

I will never forget the first time I saw a sample of Shelley Thorstensen's work sandwiched between two pieces of battered foam core, piles and stacks of the most translucent Japanese Washi with new and older pieces of printed etching, relief, litho, silkscreen and monotype all over them. She sorted through as we looked on, an amazed and astounded group of "advanced" printmaking undergraduates, in the etching studio of a sixth floor print shop in center city Philadelphia. I, like my cohorts, were training to be "macho guerilla printmaking women", proud of our inky fingernails and newly acquired calluses from hours of rolling out the surfaces of woodcuts and scraping at etching plates. Shelley's modest introduction to a folio of what she called "trash" left us drooling, and quickly reiterated that this lady was no joke. She practiced what she was preaching at us, and then and there we made deep spiritual covenants to each other, and the gods and goddesses of printmaking that had come before us.

I feel like Shelley's work is part deep personal archive, part printmaking evangelism. She's trying to write her own legacy, pay homage to her influences (contemporary and historical) and make working sense of her past. It's autobiographical, it's spiritual, and it's illustrative. It's all woven together in a fabric of metaphor and commentary. There's no question that a narrative exists within each one of her pictures, but to get at it you will have to be willing to spend time with the work to crack the code. The artist struggles through each image, pushing and pulling, and reconciling with herself what to reveal and how not to give too much away. I love Shelley and her work (one can hardly separate the two, she is as much her work as she is anything).

Shelley's works are almost strictly abstract; the floral patterns that she includes function not as representational subject matter but as identifiable motifs in the subtly nuanced compositions that she creates. Objects that are landscape based but could just as well be and sometimes are torsos, trees, lilies and fallopian tubes, balance the figure ground relationship. Her works are formally masterful, especially in terms of color, composition, and line. They speak in the spontaneous vocabulary of line drawings, but with the weight of intent that one understands is behind marks that come through the printing process.

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