

The Inner Sleeve

This month's artwork chosen by **Paul Steinbeck**

The Third Decade

ART ENSEMBLE OF CHICAGO



Art Ensemble Of Chicago

The Third Decade

ECM 1985

Painting by Roscoe Mitchell

Roscoe Mitchell began painting at a young age. By the early 1960s, he was an accomplished visual artist, as were two other Chicago musicians in his circle, fellow saxophonist Joseph Jarman and pianist Muhal Richard Abrams. Mitchell and Jarman studied painting with Abrams in between rehearsals of his Experimental Band, the ensemble from which the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians emerged. In addition to playing with Abrams's Experimental Band, Mitchell and Jarman led their own groups, and around 1967, the two finally joined forces, partnering with bassist Malachi Favors and trumpeter Lester Bowie to form The Art Ensemble Of Chicago. *Numbers 1 & 2* became the quartet's first album in 1967, and the first to feature on its cover one of Mitchell's paintings, an astonishing Afro-Cubist portrait of three musicians rendered

in bright yellows, whites and reds.

In 1969, The Art Ensemble left Chicago and set sail for France. During two highly successful years in Europe, the musicians pursued extramusical interests: Jarman joined a Paris theatre company and Mitchell had time to finish the painting shown above – a richly textured image on canvas, fabric, wood and fringe entitled *The Third Decade*.

Like the *Numbers 1 & 2* album cover, *The Third Decade* uses patterns and saturated colours, two techniques associated with Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu and other painters from the AfriCOBRA collective, a Chicago arts organisation allied with the AACM. However, the palette employed in *The Third Decade* is darker than the 'coolade colours' seen in many AfriCOBRA works, and there are only a few of their distinctive mosaic-like patterns on Mitchell's canvas: diamond-shaped inlays and checkerboard grids at the centre and right, counterpointed by the brick and mortar wall and staircase that extend upward to the top of the frame.

These geometric patterns stand in contrast to the rest of the image, which is filled with solid colours, shading and intricate, non-repeating designs reminiscent of woodcuts or textile prints.

You can lose yourself in the elaborate designs, especially in the triangular blocks at the lower left. Those blocks, though, flow into a Y-shaped yoke that reveals them to be sections of a garment draped on the mysterious figure which dominates the left side of the canvas, and indeed the entire painting. The figure's visage is both human and not human, and the longer you look at it, the more surreal it becomes. The chin and mouth are lifelike, but the nose above them appears to be carved, as in a wooden sculpture or mask. There are protruding horns where the figure's ears should be, and its deep-set eyes are hollow orbs that answer your gaze with an unrelenting, entrancing stare.

You try and look elsewhere, but focus inevitably returns to those eyes, which can summon your attention from the other side

of the canvas – or even from across a room, as happened to me when I saw the painting at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015. Mitchell's painting was part of *The Freedom Principle*, an exhibition dedicated to the AACM, AfriCOBRA and the Black Arts Movement in 1960s Chicago. I spent several hours at the exhibition, and whenever *The Third Decade* was within view, I found myself crossing the gallery to get a closer look (and to let Mitchell's enigmatic figure stare back at me). It was one of the most profound encounters I've ever had with an artwork.

As I left the museum, I wondered if record buyers had the same experience three decades earlier when they browsed through shops in search of a new Art Ensemble album called *The Third Decade*, and saw the cover art gazing at them intently inviting them to listen – if they dared – to the music therein.

□ Paul Steinbeck's *Message To Our Folks: The Art Ensemble Of Chicago* is published by University of Chicago Press. The Art Ensemble Of Chicago perform at London's Cafe Oto this month: see *Out There*