

Joan Thorne:
Traveling in Search of Light

Robert C. Morgan

Upon returning from Joan Thorne's studio one day in late December, after two hours of viewing her recent series of ebullient, yet enigmatic abstract paintings, I began the process of reflecting on how I might talk about her work. What should I say about these paintings? Having followed Thorne's evolution as a painter for more than three decades, it should not become a problem. Moreover, Thorne is a painter with a formidable career, ranging from exhibitions in prestigious New York galleries, such as Fischbach, Willard, Emmerich, and Graham Modern, to museums in the United States and Latin American, not to mention other important European venues. But sometimes what a writer knows reasonably well about an artist's work becomes the most difficult to put in words. In this sense, language carries limitations with regard to the manner in which we may choose to speak. This is particularly true of painting, and especially in the case of Joan Thorne, where the medium holds an intrinsic fictional character, a relentless rebuff, which makes it difficult to say anything at all. Even so, I believe there is a point to writing about painting, and that is to accept its delimitations and to approach the work less in a confrontational way than through an oblique angle of vision. If one is fortunate, the words will come pounding through the surface. Yet there is no guarantee of success. Language always falls a little short. I suppose there is a certain humility upon recognizing the unburdened elegance of truly significant painting. One might, in fact, consider such work at the origin of all that we may ever care to write.

During the discussion in Thorne's studio, the name of Matisse emerged in relation to one of Thorne's paintings called *Alma del Mar*. In fact, the disposition of angles competing

with organic shapes, the variety of gestural movements, and ostensibly clashing colors in this painting had little in common with Matisse. So how did he come into the conversation? Suddenly I recalled a Matisse exhibition in Boston from many years ago that focused on the late cutouts, which he called *gouache découpée* (literally: cut-up gouache). In reflecting on these magnificent shapes and colors, I began to think that maybe Thorne's recent paintings were connected obliquely, that is, indirectly to Matisse. Put another way, perhaps there is a structural (less formal) semblance between Thorne's *Alma del Mar* ("Soul of the Sea") and the *gouache découpée* that Matisse created in his wheelchair in the south of France between 1948-54. Assuming this was the case, Thorne is using a very different material medium. *Alma del Mar* is not a gouache on paper, but an oil painting. Yet given her experience with the medium, she had developed a fresh and immediate way of working, a distillation of energy one might consider exemplary. Although nothing is physically cut in Thorne's paintings, the brilliant shards and organic edges suggest an inventive approach to the concentration of light through color value and energetic gesture, often intractable in their sensory gravitational pull. Thorne's recent paintings suggest different extrusions of light as they form and re-form themselves across the canvas. In fact, the structural semblance between the two artists is not so much in the shapes, gestures, and colors, but in the production of light that emanates through the surface.

Is her sense of light, in fact, the focus of her paintings? She concurs that it is. Even so, it is not the light of the American Luminists in the nineteenth century. Nor is it the light of the American frontier. It was coming from other sources, from more out of the way sources, from other lands and other places. At a certain point, Thorne confessed that she was a traveler in search of light. She travels regularly to the Caribbean, Brazil, Turkey, and recently to India where she discovers sites in which the presence (or absence) of light has affected the history of the regions and altered the appearance of ancient Hindu monuments and Jain temples carved in granite, and where the shapes of light seem to cut

through nature, revealing obtuse angles and curvaceous tendrils, lingering in the twilight of dawn and dusk.

There are three other paintings I want to discuss without any desire to prove anything about them, simply to show the ramifications of what they are in relation to themselves and to one another. The titles are Mango, Khajuraho, and Istanbul. As the artist has made clear, her titles never precede the paintings. They come after the fact. If painting is about a discovery, rather than illustration, the exact geography of the light begins as an internal mixture, a chaotic nemesis, before it become clear. Mango is a tropical fruit, but the painting is not. (Magritte resolved that a painting can only be what it is, and that, in some sense, it exists in opposition to words.) Here the colors, red, orange, blue, and green, dominate the painting. Like other paintings in this series, flatness competes with illusion. In Mango, there are three layers – the ground, the dominant space, and the tendril-like transparent shapes that float or hover in front of the picture plane. Each element in the painting has its own defining texture, reminiscent of Frank Stella's Circuits from the 1980s, with one important exception. Whereas Stella refrains from the use of allegory or narrative, Thorne does precisely the opposite. Each shape and each texture in Mango alludes to a tropical allegory – a place in the mind, perhaps, like the French writer Raymond Roussel. Nevertheless, we understand Mango not simply as a return to formalism, but as a structural ensemble in the process of signifying a narrative expression, a tilt in the register of Modernism where painting once again renews its inner-voice and in doing so reflects the whole of nature as a neurological system dispersing synaptic charges.

Khajuraho is a place in India known for its Hindu temples and erotic stone carvings. Here transcendence is given to human bodies, the gods and the goddesses, posing in acts of defiant copulation, thus revealing the in-depth delights of Vatsyayana, accompanied by omnipresent monkeys who in the legend of Ramayana serve as attendants to these eternal

hedonistic deities. In the painting, the expressive narrative is made manifest throughout the structural ensemble in red, white, orange, blue, and turquoise. The crescent moons and small boat-like forms move optically over the figurative ground, rehearsing the simultaneity of gestural marks, space, and the piercing light opening through the varied hues. The painting is less the sum of its parts than a holistic pulsation of color, space, and organic particles that transport energy from the surface to the retina, thus inciting a sensation of balance perfectly held in overt tension.

In the painting, titled Istanbul, there are vestiges of the past, a more direct form of extended allegory, where the conjugation of signs evokes a kind of trans-sensory experience. Located on the Bosphorus above the Dardanelles, Istanbul is an ancient city that tries to function as a modern metropolis. The past and present are perpetually clashing against one another, as are sacred and secular divisions that embody historical traces of conflict between East and West. The sounds of traffic compete with evocations for prayer among practicing Muslims throughout the day from dawn to dusk, as amplified Arabic voices are drowned in the reigning din of urban chaos. Despite the constant fractures and modulations between these various oppositions, one senses the intimacy that breathes through the scented air of Istanbul, a city where mosques and minarets share space with glass and steel artifices.

Again, the painting comes to rescue this intimacy of feeling that carries a heavy dose of complexity. A wedge of turquoise (the French word for Turkish) cuts into the center of the painting from the upper left corner with considerable force like the blade of a caliph. Various shapes, in deep blue and orange, each containing highly concentrated organic gestures, dominate the remaining space. Violet strands spiral through and around the caliph's blade suggesting women's necklaces, bangles, and a drifting scarf. Within this painting is the capturing of this meeting place between the hemispheres in terms of pure

sensation. It is a painting that heralds some of Delacroix in its exuberance while bringing the romantic intrigue of the place into full view. Thorne's Istanbul argues in favor of the interiority of abstraction as the means to make this happen.

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