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By Elizabeth Train



Texture and Depth

**A Colorado
native
encourages
viewers to look
beyond the
surface**

Right to left:
"I Had To Do...,"
oil on canvas,
54"x60";
"Unscathed,"
oil on canvas,
50"x64".

JENNIFER THOMPSON FIRST PICKED UP A PAINTBRUSH IN 1997 WHEN SHE TOOK A PAINTING CLASS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF DENVER. She was instantly hooked and changed her major from English to Art. Her success was imminent as well; Jennifer sold two paintings *while* she was hanging her very first show in Littleton at CJ's Coffees, where she also worked part-time. Yet, painting complements Jennifer's personality as if it has always been a part of her life. Her art springs directly from her need to express, communicate and create. It allows her to say what she thinks and convey what she observes through a compelling visual medium.

Texture, shape, boldness and symbolism are key elements in Jennifer's paintings. She uses evocative text and scratches through her thick layers of paint to create intellectual stimulation and visual interest. Yet softness and familiar shapes and structures characterize her large canvases as well. Jennifer's work is powerful but not overwhelming, and she maintains grace and balance in the midst of poignant statements, strong images and dense hues. "I don't like things so 'in your face,'" she explains.

Many of the symbols she employs and the energy she conveys are quite subtle and understated. Earth tones and organic shapes, applied in many layers of paint, form images that are bold but intimate, full of texture and depth. Bits of text are often veiled in translucent hues.

Spatial relationships are also an integral part of Jennifer's paintings. The density of her paint, as well as the shapes and colors she chooses, create significant dimension in her work. Her pieces encourage viewers to look beyond the surface, and focal points as well as meaning lie deep within the paintings. A Colorado native, Jennifer credits this desire to convey a strong sense of space to her upbringing among the wide vistas of the state. "I need to be able to look at a great, great distance," she notes. Jennifer remembers feeling stifled by the maze of buildings and trees she found on a visit back East, and can't imagine living anywhere but Colorado. She loves it here, and despite the occasional pressure to be a part of the New York or Los Angeles art scene, she does not want to leave her home state and the blossoming art world here.

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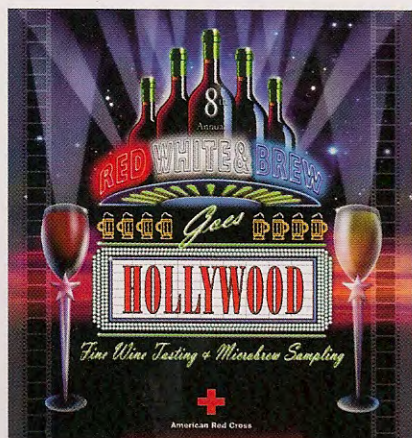


"No More Eggs," oil on canvas, 50"x30".

The abstract and very contemporary nature of her pieces notwithstanding, the foundations of Jennifer's work are quite traditional. Her technique is inspired by the early masters; she works strictly with oil on canvas, occasionally employing wax or charcoal for a slightly different texture or effect without delving too deeply into mixed-media techniques. She attributes some of the color and intensity of her pieces to her admiration for the work of modern painters. William Turner, Jasper Johns, Jean Michel Basquiat, Mark Rothko, William de Kooning and Jackson Pollack are some of her favorites, but, she adds, "the entire realm of art plays a role in my work."

Jennifer is an art history buff—"an art history addict," she admits. She continues to educate herself through books, museum visits and travel. A trip to Europe greatly influenced Jennifer's style, for she was able to actually see the work she had been studying. Like many art students, she was astounded by the difference between a slide image of a painting and the actual piece. "I didn't know about the thick paint!" she remembers. Seeing the brush strokes and layered application of the paint transformed Jennifer's technique.

The process behind Jennifer's work is, in large part, a product of her building method, the traditional "fat over lean," in which thin layers of paint are followed by thicker treatments. She usually works on six pieces at one time so that each canvas has adequate time to dry be-



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Jennifer Thompson etches texture into one of her canvases.

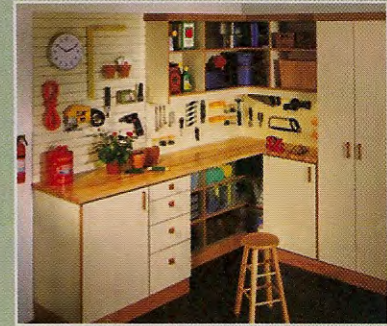
tween applications, and so the colors that she mixes in large quantity can be used efficiently. The colors are very bright at first, growing subtler as they are layered upon one another, yet the scratching technique she employs reveals hints of the early hues.

Each series of six pieces usually takes several months of eight- to 10-hour days and seven-day workweeks—"lots of studio time." But despite the fact that these pieces are companions of sorts, Jennifer notes that they evolve independently, "Each one goes to a different place, which is good; I don't want to get stuck in a rut."

The ideas behind her work come straight out of her head and onto the canvas. "I sketch *with* the paint," she says. Her early work was particularly political, motivated in part by her frustration with "cookie-cutter America," and the text and images she used often reflected the sociopolitical scene. Political activists and cultural critics such as Naomi Klein and Janeane Garofalo inspire some of the symbolism and imagery in her work. "Defender," painted in honor of Buffalo, New York pro-choice activist Lucile Cole, is composed of urban symbols and cityscapes juxtaposed against the organic curves of human figures.

Politics aside, Jennifer's paintings are an outpouring of self—a method of expressing and conveying her own voice and an outlet for the emotions she feels. "I don't know what it is about painting... I didn't get into it for therapy, but I work through things with art," she muses. Although each piece is a product of her emotions, it doesn't bother Jennifer that people perceive what they want. "Because there are so many layers, it takes a long time to really get to know my work and figure it out for yourself," she admits.

Jennifer notes that her work has been shifting as her own opinions change. A recent accident and subsequent recovery period gave her some time to think and reflect on her life as a painter and on her



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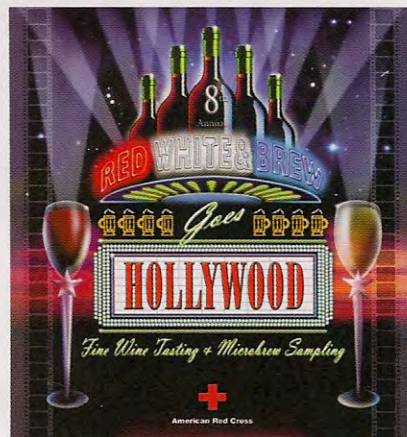
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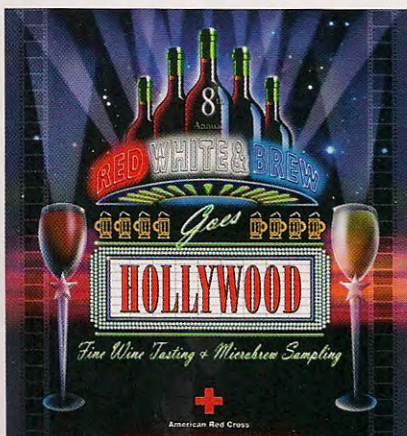


"3 White Keys," oil on canvas, 64"x50".

work as a whole. "I have different priorities now," she says. She feels that she is "heading toward a 'pretty' phase," likening her transformation to a "David Lynch meets Meg Ryan" period, with more soothing colors and images. "It took me this long to realize that it doesn't matter what someone else does or thinks," she laughs. The beautiful and the calm have become more appealing, and soft shades of white, sage and yellow frequent her canvases, giving some of her most recent work a luminous, ethereal quality. "I'm not interested in offending anyone anymore," she admits, which is why the text in her work is also taking a back seat of sorts, serving as a design element more than the verbal statement it once was.

It is hard for Jennifer to predict where her work will go in the future, but she does not question that her future will be in painting: "I don't even think about doing anything else—this is what I'm meant to do." She is astounded by the amount of change that has taken place in her work since she began painting five years ago, and expects her painting to continue to evolve as she does.

Jennifer Thompson has displayed her work in numerous galleries throughout Colorado including Pirate Contemporary Art Oasis, Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, Edge Gallery and Kurfman Gallery. She is currently represented by the Carson-Masuoka Gallery (303-573-8585) in Denver and the Karen Ruhlen Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico. ■



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