

LIMINAL VIGNETTE

Jonathan Thunder's new paintings are a heady mix of the sweet and the sour, the sacred and the profane, stirred to perfection in narratives that could only come from him.

Tweety Bird with breasts?! The moon, slightly hungover, cooking a pot of stew? A headless woman watering a plant, living inside the head of a . . .what??

Thunder is a member of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe and lives in Duluth. His art is totally eclectic. Besides his paintings, he is also a much-honored sculptor, animator, and digital artist who has completed major commissions, including the animated installation "Manifesto" in the B concourse tunnel of the Minneapolis airport.

His artwork honors his Ojibwe heritage, but his paintings are also in the tradition of such other pronounced esthetic punsters as the counterculture cartoonist R. Crumb (1943 – 2014), and the notable Bay Area artist William Wiley (1937 – 2021), whose oeuvre, like Thunder's, has a mystical bent while drawing heavily from comics, book illustrations and animation. Like Thunder, Wiley was also an inveterate storyteller whose intent was to pass along his "wiz-dum."

Importantly, Thunder belongs to an inventive, international generation of artists from various diasporas such as Japanese-American Roger Shimomura and Pakistani-American Shahzia Sikander, whose imagery from their native cultures fraternizes in an ambivalent, symbolically loaded, and deeply personal manner with that of the American and Western vernacular. These internationally savvy artists are creating the art of our times. Thunder's Ojibwe heritage and his upbringing in an urban environment ensure that the admix of iconography in his art is suitably demanding and perfect for our messy, global era. His complex compositions unhinge any singular notion of fixed identities in an ever-changing world. The results? An unexpected richness that is as confounding as it is unforgettable.

As for Tweety Bird, she appears twice in "Wrong Side of the Tracks," a 4 x 5 foot painting which Thunder refers to as "a good Tom Waits song." Like all indigenous peoples in North America, for centuries the Ojibwe have been an animistic culture, crediting animals, plants and all of nature with a living, spiritual essence. For the Ojibwe, the goldfinch is a bird that traditionally offers hope, and here Thunder morphs it into the lovable cartoon figure whose breasts suggest the nurturing mythical energy of the goldfinch. The vomiting honey bears reference how "easily identity issues can be confusing," Thunder says, while the bees lounging in the train look on sadly. The space helmet with the antlers are "meant to protect against the toxicity" that has often engulfed native peoples in America, and the necessity to "shapeshift" as a way to be safe.

"I don't want to explain every element of my art," Thunder says, "because that would be too forced." But in several of his paintings the great mythical creature the Underwater Panther has clearly been transformed into the world's most adorable pussy cat, doing its best to inspire and support those who need its care.

For the first time, in this exhibit, Thunder chose to work in grisaille (grey-scale) in several of his paintings, a technique from medieval European times used by artists to create a sculptural quality in their painting. In "The Hibernation of Reason Produces Monsters," besides playing on the title of one of Goya's most

famous prints (“The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters),” Thunder’s entourage of characters – a chess piece “who is a useless king that everyone is trying to protect,” a medicine man trying to function like a nurse, a sinister bear up to no good, and an oarsman using a giant pixie straw to push everyone through the water – Thunder has created a prototype for a frieze that could be a carving on a church altar.

For what church we don’t know. But it is one that all creatures on the planet would find inspirational, with curative powers for those who take the time to pay attention.

Elisabeth Kirsch
Art Curator and Historian