

EDUCATION GUIDE

MILDRED LANE KEMPER ART MUSEUM



**THADDEUS
STRODE:
ABSOLUTES
AND
NOTHINGS**

February 8 - April 21, 2008

About this Guide

This guide is designed as a companion to the special exhibition *Thaddeus Strode: Absolutes and Nothings*, part of the Kemper Art Museum's Contemporary Project series. Its primary aim is to provide a starting point for open discovery, facilitating the process of looking at and making meaning of the art in this exhibition.

In conjunction with the *Thaddeus Strode* exhibition, the Museum is offering a school and youth educational program entitled "Inventive Universes," using creative writing activities in the galleries to encourage a closer and more interactive exploration of Strode's paintings. For this program, the Museum has developed a creative writing prompt— included in this guide—that invites viewers to spend more time with a single work in the exhibition and take a multisensory approach to the artist's imaginative worlds.

This guide was prepared by Michael Murawski, coordinator of education and public programs at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. The exhibition overview and information on individual works of art are based on the catalog essays by curators Sabine Eckmann and Meredith Malone as well as an interview conducted with Thaddeus Strode for the Museum's newsletter *FYI*.

Thaddeus Strode: Absolutes and Nothings

Curated by Sabine Eckmann and Meredith Malone

Thaddeus Strode's paintings are wild mixtures of California surf and skateboard culture, comic books, rock music, literature, horror films, and Zen philosophy. Populated with a range of fantastic imagery—amalgamated creatures, comic characters, and impaled heads—Strode's dreamlike compositions play with the viewer's expectations and reward imaginative and eccentric interpretations.

Strode's paintings look messy. They are not only full of thick, dripping, and oozing paint, but they mix up all kinds of painting and graphic styles in a nonhierarchical and, indeed, disrespectful manner. Everything that has been carefully established as separate methods of painting over the course of the last century is freely juxtaposed in his massive canvases.

Thaddeus Strode: Absolutes and Nothings features twenty-three large-scale mixed-media paintings dating from 2001 to the present. Strode's paintings are primarily executed using the fast medium of acrylic paint. His work is compatible with the experience of a dense and fast-paced present yet there is an underlying opposition running throughout his compositions between **fast painting** and **slow viewing**. In contrast to his rapid working process, the various methods of abstract painting Strode employs—as well as the inclusion of a diversity of figurative elements—call for a prolonged viewing process that slowly reveals and uncovers.



Absolutes and Nothings, 2001. Mixed media on canvas, 86 ⁵/₈ x 83 ¹/₁₆" (220 x 211 cm). Private collection, Los Angeles.

In *Absolutes and Nothings* (2001), the work that provided the title for this exhibition, we are presented with a shaggy blond castaway dressed in tattered clothes, lounging in a makeshift hammock amidst a background of bright orange circles and hazy washes of yellow and orange. The dominant sensation evoked is a mixture of a hangover and heatstroke, with vibrant circles appearing like afterimages produced from staring at the sun too long. We cannot help

but think about the unfortunate series of events that might have brought the castaway to this island, and his attempts at rescue—evident in the bottles filled with messages at the upper left side of the canvas.

While we eagerly follow such hints that suggest a story or a hidden message, we are constantly distracted by the painterly abstractions in Strode's work. His paintings frustrate attempts to establish a consistent narrative while triggering a desire to playfully delve into the imaginary universes of paint, color, and form. In this way, Strode's paintings call on us to negotiate a barrage of materials and nonlinear narratives while encouraging us to actively engage with and expand upon the cues he lays down.

In *The Doppelganger's Boneyard* (2007)—over eight feet high and twenty-two feet long—we are engulfed in a massive dreamscape in which four eerie figures are mixed into layers upon layers of messy fields of color, spinning circles of spray paint, and cartoon-like flowers. Like many of the works in this exhibition, we are rewarded by a prolonged engagement with this immense painting. Allowing time for our eyes to wander across this canvas brings new details to light, while satisfying our curiosity as well as inspiring our creative imagination.

The addition of text bubbles, short phrases, and evocative titles further complicate Strode's already complex paintings. While some of his titles articulate what a title is traditionally supposed to communicate—to put into words what is depicted on the canvas—many of his titles convey fragments of narratives that are entirely autonomous from or indirectly complement what we see on the canvas.

“The way I work is as if I’m collaging things together, and I collage with language and I take things out of context—something I’ve read, from a song, something I’m thinking about—and then I layer them with something else. I do that with images and painting styles too.”

– Thaddeus Strode



The Doppelganger's Boneyard, 2007. Mixed media on canvas, 98¹³/₁₆ x 264¹/₁₆” (251 x 671 cm). Courtesy of neugerriemschneider, Berlin.



Suggestion Box, 2005. Mixed media on canvas, 83¹/₂ x 81¹⁵/₁₆” (212 x 208 cm). Private collection, St. Louis.

Artist Bio:

Born in 1964 in Santa Monica, California, Thaddeus Strode studied at the Otis/Parsons Art Institute and received his BFA from the California Institute of the Arts where he studied with artists and theorists as diverse as John Baldessari, Douglas Huebler, and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe. His work has been exhibited across the United States and internationally, including more than 20 solo gallery shows. His work is in public and private collections worldwide. Strode currently lives and works in Los Angeles. *Thaddeus Strode: Absolutes and Nothings* is his first solo museum exhibition in the United States.

“I’ll look at a piece of a magazine or a comic book, or an advertisement that has some kind of color, or even the section of a building or branch of a tree, and that’s literally how I’ll piece a lot of the paintings together. I think about it as constructing something and then taking it apart, constant adding and subtracting.”

– Thaddeus Strode



Under the Killing Moon (... Spilling and Spilling... There Was a Point Where No One Resisted) (2004) exemplifies the artist's technique in which he mixes a variety of dissonant elements to create a bizarre otherworld. The title is divided into two parts and points the reader in multiple directions at once. The first half alludes to the 1984 song *The Killing Moon* by Echo & the Bunnymen—a post-punk song that deals with fate, death, and desire, while the second half is more oblique and eerie. The image of the toad was taken from a mass-produced cookie jar that Strode bought at Wal-Mart. Computer keys moving horizontally across the canvas spell out words such as “creamy,” “spilling,” and “liberate,” in reference to the text of poorly composed but explicitly solicitous spam e-mails. These random bits of text, now ubiquitous in our inboxes, come together to form concrete poems on the canvas.

Through Strode's work, we observe untold stories that mingle with abstract patterns, and odd comic book characters that appear to have briefly left their stories to compete with abstract drips of paint and graffiti marks. Figuration clashes and merges with abstract imagery so that we are unable to clearly separate these methods from each other. An image such as *Suggestion Box* (2005) makes this plain, as discernable shapes and shadows transform into abstract markings and color fields.

Thaddeus Strode: Absolutes and Nothings offers an opportunity to critically consider the work of a contemporary painter who enthusiastically embraces an absurdist sensibility that mediates the contemporary American mindset and who openly conveys a spirit of intellectual curiosity and play.



Under the Killing Moon (... Spilling and Spilling... There Was a Point Where No One Resisted), 2004. Mixed media on canvas, 98 1/16 x 102" (249 x 259 cm). Goetz Collection, Munich.

“ I love the way music works and how it affects people; it's such a powerful medium. I'll use song titles or little bits and pieces of lyrics for a title or in a cartoon bubble to reference something. Even the way that, say, David Bowie and Beck would write down lyrics and clip them all up and paste them back together – that is akin to how I put a painting or drawing together. It's a process that is lyrical. ”

– Thaddeus Strode

“Inventive Universes” Free-form Writing Activity

Thaddeus Strode’s paintings can provide a wild viewing experience. When we look at his varied ways of applying paint, his eclectic mix of imagery, and his suggestive titles, we might get lost in a kind of story that never seems complete. At the same time, Strode’s paintings spark the imagination and provide a jumping off point from which we can create our own inventive tales.

Through this free-form creative writing activity, you will experience Strode’s paintings in a deliberately multisensory manner—spending some time with a single work in the exhibition and more fully exploring the imaginative universes before us.

- 1 After taking a walk through the exhibition, select one work that specifically interests or challenges you. Write the title of the painting in the space below.

- 2 Spend several minutes looking at your chosen painting. In the spaces below, try to write down at least 5 words or phrases that pertain to each category—all pulled from your experience with this single painting. Be as creative as possible, writing down descriptive adjectives, images, or even a name for one of the characters in the painting.

Colors & Textures

Place & Space

Sounds & Noises

Characters & Creatures

- 3 Continue to look at the painting. Now write down at least 5 words or phrases that suggest motion or action in the work.

Motions & Actions


- 4 With your lists of words in front of you, circle the words and phrases that are the most interesting to you. Feel free to circle words from the painting’s title, too. Your total should be about 15–20 words.

- 5 With your new group of circled words, start to write a free-form poem or story about this painting. Don’t worry if it’s not perfect or if it doesn’t make sense. Try to be as inventive as possible, collaging your words together in different and creative ways—echoing the wild and messy mix of styles and elements in Strode’s paintings.

- 6 Choose one word or phrase from your writing to be the title, write it above your final piece, and you’re done!

PODCAST AND AUDIO GUIDE

Check out the Museum's podcast and audio guide available for this exhibition!

Exhibition Highlights: Thaddeus Strode joins curators Sabine Eckmann and Meredith Malone to provide context and commentary on selected works from the exhibition. The  symbol next to a painting indicates that the work is featured in the audio guide.

There are two ways to access the audio guide:

- (1) You can download the video or audio files through the Kemper Art Museum's special exhibition podcast on iTunes, and bring your own iPod to the Museum, or
- (2) You can check out an iPod from the Visitor Services Desk during your visit.

Subscribe to the Special Exhibitions Podcast at:

<http://kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/podcast.html>

More information about our podcast, audio guide instructions, and a complete transcript for hearing-impaired visitors are available at the Visitor Services Desk.

SCHEDULE A FREE TOUR

To schedule a FREE tour for your group, organization, class, or friends and family, please contact Michael Murawski, coordinator of education and public programs, at murawski@wustl.edu or 314.935.7918

GENERAL INFORMATION

A stimulating and unique site to experience art, culture, and education in St. Louis, the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum is located on Washington University's Danforth campus near the corner of Skinker & Forsyth Blvds.

FREE and open to the public 11-6 every day except Tuesday; open 11-8 on Friday. Visitor parking available; easy MetroLink access (one block south of Forsyth station). 314.935.4523

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 Washington University in St. Louis
SAM FOX SCHOOL OF DESIGN & VISUAL ARTS

THADDEUS STRODE: ABSOLUTES AND NOTHINGS EVENTS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Artist Walk-through

Friday, February 8, 7:30 pm

Kemper Art Museum

Don't miss this unique opportunity to get the artist's perspective as Thaddeus Strode presents a walk-through of his exhibition during the spring opening with curators Sabine Eckmann and Meredith Malone. Exhibition opening begins at 7 pm.

Lecture: Douglas Fogle

Friday, February 15, 6:30 pm

Steinberg Hall Auditorium

Douglas Fogle, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh where he is organizing the 2008 Carnegie International, will discuss the field of contemporary painting. Reception begins at 6 pm in the Kemper Art Museum.

Curator's Dialogue

Thursday, March 27, 6:30 pm

Kemper Art Museum

Assistant Curator Meredith Malone leads a discussion and walk-through of *Thaddeus Strode*, discussing the curatorial process that went into bringing this exhibition to the Kemper Art Museum. Reception begins at 6 pm.



Executioners and Prisoners (Praise for the Morning), 2007. Mixed media on canvas, 97¹¹/₁₆ x 77⁹/₁₆" (248 x 197 cm).
Courtesy of neugerriemschneider, Berlin.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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