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**Roscoe Mitchell**  
**Keeper Of The Code: Paintings 1963-2022**  
Corbett Vs Dempsey, Chicago, US  
In 2020, the year he turned 80, Roscoe Mitchell was awarded a Jazz Master fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts. But it's fair to say that from the outset, his creative objectives have transcended musical genres. The name of his first album *Sound*, which was recorded in 1966, suggested that music itself was only part of his material. And the next year, Mitchell's first widely seen painting adorned the sleeve of Lester Bowie's *Numbers 1&2* LP.

These were not the acts of an artist who would be satisfied with simply playing jazz. But even though he made his first paintings in the 1960s, including one that appeared on the sleeve of The Art Ensemble Of Chicago's *The Third Decade*, they haven't received attention commensurate with his music. Keeper Of The

Code: Paintings 1963-2022 is the first solo exhibition of Mitchell's visual work.

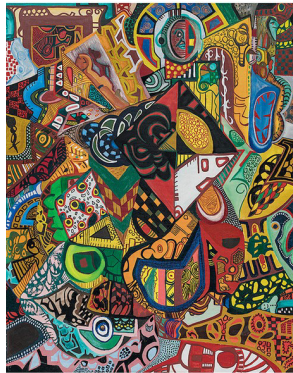
The first thing to notice upon walking into Corbett Vs Dempsey's main gallery space is *The Cage*, an enclosure of bells, drums, squeeze toys and other little instruments that Mitchell has been playing alongside his diverse woodwinds since the 1960s. Imposing, whimsical and practically laid out, it's both an instrumentarium and an installation, and its presence here makes a case that Mitchell has been using visual materials to shape space all along. It's also a way for the exhibit to acknowledge the primacy of Mitchell's musical work. One smaller room is devoted to paintings from the 60s, including the aforementioned album covers. A video programme in a small screening vault shows five films of him playing in concert and at home. And Mitchell's Space Ensemble played at the show's opening. The sight of him judiciously striking bells and splitting soprano saxophone tones, accenting the group's music with perfectly placed gestures, suggested images of how he might apply acrylic to canvas.

The main gallery is densely hung with canvases containing riotously hued human and animal visages. This registers as ironic, given that Mitchell performed in work clothes

when the rest of The Art Ensemble Of Chicago donned costumes or painted their faces. Nearly half of the exhibit's 81 pieces date from 2022, when Mitchell, kept off the road by the pandemic, spent the bulk of his time painting. One work, *COVID-19 Alert*, depicts humans and cats frolicking around a woman brandishing a nasal swab, perhaps acknowledging that while Mitchell worked, others were living it up. But it's not as though he wasn't having any fun. Paintings like *When A Pot Belly Stove Becomes A Tap Dancer* and *Angry Chicken* evidence a playfulness that has faded from Mitchell's music in this century.

Many of the paintings are portraits featuring faces, and faces within faces. Their African features are rendered using bright dots similar to those used by Australian Aboriginal artists. More action-oriented paintings like *Welcome To The Neighborhood* and *DJ's Moving And Hauling* might be drawn from memory, but the six-piece sequence dubbed *AACM Series* abstracts humans and buildings into a maze of colours and geometrical shapes. Other pieces dispense with human forms altogether, orchestrating mesmerizing expanses from a smaller dots and squares. The volume and variety of the recent paintings conveys the impression that, at age 82, Roscoe Mitchell isn't simply ensuring that a lesser known aspect of his work gets some recognition; he's revved up by the chance to do new work.

Bill Meyer



Roscoe Mitchell, *Panoply* (1967)

Roscoe Mitchell, *The Time Keepers II* (2021)

