

# FRIEZE

## Roscoe Mitchell Entangles the Sonic and Visual

At Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, the lauded musician shows artwork that reveals his decades-long experimentation in each discipline through the practice of the other

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BY DMITRY SAMAROV IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS, US REVIEWS | 21 FEB 23



A lauded musician for nearly 60 years, Roscoe Mitchell, at the august age of 82, is showing his artwork for the first time in a solo exhibition at Corbett vs. Dempsey – a gallery that has long fostered a programme at the intersection between music and art. The value of discovery here is in viewing the interchanges that result when a creative person long established in one discipline pivots successfully to another. Mitchell’s iconoclastic music is full of clashes between melody and noise, idyllic soundscape and abrasive racket. Growing up when bebop jazz was beginning to be considered the standard, Mitchell and his cohort blew the doors open to a freer, ever-mutating sound. The bright, often disjointed canvases at Corbett vs. Dempsey are of a piece with his life’s project: a creative restlessness, never satisfied in sticking to one modality, always reaching for something not yet grasped.

Mitchell has been painting since the 1960s, as the smaller back room devoted to eight works demonstrates. Primarily oil on canvas, these are muddy surrealistic attempts to render musicians and man-beasts in clumsily composed and realized environments. In *The Quintet* (1963), for instance, the titular musical combo are cartoonish instruments who sprout arms and legs. They stand uncertainly on a disproportionately high stage, seemingly waiting for something to happen. As Mitchell tells gallerist John Corbett in the catalogue that accompanies the show, he came to a realization that he'd need to study in order to progress further in the medium. As a result, he stepped away from visual art between the 1970s and '90s to devote himself more fully to his music.



Roscoe Mitchell, *The Quintet*, 1963, oil on canvas, 91 x 122 cm.  
Courtesy: the artist

But 60 years near the sonic vanguard have made Mitchell a fearless explorer in the visual arts as well. The gallery's larger front room is devoted to acrylic and mixed-media work completed in the 2000s and beyond, primarily in the last few years under pandemic lockdown. While there are still iconographic references to musicians and their instruments, there is a recognizable leap from his furtive efforts six decades earlier to the unhesitating ebullience of his recent work. The newer paintings are full of high-key colours and dispense with any attempt to render illusionistic form or space. Some of these pictures, such as *The Guardian of the Code* (2023), are reminiscent of crazy quilts in the way patterns clash. Others, such as *Cosmology* (2022), resemble mandalas or Indigenous sand paintings in their meditative repetition. The best of them, like *The Code 3* (2021), call to mind coats of arms for kingdoms beyond our grasp: flat pieces of colour and simplified human and animal figures suggest a hermetic symbolism. His limitations as a draughtsman, so apparent in the 1960s canvases, don't hinder Mitchell in the newer works: he seems to have freed himself from representation in favour of depicting what occurs in his mind's eye.



Roscoe Mitchell, *The Code 3*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 51 x 41 cm. Courtesy: the artist

Artists crossing disciplines – musicians painting, dancers writing – may be relatively commonplace, but Mitchell discernibly refreshes each art through the practice of the other. At the centre of the main gallery is *The Cage* (2023), a configuration of bells, horns, gongs and a panoply of other percussion instruments that Mitchell has been assembling, augmenting and reconstructing for several decades. At the show's opening, Mitchell led a quartet in a 45-minute concert from within this battle station of sound-making implements. The gallery was packed well beyond capacity – a testament to his standing in Chicago's music community and beyond. All eyes and ears were focused on the players in homage to Mitchell's protean contributions to music. But, given his decades-long dedication to exploring new avenues of expression, I have no doubt that Mitchell is, paradoxically, just at the beginning of his artistic career.



Roscoe Mitchell, *The Code 3*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 51 × 41 cm. Courtesy: the artist

*Roscoe Mitchell, 'Keeper of the Code: Paintings 1963–2022' is on view at Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, until 11 March*

Main image: Roscoe Mitchell, *Brogans*, 2022, oil on canvas with artist frame, 1.2 × 1.2 m. Courtesy: the artist