



Kim Thoman

Harmony Through Duality

By Mara Blackwood

In a time when there is so much conflict in the world, mixed media artist Kim Thoman finds beauty in opposition. “I am always aware that duality exists in everything,” she explains. “Opposing forces inform the world around me—intellect and intuition, male and female, stillness and movement, body and soul, light and dark, the organized and chaotic, and of course, life and death. I strive to bring these dualities into balance, to present a ‘truth’ by showing its opposing energies.”

Viewers have felt this balancing force in Thoman’s work. The way she combines opposing colors, textures, and even art forms invokes a feeling of harmony that can create a sanctuary in any space.

Born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska, Thoman began taking an interest in art when she was very young. She was a quiet child with a rich inner world and a sharp awareness of her surroundings, and it wasn’t long before she was



Entanglement 4 | 50" X 57" X 12" | Oil & Powder Coated Welded Steel Wall Hanging

expressing herself through drawing.

Some of her first works of art were imaginary “Moon Flowers,” which “were allowed to look fanciful, but they had to have some function that I deemed important on the moon—for holding gathered food or reaching around a corner, for example,” Thoman recalls. “Requiring that my drawings were of something I enjoyed looking at but that the object drawn also had to have a functional value may have been an early indication of my later developed belief that opposites are in everything.”

Thoman grew up with five siblings, and her whimsical, abstract images often shared refrigerator space with her sister Marta’s more realistic art. “Most families would have identified [Marta] as the only family artist,” Thoman says, “but luckily, my mother’s natural psychological inclination allowed her to see some unusual potential in me.” Her family nurtured that poten-

tial throughout her formative years, and she has always felt that when she creates art, her studio reflects the joy and curiosity she experienced in her childhood playroom.

When she was about to start her senior year of high school, Thoman’s family relocated to Palo Alto, California. After graduation, she began college at the University of California at Davis and quickly discovered their ceramics shop. That was when she discovered that she wanted art to be more than a side pursuit.

“I couldn’t get enough of the environment,” Thoman says, “although I was making sculptural objects that sometimes frustrated my instructors, such as a teapot that had no pouring spout or cup handles that were so thin they were completely non-functional. I’ve been a contrarian throughout my life and, initially, it always surprises people.”

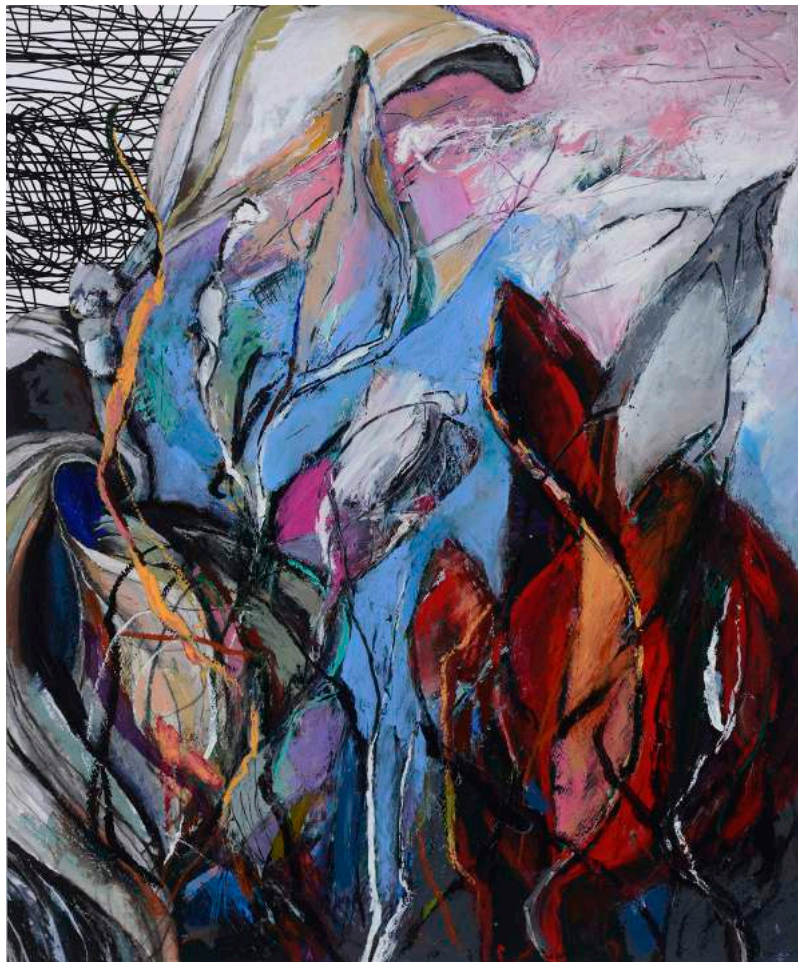
Over the course of her studies, Thoman's attention shifted from ceramics to drawing and painting, helping her develop a solid grasp of two dimensions as well as three. After earning her Bachelor in Fine Arts degree from UC Berkeley, she sought practical work. "I come from a long line of teachers," she explains, "and that was the obvious career choice."

Thoman continued to work in clay in her spare time while teaching art in elementary school for five years, then she entered San Francisco State's Fine Arts Masters program. She felt like she was back where she belonged and relished the opportunity for further mentorship and growth.

Soon, her professors suggested a move to the painting department, "but at the time, I wasn't

interested," Thoman says. "I wanted to 'paint' on the surfaces of my clay pieces, which began to get flatter and flatter so there was more area to paint on! The contrarian in me resisted my teacher's suggestions." Eventually, she produced a series of drawings and paintings with attached ceramic intestine-like forms, a precursor to her current mixed media work.

After teaching community college art classes part time for several years, Thoman accepted a full time position at Merritt College and acquired tenure. During her years of teaching, she never abandoned her own artistic path. "Even with less studio time, my artwork continued to thrive because I'd developed the confidence to work through ideas more quickly," Thoman says.



Tangled Witness Unseen 17 | 23" X 19", Mixed-Media On Paper

In fact, it was during her time as a professor at Merritt that she began to develop the digital art techniques that have become such an essential part of her artistic development.

“Using Photoshop, I make digital collages and print out on my large size 9600 Epson Printer on either paper or canvas,” she explains. “These collaged prints are made from scanning into the computer my own previously photographed artwork and using Photoshop to cut up, reshape, resize, etc. and rearrange bits to make a digital collage. This, then, becomes an underpainting ready for my handwork.”

Though she often covers most, if not all, of the underpainting with traditional materials, such as oil pastel, graphite, soft pastel, acrylic, or oil paint, Thoman values this step as an important foundation for each piece. It provides her with material to react to, and it creates a layered effect that enhances the colors and textures.

Her interest in digital art has also led to the development of 3D printed sculptures, her evocative Emerging Venuses series. These pieces allow her to experiment with creating images in 3 dimensions in a fresh, new way. She loves being able to twirl shapes around in her computer software and see how her painting designs change as she wraps them.

As Thoman developed her Emerging Venuses, she also began working with welded steel. At the time, she was recovering from a difficult illness: “While I was recuperating, my mind went to the desire for protection, support and strength. Well aware of the Terracotta Army, life-size sculptures of warriors made around 210 BC to be buried with a Chinese emperor for protection in the afterlife, I thought how wonderful to have an army of guardians for support in this life. I began the Sentinel Series.”

Thoman’s work has developed in distinct phases over the years, and her recent work has elements that harken back to these phases. As always, ideas about duality or opposing forces in all things dominate her expression.

Thoman has been showing her work across the United States for over 35 years. She is an active member of the Bay Area

Women Artists Legacy Project (BAWALP), the UC Berkeley Breakfast Group, the Pacific Rim Sculptors chapter of the International Sculpture Center, and Women in 3D. She also holds membership in the Oakland Art Museum, San Francisco (SFMOMA), and the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

Additionally, the artist has been the recipient of a grant at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of



Entanglement 9 | 70" x 55" x 12"
Oil & Powder Coated Welded Steel Wall Hanging



Sentinel 3 | 76" x 35" x 14" |
Oil & Powder-Coated Welded Steel Wall Hanging

Taos, New Mexico, the Vermont Studio Center Residency Grant, and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Change Grant.

Since retiring from Merritt College in 2012, Thoman has worked full time in her studio in Emeryville, California. When she is not creating her intriguing blends of sculpture and painting, the artist loves to read artist biographies and attend yoga classes. She also enjoys giving slideshow presentations about her unique work.

“I feel extremely lucky to be creative and

I require myself to learn from my creativity,” Thoman says, reflecting on her mission as an artist. “While I work abstractly, images from nature quite often hatch out—tree branches, leaves, sometimes petals of flowers or a horizon line and clouds. My work teaches me about my connection to nature. For me, the practical application of duality requires that I live a life that takes into account ‘the other’ in hope of greater appreciation for and acceptance of diversity and differences among us. Whether any sliver of this seeps into the hearts and minds of my viewers—well, I should be so lucky!”

Praise for Kim Thoman's Artwork

Her powerful gestural drawing and her rejection of illusionism invoke and evoke the strong forces of nature. Thoman's philosophical conviction that "duality exists in everything" informs and energizes her pastel and mixed-media drawings and sculptural works.

- DeWitt Cheng



If we can take away a moral and social lesson from Kim Thoman's oeuvre, it is that conflict resolution lies within each of us. Thoman does not think of herself as wiser than the rest of us, only more fortunate by dint of her work with art to have discovered for herself the harmony of the universe. That harmony is not in the propitious alignment of forms and meanings, but in our discovery—or, shall we say, acceptance—of balance between haphazard pairings and contrapositions. Things don't exist in opposition to other things, but only in balance with them. Finally, Thoman doesn't resolve conflicts, but reveals their superficiality. At heart, everything is in union.

- Peter Frank

Forcing the lock on Kim Thoman's images won't get you much. A viewer who shoulders roughly into her pictures, looking for solid representations and symbols, will find a buzzing horde of shape-shifting marks. A wiry line emerges out of nowhere, coils a few times, then skitters off at an angle. An oval form bounces through several incarnations, appearing first as a tone, then a drawing, then an erasure. A spiral movement manifests in drapery, then in ribbon, before spinning itself into a line. Like sprites escaping Pandora's box, Thoman's images erupt and dissipate, fleeing any pursuer who tries to pin them down.

- Meredith Tromble