

Arude

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Mickalene Thomas: The Grand Project

By Cheryl Riley

What is the first work of art you recall seeing? Which work of art or artist has had the most impact or inspiration on you and your art? Your take on Manet for the MOMA piece, "Le Dejeuner Sur l'herbe: Les Trios Femmes Noires", that was in the window of The Modern in 2010 reprises the odalisque seen in Western art for centuries. What is the significance of those images for your art that features only ethnicity?

In 1994, I was living in Portland, OR and I saw a traveling show by Carrie Mae Weems at the Portland Art Museum. That was the first contemporary work I'd seen by an African-American woman. I was particularly inspired by Ms. Weem's 1990 "Kitchen Table Series", a multimedia piece that uses photographs of people seated around the table to explore the complexities of gender, marriage and family relationships.

However, a whole range of artists who span the history of the artistic cannon also inspires me. I believe that history is important whether it is art history, political history, or cultural history- it allows you to gain an understanding of the language that has developed and where you might contribute to the discussion or dispute what has come before. Of course, I could choose to enter into the discussion at any historical point but art from the late 19th and early 20th century is of particular interest to me both because I see it as the root of the formal discussions still happening in art today and also because it really marks the time when female models started to assert their own identity and presence through the gaze. Around this time, at least in the contemporary discourse, the sitters for the classic genre nude cease to be anonymous props and begin to insist on their individuality with their gaze. Because I began my work as a way of representing figures largely absent in the canon, African American women, I feel a kinship and imperative to interact with these pivotal figurative painters. As my work has developed, I return to the past as a way of determining what is missing, what I can add, to the conversations in painting I find most interesting.

Talk to me about your models and how it evolved that your mother is a major presence in your work. What are you looking for in a model?

Most of the women I work with are friends and family members. My mother has been one of the main subjects of my work since 2001. I started working with her as my model for a photography class I was taking at Yale. Over the past few years, I have started to include women I have met through friends as well as casting women from agencies or Craigslist. Some women I have worked with for many years while others I have only worked with once or twice. One of the things I look for in a woman is a unique and sometimes unexpected interpretation of what it means to be a woman. I enjoy watching powerful women walk into a room and own it! It's a privilege and honor for me to photograph powerful women that possess their own

particular strength and charisma.

The primary difference working with my mother as opposed to other women comes when I am looking for a model to work with in the nude. Because there is such an inherent level of respect and non-sexual love in the daughter-mother relationship, I feel that working with my mother frees me from certain worries concerning exploitation and intimacy. Similarly, in the past I have worked with lovers and felt that doing so gave the work a more sensual and romantic resonance. There is also a level of comfort and lack of self-consciousness that my mother is able to achieve with me that I think comes a little bit harder for other models. Because of this, the photographs of my mother are often some of the most psychologically revealing and complex of my work.

In some of your paintings you are your own model. How is this point of view and subject a different statement than when you use models? Does it comment in anyway on the age-old artist practice of self-portraiture?

The original reason that I used myself as a subject in my work had to do with ideas of self-portraiture, artifice, and identity constructs. At the time, I was interested in exploring these ideas using my own body and also working with my mother. As my work shifted and became more about other women and broader ideas of portraiture, I continued to use myself only when necessary- I will always be the closest model that I have access to! At this point, I'm mostly uninterested in having myself continue as a subject in my work. I think that when an artist's work becomes very involved with the artist's body, issues of narcissism and self-reflection begin to be fore grounded and those are not necessarily ideas that I'm interested in exploring at the moment.

Do you have a muse or muses?

There are several women that I have worked with for many years: Din, Qusuqusah, and, of course, my mother, Sandra. I think of them as my muses in as much as the artist-muse relationship is a type of collaboration. This collaboration really happens during my photo shoots when I'm working with these women and trying to capture their own sense of sensuality or power.

For decades now, painting has been declared dead. Yet contemporary artists are still painting. Do you consider yourself a painter (even though you use photography and there are collage elements to your work) and why do you feel painting is still a medium of expression for you and (if you can speak for them) artists in general?

I definitely consider myself a painter. Even when I'm working in other mediums like photography or video, my thought-process is very painterly. I am always thinking about color and composition in relation to the history of painting and the larger art historical cannon. I have never doubted the relevance of painting in the contemporary art world. For as long as people are able to express themselves in their own way and communicate their particular vision through the medium of painting, there will always be a place for painting in our world. The possibilities of painting are endless and to say that they have been exhausted is like saying that

music or literature have been exhausted. That's a very narrow argument that I'm simply not very interested in.

Your use of Swarovski crystals has coincided with the explosion of that material in art, fashion, design, architecture. When I met you in 2003 during your Artist in Residence at Studio Museum in Harlem you were a newly minted Yale MFA graduate and were already into the crystals. How and why did you choose them as a major component for your paintings? What do they signify for you?

Aboriginal and Impressionist Art heavily influenced my early paintings and drawings that I made during undergrad. I was obsessed with pointillism and started making aerial views of landscapes with a Seurat technique. Since undergrad I always used untraditional materials in my work, from found objects to glitter. Once I started graduate school I continued to use glitter but wanted to work with a material that more closely represented pointillism.

So I started to experiment with rhinestones to make images. During the past few years the rhinestone's meaning has shifted. In the beginning they were just materials but over time they became more seductive. I started to relate them to ideals of beauty and how we present ourselves in the world; what it means to cover up or enhance our beauty to be noticed. The symbolic use of the rhinestones deals with notions of beauty and artifice. I'm interested in how we are in a constant state of transformation with our physical selves. I'm always inspired and challenged by the perception of what is real and not real.

Talk to us about the re-occurring fabrics that appear in the sets you create for your models. Do they have a personal resonance or are they a reference to a specific time in history/style/aesthetics?

The fabrics that I use for my installations come from a lot of different sources, both literally and conceptually. I still have some of the fabrics from my very earliest photographs that I selected mostly with the intention of reconstructing elements of my childhood and the aesthetic of the 1970's. Over time, I have collected fabric from many different sources and have been inspired in my selection by formal concerns, work from other artists that I admire like Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, and an interest in recurring visual themes in my own work. I am very interested in creating spaces that use pattern to give a feeling of a patched-together living room aesthetic while simultaneously using pattern to complicate and break-up the picture plane.

How old were you when you realized you were an artist? How did it manifest itself and how did your family/teachers or friends respond?

I came to art relatively late. I was living in Portland in the early 1990's, working as a paralegal and studying law. However, most of my friends were artists and musicians that were doing interesting things around the country in pursuit of their work. Gradually, as I spent more time watching my friends' work develop I became more interested in pursuing and developing my own expression. I began a body of work with the encouragement of some of my friends that eventually grew into a portfolio with which I applied to art school. I was accepted to both Pratt Institute and San

Francisco Art Institute. I elected to attend Pratt because it is located in Brooklyn, NY and, at 25, was considerably older than many of my peers at the school. I think all that experience that I had as a young adult, not studying art and just living in Portland, has really been instrumental in my development of such a profound respect and feeling of gratitude for the opportunity to make my work.

If you were not a fine artist, what would be the profession you most likely would have chosen?

I honestly can't imagine doing anything else with my life. I had thought that maybe I would be a lawyer but after working in that world for a couple of years, it became entirely clear that it's not for me! I am so grateful that I get to spend my time pursuing a career that is thoroughly rewarding on so many levels that I really don't know what else could offer this kind of satisfaction in my life.

Is there a place you can go physically or psychologically that opens your mind's eye and inspires you? What is your favorite New York Museum and your favorite museum you have visited so far in the world? What is your favorite painting or work of art?

I have been fortunate to be able to do a lot of traveling in the last couple of years and this has had a strong creative impact on my work, most notably, in my developing an entire new body of work with the landscape and interior paintings. I also see a lot of art that inspires my own studio practice but the place that I go to be inspired is actually the studio. I am a great believer in a strong studio practice as the most generative and productive place for thinking of and making new work.

I love the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Every time I go there I see something new or something that I hadn't considered before suddenly has a new relevance. As an institution, the Brooklyn Museum of Art is constantly looking for new ways to engage the surrounding community and involve younger artists. Plus, when I visit the Brooklyn Museum I get to see my painting, "*A Little Taste Outside of Love*"!

You have a great personal style. Who is your favorite clothing designer that you wear?

Right now, I am completely in love with Paul Harnden, an English designer with incredible hand-made shoes and funky wool pajamas. My perennial favorites remain Commes des Garçons and Maison Martin Margiela but my favorite new young designer is the fabulous Jose Duran!