

## **Bomb Summer 2011**

### **Mickalene Thomas**

By Sean Landers

I met Mickalene Thomas a decade ago at the Yale University School of Art and liked her instantly. She was a standout for her energy, drive, open-mindedness, and raw talent. For this interview I visited her in her Brooklyn studio where we were surrounded by a half dozen or so of her new paintings in various stages of development.

When BOMB asked me to have a dialogue with Mickalene I researched her as part of my preparation and found how pivotal the experience of seeing Carrie Mae Weems's early work, in particular the photograph "Mirror, Mirror," was for her. I also read about Mickalene's stated practice of looking in the mirror as a way to locate herself in her art. Immediately upon entering her studio to conduct this interview I saw that both of these things were very present in her work.

Through her paintings, photographs, and collages she has presented us with the perfect epilogue to the polemic raised in Weems's "Mirror, Mirror." In Mickalene Thomas's mirror the woman staring back is a self-assured, powerful woman making artwork at the very top of her game. Her new paintings are as emotionally moving as they are visually stimulating.

SEAN LANDERS Let me just say that I met you at Yale in 2000. I was one of your many teachers.

MICKALENE THOMAS One of my favorites.

SL We had a great time together. We'd meet at the Gypsy Bar after classes and we had a lot of fun. But we haven't seen each other much in the last ten years. I've followed your professional career but I don't know what your path was like. We won't dwell on it, but fill me in. You moved from New Haven, and then where'd you go?

MT I had a year-long residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. I was encouraged by Kehinde Wiley to apply, so I did, and I got in.

SL That's where it all started?

MT Well, kind of. It was a transition from graduate school to a more professional environment. I met some really great people at the Studio Museum. Louis Cameron and Deborah Grant were two young artists who had full résumés and many exhibitions. I had just graduated from the Yale School of Art. I came in fresh, very naïve, and I just really wanted to be a part of what they were doing. So they became my honest, critical voices.

SL I know that you are from Camden, New Jersey. Do you want to quickly go through some of your biography? Things that were important along the way?

MT I was born in Camden, New Jersey, in 1971 and raised in Hillside and East Orange by my mother. She very smartly put my brother and me in after-school programs at the Newark Museum and the Henry Street Settlement in New York. It was a way of getting us to see and do things that we otherwise weren't exposed to in our everyday environments.

SL Were there any other artists in your family?

MT My uncle Charles was an illustrator.

SL Would you say that he was your entry point into art or was it some other experience? Many artists whom I know discovered art through someone or something.

MT No, that didn't happen until I was a young adult. I never saw art as something that people did as a profession. But when I went to Portland, Oregon, in the early '90s, I was hanging out with a lot of artists and musicians who were doing great things.

SL What was the music scene there at that time?

MT I was there from '89 to '95 so that was when you had The Dandy Warhols, Pink Martini, and all of these self-start bands.

SL That's an incredible thing to be around. I used to have a studio in New York, on Ludlow and Stanton, in the mid-'80s and every cellar had a band practicing in it. It made me feel like I was in the right place at the right time. The whole Lower East Side was filled with young people coming from all over the world aspiring toward something creative. I loved it. Why were you in Portland?

MT I had moved there to go to school, majoring in pre-law with a minor in theater arts. And I worked at a law firm, Davis Wright Tremaine, for almost two and a half years. I was hanging out with musicians like Thomas Lauderdale from Pink Martini and artists like Patrick Abbey and people who were going to Skowhegan for the residency and having shows in New York. I was a part of this scene and so I just started making work of my own and from there it grew into this body of images.

SL What was that early work like?

MT I started looking at artists like Jacob Lawrence, William H. Johnson, and Romare Bearden. Carrie Mae Weems's show at the Portland Art Museum was instrumental. It was a small retrospective of her photographs and it was one of the first times I'd seen contemporary work by an African American woman. It made me aware of how you can use your experiences as a person and make art out of it.

SL Which series of photographs was it?

MT It was her *Kitchen Table Series* and the *Ain't Jokin'* series. And there was "Mirror, Mirror," you know, the one with the white woman in the mirror of a black woman saying "Mirror, mirror on the wall ..."

SL " ...Who's the finest of them all?"

MT "Snow White, you black bitch and don't you forget it!!!"

SL It's a really powerful work of art. You must have been 23 when you saw that and just starting to develop your own idea of yourself as an artist.

MT I was taking in a lot of information at the time. A friend encouraged me to apply to the San Francisco Art Institute and Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

I got into both but I chose Pratt because I wanted to be in New York. Actually, a friend of my mom's, Rahima Lateef, collected Carrie Mae Weems's work. When she found out how profound that work was for my development, she invited me to the opening of Carrie Mae Weems's show at MoMA, in October 1995, So I go with her and I meet Carrie. That experience was amazing. Here I was, first year in art school, not knowing what I want to do. I also met Okwui Enwezor at that opening, Thelma Golden, and all these people who were a big part of the art world. I remember seeing Carrie Mae Weems's show and thinking, I want to have a show here; watching her across the room I thought, I want to be that woman. While I was at Pratt I also met Ellen Gallagher. Remember her first show at Mary Boone in Soho?

SL Yeah. I remember it fondly.

MT I went to that show and then I decided I was going to get an internship at a gallery so I worked at Cristinerose Gallery in Soho. During that time, I met Paul Laster from Tony Shafrazi Gallery, who invited me to openings and introduced me to artists like Cy Twombly.

SL You were off to the races. Something made you want to go to graduate school; what was it?

MT It was a fluke. I went to the Yale Norfolk program where I met Sam Messer. One day, he goes, "Are you gonna go to graduate school?" and I was like "Nah, I'm not interested." He said, "You should apply to Yale!" Lisa Yuskavage, whom I met at the Norfolk program, wrote my recommendation. I didn't apply anywhere else because I was like. If I get in - great; if I don't- fine. One way or the other I was still going to make my work.

SL I agree, you were already on track. When I first laid eyes on your work, I could tell you had it together. You were using the opportunity of being at graduate school to try a million different things, to experiment and grow.

MT I was listening a lot. I wanted to make so many different things and find a way toward something that I was connected to. I didn't know what my own voice was. And, for me it's always about working with my hands. I'm a visual person; I have to see in order to understand.

SL Every time I'd walk into your studio at Yale there'd be something new. You really were using your time there, I think, as best as anyone I've ever seen.

MT I hope I still work that way. I'll show you something I'm working on. I've been finding these old frames, and making these photomontages using my old

photographs and pieces of linoleum, I used to be afraid of that practice, of constantly trying different things and being all over the place. But I think that, as a young artist, it helped me, so I don't mind oscillating between all of these different forms now.

SL Changing and growing never stops. Anyway, so that was section one: Biography.

MT (*laughter*) We're going now to section two: Influences.

SL Yes, Influences. From what I've gathered, you probably will agree with some and not with others. Manet. Matisse, Picasso - those are the art historical male painters. obviously people whose work you've used . Carrie Mae Weems is on my list, Chris Of iii, and Rob Pruitt. Kehinde Wiley?

MT Wrong.

SL Okay. We'll talk about that. I have also got David Hackney on here, Cubism, and Yoruban art.

MT Yup,

SL Which of these interest you to talk about? This is one of the things we did when I was a teacher, I'd put a list of names up and we'd cross things off. So whom do you want to cross off here, Chris Ofili and Kehinde?

MT Maybe.

SL I bring Chris Of iii up because ...

MT (*laughter*) Those are the ones you're going to talk about?

SL I just want to defend why I put them on my list. I think you and Chris have a great relationship with Yoruban art and the West-African tradition.

MT True. I used to look at Yoruban art when I was at Pratt.

SL When I look at your piece in the window at MoMA, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, I see imagery ricocheting back and forth across the Atlantic.

MT African art is prominent in my work; it's something I refer to especially regarding space and color. And if you're looking at Cubism, you're essentially looking at African art.

SL Hackney's collages are a distillation of Cubism and you're doing that too.

MT Well, that's also where Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence come back in. Even some Bob Thompson paintings. And it's true that Chris Of ii, was influential to my development. When I was at Pratt, I was one of the docent student volunteers during the *Sensation* show at the Brooklyn Museum. We wore black T-shirts that said "Ask Me" and we were each given a work of art to stand next to. I was given Chris Of ill. And of course the work became very controversial because of Giuliani's

rant against it. They had to put two of us there because there were so many people coming to see that painting. Then they had to rope it off.

SL It's unbelievable how stupid discourse outside of the art world can be. I loved the way Chris handled that. He didn't give interviews. He didn't fan the flames, he just rose above it all and let it settle down on its own.

MT I got to look at that painting for a long time. It was one of the first times where I saw someone using such distinctive materials and I was really able to spend time thinking about how those materials functioned within the context of a museum.

SL Now, when I say influences, I don't want anyone to think that I am implying that you're ripping anybody off or would ever need to. Your work has some similarities to Ofili's but it's not the same work. When I think about your work I think about different things, Matisse for instance...

MT Yeah, but what's so great is that Matisse looked at Manet. And Romare Bearden looked at Matisse and Manet. And I'm looking at all three, it's a lineage. If you look closely at the *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* photograph, you'll notice the Matisse sculpture in the background.

SL Yeah. That is a Matisse back there.

MT A large bronze relief figure by Matisse.

SL Those models sat in MaMA's sculpture garden. In the original Manet painting, there is a fourth character off in the distance.

MT Exactly. My original idea for my MoMA piece was to do something within the museum space, like pick a painting that I wanted to work around. Klaus Biesenbach took me through the museum but I couldn't find a space that called to me until we walked from one side of the museum to the other through the sculpture garden. I said, "Can't we do it here?" and he asked why. I said, "You've got the Matisse sculptures here." And then I knew I wanted to do an interpretation of *Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*, incorporating the Matisse sculptures into Manet's classic but controversial composition.

SL Yeah, that's the thing about being a good artist. Everything that you've prepared yourself for over the years, after all of the studying you've done and the long hours in the studio, it can all have its profound effect in one moment.

MT Absolutely. I think it's really important that people understand my knowledge of the relationship between Matisse and Manet and the fact that Romare Bearden is a huge part of my work. I look at his collage and composition. When I'm working with a historical image, I use photography as a way of capturing and reinterpreting the image. I take photographs and make collages out of them in order to create a new image.

SL You inject black women into the art historical canon - I'm quoting you and Kehinde Wiley is doing a similar thing with urban black men.

MT In the work of both of us, there are so many different layers. But I think my work is developing differently because of my studio practice, the way I make the work.

SL There is so much I want to ask you about these collages. I hope we cruised through Influences pretty much unscathed. (I hate it myself when people ask me about my influences). Now I want to get to Process. let's split off into photography, video, and collage. How are the paintings made? You take a picture of a setup? I was hoping to get to see your setup.

MT The set is usually in the corner of my studio where the wood paneling is installed. Those boxes where it says "fabric" - all the couches and props are over there with the boxes. I only have the installation up when I do photo shoots.

SL Are they the beginning of most paintings?

MT Yes, every painting begins with an installation in that corner. Not every painting has a collage, but every image has a photograph.

SL The interiors seem like Matisse interiors but transported to the 1970s. What are you looking for? How do you choose the models? Is there anything you want to speak to?

MT Most of the women I meet through friends and sometimes when I'm at openings or other events. Most of my models I use more than once. I've been working with Din for the past three years and with Qusuquzah for four years. And I've been working with my mother since I began making figurative work.

SL There is a certain quality in the women you select. Is it their personality?

MT It's their confidence and selfawareness. Din is studying medicine and she is very shy. She transforms like a chameleon and like no other woman that I've worked with. I always put a wig on the model to allow her to experience a real transformation for the photo shoot. I also have a makeup artist and a hair stylist. The models understand my work. I tell them what I'm thinking of and they respond in a natural way.

SL Is there anything besides confidence that you would put on that list?

MT Beauty, a little uncertainty, perseverance, and a sort of hunger. All of the stronger qualities I feel I possess. I guess I look for myself in these women.

SL What about the other stuff in the scenes you're setting- what I would call Matisse a la 1970s. It's '70s on steroids really. Probably '77, when you were a six-year-old, you started to remember things.

MT Some things I don't remember. The '70s are a part of my work, not necessarily because of nostalgia but because of a recontextualizing process. I'm reinventing those experiences that I have no memory of. I try to incorporate all these aspects of myself in my work: what I grew up with, what I'm inspired by- textiles, African photography, Yoruban art, Cubism, Matisse. How can I take the ingredients of who I am and put them into a painting? What does that look like? What does that feel like?

What's the residue of that?

SL let's talk about the photographs of your mom. Before I knew she was your mom, I thought those were the most interesting ones. There's a video of your mom trying to get comfortable on the couch. It's so awkward and powerful. Watching that I was wondering, who are these women?

MT My mother was so awkward that day! I think the other two women in the show were maybe more comfortable with the performative element of the photo shoot because they are actually transsexuals. They both had sex changes and now live their lives as women. I put my mother into that mix because there's a relationship that goes back to the mother with men who are either crossdressers, transsexuals, or transvestites. The woman who they want to emulate is most often their mother. It couldn't have used *their* mothers but I have a working relationship with *my* mother. I added my mother in there as mirror image of what they are aspiring to become.

SL That's an amazing point.

MT With the videos I am looking for those very subtle, small moments that you lose in a photograph or painting. There's a performative aspect that is definitely present in the rest of my work but is conveyed more directly through video.

SL I read somewhere that you sometimes look into the mirror to begin. When you're conceiving something. Looking at your mom and what you said about the transgender people has a relationship to this mirror thing and perhaps Weems's *Ain't Jakin'* series.

MT The mirror part comes from my reading about Lacan's mirror stage and the sense of validation and ego development that seeing your own reflection in a mirror provides. I'm so interested in this idea of being seen and seeing yourself, and how that relationship is developed. We all want to be validated and recognized in some way. This also relates to the power of the gaze in my work. When I take a photograph, that gaze is forcing the viewer to see my subjects-to recognize them.

SL Your subjects are gazing very confrontationally right back out at the viewer in almost every situation.

MT Yeah, it's an awareness: they exist, are present, and they are not going to let you go away easily.

SL Who controls the gaze, the gazer or the gazed upon?

MT I believe that the sitter has the power (or more power than I have) over what's being presented. I'm not overly choreographing the women I work with; I'm really trying to capture a quality within them. They are presenting to me, through their lens, how they want to be represented. That's where the collaboration happens. And the fact that the gaze in question is from one woman to another is more powerful, to me, than the male gaze. But I think the female gaze is still connected to the concept of the male gaze; we are all shaped by the dominant cultural norms. At the same time, I can't say that I'm not bringing what Kara Walker calls my "sexual libido" to my work, or that my own desires have nothing to do with the type of gaze I'm interested in.

SL These things tend to be politicized by other people. So where is your relationship with that?

MT Am I a feminist or do I have a political agenda?

SL What is womanism in regard to you? How is that different from feminism? It's also fine if you don't want to talk about it.

MT I think feminism has a place, but my idea of womanism is formed in large part by Audre Lorde's discussion of a Sister Outsider, of being a part of feminism but still being outside and under recognized.

SL People have tried, especially when I was a younger artist, to do the identity-politics thing with me-so much that I started thinking and writing about it. I realized over time that I was jumping through a ring that other people wanted me to jump through-until I snapped myself out of it and realized that it isn't one of my subjects, Does the art world do that to you?

MT Absolutely, I completely understand that. With me, it's the hip-hop thing. Because my work deals with a remnant of popular culture and has black women in it, people want to link it to hip-hop. That's just being lazy. You really have to look at the work in a much larger context to understand it.

SL It's so rich and layered in all kinds of history.

MT Exactly. And I like hip-hop, I'm a product of listening to it growing up. But I've never even talked about my work in relationship to hip-hop and I listen to a lot of other kinds of music.

SL Next on my list is Motivation.

MT My motivation for getting up and coming to the studio in the morning is to continue to make my work and have these crazy ideas come to fruition. Everything comes out of a studio practice. For instance, the installations I started out making for my photo shoots became an important part of my work. I'm now exhibiting some of these installations. Finding this set of books, *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement* added to an even bigger picture and in formed a whole new series of paintings.

SL Back to what you said about motivation. Yes, it's really fulfilling being an artist. Enjoyable would be too small a word. It's deeply fulfilling in every way. I wake up every day and know that I've got something totally mine to do. And I love it.

MT I want to say, one of the things that drives me is the fear of failing. But the good thing about being the kind of artist that I know I am, is that even if the ground fell out from under me, I would still make art.

SL But still you don't want to fail.

MT Of course not. But though I have a fear of failing I know that I could always go



back to zero and start again.

SL There's always another chance. I've made shows that I felt went over horribly. I did this one show for a Los Angeles gallery based on a William Hogarth painting and I got kicked out of the gallery for it. I remember the crate opening and the gallerists' jaws just dropped, like, "What the hell did you give us!?" They were pictures of colonial American tavern drunks. Long story short, Marianne Boesky Gallery uptown is re-showing that entire exhibition this spring. So the moral is, take the risk; even if you "fail," you'll get another chance. We all worry about failure. But we also have to ignore the fear sometimes and just throw ourselves off the cliff.

MT I like looking back at my notes for ideas and things that I want to do. And I find myself saying, Oh that's right, I did want to do that. I do want to engage in this conversation. And that's how the landscapes came about- three or four years earlier I had written down, "I want to make landscape paintings." My galleries didn't want my landscape paintings at first and now they are really well-received.

SL People want your signature thing. I have been beating my head against that wall for the last 20 years. People just want me to be the text guy. What's not being said about your work that you think we should be talking about?

MT The formal aspects of my work. That I'm looking at paintings, that I'm thinking about abstraction. No one talks about the work as *paintings*. For me, that's the missing discourse. The *Le Dejeuner* painting that I did at MoMA is not just Manet or Matisse. I was looking at constructivism and thinking of ways to radically break up the picture plane. I was looking at Fernand Leger when I *made* that painting, and Romare Bearden. I was considering all those components, finding a way to make them my own. So all of those elements are in there but no one talks about what's really constructed and how I'm looking at painting.

SL Why do you think that is?

MT It could be that the materials I use are too seductive and all-consuming, but that's a part of the concept. People get so caught up with the rhinestones. The rhinestones are really just one part of the work among many. They are a way of masking things and they refer to the idea of artifice.

SL I see three canvases here right now that have no rhinestones at the moment.

MT I'm slowly moving the rhinestones out of the paintings; they are becoming just one element among many that I use to construct a painting. In *Le Dejeuner* there's a limited amount of rhinestones used, but still no one wants to talk about it as a painting.

SL I personally saw it as a very active painting. It's as visually stimulating as it is meaningful and powerful.

MT That is my largest and one of my best paintings and it has changed my approach. For instance, in *Three Graces* here, I'm thinking about constructed spaces and how they look like stained glass. The paintings are becoming much more fractured and sometimes they're just about flat planes of color, If you look at this

collage, the painting's not even started yet, but this is the idea of what it is going to be, a 9-by-20-foot landscape. The panel is a Hockney grid, based on some of his landscapes. Another thing I've adapted- adopted, I should say from Hockney is his use of Photoshop to recreate his compositions. To scan this large collage, I have to photograph it. Then I scale it to this size and recreate the landscape,

SL Was there a significant art historical painting in particular?

MT Yes, Courbet's 1866 painting *Sleep*.

SL You had one named after Watteau.

MT Yeah, *Leçon d'Amour*,

SL Was Watteau's painting, *Lesson of Love*, the beginning of that painting?

MT The title, *Leçon d'Amour*. is from Watteau, but I took the composition from Balthus's *The Guitar Lesson* (1934). I usually don't title my work until it's done, However, this unfinished one is already titled as *Portrait of Din*.

SL I love your work in this stage. Whenever you feel ready to not bedazzle them, go straight ahead, because the painting is good enough.

MT I may find a different material. If not the rhinestones, there may be another surprise. The newer works retain some of those color washes you like in the unfinished work. A while ago, I started leaving the rhinestones off all of the faux-wood paneling,

SL You paint that, right?

MT Yeah, it's all painted with a sponge brush, though I probably should not tell you too much...

SL ...or I'll steal it. (*laughter*)

MT You won't be the first, but that's okay. You would do it differently because you're Sean Landers!

SL My new show, which just opened at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, has paintings of this clown mariner on a boat and there's wood everywhere. But none of my wood grain looks as good as yours, Seriously! Can we talk about Bette Davis and Eartha Kitt?

MT I'm so glad I had the opportunity to see Eartha Kitt perform at the Carlyle. I like women like Bette Davis and Eartha Kitt because not only do they transform themselves, but they're trailblazers and they put themselves out there in situations that other people would deem uncomfortable- Eartha Kitt standing up to Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House and protesting against the war and being blacklisted for almost 20 years because of her stance. She had the inner strength to voice her opinion to a president at a time when people had so much fear. I like women who have a sense of grit and a sort of hard edge while remaining incredibly sexy, These are the women I look to as mentors, because I want to remember that whatever I'm

going through, as long as I have my own faith and do what I know is right. I'm going to come out okay,

SL Is this an extension of looking in the mirror?

MT Absolutely.

SL Yoruban masks give shape to an interior quality, Ashe - animal power, strength to make things happen, Ogun-metal power, the power of machines and guns. Shango-masculinity, virility, power. Emosia-womb power. Esu is evil power. Oshun is the one I wanted to bring up with you - feminine, beauty power.

MT I think beauty is one of the most powerful elements but there's a positive and negative side to it, as there's a positive and negative side to most things in life, The figure of Oshun captures this duality by assigning beauty to a figure of great power who can be both destructive and creative. 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. Still beauty is something we aspire to and continue to be seduced by.

SL Carrie Mae Weems asked this question of Wynton Marsalis: "You know and can name many of your influences. But who will you influence? Who will emerge in your wake?" Who are the people who are going to stand on your shoulders?

MT That is a beautiful question, I'm hoping that someone standing in front of my work might get the same feeling I got when I stood in front of the work of Carrie Mae Weems, having a sense of possibility and accessibility, that ignited a new awareness and willingness to create in my own voice. That's the kind of influence that I can hope to inspire in someone.

SL I have one last question: Who is in that mirror?

MT It 's always me. Sometimes it's also my mother, my grandmother, or my great-grandmother. Sometimes it's a person I've never seen before, sometimes it's the person I want to be. Sometimes it's the person I hope to be or someone I haven't become yet. But when I look into the mirror, I say: just be truthful, truthful, truthful, That 's all I can do.