

Photograph Magazine October 05, 2011

Mickalene Thomas at Lehmann Maupin

By Jean Dykstra

Mickalene Thomas, best known for her bejeweled and rhinestone-studded paintings, initially used photographs only as source material for her paintings of voluptuous black women. But all of her work originates from photographs she takes in her studio, and she has devoted her current show at Lehmann Maupin, *More than Everything*, entirely to her photographs and collages. They're smaller in scale and in glitz, but they are more than just a look into an artist's process. They are works of art in their own right.

Thomas is a seriously playful artist, who incorporates references ranging from 1970s blaxploitation films and soul music to ethnographic imagery, pop culture, and art history. The gallery includes several large, elegantly framed black-and-white Polaroids with textiles draped in the background that recall the studio portraits of Seydou Keita (except that his subjects were generally clothed). The arrangement of small black-and-white photographs in the front room, though, seems out of sync with the rest of the show. The photographs are mounted in multi-frame constructions; in some of the works, a frame partially hides the woman in the picture, giving the whole thing an uncharacteristically precious quality.

There's nothing coy about the images in the main gallery. The collages, made from Thomas's own photographs, are hung salon-style, in clusters of riotous leopard and zebra prints, wood paneling and scraps of re-created 1970s-era interiors. The women, often with afros, high heels and low necklines, pose languidly, enjoying their sexuality. Some of the works, like *Tamika sur une Chaise Longue* or *Courbet 1 (Melody Sitting)*, reference art historical paintings, but Thomas employs those references lightly. Her photographs and photo-based collages are about race, feminine identity, and notions of beauty, no question, but her use of materials – scraps of her own photographs, with the seductive women inserted like paper dolls – is casually subversive and a lot of fun.