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PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT

ART



LUSH LIFE

Studded with rhinestones and coated with bright enamel paint, the painting-collages of **Mickalene Thomas** seduce and dazzle. Often depicting African-American women in colorful interiors, they take inspiration from the past—the sensuous odalisques of Matisse and Ingres—while also pushing portraiture forward alongside artists like

MAGIC FOREST
LANDSCAPE WITH
CAMOUFLAGE, 2012

Chris Ofili, Marilyn Minter, and Kehinde Wiley. "All of the materials I use have to do with artifice," says Thomas, 41, whose first solo museum show opens at the Brooklyn Museum this month. "I'm interested in mystery—how there's always another layer once you scrape away or unravel something. There's a grit underneath." "Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe" features roughly 100 works, most of them new, including photographs and a 1970s-style living-room installation. "When you look at her work," says curator Eugenie Tsai, "you're thinking of Foxy Brown but also of contemporary African photographers." For the show, Thomas is debuting her very first documentary film. The subject is dear: her own mother, Sandra Bush, a former fashion model who has been Thomas's muse since the artist was a graduate student at Yale. In works like the mixed-media collage *Mama Bush One of a Kind* (2007), Thomas's mother comes across as a classic figure from art history, languidly recumbent on a patterned sofa. But struggles with illness have taken their toll of late. "I realized I had stopped using her in my work," says Thomas. "So I had to question myself—what was that about? One day I was helping her get dressed, and I asked her, 'Can I film you?' And she said yes." The film represents another attempt by the artist to peel back layers of outer beauty in search of inner strength. "I thought there was something there to engage a conversation. Not just as a mother and daughter but in terms of an artist's relationship with her muse, too."—TED LOOS