

MICKALENE THOMAS WAITING ON A PRIME-TIME STAR

18 Jan — 9 Apr 2017



NEWCOMB

ART MUSEUM of Tulane

MICKALENE THOMAS

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Mickalene Thomas, *Did I Hear You Say You Love Me*, 2006, Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. Courtesy of the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS); (cover) *Racquel Standing Contrapposto* (detail), 2013, Color photograph and paper collage on archival board. Courtesy of the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS)

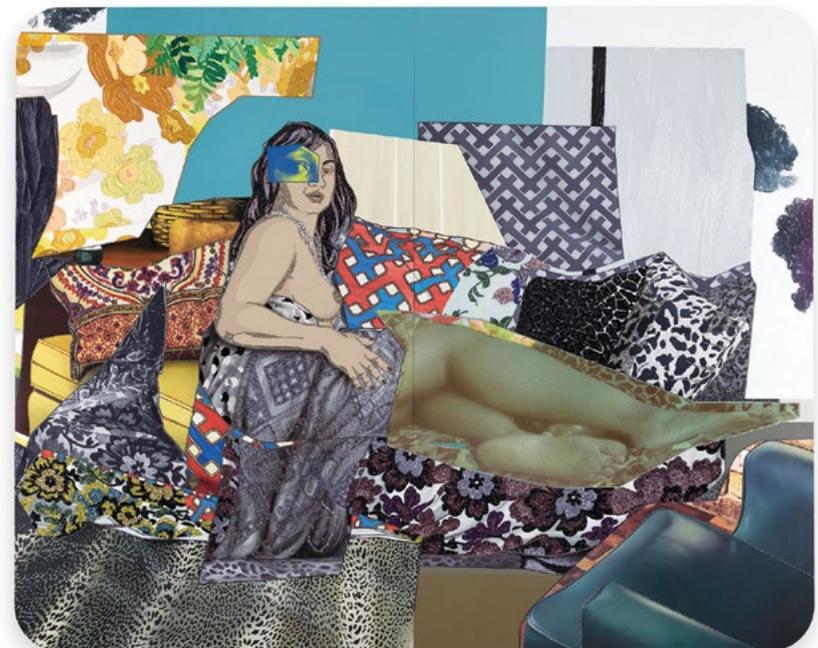
The artist's first solo exhibition in New Orleans, *Mickalene Thomas: Waiting on Prime-Time Star* brings together more than forty works including paintings, photographs, collages, sculptures, film, and a site-specific installation that broadly engage the subject of portraiture.

Mickalene Thomas (b.1971) is a USA Fellow and a distinguished visual artist, filmmaker, and curator who has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. She is known for elaborate, lush works that celebrate the power of female beauty toward claiming women's agency.

Thomas combines historical artworks and pop cultural representations that define and reference fashion and domestic spaces through a queer lens.

Waiting on Prime-Time Star also highlights Thomas' creative process of working across different media, including photography, collage, painting, film, and installation.

Utilizing such diverse strategies, she challenges portraiture's divide between representation and abstraction while also offering a vocabulary for re-defining notions of femininity.



Mickalene Thomas, *Shinique: Now I Know*, 2015, Rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels, and Artists Rights Society (ARS)

Mickalene Thomas: An Interview

Conducted by Dr. Mia Bagneris, Assistant Professor, History of Art, Tulane University, on September 9, 2016

MB: I would like to start off our conversation discussing your encounter with Carrie Mae Weems and *The Kitchen Table Series*¹ as it is often described as a transformative moment for you. In thinking about that I see a connection: your work, like hers, creates space for black women's agency and subjectivity that people are not used to encountering in a museum. I'm wondering if this was conscious goal for you at the outset, or if was it something that evolved organically.

MT: The effect that Carrie Mae Weems' work had on me was recognizing myself in those works: it was familiar and I saw myself.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with children)*, 1990, silver print ©Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

I became aware that identity and art could be incredibly powerful. I recognized sitting at that table with my mother—I recognized and related to the characters in the photograph—and only then I realized the emotional and physical experience stimulated by her work was more than agency, it was urgency.

In a conversation I had with Carrie Mae at the Brooklyn Museum,² we talked about the difference between reclaiming and claiming space, and I think this is important in understanding my work. The western art historical moments that I'm extracting as a source for my practice are not about reclaiming. It's about acknowledging that the space was always ours—about owning that space. When looking at history—art and cultural—we have to see ourselves in the story and rewrite the wrongs.

MB: It's interesting this was the moment when you said, "I want my work to do that." The work is about acknowledging a certain type of power that black women have—not giving them the power necessarily but constructing the conditions in which they can manifest or wield it. I see this in all aspects of your work, so my question is about those kinds of dynamics. Are you bringing out something that was already there, creating conditions in which their power can really be seen or are you just giving women the power they never necessarily had?

MT: The women I choose already exude that power; they have a magnetic, fierce energy



Mickalene Thomas, *I've Been Good To Me*, 2015, Silkscreen, mono-print, archival inkjet print, wood veneer, and silica flocking. Private Collection

and that is the attraction. The women I work with are powerhouses: their prowess is undeniable, and I only hope to bring forth their true selves. I want the world to see these various black women as strong, grounded, confident, and sexy. Their agency is urgent. I'm just the creative person who has the privilege to see their beauty and, in turn, project and execute it. The world needs to see and validate these images. It's imperative that young women see powerful images of themselves. It's crucial that as an artist I create works that reflect a part of myself out onto the world; positive visual messages are incredibly influential.

The power of the image is something that I learned over time once I started using other women, instead of myself, as a source for my images. Portraying the beauty of African American women or women of color who possess these energies that I desire, transforms into self-portraiture. They emerge as catalysts for my own voice; they assume form of my voice. I see many desirable aspects and qualities in other women—we are individually, extraordinarily phenomenal.

And I think that with great strength, you understand your own vulnerability if you're honest with yourself. And vulnerability is not about weakness; it's a softness, an awareness of yourself. I think you need to recognize your own vulnerability and power equally. And that's what makes the work strong.



Mickalene Thomas, *Don't Forget About Me (Keri)*, 2009, Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. Private Collection, Wilmette, IL

MB: You can't have power if you can't make yourself vulnerable, and be sort of comfortable in that. Comfortable with the uncomfortability of vulnerability.

MT: Exposing your vulnerability without being taken advantage of, right? Artists are constantly exposing themselves. Presenting my work leaves me in such a vulnerable place. To do the work that I do, I am asking of and looking to my sisters of the world. I didn't grow up with sisters; I had a lot of brothers, so in my work there is always a desire of wanting to have this connection, a sort of sisterhood. You create your own world by doing it.

MB: I'm wondering if this emphasis on creating space is perhaps because these spaces don't exist or are hard to find in the real world.

MT: This is interesting because just yesterday we visited Amistad Research Center here at Tulane,³ and we looked at documents and works pertaining to black art movements, and in them I found these spaces as well. These spaces have always existed as safe havens of expression and collaboration that can be cultivated and activated. My fabricated interior/domestic spaces function in a similar manner. Even though they are a tableaux, a faux constructed space, they are created out of a reality that has existed somewhere, at some period of time, in the memory of my or my family's life.

These interior spaces are also signifiers and stand-ins for portraits because we construct our spaces in various ways to express ourselves. It wasn't until I started building elaborate sets for my works and began

photographing the interiors without the figure, that the interior paintings really made sense. Whether a person is in that space or not, there are still elements of that person, like the books next to the bed—the ephemera. My sculpture also comes out of the installations and thinking about how objects can define a person once the presence of the physical self is gone. The sculptures explore and expand the idea that the objects we collect play a part in identifying ourselves.

MB: Are there things that you can't convey in one medium that you can in another, or is it more basic than that?

MT: I think my practice has evolved from one medium to the next by experimenting and that experimentation has taken me on a journey. The various genres I work within



Mickalene Thomas, *I Was Born to do Great Things*, 2014, multi-media installation. Courtesy of the artist, Kavi Gupta Gallery, and Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007, C-print. Courtesy of the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS)

developed out of a studio practice. Some of my works do not translate well across mediums. For example, take the photographs. I try to determine which images work better as photographs and which images transform more profoundly as collages and paintings. There are photographic works like *Lovely Six Foota* that are just so powerful they are best to remain as photographs. The image is doing everything that it needs to do as a photograph.

The spaces I build have also evolved over time, and everything in them has to function. It's important for these spaces to have objects that function in order for the space

to be transformative to a real space, beyond the artifice. I could photograph my sitters in a hotel room or in an apartment that's already set up, but I don't or haven't.

MB: You need to connect to the space through the construction.

MT: Yeah, I construct the space out of props I've collected over the years in a corner space in my studio. Most of the fabric on the furniture is designed and upholstered by me. Some of the props emulate aspects of the environments I grew up in. It's imperative I believe the reality of the space firsthand. I need to connect to the space through



Mickalene Thomas, *Portrait of Din #4*, 2015, Color photograph and paper collage on archival board. Courtesy of the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS)



Mickalene Thomas, *La leçon d'amour*, 2008, C-print. Collection of Deborah Mellen

the construction and immerse myself in it before I ask someone else to. I need to make sure the books on the table are real, that the photobook has real images in it. When someone plugs in the lamp, it needs to turn on. If they decide to get up and stand, then the prop to their left is just as important.

Think of it like a painting where everything is related. I need to know that I am providing a space where sitters and objects resonate to and with each other. Every element functions in and relates to the moment I'm trying to create. My goal is to allow the sitters the comfort to move about the space. Familiar t.v. shows like "Soul Train" are playing, and they

have a moment of recognition, of familiarity, a moment when something resonates: *Oh this reminds me of when I was at my aunt's house or my grandmother used to do this.* In some way, I hope to capture something real or performative. I guess I'm a storyteller, capturing moments as they occupy these spaces of beauty, power, and vulnerability.

MB: The idea you mentioned, *I'm a storyteller*, is interesting because perhaps these stories are also real. When a person is put into character, this situation may let them manifest a part of themselves that perhaps they cannot tap into without a sort of artificial construction.

MT: I agree. I believe we learn these habits from childhood, and as we age we develop into various characters based on our environments, circumstances, and situations. Most of our world is an artificial construct of our own reality. There are still those real moments of how I'm perceived and how people respond to me. I react based on the moment; I'm put into character. In the end, what is reality and whose is it?

MB: There's also the difference between performance and performativity, with performativity being the idea that you are acting out some cultural code, whether it be gender or whatever. In doing that, do you see yourself as playing up a distinction between an authentic self and a performed self, or do you see these as the same thing?

MT: That's a good question because someone like Eartha Kitt,⁴ or anyone who's been performing for many years, when do

they become themselves? Are they always performing? At a certain point of doing it for so many years, it becomes performativity—how do you turn on and off? I'm interested in those notions that are blurred by their own meaning.

MB: It's sort of like this concept that you cannot live outside of double consciousness.⁵ Do you think there is something particular about the way this comes about for black women, or women of color?

MT: I think people of color, in general, are put in the position of having to perform. We're masters at performing; we've been conditioned. We're one way with our families, and we've had to navigate this world by being twice as good! We wear masks, while passing and posing to our conditions that surround us. We are in the constant state of double consciousness.



Mickalene Thomas, *Sleep: Deux femmes noires*, 2013, Mixed media collage: woodblock, screenprint, and digital print on paper. Courtesy of the artist and Durham Press (printed and published by Durham Press)



Mickalene Thomas, *Sandra: She's a Beauty*, 2009, Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. Collection of Miyoung Lee and Neil Simpkins

But I think performance or performative may be the wrong words. It's how we've learned to survive. This is something that resonated with me when I began filming my mother—seeing how she responded to me as my mother and my muse.

MB: The difficulty of thinking about all identity as performance is that the tools you use to lie are the same tools you use to tell the truth. There is much gray area.

MT: It's about what you decide to believe. Who's telling the story more convincingly? Who can back up their truth of lies with assimilated facts? Who has more of a support system for it? But that doesn't mean that the support system is truthful.

MB: I also think that you're using beauty as a strategy. It's not just that your models are beautiful, although they certainly are, but there is a critique in your work. The paintings

are seductively beautiful, there's an aesthetic seductiveness: the color palette, the jewel-encrusted surfaces, the wide expanses of deep, brown skin. This is all very sensual, but I also think it is sort of a radical, unequivocal proclamation of the beauty of blackness.

This brings me to my last question about how you see your work fitting into the larger trajectory of African and African Diaspora art history and whether you see yourself as bound to that tradition by something more than melanin. I look at your work, and I'm conditioned by my training to see aspects of other artists—the flat planes of color of Jacob Lawrence or William H. Johnson, the organization of space of Romare Bearden, the composition and layering of patterns of African studio photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, the jewel embellishment of prayer flags from Haitian Vodou.

MT: Sure, for me, these notions have always been there. I'm just pulling from them and from other experiences, like my time in Australia and with Aboriginal art.⁶ There are some hyper-colors that women from Aboriginal Australia use in rituals that are really decorative and over the top, but they are not considered camp or kitsch, it's just the way it is. I'm very much interested in the high and low, and how those two come together, because that's an aspect of who I am, and of where I come from. I am interested in how these two worlds meet in the middle. ♦



Mickalene Thomas, *Untitled (Jacket)*, 2014, bronze. Courtesy the artist and Kavi Gupta Gallery, and Artists Rights Society (ARS)

¹ A collection of twenty black-and-white photographic vignettes staged by the artist in her own house, *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990) was a groundbreaking examination of domesticity, interpersonal relationships, and the portrayal of African-American women.

² *In Conversation*, Mickalene Thomas and Carrie Mae Weems, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, January 5, 2013.

³ Amistad Research Center is the nation's oldest, largest, and most comprehensive independent archive repository of original source material on racial and ethnic history, the civil rights movement, and race relations. Thomas visited during the exhibition *Black Arts Movement*.

⁴ Eartha Mae Kitt (1927–2008) was a celebrated actress, singer, dancer, and activist of Cherokee and African descent. She was perhaps best known for her 1967 role as Catwoman in the "Batman" television series.

⁵ African-American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois explored the notion of double consciousness—the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others"—in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

⁶ Thomas spent two semesters in Australia as an exchange student in 1998 and returned in 2008. When applying to Yale University's M.F.A. program, she submitted large dotted paintings reminiscent of some contemporary Aboriginal art.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mickalene Thomas is a 2015 United States Artists Francie Bishop Good & David Horvitz Fellow. She earned her MFA at the Yale University School of Art in 2002 and has been included in numerous important solo and group exhibitions worldwide.

Thomas has been honored by the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco (2015), MoMA PS1 (2015), and BOMB Magazine, and has received a United States Artists Fellowship (2015), MoCADA Artistic Advocacy Award (2015), AICA-USA Best Show in a Commercial Space Nationally (2014), Anonymous Was A Woman Grant (2012), Brooklyn Museum Asher B. Durand Award (2012), Timerhi Award for Leadership in the Arts (2012), Joan Mitchell Grant (2009), Pratt Institute Alumni Achievement Award (2009), and Rema Hort Mann Grant (2007).

Thomas' work is in the permanent collections of New York's The Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as the Detroit Institute of Arts, Hammer Museum, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Seattle Art Museum, and Smithsonian American Art Museum, among many others. Her work has been featured in various catalogues and reviewed by *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *NY Arts*, *Modern Painters*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.



Francois Meyer, *Mickalene Thomas*, 2013

ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University builds on the Newcomb College legacy of education, social enterprise, and artistic experience. Presenting inspiring exhibitions and programs that engage communities both on and off campus, the museum fosters the creative exchange of ideas and cross-disciplinary collaborations around innovative art and design. The museum preserves and advances scholarship on the Newcomb and Tulane art collections.

The academic institution for which the museum is named was founded in 1886 as the first degree-granting coordinate college for women in America. The H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College was distinguished for educating women in the sciences, physical education, and, most importantly, art education. Out of its famed arts program, the Newcomb Pottery was born. In operation from 1895 until 1940, the Newcomb enterprise produced metalwork, fiber arts, and the now internationally renowned Newcomb pottery.

In 1996, the Newcomb Art Department completed an expansion and renovation of its facilities that included the addition of the Newcomb Art Museum (previously the Newcomb Art Gallery), an exhibition space dedicated to presenting contemporary and historic exhibits. Housed in the Woldenberg Art Center, the museum today presents original exhibitions and programs that

explore socially engaged art, civic dialogue, and community transformation. The museum also pays tribute to its heritage through shows that recognize the contributions of women to the fields of art and design.

As an entity of an academic institution, the Newcomb Art Museum creates exhibitions that utilize the critical frameworks of diverse disciplines in conceptualizing and interpreting art and design. By presenting issues relevant to Tulane and the greater New Orleans region, the museum also serves as a gateway between on and off campus constituencies.

Funding comes in part through the generous support of Jennifer Wooster, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Newcomb College Institute of Tulane University.





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ART MUSEUM *of Tulane*

Tulane University
6823 St. Charles Avenue
New Orleans, LA 70118
NewcombArtMuseum.Tulane.edu
504.865.5328

Free and open to public, the museum is open
Tuesday through Friday, 10 to 5; Saturday and
Sunday 11 to 4; and by appointment.

