

Recorded and recoded

“You live like dogs are chasing you,” Mafalda Rose Sorbello Thorstensen once told her daughter. It was a disconcerting but astute observation to a young woman who has never, at least in my experience, wasted a single moment in her pursuit of understanding – of herself, of her art form, her experiences, her history and world. She has relentlessly explored the “realm of all possibilities” in her studio and many other workplaces, not to mention her kitchen or garden. And, along the way, she also forged deep, lifelong friendships with students, printmakers and teaching colleagues. While Shelley Thorstensen doesn’t live as if pursued by a pack of wild dogs, she also doesn’t stand still long enough find out if they are gaining on her.

Colorist, master printer and teacher, Thorstensen has taught at seven art schools, set up six print studios, and conducted residencies in Honolulu, Ireland, Italy and Finland. She also created the Printmakers Open Forum, aka the Home for Wayward Print Girls and Boys, that she describes as “a free form, shared, non-hierarchical amalgam of printmakers anywhere who believe information, technologies, ideas should be accessed in open-source fashion.” And, with her husband, Shelley designed and built a beautifully appointed and fully functional print studio at the edge of an orchard/vineyard/pasture just on the northern side of the Mason Dixon line in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

In 2016, Shelley spent the better part of a year making the 35 monoprints for the suite of *Strangers No More*. As a regular reader/observer of her Facebook posts over the months, I found myself looking forward to her weekly musings about what would come next, or how she would solve a technical problem. These regular reflections, recorded over months provide a window onto a distinctive way of working for Shelley – an opportunity to consider her larger body of work, herself, her visual and emotional language, and the usefulness of monoprint as a vehicle for her work. Monoprints allow an artist to test imagery and a range of technical approaches without the need to consider the demands of editioning. In this case, the prints become a collection of short stories, a song cycle – in this case, autobiographical but not chronological -- in which images may appear as leitmotifs but which don’t necessarily mean the same thing as they appear and reappear. They are her personal vernacular, rendered more powerful with changes in use, emphasis and composition.

Key to Shelley’s suite of prints is the cover image, *La Tenda (The Curtain)*. The sweeping, elegant shorthand on the lower register of the image -- it also appears in *Privato (Proprietary)* and *Ripristinare (To restore/re-establish)* -- is both a recording and re-coding device. It captures the complexity, difficulty and power of the artist’s relationship with her mother and more. Shelley remembers that her mother, trained as a legal secretary, transcribed almost all conversations – home or office, mundane or momentous, to capture every detail. But their meaning remained opaque to Shelley, detailed as they were in a secret code. This image of *La Tenda* is, in some ways, a response to her relationship with her mother, loving but also complicated. The last line of shorthand translates phonetically as “artist” as if a direct response to her. It seems to convey that Shelley’s body of work as an artist and what she has done to live

her life and overcome challenges over the years, has been a lifelong process of integration and re-integration, crafting a life that now makes sense to her and makes full use of her deep reserve of memory.

Images, patterns, colors, and textures emerge and re-surface throughout the work. Grids, bands and compartments function as windows, shutters, screens – sometimes letting light in, sometimes obscuring what is behind - or below – them as in *La Raccolta* (The Harvest) and *Protetta* (Guarded). The compositions are never centered - they are almost always slightly off balance, and intentionally taut. Translucent white lace fragments that are directional and spatial work their way through many of the images, serving perhaps as a fragile filter of nostalgia.

In other works, red, roiling, disruptive forms appear, either intent on escape from the print surface or intrusion into the composition. They are memories too, but clearly not nostalgic: *La Ripartizione* (The Allocation), *Impressionare* (To Imprint), *Esprimersi* (To Express Oneself), and *Cassaforte* (Strongbox). Nonetheless they are important counterpoint in the song cycle.

Shelley also selectively uses a particular image from her childhood that is immediately recognizable to those of us who played with “cap guns” as kids. These ribbons of red paper, punctuated by small discs of shock-sensitive explosive compounds produce noise and smoke when “shot”. They were just a little dangerous -- and very exciting. Shelley uses the pattern in several images to create borders, like tiny minefields of life.

Other identifiable fragments find their ways into several prints: a small boat that seems to be a family crest in *La Dimora* (House/Abode), and then reappears in *Cauta* (Wary/Cautious) and in a faint echo in *Esprimersi* (To Express Oneself). Perhaps they reference the seafaring ways of her Norwegian forebears, or they might nod to a personal sense of exploration – what they mean varies according to the visual and personal intent of the artist.

Finally, it is Thorstensen’s use of color, simultaneously saturated and slightly discordant, that contributes to the densely rendered and seductive sense of memory and harmony that permeate *Strangers No more*.

Thora Jacobson

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