

Mickalene Thomas — Bringing bling to the art game

Illusion, mystique and plain beauty in sparkling paintings

SHE'S COME UNDONE!

Mickalene Thomas

Through May 2

Lehmann Maupin

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BY JEFFREY CYPHERS WRIGHT

America has three super myths – the frontier, the racial mix and the belief that anybody can be somebody. We're informed and fascinated by all three. Their intersection is our most potent avenue to metaphor and metamorphism.

Mickalene Thomas is a triple-crown contender in this arena. The National Portrait Gallery acquired her silkscreened portrait of Michelle Obama. This first solo exhibition in New York at Lehmann Maupin (she had a one person show at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago) calls for busting out the bubbly. A big, brassy blockbuster, it will knock your knickers off, whether you like it or not.

Thomas builds on traditional representations of women in the arts and grafts them to modern media and the appurtenances of soft porn, pop culture and Blaxploitation films of the 70s. But her quotes are dichotomous: half pastiche and half homage... half showgirl – half earthy matriarch. Her figures exude strength and inner assurance even while the artist appropriates questionable sources of authority.

### **Voodoo and rhinestones**

Mickalene told me that she didn't gravitate to art at an early age. **"I didn't think I could draw well. I was into sports in high school."** She did attend after school programs that her mother enrolled her in. These programs had craft elements that may have influenced the use of nontraditional materials such as the rhinestones and thrift store get-ups

her models wear. In addition to formal art training at Yale, the artist also studied Aboriginal art and Voodoo flags.

Thomas has transferred some of the flash of modern day celebrities in sports and music and brought the glittering bling to her art. She's not the first or only one to use rhinestones in paintings (Rhonda Zwillinger, Chris Ofili) but she has carved out a singularly attractive signature style. And now she's upped the ante by including Federovsky crystals in the newest work.

In the main gallery, four large portraits of African American females dominate the space. Posed in dramatically seductive and over the top poses with historical precedence, the women radiate sensuality, sass and volume.

The submissive, reclining female, or odalisque, is a somewhat thorny (and corny — think saloon nude) act in art history but it is definitely a perennial. And as the great actors know, you have to risk being corny. **Every queen comes with a fool. This artist keeps the jest in majesty.**

Thomas begins with a photo of a woman in a room. Often her subjects strike subtly contorted expressions of horizontals and diagonals. Vibrant throw pillows, couches with competing patterns and wood paneling form a tropical *mise en scene* in which the subjects bloom. Thomas then makes collages based on the photos that are used as studies for the paintings. Each reproduction adds a layer of illusion and mystique.

### **Naughty 'n' nice**

A playful audacity complements the sumptuous physicality in “Naughty girls (need love too)”. As the title implies, Thomas balances her siren's edge with grace and vulnerability. A woman in thigh high “hooker boots”, raises up horizontally off a couch by one leg and one elbow in a highly manipulated and suggestive pose. The boots and outfit are studded with numerous shiny rhinestones. Crystalline points accentuate the hair and face.

The odd angles of the woman, her head dipping down and her breasts thrust up, are integrated into the overall activity. In contrast, a midnight blue miniskirt and dark skin isolate the figure and project it forward.

The wooden panels of a 70s era rec room reflect the cultural milieu of Thomas's youth and are also autobiographical.

This autobiographical aura complements the art historic associations that are apparent in "Mama Bush: One of a Kind Two." Manet's "Olympia" is updated in this twelve-foot wide rhinestone, acrylic and enamel painting on a panel. Blocked color recalls Jacob Lawrence's bold exaggeration within a representational framework.

"Mama..." peers at us over her shoulder with a "come hither" look. A riot of fabrics on the couch evokes interiors by Bonnard or Vuillard. A fractured floral pattern drapes the couch, shimmering with hundreds of black, white and grey beads and clear crystals, emphasizing a powerful, abstract subtext.

### **Dramatic daring**

Mama Bush is apparently a code name for Mickalene's mother. In addition to this nude, a simple seated painting of Mama Bush in a dramatic black and red dress exudes a different kind of daring. Here smoldering elegance and dignity crackle into flame.

In a new direction for Thomas, a video of Mama Bush posing for the camera is presented beside a portrait, creating a technical diptych. Eartha Kitt songs add a final touch, both personalizing the sitter and monumentalizing her "Everywoman" aspect.

Returning to the multi-panel format of her "FBI/ Serial Portraits" and "America the Beautiful" series from last year, she has expanded to a 40 panel painting. "A-E-I-O-U and Sometimes Y" presents expressive faces in rows, photo booth style. Most faces are limited to two tones and reference the simple silk screens of Andy Warhol.

Ten full color portraits activate the grid, giving it the conductive resonance of "Broadway Boogie Woogie" by Mondrian. This extra association also reclaims the African-American heritage of boogie woogie and its blues roots.

In addition to the iconic portraits of females, Thomas previously created a series of "Big Cats". The feline images, while sleek, emanate menace. They are beautiful but remain wild... easy but ready to spring. Likewise, Mickalene Thomas's compelling oeuvre evokes both danger and

domesticity. She forces us to confront banal stereotypes and rewards us with complex archetypes.

Reflecting on a legend that Thomas must appreciate, Benetta Jules-Rosette and Njami Simon wrote in *Josephine Baker, the Icon and the Image*: “Even contemporary pilgrims, whose quest is secular rather than religious, seek to be close to icons and glorified objects of value so that some of the magical power will rub off on them.” Go, pilgrim.