

Bruce Thorn: Organizing the Infinite

By Margaret Hawkins

"Isn't life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?" Andy Warhol asked, musing about his multiples, though he might have been talking about Bruce Thorn's paintings.

Pattern is how we understand the world, or try to. Pattern organizes the infinite, picks out a piece, and connects it to everything else by repeating it. This process is fundamental to art and life-specifically biological, botanical, and cosmic systems. Nature is nothing if not a series of interlinking and self-replicating patterns, yet replication is always organic and partial-never merely mechanical. The smallest particles of life continually repeat and regenerate, spawned by the structure of what came before and changed along the way, sometimes subtly, sometimes shockingly. This imperfect self-replication-continual and never exact-manifests most obviously in the physical world, but the process plays out in the metaphysical realm as well. Change, mutation, and evolution-from the cellular to the global-move us forward, whether we like it or not.

So it is with Thorn's paintings, seething masses of interlocking, intermingling shapes that appear to pulse, breathe, throb, squirm, and spark as their moving parts repeat and amend themselves. The paintings look like samples captured on slides and seen under a microscope, making us think this same liveliness continues *ad infinitum* off stage, off canvas. Thorn's shapes and marks appear to derive from nature, whether inspired by lightening bolts or eels in a tide pool. Some paintings look like magnified cross sections of rocks or sediment, while others recall something seen through an electron microscope: droplets of pond water, maybe, or what lives in bits of blood or slime. These microcosmic worlds of Thorn's seem to self-invent as we stare at them, reminding us of the disconnect between how we expect life to proceed and how life, in fact, unfolds. Even a machine-made pattern eventually degrades. This phenomenon can engender disappointment, of course (the best laid plans, etc.), but ultimately drives creativity-the riffing and improvisation at the essence of art and nature.

Thorn, primarily a painter, is also a musician and composer-no coincidence there. Non-representational abstraction is the style of painting closest to music. Like music, these paintings feel rhythmic if not necessarily melodic, mutating (permutating?) like a fugue. His music does the same.

Sound sensitive, Thorn sometimes listens to music while he paints-but not always. "Working in the studio, the mood dictates silence or music. Listening to traffic-like the waves of the ocean, to the kids next door screaming, to the birds in the garden and jets overhead, the sounds of life are always pulsating. Sometimes silence is the key, sometimes music. The important thing is to keep working." He says he wants to make paintings that "have a heartbeat."

It's not just a figure of speech. Thorn maintains a physical connection to his work. "Art should be alive and moving," he says. He describes his process of applying paint as dancing, and creates tools that make that possible. He talks about "the dance of a line" and uses big brushes that leave almost cartoon-like stroke marks on the canvas, which he then refines with his fastidious eye for detail. He improvises. He throws paint at the canvas with wine cups, sloshes paint with a mop that he has tied into doll-like shape. Big tools like this leave marks in scale with human proportion, even when the scale of what the marks seem to refer to is atomic, or cosmic.

Thorn has always painted. He grew up on the South side of Chicago in the 1950s and '60s, as influenced by trips to the city's museums as he was by the cultural upheaval going on around him. Thorn cites encounters with works by Ivan Albright, Jackson Pollock, and Henri Matisse at the Art Institute of Chicago as early influences on his visual imagination, and it's easy to see the trace of those

artists in his work. Albright, in particular, seems to have left an indelible impression on him, as he did on so many Chicago artists. "His detailed textures and brushwork had a huge impact on me," notes Thorn, "as did his propensity to look beyond the surface of things."

Thorn also grew up in Africa, part time at least. His father, an engineer, was posted in Tunisia, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire. Thorn spent six or seven years there as a boy. He remembers seeing monkeys in the streets and finding century-old ceramic shards in the dirt by the road. These intersections-of East and West, human and animal, present and past-enlarge Thorn's sensibility, allowing him to see the world as a seamless field of energy with endless interconnections. (See *A Commonsense Novelty* and *Autumn's Star* for proof that it's not things but energetic connections that are Thorn's real subjects.)

It was in Northern Africa, too, that Thorn discovered and learned to love Islamic decorative art and Arabic calligraphy. "I've always been drawn to all kinds of calligraphy," he says. "Especially if I don't understand it." The elegant arabesques in *As If There's No Tomorrow* could have been lifted straight out of a mosque tile, though the color—a kind of sour carnation pink—may be more of a nod to the funk of the psychedelic 1960s.

Thorn received a bachelor of fine arts degree at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970s, then took a break from higher education. In the 1980s, he went back to school and earned a master of fine arts degree at the University of Illinois at Chicago, at the height of the Chicago art boom. He paid his requisite respects to Chicago Imagism, the city's prevailing style then. "My style became folksy and figurative, influenced too much by the Chicago scene," he writes, reflecting the kind of self-knowledge not all artists have, let alone are wise enough to adjust for. Luckily for Thorn's work, he and his wife moved their family to Oregon in 1990, and stayed for 10 years. There, reinvigorated and inspired by the wetly lush natural environs of the Pacific Northwest, Thorn quickly returned to nonrepresentational abstraction, and his paintings regained what he felt to be a more authentic sense of life force, deeply influenced as they were by the natural world.

Back in Chicago now, Thorn works out of a big garage-style studio in the backyard of his house on the North side that leaves just enough room between the house and the studio for a spectacularly bountiful vegetable garden from which he plucks beets and kale for neighbors and visiting writers. The studio is a kind of sanctuary, separate from the house, with no computer and no view. "I feel safe painting," he says. "It's a warm, cozy activity where you're safe to be wild in your own mind." The only windows in his studio are skylights. Wheeled tables have different assortments of materials on them that make it possible for him to move them around and work on drawings, oil paintings, or gouaches as the spirit moves him.

The oil paintings are the main thing now.

Set up in the middle of the studio when I visit is *The Color of Money*. Four by six feet, the painting dominates the space. Green and gold brushstrokes swim on the surface of the canvas. The brushstrokes are real, painted with an enormous brush, then refined and articulated, made to look like paintings of brushstrokes, but also like fish swimming on the surface of water in some feeding frenzy, thrashing in a shallow pond. This supple shift from abstraction to nature to the metaphor loosely suggested by the wry title is characteristic of much of Thorn's work. Always most important, though, is the paint.

Thorn's paintings are meticulously executed, with surfaces that are gorgeously, precisely painted. The newer work may appear looser than the earlier paintings, but they all end in a perfectionist

finish. Every time, Thorn manages to balance both, retain the expressive energy of his loose beginnings (his paint-dances with mops), while keeping his finished paintings looking burnished, with every color invented and every shape massaged into perfection. Asked how he keeps the motion in the paintings without losing his precise touch, he says, enigmatically, that music helps. However he gets there, Thorn's paintings embody the joy of creation, and for him, creation is as much about fine-tuning as it is about explosive expression.

This attention to detail delivers great satisfaction to the viewer on both the micro and macro levels. You can get up close to these paintings with no fear that sloppiness will spoil the effect. There is no sloppiness. As in nature, and in the micro/macro poles of which Thorn references to freely in all his work, there is the appearance of accident where no real accident occurs. Rather, the apparent randomness in his work is all part of some larger design, the exact meaning of which the artist appears to know, but will not tell.

Margaret Hawkins is a critic, author, and senior lecturer in the New Arts Journalism program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her third novel, *Lydia's Party*, was just released in paperback by Penguin Press.