

# Torey Thornton: Sir Veil

February 27–May 29, 2016



Albright-Knox

**Torey Thornton:**  
**Primed for**  
**Experimentation**

Upon walking into Torey Thornton's Brooklyn studio on a crisp mid-November day, I was instantly struck by his resourceful ingenuity. "I am thinking about making a sculpture with these," Thornton said as he picked up a long-necked gourd from an overflowing box on the floor. Drawings were strewn around the space. Wood panels and paintings, some more resolved than others, leaned against the walls. Thornton gestured toward a large-scale work on our left. "I am almost finished with this one," he said. It is a buttery, pulsating yellow whose image immediately calls to my mind a pared-down graphic of the inner chambers of the heart. It is strange and menacing, yet curiously upbeat. Across the room, he motioned to another painting—one whose color palette is even more surprising. "I like how the stripe on the right in this one reads differently from afar. I love playing with color in unexpected ways." I inched closer. What I thought was a carbon black turned into a deep, earthy eggplant pigment. The image hit all the right notes: quirky, roguish, a mix of geometric and organic forms, painterly yet flat, both abstract and figurative. Thornton was breaking all the rules, and it was working.



*There's Solid Militia Fashion, but Come On, Domestic Like Focus Always, 2015*



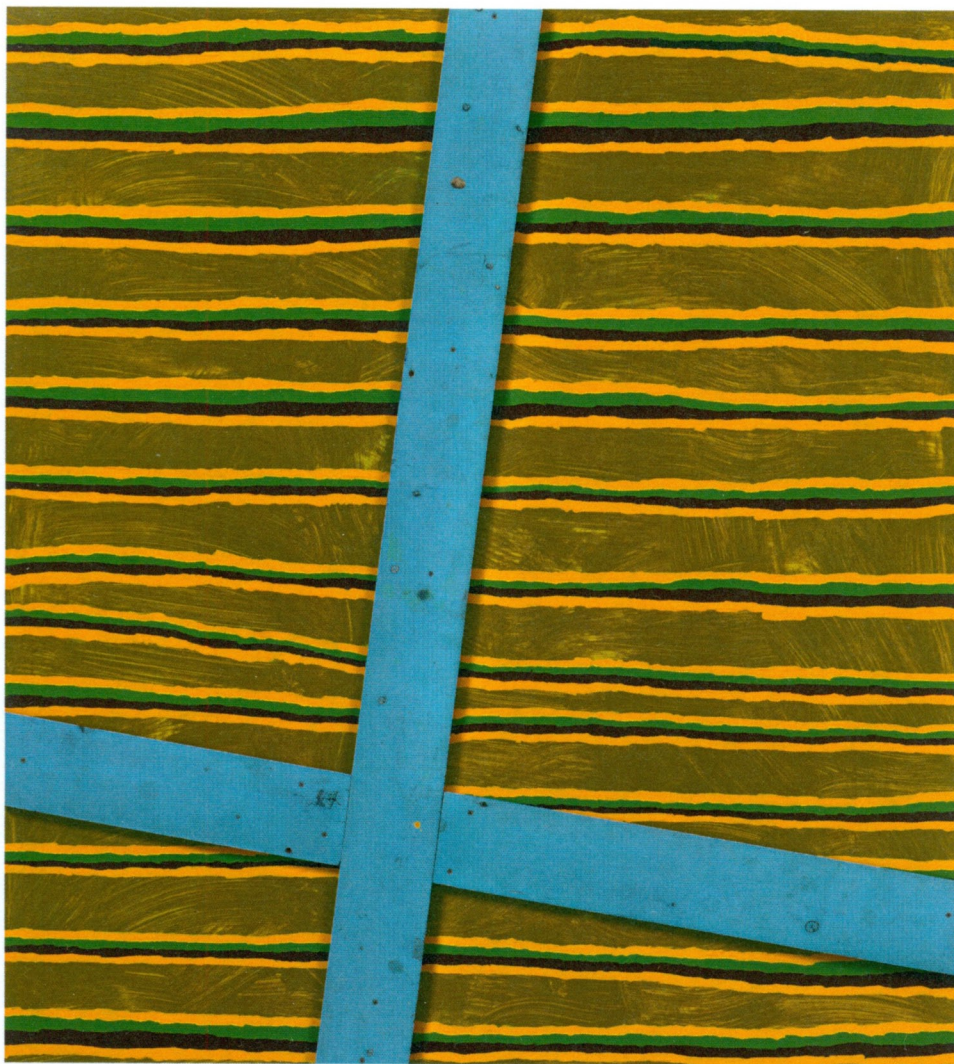


*Breaking Some Rules For Momma (Theresa), 2014*

*Breaking Some Rules for Momma (Theresa)*, 2014, is a work Thornton painted for his mother. A verdant, shadowy creature evocative of prehistoric fertility figures is seemingly strapped to a regal golden ground by colorful wooden planks. A stoic face emerges, suggesting forbearance. Thornton's current body of work emerges from this image, which is driven by his underlying yet thwarted devotion to expressionistic form. About this he says, "I wanted to reclaim gold and shed some of its tacky connotations while still speaking toward royalty. [I knew] that it should hold a lot of feelings or mannerisms that I saw in my mom in certain ways while still being an abstract painting. . . . I owe so much to my mom, Theresa; if it wasn't for her I would have nothing."<sup>1</sup> The emotions, energy, and ideas that went into creating *Breaking Some Rules for Momma (Theresa)* helped Thornton realize his current practice. This painting hails from an intimate place and is exemplary of his desire to merge the experience of living life with that of being an artist.

For the past year, Thornton has been creating paintings that challenge the limits of perception by employing imagery that is purposefully ambiguous. Unexpected combinations of shapes and colors, scale and perspective, will often suggest recognizable motifs—such as a tomato, a hard-boiled egg, or yellow lines on black asphalt—while others are more abstruse. Amid morphing imaginings and chromatic anomalies, familiar content becomes less clear. About the reading of his images, Thornton has said, "I'm always playing with what the perception of things in the work are, and attempting to build imagery or objects that go in and out of focus. . . . What appears to be a rotten





*Crop In Plain View*, 2015–16

lemon to one person could be a deflated burnt basketball to someone else. Both these readings are just fine.”<sup>2</sup> His titles are equally paradoxical, often emanating from a personal reference. Yet, like his imagery, they are playfully dubious, collaged from life with the intent to conjure further narratives and an ulterior dialogue for the object.

Thornton’s manipulation of conventional approaches to building a painterly composition also extends to the surfaces on which he creates. He chooses to reject the formal limitations of the canvas, instead favoring the texture of paper and slatted wood panels. Wielding markers, metallic paint, nail polish, and spray paint as well as graphite, oil pastels, and acrylics, Thornton layers his materials, often collaging found elements to the image. In one of the most recent works in the exhibition, *Crop in Plain View*, 2015–16, Thornton reconciles a composition that is categorically graphic in nature, yet retains a painterly essence. Two converging baby-blue planks disrupt a series of irregular, parallel rows of alternating yellow, green, ochre, and black. Here, an organic foundation builds into something angular, yet amorphous. Is this an image of an inverted, slumping cross or a crossroads within a plowed landscape? For Thornton, an unpainted surface is ripe with opportunities for experimentation; sometimes it is the most restrained configurations that can prompt a personal narrative within the viewer.

Thornton’s methodology is nourished by a rugged application of materials and his desire to push the conceptual boundaries of painting. The refinement comes into view in his mercurial application of a variety of mediums, which allows predominant shapes and colors to pop. This merging of kitsch and



fine art is evocative of Robert Rauschenberg's (American, 1925–2008) "combine" paintings, which were of early interest for Thornton. But his work also recalls the elegantly biomorphic forms of Jean Arp (French, born Germany, 1886–1966) and the raw fusion of text and image, abstraction and figuration, in the Neo-Expressionist compositions of Jean-Michel Basquiat (American, 1960–1988). Although keenly aware of the trajectory of abstraction and the paths these artists have carved, Thornton is most absorbed in executing imagery that has yet to be painted. He says, "Material exploration, pushing my knowledge of color, breaking down stereotypes and generalizations, taking back things for myself and recontextualizing them, producing new vocabulary and searching for new ways to paint and apply materials to a surface, these are all the fuel, the excitement . . . ."<sup>3</sup>

The paintings in this exhibition are stepping in and out of conversation with one another and the viewer. Owing to his practice, Thornton fights complacency, stating, "I'm not solely interested in making attractive images but in making complicated ones and asking deeper questions each time I decide to make a mark or shape; 'why' is one of the most important questions of all."<sup>4</sup> The myriad images we digest daily, whether from life or the media, have a profound effect on our feelings and our behavior. Thornton calls into question the processing of visual information in a culture pacified by that which is seen, rather than perceived.

Holly E. Hughes  
Godin-Spaulling Curator  
& Curator for the Collection



*First Cynthia*, 2014

1. Torey Thornton, e-mail message to author, February 2016.
2. Claire Marie Healy, "Looking Twice with Torey Thornton," *Dazed*, July 11, 2014, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/20812/1/looking-twice-with-torey-thornton>.
3. Torey Thornton, e-mail message to author, February 2016.
4. *Ibid.*

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This exhibition is organized by Godin-Spaulding Curator  
& Curator for the Collection Holly E. Hughes.

## About the Artist

Torey Thornton was born in Macon, Georgia, in 1990. He received his BFA from The Cooper Union in 2012. His work has been shown both nationally and abroad, including solo exhibitions at Moran Bondaroff in Los Angeles, California, and at Stuart Shave/Modern Art in London, United Kingdom. Recent group exhibitions include *A Constellation* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; *Love for Three Oranges* at Gladstone Gallery in Brussels, Belgium; and *Call and Response* at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York, New York. He is currently represented in the collections of the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, California; the Dallas Museum of Art, Texas; the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, Illinois; the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina; and the Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama.



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## Museum Hours

Tuesday–Sunday, 10 am–5 pm  
M&T FIRST FRIDAYS, 10 am–10 pm  
Closed Mondays and Independence,  
Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Days.

Edited by Emily Mangione, Editorial Assistant  
Designed by Ann Casady

## Works in the Exhibition

*Breaking Some Rules For Momma (Theresa)*, 2014  
Acrylic, metallic paint, wood, and collage on slatted wood panel  
Collection of Theresa Thornton

*First Cynthia*, 2014  
Acrylic, spray paint, oil pastel, and charcoal on wood panel  
Collection of the artist

*Ak47, Pie, Tilted Shade And Lung*, 2015  
Acrylic paint, spray paint, and galvanized steel on wood panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles

*There's Solid Militia Fashion, but Come On, Domestic Like Focus Always*, 2015  
Acrylic paint, oil pastel, sharpie, graphite, nail polish, and marker on paper  
Courtesy of CANADA, LLC

*Crop In Plain View*, 2015–16  
Acrylic paint and wood on wood panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles

*Can My Jewel Collection Cause Hearing Impediment And Lack Of Taste*, 2016  
Acrylic paint and plastic on wood panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles

*Dear Clifford Rocket, Don't You Want A Home*, 2016  
Acrylic paint and spray paint on wood panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles

*What Angel Do You Look Towards When You Are Damning Your Tears, Sweet Sis*, 2016  
Acrylic paint, corrugated plastic, collage, graphite, and nail polish on wood panel  
Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff, Los Angeles

## Photographic Credits

*First Cynthia*: Cooper Dodds Photography.  
*There's Solid Militia Fashion, but Come On, Domestic Like Focus Always*: Courtesy of the artist and Moran Bondaroff.

**Cover:** *Can My Jewel Collection Cause Hearing Impediment And Lack Of Taste*, 2016