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Radar: Mickalene Thomas Body and Soul

With a nod to blaxploitation, and a wink to balthus, Mickalene Thomas is empowering women one portrait at a time.

By Luke Crisell

Although Mickalene Thomas and I are the only two people in her sprawling studio in the outermost reaches of Clinton Hill, Brooklyn, it seems as though we're not alone. Hanging on the walls around us are the pictures she's preparing for an upcoming show at Manhattan's Lehmann Maupin Gallery. The large, beguiling paintings depict fellow black women in various states of repose - laughing, languishing naked, contorted on a couch - and the characters seem to populate the space along with us.

"When I started photographing my mother [Thomas's first, and still most frequent, model], it opened up a new type of dialogue that I'd never had with her," says Thomas, who studied art at Yale. "She started sharing things with me about herself: her past, her relationship with men. Photographing her ... allowed me to start looking at her differently. It [became] a very therapeutic thing for both of us. I photographed her in this '70s crocheted negligee in her bedroom. I would give her a scenario like, 'OK, your boyfriend just came home You're feeling very sexy. You want to surprise him.'"

In its intimacy, Thomas's work calls to mind the compelling portraiture of Balthus, Paul Gauguin, and Manet. Like Balthus, Thomas is fascinated by the expression of sexuality. But where his nudes - often of children - lack adornments, Thomas clearly delights in decorating her subjects. As Manet kept a dressing-up box in his studio, so does Thomas have a couple of racks hanging heavy with vintage clothes in the corner of her studio.

Thomas situates her subjects in a meticulously detailed - and very '70s - environment. This retro backdrop actually exists in the back of her space: an installation complete with wood paneling, upholstered furniture, and fake fruit. It's all made to look like the kind of rooms that Thomas - who was born in Camden, New Jersey - sees in the homes of her family. "The sense of play is really important to me," she says. "A meditative process of putting [the scene] together feeds the work. So by the time I get to the paintings, I already know what I want to do." Thomas hires models or invites relatives (sometimes using herself as a subject) into the space, photographs them, makes collages, then starts on the paintings themselves. More often than not, they are decorated with thousands of rhinestones. "I feel like the rhinestones in my paintings are like that really glossy lipstick that women wear," she says. "It's another level of masking, of dressing up ... black people will go so far to overdress on some occasions, just to be noticed."

Theatrical and dynamic, the resulting character studies hum with an undercurrent of sexuality. "I think how a woman navigates her sexuality throughout the world allows her to be who she really is," she says. "That's one of the most powerful things that

distinguishes a woman from a man-[women] exude a really strong, charismatic sexuality. They know how to use it as a sense of power."

Unbelievably, for an artist whose work caused collectors at London's Pulse art fair in 2007 to hurry across the floor to buy it when the doors opened (one piece sold for \$50,000), Thomas's show at Lehmann Maupin is her first solo exhibit in New York City. "It was really important to me to align myself with a gallery that [thinks] beyond my cultural identity. To be honest, my work does better in Europe than here, and the read there is always very related to art history." She smiles, and gazes out of the window at the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. "Here, it's always related to my identity."