

Thom Cooney Crawford, *Easton Irregular* art Profile, May, 2012

“The whorled swirlings curved skyward”

(Excerpt from Crawford’s poem “Moss Green Sanctuary”)

“I used to collect stones, but then I got smart and started collecting feathers--much easier,” remarks Thom Cooney Crawford during my visit to his spacious Easton live-work studio on Northampton Street. Feathers are snuggled behind picture frames, rocks nest in niches, and pieces of sawn wood are placed with aesthetic strategy throughout the room. Thom is a Modernist painter, sculptor and poet who has exhibited extensively in the U.S. and abroad. He was born in Boston, absorbed Emerson and Rilke and studied with the best artists of his generation.

Crawford spent two summers (1963-64) with painters Leo Manso and Victor Candell at the Provincetown Workshop. In 1965 at the University of Colorado, he studied with painter David Hockney and art historian Hilton Kramer, titan proponents of “retinal painting,” which favors Matisse’s color harmonies over Cezanne’s structural use of color.

He received his MFA from Syracuse University in 1967 and a post-graduate MFA Fellowship from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1969. A recipient of an NEA Fellowship in Painting (1985), he taught sculpture at Lafayette College from 1990-95. He’s also taught at Kutztown University and Northampton Community College; Binghamton University, Syracuse University and Parson’s School of Design in New York; Caldwell College in New Jersey; Rhode Island School of Design; and Middlebury College in Vermont. Here is but a sample of exhibition venues: Stadtmuseum, Weilheim, Germany; Nama Gallery, Tel Aviv; Galerie Libre, Montreal; Catherine Hammond Gallery, Dublin; Hakone Open Air Museum, Hakone, Japan; Basel Art Fair, Switzerland. In New York he exhibited at (to name a few): Dorsky; M-13; Tibor de Nagy; Sculpture Center Gallery and P.S. 1 Museum.

Material nature such as trees, rocks, feathers, water, planets and stars take precedence over ideas in Thom’s work. A Modernist working in the Post-Modern era, he can use words like “archetype,” “spirit,” “shaman,” “sacred,” and “primal” with hard-earned authority. Crawford lived in Ireland from 2006-2010 and became interested in Celtic lore and myths. Currently, he is sculpting large tree-and-figure-inspired pieces called “dryads.” Dryads or “tree nymphs” are spirits that live in trees, they die if the tree is cut down, so proper prayers must be made to harvest wood safely--they are known to haunt, seduce and/or kill lumberjacks. “Angel Tree Shape-Shifter” is formidable at eight feet tall, supported internally by a wooden armature and covered in microcrystalline sculpting wax. The surface has been pressed into raised bark or hide-like nodules, making a skin that joins fantasy and nature. An almost human presence with knobby knees and elbows moves under the waxy skin, extending curved branches upward into a crown or cluster of orbits where the head should be.

According to Rilke, Thom states, “Artists are drawn to enigmas,” and he describes his work process as, “First, doing; then, the work reveals itself.” I’m attracted to the piles of acrylic paintings on a table in the studio. Pure energy starts with a romantic, Italian Renaissance drawing style, snowballs through Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy and comes to rest with Henry Moore and Alexander Calder: the effect is concrete yet still atmospheric and open-ended.

Thom paints tentatively, avoiding straight lines, sidling up to his mysteries, allowing the material to speak to him. Working with white and grey on a black or acid-green background, adding dabs of color here and there, he paints curved horizons, tornados, waterfalls and electric storms on undulating and coiling trajectories. Figures turn into crystalline air, galaxies spin past smudges that might be antennae, satellites or radio stations where messages are being transmitted and received. Drawing intuitively, open to chance, Thom connects human vulnerability with the vast Universe.

—Elizabeth Johnson

