

Never Done Object Tour

Co-curator Rachel Seligman reflects on Syd Carpenter's *Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas* from the series *Places of Our Own*, 2009-2010.

Transcript

Rachel: One of my favorite works from the Tang's collection that's in Never Done is Syd Carpenter's "Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas." This is a wall-hanging sculpture made of earthenware, and it has a patina of acrylic and graphite. "Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas" is a kind of abstracted portrait of the farm owned by Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas as seen, perhaps, from above. The title makes it sound like this might be a portrait of two people, and in a way it is, but it's really a portrait of the connection of those two people to the land and to farming as a way of life.

This sculpture is from a larger series called "Places of Our Own," which are all sculptural portraits of farms and gardens owned and run by African Americans. This work is about reminding us of the rich history of black farmers in America despite the history of systemic racism that conspires to separate them from their land and I think it's also about the real story of farming history generally, which is that skilled black women and men have worked the soil of this country, especially in the South and West, for generations, as laborers but also as innovators.

So, in this work, Carpenter is reimagining the farm owned by Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas, and it's like a topographical map brought to life in three dimensions. In its composition, I see an aerial view of the farm, but I also see a human figure composed of fields, roads, buildings, and trees. To me, this makes the connection between these farmers and their land very vivid. Carpenter says that she thinks of her sculptures from this series as what a flat farm looks like when it inhales, and I love that description because it gets at the feeling of movement and energy that I think pours out from this work.

"Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas" is one chapter in a much larger essential story of the control, ownership, and stewardship of land and of land as one key to agency, creativity, and racial justice.