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Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy

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Thompson realized that vitality was the only answer to the mystery of being... The mystery of vitality beyond analysis is the central achievement of art because it has always proved that humanity is capable of creating living works that do not lose force when their maker meets the big darkness of death. [...] Thompson was an artist of big and foreboding passion, a man whose involvement with his era could be humorous but was never about trying to elevate himself above the human shortcomings and frailties inherent in life.
—Stanley Crouch

[In] a twisted sort of way I am doomed to be buried alive in cadmium orange, red, yellow light with flowers on my grave of magenta violet, and my casket being the canvas for forcefully having to wrap, walk and slide into it every day like the wan Prussian blue shore...
—Bob Thompson

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is pleased to announce *Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy*, a solo exhibition and career survey. Presenting major works from each year of the artist's mature practice, 1958–1966, the exhibition demonstrates the extreme polarities of Thompson's oeuvre, in which a broad range of art historical references converge through his portrayal of subjects both deeply personal and heroically universal. In addition to over fifteen paintings and a selection of works on paper, *Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy* includes a special installation of archival photographs and sketchbooks, offering an in-depth look at Thompson's artistic process.

In a tragically brief life, Bob Thompson (1937–1966) created a complex body of work structured by his own symbolic lexicon, fauvist palettes, and compositional devices drawn from the European Old Master tradition. As inspired by the improvisational riffs of jazz as he was by the formal devices of Fra Angelico, Poussin, and Tintoretto, Thompson's viscerally executed paintings conjure a psychedelic allegory of his own experience. During the years he lived in New York, the artist was deeply immersed in the avant-garde scene of Manhattan's Lower East Side, participating in Fluxus happenings, befriending poets Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and frequenting legendary jazz clubs, especially the Five Spot and Slugs' Saloon.

Titled after Irving Stone's 1961 biographical novel of Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy* demon-



Bob Thompson (1937–1966), *The Golden Ass*, 1963, oil on canvas, 62 1/2 x 74 1/2 inches / 158.8 x 189.2 cm, signed

strates the impassioned fervor with which Thompson pursued his vision in defiance of prevailing social limitations; where the Renaissance sculptor saw an angel in a slab of marble and carved until he set him free, Thompson saw himself in the canon of Western painting and revised, collaged, and electrified its components until the spark of life manifested on his canvas. Put in modern terms, Thompson was a quintessential Beat,³ as Thelma Golden submits in her text for the artist's 1998 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, especially as it was defined by Lisa Philips' exhibition on the movement mounted at the museum three years earlier, which included Thompson's 1965 portrait of Ginsberg:

*The search for alternative consciousness, the mystical side of the Beats, goes hand in hand with their gritty realism and rebellion. These two sides—the ecstatic and the horrific, the beatific and the beaten, define the poles of the Beat experience.*⁴

By turns volcanically hot and fluorescently cool, the kaleidoscopic palettes of Thompson's paintings embody the hallucinatory ethos of his moment while the formal schema drawn from the historical masterworks he obsessively studied ground his subjects in familiar narratives of tragedy, adoration, and rebellion. Often set in a pastoral countryside or dense woodlands, Thompson's scenes are populated by Madonnas and saints, monstrous birds, anthropomorphic donkeys, shadowy men in fedoras, and more. "Thompson's distortion of natural form and his transgressions of category, such as human and animal,"



Bob Thompson, November 30, 1963, Photographer: Fred McDarrah

writes curator Slade Stumbo, “destabilize notions of the real and evoke a sense of a dream state which is furthered by the fantastic setting that is absent of any reference to any actual place. Thompson’s overarching theme in this work becomes the movement between realms, metamorphosis.”⁵

Highlights of *Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy* include five large-scale paintings dating to a landmark year in the artist’s practice, 1963, which exemplify his radical approach and constitute a culmination of his travels in Europe from the spring of 1961 to the fall of 1963—his first journey to the continent. Dramatic tableaux of enigmatic interactions and sparse, set-like environs that focus attention on the figures of such works as *Untitled (The Proofing of the Cross)* and *The Nativity* revise the central action of their 15th-century referents to compose a scene that embodies the artist’s own desires and fears. Thompson’s extensive engagement with the works of Spanish Romanticist Francisco Goya reaches its pinnacle in *The Struggle*, *The Dentist*, and *Tribute to An American Indian*, which appropriate select forms from Goya’s *Los Caprichos* (1799), a set of eighty prints composed as an allegory for the follies of Spanish society; executed during an inflection point in the Civil Rights Movement, many of Thompson’s works suggest a parable of racial identity shaped by the blood-soaked history of his home nation.

A child of the Jim Crow South and husband in an interracial marriage, Thompson felt the sociopolitical upheavals of his moment with heightened intensity. Structured by his own deeply personal symbolic vocabulary, Thompson’s rhapsodic compositions offer dramatic narratives centered on the extreme emotional states of his lived experience. Encapsulating the overarching trajectory of his career while providing a primer on his complex set of references and symbols, *Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy* celebrates this unparalleled artist’s oeuvre while deepening our understanding of his life and art. “I paint many paintings that tell me slowly that I have something inside of me that is just bursting, twisting, sticking, spilling over to get out,” Thompson once wrote in a letter to his sister. “Out into souls & mouths & eyes that have never seen before. The Monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams.”⁶

Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring new scholarship by Classicist Allannah Karas, Assistant Professor at the University of Miami, and Diana Tuite, Visiting Senior Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Iowa’s Stanley Museum of Art. Tuite is the curator of the critically acclaimed retrospec-

tive *Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine* at the Colby College Museum of Art in Waterville, Maine, which recently concluded its nationwide tour at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles after stops at the Smart Museum in Chicago and the High Museum in Atlanta.

Bob Thompson: Agony & Ecstasy is Michael Rosenfeld Gallery’s sixth exhibition focused on Thompson and the first solo exhibition mounted since acquiring the estate in 2019. A concurrent exhibition featuring works from public and private collections, *Bob Thompson: So let us all be citizens*, will be on view at 52 Walker from April 20–July 8, 2023. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery’s relationship with the work of Bob Thompson dates to 1996, when the gallery took on representation of the estate and mounted *Bob Thompson: Heroes, Martyrs & Spectres*. Three more solo exhibitions followed: *Fantastic Visions* (1999), *Meteor in a Black Hat* (2005)—which traveled to the Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University in Milwaukee—and *Naked at the Edge*. Following twenty-three years of representation, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery acquired the Estate of Bob Thompson in 2019, a tremendous procurement that included all remaining works in the family’s possession, numerous artist sketchbooks and the artworks’ intellectual property rights.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC is the exclusive representative of the Estate of Bob Thompson.

About Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is recognized for modern and contemporary art. Established in 1989, the gallery was born to promote American artists who have expanded the breadth and depth of modernism through contributions to surrealism, social realism, abstract expressionism, figurative expressionism, and geometric abstraction. For over three decades, the gallery has presented an ambitious and diverse exhibition program informed by a progressive vision and a broad understanding of art history. Through the rediscovery and recontextualization of works by a range of important twentieth-century artists, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery demonstrates an ongoing commitment to expanding the canon of American art.

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is a member of the Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA).

1 Stanley Crouch, “Still Ahead,” *Bob Thompson: Meteor in a Black Hat*, exh. cat. (New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 2005) p. 6–7

2 Bob Thompson, from a letter to his family quoted in Gylbert Coker, *The World of Bob Thompson*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978) p. 21

3 Thelma Golden, *Bob Thompson*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1998) p. 22

4 Lisa Philips, “Beat Culture: America Revisioned” in *Beat Culture and the New America, 1950–1965*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1995) p. 33

5 Slade Stumbo, “Seeking Bob Thompson: Chasing Seagulls,” in *Seeking Bob Thompson: Dialogue/Object*, exhibition catalogue (Louisville: Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville, 2012), 19–20.

6 Bob Thompson, from a letter to his sister quoted in Gylbert Coker, *The World of Bob Thompson*, exh. cat. (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978) p. 21–22