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6150 WILSHIRE BLVD., SPACES 1 & 2  
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 90048  
T 323.857.5942 F 323.857.5864  
WWW.ACMELOSANGELES.COM

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### Despoliation and confinement are points of departure for two painters

By: Jordan Green



The Los Angeles artist Tomory Dodge browsed the main gallery at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem alone hours before the opening of the *Directions to a Dirty Place* exhibit on a recent Friday.

“I haven’t seen some of these paintings in 10 years, so I’m kind of enjoying looking at them,” he said.

Curated by Steven Matijcio, *Directions* brings together a survey of Dodge’s work from 2003 through the present with that of Denyse Thomasos, a Trinidadian-born painter who, sadly, died suddenly and unexpectedly last year at the age of 48 from an allergic reaction to diagnostic medical procedure.

Matijcio had been planning an exhibit featuring the two artists since 2010, and the concept had been rattling in his head since before he came to Winston-Salem to join the staff in 2008. The center had made arrangements for Thomasos to visit in October.

“I had her all scheduled to come here,” Matijcio recalled. “I was going online to get some information before I contacted her gallery, and an obituary notice came up.”

Visitors to the main gallery are greeted by gorgeous canvases — up to 13 by 20 feet in dimension — that walk a fine line between representation and abstraction with bold splashes of color and provocative forms. The work is at once accessible and thoughtprovoking, and the exhibit unapologetically celebrates painting in an age when the relevancy of the medium has come into question.

Thomasos’ absence has been keenly felt as the exhibit came to fruition.

“It’s awful that she’s not here,” Dodge said, after sitting for an interview in the gallery.

Matijcio said by pairing Dodge and Thomasos he hopes “to open up the interpretation of one artist’s work through the lens of the other.” He said he sees each artist’s work as coming from a different place but intersecting with each other in interesting ways.

“Denyse was born in Trinidad,” Matijcio said. “Her parents were involved in the fight for freedom and independence. She was part of the first generation born after independence. The idea of freedom is important to her. All of her work is based on confronting the architecture of confinement, whether it be through slavery with cages and mud huts or slave ships, or with super prisons. Through the conflation of structures she’s trying to work against them.”

Where Thomasos’ vision is rooted in African Diaspora concerns about freedom and confinement, Dodge’s work reflects the ecological savaging of the American West, what Matijcio identifies as “the loss of dreams and ambition.”

“It’s hard to live in Los Angeles without being aware of the impact of the city on the surrounding landscape,” Dodge said. “It’s a strange place because there’s no water there. It was developed because people wanted it there. It didn’t develop from a small settlement the way New York did. There were people who wanted to sell real estate, and they had to import water to do that.”

That awareness is particularly acute in “Delta,” a 2006 painting that Dodge said was inspired by seeing a photograph of Ballona Creek, which runs through Los Angeles as it flows out to Santa Monica Bay after the first rain of the season. “In this picture the litter and debris that had been on the streets all summer was being washed out to sea,” Dodge wrote in a note to accompany the piece. “The result was literally a river of garbage.” Although the painting falls at the representational end of the spectrum of Dodge’s work, it’s only loosely tethered to recognizable forms. It could just as easily be seen as a mad scrum of cars on a freeway, either jammed up or hurtling forward with some vehicles flipping into the air. While that reading is not literally aligned with the artist’s original intent, the underlying theme is the same — an out-of-control human project disgorging a malevolent flotsam into the natural environment.

Dodge said he was drawn to trashed and despoiled landscapes as subject and inspiration for his paintings because the decaying objects lend themselves “to the materiality of the paint.”

“It can’t be called a natural setting,” the artist said. “It’s unsettled space. What’s interesting is that the history of painting is long and heavy. Right now, the discourse around painting is long and heavy. I was looking for a devalued setting that I could engage with to say something new.”

***WANNA GO? Directions to a Dirty Place, an exhibit showcasing the paintings of Tomory Dodge and Denyse Thomasos, runs through Sept. 1 at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, located at 750 Marguerite Drive in Winston-Salem.***