

GARAGE

JANUARY 13, 2019

TAKING TIME WITH MUNGO THOMSON

by Haley Mellin



Mungo Thomson, "April 22, 2013 (Made in the USA), 2014, Enamel on low-iron mirror, poplar and anodized aluminum, 74 x 56 x 2 1/2 inches

Conversing on the artist's archival impulse.

Los Angeles-based artist Mungo Thomson engages with how time is archived, chronicled, and immortalized through dispersed media. One of his most well-known series, *TIME*, which documents actual *TIME* Magazine covers in paint on mirrors, has uncannily leapt from the printed page to the selfie universe. From museum-goers to cultural celebrities to artists, viewers document themselves in a moment in time and experience what it would be like to be reflected on the cover of a magazine.

In a *GARAGE* exclusive, Thomson discusses his consumptive obsession with print media and an imperative to create an encyclopedic and anthropologic mapping of the world—from the *TIME* series to his work with mail, stop-motion cinema, and *National Geographic*.

GARAGE: Can you explain your *TIME* project?

Mungo Thomson: My initial *TIME* piece was a series of around 90 drawings of the evolution of the *TIME* logo that were collected in a book that I produced with LACMA. The mirror series came after the book. They are unique, person-sized mirrors silkscreened with the border, logo, and other artifacts found on actual issues of *TIME Magazine*. This series came from the simple observation that time happens in a mirror. There was something intimate about that fact that I wanted to cultivate.

I wanted someone to live with the artwork and see themselves reflected in it, every day, and that would complete the work.

GARAGE: Does your TIME project relate to “Person of the Year”? When I stand in front of one of the mirrors, I imagine myself on the cover of *TIME*.

Thomson: Not exactly. They are vanity but also vanitas. Yes, you are on the cover of *TIME*, but you are also going to die. The work is both fun and cruel. I was referencing novelty *TIME* mirrors from the 1970s. I like drawing from sources like that, such as wall calendars, because they are already art-adjacent, or surrogates for art. I scaled the novelty mirrors to my own height so they would be large enough to reflect the viewer and their context.

GARAGE: Each mirror archives a unique *TIME* cover, for example, October 19, 1987 (The Climate is Changing). What brought you to archiving?

Thomson: Each mirror is specific to a weekly issue of the magazine. I see the series as a new archive or network. When I was young, I collected comic books. I thought I was going to grow up to draw for Marvel before I shifted into art. And that completist collector mentality, the imperative to be encyclopedic and anthropologic and to map the world, informs my work. I have built new archives, or counter-archives, out of some of my collections: Time Life books, field recordings of insects, roadrunner cartoons, Hubble photos. A work that I recently exhibited at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, titled *Mail*, collects the incoming mail at the museum hosting the exhibition and presents it as a sculpture. It is also a growing, temporary archive—I think of it as a clock.

GARAGE: What excites you about print media?

Thomson: I’m interested in the twilight of the analog. I think what something is most acutely felt when it is in decline. Currently, culture is half-and-half. While digital culture is ascending, art remains stubbornly analog. I have made an app as an artwork, and I am constantly online, but it can be like a casino on the internet, you know, airless and without clocks. I want things to feel real, to have aura, to have haptics. When I was a preparator at MoMA in the 1990s, some mornings I went into the galleries with a feather duster before the museum opened and was alone with those objects, dusting Duchamp’s *Bicycle Wheel* and Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*. I think of digital space as having no dust.

GARAGE: Experience of your work is highly variable based on the day and the viewer.

Thomson: I make a lot of works where the viewer’s experience is going to be different if you see it today rather than tomorrow, or in real life, rather than on a screen. The sound of a work I made for the Whitney Biennial, *Coat Check Chimes*, depended on how many coats hung on it that day. This is an appeal to your physical, as opposed to virtual presence, and a way to incorporate time and chance into the work. I believe in the unique encounter where the experience is variable, and context-sensitive. Like life.

GARAGE: Could you tell me about your recent piano piece?

Thomson: Composition for 52 Keys pairs a deck of cards with a player piano. The number of possible permutations of order in a 52-card deck is astronomical; they say a deck of cards has never been shuffled the same way twice in the history of the world. And a piano has 52 white keys. I produced a computer program that assigns piano keys to playing cards, lowest to highest, and then shuffles the deck over and over again—and it just goes forever. The computer feeds the piano live code, and the piano renders each shuffle as music. And it will play for trillions of years without repeating a sequence. If electricity could somehow continue to power it, the piece would theoretically outlast the earth and the sun.

GARAGE: Are the embroidered Compositions a companion to the musical one?

Thomson: Yes. They are similarly informed by chance and questions about what a “composition” is. A deck of cards is shuffled and thrown on the floor, and the resulting pattern is embroidered. Each Composition has some three million stitches. They are a super labor-intensive monument to a throwaway gesture. For me, those works are about the odds of being born, being the person you are and not some other person—they are about acute specificity within a massive set.

GARAGE: These questions of embedding cosmic thinking into everyday things is a component of your work. TIME Magazine is not just TIME Magazine, it’s also a stand-in for time itself.

Thomson: I like extrapolating out to the next frame. I am interested in how things nest inside each other, how parts make up a whole. How “mail” is made up of individual pieces of mail. How a book is made of individual pages, and a film is made of individual frames. Stop-motion animation is something that articulates this relationship well and is something I’ve been engaged with for 10 years. Stop-motion builds the whole from the part right before your eyes.

GARAGE: You often reference Heidegger’s “distance of the near,” how we fail to see what is in front of us.

Thomson: Heidegger’s idea was that there is a world before us that we forget to see, and the artists’ job is to disclose it again. I think this rings true. Heidegger uses the example of not being able to see the glasses he’s wearing, but not being able to see without them. Charles Ray also said that obvious things are the most easily overlooked and the most enigmatic. For me, that is the coins in your pocket, the sound of crickets, magazines and junk mail.

GARAGE: In discussing your work, curator Siri Engberg of the Walker Art Center, said, “He talks a lot about how he goes after simple ideas, but what he really does is make them magical.” I like your pairing of “simple ideas” and straightforward execution.

Thomson: I am more interested in a simple surface with a world beneath than a complex surface without much else going on. I think if something can be elegantly and economically expressed so that it blooms in your mind, then it should be. I want something to transmit and belong to the viewer and I do my best to remove any impediments to that. It can’t become yours if it’s too much mine.

GARAGE: What are your upcoming projects?

Thomson: I'm developing a series of videos from Time Life books on subjects like food and fitness and flowers. The stop-motion videos show the books as they are digitized for the Internet by the world's fastest robotic book-scanner. The book-scanner shoots books at eight pages per second, which is the frame rate of my animations. It posits a book-scanning robot as a filmmaking apparatus, and it's essentially making flip books and I'm filming them. I think of Time Life books as an analog prototype for the internet, in that it was an attempt to produce a popular compendium of human knowledge that arrived in your home. What do we do with these books and magazines now? We bulk scan them into PDFs for the internet. It's like watching a chemical phase shift, like from solid to gas; dematerialization into data. And that's the subject matter of this work. It's the story of time and life, told one frame at a time.