

MUNGO THOMSON. "YELLOW CANDLE" (2025). LENTICULAR PRINT  
IN ARTIST'S FRAME. 39 1/2" X 30 1/2" X 1 1/2" (FRAMED). © MUNGO  
THOMSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA.

MUNGO THOMSON

UNDISTRACTED  
ENGAGEMENT  
EVERYTHING  
SUPER  
PERSONAL

*Written by* OLIVIA LINDSAY AYLMER

MUNGO THOMSON. "MINERAL COMPOSITION" (2025). LENTIC-  
ULAR PRINT IN ARTIST'S FRAME. 39 1/2" X 30 1/2" X 1 1/2" (FRAMED). ©  
MUNGO THOMSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA.



MUNGO THOMSON, "THROWING A CYLINDER" (2024). LENTICULAR PRINT IN ARTIST'S FRAME. 39 1/2" x 30 1/2" x 2" (FRAMED). © MUNGO THOMSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA.



MUNGO THOMSON, "WHITE WINES" (2024). LENTICULAR PRINT IN ARTIST'S FRAME. 39 1/2" x 30 1/2" x 2" (FRAMED). © MUNGO THOMSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA.

WHILE SPEAKING TO MUNGO THOMSON FROM A DISTANCE ONE MONDAY IN MARCH, SNIPPETS OF AMBIENT SOUND—BIRDSONG, WIND WHISTLE, MOTORCYCLE—OCCASIONALLY INTERJECT, AS IF TO REMIND US OF THE WILD WORLD BEYOND OUR LOOKING-GLASS SCREENS.

A child of the 70s and 80s, the Los Angeles-based conceptual artist thinks deeply about what's been lost, or at least, transformed, in the shift from our primarily analog to omnipresently digital culture: an irrevocable rupture that continues to shape his perspective.

This spring at Karma's downtown New York gallery spaces, two of Thomson's ongoing works, *A Universal Picture* featuring his *TIME Mirrors* (2012) and *Time Life* (2014), invite us to reset our relationship to attention, that most valuable of commodities, in a fragmented age. What does it mean to *truly* attend to something, whether the contents of an old book or our mirrored reflection, and take in whatever it has to show us?

Consider *Time Life*, his stop-motion video series, whose visuals and text are drawn directly from and inspired by *Time-Life Books*: multi-decade volumes that first emerged in the 1960s and chronicled a vast galaxy of topics, from star maps and salads to lost civilizations and the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. In a 2016 *Art in Print* interview, Thomson recalled that his dad collected one volume per month, via a mail-order subscription. As a pre-internet kid in Northern California, growing up alongside these "aspirational middle-class artifacts" on his parents' shelves offered captivating glimpses of what lay beyond his immediate surroundings. They also held the false (albeit enticing) promise of complete expertise and abundant knowledge of the universe. Talking to Thomson, I felt an immediate kinship with his childlike impulse of wanting to read and absorb every single book in the library.

If there's any longing woven through Thomson's work, it's for sheer tactility; the pleasurable flip of the page to reveal something fascinating, new, or not yet fully grasped. "I feel like the thing that defines analog materials is they get dust on them and digital materials don't," Thomson tells me. "Art is this sort of last refuge of the truly analog experience, the haptic and the being in the room with something." But far from steeping in nostalgia (he admittedly shies away from the word), his intellectual curiosity is squarely beamed at "the acute present."

Thomson's ongoing video project is a meditation on how archival materials inform our sense of self, individually and collectively. "I don't look back that much," he notes. "I'm interested in the future. But it's all kind of a roiling mess anyway—time, how we experience it."

The videos allow Thomson to zoom in on "the moment



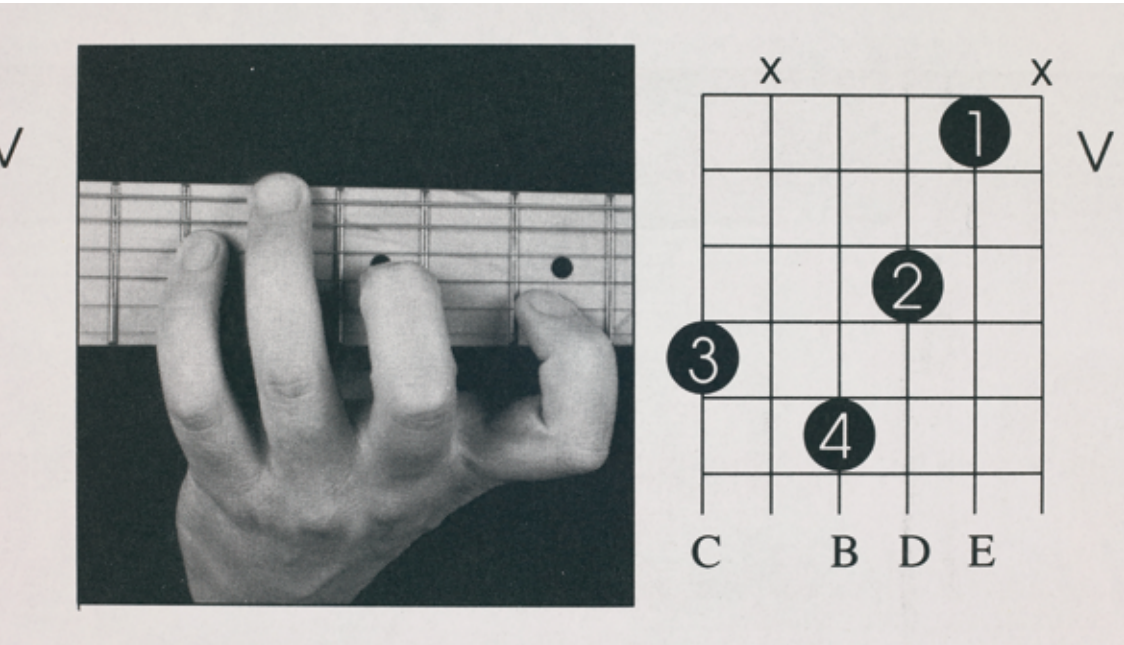


MUNGO THOMSON. "THE KISS" (2024). LENTICULAR PRINT. 39 1/2" x 30 1/2" x 1 1/2". (FRAMED). © MUNGO THOMSON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND KARMA.

of the digitization of the book and the destruction of the book in order to become a PDF that lives forever online." That necessarily destructive process occurs, in reality, by way of a rapid-speed robotic book scanner. Yet it's Thomson's ongoing curiosity about his seemingly endless source material, which has since expanded beyond the *Time-Life* books to include field guides, encyclopedias, and historical printed matter; that constructs the emotional core of each video. Midway through our call, he takes me on an impromptu studio tour; pausing in his shoot room-slash-library, complete with a copy stand, computer, and his several-shelves-deep *Time-Life* collection. Despite having acquired thousands of books that inform his multimedia practice, he does not explicitly self-describe as an archivist or librarian. Rather, he resonates with a certain caretaking instinct; the active process of building a personal archive, however subjective, that will eventually outlive him. "If Rodin's work is all lost, or if these collections of recipes from around the world are lost, you have my films, you know?"

The sensate aspect of Thomson's work cannot be overlooked. Whether setting seashells or fluttering hummingbirds or guitar chords in motion, each *Time Life* video hums with a mesmeric, propulsive energy, offering up sedimentary layers of history and art and natural beauty for contemplation. "I *am* attempting to cultivate a somatic experience," he says. As he sees it, sitting in a dark gallery with your back flat against the wall, sound cranked high (whether hearing a performance by Sonic Youth co-founder Lee Ranaldo or vinyl's ASMR crackle), as a visual avalanche tumbles before your eyes is almost like "a cousin" of the endless scroll. Spending some time with these videos might allow us to tap back into our own senses and evoke what contemporary hypersaturation actually *feels* like in the body. "Maybe [it's] my Gen X articulation of that feeling of overwhelmedness or too much information of chaos. In that respect, it's sort of cautionary and hopeful at the same time."

A similar sense of heightened self-awareness permeated my recent walk through *A Universal Picture*, as I stood surrounded on all sides by full-sized mirrors emblazoned with the instantly



recognizable TIME logo, a longtime graphic design interest of Thomson's. These silkscreened mirrors create what the artist describes as an "infinity tunnel": one that does not allow the viewer to turn away from or overlook their presence and agency in history's grand sweep. Over the course of our years on the planet, what will each of us be remembered for?

"I've always kind of liked things that have a little double duty," Thomson explains. "The mirror is where you feel time, right? That's where you see your face every day, changing. And so there is that aspect, too. It's an artwork, but it's also a highly functional object. It's a portal."

Just as magazine covers often reflect back to us our desires and fears, fantasies and obsessions at particular moments in time, these portals are paired with specific historical, cultural context. Each mirror contains a playfully folded trompe-l'oeil corner of familiar, generationally spanning signifiers: Madonna and Kermit the Frog, a model of DNA and Mars. Built into the conceit that any person staring into Thomson's mirrors becomes an instant cover star of *TIME*—ostensibly, "the most important person in the world in that moment"—is also the unavoidable, double-edged sword of mortality, hovering just on the other side of these infinitely reflective surfaces. "Like any vanitas, it's reminding you that you will die one day. I wanted that kind of 'sensational cruelty,' you might say, the two-sidedness of that."

As an artist who works expansively across sculpture, installation, print media, and video, among other mediums, I ask Thomson about the possibility of self-portraiture in his growing body of work. Across his multi-year projects, is a recognizable reflection of his recurring questions and preoccupations slowly coming into view?

"The emotional undertone of the work is one's own disposition, like it or not. You can't help but express the way you are," he says. "The priority was always that I'm trying to build a world. I'm trying to do something encyclopedic. I'm trying to do this sort of Borgesian project, where it's a map of the world that's the size of the world. Putting ourselves in scale with massive things: history and time and the cosmos. But then, you find out, oh yeah, that's just because when I was a kid that stuck in my brain, you know? Turns out everything is super personal."

At times dizzying and disorienting, Thomson's work conveys a simultaneous sense of wonder about who we are, how we got here, and where we might go next. In a time that too often tempts us to numb out and disengage, these dual exhibits propose that we might still retain a capacity for surprise, connection, and undistracted engagement in our chaotic present.

MUNGO THOMSON.  
"VOLUME 16. FOLK2NS, OR THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GUITAR CHORDS" (2025).  
4K VIDEO WITH SOUND, 4:14 MINUTES.  
PERFORMED BY LEE RANALDO, MIXED BY ADRIAN GARCIA.  
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