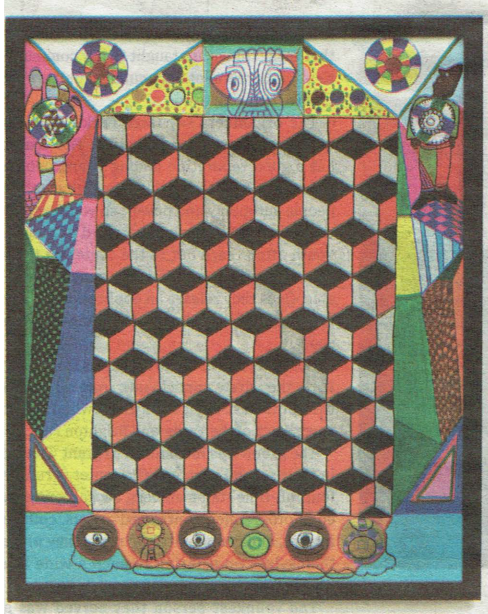


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ARTS & CULTURE

RR "KEEPER OF THE CODE: PAINTINGS 1963-2022"
Through 3/11: Tue-Sat 10 AM-5 PM. Corbett vs.
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Roscoe Mitchell, *The Code 3*, 2021. COURTESY CORBETT VS. DEMPSEY

VISUAL ART

Roscoe Mitchell's kaleidoscopic vision

In his first solo art exhibition, the legendary musician presents not a constellation of ideas but the universe itself.

By CHRIS REEVES

Bells, recorders, and watering cans craft a sound environment alongside more conventional instruments (trombone, saxophones, trumpet) on the title track of Roscoe Mitchell's debut LP, *Sound*. The first record gathering together an iteration of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), *Sound*, and especially "Sound," was crafted, according to Mitchell, "[for] musicians to create an improvisation based on sound instead of notes following notes to create a melody."

In short, Mitchell (like his AACM cohorts) is interested in provoking an exploration in what a sound does, how it punctures natural silence and fills that seemingly empty space with a given color, feeling, or power. Although

created nearly 60 years ago, *Sound* marks both a starting point for the expansive and unparalleled solo and collaborative musical activity in Mitchell's long career and also has a visual corollary in his stunning new exhibition of paintings, "Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963-2022" at Corbett vs. Dempsey.

The first solo exhibition of Mitchell's solely focused on his visual art, "Keeper of the Code" is a massive retrospective, with over 60 paintings, hung salon style, in the main room of the gallery alone. While Mitchell's prolific output in this exhibition can initially seem daunting to the viewer, this density of experience seems to be something of the point. Much like his musical work, these paintings are meant to be encountered with patience, rewarding the open

senses with their unexpected combinations, optical sensations, and almost bricolage-like two-dimensional figurative dynamism that pop and fizz and reveal new elements the longer you spend time with them. The paintings gathered and exhibited this way combat the individuality of each work, putting them in a relation-scape that crafts a collaborative sentiment between all the works, regardless of their creation dates.

Part of this relational impulse between paintings is by design. Mitchell's paintings from the last six years (including one that couldn't be photographed for the exhibition catalog because it had been created just before the opening and was still wet) are loosely themed around the notion of time. One such painting, *The Code 3*, is an exemplar of this series, its visual character landing somewhere between Imagist (Hairy Who, etc.), Bridget Riley, and pseudo-Masonic glyphs of secret knowledge, but without a particular obvious debt to any of these. The bulk of the painting is made up of a central masked figure, their body a rich repeating pattern of red, gray, and black isometric cubes. Near the figure's left and right shoulders are two other characters, both holding what look almost like circular Dutch hex signs, their features and clothing blending into the collapsing and stylistically rendered, brightly-colored checkerboard landscape that seems to optically shift as it surrounds them. The bottom of the painting features three open eyeballs separated by three more circular symbolist objects. It's an enigmatic work, but one that nonetheless playfully oscillates between vertical and horizontal ground, upending any sense of linearity and Western spatial anchors such as perspective. Time, constructed as it is in our society to mandate order, is put to visual scrutiny in this painting, suggesting instead that time might be textured, more out of sync than it seems, and graspable but confounding in its reality.

One benefit of the retrospective framing of "Keeper of the Code" is the permission to witness Mitchell's own evolution as a painter. A 1967 painting, *Panoply*, lives up to its title, a dense, almost mosaic-like collection of shapes, colors, and lines that emanate from what looks like a space-helmeted head in the work's upper middle. Like *The Code 3*, this painting formally evokes a number of art historical antecedents and precedents (Cubism, abstraction) but nonetheless exceeds those occasionally narrow categories too, like other aesthetically similar late-1960s Black arts movements (such as AfriCOBRA).

Panoply, with its complex, seemingly endless layers of repetition, details, and textures seems to attempt to try and capture everything—space, time, matter—all at once. This creates the impression that this work is not just about recapturing/defining space or evoking some kind of universal response to color combinations but rather about redefining the operation of a work of art in general. While somewhat more modest than *Panoply*, a very recent (2022) Mitchell work, *Brogans*, seems to continue Mitchell's restless pursuit to present not a constellation of ideas but the universe itself as discreetly compartmentalized shapes and dots that coalesce to piece together a figure, something possibly human, in a series of interconnected pieces. This is, of course, a central feature of Mitchell's music, the carving through the various spaces that surround us with the possibility of new sounds, but it also gets to what AACM member George E. Lewis posited in his book about the group, *A Power Stronger Than Itself*: "We must bring spiritual awareness (not as a 'thing'—a way to cash in on the cosmos) to the center of the stage... Steps must be taken to show that all art is one." For sixty years, Mitchell seems to have worked through this notion, manifesting the joys of the complexities of feeling at the center of the universe in his visual and musical work.

The correlation between Mitchell's visual and musical work is made most literally manifest here with the presence of his massive, assembled percussion collection, *The Cage*. Filled with gongs of all sizes, wind chimes, bells, hand drums, cymbals, bike horns, and my personal favorite, two small squeaky toy animal heads, *The Cage* is an exemplar of a functional sculpture, a borderline case between a music-making object and a dense three-dimensional parallel to the paintings that fill the exhibition. The exhibition's opening performance, as packed with people as Mitchell's paintings, gave viewers a chance to witness Mitchell (with SPACE trio and Robert Dick) bring this new iteration of *The Cage* to life, and it was here where all the exhibition's formal and thematic concerns seemed to converge. To bring the imperceptible and kaleidoscopic—in sound and image—into view is one of Mitchell's great gifts, and while a seemingly impossible feat, he comes as close as any in sharing his attempts to wrangle the mess of ecstatic combinations of the universe together in this exhibition. 🎨

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