



## The Curators

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Place: Pomona College Museum of Art

Date: Saturday, March 14, 2009

Exhibition: Suddenly: Where We Live Now

Artwork: The Dog & His Tail

Artist: Storm Tharp

"The Curators" viewed the exhibition *Suddenly: Where We Live Now*, currently on display at the Pomona College Museum of Art through April 12, 2009. The piece we chose to discuss, describe and analyze is titled *The Dog & Its Tail* and was created by Storm Tharp in 2008. The medium he used is ink and gouache on stretched paper. It consists of 14 separate panels that vary in size, all set up together to form one large composition that is approximately 6 feet in height and 20 feet in width.

Tharp expresses so much emotion, so much drama, and so much pain with his wordplay and his choice of colors. As simple as this work might seem to some viewers, much detail was involved. Each panel is made of rag paper stretched over a frame, similar to a stretched canvas. Every panel is completely painted in black, except for the sides, which show the paint drips and expose the white stretched paper underneath. It appears that the artist let the paint run down the sides while the paintings were laid down flat. There is a variation in the black hue because the artist used layers of other colors underneath it. Some have cool undertones in the green family and others have warm ones. We can see some of the colors used under the black, such as the reds, because they also dripped down.

Every panel has one or more words neatly painted in the center, all of them in capital letters. The words are not opaque like the black background. They appear to have been painted with a thin layer of translucent white, making the text look purplish. The panels have been set up for display in three rows. The first row consists of five rectangular panels. The words painted on them are "REFINEMENT," "CORRUPTION," "BUSINESSMEN,CLOWNS," "ACTORS&PROSTITUTES" and "WHOSWHO." The second row contains four panels with the following phrases: "SHIT HITS," "WHORINGTOGETHER THISHORROSROOM," "BUZZARDS SPEAKING" and "TURNTOCAMERA ATWISTEDFACE." The third row has a total of five panels containing "THEENCHANTEDHUNTERS THEHUNTEDENCHANTERS," "DEEPLY DEAD," "DOUBLE SUICIDE," "MIRRORS WINDOWS" and "SIREN SOUND."

The rows vary in size. The top row is the shortest and the middle row is the tallest. Each row consists of every piece measuring the same height. However, the canvases are not necessarily the same width, depending upon the length of the words or phrases they display.

The sheer size of this work is daunting. To see it in its entirety one must stand at least fifteen feet away from it. This viewpoint transforms the piece into something entirely different. The work appears to be staring down at the viewer, perhaps even “looking down upon” the viewer. The words “WHORINGTOGETHER THISHORRORSROOM” are the brightest purple of the group. This phrase lashes out at the viewer no matter where one stands in the room. Other phrases, such as “SIREN SOUND,” almost disappear as one travels to the left side of the room. The General mood of the work is dark, but also simple. If one can read English, one can derive some sort of message, meaning or opinion from viewing it.

According to curator Stephanie Snyder, “*The Dog & His Tail* is a picture book of magical thinking. Tharp has assembled eccentric word plays, gamey assertions, and literary allusions into a billboard-sized tabloid enigmatically reporting stories of sex, enchantment, celebrity, and shame--the unconscious symbolic space of the *where we live now*.”

Since the artist gives the viewer single words and glimpses of phrases, he leaves us with a limited amount of information with which to work. This is similar to what today’s billboards and other media do with products, events, celebrities and other public figures. Tharp gives us, the signifiers, words we all understand and can identify. However he uses specific words, putting them into controlled phrases that are harder to identify as one single image.

The work appears to tell a story of corruption and deception. Life isn’t always what it seems and it is not always perfect. Through words, the artist invites us to open our eyes to see the way life really is. Words are used every day to communicate a multitude of things like thoughts, opinions and feelings. In

the composition, words and phrases are strategically placed from left to right. There seems to be a purpose and reason for grouping the phrases together by their symbolic nature. From left to right each line tells a different story and leaves the viewer with a different feeling.

Semiotics, as an approach to art, is all about the sign, not only the letters and words, but the meaning behind them. Containing about forty words total, this piece is dark in color and feeling. The words emphasize this darkness even more as they expose the underbelly of the world. One question the viewer might ask is, "Do we tend to miss the alarm sounding to let us know danger is near?" Is this why Tharp put the words "SIREN SOUND" in very dark purple at the bottom right hand corner? Is this why these words seem to disappear when we start to move away from them? Very plausible indeed! "WHORINGTOGETHER THISHORRORSROOM" is a brighter purple than most of the other pieces and appears to be on the largest canvas. This sticks out because sex is a very open, mainstream occurrence today. Promiscuity is on the rise and Sexually Transmitted Diseases are a horror to society. There are many questions the viewer faces. To some degree, have we lost our self respect and dignity as a culture? How does this speak to people who rape or sexually abuse others? Why does sex sell?" While viewing this piece, one of the museum patrons was overheard saying to his companion, "Actors and prostitutes, those are the two oldest professions in the world!" Is that why they were put on the same canvas? Could Tharp be attacking the entertainment industry by using certain words like "CORRUPTION," "BUSINESSMEN,CLOWNS" and "ACTORS&PROSTITUTES?"

The size of the work, and the terms that are in it seem to peer down at us, almost frowning upon our secrets with its dreary colors. The frame that says "MIRRORS WINDOWS" is also bold. When we watch Cinema, another form of art, it can be seen as both mirror and window because it shows us ourselves. It also lets us travel to other times and places and to see life through someone else's eyes.

Some of Tharp's words are grim and scary. For example, "DOUBLE SUICIDE" was the first canvas to catch the attention of one of "The Curators," inspiring these questions. How wrong was that? Or is it wrong at all? Is Tharp merely expressing his feelings and emotions? Is he doing something that's different and radical? Does he want to catch more than just the eye of the spectator?

What does *The Dog & His Tail* signify? Perhaps most of us can't relate to all of these words in a personal way, yet we need to be aware that these things exist *where we live now*. In that respect, Tharp calls us out of our complacency. If it is a window for the viewer to look through, perhaps Tharp is asking us to clean the glass and to take care of what we see. Another option is for us to simply watch what is going on outside. Tharp reminds us that it isn't pretty outside. Today's culture is not disturbed by the crude or the shocking. Sex sells more than anything else and we are reminded of this on a daily basis, whether or not we want to be! Currently, much of Corporate America has also been exposed for the harm it has inflicted.

Is *The Dog & His Tail* a fitting title? There is no reference to dog or tail on this composition. The dog is known as man's best friend. Have we befriended these ideas and concepts that Tharp throws at us? One way a dog communicates is through his tail. We can tell how a dog is feeling by observing what he does with his tail. Can we recognize what our own tail is doing when we are confronted with these words? Is "tail" a play on words? Does Tharp really mean "tale," for the stories he's inviting us to read into these words? None-the-less, in many ways the baggage we carry is attached to us. Much like a tail, we may not even notice it's there. Perhaps others do! Our tail can get us into trouble from time to time. We can try to outmaneuver it. But if we turn around, it might be staring back at us in the face, wagging jollily from side to side! It's up to us to decide if we are going to chase it!

**Didactic:** Snyder, Stephanie. [Suddenly: Where We Live Now](#) Pomona College Museum of Art. Claremont. January 24 - April 12, 2009.