

THE EXHILARATING ART OF THERESA BYRNES

BY DENNY ROSEY



Series *Awakening*, 1996, private collection.
Top: *Yellow & Purple*; Centre: *Orange & Blue*;
Bottom: *Pink & Green*. Length: 3.66m (12 feet)

For the powerful abstract series “Awakening” Theresa devised a special apparatus so that she could apply the paint in one movement. By lying on a pallet tied to pulleys at both ends, she had the canvases suspended about 45 cms above her body and was pulled rapidly from one end to the other.

Australian artist Theresa Byrnes has been shaking cages since she was a teenager in a punk band called “That time of the month.” Twenty-five years on, she remains a wild child but the woman on the end of the Skype hook-up is also stunning, a charmer and thinker who is comfortable with who she is.

Theresa comes from a long line of free thinkers who forged lives on their terms. Her paternal grandmother, a beautiful Spaniard after whom she was named, had two passions – dancing and her son Joseph. Her obsession with the former was such that she continued to dance even when tuberculosis was consuming her body. In her granddaughter, nature and nurture have produced a woman of the same spirit.

Now based in New York, Theresa’s paintings are exhibited in prestigious galleries and snapped up by big-name buyers. Her performance art attracts audiences and column inches. Theresa could afford to slacken the pace, except the notion appals her. Painting is her lover, companion, solace and stimulus.

The themes of her art are the same as those that energize her life – transformation, exploration and life itself. “Whether I fail or not I don’t care. My work is not ego driven. I don’t use my identity as a measure of who I am.”

Theresa's energy is formidable. Nothing, even the end of a high voltage marriage, has been able to diminish her need to create, to anticipate the first stroke and then make her mark. She flicks ink at damp paper, peppering the surface with globes that dissolve at the edges into soft, strangely moving forms. She sweeps bands of colour across a prepared canvas. It looks for all the world like she got lucky: the effects are spectacular, lyrical. But it takes great skill and long experience to look effortless.

Her energy comes, she says, from her artistic parents, her "best friends": the physical drive from her "dynamo" mother Lorraine, and the intellectual muscle from her father Joseph a "voracious reader of philosophy and religion". Theresa expends both forms of energy lavishly, often working all day and through the night until she collapses on a mattress on the floor or the painting is resolved.

Throughout her life Theresa has sought transformation through adventure (experience). In *The Divine Mistake*, her funny, riotous and heart-breaking autobiography, she writes: "I see my life as an active experiment; to grasp at greatness, I must risk failure. I put instinct before caution, ideals before reality and possibility before negativity...it leads me sometimes to disaster but always to insight."

One night she dreamed of Yirkala, a place she wasn't even sure existed. In her dream an old man appeared to be preparing her for some kind of spiritual initiation. Next morning she could still smell incense and the name Yirkala repeated in her head and then faded.

Many months later she travelled to Arnhem Land and met the people of Yirkala who have become her second family and spiritual guides. She visits as often as she can. "The thing that lead



me there was that I could not believe that reality and spirituality stopped with Western culture; it seemed so shallow and unreal to me. That experience is always breathing into my work."

Theresa's artistic vocabulary is vast in its technical range and subject matter. While abstract painting is her primary focus, her portraits of family and children are funny and tender. Theresa

picks up the other-wordly, under-cooked quality of very little children or, as in *Maud and Philomena*, their utter lack of guile and artifice.

Her immersion in art is often literal and well as metaphorical. For some performances she pours paint over her body and then rolls across large sheets of canvas – or in one performance, the Stars and Stripes flag, which she smeared with black paint to signify

the cost in human lives of the war in Iraq. It suggested as well the complex interchange of the political, the erotic, loss and liberation. Audiences identify with her openness and freedom Theresa says. "People are drawn to that fearlessness and they want it too – it's contagious."

If chaos and dissoluteness are the hallmark of an artist-radical, Theresa's not it. A vegan, she exercises faithfully and lives frugally. Even on a four digit income she was able to travel extensively – to Peru and a host of other places. But her discipline is most evident with her work.

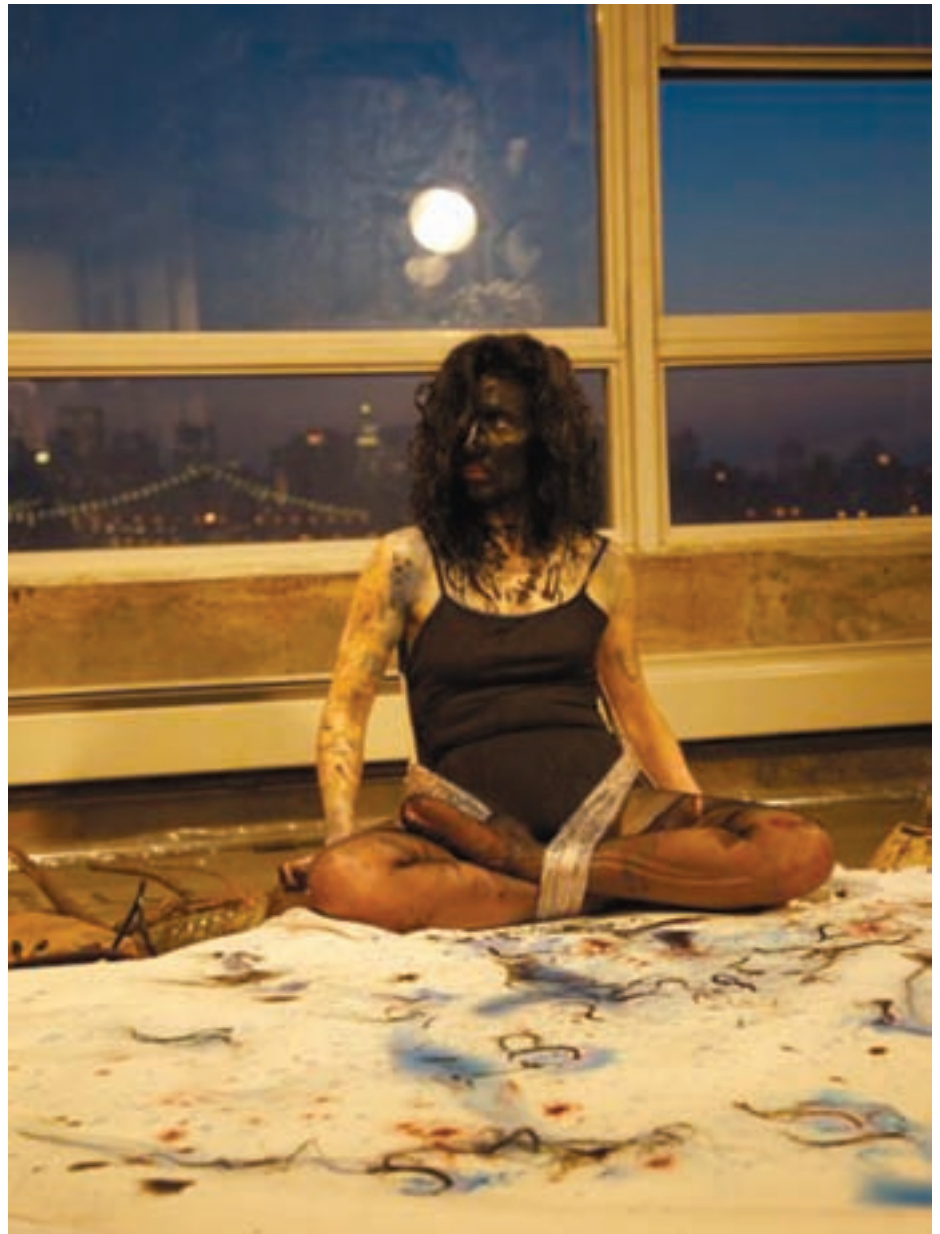
"I think being an artist with many media you have to be a master tactician to juggle them all. You have to have a running task list, you have to divide your day up into segments – you have to be quite a strategist," she laughs.

"I do weight training three days a week – I've done that for 19 years – and I practice Kundalini yoga every Sunday. Heath and fitness is religion for me: while some pray to God, I pump, move and focus on my physical incarnation. It's not like I have to do it; I'm so grateful for this life and I'm so aware of having a body and I want to take care of myself. I have this never ending stream of ideas and inspiration and getting them realised means being a superwoman. I have to be really strong and disciplined."

Why the Divine Mistake? The "mistake" is Friedrich's Ataxia, a disease of the nervous system that begins with clumsiness and ends in total paralysis and early death. Theresa Byrnes was 17 when she was diagnosed with FA. The "divine" comes from transforming the "mistake" by embracing life and being open to all that comes with it.

FA is also behind Theresa's move to New York. "I've always had really fabulous friends in Australia but the difference in New York was they didn't

Theresa performing *NEST*; New York, May 2009. Photographer: Kevin O'Hanlon



know me when I was walking so I didn't have to deal with everyone's sorrow. In Sydney I knew everyone loved me but it was so hard for me on a very deep level as I was always aware of not being who I was .

"When I came to New York, there was no loss: I wasn't judged on what I had become thank God! I could be whoever I wanted to be and that's why I'm so comfortable here. It's weird because it's the busiest, most stressful state in the world!"

While she treasures her parents, there's no question of missing them. "They are in me. How can I miss myself?" she asks.

Theresa's talent for sucking the marrow out of life, her fearlessness and exhilaration are gifts few people possess. Made a Young Australian of the Year in 1997 – it's time to consider giving Theresa Simplicia Byrnes another gong: National Treasure. 🌀

Denny Rosey