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#### A Window on Art

Paul Laster

At a lively party at the Modern restaurant earlier this spring, artist Mickalene Thomas looked in surprise at the artwork -her own installed in the window and declared what was happening a phenomenon. The fact that a flashy painting of three black women, who look like they just stepped out of a 1970s blaxploitation film, could be hanging in the West 53rd Street window of the Museum of Modern Art's eatery astonished the artist. "If I had been a young woman visiting New York 20 years ago and had seen an artwork like that, who knows what would have inspired my world as an artist," she said. Surrounded by well wishers like Senator Frank Lautenberg, museum directors Thelma Golden and Arnold Lehman and artists Glenn Ligon and Wangechi Mutu, she said, "It symbolizes a change, acceptance and new beginnings. "

Ms. Thomas' huge, sparkling, 10-by-24-foot painting came about last summer as a coordinated project of the museum and its restaurant. It was at the request of MoMA curator Klaus Biesenbach, in part because of the sheer sex appeal of Ms. Thomas' paintings. "Her treatment of surfaces as complex layers of material, lacquer, rhinestone and paint corresponds with the libidinous nature of the content she depicts," he said. The director of P.S. 1, where a related Thomas work now hangs in the lobby, said he discovered her work while doing research for the 2005 Greater New York exhibition and has continued to follow her development since. Last summer, he asked her to undertake the wall-eating canvas for the window of the museum's restaurant, adjacent to its front door. "Klaus wanted me to do something that I hadn't previously done. He challenged me," said Ms. Thomas.

Known for her rich, detailed, emblematic portraits of bold black women that reference pop culture and art history, Ms. Thomas has been on something of a meteoric ride ever since snagging an M.F.A. in painting from Yale in 2002. An artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2003 and featured in P.S.1's Greater New York survey show of new talent in 2005, Ms. Thomas has since gained gallery representation in New York, with Lehmann Maupin; in Chicago; and in Los Angeles, and landed her works in major museum collections across the country, such as the Whitney's and the Guggenheim's.

Take the Brooklyn Museum's Thomas painting, for example, dubbed *A Little Taste Outside of Love*. They've had the massive 2007 portrait of a reclining female nude (reminiscent of Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*) hanging for more than a year; it's strikingly painted with muted acrylics and shiny enamels and encrusted with glittering rhinestones. "It's one of the star attractions of the museum's contemporary galleries," said Brooklyn Museum curator of contemporary art Eugenie Tsai. "It's not just the work's 'bling' factor-almost off the meter-that makes visitor's whip out their iPhones and snap away," she said, "but also the witty and original restaging of a familiar painting."

Ms. Thomas' most public showcase, however, came when the Modern, Danny Meyer's upscale restaurant at MoMA, installed her largest painting to date, *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, in the window, where it's on view 24/7 through December 2010. It depicts three women of color in a garden setting and riffs on Manet's iconic canvas *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, which translates to "Luncheon on the Grass." That painting was deemed shocking when it was first exhibited at Salon des Refuses in Paris in 1863. "Manet's painting generated tremendous controversy at the time, because of the

two men and an undressed woman in casual conversation," said Ms. Thomas. "I wanted to insert three black women and switch the gaze of the original."

The artist did the work in stages, first as a photograph, then as a collage (which is the work on display at P.S.1), and then as a painting. Staging the photograph was a considerable undertaking. The shoot was done in the museum's sculpture garden last summer. Model Qusuquzah Muhammad described it as "going late into the night, while we waited for clearance, and exhausting, because of the long poses in low light."

When it was done, Mr. Biesenbach opted to exhibit the earlier collage version of the piece as a mural in the lobby of P.S.1. "We felt that 10 years after the MoMA and P.S.1 merger," Mr. Biesenbach said, "having an artwork that connects both the entrance of P.S.1 and the window at the Modern would be an appropriate image to reconnect, remember and re-imagine the journey it takes from one place to the other."