

David Thorpe: A Meeting of Friends

April 7 – August 13, 2006



WORCESTER ART MUSEUM



Pilgrims, 1999, paper cut out, 46 x 68 inches, Collection of Laura Steinberg and B. Nadal-Ginard. Photo courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

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In his recent book, *David Thorpe: A Rendezvous with My Friends of Liberty*, the London-based artist shares with readers his sketches and lyrics as well as a range of written and visual sources of inspiration by revered visionaries, from turn-of-the-century England (such as the romantic and socialist reforms of C.R. Ashbee, the Arts and Crafts philosophy and practice of William Morris) to 20th-century America (including the organic architecture of Bruce Goff, and the cosmic music of Sun Ra).¹

Chapter headings further convey the individualist spirit and social underpinnings of Thorpe's enterprise: *Escape into the Wilderness; Independence and Transcendence; Self-Sufficiency in the New Kingdom*.

Conceptually, Thorpe's work has often explored connections between English and American history. His preoccupation with colonists and settlements, utopias and countercultures has spawned an imaginary architecture, which he sets against a fictional wilderness. The epic character yet exquisite detail of Thorpe's intricately constructed cut-paper landscapes—a combination of the awe-inspiring and pragmatic—allies them to the 19th-century American Sublime practiced by painters Albert Beirstadt, Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, and Martin Johnson Heade among others.

The collision of culture and nature—the “meeting” of American civilization with the wilderness—was a major preoccupation of American landscape painting throughout much of the 19th century. The term “sublime” attempted to describe the imaginative response to the spec-

tacular American landscape as well as the potential danger and unknown. Philosopher Edmund Burke, in 1757, contended that the sublime “is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” and cited darkness, obscurity, vastness, and magnificence (among other phenomena found *in nature*) as its prime causes.² Writing at the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant countered that the sublime denoted the state of mind induced by apprehending such immensity or boundlessness, and thus “...the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but in our own ideas.”³

A recent visit by Thorpe to the Worcester Art Museum to explore 19th century American landscapes in the painting collection also sparked his interest in images of colonial America, especially those that depicted a vision of the domestic (and a nostalgia for the comforts of England) amidst the reality of a New World wilderness. In this “meeting of friends” (Thorpe’s first solo museum exhibition in the United States), Thorpe’s images are exhibited amidst a group of historic American landscapes he selected from the Museum’s painting collection, offering viewers a compelling re-interpretation of the “visionary” and the “sublime” for the 21st century.

With their unbridled naturalism and earnest hand-built materiality, Thorpe’s collages, which sometimes include pieces of veneer, dried flowers, bark, leather, glass, pebbles or slate, are unique among contemporary images. Although trained in painting and photography, Thorpe turned to this traditional technique (one that is rarely seen in the context of art today and more often relegated to areas of the decorative arts), in part, as a strategy to distance his work from the immediate history and conceptual “burden” of modernist painting.⁴ Thorpe’s practice is one of painstaking labor, building and re-ordering fragments of materials, moving from the paper-thin to those thicker and harder. The “workman-like” clarity and literalness that characterize Thorpe’s images seem to relate directly to their conviction. “I’ve always been interested in creating my own world and it seems like common sense that if I’m constructing a tree I should do it in bark... I’m always trying to find equivalences between subject matter and the materials.”⁵ Keenly aware of the dynamics of space, Thorpe recently has moved beyond the two-dimensional collaged surface to include freestanding elements (sculptures, architectural models, screens), objects that might reside in the world of his collages.



House for Auto-Destiny, Imaginative Research, 2000, paper collage, 23 x 39 inches, Collection of Laura Steinberg and B. Nadal-Ginard. Photo courtesy Maureen Paley, London.



Life is Splendid, 2000, paper cut out, 31 x 21 inches,
Collection of Laura Steinberg and B. Nadal-Ginard.
Photo courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Thorpe's intimately scaled images often depict dramatic, imaginary landscapes that are loosely based on representations of the American West—scenes of wilderness not experienced firsthand by Thorpe but inspired by the literary and visual accounts of others. Mountain peaks, towering pines, and vast skies become the settings for futuristic architectural dwellings—bunkers, watchtowers—that suggest loneliness, self-sufficiency, and solitude. These structures range from the sci-fi “rocket-ship” in *Life is Splendid* and the omniscient “eye” of *House for Auto-Destiny*, *Imaginative Research*, to the more organic and pre-industrial crafted buildings in *Good People* or *Militant Lives*. In *Pilgrims*, helicopters close in on three hexagonal structures overhanging a cliff. Sometimes groups of tiny figures stand nearby, dwarfed by the vastness of their surroundings. Similarly, Thorpe positions us below and at a distance, where we are left to marvel but also contemplate whether the apparent mystery spells peril or possibility.

In the Worcester installation, Thorpe's strategic configuration of images and objects results in a

unique meeting between historic worlds and contemporary ideas. It is a conception of place and an apprehension of time that stretches both forward and back. Two 18th century overmantels (decorative panoramic views), the anonymous *Overmantel from the Reverend Joseph Wheeler House* and Winthrop Chandler's *Homestead of General Timothy Ruggles, Hardwick, Massachusetts*, show early settlers' preference for civilized townscapes over depictions of the largely unexplored wilderness of the time.⁶ Thorpe identified with “the colonists' urge to build up communities during the time of transition from colony to nation.”⁷ He responded to how their strong desire to make this new world “home” not only inspired the paintings' quaint subjects but related directly to “the way that they [the overmantels] still functioned as furniture” like other decorative elements created to embellish domestic interiors. To Thorpe's eyes, these early images, with “their shallow or flat picture planes seem to be products *from* their community and *about* their community,” in other words, images from and about “a closed world, with no sense of a world beyond them, a closed perspective.”

By comparison, in several 19th century paintings, Thorpe was fascinated by the way these images “move beyond the comfort of the overmantels with their sense of being ‘here’ to looking and asking ‘what lies ahead?’” In Edward Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom*, Thorpe sees a “transitional painting, outlining general themes of peace and a new home.” Ralph Earl's *Looking East from Denny Hill* points “towards the sublime landscape tradition of the infinite horizon,” embracing exploration and the “idea that there is something beyond the actual physical and maybe the intellectual boundaries of their settlements.” Civilizing the wilderness, Thorpe feels, is accomplished pictorially in *Sun Angel Hummingbirds on a Branch Near Two Orchids* by Martin Johnson Heade and *Yosemite Falls* by Albert Bierstadt. Their compositions not only “impose order onto their subjects but turn the sublime into the picturesque, removing the sense of fear that the wilderness once had, leaving it open for settlement.”

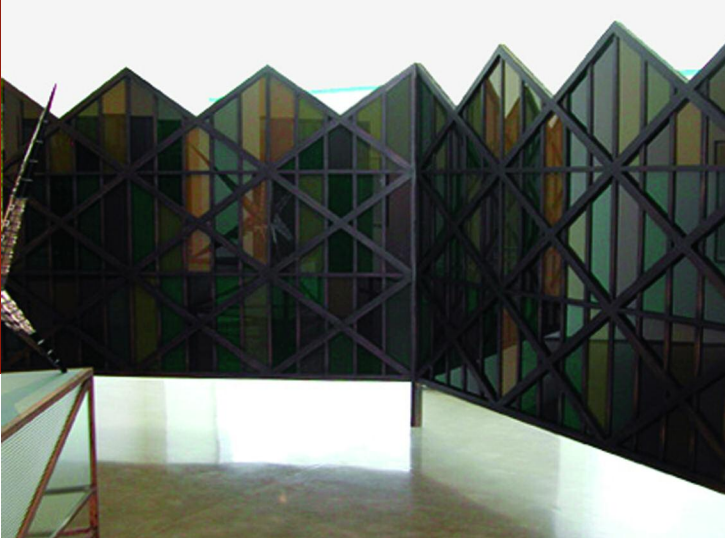


Militant Lives, 2002, mixed media collage, 14 x 14 inches, Private Collection, London. Photo courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

Installed together, the historic paintings and Thorpe's image worlds present a complex picture of the relations between the domestic and the wilderness, between the appeal of solitude and the need for community. Thorpe's inclusion of his Arts and Crafts-inspired screen, handmade of painted glass and dark wood, extends pictorial connections between subject, scale, and time into the architectural environment of the gallery. Its horizontal expanse, signifying both intellectual boundary and physical barrier, strategically separates the Museum's historic

landscapes from Thorpe's own, while also "providing (importantly) points of entry and resistance, penetration and privacy."⁸ With its earthy palette and mountain-like peaks incorporated into a furniture-like format, Thorpe's *The Impenetrable Friend* ultimately domesticates any lingering nostalgia for a natural frontier, while its translucence embodies the artist's insistent romanticism and optimistic belief that "we can transcend all limitations."⁹

Susan L. Stoops
Curator of Contemporary Art



The Impenetrable Friend, 2005, wood and painted glass, 2 panels: 94 x 114 inches each, courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

Notes

1. David Thorpe, *David Thorpe: A Rendezvous With My Friends of Liberty*, ed. Christoph Keller (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004)
2. Andrew Wilton, "The Sublime in the Old World and the New," *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 13.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 71.
5. Artist in interview with Mark Sladen, 2002, www.kultureflash.net/archive/19/preview
6. Dagmar E. Reutlinger, *The Colonial Epoch in America* (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1975), 28.
7. All of the artist's remarks about the Museum's historic paintings are from unpublished correspondence with the author, January 2006.
8. Tom Morton, "Call of the Wild," *Frieze*, Issue 88, January/February 2005, 85.
9. Artist statement, 2000, *ArtBasel/Miami Beach 2002 catalogue*, 360.

About the Artist

David Thorpe was born in 1972 in London, where he continues to live and work. A graduate of Goldsmiths University, Thorpe was the subject of a solo "Art Now" project at Tate Britain, London (2004). His work was included in *Ideal Worlds: New Romanticism in Contemporary Art* at the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2005); *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* at MOMA, New York (2002); and *Twisted—Urban and Visionary Landscapes in Contemporary Painting* at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2001). He is represented by Maureen Paley, London; 303 Gallery, New York; and Meyer Riegger, Karlsruhe.

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Cover image: *Good People*, detail, 2002, mixed media collage, 29 x 39 inches, Collection of John A. Smith and Victoria A. Hughes. Photo courtesy Maureen Paley, London.