

by **Bondo Wyszpolski**

It could be only minutes after impact, and we're among the first responders to the site of a major catastrophe. That's one way to describe our initial encounter with the canvases – some of them quite large – of Marie Thibeault, a San Pedro-based artist and professor (at Cal State Long Beach) now showing her pictures in Manhattan Beach and Torrance.

Her recent series or body of work was inspired by media images of the widespread devastation leveled upon New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The impression made upon her by photographs, video and film footage was immediate, and visceral.

We're in Thibeault's spacious, well-lit studio. It has just the right amount of clutter, with several paintings hanging from or leaning against the walls to eavesdrop on our conversation. As for the work at hand:

Suspended in time

"Well, it is about the type of change that happens with cataclysmic storms," Thibeault says. "Basically, it's a moment of reckoning, a moment where things shift and there's a sort of psychology of stillness that happens. And then they reverse and start to become rebuilt. There's a moment of suspension where we recognize our place in time and history, and that moment is very compelling to me because it's like a timeless state.

"I think of it as a moment of reflection and a moment of coming to terms with fate or reality or existence," she adds. "The structure of the painting has evolved to show that, metaphorically; that's why the show

at Torrance is called 'Broken Symmetries.' It's about some things coming together and coming apart, a reflection or mirroring. That started because I saw flood images that were mirror versions of things in the flood, like houses and rooftops, mirrored but in a degraded or altered sense of the original. So instead of an ideal landscape" – no Arcadian vistas by Poussin here – "it's a landscape that has some power and exaltation, like the powerful sublime, but it also has this sense of the pathetic to it."

A minimum of recognizable objects seems necessary for the viewer in his or her search for a handrail that leads down into the picture, and such references also provide a sense of orientation and scale.

"Some of the things that I'm working with would be car tires or mattresses or funny little windows and bedroom doors," Thibeault says; "things that are just remnants that start to peek through the rubble or the debris. But the debris fields are sort of a cacophony of activity, as though things were settling. It isn't an assessment of damage, or something that's lost or that's nostalgic; I don't think it's really nostalgic."

An important point to bear in mind. Nostalgia pairs well with ruins, of old Rhine castles, for instance, but whereas ruins are dark and cold Thibeault's images are of "ruins" that haven't yet cooled.

"Some of these forms are from a ruined factory where I grew up," she says, "but it felt too far back in history. It felt too nostalgic. In other words, I'm interested in the perpetual state.

"It may be about perception of time," she continues. "Everything is simultaneous, everything is part of the whole; and even though you may see something drastically altered, it's kind of an existent thing with other states."

This sense of interdependence among objects is a key component of Thibeault's work, which seems to sidestep the linear and perhaps the chronological. "It's almost," she says, "like a holo-

graphic configuration or matrix of information.

Color field

There's another difference between depictions of ruins with their browns and grays and the bright, gooey spills and blazing tones of an airplane crash. The latter palette projects immediacy.

"Usually black and white echoes the past, in photography and the written word," Thibeault points out, "and it speaks about what is a fact. The more color that's employed generally means there's more sensation, more instability; it's more about experiencing the moment."

In this regard, the canvases speak for themselves.

"I'm using the color symbolically as well," Thibeault adds. She describes images she's found of houses without roofs: "They're just like rooms opened up. Some of the color juxtapositions are so beautiful, like a red rug and then just mud. One of the things I'm after is this exchange of inside and outside."

But it goes deeper than that.

"Another subtext to the work is my concern with environmental conditions, global warming, et cetera, and that the environment is now affecting the inside and the inside is affecting the environment." It's a reciprocation, she says, "a breathing that goes on between things. That's why [referring to the paintings] sometimes the external colors [are] inside and the internal colors outside."

When we return to the subject of color a few minutes later, Thibeault points out something crucial: "I'm using color as structure, like Hans Hofmann or like Cézanne." In places, the color pulsates, and there are echoes of good old-fashioned Impressionism. "You've got your major time chords, and then you've got all those little pulsations so that, incrementally, the color is taking on different roles."

It's not a stretch to see the canvases as

rhythmic, as visual music.

Thibeault agrees. "I tell my family, if I were to start over again I'd just be a musician," she says with a laugh. "I'd just go right to the pulse and the beat."

Crawling from the wreckage

Marie Thibeault has had an enduring attraction to landscape painting, from Paul Cézanne in France to George Inness and George Bellows in the United States. Inness got her to thinking about the subliminal structure within the landscape and how it counterbalances the horizon. And, because after all she is a professor, the writing of Jacques Merleau-Ponty has also influenced her own thoughts on the creative process.

In other ways, the late canvases by Van Gogh have a strong connection to Thibeault's work. She refers to the heavily impastoed swaths or rectangles of color: "It could be something about interment or a grave or underground. In many of them there's a sense that you can go underneath the landscape, and through to the underground." This notion definitely clicked with the artist, who has embraced and elaborated upon it: "I want you to be able to feel where you are on your stomach, what's happening above and what's happening underneath."

Like parting the branches and pulling your way through?

"To me it's like a really deep archetypal thing, I don't even know," Thibeault replies; "but I love being in caves and underground." This might also imply an undermining of the surface. Not only that, but perhaps, as she adds, "terra firma is not so firm after all."

Still, the idea that the viewer has to crawl into the bowels of the picture to fully grasp it is an intriguing one. To induce such a motive, the works incorporate several planes. They tilt this way or that, opening up or suggesting greater depths. Thibeault, not surprisingly, has an interest in physics. She mentions that she's trying to create the effect of falling through. She points to one area of a large canvas and says, "There's the subterranean plane, which is what I'm now learning to paint. What really is difficult is the plane that negotiates between the above and the below."

The interstices, I say. She likes the word, and writes it down.

A fragile world

Wreckage of any sort implies vulnerability. In the end, aren't these pictures about human frailty?

"Exactly," Thibeault replies. "The frailty, fragility, the fleeting, and also – I don't know how to talk about it – the ecstatic. Sometimes when I'm walking up on the hill and I get this really high energy going I can comprehend multitudes of information... It's like awareness at such a pitch that everything is so fragile and fleeting."

Applied to her work, she speaks in terms of vibrating light. Again, the importance of color. People who look at her paintings will know

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"Blue World" (2007), by Marie Thibeault

or discover that they were inspired by the deluge and the winds of Hurricane Katrina, but Thibeault isn't trying to force a message on anyone. We just need to remember that we're in a fragile state, a delicate balance.

"Just like that; not really didactic or in any way trying to preach or teach. It's more like, 'Be aware,' and 'Everything is fragile, every little thing is connected.'"

Is there a correlation between Thibeault's subject matter and her outlook on life? Because of her subject matter, does she have a dim outlook on the future?

"I've done disasters on and off throughout my life," she says. "I've chosen that [theme] because of the chaos. I'm interested in the dis-allocation of order, but I'm not pessimistic. It's not about that."

If anything, her work approaches the Romantic sublime, which results when the beautiful and the terrifying converge and there's the delicious threat of being overwhelmed. If you've ever stood on a precipice on a full moon night, with a sheer drop at your feet, or at the base of a deafening waterfall, you've probably encountered the sublime and, in Werner Herzog's words, closed in on an "ecstatic truth."

The raw material

Marie Thibeault's pictures do not spring out of her head fully formed the way Athena did from Zeus. Instead, she's constantly scanning the internet or newspapers for compelling imagery, finding details that interest her and then converting them into drawings. Hundreds and hundreds of drawings that are separated into categories – she reads a few aloud: "Windows, interior, exterior, perspective, ship, Chernobyl..." – and placed in piles along a row on the floor.

She refers to these as characters, but they can also be viewed as components-in-waiting of a collage or pastiche. One need only imagine a



"Arena," (2007), by Marie Thibeault

carpenter with one drawer for nails, one for brackets, others for paintbrushes or sandpaper.

As the picture begins to take shape in her mind, Thibeault attaches her penciled drawings to a large sheet of white paper affixed to the wall. She tries out her various characters to see if they resonate, moves them around, scribbles all over them or on the sheet behind them. "The drawings," she says, "which are a really critical part of my creative process, will lead to the painting."

But the brushes aren't coming out just yet.

There's an intensity to the drawings, and

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When Worlds Collide

The devastating art of Marie Thibeault

Marie Thibeault in her studio. Photo by Bondo Wyszpolski