Curious and Mysterious

Gordon G. Thorne—so he always signs his works of art—has a touching, old-fashioned sense of *noblesse oblige*. It tallies neatly with the formality of his signature. He feels strongly that with the sizeable material resources he has been given he should take others along for the ride. Because he is so naturally introverted, he feels it's important to move in the other direction, outward, and so for decades on the top floor of Thorne's Market in Northampton he maintained what amounted to an open door policy, providing exhibition and performance space for a wide variety of oftentimes spontaneous art events. Now he is becoming more selective in his community service and wants to have a greater say about whom and what to support. He's also intent on exhibiting his own work more frequently.

Let's attribute this in part to what might be called an "old age style," a classic art historical conundrum about the way artists, increasingly aware of their own mortality, seem to become ever more personal in the outward expression of their art and yet more universal in its underpinnings. What might appear to be less regard for the public is balanced by a search for collective experience. There is here a fragile interplay between solitude and intimacy, Gordon's and ours.

Right now he is trying to imagine a way of dealing with his father's death, a man blind-sided by a terrible automobile accident, who lay unconscious for weeks before being allowed to die. Gluing together a series of photos of his father's denuded living room, the prosaic floor pattern drawn out on an attached piece of paper, he would like the image, complete with burning house and falling fish above, to begin to elicit the disturbing feeling that something is missing, which is partially a process of emptying out through lack of nourishment. In medical terminology it's called inanition. *Death, believe me, never comes to us first in words.* Or, he pairs two large framed drawings, a self-portrait in a red dress and a woman in tall grass, stringing them together by a thin, shadowy wire issuing from a tiny burning house. He says this is not really a psychological thing so much as a set of images that take us into a world mysterious and unfiltered. This is the reality of an artist crossing over into old age who has never forgotten the terror, and the excitement, in his youth of crossing over into the fierceness of the unconscious, to what most of us would call the edge of insanity. It brings to mind the Grimm Brothers' archetypal tale of *The Boy Who Went Forth in Search of Fear.*

He says he became an artist because it was the only thing that he, a straight-D student, could do. He also claims that he can't draw accurately from life, he doesn't have that skill, can't translate what he sees directly onto paper. He did discover that he had an active imagination, and that he could solve problems visually, mechanically. He knows what's wrong and how to fix it. Why am I trying to build a model of the most unstable house imaginable, he wonders? It takes awhile to figure that out, and so he works in series, everything preparation for something further down the line. He does feel that the work has to be interesting as an object, beautiful as well as strange, with an intent behind it that is larger than the thing or the material itself. And he cares about details, even crude ones are thoughtfully examined.

Somewhere inside everyone are the artistic ruins of their lives. Over the last three years Gordon has been assembling works from earlier periods of intense artistic activity, trying to understand what they were about, searching for a trajectory. He's brought together various images of a burning boat colliding with the Mona Lisa, or wind mill drawings undoing the ultimate weapon of mass destruction, the atom bomb. His creative process is akin to Carl Jung's frightening pursuit of his own inner visions in *The Red Book*. And he flares up when it's suggested that Jungian archetypes of the collective unconscious might be conjured up arbitrarily. To him they are real, serving as background for his art, themes or ideas he's always seeking to understand. When you are involved with them, he says, they too grow to be curious and come close. Like dreams, we don't know just where they are coming from since we are all too often screened off from that world. W*hat was divided on a lower level will reappear, united, on a higher one.*

My body insisted on restlessness
having been promised love,
as my mind insisted on words
having been promised the imagination.
So I remained alert, confused and uncomforted.
I fared on and, though the landscape did not change,
it came to seem after a while like a place of recuperation.
—Thom Gunn, 1992

Craig Harbison, January 2012

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