

In the Studio with Artist *Will Thoms*



A dialogue with Amena Hajjar



Amena: Using lines in a gridded, orthogonal, or hierarchical structure, Will Thoms' paintings are reminiscent of Paul Klee's famous quote, "A dot that went for a walk." Will plays with a fluid understanding of foreground and receding backgrounds, achieving depth, intrigue, and a compelling balance of order and abstraction. Working with everyday textural elements—such as paper, cardboard, and wood—and a highly curated color palette, the viewer is mesmerized by the "walk" on these surfaces. Dedicated to his lifelong craft, Will shares his creative process and the joy it brings him below.

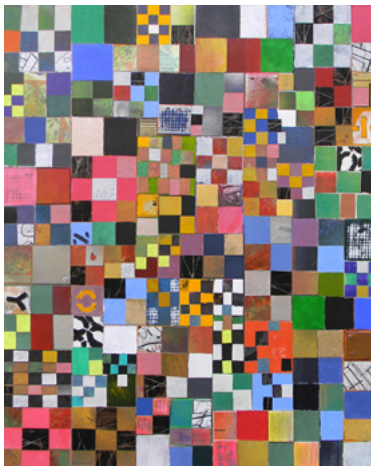
Your paintings have a distinctive style. How did it evolve?

Will: My process has varied over the years. My first show was in 1977, at the Southern Exposure Gallery in San Francisco. I was working with chicken wire stretched over frames, covered with tissue paper and roplex, all painted. After that show, I stopped painting and became busy with running my construction business and raising our five kids, along with my wife of 45 years, Paula Delehanty.

Once the kids were a little older, I started doing "kitchen table art", filling numerous notebooks. A friend suggested I frame some of my small sketchbook drawings. Following her suggestion, I had a show at a jewelry store in Mill Valley. From there, I began painting more frequently and eventually created a studio in the basement of our house in Fairfax.

What's your connection to the grid for you?

It started about 10 years ago; a logical place to start from, a square or a rectangle. The square is more neutral, in that it doesn't suggest a landscape or figure to me. I have always been very attracted to Paul Klee's work. I discovered it years ago. But truthfully, I drew a lot as a kid. And I see my grandchildren drawing, and grids naturally appear in their drawings, even in their earliest works. A grid just seems normal. I believe a square is the most abstract thing to make. The grids really took over for a long time. They are meditative. Recently, I have revived my old style of creating more abstract paintings. I start with a line or a splash of color and see where it takes me. I like collage, and I often take newsprint and paint it first, then place it on the surface as a way to start. Things just start happening.



What are the materials you use?

Everything - stuff from everyday life; house paint, acrylic paint, spray paint, newsprint, anything that works. For me, the material does the talking, and I let it have its way to some degree. Sometimes it doesn't work out. Sometimes it does.

A few years ago, I did a show using corrugated cardboard as the base surface. It is appealing to me and readily available. If you're not careful, it will fall apart quite quickly or warp. I started by adhering it to prepared armatures and applying a thick layer of shellac to preserve the surface, which created a nice finish to work on. I mixed marble dust with acrylic to give it more texture.

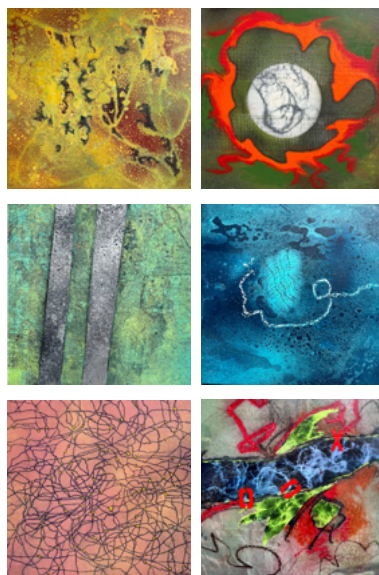
What drives your work?

Deadlines. Being a Gallery Route One member, we have shows regularly. I have opportunities to exhibit every 2-3 years in each of the spaces: the Annex, the Center Gallery, the Members Alcove, and the yearly Members Show. The built-in deadlines give me something to work towards, and I get busy.

I am not in my studio every day. Recently, I had a big push for a show in the Annex, and now I will take some time off. I know that something will build in me, and I'll start up again and see what happens.

How did you get connected with GRO?

I was aware of the gallery and its location, which is near where I live, and I frequently visited Point Reyes. Over the years, I would stop in, and at some point, I decided to apply. I was interviewed by Betty Woolfolk, a founder of GRO, and Zea Morvitz 18 years ago. I am a fairly introverted person, and painting can be a lonely activity. It's been great to have a community of artists to work with and talk to; that's a big deal for me.



What's your earliest memory of being creative?

I knew early on I wanted to be an artist. I drew all the time as a kid. I look back at some of my drawings and think, "This guy wanted to be an artist?" These are terrible. After being talked out of attending art school by my mother, I went to the University of Massachusetts, where I earned a degree in English. I taught high school English for a few years and moved on. I was also doing art, specifically drawing, at that time.

What brought you to California?

I grew up in Winchester, outside of Boston. I recall watching the events unfolding in Berkeley and San Francisco, particularly the youth culture, and I couldn't wait to arrive here. So, in 1970, we moved here.

Around 1978, I returned east for six months to work with my brother in Cape Cod, where I learned to frame. I thought it was a great way to make a living, and I loved it. After returning to California, I worked for several contractors. Then I started my own company, building and remodelling homes. I built a guest house for Richard Deibenkorn in Healdsburg and remodeled his studio. I was too busy working to engage with him about painting. I was running multiple crews and missed building with my own hands, so I decided to scale the business down. Building is a great way to make a living; it involves being outdoors all day, working with your hands, and collaborating in a group. It's hard on the body. After 70, it became difficult. I retired.

Are you doing art for yourself?

I like that my pieces end up in other people's homes. Selling is nice, but it's not the primary reason. There's a need to make things. To be a maker. It's different from building. I'm not following a blueprint or someone else's design. It's much more emotionally satisfying, and it's a process of discovery. I only do abstract. Abstract is about expressing a feeling or emotion that I can't really say, but I can - through color and line.

What is it like to have a show of your art?

It's harrowing. But about 2 months before a show, no matter how confident I am, I start to ask, "Is this any good? Will people respond to it? Am I wasting my time?"

Abstract work, for me, is tied to the deepest part of myself. It is incredibly vulnerable. I like this feeling of inquiry near the completion. It is part of the adventure. You have to take a chance. I hope I always feel this.

