

Teacher Resource

**DENYSE THOMASOS:
JUST BEYOND**

OCTOBER 8, 2022 – FEBRUARY 19, 2023

AGO

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Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012. Acrylic on canvas, overall 186.1 x 242.6 cm. Collection of Bob Harding. © Denyse Thomasos Estate and Olga Korper Gallery.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Art, Media Arts, Literacy, Social Studies and Humanities, Language

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

The Art Gallery of Ontario and Remai Modern organized this retrospective of the late Trinidadian-Canadian painter, *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond*.

just beyond positions Denyse Thomasos (1964-2012) as one of Canada's finest painters to emerge in the 1990s; her work has left an indelible, yet frequently overlooked, mark on contemporary painting. Challenging the limits of abstraction, she infused personal and political content into the medium of painting. At a time when many of her peers were addressing issues such as histories of violence, power and systemic oppression through installation, photography, and mixed media, the artist was able to use a traditional medium in an innovative manner. With pattern, scale and repetition, Thomasos conveyed the vastness of events such as the transatlantic slave trade and the mass incarceration without exploiting the images of those who were most affected by these occurrences.

The exhibition is organized chronologically, with thematic chapters that follow the artist's main areas of research. Each theme is illustrated with major works that attest to her artistic excellence. Working closely with Thomasos's family and dealer, the curators have selected approximately 70 paintings—many of them rarely seen publicly—as well as sketches, photographs, newly uncovered documentary material and footage of Thomasos working in her studio.



Denyse Thomasos, *Maiden Flight*, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, overall 152.4 x 182.9 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Gift of Gabrielle Israelievitch in memory of her beloved husband, Jacques. © Denyse Thomasos Estate and Olga Korper Gallery, 2018/5.

ARTIST BIO

Born in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, Denyse Thomasos emigrated to Canada at age six and was raised in the suburbs of Toronto. In the early 1970s, there was little focus on cultural education in the Toronto public education system, and so Thomasos's awareness and knowledge of Black culture and history was limited. Her early works reflect her search for identity in respect to Black culture, history and politics.¹

Thomasos is known to be one of the many Pan-Africanism artists whose repertoire documents and reflects the trauma, resilience and resistance that have resulted from "the Maafa". "The Maafa" is a term used to describe the historical monstrosities and atrocities committed against people of African descent, often referring to the transatlantic slave trade and its rippling aftermath. Thomasos explains that she "was struck by the premeditated, efficient, dispassionate records of human beings as cargo and also by the deplorable conditions of the slave ships—so many Africans stacked and piled into the tiny, airless holds."² Her use of lines in deep space recreate "these claustrophobic conditions, leaving no room to breathe."³

Thomasos is best known for her large-scale, abstract paintings in which she was inspired by a wide variety of sources, including Caribbean textiles, shipyards, slave ships, villages, maximum security prisons and graveyards. Abstraction is used to express the complexity of slavery and the psychological consequences of slavery, racism, displacement, isolation and confinement that continue to be experienced by people of colour.⁴ One of the most stylistic motifs Thomasos revisits time and time again is the unique use of lines. In an artist statement, Thomasos states that lines acted like building materials in which she tells the story of slavery as an analogy for psychological confinement.⁵ These lines also echo the makeshift structures found in shantytowns of Trinidad. Thomasos's inspirations through Black culture and history and natural architecture are seen throughout her repertoire.

In addition to referencing her interest in urban density and architecture, Thomasos's colour palette and recurring motifs are inspired by societies in West Africa, India and China. She traveled to these areas to research Indigenous structures. As these three non-Western societies are also the three main cultural influences in Trinidadian cultural heritage, Thomasos was able to better understand her Trinidadian heritage through her research.

She spent most of her professional career in Philadelphia and New York City. When Thomasos died suddenly in 2012 at 47 years old, she was at the height of her career, with major museum shows, a full professorship, New York and Toronto gallery representation, and many prestigious awards and residencies.

[1-5] Denyse Thomasos, "Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice," in publication to accompany the exhibition *Urban Jewels: Denyse Thomasos' Big Canvases, 1993 - 1999*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2013



SPOTLIGHT I

DISMANTLE #2



Denyse Thomasos, *Dismantle #2*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas. Overall: 160 x 183 x 4.1 cm. Gift of Richard and Donna Ivey, 2019. © Denyse Thomasos Estate and Olga Korper Gallery. 2019/2432.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

- Follow the lines in the painting. Where do your eyes go? How do the lines lead you through the artwork? How do the lines make you feel?
- How would you describe it to someone who has never seen it? What descriptive words would you use?
- What feelings do you think the artist is trying to communicate?
- If this artwork has a sound, what would it sound like? What would it smell like?

CONTEXT

Thomasos's work reflects patterns and forms that have shaped the complicated concept of "home" for Black diasporic communities. Her tight, grid-like paintings evoke the claustrophobic structures of transport and confinement that were central to the transatlantic slave trade. Thomasos's paintings often reflected the history of slavery and the forced transportation of human beings as cargo across the Atlantic. Her use of lines also serves as symbolic references where cross-hatches represent labour in the fields, or the recording of time or scratching at a wall, and tally lines as tallies of Africans on slave ships, "as if livestock".⁶

In *Dismantle #2*, Thomasos's references the slave cages and pens can be seen alongside abstract representation of urbanism and architecture. Her thatch-work strokes also suggest the woven material of African textiles, as well as the shipping containers that facilitate the global flow of commodities (and people) today.

CREATIVE RESPONSE

Create your own abstract urban landscape

- Find yourself a view of your neighbourhood, be it on a walk or out your window. Take a moment to look at the lines that make up the buildings around you.
- Use your pencil, colour pencil, or marker and draw out the buildings you see. Try only using straight lines, as Thomasos does in *Dismantle #2*.
- Once done, turn your paper 90 degrees, change colours, and draw the scene again. What do you notice on your second time drawing that you might have missed the first time? Consider how your page gets increasingly full with lines.
- Continue to turn your page. Feel free to turn your page a few more times. If you changed colours every time, how do the colours contribute to the overall look of the piece? If you only used pencil and your piece is monochromatic, how does the lack of colour affect the representation of urban architecture?
- Once you are happy with your work, give your piece a title. You could even do the activity a few times and number your work, just as Thomasos does in *Dismantle #2*.
- Share your creations with us on social media using #AGOSchools!

[6] Denyse Thomasos, "Ideas That Inform My Work and Practice," in publication to accompany the exhibition *Urban Jewels: Denyse Thomasos' Big Canvases, 1993 - 1999*, MacLaren Art Centre, 2013

SPOTLIGHT 2

METROPOLIS



Denyse Thomasos, *Metropolis*, 2007. Acrylic, charcoal, porous-point marker on canvas. Unframed: 214 x 335.6 x 3.5 cm. Art Gallery of Ontario. Purchased 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. © Denyse Thomasos Estate and Olga Korper Gallery. 2007/241.

GUIDED OBSERVATION

- Take 30 seconds to look at this art piece. Notice how the lines and colours interact with one another. What does this painting remind you of?
- What do you think the artist wanted to communicate? What do you see in the artwork that makes you say that?
- How does the artist create movement in the work?
- In real life, this painting is over 2 metres wide and 3 metres tall. How does the scale of this painting change how you feel?

CONTEXT

Throughout her extensive travels, Thomasos was always interested and inspired by urban architecture and cityscapes. In *Metropolis*, Thomasos combines architectural and figurative elements woven into a dense overlay of yellows, oranges, browns and reds. Thomasos said that *Metropolis* “symbolically represents my generation’s coming-of-age. We witness great cities and powerful nations all connected, interdependent and intertwined, yet their common destiny is tenuous and uncertain.”⁷

The abstract composition of *Metropolis* is up for interpretation. While the main architectural element has been described as an inverted buttress or a giant gripping claw, it can also resemble that of a rib cage.⁸ Regardless of the viewer’s interpretation, the notion of confinement, whether it be architectural or psychological, is charged with energy and tangible through Thomasos’s brush strokes.

CREATIVE RESPONSE

Thomasos’s large-scale paintings are evocative of urban architecture and vibrant cityscapes. Inspired by these painting, create a sculptural representation of a structural composition.

- Take a sheet of paper and cut it diagonally to create an equilateral triangle. The base of the triangle should be facing you, with the vertex at the top.
- Draw a horizon line close to the base.
- Add vertical lines that extend all the way toward the angled sides to create a cityscape.
- Add in shapes, lines, colours and textures to capture the vibrancy of a bustling city.
- Walk around your artwork. What would you add? What would you take away? What might you add to change the mood of the work? How would that impact the overall feel?

Your final piece can be digital or mixed media.

Share your creations at #AGOSchools

[7] “Summer in the City,” Art Gallery of Ontario, <https://ago.ca/learn/ago-makes/summer-city>

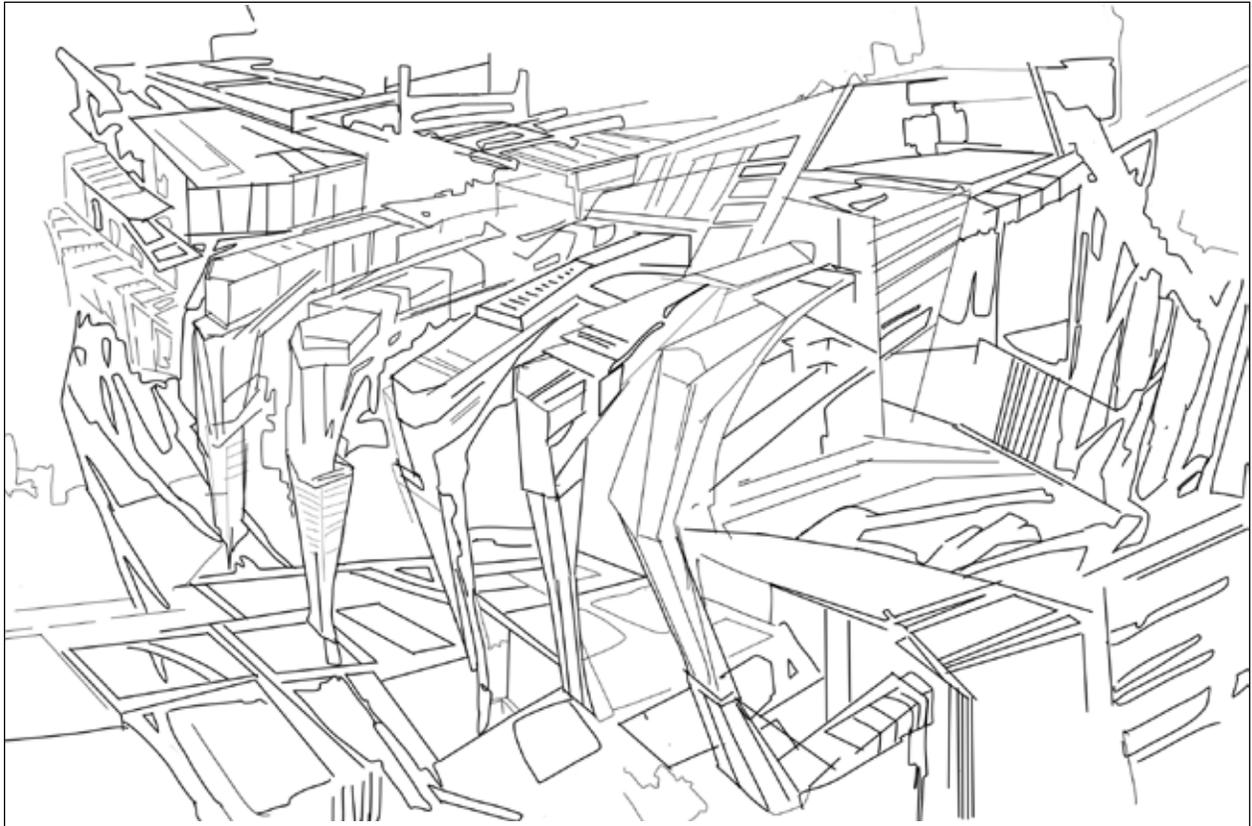
[8] Sarah Milroy, “Denyse Thomasos broke out of her own mould,” *The Globe and Mail*, 23 November 2012, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/denyse-thomasos-broke-out-of-her-own-mould/article5591670/>

Design (or colour) your own urban city using strong shapes, forms and lines!⁸

What colours will you use to make these shapes pop out? Will you use earthy tones, like browns and yellows, as Thomasos did? How about cool tones, like blues and purples? Visit [AGO.ca/learn/ago-makes/summer-city](https://ago.ca/learn/ago-makes/summer-city)

[8] "Summer in the City," Art Gallery of Ontario, <https://ago.ca/learn/ago-makes/summer-city>

Continue your creativity with this *Metropolis* colouring activity:



Book your visit today!

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