

BOMB

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Artists On Artists / Mickalene Thomas

By Kara Walker

Interspersed within my few remaining early issues of *Ebony* magazine from the 70s are faded liquor and cigarette advertisements, rich with period visions of black urban cool. These belie a voracious hunger for entry to a realm of sophistication and wealth - the satisfaction of a perfect afro and cocoa-butter skin - contra the grind of civil rights initiatives and struggles announced in the black and white articles buttressing them. In the early 70s a new social awareness within both feminist and African-American liberation circles of the unique forms of oppression suffered by Black women necessitated that women of color define Black feminism once and for all. Alice Walker put forth the term "womanist," suggesting an outrageous and audacious woman, one who loves other women, sexually or not. Seventies Blaxploitation films like *Cleopatra Jones*, with its gun-toting heroine, capitalized on this burgeoning racial pride, problematically merging a miasma of competing interests, most obviously Black power and female lack.

Mickalene Thomas's chocolate-colored sisters with statuesque thighs, supple flesh, and meandering hair announce the promise of womanist agency. The space-age domestics or mother Africa soul searchers of her odalisque photos are draped over sofas and swathed in layers of contrasting "exotic" prints - a porn trope as much as it was a fact of 70s interior design. Thomas's bodies begin as substrata, canvases to a libidinal urge reminiscent of depictions of the Other in early photography and pornography (and, in turn, historical photographs' mimicry of Western painting traditions). But, while relying on the familiar arrangements of white-male painting tradition, Thomas allows her photographic compositions to spiral inward, away from the superficial tropes of exotica, toward the complex sexuality of her models. Situated in a wood-paneled setting redolent of a recreation room or a now-dated interior redesign - familiar to a child of the 70s like Thomas - each photograph layers pride and resistance. A formerly exploitative gaze - Manet's *Olympia*, Matisse's odalisques - becomes the frame for a kind of post-womanist self-consciousness.

Wood paneling likewise pervades Thomas's rhinestone, acrylic, and enamel paintings (many based on her photos). It is this ubiquitous visual which formally announces the constraints of nostalgia. Like her photos, Thomas's paintings signal nostalgia for that transitional moment when desire, individuation, and upward mobility press against Blaxploitation. Adhering to the limits of a seductively glittering picture plane, Thomas's soul sisters gaze out from between contrasting arrays of color and pattern. In her hands, the Black woman is both a bright and polished *Ebony* ideal and a picture of womanist yearning. Posed in a sassy Pointer Sister contrapposto suggestive of dignity and self-assurance - and physically covered in bling - Thomas is proposing that playful juxtapositions of personal memory and historical example are the constructs of Black beauty ... and that such juxtapositions should scintillate and dazzle as only what's truly longed for can.

- Kara Walker is an artist living in New York. Walker's work will be in upcoming shows at the Houston Museum of Contemporary Arts; the DeCordova Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska; and the Frye Museum in Seattle.