

JOAN THORNE

ANALYTIC ECSTASY

By Vittorio Colaizzi

Although the work of Joan Thorne (b. 1943) has varied considerably since she began exhibiting in the early 1970s, her favored formal devices, visible for example in *Squazemo* (1984; Fig. 1 and Pl. 11) include elaborate polygons rolling in shallow space, linear adornments that are willfully disconnected from any grounding structure, recurring wavy or saw-toothed contours, and constantly inward-turning arrangements that articulate pictorial enclosure rather than literal surface and its attendant objecthood. These are the very devices that younger painters such as Josh Smith and Ida Ekblad deploy tongue-in-cheek.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has listed the “fallacies” of abstraction as “endless repetition, infinite refinement ... [and a] boundless range of pictorial mechanisms,” all apparent in the “empty gestural painting that came at the tail end of Abstract Expressionism....”¹ Such abundance acts as a negative example that is either strenuously avoided, as in the mechanically determined imagery of Wade Guyton, or else ironically pursued, as in the entropic production of Smith and Ekblad, and before them Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. Two notable painters working today, Amy Sillman and Joanne Greenbaum, remain cautious if not outright cynical with regard to painterly invention. The former’s gestures are praised for embodying anxiety and trepidation,² while the latter problematizes part-to-whole relationships through sprawling compositions made up of miniscule and detached line work.

Within this scenario, Thorne’s paintings are vexing because she seems to earnestly embrace that which her contemporaries handle only circumspectly; Smith’s *Untitled* (2007; Fig. 2) features curlicues, dots, and zigzags that conjure a sardonically generalized memory of modernism, and paintings such as Ekblad’s *Untitled* (2011; Fig. 3) incited Roberta Smith to compare her work to what she calls Thorne’s “generic writhing forms.”³ This “generic” quality, seen in late 1970s works such as *Kabba* (1982; Fig. 4 and Pl. 12), is key to Thorne’s critical position. Despite Douglas Manson’s appreciative claim that she “consistently takes the risk of embracing pure expression,”⁴ she is not an nth-generation New York School stalwart, quixotically rehearsing ideals that were academic by the time she

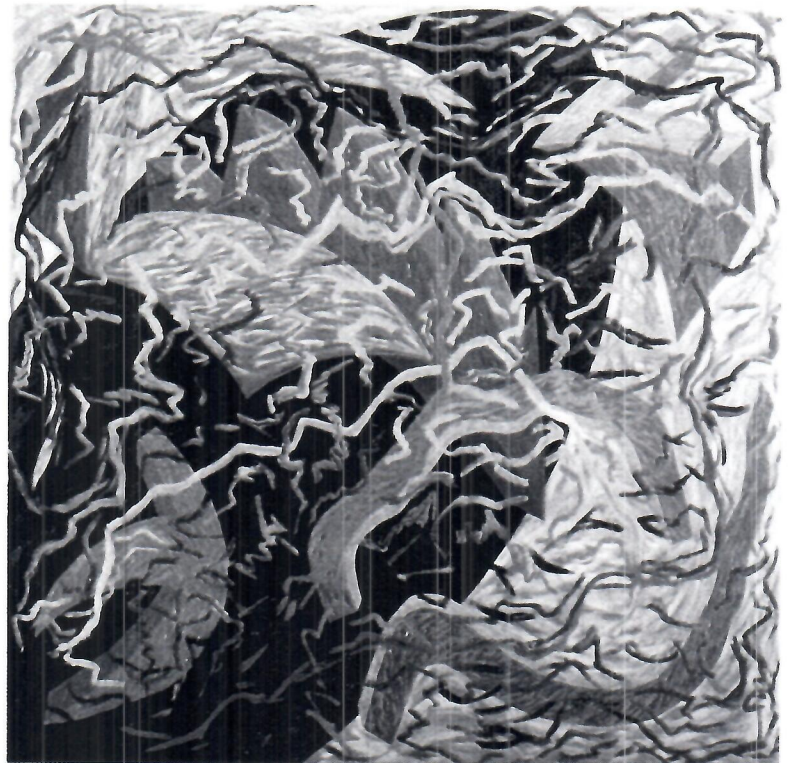


Fig. 1. Joan Thorne, *Squazemo* (1984), oil on canvas, 80" x 83". Photo: Courtesy the artist.



Fig. 2. Josh Smith, *Untitled* (2007), oil on canvas, 60" x 48". Photo: © Josh Smith. Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.



Fig. 3. Ida Ekblad, *Untitled* (2011), oil on linen, 78 3/4" x 63" x 1 3/8". Photo: John Berens. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.



Fig. 4. Joan Thorne, *Kabba* (1982), oil on canvas, 102" x 85". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

was a teenager. Nor does Ken Johnson's equally well-intentioned assessment that her canvases "fit right in with the permissive pluralism of painting today"⁵ fully explain her relevance. It is not pluralism, nor the newly minted "atemporality"⁶ that makes Thorne's work fit in as if by default, but more pointedly her career-long engagement with the problems of mark, composition, and pictorial space. While Johnson muses that Thorne's "raucously sensual abstraction" was superseded in the 1980s by "cerebral trends" and her "hot career cooled,"⁷ part of Thorne's accomplishment is to stir up the distinctions between hot and cool, between sensual and cerebral. It is not that Thorne needs to be re-positioned from one side to the other of a divide that pits expression against analysis; instead, her paintings demonstrate that the interrogative qualities associated with recent, critically respected abstract painting also appear in painting that is committed to "enigma" and "ecstasy."⁸ Her paintings embody the conflict between the valorization of subjective experience inherited from midcentury abstraction and the literalized conditions of process, materiality, and context privileged by subsequent generations.

In synthesizing these two modes and refusing to accept their growing polarization in the wake of minimalism, Thorne reveals an independence that had been encouraged from her childhood. Her parents sent her to the famously progressive Little Red Schoolhouse near their home in Greenwich Village,

where Thorne recalls folk singer Pete Seeger performing regularly. The teachers there hung her paintings in the halls and, she recalls, "talked to me about them in a serious way." Years later, while pursuing her MFA at Hunter College (after undergraduate studies at NYU), Thorne felt similarly legitimized by her advisor Tony Smith, who "From the beginning, ... treated [her] like a professional painter."⁹

Even before these experiences, however, Thorne cites her father's work materials as a partial inspiration for her paintings' intricate layering: "[M]y father was a hand surgeon. And when I was a very young child, just beginning to walk, I would turn the pages of these huge anatomy atlases that were on the floor, full of all these colored photographs and drawings of the inside of the body." In 1985, Barry Schwabsky likened the "distinctive stratification" of Thorne's pictorial space to "intellectually oriented abstract painters" such as Jonathan Lasker.¹⁰ With this somewhat surprising comparison that the artist herself hesitates to endorse, Schwabsky sees what is sometimes obscured by the exuberance of Thorne's pictorial elements: the deliberation and severity with which they are painted. This is true in her scrupulously separated snaking lines of 1978–82, in the three-part layering of stroke, volume, and background of the mid-to-late eighties, and in the translucent, near-repetitive units that structure the ambiguous space of her work since 2010. In all cases, the gesture, what Saul Ostrow, writing on Lasker, called "the most privileged signifier of modernism's pictorial paradigm,"¹¹ is not enacted as a trace of bodily immediacy, but rendered and recited with an almost classical poise.

It makes sense that Thorne should address the gesture with such deliberation when it is, after all, an adopted language. Her first exhibited works, shown at the Whitney Annual in 1972 and the Corcoran Gallery in 1973, consisted of faint washes of color against a white ground, set within hard-edged frames of unpainted canvas, as in *Untitled* (1972; Fig. 5) As she described them,

I was painting with very little pigment, mostly water, on twenty foot canvases, and when you looked at them it looked like there was just a hint of a stain of a color. But they were mostly the format of windows. I mean abstract but that kind of format, with two rectangles, one on the top and one on the bottom, or in the case of the long ones they were lined up.

According to Thorne, life events precipitated the abandonment of this approach:

I think the most drastic jump I ever made in my work was back in 1972–73.... I took a trip to Mexico, and looked at the Mayan temples and the trip to me was [such] a very mystical trip that, when I came back I changed almost everything in my life, including my art. So I went from those very faint paintings ... to very thick paint, very expressive thick paint.



Fig. 5. Joan Thorne, *Untitled* (1972), pigment and glue on canvas, 78" x 168". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

This origin myth of sorts, a change in practice brought on by personal experience, is structurally similar to futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "rebirth" from a ditch after a car crash. For Rosalind Krauss, this personal myth was indicative of modernism's obsession with origins.¹² But while Krauss identifies the grid as the recurrent and fervently sought figure of origin, Thorne, at the other end of the century, moved from the grid to the gesture, from a statement of painting's ontological wholeness to a performance of its contingent variety. Her next cohesive group of paintings, dating from 1976 and 1977, embody this turn from the attempt at an anonymous and universally valid statement to the imposition of a particular pictorial will. In *Kopt* (1976; Pl. 13), shapes and angles elbow into an otherwise unified and centralized burst of streaks and smears. These marks, made with a palette knife, stop short of the canvas edge all the way around, in a move that Thorne has called "protecting the painting," adding, "I wanted to also be very aware of the edge at that time."¹³ What she remained "aware" of, what she needed to "protect," was the literal quality of the painting-as-object and as conglomeration of applied matter, underscored by the repeated radial expansion, and yet complicated by the aggressive interior shapes. In this way, wholeness is declared and then revoked, and composition infects non-composition.

Non- or anti-composition, or the use of readymade systems or processes rather than subjective invention to determine pictorial structure, dates back to the early twentieth century,

but enjoyed wider manifestations in the wake of abstract expressionism and in the general orbit of minimalism.¹⁴ The systemic image accommodates Frank Stella's complaint that "relational" balancing in painting—"You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner"—results in "a terrible kind of fussiness," lacking a much-desired feeling of force or wholeness.¹⁵ Daniel Buren's stripes, Simon Hantaï's knotted grids, and Wade Guyton's black slabs all posit concrete and reliable forms that gain critical legitimacy by sidestepping the creative ego. However, the widespread employment and academic canonization of non-composition make it just as authoritative as previous generations' painterly virtuosity. Writing in *Artforum*, curator Mark Godfrey pointed out that it has been "the privilege of white male artists to do away with their subjectivity. . . ."¹⁶ In this he echoes Mira Schor's observation that, "It is a familiar irony in the history of feminism that the goals feminists fight to achieve are declared insignificant or in error just as the goals are at last met."¹⁷ In other words, the assertion of female subjectivity remains politically subversive even though, or perhaps because, it is supposedly artistically rear-guard. Although the photographic and conceptual strategies adopted by women artists have effectively countered the phallic hegemony of the paintbrush, artists such as Lee Lozano, Jo Baer, and Mary Heilmann, found that through painting, they could, to again quote Godfrey, "foreground the self in all its ineluctably political specificity."¹⁸

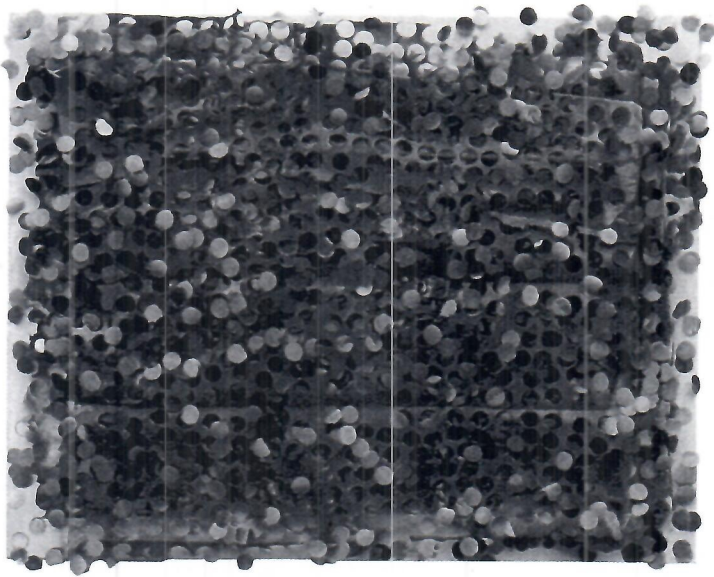


Fig. 6. Howardena Pindell, *Untitled # 73* (1975), watercolor, gouache, crayon, ink, punched papers, spray adhesive, and thread on board, 7 1/2" x 9 1/2". Photo: Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

Thorne does not speak in terms of non-composition or the self's political specificity, but she eagerly points out that she was one of the few women in the 1973 Whitney Annual and 1981 Biennial. She must be counted among those artists who practice feminism upon the field of abstract painting, working within but never resolving its conundrums. Helen Molesworth has shown how abstract painting can be an effective feminist tool against power structures inherent in aesthetic hierarchies. According to Molesworth, the aforementioned Heilmann, as well as Howardena Pindell and Joan Snyder, all "perform[ed], in the space of the canvas, the dilemma of whether or not something is a 'good painting.'" Since "quality" was the province of male critics, "their paintings stage the problem of how to ascertain it."¹⁹ For Molesworth, the painters in question undermine orthodoxies of quality through "putrid or acidic" color, "off-kilter compositions" or, in the case of Pindell, "self-destroyed drawings"²⁰ (Fig. 6), but her larger point is that the mechanism of exclusion can apply to any artistic strategy and therefore shut it out of serious critical consideration. So by the end of the 1970s, paintings such as *Naust* (1978; Pl. 14), with its ropes of paint interwoven with thickly outlined shard-like shapes, epitomized the indulgence in gesture and space that Douglas Crimp saw as "hackneyed recapitulations of late modernist abstraction."²¹ He made this call in his epochal essay "The End of Painting," which was largely occasioned by "American Painting: The Eighties," an exhibition curated by Barbara Rose that included Thorne's work.²²

In a long review of this show, Hal Foster briefly focuses on Thorne, complaining, "Her line, it is true, is not descriptive of any representational image, but neither is it definitive as line." He also reflects, "Thorne responds 'content' to the question of the critical issue in painting today; however in her work nothing contains it. No rhetorical form enunciates her 'image,' no intentionality, as it were, guides her intention."²³ As is often the case, what a critic sees as a shortcoming is particularly

helpful in determining an artist's achievement. In Thorne's turn of the decade paintings such as *Naust, Mazu* (1980; Pl. 15), or *Wa Kort* (1981; Fig. 7) it is as if she took Willem de Kooning's softened bristles, sensitized to each turn of the wrist, and hardened them into a consistently thick and sustained smear of the palette knife. Likewise, she isolated the alternately jagged and voluptuous marks that for de Kooning were informed by study of the model into meandering curves, pointed enclosures, or tumbling lighting-bolts. Just as Stella averred that artists no longer had to contend with Picasso after Jackson Pollock,²⁴ Thorne seems to negate the figurative tradition that stood behind de Kooning, mutating his legacy with decidedly inert yet shrill constituents reminiscent of the clarity, if not the austerity, of minimalism. In 1980, *Village Voice* critic Kay Larson saw something similar, as she credited Thorne with "a bright overallness that synthesiz[es] Pollock's arm with postconceptual brashness and an iconoclast's attention to her forbears."²⁵ Thorne would undoubtedly disagree with Larson's reading as well as my own for over-emphasizing calculation at the expense of the "magic"²⁶ with which she hopes to infuse each image, but the magic lies precisely in her historically based heresies, because they violate specific though tacit prohibitions. Rather than shaping, cutting, and connecting a charged pictorial space, Thorne's contorted linear trails pile upon one another, thus making intentionality—to return to Foster's complaint—the subject of their pictorial action. Thorne plays intention against non-intention by picturing a seemingly un-willed disarray. It is as if she is faking or even lampooning the ostensible moral forthrightness of non-composition through a flagrant display of its opposite.²⁷

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, at the same time that Thorne was committing these offenses, Lasker was also building a strategy out of the appearance of extravagantly flaunted aimlessness. His paintings at the time featured wild abstract figures, crisply layered upon sensual but rote gestural patterns. Hilton Kramer's characterization of Thorne's work as "suitably animated" but "terribly well mannered,"²⁸ could just as easily have been applied to Lasker, who has been celebrated for his construction of a vocabulary or "syntax" with which to "mix oil and water (the spontaneous and the contrived)."²⁹ With Lasker there remains a quest for truth, to discern the intellectual and cultural situation of painting, which he finds in an analysis of its constituents and the process of its construal, even if that truth turns out to be the constant interchangeability of signs. Thorne, like the painters Molesworth discusses, eschews the responsibility to be right and paints a conflicted condition. Nevertheless, like Lasker, she grapples with the problem of how to avoid the threat of mannered repetition. The path that she and others have taken is the isolation and recombination of abstraction's components. In one of Lasker's 1978 paintings, Ostrow finds a "field of [Jack] Tworikov-like crosshatching,"³⁰ an apt comparison, as Tworikov's miniaturized repetition of the gesture came after years of action painting. Thorne befriended Tworikov late in his life, and although she denies an outright influence, they share a re-shaping of painterly abstraction into something more deliberate.

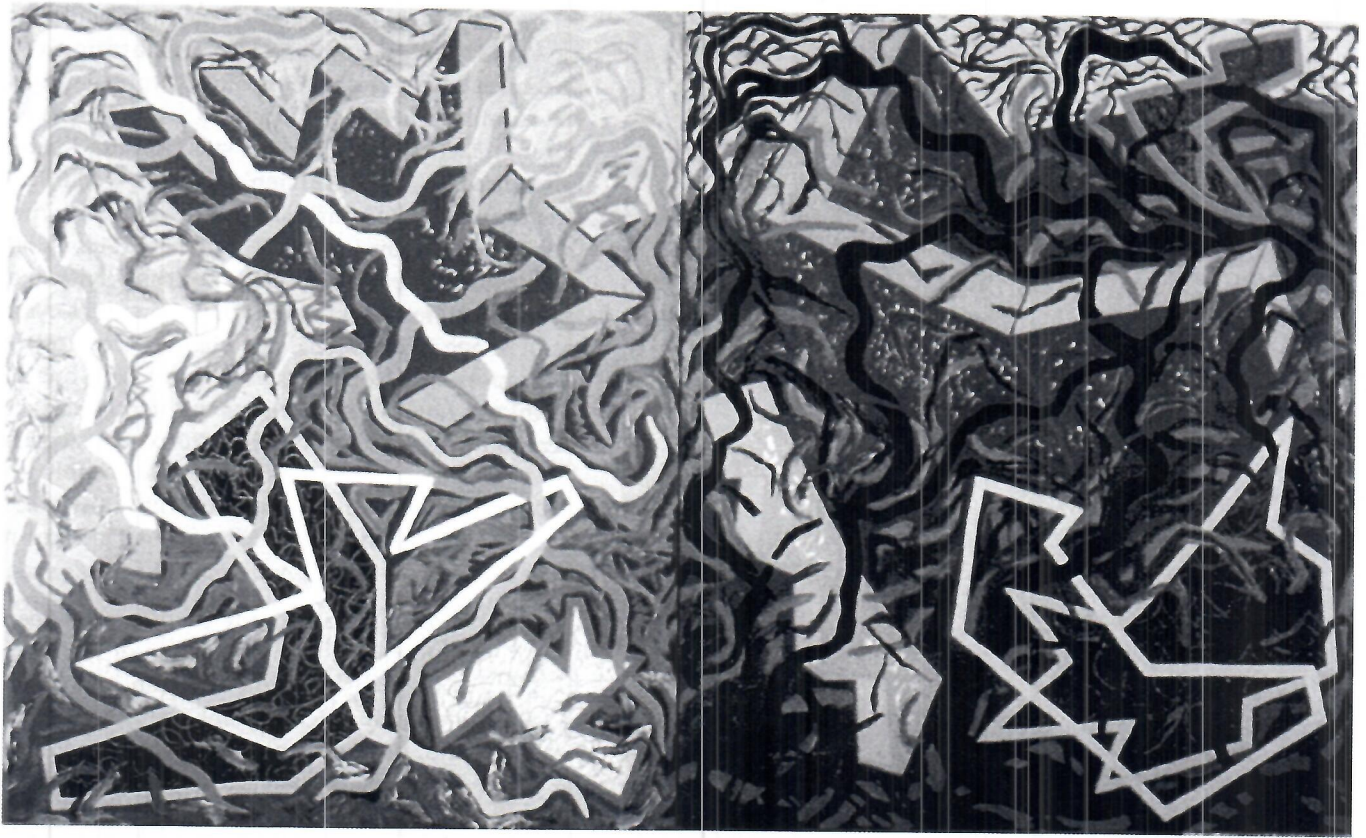


Fig. 7. Joan Thorne, *Wa Kort* (1981), oil on canvas, diptych, 102" x 180". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

Aahee (1984; Pl 16) is typical of the changes Thorne introduced in the early to mid 1980s. Pictorial space dramatically expands as existing elements pull away from one another and attain distinct identities. The polygons gain dimension and undergo almost muscular torsion, while the tangles disperse and become actual brushstrokes, sometimes breaking into smaller flickering accents, and sometimes tracing meandering pathways across the surface. In a few cases, Thorne reiterates these pathways with another color, so that improvisation and recitation go hand-in-hand. Behind this drama are backdrops of two or three large zones of color whose ambiguous figure-ground relationships underpin the more conspicuous activity up front. The figures in space possess a violent or perhaps amorous energy, but are scrupulously segregated; they overlap now and then, but seem always to push in different directions. The result is a dynamic pressure that Thorne sandwiches between the two-color background and the transparent but inviolable screen of strokes on the picture plane. Like Lasker (and these are the paintings that instigated Schwabsky's comparison), she announces the conventionality of pictorial construction, but instead of Lasker's rundown of eccentric shapes in a sequence



Fig. 8. Joan Thorne, *Hampi*, (2010), oil on canvas, 66" x 56". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

of idioms (solids, bars, squiggles), Thorne relies on the painted elements' potential to move the viewer through vicarious kinesthetic action. In other words, each picture asserts a



Fig. 9. Joan Thorne, *Aphrodite* (2001), oil on canvas, 59" x 50". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

distinctive identity, almost a narrative; the picture's self-consciousness is less important than what happens within it.

In reference to this period, Thorne noted, "These were kind of a contradiction, because you have these more dimensional images and this space with kind of two-dimensional lines. So you have opposing forces."³¹ These opposing forces are none other than the historical forces at work in painting after Pollock; not only flatness versus depth, but what Achim Hochdörfer has summarized as literalism versus transcendence.³² For Pollock and his peers, the concrete reality of their materials coexisted with abstract optical space and concomitant suggestions of sublimity. Michael Fried famously critiqued minimalist object-makers for overemphasizing Pollock's concreteness at the expense of the ambiguous space that his layered drips suggested, a space that, according to Fried, painters such as Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski preserved and highlighted with their washes and sprays of color. For Fried, literalism led to "theatricality," or the interdependence between viewer, object, and context, which made art into a situation.³³ Of course, it is along the lines that Fried warned against that the investigative inheritance of modernism has been carried out. In refusing or downplaying what is not verifiably present, literalism has manifested as the examinations of art's avenues, customs, and modalities, examinations often carried out under the banner of conceptual art.

In 2009, David Joselit posited painting's most fertile task as "transitivity," i.e., the declaration of the medium's dependence on and mobility within economic and social networks, achieved largely through tactics of installation, such as Jutta Koether's pink disco-lights and Guyton's black plywood floors.³⁴ Although the networked condition of painting is indisputable (they are shown, purchased, transported, and argued over), the strategy of transitivity, which entails a migration of interest to the painting's exterior, from image to contextualized object, is predicated on an impatience for pictorial activity, or what Scott Rothkopf has called, perhaps with some detached bemusement, "formal noodling."³⁵ Accordingly, Joselit cites Martin Kippenberger's verdict that "simply to put a painting on the wall and say that it's art is dreadful."³⁶ Already in 1989, Mira Schor had taken note of this dread:

The history of avant-garde painting has been oriented toward a demystification of Figure ... and an emphasis and amplification of ground: the flatness of the picture plane, the gallery space as ground, finally the gallery space as Figure, a subject in itself. The history of modern painting—with the possible exception of Surrealism and its progeny—is the privileging of Ground.... The privileging of ground is consistent with the utopian ideal often expressed by modernist pioneers that painting, liberated from representation and reduced to its formal elements, will transcend its end and evaporate into architecture.³⁷

Although one would be hard pressed to call Mary Heilmann and Amy Sillman "utopian," they engage in the environmental/contextual impulse Schor describes. Heilmann's colorful rolling chairs and tantalizingly sensual ceramics add a hip domesticity to her exhibitions-turned-hangouts, and Sillman positions her large abstractions as one aspect in a continuum of activities that also includes cartoons, zines, animations, and portrait drawings. Thorne stands in stark contrast to this shifted key, staking her works' identity on decisions made upon the plane. Robert C. Morgan called this an "audacity to be what they are," adding that Thorne was never "tempted to transform her work into 'installation art.'"³⁸ With this seemingly strange comment, given the legions of other painters similarly untempted, Morgan reacts to a predilection to find mere image-making dreadfully insufficient, and also shows his sensitivity to the physically expansive qualities of Thorne's work. Although with recent works such as *Hampi* (2010; Fig. 8) she has corralled the insistent and sometimes inches-thick tactility of the 1970s into thin translucence, so that the self-evident layering of brushstrokes opens an interstitial space that is more felt than seen; and while she has dialed back her frequent grand scale, there remains a certain insistence and singularity of surface treatment through near-repetition of painterly units. Thorne's

surface acts as a site of resistance to the literal by maintaining a dialectical split: they are both surface and depth, and in terms of pictorial content, both uniform and differentiated, both “all-over” and replete with incident.

This is a continuation of the conflict that Thorne noted in mid-1980s between dimensional forms and surface-adhering strokes. Each stroke is a thing, a figure or element, yet they read together as a field—the simultaneous identity is never resolved. This dichotomy is further complicated by additional elements whose seemingly inconsequential scale belies their critical significance. In the 1990s and early 2000s, congregations of floating bits of architecture, striated Hellenistic drapery, or fanciful protozoa formed the major pictorial drama, as in *Aphrodite* (2001; Fig. 9). More recently, as a repertoire of interpenetrating brushstrokes build complicated zones of space, fleeting objects such as the white zigzag in the upper right and nearly circular blue undulation in the lower right of *Ananda* (2013; Fig. 10) interrupt the gathering uniformity of surface, and with it the historical force of the all-over.

Thorne explains about these small interruptions: “I mean the courage to put this, here, I mean maybe most people don’t realize it but it takes a lot of courage to put it where it is.” Only someone sensitized to historical anxieties regarding subjective composition would make this claim. Instead of Stella’s strategy of constructing a procedural and stylistic fail-safe in the form of the one-shot image, Thorne makes the image dwell in this uncertainty, referring to but refusing the solution of a perfected image that excludes the arbitrary. By playing out loose patterns that imitate natural growth, Thorne depicts the yearning for an objective and literal image of the kind that Stella, Richter, and Guyton achieved by privileging process over judgment.

When Thorne says, “I don’t believe that the canvas is flat,” she not only distances herself from the central tenet of Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernist painting (practically a default position), she also resists the foregrounding of idiom over image. While few painters today take their historically mandated task to be the emphasis of painting’s flatness, fewer still would not concede that a canvas is, after all, flat; it’s just not the most important thing about it. But among painters to whom considerable critical attention has gone in the last few decades, flatness has been, not an abiding truth to uncover, but a grounding characteristic upon which to enumerate the inherited and conventional conditions of painting’s languages, more in keeping with Leo Steinberg’s notion of the “flatbed picture plane,” which acts as a receptor for all manner of quotations from visual culture.³⁹

In his 1979 essay “Pictures,” Douglas Crimp described how art’s theatrical operations, theretofore manifested in the spatial environment, became “quite unexpectedly, reinvested into the pictorial image.”⁴⁰ For example, the images of Sherrie Levine and Cindy Sherman call for imaginary reconstructions of their



Fig. 10. Joan Thorne, *Ananda* (2013), oil on canvas, 66" x 56". Photo: Courtesy the artist.

suggested contexts and narratives. This mode of pictorial theatricality is also in effect in abstract painting. While Lasker and Richter would balk at the idea that they compose with quotations, the historical resonance of each visual phoneme is palpable, and their constant referentiality is amplified by an internal dissociation and alienation between pictorial elements. Rather than being woven into a homogenous, if manically active space in the manner of de Kooning’s cubist-derived scenarios, Lasker cobbles his pieces together as if temporarily, explaining, “I often think of these biomorphic shapes that are laid down on top of the grounds of my paintings as being picture puzzle elements that I can grab and lift off the canvas and hang on the wall for a second. Just let them sit there on a coat hanger totally separate from what’s happening on the painting ground.”⁴¹ To deny the requisite flatness of this approach as Thorne does is to locate the most germane task of painting to be the building of space (something that Stella also insisted upon in *Working Space*, a text worth revisiting in relation to contemporary abstraction⁴²). And yet, Thorne’s paintings are also stridently, insistently literal. The flatness of the surface constantly conditions, supports, and deflects the mark. In her late 1970s tangles, the plane-bound adornments of her 1980s paintings, and in the semi-transparent loops, zigzags, and striations of her recent work, Thorne keeps flatness in operation, as something to be



Pl. 11. Joan Thorne,
Squazemo (1984),
oil on canvas, 80" x 83".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 12. Joan Thorne, *Kabba* (1982), oil on canvas, 102" x 85".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 13. Joan Thorne, *Kopt* (1976), oil on canvas, 104" x 84".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 14. Joan Thorne, *Naust* (1978), oil on canvas, 78" x 67".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 16 (right). Joan Thorne, *Aahee* (1984),
oil on canvas, 69" x 65".
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.



Pl. 15 (above). Joan Thorne, *Mazu*, (1980), oil on canvas, 74" x 102". Photo: Courtesy of the artist.