



## Acknowledgements

Life is a panoply of people, ideas and achievements. So many people cross our paths in the course of life. We share ideas, we question each others thinking and relish in each others creativity, and we celebrate each others achievements.

In the scheme of things, I haven't known Russell and Nancy Thayer for that many years, but I have always respected their art work, their creativity, and their professional achievements.

Nancy Thayer invited me to write an essay about her work for a 1997 exhibition, *Nancy Thayer Conversations/Transformations* at the Bunting Gallery in Royal Oak, Michigan. While I was aware of Nancy's landscape paintings prior to writing about her new body of work, it was in the writing and the talking to her about the paintings that gave me a new perspective on the depth of her thinking and her spirituality. I was honored to have the opportunity to write about her work.

Shortly after I became Director of the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum, which is in close proximity to Delta College, I began hearing Russell Thayer's name mentioned in conversations with artists, art professors, and art supporters. I learned quickly that his art, his teaching skills, and his persona are regarded highly by many.

Both Nancy and Russell have had numerous one-person exhibitions throughout their rich careers. Having the work of both artists exhibited together in the *Thayer and Thayer, Paintings and*

*Sculpture* exhibition at the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum is very satisfying.

The *Thayer and Thayer, Paintings and Sculpture* exhibition is made possible with a grant from the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, a state agency that supports arts and cultural organizations and projects throughout Michigan.

A funding request to the State Arts Council always requires letters of support. Nancy and Russell suggested that I invite Larry Butcher, Professor of Art at Delta College, and Patricia Shek, long-time art patron in Saginaw, to write letters in support of the exhibition. They gave high praise to both of them as artists, and to Russell as a renowned and beloved professor of art history at Delta College for 33 years. I am grateful to Larry and Patricia for taking the time to write such thoughtful letters.

Susan Bandes, Director, Kresge Art Museum, and Becky Hart, Associate Curator, The James P. Duffy Department of Contemporary Art at The Detroit Institute of Arts, were gracious in accepting my invitation to write essays about Nancy and Russell's work. Thank you so much.

It has been a great pleasure to work with Nancy and Russell in putting together this superb exhibition of paintings and sculpture.

Marilyn L. Wheaton, Director  
Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum

## Credits

Front cover: Nancy and Russell Thayer in their studio, by Adam Thayer

Photos throughout text, by Adam Thayer

Back cover: Thayer's studio and home, by Nancy Thayer

Graphic design by Andrea Ondish

*Thayer*  
*Paintings + Sculpture*  
*Thayer*

February 7, 2009 – May 29, 2009  
Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum



Marshall M. Fredericks  
SCULPTURE MUSEUM



SAGINAW VALLEY  
STATE UNIVERSITY

7400 Bay Road  
University Center, Michigan 48710  
989.964.7125  
[www.marshallfredericks.org](http://www.marshallfredericks.org)

**Nancy Thayer's** new paintings from the past two years explore deep, dark places with vertical cascades of bright lights. The thick textural white paint drips unevenly as it makes its way down the canvas. This dimensional paint contrasts with the flatness of the black expanses. Yet within the darks as within the lights, a myriad of colors is revealed the more you look. Small bursts like the sparks of fireworks -- yellows, reds, blues, violets-- start to emerge as do streaks of black on black. These grottoes and stalactites evoke nature's slow immutable transformation.

Thayer paints in series, completing one painting before moving to the next and so a sequence and progression is built. Early in this series, *Stalactite II* has more visible colors in the lower portion of the painting suggesting natural phenomena, perhaps decaying leaves. It relates to the earlier *Transformation* series done ten years ago while her mother was ill and then passed away. Those also have white vertical centers but they rise up rather than fall in settings that suggest landscapes with high horizons. Spawned as a way for the artist to come to grips with death and its aftermath, they are spiritual images of resurrection and light, partly inspired by the New Testament.

The next series were part painting and part steel. Exploring the magic of chemicals and oxidation, the lush rust and turquoise "chance" steel abstractions recall fallen leaves and accumulated organic matter on a forest floor. In the painted parts, she echoes a similar layering and beauty in decay on canvas as she does in the grotto series.

Moving in 2002 to her new home in Franklin, Michigan with its large expanses of glass windows and a studio with white walls and high ceilings, inspired the *Elevated Atmosphere* series of white paintings in which floating worlds of swirling bright colors hover midway up the canvas. The grotto paintings followed and move from out-of-doors imagery to interior spaces. Central to all of Thayer's abstract landscapes and inscapes is a sense of natural forces at work.

One is reminded of Mark Rothko's chapel at the De Menil collection in Houston, a room of quiet, large abstract canvases whose cumulative effect is an enveloping atmosphere for meditation. There, the room is hushed and the glow of light emanating from the paintings that surround the viewer becomes expansive. So too, with Thayer's paintings. Her grottoes are neither narrative nor site specific. Rather they are the total opposite: boundless, open-ended, and uncharted in their suggestion of physical phenomena. The discovery of the richness of their space is a subjective experience. Her intention is to create an opportunity for the viewer to listen to his or her own thoughts. If open to it, they are also about spirituality without being literal or referencing humans.

Texture, edges and titles are significant. Tactility in her paint harks back to her work in other mediums; clay in graduate school at Michigan State University, and paper making that occupied her for over twenty years. The smaller grotto drawings are on tar paper. Several contain small bits of her handmade paper recycled from another project. She describes herself as a messy painter, but it's a carefully controlled technical exploration and thorough immersion in and mastery of the mediums she uses. As she points out, edges are visually important. Colors reveal themselves at the lower edges of several of the paintings and thick ribbons of paint curl around the edges of others. Titles -- "Silent Grotto" and "Stalactite" -- are clues to understanding the origins.

There are echoes of J.M.W. Turner whose 19<sup>th</sup> century churning seas of color were some of the earliest painted abstractions, but they were always based in nature. Barnett Newman's writings and his appreciation of non-objective painting also inform Thayer's sensibilities.

The largest of Thayer's paintings are 5 x 7 feet, substantial but not enormous by any means. Scale, too, helps to create intimacy with the paintings and to encourage looking at what is under as well as on the surface. Between darkness and light, colors disappear and reappear. Gloom and foreboding related to what is unseen or unknown, changes into quiet hope. Discovery, based in prolonged looking, of color up-close and unknown depth is richly rewarded in this new series of paintings.

Susan J. Bandes



*Grotto I*, acrylic on canvas, 5'h x 3'w, 2008



*Silent Grotto I*, acrylic on canvas,



5'h x 7'w, 2008



*Silent Grotto II*, acrylic on canvas, 4'h x 5'w, 2008





*Silent Grotto III*, acrylic on canvas, 4'h x 5'w, 2008



*Silent Grotto IV, acrylic on canvas,*



5'h x 7'w, 2008



10 *Stalactite Study I*, handmade paper and acrylic  
on tar paper, 3'h x 2'w, 2008

*Stalactite Study II*, handmade paper and acrylic  
on tar paper, 3'h x 2'w, 2008



*Stalactite Study III*, handmade paper and acrylic on tar paper, 3'h x 2'w, 2008



*Stalactite Study IV*, handmade paper and acrylic on canvas, 3'h x 2'w, 2008



*Stalactite I*, acrylic on canvas, 5'h x 3'w, 2007



*Stalactite II*, acrylic on canvas, 5'h x 3'w, 2007



Russell Thayer

*Windrapids II*, aluminum,





16'h x 16'w x 16'd, 2008, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

**Russell Thayer's** sculpture in the retrospective at the Marshall M. Frederick Sculpture Museum documents his professional evolution from an emerging artist of clear vision and much ambition into a mature practitioner with a firm unwavering voice. Although there is not a steady trajectory from figural works of the 1960s to the architecturally scaled gates of the past thirty years one senses an on-going development: earlier works record the artist as an observer and commentator while more recent works show him inviting his audience to be an experiential participant walking through a passage or using it for personal rituals or spiritual contemplation.

Several small sculptures included in the exhibition echo the influence of modernist masters. Thayer's rendering of the human figure is simplified and direct. One understands that he developed certain themes over time when comparing these early figure studies with *Mysterious Altar* (1997). Not satisfied with simply studying the body Thayer abstracted anatomical form to instill it with emotional content. The tortured gestures of the altar figures stand in distinct contrast to the simpler figure studies. Contorted postures and stunted limbs of the predella figures convey the anguish of the crucifixion. Unlike more traditional Christian altars, however, Thayer positions the cross and stylized bodies that represent the two Marys below larger casted bronze doors. The predella is surmounted by a Torii gate. Here he combines Western iconography with Asian architectural design, which has the ritual function of separating the secular from the spiritual world. By intent the gate doors are closed: the altar, which marks a personal passage, was begun as Thayer retired from thirty-three years of teaching at Delta College.

The hard work of joining form and content was begun in earlier gates. Trained as an industrial designer and having a keen interest in architecture, Thayer makes gates of various sizes and materials. Some, like *Dawn's Gate II* (1999), are small demarcations of space that mark and become a place for private rituals—a gate, doorway or metaphorical passage that may be opened or closed. The artist often works with the formal structure of the torii, a gate comprised of two vertical columns capped by doubled lintels.

*Agamemnon* (2000) is a variant on the structure. A column is thick and angled as if to suggest movement or an entrance. One senses the peril of the Greek warrior in the pendulum form suspended from the gate's lintel. Quiet and still, it represents the sword that was both the symbol of his office as the commander-in-chief of the Greek forces in the Trojan War and the means of his death. It balances in anticipation of action. Thayer restates the formal elements of *Agamemnon* in his next work *Brass Quartet* (1993). Where balance was key in the smaller gate, harmony becomes his subject for the monumental sculpture.

As the scale of Thayer's gates increase they take on an environmental function; the sculptural forms invite entry or suggest procession. *Unfolding Gate* (1998) with its flanges sailing and brightly hued color beckons us to approach. His *Gate* (2001) boldly marks an entrance of the Ford Community and Performing Arts Center in Dearborn while it also offers a place to sit, to rest. The canopy of *Windrapids II* (2008), the most recent gate, seems to unfurl space and propel the public toward the entrance of the Bio-Medical and Physical Science Center on the Michigan State University campus. The exuberant sculpture with its tripod base is sited as a landmark that encourages the public to turn and find the building's doors.

Making work that is at times intimate and figural while at other times monumental and always beautifully designed and scaled for over fifty years, is a testament to Russell Thayer's mettle. His long career as an artist and educator is distinguished by numerous works in public and private collections. Each is made with a sense of determination and wonder as if the artist is thinking, "I wonder what will happen if I try it this way ...". A quiet man, Russell's words are well chosen when he speaks, but moreover his thoughts are boldly stated as he makes sculpture.

Becky Hart



*Gate*, aluminum, 12'h x 11'w, 2001, Ford Community and Performing Arts Center, Dearborn, MI



*Sentinel II*, aluminum and concrete block, 8' 6" h x 5' w x 1' 6" d, 2007, Saugatuck, MI



*Study for Sentinel II*, aluminum,  
5' ¾" h x 1' 8 ½" w x 7" d, 2004



*Mysterious Altar*, brass, cast bronze with  
limestone base, 4' 8 ¾" h x 1' 9" w x 5" d, 1997



*Angel*, in memory of John Shek, aluminum, 12' 5" h x 10' 8" w, 2000,  
St. Mary's Ambulatory Care Center, Saginaw, MI



*Libby's Gate II*, brass, 2' 10" h x 2' 4" w x 8" d, 2002



*Agamemnon*, brass with limestone base, 2' 11" h x 1' 11" w x 5" d, 2000



*Brass Quartet*, brass on steel plate, 8' 3" h x 5' 6" w x 3' d, 1993





*Unfolding Gate*, painted aluminum, 8' 6" h x 9' 6" w x 2' 2" d, 1998



*Figure with stool, cast bronze, 10 ½" h x 7" w x 4" d, 2007*

My work has always been about metaphysical atmospheres and environments, an expression of thought regarding important truths, a soul search. Titles of works from the 90's included *Mindscape*, *Heavenscape*, *Elevated Journey* and *Refuge*. I never paint from direct observation; my work expresses personal impressions of previous observances and influences. Although paintings are not site specific, they carry the presence of place, in this case the quiet privacy and depth of a sacred grotto that allows reflection, introspection and prayer.

**Nancy Thayer**  
**January, 2009**

My love of architecture, sculpture, dance, poetry and history has influenced and informed my work from my student days at the University of Michigan to my most recent pieces. Several of the sculptures in the exhibition reflect my early training in design and architecture. I find pleasure and purpose in creating works that are personal as well as works that are collaborations with various private and public clients.

**Russell Thayer**  
**January, 2009**

## NANCY THAYER

- Education* ▶ Bachelor of Arts, Mathematics, with honors, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI  
Master of Arts, Painting, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI  
Master of Fine Arts, Painting, Instituto Allende, San Miguel d'Allende, Mexico
- Current Profession* ▶ Faculty, School of Art & Design, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI

### *Selected Collections*

Allstate Insurance Corporation, Northbrook, IL  
American Telephone & Telegraph Corporation, Detroit, MI  
A.S. Hansen, Inc. Actuaries & Consultants, Chicago, IL  
Blue Cross Blue Shield, Detroit, MI  
Borg-Warner, Chicago, IL  
Christian Hospital, St. Louis, MO  
City of Detroit, Cobo Hall, Detroit, MI  
Comerica Park, Detroit, MI  
Compuware, Corporate Headquarters, Detroit, MI  
Daimler Chrysler Corporation, Detroit, MI  
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI  
Detroit Society of Engineers, Detroit, MI  
Dow Chemical Company, Midland, MI  
Foundation MINT ALAPITVANY, Budapest, Hungary  
Harper Hospital, Detroit, MI  
First Federal Savings of Detroit, Detroit, MI  
First National Bank and Trust of Midland, Midland, MI  
Ford U.A.W., Dearborn, MI  
General Motors Corporation, Detroit, MI  
Ford Motor Company, Dearborn, MI  
Foremost Insurance Corp., Grand Rapids, MI  
Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Rapids, MI  
Harper-Grace Hospital, Detroit, MI  
Haworth Corporation, New York, NY  
Highland Medical Group, Inc., Kansas City, MO  
Holy Sepulcher, Our Lady of Hope Holy Cross, Southfield, MI  
Hyatt Corporation, Chicago, IL  
Illinois Hospital Association, Naperville, IL  
Institute for Holistic Education, Amherst, MA  
Jovan Corporation, Collection of the President, New York, NY  
Lifetime Communications: Worldwide Players, New York, NY  
Martin Brower Corporation, Chicago, IL  
Merrill Lynch Capital Markets, Chicago, IL  
Merrill Lynch Pierce Fenner & Smith, Inc., Chicago, IL  
Michigan Consolidated Gas Company, Detroit, MI  
Michigan Bell Telephone Corporation, Detroit, MI  
Michigan Sugar Corporation, Saginaw, MI  
Midland Country Club, Midland, MI  
Muzeum Papiernictwa, Duszynki Zdroj, Poland  
NIKKO Corporation, Chicago, IL  
Northwood Institute, Dallas, TX; Midland, MI; West Baden, IN  
Pfizer Corporation, Ann Arbor, MI  
Post Denmark, Copenhagen, Denmark  
Presidential Plaza, Chicago, IL  
Renaissance High School, Detroit, MI  
Republic Development & Investment Corporation, Detroit, MI  
School for the Performing & Visual Arts, Detroit, MI  
Klaus Schrameyer, Former Ambassador, Fed. Rep. of Germany  
Shell Oil Corporation, Detroit, MI  
Smith, Schurman Associates, Bloomfield Hills, MI  
St. Joseph Mercy, Trinity Health, Clinton Twp., MI  
Steelcase, Inc., Grand Rapids, MI  
Tanguay, Burke, Stratton, Chicago, IL  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and Flint, MI  
Varnum, Riddering, Schmidt & Howlett, Grand Rapids, MI  
Goetz von Boehmer, Former Ambassador, Fed. Rep. of Germany  
WDIV-TV, Detroit, MI

### *Selected Recent Exhibitions* (\*One-person exhibition)

Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit, Detroit, MI, 2008  
Sherry Washington Gallery, Detroit, MI, 2008, 2000, 1997  
Posner Gallery, Birmingham, MI, 2006, 2000\*  
Function + Art, Chicago, IL, 2005  
Alden B. Dow Museum of Science & Art, Midland, MI, 2004\*  
Wayne County Community College, Belleville, MI, 2004\*  
NartheX Gallery, Saint Peter's Church, New York, NY, 2003\*  
Batista Gallery, Ferndale, MI, 2003\*  
Jeonju Culture Center, Jeonju, Korea, 2002  
Padzieski Art Gallery, Ford Community & Performing Arts Center, 2002  
14<sup>th</sup> IAPMA Congress Exhibition, Droj, Poland, 2001  
Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, MI, 2001, 1999  
Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 2000\*  
St. John's Center for Youth & Family, Plymouth, MI, 2000  
Biennale Internazionale Dell'Arte Contemporanea, Florence, Italy, 1999  
FUTURE COMMUNICATIONS—Post Denmark Invitational, Copenhagen, Denmark, 1996

## RUSSELL THAYER

- Education* ▶ Bachelor of Science in Design, 1957, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
 Certificate of Completion in Industrial Design, 1958, Royal College of Arts, London, England  
 Master of Arts, Sculpture, 1961, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
 Master of Fine Arts, Coursework Completed, Sculpture, 1977, Instituto Allende, San Miguel d'Allende, Mexico
- Professional Experience* ▶ Lecturer I, Drawing, Figure Drawing, TMP Metals, 1999-2008, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
 Associate Professor of Art History, Drawing, Sculpture, 1966-1999, Delta College, University Center, MI  
 Interim Director, 1970-1971 and 1999-2000, Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI  
 Creative Artist's Grant, Michigan Council for the Arts, c. 1978  
 Dow Foundation Grant, Artist-in-Residence, 1964
- Publication Selected Collections* ▶ "Art in Detroit Public Places," Dennis Nawrocki, Wayne State University, 2008  
 ▶ Alma College, Alma, MI  
 Comerica Bank Headquarters, Detroit, MI  
 Hyatt Hotels International Headquarters, Chicago, IL  
 Midland County Hospital, Midland, MI  
 National Education Association Headquarters, Washington, D.C.  
 Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI  
 Dow Automotive Company, Auburn Hills, MI
- Major Public Commissions* ▶ Windrapids II, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI  
 Gate with Angel's Wings, St. Mary's Women's Center, Ypsilanti, MI  
 Angel, St. Mary's Ambulatory Care Center, Saginaw, MI  
 Dawn's Gate III, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI  
 Unfolding Arch, Delta College, University Center, MI  
 Wind's Wings, Delta College, University Center, MI  
 Spirit Gate, Delta College, University Center, MI  
 Untitled, Butzel Long Attorneys, Detroit, MI (2)  
 Clytemnestra and Queen's Gate, Nikko Hotel, San Francisco, CA  
 Untitled, Crystal Glen Office Center, Novi, MI (2)  
 Guardian Presence, Ruby Memorial Medical Center, University of West Virginia, Morgantown, WV  
 Torii VIII, Second National Bank, Saginaw, MI  
 Gate, Art Center, Dearborn, MI  
 Entry Piece, Bicentennial Towers, Detroit, MI  
 Wall Piece, St. Mary's Medical Center, Grand Rapids, MI  
 Wall Piece, Temple Beth El, Midland, MI  
 Architectural Design, Hamilton Square Mall, Saginaw, MI  
 Ceiling Design, 1st Congregational Church, Saginaw, MI  
 Wall Relief, Oak Room Restaurant, Bay City, MI
- Selected Solo Exhibitions* Ella Sharp Museum, Jackson, MI, 2007  
 Midland Center for the Arts, Midland, MI, 2004  
 Kettering University, Flint, MI, 2002  
 Delta College, University Center, MI, 1998  
 Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, MI, 1997  
 General Motors Institute, Flint, MI, 1994  
 Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI, 1992  
 University of Michigan School of Art and Design, Ann Arbor, MI, 1991  
 Mott Community College, Flint, MI, 1987
- Recent Group Exhibitions* University of Michigan, Dearborn, MI, 2008  
 Saginaw Art Museum, Saginaw, MI, 2006  
 University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 2006  
 Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI, 2004  
 Flatlanders Gallery, Blissfield, MI, 2004  
 Ford Community Arts Center, Dearborn, MI, 2003  
 Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 2001  
 St. John's Center, Plymouth, MI, 2000  
 Krasl Art Center, St. Joseph, MI, 2000, 1998  
 Dennos Museum Center, Traverse City, MI, 1992  
 Southfield Outdoor Sculpture Invitational, Southfield, MI, 1993

Additional works in exhibition not illustrated in catalog

**Nancy Thayer**

*Singular Stalactite*, acrylic on canvas, 5' 1" h x 9" w, 2008

**Russell Thayer**

*Dawn's Gate II*, brass, cast bronze with limestone base, 2' 6" h x 2' 5 1/2" w x 7" d, 1999

*Garden Chair*, brass, 4' 8" h x 1' 4" w x 1' 4" d, 2006

*Stair Chair*, aluminum, wood, 4' 6" h x 1' 4" w x 1' 1 1/2" d, 2006

*Leaf Railing*, brass, 3' h x 10' 1" l, 1993

*Small study*, aluminum, 2' 8 1/2" h x 1' 7" w x 7 3/4" d, 2006

*Small figure*, cast bronze, 10 1/2" h x 4" w x 2 1/2" d, 2006

*Small figure*, cast bronze, 10 1/2" h x 4" w x 2 1/2" d, 2006

*Small figure*, cast bronze, 10 1/2" h x 4" w x 2 1/2" d, 2006

Large plaster figure, 5' 6" h, 2009

Maquettes of sculptures

*Angel*, St. Mary's Ambulatory Care Center, Saginaw, MI

*Gate*, Ford Community and Performing Arts Center, Dearborn, MI

*Unfolding Arch*, Delta College Library, University Center, MI

*Windrapids II*, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI



*michigan council for  
arts and cultural affairs*



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

AGENCY OF  
CREATIVE COUNCIL

This activity is supported by the  
MICHIGAN COUNCIL FOR ARTS AND  
CULTURAL AFFAIRS and the  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS.

