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1st Lady Portrait in D.C.

Kriston Capps

New York-based artist Mickalene Thomas is known best for her Blaxploitation-meets-art canon portraits of strong black women. Now the artist has an historical footnote outside of art history as well: Thomas painted the first individual portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama.

Titled Michelle O, the piece is on display in Washington for the first time as part of the "Americans Now" exhibit that opened at the National Portrait Gallery on Friday. The 2008 screenprint portrays Michelle Obama in Andy Warhol-esque Pop colors -- not unlike the famous reductive Pop portrait of her husband by Shepherd Fairey.

The piece is not Thomas's first foray into politics. She has referenced former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and media magnate Oprah Winfrey in rhinestone-applied silkscreens. In a sense, all her portraits are political, challenging conventional notions of sexuality as well as craft materials.

Michelle O is a subdued piece for Thomas, who pairs references to Ingres with the imagery of Foxy Brown. Her work can currently be seen at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and will appear in "Seeing Now: Photography Since 1960" at the Baltimore Museum of Art in February 2011.

The National Portrait Gallery exhibit, which is open through June 19 of next year, pairs notable subjects with leading portrait artists. The exhibit opened on Friday.