An interview with Thomas Woodruff

Painter Thomas Woodruff's powerful, lushly dark and decadent paintings are full of macabre wonders, strange allegories that weave the troubling effects our current culture inflicts upon us with a sense of fantastical majesty in an opulent swirl of visual alchemy. These intense and intricate narratives call to mind both the symbolic botanical grandiosities of 16th Century Dutch and Flemish painters, to 20th Century Fantastic Realism. His work is reined in from becoming too self important by the slightest touch of cartoon-ishness, with glimpses of modern life interjected within surrealistic narratives, such as tattoo and body modification imagery, or the use of contemporary couture/subculture costumery.

For example, "Choleric (Landscape variation)" has a waft of epic fantasy worthy of Frank Frazetta, with its be-goggled heroine in the grip of a supernatural tiger, but the sheer abundance and symbolism stops it just short of teetering into purely sci fi illustration. It's hard to absolutely pigeonhole Woodruff into any distinct style or movement, (although he refers to himself as a "neo-fabulist") which is a compliment to his well-acknowledged visual prowess as an image-make.

His latest series, "The Four Temperament Variations" is an exploration of the ancient notion that man was ruled by four humors (or fluids) within the body that should be identified and manipulated in order to achieve a sound mind and body. These humors were identified with different bodily fluids and each one had its distinct characteristics…the Melancholic (black bile), Sanguinic (blood), Phlegmatic (phlegm) and Choleric (yellow bile). Woodruff has created a series of paintings touching on each theme within the larger series, using a set of animals, plants, and narratives to explore each idea several times in order to create "structures of contemplation".

I hit up Thomas for a brief interview for Hi Fructose on the eve of his upcoming show at New York's PPOW Gallery, opening on January 5th. - Kirsten Anderson

Your work seems to deal with the "mundane" in a very mystical way. In fact, much of your work has a profoundly mystical air...what inspired you to take that route in your work-who were your inspirations? In this series, your emphasis is on the 4 "humors". What prompted you to explore that as a theme for this new series of works?

Images come to me and I draw them in notebooks and scraps of paper. I then let them simmer in my mind for months or years. If they still have a slippery resonance, I'll paint them. What I mean by that is that can't seem completely readable, the drama has to have both mystery and plausibility…and a sincere sense of humanity. The theme helps me to edit ideas. The four temperaments had always seemed like potent material for me, I first saw the Balanchine ballet on the subject when I was in college, and I've been interested in forgotten or failed scientific theory for a long time. They are an exploration of color

(red, yellow, black, and white), the elements (blood/air, fire, earth, water) and in my research they seemed to be associated with age (sanguinic/youth, choleric/adult, melancholic/middle age, and phlegmatic/old age) as well as the emotional traits they define. As I get older, I try to keep these emotions in better balance, and these paintings allowed me to examine my own temperament during their creation.

I love imagistic painting of all stripes, and use just about anything I come across that will work as inspiration. In this series, clearly the Symbolists are of interest, as well as medieval tapestries, Rubens, Pontormo, Delacroix, Rousseau, Blake, the Tonalists, the list goes on... I worked with Robert Wilson, the artist and theatre director, when I was in my twenties and his sense of the carefully orchestrated dream has always resonated with me, particularly with these pageant-like works.

I find it interesting that each theme (humor) has its own miniseries, from a smaller image that functions as a sort of "detail" (although a completely separate painting in its own right) up to the more epic, narrative painting. What was the thought behind this?

The first paintings I made were the still life (flower) variations. They are fairly large and complicated, and it took me about a year to finish them. I roughed out the large paintings and was a bit intimidated to complete them after they were begun. I started to do studies of the beasts, so I could get some paintings completed to build my confidence; this led to doing "butterfly" and "tiger" wildlife variations. I then set to work to complete the large landscape variations, then the male portraits, and the dolphin variation came last, in a burst-- all of the sea monsters in one canvas!

You have used the term "neo-fabulist" to describe yourself as an artist, and you clearly make new images that seem to have come from somewhere else, as if pulling previously unseen things down from the archetypal subconscious. Would you agree with that? Or are you consciously creating your own vocabulary of creatures and stories to create "fables" of contemporary issues?

I think the term "neo-fabulist" is hilarious yet apt, and a serious term for the way I approach painting. I am a relentless "cross-referencer", so I am fluent in the vocabularies of narrative picture making, but I also love formal structure. In this series, the still life, portrait and landscape variations gave me an architecture on which to build my characters and narratives. I researched other artists and their approach to the material, but I tried to come up with my own eccentric images to convey my relationship with the content, however, often strange things happen: after completing the landscape paintings, I found old engravings using very similar characters and compositions to mine, complete with owls in the melancholic, and turtles in the phlegmatic. The same thing has happened before, when working with alchemical imagery, and it freaks me out a little bit when I do tap into the image bank of our collected visual history. The process seems like a very natural, straightforward ride when it's happening, it's only when you attempt to describe later do things seem supernatural or mystical.

Your paintings always seem to have an abundance of ornamentation. I was curious about this depiction of such opulence- what inspires you to paint so lushly?

I make the paintings for me. I'm like a kid in the basement putting on the puppet show, and would

rather not invite my parents down. I love paintings that are complicated and ingenious in construction, filled with bravura flourishes, and then burn their crazy pictorial logic into the brain! I think modernism was puritanical in its withholding of pleasure, and has turned many people away from the joy of looking at art. I feel that the lack of ornament is like a lack of adjectives in literature, or a lack of seasoning in cooking…its rough going. But it must be done with balance, I am not afraid to use design and ornamentation if it will service the overall image. There is something magical in taking these very humble materials and being able to make them into shimmering tableaus, I've worked for many years to be capable of such excess and make it look easy. Hopefully, it's not overworked, the paintings in person are quite simply painted in blobs and dashes, and the brush does most of the work.

Your paintings are sometimes startling in that they often look done in an earlier era, but there will be an unexpected modern twist, such as body modification imagery, or a piece of fashion that seems out of another time. This sometimes lend a science fiction/fantasy component to the work, I was wondering what you thought about this mixing of "lowbrow" (i.e. pop culture/fantasy reference) and "highbrow" (i.e. masterfully painted symbolism)

I am a Chair at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and so I see what younger people are obsessed with: Fantasy images, Steam punk images, Animae/asian inspired images, and body modification all things in our current zeitgeist, and they are all things that have been of interest to me for many years (I was getting tattooed in the early 80's, and have used Victorian imagery even before that). My attraction to all of these things was the emotional potential in these overused, impotent images, and I am fascinated to see if there is power left in them.

This is why I like the term "neo-fabulist," as the highbrow/lowbrow distinctions are troubling to me. It almost seems that the "lowbrow" moniker gives certain artists an excuse to have their work be conceptually inane, and a lot of it is. I am far from being a lowbrow fellow; I pride myself on being culturally well educated, and can pull inspiration from whatever sources interest me at a given moment—be it grand opera or a watermelon sculpture. Great filmmakers, fashion designers, composers and writers can blend historical and popular cultural themes more freely in their work without being labeled. To me, these paintings could not me made at any other time than now. I could not have made them any earlier in my oeuvre, and to me they reflect our time. When I was creating these works, some studio visitors referred to a shared sensibility with Alexander McQueen, and in certain ways we have certain things in common: a love of color and shape, unexpected content, resuscitating fusty tropes, and a certain foolhardy fearlessness.

I'm pretty curious about the batterflies! How did they originate?

To tell you the truth, it was a pretty thrilling moment. In the melancholic image, I wanted to have a woman with a dress with a long train that turned into her dark thoughts that she must carry behind her—a pretty classic melancholic conceit. The original drawings were too Goya-esque, and looked too melodramatic with bats and owls…and it suddenly occurred to me to create the "batterfly", and it all made sense. They could be caring and protective, sinister yet comic, beautiful and horrible all at the

same time. The butterfly shape is so appealing while the bat is so scary…I was so happy I came up with the right solution to the problem, and I'm not sure where it came from!