

LINKED CONSEQUENCES: The Work of Shelley Thorstensen

*“The complexity of the human concept of **space** is demonstrated by the number of equivalent words that have had to be invented in all languages to characterize different aspects and functions of this idea . . . [T]he space of the imagination contains an essential mutation and ambiguity—that order of ambiguity that permits the poet to imply an infinite series of linked consequences in a simple phrase and a score of experiences to be simultaneously present to the mind of a child.” (boldness mine)¹*

The printmaker Stanley William Hayter wrote these words in *New Ways of Gravure*, originally published in 1949. The quote is from a passage on the creation of visual space in artwork; how space is condensed into visual narrative. He suggests that viewing an artwork is to examine a succession of ideas that do not necessarily follow one another in a linear sequence. Instead, one encounters analogous concepts again and again from different angles, like walking a labyrinth. As one approaches the center, these “linked consequences” come to exist in an accumulative totality in the mind of the pilgrim. Hayter could have been discussing the work of Shelley Thorstensen.

Hayter saw artworks as automatist strata of “linked consequences.” At the forefront of the Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist movements, Hayter saw printmaking not only as a formal means of image-making, but research in how to describe time and space, and by extension, human understanding of the universe.

His avid artistic disciple, Thorstensen creates layers that enable viewers to navigate between our agreed upon reality. While Hayter was influenced by his study of hard sciences, chemistry and physics, Thorstensen is motivated by the mystical: Catholicism, Sufism, and years of meditation practice.

In *Still Life with Rose* (2010), the viewer sees the image divided by thick solid lines into three sections. At the bottom of the print, grounding the narrative both visually and in content is the border fence, leading the eye into a maplike grid, a further reminder of the physical world and its boundaries. As the eye travels up the print, it penetrates deeply into the textured red space, to finally rise into the blue veil of the top portion of the print. Behind the blue, the red layer is still present, suggesting that a story of traveling through nature is also to travel the layers of consciousness.

In *Hanging Fire* (2010), seven symbols, evocative of the seven chakras, hover over a section of a tree. The tree section depicted is a trunk just as it splits into branches, one limb crossing over the trunk, suggesting perhaps a dervish frozen in mid-whirl. Slightly off-center a red glow hovers, and the entire print is infused with a coppery radiance like that of twilight. The overall feeling is that of suspension, of undergoing a controlled ritual to allow the self to lose control.

This concept, a contained rite to create conditions for letting-go, is an embodiment of Thorstensen’s practice. Printmaking, to her, is a translation tool—in

which both brute and hallowed experience is expressed in her personal visual language. The interrelationship between her practice and her visual language is married by process. Process provides a structure for Thorstensen to let go, to lose control, and also to tell a story.

Another recurring type of imagery in Thorstensen's work is ornament and pattern. In an ambiguous way, ornament and pattern appear to guide the viewer visually through darkness and light. To the Western mind, the checkerboard pattern of *In Other Words* (2006), seems to be a guiding presence that carries the eye rhythmically from left to right through the print, transitioning the viewer from the gloaming on the left to the right side in which a light seems to emanate from behind the pattern. However, with Thorstensen's study of Sufism—traditionally recorded in Arabic, written from right to left—leaves one to wonder if this isn't instead a crossing from light into darkness, like Psyche's journey to the underworld.

Another instance is in *Grace Note* (2010). It brings to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the protagonist, locked away in a room, descends into her own private world, one that she sees within the wallpaper.² Centered, or perhaps confined, in the pattern in Thorstensen's print is a sinister rectangle. This is Thorstensen at her darkest. In this rectangle, rigid straight lines imprison an organic shape. The central confined form suggests the anatomical shape of the human heart, albeit one with enigmatic tendrils breaking off and floating away. This dark rectangle seems to be simultaneously retreating into the space of the print, and hovering above it, encroaching on the viewer's personal space. In prints such as *In Other Words* and *Grace Note*, patterns become rituals for the eyes, paths of katabasis and anabasis, descents and ascents from the underworld.

A significant aspect of Thorstensen's work is the linear mark-making that rests as the penultimate or final layer in many of her pieces. It is this line work, with occasional gradations of form dissolving into shadows cast on previous layers, which is closest to the viewer. Both physically and visually, these lines are in a separate space from the other layers of imagery, such as the birdlike shadow reaching out from the upper right corner of *Rhyme and Reason* (2005). Contrasted with the other strata of her imagery, it is in this layer of exacting lines in which Thorstensen always seems most in control. She defines this distinct space as that of transformation, the lines as catalyst and gatekeeper. Looking past this layer into one of Thorstensen's prints is like absorbing the time of an astral projection; the line work of the uppermost layer is an indication of when the departure took place.

Each piece by Thorstensen is not a single experience; instead it is a concentration of ideas, encounters, and emotions. Her conceptual roots are in nature and its experience, but go deeper than everyday reality. Viewing her work, one winds through a labyrinthine configuration, where process, pattern, and lines become conduits and psychopomps in her visual idiom. Thorstensen presents in each piece a simultaneity of linked consequences, twists and turns of the journey of the soul.

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¹ Hayter, Stanley William, *New Ways of Gravure* (Revised Edition). New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981 (Orig. ed. 1949). Page 233.

² Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Boston: Small & Maynard, 1899.