

# FAMILY STYLE

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### *MEDIA STUDIES*

by Rachel Summer Small



Still from Mungo Thomson, *Time Life (Volume 14. The First Billion Years)*, 2025.  
Courtesy of the artist and Karma.

Two new chapters in long-running series by Mungo Thomson consider the infinite nature of collective human experience—and the impossibility of getting it all down on paper.

The conceit that a body of knowledge can be self-contained by a finite physical medium has long intrigued Mungo Thomson. It's an idea the artist further interrogates with the skepticism of a Gen X-er who has found his timeline, not to mention demands on his skill sets, split between analog and digital worlds. On view across two of Karma's downtown New York galleries are new chapters to two ongoing series that re-contextualize print-based imagery and graphics—and all the information conveyed or implied therein—to arresting visual effect.

Thomson's hypnotic "Time Life" videos, 2014–present, consist of still images of book pages flashing by at eight to 12 frames per second, creating frenzied impressions of movement and texture. At the gallery's 22 East 2nd Street location, new videos on view span *Volume 8*, 2022, through *Volume 16*, 2025. The focus of each generally takes shape after visuals-heavy books on subjects that pique Thomson's interest, the images across the pages subsequently becoming the substance of the films. One puts forth thousands of pictures of different shells; another is anchored in life-drawing model photos from a genre of anatomical reference books for artists. In *Volume 14. The First Billion Years*, 2025, brightly colored patterns flickering past are

actually photographs of thinly sliced rocks as viewed under microscopes, sourced from a geology textbook. The magnum opus of this show is the 17-minute, 15-second *Volume 12. Everything (Abridged)*, 2025, for which Thomson endeavored to catalog as many human-made objects as possible from encyclopedias, atlases, history books, major museum collections, and beyond; the results unveil 13,000 objects from around the world, flashing across the screen at 12 frames per second.

In some cases, rather than the found imagery leading to the final form, the films instead began with a more abstract concept. These had Thomson working backward from the idea, searching for the right images in print to bring the footage to fruition. For instance, the vision behind *Volume 10. A Field Guide to Hummingbirds*, 2024, was to create the movement of hummingbirds in flight via compilations of still photographs. “We chopped up hundreds of field guides to hummingbirds. We organized the photographs into, ‘hummingbird flying left,’ ‘hummingbird flying right,’ ‘hummingbird perched,’ ‘hummingbird feeding,’ all these piles,” Thomson explains. Then, using stop-motion, he and his team assembled the hummingbird images into fluid animations. “Of course, it’s hundreds of different hummingbirds in a single take. But it’s one hummingbird. So I was after that: What will you set aside to believe the illusion? What will you tolerate?”

The original inspiration behind “Time Life” is the series’ namesake: the indexical books produced by Time-Life, Inc. between 1961 and 2003 that aimed to deliver encyclopedic coverage on subjects from world cuisine to home improvement—and that Thomson also vividly remembers lying around his home growing up in the 1970s. The format came from Thomson experimenting in 2009, when he photographed every card in the Rolodex of his late dealer, the legendary Margo Leavin, and used stop-motion to assemble the stills into a short film. From there, Thomson grew interested in the machines used by libraries to digitally archive books, some of which require the printed material be disassembled page by page in the process. The fastest model can process eight pages a second—a speed directly reflected in the frame rate of many *Time Life* videos. “I knew I wanted to model it on the book scanner, because it’s so much about this disappearing world, and so much about being a Gen X person—the first half of my life was films and videotapes and vinyl records, and CMYK dots on printed matter. And the second half of my life is my computer and my phone,” he says. “It’s a very specific divide that I’m making work about.” Meanwhile, the percussive scores paired with most of the volumes (including some original commissions) are meant to evoke rhythmic sounds from the analog landscape—the mechanical lull of the archiving machines, or the gentle flip-flip of hard-won contact cards in a Rolodex. The overall vision of the films, Thomson emphasizes, is to “present this fantasy of total knowledge,” once the promise of print compendiums like the Time-Life books, and now that of the digital realm. “It’s not possible to learn and know everything. But total competence and knowledge is a compelling fantasy, because the world is such a mystery and evolving every single second.”

Complementing the “Time Life” videos is a show of new “TIME Mirrors,” with that exhibition at Karma’s 188 East 2nd Street location titled “A Universal Picture.” Unlike previous iterations in this series—which have only the *Time* logo and graphic red outline of covers emblazoned on the mirrors—this new batch also features trompe-l’œil page corners flipped back as if previewing inside coverage, from the planet Mars to Saddam Hussein to the DNA double helix. Notably, Thomson began the mirror works in 2012, before Instagram really took off as an intra-art-world game-changer—and, with it, the irresistibility of an art-mirror selfie snap. “I like that people make what they want out of the work,” he says. “But I’m not someone who loves looking in the mirror or taking photos of myself in the mirror to share them with people. So I’m always a little shocked that people want to literally line up to take photos of themselves in my mirrors.” The social-media pandering having come as a surprise, Thomson was actually inspired by real novelty *Time*-branded mirrors that the magazine sold back in the ’70s. “*People should really live with these,*” he recalls thinking while conceiving the series. “*People should spend time with these, and then that will complete them.* So, people taking photos and keeping those photos forever on their phone is another way that time is happening in that interaction.”

Whereas the “Time Life” videos—with all of their obsessive energy and, indeed, reams of content—demonstrate the futility of compiling the vastness of human knowledge and existence, the mirrors inversely embrace the infinite, doubling as windows into the endless void passing by. In this expanse, Time is suspended. “It’s a mass-culture vanitas, right?” offers Thomson. “. Briefly immortal.”