Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Jonathan Thomas / MATRIX 122
September 30 - November 14, 1993

Tumbling, 1993
Photo: Dorothy Zeidman

MATRIX is supported in part by funds from Aetna Life & Casualty and by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.
Art can be about anything, and it can employ whatever means it wishes to succeed to that intention; art must be judged by how well it succeeds to its intention and whether that intention is worth the trouble of succeeding to. Lesser art does little to disturb the status quo; it is, of course, equally true that art which disturbs, provokes, renunciates, or tries to do serious damage to established artistic coherence does not necessarily succeed in moving out of the "lesser" status simply by its aggressiveness.

What must happen for art to become a major factor in our aesthetic perceptions is that it must expand (relocate?) our judgmental boundaries and, at the same time, be a "moral" act, in that it allows the logics and coherencies of art to affect -- and effect -- our responses to the world around us and its quandaries.

To the extent that we permit the arts to impinge upon our consciousness we are altered; our perceptions are either honed or dulled and our moral comprehensions are either broadened or diminished. Art can enliven, and art can kill.

**THE USES OF ART**

It shocks me every time I write of these matters that I need do so, but as I see the chasm between what is desired and what is to be desired in the arts deepening, the mind-deadening excesses of our popular entertainments, and the lemming-like drive by our majority critics toward middlebrowism, I see that the battle is never unjoined, that there need be -- perhaps at best -- a holding action against the corruption of our arts values.

The concept that "high art" need be a minority participation in a democracy stems, we must assume, from the appalling lack of arts education in this country; otherwise, we must assume that we are populated by philistines and the retarded. We know that this latter is not so, and we keep hoping that what can be will be.

Institutions like the Wadsworth Atheneum through its MATRIX program, can help tilt the balance in the direction of sustained and useful dialogue between those who make art and those for whom they take the trouble, if you will. The MATRIX program has been going on for a long time now, and has exposed the public to a host of provocative, innovative, disturbing and thoroughly fine artists. It has served the noble double function of presenting the artists to a larger public and broadening the public's awareness of the possibilities of art.
Which brings us to Jonathan Thomas -- an artist who fulfills the criteria mentioned earlier, who combines audacity, intelligence and talent in equal parts. Even a quick look at his work will make it evident that more is going on than meets the eye and mind at first glance. Exactly what are these paintings about, these elegant, brooding, somber abstractions which suddenly become -- in revealing their materials -- disturbing messages, private and yet communicative, and which then go on to re-become what we first apprehended, though deepened?

It is this vibration -- this cross fade -- between the explicit and the implicit, between the totality and its construction, which gives these paintings their disturbing magic.

The varying sizes of the paintings determine the order of response. The huge Big Black Upright (1992) will not reveal its methods until after its sum has accosted one; American Descent (1991) must go through three stages of approach: before its particulars come into focus one must penetrate first either its symbolisms or its overall presence; while Study Number Twelve (1992) or its equally small brother paintings seem to want to be viewed in the reverse -- elements first, totality after.

Thomas did not come to painting as a profession as young as some do. While it is true that he painted and drew as an adolescent -- portraits of dogs and other family members -- his university studies in pure mathematics and art history led him to a period of absorption and consideration: dance and architecture occupied him -- as forms as much as art -- and it was not until several years after he finished his formal training that he realized painting -- as practice, though not as a limiting definition (he has made sculpture) -- should be his life's work.

I have watched the development of his art carefully now for over fifteen years -- in his studio, and in his continuing museum and gallery exposures -- and I am convinced that he has come strongly into his own, has matured into a complexity of substance and effect both intellectually challenging and aesthetically satisfying.

To my mind, the flow of dance, the solidity of architecture, the logic of mathematics and the accesses of art history have combined in his work to allow the creation of highly individual art.

His early work -- an examination of the conclusions of the Constructivists -- was, inevitably, I suspect, provoked by Thomas's university focus on pure mathematics. He moved then to explore the implications and resonances of the stuttering Cubism of Balla and Severini, and -- most importantly -- Marcel Duchamp's Nude Descending a Staircase (1911). The process then was what I would define as a kind of
intellectually controlled abstract expressionism.

Thomas has always been deeply interested in what art does to us, not merely what it does for us. And in his new work has humped full mind and talent into an examination of the conditioning of our responses by the media, of the mind-deadening effect of commercial advertising -- how the repetition of image and idea has become the reality determinant of our era.

This is merely a starting place for Thomas, however. He is not content with art as social commentary, or even philosophical examination; he is determined to make art which functions as art on its own terms, and it is this double strategy which enables his work to escape the art traps referred to earlier.

Starting with such commonplace objects as men's underwear, jeans, etc. -- everywhere with us; billboards, T.V. -- he has transmuted these almost entirely out of context (see Picasso's sculpture of the bull's head made from bicycle parts, for example), using them as a painting surface. They move back and forth intellectually between what they were and what they have become. While so many contemporary artists are imitating the recent artistic past, turning it into a kind of commerce, Thomas is beginning with commercial excess and redefining it as art.

Geometric elements are imposed on the painting surface; entire areas are indented or incised (see Figures Descending, 1991); the painting surfaces often resemble metal (see Monochrome Fall, 1991). Glue, wood, cloth, and paint meld to produce an organic whole greater than the sum of the parts. In a way, these paintings resemble sculpture -- relief, certainly. They cannot be "entered" as most painting can; the interplay of falling and supporting elements is intentionally two-dimensional.

The resulting experience is art which is not "poetic" in a limiting sense, but is confrontational, ironic and complex. Thomas's work must be experienced comprehensively for its full effect: a mere glance does it little justice. What is essential is the intense presence of the viewer in the intense presence of the art.

Edward Albee
New York City
1993
PLEASE NOTE:
Distinguished playwright and MATRIX guest curator Edward Albee will share his observations on recent developments in contemporary art and then will lead a conversation with Jonathan Thomas on Sunday, October 17, 1993, at 2:00 p.m. in The Hartford Courant Room. A reception in honor of Mr. Albee and Mr. Thomas will follow the talk. This event is free with museum admission.
Works in MATRIX:

All works are lent courtesy of the artist, NYC.

American Descent, 1991, synthetic polymer, cloth on wood, 60" x 46".
Figures Descending, 1991, synthetic polymer, cloth on wood, 60" x 40".
Monochrome Fall, 1991, synthetic polymer, cloth on canvas, 60" x 96".
Tumbling, 1993, synthetic polymer, cloth on wood, 60" x 40".

Madison Avenue Altar #1, 1991, synthetic polymer, cloth on wood, 48" x 72".

Madison Avenue Altar #2, 1991, synthetic polymer, cloth on wood, 48" x 72".

Study #3, 1992, synthetic polymer, cloth on canvas, 24" x 20".
Study #12, 1992, synthetic polymer, cloth on canvas, 24" x 20".
Study #28, 1992, synthetic polymer, cloth on canvas, 24" x 20".
Acrobats #2, 1992, synthetic polymer, cloth on linen, 60" x 96".
Big Black Upright, 1992, synthetic polymer, cloth on linen, 96" x 60".

Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

Betty Parsons Gallery, NYC '77, '80, '82; Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles, CA '77, '79; Marianne Friedland Gallery, Toronto, Canada '79, '81, '88; Paul Mellon Center for the Arts, Choate Rosemary Hall, Wallingford, CT '79; Jack Tilton Gallery, NYC '85; Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, '87.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

Betty Parsons Gallery, NYC New Talent (Guirey, Moore, Thomas) '76, Small Paintings '78, Group Drawing '83; Guild Hall Museum, East Hampton, NY Painting '76, Group Painting Show '83; Newspace Gallery, Los Angeles, CA New Painting '77; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Orange County, CA Painting Show '78; Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA New
York: A Selection '79; Harbourfront Center Contemporary Galleries, Toronto, Canada Four Canadian Artists Living in New York '79; Norton Gallery of Art, West Palm Beach, FL Material Matters '80; The Clocktower, Institute of Art and Human Resources, NYC Four Painters with Three Sculptors '80; Spoleto Festival, Charleston, SC Concrete Proposals '80; Stamford Museum and Nature Center, CT Seven Young Painters and Sculptors '80; Leo Castelli Gallery, NYC Drawing Show '80; Franklin Furnace Archives Incorporated, NYC Drawing Show '82, Group Artist Show '84; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Incorporated, NYC Small Works '84; Jack Tilton Gallery, NYC Group Painting '85; Art + Industrie, NYC Fashion Moda Show '86; Rosa Esman Gallery, NYC '88; Freedman Gallery, Albright College, Reading, PA '89.

Bibliography about Jonathan Thomas:

Rubin, David S., ed. Selections from the Edward Albee Collection (exhibition catalogue), Freedman Gallery, Albright College (Reading PA), 1989.

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Monochrome Fall, 1991
Photo: Dorothy Zeidman