

ARTFORUM
April 20, 2009**Critics' Picks**
Mickalene Thomas
Lehmann Maupin

By Cameron Shaw

Walking into the back room of Mickalene Thomas's latest exhibition feels something like entering the communal dressing room at Loehmann's: Competing voices, private posturing, and copious rhinestones expose the vulnerable underpinnings of feminine self-creation. The three diptychs on display, each composed of a small painting and a video, similarly lay bare the artist's multistep process, providing one point of access to the larger-than-life paintings that form the bulk of the exhibition. Thomas's megawatt works begin as photographs, which are then collaged and projected onto panels, painted, and adorned with rhinestones. The artist's three sitters—Sandra, Fran, and Keri (all black women)—strut, smile, and seduce against a fractured setting of trompe l'oeil wood paneling, bold floral and animal prints, and blocks of flat color. The backdrops as readily evoke 1970s rec rooms and Blaxploitation flicks as the fragmented canvases of Romare Bearden, the lyricism of the Neo-Plasticists, and the ostentatious ornamentation of the Pattern and Decoration movement. The resulting pastiche duly imitates the piecemeal construction of personal as well as artistic identity, while problematizing the roles of both African Americans and women in the history of representation. In *Mama Bush: One of a Kind Two*, 2009, Sandra Bush (the artist's mother and frequent model) assumes the pose of Ingres's *Grand Odalisque*, 1814; an assured swath of zebra-patterned fabric replaces the nude concubine's feather fan. In the forty-part work *A-E-I-O-U and Sometimes Y*, 2009, close-ups of women's expressive faces recall Warhol's celebrity silk screens; some snap with bright color, while others border on abstraction in glittering ebony. The comparisons—like the models' stylings—are far from subtle, but therein lies the success of the exhibition. It is as if art history herself has put on her freakum dress, ready for a night out with Sandra, Fran, Keri, and the gang.