

‘In the Artist’s Studio’ with Rodney Thompson

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Award-winning professional artist Rodney Thompson's art meets life. His rich encaustic works are a reflection of his love of natural environments, Eastern cultures and rituals, and his personal sense of calm. I visited Rodney's studio and chatted with him about his work, his surroundings and interesting uses for found objects.



On a shelf in your studio, you have a collection of interesting masks. But the stuffed bear doesn't seem to belong. What is his story?

In my studio I keep objects that evoke for me a feeling of mystery and wonder. I keep these objects as totems and talismans that help me search within myself for the conversations beyond words that become the narrative of my art. The bear was my teddy bear from infancy that possesses deep connections with my childhood including vivid tactile memories that precede language. It sits amongst somewhat scary masks, an intentional juxtaposition. The myth of childhood innocence belies the primal fears that require such objects of security and consolation.



I think my blood pressure dropped the minute I stepped onto your property. It is so peaceful. What influenced your home's aesthetic?

My wife, Kathy, and I have lived in our home in Redding for almost 30 years. We see life as an opportunity to be creative, and our home and land are like a canvas of space that we create and recreate over time. We have cultivated an attitude of stewardship, rather than ownership, integrating our structures and landscaping with the natural environment of our land. As a result, on our three acres there are many different environments that flow from one to another, gardens blending with native plants, meadows rather than lawns. It has become a haven and retreat for us, a place conducive to both creativity and contemplation.



Your life and your work seem so in concert. Was it always that way?

I have always believed in finding balance in my life. Life can be a creative adventure, whether doing fine art, building a fence or cooking a meal. I see it all as a continuum of creativity, the narrative of life unfolding through many activities and experiences. I have an attitude of constantly questioning and re-evaluating where I am and where I want to go. True creative thinking is not just changing one's assumptions or even questioning one's assumptions, but most important of all - discovering one's assumptions. Only then can one master life's choices.



You have an amazing studio space. What considerations went into building it?

When I designed the studio I was working with oil sticks on large canvas as well as doing print making. The two halves of the studio, one side with a 12-foot wall for painting and the other with long counter tops and room for an etching press, allowed separation of the two mediums. I also wanted a sense of space around me, openness in floor plan and high ceilings. The simplicity of the room has allowed for a modular adaptation to the changes that have occurred with my art. The amount of space has also been conducive to working with other artists, sharing the space with friends as well as for teaching classes.



How has your work evolved?

Most of my education focused on math and science, and I became good at learning with my analytical left brain. Shifting to my more emotional right brain has been essential to the evolution of my art. Learning how to not think too much and not know too much (letting go of assumptions) has helped me explore deeper feelings and issues with my art.



Explain "encaustic" to the average art lover. What appeals to you about this medium?

Encaustic is a wax-based medium. Just as oil is the medium for oil paint, and water is the medium for water colors, wax is the medium for encaustic. Actually, it is a combination of beeswax and damar resin (a crystallized tree sap). One can buy pigmented encaustic medium, such as cadmium red, or ultramarine blue, just like other painting mediums. The "paint" is kept melted and can be painted with, just like other kinds of paint. But painting is only one of the ways encaustic can be used. I mostly work with layers of translucent medium, alternating with collaged elements and drawing. Encaustic can also be carved, sculpted, poured and cast, used as

adhesive, used to obscure imagery as well as making materials more transparent. It is this vast range of potential that appeals to me, giving me many options in one medium to create my art.



I admire your ability to find a use for utilitarian found objects. What are some of your favorite finds?

I have a fascination with overlooked materials and objects of our daily lives. Simple everyday materials and objects normally discarded, forgotten or unnoticed are selected for their inherent beauty. Transforming these materials out of their usual context recycles them with a new identity while reflecting on our relationship with our material and often disposable culture. My favorite "found" (collected) material is teabag paper. We save all our teabags, and Kathy patiently dries and unfolds the paper, sometimes re-dying it in various ways. The colors and natural patterns created by the tea stains in the folds and surfaces of the paper are wonderful. Drinking tea and coffee is a calming and soothing meditation. We tend to stop and sit with the hot drink, allowing ourselves to rest and to be in the moment. These simple objects used in my art are like prayer flags marking a moment spent quietly and peacefully.



What will you include in your show for ArtHop this month?

I am delighted to be able to show some of my art at Parmer's Furniture and Design. Showing art in the context of their beautiful furniture collections allows it to be seen and imagined in real life

settings. I will be presenting two large works from my "Ceremonial Robe" series, some new work, including at least one "fault block" (shaped and offset panels), and a variety of other encaustic works.



What are you working on next?

I am currently studying and exploring the concept of creating three-dimensional objects, such as bowls and nests, by drawing on multiple layers of encaustic medium, where one literally looks into the picture with a true sense of depth rather than simply the illusion of depth created on a surface.