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Denyse Thomasos

Fisher, Cora. “Denyse Thomasos: The Divide: New Paintings.” *Brooklyn Rail*, February, 2010



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Denyse Thomasos’s paintings propose hypothetical cities where buildings overtop each other. Ruler-drawn lines scaffold over clouds of color, but never settle into finished form. The paintings appear to be in formation, heavy shapes and thin lines are in competition with each other. Stylistic parallels can be drawn to the work of Julie Mehretu, yet Thomasos’s depiction of space plays less on scale and hovers less. The mid-size canvas format is crammed almost to the edge with frenetic passages of colors—a busy profusion more like a plastered-over wall than an architect’s clean renderings.



“Inca Matrix” (2009). Acrylic on canvas. 42” x w: 60” / h: 106.7 x w: 152.4 cm. Courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.

Even with their insistent isometric lattices, one can never be sure that a given shape is a boat and not a coffin, or whether the overall scene is a compound of luxury hotels or a shantytown. Thomasos deliberately places viewers in this unsettling position, faking them out, on the one hand, by their primary reactions, which are taste-driven responses to formal abstraction. On the other hand, the artist uses abstraction to talk about spatial questions related to but still remote from painting—that is, the built environment of the future. Abstraction—in the sense of a tendency toward the universal and generic—is the vehicle to show the polymorphous urges driving the city.

Thomasos cites her inspiration for these paintings in the development of her own visual language, and the general condition of being a transnational and a traveler, both of which bear on the artist’s ability to generalize

structures into homogenous, placeless abstractions. The generic forms in the pictures almost stage a critique of pure abstraction because they are directed at specific content. In the back of the gallery I find a lone monitor with a video of super-jails meant to footnote the source material of the paintings, but the video stands apart as an alien support to these stylistically consistent pictures. Given the visual similarity from painting to painting, the titles, too, are all over the place. “Inca Matrix” and “Dogon Digital” call upon former worlds and deeply rooted cultures, while “Lollipop Nation” and “Urban Podding” convey a factory-extruded Brand X of global futurism. Her amalgamation of buildings is about density rather than local flavor.

Abstraction's tendency toward the universal, when understood in the context of the built environment, architecture, and the design and “development” of the future, can imply hegemony. The phrase “Manifest Destiny” was coined in 1845 by the journalist John L. O’Sullivan as he described, in reference to the annexation of Texas, that it was “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” With ICE and a tenuous political climate making the Mexican-American border a locus of continual struggle, O’Sullivan’s sense of entitlement still looms large. The notion of posterity and progress in “our yearly multiplying millions” has been lost to Malthusian projections of food shortages to come, urban blight, or at the very least, class wars. As the layers of paint quickly multiply on the canvas, so do the hypothetical conditions of the future. While the show is called *The Divide*, in each of these scenes there is absolutely no boundary between luxury and ghetto, no architectural divide predicated on class, because the distance between the high and low has collapsed. A better stylistic parallel than the abstract painters is Grandmaster Flash... “Too much, Too many people.”

If what Thomasos is manifesting about the future is true, then in the future, O’Sullivan’s arrogant ideology will continue—but not by redrawing the frontier line or the boundaries between countries, neighborhoods, and classes. With the west no longer wild, Thomasos’s emergent frontier is the next form of spatial control: the total taking-over of megaplex architecture.

Responding solely through taste to the formal qualities of Thomasos’s paintings is a natural consequence of their sort of abstraction, but also a built-in limitation for the viewer. The paintings, and the video, want us to consider whether the models of massive organization that we are building in the world are at all desirable or even efficacious. If Thomasos’s line work suggests an analogy to an architect’s blueprint, it would be for a dystopian remodeling job, where the end is nowhere in sight, and the wealthy client is never satisfied. Privilege, the ability to pay to isolate oneself from neighboring conditions, to overtop, just might be doomed here. These theoretical worlds signify overpopulation, an impersonal and confining density that has not fully taken hold.