

Historic Exhibition of Trinidadian-Canadian Artist Denyse Thomasos Debuts Virtually at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection



Denyse Thomasos (1964–2012), *Sparrow*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 152.4 x 182.9 cm, Private collection, L2021.9

May 25, 2021, KLEINBURG, ON - The McMichael Canadian Art Collection is pleased to announce that the highly anticipated exhibition, *Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey*, will debut virtually on June 14, 2021, and in person once the McMichael reopens. It will remain on view through September 26, 2021. The exhibition is co-curated by Gaëtane Verna, Director of The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, and Sarah Milroy, Chief Curator of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. The show brings together more than 50 works from every phase of Denyse Thomasos' (1964–2012) career, celebrating her historic contribution to Canadian art.

Thomasos was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and immigrated with her family to Toronto at the age of six, finding a new home within the city's diverse Afro-Caribbean community. She studied art at the University of Toronto and the Yale School of Art, later taking up a teaching position at Rutgers University. During the course of her career, Thomasos conducted wide-ranging research into the social justice issues of her day, travelling extensively to many parts of the world. Through this, she developed a visionary understanding of how people organize themselves in both physical and social spaces. Thomasos transferred that understanding onto canvas, creating epic paintings that incorporate imagery from a range of sources, from historic slave ships to contemporary industrial shipyards, and from maximum-security prison architecture to the interwoven textures of Caribbean textiles. She examined the structures that both define and confine us—whether political, social or architectural —, transforming them into vibrant colour and form in paintings that blur the line between representation and abstraction.

"I was struck by the premeditated, efficient, dispassionate records of human beings as cargo," Thomasos said in a 2012 interview, "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."

Tragically, Thomasos died in 2012, abbreviating a career that was as vibrant and powerful as the stories that inspired her. While Thomasos' work was celebrated in the period immediately following her death, her legacy has since remained dormant. The unique way in which she examined issues regarding race and representation have now become particularly relevant, as these issues increasingly consume our collective attention and our headlines.

"The Black experience in all of its historical and contemporary complexity is at the centre of Thomasos' work, and she used this subject matter to create complex and conceptual works of art, forging a distinct painterly vocabulary that spoke both of her personal experience and her global perspective," says Verna. "Memory, loss, trauma, injustice, longing and the politics of war are constantly interwoven in all of her works, expanding the conversation on human issues as we strive for a better shared future."

Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey is accompanied by an exhibition catalogue including a curatorial conversation between Verna and Milroy, as well as an essay by illustrious Canadian author Esi Edugyan. The catalogue is available exclusively at the McMichael's Gallery Shop and online eShop.

Please note that the McMichael Canadian Art Collection is closed until further notice while Ontario remains under a province-wide declaration of emergency and stay-at-home order. For more information about virtual offerings, programs and online shopping, please visit mcmichael.com.

Media wishing to request an interview with curators Sarah Milroy or Gaëtane Verna, request a review copy of the exhibition catalogue, or obtain high-resolution images of the artworks, are asked to contact Sam Cheung at scheung@mcmichael.com or 905.893.1121 ext. 2210.

Ces informations sont aussi disponible en français.

ABOUT THE McMICHAEL CANADIAN ART COLLECTION

The McMichael Canadian Art Collection is an agency of the Government of Ontario and acknowledges the support of the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries, and the McMichael Canadian Art Foundation. It is the only major museum in the country devoted exclusively to Canadian art. In addition to touring exhibitions, the McMichael houses a permanent collection that consists of more than 6,500 works by historic and present-day Canadian artists, including Tom Thomson, the Group of Seven and their contemporaries, Indigenous artists and artists from the many diasporic communities. The Gallery is located on 100 acres of northern landscape and hiking trails at 10365 Islington Avenue, Kleinburg, north of Major Mackenzie Drive in the City of Vaughan. For more information, please visit mcmichael.com.

Denyse Thomasos: Odyssey

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