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by Holland Cotter

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week



Mildred Thompson's "Magnetic Fields," from 1990; acrylic on canvas. Credit The Mildred Thompson Estate/Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

Mildred Thompson

Through March 31. Galerie Lelong & Co., 528 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-315-0470, galerielelong.com.

Mildred Thompson (1936-2003) graduated from Howard University in 1957, went on to study at the Brooklyn Museum of Art School, and had an early start to a strong career when the Museum of Modern Art bought two of her prints. Trips to Europe, however, convinced her that, for a black female artist, living and working there would be far more comfortable than in New York. So she returned to Germany and spent a productive decade there, exhibiting often. (She later traveled to Africa and the Middle East.) In 1974, an artist-in-residence grant brought her back to the United States. In 1985, she settled in Atlanta, painting and teaching to the end of her life.

She was right about sizing up her opportunities in New York. It's taken six decades to have a first solo show here, but what a sparkler it is. Thompson's formal range was

wide, embracing painting, sculpture and electronic music composition. So were her intellectual interests, which along with art history, included physics, astronomy and theosophy. There's evidence of all these disciplines in the show made up of abstract paintings and drawings, most from two 1990s series titled "Magnetic Fields" and "Radiation Explorations."

Each of the series is color-keyed. In the "Magnetic Fields" paintings and pastels, molten yellow forms an all-over ground for funnel-like swirls of red lines and fusillades of pink and lavender. The larger, horizontally oriented "Radiation Exploration" pictures are based on fields of sea-blue over which burst the equivalent of cosmic fireworks: lightning bolts, planetary fireballs and meteor showers of individual strokes. It's a chaos that doesn't feel chaotic. It's a spontaneously choreographed and completely controlled dance to the music of the spheres.

In short, this is beautiful, upbeat work, backed up by an entire creative history yet to be fully explored. And it arrives at a moment of long-delayed acknowledgment of abstract art by African-American women. A Howardena Pindell retrospective recently opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. And in Chelsea, along with the Thompson show — which comes with an excellent catalog by the art historians Lowery Stokes Sims and Melissa Messina — there's a solo exhibition of paintings and collages by the New York City artist Nanette Carter. It's at Skoto Gallery, and not to be missed.