

“The Ghost Picked Me”:  
The Life and Art of Joan Thorne

*It's like the ghost is writing a song like that. It gives you the  
song and it goes away. You don't know what it means.  
Except the ghost picked me to write the song.*

— Bob Dylan

Ask Joan Thorne to describe the creative sources of her imagery, and her reply will reflect annoyance tempered by patience. She defers to Bob Dylan, who, when asked the same question, replied, “The ghost picked me to write the song.”

Thorne and Dylan came of age in New York City in the early 1960s. Dylan arrived in 1961, determined to become a unique part of the new folk music movement. By the middle of the decade, his career had taken off. At the same time, Thorne was emerging from the shadows of the Abstract Expressionists, determined to make her own mark on painting.

Thorne grew up in Greenwich Village. Her mother was a Ukrainian immigrant from a musical family, who became an English teacher; her father, a surgeon. Recognizing their daughter’s artistic talents early, in 1949 they enrolled her at age six in the Little Red Schoolhouse on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. Founded in 1921 by Elisabeth Irwin, a pioneer in educational reform, the school has continued to maintain its reputation as a progressive and nurturing catalyst for creative children. Pete Seeger, the folk singer, performed there so frequently that Thorne remembered him as if he were one of the teachers.

Among Thorne’s schoolmates were a future actor, Robert DeNiro; a future political activist, Angela Davis; and Michael Meeropol, whose parents — Ethel and Julius Rosenberg — were found guilty as alleged Communists for conspiring to commit espionage and executed in 1953, when these children were in the fifth grade. And then there was the other tomboy in the class, her friend Kathy Boudin, whose father was a well-known radical lawyer. Boudin went on to join the Weather Underground and

would take part in the infamous Brinks Robbery of 1981. “When we had a class reunion around 1990,” recalls Thorne, “we called her in prison and spoke to her. She had become very active in education and AIDS.”

The faculty at “Little Red” reinforced Thorne’s role as the school artist. “Year after year, the teachers frequently hung my paintings in the hallway,” she says. “More than that, they really talked to me about them in a serious way. This made me feel that I was engaged in something very important. It was there I became a painter.”

Thorne’s next source of inspiration came with what she describes as her first true communion with nature. During her summers at an upstate camp she loved to climb trees, upon whose branches she would perch for hours, sometimes to the consternation of the counselors. This lengthy tree-sitting was the consequence of her having become transfixed by the gradual changes in the light as it streamed through the leaves and branches, creating abstract patterns. All the while, she felt protected as if she were a part of the tree and the light.

In the early 1960s, Thorne was an undergraduate at New York University, where she was stimulated by a cross-disciplinary curriculum that brought experimental theater and philosophy to bear on her approach to painting, which up to that time had been largely figurative. She was impressed by avant-garde plays such as Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story* and Jean Cocteau’s seminal *Orpheus*, with their surrealist sets that reinforced themes of dreams and obsessions. Her artistic maturity came while she was pursuing her master’s degree at Hunter College of the City University of New York. She began to trust an instinctive approach to painting, crediting her thesis advisor — Tony Smith — for having instilled in her the greatest confidence in her abilities. Whether in Smith’s Greenwich Village loft or at his New Jersey home, Thorne recalls, “He never made me feel like I was a college art student. From the beginning, he treated me like a professional painter . . . He said, ‘You’re going to continue to paint when you leave Hunter. You’re very fortunate. Women are closer to the source. They’re not afraid to use their intuition.’”

Smith’s words resonated with the young painter. For the rest of the 1960s, she indeed tapped into her intuitions, performing extempore, and trusting that a unique style would eventually emerge. She acknowledges her roots not only in the Abstract Expressionists but also in their abstract predecessors such as John Marin, Georgia O’Keefe, and Arthur Dove. Ultimately, she is a painter’s painter, also

admiring the works of Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Soutine. “But the real source,” she claims, “is a very primal place. First, I get possessed by an image, which may well have come to me in a dream. But the process of how an image appears and then disappears is an enigma. It’s much more complicated than just saying, for example, that I was influenced by nature. I start to paint, and it just happens. It’s like the painting is painting itself.”

At the end of the decade, Thorne took a large studio on John Street in the financial district. In a neighboring studio, Jack Youngerman was painting hardedge abstractions of natural forms. Thorne’s expansive space, with its soaring ceiling and skylight, proved to be her first effective platform for painting on a large scale. Here, her purposeful forays into the subconscious found her injecting new life into Abstract Expressionism at a time when a cacophony of artistic styles resounded in different directions, from Pop to Op, from Lyrical Abstraction to Minimalism. Complicating it all, Happenings signaled the emergence of conceptualism. In the midst of these different styles, her approach to painting may even be seen as an affirmation of the spirit and the peaking countercultural movement, which had adopted freedom of expression as its mantra.

At the same time, waves of activism continued to rage: the Vietnam War was exposed as a true quagmire; the civil rights movement marched painfully yet inexorably forward; and, the women’s rights movement announced that a male-centric culture would have to change its ways. But the counterculture was also the generation of love, peace, and psychedelia — just as bent on the spiritual explorations of one’s inner self as it was on exposing society’s ills — all to the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Dylan, too, had transformed himself into a rock musician. With the five members of The Band, he recorded “The Basement Tapes” in a house dubbed “Big Pink.” His lyrics and lines now seemed to float in an ethereal space, as if in counterpart channeling Thorne’s surreal shapes and psychic environments. Her direction was powerfully reaffirmed in 1969 while traveling throughout the Yucatán Peninsula. “Something very strange happened to me there,” she says. “Whether it was the temples and their spirits, I cannot say, but I immediately experienced an overwhelming sense of energy.” Years later, she realized that she had unknowingly traversed the site of the world’s largest meteor impact, the 100-mile-wide Chicxulub crater, credited by most scientists as the likely cause of the demise of the dinosaurs. Had she sensed the Earth’s most explosive prehistoric moment? From that point on, her vivid dreams became the primary source for her vision and were reflected in the increasing intensity of her paintings. So singleminded was her pursuit that she ended her marriage to a mathematician out of fear that a lifestyle in the suburbs would be predictable and deadening.

In 1971, Thorne met Faith Ringgold [b.1930] and joined her as a teacher at the Women's House of Detention on Rikers Island in a new program called "Art without Walls-Free Space." The program, which had been born from the civil rights movement, was aimed at enriching the lives of the inmates. Ringgold even painted an eight-foot-square mural for the facility. She also encouraged the younger painter to remain true to her inner drive. "I became an artist because I wanted to tell my story," says Ringgold. "Joan understood that path. Still, when people see her paintings they are constantly trying to relate the shapes and forms to reality. But they can't be identified because they are other-worldly. They have a beauty about them that's very compelling because of her highly developed technique, absolutely gorgeous colors, and musical metaphors. It's as if music is playing color."<sup>1</sup>

In 1972, Thorne's painting was included in the Whitney Museum's last Annual Exhibition (thereafter it became the Biennial Exhibition). This show was developed under the museum's director, John Bauer, who had begun as a curator there in 1952. Bauer featured works by aging members of the first and second generations of the New York School, enlivened by the emerging third generation. Only 21 percent were women, anchored by Georgia O'Keeffe [1887-1986], who had initially exhibited there forty years earlier. The first generation of the New York School was represented by one woman, Perle Fine [1905-1986], and four men: Adolph Gottlieb [1903-1974], James Brooks [1906-1992], Willem De Kooning [1904-1997], and Jack Tworkov [1900-1982]. Only one woman, Helen Frankenthaler [b.1929], represented the second generation, but there were many men, including Al Held [1928-2005], Jasper Johns [b.1930], Alex Katz [b.1927], Roy Lichtenstein [1923-1997], Kenneth Noland [1924-2010], Jules Olitski [1922-2007], and Cy Twombly [b.1928]. The young women of the third generation of the New York School included Nancy Graves [1940-1995], Sylvia Mangold [b.1938], Elizabeth Murray [1940-2007], Joan Snyder [b.1940], Pat Steir [b.1938], and Joan Thorne [b.1943]. There were many more young men of the third generation, including Dan Christensen [1942-2007], Chuck Close [b.1940], Larry Poons [b.1937], and Richard Pousette-Dart [1916-1992].

The Whitney portended for Thorne numerous museum and gallery exhibitions over the ensuing decades, kicked off by a solo show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1973. Shortly afterward, she met Jack Tworkov and was delighted to find that he was already an admirer of her works. "Jack became the father I really never had," she says. "We had frequent dialogue about both painting and life . . . and he always treated me like an equal in painting." By 1960, Tworkov's boldly expressive brushstrokes had given way to the hard edges that defined his geometric abstractions. Despite their

stylistic differences, Tworkov enjoyed keeping abreast of Thorne's paintings because "they reminded him to always remain free." Thorne last saw him when he visited her studio in June 1982 before heading to Provincetown, Massachusetts, for the summer. In late August, she had a vivid dream of climbing a mountain with him. As they struggled up the rocky incline, they carried buckets filled with melted butter. Dipping their brushes, they painted the huge rocks in butter as they climbed, nearly out of breath. Startled, she woke up. The next day she was unable to reach Tworkov, and friends told her that he was ill with cancer. He died a few days later.

In 1977, Thorne contributed to the first issue of *Re-View*, likely the first American magazine published, illustrated, and written by artists. Its founder, the painter and writer, Vered Lieb, lauded Abstract Expressionism in her editorial as a "necessary and inspirational part of our national heritage." However, she reminded the third generation of the New York School that it had a new and higher responsibility. Harking back to art's role as "the only spiritual counterbalance to a materialistic world," she wrote that works in *Re-View* would be "significant and representative of a 'cultural consciousness' of our time." She was confident that the third generation had found itself on a new frontier that was "the fertile ground from which profound artistic expression will arise."<sup>2</sup> The magazine caught the attention of Barbara Rose, who subsequently included Thorne, and some of the other featured artists, in her seminal 1979 exhibition, "American Painting: The Eighties," at the Grey Gallery at New York University. The *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, singled out one of Thorne's paintings to illustrate his review.

The next year, Thorne was included in an exhibition of critics' picks at the Grand Palais in Paris, sponsored by the Société des Artistes Indépendents. When Joan Mitchell [1926–1992] invited her to stay for several days at her home in nearby Vetheuil, Thorne was surprised to discover that Mitchell painted only at night, from about eleven o'clock until just before sunrise. While the Paris exhibition provided welcomed exposure, acceptance into the 1981 Whitney Biennial proved most important to Thorne. Despite the Biennial's bias toward conceptualism, which has persisted to the present day, there was an effort to maintain diversity and include artists who were still in hot pursuit of dragging, slashing, dripping, and scraping paint across a two-dimensional surface. De Kooning and Tworkov continued to represent the first generation of the New York School, joined by second-generation painters such as Held, Richard Diebenkorn [1922–1993], Ellsworth Kelly [b.1923], James Rosenquist [b.1933], and Wayne Thiebaud [b.1920]. Meanwhile, the participation by women had dwindled to 15 percent, shored up by Thorne, Murray, Snyder, Jennifer Bartlett [b.1941], Lynda Benglis [b.1941], and Judy Pfaff [b.1946]. This vanguard of women continued to fight for greater recognition in a male-dominated art

world where “art dealers admittedly recognized and promoted trends while the curators, relying on the gallery system to form the basis of their selections, offered a summary of recent goods.”<sup>3</sup> Subsequent Biennials came under increasing attack, as did Thomas Armstrong, the museum’s director from 1974 to 1990, who during his tenure endured loud public criticism that he was catering to the production of “art stars” by the leading galleries.

However, Thorne and her peers came of age struggling against sexism in the art establishment and its attendant lack of exhibition opportunities for women. Since 1985, this issue has been loudly exposed by the public protests of the Guerrilla Girls, whose members remain a well-kept secret. By 2006, representation of women at the Whitney Biennial improved to 29 percent, and by 2008 and 2010 to 40 percent. Despite these gains, in May 2009, Jerry Saltz, the art critic for *New York* magazine, accused the Museum of Modern Art of “a form of gender-based apartheid” because only 4 percent of its permanent collection on display consists of works by women.<sup>4</sup>

In 1987 the American Academy awarded Thorne the Prix de Rome in Visual Arts. She stayed in Rome for a second year and returned to Italy for the next twelve summers, painting in Siena.<sup>5</sup> When Barbara Rose curated “Abstract Painting of the 90s” at the Andre Emmerich Gallery in New York in 1991, she again selected Thorne. Certainly, the inspiration for much of Thorne’s imagery has been fueled by her extensive sojourns. In addition to her summers in Siena, she began the first of extended stays annually in Haiti and the Dominican Republic, which have continued to this day. And in 2008 and 2009 she spent months in India.

The painter, Thornton Willis [b.1936], a close friend since 1974, explained Thorne’s roots and those of the third generation. “As much as we like to place artists in neat categories, Joan’s art is unique. It comes from a highly personal vision, as does all moving art. For a long time, some conceptualists have been saying that painting is dead, but it remains very much alive. Joan’s energy, and the energy of all great painters, is still coming out of those avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century. Certainly, her roots are in Abstract Expressionism, with surrealist imagery emerging to the forefront. These are our roots. After all, if an artist has no roots in the past, there is no future. With this perspective, Joan has always been respected among artists as a strong painter whose expressions are uniquely her own.”<sup>6</sup>

Art critics have frequently referred to Thorne's paintings as "highly independent," "aggressive," and "confrontational" yet requiring a period of contemplation in order to decipher their meanings. One critic, astutely perceiving the influence that experimental theater had upon her in the 1960s, stated, "There is no counterpart to nature in these paintings. Rather, like Cocteau's Orpheus passing through the mirror, they disclose a hidden, mysterious realm that lies behind the appearance of things and perhaps behind the painting itself."<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Thorne's paintings make no promise of delivering us to an empyrean realm; rather, it is the voyage itself we experience. Her biomorphic and crystalline shapes are not chimerical, nor are her purposeful weavings born of paroxysms. The entire surface is activated by undulant shapes and colors, not out of a *horror vacui*, but rather a striving for the numinous. Thorne is that *rara avis* who even dreams of shapes, brushstrokes, and the tonalities of her colors, be they earthy or vibrant. Earlier in her career, when a painting was finished its title would often appear to her based upon her primal perception of a sound she heard emanating from it, such as *Ung* and *Kopt*. While the depth of her intuitive approach has retained its vitality for four decades, her latest works favor brushwork over heavy impasto to weave their story. Certainly, the spur for the birth of each painting has remained the same: a voyage, to exotic place as well as to the subconscious. Ultimately, her quest is one of experiences of worlds of light and color, known and unknown, to be vividly recorded. Her mission is most succinctly expressed, again, by Bob Dylan: "The world don't need any more songs. There's enough songs. Unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart and has something to say. That's a different story."<sup>8</sup>

— Peter Hastings Falk

### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Faith Ringgold, 8 Jan 2010. In addition to providing art instruction, a creative writing program was founded in 1972 by Carol Muske-Dukes, California's poet laureate. More improvements came in 1985 when Rikers opened the nation's first jail-based nursery. In 1988 the women were moved to the Rose M. Singer Center, a new women's facility in East Elmhurst, New York. The men on Rikers Island immediately covered over Ringgold's mural, *For the Women's House*, with white house paint. Years later, after a tedious restoration, the mural was installed at the Singer Center.

<sup>2</sup> In 1977, Vered Lieb and her husband, Thornton Willis, published *Re-View: Artists on Art*, in SoHo. Their inspiration was the magazine *View*, which, from 1940 to 1947, had introduced America to Dada and Surrealism. Publication of *Re-View* ceased in 1979 when Lieb began writing for *Artforum* and *Arts* magazines. Lieb's quotes are from her editorial in *Re-View: Artists on Art*, 1, no. 1 (October 1977) New York.1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lineker, "The Annual and Biennial Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1932–1989: A History and Evaluation of the Impact upon American Art." Introductory essay in Peter Falk, *The Annual & Biennial Exhibition Record of the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1918–1989* (Madison, CT: Sound View Press, 1991) 47.

<sup>4</sup> Phoebe Hoban, "The Feminist Evolution," *ArtNews* (December 2009): 87.

<sup>5</sup>The prestigious Prix de Rome was first awarded in 1896 and allowed artists to live and work at the American Academy in Rome for a year. With the exception of two sculptors, no women won this award until the 1960s, when four of its fifty-four winners in the Visual Arts were women. That 8 percent representation grew to about 15 percent in the 1970s. During the 1980s, when Thorne won, the rate had risen to 32 percent. That number increased to 38 percent during the 1990s and to 44 percent during the first decade of the twenty-first century. During the 1980s, notable winners in the Visual Arts category included: Al Held (1981); Philip Pearlstein (1982); Frank Stella (1983); Alex Katz (1984); Beverly Pepper (1986); Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, and Joan Thorne (1987); Judy Pfaff (1988); and Roy Lichtenstein (1989).

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Thornton Willis, 3 February 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Dumas, "Joan Thorne," *Arts* (January 1991): 82.

<sup>8</sup> Dylan quotes from [www.slideshare.net/chrislandry/bob-dylan-on-creativity-presentation](http://www.slideshare.net/chrislandry/bob-dylan-on-creativity-presentation).