

Loop 21

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Artist Mickalene Thomas Immortalizes Bold and Beautiful Women

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This mixed media exhibit incorporates photos, drawings and collages

The work of Mickalene Thomas uses color, pattern, and multiplicity to reverberate into the universe. Her photographs, drawings, and collages of women bellow beyond the walls of [Lehmann Maupin's Chrystie Street](#) gallery in New York where her exhibition "More Than Everything" is currently on view through October 29th.

Poignant and powerful large scale portraits challenge mass media's representation of femininity and beauty. Ms. Thomas' models, including her own mother, come in all sizes and range in skin tones defying the notion that beauty is most often blonde, thin, and demure. The female gaze in her work is confident whether the subject is regarding the viewer or herself.

The women in Ms. Thomas' work are shown as serious and playful, sensual and sexual, not afraid to love themselves or other women. Her large scale paintings (not in this exhibition) and her current collages serve to quiet the voices and images that have often denied women, specifically of the African Diaspora, a more full-bodied representation. Ms. Thomas positions women as nuanced, complex, and beautiful, statuesque and worthy of regard. While Ms. Thomas is often known for her large scale, rhinestone, and colorful paintings, many of the images in this work are small and intimate, beckoning (or daring) viewers to come closer.

In a recent interview, Ms. Thomas speaks of her recent travels and the intimacy of her work.

Loop 21: Describe your primary influences for the work that is in your current exhibition "More Than Everything."

Mickalene Thomas: For the work included in "More Than Everything," I decided that I wanted to focus on smaller, more intimate works on paper. From the beginning, as I conceptualized the show with my gallery, I knew that I would want to present a large number of collages in a salon-style hanging. Because Lehmann Maupin's space at 201 Chrystie is so large, almost cavernous, my interest was in how I could both work 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.

The small collages in the salon-style groupings work perfectly for this; they invite the viewer into what might otherwise be an overwhelming space and demand focused attention to their detail and personal scale. As I thought more about the salon style

of hanging and as I worked on the conceptual groundwork for my upcoming shows at Santa Monica Museum of Art and the Brooklyn Museum of Art, it became clear to me that I wanted to explore this historical theme with my show More Than Everything. As I thought about what size and type of works would complement the clusters of collages, it occurred to me that I wanted to include large-format Polaroid's, framed in such a manner as to recall the earliest daguerreotypes that were a direct influence to artists such as Courbet.

Loop 21: The black woman is most often central to your work from your paintings to your collages; the subject's gaze (whether she is staring at the viewer or at herself in the mirror) display confidence. Additionally, you intentionally work with women of all body types and skin complexions; can you talk a bit about why this important to you as an artist, as a woman?

Thomas: 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.

Loop 21: You recently returned from Giverny, France where you were for the Versailles Foundation Munn Artist program; explain what it was like for you to create in this space vs. your studio space in New York.

Thomas: Making work in Giverny was amazing. This past summer allowed me an incredible amount of solitude and quiet. I was able to focus without all of the personal and private obligations/distractions that are here for me in New York. The countryside and buildings of Giverny were also a great influence on the work. 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. The sheer beauty or the setting is inspiring in itself and I think that all of that time gave me the chance to try out some completely new ideas that I'm still not sure where they'll take me!

Loop 21: What's coming up/next for you that you are most excited about?

Thomas: Right now I am preparing for my solo show at Santa Monica Museum of Art which will open April 13th, 2012, a solo show with Brooklyn Museum of Art which will open September 28th, 2012, and my next show with Lehmann Maupin, also opening October 4th, 2012 which will be very different from this current show!