

ART SHOW



Navigation, 2012.

TOM THAYER

Whether working in two dimensions or three, he creates compelling visions that incorporate old technologies, childhood memories, and elements of nature

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

Back when Tom Thayer was studying painting at Northern Illinois University in the early 1990s, he hosted parties that weren't your typical bingers. Sure, there was loud music, even some alcohol—this was college, after all—but the guest list was limited to a few close buddies, and “hooking up” wasn't the goal. For 12 hours or, sometimes, for a full weekend, the friends would “play” broken instruments and wordlessly improvise games and gestures. One time, a guy broke a bottle, inspiring the rest of the group to smash their own bottles—and every other piece of glass they could find in the apartment. Then they pushed all the shards into a heap. “I had glass in my feet for a year,” Thayer remembers.

“A lot of times the police were called,” he adds. “We were sort of oblivious. We would keep going and going and going.”

Those parties, Thayer realizes now, were performances, only without audiences. The same elements that were vital to the group then—including collaboration, sound, visuals, and improvisation—continue to define Thayer's art today. There's an off-kilter quality to his work, which ranges from rough-hewn paintings on burlap affixed with detritus, to delicate cardboard puppets and the paper collages that he uses to make animation. There are also freaky home videos, shot by Thayer and his four siblings in their youth, that he manipulates to an effect that is simultaneously quaint and creepy.

Thayer grew up in suburban Chicago in a family that encouraged creativity. (His parents met in a theater class.) After graduating from college, he received some local exposure, but galleries were only interested in showing his paintings, not the videos that he felt were just as integral to his work. Frustrated, he impulsively accepted a teaching post in Nashville. “It was a good place to hibernate and grow,” he says. The city's underground music scene helped crystallize his odd performances, including what he describes as a “very, very strange” piece that featured a paper bird puppet holding a record-player stylus in its mouth. ▶

Nature Scene, a 2011 collage.



ART SHOW



About five years ago, Thayer moved to New Jersey after accepting a teaching post at the City College of New York, and quickly gained notice on the alternative music and theater scenes. The curator Jay Sanders saw a performance and promptly put Thayer in the 2008 White Columns Annual and, later, in the 2012 Whitney Biennial. “It's so inventive,” Sanders says of Thayer's art. “There's an intensity and density and thoughtfulness to Tom.”

Thayer now lives in Ridgefield, New Jersey, which he chose mainly for its proximity to CCNY—across the George Washington Bridge in Harlem—but also because Man Ray had helped create an artists' colony of wooden shacks there about a century ago. “Most of the people I work with live in Brooklyn. It's typical of my decision-making to live across the other river,” Thayer says, laughing.

His small, messy studio is at the back of the apartment he shares with his wife and young son. Taking up most of the space is a makeshift, L-shaped desk that holds two computers, a stop-motion animation station, and stacks of old-fashioned VHS- and audio-editing equipment. “No one really wants them anymore,” Thayer says. “I was born in 1970, so these were the tools for the visual diet I grew up on. I don't look at them as vintage.” To Jay Sanders, Thayer's use of obsolete technology gives his work a kind of “patina” unusual in new media art.

Thayer also collects old children's books. Sometimes he uses the science-themed titles to make collages. Turning to a picture of moldy bread, he says with a sigh, “This is just beautiful.” Other volumes, of children's art projects, provide inspiration for his paintings: He mixes his own pigments and inks to replicate the supersaturated hues of that nursery school staple, tempera paint. His habit of adding bits of wire or other odds and ends to his pieces also mimics children's uninhibited art-making. “It's not about making a work of art, but about the experience of exploring,” Thayer says.

He always begins with a physical gesture rather than an idea. It helps when his objects “have a function,” he says, “so I don't have to try to ‘make art.’” His paintings, for instance, often do double duty as scenery in his videos, and his puppets can find their way onto his paintings. But whether he's working with pigment or laundry list, sculpture or video, the specific material and medium aren't so important in Thayer's eyes. “They're just a portal,” he says. “Communication is the artwork.”

Exactly what he wants to communicate is harder for Thayer to articulate. He hopes his objects somehow provide a mirror for the viewer. At least, they do for him. “It all comes out of looking inward, as deeply as I can,” he says. “The more personal something is, the more universal it becomes.” ■

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Forest, 2011; The Ecstasy; Congregation, 2012; Installation, 2012 from the 2012 video Asks Solotchi.