

The background of the cover is a painting of a man in a white shirt and tie, possibly a religious figure, set against a background of a brick wall with a light switch and a meter. The man is depicted in a dynamic, almost contorted pose, with his arms raised and his head tilted back. The colors are muted and earthy, with a focus on greens, browns, and greys. The brick wall is rendered in a textured, painterly style, with a light switch and a meter visible in the upper right corner.

Denyse Thomasos

Till the River and Kingdom Come

An essay by John Armstrong

Till the River and Kingdom Come

Denyse Thomasos's Earliest and Most Recent Wall Works

by John Armstrong

In *Kingdom Come* (2011), Denyse Thomasos's new wall work at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, the artist sets out to address the pressing issue of the degradation of the natural environment by human activity and the complexity of implementing environmental solutions across income levels in developed and developing countries. In short, she asks a fundamentally political question: who can actually afford to be eco-friendly? Engaging with political issues in large-scale murals and installations is something that Thomasos has practiced since the mid-1980s. Her wall works ask searching questions through gestural painting and perspectival conundrums that engage their architectural settings.

Thomasos has always worked from the premise that her identity as a Trinidadian Canadian who now lives in the United States should be implicit in her artistic practice. Thomasos came to Canada with her family at the age of seven, and she has always been mindful of the international reach of Trinidad's colonial history of slavery and indentured servitude, which subjugated indigenous Caribs, Africans, and South and East Asians.

In this essay I am going to consider *Till the River* (1986), a large-scale mural that Thomasos created in her last year as an undergraduate art student. I thought of this work as a fitting place to begin because the current exhibition of Thomasos's new work at Oakville Galleries is in support of the fortieth anniversary of Art and Art History (AAH), a joint program between Sheridan College in Oakville and the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) from which Thomasos graduated in 1987. This early work, which Thomasos describes as "young and romantic," is given extra focus as the mural will soon be destroyed to make way for a renovation.¹

Before discussing Thomasos's mural, I will present the context for her political activities as a student. In 1985, the Canadian government initiated a number of measures to limit Canadian support of the apartheid regime in South Africa: commercial flights between the two countries were banned, as were Canadian bank loans to the South African government.² There was considerable public pressure on the Canadian government to more forcefully urge the end of South African apartheid and many Canadian consumers participated in a voluntary boycott of South African imports. The University of Toronto held investments in South African companies and in 1983 the African and Caribbean Students' Association formed a divestment committee.³ Thomasos was involved in the campus anti-apartheid movement, organizing and participating in protests. *Till the River* of 1986 may be seen as a prelude to the anti-apartheid protests that would take place at the university: a sit-in at the president's office on 4 March 1987 and then, the next day, a disruption of a meeting of the university's Governing Council by 250 protestors.⁴

Thomasos recalls the Governing Council event as follows:

It [the council disruption] did get out of hand as students erupted in anger when the vote was not positive. However, a short while later, U of T did divest in South Africa.

I photographed and recorded the sit-in of the president's office as a resource for my paintings. This was a very rich experience for me as much of my education was rather isolating regarding being around people of colour so this was a largely integrated group made up of Caribbean and African students. At the time, South Africa was very much in the media and many universities had student groups working towards divestment. I was able to make a topic that was in the media a more personal experience.⁵

Cover: Denyse Thomasos, *Till the River*, 1986 (detail). Photo: Owen Colborne



In the summer of 1986, Thomasos worked on a two-month summer employment program to paint a series of floor-to-ceiling murals in the entrance lobby of the North Building at Erindale College, as UTM was then called.⁶ The mural was commissioned to represent university life, the campus or its suburban setting. Thomasos was going into her fourth year of study and in addition to responding to the specific requirements for the

mural, her approach echoed the direction of her own interests and developing studio work in painting. The mural was executed in her customary painterly manner with gestural brushwork that used the uneven surface of the cinder-block walls to blend divergent tones through scumbling, a painting technique that involves dragging a brush lightly over a textured surface in order to create smooth gradations.

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Till the River*, 1986 (installation view), oil-based enamel on cinderblock wall, East wall: 271.8 x 436.9 cm, 271.8 x 144.8 cm, 271.8 x 218.4 cm, 271.8 x 69.9 cm, 271.8 cm x 3.1 m, South wall: 10.2 m x 436.9 cm, North Building, University of Toronto Mississauga. Photo: Owen Colborne



Till the River recounts a loose, symbolic narrative of struggle through to calm. As you step into the lobby from the outdoors, the work begins on the eastern stepped wall, moves over five surfaces, pauses for a hallway, and then concludes on an uninterrupted south wall. The complex structures of the wall serve to isolate single figures or figural groups against a moody, continuous backdrop of cliffs, barren landscape, river, and sea. The figures—men and women of African or Caribbean origin—are either naked or shirtless in otherwise baggy, non-descript clothing, and every figure is barefoot, all of which suggests theatrical staging rather than a record of any actual event.

In 1986, Thomasos characterized her approach to figuration in the mural as follows:

I chose students from Erindale College to pose in various positions, to actually take part in the mural. The figures

are set in a landscape that dictates the circumstances, which they are to overcome, enjoy or accept. The sculptural, monumental style also allows each viewer to take part in the painting, to enter an environment, which was both realistic and imaginary.⁷

In the mural's first figural grouping, we encounter four standing figures: two extend their hands in gestures that push the viewer away and two stretch their arms upwards. The group dominates the wall from floor to ceiling and, with their gestures and presence, metaphorically block our access to a rapidly receding landscape of cliffs. The figures appear to be shouting, angry, and it is not difficult to imagine that they represent protest in a universal manner. The female figure in the group is a self-portrait of the artist; she shouts and extends her arm forward, heatedly pushing us away. It is unsettling to encounter

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Till the River*, 1986 (detail). Photo: Owen Colborne



such a confrontational image on first entering the building; the play of figural groupings implicates the viewer of the artwork in an angry protest. Thomasos seems to ask what our position is.

On the same panel to the right of the standing figures, a naked male pulls a figure from the water to the shore in a manner reminiscent of the survivor holding onto a corpse in Théodore Géricault's epic *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19), a pointedly political portrayal of a French naval tragedy. As Thomasos's mural turns a corner, a single male bather emerges from the water and points to the crest of a hill that serves as the vanishing point for four cables linked to rings that lift up the barren hillside as though it were a tarpaulin. Another turn of the corner and we see an isolated and monumental bather who stands waist-deep in water and lifts his arms to splash

his skyward-looking face. The shadows of two figures mysteriously intrude on the river's surface in front of the bather, again hinting at the presence of observers in front of the mural. The final figure in the mural on the separate south wall is a naked woman who floats calmly in a channel that leads out to sea. The woman's finger almost nonchalantly points outward, gently if graphically suggesting we direct our attention to the distant maritime horizon, a place of possible transcendence well removed from human conflict.

In 1986, Thomasos described her working process on *Till the River*:

This was the first time I had undertaken a painting on such a large scale; therefore, my approach to painting underwent some dramatic changes. Because of the unique

Above: Denyse Thomasos, *Till the River*, 1986 (detail). Photo: Owen Colborne

*shape of the wall and the space, most of the sketches were done directly on the wall. Initially, I applied a dark, general ground of sky, land and water. I worked the entire mural continuously, rather than by section, adding and eliminating figures until the composition created the dramatic effect that I wanted.*⁸

There are echoes of contemporary painting and painting methodology in the mural. Thomasos saw the survey exhibition *Eric Fischl: Paintings*, organized by the Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, when it travelled to the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto in the fall of 1985. Fischl's approach to creating narrative by dynamically adapting the ground to the figure is an approach shared by Thomasos, as is the use of photographic references. While Fischl's interest in suburban ennui is not shared by Thomasos, the artists demonstrate similar use of scale, unblended modeling, and naked and semi-clothed figures.

The mural's near-apocalyptic, denuded landscape, which uses schematic, perspectival recession, may reflect some of Anselm Keifer's large-scale allegorical renditions of an ethically bereft post-World War II Germany. Thomasos recalls seeing the Keifer exhibition at the Marian Goodman Gallery, New York during a 1985 AAH trip and acknowledges the impact that it had on her: "It was the first time that I saw a contemporary artist express political ideas on a monumental scale and I knew that is what I wanted to do. I was also struck by the idea that you can speak on political topics using structures as metaphors."⁹ Thomasos in all likelihood did not set out to emulate these artists but was certainly aware of their work and dedication to representing a social and political malaise.

Till the River is not a political allegory; although it is obliquely reflective of Thomasos's political engagement, it also exceeds this frame. Her African or Caribbean protagonists protest, assist one another, point to the landscape, or float in repose, and so it is a range of positions and attitudes that we encounter. Thomasos wrote in 1986, "Essentially, the mural was executed for the students of this university; it represents our struggle and our choices."¹⁰ In *Till the River*, Thomasos broadly responds to her experiences as an art student looking

for an artistic identity, as a person of colour and as a citizen of the world.

Fast-forward twenty-five years to the present exhibition, *Kingdom Come*. Thomasos presents a floor-to-ceiling wall work that sweeps around a large, very tall, and approximately square gallery space. Thomasos applied a background patchwork of opaque and transparent colours to the wall to create contrast between the two very separate visions that she would paint on top: above, loosely gestural painted marks sketch out linked, boat-like pods that snake their way through the work; below, an intricate matrix of sharply delineated, taped lines create an aerial view of a high-tech, "green" rooftop garden. As viewers, suspended between sky and earth, we look up to a meandering river of floating forms and down upon an undulating rooftop. From our metaphorical position, Thomasos asks us to take stock.

The pods are composites of Thomasos's previous paintings and wall works, which included similarly gestural renditions of eighteenth-century ships, prisons and coffins used in the transport of slaves from West Africa to the Americas, and most recently, traditional domestic architectural forms that the artist studied on travels to India, Africa and China. A viewer may not find these specific references in *Kingdom Come* but the work does give a sense of the hand-wrought structure present in indigenous architecture or basketry, and of an ominous procession. These purposeful forms are technological at a simple, immediate level, close, one imagines, to a natural world less inflected by human activities.

The diagrammatic green roof also refers to Thomasos's earlier projects. In *Hybrid Nations* (2005) at the Art Gallery of Ontario, she created a schematic, oblique view of a panoptic super-prison set among painted rudimentary shelters. For *Kingdom Come*, Andrew Piotrowski from the Oakville firm Glenn Piotrowski Architect, has plotted a similarly technical rendering of the green roof. The roof's technology is foregrounded here in the intricacy of the revealed trusses, which the artist uses to emphasize the sophisticated engineering often necessary to respond to global warming and our human-altered environment. The cost of this technology is prohibitive to a

majority of homeowners and is for this reason most often found in public or corporate settings.

Thomasos suggests that humans live in nature either directly or prosthetically. She graphically performs these alternatives in paint, aided by a team of senior art students to create a collective gesture. Unlike *Till the River*, there is no narrative arc here to offer a resolution of oneness in nature. There are no human protagonists depicted; we see only the unpeopled shells of human habitation. Thomasos wonders what the politics of responding to climate change might be across economic strata. Who will be left adrift, exposed in a chain of empty vessels, and who will be lodged somewhere beneath a canopy of temperate and lavish science?

Thomasos's work is also included in the University of Toronto Mississauga Blackwood Gallery's concurrent exhibition *Viva Voce* (14 September–23 October 2011), which includes the work of ten AAH alumni and their collaborators: Dorian FitzGerald, Alison S.M. Kobayashi, Richie Mehta and Stuart A. McIntyre, Johnson Ngo, Denyse Thomasos, Carolyn Tripp, Jessica Vallentin, Rhonda

Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, Andrew Wright, Robert Zingone. *Viva Voce* is curated by AAH alumna Shannon Anderson.

¹ Denyse Thomasos, email to the author, July 25, 2011. ² "Apartheid South Africa," *Apartheid South Africa*, 2009. Wed. 29 July 2011. ³ "The Age of Dissent," *U of T Magazine*, Spring 2002. ⁴ "Anti-apartheid protestor disrupt Council meeting," *University of Toronto Bulletin*, March 9, 1987, 598. ⁵ Thomasos, email to the author, July 30, 2011. ⁶ The murals were funded by a 1986 grant from the Summer Employment Experience Program (SEED) of Employment and Immigration Canada. Sheridan donated all paints and materials. Further financial contributions were made by the Erindale College Student Union; the Erindale Part-time Undergraduate Students' Association; the Fine Art Department, St. George campus; the Humanities Division, Erindale campus; and the Mississauga Arts Council. The murals project was facilitated by Professors John Armstrong (Studio), Randy McLeod (English) and Bogomila Welsh (Art History) at the request of Dean Roger Beck. ⁷ Janice McDermott, "Sheridan displays its artistic talent," *Sheridan Sun*, November 6, 1986, 4. ⁸ Thomasos, extended label copy for *Till the River*, August 1986. ⁹ Thomasos, email to the author, September 17, 2011. ¹⁰ Thomasos, extended label copy for *Till the River*, August 1986.