

Susan White's Thorn Works

David Cateforis

For over a decade, Susan White has been creating unconventional and captivating works of art built from the spiky thorns of the honey locust tree.¹ White's free-standing table-top scale sculptures made of thorns, rising delicately from their pedestals, appear both fragile and menacing. Intricately assembled from slender interlocking thorns and open to the surrounding environment, the sculptures have an air of vulnerability, yet they bristle with sharp points that warn the viewer to keep a safe distance. Equally minatory if closely approached, White's wall-mounted thorn works spread across the wall in clusters evoking distant stands of trees or the islands of an archipelago.

White harvests the thorns herself and brings them back to her studio, where she constructs her free-standing sculptures, or she transports the thorns to the gallery where she assembles a wall composition on site. Each piece begins with a single thorn that the artist pierces using a wood burning tool. She then inserts the pointed tip of another thorn into the hole to join the two elements. Over time, through this accretive method of piercing and doweling, which the artist likens to traditional Japanese wood joinery techniques, White builds an entire structure. In 2015 she began to make bronze versions of the table-top sculptures, assembled from unique casts of individual thorns pierced by means of a drill press.² Most of the thorn works are completely abstract, their compositions discovered intuitively by the artist through the process of creating them. Some of the wall pieces, however, are representational, consisting of thorns painted red, white and blue combined to form a bristling image of the American flag.

Two key principles underlie all of White's work with thorns: a philosophy of love and respect for nature, and the artistic concept of drawing in space. The latter White articulates by referring to her thorn works as "three-dimensional drawings."³ Julio González coined the phrase "drawing in space" in the early 1930s to refer to the new sculptural technique he pioneered in collaboration with Pablo Picasso: the use of welded iron rods or bars to build a linear sculpture. American modernist sculptors of the mid-twentieth century, most famously David Smith, adopted this method to produce open-form sculptures possessing little solid mass or volume, their thin metal elements traversing but not enclosing space. Susan White's free-standing thorn sculptures call to mind the cage-like welded metal abstractions of Smith's colleague Ibram Lassaw, but White's medium – natural thorns instead of welded metal – roots her work in the organic rather than the industrial realm. In this regard her art is closer in spirit to that of Italian Arte Povera sculptors such as Mario Merz and Giuseppe Penone, who have worked with natural materials such as brushwood and acacia thorns, respectively.

White describes herself as a lover of trees who has been drawn to the use of wood since her days at the Kansas City Art Institute in the 1990s, where as a student of sculptor Karen McCoy (also known for her use of natural materials), White began to craft sculptures out of thin branches connected by means of toothpicks inserted into holes burned into the wood. After discovering honey locust thorns on family property outside of Lawrence, Kansas, White began to use them in her work. White describes the thorns as dangerous – fallen thorns, hard as nails, can puncture tires, shoe soles, or animal hooves – but also as beautiful. She admires the thorns' elegant, inherent geometry, the gestures made by their spiky extensions (which sometimes curve rather than jutting out straight), and their individual character; each is as unique as a snowflake.

Emerging directly out of the tree trunk and sometimes exceeding a foot in length, the thorns are green and malleable as they grow, turn mahogany red as they mature and harden, and then become gray as they die and dry out. White favors the mahogany and gray thorns for her sculptures, and is also attracted to thorns covered with lichen, which create surfaces of richly varying colors and textures. She uses the gray thorns, sometimes bearing lichen, for her bronzes, working with Kansas City's Eligius Bronze foundry to create the unique bronze simulacrum of each original thorn through an organic burnout process.

Fundamentally, White aims to work with the thorns, gathered from nature, in a way that is itself natural. "I try to use natural materials in such a way as to express what I find in nature," she says.⁴ White considers burning to be a natural means of piercing the thorns and her accretive method of building the thorn sculptures as analogous to the process of organic growth. In the case of the bronze thorn works, the use of a drill press may also be considered a natural, i.e., fitting, way of boring a hole through cast metal. And White describes the patinas she gives the bronzes through fumed salt and vinegar as organic, noting that their colors will change over time.

White made her first thorn work, entitled *Sanctuary*, for the 2004 exhibition "Born Again! Contemporary Christs and Modern Madonnas," staged at Kansas City's Greenlease Gallery. Roughly resembling a church, *Sanctuary* invoked for many viewers the crown of thorns placed on the head of Jesus by the Romans to torment him and mock his authority. White, however, did not intend this specific reference, either here or in any of her other works. Rather, she saw *Sanctuary*, with its menacingly sharp interior, as conveying the idea of a church as an uncomfortable place, the personal view of the artist. On the other hand, White considers nature itself, evoked palpably through the organic elements of her art, to be a sanctuary, and she likens the activity of creating her thorn works to a ritual.

White has bestowed the title *Sanctuary* on several subsequent thorn works. On her website, she explains that these pieces "respond to . . . the sense of random chaos versus the need for organizing structure, resulting in the need for sanctuary." She also sees them as combining the "idea of refuge . . . with the obvious discomfort of the medium" to suggest "the possibility of seeking refuge in discomfort, much like the wearing of a hair shirt or the penance exacted from various religious groups."⁵ White has titled other table-top pieces *Temple* or *Dwelling*, connecting them to ideas surrounding building, either sacred or secular, and shelter. Some of her more vertical sculptures she has called *Sentinel* (a title also used by David Smith for one of his series), licensing an imaginative understanding of the upright thorn structures as watchful anthropomorphic presences.

White relates many of her abstract wall works to sources in nature. Viewed from a distance, the elegant white-painted *Floating Between the Real and the Ideal* (2015), which spread across the equally white wall of White's exhibition at the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art in Sedalia, Missouri, suggests drifting clouds in a pale sky, with the complex shadows cast by clustered thorns adding a layer of visual depth. Viewed up close, the gaggles of thorns reveal their spiky and unruly nature, at odds with the impression of vaporous clouds gained from a distance, and indicative of the polarity of the real and ideal invoked by the work's title. White's most recent wall work, *Flock*, installed at the Volland Store in Alma, Kansas, in September 2016, with its ragged clusters of natural mahogany-colored thorns scudding along a gently rising diagonal, evoked for the artist the groups of birds she sees flying together across the highway.⁶

Standing apart from the rest of White's wall works due to their recognizable subject matter are her large American flags composed of thorns painted red, white, and blue. The first of these, *Untitled (flag)*, presented at Kansas City's Cara y Cabezas Contemporary in an exhibition entitled "I Am An American!" conveyed through its bristling appearance the artist's anxiety over the fractious atmosphere of the 2012 U.S. presidential election. According to White, some viewers connected the work to painful aspects of American history or, due to the inescapable (if unintended) reference to the crown of thorns, the entanglement of American politics with religion.⁷ In *Flag II*, installed at Kansas City's Haw Contemporary in 2014, the banner is shown tattered and disintegrating, with fallen red and white thorns scattered on the floor beneath the distressed stars and stripes, a metaphor for a country rent by extreme political divisions and crises. *Flag II* seemed only more relevant in the summer and fall of 2016, as Americans endured one of the ugliest and nastiest presidential races in our nation's history.

White recently commented that she wished *Flag II* had been on view in Kansas during the 2016 campaign season to resonate within that contentious atmosphere. But perhaps what is needed much more now, in the wake of a turbulent and, for many, devastating election, are the healing and affirmative energies of immersion in nature and of the human drive to create artistic marvels out of nature's bounty. And these are what Susan White's thorn works give us – in abundance.

David Cateforis is professor and chair of art history at the University of Kansas

¹ Much of the information and many of the ideas in this essay come out of a long conversation between me and Susan White conducted on October 10, 2016, in the car between Lawrence and Alma, Kansas, and in the Volland Store in the midst of her exhibition there. I am grateful to the artist for the invitation to write this essay and to think long and deeply with her about her work.

² While primarily held together through piercing and doweling, White's bronzes are also spot-welded at various points for enhanced strength and stability.

³ Susan White, artist statement for "Landscape/Skyscape: Meditations in Thorn Works and Burn Drawings," The Volland Store, Alma, Kansas, September 10 - October 16, 2016, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://thevollandstore.com/fierce-thorns-and-gentle-burnings/>.

⁴ Susan White, email to the author, December 16, 2017.

⁵ Susan White, "Thorn Works," 2010, *susan-white.com*, accessed December 9, 2016, <http://www.susan-white.com/thorns/Thorn%20works.pdf>.

⁶ *Flock* was the first work White made by inserting thorns directly into holes drilled in the wall. Each thorn sunk into the wall served as an anchoring element to which the artist attached additional thorns through her piercing and doweling method. Previous wall works were hung by means of thin bamboo skewers inserted into drilled holes.

⁷ Susan White, post of September 10, 2012, *susan-white.com*, accessed December 9, 2016, <https://susanwhiteneeds.com/category/thorn-works/page/2/>.