

Whitewall

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Mickalene Thomas: Lush Life

By Simon Watson

Mickalene Thomas's lush and complex portraits of African-American women are derived from contemporary culture and personal memories of the women in her family. Glamorous, aggressively sexual, and flashing with glittering Swarovski rhinestones, Thomas's paintings celebrate female beauty and power. Her scantily clad black heroines are quasi-self-portraits inspired by pop culture (1960s girl wrestlers, 1970s blaxploitation movies featuring Pam Grier, disco-era album covers, and Jet magazine "Beauties of the Week") and framed by high-culture references to nudes by Matisse, Picabia, and Balthus.

Early on in her career, before Yale graduate school and an artist residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem, Thomas was using art as a personal means of recovery, of art therapy, a process of coming to an understanding of herself and her complicated dynamic with her mother.

She would take photographs of herself posing as pop icons, as black celebrities. And she convinced her mother to become her first model, producing erotically charged images that became the basis for her early paintings. In fact, much of her process comes from performance, and photographing performances that she stages. For Thomas, photography is a resource, a form of drawing. Usually depicted as servants or docile bystanders in Western art, African-American women are the central focus in Thomas's paintings - resplendent in rich patterns and colors and bejeweled with rhinestones, secure in their self-possession and dignity. In installations filled with fabric throws, pillows, vintage clothing, and afro wigs, Thomas photographs intimate vignettes populated by herself and models. Reconfigured on panels and heavily accented with rhinestones, these images of empowered women successfully negotiate the tension between personal investigations of eroticism and self-identity.

Hers is a fiery eroticism, central both to her work and her being. As she said in an interview with Paul Laster for The Studio Museum in Harlem: "Sexuality is everything. It's a form of expression that allows me to be completely in control of my environment and social encounters. I don't mean that as a sleazy thing. I believe that when women are in touch with their sexual selves we are at our most powerful, which has nothing to do with lack of intelligence. Having a strong awareness of your sexual self provides a certain sense of confidence and assertiveness. This is why I like icons from the 70's. The women at that time were full of sexual energy and strength. Pam Grier was sexy and kicked ass without smearing her lipstick."

Mickalene Thomas earned her MFA from Yale University and after graduating in 2002 participated in the Artist-in-Residence program at The Studio Museum in Harlem. Her work has been included in many prominent group exhibitions, including "Hands on. Hands Down" and "Frequency" at the Studio Museum and "Greater New York 2005" at P.S.1/MoMA. She has had solo shows at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; a project installation at Susanne Vielmetler, Los Angeles; a two-person show at Caren Golden Fine Art, New York, and a solo exhibition at the Indianapolis Museum of Contemporary Art opening in November 2007.