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Mickalene Thomas: 'More Than Everything'

By Karen Rosenberg

Mickalene Thomas is best known for her large, enameled, sequin-encrusted paintings of diva-ish women, works that are as impenetrable as they are spectacular. In her process-oriented second solo at Lehmann Maupin she strips away some of those layers but retains the pizzazz.

She does it by giving us a peek into her studio, via a salon-style installation of photographs, drawings and collages. Looking at them you can see how the paintings develop and how the work of other artists has affected them.

In the collages Romare Bearden is the strongest influence. (Ms. Thomas will have a piece in the coming tribute, "The Bearden Project," at the Studio Museum in Harlem.) Like Bearden she drops figures into fractured, quasi-abstract landscapes and interiors. And she has fun with those settings, even before gracing them with her sultry odalisques, in works like "Interior: Yellow Couch, Blue Foyer, and Fireplace" or "Landscape With Camouflage."

To offset these exuberantly crowded walls Ms. Thomas is also showing black-and-white Polaroids of nudes sitting and lounging on patterned bedspreads. Courbet's sensual painting "Sleep" is one source of inspiration, name-checked in the titles and echoed in the poses of two intertwined nappers; the fabric backdrops of traditional West African studio portraiture might be another. Although these works are pared down by Ms. Thomas's standards, she can't resist a decorative touch in the form of curved gilt frames and black velvet mats.

The drawings — women's faces, awkwardly inked on shiny paper and slippery acetate — aren't as compelling. They confirm that Ms. Thomas is a collagist at heart and needs some sort of material or historical spark to get going.