

Modern Painters December 2007 - January 2008

Mickalene Thomas Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects

By Stacey Allan

Brooklyn-based Yale grad Mickalene Thomas's first solo exhibition in LA was a two-room painting installation of heavily lacquered, Swarovski-encrusted panels that visually conjoined the stylized portraiture of Seydou Keita, the talismanic gestures of Chris Ofili, and the pulp homoeroticism of the late-'60s pinup genre of "apartment wrestling." Instead of cheesecake blondes, though, Thomas offered lean black women grappling in cropped dos and animal-print catsuits, continuing her nostalgia-infused investigation of representations of black female sexuality. Fully clothed to the ankles and wrists (with only one woman's face ever visible), the wrestlers torque into disembodied graphic patterns, their relationship unclear: is it competitive, antagonistic, erotic? The ambiguous scene unfolded across two large paintings with the rounded corners of old snapshots, installed in a small gallery-cum-1970s rec room, retrofitted with laminate wood paneling and aquamarine paint. An adjacent gallery contained a series of small portraits hung on traditional white walls, in which the acrobatic visage of one wrestler twists through a catalogue of emotions: fierceness, tenderness, amusement, rage, love, pain, erotic pleasure, vulnerability. The press release referenced "the uncomplicated self-assuredness of a bygone era," but the blaxploitation-style foxiness depicted by Thomas is, to its great credit, fraught with complexity. Bearing titles like I Still Love You (You Still Love Me) and It Hurts So Good!, the paintings hint at a subtext of dependency and need; instead of a glittering, media-friendly spectacle of strength and sassiness, Thomas's images of black femininity are full of love, because they allow for vulnerability and offer no resolution.