

## Artforum December 2011

### Mickalene Thomas

By David Frankel

"We respond to beauty, its seduction and attraction, yet what that has done culturally to people that are subject to universal codes of beauty has been devastating." So said Mickalene Thomas earlier this year, interviewed by the artist Sean Landers for *Bomb* magazine. She was talking about "codes of beauty" as they apply to people—to whether or not people are found beautiful, in their bodies, in their styles—but her remark seemed all so to touch on a divide in American thinking about art, one that has played out quite virulently over the past thirty years. Should art be beautiful? Is its value formal and is it a world unto itself? Or is it a vehicle of identity, asking us to focus more on the people using its codes, or who are subject to its codes, than on the codes themselves? That's simply put, of course, and the division is never that clean or complete, though from reading critical writing in the press, you'd sometimes think it was. In any case, it's probably inevitable that Thomas's work would be considered in terms of identity politics, since it deals intensively with black women, their representation, and their self-assertion. Yet Thomas is an artist deeply attentive to codes of beauty embodied quite specifically in the history of painting, and it seems entirely typical of her to be thinking, in that conversation with Landers, simultaneously about formal systems and the people they affect.

Thomas's best-known paintings are both grand in scale and, how shall I say, gaudy, being often literally studded with rhinestones. In this show she exhibited mainly smaller pieces—many of them photo graphic and mixed-media collages looking compositionally like mini-me versions of the paintings—which she hung salon style in clusters, creating the effect of large works constituted of many intricate parts. While the paintings seem to ask for a certain distance, these arrangements pulled the viewer in close, since the individual pieces were too small to be wholly seen from any remove. The device made literal a push-pull effect, as much erotic as visual, in Thomas's full-size works, whose female figures often have the seduction and attraction she recognizes in beauty but who are also physically imposing and demand space. They are additionally complex in reflecting Thomas's sensitivity to a continuing visual argument over the representation of the black body here objectified, there its power accentuated—that you can see played out in both popular culture and the work of contemporary artists such as Carrie Mae Weems and Wangechi Mutu.

The salon hang, whose gregariousness Thomas compounded by setting the works in a multitude of different frames, served another purpose, moving the show away from the modernist white-box vocabulary and toward a more polyglot speech. And this is, in fact, Thomas's tongue, seen nowhere more clearly than in the wildly clashing juxtapositions of patterns that pervade her scenes, whether through fabrics on couches, cushions, and clothes in her studio photographs or through the cutout colored and printed papers and other materials that make up the landscape of the collages. One touchstone here is surely the Cubist papier collé, another the related art of Romare Bearden. But other thoughts crowd in as I look at these works: about

the decorative, famously prohibited in classic modernism but here explicitly embraced; about Matisse, whose gorgeous use of printed cloth Thomas both adapts and wildly heightens, even though his insistent use of fabrics as studio props was partly responsible for what Robert Hughes has called the "image of Matisse as a decorative, hence feminine, hence inferior painter"; about high art and low, and about sanctioned and unsanctioned means of picture making; and then-Thomas being interested not only in the visual codes of pictures but in the people those pictures touch by powerfully influencing the way they are seen-about popular taste in decor and fashion. What assumptions do our tastes, our styles, our appearances, lead others to make about us? The question leads inevitably out into the world, to issues of class, race, and gender that, however, are embedded in work that treats art history with delight.