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At the Bundy Modern, Shelley Reed and Randal Thurston Explore History and Memory in Black and White

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From left: "Fruit" and "Fish" by Shelley Reed, cut-paper installation by Randal Thurston

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The phrase "black and white" is laden with meanings: Putting something down in black and white — that is, in writing — makes it more of a guarantee than a handshake deal. People who think in black and white are not very good at navigating the steps between polar opposites. Which brings us to the simplistic terms in which we characterize race: "Black," "white," and the more inclusive but squishier "people of color."

A current exhibition at the **Bundy Modern** in Waitsfield features two Boston-area artists who work solely in black and white; neither engages any of these tropes. Rather, their creations find vigor in aesthetic excellence and subtle metaphor.

In **Randal Thurston's** cutouts and **Shelley Reed's** paintings, a viewer can appreciate both striking beauty and something much deeper. Thurston creates "imagery associated with the idea of mortality as a way of exploring what it means to be alive," according to his artist statement. Reed writes that she is addressing "how our animal natures have or haven't changed, and what that signifies for our collective future."

Phone conversations with the artists last week made clear what they have in common besides an attraction to the optical binary of black and white.

Actually, Thurston works only in black: silhouettes of flora and fauna, meticulously cut with an X-Acto knife from dense, matte-black printmaking paper. In the Bundy, his cutouts shimmy up the walls like vines drunk on summer.

A piece in the entry and another in the main gallery space pop against white-painted brick. The latter is a matrix of knobby branches spreading across one entire side of the room. Silhouetted birds perch upon it here and there, each representing a species native to Vermont, Thurston said.

Last December, while visiting the Bundy, he took a walk in the nearby woods with gallery owners Wendell and June Anderson. The shapes Thurston subsequently cut for his installation are based on memories of that walk, he explained, but also on his memories from childhood, living next to a dense wood. Memories have a way of evolving and conflating, Thurston suggested. He believes the silhouette is "a shape that someone would fill in with their own experience."

As for the birds and the flora — neither present in December — they are specific and imaginary, respectively, Thurston said. "I like to research an area so the work is responsive to a place," he said. "I was interested in creating the craggy density in the woods, but also I looked at Audubon to learn more about what flora and birds might be there.

"It's worth addressing that I'm into specific birds, but the flora is collage-based," Thurston added. "On-site, I embrace serendipity."



Untitled cut-paper installation by
Thurston on entry wall - COURTESY

Untitled cut-paper installation by Randal Thurston on entry wall

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When he returned to the Bundy to install his work this summer, Thurston brought a thousand pieces of precut silhouettes — of branches, birds, flowers — and a roll of black paper in case he needed to make more. He did. "I always think it will be 80 percent planning and 20 percent serendipity," he said, "but it's almost always the opposite."

Because the Bundy's walls are brick, Thurston couldn't tack on the paper as he would with sheetrock. Instead, he said, his wife came up with the idea to adhere corks to the wall and tack into them at junctures where one silhouette connects with another. The installation's small remove from the wall adds dimensionality and the variability of shadows.

Thurston has a background in printmaking and drawing. But 30 years ago, he said, "I came across a catalog of colonial silhouettes and was really drawn to it. It started me thinking that working in silhouette would allow me to manipulate them."

While the art form was originally flat and static, "now silhouette is part of the palette of contemporary art," Thurston noted. Perhaps most prominently, **Kara Walker** has explored topics of race and gender using silhouetted images of the antebellum South.

Thurston has found limitless inspiration in the natural world; over three decades, he's cut upwards of 60,000 pieces, he said. For the Bundy installation, he writes in his statement, "I found myself thinking about how landscape changes over time and how memory often alters and transforms our experience. While the installations I've created do not depict a specific place, I've come to think of them as love letters to Vermont."

Reed works exclusively with two oil paints — ivory black and titanium zinc white — and mixes a range of grays for each canvas, as well. With this minimal palette, she invents lavish tableaux. Or perhaps we should say "reinvents," as her paintings are mashups of elements in paintings from centuries past.

Like Thurston, Reed has a background in drawing; she suggested that was a bridge to painting in black and white. Specifically, she recalled, during a period living in London and "going to fabulous art museums," she came upon a George Stubbs (1724-1806) painting and decided to reproduce "a tiny detail of it but blow it up to six feet." She was looking at an old art book, and the image was in black and white. "And that did it for me," Reed said.

Uninterested in "delving into my own stuff," Reed decided she wanted to paint about the human condition. "Artists 300 or 400 years ago were painting about their own issues. I wanted to look at that and, rather than repeat the painting, create a new narrative," she said. "It feels potent and relevant not just to our political condition but our social evolution."

Reed prefers to do this at a scale she called "operatic."



Detail of "Meat (after Snyder, Beuckelaer, Aertsen, van Schooten, Desportes, Claesz, van Aelst, de Heem, Melendez, F. van Dyck, Empoli and Peeters)" by Shelley Reed

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At the Bundy, three of her enormous still lifes cover two walls of the main gallery. (The fourth wall is floor-to-ceiling windows.) Her monosyllabic titles — "Meat," "Fish," "Fruit" — are followed by parenthetical nods to the painters whose works she appropriated. The shortest example is "Fish (after Snyder and de Vos)."

Credit goes to 12 artists in "Meat," which is six feet, three inches high and 14 feet, eight inches wide. This painting is a vegetarian's nightmare: a long table strewn with animal parts, including a cow's head, legs of this and that, a hefty ham, and intestinal bits draped from an overhead beam. As Reed pointed out, "If they were in color, there would be blood dripping off the table." She believes that rendering her scene in black and white "cools it down" and invites viewers to take a closer look.

Though visceral, the still life "Meat" does, in fact, appear still. In "Fish" (seven feet high and 14 feet, three inches wide), the lack of color does not preclude a sense of movement. All sorts of marine creatures seem to flop about on a table and in adjacent baskets, though the fish at the bottom of the heap have clearly taken their last gasp. Some of the animals are recognizable; others, not so much. But many of them were brand-new to human eyes several centuries ago, Reed pointed out.

"They were exploring, discovering, pulling things out of the ocean they'd never seen before," she said. "I thought, *What does this mean for us today?* Unfortunately, it's about our unending appetite for not just discovery but for use."

The message in Reed's paintings, she said, is "the potential we have to misuse, to charge on unthinkingly."

"Fruit" is six and a half feet high and nearly 11 feet long; nine earlier artists are acknowledged. Compared to the paintings of formerly breathing creatures, this composition is pretty and nonconfrontational; it is perhaps the difference between being killed and being plucked that guides a viewer's responses. But if a stack of plump nectarines fails to intimidate, "Fruit" is no less sumptuous an offering.

These three large paintings are about abundance and appetite, germane to the exhibition title, "To Market." Whatever the content — in these or in smaller works elsewhere in the gallery — Reed's execution is breathtaking. So realistic are the renderings that some visitors to her website mistake the paintings for photographs, she said. But Reed is not interested in photorealism; she purposely includes "little glitches" in her works between borrowed elements or sections in a multipaneled painting. She said they represent "a switch in time."

A viewer could be forgiven for missing these subtle metaphysical clues, or even the paintings' contemporary implications, and just marveling at Reed's rich vocabulary of grays.

Thurston also contributed a handful of smaller, framed works to the exhibition: intricate, mandala-like cutouts with mesmerizing patterns. According to his website, these are part of a series called "Natural World" that is based on stained-glass windows he saw in Paris. They make one wish for a kaleidoscope sans color.

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