

Phyllis Thelen

Coming Full Circle





Shinto, 2001
ceramic, bamboo, paper,
beads, raffia
11" x 5" x 6"

Phyllis Thelen: Coming Full Circle

January 10–February 27, 2020

Receptions: January 10 and February 14, 2020

Exhibition Curated by:
Carol Durham, Mary Edwards, and Max Thelen

Phyllis! video by Harris Cohen

The Voice of Mother Earth, audio by Natalie Mendes and Max Rehkopf

Installation by Chris West

Photo Credits:
Alive Again, *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Deep Sea Monster*, and *Shinto*
taken by Photo © Cindy A. Pavlinac

All other photos taken by Max Thelen

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Front Cover: *Cocoon* (detail), 2016, eucalyptus bark, twig ball, paper, nest glass egg, 14" x 35" x 14".
Back Cover: *Shore Upon Shore* (detail), 1975, serigraph, 32" x 39".



Phyllis Thelen: Coming Full Circle

Art Works Downtown is pleased to honor Phyllis Thelen, Founder of AWD, with a retrospective of her work. Now 93, Thelen has been making and exhibiting her art for the past 70 years.

The exhibition fills four galleries at AWD, and includes her painting, sculpture, printmaking, and scrolls. An entire gallery features her political and environmental art, including the series *Planet Earth Screwed* and *Take Shelter from the News*.

The mission of Art Works Downtown is to provide an environment where visual arts thrive for the well-being of our community. We are proud to have been named the 2019 Downtown Business of the Year by the San Rafael Chamber of Commerce, and our gallery was awarded "Best of Marin" by both the *Pacific Sun* and the *Marin Independent Journal*.

As 2020 begins, we are delighted to honor the artist who started it all.

Elisabeth Setten, Executive Director

WELCOME!

The exhibition begins in the **1337 Gallery**, where we are given an overview of Thelen's art. She has experimented with a variety of media, materials, and techniques throughout her long career. Here the viewer will see her fiber sculptures, the monumental miniatures, plus works on paper and on canvas. The gallery shows relationships among works created many years apart and also reveals recurring themes.

The exhibition continues in two galleries on the lower level. The **Underground Gallery** is devoted to Thelen's political and ecological art: *Planet Earth Screwed* and *Take Shelter (from the News)*, a series of umbrellas covered with newspaper headlines.

Just around the corner the **Founders' Gallery** shows the remarkable range of Thelen's talent as a printmaker.

The **1325 Donors' Gallery**, located upstairs between the Marin Jewelers Guild and Framing Interiors, showcases Thelen's scrolls.



Alive Again, 2012
coconut tree branch and pod, seed pods, rock, beads
25" x 49" x 22"

INTRODUCTION

Phyllis Thelen's art encourages us to think differently about our relationship to nature. Inspired by the organic materials she finds in the forests and on the beach, her work has unfolded in many phases. She began as a painter and printmaker, and then began to create the fiber sculptures for which she is best known. While Thelen has continued to experiment with materials and forms, all of her work is unified by her passion for defending, protecting, and celebrating nature.

Thelen, now 93, has continued to make art throughout her life. The exhibition is titled *Coming Full Circle* because Thelen's work has developed in an organic way, not in a straight line but in circles that keep bringing her back to her beginnings. She explores themes of reinvention, transformation and sustainability by incorporating her older silkscreen and woodblock prints into new forms, including innovative scrolls and small vessels.



Blowin' in the Wind, 2014
bamboo shields, mulberry bark, stenciled paper
28" x 23" x 11"

STORY TELLING

Thelen had a successful career as a painter and printmaker when the tragic events of 9/11 inspired her to create new three-dimensional art. Her *Twin Towers*, made out of newspapers describing the tragic events, initiated a whole series of sculptures made out of organic materials. These works told stories of journeys to imaginary safe places, where the mind could find respite from the turmoil of the world.

Thelen used materials found in nature (barks, pods, plant stalks, banana leaves, bamboo sheaths and shells) to create vessels, creatures, and sanctuaries. These works are shaped by the stories they tell. The vessels, symbols of passage and transformation, suggest imaginary journeys of the spirit. Strange creatures appear as unusual beings encountered along the way. The little retreats, or sanctuaries, offer a symbolic place of safety and simplicity in turbulent times.



Deep Sea Monster, 2011
coconut shards, paper, beads, acrylic paint
8" x 26" x 6"



Rejuvenation, 2016
eucalyptus bark,
palm seed stems, acrylic paint
14" x 43" x 14"

NATURE AS THE ARTIST

In the next phase of her work Thelen's sculptures became more abstract. Instead of using the materials of nature to create realistic works of art, her purpose is to reveal nature's own artistry.

The seasons unfold in these works: spring flowering, summer growth, fall seeding, and winter dying. Nature's shapes, textures, and designs are presented, seemingly without intervention by the artist.

Always inspired by the materials she finds, Thelen now lets them speak for themselves, without undue manipulation.



Budding, 2017
coconut pod, artichoke
23" x 10" x 10"



#66, 2014
fish bone, shell, ivory disk,
wood mount
4" x 9" x 2.5"

MONUMENTAL MINIATURES

Thelen's *Monumental Miniatures* continue to explore nature's role as our first artist. These tiny sculptures, 3 to 6 inches high, are presented on pedestals, as though they were in a gallery.

By collecting tiny fragments and fossils on the beach and in the desert, and presenting them on pedestals, Thelen suggests that they are serious works of art. A crescent shape, an antique piece of driftwood, an ancient fossil become important as Thelen elevates nature's smallest art works. She takes the materials we barely see and turns them into art. By making the invisible visible, she helps us discover and celebrate nature's own designs.



#78, 2016
seed pod, coral
5" x 3.5" x 3.5"



#84, 2017
pod, wood
5" x 3.5" x 2"



#95, 2015
pod, jade, bamboo
9" x 3" x 1"



*Planet Earth Screwed:
Oceans Polluted*, 2016
plastic refuse, blue paper,
wood, screw
7" x 12" x 7"

POLITICAL AND ECOLOGICAL WORK *Underground Gallery*

These two bodies of recent work, *Planet Earth Screwed* and *Take Shelter (from the News)* continue Thelen's artistic response to political and ecological events and issues.

PLANET EARTH SCREWED

Planet Earth Screwed is a series of a dozen globes, where each globe defines a pressing issue that challenges our planet: pollution, overpopulation, political leadership and the many effects of climate change. When seen together they send a powerful message about our disregard for our most precious resources.

Several encaustic paintings accompany the globes. These works convey the strength of our emotions as we contemplate the state of the planet.



Top: *Planet Earth Screwed: Overheated*, 2016
paper, metal screw, 9" x 14" x 9"

Bottom: *Planet Earth Screwed: Overpopulated*, 2016
wood, metal screw, 9" x 14" x 9"





TAKE SHELTER (FROM THE NEWS)

Thelen has made a dozen umbrellas out of paper and bamboo. They are full size, waterproof, and open and close like normal umbrellas. Each one is covered with clippings from newspapers and magazines from recent years. The umbrellas recall Thelen's earlier sanctuaries or small retreats, which were also designed to protect us from turbulent events.

While umbrellas are normally intended to shelter us from nature's nurturing sun and rain, here they have a different purpose. These umbrellas are covered by the relentless storm of news that bombards us every day. They seem to offer only temporary shelter, as the storm continues.



Take Shelter (From the News)
2017
paper and bamboo umbrellas
with newsprint
30" x 22" x 30"



Paper Quilt, 2017
plated paper, encaustic
34" x 27"

PRINTMAKING

1337 Gallery and Founders' Gallery

Thelen has been experimenting with printmaking since the late 1970s. She has created woodblock prints, collographs, serigraphs, plated and collaged serigraphs, and prints in the form of paper quilts. *Kauai*, made in 1980, has been given new form in *Paper Quilt*, 2017.

While Thelen experiments with a wide variety of materials and techniques in her prints, many of her titles suggest an ongoing interest in celebrating nature's bounty. *Sea Cradle*, *Moon Mirror*, *Dark Seashore*, *Sunlight*, and *About Water* were made between 1978 and 2018, but they all seem contemporary.



Kauai, 1980
woodblock print
15" x 12"



Relentless Waves, 1983
etching, mixed black bamboo
34" x 17"

SCROLLS

1325 Donors' Gallery

This gallery features a collection of Thelen's scrolls, where she continues the theme of reinvention and transformation. She incorporates older silkscreen and woodblock prints to create innovative contemporary scrolls.

The theme of celebrating nature continues in these works, such as *Relentless Waves*. *Fall* incorporates organic materials from nature (paper, bark, and leaves.) Other scrolls are made out of antique paper, bamboo, shells, and even dryer lint.



Fall, 2015
paper, bark, leaves
75" x 24"



Oars Up, 2019
plaited serigraph sculpture,
encaustic, joss paper
7" x 12" x 6"

THELEN IN 2020

When Thelen looks back at her many years as an artist, she notes that her work took different paths, as the world changed and she grew as an artist. Her art did not develop in a linear way, but in a series of circles where she returned to earlier themes with new intentions.

Often she thought that a new technique was driving her off course, yet the work somehow remained coherent. This realization inspires her to remind other artists to trust themselves as they grow and change.

"You have to keep doing, and the next stage will emerge. Your work will grow and develop, but you don't start all over each time. You will not lose your signature—it is YOU. Sometimes I take things out of the wastebasket—and find a link to my next idea."

Oars Up, made in 2019, evokes Thelen's childhood days in Colton, California. She loved to float tiny boats along the flume, a narrow ravine full of water. The artist's imagination has now come full circle.



BIOGRAPHY

Phyllis Thelen is an experimental artist who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She received a BFA from Stephens College, a BA in Art from Connecticut College, and continued her education at the San Francisco Art Institute, Dominican University, and the Miasa Bunko Center in Japan. She received an honorary Ph.D. from Dominican University in 2002.

Thelen's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at galleries and museums. These include two solo museum exhibitions: ***Spirit Vessels*** at the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art and ***Journeys of the Imagination*** at the Morris Graves Museum of Art.

Additional exhibitions include the Pence Gallery, Richmond Art Center, the Museum of Northern California, Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, San Jose Quilt and Textile Museum, Napa Valley Museum, the Gallery Strasse in Japan, Studio Gallery in San Francisco, Gallery 64 in San Rafael, the Presidio of San Francisco, Dominican University, Santa Cruz Art League, Falkirk Cultural Center, and Art Works Downtown. ***Planet Earth Screwed*** was featured at the KQED Climate Change Summit in 2018. For more information, visit www.thelenart.com.

Phyllis Thelen: Coming Full Circle is the first retrospective of her work.

Self Portrait, 1948
oil on canvas
25" x 25"

