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Rhinestone Odalisques



Mickalene Thomas's audacious, curvaceous beauties rock an African American esthetic in classic art-historical poses

BY BARBARA POLLACK

INSIDE Mickalene Thomas's studio, located just steps away from the Brooklyn Navy Yard, four young women are diligently applying rhinestones to Thomas's signature paintings. It's like a 21st-century quilting bee. Then, at around lunchtime, Thomas's girlfriend, artist Carmen McLeod, stops by, accompanied by the couple's longhaired dachshund, Priscilla.

It's been a busy time for Thomas, whose work has attracted a great deal of attention over the past 12 months as it filled the windows of the Museum of Modern Art, graced the lobby of PS1, appeared in the triennial of photography and video at the International Center of Photography, was installed at the Brooklyn Museum, and was shown at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York and at Susan Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

"I am interested in the sense of perseverance in women's lives, the feeling of winning in one's own life. That kind of strength in a woman is something I gravitate toward," says Thomas, 39, who could be describing herself. With her cropped hair and purple Polo shirt, embroidered with her initials, she seems as confident as the brazen, self-possessed women in her paintings. She has drawn inspiration from such artists as Eartha Kitt, Billie Holiday, and, most recently, the Brooklyn singer Sharon Jones, who influenced her new painting series "Put a Little Sugar in My Bowl." In one corner of her studio is a faux living room with a wood-paneled wall and a couch covered in gaudy fabric. This is where Thomas begins her process—photographing African American models decked out like heroines from 1970s flicks, like *Foxy Brown*.

As recent videos reveal, Thomas maintains as friendly and informal an atmosphere on the set as she does in her studio. She gently coaxes her subjects to beam with pride as they flaunt their curvaceous figures. These pictures, often projected onto large white panels, form the basis of her paintings, which suggest a cross between Romare Bearden and Henri Matisse, albeit with dazzling surfaces that almost border on bad taste. "Everyone had wood paneling in their house, regardless of race, and everyone loves rhinestones," Thomas says. "These elements are not necessarily about the black experience; it's about the idea of covering up, of dress up and make up—of amplifying how we see ourselves. It's beyond a black esthetic."

"I am so attracted to the way that Mickalene brings form and content together in a beautiful way," says Klaus Biesenbach, director of PS1, who chose her for the 2005



RIGHT *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007, portrays Thomas's lover at the time.

BELOW RIGHT Thomas adds glitter to the outdoors as well in *Landscape with Woman Washing Her Feet*, 2008.

OPPOSITE The artist reflects.



rendition of “Greater New York.” “She really has something to say, but she seduces you with the surfaces and the ways she composes the images,” he adds. This year Biesenbach commissioned Thomas to create a painting for the windows of The Modern, the Danny Meyer restaurant adjacent to MoMA, on West 53rd Street. He recalls that he and the artist came up with the idea for the work during MoMA’s 2009 Party in the Garden benefit. Pointing out that there is a history of feminist interventions in the garden, including Yoko Ono’s 1971 *Museum of Modern (F)* and Yayoi Kusama’s 1969 *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead Happening*, Biesenbach arranged for Thomas to use the garden as the backdrop for her image *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (2010)—a play on Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*, which shocked the French public in 1863 with its depiction of two gentlemen picnicking with a nude woman. Thomas’s painting features three black women staring brazenly out at pedestrians. “It has an alluring quality that provokes curiosity,” Biesenbach says. “It has become a photo-op with so many people stopping to be photographed in front of it.” He installed the original photograph that was the basis for the painting as a photo mural in the lobby of PS1.

For Thomas, this opportunity to insert herself into MoMA’s largely white-male canon is part of her intention. “I am always looking back at history and thinking about the images that have come before me and what they meant and how I can use them in my own way,” she asserts. “Plus, I studied; I went to art school. I entered in the canon once I decided to go to art school. I’m not just some artist working in a garage somewhere.”



ABOVE Thomas’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, 2010—a sparkling riff on Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*—hung in the windows of MoMA’s restaurant. **LEFT** In *Portrait of Michaela*, 2008, Thomas turns a white woman, Michaela Neumeister, into an African American sex symbol.



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)



Born in 1971 in Camden, New Jersey, to a single mother, Thomas was raised with her brother in an extended family. As she tells it, “Most of the men were in and out of jails, some of them on and off of drugs, and the women having kids at a very young age. . . . There was a really strong sense that the women in my family kept things together.” As a young teen, Thomas moved into her grandmother’s house while her mother pursued a career in modeling.

THOMAS had some exposure to art as a youth, attending after-school programs at the Newark Museum, but all the while she thought she would grow up to be a lawyer. At 18, realizing that she was gay and afraid to share the knowledge with her mother, she moved to Portland, Oregon, accompanied by her first girlfriend. She got a job in a law firm but then began waitressing in coffeehouses and hanging out with a circle of friends that included Patrick Abbey, an established artist who served as a mentor. Thomas attended an art-therapy workshop at the urging of a friend, and there she made her first drawings—oil-pastel pictures of her family and friends. Abbey, seeing the work, arranged for her to have a show at a local coffeehouse, where her drawings became an instant hit. In 1995, she attended a portfolio-review day, where art schools seek out new recruits.

Although Thomas was reluctant to apply, a friend gave her drawings to a representative of the San Francisco Art Insti-

tute. She was accepted, but decided not to attend. “I thought that if I was going to go to art school, maybe I ought to be closer to home,” she says. So she applied to and was accepted at Pratt, which she feels was the perfect place for her.

Self-conscious about her age—she was 24, an older student—and her poor grades in draftsmanship, Thomas immersed herself in abstract painting, inspired by Brice Marden and the Color Field painters. She was also influenced by Aboriginal painting, and spent a year, 1998, at Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia. In 1999, she discovered Chris Ofili’s paintings in the “Sensation” exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, where she worked as a student docent. Like Ofili, she was working with dot-encrusted surfaces, to which she sometimes added glitter. Based on these works she was admitted to the MFA program in painting at Yale University School of Art in 2000.

“Yale was a very intense school environment because they required an independence and an awareness about making art that I didn’t know existed or how to enter,” says Thomas. “It was the first time students and instructors questioned why I was making something, asking, ‘Why are you doing this; what does it mean?’” Thomas used the opportunity to test her first figurative works, photographs of her mother and self-portraits in which she posed as various characters. “I painted myself as Lil’ Kim, posing as the Mona Lisa,” says the artist, recalling her first attempts to merge pop culture and high art. “I really started to pull

from all these images of beauty and make them my own.”

Upon graduating from Yale, in 2002, Thomas moved to Brooklyn and began working low-level jobs, including housecleaning and selling jeans at G-Star—anything to keep her from being distracted from her painting. “I remember reading something by the artist Emma Amos, on her list of things to think about if you want to be an artist. It said, ‘Never get a job that is going to take you away from making art, and always have a job that you can walk away from.’ And that stuck to me.”

While juggling various such positions, Thomas entered a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she met museum director Thelma Golden. By then, she was well on her way to developing her signature style, featuring strong



African American women, especially her mother, in elaborately collaged and rhinestone-covered settings. “I have been thrilled to watch Mickalene’s development as an artist since her residency at the Studio Museum in 2002–3,” says Golden. “She simultaneously reinvents and pays tribute to centuries of artistic depictions of women as she draws on an astonishing and inspired range of esthetic, historical, and social references. Her work is viciously smart, audaciously sexy, and incredibly beautiful to look at.” Two years later, Thomas was featured in “Greater New York,” and in 2006 she had her first solo show, at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago. Today, at Lehmann Maupin, prices for her work range from \$8,000 to \$250,000.

Thomas has sometimes chosen as models people with

whom she has had a personal relationship. In graduate school she began photographing her mother, Sandra Bush, who also appears as the subject of many of her paintings, most recently *Mama Bush: One of a Kind Two* (2009), an homage of sorts to Ingres’s *Grand Odalisque*. Using her mother as a model, Thomas says, has enabled them to repair their relationship and grow closer. By contrast, Thomas featured her former girlfriend Maya in many paintings, and it hurt their relationship. “She really didn’t like the work until she saw herself at the Brooklyn Museum,” says the artist, whose painting of Maya, *A Little Taste Outside of Love* (2007), hung outside the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art this year.

IN 2008 Thomas created one of her first commissioned portraits. It was of Michaela Neumeister, a senior partner at Phillips de Pury & Company. She depicted the decidedly white Neumeister in an Afro, making her look like a light-skinned African American sex symbol. “I got this wig on, and then I got all these long fingernails and these artificial eyelashes, and everything was extremely uncomfortable. That was my first impression,” says Neumeister, who recently married auctioneer Simon du Pury. “But Mickalene was so nice, and she wants the shoot to be casual and natural, so the dressing up was the only thing for me that was a bit uncomfortable, but the rest was fantastic.”

“If you spend any time talking to Mickalene, you learn very quickly that she has a very strong interest in contemporary fashion. She dresses very adventurously herself and is someone who appreciates fashion design,” says curator Christopher Phillips, who put three of her large-scale photographs in the ICP triennial “Dress Codes,” in 2009. It was an exhibition of images by artists examining fashion—not fashion photography. Only recently has Thomas wanted to show her photographs as works in themselves rather than as mere reference tools for her paintings. With the photographs, which often take inspiration from classical paintings, she blatantly reverses the male gaze—the women models stare straight out at the viewers. “In her photographs, you get a strong sense of her own self-identity as a kind of sexual outlaw,” says Phillips, “but then, in a lot of her works, too, her mother is cropping up in very surprising situations. It provides a very coherent emotional grounding.”

Perhaps most surprising is the latest development in her work: the focus on landscapes. Thomas views it as a logical continuation of her interest in 19th-century Romantic painting as well as a reflection of how her life has changed to include considerable travel. “I love landscapes and, for me, they are an extension of the body, of nature and beauty,” she says. “There is the element about the landscape that allows me to go back to my earlier work, the abstractions.”

But more surprising is the fact that Thomas, who has accomplished so much in such a short time, still thinks of herself as an underdog. “I like when there is a struggle in my work, and I like being an underdog because it allows me to grow,” she says. Unlike the confident heroines in her paintings, she admits to a host of insecurities. “The world may see me differently, but I still feel like I am a graduate student, insecure about my work, and those kind of feelings allow me to keep pushing the boundaries.” ■

RIGHT *I'm Not the Woman You Think I Am*, 2010, highlights the eclecticism of Thomas's esthetic, which embraces fashion, funk, and art.

BELOW RIGHT *Tamika sur une chaise longue*, 2008, is one of Thomas's photographs of African American women decked out as heroines from 1970s flicks, like *Foxy Brown*. **OPPOSITE** *Mama Bush: (Your love keeps lifting me) higher and higher*, 2009, features Thomas's mother.

