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Mickalene Thomas - Material Stealth

Mickalene Thomas' works come at you like a worked up member of the audience on Oprah: hand waving, hair bobbing and offering no doubt that it's gonna be told just like it is. Bright colours, bling materials and pimptastic styling, her ladies take no hostages.

Yet, for all their unabashed sensibility and in-your-face upfrontness, Thomas' work plumbs subtle depths that few artists addressing identity politics manage to reach. If we make the mistake of thinking that we've read the work with a single glance simply because of its accessibility and apparently familiar iconography, then the weakness rests with us. One gets the feeling that Ms Thomas - perhaps familiar with the dismissive expectations of certain art audiences - occasionally smiles to herself knowing very well that the last laugh remains with her as an artist who, to quote Missy Elliott, "knows her shit."

The way in which Thomas addresses issues of African American identity through the use of imagery that could appear to perpetuate stereotypes according to the laws of "political correctness" is fairly immediately fathomable. This is not work that attempts to address white racist attitudes or black low self-esteem through the endless depiction of positive role models. There are no parades of Bill Cosby-esque families of African American couplings between lawyers and doctors. Politically, Thomas' work sits plainly in the tradition of more radical Afrocentric conceptualisations of addressing power struggles. It is the visual artist's version of something more akin to the notion of 'reclaiming' negative stereotypes that rose to prominence - and controversy - in the 1990s within rap music and Queer Politics, itself a variation on the radicalism of 1960s movements resisting racism in America. Mickalene Thomas presents us with women who are black, beautiful, powerful and present. Deal with it.

But if her work offers an appropriately clear message on this more straightforward political position, within the nuances of her practice, there is a world that seldom finds such sophisticated outings on the white walls of galleries. For, against a broader background of African American identity, Thomas weaves complex visual structures that attest to an acute understanding of art history in addition to the history of the Diaspora. And then of course, there are the layers addressing female sexuality and sexual identity, at times unleashed with a joyously clever sense of humour as she runs rings around traditional orthodoxies on just who is supposed to be the object of whose gaze - and lust - and who, in turn, has the right to assume the empowered gaze of the artist.

But, perhaps most impressively of all, she manages to undertake all of these intellectual and political positions within her work whilst never losing a subjective and emotional sincerity, often conveyed through the careful use of materials that conjure up a feeling and sense of place - more cultural than physical - that have the heady strength of a Proustian association. Her evocative use of brash textiles, cheap wood veneers and shiny decorative materials, many of them drawn from her love of the materials that surrounded her growing up in the 1970s, are used as a vehicle for both an emotional punch and a visual critique.

The precise use of textile patterns and particularly how they sit within the image - create the surface that we must encounter - often construct the same discussions that numerous artists raise about exactly how an image is constructed. What is impressive about how Thomas enters into the same discussions is that she does so almost incidentally, the very blocks of pattern used to critique the construction of the larger image itself, still being subsumed into the cohesive content that might be about something altogether different, for example, identity or gender politics.

And, beyond even this layer is the dense and intense sense of an existential experience of which many of these materials speak. They may be reduced to a smooth denying surface - such as in the photographic work - or they may actually be literally the physical surface itself - such as in the rhinestone studded portraits - but they always speak of a thing that is tactile, the meaning of which might be understood by contact with (black) human skin in addition to its visual appearance. Thomas mines the psychology of a cultural aesthetic. She takes us to a place in which we can understand how these materials, often cheap replicas of traditional luxury, have accumulated such importance because of their highly loaded meanings.

Fake and faux replace precious metals and expensive gems. The cheap rhinestones that stand for diamonds or the leopard and zebra skin prints that must stand for traditional fur and hide become a potent shorthand for an anthropology understood both intellectually and subjectively. They tell us of an African American cultural desire for wealth denied through political injustice. They tell us about the relationship between social position and social display. They tell us of the attraction of mythologies that promise to reconcile certain unrequited longings within cultures affected by Diaspora. Ultimately a dignity and power arises, despite whatever attempts at subjugation or denigration may have been made through stereotyping of the same visual aesthetic by hostile racist points of view, in showing this honesty. Mickalene Thomas does not 'reclaim' the materials of African American cultural identities because, in effect, her work manages to show them to us in a way that is so fresh and with such a depth of connection and understanding, that they are literally not what they were before.

There is, however, no apology in her presentation. The imagery, through photography, collage or three-dimensional works she offers us, makes full use of the materials that construct an acute sense of an African American identity. The tone is emotive, emotional and empathetic. But, it is never the stuff of multiculturalist infomercials. A million miles away from sanitised 'community art' or works commissioned to the instrumental end of promoting positive transcultural relations, Thomas pulls off the trick of engaging with issues of cultural identity in a manner that seems full of warmth and humour whilst simultaneously toying irreverently with sex and sexuality, not just as an objective commentator, but as a potentially transgressive participant.

A number of the works show depictions of women (in fact, are there any images of males in her work at all?) that appear at first glance to be offering up a version of the highly-sexualised image of desirable black women objectified by Blaxploitation films or pornography and girlie genres. She lifts from the aesthetic of Blaxploitation itself, perhaps historically largely produced by white males. In effect, many of the images

that Mickalene Thomas offers us, taken out of context, could be read as offensive depictions of black women. Or, at least, seductive erotic images of women.

And, of course, that is what they are. It would be facile and misguided to pretend that we are supposed to understand them as otherwise. Thomas, of course, rather than apologising for the depictions or the desire she may not feel for the depicted women, instead demands the validity of the position. Perhaps, like men who enjoy ogling 'porn lesbians', it might never have occurred to us that what appears to be an object of desire and gratification purely to serve our needs, may, in fact, be involved in an erotic or emotional interchange with someone else altogether different from ourselves. Despite the egotistical assumptions of certain men, the pretty lesbians engaged in activities of great interest to the male observer may, ultimately, be completely disinterested. These sisters might very well be doing it for themselves.

This in itself immediately raises interesting questions, given the cross-fertilisation of meanings drawing on sexual and cultural identity politics. The sexy Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones representations of African American womanhood are undeniably sexy and sexualised. And, even in depictions dating back to the first emergence of Blaxploitation, Feminist discussion has remained persistently divided on many of these representations. There has been much debate, for example, as to whether the sharp-shooting, Kung Fu consummate heroines of Blaxploitation narratives constitute positive role models that should be embraced by Feminism or rejected as a construct that was ultimately a heterosexual (white) male fantasy, a reactionary and cynical move on the part of film producers. Many Blaxploitation films have been accused of appearing to give certain feisty women characters some notional respect as active, independent women whilst ultimately, by the time the credits rolled, they are shown to return to the fold and conform to the (white) male heterosexual agenda.

Others have argued that although few Blaxploitation films were ever scripted or made by women and certainly there are many ways and examples in which the gender politics portrayed are highly suspect or blatantly offensive, Blaxploitation should not be completely dismissed for some of the attempts that it made to at least give some visibility to female African American experiences, albeit in a very specific way. The choice between remaining committed to an abusive relationship or to break free and go it alone on the mean streets, for example, is a recurrent theme raised by various female characters within the genre. Often it is portrayed in a way where the woman character, even if choosing independence, is portrayed empathetically. But on the whole, however, the general body of critical reflection on Blaxploitation tends to point towards a summary of certain positive steps in the direction of radical race politics and treading water with reactionary gender politics.

What few such discussions have really addressed, however, is that, regardless of the correctness of a political position in the images of African American women offered by Blaxploitation, they nonetheless offered highly charged role models and/or objects of desire for millions of people of a certain generation. Even more interestingly, what is the correct political position when one of those people who might desire such women, not in a genteel, but in a down-n-dirty way, is, in fact, herself an African American woman?

The question itself is an important one not because it is something that requires an answer that benefits white heterosexual men, but because it stands to underscore the

mass of unresolved taboos within politicised and educated black communities. The risk of disunity and the weakening of a political critical mass has always appeared, from the outside, to be one of the strategies by which political leaders- or self-appointed spokespersons have simply chosen to avoid the topic of gay and lesbian African American identity, experience and, most sensitively, rejection or violence from within their own cultures or communities. The role of contributing attitudes drawing on a historically staunch Christian point of view in many African American communities, for example, remains a topic rapidly avoided. After all, why would one want to tamper with a force that has, historically, proved such a powerful ally to community cohesion and political advancement?

Without once waving a banner bearing text, assuming an angry Queer stance or citing autobiographical detail as overt content, Mickalene Thomas quietly blows the topic wide open. We know quite clearly that when she shows us a "Lovely Six Foota" or two women brawling like spitfires in skintight spandex, it is not the titillation of the male viewer that is the only possible outcome.

In Thomas' work though, none of these content layers that address complex political or deeply personal questions of identity are separated from the visual aesthetics of the work. In a way, this differs from numerous artists dealing with related themes or content where the choice of visual manifestation is never allowed to overshadow the overt message or intention of the piece. Thomas, by contrast, insists that her discussions must unfold in an almost baroque sensibility in which the figurative depictions that act as the conduits of the discussion must share the space with elaborate and striking decorative or formal elements. Perhaps this is partly responsible for the level of ambivalence or absence of a monographic dialectic in her work.

It also highlights the strong interaction between the newness - for example, the new way in which she attempts to use familiar decorative patterns and motifs in contrast to their expected readings - and the art historical. In her 'Odalisques' series we frequently encounter figures that are simultaneously reminiscent of Blaxploitation sex goddesses, but, in turn, relate to similar constructions in earlier art such as the soft-porn aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century French painting with which the term itself is often associated.

In the nineteenth century, the odalisque was strongly connected with the fashion for Orientalism. The figure of the odalisque, an object of sexual fantasy and desire for Western gentlemen, was usually depicted in the languid poses mimicked by Thomas for her reworking of the genre. The connections between white Western fantasies being projected onto 'the other' - the mythical women of the East - are naturally referenced as Thomas raises questions about white male projection onto the sex goddesses of African American cultural genres.

In the nineteenth century the word odalisque was so strongly bound up in eroticism and the pull of exotic sexual possibilities that it eventually became a common term to refer to a mistress or illicit lover. There is a certain irony in this, given that the term, originally coming from Turkish, refers to young virgin handmaidens within Ottoman Empire harems whose role was specifically to serve the concubines and not the Sultan. In order to serve the Sultan in the ways that Western gentlemen fantasised about, the young woman could not, intrinsically be an odalisque.

So, do we detect yet another layer of concealed meaning in these works, every bit as nuanced and coded as the meaning of specific flowers in the hands of Florentine women in fifteenth century portraits? Mickalene Thomas insists that her subjects are odalisques. Yet odalisques are by definition those who serve the concubines and are virgins, at least from a traditional phallogocentric point of view. But, she both presents them and names them as sexualised beings, in the paradoxical nineteenth century use of the term. Which means that, in order for the whole to remain as a truth, there is only one possible sexual permutation in these particular Odalisques.

Mickalene Thomas reminds us in these works of the white perspective from which much of cultural history has been written. Maybe she simultaneously reminds us that even if we are asked actively to reflect on overt specific identity topics - such as race and gender - we should never assume that topics that are not overtly on the agenda - such as sexuality - can be overlooked.

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All images courtesy of the artist, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York.