cruz identifies as an essential trait of African character. He states, “Many of us

still look at the world as if it were alive with phantoms and ghosts. For us all things possess spirits,” but it is a view suppressed under the domination of European cultural traditions. Cruz continues, “The Protestants turned the old gods into demons” (B.T. Life and Friendship 118). Thus it may be that Thompson’s monsters serve a recuperative function. The monsters are often vehicles through which Thompson expresses his sense of humor and it bears stressing that Thompson imbues his works with humor, a detail not easily overlooked as a viewer but one that one can easily fail to mention in discussions of grander meaning.

While for Goya nightmares may have been a symbolic device for expressing social evils, for Thompson nightmares, aside from their symbolic meanings, were quite literally nightmares, dreams. Thompson transferred images from his dreams to the canvas. Just as Goya aired Spain’s nightmares through *Los Caprichos*, Thompson gave his unconscious form and thus a presence in the conscious world. In a letter to his family, Thompson writes:

The monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams; the horses are there the dancing nudes and the little man with the pie shaped hat and the earth, the earth sometimes green, purple, blue, violet, the trees orange, yellow, green, red everything my imagination tells me. I feel free—can you hear me free! To such an extent that madness is but a 3-letter toy with 4 arms 16 feet and funny noises that the children would enjoy.

(Letter published 1971 Speed Catalog)

Intriguingly, Thompson seems to indicate that all of his iconic imagery was born in his dreams, depending upon how his statements are read. Although he fails to mention birds in this particular passage, he mentions dreams of birds elsewhere. Whether or not he meant to state that all of the aspects of his art that he mentions arose in dreams, it is clear that at least one does—his monsters. That being so, it is little wonder that Goya, and *Los Caprichos* particularly, should hold such fascination for him. They are the source of scores of works by Thompson, perhaps more than any other precursor works. In addition to the association of

Los Caprichos with dreams, they are also works of art about art. Goya ensured this connotation through the inclusion of *The Sleep of Reason*, an image of the dreaming artist, and its accompanying commentary as well as by including a self-portrait and positioning it as the frontispiece, where *The Sleep of Reason* had been originally intended to appear. Thompson appears to have studied *Los Caprichos* as if they were a treatise on the modes of creative expression.

In *La Caprice* (figure 11), 1963, based on Goya's *Correction*, plate 46 of *Los Caprichos* (figure 12), Thompson depicts a white-faced goat-man embracing a brown figure with a bright red smiley face. The goat man's eyes are closed as if in sleep, perhaps in love, but his green claws hold the brown form, which resembles a gingerbread man, in a way that suggests predation. This gingerbread man is, perhaps, a reference to racist Sambo art, a 20th century monster that emerges on Thompson's canvas from America's 300 year sleep of reason that was the living nightmare of slavery and its repercussions, which are arguably still felt today. On the left of Thompson's composition, he includes another brown face with red eyes and lips. This disembodied face that floats in an amorphous patch of blue paint may be a representation of an African mask, an assertion of ethnic identity that serves as a counterpoint to the disempowered gingerbread man. Goya provides the following commentary for *Correction*, Plate 46 of *Los Caprichos*: "Without correction and censure one cannot get on in any faculty, and that of witchcraft needs uncommon talent, application, maturity, submission, and docility to the advice of the great Witch who directs the seminary of Barahona." Goya's sarcastic representation of witchcraft as a highly technical skill pollutes Enlightenment ideas of education with their opposite, superstition. By applying Goya's commentary on *Correction* to *La Caprice*, notions of European superiority may be likened to Goya's sarcastic description of witchcraft as a carefully practiced faculty.

The positions of Thompson and Goya in relation to the societies and times in which they lived are nearly opposite. Thompson, as a black artist from the South, had few of the privileges and connections that might be associated with Goya, whose masterpieces were often the products of royal or noble commissions. Artistically, Thompson was in some ways more fortunate than Goya and the other masters who inspired him. Thompson worked in a time after art had been freed from its establishmentarian function by the Romantics and later nineteenth century artists, who insisted that art could be *pour l'art*, freed from conventional conceptions of beauty, and through the Impressionists and their followers, freed from the confines of illusion. Thompson stated that he enjoyed more artistic freedom than did the Old Masters (Siegel 14).

Regardless of considerable differences, there are certain similarities between Thompson and Goya that bear noting. Goya's Spain was a country of extreme social stratification, where an opulent aristocracy lorded over the destitute and neglected masses. Despite being well-connected, Goya was also committed to the Campos. Similarly, Thompson navigated the divides of "high" and popular culture, of black and white society. While in the post-World War II America of Thompson's time there was a robust and prosperous middle class unimaginable in Goya's Spain, it was a time of popular uprising, when the oppressed and ignored were exerting their rights and wrestling for political power, most notably in the Civil Rights Movement. Although Thompson would die before the social ruptures of black militancy and the anti-war movement, the societal pressures were present as a backdrop to the various tensions that Thompson employed on the canvas. Both men lived in a time of flux. As an artist, Thompson painted in a time of uncertainty as the hold of Abstract Expressionism faded but without clear direction as to what was next. He and his figurative allies were given brief notice only to be virtually written out of the

genealogy of contemporary art when the market turned its focus to the emergent Pop Art movement. Goya bore rather better the transition between, not only movements in art but great ages of history, the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Both Thompson and Goya worked against the backdrop of looming annihilation: for Goya, in the form of the Inquisition and for Thompson, in the form of lynching and violent racism, and living at the height of the Cold War, the ever-present threat of nuclear devastation. Not only did both artists' not shy from the incongruities and contradictions, the clash between the optimistic yearnings and cold realities, of the worlds they inhabited, they drew from them inspiration and depicted them in their artworks. Thompson's commentary on the racial politics of the 1950s and 60s are as sophisticated, complex and engaged as Goya's observations on the politics and social prejudices of his day.

In 1965, pointing out a derelict in a bar to his friend, jazz saxophonist, Jackie Mclean, Thompson said, "Look at that motherfucker with the crushed up face and bloody lip. Can you imagine what he must have seen? Now this is *really* America down here. There ain't no color, just suffering. I want to express some of that in my paintings, tell those motherfuckers how it feels out here." (qtd. in Crouch 17) Thompson's social commentary seeks to explode the racial divisions which were for him another set of unacceptable boundaries. In his art, he sought to mine the many layers of truth within his borrowed compositions and to convey his understanding of the human experience beyond inherited or prevailing notions of reality and conventional modes of classification. Thompson was not an ideologue, however. He explored multiple truths and perspectives and was drawn to hedonistic pursuits as much as intellectual ones. In *The Golden Ass* (figure 9), 1963, as the pun in the title suggests, Thompson reduces the moralizing aspects of Goya's *Caprichos* No. 42, *Thou Who Cannot* (figure 10), and renders a scene of unapologetic sexual delight. Here

one finds multiple examples of Thompson's use of visual rhyme which, Wilson has noted, he employed to further what Tabachnick refers to as "his own taste for a scandalous anecdote" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 141).

Although Goya's *Caprichos* are generally read as social commentary, at a more basic and personal level, they offer a glimpse into madness. *The Sleep of Reason*, in particular, offers an admonition to artists that true creativity in art comes from a balance of fantasy and reason. Without this balance, the nightmare serves as the momentary experience of what if prolonged is madness. Just as creativity and madness seem to cohabitate *Los Caprichos*, the two may be easily conflated. Hara Marano writes, "As with mental disorders, there is something mysterious and unexplainable about the creative process." Marano notes that artists are ten times more likely to suffer from severe depression. She clarifies, "The link, however, is not creativity. Artists are more likely to be self-reflective and to ruminate, to mull things over. And that thinking style—as opposed to creativity itself—is a hallmark of depression and commonly leads to it." (Marano) Although the correlation between mental illness and creativity is problematic, it is possible that people who experience certain sorts of emotional disorders may develop skills that are useful to an artist. Kate Stone Lombardi writes, "Geneticists suggest that because the way a manic depressive episode arouses brain activity — triggering extreme swings of emotion — the brain may become more adaptive to synthesizing incongruous thoughts. That process — of reorganizing disparate emotions into a new order -- may be the essence of creativity" (Lombardi).

The link between madness and creativity has been discussed since antiquity, such as by Plato in *Phaedrus*, in which he claims that artists possess a sort of "divine madness." In Thompson's own time, just as he was beginning to explore an education in art, the line between genius and madness was explored in the film *Lust for Life*, 1956, a fictionalized

biography of Vincent Van Gogh, directed by Vincente Minnelli and based on the 1934 novel by Irving Stone, which was in turn based on personal correspondences between Vincent and his brother Theo. In a review of the film written at that time, Ellen Conroy Kennedy states:

The circumstances and background of Vincent's breakdown are handled with admirable restraint. In none of the picture is there the stooping to mere sensationalism suggested in the early magazine advertising. The extent and diagnosis of Vincent's madness, be it psychotic or epileptic, are still uncertain and something for psychiatrists to debate. From the layman's point of view the sympathetic manner in which it explained and presented by the film, is sufficient.

(Kennedy 256)

The degree of accuracy with which the film portrays Vincent's maladies is as debatable as are posthumous diagnoses of his mental state. No matter how sensitively done, it is easy to romanticize the suffering of artists such as Van Gogh, among countless others, in the legends and biopics that arise after their deaths, especially once the term "genius" is uttered. Beyond the fact that Thompson learned from and is indebted to the Post Impressionists, it is more the construction in the popular imagination of Van Gogh as a tortured artist or mad genius that is useful in an examination of Thompson. *Lust for Life*, appeared in theatres at nearly the exact moment that Thompson began to conceive of himself as an artist and to pursue an education in the arts, and thus it may have informed his early conception of what it meant to be an artist.

In character Thompson and Van Gogh were opposites in so many ways that to engage in a thorough comparison between the two would be both laborious and ultimately fruitless for the purposes of this essay. However, both men were drawn to and influenced by Gauguin and, in their youth, both men considered a career in the ministry, though that was much more developed in Van Gogh than in Thompson. Although neither of the two ultimately became ministers, as artists, both men would dedicate themselves with a

conviction and intensity analogous to religious devotion and fervor in their attempts to convey the truth of the world as they saw it. Jay Milder remarks:

[R]emembering Bob is like a ritual... and Bob was very much into ritual. Bob understood ritual and he understood prayer. And, he understood that if you do it [your work] you are in it and it isn't lost. And, he was always apprehensive of losing it if he wasn't doing it. He would stay up all night painting and he'd go out for two days and not paint. He was sort of keeping the faith, keeping many faiths at the same time.

(“B.T. Life and Friendship” 132)

That apprehension of “losing it,” which Milder detected, is telling. It indicates that Thompson saw his talents as arising through some sort of altered state, a sort of artistic grace, a divine gift that might somehow be misplaced, lost, or even taken away. His frantic production was a result the energizing intensity of the emotional experience and at the same time a ritual by which he invoked the mythic source of “divine madness.” Milder also recalls:

I have never met anyone so intensely into all the emotions of life at his pace of living. [O]ne time I brought my students from Dayton Art Institute to New York for a field trip. Bob gave them a four hour lecture in his studio starting at three A.M., after we had been at the Five Spot listening to Thelonius Monk. After the lecture, Bob and I drove to Staten Island just to ride over the new Verazzaano Bridge... Bob painted the whole next day and well into the night. No sleep for about 36 hours...

(qtd. in Wilson 47)

Social historian Dr. Roy S. Porter remarks, "In history a lot of people diagnosed as mad were misunderstood. Every artist who is trying to push past the frontiers sees himself as a misunderstood or romantic genius. This myth has sustained the artist. But the person who is genuinely mentally ill doesn't have that comfort" (Lombardi). All artists while still needing to be understood, must find a way of setting themselves apart in order to gain recognition, especially in modernity, when the extraordinary is a required characteristic of greatness.

They must somehow mark themselves as other, but this is a risky affair as to do so is also to make them vulnerable to being abject. Whereas the truly insane are aberrant and disempowered, those who aspire to greatness must find a third position, not truly outside but rather beyond, within and yet apart. In the words of Aristotle, "No excellent soul is exempt from a mixture of madness," (Lombardi). It is this sort of madness, that which is a constituent of excellence, that Thompson embraced. Here it bears repeating Thompson's comments; he writes:

The monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams; the horses are there the dancing nudes and the little man with the pie shaped hat and the earth, the earth sometimes green, purple, blue, violet, the trees orange, yellow, green, red everything my imagination tells me. I feel free—can you hear me free! To such an extent that madness is but a 3-letter toy with 4 arms 16 feet and funny noises that the children would enjoy.

(Letter published 1971 Speed Catalog)

Although Thompson emphatically expresses his sense of freedom, the specter of madness lurks in his assertions despite his attempt to ridicule it, suggesting the psychic tensions that manifested themselves in dream symbols that he then transferred to the canvas. Indeed, it is madness which he specifically mentions as changing form from nightmarish into ridiculous or delightful. For madness to have become but a toy implies that at some point and in some way it appeared fully fanged and potent. To employ Alford's analysis of Goya's *Caprichos*, Thompson, "cooled down" the image of madness and rendered it a plaything so that it could be approached and handled. Interestingly, madness is the only one of Thompson's monsters, if it may be construed as such, that he specifically names and he juxtaposes it against his proclamations of freedom, echoing his earlier statement in which he compared certain concepts of "good art" to an "academic strait-jacket;" In both instances insanity is posited as a foil to freedom. However, for Thompson, madness was not only a distant fear; it was a mental state that he related to the creative process. Madness was a thing of both

repulsion and attraction. Thompson was drawn to such juxtapositions. Thompson states, “I must get on with myself settled where I can paint until my brow flood[s] my cheeks with perspiration, until I go mad” (qtd. in Wilson 50).

This discussion of madness is by no means intended to diagnose Thompson, nor to imply that he was truly mad, nor even that he thought himself literally mad. Rather, madness is a descriptor of the inspired, altered state in which he painted and the energy he channeled into his works. The term “mad” is used to express an intensity of emotion, often ecstasy, as to be madly in love, or to be mad about any particular interest, object of desire, or sensational stimulus. It is with that sort of intensity that Thompson experienced art as a viewer, as Teitelbaum observed in his account of Thompson’s visceral reaction when he first stood in front of the Arezzo frescoes. Although Thompson was loathe to express his sensitivity in terms of his personal insecurities, he openly expressed emotion, at least to his closest confidants, especially in his reaction to art. Bill Barrell recalls:

Bob could cry. We’d sit and look at a painting of Christ, the Nativity, and tears would just come down from his eyes. He was able to cry and he was never ashamed of crying. He could cry like a baby. It was beautiful...
(B.T. Life and Friendship 110)

As a maker of art, Thompson attempted to tap into that same intensity of emotion and to apply it to the canvas. Thompson seems to have been reasonably aware of the potential threat of true madness as a limitation to his freedom, as opposed to the transported and inspired state through which he produced his creations. However, his drug abuse, whether and to what degree it was first initiated either as an escape from feeling or thinking the unbearable or as inspiration for producing artworks that were expressive of his own sense of freedom, was the means by which Thompson placed upon himself the most absolute and inescapable of all limitations... death.

Bob Thompson painted with the voracity with which he lived. He marveled at the works of the old masters, but unsatisfied with simply receiving their messages, he insisted on responding to them and extending that dialogue to his audience. He said, “I like all things that look the way I feel,” and he painted his feelings into compositions conceived of centuries ago. Yet, he refused to be contained within traditional bounds. Time was but another barrier for him to breach. In his works, he challenged prevailing societal and artistic regulations, seeking freedom, exploring the unconscious as well as the academic to take meaning and pleasure wherever they were to be found. Through his works, Thompson boldly asserted and inserted himself into Western culture. His works are material testaments of an artist seeking—to experience life without restraint, to render his demons into playthings, to express the ineffable, and to glimpse life’s elusive truths.

SEEKING BOB THOMPSON: THE EXHIBITION

The following is a description of the way in which the findings that have been previously discussed were presented to the public through the exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson* with brief discussions of selected works that represent the sub-narratives of the show. The works were presented so that their inherent content could best be communicated and arranged as visual arguments of the exhibition's thesis. The gallery at the Cressman Center for Visual Art is a large open rectangle intersected by a small wing that extends westward with a prominent curved wall. Although it is a single open room, it is comprised of three mini-galleries: the north and south halves of the main rectangular gallery and the west wing. Although the exhibition, *Seeking Bob Thompson* spanned the career of the artist, it was not presented in a chronological arrangement, the traditional arrangement of a retrospective. Indeed, to have done so would have been virtually impossible given the gallery layout and the dimensions of the selected works. All except for one of the larger works exhibited were painted between 1963 and 1965 with earlier works rendered in a generally smaller format. To have displayed the works in chronological order would have resulted in a remarkably unbalanced aesthetic with larger works massed together and occupying the smaller walls while lesser works would have been overwhelmed, in the most prominent positions in the gallery, by both an excess of blank wall space and the visual loudness of the larger, more colorful, works. The plan of the gallery space aside, the thesis

of the exhibition is a holistic examination of both the development and continuity of Thompson's images and their constituent themes rather than one of linear progression.

It bears reemphasizing that in spite of any thematic or narrative concerns, architecture asserts its own authority. Ultimately the demands of the physical space, being concrete, trump abstract concepts no matter how astute, high-minded, or central to the thesis. This is simply a given. It is the responsibility of the curator to work within the given parameters, however arbitrary, of which the layout of a gallery is among the most absolute. So, the decisions made regarding the selection and placement of works were not general, but rather specific to the gallery space. Among such concerns was how to best use the lobby area of the Cressman Center to introduce and orient the audience to the exhibition. *Seeking Bob Thompson: Object/Dialogue* was, in effect, comprised of two exhibitions: that of Thompson's works in the gallery proper and a mini-exhibit of photographs by Jules Aarons displayed in the lobby, which served as a preface to the exhibition.

Jules Aarons' Sun Gallery Photographs: Preface to the Exhibition

In the summer of 1959, "The Three Musketeers," Thompson, Grooms, and Milder returned to Provincetown where they had met. The Sun Gallery, operated by Yvonne Anderson and Dominic Falcone as an alternative space for the exhibition of artists whose works did not fit into the dominant style of the New York school, had scheduled a Red Grooms solo exhibition. Anderson recalls:

The only show Dominic and I did not choose the painters for was the Milder, Grooms, Thompson show. I was not familiar with Milder or Thompson. The year before, we had given Red his first one man show. I had not heard of Bob Thompson or Jay Milder until they arrived with Red one night shortly before his show was due to open.

They were low on money (as we all were in those days) so we closed

the orange curtains in the gallery so the guys could crash on the floor for the night. Red had been working and traveling with them the previous winter, and decided he would like to share the show with his friends. So we hung a three man show the next day. (Anderson, email)

The three-man show would be documented in the photographs of Jules Aarons, selections of which were exhibited in the lobby area of the Cressman Center (figure 40) where they served as an introduction and pictorial preface to the exhibition *Seeking Bob Thompson*. Taken from the exterior of the Sun Gallery and depicting the interior in glimpses through windows and doors, Aaron's black and white photographs are arguably of greater artistic value than they are of documentary evidence. The figures of Thompson and his friends are pictured from non-frontal angles, in shadow, or otherwise obscured. The few works of art that are clearly depicted in the photographs do not appear to be Thompson's. None the less, the Aarons photographs were a valuable asset to *Seeking Bob Thompson*. Aarons was adept at capturing images that mimic the way in which the eye views. Although his images are well balanced formal compositions, they appear as glimpses and impart a sense of immediacy despite the passage of time since they were produced. Aarons' photographs offer an intimate though limited view into the Sun Gallery's Grooms, Thompson, Milder exhibition of 1959. One photograph in particular (figure 41), an image of Thompson sitting beneath his signature with his back to the window and a flower in his hair, captures the sensitivity of the artist and yet through the lack of a clear frontal view, the absence of a face like so many of his figures, the photo also expresses the difficulty in categorizing this complex man and his works. The limited intimacy of the Aarons photographs is also applicable to *Seeking Bob Thompson* as a whole. Although the show presented many pieces of evidence that offered a glimpse into the mind and practice of the artist, a complete and singular view proved elusive. Thompson is not easily pinned down, in part because his works mine the space between oppositional forces and his biography is rife

with contradictions. In the search for the essence of Thompson, a view of the artist emerged as someone who was himself seeking—personal and artistic freedom as well as his own self-styled identity as an artist and individual.

Presenting the Exhibition: Object and Dialogue

The Cressman gallery is located through a glass door on the west side of the building's lobby where the Aarons photographs were installed, to the east, a glass wall offer views of the center's glass-blowing hot shop. The only contiguous wall space in the lobby is located directly opposite the building's main entrance behind a long receptionist's desk, where the Aarons' photographs were displayed along with a text label that stated the importance of Provincetown, where the photos were taken, in the development of Thompson's career and a transcription of Anderson's account of the 1959 Sun Gallery Show.

Although *Seeking Bob Thompson* was arranged thematically rather than chronologically, there was a loose chronological skeletal framework; the gallery entrance was flanked by *Partly Morbid*, among Thompson's earliest works presented, on one side and Bill Barrel's *Homage to Bob Thompson*, 1966, which was painted after Thompson's death, on the other. The curator's statement and a photo of Thompson were displayed next to the gallery entrance and served as an introduction to the exhibition proper. Since appropriation was an important aspect of Thompson's artistic project and of the exhibition, a text label with images of Thompson's appropriations and their Old Master source works was displayed to the right of *Partly Morbid*, as an orientation to his appropriations. Notably omitted from this list of appropriations were Thompson's untitled tondo and its source work, Bosch's *Cutting the Stone*. The attribution of this tondo as based on a work by Bosch was made after the show was

installed, on opening night, by art historian James J. Bloom, who immediately recognized the composition.

In the exhibition, Thompson's works were arranged thematically. In a clockwise arrangement from the gallery entrance, the primary groupings of presented works were: early works; Goya's *Los Caprichos* and Thompson's appropriations thereof; the "man in the pie hat," forests, and nudes; family and friendship; and death. However, the names of the groupings were not emblazoned on the walls. These groupings served as a device to strengthen the narrative structure of the exhibition; they were an internal organizational tool and not an attempt to categorize the works in any particular way at the expense of other aspects of the works. Of course, most works could fit into multiple categories, especially considering the multifaceted nature of the works. Likewise, all works, especially those not employed within the exhibition as a constituent of a particular grouping, had to be positioned so as to best feature their content and context within that of the exhibition as a whole. In addition to the major groupings, works were positioned as aesthetic and/or thematic liaisons, to communicate with neighboring works and works within prominent view, as much as possible. This communication among works provided alternate directions of movement to the generally clockwise arrangement. Works were consciously placed so as to suggest a virtual web of interconnectivity within the gallery.

Early Works

The group of early works consisted of *Partly Morbid* (figure 2), 1957, a small *Still Life* (figure 3), c. 1957-58, and *Wilting Flower* (figure 4), 1959. These paintings provide an example of the influence of Thompson's instructors at the Hite, such as Nay, Leake, and Wilke, on the artist's earlier works, while their positioning before the Goya section expressed the

artist's eventual shift of attention to the Old Masters for inspiration. *Wilting Flower*, the largest of Thompson's earlier works presented, provides a contrast between the artist's approach to contemporary scenes and his appropriations.

Wilting Flower is typical of many of Thompson's "original" compositions in the degree of solitude that it appears to depict. The painting is an example of the few paintings by Thompson to depict an interior space. Thompson very much preferred an outside, though fantastic, setting. It is likely Thompson's abhorrence for the concept of being contained that explains this aspect of his works. Whereas the out-of-doors was vast and expansive, the interior of rooms represented a sort of contraction. The only interior that he often explored in his art was that of the mind. It is a lonely painting in which the figure of a woman is depicted contemplating a rose. She is lost in the emptiness of the room, which is dominated by a large table. Her figure is juxtaposed against the image of an empty chair and a closed book, which reinforce the ideas of solitude, endings, and unmet potentials. A lamp sits on the center of the table like a fulcrum from which the woman and her rose and the empty chair and book are balanced. *Wilting Flower* bears a remarkable resemblance to Vincent Van Gogh's *Night Café*, 1888, despite the difference in settings and Thompson's rather sparser composition. Both paintings have a similar palate of gold, red, and green; both are of rooms dominated by a central table; the figures in both paintings are off-centered, both are paintings of empty chairs, and both compositions place a focus on lamps and the light they give — lamps that are depicted to resemble the almond shape of an open eye. Where Thompson places an empty book on his table, Van Gogh's billiard table holds the balls and sticks of a game already played, or ready to be, and those smaller tables to the sides hold bottles and glasses unaccompanied by people, remnants of activities that are past. There is a golden rectangular shape in the background of Thompson's painting. Due to the lack of

detail, it is difficult to be certain what it might represent: perhaps a doorway, a window, or a picture. In *Night Café*, a similar golden doorway appears in the center-left of the background, suggesting a space, or concept, beyond what is directly represented. These similarities between the two paintings reinforce Thompson's commitment to the Post-Impressionists. If they represent a conscious choice on Thompson's part, direct quotation, to use Van Gogh's paintings as inspiration for his own, then this painting may represent an interim way of approaching older works and styles before he adopted full-scale appropriations.

This image of contemplation and isolation and others like it are reflective of the other side of Thompson, his private self, which was rarely manifested in public and stood in stark contrast to the exuberantly social and confident Thompson that most who met him encountered. In contrast to the Old Master compositions appropriated by Thompson, in many of Thompson's paintings and in even more of his drawings, his figures are stiff and posed. When there are multiple figures depicted, there is often little indication of interaction and only the slightest suggestion of movement. These notes, however, are not intended to categorically portray the works that Thompson created entirely from his imagination or from observed contemporary scenes as lonely and stagnant. These are the exceptions which stand in contrast to the multitude of orgiastic, ecstatic, and dynamic depictions of sex, violence, and the fantastic.

Goya

Thompson's appropriation of Goya's *Los Caprichos* is one of the most important undertakings of the artist's oeuvre and, accordingly, these works were given a central position in the exhibition and in the gallery space. This section was comprised of Thompson's appropriations of Goya's *Caprichos*: *Untitled (White figure with Green Birds)*, *The*

Golden Ass, and *La Caprice*, each accompanied by original etchings and aquatints of plates from *Los Caprichos* upon which Thompson's works were based. Despite consisting of only three works by Thompson, the Goya section was arguably the most impactful and central component of the exhibition. This is in part due to Goya's arresting images in *Los Caprichos*, the monumental size of and bright colors of *The Golden Ass* and *La Caprice*, but also due to the fact that by pairing each of Thompson's works with a plate from *Los Caprichos*, each composition was doubly emphasized. Serendipitously, the fact that Thompson based many of his works on *Los Caprichos*, which were among the original works included in the Carnegie gift, the nucleus of the university's art collection, acquired by the department's founder Richard Krautheimer, provided a fortuitous opportunity. As the exhibition was presented as an event celebrating the Hite Art Institute's 75th anniversary, Thompson's appropriation of *Los Caprichos* provided a pretext for featuring works from the university's permanent collection and, by extension, the Hite's history. This section was introduced by a text label that quoted Goya's commentary on *The Sleep of Reason* along with Thompson's letter, "The monsters are present now," in which the artist describes the dream imagery that he painted. At the most basic level, Thompson's list of images and colors provided a verbal reiteration of the visual content of his works and thus a cue to the audience to look for these important components. Additionally, this text was intended to help to provide a connection between Thompson's personal, internal impulses and the works that he appropriated to express them.

The Goya section was introduced by *The Sleep of Reason*, appropriately so, as it served as the original frontispiece of Goya's series and remains the quintessential representative thereof. Thompson's watercolor *Untitled, (White Figure with Green Birds)* (figure 8) was the only work accompanied by two potential source works from *Los Caprichos*. Through flattening his images and suppressing detail, Thompson lays bare an aspect of the

formal compositions of art history not immediately evident in more illusionistic works. As Anne Tabachnick observes, “More and more, he [Thompson] saw that the kinds of painting structures were really very few in history,” and, “He copied not a picture, but a plastic problem. Sometimes, he combined the ideas of two or three different paintings in one canvas” (B.T. Life and Friendship 141). By exhibiting two source works, Thompson’s use of multiple sources was illustrated while at the same time allowing for a greater engagement with the audience. Instead of being told, “This painting is based on this etching,” they were presented with two options and provided the opportunity to decide for themselves, if they should so choose, if one was more compelling than the other.

La Caprice was among the few works that were accompanied by text labels that included a brief analysis of the work, an abbreviated version of the discussion that appears in *The Sleep of Reason* section of this essay. Beyond the specific points made in the text, the objective of this label was to encourage the audience’s engagement with the rather complex composition and iconography of the work and to examine the way in which Thompson appropriated Goya’s works and adapted the social commentary they express to convey his own critique of Twentieth Century America and the demons that arise when reason sleeps. It is the one of only two text labels in the exhibition to overtly mention race, the other being a label discussing the Man in the Pie Hat, which will be discussed later on in this essay, though the subject of race was discussed in greater detail in the exhibition catalogue. This limitation of discussion of race was not intended to avoid the issue so much as it was an attempt to respect the artist’s own complicated views on race and to avoid reducing him to a representative of the black artist. Race was discussed when warranted and within the context of how it may have affected Thompson’s art, as discussed in the catalogue and expounded upon here.

Red

The Goya section stretched between portions of three intersecting walls. *La Caprice* was positioned to the far right of a long wall leaving a remainder of wall space that, though in a prominent, central location, was too small to contain a major grouping of its own and too disconnected from other walls to hold a portion of a larger grouping. To answer this problem, two smaller works of a complimentary palate were paired: *Figure with Red Balloon* and *Red*. Both convey the theme of flight or ascension begun with *The Sleep of Reason*, as a flight of fancy, and continued throughout the exhibition in Thompson's abundant winged figures. The expansive theme of the works was represented in *Red Balloon* through the balloon itself, rising out of the frame, and in *Red* (figure 15) through the artist's treatment of the figure's head which swells and dissipates into lines as if exploding or dissolving upward. Given the similarities between the two works' size, palate, media, and theme, their pairing provided a remarkably cohesive if originally unintended mini-grouping. Their prominent positioning in the gallery reinforced the centrality of their themes within the exhibition and provided the opportunity for the examination of the artist's multiple approaches in conveying meaning. *Red Balloon* was accompanied with a text label that included a brief analysis so that its thematic content was stressed and to specifically draw the audience's attention to Thompson's treatment of monstrosity, which was also mentioned, in a different way, in the label accompanying the neighboring work, *La Caprice*. *Red*, a portrait of Red Grooms, among the young artists whom Thompson met in Provincetown, was accompanied by a brief note reiterating the importance of Thompson's Provincetown friends and experiences to his career. The positioning of the text, very near the center of the gallery, symbolized the centrality of that pivotal period. *Red* was a logical candidate for inclusion in

the “family and friends” grouping, but its pairing with *Red Balloon*, as partners, strengthened the expressive power of both works and helped to illustrate their alliance with the many winged figures displayed nearby.

Forests, Nudes, and the Man in the Pie Hat

The Cressman Gallery is one large open space with a wing protruding westward with a curved wall on the southern side. The curved wall of this western section of the gallery contained various smaller works, beginning with *Untitled Tondo* (figure 16), *Salome* (figure 18), and *Untitled Landscape* (figure 20), before three works in black, white, and gray of the man in the pie hat in forested settings. All the works in this grouping were of outdoor scenes except for *Salome*. The tondo was situated as the first work on the wall in order to correspond with and yet break up the black and white palate of the majority of works and to help balance *Salome*’s larger size and bright colors. Its inclusion within this grouping was based primarily on aesthetic concerns. It was assumed to be based on an Italian work, but that assumption proved erroneous, as it was identified by James Bloom as based on *The Stone of Folly* by Bosch.

Salome or *Feast of Herod* is an appropriation of a predella of an altarpiece (figure 19) (date unknown) by Fra Angelico (c. 1387-1455). The horizontal orientation of the painting helped to guide the viewer along the curving wall and introduced the subject of the female nude, which was featured in two paintings on the west wall, in a shallow niche formed by the temporary covering of a large arched window. *Salome* was positioned between the tondo based on Bosch and a landscape. The primary colors of *Salome* related to the bright colors of Thompson’s appropriations in other areas of the exhibition and introduced the subject

matter of a female nude, which would be repeated in a larger format at the far side of this grouping where *Untitled (Bather with Red Bird)* was paired with *Untitled*, 1959.

The landscape (figure 20) that was installed to the right of *Salome* was included in order to provide some variety. Landscapes, except for those of the settings for his figures, are rare in Thompson's oeuvre. This particular work is most anomalous in that it represents, or at least evokes, an actual place rather than the dream-like other-worlds so typical of the majority of his works. Given its date, 1958, well before Thompson first visited Europe, this landscape might indicate that Thompson's European travels were the realization of a long held desire. It was also included as a representation of Thompson's fascination with Europe and the Mediterranean, in particular, which the work appears to depict, and where Thompson spent some time. The rich but diffuse color of the landscape, in pastel and watercolor, served as a transition between the intense primary palette of *Salome* and the works in black, white, and gray nearby.

At the far side of the curving wall, three works depicting Thompson's man in the pie hat, were accompanied by a text label that examined this important and recurrent motif of Thompson's oeuvre and proposed potential contexts in which it might be read. The man in the pie hat, like many of Thompson's recurrent symbols, seems to have emerged from his dreams. This shadowy figure that lurks in many of Thompson's works, especially in those produced in or around 1959, has been widely interpreted as a representation of the artist, himself, inhabiting his creations. The figure may also be a personification of the unseen, paradoxically asserting its presence through its absence.

Bob Thompson's father died when the artist was 13. Cecil and Bob Thompson were virtually inseparable, known for a time as "Big Shot" and "Shot," respectively, by the Thompson family. Cecil died in an automobile accident on his way to attend a basketball

game in which his son was playing (Wilson 29-30). For Bob Thompson, in the early stages of puberty, the sudden death of his masculine role model was an extremely traumatic event, one that immediately manifested itself in a series of physical maladies and was, perhaps, later echoed in dreams of the man in the pie hat, the presence of the trauma of his father's absence.

When the man in the pie hat appears alongside a female nude, Thompson may be exploring issues of miscegenation or interracial sex. In other compositions interpreted as images of miscegenation, Thompson depicts black men either as reptilian monsters or satyrs (Wilson Optical Illusions 88-107). However, the monsters are playfully rendered, inspiring little sense of real threat. Similarly, Satyrs, though symbols of sexual transgression are lifted from classical European tradition, and thus familiar and palatable. To the contrary, the man in the pie hat remains unseen and thus refuses to surrender his potency. It bears noting that the man in the pie hat is especially preponderant in works produced in and around 1959, the year that Bob Thompson began dating Carol Plenda, who was white. They were married on December, 16th, 1960.

The man in the pie hat appeared in wooded settings in all but one of the works exhibited in which he was featured. That work, *Untitled, (Man in Hat)* (figure 21), was a close up and did not include much background imagery except for a partial representation of a gray form that appears to be one of Thompson's iconic horses. One of Goya's Caprichos was included here, *Capricho* □ 57: *The Filiation* (figure 22), because of the appearance of a similarly shadowy hatted figure. It may have been among the sources of Thompson's motif, or it could partially account for Thompson's affinity for Los Caprichos, were it that he found one of his personal symbols haunting Goya's works as well. Three of the four forested scenes, the exception being *Untitled*, 1959, include trees that bend to one side. This feature

of vertical lines, here representing forests, interrupted by a diagonal also occurs in Thompson's early abstractions and abstracted works such as *Partly Morbid*. *Untitled*, (*Bather and Red Bird*) was intentionally positioned opposite *Partly Morbid* in order to allow comparison between these works. *Untitled*, 1959, is a painting of a muddy green nude flanked by two representations of the shadowy man in the pie hat. The setting is again a forest; the background colors—green, red, yellow, and blue are much brighter than those of the featured figures. The pairing between *Untitled*, 1959, and *Untitled* (*Bather with Red Bird*) was particularly strong; they appeared almost as windows into different views of the same scene. This pairing strengthened the effect of both works, providing double emphasis while at the same time the warmer palate of *Bather with Red Bird* contrasted with the subdued colors of *Untitled*, 1959. Being of a smaller size, *Bather with Red Bird* was positioned to the right of *Untitled*, 1959, so that the diagonal tree pointed toward the top of the frame of *Untitled*, 1959, and thus leaned on the larger work to gain support and to further tie the works together.

Family and Friends

The importance of Thompson's friendships to his artistic production warranted giving them a grouping within the exhibition. Friendship is one aspect of the more general range of influences on Thompson's works, such as that of his teachers, his adaptation of different artistic methods, and his appropriations of Old Master compositions, which was represented throughout the exhibition. Wilson writes, "Asked about literary critic Harold Bloom's view of artistic production as a process of reinvention fueled by an Oedipal 'anxiety of influence,' Meyer Schapiro is said to have replied, 'It just isn't true! We feel an ecstasy of influence'" (Wilson *Garden of Music* 43). Just as Thompson's family life was of obvious formational importance to his personal development, he maintained a close relationship with

his family even when they lived far apart, and he sought their approval (Wilson 50). This commitment to family is, in part, responsible for the many depictions of families present in Thompson's works throughout his career. Various families appear in Western art, from myths and legend, and especially the Holy Family.

The "Family and Friends" grouping was exhibited next to the pairing of *Untitled*, 1959, and *Bather with Red Bird*. In order to achieve aesthetic continuity, the vertical orientation and central female subject of that pairing was repeated in the first two works of the "Family and Friends" section. *The Family* (figure 26) and *Mother and Child* (figure 27) may have been two versions of the same subject; both bear a remarkable formal resemblance to an untitled work by Mary Spencer Nay, in the collection of the Louisville Visual Art Association. *The Family* was the only print by Thompson included in the exhibition. It was produced in Mary Spencer Nay's Design and Lithography course. Within this grouping, it represented both friendship and family more strongly than if it had rather been placed among Thompson's early works. The influence of Nay was stressed through her mention in an accompanying text label.

Mother and Child was the biggest find in the exhibition, discovered and located through an exhaustive adventure in the detective aspect of research. Working at first with only a brief description in an email from the 1990s to Judith Wilson, this under-documented painting was located, cleaned, and featured in its first public display in over forty years. This is the only work in the exhibition from a Kentucky collection other than those of Thompson's family or the university. It was purchased from the artist by Bill Allen and Carol Epley to help Thompson pay for a trip, perhaps his summer in Provincetown or his move to New York. Thompson told the pair that the painting had been included in an exhibition in which he had won a "best-in-show" or some other sort of award. Epley dates

the purchase to 1959, but based on her recollection of where the family was living at the time, she concedes that it is possible that it was purchased as early as 1958 but no later than 1960 when the family moved to prospect for oil. The year of the painting's production is difficult to date because the last number on the lower right hand side is illegible but appears to be a 7 or a 9. Since the monoprint *The Family* was included in the 1959 show, it is possible that its companion work, *Mother and Child* was also displayed, but while the back of *The Family* is affixed with a label from that exhibition, Epley's painting is not. The partial arches in the background of *Mother and Child* may be a general reference to Classical architecture or they may indicate a triptych as the source material for the composition. In sacred western art, the Madonna and Christ child often occupied the central panel of triptychs. If the architectural form in the background represents a poster of an earlier work, it may indicate a stage in Thompson's adaptation of the themes and compositions from art history before taking on full scale appropriations as a major aspect of his oeuvre. The text label also drew attention to Thompson's use of sgraffito, which he here employs to indicate a degree of modeling and to indicate the eyes and lips (figure 28), among other features of his monochrome figure.

The other works in the "Family and Friends" grouping included *Portrait of Carol* (figure 29), representing Thompson's wife Carol Plenda; *Untitled (Une Grande Future)* (figure 31), which Thompson presented to friend and teacher John Frank as a wedding gift; and *Joint Effort* (figure 30), a collaboration between Thompson and Bill Barrell. An accompanying text label listed some of the happenings produced by friends of Thompson in which he participated in various roles.

Beyond Death

Among more emancipatory and fanciful connotations of Thompson's winged figures is his fascination with the "ultimate flight of death." The grouping of works arranged as concerning death included *The Entombment* (figure 32), 1964; *Untitled*, 1963 (figure 34); *Untitled (Last Panting)* (figure 38), 1966; a smaller study (figure 37) for that work; and Bill Barrell's *Homage to Bob Thompson* (figure 39), 1966. *The Entombment* and *Untitled*, 1963, were featured in one of the most prominent positions in the gallery, directly in front of the gallery entrance and the glass wall of the lobby, and also visible from the street. *The Entombment* was featured as the cover art for the exhibition catalogue.

The Entombment is an appropriation of a work of the same title by Dieric Bouts, the Elder. Thompson's works exhibit a great diversity of techniques employed in his application of media. Some of the painted areas are so thin that the canvas shows through, while others may have a degree of impasto. Sometimes these extremes exist within the same painting. Such is the case with *The Entombment*. For instance, the figures in *Entombment*, 1964, are painted with a relatively thin application of paint. In fact, the preparatory sketch shows through. In places the figures are outlined by bare canvas. The individual figures are all monochromatic with very little variation of tonal value except for that which occurs by means of his brushwork, an effect of the amount of paint rather than any sort of blending of pigments. Conversely, the sky is composed of an impasto application of white paint in which he blends in broad curving strokes the colors lifted from those of the figures below. Although a thick sky hovering over thin images seems counterintuitive, Thompson's emphasis on the sky marks it as the locus of the climax of the work. Thompson's multicolored sky diffused by white creates an airy effect in stark contrast to the vacuous distance of the sky in Bouts' original. Although Thompson depicts the entombment of

Christ, his emphasis on the sky foreshadows the resurrection and spiritual transcendence. The blending of the colors of the figures in the sky may be read as symbolic of the reunion of Christ the son with God the father and of the separate, fragmented selves into wholeness. Of course this is one among many potential readings, but regardless of one's particular interpretation, Thompson's attention to both the grounded worldly realm and that of the heavens is well documented in his works. Although Thompson often depicts a clearly delineated separation between earth and sky, the occurrence of birds and other winged creatures or celestial objects reveals his concern with penetrating this boundary.

Last Painting and the study for it take the exhibition to the period of production cut short by the artist's death. Visually, the diffuse traces of color on a field of white metaphorically impart the notion of the artist's own passing. In his work based on Titian's *Venus and Adonis*, as in so many, Thompson transcribes the work of an artist he admired and places into it a signature element of his own, the bird, in a break in the clouds of the upper right hand side of the composition from which rays of light radiating downward. The bird's placement here reminds the viewer that Thompson's practice of freely associating forms, of transmutation, and rhyme, is very much like the child's preoccupation with finding images in clouds. Art dealer and Thompson devotee Martha Henry points out that Adonis' staff(s), here depicted in multiple form, reminiscent of the Cubists' portrayal of movement, resemble baseball bats and given that Thompson has also fitted his subject with a cap, may be a reference to his hometown of Louisville, where the Louisville Slugger is produced. Henry also suggests that this work may not actually be unfinished as it first appears but rather representative of a new direction in Thompson's oeuvre, a sort of large scale drawing in color (Henry interview). To the contrary, Michael Rosenfeld doubts this assertion, pointing out that Thompson had a habit of signing everything and that the lack of a signature here

suggests the beginning of an uncompleted work (Rosenfeld interview). Whichever the case may be, whether an unrealized new direction or an unfinished work, this work as it is served the same function for the show, to present an artist whose project was cut short by death. Aesthetically, the work, an expanse of white with cool markings, provided a stark contrast to the density of color of Thompson's other works.

A text label titled "Appropriation and Homage" accompanied Barrel's *Homage to Bob Thompson* so that the exhibition began and ended with an examination of appropriations. Barrel's painting, produced just after Thompson's death, was included because Thompson's appropriations may be viewed as, in part, a form of homage. In Barrel's *Homage*, he quotes elements of Thompson's iconography by depicting his friend as a winged figure. The painting continues the discussion of appropriation, homage, and influence beyond Thompson's death. As the exhibition examined Thompson's influences, it ended with the suggestion of his influence upon others, a posthumous continuation of his project and his "ecstasy of influence."

Through the above mentioned groupings, works were presented in a particular context and this constituted, to a degree, a privileging of those concepts over potential others. However, these groupings were not intended to reduce the works to representing those aspects mentioned above. Each work was selected based on its merits in terms of its ability to serve as evidence to support the curatorial thesis, to meet the objectives of the exhibition and the missions of the Hite Galleries and the University of Louisville, to impart as wide a perspective as possible on Thompson's oeuvre, and to provoke an informed dialogue within the audience and the wider community at large. Certain criteria that were considered in selection of the works to be exhibited were not given a grouping, but still

constituted ideas expressed within the exhibition. For instance, the exhibition presented a diverse range of media and techniques without segregating them into particular categories. While some subjects were sorted and presented in particular places, others, such as the bird, which was central to the exhibition's thesis, were presented throughout and without being given a particular section. Likewise, other central themes of the exhibition, Thompson's exploration and complication of categories and boundaries, his sense of spirituality and his yearning for a mythic other place, his challenging of notions of what is real, were too overarching to be distilled and separated into a single group of works in a specific place.

The most prevalent theme among the selected works that was not given its own group was Thompson's reinterpretation of sacred art and his depiction of religious narratives. This could have constituted a major section and was, arguably, still a sub-narrative of the exhibition but was not presented as separate group. However, to have done so would have robbed the groupings, as they were presented, of their major components and would have necessitated the use of a significant amount of available contiguous wall space.

The Entombment, *Untitled*, 1963, and *Salome*, were all appropriations by Thompson of works depicting Christian narratives. *Mother and Child* and *The Family* were likely also depictions of religious themes, likely based on the prevalent Catholic theme of the Madonna and child. It may be easily and reasonably assumed that religious imagery makes its way onto Thompson's canvases by way of his appropriations of the Western canon. However, religious themes seem to have been more than a byproduct of Thompson's commitment to Western art history. He is universally described by his friends as a spiritual man and, in his childhood, he considered a career in the ministry. While the religious imagery, such as in *The Entombment*, is sometimes immediately evident, at other times it is less obvious. The Christian content of *Untitled*, 1963, is less than overt but maintains a sense of the spiritual

through its depiction of ritual. However, a careful examination of the work reveals that it was informed by Christian principles even though Thompson approached them in a very different way than did Piero.

Thompson's *Salome* is more a painting of a feminine erotic display for the titillation of a male audience than it is a depiction of Christian dogma, but here Thompson is following the lead of many generations of Western artists. Centuries before *Salome* was adopted by nineteenth century aesthetes as the personification of the femme fatale, artists used the religious pretext of the story's appearance in the Bible to mine its erotic potential. Even the pious Fra Angelico paints the scene as an erotic spectacle, relegating John the Baptist's decapitation to the far left side of his composition. However, the nudity and eroticism that Thompson injects into his depictions of religious scenes are not necessarily at the expense of the spiritual content. To the contrary, as Levine detected, nudity becomes a means of laying bare the intent and truth of his subject matter, especially when depicted in his vivid colors. Thompson painted his nude figures "in the color of the intensity of their belief" ("B.T. Life and Friendship" 126).

In addition to the rather vague notion of Thompson as a spiritual man or his introduction to and belief in Christianity in his early childhood, through approaching religious themes and depicting Christian imagery, he was tapping into, arguably, the most powerful force in Western history. Just as Thompson appropriated works by the Old Masters as a means of competition to wrest away some of their power and claim it for himself, to colonize art history, so by quoting religious imagery, he was positioning himself in a flow of power even greater than anything art history could provide alone—the Christian core of Western belief. To become a great artist, he revisited the source of his artistic knowledge, the Old Masters, and as a man who felt deeply connected to spirituality, to

become a great knower of truths, he revisited the supposed holder and source of supreme truth, Christianity. Christianity had done some appropriation of its own, synthesizing pagan beliefs and rituals in order to consolidate power. From the Renaissance onward, Christian artists quoted and reinterpreted Classical mythology and iconography as extolling Christian virtues. In the Italian Renaissance (and elsewhere), competing city states vying for superiority over their rivals appropriated classical motifs, forms, and styles as a means of aligning themselves with the power and glory of the great Greco-Roman empires. Similarly, Thompson's religious images, which appear by the virtue of his appropriations, his paintings of crucifixions, nativities, and Madonna's, at a time when such subjects had been virtually banished from the canvas, represent an historical return through which he contemplated and attempted to tap into the power of spirituality and parabolic narrative.

A display case containing various objects from the Robert Louis Thompson Archives (figures 48-49), housed in the University of Louisville's Margaret Bridwell Art Library, was presented just north of the gallery entrance, in front of *Last Painting*. The case contained various ephemera, such as family photos, personal letters, exhibition announcements, and sketches. The objects in the case were not labeled, partially due to an economy of words, as written materials comprised a major portion of the contents, but also due to an economy of space, privileging the presentation of as many objects as possible over their explication. However, to a reasonable degree, the identity of the objects was self-evident. These personal effects from Thompson's life were presented in order to help provide the audience with a more intimate sense of the artist as a real person—in a sense, to increase the contact between the artist and the audience. The objects were strewn in the case as they might appear on one's desk and arranged to be viewed from all sides. They were arranged in this manner in order to encourage the audience to move around the case

and so grant them their sustained attention as opposed to a brief glance. This display was a surprise star attraction of the exhibition. Despite appearing among Thompson's highly impactful, even loud, paintings, these objects commanded the audience's attention, likely due to their very personal nature. One audience member searched out the addresses on the letters to find out what had become of the places familiar to Thompson.

The objects displayed in the case offered the audience a glimpse into Thompson's life and at the same time, a glimpse into the curatorial process, serving as an example of the sort of primary resources investigated in the research conducted in preparation for the exhibition. The display presented a sample of the sort of resources housed at the University of Louisville and, through the exhibition, one way that they may be employed in scholarly pursuit and to serve the community. In this sense, they served as promotional materials in a dual fashion: attesting to the value of the university's assets to the community and encouraging their greater usage.

Three events were held in conjunction with the exhibition: invitational and public receptions and a curators' chat. Attendees included Thompson's family and friends, such as friend and fellow artist Robert Douglas, Thompson's nephew Robert Holmes Jr., and Dario Covi, who taught Thompson art history. For those who knew Thompson, the exhibition and its programming provided an opportunity to reconnect and reminisce. The exhibition received a local and regional audience, including representatives from arts and cultural organizations, museums, and schools. Through them, the exhibition has the potential to have a greater and more enduring impact in promoting the scholarship and dialogue on Thompson beyond the immediate audience in attendance. The scope of the exhibition's potential contribution was extended even farther through the distribution of the exhibition catalogue, which was offered to institutions that include Thompson's works in their

collections. School groups, including one from Central High School, where Thompson attended, toured the exhibition and teachers were provided with information to help them present Thompson in the classroom. A visiting teacher from Central pointed to one of his students who had demonstrated some artistic talent; for this young man, Thompson can serve as proof that if a man of his race, from his town, from his very school, could become an important artist whose works are the subject of books and exhibitions and are collected by major museums, then so perhaps could he.

CONCLUSION

Seeking Bob Thompson, the exhibition, was presented by the University of Louisville at the university's downtown facility, the Cressman Center for Visual Art. It was my Master's thesis project and although I had been lucky enough to have had the opportunity to serve on curatorial teams for several other university sponsored research projects and exhibitions, it was my first experience to lead a project, to conduct all the research, to locate and select the works to be exhibited, to construct both the concepts behind the exhibition: the thesis and narrative, as well as the physical structure of the exhibition, to write the central essay for a catalogue, and to present my views to the public in speeches and press interviews. I did these things under the tutelage of the director of the Hite Galleries, John Begley, who gave me broad latitude. Although there were occasional disagreements, they were always very brief, leading to thorough discussions and consensus, so that there was never the occasion for one to trump the opinions and concerns of the other.

Two instances in which Begley and I at first disagreed merit mention as they reveal a bit more of the curatorial process and are pertinent to the methods and motives behind the selection of the particular works that were presented. The first was a question of media. Since Thompson was a painter, then obviously our exhibition should be one of paintings, I thought. After all, it is documented that Thompson called himself a painter rather than the more all-encompassing "artist," and the decision to include any particular work also necessitated the exclusion of others. Certainly, drawings could be included, but not at the

expense of masterworks. Begley, being an artist himself, was confident that drawings and other smaller works could be just as valuable to the exhibition as the large colorful paintings for which Thompson is best known. The difference between the two perspectives can be described as a “best of” versus “broad view” exhibition. Both have their merits, especially considering that there had been no exhibitions of Thompson’s works on this scale in Louisville since 1971. The highly subjective nature of qualitative assessments aside, the decisions that lead to the show taking on the form that it did were based on comparisons between different possible exhibitions and their ability to meet the goals and objectives of not only this specific project but also of the university and its galleries.

Thompson was an intermedial artist who was inspired by and composed his paintings as if they were works of music and who regularly mixed media in his works. Although his mixing of media is somewhat less obvious than in collage or more sculptural art forms, Thompson appears to have cared little for the integrity of such categories as an “oil painting.” Instead, he employed whatever materials caught his fancy or achieved particular visual effects. He was both experimental and pragmatic. Thompson mixed media not only in terms of the materials he used to build his works but also the approaches and techniques he employed to do so; he painted with pastels and charcoal and drew with paint.

By far, the most common example of mixed media in Thompson’s works is the preponderance of drawing in his paintings. It is at once the most obvious and frequent and yet easily overlooked. In ink or pencil, Thompson would outline his figures, in cloisonnistic fashion, to give his monochrome figures a restrained degree of modeling, such as the breasts of the yellow woman in *The Entombment*, much as he used sgraffito to indicate facial features in *Mother and Child*. The reason that this technique of paint and pen may be both obvious and overlooked is that it may be dismissed as preparatory. While Thompson did

indeed draw on his surfaces in preparation for his paintings, it is erroneous to view these markings as merely traces of initial process that should be ignored as if one had walked in on the artist with his pants down. To the contrary, the fact that Thompson often made little or no effort to cover such markings and observably employs drawing as a practical means to apply the amount of detail of his choice indicates that they are integral elements of his finished works. Although these aspects are not necessarily present in all of Thompson's paintings, his mixing of media was identified as illustrative of his pushing of boundaries, such as those of what a painting is, what it may contain, and what constitutes a finished work, ideas central to the thesis of the exhibition. Although to a degree such aspects could be present in the exhibition even if it had focused primarily on painting, Thompson's approach to different media, the choices he made in their combination, and the ways in which his selected media informed his techniques were brought into greater relief through the more diverse range of works exhibited.

While Thompson's use of mixed media and intermedial approaches supported the exhibition's thesis, there were other reasons for selecting this particular assemblage of works. As a university project, the exhibition and related programming were presented as a public service to the wider regional community, to contribute to scholarly discourse, and to serve the university as a primary stakeholder. These concepts guided the exhibition's development in two important ways: positioning university faculty and students as a precise target audience among the general public and necessitating the use and presentation of the university's resources to maximum effect to meet the overlapping missions of the gallery and university at large. Indeed, Thompson's selection as the subject of an exhibition was partially based on his status as a Hite student. By presenting a variety of media, the

exhibition could better serve and be relevant to the Hite's studio artists of various disciplines.

Two university assets were both used as primary resources for research and also included in the exhibition: The Thompson archives and the Hite Art Collection. Since the works by Thompson housed in the collection are almost entirely from his student years, before he settled on a course and style that would define the reception of his oeuvre, it was decided that they might be given the greatest context through being presented along with later works, allowing a comparison, and to make more evident the artist's progression. By presenting a diversity of themes, media, and approaches by the artist, throughout his career, the throughlines of his oeuvre became more evident than they would have been by merely contrasting early and later paintings. Even that potential had been greatly reduced by the failure to secure the loan of a particular group of works, which had been included in Thompson's 1959 solo exhibition at Zimmerman's Arts in Louisville House. Their absence further necessitated a broad approach and scope of the exhibition in order to adequately provide context to the works housed in the university collection.

The other question of what to include, or exclude, from the exhibition that was the source of some debate involved Barrell's *Homage to Bob Thompson*. Begley, who visited Barrell at his home, initially mistook *Homage* as a work produced in collaboration between the two artists. The usefulness of a collaboration to the exhibition was immediately evident as Thompson's influences were a central focus of the exhibition. Collaboration expanded the concept of influence and provided a pretext for the mention of Thompson's participation in various happenings staged by his friends. Upon realizing the mistaken attribution, Begley felt that Barrell's solo work had no place in the show and should be cut. To the contrary, I argued, and Begley would come to agree, Barrell's *Homage* broadened the inherent discussion

of influence and appropriation and extended it beyond Thompson as a recipient of others' innovations and instruction.

In addition to being a work *about* Thompson, as a work informed by those of another artist, borrowing aspects from Thompson's oeuvre and adapting them for his own purposes, Barrell's *Homage* paralleled a signal aspect of Thompson's project. It served to better elucidate influence as multidirectional, a web of interconnectivity in which Thompson is positioned as a source of the same sort of influence and inspiration so evident in his own works. Although one work alone cannot adequately document the degree to which Thompson may have impacted American art, nor the precise manner in which he may have so done, nor posit his genealogical place therein, it can raise the issue. Positioned as it was, at the exhibition's close, *Homage* was intended to extend the dialogue beyond the particular scope of the show and the time period in which he lived. As an artist who looked both to his contemporary culture and the corpus of art history to inform his production, his concepts and expressions of self, and his understanding of the human condition, and who took up the diverse dialogues they provoked and thereby extended them through cultural and temporal divides into his own immediacy, how might Thompson, his works, his methods and their meanings, be employed to further develop those dialogues and provoke current and future scholarship and production of art?

Thompson's summer in Provincetown and his eventual move to New York, which was precipitated by his experiences that summer, were pivotal to his career. However, Thompson did not arrive in Provincetown or New York as naïve innocent. In Louisville he explored a sophisticated and diverse array of pursuits, attending lectures, plays, and exhibitions as well as collecting records and listening to both classical and jazz music. He bridged what would later be called the "cultural divide" without any sense that one category

of tastes might preclude others. In high school he was a star athlete while at the same time nurturing his development as a “closet artist.” Once he discovered paint, or perhaps just as importantly, once his talents there were recognized and affirmed, the trajectory of his course was set. The details of his life and art were, however, still to be determined by his continuous investigation, his hungry pursuit of experience and stimulation, and by the other people with whom he chose to associate. All of these things comprised his education beyond institutional academics. His education in art began at least as early as when he began to copy pictures as a child. His social education, though it began in his early childhood among a tightknit family, especially with his father, with whom he deeply identified, certainly intensified with the major injection of a diversity of people and interests that becoming a student at the University of Louisville provided. Robert Douglas remembers Thompson in his early student days as “Too caught up in the bougie scene” (Douglas Interview). It is not at all surprising that Thompson should seek out the company of “bougies,” the black petit bourgeois, because as the son of educated middleclass entrepreneurs, this was the set of people with whom he was most similar and familiar. Douglas’ comments are indicative of how readily different groups accepted Thompson as one of their own despite certain obvious differences. However, Thompson did not rest in the comfort of familiarity. Instead he seems to have flowed rather seamlessly among various distinct groups, listening to classical music with friends on one night and jazz on another. What makes this detail of Thompson’s life remarkable is that it occurred at the very beginning of racial integration. It was likely the empowering influence of his family that prevented Thompson from internalizing the racial prejudices and boundaries of his day. Thompson’s disregard for boundaries and fixed categories, or rather, his headstrong willingness to breach such boundaries and to find union within division would become a signal element of his works.

Informed by the contemporary conditions into which he came of age, chief among them racism, segregation, the limits they could place on people, and the way that, unchecked, they could even define an unbearable construction of reality, he was determined never to accept any boundary or assertion of a proper order, place or hierarchy without thorough investigation. In his exploration of contemporary culture, art history, and life's grander existential questions, his was a project of continuous reordering.

A cursory view of Thompson's life and works reveal a plethora of seeming contradictions. He is described as both genuine and a manipulator, an introverted extrovert, accused by some of being a race-traitor, while others claim that he played the role of a black man of the streets belying his affluent upbringing. However, what appears to be contradiction is actually evidence of a fractured and partial view. These fragments, especially when discordant, serve as beacons to the scholar, points of entry to investigate the space between such polar conceptions, to bridge particular points and to reveal and postulate their commonalities and throughlines. While a complete examination of and explanation for the multitude of Thompson's seeming contradictions is beyond the scope of my research, which was conducted for the preparation of a particular art exhibit, *Seeking Bob Thompson* and the arguments laid out in this thesis champion and support a view of Thompson as an artist driven by his quest for and expression of his sense of freedom and bent on finding and asserting himself within the canon of Western art.

Thompson's concern for boundaries and categories was not arbitrary. Rather, it was a calculated study of the way that truth is figured, constructed, enforced, and communicated, or denied within artistic production. Of Thompson's works, Frances Richard writes, "The forces guiding his work travel under many names but ultimately what characterizes his art is its insistence on a third position, a precarious balance between seemingly polar opposites"

(Richard 58). This “third position” that he staked out in his art is reflective of his own situation in his contemporary society, his sense of in-between-ness. It is expressed in such paintings as *Red Balloon*. Thompson recognized the liminal space as one of great creative potential, though also a perilous position in which one risks abjection.

Thompson set himself apart, as a beatnik, bohemian, rebel, and truth-teller. He sought to be awake, and his paintings were intended to wake up those who would look at them. However, Thompson was not truly an outsider. In fact, he loathed the idea of isolation and for all his insistence on his individuality he was dependent upon maintaining strong social and personal connections. He was especially reliant on his wife Carol for the love, comfort, and support that she provided him. She supplied a stable ground for him, a necessary center from which he could wildly explore life’s offerings and the possibilities of paint. This role was undoubtedly a burden on her. When she was away, his energies and enthusiasm dwindled. Barrell, who lived with the Thompsons on Ibiza, asserts:

Carol was really Bob’s anchor. When Carol left for New York [in 1963, leaving her husband behind on the island of Ibiza], Bob was just lost. I mean, it was really all over; he didn’t know what he was doing. Finally, he left for New York. I went out to his farm and he had left a huge pile of his paintings and just split. (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 109)

Isolation and seclusion had no appeal for Thompson, even in less emotional, more geographic considerations. On Ibiza, Barrell had wanted to escape from the hectic human commotion of their cave-like house in the center of the busy Oldtown district and so the pair relocated to their own farms in the country, which Barrell recalls as “an idyllic, beautiful place --- peach trees, apricot trees, donkeys. But, Bob had to get into his car” and return to town (“B.T. Life and Friendship” 109). Barrell says that Thompson liked the idea of getting out of cities and experiencing the natural charm of the countryside but, in reality, he couldn’t stand being outside of urban energy.

Similarly, Thompson's travel to Provincetown and his move to Manhattan were not as much a departure from his comfort zone as may be assumed. The artistic community had an unofficial but honored tradition of summering in Provincetown. Many of the Hite's faculty members either owned properties or regularly rented homes on the cape, such as Wilke, Nay, and Frank. The fact that Thompson's friend Don Fiene ran into Thompson in Provincetown, quite by accident, affirms the considerable exchange of population between Louisville and Provincetown despite their geographic distance. It is unclear whether Thompson's desire to move to New York would have existed at all or at least held such urgency for him had he not met a group young Manhattanites with whom he deeply connected in Provincetown. Every move that Thompson made away from something was predicated upon that relocation positioning him in the center of something else that he judged to be better or more stimulating.

Thompson's reliance on others, both in his life and as an artist, might at first seem antithetical to his mission of fostering and expressing his freedom and individuality. The fallacious tenet of "separate but equal" underpinning the codified racial segregation into which Thompson was born can help clarify why the locus of freedom, as conceived by Thompson, was centered on being *within* rather than *without* a social and cultural collective. Segregation was devoid of equality because of the concentration of power within one group (whites) over another and because it positioned whites as normal and blacks as the diminished other. Thompson was not satisfied with protest alone; he wanted to take power where he found it, claim it as his own, and use it to "express that which is visually true to me [Thompson]." He asserts, "The important thing is to transfer the image to the canvas as it appears to me; to modify the would-be fallacious" (Thompson *Gazette* I). Instead of

shouting angrily from the sidelines, Thompson sought to enter the field, to be an active player, to fight for and win tangible power.

Thompson was highly adept at identifying the sources of experiences, knowledge, and power he sought, and he had a magnetic attraction that pulled him to the center of what he admired and desired. A music lover, he was not satisfied to merely be a collector or a fan. He sought out and made friends with legendary Jazz figures of his time, who considered him an honorary Jazzman who played his riffs loudly in orange, green, and blue. He studied musical structures, rhythms, and tones, and he translated them in paint.

In his student days, his emulation of the styles and techniques of his teachers, especially Nay and Wilke, and likely others as well, was another example of his identifying a source of power that he might claim, in the form of their knowledge and practice of art. Of course, he was prone to get into oedipal struggles in his attempts at self-assertion, but the degree to which he studied their works is evident in his own early works. Thompson did not readily abandon what was useful to him. Indeed, just as his abstract works were always caught up with his concern to represent aspects of the real, or his conception thereof, his figurative art appears to be informed by the lessons and concerns of abstraction. Given his abiding interests, it is likely that the influence of his teachers is there to be found in even his last period of production, although they are probably overshadowed by the glaring presence of the Old Masters whose works he appropriated and that of the Post-Impressionists and German Expressionists whose styles and techniques he adopted and adapted in forming his own. Influence will likely continue to be a hugely fruitful line of inquiry.

One potential influence that warrants further scholarly investigation is that of Justus Bier, and perhaps through him that of Richard Krauthemier as well. Through the German refugee faculty members of the Hite as well as in American academia at large, Thompson

and other young Americans of his generation are pedagogically positioned as the surrogate inheritors of the knowledge and wisdom of Jewish and liberal intellectuals that the National Socialists had attempted to eradicate. Beyond the general notation of Thompson's German Expressionist tendencies, the fact that Bier was equally committed to avant-gardist contemporary art and medieval sculpture is jarringly similar to Thompson's synthesis of art historical and contemporary interests, techniques, and themes in his oeuvre. Coupled with Tabatchnick's claim that two German teachers were among Thompson's greatest influences, the similarities between the tastes and concerns of Bier and Thompson is all the more compelling. To what degree Bier may have affected the attitudes and art of Thompson and whether such influences are discernible in his art remain to be seen.

Thompson's attempt to center himself within the flow of artistic knowledge and power explains not only the appeal of certain people, places, and art history to Thompson, but also that of certain states of mind. He likened his frenzied production to a sort of artistic madness. To free himself of the confines of bedrock reality, he sought to give his unconscious a material, visual voice by transferring images from his dreams to his canvas. He approached painting as a form of ritual in which he entered an altered state of mind of heightened sensitivity and consciousness, seeking divine communion. This spiritual and sensational yearning was a means of inspiration and is physically manifest in the dream-like works he created. In some, such as *Untitled*, 1963, Thompson's ritualistic invocation of the spiritual realm and the juxtapositional tension between the body and mind is the explicit content expressed in his work. While Thompson's paintings reject illusionism and complicate notions of the real, he does not appear to have looked to the Surrealists, but he went instead to two of their inspirational sources and predecessors, Goya and Bosch, whose works are rife with fantastic images. Thompson identified the Old Masters as another

source of artistic power that he would claim. From Piero, he quoted the mathematics of formal arrangements, but of equal importance, he noticed the master's ability to convey complex meanings within a limited range of compositional arrangements, restrained indications of movement, and a near-absence of facial expressions. He studied and learned from the Old Masters, as many have, but he went the great leap forward to make appropriation a major project of his career. Thompson copied, revised, and improvised on their compositions, and in so doing, he boldly positioned himself among them and attempted to wrest some of their power and claim it as his own. This practice has been categorized as a form of signifying. Signifying, even in its vernacular sense, is not independent of its linguistic implications and the way in which that discipline has informed theoretical approaches to art history. Thompson developed a rich vocabulary of signs and symbols. He was fascinated by the way in which visual cues could be employed to convey meaning. He stretched and distorted his images in an exploration of their ability to retain their signification, the relationship between the signifier and the signified. He explored morphologies of form, displacing or mutating his original concepts and images, or those he appropriated, until they were reordered as something else. With these traits in mind, Thompson's oeuvre seems ripe for a thorough semiotic investigation, but one has yet to be conducted.

John Tagg writes:

The dominant form of signification in bourgeois society is the *realist* mode, which is fixed and curtailed, which is complicit with the dominant sociolects and repeated across the dominant ideological forms. Realism offers a fixity in which the signifier is treated as if it were identical with a pre-existent signified and in which the reader's role is purely that of consumer. ...In realism the process of production of a signifier through the action of a signifying chain is not seen. It is the product that is stressed, and production that is repressed.

(Tagg 53)

These remarks bear repeating here, not because they are in any way reflective of Thompson's art, but because they are diametrical opposites, and in some cases his process was the reverse of that described. As a counterpoint, Tagg's analysis of hegemonic production can bring the key methods and objectives of Thompson's project into sharper focus. Far from conflating the signifier and the signified, fixing concepts of the real, as conceived by dominant social forces, as absolute, and concealing the fabrication of signification, Thompson examined the distances between concepts, objects, and the visual signs through which they are communicated; he exposed the malleability of both form and the mental constructs to which it refers. He privileged the presentation of his process and that of constructing and conveying meaning over the pristine polish of the finished product. In so doing, he proposed a rescue trope through which he, and affording a degree of authorship to the audience, his viewers may be liberated from dominant constructions of truth and enter a realm of the possible.

Where some may have considered the Old Masters' works as historical detritus, he recognized their relevance to his own project, and where others revered the Old Masters from a great distance, Thompson felt their immediacy, and through his appropriations, extended it to his time and to his audience. Instead of viewing greatness (the Western canon) as beyond approach, he proposed the sanctity — necessity of contact. Thompson saw the works of the Old Masters as opening utterances of a dialogue that he answered in his own art and, keeping the conversation open and vital, he extended it to his viewers.

Figure 1

Bob Thompson, *Untitled Abstraction*, c. 1958, pastel and ink on paper.

Collection of Francis Frost

NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

Figure 2

Bob Thompson, *Partly Morbid*, 1957, oil on board.

The Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 3

Bob Thompson, *Still Life*, c. 1957, oil on Masonite.

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 4

Bob Thompson, *Willing Flower*, 1959, oil on canvas.

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr.

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 5

Francisco de Goya, *Capricho* □ 43 (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*), 1799, etching and aquatint.

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 6

Francisco de Goya, *Capricho* □ 29 (*Now That's Reading*), 1799, etching and aquatint

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 7

Francisco de Goya, *Capricho* □ 72 (*You Will Not Escape*), 1799, etching and aquatint

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 8

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (White Figure with Green Birds)*, 1962, gouache on paper

Collection of Bill Barrell

Easton, Pennsylvania

Figure 9

Bob Thompson, *The Golden Ass*, 1963, oil on canvas

Signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, New York

Figure 10

Francisco de Goya, *Capricho* □ 42 (*Thou Who Cannot*), 1799, etching and aquatint

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 11

Bob Thompson, *La Caprice* (aka The Forest and the Zoo), c. 1963, oil on canvas

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC

New York, New York

Figure 12

Francisco de Goya, *Capricho* 46 (*Correction*), etching and aquatint
Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 13

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Figure with Red Balloon)*, c. 1958, watercolor on paper

Collection of Rita Salzman

New York, New York

Figure 14

Albert Lamorisse, director, *The Red Balloon*, 1956, film still

Films Distribution, Paris, France

Figure 15

Bob Thompson, *Red*, 1958, pastel on paper

Collection of Rita Salzman

New York, New York

Figure 16

Bob Thompson, *Untitled Tondo*, c. 1959-1966, brushed ink on paper

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 17

Hieronymus Bosch, *Cutting the Stone*, c. 1494, oil on board

Museo del Prado

Madrid, Spain

NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

Figure 18

Bob Thompson, *Salome's Dance or The Feast of Herod*, 1962, oil on canvas

Private collection

New York, New York

Figure 19

Fra Angelico, Predella for an Altarpiece, *The Feast of Herod*, 15th c., oil on wood

Musée du Louvre, Paris, France

NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

Figure 20

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Landscape)*, 1958, watercolor and pastel on paper

Collection of Rita Salzman

New York, New York

Figure 21

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Man in Forest)*, c. 1958, oil on paper

Collection of Rita Salzman

New York, New York

Figure 22

Francisco de Goya, Capricho □ 57 (the filiation), 1799, etching and aquatint

Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 23

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Man in Forest)*, c. 1958, charcoal on paper

Collection of Kyle Staver

Brooklyn, NY

Figure 24

Bob Thompson, *Untitled* [MR163], 1959, oil on canvas

Signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC

New York, New York

Figure 25

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Bather with Red Bird)*, 1960, oil on board

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr.

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 26

Bob Thompson, *The Family*, 1958, monoprint on paper.

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr.

Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 27

Bob Thompson, *Mother and Child*, c. 1959, oil on canvas

Collection of Carol Epley

Russellville, Kentucky

[**Note:** lighter shades of upper third of painting due to gallery lighting]

Figure 28

Detail of Mother and Child showing sgraffito and facial modeling

Figure 29

Bob Thompson, *Portrait of Carol*, 1958, oil on paper

Collection of Christopher Lane

New York, New York

Figure 30

Bob Thompson & Bill Barrell, *Joint Effort*, 1963, oil on paper

Collection of Bill Barrell

Easton, Pennsylvania

Figure 31

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (For Thom & Lori “un grande future”)*, 1965, ink (marker) on paper.

Collection of John Frank

Stone Ridge, New York

Figure 32

Bob Thompson, *The Entombment*, 1964, oil (and graphite) on canvas

Signed and dated

Private collection

Los Angeles, California

Figure 33

Dieric Bouts "the Elder", *The Entombment*, c. 1450, distemper on canvas

The National Gallery

London, United Kingdom

NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

Figure 34

Bob Thompson, *Untitled* [MR43], 1963, oil on canvas

Signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC

New York, New York

Figure 35

Piero della Francesca, *Proofing of the Cross*, c. 1447-1466, fresco

Basilica of San Francesco

Arezzo, Italy

NOT INCLUDED IN EXHIBITION

Figure 36

Detail of *Proofing of the Cross* showing cracks interpreted as a stream

[**Note:** Thompson's stream in *Untitled*, 1963, corresponds to the smaller crack between the larger, more obvious crack and the Basilica. However, both may have inspired the form of his reinterpretation.]

Figure 37

Bob Thompson, *Study for Last Painting*, 1966, graphite and colored ink on paper.

Collection of Manhattan Art Investments

Boca Raton, Florida

Figure 38

Bob Thompson, *Last Painting*, 1966, oil and ink on canvas

Collection of Kathy Moskal

New York, New York

Figure 39

Bill Barrell, Homage to Bob Thompson, 1966, oil on canvas

Collection of the artist

Easton, Pennsylvania

Figure 40

Installation view of the Cressman Center lobby showing display of Jules Aarons' 1959 Sun Gallery photographs.

Figure 41

Jules Aarons, *Untitled (Sun Gallery Window, Provincetown, Ma.)*, 1959, black & white photograph

Provincetown Art Association and Museum

Provincetown, Massachusetts

[**Note:** Bob Thompson is pictured from behind, wearing lilacs in his hair.]

Figure 42

Jules Aarons, *Untitled (Sun Gallery Group)*, 1959, black & white photograph

Provincetown Art Association and Museum

Provincetown, Massachusetts

[**Note:** From left...Bob Thompson (seated), Jay Milder (standing), Red Grooms (kneeling), Sheila Milder (standing), Emilio Cruz? (seated), and Marcia Marcus.]

Figure 43

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object, installation view from gallery entrance

Figure 44

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object, installation view, Introduction.

Figure 45

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object, installation view south-east.

Figure 46

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/ Object, installation view south-west.

Figure 47

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/ Object, installation view of female grouping.

[**Note:** Grouped by similarities in content and formal arrangement in order of progression from monochromatic to contrasting color palette.]

Figure 48

Display of objects from the Robert Louis Thompson Archives
Margaret Bridwell Art Library of the Hite Art Institute
Louisville, Kentucky

Figure 49

Dr. Jongwoo Jeremy Kim (left) and Slade Stumbo (right) discuss the Thompson Archives.

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The works of Bill Barrell appear courtesy of the artist.

The photographs of Jules Aarons appear courtesy of the Provincetown Art Association and Museum and the estate of Jules Aarons.

Installation shots were taken by Martha Henry and the University of Louisville

APPENDIX A

SEEKING BOB THOMPSON CHECKLIST OF WORKS

Works by Bob Thompson

1.) Still Life, c. 1957-1958

oil on panel

11 7/8" x 15 3/4"

University of Louisville Art Collection

2.) Partly Morbid, 1957

oil on panel

37 1/8" x 25"

University of Louisville Art Collection

Gift of Donald and Judith Fiene

3.) The Family, 1958

monoprint

20" x 5 1/2"

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

4.) Red, 1958

pastel on paper

13 7/8 x 10 3/4"

Collection of Rita Salzman

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

5.) Untitled (Figure with Red Balloon). C. 1958

watercolor on paper

13 1/2" x 10 3/4"

Collection of Rita Salzman

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

6.) Untitled (Man in Hat), c. 1958

oil on paper

13 1/2" x 10 3/5

Collection of Rita Salzman

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

7.) Portrait of Carol, 1958

oil on paper

17" x 11"

Collection of Christopher Lane

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

8.) Landscape, c. 1958

watercolor & pastel on paper

13 1/4" x 18 1/4"

Collection of Rita Salzman

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

9.) Untitled (Man in Forest), c. 1958

charcoal on paper

11 7/8" x 17 3/4"

Collection of Kyle Staver, Brooklyn, NY

10.) Untitled (Tondo), undated

brushed ink on paper

20 5/8" x 27 1/2"

University of Louisville Art Collection, Louisville KY

11.) Wilting Flower, 1959

oil on canvas, 46 1/2" x 67"

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr.

Louisville, KY

12.) Mother and Child, 1959

oil on canvas

63" x 31"

Collection of Carol Epley, Russellville, KY

13.) Untitled [MR163], 1959

oil on canvas

49" x 35 1/2", signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

14.) Untitled, (Bather with Red Bird), 1960

oil on board

40" x 29 3/4"

Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

15.) Salome's Dance or Feast of Herod, 1962

oil on canvas

36" x 51.5"

Private Collection

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

16.) Untitled (Green Birds White figure), 1962

gouache on paper

21 1/4" x 18"

Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

17.) Untitled [MR43], 1963

oil on canvas

63" x 86 1/2", signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

18.) The Golden Ass, 1963

oil on canvas

62 1/2" x 74 1/2", signed and dated

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

19.) La Caprice (aka The Forest and The Zoo), c.1963

oil on canvas

62 1/4" x 51 1/2"

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

20.) The Entombment, 1964

oil on canvas

20" x 16", signed and dated

Private Collection

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

21.) Untitled (Une Grande Future), 1965

ink (marker) on paper

18" x 12"

Collection of John Frank, Stone Ridge, NY

22.) Last Painting (After Titian's Venus and Adonis), 1966

oil with ink on canvas

55 1/2" x 63 3/4"

Collection of Kathy Moskal

Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

23.) Study for Last Painting, 1966

Graphite and ink on paper

13 1/2" x 13 3/4"

Collection of Manhattan Art Investments, Boca Raton, FL

WORKS BY OTHER ARTISTS

24.) Bill Barrell & Bob Thompson

Joint Effort, 1963

oil on paper

23 3/4" x 18 3/4"

Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

25.) Bill Barrell

Homage to Bob Thompson, 1966

Media?

43" x 60"

Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

**Selections from *Los Caprichos*, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, etching & aquatint
on paper, 1799**

26.) Capricho □ 42: Tú que no puedes (Thou who cannot)

27.) Capricho □ 43: El sueño de la razón produce monstruos

28.) (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)

29.) Capricho □ 46: Corrección (Correction)

30.) Capricho □ 57: La filiación (The filiation)

31.) Capricho □ 72: No te escaparás (You will not escape)

Jules Aarons, 1921-2008

Photographs (digital prints)

Provincetown Art Association and Museum, Provincetown, MA

32.) Man & Face, 1959

33.) Sun Gallery, Figure in Door, 1959

34.) Sun Gallery, Figures Passing, 1959

35.) Sun Window, 1959

36.) Sun Gallery, 6 People in Window, 1959

APPENDIX B

TEXT LABELS

Provincetown 1958

Bob Thompson's summer in Provincetown in Massachusetts was pivotal to the development of the artist's career and craft. John Frank, who taught at the Hite as a temporary replacement for Ulfert Wilke, who was on sabbatical, taught at the Seong Moy School in Provincetown, where Thompson would take classes. Frank helped Thompson find accommodations in the form of a shack behind a grocery store that was owned by an elderly blind man, who was one of the few African American property owners in Provincetown. This dwelling would play host to a number of parties and informal gatherings for a group of young artists whom Thompson met that summer, many of whom would become major influences and close friends. Among them were, Jay Milder, Red Grooms, Bill Barrell, Emilio Cruz, Lester Johnson, Christopher Lane, Mimi Gross, and Anne Tabachnik. Many of the young artists whom Thompson met were students of the abstract expressionist painter, Hans Hoffman. Dody Muller advised Thompson, "Don't ever look for your solutions from contemporaries--- look at Old Masters." Thompson exhibited 13 works at the Provincetown Art Festival that summer, all of which were purchased by Walter P. Chrysler. The personal and artistic freedom that Thompson experienced that summer as well as the sense of belonging to a community of other young figurative artists who were also rebelling against the domination of Abstract Expressionism precipitated Thompson's withdrawal from the University of Louisville after his next semester and his move to New York where Thompson lived first with Jay Milder and then with Red Grooms before finding a studio of his own.

Provincetown 1959

In the summer of 1959, "The Three Musketeers," Thompson, Grooms, and Milder returned to Provincetown where they had met. The Sun Gallery, run by Yvonne Anderson and Dominic Falcone as an alternative space for the exhibition of artists whose works did not fit into the dominant style of the New York school, had scheduled a Red Grooms solo exhibition. Anderson recalls:

“The only show Dominic and I did not choose the painters for was the Milder, Grooms, Thompson show. I was not familiar with Milder or Thompson. The year before, we had given Red his first one man show. I had not heard of Bob Thompson or Jay Milder until they arrived with Red one night shortly before his show was due to open.

They were low on money (as we all were in those days) so we closed the orange curtains in the gallery so the guys could crash on the floor for the night. Red had been working and traveling with them the previous winter, and decided he would like to share the show with his friends. So we hung a three man show the next day.”

The Sleep of Reason

Francisco de Goya's *Los Caprichos* is a series of 80 etchings of social critique and satire. The exact meaning of *Los Caprichos* has been debated since they were first published in 1799. *The Sleep of Reason*, plate 43 in the series, depicts the sleeping artist slumped over his desk surrounded by cats, owls, and bats. The scene may be interpreted as a nightmare. However, are these beasts truly horrific? All these creatures, apart from the man, are keen nocturnal hunters that can see or perceive in ways that humans cannot. Goya provides a brief explanatory text: “fantasy abandoned by reason begets impossible monsters; united with it, it is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels.” On one hand, Goya appears to be championing the Enlightenment principle of reason, but on the other hand, he challenges its primacy through presenting fantasy or imagination along with reason as equal partners in the creation of the arts and “all their marvels.”

In Goya, Bob Thompson found a rich source of inspiration. Thompson appropriated Goya's compositions in order to convey his own social commentary of the world around him and to explore the interior world of his dream imagery. In an undated letter to his family, Thompson wrote:

The monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams; the horses are there the dancing nudes and the little man with the pie shaped hat and the earth, the earth sometimes green, purple, blue, violet, the trees orange, yellow, green, red everything my imagination tells me. I feel free--- can you hear me free! To such an extent that madness is but a 3 letter toy with 4 arms 16 feet and funny noises that the children would enjoy.

Correction and Caprice

Goya provides the following commentary for *Correction*, Plate 46 of *Los Caprichos*:

"Without correction and censure one cannot get on in any faculty, and that of witchcraft needs uncommon talent, application, maturity, submission, and docility to the advice of the great Witch who directs the seminary of Barahona."

Goya's sarcastic representation of witchcraft as a highly technical skill pollutes Enlightenment ideas of education with their opposite, superstition. In Thompson's appropriation of *Correction*, *La Caprice* (aka. *The Forest and the Zoo*), c. 1963, Thompson depicts a white faced goat-man, Goya's wizard, embracing a brown figure with a bright red smiley face. The goat man's eyes are closed as if in sleep, perhaps in love, but his green claws hold the brown form, which resembles a gingerbread man, in a way that suggests predation. This gingerbread man is, perhaps, a reference to racist Sambo art, an American monster that emerges on Thompson's canvas from America's 300 year sleep of reason that was the living nightmare of slavery. On the left of Thompson's composition, he includes another brown face with red eyes and lips. This disembodied face that floats in an amorphous patch of blue paint may be a representation of an African mask, an assertion of ethnic memory that serves as a counterpoint to the disempowered gingerbread man. Applying Goya's commentary on *Correction* to this reading, notions of European superiority may be likened to Goya's description of witchcraft as carefully practiced faculty.

Red

Bob Thompson met Red Grooms (Charles Rogers Grooms) and Jay Milder in Provincetown, Massachusetts in the summer of 1958. The three would become close friends. Marcia Marcus referred to the trio as the "Three Musketeers." In 1965, Thompson recalled, "Everyone turned Red Grooms at that time." Although Grooms was well known for his unique sense of humor, in this portrait, Thompson chose to represent his friend as a pensive, Christ-like sage.

Red Balloon

Bob Thompson's untitled watercolor is based on a still from the 1956 French short film, *The Red Balloon*, written and directed by Albert Lamorisse. In the film, a boy is confronted with a reversal of natural order when he is followed by a red balloon. In Thompson's rendition of the scene, the artist conveys a sense of yearning in the boy, despite the fact that the figure does not face the viewer. The boy's right hand reaches, almost tentatively, for the balloon. This subtle touch of human frailty may arouse the sympathy of the viewer. However,

Thompson's uncanny shadowy figure is also a representation of monstrosity; with a lobster claw for a left hand and pointy vampiric fingers on the right, it is uncertain what one would encounter if the figure were to turn to face his audience. The paradox of the situation is that if the boy were to reach the balloon which he seeks, his piercing fingers would pop it. Thompson paints desire and loss as inextricably bound.

The Man in the Pie Hat

The man in the pie hat, like many of Thompson's recurrent symbols, emerged from his dreams. This shadowy figure that lurks in many of Thompson's works, especially those produced in or around 1959, has been widely interpreted as a representation of the artist, himself, inhabiting his creations. The figure may also be a personification of the unseen, paradoxically asserting its presence through its absence.

Bob Thompson's father died when the artist was 13. Cecil and Bob Thompson were virtually inseparable, known for a time as "Big Shot" and "Shot," respectively, by the Thompson family. Cecil died in an automobile accident on his way to attend a basketball game in which his son was playing. For Bob Thompson, in the early stages of puberty, the sudden death of his masculine role model was an extremely traumatic event, one that immediately manifested itself in a series of physical maladies and was, perhaps, later echoed in dreams of the man in the pie hat, the presence of the trauma of his father's absence.

When the man in the pie hat appears alongside a female nude, Thompson may be exploring issues of miscegenation or interracial sex. In other compositions interpreted as images of miscegenation, Thompson depicts black men either as reptilian monsters or satyrs. However the monsters are playfully rendered, inspiring little sense of real threat. Similarly, Satyrs, though symbols of sexual transgression are lifted from classical European tradition, and thus palatable. To the contrary, the man in the pie hat remains unseen and thus refuses to surrender his potency. It bears noting that the man in the pie hat is especially preponderant in works produced in and around 1959, the year that Bob Thompson began dating Carol Plenda, who was white. They were married on December, 16th, 1960. The man in the pie hat, like most of Thompson's symbolism, is open to individual interpretation, conveying multiple, even contradictory meanings.

Mother and Child

“Mother and Child” is the theme and or title of a diverse range of Thompson’s works. This painting, which has not been on public view since 1959, is particularly emotive despite its limited palette. Thompson, who experimented with several techniques in painting, here employs sgraffito, the scratching off of the surface layer of paint, in order to delineate portions of the figures’ outlines and to accentuate the detail of facial features, such as the mother’s lips. The partial arches in the background may be a general reference to Classical architecture or it may indicate a triptych as the source material for the composition. In sacred western art, the Madonna and Christ child often occupied the central panel of triptychs.

Group Efforts

Bob Thompson’s friend, saxophonist Charlie McLean was so accustomed to seeing Thompson drinking in cafes or attending concerts that he was surprised to find Thompson’s studio filled with art. Considering Thompson’s social persona, it is no surprise that he was open to artistic cross-fertilization and collaborations. Bob Thompson participated in some of the country’s earliest happenings, including: Allen Kaprow’s *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959), Red Grooms’ *The Burning Building* (1959), and Marcia Marcus’ *A Garden* (1960). Thompson played various roles in these happenings, painting for Kaprow, acting for Grooms, and playing bongos for Marcus. Thompson played the leading role in Grooms’ film *The Magic Train Ride* (1960).

Flesh and Spirit

The works of Piero della Francesca (c. 1415-1492) provided the inspiration for many of the works of Bob Thompson. This untitled work, painted by Thompson in 1963 is based on Piero’s *The Proofing of the Cross*, 1460, from *The Legend of the True Cross* frescoes, 1452-1465, in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy. Piero’s fresco depicts a Christian legend in which the cross of Christ is found in the Holy Land and its status as a holy relic is confirmed by St. Helena, Roman empress and mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome.

While Piero’s depiction of the Christian story stresses the reality of the scene in humanist, Renaissance form, Bob Thompson’s appropriation of Piero’s composition reverses the process, challenging notions of reality and suggesting an unseen truth. Although Thompson keeps Piero’s general arrangement of figures intact, he disrupts the original narrative; where Piero depicts the proofing of the cross as an actual event, Thompson presents an image of a mysterious ritual. In Thompson’s rendition, the very subject of the legend, the cross of

Christ, is transfigured as a stiff pink female nude. St. Helena, who Piero depicts wearing a conical hat, is depicted by Thompson without any variation of color, tone, or line that would distinguish her head from her hat so that she is distorted into a strange alien form. The brown and rust colored figures in the foreground appear to be rooted to the earth. Thompson attaches a bird beak to the brown figure and a man on the right side of the composition appears as a purple penguin. Thompson's distortion of natural form and his transgressions of category, such as human and animal, destabilize notions of the real and evoke a sense of a dream state which is furthered by the fantastic setting that is absent of reference to any actual place. The building that serves as the backdrop in Piero's fresco is replaced by a grouping of overlapping birdlike forms.

Homage and Appropriation

Today, Bob Thompson is best known for his colorful appropriations of Old Master compositions. Upon Thompson's death in 1966, his friend and fellow artist, Bill Barrell painted this homage to his late friend. In a fitting tribute, Barrell employed Thompson's iconography in his own composition. Thompson is depicted wearing the wings that populated so many of his paintings.

APPENDIX C

Selected List of Institutions Housing the Works of Bob Thompson:

Anderson Gallery, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY

Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR

Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center,
University of California, Los Angeles, CA

Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL

Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY

California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA

Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR

Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME

The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville FL

Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH

Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO

Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI

Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN

LaJolla Museum of Art, LaJolla, CA

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN

Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC

Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

Museum of the National Center of Afro American Artists, Boston, MA

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY

Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ

New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA

The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ

Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY

The Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, DC

The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY

The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

APPENDIX D

For the Record: From Louisville to New York

1959

For the record, there is a degree of uncertainty concerning when Thompson moved from Louisville to New York, which I can help to clarify. Judith Wilson writes, “A few friends date his permanent departure from Kentucky sometime after his February 12—March 5, 1959, ‘Arts in Louisville’ show, but his New York comrades Jay Milder and Christopher Lane both give the fall of 1958 as his official arrival date in Manhattan” (Wilson 46). Having viewed Thompson’s official transcripts, I conclude that it is much more likely that Thompson moved to New York in late winter or early spring of 1959, after his Louisville solo exhibition, rather than the fall of 1958. Even if Thompson had wanted to move for some time, the Arts in Louisville show would have given him impetus to stay until the exhibition was mounted and the potential sales of his artworks could have helped finance his eventual move. Indeed, Carol Epley recalls that Thompson was trying to raise money for a planned trip, the details of which she was unsure, that her purchase of *Mother and Child* was to help fund. Thompson was enrolled and registered for specific classes in both the fall of 1958 and the spring of 1959 semesters. Although I have been asked not to divulge Thompson’s precise grades, he received fairly high marks for his last fall semester, indicating that he adequately completed his final exams and projects. He would have registered for his spring courses in the late fall or early winter. Thompson received grades

for the courses in which he was registered for the spring of 1959 rather than “w” indications of withdrawal. This means that Thompson either missed the deadline to withdraw without penalty or simply neglected to withdraw from his classes before he moved. It is possible that Thompson neglected the deadlines for withdrawal but given the fact that he went to the trouble of writing a letter formal relinquishing his scholarship, it seems more likely that his move and even his final decision to do so came after such deadlines. The fact that he did not fail all of his spring classes means that Thompson must have presented some sort of coursework to be graded before he left and likely attended at least some classes of the spring term. What more, he received a very good grade in painting. The sheer fact that he registered and was charged for classes in the spring makes it highly likely that, not only was he still in Louisville through the end of 1958, but also that he was not entirely sure when he might leave well into the new year. Based on the available evidence, I postulate that Thompson returned from his summer in Provincetown and continued his studies that fall, but the rigors of academia were a let-down after his heady summer experiences. He may have visited his friends in Manhattan during the fall break or another holiday, which would account for Milder’s and Lane’s recollections. Distracted by the memories of Provincetown, the taste of the life he wanted to lead, he was unable to apply himself to his coursework except for that of his great passion — painting. Thompson may have wanted to make his way to New York, but his mother’s disapproval of his leaving academia and his realization that his Hite Scholarship was an opportunity that might not be repeated, subdued his desire to leave, for a while. The Arts in Louisville show, his second major exhibition in only half a year, bolstered his confidence and reinvigorated his sense of himself as a practicing artist that he had discovered in Provincetown. While Thompson may have struggled with mediocrity in academia, he had tasted something of success in Provincetown, especially through

Chrysler's mammoth purchase of his works. The contrast between the two likely bolstered Thompson's resolve to leave school, family, and home to make his own way where he might experience more of that early success—New York. Thompson's boldly assertive manifesto, published as the exhibition announcement for the Arts in Louisville show, was likely his reaction to the voices of discouragement, real and imagined, and his own lingering doubts that ran counter to his dream.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: William Slade Stumbo

ADDRESS: 902 Delor Avenue
Louisville, Kentucky 40217-2225

DOB: Xenia, Ohio – October 10, 1971

EDUCATION
& TRAINING: B.A., Humanities (Modern Culture)

AWARDS:

Dean's Citation Nominee
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky
2013

Outstanding Graduate of Fine Arts
Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville
2013

Allen R. Hite Scholarship
Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville
2012-2013

Theatre Arts Scholarship
Coe College
Cedar Rapids, Iowa
1989-1990

Seeking Bob Thompson: *Dialogue/Object*

Hite Art Institute

The Department of Fine Arts at the University of Louisville was founded in 1937. In 1946, the Department was endowed as the Hite Art Institute in recognition of the bequest of Allen R. and Marcia S. Hite. The Hite Endowment provides support for academic programs, library acquisitions, scholarships, faculty and student research, visiting artists and scholars, and exhibitions that enrich the experience of students within the Institute.

Preparing its graduates to function at the forefront of the art world, the Hite Art Institute offers a curriculum that promotes critical thinking, incorporates diverse perspectives, and reflects current scholarship in art history, theory, studio art, and curatorial practices. Fine Arts majors can earn the BA, BFA, MA, MAT, or PhD by specializing in art history, art education, painting, drawing, printmaking, photography, sculpture, fibers, glass, ceramics, communication arts and design, interior architecture or critical and curatorial studies. The Institute currently has twenty-three full-time faculty members responsible for the instruction of 450 undergraduate majors and 30 graduate students.

The Hite Art Institute maintains six art galleries which feature rotating exhibitions by nationally and internationally renowned artists and designers, as well as students and faculty of the Institute. Schneider Hall, on the Belknap campus of the University of Louisville, is home to the Morris B. Belknap Gallery, Dario A. Covi Gallery, and Gallery X, as well as a library dedicated to fine arts scholarship. The Cressman Center for Visual Arts, located in the heart of the downtown arts district, houses the John B. and Bonnie Seidman Roth Gallery, Leonard and Adele Leight Gallery, and the Alice S. and Irvin F. Etscorn Gallery for ongoing exhibitions, and provides the public with an opportunity to observe the daily operations of the glass studio.

Seeking Bob Thompson

Dialogue/Object

October 20 - November 24, 2012
Cressman Center for Visual Arts
Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville

The Artistic Journey of Bob Thompson and the History of the Department of Fine Arts

Bob Thompson, circa 1964. Courtesy Yvonne Andersen

Considered a genius by his peers and critics, Robert Louis Thompson grew up in an educated African-American family in Louisville. Inspired by his brother-in-law Robert Holmes, Thompson began his artistic journey early in life. In 1957, at the age of twenty after a year of pre-medicine education in Boston, Thompson enrolled to study art at the University of Louisville.

Bob Thompson was born in the summer of 1937, a year that also marked the beginning of the exciting and unique history of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Louisville. From the outset, the department had the good fortune to recruit world-class scholars, two of whom are recognized as its founders. When the University formally approved the establishment of an art major in 1937, Dr. Richard Krautheimer of the University of Marburg had just arrived in Louisville to serve as Assistant Professor of Fine Arts. The following year, Dr. Krautheimer invited his friend Dr. Justus Bier, the artistic director of Kestner-Gesellschaft (Kestner Society) in Hanover, to join the faculty.

Dr. Krautheimer studied at universities in Munich, Berlin and Marburg and was a Baroque and Byzantine scholar. Dr. Bier, who studied at universities in Munich, Erlangen, Jena, Bonn and Zurich, was an expert on the German sculptor Tilman Riemenschneider. Both scholars studied with the renowned art historian and critic Heinrich Wölfflin. Both came from the Middle Franconia region of Bavaria, known for its rich Jewish heritage since medieval times. Finally, both scholars were sponsored by the Emergency Committee to Aid Displaced German Scholars of the International Institute of Education which had helped hundreds of distinguished Jewish scholars to flee the Nazi persecution.

During Dr. Krautheimer’s brief tenure from 1935 to 1937, he established an art collection. In 1937, the Department of Fine Arts received the gift of an art collection from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This collection included a complete set of 80 aquatint prints from the *Los Caprichos* series by Francisco Goya. This series of etchings, including the iconic image *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, consequently penetrated deeply into Bob Thompson’s psyche and profoundly influenced his work.

Before immigrating to the United States in the early ‘30s, Dr. Bier was the curator of the Kestner Society which exhibited work by some of the most progressive modern artists. The Kestner Society was shut down by the Nazi regime in 1936 and the works which the gallery promoted were condemned as degenerate art in 1937. The following year, Dr. Bier left Germany and moved to America, where he taught art history and chaired the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Louisville from 1938 to 1960. In 1946, upon receipt of a prestigious bequest from Mr. and Mrs. Allen R. Hite, he founded the Hite Art Institute and served as the Director of the Hite Art Institute until 1960. From the beginning, Dr. Bier established a tradition of amicable working relationships between the art historians and studio artists in the department, a tradition that had considerable impact upon Bob Thompson’s art.

Dr. Bier was also one of Bob Thompson’s teachers. Although Dr. Bier was a Mediaeval and Renaissance scholar, he was a strong advocate of contemporary art. As the curator of the Kestner Society in Germany, he became friends with artists associated with the Bauhaus including Paul Klee, Lyonel Feininger and Mies van der Rohe, and collected their work.

Bob Thompson, a highly motivated, energetic and passionate painting student, received a Hite Scholarship in his second semester. In the two years that Thompson was a student, he had the opportunity to study with a wide array of excellent teachers who inspired him to excel as a creative individual. In particular, Thompson worked intimately with Ulfert Wilke, a well-known abstract expressionist painter and calligrapher. Wilke was born in Bavaria, Germany in 1907 into an artistic family, and studied in Paris and later at Harvard and the University of Iowa. He received two Guggenheim Fellowships supporting extensive travel in Europe and also studied calligraphy in Japan.

Another one of Bob Thompson’s teachers at the University of Louisville was John Frank, a native of Louisville who lived in New York for a decade and studied art at Hunter College and Columbia University. He was a student of Robert Motherwell and friend of Franz Kline and Philip Guston. John Frank also taught

art in East Asia and studied calligraphy and Zen Buddhism in Korea and Japan. He later traveled extensively in south Asia, including an extended Fulbright trip to India.

In 1958, Thompson also studied with Charles Crodel, a visiting German painter and graphic artist. Charles Crodel studied at the University of Jena, and taught at the art academies in Halle, Berlin, and Munich. He also had a keen interest in world cultures and had a particularly deep admiration for Chinese art. He traveled extensively in Italy, France, Greece, and Spain and received a Villa Romana Prize to Florence.

In the early years, the Department of Fine Arts offered a curriculum including studio classes taught in collaboration with the Louisville Art Center Association. This affiliation allowed Bob Thompson to study with Eugene Leake and Mary Spencer Nay, instructors who both served as directors of the Art Center Association.

Eugene Leake was born in New Jersey and grew up in Pennsylvania to become a masterful landscape painter. In the '30s, he studied at Yale University and the Art Students League, and travelled to Mexico to view murals of Diego Rivera and Jose Orozco. By the time he served as instructor and the Director of the Art Center Association, his work had been included in juried shows at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum. Eugene Leake left Louisville at about the same time as Bob Thompson, and later become the President of the Maryland Institute College of Art.

Mary Spencer Nay was born in Crestwood, Kentucky and graduated from the University of Louisville in 1942.

After graduation, she moved to New York to study at the Art Students League with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, George Grosz, and Will Barnet; in 1946, she studied with Carlos Merida and Alfredo Zalce at the International School of Art in Mexico. Having spent every summer since 1937 on Cape Cod, Nay advised Thompson to make the fateful move to study in Provincetown in 1958. After teaching for 44 years and receiving several distinguished professor titles, Mary Spencer Nay retired from the University of Louisville in 1979 and settled in Provincetown.

Thompson's work referenced Renaissance painting by Masaccio, Fra Angelico, and Piero della Francesca. His affinity for art of the Italian Renaissance began with his studies with Dr. Dario Covi. To this day, Dr. Covi can remember Thompson participating in an introduction to painting class that organized a field trip to Chicago to view an exhibition of work by Picasso. Dr. Covi, an insightful scholar of the Italian Renaissance, joined the Fine Arts faculty in 1956 after studying at universities in the United States and Europe and completing his doctorate in Art History at New York University. For fifty-six years, during which he served as the Department Chair and Institute Director for several terms, Dr. Covi has contributed to the Department in multiple capacities. He is currently the Curator of Art Collection.

At the University of Louisville, Bob Thompson received an education with a global perspective that integrated classical and enlightened philosophies, avant-garde ideas, modernist and figurative methodologies, as well as calligraphic expressionism and eastern spirituality. The faculty of dedicated teachers in the humanities as well as art history and in studio art

provided Thompson with solid foundations in the understanding of the humanities, music, literature, aesthetics, art and modernity.

Thompson's career is also a reminder of another significant dimension in the history of the department. Despite its cultural and geographical situation in a segregated southern society, the Hite Art Institute provided a liberating environment and empowering education that resulted in a remarkable number of African American artists making significant contributions in the arts. Beginning with G. C. Coxe, several peers of Bob Thompson, including Bob Carter, Sam Gilliam, Robert Douglas and Ken Young, have attained national and international recognition.

Today the Hite Art Institute, the endowed Department of Fine Arts, offers one of the most comprehensive art programs in the region. Our vision remains consistently focused on quality in teaching with a goal of preparing our students to function in the ever-changing art world. As a forward-thinking institution, the Hite Art Institute engages in the most current scholarship and praxis in art. We cultivate critical thinking and examine the production of art in historical and cultural contexts. Our diverse faculty continues to work diligently to help our students acquire skills as artists, designers and scholars who will engage in art that is inclusive, reflective, and sustainable.

I want to express my deep gratitude to my colleague John Begley who had the foresight to conceive this project to celebrate the life and work of Bob Thompson. It is remarkable and timely to present this exhibition during the Department's 75th anniversary. My appreciation goes to both John and his co-curator William Slade Stumbo for devoting an entire year to planning and organizing this spectacular exhibition. We also owe special thanks to institutions and individuals for their generosity in lending the artworks to this exhibition as well as their contributions to the collective memory of Bob Thompson, in particular Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and the Bob Thompson Estate, Robert Holmes, Jr. and other members of Bob Thompson's family, and Martha Henry who has been one of most passionate advocates of Bob Thompson's work.

Ying Kit Chan, Director
Hite Art Institute

Salome's Dance or Feast of Herod, 1962, oil on canvas, 36" x 51.5"
Private Collection. Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY
Image Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro) (c.1395-1455). Beheading of St. John the Baptist and the Feast of Herod with Salome Dancing, c. 1430. Predella for an Altarpiece. Oil on Wood
Musee' de Louvre, Paris, FR

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Covi, Dario, *History of the Allen R. Hite Art Institute*, unpublished manuscript.

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Smithsonian American Art Museum Website <americanart.si.edu>

Dictionary of Art Historians Website <dictionaryofarthistorians.org>

Landscape, c. 1958, watercolor & pastel on paper, 13 1/4" x 18 1/4"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

Courtesy Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

Seeking Bob Thompson:
Dialogue/Object

Seeking to find someone long dead is a daunting task. When that someone spent his working life attempting to escape capture, to be free, the task is even more difficult.

Prologue

An anniversary is equal parts reclamation and celebration. Looking back requires that the past be re-examined and re-contextualized in the light of the present. Seventy-five years of the Department of Fine Arts' history includes many neglected and unremarked incidents, people, and histories. It is a pleasure to have an opportunity—the anniversary of the founding of what is now the Hite Institute—to recollect and retell these forgotten stories for the sake of the future. As Jacques Derrida notes, archives are not about the past but the future, the promise and the responsibility for tomorrow.

Assembled in response to the above imperative to both remember and enjoy, this exhibition presents Bob Thompson, a University of Louisville fine arts student whose work embodies the creativity that emerges when individual imagination is fostered by study, hard work, supervised instruction and timely encouragement. His experience is a model of the idea motivating the development of University art departments, a national impulse that led to the establishment of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Louisville in 1937.

The Task

Finding people involves looking for them where you suspect they will be – their locations. Biography, environment, context, all are aspects that help determine where artists are coming from, what they are striving for and wanting to be. But those are factors in a process, not the actual discovery of the fundamental person.

The most direct way to find the artist – the essential person – is have a dialogue with his work. Location, context, theory are helpful in this conversation, but the place to find Bob Thompson is in his art. By looking carefully, his painting reveals his values, quest and methods. His character and personality are embedded within it, and his truth is there to see.

The Challenge

Signifyin', according to Louis Henry Gates, is the practice employed by the trickster, an archetype found throughout African mythology (as well as in Jungian thought) who can be a man, a spirit or an anthropomorphic animal, to trick, misdirect and otherwise disobey normal rules in order to escape societal norms and achieve his goals. To be successful seeking Bob Thompson, it is necessary to come to an understanding of how he works this practice in his artwork. Gates' ideas offer a way to apprehend Bob Thompson.

Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled and (re) doubled, a signifier in this instance that is silent, a “sound-image” as Saussure defines the signifier, but a “sound-image” sans the sound. The difficulty that we experience when thinking about the nature of the visual (re)doubling at work in a hall of mirrors is analogous to the difficulty we shall encounter in relating the black linguistic sign, “Signification,” to the standard English sign, “signification.” This level of conceptual difficulty stems from – indeed, seems, to have been intentionally inscribed within – the selection of the signifier, “signification.” For the standard English word is a homonym of the Afro-American vernacular word. And, to compound the dizziness and giddiness that we must experience in the vertiginous movement between these two “identical” signifiers, these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing. (Gates 44-45)

Bob Thompson was, among other things, a trickster. Clever, variable, shifting, dual (at least), he is difficult to pin down, intentionally elusive. Examination of his work shows the doubling and (re)doubling of ideas that Gates discusses. Sorting these references, puns, allusions, and transformations can be daunting, but

in the end rewarding. For in the end his trickery, this elusiveness he pursues, is an essential characteristic of an artist seeking to be free.

The Search

Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object is a search to find and reveal Bob Thompson, a noteworthy participant in the story of art, whose achievements deserve recognition not only from the Department of Fine Arts, but also from the University and the wider Louisville community. This exhibition identifies the forces that create a significant artist demonstrating how people, place and circumstance come together to produce extraordinary accomplishment. Bob Thompson's story has value for all creative individuals who need to grant themselves permission to experiment, sometimes against conventional wisdom. This is a lesson that applies not only to future students and faculty of the Hite Art Institute, but indeed to artists everywhere. The search for Bob Thompson thus encourages seekers to extend imagination, to understand ambition and to recognize the role of place in creative development.

In a joint search for Bob Thompson, Slade Stumbo and I embarked on assembling an exhibition that would reveal an artist whose presence within the Department of Fine Arts' history has become vaguely mythic over time. References to Thompson and his work are received with enthusiasm by people who remember his history and curiosity by people who are too young to have ever known him. It is our hope that *Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object* refreshes institutional memory and brings Thompson's work to a new audience.

An African-American student who attended classes here from 1957 until the beginning of 1959, Thompson left the department after being stimulated by his exposure to faculty, ideas and peers to launch a career as an artist. While his academic experience proved liberating, Thompson's driven nature and unwillingness to be confined within traditional boundaries led him to pursue his goal with an intensity and commitment that consumed him in a very short time. By 1966, he was dead, dying in Rome where he had gone to investigate Renaissance frescos at the same time that he was

Bob Thompson, *Untitled, (Bather with Red Bird)*, 1960, oil on board, 40" x 29 ¾"
Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

battling gall bladder surgery and sense-numbing drugs while painting incessantly.

His biography reveals unceasing creative tension as he alternated roles between insider and outsider, shifting forms between his peers, his lifestyle, his profession or career. However, more than the facts of his life, it is Bob Thompson's work that provides the best approach to discovering the artist, his story and his significance. Finding Bob Thompson—at least to the extent possible at this juncture in time—is accomplished through careful examination and analysis of the visual record.

To see Thompson's work, one must find it first. As recent participants in the Hite Art Institute (as the Department was renamed about ten years after its founding when a significant gift was received from Allen and Marcia Hite), both Stumbo and I were part of a group that knew of Thompson, better perhaps than many but still in a very incomplete way. We had already begun to look for

Last Painting (After Titian's Venus and Adonis), 1966
oil with ink on canvas, 55 1/2" x 63 3/4"
Collection of Kathy Moskal
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

Untitled (Man in Hat), c. 1958, oil on paper, 13 1/2" x 10 3/5"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

his work in other places and institutions and through writings about him. We reacquainted ourselves with work, mostly from early in Thompson's career, that is contained within the University art collection, and with the records within the Bridwell Art Library's archives on the artist.

An important reason for the blank, albeit interested, stares when mentioning Bob Thompson is that the artist has not had a focused, solo exhibition in Louisville since a memorial exhibition for him at the Speed Museum in 1971. His work was included in a small survey of Louisville African American artists that accompanied a Sam Gilliam retrospective (a fellow student at the Hite at the same time as Thompson) in the last decade, and he has occasionally been on view at the Speed Museum, represented by a handsome but small watercolor that is the only Thompson work in the Speed's collection; this constitutes the primary visibility he has had in his hometown in recent decades. In contrast is Thompson's renown nationwide: major institutions throughout the US hold multiple examples of his work, exhibitions appear regularly in New York and at other major art venues, and collectors eagerly buy, trade and sell his artwork. Still, even among his contemporaries in Provincetown and New York, as his Louisville connections, he was prone

to appear and disappear, alternating between being on stage and preforming and then being sequestered in his studio for days. His incessant trave between Louisville, New York, Provincetown, Ibiza, Paris, Rome and elsewhere within the short period of his professional life is indicative of his unwillingness to be pinned down. Perhaps, even after his death, the unrevealed nature of his relationship with his home is demonstrative of a personality always wary of being captured and defined.

The work is complex, as is the artist. Inspired by sources as diverse as Renaissance painting, Goya's etchings, and expressionist tendencies very much in the air at the time of his coming of age, Thompson combined these influences into a personal style that quickly captured the attention of a wide audience, gaining support from leading New York galleries and attracting collectors as important as Walter Chrysler. Expressing the full range of his personality, which was charming, open and engaging at the same time remaining elusive, hidden and driven by the unconscious that was his inner source of inspiration, Thompson's work is difficult to pin down. Thompson's affability and magnetism, tied to the power and intensity of his work, is attested to repeatedly by

his friends and associates. His separateness, and willingness, even compulsion, to follow a personal path, demonstrated through his biographical history, is also evident in his work with its commitment to figuration at a time when it was not in vogue. Thompson's interest in the remaking of Western art history, through examination of sources again neither popular nor expected, is another element visible in the work. Finally, Thompson's work is the visual expression of the duality contained within the artist, including both his personal joys and demons with an openness that reveals the man. A Black man succeeding in a largely white arena, confident and aggressive, yet fragile and vulnerable, Thompson both revels in freedom and is constrained by history. Engaged in the excitement and vitality of the Beat movement and helping lead the emergence of the Pop scene challenging Abstract Expressionism in New York at the time of his arrival there, Bob Thompson is a seminal figure in 20th century American art and his work reveals him as such.

With the generous assistance from the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and the Thompson estate of which Rosenfeld is the representative, and his family, particularly Robert Holmes, Jr., plus dealers such as Martha Henry, colleagues like Bill Barrell and collectors from around country, as well as from the Hite Art Institute's collection, we have put together an exhibition that spans Thompson's working life. The mix of preparatory work alongside large-scale mature expression combined with source material, biographical documents and early work done while Thompson was a student in Louisville provides visitors with an opportunity to find this remarkable artist for themselves by looking closely at his work.

Like us, we hope you find the search to be a joy. The revelations found in the work by my co-curator, Slade Stumbo, the new works unearthed locally, the integration of inspiration and personal creativity revealed, and the depth and complexity of Thompson's expression have made the search for Bob Thompson both rewarding and memorable.

John Begley, Gallery Director
Hite Art Institute

Portrait of Carol, 1958, oil on paper, 17" x 11"
Collection of Christopher Lane
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

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University of Louisville Art Collection. Gift of Donald and Judith Fiene

Seeking Bob Thompson
Chasing Seagulls

“Every artist’s problem is to invent himself.”

Robert Motherwell

Of Place and Time

Bob Thompson returned to his hometown of Louisville in 1956 after a disappointing year in Boston as a pre-med student. Upon returning home, his abiding but un-acted upon interest in art took a larger place in his life when he became involved in the Louisville art scene and enrolled in art classes at the Louisville Art Center Association School.

On April 8, 1957, *Life* magazine published an article entitled “Culture’s New Kentucky Home” that celebrated Louisville’s emergence as an urban center of art and culture.

Louisville, which for years got by adequately enough by marketing bourbon, burley tobacco, baseball bats, and the Kentucky Derby, is now producing (and hugely consuming) a new product – the lively arts in all varieties. Once described as a city full of “moth-eaten moribund ‘charm’ ” and virtually devoid of intellectual life, Louisville is caught up in a civic cultural renaissance that is without parallel in the country. (125)

In addition to the prerequisite markers of cultural refinement mentioned in the *Life* article, such as opera, symphony, the fine arts, and the theatre, Louisville also offered a thriving nightlife. Jazz, of which Bob Thompson was an avid fan, thrived in Louisville, with artists such as Wes Montgomery and Cannonball Adderley appearing at the Arts in Louisville House, where Thompson would later hold his first solo exhibition and other clubs such as the Joe’s Palm Room. The Brown Derby became a hangout, mini-gallery, and salon for African American student artists that included Sam Gilliam, Fred Bond, Ken Young, and Bob Carter as well as Thompson.

It was during this renaissance in Louisville that Bob Thompson took his first steps on the path to becoming an important figure in American art of the twentieth century.

Within the pages of this *Life* article, Bob Thompson made his national (although anonymous) debut. In a photograph of a talk on Shakespearian Theatre, the young Bob Thompson is pictured sitting in the front row. The event was presented as part of the University of Louisville’s continuing education programming and was held in the university’s new library, a building that would later become Schneider Hall, the heart and headquarters of the Hite Art Institute. After studying at the Art Center School as a non-degree student, Thompson formally enrolled as a student of the Hite Art Institute of the University of Louisville in the spring semester of 1957. (Registrar) Thompson’s aspirational shift from medicine

Mother and Child, 1959,
oil on canvas, 63” x 31”
Collection of Carol Epley, Russellville, KY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

Red, 1958, pastel on paper, 13 7/8 x 10 3/4”
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York

to fine arts was not entirely out of the blue; in a 1965 interview with Jeanne Siegel, Thompson stated:

I painted a lot from the age of 8 until about 12, but then my mother wanted me to be a doctor. But before that, I had a brother-in-law [Robert Holmes] who was in my life very early and he was a painter. So I was very attached to him, like a brother, and I started drawing with his instructions. Painting a lot, I used to get bawled out by my mother because at the time we had to use old canvas – old window shades, and I stole all the window shades in the house. And I was working on them and painting scenes out of books and I also painted some abstract pictures then too... (qtd. in Siegel 12)

Judith Wilson, in the catalog for Thompson’s 1998 Whitney retrospective also affirms this incipient interest in art when she states that Thompson was a “‘closet artist’ at Central High School” (Wilson 31)

At the Art Center and the Hite, Thompson was introduced in some depth and sophistication to the current trends in contemporary art. Of his time as an art student in Louisville, Thompson said, “... I had a beautiful education there. I worked in my own studio. Eugene [Leake], helped me with drawing...” (qtd. in Siegel 12).

It was another member of the Hite faculty who likely had the most direct influence on Thompson’s creative production, the expressionist painter and calligraphist Ulfert Wilke. Wilke taught at the Hite from 1948 until 1964, after fleeing Hitler’s Germany like several other Hite faculty such as Richard Krautheimer and Justus Bier before him. Wilke and the other German refugees on the university’s faculty may have felt a particular affinity with their African American students since they too had been marked as other, had experienced abjection and dispossession, and knew how thin the line could be between a civil and tolerant society and one that was murderously oppressive. Judith Wilson writes, “[Wilke’s] extraordinary range of knowledge, taste, and social references was irresistibly attractive to Bob Thompson.” However, Wilson also suggests that Wilke had an ambivalent relationship with Thompson.

She notes that Thompson is mentioned in only three brief entries in Wilke’s diary, none of which offer any praise of Thompson’s artistic abilities. Wilson quotes an entry in which Wilke refers to the work Thompson produced as Wilke’s studio assistant: “[T]he best he did in our studio; alone only little things developed” (qtd. in Wilson). Robert Douglas, a classmate of Thompson’s at the time who later went on to complete a Doctorate in Pan African Studies, indicates that Wilke and Thompson were closer than these entries might suggest, noting that Thompson sometimes babysat for the Wilkes (Douglas Interview). In a letter of condolence to Thompson’s mother, written upon learning of Bob Thompson’s death, Wilke refers to his deceased student as “... one of my favoured art students at the University of Louisville and who was at the same time a friend.” (Wilke Letter) Certainly, a letter of condolence is unlikely to contain harsh criticism. However, Wilke continues tenderly but with some candor, “Your son was a true artist and from the very beginning when he studied with me it was clear to me that he was an artist. He tried to comply with academic life as best as he could but his heart was all in painting.” Wilke concludes his letter with a mention of a painting that Thompson presented as a gift to his teacher after returning from a summer (1958) in Provincetown:

Jules Aarons, *Sun Gallery Window*, 1959, posthumous digital print
Courtesy the Estate of Jules Aarons

I have a small painting by Bob which he gave to me. It shows a man, perhaps himself trying to catch a seagull. He spoke about this experience he had in Provincetown. In a way it was a true self-portrait, aiming and reaching for something. Maybe in his short life he found already to some extent for what he reached. – His art stays in my memory (Wilke Letter).

The small painting that Thompson gave to Wilke is evidence of the respect, if not amity, that he had for his teacher, a sentiment that was reciprocated by Wilke through the painting’s inclusion in a 1975 exhibition of Wilke’s collection at the University of Iowa Art Museum titled *An Artist Collects: Ulfert Wilke: Selections from Five Continents* (Wilke, *An Artist Collect* 146). Wilke saw in this painting an artist reaching. Was Thompson’s gift to his teacher an act of reaching as well... asking to be understood or even stating that he himself understood something of what it was to be an artist and wanting his elder to see that in him in turn? It was, perhaps, an amicable declaration of independence, a statement by Thompson that he had found his path and would leave those who had thus far helped him behind, not as a rejection but as an act of yearning for the fragile freedom, which birds so represented for him. Bob Thompson would return to the University of Louisville for the fall semester of 1958. In 1959, Thompson relinquished his Hite Scholarship, formally withdrew from the university and moved to New York, where he rejoined the young artists whom he had met in Provincetown.

It is unclear how much of Thompson’s student work survives. Two 1957 works are in the University of Louisville Art Collection, *Partly Morbid*, an abstract depiction of potted flowers, and a small still life. Another work from Thompson’s student years, *The Family*, 1958, is in the collection of his nephew, Robert Holmes, Jr. *The Family*, a monoprint likely made as part of Thompson’s coursework in Mary Spencer Nay’s Design and Lithography class during the spring semester of 1958, is an early example of Thompson’s adaptation of traditional themes of Western art. In its biomorphic abstraction, Thompson may have been emulating the style of his teacher (Wilson). *The Family* was one of four works

Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Une Grande Future)*, 1965, ink (marker) on paper, 11" x 17"
Collection of John Frank, Stone Ridge, NY. Presented by Thompson as a wedding gift.

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

Partly Morbid, 1957. Oil on panel, 37 1/8" x 25"
University of Louisville Art Collection
Gift of Donald and Judith Fiene

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

Thompson exhibited in the 1958 Louisville Art Center Annual, which he displayed alongside the works of several of his teachers (Wilson 32).

Thompson’s university years were a time of significant transformation, when young adults who had grown up under segregation were interacting in a newly racially integrated system. Bob Thompson graduated from Central High School just prior to the racial integration of Louisville Public Schools. Louisville Public Schools were desegregated in 1956 with relative ease, garnering national attention as a model of how desegregation could occur. President Eisenhower invited Superintendent Omer Carmichael to the White House in recognition of the peaceful integration of Louisville Public Schools. Although Louisville did not erupt in the sort of violent clashes that occurred in other American cities, North and South, congratulatory statements of the city’s racial harmony oversimplify complex social interactions and efface the sometimes covert, but deeply rooted, racial prejudice (Louisville: *Look*).

Judy Fiene recalls, “At the university many of us were negotiating our first personal friendships with persons of a different race. The African-American students were a small minority. Most of us had attended segregated high schools. Mentors are always important to students, particularly in the arts. I think that Bob, Sam [Gilliam], and Bob Douglas (who can speak for himself) looked to some of the older painters in the African-American community. One of these mentors I remember is G.C. Coxe” (Fiene Interview). G. Caliman Coxe was among the first group of African-American students to graduate with a degree in the fine arts from the University of Louisville. He, like Thompson after him, was awarded the Allen R. Hite Art Scholarship. Coxe would often return to the university even after he earned his degree and was something of an elder-statesman for the young African-American artists of Thompson’s generation (Douglas interview).

Bob Thompson was one of several talented young African-American artists who studied at the University of Louisville in the 1950s. Thompson and Robert L. Douglas, both graduates of Central High School, were reunited in 1956 when they were taking classes part-time at the Art Center Association. Sam Gilliam, who had also graduated from Central High School and who completed his undergraduate degree at the Hite in 1955 and then returned for a graduate degree after two years in the service, approached Douglas with the proposition of forming a black artists group, hoping “...that if they worked together, they could change the discrimination that worked against them” (Douglas, Louisville Art 2). Douglas and Gilliam founded Gallery Enterprises in 1958. The group also included Bob Carter, Kenneth Young, Bob Thompson, and Thompson’s brother-in-law, Robert Holmes. In addition to this core group, other artists would make occasional appearances and G. C. Coxe, Fred Bond, and Eugenia Dunn would later join. The group would meet at the Brown Derby nightclub where they began to draw considerable crowds. Douglas recalls, “There were the usual ‘hangers-on’ and dilettantes as well as those aspiring to achieve what they were sure we already had. Aside from the critique sessions, there were poetry readings and even short theatrical readings done by John Wise. Wise was a theater major who hung out with us after he joined the Arts Students League. He was our only white comrade who stayed the course, although one or two others came to some of the first meetings” (Douglas, Louisville Art 6). Gallery Enterprises lasted for only three years but was the precursor for the Louisville Art Workshop. Gallery Enterprises and the efforts of its participants are evidence of the increasingly assertive and self-empowered presence of African-American artists working in Louisville in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s.

After the end of his third semester at the Hite, in the summer of 1958, Thompson and John Frank loaded their art supplies and belongings into Frank’s car and headed to Provincetown, Massachusetts. John Frank, a student of Robert Motherwell, taught at the Hite as a temporary replacement for Ulfert Wilke, who was on sabbatical. Thompson and Frank packed an old station wagon that was on its last legs to its capacity (Frank Interview). Thompson had received a scholarship to study at the Seong Moy school, where Frank taught. Thompson studied drawing there under Frank, but Frank’s assistance extended beyond the classroom. He helped Thompson find a place to live, a small shack owned by a reclusive older black man who was blind. Emilio Cruz, who was one of several young artists whom Thompson met in Provincetown, remembers:

The Family, 1958, monoprint, 20" x 5 1/2"
Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

It was difficult then to rent a place in Provincetown; only rare individuals would rent to you if you were black... Everything was arranged for him by one John Frank, who was then Bob's teacher at the University of Louisville. Things had to be arranged quite precisely or Bob's existence in Provincetown would have become quite difficult. John Frank was a sensitive and talented man who loved Bob and was proud of him as his best student. John wasn't a foolish man. He understood the realities of the present social arrangement and realized how harsh and cruel [they] could be... I, who had no one to fulfill these obligations, can testify to that fact...(B. T. Life and Friendship 112)

Thompson's shack would be the site of a number of parties and informal gatherings for a group of young artists whom Thompson met that summer, many of whom would become major influences and close friends. Among them were Jay Milder, Red Grooms, Bill Barrell, Emilio Cruz, Lester Johnson, Christopher Lane, Mimi Gross, and Anne Tabachnik .

Many of the young artists whom Thompson met that summer were students of the abstract expressionist painter, Hans Hoffman. Dody Muller advised Thompson, "Don't ever look for your solutions from contemporaries – look at Old Masters" (qtd. in Wilson 39). Thompson exhibited 13 works at the Provincetown Art Festival that summer, all of which were purchased by Walter P. Chrysler. The personal and artistic freedom that Thompson experienced that summer as well as the sense of belonging to a community of other young figurative artists who were also rebelling against the domination of Abstract Expressionism precipitated Thompson's withdrawal from the University of Louisville after the fall 1958 semester and his move to New York where Thompson lived first with Jay Milder and then with Red Grooms before finding a studio of his own.

Goya and The Sleep of Reason

"All art is a memory of age-old things, dark things, whose fragments live on in the artist."
Paul Klee

Jay Milder remembers Bob Thompson:

I knew him as a very spirited, spiritual, transcendent figure. I knew him as the messenger, the mercurial man. He used different compositions. He was very involved with the twentieth century. Not only did he use old masters, but he used Franz Kline and de Kooning. He understood Cubism, he understood the African true cubism and, vice versa, understood Jungian dream concepts. These are things we always talked about. We used to drive around in cars and invent operas. Bob mainly started it (B. T. Life and Friendship 131).

Selections from *Los Caprichos*
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
etching & aquatint on paper, 1799
Capricho N° 43: El sueño de la razón produce monstruos
(The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)

Thompson employed a diverse range of influences to express his own unique artistic vision. Thompson looked to the works of other artists for his own aesthetic pleasure and as a means of discovering the methods by which they were created. He was not, however, beholden to follow whatever rules he might discover through his observations nor did he merely replicate the narratives and themes of his source materials. Instead his was often a project of collage and synthesis in which he chose elements from aesthetic culture and combined them to see what new things might emerge. In *Expulsion and Nativity*, 1960, for instance, Thompson combines his renditions of Masaccio's *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, 1425, and Piero's *The Nativity*, 1470. (Siegel 10-11).

Thompson explored boundaries in his art as a way of working through them. It was a quest for freedom in the most general sense, one that was most overtly expressed through the birds (or bird-like creatures) that populate so many of his compositions. Birds and winged figures and forms enter Thompson's iconography at least as early as 1958 when he chased seagulls along the beach in Provincetown Mass. Thompson said that birds represented freedom:

I had a dream once where the birds sort of went like that, and swept up everything, including me, and took me away. The wind was so strong and

powerful and yet they were so free and soaring... You know how birds are. They fly. They have a certain gentleness about them and delicacy about them. Like the eagle. I think they primarily mean freedom. That force... that fantastic thing to fly! (Siegel 14).

Thompson's mention of "strong and powerful wind" and the "gentleness and delicacy" of birds indicate a subconscious recognition of forces greater than himself and the sensitivity that would be required of him as an artist, perhaps even a fragility that he rarely overtly expressed. Since the scene he describes is from a dream, the wind and the birds may represent opposing aspects of the artist's own psyche, a reservoir of deep inspiration and insight, a source of great creativity as well as self-destruction.

Thompson completed an untitled watercolor in 1958, based on a still from the 1956 French short film, *The Red Balloon*, written and directed by Albert Lamorisse. In the film, a boy is confronted with an illogical reversal of natural order when a red balloon follows him. This inversion of the real and the animistic portrayal of the inanimate balloon as a creature of will would have appealed to Thompson who explored similar themes through the course of his artistic production. In Thompson's rendition of the scene, he conveys a sense of yearning in the boy, despite the fact that the figure does not face the viewer. The boy's right hand reaches, almost tentatively, for the balloon. This subtle touch of human frailty arouses the sympathy of the viewer.

Untitled (Figure with Red Balloon). C. 1958
watercolor on paper, 13 ½" x 10 ¾"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New York, NY

However, Thompson's uncanny, shadowy figure is also a representation of monstrosity; with a lobster claw for a left hand and pointy vampiric fingers on the right, it is uncertain what one would encounter if the figure were to turn to face his audience. The paradox of the situation is that if the boy were to reach the balloon, which he seeks, his piercing fingers would pop it. Thompson paints desire and loss as inextricably bound.

In his watercolor, Thompson blends the red hues of the balloon in the airy background as well as the body of the shadowy figure, suggesting a potential union of the figure and the balloon. This union is, however, complicated by the fact that the balloon is only partially depicted. It rises beyond the top of the frame, suggesting that the balloon may drift beyond reach. Thompson's watercolor may be interpreted as a depiction of two aspects of the self: the grounded bestial self, which is a figure of want, in form of the boy; and the transcendent self, which although superior to the former in terms of intelligence and spirit, is fragile and amorphous. *The Red Balloon* may have appealed to Thompson as subject matter for his own art because of the film's final sequence in which, after bullies destroy the boy's balloon, a multitude of balloons descends upon the boy and carry him away. The film's finale is reminiscent of Thompson's dream of being carried away by birds. Thompson's deep yearning for deliverance, escape, or perhaps apotheosis emerges from his subconscious and his search for this elusive goal is recorded in his works. However, it is not a scene of transcendence or deliverance that Thompson depicts in this watercolor; rather it is the perilous process of becoming, one in which self-fulfillment lies perilously close to self-destruction.

Francisco de Goya's *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, plate 43 from *Los Caprichos*, 1798, depicts the dreaming artist slumped over his work as winged nightmares rise from his unconscious. This etching, originally intended to be the frontispiece of the series, was moved to the center prior to publication where it marks the shift from the human follies depicted in the first 43 plates and the supernatural images that proceed after it. In *Los Caprichos*, Goya questions the primacy of reason in the Enlightenment and expresses the limited applications of Enlightenment principles in 18th century Spain, where reason was rooted out by the Inquisition. Miroslav Micko describes Goya's Spain as "... a country of the most extreme social contrasts, where two thirds of the arable land belonged to the nobility and to the Church, where there were more aristocrats

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

La Caprice (aka The Forest and The Zoo), c.1963, oil on canvas, 62 1/4" x 51 1/2"
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

than artisans, where the large number of the clergy was far surpassed by the number of beggars, where the luxury and pride of the privileged classes contrasted with the misery and destitution of the people; a country full of absurdities, of medieval survivals and superstitions, stagnation and ignorance, where the educated were only a very small proportion of a nation that was almost completely illiterate” (14). Goya helped to usher in Romanticism by challenging the concept of reason with notions of individuality and imagination as integral to art and the artist. Goya writes, “fantasy abandoned by reason begets impossible monsters; united with it, it is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels” (qtd. in Micko 37).

Roberta Alford suggests that *Los Caprichos* were created not only as social commentary but also as a means for the artist to approach the absurdities and contradictions he saw around him. Alford writes, “His bats and owls are unpleasant but not nightmarish; one can only believe that they are not the actualization of his own personal fears, but of the fears of his forefathers and of his more superstitious contemporaries, for him cooled down to the point where they could be readily handled” (Alford 491-492). Similarly, Bob Thompson attempted to grapple with his personal demons and the absurdities of his own time through his artistic production. In a letter to his family, Thompson writes:

Selections from *Los Caprichos*
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
etching & aquatint on paper, 1799
Capricho Nº 46: Corrección (Correction)

The monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams; the horses are there the dancing nudes and the little man with the pie shaped hat and the earth, the earth sometimes green, purple, blue, violet, the trees orange, yellow, green, red everything my imagination tells me. I feel free – can you hear me free! To such an extent that madness is but a 3-letter toy with 4 arms 16 feet and funny noises that the children would enjoy. (Letter published 1971 Speed Catalog)

Although Thompson emphatically expresses his sense of freedom, the specter of madness lurks in his assertions despite his attempt to ridicule it, suggesting the psychic tensions that manifested themselves in dream symbols which he then transferred to the canvas.

In *La Caprice*, 1963, based on Goya's *Correction*, plate 46 of *Los Caprichos*, Thompson depicts a white-faced goat-man embracing a brown figure with a bright red smiley face. The goat man's eyes are closed as if in sleep, perhaps in love, but his green claws hold the brown form, which resembles a gingerbread man, in a way that suggests predation. This gingerbread man is, perhaps, a reference to racist sambo art, an American monster that emerges on Thompson's canvas from

Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

The Golden Ass, 1963, oil on canvas, 62 1/2" x 74, 1/2", signed and dated
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

America's 300 year sleep of reason that was the living nightmare of slavery and its repercussions. Thompson's commentary on the racial politics of the 1950s and '60s are as sophisticated, complex and engaged as Goya's observations on the politics of his day.

In 1965, pointing out a derelict in a bar to his friend, jazz saxophonist Jackie Mclean, Thompson said, “Look at that motherfucker with the crushed up face and bloody lip. Can you imagine what he must have seen? Now this is really America down here. There ain't no color, just suffering. I want to express some of that in my paintings, tell those motherfuckers how it feels out here” (Qtd. in Crouch 17). Thompson's social commentary seeks to explode the racial divisions which were for him another set of unacceptable boundaries. In his art, he sought to distill essential truths of the human experience beyond inherited notions of reality and conventional modes of classification. Thompson was not an ideologue, however. He explored multiple truths and perspectives and was drawn to hedonistic pursuits as much as intellectual ones. In *The Golden Ass*, 1963, as the pun in the title suggests, Thompson reduces the social commentary of Goya's *Los Caprichos* No. 42, *Thou Who Cannot*, and renders a scene of unapologetic sexual delight.

Judith Wilson notes, “Bob Thompson was loath to relinquish a mythic ‘universalism’ that has had special force for academically trained black practitioners of the visual arts” (69). While Thompson's wife Carol and many

Selections from *Los Caprichos*
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes
etching & aquatint on paper, 1799
Capricho Nº 42: Tú que no puedes
(Thou who cannot)

of his closest friends were white, he did not simply enter the white world and check his African heritage at the door. His was a project of synthesis and self-assertion on the canvas as well as in the diverse social scenes he inhabited. Mimi Gross recalls, “[Thompson] was obsessed with his blackness. He was obsessed with other people's whiteness. But, he wasn't obsessed in the sense that if you didn't understand it he was unkind. It was just something that was always with him” (B. T. Life and Friendship 119).

Thompson's multicolored figures have been interpreted as an attempt by the artist to complicate the rigid racial divisions of 20th-century American culture. Indeed, this is a cogent observation but oversimplifies Thompson's complex revisions of many aspects of Western art history. The multicolored figures that inhabit Thompson's canvasses are one of many interventions that Thompson makes on Western art through his appropriations of old master compositions. The complexity of Thompson's personality and his deliberate use of multiple sources, transposed color, and dream imagery suggest that he had overlapping and multiple metaphors in mind as he built his work. The multicolored figures that inhabit Thompson's canvasses are comments on his contemporary situation but also continue the questioning revisions of western art history begun by Goya.

Jay Milder notes Thompson's ability to understand and draw from a diversity of influences: “He learned from

The Entombment, 1964, oil on canvas
20" x 16", signed and dated. Private Collection
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Goya and he learned from Franz Kline, but he also learned from Ornette Coleman. I think he even learned from Shostakovich. He understood paradigms. He was like Paul Klee, understanding certain kinds of mindsets; he could get into them just like a great actor” (B. T. Life and Friendship 32). Thompson regularly visited museums and attended concerts and he was known to carefully study slides and images from art history texts. Thompson painted his act of viewing. It was a dialogic process in which he sought to express the way that he received the works he viewed. As he worked out his relationship to the works which he appropriated and the methods he adopted, he extended that dialogue to his audience, expressing not only himself, but proposing new ways of viewing art. Thompson freely synthesized his impressions of seemingly disparate sources from the visual arts as well as music. Thompson would take certain aspects of a particular artist and then imbue them with traces of another. Indeed, the influence of Gauguin can be seen in Thompson’s flattened colorful figures. The yellow body of Christ in Thompson’s *The Entombment*, 1964, after a work by the fifteenth century painter, Dieric the Elder Bouts, also refers to Gauguin’s *Yellow Christ*, 1889.

Piero and the True Cross

“Champions were [are] great liars. They had to be. Once you knew what they thought, you could hit them. So their personalities became masterpieces of concealment”
Norman Mailer

Although Thompson’s use of European old masters as source material affirms their place in the Western cultural cannon, Thompson’s paintings are neither mere reproductions nor simple homages. In Thompson’s revisions he often disrupts the original narrative, reducing the compositions to formal arrangements that he exploits for his own purposes and permeates with personal dream imagery. Thompson’s appropriation of the old masters is a significant intervention into the analysis and reception of Western art, one in which he boldly asserts his presence and thus a black presence in the highest sanctum of Western (white) cultural achievement. Thompson’s paintings have been compared to jazz with which he was deeply involved through friends and his alternative space activities at the Delancey Street Museum, where fellow artist and friend Marcia Marcus once staged a happening, A Garden, for which Thompson played music (Marcus Interview, Coker 18-21, Crouch 14). As jazz musicians improvise their music based on pop standards, Thompson used old masters as the standards upon which he painted his improvisations, twisting and manipulating them as he explored their potential to convey multiple meanings, pulling them from the rarified and distant confines of art history and bringing them into the world as he saw it. Crouch writes, “Where the Cubists were sophisticates inspired by the distortions and rhythmic power of primitive art, exploiting it for decorative purposes or for fresher and more powerful expression, Thompson’s decision to shoot primitive energy through the classical models that attracted him reversed this process. The gall of it was that Thompson placed his own work next to that of the masters he loved most, encouraging comparison with the greatest painters of all time” (Crouch 14).

Thompson’s empathetic personality was one he used to gain friends and allies and as a tool for negotiating the contradictions of the New York social scene and the art market. Thompson’s charm brought him the affection that he needed and afforded him the opportunity for self-assertion and self-promotion that would bring him notice. Crouch asserts, “Though known for his generosity, Thompson was also a charmer and manipulator, a thorough and quick reader of character

Bob Thompson, *Untitled*, 1963, oil on canvas, signed & dated,
Photo: Courtsey Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC. New York

who could always don the necessary mask. The painter radiated charisma in two worlds by juxtaposing cultural references – springing existentialist concepts on his pool-room buddies, then trumpeting motherfuckers and bitches among Caucasian aesthetes and Bohemians hungry for social spice. Or some lunkhead he hung around with to the despair of his friends would turn out to be the son of a rich collector who he was stalking” (Crouch 12).

Despite Thompson’s personal charm and his ability to move between diverse circles, black artists did not universally hail his success. His use of traditional European themes and his appropriations of the old masters may be viewed as pandering to a white audience and reproducing the hegemonic order. One artist complained, “He didn’t have any problems with white people and he didn’t present any challenges in his art, because all of his forms came from European masters. That made white people comfortable” (qtd. in Crouch 16). Crouch states, “The anger of certain black artists [toward Thompson] is worth recording, if only because we can better understand the complex of hostility that knows no racial limitations (16).

The works of Piero della Francesca provided the inspiration for many of the works of Bob Thompson. The works of Piero had captivated Thompson since his days as a student at the University of Louisville, where he wrote a term paper on the quattrocento artist. Thompson was particularly drawn to Piero’s frescoes at the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy. Thompson’s friend, musician Richard Tietelbaum was with the artist when he first viewed the frescoes in person and recalls:

Piero della Francesca (c. 1425-14920)
Proofing of the Cross, the Legend of the True Cross, 1455-1466, fresco, Basilica of San Francesco, Arezzo, IT

It was very inspirational because I had never seen anyone respond to art with such intensity. It was the most visceral experience I had ever witnessed. He was awed, angered, and challenged. He loved this work, it intimidated him, and he vowed to equal what he saw. It was beyond shaking one’s fist at fate; Thompson was shaking his fist at the weight of history, art history, a history he understood intimately and clearly, so well that his responses to it were physical and vocal. It was almost frightening to watch (qtd. in Crouch 17).

An untitled work, painted by Thompson in 1963 is based on Piero’s *The Proofing of the Cross*, 1460, from *The Legend of the True Cross* frescoes, 1452-1465, in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo, Italy. Piero’s fresco depicts a Christian legend in which the cross of Christ is found in the Holy Land and its status as a holy relic is confirmed by St. Helena, Roman empress and mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, praying before it. While Piero’s depiction of the Christian story stresses the reality of the scene in humanist, Renaissance form, Bob Thompson’s appropriation of Piero’s composition reverses the process, challenging notions of reality and suggesting unseen, unconscious truths. Although Thompson keeps Piero’s general arrangement of figures intact, he disrupts the original narrative; where Piero depicts the proofing of the cross as an actual event, Thompson presents an image of a mysterious ritual. Indeed, in Thompson’s rendition, the very subject of the legend, the cross of Christ, is transfigured as a stiff pink female nude. St. Helena, whom Piero depicts wearing a conical hat, is depicted by Thompson without any variation of color, tone, or line that would distinguish her head

from her hat so that she is distorted into a strange alien form. The brown and rust-colored figures in the foreground appear to be rooted to the earth. The rust-colored figure wearing an elongated headdress is reminiscent of North African costuming. Thompson attaches a bird beak to the brown figure and a man on the right side of the composition appears as a purple penguin. Thompson's distortion of natural form and his transgressions of category, such as human and animal, destabilize notions of the real and evoke a sense of a dream state which is furthered by the fantastic setting that is absent of reference to any actual place. Thompson's overarching theme in this work becomes the movement between realms, metamorphosis. The two figures in the foreground emerge from the earth and behind them the strange ritual is enacted. The morphology continues its ascent into the spiritual realm in the overlapping birdlike forms in the background. They progress in size with the largest of them resembling a mountain range as much as a bird. Its wings (or summits) extend beyond the top of the canvas. This suggestion of visual excess impregnates the composition with the very notion of the unseen and the ineffable, perhaps unattainable truth, which Thompson sought.

Jay Milder said:

... [R]emembering Bob is like a ritual... and Bob was very much into ritual. Bob understood ritual and he understood prayer. And, he understood that if you do it [your work] you are in it and it isn't lost. And, he was always apprehensive of losing it if he wasn't doing it. He would stay up all night painting and he'd go out for two days and not paint. He was sort of keeping the faith, keeping many faiths at the same time (B. T. Life and Friendship 132).

Finding Bob Thompson in the Dialogue with His Work

Bob Thompson painted with the voracity with which he lived. He marveled at the works of the old masters, but unsatisfied with simply receiving their messages, he insisted on responding to them and extending that dialogue to his audience. He said, "I like paintings that look the way I feel," and he painted his feelings into compositions conceived of centuries ago. Yet, he refused to be contained within traditional bounds. Time was but another barrier for him to breach. In his works, he challenged prevailing societal and artistic regulations, seeking freedom, exploring the unconscious as well as the academic to take meaning and pleasure wherever it was to be found. Through his works, Thompson

boldly asserted and inserted himself into Western culture. His works are material testaments of an artist seeking – an unrestrained experience of life, to render his demons into playthings, to express the ineffable, and to glimpse the elusive truth.

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and M.A. candidate in Curatorial and Critical Studies
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Biography of Bob Thompson

Robert Louis (Bob) Thompson was born on June 6th, 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky to Cecil Dewitt and Bessie S. Thompson. The Thompsons were an educated, tight-knit, entrepreneurial family. Soon after Bob's birth, the family moved to Elizabethtown, Kentucky where his father opened a chain of dry cleaners. Bob and his father Cecil were very close. Within the family, the elder Thompson was known as "Big Shot" and his son, Bob, as "Shot." This close bond was abruptly broken in 1950 when Cecil Thompson was killed in an automobile accident. Soon after his father's death, Bob began to be plagued by a series of illnesses, perhaps precipitated by the trauma of losing his father. Fearing for the boy's health, the Thompson family agreed that Bob should live with his sister Cecile and her husband Robert Holmes in Louisville. Bob lived with the Holmes family until he graduated from Central High School in 1955.

The following summer, while visiting another sister, Phyllis, in Cambridge Massachusetts, Bob enrolled in Boston College's premed program on full scholarship through the Reserve Officer's Training Corps. Thompson remained in Boston only through completion of his freshman year, after which he returned to his hometown of Louisville. Upon his return, he enrolled in classes at the Art Center Association School and began his formal training in the fine arts. Thompson enrolled in the Department of Fine Arts, also known as the Hite Art Institute, at the University of Louisville in spring of 1957 and was awarded a full Allen R. Hite Art Scholarship that fall. He would continue to be awarded the scholarship until he formally relinquished it in early 1959 in a letter to the department chair explaining that he felt it necessary to move to New York to pursue painting fulltime. There he lived and worked with Jay Milder and Red Grooms whom he had met the previous summer.

In 1958, encouraged and aided by several University faculty including Ulfert Wilke, Mary Nay and John Frank, Thompson summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he met a number of young artists, Milder, Grooms and many others, who were studying with various teachers there including Seong Moy and Hans Hofmann. The friendships and influences gained there were central to his artistic development. These younger generation artists, of which he was an important part that summer, were

reluctant to follow the dominant abstract expressionist style and instead remained committed to a figurative expressionism and engagement in a variety of cross-disciplinary "pop" culture activities.

It was that summer in Provincetown when Thompson would gain the attention of his first major collector; Walter P. Chrysler purchased all thirteen works that the artist exhibited in the Provincetown Art Festival. After Thompson moved to New York in 1959, he exhibited his works in several alternative space venues, such as the Delancey St. Museum, the Friendly Art Store, and the City Gallery. Early in his New York residency, Thompson participated in some of the country's earliest happenings, collaborating with Red Grooms, Allen Kaprow, and Marcia Marcus, among others. By the early 1960's, he had secured solo shows at the Martha Jackson Gallery demonstrating the acclaim that the artist was quickly receiving. in his lifetime. At the first Jackson show opening, in 1963, Thompson was greeted by a crowd chanting "We want Bob!" and the second, in 1965, broke all attendance records for the gallery at the time.

During the 1960's, Bob Thompson also spent considerable time in Europe. He and his wife Carol travelled to London in 1961 funded by a grant from Walter Gutman, and their stay was extended thanks to a Guggenheim Fellowship the artist received in 1962. The couple lived on Ibiza until they returned to New York for Thompson's solo exhibition at Martha Jackson. Other shows in leading galleries in Detroit and Chicago soon followed his New York successes. Thompson returned to Europe in late 1965 and died in Rome in May of 1966, on his second extended stay in Europe, less than a decade after beginning his career as an artist.

In this brief career he made an indelible mark on American art of the twentieth century, becoming a leader in transforming the critical dialogue about painting in the early 1960's. A driven personality, Thompson produced well over a thousand significant works. Now included in the collections of America's preeminent art museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago, MOMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Smithsonian, as well as many others, Thompson's interests and artwork pre-figured and predicted many of the issues and ideas that occupied artists for the rest of the twentieth century.

Checklist of Works
Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object

Works by Bob Thompson:

1.) Still Life, c. 1957-1958
oil on panel
11 7/8" x 15 ¾"
University of Louisville Art Collection

2.) Partly Morbid, 1957
oil on panel
37 1/8" x 25"
University of Louisville Art Collection
Gift of Donald and Judith Fiene

3.) The Family, 1958
monoprint
20" x 5 ½"
Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

4.) Red, 1958
pastel on paper
13 7/8 x 10 ¾"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

5.) Untitled (Figure with Red Balloon). C. 1958
watercolor on paper
13 ½" x 10 ¾"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

6.) Untitled (Man in Hat), c. 1958
oil on paper
13 ½" x 10 3/5
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

7.) Portrait of Carol, 1958
oil on paper
17" x 11"
Collection of Christopher Lane
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

8.) Landscape, c. 1958
watercolor & pastel on paper
13 ¼" x 18 ¼"
Collection of Rita Salzman
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP,
New York, NY

9.) Untitled (Man in Forest), c. 1958
charcoal on paper
11 7/8" x 17 ¾"
Collection of Kyle Staver, Brooklyn, NY

10.) Untitled (Tondo), undated
brushed ink on paper
20 5/8" x 27 ½"
University of Louisville Art Collection, Louisville KY

11.) Wilting Flower, 1959
oil on canvas
66" x 45"
Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

12.) Mother and Child, 1959
oil on canvas
63" x 31"
Collection of Carol Epley, Russellville, KY

13.) Untitled [MR163], 1959
oil on canvas
49" x 35 1/2", signed and dated
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

14.) Untitled, (Bather with Red Bird), 1960
oil on board
40" x 29 ¾"
Collection of Robert Holmes Jr., Louisville, KY

15.) Salome's Dance or Feast of Herod, 1962
oil on canvas
36" x 51.5"
Private Collection
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP
New York, NY

16.) Untitled (Green Birds White figure), 1962
gouache on paper
21 ¼" x 18"
Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

17.) Untitled [MR43], 1963
oil on canvas
63" x 86 1/2", signed and dated
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

18.) The Golden Ass, 1963
oil on canvas
62 1/2" x 74 1/2", signed and dated
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

19.) La Caprice (aka The Forest and The Zoo), c.1963
oil on canvas
62 1/4" x 51 1/2"
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

20.) The Entombment, 1964
oil on canvas
20" x 16", signed and dated
Private Collection
Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC,
New York, NY

21.) Untitled (Une Grande Future), 1965
ink (marker) on paper
11" x 17"
Collection of John Frank, Stone Ridge, NY

22.) Last Painting (After Titian's Venus and Adonis),
1966
oil with ink on canvas
55 ½" x 63 ¾"
Collection of Kathy Moskal
Courtesy of Martha Henry Fine Arts & SHFAP, New
York, NY

23.) Study for Last Painting, 1966
Graphite and ink on paper
13 ½" x 13 ¾"
Collection of Manhattan Art Investments, Boca
Raton, FL

Works by other artists:

24.) Bill Barrell & Bob Thompson
Joint Effort, 1963
oil on paper
23 ¾" x 18 ¾"
Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

25.) Bill Barrell
Homage to Bob Thompson, 1966
Oil on canvas
43" x 60"
Collection of Bill Barrell, Easton, PA

Francisco de Goya
Selections from *Los Caprichos*, Francisco de Goya y
Lucientes, etching & aquatint on paper, 1799:
26.) Capricho № 42: Tú que no puedes (Thou who
cannot)
27.) Capricho № 43: El sueño de la razón produce
monstruos (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters)
28.) Capricho № 46: Corrección (Correction)
29.) Capricho № 57: La filiación (The filiation)
30.) Capricho № 72: No te escaparás (You will not
escape)

Jules Aarons, 1921-2008
Photographs (digital prints)
Provincetown Art Association and Museum,
Provincetown, MA
31.) Man & Face, 1959
32.) Sun Gallery, Figure in Door, 1959
33.) Sun Gallery, Figures Passing, 1959
34.) Sun Window, 1959
35) Sun Gallery, 6 People in Window, 1959

All images of the works of Bob Thompson are
reproduced courtesy of the Michael Rosenfeld
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Selected list of institutions housing
the works of Bob Thompson

Anderson Gallery, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, NY
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, AR
Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center,
University of California, Los Angeles, CA
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY
California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR
Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME
The Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville FL
Dayton Art Institute, Dayton, OH
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY
Herter Art Gallery, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN
LaJolla Museum of Art, LaJolla, CA
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN
Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, NY
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Museum of the National Center of Afro American Artists, Boston, MA
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, NC
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, NJ
New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
The Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY
The Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, DC
The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA
University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, CT
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Acknowledgements

The Hite Art Institute deeply appreciates and thanks the following
galleries and individuals for their generous assistance in the
assembly of this exhibition:

The Estate of Bob Thompson
Hailey Harrisberg, Director, Michael Rosenfeld
Gallery, LLC, NY
Martha Henry, Director, Martha Henry Fine Arts &
SHFAP, NY
Robert Holmes, Jr., and the Holmes family
The Estate of Jules Aarons & the Provincetown Art
Center
Maurice Vanderwoude, Manhattan Art Investments,
LLC
and other anonymous private collections

Dr. Dario Covi and Madeline Covi
Gail Gilbert
Dr. Robert Douglas
Henry Heuser
Bill Barrell
Carol Epley
John Frank
Christopher Lane
Rita Salzman
Kyle Staver
Drs. Don and Judy Fiene
Delinda Buie
Marcia Marcus
Yvonne Anderson
Nick Wilke
James Zimmerman
Logan County Archives
Logan County Public Library
Western Kentucky University
Karen Shafts
Andrew Hottle
Pat de Groot
Iris Samson
Warren Payne
Brent Oglesbee
Jerzy Kolodziej
Thelma Golden
Dr. Jongwoo Jeremy Kim

Judith Wilson-Pates, whose scholarship on Bob Thompson is
the nucleus for most of what has followed and whose generous
advice and consultation has been invaluable to this project.

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Graphic Design, 2-D Design

John Whitesell, MFA
Professor
Printmaking, 2-D Design

Adjunct faculty

Madeleine Burnside, PhD
Director
Frazier International
History Museum

Charles Venable, PhD
Director
Speed Art Museum

Professor Emeriti

Donald Anderson, MFA
Thomas Buser, PhD
H. Stow Chapman, MArch
Henry Chodkowski, MFA
Dario Covi, PhD
Julia Duncan, MA
Linda Gigante, PhD
Jay Kloner, PhD
Stephanie Maloney, PhD
Suzanne Mitchell, MFA
William Morgan, PhD
Nancy Percy, MA

Part-time Faculty

Dac Austin, MA
Lexi Bass, MA
Michael Brohm, MA
Steven Cheek, MFA
Jennifer Dumesnil, BS
Wendy Dunleavy, MA
Tracey Eckersley, MA
Brooke Leeton, MA
Bill Gilliss, MArch
Matthew Landrus, DPhil
Sharon Leightty, MFA
John McCarthy, MA
Erin Miller, BFA
Jeffrey Randall, MS
Bess Reed, PhD
Mark Rosenthal, MA
James Southard, MFA
Dennis Whitehouse, MFA

Staff

Theresa Berbet, MA
Academic Coordinator, Senior

Janice Blair
Program Assistant, Senior
Art History

Dario Covi, PhD
Curator
Art Collection

Amy Fordham, MA, MLIS
Curator of Visual Resources

Renée Murphy, BFA
Program Assistant

Claire Pope, MA
Gallery Assistant
Cressman Center for
Visual Arts

Linda Rowley
Unit Business Manager

University of Louisville

The University of Louisville is a state supported research university located in Kentucky's largest metropolitan area. It was a municipally supported public institution for many decades prior to joining the university system in 1970. The University has three campuses. The 287-acre Belknap Campus is three miles from downtown Louisville and houses seven of the university's 11 colleges and schools. The Health Sciences Center is situated in downtown Louisville's medical complex and houses the university's health related programs and the University of Louisville Hospital. On the 243-acre Shelby Campus is located in eastern Jefferson County.

Mission statement: The University of Louisville shall be a premier, nationally recognized metropolitan research university with a commitment to the liberal arts and sciences and to the intellectual, cultural, and economic development of our diverse communities and citizens through the pursuit of excellence in five interrelated strategic areas: (1) Educational Experience, (2) Research, Creative, and Scholarly Activity, (3) Accessibility, Diversity, Equity, and Communication, (4) Partnerships and Collaborations, and (5) Institutional Effectiveness of Programs and Services.

College of Arts and Sciences

The mission of the College of Arts and Sciences is to improve life in the Commonwealth and particularly in the greater Louisville urban area, creating knowledge through its research, sharing knowledge through its teaching, and guiding all its students to realize their potential.

We believe that an excellent education in the liberal arts and sciences is the best preparation for life and work in a world of increasing diversity and ever-accelerating change because it prepares our graduates to be informed and critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and confident communicators.

Our students learn by doing: They conduct research and express their creativity, include ethical considerations in their thinking, and experience the world from the perspectives of other cultures. The College brings the heritage of the intellectual tradition to bear on the challenges of the future.

Untitled [MR163], 1959, oil on canvas, 49" x 35 1/2". Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY