

Barbara Earl Thomas: The Blood Catcher and Other Stories

March 2 - April 8, 2017

It makes no difference to the black bird if he eats from our table or scavenges from our discarded piles. The future of his kind may not be altered. But that is not our fate. We've inherited the burden of knowledge and the grief of failed intention. We are not born blind but we can choose to live that way. --

Barbara Earl Thomas



Retake
cut Tyvek and rag construction paper
40 x 60 inches

In Barbara Earl Thomas' works of art, we are treated to a chaotic dream world, cross pollinated with fragments of bible stories, folklore and superstition brought forth from the artist's 'deep south' childhood. Her personal history and current social narrative harmoniously coexist in these visual anthologies; there is never a single thread of delineation for the artist, as there a proliferation of concurrence in the world we all inhabit together. As Thomas's grandmother often told her, we are all damned and redeemed every day. "Even if we cannot see it, there are amazing things going on around us at every moment" she says.

Jacob Lawrence, Thomas's mentor, said of her work, "Her technical skills as an artist, in terms of abstract elements of color, line, texture and shape are inventive, dynamic and exciting. Her works have scope and dimension. She continues to express with deep conviction and passion her perception of life." One can see the influence of Lawrence in her work however it is clear that Thomas's work is singular and informed by many things, including dance and literature.

Creating a mature style early in her career afforded the artist the luxury of exploring a multitude of media in her studio practice. The artist works in linocut and vitreography, painting, papercut, text, mouth blown glass and large scale installation in turn as required; inspiration and concept are one for Thomas. Each medium communicates her message in a different voice, yet all pull together a narrative line running deep and indelibly marking the creative impulse that flows through her. Thomas's work assures us that it is ok to fail and still go on to ultimately succeed: "we can have differences with others, not agree, and yet be able to ultimately come to an understanding. We can manifest this dream through a lot of hard work."

Thomas is a story teller, a recycler of everyday acts, and a reshaper of the common occurrence into something worthy of our contemplation. Her work thrives on noise, movement, drama and the mess of living. "The decaying smell in the heart of the exquisite garden is the undoing of its own beauty", says Thomas. She attempts to keep a good balance between humor and content in her work: "it is essential to our survival and makes the harsh palatable", Thomas's work positions a fragile light between us and all that is vile.

A cultural ambassador and activist in her community, Thomas draws on current events in hopes that her work will help others to gain a new perspective on the important incidents presently

shaping our world. The artist's extant body of work addresses the growing hair trigger violence in our society and, in particular, addresses that brutality surrounding young black men.

Forsaking the grand narrative for the more intimate and poignant small story, as Thomas tells it, she "goes back through the closet of her youth", drawing on the familiar to her, yet not totally explicable, lexicon of recurring images which manifest themselves in a complex system of interdependence. She uses these icons (be they rooster, bed, book or fish) in her construction of non-linear fables. Speaking through these images, Thomas is able to narrate a life that goes on in the midst of the chaos and concerns most pressing in our own time.

In her recent linocut work *In Case of Flood* we see swirling stories about water and fire; catastrophe coexists with beauty as foreground, middle ground and background compress into a single picture plane. Her distinctive visual vocabulary of strong, clear line, symbolic imagery, dramatic tension and epic tale tell a story of great tragedy and heroic phenomenon. Small boats are buffeted in turbulent waters filled with catfish, miniature people scale giant book shelves and children sleep peacefully in beds afloat on the raging current; the cock crows. There is a meticulous attention to detail; Thomas has mastered the manipulation of space.

Barbara Earl Thomas is a first-generation descendant of the second Great Migration, that group of African Americans that left the South (Louisiana) for the North West at the very beginning of WWII in search of jobs and the ability to own their own homes. As she tells it, her family moved to Seattle in search of bigger dreams for their children and she is the (happy) product of their sacrifice and hard work. Barbara Earl Thomas lives and works in Seattle, Washington.



Fire Wall
glass plate print
15 x 20 inches

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