

James B Thompson: Fragments in Time
January 23 – March 27, 2016

Hallie Ford Museum of Art
Willamette University

James B. Thompson: Fragments in Time

Teachers Guide

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *James B. Thompson: Fragments in Time*, and to offer ideas for leading self-guided groups through the galleries. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials.

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of James B. Thompson.
- To explore the subject matter and themes in the work.
- To explore the relationship of form and content in the work.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of the artist's style.
- Discuss the artist's interest in the "fragment" as it relates to his work.
- Discuss the concept of "time" as it relates to the artist's work.
- Discuss how Thompson creates meaning through subject matter and form, particularly the layering of color and mark-making.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

By John Olbrantz, The Maribeth Collins Director, Hallie Ford Museum of Art

Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1951, James B. Thompson was educated at Ripon College in Wisconsin, where he received his BA degree in 1973, and at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he earned his MFA degree in 1977. Since 1986, he has been on the art faculty at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where he teaches courses in painting, printmaking, drawing, and design, and has served as a teacher and mentor to several generations of students. As a practicing artist, Thompson has created a diverse body of work during the past two decades, one that, in the words of art writer Bob Hicks, “grapples with the perplexing issues of cultural and geological change. He ranges freely through ancient and forgotten forms to confront the mysteries and fractures of the universe, investigating not just the abandoned and the unknown, but the limits and possibilities of the art forms, often with understated wit.”

Over the years, Thompson has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States, including a mid-career survey exhibition at the Hallie Ford Museum of Art in 2009 based on his Vanishing Landscape series, which was supported by grants from the Oregon Arts Commission, Western States Arts Federation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He is included in public and private collections throughout the United States and Europe, including the State of Oregon, the Portland Art Museum, the Hallie Ford Museum of Art, 4Culture (formerly the King County Arts Commission, in Seattle), and the Orkney Archaeology Society in Scotland, among many others. As one of the most interesting and innovative artists in Oregon, we are pleased and honored to be able to recognize him with a twenty-year retrospective exhibition and book.

James B. Thompson: Fragments in Time has been supported with funds from the Maribeth Collins Art Exhibition Fund, with additional financial support provided by general operating support grants from the City of Salem’s Transient Occupancy Tax fund and the Oregon Arts Commission. Special thanks to art writer Bob Hicks for writing the chat panels that introduce visitors to each of Thompson’s series.

INTRODUCTION

By Bob Hicks, from *James B. Thompson: Fragments in Time*

The world of James B. Thompson is a mindscape of bits and pieces waiting to be rearranged. It holds fragments of history and shards of place. Fleeting thoughts, broken connections, surviving evidences of cultures and ways of thinking buried deep in time. It's a destination of transformations and sly jokes about the universe's constant state of change: as he wryly puts it, the fragmentary is *so* becoming. His art ranges across continents of possibilities, assembling and creating contemporary beauty out of evidences of things past. The ritual sites of prehistoric Picts. The game of golf. Disappearing landscapes. French village life. The medieval sense of space, forgotten hand tools, the way that glass can be like a map.

Born and raised in Chicago, settled for thirty years in Oregon's fertile Willamette Valley, and a frequent visitor to the Scottish Highlands and Orkney Islands, he is a contemporary man living in a world that bends in time. He bends with it, exploring its crevasses, anticipating its tides, contemplating what's been lost and what might be gained. In his large and quietly provocative body of art—paintings, drawings, prints, kiln-formed glass—he watches as the world turns, and shifts, and reassembles, and becomes something new, and new again. Then he makes images of what he observes: imaginary places that, in the making, become real. “I make things up,” he explains. “That's what I do.”

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the three images and suggested discussion to introduce students to the work of James B. Thompson.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

Three Images: Looking at the Work of James B. Thompson

Every mark I make is real, and the artworks I create inhabit a space...of their own that is at once a fragment of the “real” cultural and visual landscape you see around us, and also its own separate reality on the picture plane.

James B. Thompson

James B. Thompson works may reflect what we see around us – floating figures and objects, or suggestions of landscapes – but they also exist in a real sense – they are line, shape, and color on canvas, paper, or glass.

He is interested in marks – whether made by nature or by man – and how they are affected by time and history, by deliberate intention or by chance. This is echoed in the marks the artist makes, the possibilities they create, and how they are determined by the artist’s decision-making process.

Whether inspired by natural formations, ancient stone markings in the landscape, or the fragment of an object, Thompson sees these marks more as formal ideas: shape, color and line, “a detail that could be enhanced, or useful as an object taken completely out of its context to be subsequently reintroduced into a new visual realm.” The same marks that are clearly recognizable as part or whole of a figure or an object in one work, may become something else entirely in another – perhaps a suggestion of land formations, or complete abstractions.

Linear Metaphysics: Contemporary Mark-Making and Time-Based Art Works, 2011

The “pictograms of the past” in this series of paintings, prints, and embossments explore the elementally human act of making marks. They are inspired by the fragmentary and puzzling carved stones of northern Scotland and the Orkney Islands: the knowledge of their original intention and the people who made them has faded over the centuries. Thompson transforms these archaeological shards into a contemporary contemplation of a lost pictorial language and a lost way of life.

The titles of individual pieces in *Linear Metaphysics* are further fragments of the series’ origin: names that ancient Greek and Roman historians gave to early Scotland and Britain’s Iron age people and places. They are likely not even what the people called themselves, but designations created by the historians. This, too, is elusive and fragmentary.

With their deep scratches and stylized terrains, the intaglio prints have a curious, antique beauty, like a mellifluous language you can’t quite understand. The marks are set loose in the modern world as pleasing mysteries of shape and form.

Bob Hicks



Novantae

2011

Intaglio with gouache, acrylic, walnut and India inks on paper

19-1/4 x 22-1/4” (framed)

Courtesy of the artist

Photography by Martha Schuyler Thompson

Schemata: Rural Life and Leisure Pursuits, 2014

Reflecting on nostalgia and technology, Thompson returned in this series of mixed-media paintings on paper to his investigation of Scottish life, this time to the rituals of everyday life. In addition to sporting customs, the paintings in *Schemata* embrace everyday sights and implements. Narrative meaning remains elusive, because, deliberately, nothing quite falls into place. Yet the paintings, which are often drily comic, exude a familiar sense of place and culture. Thompson finds visual cues sometimes in the most ordinary and utilitarian of places, and often in unexpected and mysterious combinations. The paintings recall, as he puts it, “fragments of ruins in the landscape, layers of time.”

Bob Hicks



Basket Wheel

2012

Acrylic, gouache, and mixed media on paper

27-1/4 x 31-1/4” (framed)

Private collection

Photography by Dale Peterson

Elemental Mutability, 2012

This series showcases Thompson’s successful expansion into the intensely process-oriented medium of kiln-formed glass. With its melting, fluid nature and reliance on chance, glass is a good match for Thompson’s belief in a world that is in constant transition. Experimenting freely, he fired and re-fired pieces, backing off on temperatures to get less gloss, turning up the heat to get more fully fused color. Working with glass has allowed him to push further into the realms of texture and layering that have always fascinated him, and to take his interest in cartographic and territorial ideas into three dimensions. Thompson was also thinking of the dualities that ancient peoples saw in their lives: “light and shadow; night and day; winter and summer; above and below ground; solar and lunar; life and death.” The pieces are like raised-relief maps of rugged territories, and they are also territories in their own right: little created topographies of discovery.

Bob Hicks



Mudflats

2012

Kiln-formed glass

24 x 24” (image)

Courtesy of the artist and Bullseye Projects

Photography by Jerry Sayer, courtesy of Bullseye Projects

Suggested Discussion:

Thompson's work encourages the viewer to look deeply. Juxtapositions of fragments may appear to tell a story, but they are often more puzzling than not. The work also invites viewers to shift their perception between subject matter and form. Even when we think the meaning is about what's being represented, the play of the formal elements is just as important.

Without giving students titles or information about the individual works, use the following questions for *Novantae*, *Basket Wheel*, and *Mudflats*:

- Describe what you see in the work.
 - What is your first impression of this work – subject matter, mood, etc.?
 - Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
- Look at the work in terms of form, even when it seems to describe/represent something.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (line, color, shape, form, texture, space, value), and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- How was the work made? (painting, prints, glass, etc.)
 - Does the particular technique contribute to the total? How?
- Read the title and the information about the work.
 - How does this influence your experience of the work? Do you see new things, make new connections? Do you think the title an artist gives to a work is important to understanding it? Why or why not?

Discuss Thompson's statement as they relate to each work:

“Every mark I make is real, and the artworks I create inhabit a space...of their own that is at once a fragment of the ‘real’ cultural and visual landscape you see around us, and also its own separate reality on the picture plane.”

- Discuss the idea of “mark-making.” Using the details as well as the full images, describe the marks the artist made on the surface of each of the works and their role in the overall composition.

“...I rarely view these figural elements or images as...‘animal,’ ‘person,’ or ‘plant.’ Instead, I see them more as shape or line, a potential use of color, a detail that could be enhanced, or useful as an object taken completely out of its context to be subsequently reintroduced into a new visual realm...It is important to understand that the figural elements introduced in the paintings are no more important than the color fields, nor are they any less important.”

- Look for similar marks that may appear in one or more work and how the artist has re-contextualized them in each work. (e.g. marks similar to those that make up the entwined twigs and branches in *Basket Wheel* can be found in *Novantae*).

Discuss the title of the exhibition, *Fragments in Time*, as it relates to the individual works.

AT THE MUSEUM:

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider the same discussion strategies they used in the classroom.
 - Describe what you see in the work.
 - What is your first impression of this work – subject matter, mood, etc.?
 - Where does your eye go first? Where does it go next? Why?
 - Look at the work in terms of form, even when it seems to describe/represent something.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (line, color, shape, form, texture, space, value), and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - How was the work made? (painting, prints, glass, etc.)
 - Does the particular material and technique used contribute to the total? How?
 - Read the title and the information about the work.
 - How does this influence your experience of the work? Do you see new things, make new connections? Do you think the title an artist gives to a work is important to understanding it? Why or why not?
- Create a cinquain (pronounced sincane: a five-line stanza) inspired by a single work or a series in *James B. Thompson: Fragment in Time*.

Structure your cinquain as follows:

Line 1: A noun (you may want to use the actual title of the artwork or series).

Line 2: Two adjectives that describe your noun.

Line 3: Three verbs that describe the noun.

Line 4: A short phrase about the noun.

Line 5: Repeat noun in Line 1.

AFTER THE MUSEUM:

Suggested Activity:

Mark-Making

Mark-making refers to the different marks an artist creates using any material/tool (paint, ink, a stylus for scratching, a computer drawing tool) on any surface (canvas, paper, metal, computer screen). It is an individual mark – such as a line or a dot – or the patterns and textures they make. Marks can be used to describe an object, or to create an abstract composition.

- Demonstrate different types of marks. Begin by using a pencil, paper, and eraser, then try a variety of materials and surfaces. You can take a walk outdoors for inspiration, communicate an emotion or feeling, or just let your thoughts go. You can use the tip of your pencil or the side, and use the eraser to manipulate marks or reduce them. Experiment.
 - What type of marks did you make? Loose and gestural? Neat and controlled? Describe your marks. They may be:

scribbles	strokes
straight	circular
fluid	stabbing
thick	thin
light	dark

- Create patterns and describe texture by repeating marks. At this point you can use these textural marks to draw an object with texture (rough, smooth, hard, soft, reflective, etc.). It doesn't have to be detailed, but just enough to give a sense of the object (e.g. the grain on a block of wood or the hairs of a paintbrush).
 - Create a collaborative work by sharing your marks with another student to use in their own work. They can choose how they want to use it: in a picture of an object or a scene, or perhaps an abstraction composition. How is their use of the marks similar to, or different than, the way you used it?

RESOURCE:

Hicks, Bob. *James B. Thompson: Fragments in Time*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art at Willamette University, distributed by University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2016.

COMMON CURRICULUM GOALS

The suggested discussions and activities included in this packet can be used to support the following Common Curriculum Goals developed by the Oregon Department of Education. For specific benchmarks for your grade level check with your school district or the Oregon Public Education Network (O.P.E.N.) www.ode.state.or.us/search/results/?id=53

The Arts

Aesthetics and Criticism

- Use knowledge of technical, organizational and aesthetic elements to describe and analyze one's own art and the art of others.
- Respond to works of art, giving reasons for preferences.

Historical and Cultural Perspectives

- Identify both common and unique characteristics found in work of art from various time periods and cultures.
- Explain how a work of art reflects the artist's personal experience in a society or culture.

Language Arts

Writing

- Use a variety of written forms (e.g. journals, essays, short stories, poems, research papers) to express ideas and multiple media to create projects, presentations and publications.

Speaking and Listening

- Communicate knowledge of the topic, including relevant examples, facts, anecdotes and details.
- Demonstrate effective listening strategies.









Novantae (detail)



Mudflats (detail)



Mudflats (detail)