

Susan White's *The Untangling*
By Anne Gatschet

Since she entered the practice of sculpture in the late 1990's, Susan White has continually quieted the art of building space. In her subtle and methodical work, she is especially attracted to the precise moments of transforming materials and to the processes that join them. In the quiet study of each point of material contact, her primary mentor is nature. Formally comparing her own space-building to structures in the wild, White studies the vulnerabilities, defenses, and risks inherent in making and taking space. Her artwork has gained recognition for its use of the dagger-like thorns of honey locust trees.

White describes herself as a person motivated by the experience of fear, and aware of the spatial-material expression of risk and exposure. In her artistic practice, she has inquired continually about these topics and their relation to comfort and sanctuary. Transforming the material of thorns, she deepens our perception of their form, inviting us into quiet points of mystery. Each thorn's strong, elegantly smooth line diminishes toward its own vanishing point, a place at the edge of invisibility that coincides both with the viewer's sense of danger and the locust tree's self-protection. Connecting thorns, White moves from sculpture to scripture with their form, drawing in space with attention to nature's genius and to the slow precision of the human eye.

Her practice, which she describes as meditative, often involves burning holes into thorns with the pencil point tip of a wood burning tool that mirrors the shape of the thorn. In pyrographic drawings, she burns consecutive points on paper while a thin column of smoke rises. This patient labor honors the minutiae of each material transformation in every work, and, while the assemblages and drawings she makes suggest wilderness, they are places of overall quiet and profound formal integrity.

The final year of White's three-year residency at Studios Inc was 2020, and her solo show was born during the height of the 2020 crises in ecosystems, politics, and public health and safety. As she began to bring recent artworks into the expansive exhibition hall, White came to understand that her quiet, solitary practice had taken in and responded to the weight of last year's monumental and clamorous struggles. She saw that this installation would describe the anguish it had absorbed and offer a space from which to push back against violence and morbidity. It would mark *The Untangling* of our collective ordeal. Like the year 2020, Susan White's complicated assemblages look forbidding; but once we acknowledge their danger, we are drawn to the relationships involved in them and might ask just how we ourselves are joined in such difficult, tangled existence.

At an early point in her studio practice, White began to notice that her interest in the pointed tips of sculptural tools coalesced with a fascination for the honey locust thorn. The tree covers itself with sharp, strong points that reminded her of the point of transformation she saw when she burned small holes in wood with a copper-tipped tool. The thorn's delicacy, quiet, and strength are still fundamental in her practice. These concerns place her work in a unique relation to an artistic discipline usually associated with volume, mass, and plane. She asserts, "Within sculpture, I think in a quiet way of building."

Minute attention transcends this exhibition, which comprises works built from locust branches and from natural and bronze-cast thorns; a pyrographic drawing of hundreds of delicate burn points on paper; and two series of paintings that represent the airy labyrinths of her sculptures. In her practice, White focuses on the formal significance of the point: the precise site of material joining; the sharp nibs of her studio tools; and the exact moment in time when materials meet and transform one another.

Throughout the works of *The Untangling*, we sense her meditative focus on points of contact, exaggerated by open or “negative” space around each. To construct her quietly intriguing spaces, White burns holes in multiple thorns, then uses triangulation and tension to insert the thorns into one another, forming a segment of three or four. She uses the segments to interlock with one another. The resulting assemblages draw attention to the precarity of what connects.

A remarkable, aesthetic passage takes place when this formal ground encounters cultural and psychological realities. The thorns carry strong associations in the memories of viewers. For many North Americans, they recall encounters with honey locust trees in the wild. No one plants a honey locust on purpose, but throughout this region we often encounter them and find ourselves watching cautiously, as when we meet wasps or snakes. Unlike animals, though, the trees stand still, inviting our eyes to study their elegant weapons. What happens to that remembered encounter with a difficult, dangerous living body, when the memory is brought into a cultural, social, or political context?

White extends the meditative effect of her sculpted spaces by merging them with cultural imagery. The immediacy of the point gives way to the figurative force of line as recognizable shapes emerge. The locust thorn itself is a line interrupted by the sharp points of smaller, emerging thorns, and throughout *The Untangling* we sense the dramatic tension between line and point, between weighty contour and delicate juncture.

Lure (2020) is a painted, bronze cast of numerous thorns that draws us to interpret their unique formal possibility. When locust thorns reach a certain maturity, new thorns emerge along their tapering length. Not unlike a letter in script, their basic line becomes the supporting structure of a system of lines and points. For *Lure*, White has linked such segments to form a nine-inch high, five-foot long line that evokes a line of writing. Its dynamism looks like a single, brave verse of poetry hanging on the wall’s white page, each jagged thorn evoking the strokes of a written letter.

If and when the viewer realizes that *Lure*’s length of thorns is made of bronze, her awareness increases of the work’s cultural distance from so called “nature” — the world where trees make artful systems of defense regardless of human interference. The associative oscillation between the product of human artwork and that of nature is refined in this piece and lures the viewer into the expressiveness of each unique barb. Here, as with all the sculptures in *The Untangling*, shadows cast by thorns join other materials as formal elements. Like poetic rhyme, the shadows provide tonal repetitions of principal forms. Taking the visual signs all together, we are drawn into both the art and nature of danger, where we pause to interpret a bold expression of precarity and survival.

The Hope Line II is a fifteen-foot, cascading strand of gold-painted thorns, suspended from high in the gallery. Its fall evokes liquidity, and yet, one feels how strongly the spikey materials assert their rigid form in diverse directions. It is remarkable how clearly this symbol echoes the collective experience of hope we felt in 2020: a slender but glowing presence in the room: fragile, risky, and resolute.

The precarity of the point and the meanings of the jagged line remain present in White’s treatment of sculptural volume. This exhibition contains the fifth of the artist’s American flags built from honey locust thorns. These largescale flags — this one, seven by thirteen feet — provide a voluminous third dimension to the flat shape of a banner. They are deep visual tangles, offering room for us to look *into* the political symbol that we are so often asked to look *at*. On the floor under the bottom edge of White’s *Flag V*, 2021, lie fragments of red and white stripes, suggesting that a delicate and dangerous body has broken under its own weight.

The space she builds from formal meditation on the thorn has evolved into a motif that White places in a range of contexts. Recontextualizing the thorn sculpture's form, she can shift her work conceptually from the human rapport with ecology, to the fragility of cultural images, or to the emotional content of social and political structures.

The Untangling displays two series of two-dimensional works on paper and matboard. These dark images are less associative with nature and culture, but continue to explore the mood of our times. Seven *Tone Poems*, each 22 1/2 x 12 inches, in ink and acrylic on paper, occupy a wall of the exhibition with black and grey hues whose density calls for silence. In each poem, the artist remembers the form of her largescale, white-painted thorn sculpture called *Rift* (2018), which now hangs in a private home. The *Tone Poems* each represent *Rift* as an ephemeral presence within vast darkness. Emotionally, they offer a quiet opening and vitality within the dark realities of the year 2020. With matt black acrylic and Sumi ink, White created a ground she calls a "velvet silence," a protected space within darkness. She scored it with sandpaper and burning tools to suggest the deep, dynamic complexity of *Rift*.

With the small-scale studies of her *Tone Poems*, White prepared to paint the larger works on matboard that comprise *The Fugue Suite*. In these fugues, however, *Rift's* white lines are more raw and less protected by their black ground than in the *Tone Poems*. The fugues express exposure to danger, and even pain. Throughout the *The Fugue Suite*, oil paint and other media, combined with ongoing experiments in scoring, appear in quick, crisscrossed gestures. White's sculptural motif takes on more personal expressivity in this new, painterly territory. While the fugues reiterate the airy space of *Rift*, they also describe the angst the artist felt around her as a chaotic public environment imposed itself on individual life.

The Untangling, like the year in which it was made, takes us from moments of solitary meditation to a grappling with collective shock. The exhibition carries the viewer through Susan White's formal journey as a sculptor, from point to line to volume, and then beyond sculpture, to mark making. Throughout, she seems to bring with her an intelligence she learned from the honey locust's dangerous, strong, and delicate thorn. White carries this natural form through a range of artistic media, and wherever she takes it, it offers her a quiet way of building.