

Denyse Thomasos

An odyssey through the prisons, burial sites and slave ships of Black history.

by Portia Priegert

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Denyse Thomasos, "Sparrow," 2010, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72" (© courtesy the estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto)

Several mesmerizing paintings by the late Denyse Thomasos, a Trinidadian-born artist who grew up in Toronto, bear the names of birds. It's an emotive gesture, calling to mind diasporic transience and migration – forced transport across the Atlantic, fuelled by the hateful ideologies of slavery, as well as more recent journeys across the Mediterranean by Africans seeking refuge from desperate conditions at home.

Other avian metaphors can be found in Thomasos's stunning solo show, *Odyssey*, on view at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria until March 13. Essentially, her paintings reflect aspects of the built environment, evoking shifting permutations of boats, coffins and prisons, as well as any number of dwelling spaces, ranging from apartment buildings to shanty-town huts. Occupying an ambivalent space between abstraction and representation, these elaborate and layered constructions can resemble floating islands approached from above – a bird's-eye view.

Sparrow, for instance, painted two years before the artist's death in 2012 at age 47 from an allergic reaction during a diagnostic medical procedure, feels aqueous. It offers a plethora of lines, both thick and thin, that suggest board walkways and moored boats, amidst a melee of competing rhythms and colours. This complex swirl almost becomes a nest – a human nest. It's a tricky chimera, though. Viewed more closely, individual elements refuse definitive categories. As one studies them, boats morph into coffins or houses, then back again.

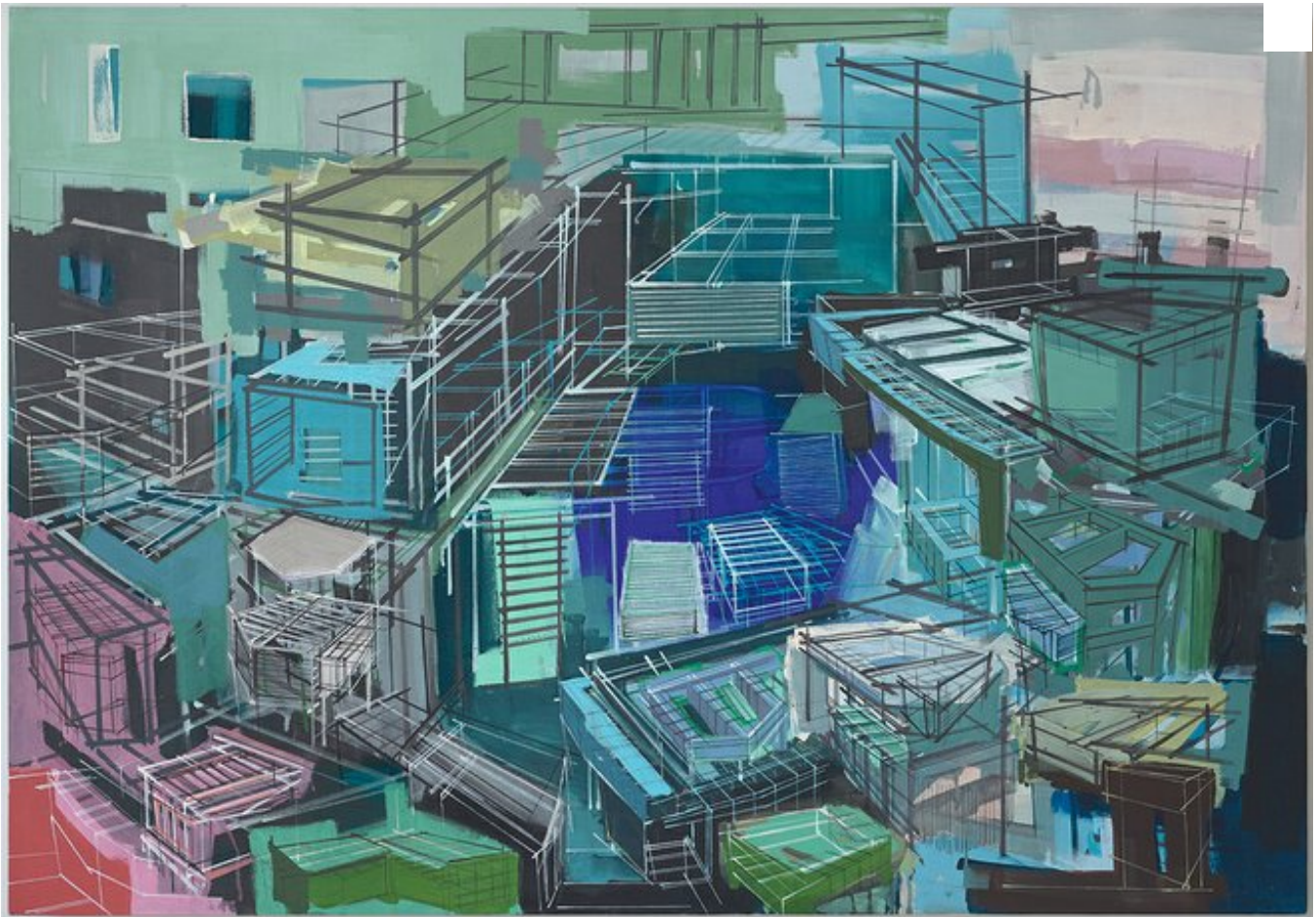
Albatross, completed the same year, shares a similar visual language but is less watery. Its towering imagery suggests a ship. But, look again, and it seems to disgorge myriad smaller craft. Or, perhaps, it is coffins spilling from a ghostly death boat. And the titular albatross? The large itinerant seabird comes with rich literary associations, accursedness and psychological burden among them.



Denyse Thomasos, "Odyssey," 2011, acrylic on canvas, 73" x 96" (© courtesy of the estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto)

Thomasos often spoke of her interest in structures used to confine people of colour, such as slave boats, burial sites and prisons. A professor at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey – she had completed her MFA with a scholarship at the Yale School of Art after studying at the University of Toronto and was researching America’s prisons, often run as profitable businesses incarcerating astonishing numbers of Black men. She had visited a superjail in Maryland, and had started to explore that theme in her studio, but said in a [2010 interview](#) with the National Post, that her latest work “kind of turned into bird machines or winged objects. There’s freedom to them, but if you look closely, they’re still made of small prison forms and containers.”

Thomasos, in a 2012 artist statement, described how her interest in slave ships developed. “I 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. In my artworks, I used lines in deep space to recreate these claustrophobic conditions, leaving no room to breathe. To capture the feeling of confinement, I created three large-scale black-and-white paintings of the structures that were used to contain slaves – and left such catastrophic effects on the black psyche: the slave ship, the prison, and the burial site. These became archetypal for me. I began to reconstruct and recycle their forms in all of my works.”



Denyse Thomasos, “Excavations: Jodhpur Rooftops,” 2007, acrylic on canvas, 42” x 60” (© courtesy of the estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto)

Thomasos travelled widely to Europe, Asia and Africa, seeking to expand her perspective on human history. Her visits included the ancient hanging coffins on cliffs along China’s Yangtze River before the area was flooded for

the immense Three Gorges Dam hydroelectric project. Her smaller sketches show an energetic and gestural hand, qualities that remain evident in her largest paintings.

The show, which includes more than 50 works from across her career, is effectively installed on industrial grey walls that resonate with the paintings' matte tones. Digital images fail to capture the work's full appeal – this is a show well worth a visit.

The originating institution, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, near Toronto, has produced a catalogue that includes a conversation between the show's organizers, Sarah Milroy, chief curator at the McMichael, and Gaëtane Verna, director of the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto.

Thomasos was fascinated by all she learned, says Verna, who first saw her work in 2000. "Denyse was joyful, and totally believed in life. At the time of her death, she was living her best life. She took tremendous pleasure in finding Samein, her life partner, in finally having a child – their daughter, Syann – in her exhibiting, in her teaching. What's the expression in English? Everything was coming up roses."



Denyse Thomasos, "Untitled," 2012, acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24" (© courtesy of the estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto)

The catalogue includes a remarkable essay by acclaimed Victoria novelist, Esi Edugyan. She observes that Thomasos did not paint people marked by injustice, preferring the more oblique reverberations of the spaces

that confined them.

“Instead of the slave, we have the slave ship – but half constructed, as if the possibility of freedom still exists,” she writes. “Instead of the glass ceiling, we have the roofless skyscraper, as if the limits on human achievement haven’t yet been imposed. Instead of the prisoner, we have the blueprints for the prison, as if the whole enterprise were in its early stages, as if there were time to turn things back, to not build it, to choose differently. The sense of possibility and openness in her work arises from what remains undone, as if a moral awakening might arrive in the eleventh hour. As if we might yet be saved.”

American poet Maya Angelou, in her 1969 autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, recounts how a love of literature helped her overcome trauma and racism. Thomasos, in her work, also seems to offer a path forward, a space where the bird can take flight. In her paintings, doors are open, restraining bars are gapped and airy. What she portrays, after all, are empty spaces, devoid of figurative elements. Against a historical narrative of overwhelming wrongs, her work seems a hopeful gesture. ■

Denyse Thomasos, *Odyssey*, at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria from Dec. 11, 2021, to March 13, 2022.

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Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

1040 Moss Street, Victoria, British Columbia V8V 4P1

PHONE [250-384-4171](tel:250-384-4171)

EMAIL visitorservices@aggv.ca

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Portia Priegert

Portia Priegert, the editor of Galleries West, is based in Victoria on the traditional territory of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples. A former national news reporter with the The Canadian Press, she holds an MFA from UBC Okanagan.

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