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A Decorative Alternative Reality

Thomas Chimes is not an easy painter to comprehend, let alone appreciate, but his meticulously crafted, densely symbolic compositions usually command attention because of their insistent intellectual rigor.

Also, as he has demonstrated repeatedly in his all-white paintings and his portraits of dead literary figures, Chimes knows how to create an alternative reality that will fascinate solely because of its visual intensity.

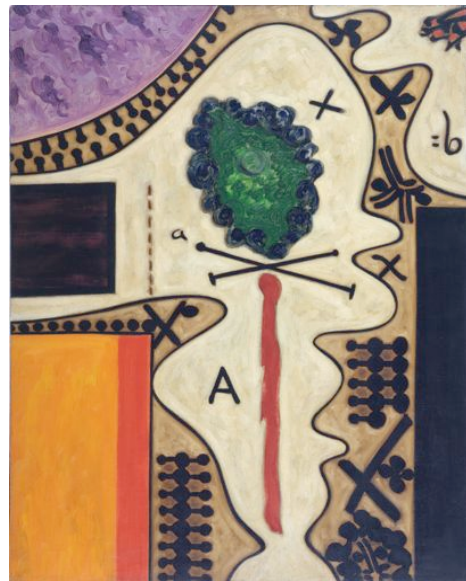
The 83-year-old Chimes entered this mature phase of his art in the 1950s. His exhibition at the Locks Gallery of paintings made between 1958 and 1965 reveals how he moved from evocations of landscape into a synthetic, highly symbolic abstraction that doesn't seem to connect to any antecedent.

The paintings are constructed of colored shapes, heavy black outline drawings, and stylized allusions to the human figure. They're often decoratively ornate, like Islamic or Persian art, and their spirit is Near Eastern or eastern Mediterranean.

Relatively few symbols, particularly the crucifix, are easy to recognize; otherwise the symbology seems idiosyncratic.

However, this doesn't render the paintings unapproachable. Their vivid colors, emphatic gestures and exotic aura more than compensate. Looking at this show is like attending a religious service in a language you don't understand; the religiosity can't be denied.

The ornate boldness of these earlier abstractions provides provocative counterpoint to Chimes' more recent work, in which he has distilled this 1960s panoply down to a pure, Zen-like spiritual essence.



Untitled, 1964, oil on linen, 28 x 22 1/8 inches