

ARTIST PROFILE

Light Years

Four decades of illuminating work by Rhett Thurman



The Hood, oil, 2010

Once, while Rhett Thurman was painting downtown (a pastime that will make you as tough as nails, she says), a man who'd been watching over her shoulder for a little while boldly asked, "Who told you that you could use colors like that?" The artist can't remember her response, but really—given her 40 years of painting in the Holy City, 25 years teaching studio art at the Gibbes Museum, lifetime of travels, and clientele that is always begging for more, this artist needs no one's permission to



Behind Broad, watercolor, 1970s

manipulate her unconventional palette of warm, unblended colors into luminous signature scenes.

You could say that Thurman and the Charleston art community have grown up together. When the fresh-faced novice first pulled into town in 1970, the commercial art scene was nonexistent, with the exception of a few frame shops. Without an established network to lean on, Thurman found support in the up-and-coming talent around her. "If I am proud of anything from those years, it's the way my generation of artists worked to create an embracing atmosphere in which new artists can support themselves in this city," she says.

Starting out in oils, Thurman dabbled in watercolor but returned faithfully to opaque paint. It didn't take long for her to make a name for herself as an esteemed colorist; however, she claims that it is actually not color she is after, per se. While on a trip through Mexico in the '80s, her fascination with the bleaching sunlight led her to articulate her real journey: to capture the ephemeral hues



Rhett Thurman has served as president of the South Carolina Watercolor Society and was a long-standing faculty member of the Gibbes Museum's studio art program. (Pictured: *Order Out of Chaos*, oil, 2010)



Bellas Artes, oil, 2010



Thurman, who travels the globe for inspiration, paints en plein air during a trip to Mexico this past February, capturing the rooftops on a vivid canvas of color.

that color emits when struck by radiant light. Since then, Thurman has made a habit of chasing bold, brilliant tones through the American South, Europe, India, and Central America. "For me, it's about dazzling light and what it does to color—this is my absolute passion," she explains. "I try to never interpret the colors I see too literally, but rather to be true to my own eye."

Whether she is painting the neon light smeared along the shop windows of Upper King, the dark shadows splashed across the boiling Queen Street pavement, the sun-battered sidewalks of Corona, or the brilliant red umbrellas at a Tuscan cafe, Thurman internalizes the energy

PHOTOGRAPH (PORTRAIT) BY REBECCA GALLAGHER;
IMAGES (6) COURTESY OF RHETT THURMAN



Sbem Creek, watercolor, 1980s



Sea Sisters, III, oil, 2000

Though she dabbled in watercolors during the 1970s and '80s, Thurman works primarily in oils.

of her subjects and magically projects it onto the canvas. The magnetic result has kept her pieces flying off the walls of the Sylvan Gallery for six years. "Her work is so recognizable," says gallery owner Joe Sylvan. "Rhett paints like her personality—bright, cheerful, and eclectic. People are drawn to her vivid colors and her different approach to classic scenes."

With the Sylvan Gallery maintaining her high-profile wall space and her husband, Harry Clark, managing her business, Thurman says that these days, she is free to paint. No matter that she has settled into her icon status on the peninsula, she insists she is on an unending quest to improve her technique at home and abroad. "The artists whom I respect would agree that we cannot stay the same in our work," she explains. "Even after 40 years of painting in Charleston, I am still challenged daily to capture the juxtaposition of light and color that moves me to pick up the brush." —*Kristen Gebrman*

"Rhett Thurman: 40 Years of Painting in Charleston" opens at the Sylvan Gallery (171 King St.) on October 1.



PLACES TO CALL HOME



172 Windo Reach Ct. • Mount Pleasant
Deepwater Homesite • \$1,499,000
Laurie Thornhill 843.270.7633



101 Venning • Old Village Harborfront
Mount Pleasant • \$8,000,000
Laurie Thornhill 843.270.7633
Chris Anderson 843.442.2339



2314 Middle St. • Sullivan's Island
\$1,350,000
Leigh Rowe 843.343.5675

843.849.3636

[THE PEOPLE THAT CAN PUT YOU THERE]

CHRIS ANDERSON	LAURIE THORNHILL	ASHLEY TRULUCK
CAROLINE DEVLAMING	LEE HUGHES	LEIGH ROWE
DANIEL DUKES	CHRIS HULSEY	GAIL SALOMON
JILL FORD	KIM HULSEY	KYLE SMITH
SHERRY FORREST	BRANDY KEENER	JEFFREY THOMAS
ANNIE HENDERSON	AMEE LELAND	LAURA WILLIAMS
	DAVE PERRETT	

Find your place today at www.scplaces.com

