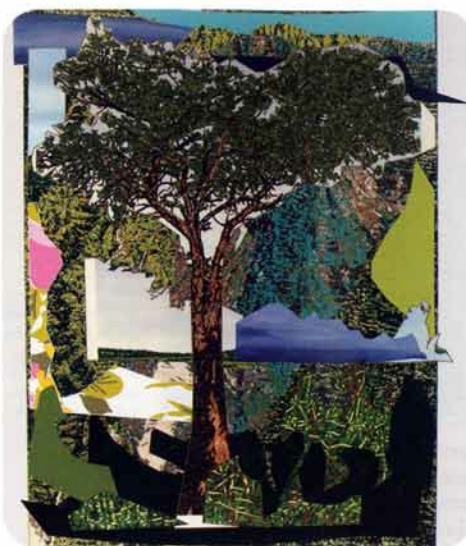


## Mickalene Thomas SANTA MONICA MUSEUM OF ART

REVIEWS

Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (The Origin of the World), 1866, was staged to great effect in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2008 retrospective, where a protective wall, rather than secreting it away, none too subtly called attention to the infamous painting of a crotch splayed open. Mickalene Thomas's rejoinder—the crux of her first solo museum exhibition, “Origin of the Universe,” which opened at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and is currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum—is rooted in this retrospective, and the physical fact of confronting the panel seems key to what she makes of it: three versions of the original (all works 2012), with herself and her partner alternately serving as the models for the cropped, attenuated figure disappearing under the folds of rumpled bed linens. As with her pastiches of Hockney and Braque, Manet and Matisse, Ingres and Romare Bearden, Thomas's straight-up evocations of Courbet are thick, tangible things that evidence the weight of her borrowings with bracing earnestness. But the Courbet images are more forthright about Thomas's ambition relative to capital-H history, claiming her consequence, rather literally, in a long narrative of representational gambits. (In Santa Monica, lest the point be missed, Thomas propped a massive collage, *Landscape with Camouflage*, on an oversize easel.)



Mickalene Thomas.  
*Landscape with Tree*.  
2012, rhinestones,  
acrylic, oil, and  
enamel on wood  
panel, 100 x 90 x 2".

With *Origin of the Universe 1* anchoring the show, the selection of work on view, as stated in the press release, “examines art historical constructs of feminine identity, sexuality, beauty, and power.” Perhaps it is no surprise that, given this orientation, Thomas takes on Duchamp, reprising his seminal *Étant donné*s as *Take All the Time You Need*. Following Duchamp's conceit of presenting a scene spied through a pair of bored holes, Thomas used SMMA's project space to fashion a room accessible through peepholes alone. During the opening, viewers would have glimpsed a woman lounging in the cloistered area; afterward, her scent lingered, while the place, pulsing with a 1970s funk sound track,

was otherwise unoccupied. Through the crevice, a wood-paneled period piece came into focus, replete with allusive details: patchwork, multipatterned furniture straight out of the artist's childhood; framed geometric abstractions whose patterns complemented those in the fractured surface planes of Thomas's paintings; and books, including *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement*, which informed the depictions of depopulated interiors situated in the adjacent SMMA galleries. Through the knickknacks, too, one might have spotted a third version of the *Origin of the Universe* adorning the rear wall (the other two iterations were installed in the galleries proper).

Though the Technicolor homages to Malian photographers Malick Sidibé and Seydou Keita that have made Thomas's career—big, gorgeous rhinestone-encrusted portraits of accessorized and painted women (including her model-collaborators Din and Qusuquzah, both depicted here)—are well represented in this show, the strongest works are, perhaps, her paintings of empty rooms. Like *Take All the Time You Need*, they cannily imply corporeal presence without actually representing bodies and while refusing the encyclopedic purview implied by their source (the home-decor volume discreetly shelved in the antechamber). Particularly convincing is *Interior: Striped Foyer*, a madcap picture of a vestibule with a side table and shifting wall planes covered in wallpaper so finely striped as to produce an assailment comparable to the queasy afterimages of Op art. *Interior: Blue Couch with Green Owl* sports a foreground coffee table holding the titular bird figurine, a fruit bowl, and a pile of magazines—elaborate excuses for the production of a still life—while the whole scene allows for a magpielike overlay of a modernist aesthetic. Broadly characteristic of Thomas's embalming of precedent under layers of enamel, these works transcend their references to history and start making it.

—Suzanne Hudson