

Artinfo

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25 Questions for Artist Mickalene Thomas

By Artinfo

Name: Mickalene Thomas
Age: Age? That's just a number!
Occupation: Artist
City/Neighborhood: Fort Greene, Brooklyn
What project are you working on now?

Three solo exhibitions planned for 2012: Santa Monica Museum of Art in April, Brooklyn Museum of Art in September, and Lehmann Maupin's Chrystie Street location in October.

In your new show you're exhibiting your collages, which you began creating as preparatory studies for your paintings, for the first time. What made you decide to display them?

From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to present a large number of collages in a salon-style hanging. Lehmann Maupin's space at 201 Chrystie is so large and almost cavernous, and my interest was in how I could work both with and against the space, how to take advantage of those incredibly high walls and open space while simultaneously creating an intimate, personal feeling with the show. I decided to focus on my collages for this exhibition because I want people to know that I'm not just making rhinestone-covered paintings. There is another side to my work that doesn't get as much attention but is equally important and much more accessible than the large paintings.

Your show's display is modeled after the artistic salons of the early 19th century. Do you find yourself ever attending salons like that today? If so, where? (And how does one get an invitation?)

I wish! The closest to a salon that I get to participate in are the intimate dinners with other artists and writers that my wife and I host in our home. It's different than the traditional salons you're asking about — maybe we could get something like that together...

Your portrait of Michelle Obama was the first solo portrait ever done of the first lady. What was that process like?

Amazing. I decided to do the portrait before Obama had won the election because I could see that Michelle was already becoming a major icon of both style and power. I wanted to highlight and pay homage to that fact by creating a portrait of Michelle

Obama based on the iconic portraits that Andy Warhol created of Jackie Kennedy Onassis.

This year, you were the artist in residence at the Versailles Foundation Munn Artists Program in Giverny, France — Monet's old stomping grounds. Any plans to channel Monet in your work anytime soon?

He already worked his way into some of the collages included in "More Than Everything"! I had the opportunity to photograph Monet's home and, of course, gardens, and it was so exciting for me to contend with such picturesque images, finding a way to make them my own.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

Mostly my travels — most recently, South Africa, Japan, France, Spain, Costa Rica, and Upstate New York!

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

My chopsticks. I use them to apply the rhinestones to my paintings.

What's the last show that you saw?

Carmen McLeod at CRG Gallery

What's the last show that surprised you? Why?

The Manet show at Musee d'Orsay in Paris. It was surprising to me how small these incredibly iconic paintings are in real life. I know it's silly but they just seem so much larger in my imagination. That said, as soon as I left, they resumed their monumental sizes in my mind!

What's your favorite place to see art?

This seems a good place to give a shout-out to the Brooklyn Museum of Art; I can't think of another mainstream museum that shows more women or people of color. It's rare to find the usual or expected.

Do you collect anything?

Art. Mostly emerging artists but I also have works by Arlene Shechet, Henry Taylor, Malick Sidebe, Shinique Smith, Wangechi Mutu, Lisa Yuskavage, Barkley Hendricks, and my wife gave me a Matisse print for my 40th birthday.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

I just bought a small sculpture that I'm very excited about from Norm Paris's show, "The Wall Still Stands," at the Proposition Gallery.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

The first painting I remember selling was "Panthera." I made it while I was in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the museum actually purchased it directly from me.

Do you make a living off your art?

Yes.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

Well... it's not exactly something weird but I do have a great memory from Marina Abramovic's opening last year at MoMA. It was a really packed opening and I was waiting in line to move through one of her performance pieces — the one where you step through a doorway between a nude man and nude woman — when the line suddenly stopped moving. Being nosy, I went to the front of the line to check it out and found Chuck Close moving very slowly through the passage, clearly enjoying himself, while Jerry Saltz snapped pictures from the other side! The memory of this scene still brings a smile to my face!

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Triple-kissing. It's just confusing.

What's your favorite post-gallery watering hole or restaurant?

Mostly, I head back to Brooklyn and straight to one of my three favorite restaurants: Diner, Marlow & Sons, or Roman's.

Do you have a gallery/museum-going routine?

No, I just try to go as often as I can and to not completely miss any of the shows that I really want to see.

What's the last great book you read?

I'm in the middle of Haruki Murakami's "Dance Dance Dance" right now and loving it.

What work of art do you wish you owned?

I would love to own an Alice Neel portrait.

What would you do to get it?

Wait until the time is right and an opportunity comes my way!

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

There are so many places I want to go. Top of the list right now: Marfa, Venice, and Berlin.

What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

Dani Leventhal is a great artist living and working in Brooklyn. She was included in PS1's "Greater New York" show in 2010 and I'm just waiting for everyone to catch on to her.

Who's your favorite living artist?

That's impossible for me to answer — all I can say is that I'm obsessed with David Hockney right now.

What are your hobbies?

Whenever I have the time for it, I like to garden (mostly just weeding), I love cooking, and I just got a new Vespa that I've been cruising around Brooklyn every chance I get. I also have ambitions to start practicing Tai Chi!