

David Cateforis, essay for “Susan White: *River of Solace, River of Hope*,” an installation in the exhibition, *Ephemera*, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas, October 19, 2017 – January 28, 2018. Originally published as a wall text in the gallery.

*Images of the installation follow the essay. Photographs by E.G. Schempf, courtesy Susan White.*

### **Susan White: *River of Solace, River of Hope***

From across the gallery, Susan White’s artwork intrigues and beckons us. At first, it seems to be a wall drawing comprising innumerable dark, sharp lines gathered in unruly configurations of different sizes and densities. Separated by expanses of white wall and crossing the room’s corner, the linear clusters limn a meandering course lightly rising and falling from about six to ten feet off the floor. Moving closer, we realize that the linear elements are spiky, interlocked thorns, some sunk directly into the wall. Different colors – muted yellows, yellow-greens, purples, blues and grays – cover the thorns’ surfaces. The clusters gain greater visual depth and density through the dark shadows they cast under the strong gallery lighting. We are invited to slow down, look closely, and savor the diversity of intersecting lines and subtle hues in each clutch of thorns, and to step back and appreciate the whole composition in its rich complexity. On one level the work asks nothing more – or less – of us. But its title, *River of Solace, River of Hope*, tells us the artist seeks to convey deeper meanings.

The Nerman Museum installation is the latest in a series of Thorn Works that Susan White has been making for over a decade, using the hard, sharp thorns of the honey locust tree, which the Kansas City artist harvests locally. These thorns, which can exceed a foot in length, grow directly out from the trunk of the tree and protect it from animals that would eat its bark. White treasures each thorn’s individuality and its combination of elegant beauty and sharp menace. She delights in the thorns’ natural colors – green when young, mahogany when mature, gray when old and dry – and is fascinated by the colorful lichen she finds attached to them.

White builds her Thorn Works through an accretive and unpremeditated process. She uses a wood burning tool to pierce one thorn and then inserts the tip of another into the hole to lock the thorns together. Proceeding thorn-by-thorn in this fashion she discovers intuitively the overall composition of her work through the act of creating it.

White compares the thorns to marks on paper and the process of combining them to making a drawing in space. She also uses her wood burning tools to scorch or burn marks on heavy rag paper resulting in nonrepresentational drawings she calls Pyrographs. The scorched marks of White’s Pyrographs often cluster along the central axis of a rectangle of paper the way her clutches of thorns travel across a wall.

White’s first Thorn Works were freestanding table-top-scale sculptures. Since 2012 she has also made temporary site-specific installations composed from sections of interlocked thorns transported from her studio to the gallery. Many of White’s past wall works were made of thorns painted a single color in acrylic, either crimson red or snow white. She has also made a series of wall-sized red, white and blue Thorn Works resembling the United States flag, including a disintegrating banner (*Flag II*, 2014) meant as a metaphor for the fractious state of our national politics. By contrast, a wall work entitled *Flock*, installed in September 2016 at the Volland Store in Alma, Kansas, presented ragged clusters of

unpainted mahogany-hued thorns scudding along a gently rising diagonal. It evoked groups of birds flying across the highway that White saw on her drives through open country.

Like *Flock*, White's work at the Nerman Museum arouses thoughts of nature. The artist likens the composition's rising and falling contours to those of Kansas's Flint Hills and notes that it was inspired by a horizontal Pyrograph possessing a similar landscape quality. The palette, described by the artist as "dusky," derives from the gorgeous muted colors of lichen encrusting a piece of bark she brought home from a thorn-gathering excursion. And here, for the first time, White has painted the thorns in oil rather than acrylic. She relishes the way the oil paint seeps naturally into the wood rather than coating its surface the way acrylic, a synthetic polymer paint, does.

The importance of nature as White's fundamental source of inspiration provides the key to understanding this work's title. *River of Solace, River of Hope* may suggest a likeness between the thorn-clusters' wandering course and that of a river, but what White wants to emphasize are the qualities of solace and hope – so desperately needed in our disaster- and hate-filled world. Some seek these qualities in religion and many viewers have seen Christian symbolism in White's work. This is not White's intention; she embraces a non-sectarian spirituality abiding in nature that she channels into culture. Hers is a work that invites us to share in the affirmative energy and transporting beauty that both art and nature offer to console us – even in the darkest times.

David Cateforis  
Professor and Chair of Art History  
The University of Kansas

















