

Denyse Thomasos: just beyond

This first-ever career retrospective of the late Trinidadian-Canadian artist Denyse Thomasos (1964–2012) is a celebration of the painter and her singular voice in modern abstraction. She immigrated to Toronto in the 1970s with her family from Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, and began painting around the age of 15, quickly finding that the medium was a foundation to anchor herself in society. Inquisitive and socially conscious about the systems and institutions around her, Thomasos commonly wove a political thread throughout her practice. Ten years after her death, her studies on mass incarceration and confinement remain as relevant as ever.

The never-before-seen studio footage and personal journals on view provide glimpses into the artist's innermost thoughts, her rigorous research practice, and the gradual development of her unique artistic language. Thomasos's skillful use of colour, her confident lines that are simultaneously gestural and architectural, and challenging narratives are evident in every stage of her brief yet remarkable career.

Organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, and Remail Modern, Saskatoon.

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Room 501

Hybrid Nations

In 2005, the AGO invited contemporary artists to create site-specific wall works as the gallery was undergoing a massive

renovation. Thomasos worked on her commission, *Hybrid Nations*, directly in Leonard Gallery, which currently houses the AGO's European collection. In this photograph, the artist can be seen at work. The massive mural was positioned in the centre of a computer-generated rendering of a panopticon, a building designed to allow for constant surveillance of occupants from a single vantage point without the occupants knowing if and when they are being watched. Thomasos surrounds her linear, roofless panopticon with hand-painted structures, while rigid cells devolve into curved forms, referencing ribcages and boats. The symbols in this work serve as a reminder that the prison industrial complex represents a modern manifestation of the transatlantic slave trade.

Image caption: Denyse Thomasos working on *Hybrid Nations* in Leonard Gallery, Art Gallery of Ontario, 2005. Photograph © AGO.

Maiden Flight

2010

acrylic on canvas

Gift of Gabrielle Israelievitch, in memory of her beloved husband Jacques, 2018

2018/5

Room 502

The Grid

“Process is an insistence of structure.” — Denyse Thomasos

As Thomasos began to move away from figurative painting in the 1990s, she found her own way to confront the real world through abstraction.

Abstract art, by definition, does not provide an accurate depiction of a visual reality; the artist instead used colour, form, and gestural marks that do not explicitly reference the real world. Thomasos employed these formal techniques but also included identifiable motifs, such as boats, in her canvases.

Thomasos often referenced the grid, a pervasive modernist device, and made it her own. Her recurring grids serve both formal and philosophical purposes, taking the shape of cages and cargo in reference to the claustrophobic conditions of slave ships and prisons—sites of structural racism. Thomasos asserted her right to obliterate such longstanding conventions and commonly rooted real-world references into her painting.

Urban Rhyme

1994

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Tickled Restriction

1994

acrylic on canvas

Collection of McMillan LLP

Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)

1993

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Cadillac Fairview

The early 1990s signaled Thomasos's shift into abstraction. In this work, she references the transatlantic slave trade—specifically, the claustrophobic boats constructed to transport enslaved Africans to the Americas. These structures of confinement would continue to preoccupy her research. Thomasos uses line to convey the inhumane conditions of the boats, arranging the black marks in a way to suggest a suffocating cage. The title, *Dos Amigos*, references a 19th-century slave ship that carried enslaved Africans to Cuba. Using an unassuming palette of black, white, and grey, and employing a deceptively simple painting vocabulary of gridded latticework, Thomasos creates a visual experience that conjures the stifling intensity of a ship's hold.

Virtual Incarceration

1999

acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Rally

1994

acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Thomasos spent the early 1990s teaching art in Philadelphia. During this period, she witnessed the devastating conditions many Black people lived in due to poverty. The artist revealed that “the immediate experience of urban collapse had a psychological effect on my works.” She also began her research on mass incarceration during this time.

Here, Thomasos paints countless grids in a variety of colours, inspired by the brightly painted row houses she saw in Philadelphia. In a 2012 artist statement, she described seeing pink, green, and bright-blue homes situated beside bombed-out or abandoned houses. She wrote, “I developed my palette from the contradiction of brights and greys intermingled, symbolizing life among the dead.”

Urban Jewel

1995

acrylic on canvas

The Collection of Tricon Residential Inc., Toronto, Canada

Swamp

1996

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Recollect

1994

acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Interview:

Artist Linda Martinello recalls her time as Thomasos's former studio assistant and mentee.

video (colour, sound, 4 min. 7 sec.)

Room 509

Artist Residences

Artist residencies were an integral part of Thomasos's development as a painter. She participated in programs all over the world, from the Yaddo artist residency in Saratoga Springs, New York, to a Sanskriti residency near Delhi, India. Thomasos produced the works in this section—stylistically unique in her oeuvre—during her Ucross Foundation residency in Wyoming. Experimental, colourful, and unusual, they trace the beginnings of her approach to line and colour that she carried into her later work. Thomasos revealed that after each residency she “taught herself” how to paint again. The Wyoming works reflect her dedication to the act of painting.

Located outside 509:

Inside Wyoming

2001

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Jack Coyne, New York

Located inside 509:

Untitled

around 2000

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Open Range Wyoming

2000

pencil, charcoal, and acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Cowboy Interior

2000

acrylic on paper

Collection of David and Stacey Sharpe

Wyoming Trail

2000

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Yellowstone Steam

2000

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Cowboy

2000

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Working Process: Archives and Sketchbooks

Some of Thomasos's diaries, sketches, photo albums, slides, and other objects (including the shoes she wore while painting) are presented in display cases and on screens throughout the exhibition. These items have graciously been loaned to the AGO by members of the artist's family, and give us an intimate view into the methods that were foundational to Thomasos's working process.

The exhibition includes a selection of photographic materials from her extensive documentation of the indigenous structures she saw during her travels and that came to inspire her approach to abstraction. Similarly, the sketches reveal how her real-world experiences were translated into her personal, painted vocabulary. These sketchbooks are more accurately described as diaries because they contain as much personal reflection on Thomasos's life as they do artistic exploration. For Thomasos, life and art were inextricably linked.

Table case display:

Sketchbooks and notebooks

2000s

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Wyoming Attitude

2000

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Room 508

Kingdom Come

These preparatory drawings for *Kingdom Come*—a site-specific wall work Thomasos made for Oakville Galleries in 2011—provide a glimpse into the artist’s onsite working process.

For this installation, Thomasos focused on climate change—specifically how economic inequality and environmental racism can affect certain communities and their response to ecological devastation. To express this message, Thomasos created a futuristic and ethereal floor-to-ceiling world: boat-like pods float above a high-tech, “green” rooftop garden seen from an aerial view. However, only wealthy corporations can afford the staggering costs of this progressive architecture, leaving the majority of the population without eco-friendly housing. In an essay about this work, artist John Armstrong writes, “Thomasos wonders what the politics of responding to climate change might be across economic strata. Who will be left adrift, exposed in a chain of empty vessels, and who will be lodged somewhere beneath a canopy of temperate and lavish science?”

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of the Visual Arts Collection, McGill University,
purchased with support from staff and student alumni of the
McGill Visual Arts Collection

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of the Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, donated by Dr. Carlyle Farrell

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Dr. Carlyle Farrell

This is one of several preparatory works Thomasos made for *Kingdom Come*, her site-specific installation at Oakville Galleries in 2011. She marked up the paper with ideas she wanted to convey in her installation; scribbled across the page are words and phrases like “prisons as pods,” “boats, coffins,” “high tech. cutting edge,” “roof innovation,” “green garden,” “moss insulation,” and more. Through this glimpse into her working process, we can see how she came to infuse the mural, a futuristic urban-scape, with issues of class and race.

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Program of the Gordon Foundation, administered by the Ontario Arts Foundation, and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2022

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Elizabeth L. Gordon Art Program of the Gordon Foundation, administered by the Ontario Arts Foundation, and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2022

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Oakville Galleries, gift of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos, 2021

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Andrew Piotrowski

Table case display:

Kingdom Come installation table

artist's shoes, installation photographs, and paint containers

Materials courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos, Andrew Piotrowski, Oakville Galleries, and Linda Martinello

Thomasos's former studio assistant, artist Linda Martinello, mixed these paint containers so we could recreate the working area Thomasos used at Oakville Galleries while installing *Kingdom Come* in 2011.

Room 503

Sailor I

2000

acrylic on board

Collection of Robert Palombi

Sailor II

2000

acrylic on board

Weisz Family Collection

Room 504

The Figure

“My early work was both an attempt to capture the emotion of isolation and a means to learn about myself with respect to Black culture, history, and politics.” — Denyse Thomasos

Thomasos received her undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto Mississauga (1984–1987) and completed her graduate studies at Yale University (1987–1989). As a student, Thomasos painted real-world imagery in a figurative style, and the works on view in this section are important precursors to the abstract forms for which she became best known.

In the mid-1980s, Thomasos began exploring tropes that would recur in her oeuvre, including skulls, cages, and other architectural structures. Early works such as *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (1984–1985) are nuanced, psychological depictions that reveal Thomasos’s heavily researched, politically rigorous, and deeply personal artistic vision. Issues of identity, including her family’s immigration from Trinidad and Tobago to Canada, also underpin the artist’s thematic interests.

Untitled (Self-Portrait)

1984–1985

acrylic on canvas

Gift of Gail and Gerald Luciano, in memory of Denyse Thomasos,
2022

2022/27

Table case display:

Foundations

The items in this case highlight Thomasos's foundations as an artist. Photographs from her youth and student years, early student work, studies, posters, and a self-portrait reveal the evolution of her practice during the 1980s and 1990s.

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos, The Luciano Family, and Garvin Linley

1. Self-portrait, charcoal on paper, early 1980s
2. Photograph of the artist installing *Tracking*, 2004, mid-1980s
3. Artist Alex Colville presenting Thomasos with an award, mid-1980s
4. Family photographs, from around 1965 to 1981
5. Spring Madness poster, C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute, around 1983
6. Untitled relief print, mid-1980s
7. Untitled etching, mid-1980s

8. *Annotated page from book, mid-1980s*

9. *Untitled (Figure study)*, acrylic on board, around 1984

10. Preparatory photographs for *Untitled [Interior]* painting, Yale University, c. 1988.

This painting is hanging on the nearby wall.

Interview:

Artist and professor John Armstrong reflects on Thomasos's student years and early work.

video (colour, sound, 4 min. 3 sec.)

Untitled (Interior with figures)

1986

acrylic on canvas

Gift of Gail and Gerald Luciano, in memory of Denyse Thomasos,
2022

2022/26

Sacrifice

1989

etching

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos and The Luciano
Family

Sacrifice

1989

acrylic on canvas

Gift of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos, through the American Friends of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Inc., 2022

2022/9

This early work is among the first major paintings in which Thomasos directly references her research on slavery. To create this dark and confined space, she uses a muted colour palette. A black horse hangs above a pile of human skulls, hoisted in the air by an old-fashioned sling with pulls, straps, and a large counterweight resembling a body bag. The looseness of Thomasos's approach is evident in her gestural brushstrokes. In this haunting and unnerving scene, the skulls fade into the background as though they are infinite.

Preparatory photographs and a related print are on view nearby.

Room 510

Late Work

The works in this section were found in the artist's studio after her death. It is clear Thomasos was taking her practice in a new direction by demonstrating her skill with colour and emphasizing the importance of increasingly unrestrained linework in her practice. Some familiar motifs, like boats, also appear in these later canvases. Although we can only speculate what Thomasos would be producing today, these works emphasize her engagement with the world around her and her ever-evolving style.

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Anita Lorelli and Mark Wallace

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Paul and Mary Dailey Desmarais III

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Jack Coyne, New York

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Bob Harding

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Joel Ray and Marian Vermeulen

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Michelle Koerner and Kevin Doyle

Untitled

2012

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Dr. Ken Sealey

Room 505

Aesthetics of Survival

“At its core, my art is about survival.” — Denyse Thomasos

The monumental works in this section highlight several motifs Thomasos continued to develop throughout the 2000s, from cross-hatched metal cages and boats to human ribcages and cell-like structures. As she continued her research on prisons and other structures of confinement, she advanced her artistic language.

Thomasos’s Caribbean identity is also largely reflected in her aesthetic style. She and her family had to navigate complex racial and cultural issues when they immigrated to Canada, and scholar Dr. Marsha Pearce insists that Thomasos’s paintings “bear a particular will to survive, as articulated by Caribbean people.” Thomasos revealed in 2011: “More and more, I recognize that my interest in imprisonment in the outside world actually stems from my own feelings of isolation and the ways I have had to survive that. With every line, every mark, it’s a language that I weave together to survive.”

Night

2009

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Anchor

2009

acrylic on canvas

Royal Bank of Canada Art Collection

Raft

2011

acrylic on canvas

The Collection of Tricon Residential Inc., Toronto, Canada

Albatross

2010

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Shelli Cassidy-McIntosh and Mike McIntosh

Life

2009

acrylic on canvas

Museum of Art Collection Trust, McMaster Museum of Art,
McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario

Arc

2009

acrylic on canvas

Purchase, with funds from the Women's Art Initiative, 2022

2021/356

This vibrant, eleven-by-twenty-foot painting—the same dimensions as Thomasos's former East Village studio wall—reveals traces of the artist's body through swoops, strokes, and drips of paint. This was the largest scale in which the artist worked.

Two massive ribcage-like forms dominate the upper half of the composition. The ribcage—an arc in itself—appears sporadically throughout Thomasos's work. She subtly infuses her work with personal meaning (once revealing that the ribcage motif symbolizes her father), while simultaneously addressing larger political concerns. She again employs the skull motif in this work, but here she renders the forms loosely and colourfully. Spilling into the foreground and commanding our attention, the skulls represent Thomasos's commitment to calling out systemic racism and structures of oppression.

Dwelling – Prison

2005–2006

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Barbara Shum and Manos Vourkoutiotis

Dwelling – Caves

2005–2006

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Rosamond Ivey

Dwelling – Dogon Caves

2005–2006

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Dwelling — Tower of Babel

2005–2006

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Megan Long

Interview:

Curator Michelle Jacques discusses what Thomasos meant to her, as both an artist and friend.

video (colour, sound, 4 min. 15 sec.)

Metropolis

2007

acrylic, charcoal, and porous-point marker on canvas

Purchase, with the assistance of the Toronto International Art Fair
2007 Opening Night

Preview, and with the Financial Support of the Canada Council for
the Arts Acquisition

Assistance Program, 2008

Room 506

Dismantle #1

1998

acrylic on canvas

Hart House Collection HH1999.001, University of Toronto.
Purchased by the Art Committee with financial support from the
Canada Council for the Arts Acquisitions Assistance Program,
1999.

Dismantle #11

1998

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Sun Life

Dismantle #12

1998

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Sun Life

Dismantle #13

1998

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Sun Life

SAMEIN PRIESTER

born New York City, New York, United States, 1974

Battleground

2022

video (colour, sound, 7 min. 23 sec.)

Courtesy of the artist

Dismantle #2

1998

acrylic on canvas

Gift of Richard and Donna Ivey, 2019

2019/2432

Room 507

Excavations

“My paintings came from thinking about the world politically—they came from my own sense of isolation and my own sense of psychology.” — Denyse Thomasos

After the tragic 9/11 attacks, Thomasos began travelling as a way to disconnect from the stresses of the New York art scene. She explored India, South China, Mali, Cambodia and several other countries, expressing that her “agenda when travelling [was] figuring out indigenous structures.” From Vietnam’s terraced rice fields and the handmade mud mosques en route to Timbuktu, to the abandoned temples hidden in Mongolia’s cliff- sides and the elaborate Shekhavati wall murals in India, Thomasos would photograph buildings, caves, dwellings, and, as the artist put it, “anything that could teach me about the politics of the country I was in.” The works in this section reveal how Thomasos’s travels inspired the abstract, linear language she developed throughout her practice.

Table case display:

Travel albums

2000s

Courtesy of The Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Thomasos travelled extensively between 2001 and 2012, photographing her way across the globe. These six albums contain some of her travel photographs from Peru, Southeast Asia, India, China, Mali, Senegal, and South Africa.

For more travel photographs, see the iPad in this gallery.

travel iPad

selection of digitized photo transparencies (TK min.)

Images courtesy of the Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Denyse Thomasos took hundreds of photographs during her travels in the 2000s. She often saved her photographs in transparency format, so she could project images in large scale onto her studio walls. The photographs on this iPad are digitized scans from a binder of transparencies—one of many resources documenting her travels.

Blue Entwined, Yaddo

2002

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Emlyn McIntosh

Shanghai at Night

2003

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Andrew Piotrowski

Burial

2004

acrylic, watercolour, ink, and graphite on paper

Collection of Michael Devlin, New York

Wishing Well, Yaddo

2002

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Untitled

2003

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Michelle Koerner and Kevin Doyle

Excavations: Courtyards in Surveillance

2007

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Bob Harding

Excavations: Jaipur Royal Visit

2007

acrylic on canvas

Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank / Collection de la
Banque d'art du Conseil

des arts du Canada

Excavations: Jaisalmer Night Suspension

2007

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Richard and Donna Ivey

Excavations: Shekhavati Walls

2007

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Hazel Linley

Excavations: Jodhpur Roof Tops

2007

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Robin & David Young

Excavations: Dogon Dwellers

2007

acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Untitled

2004

acrylic, watercolour, ink, and graphite on paper

Collection of Michael Devlin, New York

Yangtze Boat

2003

acrylic on paper

Collection of Dr. Carlyle Farrell

Burial on Yellow Mount

2004

acrylic, watercolour, ink, and graphite on paper

Collection of Michael Devlin, New York

Room 500

Babylon

2005

acrylic on canvas

The Donovan Collection, University of St. Michael's College

Thomasos continued to develop her artistic vocabulary in the mid-2000s. This work reveals the new ways in which she experimented with line, structure, and colour. The recognizable grids from her earlier work are gone, but the dense matrix of brushstrokes creates the effect of a packed, urban space.

References to the language of graffiti are present, and the canvas appears to vibrate with the infrastructure and energy of a city.

Biblical references also recur in Thomasos's work, and this work's

title may be a direct reference to the troubled and immoral Mesopotamian city that reappears throughout the Christian Bible.