Welcome to episode 90: Alma Woodsey Thomas: Constructing the Natural World

Some of the most beautiful traditional gardens composed and painted are filled with bursting flowerbeds. One of my favorites is 19th century painting, "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose" by John Singer Sargent. His composition of carefully arranged models, two young girls, the daughters of the illustrator Federick Barnard--Groupings of wide-mouthed trumpet like white lilies seemingly release their fragrance as the light begins to fade. The girls are preoccupied with Japanese paper lanterns, by their feet, a spray of wildflowers brush against their dresses, in the far right, tightly wound petals of pink roses. For me, what makes this painting so captivating is the visible brushstrokes; they are the fingerprints of the artist, and that sense of light as it washes away into the threshold of dusk. I revel in every moment when I step into the space between myself and verdant landscapes like the Sargent painting. That tangibility of paint is what I most revel. I am being swallowed into a world, experiencing it the way the artist does. And I suspect the reason, a reservoir of emotions always swell within me.

What if you could walk through a garden from above? As high as a bird swimming across a light filled day? What shapes and forms and colors would you be able to detect? Would you be able to recognize individual flowers or plants?

The 20th century painter Alma Woodsey Thomas conveyed gardens through a mosaic patches arranged in concentric circles or stripes. Her works or constructed images are this fascinating marriage of her inspirations: horticulture, scientific color theory and music, particularly jazz. The result are are brilliantly fractured abstractions of methodically layered patches or small bars of bright colors applied thickly onto spacious backgrounds---unlike the paintings by Sargent she abandoned realism completely, depending solely on color and form.

In her work, 1976, Red Azaleas Jubilee, Thomas constructs her composition from a palette of vivid red and through lines and shapes, a repetition of forms that cover the large scale canvas. There is no foreground, middle ground or background. You do not step into the pathways of red azaleas, you are planted firmly above. their funnel shaped flowers are pressed into irregular patterns, and like the Sargent painting, you can see and feel the effects of light--in Red Azaleas Jubilee, a profuse, full sunlight blazes onto the landscape. The sounds of her garden, have been described as a "syncopating rhythm comparable to the minimalist jazz piano of Ahmad Jamal." Red Azaleas Jubilee is part of the collection at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford. I have embraced this work visually on many occasions. It illustrates Thomas' adventurous range and her way of improvising what a garden looks like, smells, feels like as you walk through its paths. This work is big in scale, the red is bold. Her work is entirely dependent on strokes: small, rough patches laid down in dense, eccentric patterns on painted canvas grounds. This becomes her signature style which she developed much later in her career--she was influenced by the Washington Color painters, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, but they developed staining techniques in their work, she did not distance herself from the gestures of the hand.

To be honest, as I crafted this podcast episode, I found myself struggling to truly translate what I experience in Alma Thomas painting. I think my loss for words may be a result of our times--Covid-19 pandemic stripped from my routine of experiencing the visual arts in museums and collections. I rely on the digital image and my memory--that tangibility of paint that I mentioned earlier--that sensual experience is fading.

So I turned to poets and writers for some help. Like the poet Mary Oliver who spent her life walking in nature and in gardens and amongst trees. She wrote from her book , "Upstream" One tree is like another tree, but not too much. One tulip is like the next tulip, but not altogether--a general outline, then the stunning individual strokes." Aahhh! That is what I experience in Thomas' painting--we get to walk atop those "stunning individual strokes" those individual patches--"across, what Oliver describes in her walks in nature, "the heaven-verging field." We get to live in Thomas' vision, an adventurous joy to be lost in color and texture and on the edge of those compressed shapes and forms---we are in that moment of full bloom.

Another writer, contemporary author Melina Rudman, from her book "Sacred Soil: A Gardener's Book of Reflections: describes the garden as a "human attempt to contain and plan Nature." Nature sometimes humors us for a time, but never for very long. For every promise of spring, there are summer disappointments, and the reckoning of autumn when mistakes and the scars of the land laid bare. I have become the keeper of a particular bit of the planet; I live and work in and on it, and it lives and works in and on me." That garden by Sargent, there is story behind that composition. --behind the painting, the process of composing the work. This is from the Tate Museum, "He worked on the picture, one of the few figure compositions he ever made out of doors in the Impressionist manner, from September to early November 1885, and again during the summer of 1886, completing it sometime in October. Sargent was able to work for only a few minutes each evening when the light was exactly right. He would place his easel and paints beforehand, and pose his models in anticipation of the few moments when he could paint the mauvish light of dusk. As autumn came and the flowers died, he was forced to replace the blossoms with artificial flowers. In essence Sargent presents to us contained beauty somewhat artificially, not in a serendipitous moment as convey on the canvas. Thomas evokes in her gardens the contained beauty of a syncopated rhythm, inspired by jazz music. on the rigidity of a canvas. What Thomas evokes in her gardens, and she has done other paintings, is that syncopated rhythm, inspired by jazz music.

I believe what Thomas offers us the viewer is to see and experience and be transported by the nuances of what we think a garden is, what we don't see are the cycles of nature as implied by the author Rudman which she sums up as "Much of my time in the garden is spent waiting." Thomas' garden does not dwell in vernal cycle of nature. She once said, "I've never bothered painting the ugly things in life… no,” “I wanted something beautiful that you could sit down and look at.” Her paintings offers us a wide embrace to the physical and the transcendent; she employs unfettered optimism and generosity of spirit, an invigorating antidote to what I see as current pervading anxious negativity. Mysterious Beauty, strategically placed--the entire surface of her garden inspires a sense of wonder.

Born in Georgia in 1891, was a graduate of Howard University, taught art in the Washington D C public school system. It was after her retirement she pursued a career as an artist and began to paint seriously, finding her signature style, abstracting shapes and patterns from the trees and flowers around her. She had abandoned realism, dependent solely on color and form. In 1972 six years before her death she became the first African American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. What was fascinating about Thomas was her attitude towards race, as a black woman artist she encountered barriers, but "she did not turn to racial or feminist issues in her art, believing rather than the creative spirit is independent of race or gender." Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, author and art historian, wrote, "Man's highest aspirations come from nature. A world without color would seem dead. Color is life. Light is the mother of color. Light reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors." Thomas' exploration of color and form and rhythm leaves us with luminous abstract works that complicates the idea of what we think of "gestural" abstraction, the personal expression as we learned even in Impressionistic works like the Sargent painting, there is expressiveness in Thomas' painting but it is constructed. As I read in a NY Times article, "its a construction, a sort of funky one." As you look and contemplate Thomas' painting, as you hover above that sea of swelling mosaic of reds may you experience the exuberance she sought and explored in the natural world.

Thank you for listening. Resources for this podcast episode include, Mary Oliver, Upstream, Melina Rudman, The Wadsworth Athenaeum, The Tate Museum, the Studio Museum--links are in the podcast notes. You can see works discussed on my website at beyondthepaint.net and on Instagram @beyondthepaintpodcast. Thank you