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Q+A: Mickalene Thomas' Photographic Funk

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Mickalene Thomas's large-scale, sequin-bedecked panel paintings starring seductively posed black women speak as much to the history of the portrait as they do to contemporary bling, hip-hop culture and sexuality. Raised in the Newark, New Jersey, area by her mother and aunts, Thomas reinterprets feminine beauty from a female perspective. Take for instance *Fancy This: Lovely Six Foota* (2007) (below, left), currently on view in a group show at the Bronx Museum ["Stargazers: Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation with 21 Contemporary Artists," through May 29], in which a voluptuous black woman reclines in a firm but sexualized pose, her eyes turned coyly from the viewer. Amid a sea of illustrated pillows and wood panels, Thomas's subject appears to be a caricature of a brassy, stylized exoticism, her body rendered in a relatively matte painted finish, while the creases in her knee-high boots and outline of her open blouse are executed in sequins.

Over the next six months, the in-demand 39-year-old Brooklyn-based artist will participate in a 13 shows, ranging in location from Iowa to Tokyo. Thomas is included in the "Seeing Now: Photography Since 1960" exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art on Feb. 20. Here we discuss how her photography has evolved from preparatory study to the final picture:

MADISON MOORE: What was it like going to art school in Brooklyn in the '90s?

MICKALENE THOMAS: Being at Pratt was a new phenomenon because you're in New York, not Manhattan, but you're still in Brooklyn, which has its own history. And you're in an affluent black neighborhood. When I started at Pratt, Spike Lee had his 40 Acres and A Mule studios down the street. You'd see Rosie Perez walking around going to Mike's Coffee Shop. So it was this black bohemian...

MOORE: Creative hub.

THOMAS: Yeah, a creative hub. And that was exciting, [*laughs*] to be here in '95 and walk to Pratt's campus and see Spike Lee filming a movie.

MOORE: After Pratt you found yourself at Yale in the MFA program.

THOMAS: Yale was the only school I actually ended up applying to. When I decided to go to art school, it wasn't necessarily something I thought I needed. No one talked about graduate school when I was an undergrad. I went on to a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and that transition from Yale to the Studio Museum, that was the *real* beginning of my professional career. Exposure to people like Thelma Golden and Christine Kim was very new, because while I was at Yale I didn't have gallery people talking to me about my work.

MOORE: You're about to show in "Seeing Now: Photography Since 1960" at the

Baltimore Museum of Art. People are most familiar with your rhinestone paintings. How does your process triangulate among photography, collage and painting?

THOMAS: That all started-working with nontraditional materials-when I was an undergrad. But once I got to Yale I put some of those things on the back burner because I really wanted to just paint. I stopped working with collage and fabrics and craft materials, because I just wanted to show them that I *could* paint [*laughs*]. But I was advised to take a photo class with David Hilliard, and he encouraged us to do personal documentary photographs. That led me to do a series of photographs with my mother. I started using photography more as a tool or resource--not necessarily to create a body of work.

MOORE: Did you keep them as a document of that period of learning?

THOMAS: Yeah, so they were really crappily taken. I didn't think about the medium at that time. And sometimes I used a disposable camera or a point and shoot because they were always just intended to be resources for my paintings.

MOORE: When did you start to look at them as more than documents?

THOMAS: A good photo friend who came to my studio was looking at some of my photo resources and he said, "I want *that* image. The way you shot your mother, it's not just a resource. Even if you're not looking at photography in that way, you're taking really great photographs." So that's when I decided to take the material and really think about the type of film I would use and started to consider composition.

MOORE: Well, I think one of the exciting things about your work is the sense of vibrancy. It's almost like I can hear soul music when I look at your work. Maybe Betty Davis or...

THOMAS: Yeah, well, it is-a lot of titles *are* from Betty Davis! I used to listen to a lot of music in my studio-all the time. But as far as the music that interplays with my work, what I've done and still do is keep a lyric book and song title. The material typically comes from Eartha Kitt, Betty Davis, Donna Summer, Whitney Houston...

MOORE: Chosen because they are divas?

THOMAS: Yeah, all of my favorite female heroines in music. After the painting's made, I think about the painting and peruse my song titles. And so that's how that works, and I'm glad you said Betty Davis because a lot of people don't know that most of them are from Betty Davis.

MOORE: Oh, Betty Davis was bad!

THOMAS: She was *very* bad [*laughs*]. She's the queen of funk and she has sort of a nasty mouth. And it's just my poetic way of flipping what the viewer's seeing and what the subject or the model is saying to the viewer-having a dialogue. It's this funny metaphor in the work that not everyone can get, but that's okay. It's exciting when people do notice those things.

MOORE: You've done a portrait of Naomi Campbell. How do you see your work

critiquing or bolstering black women in popular culture?

THOMAS: I'm loosely a product of hip-hop, and a lot of the images in that genre of women are very negative. Take Lil' Kim: She was doing what she was doing, but how much of that is her, and how much of that is her as a product of genre? I wanted to take control of my responsibility and how I could present something new.

MOORE: So how do black women respond to your work?

THOMAS: I think some still have issues when they see a breast, but I tell them when I photograph my models I want them to feel their sexy selves. If they're revealing to me their sexy selves by showing a little cleavage, then for me that is powerful. There's a greater power and charisma when a woman is aware of her sexual prowess when it's not necessarily about victimization or someone else's pleasure but her own feeling about her own body, and understanding and loving herself.