

French artist melds music and art in US debut of paintings at Holy Cross gallery



French artist Gabrielle Thierry is presenting her first show in the U.S. at the Cantor Gallery in O'Kane Hall at the College of the Holy Cross. [Photo/Matt Wright]



WORCESTER — For French painter Gabrielle Thierry, there is the art of music and the music of art.

A richly colored creative synergy between those two usually separate artistic modes can be seen in an exhibition of Thierry's work on view at the Cantor Gallery at the College of the Holy Cross through Oct. 7. Titled "Gabrielle Thierry: The Musicality of the Water Lilies / La Musicalité des Nymphéas," the show features eight large-scale paintings as well as recordings of classical music movements that Thierry associates with them. The music is accessed by headphones stationed throughout the gallery.

The work is the result of an effect Thierry experiences when she looks at the natural landscape or certain paintings. There is the usual visual impact but simultaneously she "hears" with her inner ears a play of rhythms and notes, a symphonic evocation of aural sensations activated by the visual cues. It is a perceptual phenomenon known as "synesthesia," in which stimulation of one sense in turn triggers a another, different one.

Thierry has been especially inspired by Claude Monet's "Water Lilies" series and experiences a profound musicality in Monet's work that she then translates into abstract paintings of colored musical scores.

The show is Thierry's first in the United States. The exhibition was arranged after Maurice G racht, professor of humanities at Holy Cross, and Brit Smith, director of the Holy Cross Study Abroad program, saw Thierry present a talk on her work at a synesthesia conference in Dijon, France, in 2014. G racht and Smith are coordinators for the International Word and Image Conference, which rotates between Holy Cross, Universit  Paris Diderot in Paris and Universit  de Bourgogne in Dijon.

G racht said Thierry's paper was a clear standout that made an immediate and lasting impression.

"We had maybe 20 or so papers on synesthesia — including mine, actually," he said. "Hers was the paper, both verbally and visually, that made sense in explaining what synesthesia was really about. It blew me away, to use my students' vocabulary, and I said 'I've got to bring Gabrielle to Holy Cross.'"

Synesthesia is experiencing one sense via another. Though the effects vary from person to person, that experience might include a strong association of color with a particular sound. In Thierry's case "she sees sound as color so when she hears music she actually sees it," Smith said, in the Cantor Gallery recently. "So what you have here are notes from the music that are in color."

Those colored notes are circular forms that seem to dance across Thierry's paintings in coherent patterns that resemble notes on sheet music. The circles are her "Water Lilies," echoing the printed reproductions of Monet's works that hang throughout the show near the paintings they inspired.

"There are the original Monet paintings and there's a dialogue being carried on between the impressionism of the Monet and Gabrielle's expressionistic form," Smith said. "But there is a link between them so you can really see the connection but also the difference, and the major conversation that's going on is among all the various paintings themselves, how they speak back and forth to each other and how they move with each other. It's quite remarkable."

Thierry's inspiration came when she rediscovered the "Water Lilies" landscapes by Monet on view at the Mus e de l'Orangerie in Paris. She spoke about the effect the outsized paintings had on her recently, after her Air France flight to Boston just a day earlier. She had come for a week-long stay that included a visit to Worcester Art Museum to see a 1908 "Water Lilies" canvas by Monet, purchased by the museum in 1910 when impressionism was still a controversial approach in the art world.

Thierry explained that she had seen the Mus e's "Water Lilies" — an extensive series displayed over several galleries — during her postsecondary art-school years in Paris. "I used to live in Paris and I knew the museum, the space Monet chose to exhibit," she said. "There are four in each room and it's just amazing. But I didn't understand why he painted this. They were huge and beautiful but I didn't understand it."

Later, after she had moved just outside of Paris, Thierry devoted her time to landscape painting but began to feel something was missing. When she looked at a landscape, she could see rhythmic patterns (they really are everywhere once you learn how to look for them). For Thierry, who lives along the River Seine, one example was the gently undulating reflection of the trees on the water.

"To find the rhythm in the landscape is really, really easy," she said. "I could see the rhythm but I didn't see the music. I said, 'I have to find out why I feel that.'"

Intuition led her to try landscape painting while listening to classical music CDs. The result was a bit of a shock to her. She had been a figurative painter but that all changed when the music came on.

"I took my first CD and I said 'I'm going to paint what I hear' and abstraction is what came onto the canvas," she said. She continued to explore the art/music connection through her work and then, 15 years after she had first seen the "Water Lilies" at Mus e de l'Orangerie, she returned and had an epiphany of sorts.

"I came back and, with my work on music and landscape, I rediscovered the 'Water Lilies' of Claude Monet and I said 'Of course. It's musical scores,'" she said. To her, two willow trees standing near each other seemed to form the edges of a bar, or measure, like you would see on sheet music. Monet's water lilies, placed as notes on a musical staff, danced through and beyond the trees, indicating the continuation of the score into the next measure.

With special permission from the museum, Thierry painted in front of Monet's originals for 18 months from 2010 to 2012, interpreting the inner musical qualities of his paintings through her own visual representations.

It took three years to pull the show together across international boundaries. "Anything shipped internationally these days, because of homeland security issues, it takes a lot of expertise to make sure that everything goes smoothly," Roger Hankins, Cantor Gallery director, said. "There are many government agencies that have oversight over that." A Boston agency that specializes in international shipping of artwork was engaged to make sure everything was well-orchestrated and the endless details attended to.

"We spent months and months and months working this out," Hankins said. "Because of the scale of the pieces, there were more considerations for this size gallery so Frank Graham and I spent a bunch of time figuring out how we were going to move our walls."

Then, one day in July, Thierry's paintings arrived in giant crates. "We took them out and I immediately start to calculate 'OK, how can we make this work?' We spent about two or three days just walking around thinking of different scenarios until it was 'OK, I think we need to move this wall here, do that there, this makes sense, or maybe that does,'" Hankins said.

The result is a perfectly cohesive show without a single sour note. Headphone stations with classical snippets are paired with Monet prints that in turn reflect the Thierry paintings they inspired. A baby grand piano sits waiting for a planned concert series on Fridays, involving the Holy Cross music department in the exhibition. Crowning the scene are Thierry's striking visual images of the musical landscape. In the context of the flawless exhibition installation, her paintings become works of art within a work of art.

"It's a musical composition for me," Hankins said, with a smile. "Everything has to fit just the right way and that's like a mirror of her work, actually."

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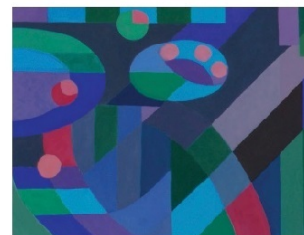
Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday. Admission is free. The gallery is located in O'Kane Hall on the Holy Cross campus.

Some lectures, open to the public, being held in connection with the exhibition:

4 p.m. Sept. 21, Levi Browsing Room, Dinand Library, Professor Frederic Ogee, University Paris Diderot, "J.M.W. Turner, Landscape and History"

4 p.m. Sept. 27, Levi Browsing Room, Dinand Library, Professor Mark Freeman, College of the Holy Cross, "When the Senses Meet: Synesthesia and Artistic Imagining"

(This story has been amended to correct gallery hours.)



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