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A Confidence Highlighted in Rhinestones

By Carol Kino

A WEEK before the opening of her first New York solo show, the artist Mickalene Thomas welcomed a visitor to her studio in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn. The mood seemed preternaturally serene, like the lull before a storm. In one corner stood the campy rumpus-room-style stage set, outfitted with fake wood paneling and gaudily upholstered furniture, where Ms. Thomas poses her models. Next to it was the costume rack, hung with enough sparkly fabric and feathers to outfit a small army of drag queens. Near the window a lone assistant sat hunched over a painting, carefully gluing black, purple and blue rhinestones onto an Afro. More paintings lay on tables and hung on the walls.

Yet Ms. Thomas didn't seem especially interested in showing off her new paintings and photographs. Instead she wanted to talk about the volatile emotions that had possessed her while making the work.

Although she was "finally at the point where it feels O.K.," she said, there were times during the past few weeks when she would ask herself anxious questions: "Do I really want to take this challenge on? Am I ready for it?" A few minutes later she would put on music and find herself dancing wildly around the room, most recently to the indie rocker Feist. Then she would stop and admonish herself, "Mickey, get back to work."

This level of uncertainty isn't exactly what one would expect from Ms. Thomas, known for outrageously decorative paintings that depict black women in different guises: posed demurely in their Sunday best as if for church, sprawled naked like sirens or vamping in vixenish outfits that suggest the 1970s blaxploitation heroines Cleopatra Jones and Foxy Brown. The works themselves, made with acrylic and oil enamel on wood, are covered with intricate patterns and encrusted with rhinestones, suggesting sources as various as Byzantine mosaics, Gustav Klimt, the collagelike cubism of Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence and the sequined Haitian voodoo flags that obsessed Ms. Thomas during her years in the master of fine arts program at Yale.

"I've always been interested in masking, layering, dressing up and beautifying yourself and what that meant to black women," she said. "I've always wanted to make things that I haven't seen before."

Although Ms. Thomas considers herself primarily a painter, she has recently begun to exhibit the different mediums that go into making her paintings, including photography, collage, installation and, most recently, video. "I don't see myself as a photographer," she said, "I still see the photographs and collages as a resource for the painting. But now I think each element of this process can stand on its own."

The work in her current show, "She's Come Undone," running through May 2 at Lehmann Maupin in Chelsea, offers three of those elements. It features paintings and videos, along with a rotating selection of photographs hung in a back office. The

show focuses on three women, including the kittenish, outlandishly bosomed Keri, and Fran, a near-ringer for Mary Wilson of the Supremes.

But the most spectacular paintings depict the statuesque woman Ms. Thomas calls "my No. 1 muse" — her mother, Sandra Bush, a former fashion model who works in the special services school district of Bergen County, N.J.

In "Sandra: She's a Beauty" (2009) Ms. Bush sits on a couch, her hands folded in her lap and her knees primly locked together. In "Mama Bush: One of a Kind Two" (2009), she reclines naked, posed like the concubine in Ingres's "Grande Odalisque" (1814), the contours and folds of her flesh glistening with brown rhinestones.

Although Ms. Thomas and her older brother, Paul, were raised solely by her mother after her parents divorced nearly 35 years ago, she spent a few years estranged from her mother while figuring out how to tell her that she is a lesbian. "Using my mother as a model has allowed us time to establish this nice relationship, for me to get to know her," she said. "I feel it's a way of making her happy."

At first blush the women in these artworks seem the very picture of self-confidence. Yet something about them also suggests an amateurish vulnerability — especially in the videos, which show model and artist interacting during the photo shoot — as though their braggadocio had been hard won. That's the sort of ambiguity that interests Ms. Thomas, who has also painted well-known figures like Eartha Kitt, Oprah Winfrey and Condoleezza Rice. "I'm really interested in women," she said, "particularly the kind of black woman who has overcome obstacles in her life and transformed."

Initially, however, it's hard to see how these words apply to Ms. Thomas herself. Now 38, she seems to have been on a steadily upward career trajectory since she graduated from Yale in 2002. Soon after, she was chosen as an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem. By 2005 she already had an impressive history of important group shows and surveys, and in 2006 she had her solo debut, with Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago.

Her admirers have always seen her as fearless and original. "Mickalene is totally unafraid, and that is a quality I love in artists," said Klaus Biesenbach, chief curator of the media and performance arts department at the Museum of Modern Art, who chose Ms. Thomas for the 2005 survey "Greater New York." "When you do a show like that, you want to know if there's a certain promise. I felt that Mickalene's work was formally very accomplished, I felt it was very strong and political, and I also thought that it was very beautiful. When I first saw it, I said, 'This is really new.' "

In September Ms. Thomas's photographs will be showcased for the first time in another important New York survey, the International Center of Photography Triennial. Christopher Phillips, one of the curators, said her work departs entirely from what he called "the standardized brand" long identified with Yale, known for producing young female photographers whose staged tableaux explore adolescent female identity.

"The layers upon layers of textures, patterns, clothing and the stylistic references to different moments in African-American culture: all that coheres into something that is completely unlike any photographic works out there," he said. "I think there is an

audience waiting for an artist whose work evidences such boldness and visual confidence.”

Ms. Thomas also seems fearless in her exploration of sexuality and gender. While her work follows in the feminist tradition of subverting the male gaze and letting female subjects seize power, that they are practicing their allure on a female artist gives this dynamic an additional twist. And sometimes the femininity seems so extreme that one wonders if Ms. Thomas’s women are quite what they appear to be. “People always ask me, ‘Are you going to paint men?’ and I always say, ‘Well how do you know that I haven’t?’ ” she said. “I’m also playing with artifice, what’s real and not real, and how we perceive things.”

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of her story is that she too was once a girly fashion plate. “That’s why I have an understanding of these women,” she said. “Because I was one of them myself.”

In her 20s, back when she was mannequin-svelte and sported waist-length dreadlocks, Ms. Thomas left New Jersey to follow a girlfriend to Portland, Ore., where she supported herself for many years by doing odd jobs, one of which was fashion modeling. “My mother taught me how to walk the runway,” she said. For a while she also did some acting. The high point of her career came when she was a featured extra in the 1993 B movie “The Temp.”

Then, in 1994, she saw a traveling show by the artist Carrie Mae Weems at Portland State University. “That was the first work I’d seen by an African-American woman,” Ms. Thomas said. She was particularly struck by Ms. Weems’s 1990 “Kitchen Table Series,” a multimedia piece that uses photographs of people seated around a table to explore the complexities of marriage and family relationships.

“It really reminded me of my family,” she said. “It was a profound and transforming moment in my life.” She visited the show 10 times and developed an obsessive interest in art.

Some months later her best friend urged her to sign up for an art therapy workshop. “It was all white middle-aged women,” she said. “I was the only African-American in the group.” After spending the weekend talking, writing, painting and crying, she made a series of pastel drawings, which eventually led to the rapprochement with her mother and won her a scholarship to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where she started out making aborigine-inspired abstractions, glitter and other decorative elements infiltrated her work from the start.

“I purchased my art supplies from craft stores,” she said. “The materials were cheaper, and they also allowed me to experiment and play.” By the time she arrived at Yale, she had moved on to representational painting and sequins. Gradually she settled on rhinestones, and images of women began creeping into her work.

Initially Ms. Thomas used herself and her mother as models. But while in school she began to cut her dreadlocks shorter, and in 2004 she took herself entirely out of the work. “It was really difficult,” she said. “It was starting to become about narcissism, which I didn’t really want my work to be about.” With critical distance her work became more hyper-feminine and decorative, and she began to adopt a more androgynous look.

"Once I removed myself, I think the work got better," she said. "All of my experiences modeling, acting, doing theater, it's all in the work now. And the work freed me to transform myself."