

IN THE
STUDIO



Mickalene Thomas's *Between Ourselves*, 2007, an installation based on the set where she stages her photographs. Opposite: Thomas in her Brooklyn studio with works in progress for her Lehmann Maupin show, opening later this month.



MICKALENE THOMAS

With her '70s-inflected iconography and striking portraits of women, the artist is reinventing the grand tradition of painting. *By Meghan Dailey*
Photographs by Lisa Corson

"THERE ARE CERTAIN THINGS that you have a crazy fascination with, that just move you," says Mickalene Thomas. "And wood grain does that for me—I think it's because I grew up around it. It's very nostalgic." One corner of the 38-year-old artist's Brooklyn studio is a set designed like a 1970s living room, complete with, yes, wood-paneled walls. In this stylized environment, accessorized with a rotating set of props—wicker furniture, record albums, shot glasses and silk flowers—Thomas photographs models wearing eye-catching outfits or in various states of undress, against vivid upholstery. (She has also re-created this room before, as an installation.) The photos are artworks in themselves as well as the starting point for her collages and rhinestone-encrusted paintings, all of which are the subject of her debut show at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery, in New York, from March 26 through May 2.

Thomas populates her pieces with sexy, assertive and beautiful African-American women. They make reference to pop culture and high art: girl wrestlers and disco queens, Pam Grier's blaxploitation characters as well as Matisse's odalisques and Romare Bearden's abstract figures set off against patchwork backgrounds.

Wearing dark work jeans and a blue plaid shirt, her hair in short dreads, Thomas projects a more down-to-earth style than the glamorous figures she depicts. Not that she can't play the part: Before she had anyone pose for her, she put herself in front of the camera. "I wanted to do it so I could understand the idea of dressing up or emulating icons. I had just turned 30, and I found an old photo of my mother. Her hair was in braids, and she had this leopard-print bathing suit on. I got the bathing suit from her and a wig and photographed myself in

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celebration of my birthday.” Although this approach brings to mind the self-portrait masquerades enacted by Cindy Sherman in her “Untitled Film Stills,” she says it was directly inspired by *Jet* magazine’s Beauty of the Week feature—a housewife or college girl whose photo was published along with a little description of her hobbies, achievements and personal history.

Immersed as she was during her youth in the popular imagery of publications like *Jet* and *Ebony* and of ’70s funk and soul music (some of her paintings are titled after songs), Thomas, who was raised by her mother in northern New Jersey, was also looking at fine art. “My mother put me in the Newark museum after-school program, and we took field trips to the Met. Art was something I had fun doing and was good at, but I wanted to be a lawyer.” After high school she moved to Portland, Oregon, where she befriended many of the artists and musicians who formed a vibrant but relatively small creative community there. “It was easier to figure out what I wanted to do in a place like that than in New York,” she says. A friend asked Thomas to join him on an art-therapy retreat. He didn’t go, but she did and made “all of these crazy drawings” that to her surprise, became the basis of her portfolio. She was admitted to the San Francisco Art Institute but wanted to be closer to her family, so she applied and went to the Pratt Institute instead. By the time she graduated from the Brooklyn art school with a BFA, in 2000, she had made a lot of “sloppy but satisfying” abstract dot

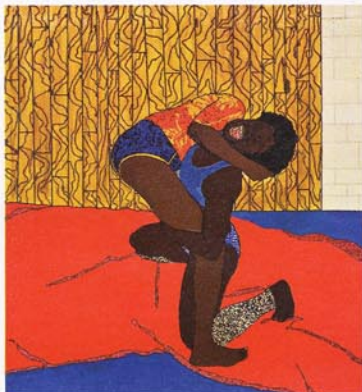
pictures. “Basically I made a painting a day. My professors weren’t into them—I think they wanted something more minimal—but they got me into Yale!” she exclaims, laughing.

At Yale, Thomas experimented with various abstract and conceptual styles (“I was all over the place”) and even imitated her mentor there, Mel Bochner, with some text paintings. After an unsatisfying phase using glitter, she began to incorporate rhinestones into her paintings. “It was a sense of landing home again,” she says. “It was meditative, and there was more immediacy.” This discovery—and that of photography, after the Yale faculty suggested she take a class in the medium—opened up her work.

The rhinestones, some are Swarovski crystal, are what define her paintings. She sets them like jewels in already bold floral and animal prints, creating a dazzling optical intensity and adding, through their sparkle, a sense of movement. She also uses them to outline the contours of the women’s bodies and emphasize their most sensual features—lips, eyes—and parts that are usually concealed: nipples, the lines on the soles of their bare feet. “Oil painting was never satisfying to me,” Thomas explains. “I always felt like I had to put something on it or it was never finished.” »



Clockwise from above: Rhinestones are applied meticulously to each of Thomas’s paintings by hand; *Portraits of Quanikah*, 2006; *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007; panels in progress in the artist’s studio; and *Instant Gratification* (From *Brawling Spitfire Wrestling Series*), 2005.



TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM RIGHT: LISA CORSON; OTHER IMAGES: MICKALENE THOMAS; RHONDA HOFFMANN GALLERY AND LEHMANN MAUPIN

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She buys the stones in bulk, having persuaded Margola, the longtime Garment District supply company, to give her a discount, and stores them, separated by color, in numerous clear plastic containers on shelves in her studio. The space, which is in a large building on an industrial street near the Brooklyn Navy Yard in Clinton Hill, has an expanse of windows with a view of the traffic snaking along the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. She walks here from her home, which is also in Clinton Hill, accompanied by Priscilla and Rocco, a pair of long-haired dachshunds that were gifts from her friend the painter and Yale graduate-school classmate Kehinde Wiley.

With the pups settled into a cozy spot under a desk, Thomas approaches a worktable covered with stacks of snapshots and ornate-looking but cheap frames—materials for her new works. “I’m still playing with them,” she says of the pieces, for which as many as eight picture frames are stacked around a snapshot, resulting in a kind of photo-sculpture. The layering technique she uses here corresponds to her larger, elaborate artistic process. Her paintings begin with creating the set and taking the photos, which are then printed, cut up and made into collages that she projects onto wood panels. After drawing the projected images onto the panels with pencil, she applies color employing Flashe, a vinyl-based paint, and something called 1 Shot, a shiny enamel used for detailing cars.

Clockwise from below: *Tamika sur une chaise longue*, a 2008 photograph; *This Girl Could be Dangerous*, 2007; Thomas considers a collage, one step in her multilayered process—the numerous steps are “what’s really fun about my work,” she says; and a bulletin board in her studio, covered with snapshots and source material.

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“My work is about a sense of empowerment and celebration of self,” Thomas says.

Then, the rhinestones are glued on individually. The many steps are “what’s really fun about my work,” says Thomas, who uses the words *fun* and *play* a lot in the context of art making. “You have to have that excitement. Once that’s gone it’s really difficult to create something.”

For the pieces in her show last November at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery, in Chicago (where her first solo exhibition was held, in 2006), Thomas decided to mix things up. “I wanted to focus the work around a tradition of painting,” she says. “Of all the shows I’ve done, it’s probably the most painterly.” To this end, she applied the rhinestones more sparingly, as in the regal portrait of a seated woman, *Din avec la main dans le miroir*, 2008, and riffed on traditional genres with a selection of flower still lifes and even, surprisingly, a large-scale landscape that suggests a Hudson River School scene filtered through her funky brand of analytic abstraction. “She’s layering history the way she layers fabric,” says Hoffman. The gallery had sold about half the 21 paintings (priced from \$20,000 up to \$90,000, for the largest panels) by the end of the exhibition’s run in January.

At the time of this studio visit, in late November, Thomas is between shows—her Rhona Hoffman exhibition having opened and her debut at Lehman Maupin still forthcoming—but the place is buzzing. “We have a lot to do,” she says, explaining that she’s just finished the photo shoots for the paintings for Lehman Maupin. Tacked up on one wall are a few digital prints of a woman »



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in her early to mid 50s wearing a curve-revealing ensemble, turning to look over her shoulder. Thomas also took her and two other women to a photo booth. Those snapshots are the basis for *A-E-I-O-U (And Sometimes Y)*, 2009, comprising 40 individual panels set with rhinestones against brightly colored backgrounds—a nod to Warhol's "Photo Booth" paintings.

Unlike her previous subjects, the models Thomas used this time seem to be posing for their own pleasure rather than the viewer's. "In her laughter she had a sense of freedom and excitement, of feeling alive," Thomas says of the woman in the prints. These models, one of whom is her mother, "have a different type of gaze," she adds, in part because they're not as young as those she typically shoots. Older women "exude their sensuality in a different way." Has anyone ever accused her of objectifying her subjects, whether young or old? "Yeah, I get that," she says. "But my work is about a sense of empowerment and celebration of self. Beauty, sexuality and sensuality—these are components of how we feel about ourselves."

"The visual presence of her works is so engaging," says dealer David Maupin. "But there's a lot of edginess too, because she photographs the women." The photo sessions, Thomas says, are collaborative, and the models "are often telling me what they want to do. If the women reveal a breast in the photo, I'm not asking them to do that. I tell them what I want, maybe show them a

pose from Manet or something, and we go through the outfits." Certain sitters appear more than once, and one in particular, Maya, is the subject of all the paintings Thomas made for about three years. "My relationship with Maya was different because she was also my girlfriend," says Thomas. "It was a relationship between artist and muse." Her last portrait of her former partner, the monumental reclining nude *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007, is prominently displayed in the Brooklyn Museum. It greets visitors as they approach a gallery of recent contemporary acquisitions and, appropriately, hangs adjacent to the entrance of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Thomas's work is also in the Rubell Family Collection, in Miami, and the Studio Museum Harlem, where she had a residency in 2002–03. Her work, Maupin says, is acquired by collectors from all over the world—Italian Princess Giulia Borghese is a fan—and although she rarely accepts commissions for portraits, she's doing one of Michaela Neumeister, a senior partner at Phillips de Pury & Company and the first white woman Thomas has painted.

Thomas is pleased with her recent creations and looking forward to what's next on the calendar. Later this spring, she'll have more new work at Suzanne Vielmetter Projects in Los Angeles. The artist's aspirations suggest she's thinking not just about the next commission or show but farther ahead, to how her work might fit into the canon. "I'm hoping my paintings are going to be part of art history," she says. "When you see an image in a book—a female nude by Courbet, for example—"next to it you'll see a work by Mickalene Thomas." ▢

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Clockwise from above: *Landscape with Woman Washing Her Feet*, 2008, shown at the Rhona Hoffman gallery last fall; *Photomontage 6*, 2008; a new portrait underway in the studio; and *Negress 2*, 2005, an early work for which Thomas posed, outfitted in a wig and her mother's vintage bathing suit.

