

AUDIO 1

Babylon

2005

acrylic on canvas

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

Audio description of the work

This massive wallwork is an abstract painting.

With its bottom edge at bench height, the work is hung in landscape orientation. It is 11 feet or three point three meters tall by 20 feet or six meters wide.

The artist creates a spatially complex scene with brushstrokes and rollers. The upper part of the landscape has some bent grey and blue lines forming casual swirls. Below and behind this are straight line brush strokes which pull upwards, grids and rows of lines make layers of abstract structures. These structures (including buildings, spaces of confinement, bridges, and boats) are also explored in many of her other works.

This huge composition uses a palette mostly of creamy whites, shades of grays, brown, black with lots of blue background on the left and lots of oranges on the right. There are also pops of greens on both sides.

Described from left to right: The artist has painted many vertical lines of relatively equal width in brown and terracotta oranges, some of which resemble, rungs of a ladder and building frames. Under this is a background of grey, then light blue, then white.

Moving towards the centre, the colours become more vibrant and the lines are sparser and thinner. The upper part of the image has grey and light blue grids over blue and three bright blue horizontal stripes. In the lower half of this section a cloud of grey loops pour upwards from a sketch of thin horizontal lines which seemingly form the walls of industrial structures.

Moving to the right, the top of the next section introduces roller lines (where the paint was thicker) in areas that now repeat. High up is a brown roller mark that goes from vertical to curving right and a red one that is straight up and down. Beside it are light grey and brown swirls over an orange background.

The lower part of this section is streaked with drips of paint from above. It has an arch and layers of knots of green, choral and burgundy. Thick dark brown vertical lines descend from them.

The farthest right section has a light grey swirl against a dark grey background. The lower right corner of the work has an abstract structure resembling a cargo boat hull in brown and black which is highlighted with light grey.

End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text.

AUDIO 2

Dos Amigos (Slave Boat)

1993

acrylic on canvas

Collection of Cadillac Fairview

Audio description of the work

This work is an abstract painting in a landscape orientation. It is 9 feet or almost 3 meters tall by 14 feet or around 4 meters wide.

Taking up the majority of the canvas is an architectural structure shaped like a capsule which is broken open. It is composed of black and white cross hatched lines. Above it the sky is a crosshatched grey and white. Where the capsule breaks, the space between is filled with intersecting white lines forming an X. The lines in this work range in thickness from very refined to very thick. The vertical lines are the thickest, they appear in front of the structure. The left half is higher than the right and takes up the top two thirds of the canvas while the right half takes up the lower two thirds of the canvas.

End of Audio description

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text.

AUDIO 3

Rally

1994

acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the Estate of Denyse Thomasos and Olga Korper Gallery

Audio description of the work.

This monumental work is an abstract painting in landscape orientation. It is 9 feet or almost 3 meters tall by 14 feet or around 4 meters wide.

This painting is composed of tight stacks of similar horizontal brush strokes in multiple vivid colours. There are 22 stacks from left to right and an average of 50 brush strokes in each stack. By this count the work totals 1100 repeated brushstrokes. Each column counts multiple short stacks. In each stack the same colour is repeated an average of 6 times; the predominant colours are orange, blue and red and less so, purple, white and yellow. The canvas behind the brushstrokes is painted with vivid colours which peek through. In the sixth stack near the top left there is one small section where the brush strokes line up vertically instead of horizontally and closeby another small section has both horizontal and vertical lines.

End of Audio description.

Exhibition label text:

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.”

End of Exhibition label text

AUDIO 4

Sketchbooks and notebooks

2000s

Courtesy of the Estate of Denyse Thomasos

Audio description of the work

Eight open notebooks make up this table display. They range in size from a pocket notebook to slightly larger than letter paper size. In the middle of the glass encased table is a book open to a 4 colour sketch of structures. At the centre of the sketch is a low green circular structure that resembles a wheel with six spokes. It is surrounded by sketches of taller architectural structures in black brown or blue. Three other sketchbooks are open to what appear to be architectural sketches and the other books are open to pages with neat handwriting in black ink.

A pad of parchment tracing paper is flipped open, it reads:

My work is about cages. About enclosure. Being enveloped. I think of the “cage” as a political object. The cage is however an animal object. My idea is a visual object – it is not an idea really. It is like saying my idea is a “line“. That is not an idea – it is still visual. What is my idea. Many artists never really have an idea. When I critique them I realize they are looking or waiting for their idea. The activity in the studio is just keeping them busy until something happens. I never thought of myself as one of “those“ artist but now I am wondering. What is my idea outside or apart from a visual language. Should a minimum mural artist have an idea outside of a visual idea – is it possible. End of text.

This room also displays seven similar medium sized paintings on the walls, they all show a variation on a grid pattern.

End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text

AUDIO 5

Untitled (Kingdom Come)

2011

acrylic on paper

Collection of Dr. Carlyle Farrell

Audio description of the work

This room contains 7 colourful fast sketches and a table displaying photos and painting materials including shoes.

The painted sketches are all in landscape orientation, two and a half feet or three quarters of a meter high by three and a half feet or just over one meter wide and focus on different motifs and approaches to painting a wall with a corner at the centre of it.

The sketch beside the label with the QR code in this room has 4 colours : green, grey, aqua and red and writing marking out elements of the design. Along the top the writing points to floating pod-like structures which have the label "prisons as pods growing green" and "pods of boats , coffins, prisons" between these an area near the centre or room corner is marked "matrix prison". Along the bottom are stair and ladder like structures lying horizontal, they are marked "rectangle roof", "roof innovation" "roofing device", "containers of moss growing green" and "green garden moss insulator", a swath of red along the bottom is labeled "high tech cutting edge".

Across from the sketch is the close end of the long table displaying studio material, it's furthest end has about 35 medium sized clear plastic containers, of the sort you might find in a grocery store or deli. In them are paint in all of the colours in the room and common colours in the artists work. At the centre of the table is a pair of clog style shoes, about a womens size 7, they are black and have splotches and drips of paint on them. Displayed at the closest end and to be viewed with the wall with the entrance to the room behind you, are 9 photographs of wall works in various stages including the artist in action and shots with a staging area with tables of multiple cans of paint.

End of Audio Description.

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text

AUDIO 6

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

Audio description of the work

This work is a figurative painting in a portrait orientation and is about the size of a queen size mattress at 6 and a half feet or 2 meters tall by 5 and a half feet or 1.7 meters wide.

It depicts a black horse suspended in a white cloth harness dangling beside a mound of skulls piled against an interior wall.

The colours in this work are hues of browns with beige and yellow tones.

With its body facing right, the dark horse dominates the top half of the painting. The harness has openings for the horse's legs and its tail. In the upper right corner is a high up small deep set window. It's bright on the other side of it. The horse's head is down and it has its nose in what is presumably a bag of feed.

Thin rope dangles down at the far left and connects to a large heavy counterweight which is a long sack that lays on the ground at the bottom left beside a canvas horse trough water bag. On the right side, the skulls are piled to the height of the horse's knees and cascade downward toward centre. The skulls have dark eye sockets and are various shades, some are black some are bleached completely white which blend in with the back wall.

Hung to the left of the painting is a small framed black and white work which is the same image as an etching. It is signed by the artist.

End of Audio Description

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text

AUDIO 7

Arc

2009

acrylic on canvas

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

2021/356

Audio description of the work

Hung with its lower edge at bench height, This monumental painting is the only work on this wall. It is 11 feet or almost three and a half meters tall and 20 feet or 6 meters wide.

It is an abstract painting in a landscape orientation.

This vigorous canvas uses a kaleidoscope of patterns. It's colours consist of black, light green, light blue, dark blue, pink, grey and yellow and will be described using a clock face. At its centre is a pod structure (topped by a little red house) and knots of black. The 8 o'clock to 4 o'clock area is occupied by two mashed together arching pipe-like structures made of grills, grids and black lines over multiple layers of bright colours. Between 2 o'clock and 4 o'clock, it resembles a ladder and then, the hull of a ship. From 4 o'clock to 6 o'clock and filling in most of the centre of the clock face is a mound of abstract human skulls. Some of the skulls closest to centre have an additional layer of a sketch of a face overlaid on them. From 6 o'clock to 8 o'clock is a decaying industrial structure. The four outside corners of the work are repeated variations of coloured rectangles and squares with the top left corner being brightest with a yellow rectangle overlaid by black vertical bars.

End of Audio Description

Exhibition label text:

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.

End of Exhibition label text