

An abstract painting by Denyse Thomasos, featuring a complex, layered composition of dark, expressive brushstrokes in black, grey, and brown, set against a background of vibrant green and light blue. The painting has a dynamic, almost architectural quality, with sharp lines and a sense of movement. The overall effect is one of intense energy and emotional depth.

Denyse Thomasos

Kingdom Come

24 September to 13 November 2011

Oakville Galleries
at Centennial Square

Curated by Marnie Fleming

Denyse Thomasos in conversation with Marnie Fleming

Marnie Fleming: You've travelled a long way since your student days at Sheridan College and I mean that both literally and metaphorically. Let me start by asking: how have your extensive travels and cultural experiences over the years informed your practice?

Denyse Thomasos: Well, my first research trip was to South Africa in 1997—right after I was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship—to visit Robben Island where Nelson Mandela had been imprisoned. I was interested in visiting South Africa while Mandela was in power and seeing the structure where, for years, I had imagined what his life was like. While I was a student at the University of Toronto, I was very much involved with the anti-apartheid movement on campus, which was focused on getting the university to divest in South Africa. So this visit to South Africa was like a tribute to Mandela and his 27 years in prison. It was also a confirmation of the use of confined forms in my painting.

Then after 9/11, I toured the world looking at indigenous and political structures, such as prisons in Cambodia, war sites in Vietnam and a number of other structures throughout Africa, India and China, all of which have given me an incredible breadth of knowledge and have also built my confidence. Confidence was something that I had been struggling with, because prior to these travels I was learning directly from books in my studio. I found it all rather difficult to learn only through interpretive research. Travelling opened up a whole other world, as I was able to approach my work from a place of knowledge, of first-hand experience with other cultures.

This was essential for me to advance my practice. I now see myself as an active observer, analyzing and questioning the various complexities that we are experiencing in society regarding race, culture and class.

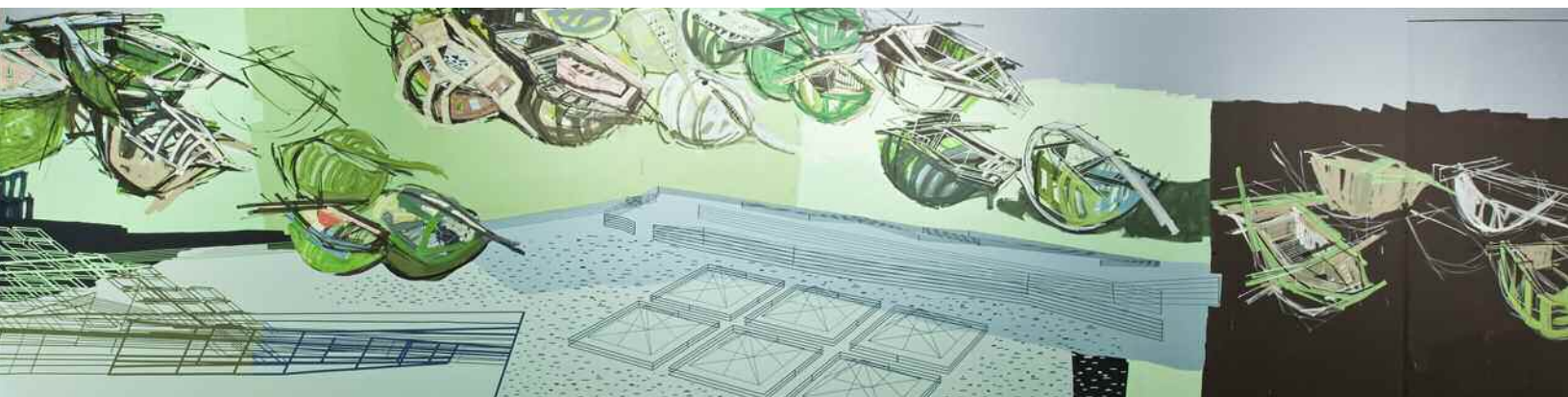
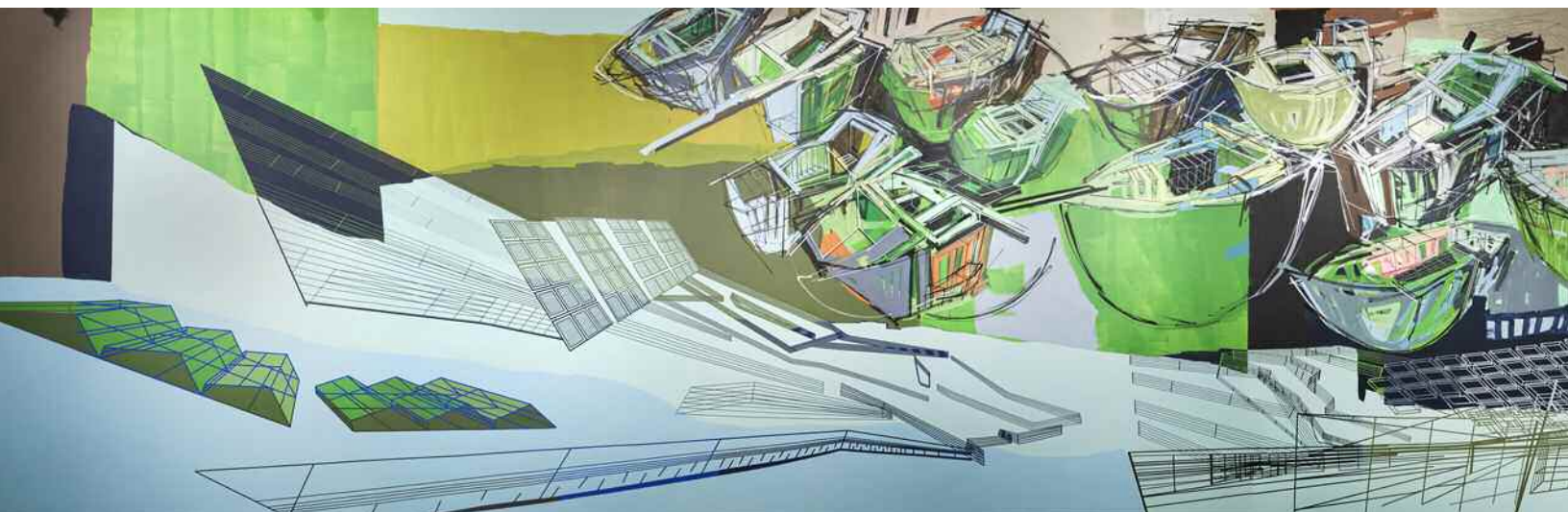
MF: When you first came to Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square to examine the space for your wall painting, I noticed you had a small sketchbook that you were filling with thoughts and ideas. From such an intimate scale, how do you move through your creative process to eventually fill the walls of such a large space?

DT: It is important for me to visit a site in advance because so much of my content is affected by the actual physicality of the space. I have to ask myself, "How will the viewer first experience my work? Where can I make the biggest impact?" I try to draw upon the nuances of the architecture to create a sense of awe. For Centennial Square, I thought I could create a sense of drama in the northeast corner of the gallery, a place where the viewer would feel the impact of scale.

As you mentioned I have many, many sketchbooks in which I record my thoughts and feelings about a given space. Working from there, I draw on paper; the gallery space at Centennial Square, with the adjacent smaller room, has worked well for me because I can use that smaller space to sketch on paper and then move directly from that scale to a larger one right on the wall. I work intuitively and couldn't possibly pre-plan, however these initial steps—being in the gallery first with a sketchbook and then working on larger sheets of paper—are completely necessary for me to get a feeling for a space. Colour and atmosphere are important, so the twelve drawings on exhibit in the smaller gallery within Centennial Square reflect the warm-up—the exploratory exercise—I use to move into a full-scale work.

MF: Your work seems to be in a lively conversation across art history, combining the historical impulse of artists like Géricault with the dynamism of the Futurists, the geometric abstraction of Mondrian, and the enveloping

Cover: Denyse Thomasos, *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (detail). Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid



scale of colour-field painting. Yet to these you add new narratives, social critiques, and suggestions of personal biography. Can you discuss how the art historical and the political come together in your work?

DT: The first painting that had an impact on me specifically was Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–1819). It is a large-scale painting that depicts the aftermath of a naval shipwreck, a well-known event in Géricault's time. The painting was contemporary, not history painting as such; it had to do with grandeur, and the zeitgeist of that moment. It had a big effect on me, as did Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820). Goya is interesting to me because he rejected the

bombastic heroics of the Spanish historical painting that came before him, instead depicting the effect of conflict on individuals. He had the consciousness, ability and skill to translate the emotional and psychological impact of war into a visual language.

All the other influences you mention make me think of people who say to me, "Denyse, you want it all!" I feel the more experience I have in looking at and learning about different art historical styles, the more I want to bring all these complex languages together and create something that is uniquely my own.

MF: In your paintings, the spaces you create put construction and demolition in tension with each other;

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (installation view), latex paint and marker on drywall, dimensions variable.
Photos: courtesy of Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid



there is a fragile equilibrium between the two. Is this something that is intuitive, or a calculated strategy?

DT: I think it's both, actually. It is calculated because it is something that I am conscious of and want in all of my work, while the execution is very intuitive in terms of how I go about painting.

My method came about through striving to find a way to structurally record the fragility of human psychology, especially under difficult or trying conditions. What led me to this idea was experiencing Gaudi's architecture in Barcelona and understanding how he was able to manipulate his structures. Standing under one of his arches, the structure feels both extremely strong, but also as though it is organic, about to collapse at any moment. He made sure his structures were soundly constructed, but

at the same time he was reminding us of how fragile and vulnerable we are as humans.

So you will find in my paintings strong linear marks—whether they are computer-generated or made by my own hand—right next to more organic structural forms. The same structure is often seen from different angles in my paintings; I try to bring together a variety of vantage points and perspectives in my work, which doesn't always make immediate sense. Viewers often find themselves in a position where they are looking across the work, then up or down. It forces viewers to reorient themselves when standing in front of a piece.

Agitated surfaces like this create a kind of flux, so you are never quite sure if you are looking at construction or demolition. I do this to mimic the human vulnerability—

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (installation view), latex paint and marker on drywall, dimensions variable.
Photos: courtesy of Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid



and confusion — that one can encounter when faced with matters such as genocide, imprisonment or other unspeakable situations.

MF: Yes, your work has often focused on difficult situations, particularly the built environments that surround them. Slave ships and prison structures, for example, are very much in evidence in your previous paintings, and your current works are starting to look at structures of economic exclusion. Why are these issues important to your work?

DT: I think it has taken me a long time to understand it on a personal level. I have always been interested in examining human vulnerability and compassion, but it wasn't until I took a good look at my own biographical circumstances that I began to gain insight into where

I was coming from. This past summer I was organizing about two hundred of my journals, some of which go back to when I was fifteen. As I re-read them, I realized that I had used them to survive the feelings of isolation that I was experiencing at the time. When we first came to Canada, I was seven. We lived in an Italian community where we were the only black family; I didn't see another black family for almost five years. That level of isolation was quite acute.

While I have found success over the years, and been in many elite places — studying at Yale, taking part in coveted artist residencies around the world, receiving tenure at Rutgers University (where I am only the third black female to do so) — I still find the circumstances of growing up isolated extremely painful. Now that I am living in New York, I am a West Indian-Canadian and not

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (detail). Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries ©Toni Hafkenscheid



considered an African-American, which has been another kind of isolation. It just doesn't go away. The journals represent a form of survival in my own metaphorical prison. 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. That is essentially what I paint on the walls: I am journaling survival. With every line, every mark, it's a journal, a word, a language that I weave together to survive.

MF: Clearly your visual lexicon changes in the context of what's going on in the world and how that makes an impact on you. What new vocabularies are you working with in *Kingdom Come* (2011)?

DT: I think *Kingdom Come* is a very important work for me because it gives me the opportunity to move beyond

some of my previous conceptual concerns, which had to do with examining issues such as slavery, confinement and imprisonment, and their impact on our society. Now I am fascinated with green architecture and its increasing cultural influence.

Initially, when I encountered the language of "eco-living" and "green" architecture, it seemed these terms were intended to raise our awareness of important environmental issues, much like the language of other political movements. However, it is increasingly becoming clear that green living is a movement of the elite. "Sustainability," the catchword of the day, suggests a kind of lifestyle that is often only attainable through a certain kind of wealth, further exacerbating the divide between rich and poor. I am not sure costly measures aimed at benefiting the well-being of future generations is something

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (detail). Image courtesy of Oakville Galleries ©Toni Hafkenschoid

the poor can rally around, given that many are concerned with merely surviving the present moment.

In *Kingdom Come*, then, I contrast a pod form—an organic shape I connect to vernacular structures—with architectural design elements that have been drafted in collaboration with an Oakville architectural firm. I do this to intertwine the economies of necessity that drive indigenous architectures with the decadence of “green” urban design.

In my mind, the pod form not only represents vernacular structures, but also alludes to the prison structures that appeared in my previous works. In those works, I considered the way that prisoners from urban centres serve as metaphorical compost heaps for the rural economies where superjails are located; the decay of one economy feeds another. It's not much of a stretch to think about the relationship between indigenous architectures and sustainable design in a similar way.

Both the pod forms and the green architectural design elements are new to me, and I'm excited to add them to my repertoire in this way.

MF: You have a distinctive crosshatching technique that you use to build forms—such as the pod structures—in your work. Can you elaborate on the significance of this technique?

DT: I was initially drawn to crosshatching by looking at African cultures, particularly the weaving of the branch and thatch homes found in the Mopti region of Mali. Conceptually, this kind of mark-making appealed to me because it embodied a kind of labour—my ideas about labour, of course, stem in large part from my research on slavery and thinking about what it would be like to do hard, back-breaking work day in and day out.

In my early paintings, I used very small brushes and built images from the center of a canvas outward, hatching out forms. The hatching symbolized not only labour in the fields, but also the recording of time, such as the

scratched lines that mark time on a prison wall. The lines I crosshatch also operate as building blocks to suggest makeshift structures, such as those found in the shantytowns of Trinidad. Over the years, my crosshatching has taken on new forms and sensibilities, in much the same way that daily journaling changes in tone as time passes. Crosshatching allows me many layers of complexity, acting as the connective tissue that holds my thoughts together. Such mark-making weaves the past together with the present, while also providing me with a formal device to anchor an image down.

MF: As with a number of your past works, *Kingdom Come* is painted directly on the walls of Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square. What draws you to do these wall paintings, given that they last for a relatively short time before being painted over?

DT: Initially my wall paintings were much more simple and developed quite quickly. Now, however, the pieces are very laborious and end up being quite significant in terms of the visual impact that they have, so I am increasingly interested in more permanent installations!

That said, there is something that I still enjoy about filling a space in a public gallery that has more to do with communicating direct concerns than commercial value. I am involved with the commercial world—I do have galleries where my work is sold—but these wall works are free of those constraints, which I appreciate.

There is something quite crazy about creating a painting this laborious that exists only for a moment in time. But, when I think about that, I often think about Carnival in Trinidad, where I'm from. People there spend all year preparing elaborate costumes for Carnival celebrations that, once worn, are abandoned at the side of the road or tossed out. There is something very magical about that kind of festivity that I try to bring to my wall works—an excitement, a celebration, an investment of time and labour that I find very cathartic.