

NY Arts Fall 2009

Bedazzled

Mickalene Thomas interviewed by Leah Oates

Leah Oates: Every artist has a different path to becoming an artist. What was your path?

Mickalene Thomas: When I was in middle school I attended an after-school program at the Newark Museum in New Jersey. But during high school my interests naturally shifted and I became seriously into cross-country and track and field. It wasn't until my mid-twenties, while living in Portland, Oregon, that I began to develop the desire to make art. I was a product of my environment, heavily influenced and inspired by my friends—mostly artists and musicians—like Patrick Abbey, a painter; Thomas Lauderdale, a musician and lead of Pink Martini; and Chris Stark, a photographer. In 1994, the Portland State University hosted a solo exhibition of Carrie Mae Weems's work and I was blown away. It was the first work I had seen by an African-American woman artist and I visited the show again at least ten times. Although so much talent surrounded me, I didn't truly pursue art until after I spent a weekend at an art therapy retreat. Shortly thereafter, I made several works on paper and later applied to Pratt Institute and San Francisco Art Institute with the encouragement of my friend, Chris. I ended up attending Pratt for my undergraduate studies and later went to Yale for my MFA.

LO: How do you conceptualize your images and what is your working process?

MT: Believe it or not, some of my best ideas come to me in my dreams. It's wild, in my dreams the concepts are so tangible that when I wake up I have to make it real. Other times, my work comes from the desire to dissect and understand my own journey. Sometimes it's as simple as holding the mirror up to my face and looking deep into myself every day. There's what you see in the mirror and what you project when you're out in the world. I'm trying to connect the two in my work.

When I decide on an idea or new body of work, I begin to research ways of executing my idea literally and theoretically. A lot of what I do formally in my work is driven by the idea of artifice, of what's real and not real, and how we perceive the difference. Once it's narrowed down to a particular time or space, I build up the installation in my studio and then I open it up to auditioning women. Thus, the work begins. From the session with the models, I choose several photographs to recompose as collages, from which I base my paintings.

LO: Your paintings are of black women from popular media or of models that you photograph in your studio. Your work explores ideas of gender, sexuality, power, and femininity. Please explain in more detail the themes in your work and how you choose a model for your paintings.

MT: Over the years, I have painted and photographed a lot of different kinds of

women—from my mother, to women auditioned from Craigslist, to lovers, to transsexual women, to celebrities from Oprah to Condoleezza. But what they have all had in common is a sort of prowess, an incredible degree of self-awareness and self-possession that never ceases to fascinate me. Sometimes this manifests as a very sexy painting or photograph, but I am always taking my cues from the models and from the conventions of art historical figurative painting. My work is rooted in the tradition of portrait painting. This is essential to me because I want to insert these women into the history of art and to thereby shift the existing canon that has historically under- or misrepresented black women.

LO: What is the difference being at the level that you are at professionally now as oppose to when you were emerging in the NY art scene?

MT: When you're starting out, the most important thing is the conversation and relationships you have with your friends that are also making art. Then, as your career grows, some of those friends grow as well and the conversation deepens, while also broadening to include all of the new people you're continually exposed to. Ultimately, the NY art scene is all about relationships, no matter what stage your career is at, and growing, your career is all about maintaining those relationships. So the difference between now and when I was first starting out is that the dynamics of my relationships have shifted somewhat to include people beyond just my friends.

LO: Why does your work have pattern and beading, and is this a reference to feminist art? Please explain how this came to be part of your work and why.

MT: Inasmuch that feminist art has been responsible for really asserting non-traditional materials into the fine art canon, my work reflects this shift. Additionally, the focus on a woman's own voice and gaze, as opposed to the more art historical objectification of women, that the feminist artists initiated, deeply influenced my education and thus my own practice. The power of my work is all from the voice and personalities of the women I work with. It's not something that I project onto them, it's something that we create together. My work engages in the ongoing academic and theoretical conversation that the feminist artists of the 1960s and 70s initiated.

However, the pattern in my work actually has much more to do with the use of pattern in West African photography, especially Malick Sidibé, from the 1970s through the present and from the interior decoration trends of my own upbringing in South Jersey in the 1970s and 80s. The beading, actually rhinestones, first entered my work through my fascination with Haitian voodoo flags while I was studying at Yale. The rhinestones represent the urge to adorn ourselves, to present an alluring exterior to the world. Similarly, the patterns serve to project a set of cultural references that are calculated to give a sort of aura of sophistication and worldliness to the individuals enmeshed within them. Both of these motifs represent the idea of artifice and are juxtaposed with the more interior reality of the model's gaze and presence.

LO: What advice would you give other artists in NYC who are still "emerging" to get their work to a similar level?

MT: First of all, I'm flattered that anyone would think that I'm on a level to give such

advice. The most important advice I can give to another artist is to make the work. You must have the work speak for itself. Build a strong studio practice, despite your obstacles. There are always obstacles in one's life; what's important is that you prioritize your studio practice. And don't rush to have a solo show. It's important to be honest with yourself. If you aren't ready and your art is not ready, then don't show. Make sure both you and your art are on the same level.

LO: What will you be working on in the next year and what projects or shows do you have coming up?

MT: I have two catalogs coming out this year, one with Rhona Hoffman Gallery in late June and one with La Conservera in Murcia, Spain in September. I'm working on a new series of paintings and sculptures for my solo show in LA at Susanne Vielmetter Projects. In September, I have a solo exhibition at the La Conservera and will also be included in a group show curated by Isolde Brielmeier in Paris, France. My photographs will be featured in this year's ICP Triennial and I'm very excited to be included in the Akron Museum's upcoming traveling exhibition, *Pattern /D*, curated by Ellen Rudolph opening January 2010.