

## Recorded and recoded : Thora Jacobson

“You live like dogs are chasing you,” Mafalda Rose Sorbello Thorstensen once told her daughter. It was a disconcerting but astute observation to a young woman who has never, at least in my experience, wasted a single moment in her pursuit of understanding – of herself, of her art form, her experiences, her history and world. She has relentlessly explored the “realm of all possibilities” in her studio and many other workplaces, not to mention her kitchen or garden. And, along the way, she also forged deep, lifelong friendships with students, printmakers and teaching colleagues. While Shelley Thorstensen doesn’t live as if pursued by a pack of wild dogs, she also doesn’t stand still long enough find out if they are gaining on her.

Colorist, master printer and teacher, Thorstensen has taught at seven art schools, set up six print studios, and conducted residencies in Honolulu, Ireland, Italy and Finland. She also created the Printmakers Open Forum, aka the Home for Wayward Print Girls and Boys, that she describes as “a free form, shared, non-hierarchical amalgam of printmakers anywhere who believe information, technologies, ideas should be accessed in open-source fashion.” And, with her husband, Shelley designed and built a beautifully appointed and fully functional print studio at the edge of an orchard/vineyard/pasture just on the northern side of the Mason Dixon line in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

In 2016, Shelley spent the better part of a year making the 35 monoprints for the suite of *Strangers No More*. As a regular reader/observer of her Facebook posts over the months, I found myself looking forward to her weekly musings about what would come next, or how she would solve a technical problem. These regular reflections, recorded over months provide a window onto a distinctive way of working for Shelley – an opportunity to consider her larger body of work, herself, her visual and emotional language, and the usefulness of monoprint as a vehicle for her work. Monoprints allow an artist to test imagery and a range of technical approaches without the need to consider the demands of editioning. In this case, the prints become a collection of short stories, a song cycle – in this case, autobiographical but not chronological -- in which images may appear as leitmotifs but which don’t necessarily mean the same thing as they appear and reappear. They are her personal vernacular, rendered more powerful with changes in use, emphasis and composition.

Key to Shelley’s suite of prints is the cover image, *La Tenda (The Curtain)*. The sweeping, elegant shorthand on the lower register of the image -- it also appears in *Privato (Proprietary)* and *Ripristinare (To restore/re-establish)* -- is both a recording and re-coding device. It captures the complexity, difficulty and power of the artist’s relationship with her mother and more. Shelley remembers that her mother, trained as a legal secretary, transcribed almost all conversations – home or office, mundane or momentous, to capture every detail. But their meaning remained opaque to Shelley, detailed as they were in a secret code. This image of *La Tenda* is, in some ways, a response to her relationship with her mother, loving but also complicated. The last line of shorthand translates phonetically as “artist” as if a direct response to her. It seems to convey that Shelley’s body of work as an artist and what she has done to live her life and overcome challenges over the years, has been a lifelong process of integration and re-integration, crafting a life that now makes sense to her and makes full use of her deep reserve of memory.

Images, patterns, colors, and textures emerge and re-surface throughout the work. Grids, bands and compartments function as windows, shutters, screens – sometimes letting light in, sometimes obscuring

what is behind - or below – them as in *La Raccolta* (The Harvest) and *Protetta* (Guarded). The compositions are never centered - they are almost always slightly off balance, and intentionally taut. Translucent white lace fragments that are directional and spatial work their way through many of the images, serving perhaps as a fragile filter of nostalgia.

In other works, red, roiling, disruptive forms appear, either intent on escape from the print surface or intrusion into the composition. They are memories too, but clearly not nostalgic: *La Ripartizione* (The Allocation), *Impressionare* (To Imprint), *Esprimersi* (To Express Oneself), and *Cassaforte* (Strongbox). Nonetheless they are important counterpoint in the song cycle.

Shelley also selectively uses a particular image from her childhood that is immediately recognizable to those of us who played with “cap guns” as kids. These ribbons of red paper, punctuated by small discs of shock-sensitive explosive compounds produce noise and smoke when “shot”. They were just a little dangerous -- and very exciting. Shelley uses the pattern in several images to create borders, like tiny minefields of life.

Other identifiable fragments find their ways into several prints: a small boat that seems to be a family crest in *La Dimora* (House/Abode), and then reappears in *Cauta* (Wary/Cautious) and in a faint echo in *Esprimersi* (To Express Oneself). Perhaps they reference the seafaring ways of her Norwegian forebears, or they might nod to a personal sense of exploration – what they mean varies according to the visual and personal intent of the artist.

Finally, it is Thorstensen’s use of color, simultaneously saturated and slightly discordant, that contributes to the densely rendered and seductive sense of memory and harmony that permeate *Strangers No more*.

Thora Jacobson

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### **LINKED CONSEQUENCES: The Work of Shelley Thorstensen**

“The complexity of the human concept of space is demonstrated by the number of equivalent words that have had to be invented in all languages to characterize different aspects and functions of this idea . . . [T]he space of the imagination contains an essential mutation and ambiguity—that order of ambiguity that permits the poet to imply an infinite series of linked consequences in a simple phrase and a score of experiences to be simultaneously present to the mind of a child.” (boldness mine) 1

The printmaker Stanley William Hayter wrote these words in *New Ways of Gravure*, originally published in 1949. The quote is from a passage on the creation of visual space in artwork; how space is condensed into visual narrative. He suggests that viewing an artwork is to examine a succession of ideas that do not necessarily follow one another in a linear sequence. Instead, one encounters analogous concepts again and again from different angles, like walking a labyrinth. As one approaches the center, these “linked

consequences” come to exist in an accumulative totality in the mind of the pilgrim. Hayter could have been discussing the work of Shelley Thorstensen.

Hayter saw artworks as automatist strata of “linked consequences.” At the forefront of the Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist movements, Hayter saw printmaking not only as a formal means of image-making, but research in how to describe time and space, and by extension, human understanding of the universe. His avid artistic disciple, Thorstensen creates layers that enable viewers to navigate between our agreed upon reality. While Hayter was influenced by his study of hard sciences, chemistry and physics, Thorstensen is motivated by the mystical: Catholicism, Sufism, and years of meditation practice.

In *Still Life with Rose* (2010), the viewer sees the image divided by thick solid lines into three sections. At the bottom of the print, grounding the narrative both visually and in content is the border fence, leading the eye into a maplike grid, a further reminder of the physical world and its boundaries. As the eye travels up the print, it penetrates deeply into the textured red space, to finally rise into the blue veil of the top portion of the print. Behind the blue, the red layer is still present, suggesting that a story of traveling through nature is also to travel the layers of consciousness.

In *Hanging Fire* (2010), seven symbols, evocative of the seven chakras, hover over a section of a tree. The tree section depicted is a trunk just as it splits into branches, one limb crossing over the trunk, suggesting perhaps a dervish frozen in mid-whirl. Slightly off-center a red glow hovers, and the entire print is infused with a coppery radiance like that of twilight. The overall feeling is that of suspension, of undergoing a controlled ritual to allow the self to lose control.

This concept, a contained rite to create conditions for letting-go, is an embodiment of Thorstensen’s practice. Printmaking, to her, is a translation tool—in which both brute and hallowed experience is expressed in her personal visual language. The interrelationship between her practice and her visual language is married by process. Process provides a structure for Thorstensen to let go, to lose control, and also to tell a story.

Another recurring type of imagery in Thorstensen’s work is ornament and pattern. In an ambiguous way, ornament and pattern appear to guide the viewer visually through darkness and light. To the Western mind, the checkerboard pattern of *In Other Words* (2006), seems to be a guiding presence that carries the eye rhythmically from left to right through the print, transitioning the viewer from the gloaming on the left to the right side in which a light seems to emanate from behind the pattern. However, with Thorstensen’s study of Sufism—traditionally recorded in Arabic, written from right to left—leaves one to wonder if this isn’t instead a crossing from light into darkness, like *Psyche’s* journey to the underworld. Another instance is in *Grace Note* (2010). It brings to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the protagonist, locked away in a room, descends into her own private world, one that she sees within the wallpaper.<sup>2</sup> Centered, or perhaps confined, in the pattern in Thorstensen’s print is a sinister rectangle. This is Thorstensen at her darkest. In this rectangle, rigid straight lines imprison an organic shape. The central confined form suggests the anatomical shape of the human heart, albeit one with enigmatic tendrils breaking off and floating away. This dark rectangle seems to be simultaneously retreating into the space of the print, and hovering above it, encroaching on the viewer’s personal space. In prints such as *In Other Words* and *Grace Note*, patterns become rituals for the eyes, paths of *katabasis* and *anabasis*, descents and ascents from the underworld.

A significant aspect of Thorstensen's work is the linear mark-making that rests as the penultimate or final layer in many of her pieces. It is this line work, with occasional gradations of form dissolving into shadows cast on previous layers, which is closest to the viewer. Both physically and visually, these lines are in a separate space from the other layers of imagery, such as the birdlike shadow reaching out from the upper right corner of *Rhyme and Reason* (2005). Contrasted with the other strata of her imagery, it is in this layer of exacting lines in which Thorstensen always seems most in control. She defines this distinct space as that of transformation, the lines as catalyst and gatekeeper. Looking past this layer into one of Thorstensen's prints is like absorbing the time of an astral projection; the line work of the uppermost layer is an indication of when the departure took place.

Each piece by Thorstensen is not a single experience; instead it is a concentration of ideas, encounters, and emotions. Her conceptual roots are in nature and its experience, but go deeper than everyday reality. Viewing her work, one winds through a labyrinthine configuration, where process, pattern, and lines become conduits and psychopomps in her visual idiom. Thorstensen presents in each piece a simultaneity of linked consequences, twists and turns of the journey of the soul.

Michelle Wilson, Artist Richmond, California, 2011

1 Hayter, Stanley William, *New Ways of Gravure* (Revised Edition). New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981 (Orig. ed. 1949). Page 233.

2 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Boston: Small & Maynard, 1899.