



Theresa Byrnes in her studio, 2009. Photographer: Lauriano Batista



# EXCERPTS FROM THE DIVINE MISTAKE

BY THERESA BYRNES

*Every intelligent modern painter carries the whole culture of modern painting in his head – Robert Motherwell, 1951.*

I had been headed to New York my whole life – I'd studied American painting and discovered like minds. Other artists had warned me about its dog-eat-dog art world. If you thought the art scene here was tough, you won't have a chance in New York! Their comments didn't daunt me, I wasn't expecting anything good or bad; I just wanted to go to the galleries and see God in the flesh of canvas and paint.

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*The texture of experience is prior to everything else – Wilhelm de Kooning.*

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Within the week I was sharing a tiny apartment with a sculptor named Mark. He gave me his mattress and he slept under his desk. Mark was quirky. His sculpture was about making garbage art – he wrapped all kinds of junk in platter and positioned them in geometric installations.

On the day I moved in he built a ramp over the only step into the place. We became friends. Mark also let me paint in the apartment. He kept his space bare because clutter inhibited his thought process but living in creation was an entirely different thing. "I don't mind if you splash paint around, just keep it off the computer and the white goods, that's all I ask."

I went art supplies shopping with an artist friend of Penny's, Patrick Bucklew. He had a prosthetic foot and a handsome face. We got on like a house on fire. We talked about art, beauty and disability, on the way back from Canal Street store. It began to rain, heavy fat wads of water.

"This is like wet season in Arnhem Land," I yelled to Patrick as he ran, pushing my chair.

"I hope you don't mind getting wet."

"Are you kidding, I love it."

Water poured down onto my hair, my face and ran off my chin. I screamed in delight. "Yahooooooh, yaaaaaaah!"

"Go girl," a passer-by replied.

I loved New York.

The apartment became too small, very fast. I was on fire, painting and resolving each piece with gusto. Mark had given me ten 1x2 metre wood panels to work on and within a few weeks I needed more. I hadn't planned on painting in New York and now there was no holding me back. I painted mainly in black and white. The subject wasn't cityscape or figure, it was the exhilaration I felt. New York seemed to feed my insatiable hunger for inspiration.

I met an actor-photographer called Malachi who looked like a young Orson Welles with dark skin. He was part of the extended group of neighbourhood artists. His photographs were mainly nude studies. I loved how he brought out the strength of the form by using light and shadow. His subjects were both defiant and vulnerable. He agreed to do a nude photo shoot with me.

The idea of my body as a subject challenged me in the face of my commitment to abstraction. It also challenged my personal conclusion that in disability I had achieved beauty and grace. I would be unable to hide disfigurement and grotesqueness in the instant of a clicking frame. I wanted an honest report as to who I was and what I had become. We did a couple of shoots, each time I became more relaxed.

"Malachi, you understand that when we get the proofs back I may become hysterically upset?"

"Why?"

"Well if the strength and beauty I feel doesn't appear in the proofs I may be kicked from the comfort of delusion."

Mark offered me the use of his studio across the road to nurture the rapid expansion phase of my work. Every day I went to paint I called Michael at the Lotus Club, and he nicked around the corner to help carry me first, then the wheelchair, up the four flights of stairs to the studio.

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Theresa with acrobat/stunt man Sebastian Dickens, Sydney 2006. Photographed by Greg Weight.

“ I hadn’t planned on painting in one of the most sought after studios in Manhattan and I certainly didn’t expect to have an exhibition. ”

Fifteen years of painting had led me to a profound understanding of what was sacred in life. I obliterated fear in hurtling my uncontrived spirit at the canvas – paint extended my force and made visible my intention. My intent was to demystify life through freedom.

Michael came back for me at about 9 pm. By that time the canvases and panels I had been working on would be finished or bordering tantalisingly on completion and I would be covered in paint. We’d sit for a while together and take in the work.

Often Penny would call me at the studio, spreading the word that there was a must-see performance.

“You must come, Theresa, you mustn’t miss this.”

“But Penny I am a complete mess, top to toe in paint. It’ll take me at least an hour to scrub it off.”

“Don’t worry about it. No one is going to care. We’re all freaks and artists here, darling.”

So I’d go out all night with drying paint flaking from my skin and my arms, legs, feet, stomach, face and hair. Penny was right, no one cared.

Malachi brought over the proofs.

“They are beautiful. I never expected ...”

“I did,” he replied.

I hadn’t planned on painting in one of the most sought after studios in Manhattan and I certainly didn’t expect to have an exhibition. Penny found space, in the basement of the Angel Orensants Foundation, an old synagogue, space famous for hosting performance and art of all disciplines.

It was a one-day-only exhibition as I was flying out two days afterwards. Penny went through her entire Rolladex, Tiffany and Colby made the calls of invitation and I used one of Malachi’s photographs, from our shoot for the poster which we posted up in shop windows all over the Lower East Side. I called the show *From Light to Hot to Dark*.

Everyone in our tight-knit group chipped in, hauling my paintings the three blocks from the studio to the gallery. I had made wonderful friends. I told them how much I

appreciated their support and they thanked me for bringing them all together. My new-found friends didn’t want me to leave and I didn’t want to go but my ticket bound for Australia was booked, I would be back for Charles Blackman’s seventieth birthday, Danielle’s thirtieth and I had a group show in Melbourne and a book to write.

As soon as the gallery doors opened there was a steady flow of people coming to view my work. Many of the visitors were amazed I had painted such a large body of work in only two months. It seemed that my inspiration and motivation counted for about two years of procrastination.

“How can you leave New York when you’ve just revealed all this to us? You must come back soon.”

I was leaving on a high note. I knew the impact my visit had made would create opportunities I would return to. On my last day in New York, Patrick and I rolled and strolled up to Tompkins Square. We fell deep into discussion about the nature of suffering.

“Come on Theresa. You must agree that greatness comes from suffering.”

“It depends on what you perceive as suffering and how the individual reacts and deals with it.”

“But from your suffering you have attained wisdom and greatness.”

“I would be great with or without disease! That assumption pisses me off. You know I was born and grew up with an artist’s vision and now I’m in a wheelchair. People can’t resist attributing my talent to it.”

“I know I have had major insights through living with my foot.”

“But you’re an artist too. Look, I’m trying to say that suffering doesn’t necessarily make you great. For instance there are people with FA who won’t leave their rooms because they are freaked out and full of loathing for themselves and the world. Suffering hasn’t helped them any.”

“I see your point but I don’t agree with you all the way.”

“I see your point too. I am just defensive about it because

it's too easy to be pigeonholed. I don't hold suffering above ease."

"What do you mean?"

"It's people's connotation of suffering that limits their experience of it. There's no such thing as suffering unless you attribute the cause of it as negative. Suffering, then, becomes easy."

Patrick nodded, thoughtfully.

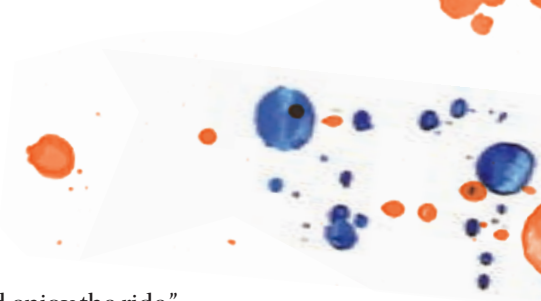
"When situations have thrown themselves in my lap I have chosen to roll with them, take them on and let them burn. I find ease and beauty in suffering because it takes me to places I would never have gone – the divine mistake is nature and in my own existence."

"So then you agree with me?"

'You're a bastard Patrick.'

We laughed then rolled and walked in silence for a while.

"So basically you're saying that yes, suffering does lead to greatness, but only if you relax and take it easy? Go for the magical mystery tour."



"Exactly, sit back and enjoy the ride."

I slouched and crossed my legs in the wheelchair as we moved on.

"Did I ever tell you about when you take suffering like the horns of a bull and ride it like an urban cowboy?" I drawled in a Southern accent.

Patrick picked up speed.

"I'll give you a ride," he gibed.

"Naa, I've gone faster." ↻

*The Divine Mistake* by Theresa Byrnes, Pan Macmillan Australia, 1999.

Now out of print, a few copies are available at [www.theresabyrnes.com](http://www.theresabyrnes.com) for \$40 (includes shipping). Her second book *Black Gold* is due for release in 2010.

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