

Larry D. Thomas. *Art Museums* (Blue Horse Press, 2014) and *The Circus* (Blue Horse Press, 2016).

Reviewed by Nick Brush (*The Oklahoma Review*, Vol. 17:1, Spring 2016, Cameron University)

Charles Bukowski once said, “An intellectual says a simple thing in a hard way. An artist says a hard thing in a simple way.” Larry D. Thomas is an artist. A wordsmith in every possible connotation, his poetry recalls Barnett Newman; Thomas’s deceptively plain language invites readers into a deeper conversation the same way that Newman’s zips pull us into his canvases. Thomas’s work suggests a new kind of abstract expressionism, a new form that exists not on the page nor in the minds of his readers, but rather in the space between. His poetry rips you out of the physical, sometimes violently, but then pulls you gently through the ephemeral with the care of an old friend.

Art Museums, published by Blue Horse Press in 2014, features thirteen different ways of looking at art and everything associated with it. Thomas invites readers to follow along as he tours museums like the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Kimbell. Some poems describe an artwork as though we were standing right in front of it. In “Amon Carter Museum,” Thomas details a painting by Frederic Remington: “a stagecoach lunges / as if spewed from the night itself, / ejected from the canvas / into the trembling, outstretched arms / of the viewer.” The viscerality of Thomas’s words combined with his imagery make the painting’s viewer a piece of the work itself. His poetry does the same thing to its readers; we are pulled into and invited to be a part of Thomas’s work.

Thomas not only acquaints readers with artworks, but he also introduces readers to the museums and their inhabitants. He discusses architecture in poems like “The Steps” and “Kimbell Art Museum,” giving readers a chance to experience all the splendor of these magnificent buildings through simple, yet powerfully expressive, poetic musings. Restorers, moving men, and even security guards get the Thomas treatment as he paints them as not mere employees, but as the forces that keep these institutions running; they are as much the art as what hangs on the walls.

Moving from concrete walls covered in canvas to walls made of canvas itself, Thomas’s newest offering, *The Circus*, takes us into the mind of a childlike version of the poet. Published by Blue Horse Press in 2016, *The Circus*’ poems are based on Thomas’s childhood memories of attending these vibrant and lively events. What makes these poems so unique is Thomas’s method of conveying the unsophisticated wonder of a young boy through the wise and practiced language of a grown poet. Years of experience are evident in these poems, but Thomas’s skill blends the two together as if we were reading the thoughts of a too-smart-for-his-own-good little boy.

Like *Art Museums*, *The Circus* is about more than just the art, and as Thomas describes it, the theatricality of the circus is definitely art, but it is also about the people; it is about the circus as an institution and an idea instead of just a big tent in a field. “The Ringmaster,” arguably the strongest poem in the collection, summarizes the entirety of circus culture in four short stanzas. The man himself, a “commandant of freakdom” and “consummate public relations director / of death” pokes and prods both his performers and the audience, taking charge of the three-ring wonder. However, as Thomas goes on, we find out that the circus’s magic lies only on the surface; there is a dark, gritty, and dirty underbelly that only an experienced patron would dare to discuss.

Both *Art Museums* and *The Circus* are essential writings of Larry D. Thomas and also serve as a good introduction to the poet. His linguistic skill is rivaled by few alive today; his techniques are reminiscent of a Renaissance master combined with the creativity and bold, comfort-be-damned attitude of a Postmodernist. Everything Thomas touches turns to poetic gold, and readers would be remiss to not give his work their undivided attention.