HYPEBEAST



Mickalene Thomas Has a New Muse

We took a trip to the artist's Brooklyn studio for a look inside 'Beneath the Moonlight,' her first exhibition devoted to Black masculinity, at The Shepherd.

By Erin Ikeuchi
July 16, 2026

If we're talking most memorable rooms in New York, Mickalene Thomas' rhinestone vault takes the crown. Thousands of crystals in just about every color make up the towering shelves in the back corner of her studio, a converted two-storey mechanic's garage. Just a few steps beyond, her latest collection is mounted in the main room. The sun hangs high over Brooklyn. What a fitting backdrop to welcome in her next chapter.

Hot off the Paris stop of her global *All About Love* tour, the Jersey-born, New York-based artist, it seems, is already looking ahead. By now, the works have touched down and gone up in Detroit for her ongoing show at The Shepherd, presented by the beloved Library Street Collective. But if you ask her, *Beneath the Moonlight* was a long time coming.

An international art star, Thomas is rewriting the rules of Black portraiture. Her opulent multimedia portraits of Black women in luxuriant interiors — maximalist collages of photography, screenprinting, painting, glitter, and rhinestones — have earned her acclaim within the contemporary art vanguard, and now she's turning elsewhere. With the new show comes a new cast of subjects, with Thomas shifting her gaze towards Black masculinity for the very first time in an exhibition.

"Men do think they're beautiful," she shared. "We've given them the safe space, in a myriad of ways, to do that unapologetically. It's okay to show your sensitive side. But that's not always afforded to some Black men within their own communities."



“Men do think they’re beautiful… It’s okay to show your sensitive side.”

Thomas isn’t leaving behind the ideas or lens long explored in her practice so much as deepening them. She’s still committed to vulnerability, sensuality, agency, and acceptance, simply reconstellating them through different figures. As with her femmes, she’s putting fire beneath historical images depicting Black masculinity, rewiring these canonical motifs into visions of possibility.

The show, curated by Dexter Wemberly, sees Thomas’ 2024 editorial commission for *Another Man* undergo her signature collage treatment. In the original photos, her subjects lay it all bare, dialing down stoicism in favor of something more open, more tender, christened by the same ardent attention she’s so well known for.

> The finished canvases are rooted in strength as embodied rather than expected. Her figures don’t rehearse familiar narratives of resilience or burden, but exist on their own terms in states of grace. Even the show’s title, *Beneath the Moonlight*, evokes a sense of being – who we are when the rest of the world falls quiet.
>
> “In some ways, softness is perceived as a weakness. But for me, I want to present softness as a strength,” she illuminates, gesturing toward “In Blue: The Odalisque.” The pearl earring. The languid Manet-like lay. The red scarf, “a reminder of warriorship,” still contends with societal norms.



“In some ways, softness is perceived as a weakness. But for me, I want to present softness as a strength.”

“When you take the Black body out of the context of how it’s stereotypically known, and put it up against historical ideologies, the narrative shifts.” Out with the Old Guard and in with the new. Fantasy, here, is reengineered into tools for unapologetic self-image. “It’s not just seen as some element of erotism, but as them owning their own prowess.”

The process behind each work is cinematic. In the best films, she explains, the storytelling is all in the editing, taking contradicting frames and making them into one. Richly patterned compositions pull from her library of references, as various eras, images, and styles happily collapse into sites of belonging, memory, and leisure. Even visual juxtapositions can be orchestrated into a symphony when done carefully.

Thomas stops in front of another piece, “In Blue: The Thinker,” on the opposite wall. The figure, channelling Rodin’s iconic sculpture, appears otherworldly, the back of his body cloaked in deep lapis paint. “He’s blossoming and contemplating the next move,” she muses. The work emerged from reflections on the bodies among the transatlantic. “What was that like for them to harbor this strength, harbor this tradition of protection of their people, and to be stripped of that?”

The story of transformation, told throughout the show, is also one of transcendence. Working with non-binary and trans models, too, gives acceptance that much more texture and depth, all of which radiate from the seven-foot-long canvas, “I’m Here,” the largest work in the show. Inspired by the luminous stained glass windows at the Shepherd, a Romanesque-style ex-church, three picks from the new “Au Revoir” series are featured alongside the portraits, echoing ongoing themes of rebirth and sacredness.

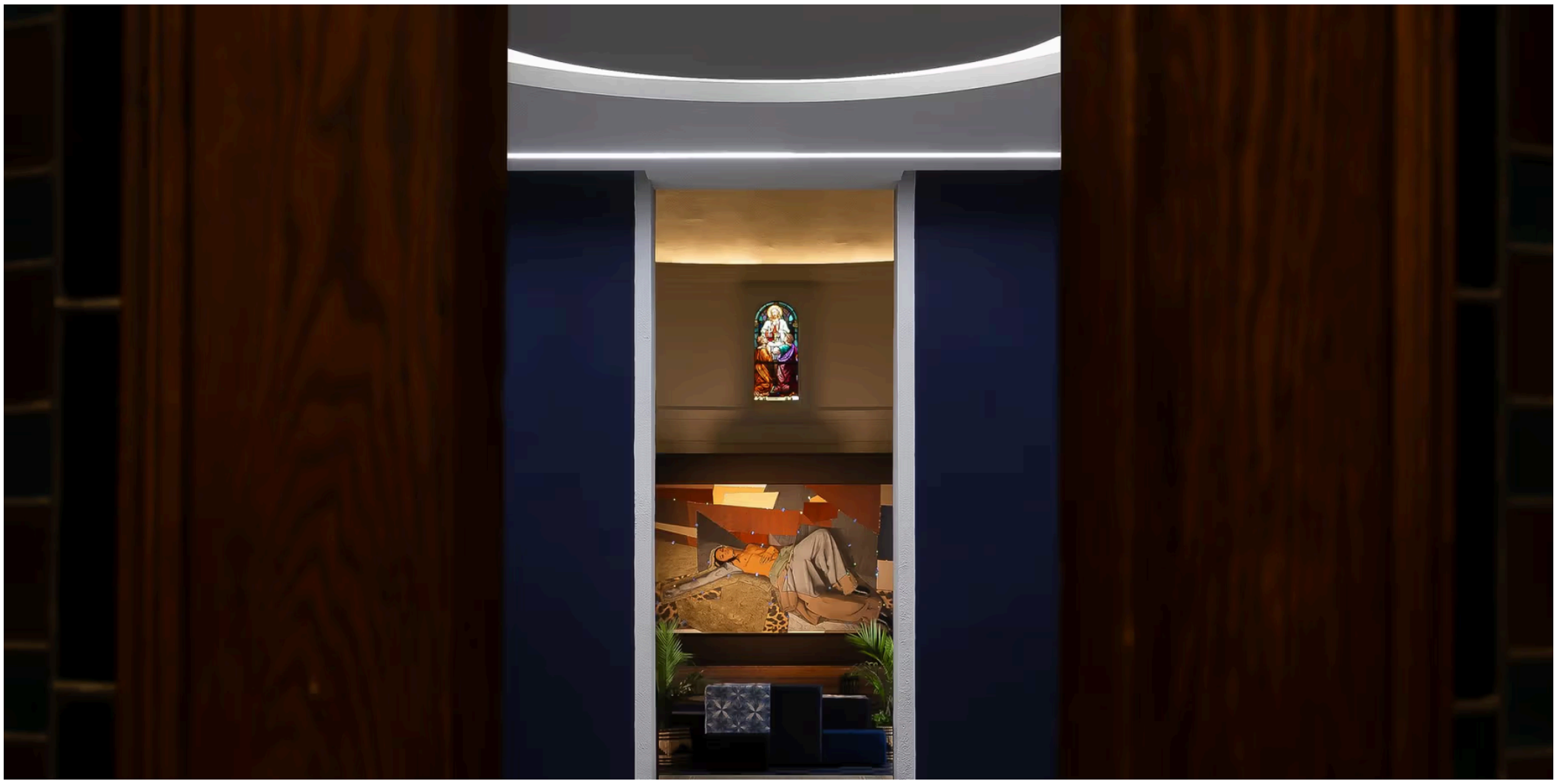


“The male body was not something I wanted to shy away from. It was more about when the right time is for me to do it, on my terms.”

It was church, after all, that inspired the rhinestones in the first place. Thomas often cites matriarchs as the inspiration behind her leading ladies, and watching her grandmother get dressed in her Sunday best to go on stage and lead the congregation choir initially instilled love and curiosity for how we perform. As a child, “seeing those rituals of how we adorn ourselves,” she reflects, “those moments were just so ceremonious.” If clothing is a way of staking a place in this world, so too, in the case of *Beneath the Moonlight*, is the lack thereof: authoring when, how, and by whom you’re desired.

Back in the studio, the question still hangs heavy: why now? “The male body was not something I wanted to shy away from,” she puts plainly. “It was more about when the right time is for me to do it, on my terms.”

For two decades, Thomas waited for the work to find her. There’s always noise about the next new thing, and the market’s appetite for “question-answer” progress, but she held off for the opening she needed, to see it through her own lens. “It needs to come out of the experience, from being in the moment. And you don’t always know when you’re in it. My work always has to make sense to the process. It has to come out of becoming.” And if this marks a new chapter, it’s one without a final page. The rest, as Thomas sees it, is already somewhere in the making.



Beneath the Moonlight is now on view at The Shepherd until August 23.

Studio portraits by Lila Barth. All images courtesy of the Artist and Library Street Collective.

Harper's BAZAAR

Mickalene Thomas Takes on Black Masculinity, Wants an Armor Made of Margiela and Rick Owens

Ahead of her show opening at the Shephard, the artist answers *Bazaar*'s "First, Now, Next" Questionnaire



LILA BARTH H<

BY MAXWELL RABB PUBLISHED: JUN 5, 2026

8 MIN READ

Making paintings is an involved process for Mickalene Thomas. First, the New York artist stages a photo shoot, directing models through highly stylized scenes. The resulting photographs are cut and collaged, and from these, she builds an idea of the image that will then be translated onto a much larger painted canvas. The paintings—portraits of Black women, often inspired by her late mother, Sandra Bush—are then finished with glitter, sequins, appliquéd fabrics, or rhinestones, among other materials. Her works are unmistakably her own: dazzling portraits of femininity that challenge art history and the representation of Black women in the art world.

For the first time in over two decades, Thomas is turning her attention to masculine bodies, introducing "Beneath the Moonlight," a new body of work concentrated on Black male bodies, including nonbinary individuals and trans men at **the Shepherd in Detroit**. In her artist's statement, Thomas explained that she wanted to work with the Black male body "to express those ideas that are resonant and parallel to my concepts that

I'm already working within with the female body." The show comes on the heels of a massive solo show, "All About Love," that closed in April at the Grand Palais in Paris.

Harper's Bazaar's questionnaire series "First, Now, Next" dives into the past, present, and future of some of our favorite creatives, spotlighting the moments and people that have influenced them. We caught up with Thomas on a video call just before her show to unpack why she turned her attention to the masculine form. We spoke about her friendships in the art world, her ever-growing reading list, and why she could never imagine wearing one outfit for the rest of her life.

What's the first artwork or exhibition that cracked something open in you?

When I was living in Portland, Oregon, one of the first artists that inspired me was William H. Johnson. I was looking through the stacks at Powell's Books, and I was in the Black-art section and was just pulling out different books—Bill Taylor, books on the Harlem Renaissance, Romare Bearden—and I discovered William H. Johnson. It wasn't anything or anyone specific. It was his oil-pastel, painted images of Southern families. It almost looked like they were coming from the juke joint. There was something about the geometry of the figures, the shapes, the rhythm of it that felt like jazz. They were very colorful, and there was a naivete, a childlike approach, but it seemed very intentional. I remember responding to those. I remember the hands being big and expressive, the scale shift, the car, the will. They were just really fun and bold colors that popped off the page. I started emulating that style early on.

Who was your first true friend in the industry?

One person who introduced me to a lot of people in the art world is my friend Muna El Fituri, an art therapist who was really tapped into the New York art world. It's so funny to pick out one person; it's a little awkward and strange for me because I always think in a community of people.... I had Paul Laster, who worked at Tony Shafrazi at that time, and he was really formative in introducing me. I was an intern at this gallery that doesn't exist anymore, called Cristinerose Gallery on West Broadway. On my way to and from there, I always stopped by Tony Shafrazi, and Paul was very nice to me. He started introducing me to artists like Cy Twombly, Paul D. Miller, and DJ Spooky. It was these people and openings that were happening, [and] he would invite me to them. It left this great impression, and we're still friends today. He just watched my career develop.

A really good friend that I grew up with in the art world is my buddy Derek Adams. We went to school together. We're like family. We support each other in many ways. We open doors for each other.... We are aligned in our vision, mission, impact, and community—on how we think about mentoring emerging artists. It's hard for me to say just one person, because there were so many people who created space for me.



LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Mickalene Thomas, *Perfectly Purple Standing,* 2026

What was the first project that made you take yourself seriously?

That's an easy one for me. It's when Klaus Biesenbach invited me to do the art piece at the MoMA Modern Window in 2010. I did my first big project, *Le déjeuner.* It was a huge project, and I did it in all three spaces: the mural at MoMA PS1, the photograph at the Modern Window, and the photo shoot at the Modern. It was my first site-specific photo shoot ever, where I did photos outside of my studio, so that was really groundbreaking for me to know the possibility of not having all my work be studio photographs.

What made you feel like it was time to extend your practice to explore masculinity and the representation of the Black male body?

[It's] mostly where I'm at in my headspace and in evolving the work and seeing a lot of myself within the Black male body. My close relationships with Black men, my friends and siblings—thinking about the Black male body and society and how the disruption and abuse against the Black male body—and the Black female body. I never wanted to do something because I could do it. It had to organically evolve for me in a profound way. When I did this photo shoot, I could see things clearly: the relationship and the prowess that these men were carrying, the weight they were carrying—the comfortability, the vulnerability, the softness, the masculinity. All of that was just encompassed, and I can feel it. The energy. I had this foresight of understanding their bodies and desires and how I was seeing it.

What inspired the title *Beneath the Moonlight*?

The more I was looking at the work (and I love the film *Moonlight*), I just started thinking of the bodies among the transatlantic, the Black bodies —the Black male and female bodies—but really imagining what it's like to be a Black male in society: one with the notion of providing security, protector, all of these things that are put on to the male body when it comes to familial relationships. [I was] imagining those particular men on ships not being able to be that for their people, for their women, for their children—having that stripped away—and what does that feel like under the moonlight.

A lot of your portraiture has been inspired by your mother. Now that you've turned your eyes toward masculine figures, is anyone stepping into this role?

There are no people directly. I have become close with some of the subjects. What has happened is that it has opened the door [to] really engaging with my brothers a little more as subjects.



LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Mickalene Thomas, *I'm Here,* 2026

How did you define success at 16?

As a teenager, it was everything. You couldn't tell me *nothing*. We thought we knew everything as teenagers. [Sixteen is] such a formidable year. For me, I was out of the home at 16. I was living on my own. I was an adult. Me, as a teenager, I grew up very fast. I was taking care of myself. I had my own job and my apartment at 16. I was a young adult, so that was success for me. That life of being independent, surviving, and taking care of myself. That was, at that moment, success.

How would you define it now?

My level of success frightens me. It feels open. It feels exposed. I'm desiring the quietness of things more. And I feel like that's success when I can do that.

If you could wear only one outfit for the rest of your life and had to pull it out of your closet right now, what would you reach for?

Me? Never. Not just one outfit. Who wants to do that? No, no, no, no, no, no, no. The world is just too much to narrow down to one outfit.

I wouldn't mind a uniform look for sure. It would be a combination of Margiela and Rick Owens, a little Rei Kawakubo, a little Issey, a little L'Enchanteur, a little luxury Dior—a combination of all those things in one, that presents itself as an armor or a knighted person. A uniform like that would be cool.

Your last show in Paris was called “All About Love.” Do you see your portraits as an act of love?

Yes. I see all my portraits as an act of love. It comes from a place of desire and wanting to be connected heart to heart with people.

How does this act of love come through in the new show? Can you name any specific paintings?

I would say the act of love comes through *In Blue: The Odalisque*, because it really speaks, for me, [to] this notion beneath the moonlight. The bed becomes this floating platform as they’re moving across water, and they’re coming from the ocean, this spiritual place of Ifá and all these gods in African spirituality. They feel part of the reef that becomes intertwined with their body, and they become one with the ocean. It’s a fabric, but the velvetness of the fabric feels like water.



LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Mickalene Thomas, *In Blue: The Odalisque*, 2026

You often nod to books for your paintings: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and, of course, bell hooks, for your Paris show. What books are on your reading list right now?

There are lots. All of James Baldwin. Some of Michelle Wallace. All about the Black male body and resistance and desire and abuse and transformation. Bell hooks is in there again. *All About Love*, but in a different way in relationships. *Belly of the Beast*, [a book about] the politics of anti-fatness and anti-Blackness by DeShawn Harrison. A lot of fiction and storytelling of young men. One of Darnell Moore's [stories] about his experience in Camden, New Jersey. I love having the books be part of [the show].

If you could single-handedly dictate the next big trend in culture, what would it be?

The trend in culture will be that people will create new and more collectives. There will be more pods and groups of people pulling together their resources and working in community. The notion of collaboration will really spread through how we think of commerce, how we think of our natural resources, and how we think of health care. All these things are going to go back to community building and community leaders shepherding and providing ways in which we do these days.

What are you saying no to now? What are you saying yes to?

What I'm saying no to is people who are incorrigible about being accountable for anything. What I'm saying yes to is kindness.

If you retired from making art, what would you do next?

I would still be creative in some ways. I'd like to connect people. I feel like I'm a connector, so I would be some type of innovator, shape-shifter that brings ideas and people together. I do it now. I have a good way of bringing people together and having them create something.

CULTURE

Mickalene Thomas, love supreme: the contemporary art superstar honored at the Grand Palais

By Florine Delcourt
Published onMarch 7, 2026 at 09:32.



The artist in 2005, by photographer Joshua Woods. © Joshua Woods

The first African-American to be honored at the Grand Palais, contemporary art superstar Mickalene Thomas presents "All About Love", a retrospective that questions the visibility and representation of Black women while making love a force for emancipation, affirmation and joy.

She speaks of freedom as a matter of course: “As children, my friends and I would lose ourselves in a world governed by its own rules. This taste for play and adventure was very powerful, because it was there that I understood social dynamics.” For over twenty years, Mickalene Thomas, a leading figure in contemporary art ranked by *Time* magazine among the 100 most influential people in the world, has been developing a prolific body of work—painting, collage, photography, video, installation—that places Black women at the center of art history and visual culture. Her monumental canvases, saturated with color and pattern, combine acrylic, enamel, and especially rhinestones, her signature material,which allowsher to find a balance between her incisive vision and the glamour of her art. Drawing inspiration from Ingres, Matisse, and Manet, as well as from Pop Art, 1970s blaxploitation films, and the interiors of her childhood, the cool and laid-back American artist reinterprets the conventions of portraiture and the nude, replacing white muses with powerful, sensual, and sovereign Black women—among them anonymous figures, icons (Eartha Kitt, Michelle Obama, Naomi Campbell ...), friends, lovers, and even her mother. Her major retrospective, *All About Love,* presented at the Grand Palais, celebrates a body of work that has consistently reinvented visual narratives around race, gender, desire, and power.



© Mickalene Thomas

Harper's Bazaar: The title of your exhibition, *All About Love,* refers to bell hooks' book. Do you remember when you first discovered his work?

Mickalene Thomas: I discovered it thanks to *Art on My Mind,* a book given to me by a friend. He particularly recommended the text on Carrie Mae Weems—a photographer who was important to me, both as a reference and a mentor, and who greatly fueled my desire to become an artist. Reading *All About Love afterward,* I understood the idea that my work is rooted in a “space of love”: the place from which I create, driven by an intention of care, respect, and generosity. Bell hooks reminds us that love is a practice, an act that requires real commitment—putting energy into something so that it happens and flows back. In my case, this ethic guides an approach that celebrates and re-centers the agency of Black women in a world that too often relegates them to the margins and denies them certain spaces. To withstand this brutality and these imposed limitations, you have to start from a place where there is love.

HB: Why don't you like the notion of victimization?

MT: Let's say I don't see myself that way, because I don't hold others responsible for what happens to me personally. I sincerely believe in the principle of cause and effect: the way we present ourselves to the world inevitably generates certain consequences. But that doesn't mean I consider people responsible for everything that happens to them. There are forms of violence enshrined in laws, institutions, and cultural norms, which stem from systemic victimization. I think there's also a social victimization, made up of stereotypes and situations where people are objectified, silenced, or held responsible.

HB: How are you experiencing this?

MT: Artists are often very vulnerable and particularly attuned to society: they absorb information, filter it, try to make sense of all this complexity, and then reintegrate it into their creative practice to shed light on things. For me, it's like a continuous flow of information and emotions. Artists are sometimes expected to react immediately, but I think it's important
to remain contemplative. Even in the midst of chaos, I look for the best way out: I want to remain hopeful, convinced that beyond the wall, there is light, perhaps even a rainbow. Despite all the hardships, the world also holds many beautiful things.

HB: Would you say that your art is political?

MT: I see my practice as both a feminist and political act, as a Black, queer woman. Without always needing to state it explicitly, the act of creating art for a woman is already a profoundly political and feminist act. Of course, I could very well paint flowers: it would be simpler. But choosing the subjects I choose, and showing them to the world, is a political stance. Some series, like *Resist* or the works presented in *All About Love,* directly address violence against Black bodies, police brutality, and persistent inequalities. They invite the viewer to confront the reality of this violence, which is not limited to the United States but also affects other countries, where people are still fighting for their freedoms.

HB: How do you choose your models?

MT: According to several criteria: their vulnerability, their strength, their sensitivity, their way of moving in the world, and the energy they exude. It's this combination of fragility and strength that attracts me, and especially the fact that they aren't afraid to show these two aspects.

HB: You have been exhibiting for over twenty years. What is your perspective on the evolution of the body in your art and, more broadly, in society?

MT: I think there has been progress, but women's bodies remain in conflict with opposing forces in societies that still seek to control them—whether it's reproduction, the bodies of Black women, or the female body in general. Much remains to be done for women to feel free in their bodieswhetherin the United States, Europe, the Middle East, or parts of Asia and Africa. In many contexts, women are still being made to understand that their bodies don't truly belong to them. Historically, we have long been reduced to "fertile" bodies, defined more by our capacity to bear children than recognized as thinking, celebrated, and powerful beings. Today, we see more talk, visibility, and debate around diversity, autonomy, and consent. Movements like body positivity and body neutrality are challenging long-standing norms. But there remains a form of permanent surveillance that weighs on the female body – and this is clearly reflected in current political dynamics and tensions, particularly in the United States.

> Saying “I am beautiful” is a gesture of celebration and defiance. ”

HB: You believe that the beauty of women, and particularly that of Black women, is the subject of ongoing debate. Can you explain what you mean by that?

MT: For generations, the beauty of Black women has been a subject of debate, because it has been measured against standards shaped by whiteness: lighter skin, straightened hair, delicate features. This “manufactured beauty” then becomes something to be proven, defended, and negotiated, rather than simply experienced. This obsession is also rooted in the history of slavery and colonialism, where the bodies of Black women were exploited, scrutinized, deprived of dignity, and then rendered invisible or, conversely, hypervisible—often at the cost of stereotypes. Faced with this, Black women had to invent their own codes, their own languages of beauty: hairstyles, adornments, ways of presenting themselves, community rituals. We also see this in resistance movements, for example, with Black Power and the choice to wear the afro in the 1960s and 70s, celebrating the natural texture of hair. Redefining beauty, then, is about strength, creativity, and survival. Today, visibility has increased, but tensions persist: Black beauty remains controlled in certain spaces, and it is often appropriated without recognition. Beauty is not simply about appearance: it is also about autonomy, safety, and self-definition. Saying “I am beautiful” becomes an act of celebration and defiance.

HB: Ultimately, what space of resistance does art belong to?

MT: Art, in many ways, functions like queer theory: it restores humanity to people. It preserves memory when history is erased or rewritten, offering artists a creative and safe space to reconfigure the narrative and tell stories. It allows us to confront racism, gender-based violence, and colonialism. Whether it's music or performance, art gives voice to grief, anger, and joy, outside of polite discourse. It opens a space for people like me, whether we identify as queer, Black, or feminist. It rejects the injunctions to respectability and invisibility dictated by dominant norms. Art unfolds beyond the systems that absorb and exploit our way of seeing the world. Artists, therefore, constitute a true force. Art allows for flamboyance and creates

a space with irregular boundaries. He accepts that the line is not straight, and affirms that this is perfectly fine. He makes imagination and dreaming possible, and offers a place to sit and contemplate.

HB: What you're saying reminds me of this quote from Lorraine Hansberry, the American activist and author: "Don't get up. Just sit for a while and think. Never be afraid to sit for a while and think..."

MT: ...And be at peace with yourself." Yes. When we think of the work that Lorraine Hansberry accomplished at a time when injustice surrounded her, when we think of all those writers, or a figure like Josephine Baker, who made dance a way to traverse an unjust world – to inhabit her own body, to shift perspectives, to bridge the gap between America and Paris –
we measure the power of art.

HB: Have you always wanted to be an artist?

MT: I believe my way of seeing the world is intimately linked to who I am. I feel capable of many things, but being an artist has always been, for me, a given in how I wanted to live my life. Creativity has always been at the heart of how I define myself in the world, how I move, how I build relationships, and how I navigate experiences. I'm also interested in other activities, such as art direction in the field of design, which is, in reality, another facet of my work and what I love to do. My creative practice has multiple facets that can unfold in many directions: film, performance, fashion collaborations, architecture...



© Mickalene Thomas

HB: What was the first work of art that touched you?

MT: The first work that truly moved me as an artist was Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* , which I discovered in Portland in 1994. For the first time, I saw in a contemporary space a work that was both intimate and permeated by the tensions of power, gender roles, love, and silence. CarrieMaeWeems transforms the domestic table into a political stage for Black life, family ties, and relationships between partners and between parent and child. I saw a narrative in which I could finally recognize myself. This experience, both everyday and interwoven with broader social structures, made me feel seen and validated, to the point of inspiring me to become an artist.

HB: What do you do when you're not creating?

MT: I'm always creating! I love to cook. I spend my time redecorating my home because I love design, architecture, spaces, and light. Lately, I've been writing more in a journal. I'm going back to books after years of reading everything on screens. I'm currently reading *Baldwin: A Love Story* by Nicholas Boggs, which I think is incredible. I'm trying to consume less news and information on my phone, so I'm listening to more music. I like going to comedy shows and the theater. I also love movies. And I love concerts: one of the last ones I went to was Tyler, The Creator , and it was amazing.

HB: Oh really?

MT: Yes. I find him incredible, both in his performance and his music. His world is truly intriguing and impressive, and his show is on another level. From the moment he stepped on stage until the end, I was captivated. It was incredible, and that energy really revitalized and inspired me. It had been a long time since I'd left a concert feeling so energized as an artist. Seeing him so connected to his authenticity and creativity was profoundly joyful, almost magical.

HB: Which album would you take with you to a desert island?

MT: Only one! Impossible!

HB: One or two, then.

MT: It would depend on my mood, because those choices can vary, but I have certain go-to albums for when I need inspiration or to relax. There would be: Grace Jones 's **Slave to the Rhythm **... Maybe also a Thelonious Monk album, any one. And then, Nina Simone, probably * *Pastel Blues* * or * *I Put a Spell on You*.* So that makes four albums...

Mickalene Thomas, All About Love, exhibition at the Grand Palais (Paris), until April 5.

Numéro

NUMÉRO ART 24 Feb 2026

Interview with Mickalene Thomas, the artist who celebrates black bodies at the Grand Palais

Until April 5th, the celebrated African American artist has taken up residence at Paris's Grand Palais with the exhibition All About Love. In the manner of bell hooks's eponymous feminist manifesto, her oeuvre foregrounds Black women – so long ignored by the history of art – in a humanist gesture of love and resistance.

Interview by **Nicolas Trembley**.

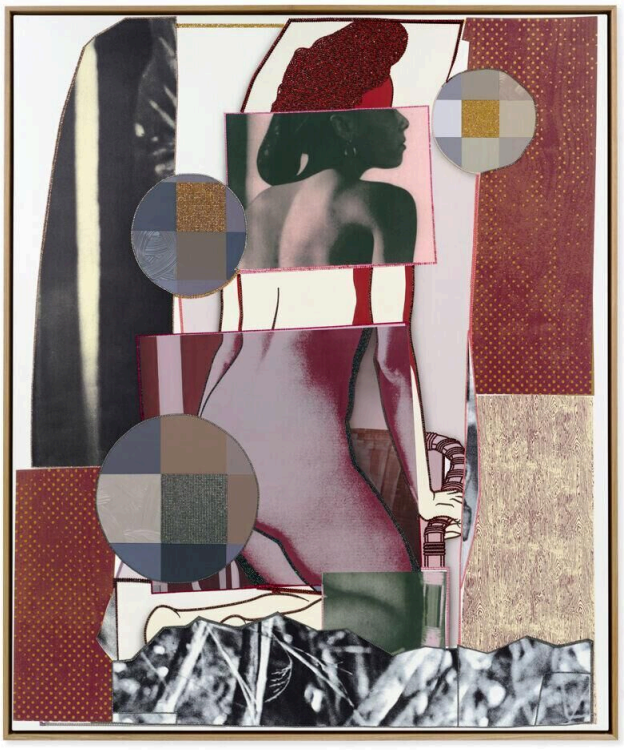


Mickalene Thomas photographed by Joshua Woods.

Mickalene Thomas’s art as a political act

With ***All About Love***, her exhibition at the **Grand Palais** in Paris, African American artist **Mickalene Thomas** has put together a show that sets in tension art history, pop culture, and the very conditions in which images are produced. Rather than a retrospective, the exhibition is a journey through visual situations that mix **painting**, **photography**, **collage**, **film**, and **installation**. In parallel to his exploration of love, desire, and resistance, she is showing new works at **Galerie Nathalie Obadia**, prolonging her investigations in a smaller-scale context.

Thomas’s oeuvre maintains a constant dialogue with the history of European art, in particular French painting, with multiple references to **Courbet**, **Ingres**, **Manet**, and depiction of leisure, the domestic interior – she shifts the gaze so that Black women take centre stage in a narrative from which they were so long excluded. Technique is key to this approach; **painting**, **silkscreen**, **photography**, and **collage** combine according to very precise processes in which the hand remains determinant.



Mickalene Thomas, *November 1950* (2021). Rhinestones, acrylic and oil on canvas mounted on wooden panel with oak frame, 218.8 x 132.2 x 7.3 cm. © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

All about love, love as an act of resistance

Thomas's approach also involves the appropriation of images from popular culture, in particular ***Jet***, a magazine emblematic of the African-American press. By transforming photos of Black women from the magazine's archives, Thomas questions the regimes of visibility and desire, all the while affirming the visual sovereignty of the bodies she depicts. Her **Grand Palais** show envisages love as both a formal and political question in which time, doing, and materiality are indissociable from representation.



Mickalene Thomas, *Clarivel Face Forward Gazing* (2024). Rhinestones, acrylic and oil on canvas mounted on wooden panel, 243.84 x 365.76 cm. © Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

Interview with artist Mickalene Thomas for *Numéro art*

***Numéro*: Can you say something about the title of your exhibition?**

Mickalene Thomas: *All About Love* is borrowed from the title of a book by **bell hooks** in which she talks about love as an action. Love requires responsibility. It's work. It's not just a feeling. For me, this exhibition comes from a personal place. My relationship with my mother. My childhood. My body. Desire. Queerness. Tenderness. Beauty. But also resistance.

What do you mean by resistance?

In the show, I included pieces from my *Resist* series that contextualize images of violence and activism across history – from civil rights to **Black Lives Matter**. It's not only about Black bodies, but about all bodies that have been dehumanized. For me, making this work was a way to process grief without imploding. Art becomes a language when words aren't enough. Culture matters because it reminds us, again and again, of our humanity. That's why the *Resist* series is present. It reminds us that even rest is political. For Black bodies, rest has historically been denied. Leisure becomes a radical gesture.

"Even rest is political." — Mickalene Thomas

Where did you grow up, and what's your background?

I'm originally from New Jersey. I was raised by my mother, but also spent time with my grandmother. My family was very matriarchal. Education was important. Music

was central – gospel, church, family gatherings. I was athletic, shy, moved schools a lot. At 16, I came out, moved to Portland, Oregon with my girlfriend, became independent very young. That experience shaped everything. It opened my world. Portland was where art became serious for me. I was surrounded by queer creatives, activists, and musicians. That community is still my family today.



Mickalene Thomas, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Three Black Women* (2010). C-Print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm.
© Courtesy of the artist. Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

"I'm interested in how certain graphic processes become painterly." — Mickalene Thomas

In your work, you've developed some very specific techniques.

Yes, technique is very important for me. I'm interested in how certain graphic processes become painterly. When **Andy Warhol** was working with silkscreen, he used a very graphic technique but turned it into something expressive. He would do a lot of one-offs, experimenting, playing. With my silkscreen work, everything begins with my hand – I draw directly onto the acetate. Then we transfer that drawing onto the screen and print it. So it's a two-part process: my hand is present, then it's removed. It's pushed through another system. That tension is important to me.



Mickalene Thomas, Guernica Detail (Resist #7) (2021). Rhinestone, acrylic and oil on canvas mounted on wooden panel, 152.4 x 243.84 cm. © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

"Though it's not literal collage, even if it often looks like collage." — Mickalene Thomas

Where do your patterns come from?
The patterns are all mine. We take them and create prints, often using several colours – four, sometimes more. Some elements are painted directly onto the canvas, sometimes with tape that I later remove. Everything else is screen-printed. Because of the way I integrate techniques, you get a **trompe-l'oeil** effect. It can look like something is collaged or applied, even though it isn't. The edges, the layering, the way things meet – all of that creates an illusion.

Might one therefore say your favourite technique is collage?

Yes, though it's not literal collage, even if it often looks like collage. The language of materials is important, but it's never one-to- one. The source material might be paper or magazine images, but once it enters the painting, it becomes something else.



Mickalene Thomas, *Afro Goddess Looking Forward* (2015). Rhinestones, acrylic and oil on wooden panel, 152.4 x 243.8 x 5.1 cm. © Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

"Chance plays a role, but not in a loose way." — Mickalene Thomas

I always make a **physical model** first – not a digital one. I only use digital tools when I need to scale something up. I scan the original layers and then adjust them digitally if the work is going to become a mural or be adapted to a specific architectural space. But the image itself is always handmade. There's no digital manipulation in terms of composition – just scale and placement.

Do you control absolutely everything in the process?

Chance plays a role, but not in a loose way. I make decisions, but allow myself to change my mind. Not everything planned in the collage ends up in the painting. When I paint, new gestures appear, new marks. The relationship to material shifts. You have to let the materials do something else. You can't stay married to the original source. Sometimes I step back and realize something feels too flat, or the depth isn't moving. Then I intervene. That's where painting takes over.

"There's a sense of play in this body of work. It's very organic, very intuitive. Almost childlike." — Mickalene Thomas

You often refer to Picasso's *Têtes de femme* series. What interests you in it?

Initially, I was interested in Picasso's films, but it really emerged from a conversation with my makeup artist during a photoshoot. I wanted to collaborate with the people I work with behind the scenes – my makeup artist, my hair stylist, the people who help

construct the image.



Mickalene Thomas, *Sleep: Deux femmes noires* (2012). Rhinestones, Rhinestones, acrylic and oil on canvas mounted on wooden panel with oak frame, 609.6 x 274.32 cm. © Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

How do you translate it on canvas?

We began by looking at faces, but abstracting them. I would cut a shape, place it, then my makeup artist would make a mark. Then I'd respond with another shape. These works are composites of multiple portraits – sometimes my sisters, sometimes other muses. There's a sense of play in this body of work. It's very organic, very intuitive. Almost childlike. Many of the pieces are made from scraps – negative shapes left over from other works. I don't throw anything away. Everything is recycled, reactivated, transformed into something else.

"I don't throw anything away. Everything is recycled, reactivated, transformed into something else." — Mickalene Thomas

Do you only work in series?

Yes. Series allow me to communicate more clearly with the viewer. A single work can say something, but a series builds a language. Some series are numbered, others use dates.



Mickalene Thomas, *Clarivel Centered* (2013). Photograph in colours and paper collage on archival cardboard, 40.64 x 27.94 cm. © Courtesy of the artist. Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

You also produce shaped canvases. Why?

Shaped panels are something I've worked with for a long time. I wanted to move beyond the traditional frame. Early on, I was looking at artists like **Elizabeth Murray** and **Frank Stella**, thinking about how the frame itself is part of the work. If someone else frames the image, they control how it's seen. I don't want that. I design the frame as part of the work. Collectors can't reframe it. The edge is conceptually integral. Originally, many of the shapes I used referenced Victorian mirrors – ovals, ornamental forms. The idea was to push beyond containment, to question how images are held and presented.

"I think about how the body moves through space, how the experience begins before you even enter the exhibition." — Mickalene Thomas

How important are the setting and the exhibition design to you?

Display is extremely important to me. I'm not interested in work simply hanging on walls. I think about how the body moves through space, how the experience begins before you even enter the exhibition. If I have the opportunity and the budget, I want to be involved from the very beginning, even on the outside of the museum – the façade, the entrance, the transition. Once the doors open, everything matters: sound, light, props, colour. I want people to feel like they're entering a home. Low light. Brown walls. Screens. Sound. I want to set a tone of intimacy. I want visitors to forget where they came from and enter a space of imagination.

“It’s not enough to show an artist – you have to support the communities connected to that work. Programming, education, access. Otherwise, it’s just symbolic” — Mickalene Thomas

In your Grand Palais show, you’ve even reproduced rooms from your mom and grandma’s apartments.

Yes, I want people to feel that sense of lived memory. Art comes from places you don’t always consciously understand. You just know you have to make it. My grandmother’s chair is a recurring image for me. She used to patch furniture with scraps of fabric. When I started making chairs in my installations, I didn’t immediately realize why. Then it clicked – that memory was stored in my body.

What do you want people to take away from this exhibition?

I want people to feel something deeply. Beauty. Politics. Life. A moment of transformation. I want the experience to hit the gut. **Paris** is different from **New York**. The language, the structures, the pace of change. But the support from Black communities here has been very meaningful. Institutions have responsibilities. It’s not enough to show an artist – you have to support the communities connected to that work. Programming, education, access. Otherwise, it’s just symbolic. I don’t want to be the first Black female artist if there’s no second or third. That’s meaningless.

“Mickalene Thomas. All About Love”, exhibition until April 5th, 2026, at the Grand Palais, Paris 8th. Mickalene Thomas is represented by ***Galerie Nathalie Obadia****.*

ELLE DECOR



Kennedi Carter

celebrity style > celebrity homes

HOW MICKALENE THOMAS TURNED AN ABANDONED AUTO GARAGE INTO HER NEW CREATIVE HEADQUARTERS

After taking her time to find the perfect location, the Brooklyn-based artist tells her friend Whoopi Goldberg why it was worth the wait.

BY WHOOPI GOLDBERG PUBLISHED: FEB 13, 2026

4 MIN READ

In 2022, after decades of working in studios that were either too bright or too dark, Mickalene Thomas finally found a place that answered her Goldilocks-esque conundrum: a two-story mechanic's garage in her neighborhood (Fort Greene, Brooklyn) that was just right. She set out to create one of her finest masterpieces yet. As she does in her diverse multidimensional works, the artist—whose work celebrates Black women and culture through painting, photography, and collage—envisioned a catch-all: a community-driven space with a gallery, a wet room for silkscreening, and entertaining space. During the three-year renovation, Thomas also focused on her touring monographic exhibition, "All About Love," which is currently on view at the Grand Palais in Paris—Thomas is the first African-American artist to have a solo show at the French museum. Her prolific output and achievements have not gone unnoticed by friend, actor, and television personality Whoopi Goldberg, who checks in with her here for *Elle Decor*.



Kennedi Carter

The main production space on the first floor, with artworks by Mickalene Thomas.

Whoopi Goldberg: *This is an honor. Your work makes me feel stuff. How does it feel, showing at the Grand Palais?*

Mickalene Thomas: When I walked in, I just teared up. I've received so many texts and DMs that said, "Do you know you're plastered all over Paris?" This institution is showing up. To me, this is just the beginning.

WG: *Where does your fight to get your work out come from?*

MT: I come from a long line of incredible matriarchs who always fought to do the right thing. My mother worked and struggled, so I know what it takes to get things done. I have a mission and a vision, and nothing is going to get in my way.


42

Kennedi Carter

Mickalene Thomas in front of her Brooklyn studio, co-designed by Peterson Rich Office. The exterior is partially painted in Tricorn Black by Sherwin-Williams.

WG: *How does that relate to this new studio?*

MT: My first thought was, I want this building to not only be about me, I want it to be about the community. With my architect [Miriam Peterson] at Peterson Rich Office, I discussed creating a loftlike kitchen on the top floor to host events. Our first activation was a beautiful luncheon with the Bill T. Jones Legacy Council in October.

WG: *The studio is just over 7,000 square feet, which seems small for an artist. How did you decide on this building?*

MT: I chose the space for its location. I've been living and working in the neighborhood for over 20 years. Incredible artists like Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Adam Pendleton, and Spike Lee have planted seeds and roots here. It's like the Black *bohème*. The energy is so vibrant. I waited for the right space. I wanted something expansive yet still intimate. This one just felt right.



Kennedi Carter

A view from the open kitchen area into the communal office space. Artworks by Thomas.

WG: *You are so expansive. Seven thousand square feet is not going to hold you for very long. [Laughs]*

MT: When you walk in, it feels larger. It's so open. It has the exact amount of working space and production area I need. A lot of

artists who have monumental megastudios are having to rent them out because there's too much space. When I'm there at night by myself, it feels the way it did in the beginning: a live-work space, a home.

"Most of the people who work with me are also artists. I want this to be a place they want to come to."
—Mickalene Thomas

WG: *What else was important to you in selecting this space?*

MT: It reminded me of two studios that I've had in the past. One was full of cascading light, with many windows. The second had no light, which allowed me to focus on the work. When I walked into this particular building, I realized that downstairs had the potential to be the studio with no light, and upstairs reminded me of my other studio. It's completely open, with a roof deck and a nice garden. I also have my maker space, where I can work through ideas without caring who's watching. Next to that is my private office, which faces my team. Windows and sunlight surround us on all sides. I often like how architectural offices are designed, where it feels like the creative team is working in a really high-end chef's kitchen.



In the second floor lounge, the white sofa, pair of tables, floor lamps, and rug are from Moooi. Armchair by Anonima Castelli; gray sofa by Resource furniture; basket by Muuto; prints by Thomas.

WG: ***Is that for everyone? I don't understand cooking.***

MT: It is. Most of the people who work with me are also artists. I want this to be a place they want to come to. If they're giving me

eight hours a day, they've got to be happy to walk through the door. We have lunch together every Thursday, and once a month we have a potluck. I also like having family meals curated by culinary artists like Jon Gray from Ghetto Gastro.

WG: *I'm curious about mentorship: You inspire people.*

MT: I'm investing in emerging artists; that's how you pay it forward. It's crucial to lay that foundation, because if we don't, there won't be artists who look like me who survive.

WG: *You're the reason things are going to get better. Bravo, baby, bravo.*

STEP INSIDE MICKALENE THOMAS'S BROOKLYN STUDIO





Article - February 12, 2026

Portraits of intimacy: the muses of Mickalene Thomas

Mickalene Thomas celebrates Black women through intimate, sensual and powerful portraits. In large-scale works, her friends, lovers and icons become both muses and the protagonists of their own image.

The *All About Love* exhibition currently on show at the Grand Palais reveals the vibrant universe of the African-American artist, born in 1971. Her works, combining painting, photography, collage and video, explore love, desire and self-affirmation. Each portrait elevates her subjects, offering them a space of power and freedom.

The women Mickalene Thomas paints mostly come from her circle of friends, family, or lovers, with only a few professional models. She often works for extended periods with the same individuals, whom she calls her “muses,” admiring their deep connection to their own beauty.

In the *Black Goddesses* room, her loved ones pose in domestic settings recreated by the artist, revealing the beauty and strength of their intimacy. Photographs and collages extend this dialogue, celebrating fashion and African-American culture as instruments of self-affirmation.

Among her muses are her mother, Sandra Bush, as well as figures of Black culture and models she admires, such as singer Solange Knowles, artist Carrie Mae Weems, and icons Whoopi Goldberg, Diahann Carroll and Eartha Kitt.

The *Shrine* (2024) installation is a key moment in the exhibition. Conceived as a personal space of devotion, it brings together images, objects and texts dear to Thomas, offering visitors a place for contemplation at the heart of the artist's and her muses’ intimacy. It's a space where the link between inspiration, memory and affection becomes tangible.

The *Brawlin Spitfire Wrestlers* series (2005-2007) explores the multiple facets of the artist's identity through female figures in struggle. These embracing bodies blend eroticism, power and tension, blurring the lines between pleasure and domination. Inspired by the Amazons, pop culture and classical iconography, Thomas uses motifs and poses to reaffirm the strength, confidence and autonomy of Black women, while challenging stereotypes inherited from history.

All About Love resonates intimacy, culture and history in a rich, assertive aesthetic. Mothers, friends, lovers and icons become so many muses that feed Mickalene Thomas's gaze and imagination, offering a unique celebration of the love, beauty and power of Black women. On view at the Grand Palais until April 5, 2026!

Numéro

ART

22 Dec 2025

Mickalene Thomas in 3 works that challenge art history at the Grand Palais



Mickalene Thomas, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe : Les trois femmes noires* (2010). © Courtesy of the artiste. © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

1. From muse to protagonist: *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*

Mickalene Thomas's exhibition at the Grand Palais just opened a few days ago. And just like the artist herself, her works have traveled a lot. From **The Broad** in Los Angeles to the **Barnes Foundatio**n in Philadelphia, the **Hayward Gallery** in London, and **Les Abattoirs** in Toulouse, "All About Love" closes its world tour in Paris. This is the artist's most ambitious art show in the French capital to date. A new iteration that carries special resonance, as the American artist has drawn many of her inspirations

women are seated down in a park, their eyes meeting the visitor's gaze. The arrangement of the figures and their direct stares are unmistakable references to **Manet**'s ***Déjeuner sur l'herbe*** (1863). Taken in 2010 in the MoMA's sculpture garden on a commission by the New York museum, and previously shown in Paris three years ago in dialogue with works by Manet at the **Musée de l'Orangerie**, this large photograph brings together many of the central themes that run through **Mickalene Thomas**'s practice.

When Mickalene Thomas revisits art history

The monumental composition takes another look at art history and classical portraiture. Through the artist's lens, it asserts a **queer aesthetic** that rejects Western beauty standards – standards largely rooted in the depiction of white women. Drawing on the legacy of Western art masters, who for centuries portrayed Black figures through the lens of exoticism, and even racism, the artist replaces the two clothed men and the nude woman – all white in the original painting – with three triumphant Black women. Their skin gleams, and their colorful clothes draw their inspiration from the "super-fly" aesthetic of the 1970s, closely tied to African-American empowerment. There is nothing passive about their posture. They sit upright and proud, taking ownership of the role of muse to become protagonists in their own right.

This reinterpretation of ***Déjeuner sur l'herbe*** by **Mickalene Thomas** stages people who are close to the artist and who inspire her, such as friends, family members, lovers, as seen throughout the works on display. Often shown in domestic settings, these women echo the spirit of the photographs by **Carrie Mae Weems**, whose influence runs deep in the American artist's practice.



2. The art of self-portraiture: *Afro Goddess Looking Forward*

A little further on in the exhibiton, we encounter another woman. This time, it's **Mickalene Thomas** herself, who appears almost lying down, once again meeting the viewer's gaze. However, her gaze is fragmented here by a patchwork of prints and colors emblematic of the aesthetic references and techniques that shaped her. Born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1971 at a time still deeply marked by racial tensions in the United States, the young artist studied at the Pratt Institute in New York, then at Yale, where she discovered the work of artist and activist **Faith Ringgold**, whose influence is clearly felt in **Mickalene Thomas**'s use of collage and vibrant color palette.

In this work, titled ***Afro Goddess Looking Forward***, we can see Mickalene Thomas's distinctive, unconventional creative process, where photography, collage, and painting intersect. Most of her artworks begin with photographs of sets she constructs in her Brooklyn studio. Then, she enriches these compositions with layers of oil or enamel paint, multicoloured rhinestones, and fragments of images.

A free, political practice of collage

In **Mickalene Thoma**s's work, self-portrait is central. Here, she poses like an odalisque, in a posture reminiscent of **Manet**'s ***Olympia*** (1863). She is resting, one arm on her stomach, her gaze fixed steadily on the viewer. But unlike the portrait of her French predecessor, the American artist excludes any bourgeois setting or colonial references, replacing them with layers of floral prints in the background and on her dress. In fact, her gaze is the only element taken from a photograph.

In black and white, her eyes offer a sharp, yet calm and severe contrast from the rest of the composition. The artwork enters into a dialogue with Western art history, borrowing its pose while overturning a traditionally male-dominated pictorial tradition. The Black woman appears not only in the foreground, but also in front of the painting, becoming the author rather than a mere muse. As Mickalene Thomas writes of the female figures that populate her exhibition at the Grand Palais: "*They have all the power and agency needed to compel the viewer to meet them in their own space, rather than being exploited or scrutinized*."



Mickalene Thomas, *Guernica Detail (Resist #7)* (2021). © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris.

3. Collage, from rhinestones to political tool: *Guernica*

Beyond the classics of Western art history, **Mickalene Thomas**'s work is deeply rooted in contemporary and popular culture, drawing from cinema, music, and television. As the **Black is Beautiful movemen**t, which challenged the imposition of white aesthetic norms on Black communities, gained momentum in the late 1980s, the young artist was shaped by the raspy voice of disco queen **Eartha Kitt**, the boldness of model **Naomi Sims**, and the commanding presence of actresses **Whoopi Goldberg** and **Diahann Carroll**. These figures emerge throughout her paintings, photographs and videos, several of which are featured in the exhibition.

One piece in particular belongs to her ***Resist*** series (2021). Each image unfolds as a collage in tonal variations, blending protest photography with fantastical illustrations. In the penultimate room of the exhibition, visitors discover a large-scale video work, which is part of the *Resist* series. Its title and format once again echo one of the most iconic works of modern art, ***Guernica***.

Collective memory and political collage

Within this series and composition, the artist draws our attention to the struggles of Black communities in the United States, particularly the history of civil rights activism from the 1960s to the present day. She overlays images of **protests**, both archival and recent – including recognizable Black Lives Matter slogans – linking them visually through bold black linework that either frames or cuts across each image.

VOGUE

ARTS

Mickalene Thomas's New Survey at the Grand Palais Is for Lovers

BY AMY VERNER

December 20, 2025



Mickalene Thomas, *Clarivel Face Forward Gazing*, 2024 © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris

Two years after Mickalene Thomas's first visit to Paris in 2009, she returned for a residency at Giverny, the well-known home and garden of Claude Monet, where she was deeply drawn to the interior and exterior worlds he created. Now, with her solo exhibition "All About Love," at the Grand Palais, visitors can experience her own worlds transposed into immersive spaces filled with furniture, stacks of books and *Jet* magazines, arrangements of potted plants, and still-life vignettes in which every object is painted a deep brown.

Chief curator Rachel Thomas, along with Laure Gricourt and Erin Jenoa Gilbert, has accomplished an utterly captivating survey of Thomas's work, which, before touching down at the Grand Palais, made highly praised stops at the Broad in Los Angeles, the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, the Hayward Gallery in London, and Les Abattoirs in Toulouse. The lush domestic tableaux exist among monumental artworks, multi-channel videos, and in-depth preparatory designs, with the show's nearly 80 works staged throughout a newly reopened gallery spanning two voluminous levels. Most of the space is dimly lit, with spotlights that accentuate Thomas's signature strass ornamentation—liberally applied not only to the outlines of her Black female figures, but also to their ruby-red lips, lustrous hair, the lines between their toes, and the surrounding decorative patterns. Many of the collage paintings on display also reimagine and subvert depictions of women that ripple through art history: buttocks by Boucher, Ingres's

When the artist and I meet, she is wearing a denim suit by Romeo Hunte (she wore Dior, with whom she has collaborated on set designs and the Lady Dior bag, to the opening dinner). Directly after we speak, she's due to join a Zoom call with MFA students at Columbia. For Thomas, love can take many forms—from representing the people closest to her as soulful goddesses to encouraging next-generation artists to seek out and express what moves them.

***Vogue*: As we're sitting here, Eartha Kitt's "Paint Me Black Angels (Angelitos Negros)" is on repeat, with lyrics like, "How come you don't paint our skin? If you put love in your art…," while the accompanying video features several women singing over her voice. When did you first hear the song?**

Mickalene Thomas: I think I heard it when I was in graduate school. A lot of what I'm excited about with my work—and I think many artists might feel the same way—is that sometimes your ideas come five years before. And that's sort of the magic of being an artist; it's all about time and space and resources. For me, when I heard it, I knew it resonated in a way, but I didn't know how I would use it.



Photo: Didier Plowy pour le GrandPalaisRmn, 2025

Let's talk about love, the theme of your show, which has already toured several cities. Many of the painters you have referenced over the years—Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse—capture desire and eroticism, but not necessarily love. How does love come through in your portraits?

I think the intimacy is on a different level, because a lot of them come from relationships I have with women. Over here is Maya, who was my partner at the time. These two women [in *Sleep: Deux Femmes Noirs*, 2012] didn't know each

How would you rate your level of self-love?

Very high!

Do you think this is necessary to produce your art?

I think you definitely need your compass to be very centered, and to remind yourself of this even with parameters of self-care. I think I've always tapped into my personal journey and self-love as extensions of how I'm going to make the work. I have a hard time moving through the work or doing something if there's no personal connection to it. It has to be organically evolved from the work itself. Otherwise there's a struggle.

What would be an example?

Some of the work that is presented today, I tried many years before, but I wasn't connected to it. If you go upstairs to the "Resist" section, the imagery in those works was collected many years ago. But then the unfortunate display of George Floyd really hit home, and that emoted a kind of empathy and passion and compassion for someone's life that made me really feel connected.

How does it feel to have your art presented as part of the Grand Palais's new programming?

Well, to think there's also Eva Jospin, Claire Tabouret, Niki de Saint Phalle, and then Nan Goldin is coming… all these women! It's really, really empowering to be a part of this discourse of women right now and the intergenerational and different perspectives on our art. I think it's a really good moment. And I think [the Grand Palais] partnering with the Pompidou is a really new shift in their historical conversation. The Grand Palais is very old French history, so to move towards and integrate these new conversations of the world is really smart for them. I hope they continue it!



Photo: Didier Plowy pour le GrandPalaisRmn, 2025

You are often described in precedent-setting terms. When "All About Love" debuted in Toulouse this summer, it marked your first monographic show in France. And apparently you are among the first African American artists to be honored with a solo exhibition at the Grand Palais. Does this excite you?

I'm excited about being first, but I want the doors to stay open for others. I think it's okay if that comes with not codifying it; that we've done our job, you know what I mean? I don't want to be used and modeled for something being done that's of the moment. I want it to be like, *Okay, I broke this barrier for others*, and that in doing so, and having me here, we're going to make space for other conversations—other people of color and other people of non-color that can have these type of conversations and expressions in spaces like this. And so I welcome that, but let's continue to do the work. And one way that we are going to be doing this is by collaborating with a lot of communities through partnerships and programming. We are going to be robust about it, too.

It seems noteworthy that many of the works presented in the show are from your personal collection.

I think it's really important for an artist to maintain some works for their collection, just for their own assets, for provenance, for other reasons. The hope is when you put your work out into the world, and it's collected by really important patrons and collectors and museums and other institutions, that they would want to loan it. That's not always the case today. I think there's a lot of variables and things that are happening in the world that people are no longer wanting to loan their art. The maintenance of these collections isn't what they used to be, and it has nothing to do with people or because people don't care. The resources aren't there.



Mickalene Thomas, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires,* 2010. © 2025 Mickalene Thomas / ADAGP, Paris

Many of the familiar paintings that you subvert and reimagine—such as *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* or *Le Sommeil*—can be found in museums around Paris.

I think that's why it's really exciting. I think, as people come in, there are all of these references that can really inspire an audience and a viewership with engagement in what history can do, right? Here's this girl, this artist coming from Camden, New Jersey, to the Grand Palais. And between that space is all of this experience and exposure and discovery and investigation that comes with cooling up the ideas and creating these dynamics of rhythm and perspectives that are nuanced in the history. They are complex, but there's a way of working through that complexity and coming out the other side of it and saying, "Hey, let's look at it *this* way."

So you're not necessarily aiming for a correction, so much as an expansion of what already exists?

It's an expansion but it's also just claiming some agency, you know? The works are not only physical, they're psychological. And so within those highs and lows of the physicality of moving towards the work and standing back from it, there's also the collaging of it—like the quilt-making of things, of histories. There's a lot of Faith Ringgold and Romare Bearden and the Harlem Renaissance and Black American culture, while also just saying, *This is me.*

Has your understanding of Black femininity shifted over the years?

Oh, yeah. I mean, Black femininity is always something that I try to fully tap into, just because I tend to lead towards a masculine identity—in norms and the way I dress. And I've always been like that, since I was a kid. I think I'm sort of more androgynous in the space of being feminine, and I like the play of those themes. And so it's been about for my mother. I didn't say that they were trans women, but I was really interested in femininity from a different perspective and how that can be seen.



The artist Photo: Joshua Woods

In the show, you have created a few staged settings and environments with plants throughout the show as well as these printed cushioned benches we are seated on.

I want people to feel as though they can be with this for a while. When I grew up going to institutions, whether it was the Newark Museum or the Met or MoMA or Guggenheim or Brooklyn Museum, in so many of the spaces, there's no real place for you to really get into the work. And I always found that Rothko created that moment all the time. So for me, it was really important to bring all those aspects into the space.

We're facing a tableau of a living room. There's a pair of heels on a plush carpet and flowers strewn across an upholstered sofa. Slow jams and R&B from Luther Vandross and Babyface are playing.

There's some Diana Ross, too. Basically, it's my mother's playlist. The two framed Polaroids are actual Polaroids that I found when my mother passed. And the mirror is a mirror that I grew up with in our living room.

She has been one of your earliest and recurring muses.

My mother was very fashionable. She was very stylistic and was always dressing up. But that's also sort of the Black community and the urban community. Your presentation, your perception of style—you didn't leave the home without looking a certain way.

How do you think she would feel about this exhibition?

Oh my gosh. She would be… she's here. She's here. And she's the reason why I'm here, for sure.

Maybe when we move past the paintings, she's there in the shimmering rhinestones.

Exactly. That's really nice. I love that.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and length.

"Mickalene Thomas: All About Love" continues through April 7, 2026 at the Grand Palais in Paris. A parallel presentation, "Mickalene Thomas: Je t'adore deux," is running at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris until January 24, 2026.

GrandPalais



Article - January 14, 2026

Ten questions with artist Mickalene Thomas before visiting the exhibition "All About Love"

Entering the world of Mickalene Thomas means discovering a universe where love, beauty, and the power of Black women shine brilliantly. Over more than twenty years of creation, the American artist has reinvented the canon of art history, blending painting, photography, collage, and immersive installations. Ten questions with the artist to explore her work, a celebration of joy and resilience, before visiting the exhibition *All About Love* at the Grand Palais, open until April 5.

Love plays a central role in your work, both as a creative driving force and as a form of resistance. Why did you choose to draw on bell hooks's All About Love, and how did that book shape the conception of the exhibition?

I'm often inspired by intergenerational female empowerment, autobiographies, memories, and Black feminist theories and writings. bell hooks, in particular, has had a profound impact on me. "All About Love" so yes, this touring exhibition is inspired by her 2000 essay collection. My exhibition explores how my work draws on relationships centered around family, love, self-expression, vulnerability, and joy, which are topics that bell hooks explores in these essays. Similar to bell hooks, I believe we should all find the strength to explore who we are and to fully embrace it. Once we can do this, we have reached a certain level of freedom and inhibition that can help us transform our self and others.

Your work celebrates the beauty and power of Black women. To what extent do you see it as an act of repair or reclamation?

As an artist, I have the ability to radically disrupt and shift narratives for present and future generations. I use my work, which is about Black women claiming space, to depict their beauty, femininity, desire and power as a way to liberate cultural oppression and marginalisation. I want to make Black identity, femininity and queerness more visible and I believe it's possible to achieve this through my practice as both an act of repair and reclamation.

How do you choose the women you portray? What kind of personal or emotional connection do you have with them?

My mother, Sandara Bush, was one of my first muses. I wanted to portray her exactly how I saw her: a worthy and powerful Black woman. My goal was for others to see the beauty and strength she – and all Black women – possess. Today, my subjects range from friends, family, lovers, and cultural figures that I admire. With each subject, I explore pleasure, love, and joy and create narratives idealised based on memories of desire. I hope to convey that the inner beauty, allure, and sexuality of my subjects are not imposed from the outside— they are inherent to each person and should be celebrated on their own terms. I want to continue exploring make work that look like Black women.

You revisit masterpieces by Matisse and Manet. What draws you to these dialogues with the Western art canon?

I playfully revisit paintings by many artists, what is mostly referenced are these artists, Édouard Manet and Henri Matisse, who both recall and frame the dominant Western art canon. I insert black women into positions originally occupied by white figures as a provocative way to start new narratives about identity, representation, and to claim the Black female gaze. For example, in my piece Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: les trois femmes noires, which was my largest work at the time and commissioned by the MoMa for the Modern restaurant I recreated Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe as a way to challenge the original notions of beauty and identity. In my version, three confident Black women are depicted in the center with a fixed resilient gaze at the viewer. It literally and figuratively took up space.

You work across painting, collage, photography, video, and installation. In your collages, you gather images, sometimes from archives. What is it about these fragments that draws you in? When you assemble them, are you trying to document the world, or offer a fresh reinterpretation of it?

I use a variety of techniques as a way of dismantling the western notions of beauty. The tools I harbor help me to create my artworks that authentically speak my creative language. My signature technique is layered and complex, even if I am using my own photographic resources or archival images, I'm exploring the nuance of the materials resource to reimagine the image. By using techniques of silkscreen and collage which allow for the disruptive and playful integration of painting and photography and the addition of rhinestones create a sense of pleasure, seduction and light. Collage is an intricate means of discovery and exploration for all my ideas and a way of learning and unlearning systems. It helps me anchor and make sense of my composition and the narrative around the work. With this technique, I can edit back and rebuild layers throughout the process to reach my core idea.

Vinyl, rhinestones, fabrics and paint play a prominent role in your works. What symbolism do you attribute to these various materials, particularly the many reflective surfaces, mirrors, and rhinestones? Are they a way to engage the viewer, to make them 'reflect', in a literal and figurative sense?

I find the materials to be provocative and bold with my use of rich, vibrant color. The materials set the tone for the psychological play, rhythm and magic communicated. My work is exuberant with signifier's that carry important messages, coded within the new storylines, celebrating Black women that claim space and embrace their beauty, femininity, and power. Through my many materials, I capture the strength, vulnerability, and sensuality of my subjects. The reflective and colorful touches bring more attention to the beauty, essence, and elegance of the Black bodies I'm portraying. By juxtaposing different elements in my work, I spark new dialogues and challenge traditional representations of women and liberate cultural oppression and marginalization in memorable ways.

How did you conceive the layout of this retrospective? Were you aiming for a chronological narrative, or more of a sensory experience for the visitor?

The exhibition brings together works spanning the last 20 years of my career. It's not only a milestone for me as my first major international show, it's also deeply personal. The show is arranged in thematic chapters using temperature, time, sound, color, scale and pace as a means of authoritative ownership to choreograph the audience experience in an immersive way. It is definitely not in a chronological narrative. There are moments where later works are in dialogue with earlier pieces to showcase how I revisit, revise, and deepen subjects across time.

The paintings, collage, photography, performative videos and site-specific installation from public and private collections are arranged to showcase the my iterative practice, offer an in-depth look at select muses who appear throughout my oeuvre, and highlight my continual dialogue with canonical works by Bearden, Warhol, Ringgold, Monet, Picasso, and Courbet, to name

a few. It is not a retrospective, but a portal into my world where love reigns above all. We would need a bigger space to really provide a fully comprehensive showcase of my work.

Your work is often compared to Pop Art. How do you feel about that comparison? How does the approach of artists from that movement relate to your own practice?

My bold use of color, patterns, and luminosity are connected to Pop Art which is cultivated by Black culture, but what's unusual for most Pop Art in my work is that Black women are the central figures. I expand upon Pop Culture to create new narratives and initiate an in depth narrative on historical art narrative where Black women have been omitted. Out of the Pop Artists Wesselmann's and Warhol, work in particular has resonated with me. For Wasslemann's I was initially drawn to his great American nudes and his bold, flat colors. These elements related to the ways I was experimenting with fragmentation and the body at the time. For Warhol it's his portraits of Icon /Famous Faces, which lends inspiration to my silkscreen methods and practice.

If your work could be translated into sound, what kind of music or rhythm would it have?

If my work were sound, it would be layered and unapologetic. It would move like jazz and funk braided with hip-hop, improvisational, rhythmic, and deeply rooted in Black cultural memory. There'd be a steady bassline holding everything together, like resilience, while sharp accents hit unexpectedly like rhinestones catching the light. The rhythm would be sensual but defiant, slow grooves that invite you in, then sudden

syncopation that reminds you you're being challenged, not comforted. Background music that follows you in your dreams demanding presence, confidence and self-resilience.

If this exhibition were to leave a single phrase or feeling in the visitor's mind, what would it be?

Love as a quiet shift, the sense that something small but fundamental has changed in how you see the world.

A few words on Mickalene Thomas's artistic journey

Mickalene Thomas has built a body of work focused on the visibility and power of Black women, challenging the conventions of art history. Through painting, photography, and installation, she uses bold materials and artistic references to assert the pleasure, autonomy, and identity of her subjects, always placing them at the center of representation. A major turning point in her career came in 1994 in Portland, Oregon, when she discovered Carrie Mae Weems' Kitchen Table Series at the Portland Art Museum. For Thomas, it was the first time she saw the work of a Black artist who seemed to "see" her, her roots and her story. This encounter with an intimate and assertive narrative opened the way for her: she realized that her own perspective as a Black woman is legitimate and essential in artistic creation. This experience marks the beginning of her creative approach, in which representing Black people becomes a conscious act of storytelling and cultural affirmation, rather than mere observation.

Harper's BAZAAR



MICKALENE THOMAS

CULTURE > ART, BOOKS & MUSIC

Mickalene Thomas On Finding the Joy in the Everyday

In a new exhibition, the artist intimately captures the community of her local park in Brooklyn

BY LYNETTE NYLANDER PUBLISHED: SEP 19, 2025

4 MIN READ

Like many of us right now, Mickalene Thomas has been in pursuit of joyous moments. The celebrated artist is best known for her vibrant, rhinestone-adorned portraits of Black women, which line the walls of the MoMA and the Whitney, but when director, artist, and curator Kathy Ryan approached her with the prompt of exploring joy on her own terms through the medium of photography using the new iPhone 17 Pro Max, Thomas was all in. “I think as a Black artist in conversation with my peers, we think about joy a lot. When we see it, we're basking in it, with elation and smile,” Thomas explains in a preview of 'Joy, in 3 Parts', an exhibition of original photography by Thomas, husband and wife duo Inez and Vinoodh, and Trunk Xu that is on show in New York City and Shanghai concurrently this weekend.

Curated by Ryan, the exhibit represents each artist’s unique approach to the idea of joy. “We've always talked about what joy means to us, in the context of when we're not afforded that on the day to day, how do we make space for that for ourselves and how do we show up with it for others? So when Kathy came to me, I was like, I know exactly what I want to do.”

Thomas started close to home, post a meeting with fellow artist Derrick Adams in her local park in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. “He and I were sitting there together on the bench and we saw this couple that set up a hammock right in the middle of the day when we all should be working. They just laid in [the grass] with their little boombox at the foot of it and just embraced each other. And we were both like, ‘That is the joy!’ What's ironic is that he went on and made a painting of that particular moment and I went on to make a photograph of that.”

Thomas used the chance encounter to reimagine the scene in the framing of her Apple shoot. Her contributions document an often-forgotten side of Black life, reframing the typical routines of Black Brooklynites as moments of strength and resilience. A woman basking in the Brooklyn sunlight, an elderly gentleman pausing for respite on a park bench, and a group of young girls playing double dutch in the park—though the photos have been restaged for Mickalene’s camera, they are all situational encounters that Thomas sees daily as a nearby resident.



COURTESY OF APPLE

One of Mickalene's work from Joy, In 3 Parts

Beyond just moments of leisure and levity, Thomas' images, as Ryan explains, represent the tradition set by photographers like Carrie Mae Weems and Gordon Parks, but in modern settings. "My work has always lived at the intersection of truth-telling, representation, and radical love. I wanted to share an extension of myself in a neighborhood that I love and live in and what I see on a day to day when I go to the park and what I experience of these little moments, these little narratives. I really just wanted to put in a capsule and share and have them expressed, and the intimacy and immediacy that you can get from the iPhone is a really amazing way to capture the moment."

The relationship between Kathy and Mickalene spans back to Ryan's time as the director of photography at *The New York Times Magazine*, a position she held for almost four decades before retiring in 2023. "Kathy was one of my first supporters in pushing me into the editorial world by allowing me the agency to photograph Venus Williams and Brittany Griner for the cover. Most of my opportunities as an artist come from being a painter. I really saw this as an opportunity to use my narrative and my concepts in a different way. I use photography but this is street photography. It's everyday. It's the moment. It's like documentary, it's like a journal. I had never really approached people on the street before this project. To me, when I enter a new project, I'm always going into it hoping that I can take away something for my own practice."

Ryan, the curator of Apple's photography exhibition for the second year, speaks of her own surprise in what they found. "The first day I go with Mickalene for a scouting visit, just to look, weeks before the shoot, this guy was dancing without a shirt. He's dancing at the base of that big monument in the park. He's got a boombox. It was beautiful. He was in another world of his own. People don't feel intimidated when it's a phone. I feel like this is counter-programming," Ryan laughs.



COURTESY OF APPLE

Mickalene Thomas behind the scenes of the shoot.

Thomas sees this work as a necessary and urgent dialogue in a time of dark and confusing public sentiment. “Right now, there’s a collective consciousness for joy. There’s a hunger, there’s a need for it. And things like this are our way of saying, ‘Okay, this is what we're all choosing to hold on to it.'”

Harper's BAZAAR

Mickalene Thomas: "I want to be impactful, inspiring and powerful"

The artist reveals the inspirations behind her life-affirming works, on show at the Hayward Gallery

BY FRANCES HEDGES PUBLISHED: 11 FEBRUARY 2025



© MICKALENE THOMAS

For the artist Mickalene Thomas, preparing for her solo show at the Hayward Gallery has been a process of introspection as well as of creation. "I started thinking about the trajectory of my practice and why I make art," she says. "I reflected on the relationships I've had with my sitters – my mother,

friends, ex-partners – and it occurred to me that a lot of my images are rooted in love and the different forms it takes, whether strength, vulnerability or desire."

Coming to this realisation gave Thomas the idea for her exhibition's title, 'All About Love' – also a reference to a seminal text by the feminist writer bell hooks, whom Thomas has long admired. "She always talked about love being a verb and not a noun – that felt really empowering to me, because that's what I'm trying to do; to look at love as a journey or a narrative."

"I'm trying to look at love as a journey or narrative"



© MICKALENE THOMAS

A Little Taste Outside of Love (2007) by Mickalene Thomas

Taking centre-stage at the Hayward are Thomas' mixed-media paintings of female figures in relaxed, leisurely poses that express comfort and pleasure – a subtle



MARK BLOWER. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE HAYWARD GALLERY

> “Anyone who comes through should feel a sense of belonging”

challenge to the historic eroticisation of Black women in art. These canvases feature vivid, highly patterned backdrops embellished with rhinestones, giving them a luscious, celebratory feel.

Complementing the paintings are large-scale installations that recreate the domestic settings of the artist’s 1970s and 1980s childhood, filled with personal keepsakes, Polaroid photographs and beloved books. “I wanted to create immersive spaces that a particular demographic of people feel they can occupy – places of contemplation where they can come and sit down, and see things that resonate with them,” says Thomas. “The idea is that anyone who comes through should feel a sense of belonging.”

A recreation of the artist's personal moodboard – a "shrine", as she calls it – offers insight into her creative process, which sees her draw inspiration from multiple sources, both visual and literary. "I use collage as a way of working out some of my ideas, whether that's through archival images that I re-scan and print on special paper or my own photographic resources," explains Thomas. "And I read a lot – the writing of James Baldwin, biographies of [the painter] Alice Neel – which informs how I think of myself as an artist."

Her references are intentionally broad: Faith Ringgold and Carrie Mae Weems are important influences, but so are European artists such as Gustave Courbet and Claude Monet. Indeed, one of the highlights of the exhibition is a lush, verdant reimagining of Monet's garden at Giverny, where Thomas previously spent time. "Giverny has a warm place in my heart, because I learnt so much about my own practice and Monet's," she says. The genius of her work lies in her ability to show respect for the legacy of the Western art canon while bringing attention to the limited field of vision it offers.



© MICKALENE THOMAS

A Moment's Pleasure #2 (2008) by Mickalene Thomas

Of course, the show offers only a snapshot of Thomas' diverse oeuvre, which in the past has included collaborations with Dior and with the musician Solange. "I didn't want to call it a retrospective because I'm very prolific – I make a lot of work, and there's more to come," she says, adding that she is currently working on a series of monumental sculptures to be displayed as public art in New York and Switzerland, as well as a number of films. Whichever medium she is focusing on, what matters to her is the power of art to change people's outlook. "I'm always looking for that one person who is transformed when they see it, just like I was when I stood in front of Carrie Mae Weems' art in 1994 in Portland, Oregon, and became the artist that I am

today," she says. "I want my work to be impactful, inspiring and powerful – and I want you to walk out of the gallery feeling a better sense of yourself than you did."

'Mickalene Thomas: All About Love' is at the Hayward Gallery until 5 May, paired with 'Linder: Danger Came Smiling'.



Mickalene Thomas at the show she co-curated at the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, Conn., on Aug. 8, 2023. In "Mickalene Thomas/Portrait of an Unlikely Space," the artist designs a show blending fact and speculation about the lives of Black Americans whose stories have largely been lost. (Malike Sidibe/The New York Times) *Malike Sidibe—The New York Times/Redux*

APR 16, 2025

Mickalene Thomas

by Alicia Keys

As artists, it can often feel like we're expected to stay consistent, stay the course, just keep doing what we've always done. But Mickalene Thomas doesn't subscribe to that way of thinking. With her art—including in "All About Love," her exhibition currently on tour—she's constantly creating new lanes, breaking boundaries, and exceeding expectations. She plays in all realms—photography, painting, video, fashion, furniture—and creates stunning, dynamic worlds in every one. Even across different mediums, she's able to create synergy between all of her pieces. You can tell right away when you're looking at something created by Mickalene. She's a mastermind at conveying poignant messages through striking visuals, and stepping into one of her shows feels like entering another world—it's one of many reasons my husband, Kasseem Dean, and I are so honored to include her work in The Dean Collection. There's nothing else quite like it. Mickalene herself is walking art. She has such a distinct presence and aura that it's impossible not to feel inspired by her. The art and the artist both are bold, fearless, and fierce. She is uncontainable, a true giant!

Keys is a Grammy-winning musician

Mickalene Thomas' disruptive paintings of Black domesticity

As her new exhibition, All About Love, shows at London's Hayward Gallery, decolonial African-American artist Mickalene Thomas talks Eurocentrism, domestic space and creating work that people can 'sit with'



FEBRUARY 17, 2025

Text Zara Afthab

Mickalene Thomas, All About Love











GALLERY / 7 IMAGES

In the introductory texts for her new solo show *All About Love* at London's Hayward Gallery, Mickalene Thomas establishes the notion that she is talking back to the Old Masters. To 'talk back' to the authoritative canon of art history is an intriguing act, and one that is increasingly popular within contemporary art practices. Artists may use unexpected materials, draw from decolonial theory or look beyond European references to move away from Eurocentrism.

Thomas's perspective on talking back is, however, not as oblique. She confronts the canon head-on, reimagining famous paintings such as Édouard Manet's "Olympia" in her painting from 2007 titled "A Little Taste Outside of Love". "I learned much later in my life that these famous artists had included the Black model in their work, but patrons and historians had rewritten their histories for their own benefit," Thomas shares with me on the morning of the exhibition's preview. "When you're left out of the canon, you've got to look, find those areas that are missing and understand why certain bodies were left out. You realise that there are many reasons why they want to keep you out; it's a way of distracting and disenfranchising people and creating a narrative of artifice and untruth. For me, it's crucial to look back at these moments and insert myself in them because there's a narrative here that has been disrupted and needs to be told."



Mickalene Thomas

Much like “A Little Taste Outside of Love”, the show at the Hayward is abundant with mixed-media works that reference old masters and Western art traditions, while featuring Black women in repose. Alongside these grandly scaled paintings, *All About Love* explores the breadth of Thomas’s oeuvre, which includes photography, installation, collage and video work. A subversive impetus drives through each aspect of her practice: the collages are invested in ideas of beauty and desire while questioning the eroticisation of the Black body; the video work subverts the omnipresence of white angels in Christian art; her installations are concerned with the domestic as a site of belonging.

The domestic is a crucial physical and theoretical space for Thomas. For this exhibition, she recreated two living rooms inspired by her childhood in the 70s and 80s. “So much happens in these domestic spaces and around the kitchen table, specifically in Black families,” the artist shares.

During our chat, Thomas and I sit across from each other in one of her carefully constructed living room installations as jazz plays. We are surrounded by lampshades, a side table with a handheld mirror, a patchwork sofa with patterned cushions and Thomas's mother's Crocs that she had cast in bronze. It's a perfect vantage point to absorb the gallery. The scene is purposefully sentimental, designed thoughtfully by Thomas to unlock memory and elicit a sense of belonging. "I tried to approach each section of the exhibition differently. Here, I lowered the lights so that you feel a sense of warmth the minute you look at it. I want the visitor to feel comforted by the space, but I am also interested in how playing with elements such as sound and light can engage the senses and trigger memories".



Mickalene Thomas

While Thomas would prefer for visitors to experience every aspect of her installation, due to museum guidelines and insurance policies, some of her work, such as the living rooms, cannot be entered. “It frustrated me that I was limiting my audience to a full engagement, so I created other tableaus in the space, such as where *Angelitos Negros* is screened, where the visitor can sit with my work for a long period of time,” she explains. “I was insistent on this aspect of the work because I want people to access and engage with this work. I know people can’t touch the paintings, but they can sit on the ottoman while watching the video, sit on a lounge chair, look at photographs, or even go to those spaces to close their eyes and rest. I want my audience to see the exhibition as a place that is accessible to them and that of leisure.”

Mickalene Thomas‘ new exhibition, All About Love*, is showing at the Hayward Gallery until 5 May, 2025.*

WHYY



Renée Mussai, who curated "Mickaline Thomas: All About Love," gives a tour of the exhibit at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Mickalene Thomas' homecoming at the Barnes is 'All About Love'

The internationally recognized artist from Camden has her first solo exhibition in the Philadelphia region.

By Peter Crimmins · Updated Oct. 24, 2024 12:41 pm

From Philly and the Pa. suburbs to South Jersey and Delaware, what would you like WHYY News to cover? Let us know!

The day before her internationally touring exhibition "All About Love" opened at the Barnes Foundation on Oct. 20, Mickalene Thomas hosted a soft opening for about a hundred friends and family.

The show's stop at the Barnes is a homecoming for the native of Camden, whose work is known around the world but has never had a solo exhibition in this region.

"There are a lot of family members who are seeing the work for the first time, many of them only seen it and reproductions," Thomas said. "It's been really incredible to see how they connect with the work in person. The reproductions don't do the work justice."

Monumental and glittery, Mickalene Thomas' portraits of Black women are a fever of reverence, play, nostalgia and erotic desire. Many of the works are made with a collage effect, layering textures over patterns with veins of rhinestones that make the pieces sparkle, something impossible to replicate in printed reproductions.

"They have to glimmer. We have to shine," she said. "They are hung at a height so that you're looking up to them. They're feeling very angelic, like goddesses."



With "Three Graces: Les trois femmes noires" Mickaline Thomas references the three goddesses of Greek mythology representing charm, beauty and creativity. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

“All About Love,” whose title references the book by bell hooks, was created by the Hayward Gallery in London and The Broad museum in Los Angeles, in partnership with the Barnes. The tour visits all of these locations, in addition to Les Abattoir in Toulouse, France.

The exhibition will be different in each location. When it opened in Los Angeles earlier this year, The Broad highlighted Thomas’ connection to New Jersey by creating a facsimile façade of the rowhouse at 604 Mt. Vernon Street in Camden, Thomas’ home when she was born in 1971, which no longer exists. Growing up, she toggled between Camden and Newark.

The Barnes makes no such gesture to the city across the river. Rather it includes domestic tableaus designed by Thomas into which visitors can stroll, sit and browse selected books. The upholstered benches, flooring, wall paneling and décor are designed with the 1970s aesthetic of the kind of home in which Thomas was raised, and seen in many of her staged portraits, including those of her late mother Sandra Bush.

Curator Renee Mussai organized “All About Love” into five rooms representing five “temperatures of love,” moving through sororal and social bonds, family bonds and personal love. Thomas represents herself nude, fractured into 12 video monitors, and erotic works glorifying the bodies of women, often using former lovers as models.

Mussai arranged the works so that the same models appear in different rooms, building a sense of familiarity as the visitors walks through.

“The exhibition was very much envisioned as a kind of artistic love letter,” Mussai said. “The idea for the viewer to meet recurrent muses in Mickalene Thomas’s visual universe, to amplify the sense of continual embrace, returning to muses and envisioning them over and over again.”

“There’s something about memory and nostalgia that allows you to reimagine a particular time of your life,” Thomas said. “That’s what a lot of the images did for me, looking back at my photographs. I knew they had some significance and connection because they triggered for me a sense of unity and family and strength and vulnerability and love. A place where anything’s possible.”



A detail from "Din, une très belle négresse 2," (2012) by Mickaline Thomas, glimmers with rhinestones. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Thomas dips into vintage pin-ups of Black models from the 1970s and '80s, using old Jet magazine Beauty of the Week photographs as source material, and photographs from a 1950s French erotic magazine featuring Black nude women, Nus Exotiques.

If some of the images look familiar, they are. In several works Thomas is making direct references to classic compositions of the fine art canon, including Édouard Manet's 1862 "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe" (Luncheon in the Grass) and the Three Graces, a trio of mythological women who have been represented throughout art history.

Thomas returns more than once to the odalisque, or a classic pose showing a woman reclining in a suggestive way. In Thomas's hands, it represents the artists' sexual gaze as feminine.



"Dim All the Lights" (2009) is a tribute to the artist's mother, Sandra Bush, whom the artist has spoken of as a mirror and compass for her life. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

She said her art history education started as a child in Camden visiting museums in Philadelphia.

“Those explorations were – I don’t want to use the word escape, I want to say adventure.

It was a way of exploring other worlds,” she said. “It’s a painted image of a narrative. Some of those things have truth in it, some are fabricated fantasies. But all work has some line of truth to it.”

“All About Love” will be at the Barnes until Jan. 12.



Barnes Foundation President Thom Collins stands before an embroidered portrait of Josephine Baker as he introduces the exhibit "Mickaline Thomas: All About Love." Thomas's portrait of Baker was originally made for Dior's 2023 couture show in Paris.(Emma Lee/WHYY)

Alta

Mickalene Thomas's Visions of Love

The multimedia artist brings her work to a major show at the Broad in Los Angeles.

BY SHAQUILLE HEATH | PUBLISHED: SEP 12, 2024



when mirrors covered entire walls and shag carpets engulfed your feet with every step. These living-room installations welcome you into the interior spaces where Black women find their sexualities and desires, where they daydream in leisure after a long day's work. It's also a place where they can be vulnerable yet confident, heal and mend.

These are spaces where they love and are loved.

On view through September 29, *All About Love* shares its title—and many of its themes—with the pivotal text by feminist author bell hooks. "Her pioneering work and the way she revolutionized contemporary notions of systemic oppression, in particular, keep fueling the framework of my artistic practice," Thomas tells me when I talk to her. On view are more than 80 works created over the past 20 years that showcase Thomas's mastery of every medium she's worked in: video, painting, collage, installation, and photography.

Born in 1971 in Camden, New Jersey, Thomas completed her MFA at the Yale University School of Art in 2002. She held a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2003, where she became well-known for large-scale paintings of Black women in repose. Vibrantly colored rhinestones and jewels became key identifiers of a Thomas work; she utilized these adornments to symbolize the complexities of femininity. As a viewer, I can't help but see these women as familiar. They are aunties and sisters who decorate my own life with their poise and dazzle.

Thomas appears in many of these pieces herself, but she also draws from a host of women, whom she refers to as muses, including her own mother, affectionately known as Mama Bush. "When I began creating my own work in graduate school, I

knew I had to start by using my mother as the subject, as a way to understand and explore the representation of the Black body," Thomas says. "This decision was both personal and complicated, as it forced me to navigate my own self-perception and sense of identity. As a young queer person, I had always idealized my mother's beauty and sensuality, and this complex dynamic became the foundation of my exploration of desire. By examining my own relationship with my mother's image, I began to unravel the intricate web of desire, self-love, and identity."

Desire—both what we have for others and, specifically, the desire to be desired—makes itself seen throughout much of Thomas's work. Throughout, the artist gives her muses agency to experience eroticism on their own terms. "Desire is the most complex and unpredictable manifestation of love, often leading me to a vulnerable and uncomfortable space, even though my ultimate destination is always love," she says.

In many of the works in *All About Love*, Thomas's muses connect your eyeline with theirs. It is not that you are walking in on them but that Thomas allows you to be a guest to their private celebrations. "Black erotica is everything to me," Thomas says. "I appreciate women that are not afraid to be vulnerable yet confident and comfortable with their bodies and understand their prowess."

Thomas's work has always pushed back against art history, particularly what has been labeled "beautiful" by convention. With each sparkling piece, she interrogates the exclusion of Black and queer people from the Western art canon. Reinterpreting artists like Francisco Goya, Édouard Manet, and Pablo Picasso, Thomas appropriates their famous paintings by situating her muses in what can only be their rightful place. On view is Thomas's Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe les Trois Femmes Noires d'après Picasso, in which she appropriates Manet's 1863 Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe (Luncheon on the grass), a work Picasso himself reinterpreted many times. In Manet's original, a naked woman sits engaged with the viewer as two men carry on a conversation next to her. In Thomas's version, she portrays all Black women, adorned with her palette of beautiful patterns, their likenesses collaged together. Her muses, all clothed, their hair in various forms of Afro'd Blackness, beckon the viewer. Here are three beautiful women enjoying the leisure of an afternoon picnic. What say you?

Fashion is central to Thomas's practice. Whether nude or clothed, her muses embody the style and glamour of Black women, from their long acrylic nails to stylish accessories like platinum silver pumps. "I must say, I take great pride in my curated closet, which serves as a treasure trove of inspiration," Thomas says. "The attire my subjects wear, like other elements in my compositions, blurs the line between reality and imagination. The actual image in front of me and my artistic interpretation often diverge, but that's what makes it fascinating."

Accompanying the Broad show has been a variety of public programs that celebrate queer and Black feminist creative practices, each centered around communal care, including therapeutic workshops, a comedy night, screenings of films by LGBTQ directors, and live performances, including that of rapper Flo Milli. All of these events aligned with the profound ways that love transforms us. "Knowing and loving yourself is something I had to learn over time, especially the last few years, when an unexpected, disheartening, and disruptive separation happened. It just made me stronger. That obstacle was the best thing that could have happened to me," shares Thomas. "I'll always come back to the place of love, joy, leisure, and celebration, and as an image maker, I have a desire to see positive images in the world."•

Mickalene Thomas: All About Love *is on view at the Broad through September 29*

Forbes

Mickalene Thomas: ‘All About Love’

By Chadd Scott, Contributor.

Published Jun 08, 2024, 05:33pm EDT, Updated Jun 08, 2024, 05:34pm EDT



Mickalene Thomas, 'A Little Taste Outside of Love,' 2007. Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel 108 x 144 in.
© MICKALENE THOMAS

Love as an action.

Not primarily a feeling, or emotion, or the randomness of Cupid’s arrows; love as a behavior. Love as a practice for changing our individualistic, ruthless, greedy world.

An over-simplification of bell hooks’ 1999 “All About Love,” the book from which Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971; Camden, NJ) takes as the title of her exhibition on view now through September 29, 2024, at The Broad art museum in Los Angeles.

“One of the reasons why I was thinking about love, I was thinking about it in relationship to who I am in the world, and the impact that I'm creating, and how I'm

we should always expect in the same way from someone else," Thomas said. "We put things out in the world, but then it's kind of an awakening of self, to feel this act of love in response to someone else, then becomes like a mirror image."

Looking at Mickalene Thomas' artwork is looking at love.

"My work expresses love from the relationships I have with my sitters, the love that I'm hoping is conveyed and portrayed by celebrating them in their best light, especially when it's the portraitures or the reclining sitters," Thomas explains. "It's the beauty and prowess and the vulnerability and the strength of presenting them in their best form, as best as I possibly can, and it's surrounded with joy and an elegance and desire. The central place of my work, and my art, is from a loving space."

Thomas traces her love and the unapologetic focus and glorification of Black women throughout her artwork to her mother.

"It was her charisma, I really started thinking about women like her and I wanted to celebrate Black femininity and that sexuality in a different way–by claiming the space that seemed to be voided–as these iconic images," Thomas states on her website.

The voided space was art history. Thomas would, and has, provided the iconic images.

Look at Mickalene Thomas' paintings and collages and see Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* (1814). See Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863).

See all the idealized, comely, young, beautiful, white, reclining, female nudes that occupy every art museum promoting Western art descended from Greece and Rome as the apex of beauty and culture. Black women rarely occupied these walls. Then Thomas came along.

"All of these paintings that we held up as very important, images that have changed the world, of how we see women at that particular time, and beauty… I thought, 'why isn't the image of a Black woman held up to that same light,'" Thomas said, again from her website.

Thomas has been depicting Black women at their best–glamourous, assured, sexy–for 20 years, artworks now found hanging alongside those of the white women which



Mickalene Thomas, 'Afro Goddess Looking Forward,' 2015. Rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel 60 x 96 x 2 in.
© MICKALENE THOMAS

Along with their celebration of Black femininity and tremendous scale, regularly stretch 1ingo-feet–Mickalene Thomas' paintings are most easily identifiable by the rhinestones.

"I really wanted to explore ways of making a painting with my hands, and making with materials that wasn't necessarily paint–because I also enjoy working with texture and layers–and I couldn't figure out how to do that with paint, but I figured out how to do that with the rhinestones," Thomas said.

Thomas was led to this breakthrough by Aboriginal dot paintings encountered during a student exchange program in Australia. She was also interested in Georges Seurat and Pointillism.

Graduate school at Yale and a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2003 allowed her to continue experimenting with rhinestones.

“I was very interested in the notions of hierarchy, of the high and low,” Thomas continues. “Why is it that oil paint is the high art of material and glitter is low art?”

Thomas’ experiments were successful. Soon after, she became well known for her large-scale acrylic paintings of Black women in states of leisure and repose incorporating rhinestones.

Tableaus



Love.”

“It started out as providing a full context to the environment in which my sitters= occupied when I photographed them,” Thomas explained of the installations. “I= wanted a sense of reality. I wanted a sense of an experience for them–fully–when= they were in space, so no matter where they looked, or how their gaze shifted, they= related to something in a room which allowed them to respond to the space that they= were in.”

Thomas’ exquisite tableaus include fantastic patterns, rich surfaces, all manner of= powerful nostalgic throwbacks, books and lampshades and wallpaper. Sofas, end= tables, pillows, quilts.

“Those are about creating an immersive experience and context around spaces that= have been occupied and are used for conversation and creating a sense of comfort= and hope and unity; the alternative spaces that provide support for people that have= to create those themselves because they're not accepted into other spaces,” Thomas= said. “The home, for me, has always been this great space of solace, comfort, and= love.”

Again, going back to mom.

And love.

More than 80 of Thomas’ artworks are on view during the “All About Love”= exhibition which the artist is quick to point out is not a retrospective.

“It gives great insight into my practice and to the bodies of work that I made over a= period of 20 years, but I’ve made lots of work–I always tell people I can actually take= over the whole museum if they allow me to,” Thomas said.

One day.

For now, this will do.

After closing in Los Angeles, the show travels to the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and the Hayward Gallery in London.



Photo by Steve Benisty.

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REVIEWS

FOCUS

176 Dodie Bellamy *on* **Judy Chicago**

NEW YORK

178 Jan Avgikos *on* **Mickalene Thomas**

Murtaza Vali *on* **Hugh Hayden**

179 Margaret Ewing *on* **Janaina Tschäpe**

180 Zack Hatfield *on* **Michael Dean**

Donald Kuspit *on* **Brea Souders**

181 Jennifer Krasinski *on* **Laura Parnes**

Barry Schwabsky *on* **"Colored Pencil Redux"**

182 Chloe Wyma *on* **Marcia Schvartz**

183 Alex Jovanovich *on* **Agatha Wojciechowsky**

Charity Coleman *on* **Jennifer Carvalho**

184 Max Lakin *on* **Sarah Slappey**

NEWBURGH, NEW YORK

185 Jeffrey Kastner *on* **Martin Roth**

DETROIT

Lee Ambrozy *on* **Cay Bahnmiller**

CHICAGO

186 Lane Relyea *on* **Matthew Metzger**

187 Lori Waxman *on* **Jeffrey Gibson**

LOS ANGELES

188 Andy Campbell *on* **Soufiane Ababri**

Suzanne Hudson *on* **Susan Silton**

KLEINBURG, CANADA

189 Dan Adler *on* **Jon Sasaki**

MEXICO CITY

190 Gaby Cepeda *on* **"The Light Comes from Within"**

LIMA, PERU

Giuliana Vidarte *on* **"Hard to Swallow"**

SÃO PAULO

191 Ela Bittencourt *on* **Rafael Carneiro**

LONDON

192 Gilda Williams *on* **Leilah Babirye**

Olamiju Fajemisin *on* **"War Inna Babylon"**

OXFORD, UK

193 Allison Young *on* **Samson Kambalu**

NICE, FRANCE

194 Anya Harrison *on* **"She-Bam Pow Pop Wizz! The Amazons of Pop"**

MILAN

Ana Vukadin *on* **Nairy Baghramian**

LECCE, ITALY

195 Samantha Ozer *on* **Dora Budor**

VADUZ, LIECHTENSTEIN

196 Camila McHugh *on* **Paul Neagu**

BERLIN

Martin Herbert *on* **Alexander Basil**

HANNOVER, GERMANY

197 Andrew Witt *on* **Camille Henrot**

ARNHEM, NETHERLANDS

Adam Kleinman *on* **Sonsbeek 20→24**

LUND, SWEDEN

198 Fredrik Svensk *on* **Runo Lagomarsino**

VILNIUS

199 Inga Lāce *on the* **Baltic Triennial 14**

ISTANBUL

Kaya Genç *on* **Volkan Aslan**

BEIRUT

200 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie *on* **Shuruq Harb**

MUMBAI

201 Mario D'Souza *on* **Mehlli Gobhai**

BANGKOK

Abhijan Toto *on* **"A Life Beyond Boundaries (The Geography of Belonging)"**

HWASEONG, SOUTH KOREA

202 Andrew Russeth *on* **Sung Chankyung**

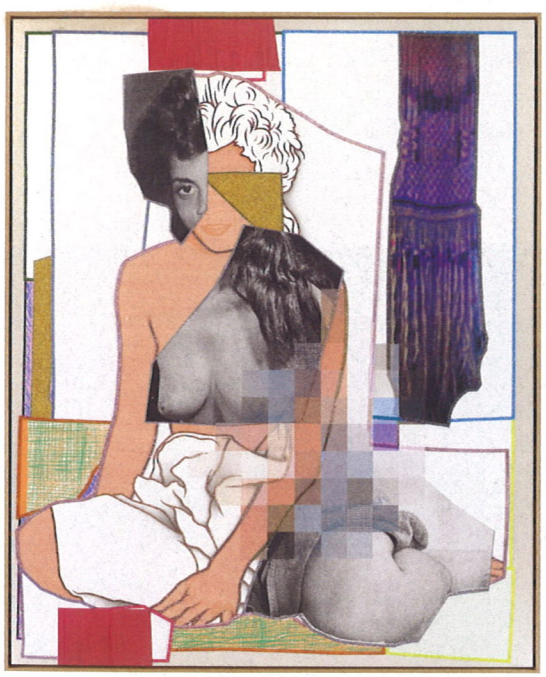
NEW YORK

Mickalene Thomas

LÉVY GORVY

There used to be a joke that went around the art world: When is a painting finished? The answer: When it goes to the conservator. The truth lurking in this gag addresses the experience of many painters who've realized they didn't always know when to quit. Mickalene Thomas's strength, in part, resides in the very fine line she walks between a fabulous intricacy and a dizzying overabundance. In her show of collaged canvases here—the first of four successive exhibitions, all to be titled "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" and to be staged throughout the fall at Lévy Gorvy's other branches, in London, Paris, and Hong Kong—her trademark surfaces are dense, decorative, and fiercely wrought. It's abundantly clear that she's completely comfortable with overload, but she has also calmed the dazzle down in several paintings for this outing, opting for an approach that's less fraught and more serene.

The unifying theme of the ten paintings and one sculpture in this presentation is derived from nude pinup calendars published by *Jet* magazine during the 1970s, which championed the beauty of young anonymous African American women. Thomas appropriates the vintage photographs and redirects their sensuality and playful seduction in the service of her ongoing articulations of Black lesbian desire.



Mickalene Thomas, *May 1977*, 2021, rhinestones, glitter, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 98⅛ × 82⅛".

In the canvas *September 1977* (all works 2021), the model—despite the glitter, rhinestones, and variously textured cutout elements that abstractly animate the rhythmic composition—looks relaxed in the open space she's been accorded. The full-length portrayal of her body retains the photographic quality of the original printed source, which distinguishes her silhouette amid visual pyrotechnics and gives the impression of a woman who owns the space she occupies with a quiet but undeniable confidence. Similarly, in *May 1977*, another comely nude beauty in a lovely, seated pose isn't fragmented, flattened, and dispersed but is visually unified, whole—as if she exists in a world apart from her spectacular setting. Spatial depth creates a pictorial environment that makes room for the viewer's own absorption into the picture.

Other works, such as *February 1971* and *February 1975*, also include images of *Jet* models, but the figures are more heavily embedded in a plethora of surface effects chock-full of patterns, materials, and linear traces; also, their faces are largely obscured with overpainting. In these tableaux, all the emphasis is on pleasurable formal elements and spectacular craftsmanship. Yet what lies "beyond the pleasure principle" is a discourse that grounds Thomas's art in the politics of gender and race. If you knew nothing about her practice and her own sexual orientation and identity, it wouldn't take you long to perceive the underlying content and artistic intent. Thomas includes short stacks of books casually positioned in front of several of the canvases; volumes that theorize the queer Black female body, reinforcing the exhibition's conceptual framework. And it must be stated that Thomas orchestrates a beautiful detournement of genre painting, plucking odalisques, bathers, and marvelous muses right out of pasty male art history and giving them new life as imaginary lesbian lovers. The same goes for the pinups, whose appeal and seductive powers are no longer in service to patriarchy but liberated as emblems of queer power, sensuality, and feminine freedom.

Thomas's work is in huge demand. At a time when LGBTQIA+ freedoms are seriously under assault—and being queer can get you killed in more places than we might like to think possible—taking the discourse of Black queer feminism on a journey around the world and being met with such acclaim is quite a feat. (The jury, however, is still out on whether all corners of the art world truly care about diversity and inclusion.) Meanwhile, Thomas continues to blaze a trail, undeterred in her defiance of institutional norms that once marginalized artists like her. Culling and synthesizing from virtually every dimension of culture, she creates an informed and expansive aesthetic that is broad in its appeal and insistently subversive in its message.

—*Jan Avgikos*

Hugh Hayden

LISSON GALLERY

Sculptor Hugh Hayden has enjoyed quick success, his work interrogating the idea of the American dream, often symbolized through the kitchen table, to explore class, aspiration, and the African origins of American cuisine, especially in the South. Hayden's strength lies in his skillful use of wood—specific types of which he often sources from particular places for their cultural and historical import—as both material and symbol. His exhibition here, titled after his pet name, "Huey," drew on memories of his Texas upbringing to tackle the knotty subject of African American childhood through sculptures poised between indoctrination and imagination, discipline and play.

The show was divided into three spaces, each referring to a different section of a church. Six salvaged pews and a school desk filled the sanctuary, all carefully reupholstered with chemical cleaning brushes, the pews an eye-catching red. A pair of hairbrushes and a comb, each with a menacing steel blade in place of a handle, were affixed to the far wall. Making up a series titled "Good Hair" (all works 2021), the modified seating acknowledged the role that institutions such as church and school play in establishing and enforcing standards of appearance, while the objects, somewhat heavy-handedly, implied the violence of such disciplinary regimes. A chapel-like second room tackled the oversize role that athletic excellence plays in narratives of Black masculinity through a half dozen wall-mounted basketball hoops woven out of rattan and other materials. One of these, *Huey*, was inspired by the iconic 1960s poster of Black Panther cofounder Huey P. Newton enthroned on a wicker peacock chair, an image whose popularity made that item of furniture a familiar fixture in African American households. Hayden re-created its oversize back as a backboard, weaving the logos of Nike, Under Armour, and Umbro into the frame. Another work, *Fruity*, is unexpectedly pink, the rattan strips stained with Gatorade. In *Rapunzel*, the net, woven out of synthetic blond hair, is more than six feet long and just skimmed the floor. A number of these pieces referenced fairy-tale characters in their titles, perhaps suggesting that those seeking success and communal upliftment via sports might be engaging in wishful thinking.

In a minimally lit all-black crypt, Hayden presented a set of ebony sculptures, interrogating the material as a signifier of African American excellence. Some pieces directly referenced the history of slavery: A

LUX
RESPONSIBLE CULTURE

Frieze NY Special: In the studio with Mickalene Thomas



Mickalene Thomas with her work *Clarivel #6* (2019). Photograph by Maryam Eisler

New York-based Mickalene Thomas is an important and innovative voice in the art world. Her dazzling portraits of African American women use collage, enamel and her signature rhinestones to explore femininity and ideas of beauty. Maryam Eisler visits her in her

Manhattan studio to photograph her and talk beauty, sexual politics, identity and racial stereotyping

LUX: Your work is almost exclusively about women – real women, everyday women, in different sizes, with different stories, textures, colours. Tell us a bit about this.
Mickalene Thomas: I love everything about women and more – confident women, smart women, the I-don't-give-a-sh*t women, with all shades of blackness. When I think of all the women in my life, I think of those who have mentored me, about those I've read about in books and their stories. I think about all the women who have trail-blazed and sojourned that I aspire to be, about all the women who I haven't met yet and who protect me. When I think of blackness, I think of my grandmothers. I remember seeing one of them at 95 years old in her apartment sitting in her favourite chair, and the wrinkling, deep indigo colour of her skin, that blackness, the ageless glow in her eyes, and thinking about all of the history that she's endured and the things unspoken, all those secrets. I think of her vulnerability, her beauty, her fragility, her strength.

LUX: There are many stereotypes of black women set by white patriarchal societies. Is there an expectation for you to fit within a white canon of beauty? Not that you have ever conformed to that way of thinking, of course!
Mickalene Thomas: Yeah, especially when you think of the ideology of a beauty that was put forth, setting a paradigm and an agency for everyone to follow. I've always tried to figure out how that happened and how it remained at the centre of our world. Because there were so many other powerful empires that had their own notions of beauty and aesthetics.



The artist with her partner Racquel Chevremont, in front of *October 1975* (2019). Photograph by Maryam Eisler

LUX: How did you extricate yourself from this way of thinking about beauty?

Mickalene Thomas: As a woman of colour, I was fortunate to be raised by a very strong group of women. I never grew up wanting to be anything other than what I am, or wanting to question my own blackness. I never thought, "Am I light enough for you?" I've always had natural hair or locks. I've never straightened my hair. That's never been an issue. So that white notion of beauty has never been imposed on me.



Installation view of 'Mickalene Thomas: A Moment's Pleasure' at The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2019. © Mickalene Thomas. Photo Mitro Hood, BMA/The Baltimore Museum of Art.

LUX: Was this down to the influence of your mother and your grandmother?

Mickalene Thomas: Yes, they let me know that I was beautiful enough for myself and no one else, and that I'm of a new generation and can be a leader and that my blackness and difference is important. I questioned their ideas of beauty because they were vastly different from mine – but I also think that growing up with Black Power in the 70s made me think differently. Looking around the room and seeing women with hair in Afros was very empowering. It's about freedom, really.

LUX: Yes. And owning it, right?

Mickalene Thomas: Yes, absolutely. However, you start questioning these ideas of beauty placed on you by the media because it's the only representation that you see. You know that within your own community some things are considered beautiful, but then the media tells you otherwise.



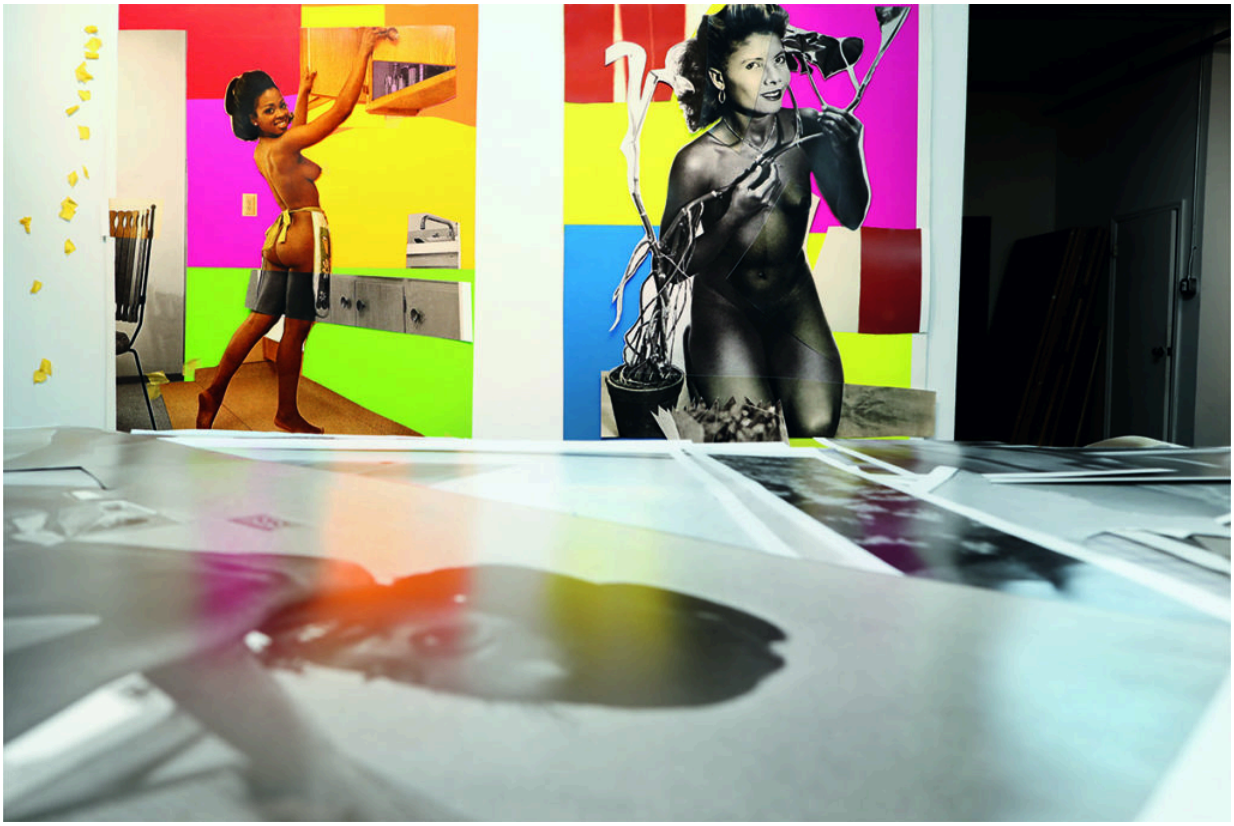
Untitled (Maya #4) (2019) by Mickalene Thomas. © Mickalene Thomas.

LUX: Does that make you wonder if you're creating your own bubble?
Mickalene Thomas: Yes. And you're constantly up against creating your own agency. Where do you fit in exactly? How do you navigate this world and this image consciousness as it is? Forget double consciousness!

LUX: With the histories and background stories involved, it's probably more like a tenfold consciousness?
Mickalene Thomas: Yes! I think that if we embrace the diaspora and look at ourselves as the melting pot that we are as a people, then we can start tolerating our differences and embrace the various forms of beauty that each of us harbour.

LUX: Do you think we tend to forget about our humanity as the common ground?
Mickalene Thomas: Yes, that would be a much healthier way of looking at the world – to try and understand the way we are because we had to migrate and move around for a variety of reasons, such as adverse conditions, weather, food, nature and much more!

LUX: What does it mean to question such stories of migration within your own community on a daily basis, in this day and age and in the USA of all places, the country of migration par excellence?
Mickalene Thomas: The entire country is based on migration. And for me, to even have to think about it gives me an ulcer. To think that America is leading this atrocity of deportation, when it is built on people immigrating here for many different freedoms.

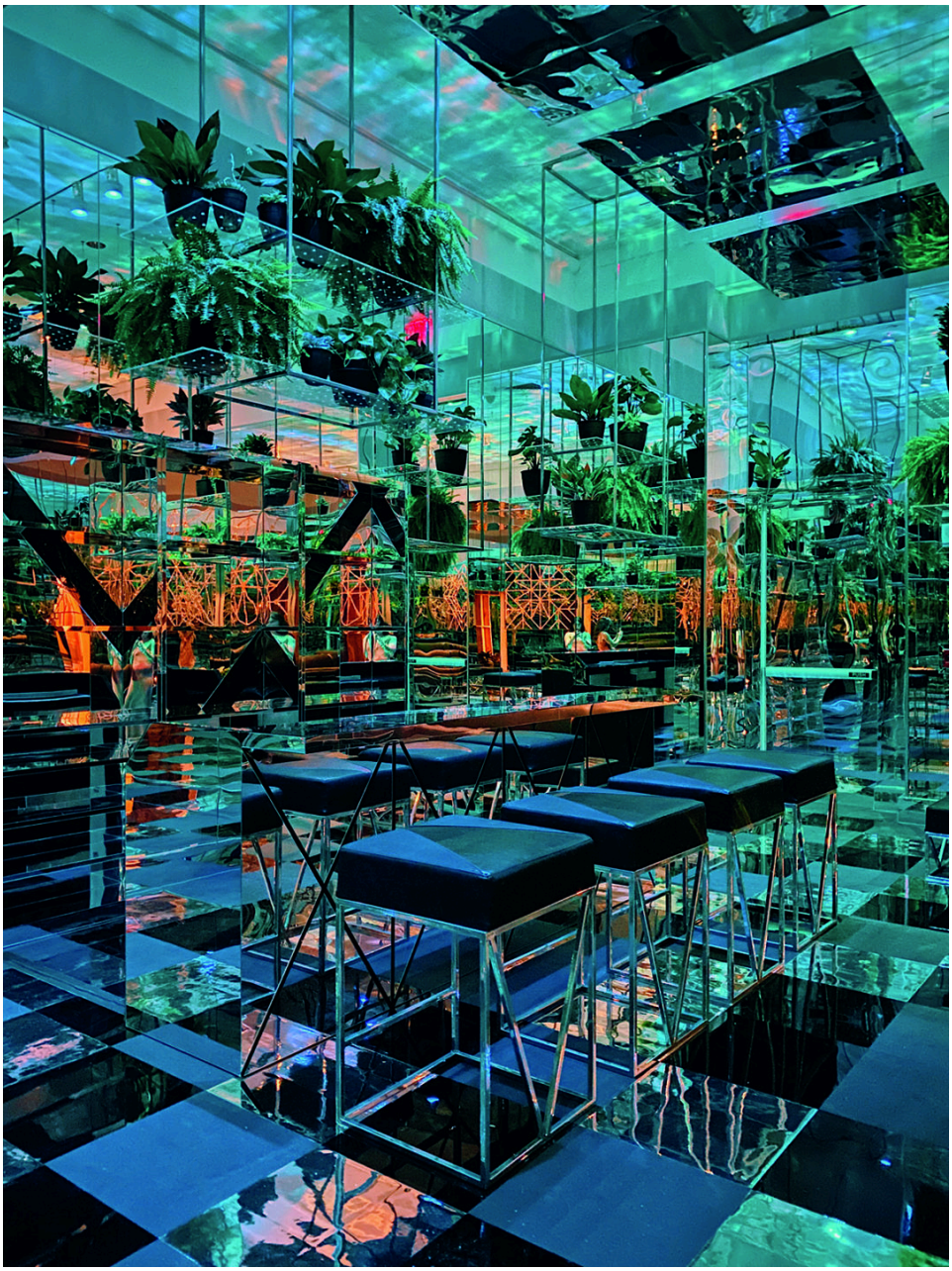


Studio shot of two works from Thomas's 2019 series based on images from the *Jet Magazine* pin-up calendars from the 1970s. Image by Maryam Eisler

LUX: Where is this re-examination of colour, race, faith, culture coming from?

Mickalene Thomas: I think there are many people in the world who operate specifically out of hatred and fear. I was raised a Buddhist and I think that was one of the fortunate gifts my mother gave my brother and me, this sense of spirituality and the sense of philosophy of life. It's not necessarily a religious practice, but more a philosophy of understanding, through knowing your causes and effects. The people who commit atrocities, such as mass shootings and bombings, are feeling displaced and threatened in society, and the causes are deeply rooted in their ancestors' past. We want to live right now and right here, but there's a lot we don't look at in our pasts. I really believe that, as an artist, you have to look at history to move forward. We're just moving forward without resolving our past histories. Times are tough. Our economy is about to take a huge shift, and I think it won't just affect the poor or the middle classes – it's going to affect many people in ways that they haven't really seen before.

LUX: And there's a lot of anger out there.
Mickalene Thomas: Yes. And people want something that they feel is owed to them, or that they are entitled to. And they think that immigrants and people of colour have been given some special privilege, not realising that most of us, if not all, have worked very hard to get to `where we are.

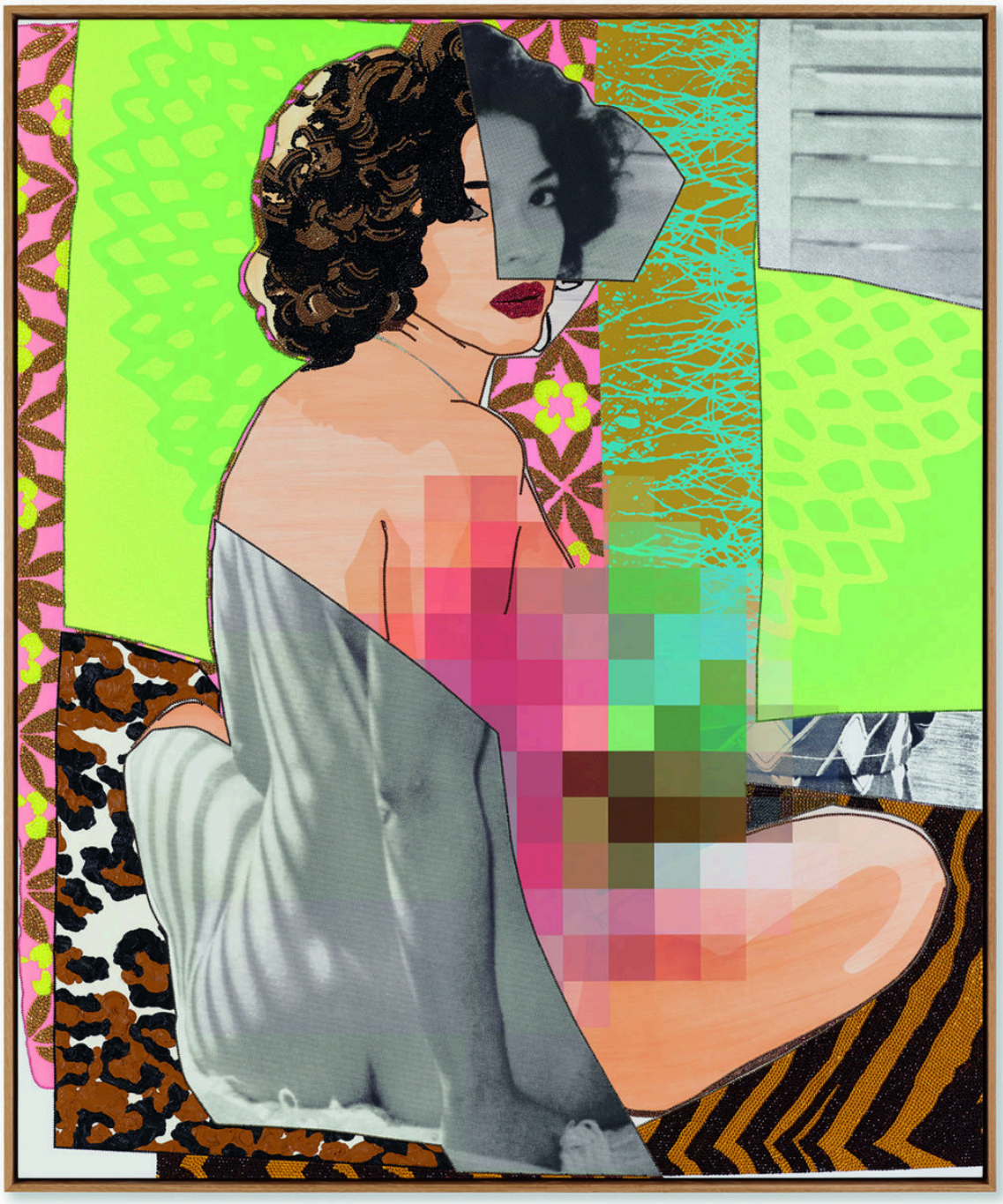


Installation view of the exhibition 'Mickalene Thomas: Better Nights', at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 2019. Photo Jessica Klingelfuss, courtesy of Mickalene Thomas and Jessica Klingelfuss

LUX: Can we talk about ownership of one's sexuality?
Mickalene Thomas: You've got to own it! You only have one life. Period. And it took me a long time to recognise my own power and strength.

LUX: And while it's okay to flaunt it, it seems that women and men are judged differently when they do…

Mickalene Thomas: Men have much more access to self-expression as well as the freedom to navigate the world and go about doing whatever they want to do. I remember arguing with my brother and having to figure out how to deal with those complications and being very argumentative with my family about it: "So why is he able to do certain things and I can't but that I do better?"



August 1977 (2019) by Mickalene Thomas. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2020, photo Elisabeth Bernstein

LUX: Your work can be flamboyant, exuberant and cacophonous, with much layering and fragmentation. Is this a case of eye candy on the outside, but with deeper issues beneath?
Mickalene Thomas: These ways of telling stories, of thinking about how the women I depict collected their own histories, making sacrifices and compromises with little means and making the best of it. They went from one place to the other, transcending time and space.

LUX: So, it's about stitching together a patchwork of life events?
Mickalene Thomas: A lot of the layering of material and patterning is about their own journeys, their own perseverance, their own struggles. The residue, the unearthing of time and space, is about their scars, and mostly it's about the artifice of what you may think you see and the reality of it being another truth.



Installation view of 'Mickalene Thomas: I Can't See You Without Me' at The Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 2018. Photo Luke Stettner, courtesy of Mickalene Thomas and The Wexner Center for the Arts.

LUX: The visual effect is powerful, and the nostalgia palpable.
Mickalene Thomas: There's the power of the visuals, yes, and how we begin to believe our own truths or memories, whether or not there's myth, and how they then become our reality. And so, as artists we create time capsules for histories. I find this very interesting, how people believe their own lies, their own truths, or their own memories or fantasies or dreams. These become reality to the point one might think: "Well, did that really happen?" When my mother passed in 2012, I came across photos that were almost a validation of my memory of childhood experiences. The photos encapsulated many moments for me – "Okay, now I have some evidence of what happened in my life. Now I have images from which to work. So now I have material to use for creative ideas and put the pieces of the puzzle together."

LUX: So, above all, is your art a journey of research and self-discovery?
Mickalene Thomas: I think, as an artist, if you're not doing self-discovery, then you're really no longer making the art. It's always a journey.

For more information visit: mickalenethomas.com

This article will also be published in the Summer 2020 Issue, hitting newsstands May 2020.

ELEPHANT

The Index
15 Apr 2020

For Mickalene Thomas, Success Is About Elevating Others

"I want everyone to have a seat at the table." [author]Charlotte Jansen[/author] talks to the sought-after American artist about intimacy, the fierce uprisings of the 1970s and the importance of incorporating other artists into her own, powerfully inclusive exhibitions.



Mickalene Thomas: Better Nights Installation view at The Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 1 December 2019–27 September 2020. Courtesy The Bass. Photography by Zachary Balber

During the current Coronavirus crisis, we are publishing one article per week from our latest Spring issue. It is also available to read in full via the Elephant app, or a physical copy can be ordered from our online store.

It's Thanksgiving in the US and Mickalene Thomas is returning a hire car when I call. She is in the middle of a trip along the coast in Florida, where she is finishing installing her exhibition at the Bass Museum. Mickalene Thomas: Better Nights is set to close in September [note, the museum is not currently open to the public] and it is the second long-running institutional exhibition Thomas has installed in as many months. It is described as an immersive art experience, but Thomas herself calls it a "social experiment", which incorporates the work of many other artists: the painters Nina Chanel Abney (who shares Thomas's love of Matisse) and Derrick Adams (who is, like Thomas, a fan of beautiful interior design); photographic artists Paul Mpagi Sepuya and John Edmonds; video maker Ja'Tovia Gary; and Christie Neptune, Devin Morris and Brontez Purnell. The range of work speaks to the breadth of Thomas's own interests, artistically, politically and aesthetically.



Mickalene Thomas, Family Photos of Sandra Bush © Mickalene Thomas, Courtesy the artist

Thomas sees this way of approaching exhibitions as "another iteration of curation", part social-practice, part radical rethinking of the role of the "artist". "I'm not really interested in doing solo exhibitions anymore—that doesn't really excite me," she tells me later on the phone, car now safely parked up. "I want to have a dialogue with other artists, whether they are masters or contemporary." She rejects the standard practice of showing and selling work every two years. "I just don't understand that model," she says. "When I see a show, I want to see the relationships between artists, to make connections on different levels with the work. I'm inspired by other things; so what are those things and why am I not showing them? Why is it just about me?" It might, I interject, be to do with the fact that those models have been based on the mostly male egos of artists and art historians, who wanted to cover their tracks and feign originality for their ideas. "But we know that's not true—no-one gets to where they are by themselves. It comes from something else, from looking, from digesting—you have to acknowledge that."

"The seventies were so profound for me, it was a really fierce moment"

This has been the impetus behind all of Thomas's institutional exhibitions in the last year: building a community that can bring joy, but that also addresses what Thomas sees as a real concern in the art world. Since her breakthrough exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 2016, Thomas, aged forty-eight, is now one of the most sought-after artists in the US, both in terms of the market (her photo-collage portraits regularly fetch upwards of $20,000 at auction) and in terms of institutions inviting her to stage headline shows. "The opportunities have allowed me to make bodies of work that I've wanted to do for a long time, but also to create platforms for other artists, specifically emerging artists, and to provide opportunities for them too."

"There are a lot of artists who aren't getting the visibility they need, so when I have the chance to exhibit in particular institutions it's part of my responsibility to provide some of that agency and to hold the museum a little more accountable," she adds. "No-one wants to be at the top by themselves; at least, I don't! I want everyone to have a seat at the table."



Portrait by Donald Stahl

If the demand for visibility has been at the centre of Thomas's work since the start, she's now taking it to a whole new level. Where she used to paint and photograph mostly black, female figures (her late mother; lovers; her chosen family) back into the world with what bell hooks might have called an "oppositional gaze", Thomas is now insisting on seeing others as they want to be seen, by directly introducing diverse voices. "I want the room to be peppered with diversity and many types of people, people of colour, different genders… that's what the room should be like. The art world needs to be the leader in a changing world. Oftentimes artists who are in the most vulnerable places are the ones who step up and take the risks, to ignite those conversations, to see if it generates new conversations and discourses that move the needle and force people to start thinking of new ways to create exhibitions."

The process in itself is revealing: while there is a huge demand for diversifying, the figures often reveal that little progress has been made. Commercial gallery representation and museum acquisitions are still vastly tipped in favour of white, Western men. Clearly, there's a degree of lip service going on. Thomas wonders whether her ambitious new way of creating exhibitions will have an impact on which institutions invite her in the future. For now, despite some bumps in the road, she is enjoying being able to impose her demands. Even as the works are going up at the Bass, "I feel like we're still struggling to get an understanding of what this mission is. When I said I wanted to involve locals, it was kind of dismissed," she admits. At Baltimore Museum of Art, she opened A Moment's Pleasure in November (the show, temporarily closed until at least the end of April 2020, is set to run until May 2021). "Their involvement with what I'm doing, and my vision, has so surpassed my expectations. They have held themselves accountable in such an incredible way. They decided to take responsibility, to really engage their departments and their community."



Thomas is aware that what she's doing disrupts the rubric. "It's not a political move, it's more of a conscientious way of advocate for others, and it's about mentorship—that's one of my missions and visions as an artist. As I grow as an artist, I want to be able to foster and bring others up with me. I think it's because I didn't have that support—that's why I want to create this. The artists I looked at didn't have those resources, they were very limited, they couldn't provide that support even if they wanted to. They've opened the door and laid the groundwork for artists like me to do this now." Being in one of Thomas's exhibitions isn't just about art "hanging on the walls", it's an invitation to be "part of a family".

An early encounter with a work by Carrie Mae Weems in Portland was a complete revelation for Thomas—the decisive moment she became an artist. "It transcended me in such a big way," she recalls. She also mentions Faith Ringgold as someone who set a precedent for her path. "But I didn't have access to them then—it's not like I could go up to Faith and say, 'Hey, how did you make this work and how do you navigate the art world?'"



Mickalene Thomas: Better Nights Installation view at The Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 1 December 2019–27 September 2020. Courtesy The Bass. Photography by Zachary Balber

Thomas's partner, the art consultant and collector Racquel Chevremont, has played a major role in her work, both as a muse and a collaborator. It was Chevremont who got Thomas's 2010 painting Le Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires—a riposte to Manet's Impressionist work from 1862—on the hit American TV show Empire. It's perhaps no surprise that since the pair became a couple seven years ago, Thomas has been on the rise. Chevremont played a fundamental role in Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires, a show that travelled from AGO Toronto to the CAC New Orleans. Le Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires was a centrepiece of the show, alongside works featuring characters like Shug Avery from The Color Purple and Dynasty star, Diahann Carroll.

This kind of representation matters. At her New Orleans opening, Thomas had an experience she says she won't forget. "There was a woman there who came up to me and just started crying. All she could do was say, 'Thank you, thank you for this.' She was so full of joy that this work was there for her. It is incredible for me, when people feel that. That's real. That's what it's really about—that's why I love doing what I do." Emotion clearly present in her voice, she continues, "You can feel it when people see themselves; that's the power of art—that's the power of representation. It's transformative in a big way."

SHOP



Mickalene Thomas, Family Photos of Sandra Bush © Mickalene Thomas, Courtesy the artist

Educated at Pratt and then Yale, Thomas is used to institutions, but she emerged into the art world ignorant about the business side of art. Perhaps it's Chevremont's insight, but she now seems savvy about the pitfalls of the art market, and that knowledge is something she wants to share. "Artists are often getting into very tricky situations because they don't understand the business of the art world, it isn't taught in art schools, and galleries don't educate their artists, so you have to learn from your own errors," she explains. "On top of creativity, it's a huge part of an artist's work, but no-one talks about it." With Chevremont, she's also founded The Josie Club, a support network for queer women artists of colour, to help fundraise, sponsor and support their artworks. Is this social practice something we can expect from Thomas in the future? "Oh yes, we're just getting started!"

"I think it is very exciting for black and brown artists right now. But art is fickle and unpredictable"

It all makes perfect sense looking at Thomas's works: whether it's in paintings or installations, she often creates a homely atmosphere, comforting and comfortable. In their details they often recall her own home, growing up—her installation at the Bass references happenings at her mother's in the 1970s and 1980s. The family atmosphere seems to be a natural extension that has evolved into her new way of working. "I think for me, it's about creating that kind of intimacy with people, because oftentimes people have to create chosen families, right? That's something that has been known in the queer community for many centuries."

The 1970s is a decade that Thomas constantly comes back to in her art: the fashion, the decor, the vibe. Why does she think the seventies continue to be mythologized in visual culture, even by people who didn't live through the period? "I guess for me it's mostly about the 1970s Black Radical Aesthetic, which created a lot of joy," Thomas reflects. "Everything that was happening at that time—from the ongoing Civil Rights Movement to the Black Panthers, to Black Is Beautiful—it was about self-identifying and people taking full agency of themselves, creating these collectives and uprisings. And it was a time of political activism, whether vocalizing on the streets or through entertainment, things were radicalized in a huge way. The seventies were so profound for me, it was a really fierce moment."



Mickalene Thomas: Better Nights Installation view at The Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, 1 December 2019–27 September 2020. Courtesy The Bass. Photography by Zachary Balber

Does it compare to the presence and power of black artists in America at the moment? "I think it is very exciting for black and brown artists right now. But art is fickle and unpredictable, it's like a tidal wave; first it was Latin American, then Chinese, then Middle-Eastern, now it's black American—we don't know how long that wave will stay up high, but the surfers are riding that wave really well right now," Thomas responds. "I'm excited about it and I'm enjoying some of the rewards, I know I'm benefitting, and some of these shows have to do with it currently, but we have to ensure there's no backlash and that we don't look back and see this moment as only a politically correct movement. We'll all still be here making art, whether it's a good ten-year period or not—it's about what's going to happen after that moment is gone." If it's left up to Thomas, there's no doubt their legacy will endure.

Mickalene THOMAS

Going beyond the pleasure principle.

BY KATY DONOGHUE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY

This fall, Mickalene Thomas embarked on a major endeavor, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," a four-city, multi-venue series of blockbuster exhibitions. Opening first in New York at Lévy Gorvy was a three-floor presentation of new works derived from *Jet* magazine pinup calendars. More of those paintings were on view in London at Lévy Gorvy, as well as at Nathalie Obadia in Paris. A new group of "Resist" paintings as well as a video installation were on view at Lévy Gorvy's Paris location, and at its Hong Kong home, Thomas showed paintings from "Tête de Femme."

The project was the result of her new gallery partnership, a desire to make Thomas's work more visible in Europe, and the opportunity amid much uncertainty to show as much as she could while she could.

The new paintings also serve as a full-circle moment of sorts, revisiting imagery from *Jet* magazine, as its "Beauties of the Week" were the subject of a performative piece while she was in grad school at Yale. While she wouldn't revisit *Jet* as source material for years, the thread of the gaze, representations of the Black body, and a celebration of sensuality can be drawn throughout Thomas's practice.

On the day of her openings in Paris, Thomas spoke with *Whitewall* from her studio about the impact of images, the role of jazz in collage, and her plans post "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

WHITEWALL: *Your exhibitions in New York and London at Lévy Gorvy feature new large-scale paintings sourced from* Jet *magazine pinup calendars. You've talked about the importance and role* Jet *magazine played in your life. And then in 2012, when your mother passed, you found boxes of* Jet *among her things. You didn't use that as a resource in your work until later. What made you feel ready to engage with this material?*

MICKALENE THOMAS: In 2012 my mother died, and I inherited her box of *Jet* magazines. Prior to her death, I had already explored and created some images around the "Beauties of the Week" from *Jet* magazine while in graduate school as a performative project in Kellie Jones's class.

I started experimenting with other ideas through photography by staging photo shoots of women in my life—my mother, myself, and my lover at the time. This experimentation cemented the ideas in my creative process; it wasn't fully developed until now.

Now, at this point in my life, after my journey, after collaborating with muses, working with various sitters and models, it makes sense to look back at the pivotal moment where the first images provided a sense of validation, in beauty and recognition. These images created a platform of agency and became the central point of focus to why the concepts in my work are related to desire, beauty, and erotica.

WW: *So, the* Jet *"Beauties of the Week," whether directly or not so directly, have been there all along for you. But the* Jet *pinup calendars were a new discovery for you, right? What about these images struck you?*

MT: Not until 2015 did I discover the pinups. I did not grow up with them, nor do I have memory of seeing them in my environment. It depends on the generation—not many women of my generation had heard of them. Researching with my team, we started collecting and buying different *Jet* magazines from the 1950s and they had the "Jet Calendar Girl," but they were fully clothed, and presented as pageant girls. Different from what's happening 20 years later, in the fifties they were identified, similarly to the "Beauties of the Week."

Moving into the seventies and they are semi-nude, topless, they are insinuating some signifiers of desire, sexuality, and sensuality, blocking their vaginas with a propped plant. Their names aren't revealed; there are no descriptions. I'm curious about those parameters around finding or presenting Black erotica, acceptability, and respectability.

WW: *So, once they expressed their sexuality, their identity was kept out.*

MT: Exactly. Perhaps for their protection, of course, but sometimes the mystery in desire is not knowing—there's a degree of separation. There's a myriad of reasons why that is necessary. But I'm interested in the dichotomy, related to art history, when we place the Black body in overtly erotic positions or servitude positions, that we don't need to know who they are. So, when you look at the maid in *Olympia* by Manet, the Black woman is secondary; today we are identifying the women in these paintings.

However, another notion is that I think there's something to owning Black women's erotica—us owning our sexuality needs to be validated as we own and love our own bodies, and want to be desired. The Black female body is beautiful. Damn it, women's bodies are sexy. Our bodies vary in size and shape. As it should be—who wants to have the same body as someone else? Unlike some of the images of women in the media today, who are starting to morph into looking like each other with the same type of lips, butt, and breasts. That's unfortunate. It is really desirable to love yourself and accept your own body. It's empowering, like Tina Turner loving and owning her sexy legs. Putting these images forward as a way of celebrating the Black body is imperative for young girls.

WW: *In the paintings, how did you want to make these images come alive again?*

MT: Trying to understand the archival images by collaging and deconstructing them. Thinking about them as if they aren't vintage or archival photos by putting them through the same process that I would my own images—scanning, reprinting, resizing, coloring, distorting, and deconstructing. There's a lot of experimentation, playing with form and formal aspects of the body. I'm shifting and editing, reimagining the image.

I like to think that I'm giving them agency over what's revealed—it's gazing into their eyes and speaking to them, having conversations with the image. Who are you? What are you doing? Where are you from?

Presenting their power and ownership so that these are not presented as fictitious women, that these are real women. They made the decision to be photographed in this way. To me, that's empowering.

What's so exciting about some of the images is how they present, in some way, this moment of possibility. Some images have them with a golf club, sitting by a luxury pool, cooking in an ideal kitchen, or with a tennis racket; there's the possibility of desire either for the beautiful woman or the activity. It's these moments of sexuality and possibility of what you are capable of doing, or being, in the world. *Jet* provided these desires on many levels.

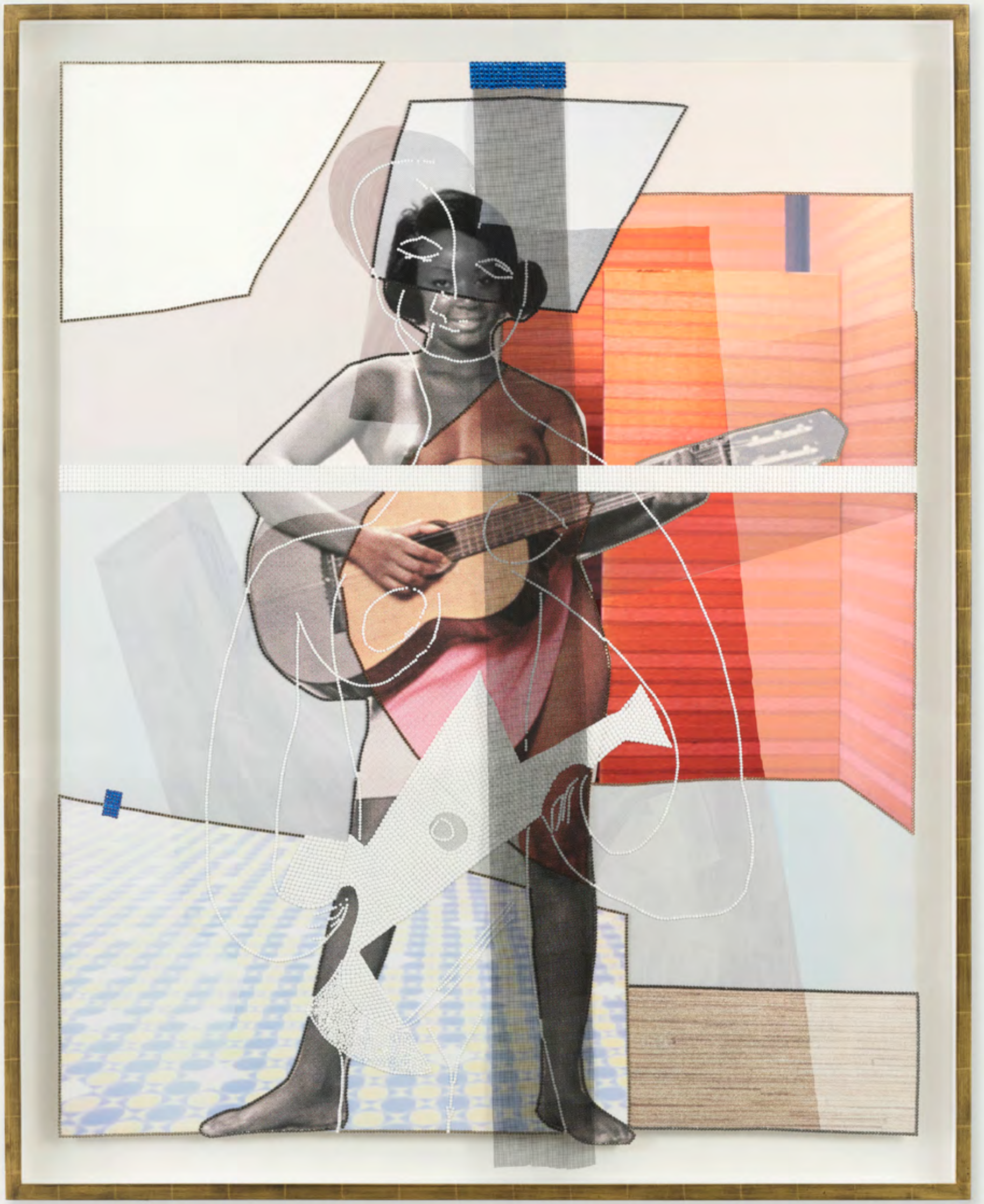
WW: *The installation of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in New York included stacks of books placed near different paintings. Can you tell us about those?*



Photo by Steve Benisty.



Mickalene Thomas, *Jet Blue #26*, rhinestones, fiberglass mesh, acrylic paint, chalk pastel, oil pastel, mixed media paper, and archival pigment prints on museum paper mounted on dibond with mahogany frame, 93.75 x 64.375 x 2 inches, © Mickalene Thomas.



Mickalene Thomas, *Jet Blue #43*, 2021, color photograph, mixed media paper, acrylic paint, rhinestones, fiberglass mesh on museum paper mounted on dibond, 61 x 48.25 inches, © Mickalene Thomas.

> “It is really desirable to love yourself and accept your own body”

MT: The books for me in the installation act as this fundamental literary thread to how I’m giving context to my work through other authors and how they see or think about the Black body. Some of these writings inform my decision-making and ideas. I just delved into *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay. She’s been incredible for me for thinking about my own empowerment and my place in the world—how it’s okay not to have people agree with your ideas, and because you might enjoy your own bravado or notions of your sexuality, that could make you a “bad feminist.”

Not everyone is going to agree with my images. Not everyone’s going to look at them in the way that I see them. Some people might find them problematic, and that’s okay. It’s okay to put works out there that are not always celebrated. It’s okay to take risks and have the discourse be conflicted or complex or rub people the wrong way or disrupt the conversation about respectability. It’s about bringing things to light and having full conversations about all the different ways of how our bodies are presented in the world.

Roxane Gay has been a really amazing literary resource for my work, in the same way that James Baldwin is for my “Resist” series.

WW: *Mentioning your “Resist” series, those were on view at Lévy Gorvy in Paris. Can you tell us about creating these* Guernica*-inspired pieces?*

MT: I’m creating particular images that deal with the dehumanization of Brown and Black bodies. I put sociopolitical elements in my work to create a palpable discussion around ways in which our society is still battling and dealing with the disproportionate attack on Black people, even when our Black excellence greatly contributes our culture to American society. The struggle still exists, the movement is real—we are still dealing with some oppression.

Considering Picasso, who is extremely prolific and complicated, I decided to use images from *Guernica*. He was an artist I could use as a connection with my other show at Nathalie Obadia in Paris, which was primarily the *Jet* pinup calendars and mostly seated women. Picasso had very controversial works that dealt with sociopolitical issues, as well as portraits of abstract, seated women. So, the thread moves back and forth between these ideas.

I was able to layer *Guernica* or the seated women as a ghost image to weave through the work. You see a hint of *Guernica*, but it’s mostly about presenting Black Lives Matter and Black citizens that are dealing with inequities and prejudices—and not just in America but around the world. How people are protesting the inequality internationally.

We’re resilient. We have Black excellence, we have Black joy, we have Black celebrity, we have Black success.

WW: *And those paintings accompany a video, as well?*

MT: The title of the video comes from the James Baldwin quote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” It’s a five-minute, 11-second, multi-channel video where I use my aesthetic of collage and apply it to filmmaking by creating a compilation of documentary footage from archival and news sources. It’s featuring moments from the Black liberation movement, and a composition by Grammy Award–winning American jazz drummer, composer, educator, and producer Terri Lyne Carrington.

It’s layered across five screens that are in various sizes, and each screen syncs up at different moments. The composition is this beautiful cacophony of movement and sound; it’s like jazz and it’s intense.

WW: *How do you see your process in relation to rhythm and sound and movement?*

MT: Collaging is about rhythm, shape, composition, and political movement. It’s composing. It’s about various elements from different sources or different perspectives and putting them together to create a narrative. You can do that with poetry, with language, music, and dance. I choose to use different genres of painting by collaging various images in my work. These various genres in my own process layer my paintings and videos. I’m always thinking about painting, I’m thinking about music, I’m thinking about poetry and dance. I’m thinking about how the viewer is going to move through, experience and engage with my painting—how do they physically respond?

WW: *“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” is a global project, opening across four cities in several galleries in partnership. What was the starting point for such a monumental project?*

MT: I really wanted to partner with a gallery that believes in my process, my vision, and my work, and was willing to take a risk with me. I want a partner. Lévy Gorvy seemed like the best gallery to develop this relationship with at this time. I haven’t shown in Europe much; although, I have a gallery in Paris, this global exhibition allows me to show in spaces that have not been accessible in the past. This is my first solo exhibition in London.

WW: *Really?*

MT: Yes, really! It’s been a long time coming. I knew Lévy Gorvy was the gallery to do this with me. Initially, I was only going to have a New York show, but the opportunity and monumental idea came about to make work for Paris, London, and Hong Kong. It was really the unknown. We were excited about things opening up and being ready to have this work to present to the world.

I think all the works are at the right places at the right moment for the right reasons. I think it’s all appropriate for what’s going on in Paris right now that the “Resist” paintings are being presented. It’s the same with the works in Hong Kong, the works of “Tête de Femme,” the broad, bright faces with geometric shapes and color and gesture that explode on the canvas. They make you feel so joyful and happy, which is needed right now.

WW: *After such a major output, what do you do next? Take a well-earned break, I hope?*

MT: I think it’s a combination of self-care at this moment, but also you get so pumped up by the energy of it all that these new ideas come from the growth of the work. Right now, it’s a lot of research, writing ideas down, collecting, and gathering. I have some other projects and obligations to finish. Once these are completed, we’ll close the studio for the holiday and take a nice long vacation and return, reassess, and see what’s next. We’re moving toward living our lives, having my studio open, the way Europeans do—away for August and for the holidays. I’m excited about this new organization and outlook on life.

I thought about this during COVID, reconsidering how I want to operate and manage my studio. There were some people that I had to let go. I have an intimate and loyal team. It’s about us being a family, working together and supporting each other. I can’t do this global show or any show of this magnitude by myself. I’m really appreciative and very generous to those who help me move this forward.



Photo by Steve Benisty.



Galerie

ART & CULTURE

5 Milestone Moments from Mickalene Thomas's Groundbreaking Career

Acclaimed for her decorative style and unique approach to the Black female form, the cross-disciplinary artist celebrates a multipart gallery exhibition and the release of a new monograph

BY LUCY REES

DECEMBER 14, 2021



PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE & CO.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS

Mary J. Me, 2002

Created while the artist was pursuing her MFA at Yale University, this bedazzled work depicting singer Mary J. Blige reveals Mickalene Thomas's early interest in reshaping perceptions of beauty and building recognition for Black women. "From the beginning, I have striven to reach new frontiers in my work," she says.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS

Three Graces: Les Trois Femmes Noires, 2011

Originating in Greek mythology, the three Graces personify charm, beauty, and creativity and have inspired artists for centuries. In Thomas's groundbreaking version, three confident Black women are swathed in bright outfits and bold accessories, prompting the viewer to rethink their perception of the ideal form.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS

Racquel Reclining Wearing Purple Jumpsuit, 2016

This work, anchored by an image of Thomas's partner, Racquel Chevremont, serves as a dazzling example of Thomas's craft, where layers of paint blend with oil, acrylic, silkscreen, rhinestones, faux pearls, glitter, graphite, and flock. It achieved more than $1.8 million at a Christie's sale earlier this year, marking a new record for the artist.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS

“Better Nights,” 2019

Thomas transformed the Bass museum in Miami Beach with “Better Nights,” an immersive show that recalled jubilant parties at her mother’s home. The galleries were decorated in retro decor, complete with faux-wood paneling and vintage furniture reupholstered in the artist’s signature zippy textiles. Alongside her own works, Thomas curated a selection of pieces by emerging and prominent artists of color. “I’ve had a great deal of new milestones leading up to now, but 2019 was a particularly successful year in terms of exhibitions and recognition,” notes Thomas. “That year, I was able to exhibit in four consecutive museum exhibitions, including the installation at the Bass Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami as well as develop my major monograph with Phaidon. So when I look back on my journey, I am grateful.”

“I am driven by the incredible impact and impression my work provides for viewers and the world”

MICKALENE THOMAS



Mickalene Thomas.
PHOTO: TATIJANA SHOAN

“Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 2021

Thomas’s latest exhibition takes over all four Lévy Gorvy locations around the world. Here, an installation view from London showcases works inspired by past issues of *Jet* magazine. “The title is a conflation of the names of Janet Jackson’s 1987 song “The Pleasure Principle” and of Sigmund Freud’s 1920 essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” says Thomas. “Thematically, it is a continuation of the overarching theme that has persisted throughout my career. It represents the desire and sensuality of capturing glimpses of the Black erotic, sex, race and

respectability." The show includes new work that ranges from from painting and collage to installation and video. "I enjoy collage the most," Thomas says. "Collage is a contemplative, thorough practice that allows me to make sense of the world around me by deconstructing and then reassembling the various parts; within this process is the prospect of discovering something new."



PHOTO: STEPHEN WHITE & CO.

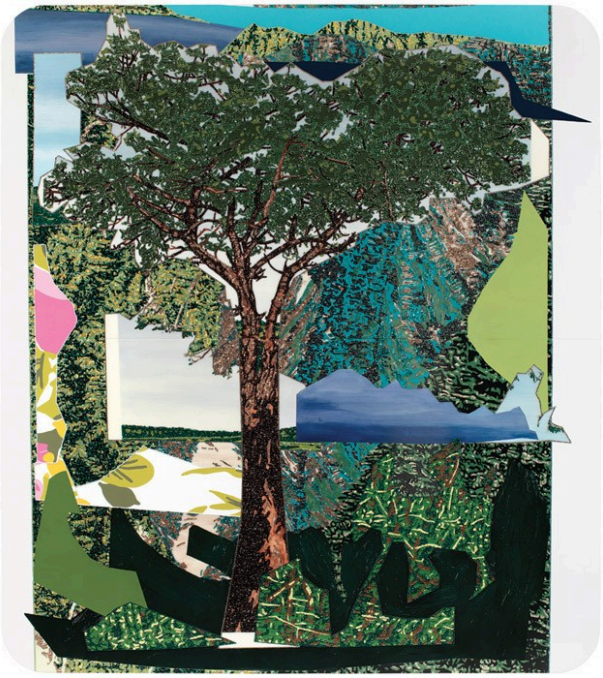
A version of this article first appeared in print in our 2021 Winter Issue under the headline "Milestone: Mickalene Thomas." Subscribe to the magazine.

ARTFORUM

Mickalene Thomas

ICA - Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

By Suzanne Hudson



Mickalene Thomas, ***Landscape with Tree***, **2012**, rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel, 100 x 90 x 2".

Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World), 1866, was staged to great effect in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2008 retrospective, where a protective wall, rather than secreting it away, none too subtly called attention to the infamous painting of a crotch splayed open. Mickalene Thomas's rejoinder—the crux of her first solo museum exhibition, "Origin of the Universe," which opened at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and is currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum—is rooted in this retrospective, and the physical fact of confronting the panel seems key to what she makes of it: three versions of the original (all works 2012), with herself and her partner alternately serving as the models for the cropped, attenuated figure disappearing under the folds of rumpled bed linens. As with her pastiches of Hockney and Braque, Manet and Matisse, Ingres and Romare Bearden, Thomas's straight-up evocations of Courbet are thick, tangible things that evidence the weight of her borrowings with bracing earnestness. But the Courbet images are more forthright

claiming her consequence, rather literally, in a long narrative of representational gambits. (In Santa Monica, lest the point be missed, Thomas propped a massive collage, *Landscape with Camouflage*, on an oversize easel.)

With *Origin of the Universe 1* anchoring the show, the selection of work on view, as stated in the press release, "examines art historical constructs of feminine identity, sexuality, beauty, and power." Perhaps it is no surprise that, given this orientation, Thomas takes on Duchamp, reprising his seminal *Étant donnés* as *Take All the Time You Need*. Following Duchamp's conceit of presenting a scene spied through a pair of bored holes, Thomas used SMMA's project space to fashion a room accessible through peepholes alone. During the opening, viewers would have glimpsed a woman lounging in the cloistered area; afterward, her scent lingered, while the place, pulsing with a 1970s funk sound track, was otherwise unoccupied. Through the crevice, a wood-paneled period piece came into focus, replete with allusive details: patchwork, multipatterned furniture straight out of the artist's childhood; framed geometric abstractions whose patterns complemented those in the fractured surface planes of Thomas's paintings; and books, including *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement*, which informed the depictions of depopulated interiors situated in the adjacent SMMA galleries. Through the knickknacks, too, one might have spotted a third version of the *Origin of the Universe* adorning the rear wall (the other two iterations were installed in the galleries proper).

Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keïta that have made Thomas's career—big, gorgeous rhinestone-encrusted portraits of accessorized and painted women (including her model-collaborators Din and Qusuquzah, both depicted here)—are well represented in this show, the strongest works are, perhaps, her paintings of empty rooms. Like *Take All the Time You Need*, they cannily imply corporeal presence without actually representing bodies and while refusing the encyclopedic purview implied by their source (the home-decor volume discreetly shelved in the antechamber). Particularly convincing is *Interior: Striped Foyer*, a madcap picture of a vestibule with a side table and shifting wall planes covered in wallpaper so finely striped as to produce an assailment comparable to the queasy afterimages of Op art. *Interior: Blue Couch with Green Owl* sports a foreground coffee table holding the titular bird figurine, a fruit bowl, and a pile of magazines—elaborate excuses for the production of a still life—while the whole scene allows for a magpielike overlay of a modernist aesthetic. Broadly characteristic of Thomas's embalming of precedent under layers of enamel, these works transcend their references to history and start making it.

—Suzanne Hudson

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MICKALENE THOMAS