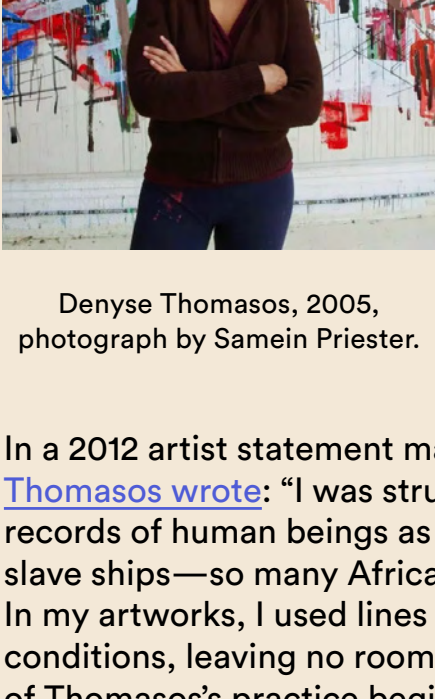
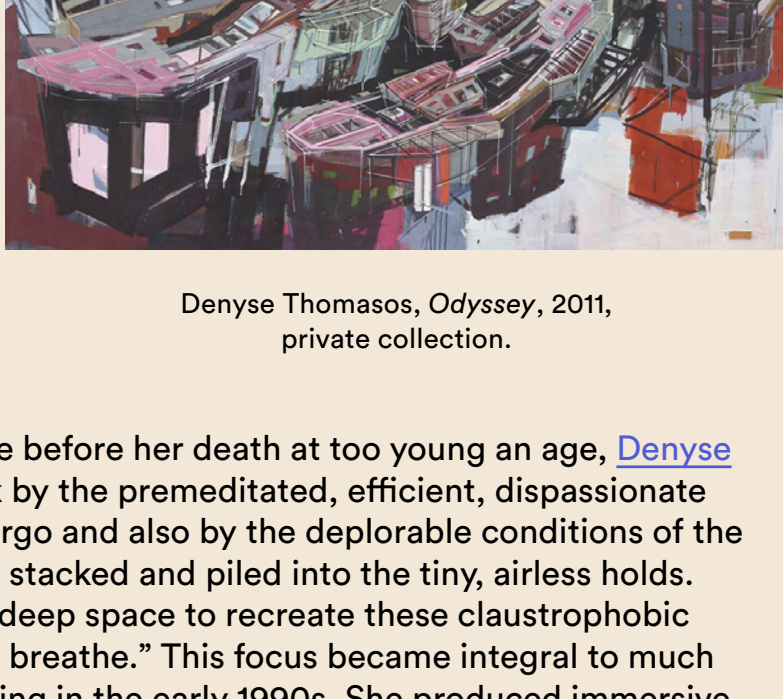


FEBRUARY 2, 2024

SPOTLIGHT: DENYSE THOMASOS
HER EPIC PAINTING AND VISION*To mark the beginning of Black History Month, we're looking at the work, words, and extraordinary career of the late Trinidadian Canadian artist Denyse Thomasos (1964–2012).*

Denyse Thomasos, 2005, photograph by Samein Priester.



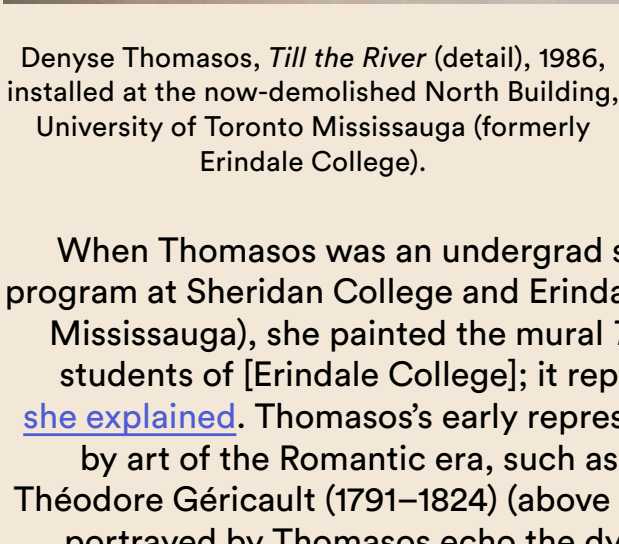
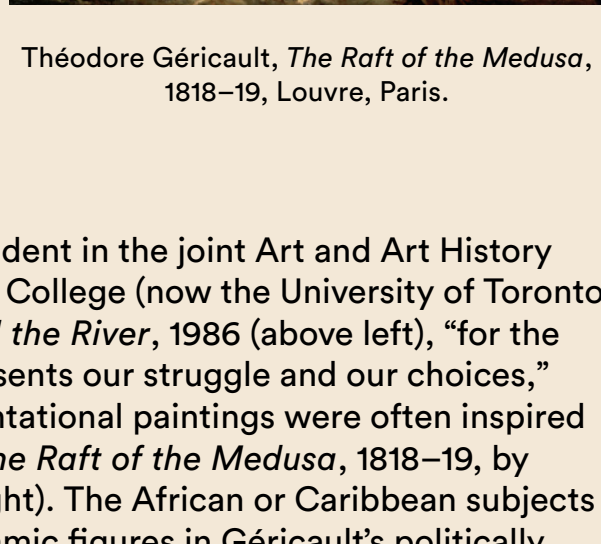
Denyse Thomasos, Odyssey, 2011, private collection.

In a 2012 artist statement made before her death at too young an age, [Denyse Thomasos wrote](#): “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.” This focus became integral to much of Thomasos’s practice beginning in the early 1990s. She produced immersive, large-scale paintings informed by extensive research into structures of confinement, including slave ships and superjails, and vernacular architecture she encountered during her travels around the world, notably in Africa, Asia, and South America. Reflecting on this important artist, our newsletter explores her influential vision and statements.

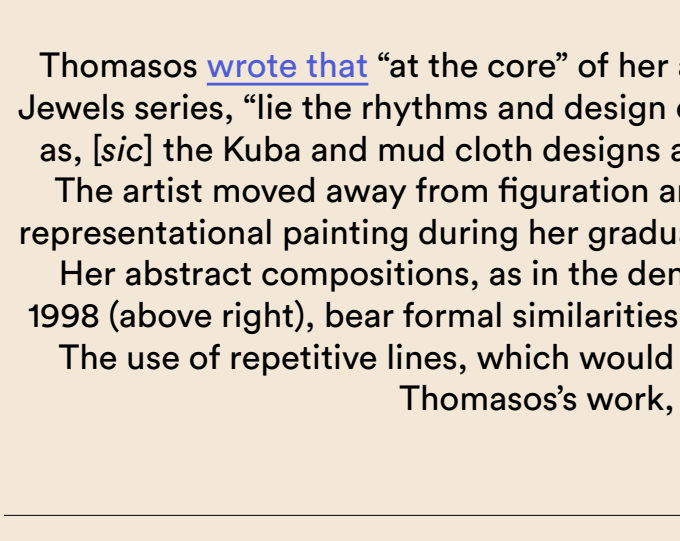
Thomasos is the subject of the touring career retrospective [Denyse Thomasos: just beyond](#), currently on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery (through April 1, 2024), after being shown at the institutions that organized it: the Art Gallery of Ontario and Remai Modern. *just beyond* follows the McMichael Canadian Art Collection’s 2021 travelling exhibition [Denyse Thomasos: Odysssey](#).

—The Art Canada Institute editors

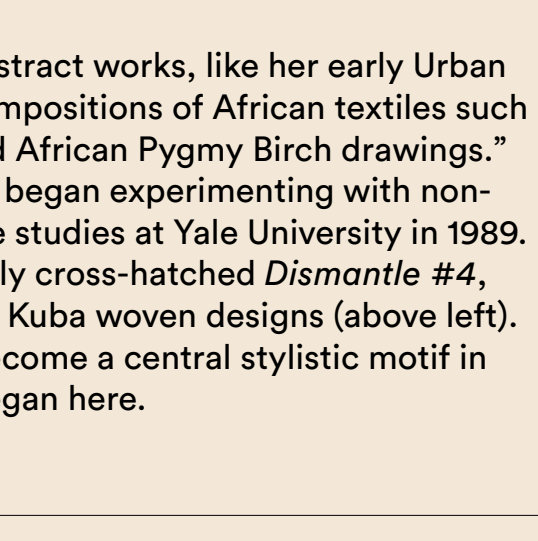
EARLY FIGURATIVE WORKS

Denyse Thomasos, *Till the River* (detail), 1986, installed at the now-demolished North Building, University of Toronto Mississauga (formerly Erindale College).Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818–19, Louvre, Paris.

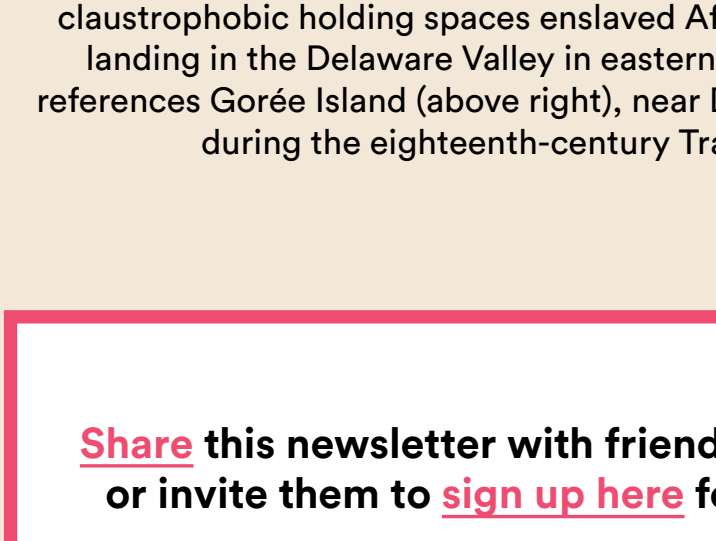
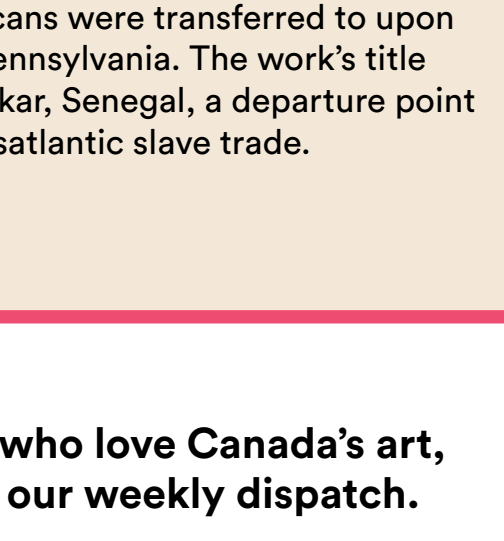
When Thomasos was an undergrad student in the joint Art and Art History program at Sheridan College and Erindale College (now the University of Toronto Mississauga), she painted the mural *Till the River*, 1986 (above left), “for the students of [Erindale College]; it represents our struggle and our choices,” [she explained](#). Thomasos’s early representational paintings were often inspired by art of the Romantic era, such as *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1818–19, by Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) (above right). The African or Caribbean subjects portrayed by Thomasos echo the dynamic figures in Géricault’s politically charged depiction of a French naval tragedy. “I chose students from Erindale College to pose in various positions, to actually take part in the mural,” [says Thomasos](#).

TURN TO
NON-REPRESENTATIONAL ART

Detail of geometric patterning on Kuba overskirt, 1912–42, courtesy of Bmore Art.

Denyse Thomasos, *Dismantle #4*, from the series *Urban Jewels*, 1998, private collection.

Thomasos [wrote that](#) “at the core” of her abstract works, like her early *Urban Jewels* series, “lie the rhythms and design compositions of African textiles such as, [sic] the Kuba and mud cloth designs and African Pygmy Birch drawings.” The artist moved away from figuration and began experimenting with non-representational painting during her graduate studies at Yale University in 1989. Her abstract compositions, as in the densely cross-hatched *Dismantle #4*, 1998 (above right), bear formal similarities to Kuba woven designs (above left). The use of repetitive lines, which would become a central stylistic motif in Thomasos’s work, began here.

AFRICAN DIASPORA
AND MIGRATIONDenyse Thomasos, *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée*, 1993, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Gorée Island, photograph by Gregor Rom.

Describing a major series she completed that included *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée*, 1993 (above left), [Thomasos stated](#), “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.” [For Thomasos](#), *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée* evokes the claustrophobic holding spaces enslaved Africans were transferred to upon landing in the Delaware Valley in eastern Pennsylvania. The work’s title references Gorée Island (above right), near Dakar, Senegal, a departure point during the eighteenth-century Transatlantic slave trade.

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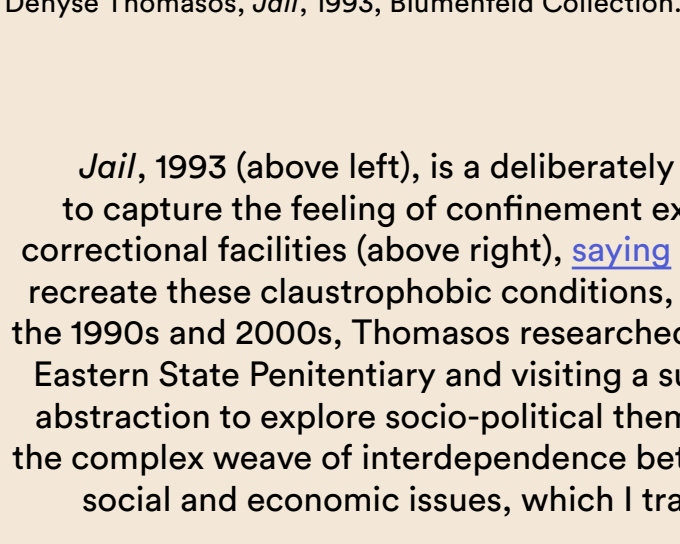
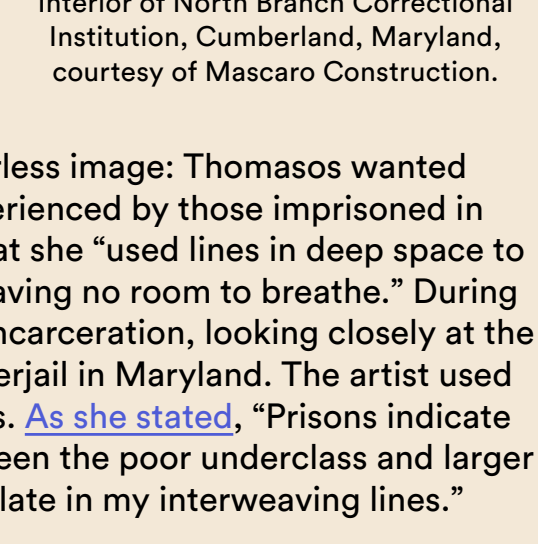
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Denyse Thomasos, *Excavations: Jodhpur Roof Tops*, 2007, private collection.

Aerial view of the city of Jodhpur, India, photograph by Strudelt via Flickr Commons.

“For the past ten years I have traveled throughout the world collecting images of indigenous architecture and structures including dwellings, bridges, temples and to influence my abstract paintings and to broaden the spatial component in the work,” [wrote Thomasos](#) in 2010. Architecture played a big part in her visual language—its influence can be felt in works such as *Excavations: Jodhpur Roof Tops*, 2007 (above left). The varying shades of blue and the tightly packed shapes in this painting reference the indigo buildings in Jodhpur’s historic district (above right), known as the “Blue City.” India held special significance due to its influence on the culture of Thomasos’s native Trinidad.

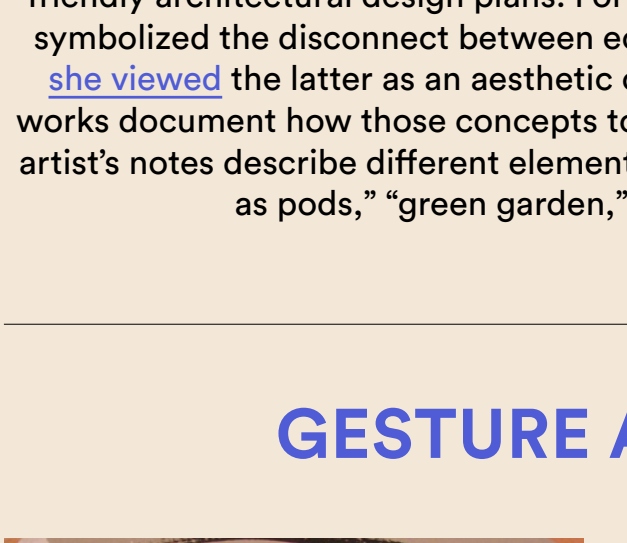
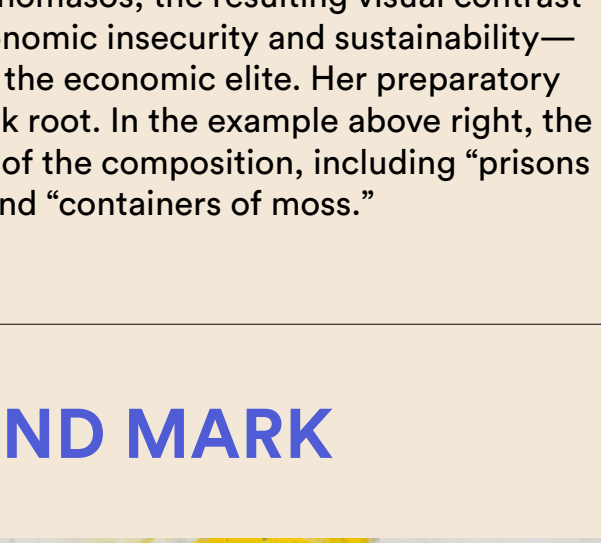
THE PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

Denyse Thomasos, *Jail*, 1993, Blumenfeld Collection.

Interior of North Branch Correctional Institution, Cumberland, Maryland, courtesy of Mascaro Construction.

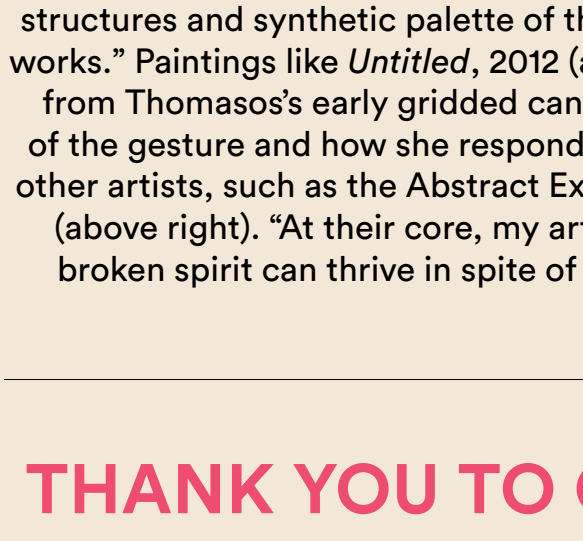
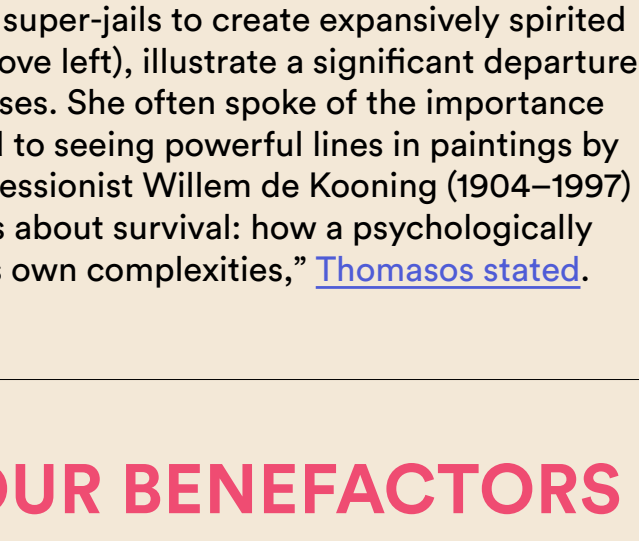
Jail, 1993 (above left), is a deliberately airless image: Thomasos wanted to capture the feeling of confinement experienced by those imprisoned in correctional facilities (above right), [saying](#) that she “used lines in deep space to recreate these claustrophobic conditions, leaving no room to breathe.” During the 1990s and 2000s, Thomasos researched incarceration, looking closely at the Eastern State Penitentiary and visiting a superjail in Maryland. The artist used abstraction to explore socio-political themes. [As she stated](#), “Prisons indicate the complex weave of interdependence between the poor underclass and larger social and economic issues, which I translate in my interweaving lines.”

WALL PAINTINGS

Installation view of *Denyse Thomasos: Kingdom Come* at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, 2011, photograph by Toni Hafkenscheid.Denyse Thomasos, preparatory drawing for *Kingdom Come*, 2011, at Oakville Galleries, private collection.

Thomasos’s *Kingdom Come*, 2011 (above left), a massive site-specific installation presented at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, marked a turning point in the artist’s practice as she began painting directly on gallery walls and became, [she explained](#), “fascinated with green architecture and its increasing cultural influence.” The work places images of organic green pod forms alongside eco-friendly architectural design plans. For Thomasos, the resulting visual contrast symbolized the disconnect between economic insecurity and sustainability—[she viewed](#) the latter as an aesthetic of the economic elite. Her preparatory works document how those concepts took root. In the example above right, the artist’s notes describe different elements of the composition, including “prisons as pods,” “green garden,” and “containers of moss.”

GESTURE AND MARK

Denyse Thomasos, *Untitled*, 2012, private collection.Willem de Kooning, *Door to the River*, 1960, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

In the final years, Thomasos explored an increasingly gestural style, [explaining that](#) “in my most recent works, I entwined the organic structures and the mudlike palette from my vernacular research with the hardedged prison structures and synthetic palette of the super-jails to create expansively spirited works.” Paintings like *Untitled*, 2012 (above left), illustrate a significant departure from Thomasos’s early gridded canvases. She often spoke of the importance of the gesture and how she responded to seeing powerful lines in paintings by other artists, such as the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) (above right). “At their core, my art is about survival: how a psychologically broken spirit can thrive in spite of its own complexities,” [Thomasos stated](#).

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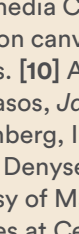
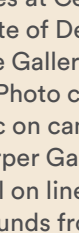
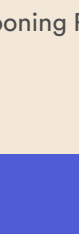
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