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Composer, jazz musician and painter Roscoe Mitchell with some of his work at the Corbett vs. Dempsey art gallery. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

## New form of artistic expression

Musician Roscoe Mitchell has made his name in jazz. But for the first time, he is allowing his painting to take center stage.

**By Hannah Edgar**  
For Chicago Tribune

Roscoe Mitchell has a morning routine.

He wakes up at 4 a.m., when the windows of his Fitchburg, Wisconsin, home are still sheets of black. After watching the news, he heads to the sunroom at the rear of the house to start painting.

Gradually, light floods the room; the canvas' colors buzz and vibrate, as if stretching awake. Then, once the sun is up, he's off for breakfast and a walk before returning to paint some more. The next morning he does it all over again.

Mitchell, 82, is among the most influential living

musicians in the free-jazz firmament, famed for his work with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, an AACM outgrowth he cofounded. Mitchell's first forays into painting coincided with his first footholds in Chicago's creative music scene in the early 1960s. Those artistic practices might have continued in tandem, had Mitchell not walked away from painting in the 1970s to focus on music.

"Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963-2022," a retrospective showing at Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery until March 11, documents Mitchell's triumphant return to the

easel. Since picking up painting again in earnest a few years ago he has become almost bafflingly prolific: The vast majority of works in "Keeper of the Code" were painted in 2022. (One 2023 work even sneaked in: "Guardian of the Code," visible from the gallery entrance.)

Mitchell has been recognized as a visual artist before, both in other high-profile exhibitions, like MCA Chicago's "The Freedom Principle" in 2015, and through a handful of his own album covers, the oldest of which is the Art Ensemble's 1985 album "The Third Decade." But "Keeper of the Code,"

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remarkably, is Mitchell's first solo painting show.

The day before it opened to the public, Mitchell guided us through the exhibition, which begins with his most recent works and ends with his early canvases, dating from roughly 1963 to 1973. The following conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity.

**Q: You started painting in the 1960s, around the time you linked up with musicians who would go on to form the AACM. And now, some 60 years later, you're painting more prolifically than ever. What's it been like returning to the medium?**

**A:** My experience with painting came through my uncle, Charles Commodore Carter. He worked with crayon and pen and ink, then he took a metal protractor and scraped the colors to blend them.

(In his illustrations) my sisters, myself and our friends were all people from outer space. Those books got away; I can still see them just as clearly as I did in my head, but no one else can.

When I first came back from Europe with the Art Ensemble (in 1971), I had decided that I would step down from painting for a while and concentrate on composition. It wasn't until (jazz critic and molecular biologist) Terry Martin, a longtime friend of mine, wanted to buy my painting "Lady Moon" (2019) that I got back into it.

I had the most fun painting whenever I had to just sit in front of the canvas and try to figure out how to continue. Now I'm back to that — I came full circle. I think I came back with more on my brain, you know. I'd had that experience of developing my musical compositions. It made it easier to combine the two.

**Q: In those early years you also combined the two sometimes in concerts, right? Showing your art while you performed?**

**A:** Those were early AACM concerts, yeah. A lot of people in the AACM were painters. We had our own space at Lincoln Center there on Oakwood Boulevard (in Bronzeville). We also had a place in Hyde Park.

Different people, when their concerts were on, they would bring their paintings. As a matter of fact the AACM is having an exhibition in New York at the Park Avenue Armory, curated by (pianist and composer) Jason Moran. I've done some paintings for that exhibition as well.

**Q: I assume there will be works by (AACM cofounder) Mual Richard Abrams too. He's in this painting, isn't he? (Gestures to "The Quintet," 1963.)**

**A:** Yeah. Mual's the one that got me into painting. We always went to all these exhibitions — the Art Institute, anything. That continued throughout his whole life. Whenever I got together with Mual, we would just kind of pick up from where we left off.

During that time he encouraged me to get a sketchpad. When I joined up with his Experimental Band (a precursor to the AACM), he encouraged all the musicians there to write their own music.

He would always say, "Whenever you start something, finish



Some of the paintings in the retrospective exhibit "Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963-2022" by the composer, jazz musician and painter Roscoe Mitchell are seen at Corbett vs. Dempsey. The paintings "Lady Moon" and "The Ticket Taker" are the first larger canvases on the left, with "Lady Moon" above in a heavier black frame. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS**



A painting called "Totems."



A painting called "3 x 4 Eye."



Some of the paintings by Roscoe Mitchell on display in "Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963-2022"

it." That's good advice, you know. Because if you don't, then you're always going to be troubled by the part you left unfinished.

**Q: As I understand it, you also returned to a detail in "The Quintet." What was going on in your life when you painted it?**

**A:** ("The Quintet") came from an angry period of my life. Mingus said that "If Charlie Parker was a gunslinger, there'd be a whole lot of dead imitators." So that sign used to say, "Anybody for old Bird licks?" But I just backed off a bit. It wasn't 10 years later or anything like that. That's just how

it ended up finished. Everything, for me, has its own time.

**Q: You've said before that "Music is 50% sound and 50% silence ... As musicians, when we make a sound we have to make sure that sound carries the same power as the silence around it." Do you find**

**that you think in those terms as well when you paint?**

**A:** Yes, I do. I mean, silence is perfect. If you don't believe it, just go somewhere where it's completely silent. So, if you want to measure up (laughs) you've gotta try to do something when you interrupt that silence.

I never try to do the same thing over and over. I feel better if I'm able to catch what's flying around at the moment that I'm doing it.

**Q: So, on a canvas, silence is ...**

**A:** It's just a blank space. There's silence in that one, right down there. (Mitchell points to "The Ticket Taker," 2021.) The white is silence. It gives me the eyes and the mind a rest. This — (he points to "Circle Fines 4x4," 2022, a boisterous acrylic work composed of beadlike, pointillistic circles) — not so much, though, because I'm a study of opposites.

That's the only way I can learn. If that type of painting exists, so does this one. Once I've experienced both ends, that helps me figure out what's in the middle.

"Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963-2022" is on display through March 11 at Corbett vs. Dempsey gallery, 2156 W. Fulton St.; hours 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; corbettvsdempsey.com

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