

# Dance Electric



*Joan Thorne: Squazemo, 1984, oil on canvas, 80 by 83 inches. All photos courtesy Graham Modern Gallery.*

**By STEPHEN WESTFALL**

**A**bstract painting has benefited from and been victimized by a tendency towards esthetic determinism (the "forward march" of Western culture) and an overall drift towards congenially quiet tastefulness. This wasn't always the case, obviously. There was a time when the public felt personally affronted by abstract painting, and the artists producing it were not themselves wholly cognizant of what they were doing, seeing only that a window had been opened onto a vast esthetic territory of as yet unfixed or undemonstrated formal laws. The possibilities, including the breakdown of traditional pictorial values, seemed limitless. Of course such values never broke down completely, and abstraction itself has quieted down into a conservative

*Joan Thorne's high-strung paintings have been pushing the limits of control for over a decade now and show no sign of quieting down. Even amid this will to wildness, however, they have evolved in a manner as purposeful as it is steady.*



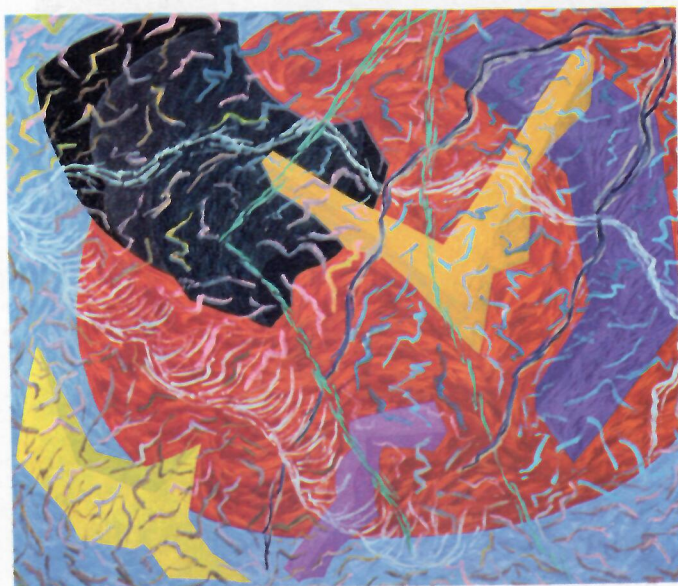
*Mazu, 1980, oil on canvas, 74 by 102 inches.*

genre more widely accepted by the public. Abstract painters find themselves lecturing about Piero to heavy-lidded Neo-Expressionists who just want the keys to the car.

Joan Thorne can't make abstract painting dangerous again all by herself (given the current permissiveness of the art world, perhaps no art can be all that threatening), but she certainly manages to restore the sense of confrontation. Does she really know what she's doing? Happily, I think the answer is both yes and no. Her paintings possess a discernible formal logic developed in pursuit of highly personal criteria that have, in turn, evolved under the pressure of the painting process. Her development has been purposeful and consistent over the last decade or more, and yet there's a suspense underlying her already high-strung imagery. There's an exhilarating tension in the feeling that she doesn't have it totally worked out, that she's not

proceeding according to a program—that she may *not* quite know what she's doing.

Thorne's paintings of a few years ago are as spatially dense as lava. The hard-edged bands outlining quirky, vaguely geometric shapes emerge from the seething pictorial field like skeletons from a tar pit. At the same time, the range of Thorne's explosive color and her vast inventory of marks rattle perceptions of surface unity (a unity that so much post-'50s abstract painting has done its best to emphasize). By the time her paintings appeared in the '81 Whitney Biennial, they seemed to carry a virtual compendium of non-accidental marks and effects: gouges into impasto fields, lightning-quick dashes of the brush across flatter spreads of color, twisting arabesques, abutted areas of



*Fandango*, 1985, oil on canvas, 79 by 92 inches.

**Antically full, Thorne's art undeniably makes a lot of noise—but it's not a cacophony. Her shapes, as awkwardly original as newborn animals, are set in motion by her vigorous attack.**

glossy gels and matte medium, hard-edged forms that either slash through or drown in looser brushwork. The richness and intensity are reminiscent of Stella's "Painted Birds," if one could imagine them broken and steamrolled back into the picture plane. In attempting to analyze the emotional effect these and subsequent paintings have I find myself thinking of the eerie beauty of Islamic calligraphy, where the script is both gesture and organic shape. Not that the marks are the same (Kandinsky in his final biomorphic period is closer to Islamic script), but Thorne's paintings share some of that strange animation. The biomorphism of Miró and Baziotes has had a clear influence on her work from the first, even as she was pursuing a more "American" high velocity attack in heavier-bodied paint.

This spring at the Graham Modern Gallery, Thorne exhibited a group of characteristically nervy pictures that are openly

illusionistic, exploding into three distinct planes. Stringy, flame-like brushstrokes intertwine and writhe right up against the windowpane of the foreground. Set further back are volumetric cousins of her earlier clunky polygons. And furthest back, huge areas of color slowly drift. The near sentient quality of the twisting and turning middle-ground shapes recalls the biomorphism in her early paintings. Like science-fiction speculations about life based on silicon, or photomicrographs of viruses, they posit a meeting of the organic and crystalline. And yet, however visionary or strange the separate elements in her paintings are, I'm more impressed by Thorne's ability to integrate them into a pictorial whole.

One way she unites the paintings is by establishing similar arabesques among the three pictorial layers, as in *Fandango*. The nervous foreground squiggles braid into three wraithlike outlines overlapping and fanning across each other, their top points plotting a crude arc. The circular arrangement of the middle shapes is more obvious, as is its echo of the big red oval behind it. The motif of a curve, moving from the barest suggestion of an arc up front to the specific shape in the distance, begins to yoke together the spatial levels in the painting. At the same time, the diagonal axis of the oval finds a rough parallel in the coaxial alignment between the lavender form at the bottom of the picture and the right arm of the yellow flying-V shape above.

Despite its differing motions and high-keyed color, *Fandango* is one of Thorne's quietest pictures. *Squazemo* (almost all of her titles are neologisms, *Fandango* being an exception) generates its electrical hiss from its yellow background, blatant primary and secondary hues throughout the rest of the painting, and its wiggly middle-ground shapes. The most arresting of these are the central, sawtoothed red form with its impossibly simultaneous upper/lower viewing angles and, in the lower left of the painting, the comically sinister orange shape that looks like a crescent with a hangnail. All the shapes spiral away from each other (in contrast with *Fandango's* inward curl), and the eye of this storm is to be found at the painting's lower right center, where the serrated red shape comes to a sharp point. This red point pushes the rim of blue it overlaps back far enough for it to resemble the curve of the earth from a satellite photograph. The heightened brightness of the mottled yellow ground in this area is like a glow from an eclipsed sun, a corona. And yet the vigorous brushwork and bright color bring the background right back to the surface of the painting. As you embark on a formal analysis of Thorne's paintings you become aware of an enormously complex interaction among diagrammatic, tactile and chromatic elements.

There's no atmospheric naturalism to be found in Thorne's colors, and yet they sustain a consistent light, not far removed from the cartoon illumination of Peter Saul's paintings. The antic fullness of her abstractions has proved to be as hard for some people to take as Saul's angry blasphemies. I could sympathize, if not agree, with one critic I respect who scorned Thorne's paintings in conversation as "electrified spaghetti." Her art makes a lot of noise, but it's not a cacophony. Her shapes, awkwardly original as newborn animals, are set dancing by her attack. Thorne's paintings will never take us out of ourselves by quieting us down; they require us instead to raise ourselves to her level of intensity. The notion of "modernity" in art is based on such demands. □

Author: Stephen Westfall is an artist who writes about art.



*Zera, 1985, oil on canvas, 68 by 65 inches.*