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Thomas Woodruff

THE FOUR TEMPERAMENTS



This acrylic artist was inspired by an ancient theory to craft a series of mind-bending paintings.

by JOHN A. PARKS

Thomas Woodruff paints worlds drenched in phantasmagorical color, richly layered with glittering detail and possessed of their own eerie logic. Styling himself a “neo-fabulist,” he builds tableaux so loaded with invention, so ornamented with incident, and so outlandish in subject matter that they seem destined to collapse under the sheer weight of descriptive excess. Yet the pictures hang together, cannily organized around stable geometries as contained explosions of glorious invention. Their visual wealth entices the viewer into curiously vivid realms in which every element seems potent and meaningful, even while any direct sense of meaning remains tantalizingly elusive.



LEFT

Tiger Variation, Choleric

2010–2011, acrylic on heavy rag paper, 30 x 30.

All artwork this article courtesy PPOW Gallery, New York, New York.

ABOVE

Landscape Variation, Sanguinic

2010–2011, acrylic on linen, 66 x 90.



In his latest exhibition at PPOW Gallery, in New York City, Woodruff presented a large suite of paintings inspired by the ancient idea of the Four Temperaments. This is a theory of human psychology that dates back at least to the Greek physician Hippocrates (ca. 460–377 B.C.), who posited that human behaviors and feelings were caused by four fluids,

or *humors*, within the body. The theory took several forms over the years, and the Roman physician Galen (129–199 A.D.) propounded a theory of four temperaments named after the four humors: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic.

Woodruff's interest in the Four Temperaments is in keeping with his ongoing fascination

with what he calls "failed and forgotten scientific theory." With his fluency in pictorial strategies and a knowledge of art history that encompasses Symbolism, Surrealism, and Mannerism, the artist brings a highly original take on this subject matter. He happily combines the painterly command of a fine artist with contemporary populist subject matter

such as body art and science-fiction illustration.

For all its imaginative flights, Woodruff's new series of paintings is carefully and coherently organized into four discrete groups of works, each devoted to one of the four temperaments. The artist made a connection between four dominant colors and the four temperaments so that the sanguine is represented by red, the choleric by yellow, the melancholic by black, and the phlegmatic by white.

Woodruff says that he requires a certain "slipperiness" in his images, meaning that they are at once powerful and potent and at the same time possess an indeterminate and shifting sense of meaning. The paintings are organized into themes so that each temperament presents its

own version of several genres of painting: still life, animal, portrait, and landscape. For example, the choleric personality is by tradition ambitious and likes to lead, even to dominate. It is given to passion and strength. Woodruff's *Tiger Variation, Choleric* is an image that certainly seems charged with energy. It depicts a tiger with eyes closed, as though in pain or, perhaps, screaming. A garland of effulgent chrysanthemums hangs around the creature's neck. The river of melting wax descending from the lighted candles atop its hat suggests a romantic urge that is perhaps out of control.

In this image, as in all the paintings, Woodruff builds up his acrylic paint with considerable savvy. Even though the images are complex and well-rendered,

he manages to avoid overworking by applying the paint in swift, sure brushstrokes. The attentive viewer can find many pleasures in the active, lively condition of the paint layering. This direct, no-nonsense application is doubtless made possible by careful control of values on the palette and a good sense of when to leave well enough alone. Woodruff himself declines to discuss his technique. "I'd really prefer just to have the viewer see it as magic," he says.

The artist is more forthcoming about his creative process. "Once I've decided on the image in the sketch, the finished painting doesn't vary too much from it," he says. "It's probably due, in part, to my years working as an illustrator." Woodruff notes that he can't spend all of his time painting—as the chair of the illustration department

**Landscape
Variation,
Choleric**

2010–2011,
acrylic on linen,
66 x 90.





at the School of Visual Arts, he has to organize his time in the studio efficiently. "However, in scaling up an image, there are inevitably some adjustments that have to be made," he says. "Once I'm working, I have no set plan as to how things will progress. Sometimes, like most painters, I get moments of recognition when I realize, That's what it's about! and make the appropriate changes."

Each of Woodruff's sets of four temperaments builds to an

**Landscape
Variation,
Melancholic**

2010-2011,
acrylic on linen,
66 x 90.

enormous "Landscape Variation." Together, the four landscapes form a remarkably ambitious group of compositions in which the artist succeeds in scaling up his densely packed world to an extraordinary size. "The initial inspiration came from Henri Rousseau's *The Sleeping Gypsy*," says the artist. "The paintings are the same size as the Rousseau—in fact I went to the museum and paced it out." Again the imagery contrives to be on-theme yet

ultimately elusive in meaning. As in *The Sleeping Gypsy*, each canvas shows a dramatic situation involving a human and an animal. In this case, each canvas also represents a woman at a different stage of life, and Woodruff is obviously drawing a comparison between the four temperaments and the four ages of man.

In the sanguinic landscape, a young woman faces a creature that is half-goat, half-unicorn—a "quadacorn," according to Woodruff. The woman puts the



animal's long horn in her mouth as if it were a musical horn to be played. The landscape throbs and sways in a mass of ripe melons, pink ribbons, peonies, and candy-striped poles. The air is thick with sweetness. Is this a lover's tryst or a wedding of some sort? Certainly sex and fecundity seem to be in the air. Woodruff himself admits that the painting concerns "the loss of innocence."

A more violent scene presents itself in *Landscape Variation, Choleric*. Here a somewhat older woman seems to be locked in a battle with a blind tiger who appears to be chewing off one of her legs. The young woman thrusts a sword into the side of the animal, but this is clearly useless, as a dozen or so swords have already been sunk into its body with no effect. The two suns in the sky pay tribute to

the art of science fantasy, as does the marriage of modern plastic goggles with some sort of ancient costume that the girl wears. Are we being reminded of the ambitious, all-devouring power of the choleric personality, a temperament that might prefer to choose domination over sexual equilibrium? Does the somewhat cartoonlike drawing of the girl suggest that we should not really take the image too seriously?



"It's important to remember that a painting has the power to stop time," says Woodruff. "There will never be any more blood spilt in this image than there already is. The blind tiger will never get to chew the leg of the girl, and the girl will never get to kill the tiger. I am both of these characters—the crazed, blind tiger creating damage, and the anime-inspired girl in the armor." The artist suggests that the characters represent polarities within the choleric personality, opposing forces forever at play.

"The melancholic personality is one that thinks too much, that dwells too long on ideas," says Woodruff. In *Landscape Variation, Melancholic* a middle-age woman is walking through a moonlit landscape quietly reading with the aid of a lightbulb carried on the back of a turtle. Electricity is supplied by a generator powered by two mice running in a treadmill. The woman's dress trails away into the night releasing a host of "butterflies," perhaps embodiments of the melancholy thoughts that obsess the young woman. In their flight these creatures form a large circle in the center of the painting, a shape that provides a geometric framework for the piece and a focus for a large spider's web silhouetted against the dark. "It's important to me that the paintings also have an abstract construction," says Woodruff, "a structure that underlies and underpins all the imagery."

As for the symbolic clues within this painting, the viewer is offered a vast array of interpretations. Is the tortoise a symbol of the strength and solidity obtained by withdrawal into one's shell? Perhaps the girl's shoes are growing roots because this kind of

Landscape Variation, Phlegmatic

2010-2011,
acrylic on
linen, 66 x 90.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Thomas Woodruff

studied at The Cooper Union, in New York City, and worked as an illustrator, producing work for publications and book jackets. As a fine artist, Woodruff has staged more than 20 solo exhibitions, and his work is held in many public and private collections. His book, *Thomas Woodruff's Freak Parade* (Hardy Marks Publications, 2007), won an AIGA award for best design. The artist is the chair of the illustration department of the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and his paintings are represented by PPOW Gallery, also in New York. For more information, visit www.thomaswoodruff.com.

personality will tend to settle down and stay out of the limelight. All these images seem to be leading in the same direction, even when they do it according to their own implausible logic.

Landscape Variation, Phlegmatic takes place beneath the ocean, where an older woman in a long pale dress descends to meet a dolphin. He is joined with a throng of jellyfish whose transparent bodies encase a variety of flowers. Phlegmatics are supposedly somewhat passive personalities who tend to prefer stability to change. Is that why she has sunk to the ocean floor? And what possible transaction can be taking place between these creatures? The woman's dress suggests a marriage, and the dolphin is assuredly male, but the gloom of the atmosphere does not bode well for the union. "Actually I was thinking about the Sistine Chapel when I composed this painting," says Woodruff. "I had just seen it for the first time, and the way that the girl's foot is about to touch the dolphin's tail is inspired by *The Creation of Adam*. Only in this case, we are not sure who is creating who."

Woodruff's intensely atmospheric, disorienting, magical, and fascinating realm utterly seduces but nonetheless rewards us with some profound insights into ourselves and the very real world we inhabit. The artist returns us from his dream stimulated, challenged, energized, and thoroughly pleased—no small accomplishment. **A**

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by 532 Gallery Thomas Jaeckel in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, and Watercolor magazines.