

At the center of Mickalene Thomas's exhibition, *Origin of the Universe*, is a cropped nude portrait of a black female torso. The painting updates *L'origine du monde*, folding Courbet's famously ambiguous gesture back on itself to re-inscribe it within a narrative of black identity politics and feminist sexuality. The original ambiguity doesn't disappear, however—it proliferates a series of new questions about which universe is being created and what or whom is doing the creating. The questions are again re-phrased and compounded on the cover of the monograph accompanying the show, which instead of the nude torso displays a photograph of a one of Thomas's signature cozy interiors. A brightly patterned couch with a riot of throw-pillows nestles in the corner of a presumptive living room, waiting placidly beneath Thomas's ubiquitous wall-paneling and a photograph of a naked woman seated in a refracted, nearly identical environment, her afro the same size as the vinyl records haloed on the wall behind her.

These two different implicit versions of the *Origin* mutually inform each other and map out the valences Thomas's work has taken recently—zooming in to deep personal interiors and telescoping out to collaged landscapes and figureless spaces. While 'figureless' isn't usually a very descriptive term, in Thomas's work it makes sense; the momentum of the body of work she has produced over the last decade of her meteoric rise implies a figure even when none is present. She has become famous for her bold rhinestone-encrusted portraits of black women seated in plush cacophonous interiors, the women's postures at once seductive and challenging, lustrous and evaluative. This work culminated in Thomas's gigantic painting commissioned by MOMA in 2010. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noir*—a fractured, explosive kaleidoscope of texture and pattern presided over by three women who look back at the viewer as though waiting for answer as to why you have interrupted their moment (but maybe if you're cool you can have some quiche). Now, even when Thomas paints a room without anyone there, you still feel the presence of her women boldly gazing out.

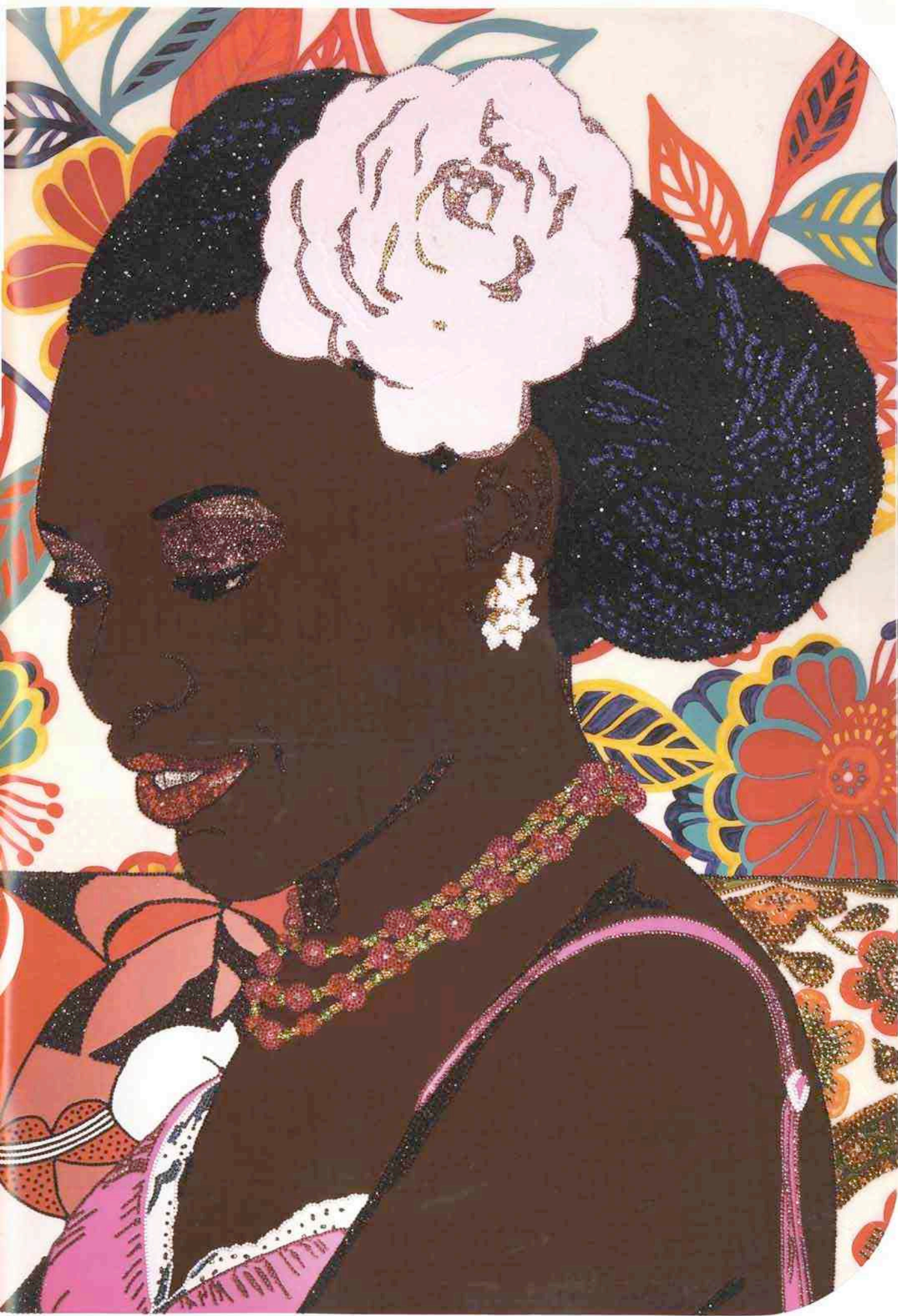
Thomas's landscapes remove further from figured space without leaving altogether the realm of interior. Strips of camouflage fight for space with 'trees' of wood paneling punctuated with colored shapes that recall Stuart Davis's work. But under Thomas's hand, even the naked torso of *Origin* itself becomes a refracted landscape, viewed and viewing without eyes, a cipher yet still a real physical presence. *Origin of the Universe*—Thomas's recent large-scale solo museum exhibition, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, represents a huge transition in her work both in style and subject matter, while retaining her signature themes. We spoke about the new show, her technique and what has lead her to this point in a recent phone conversation...

BY SEAN KENNERLY / IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST

# MICKALENE THOMAS











(previous page)  
**Portrait of Mnonja with  
 Flower in Her Hair #2**, 2011  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 60x48 in.

(this spread)  
**Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe les  
 Trois Femmes Noires**, 2010  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 120x288 in.

**Baby I am Ready Now**, 2007  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 72 x132 in.







**Sean Kennerly: The first thing that jumped out at me about your show *Origin of the Universe* is the space in the paintings. How did you approach space differently for this show?**

**Micaklene Thomas:** The space in the work has to do with how I'm considering a collage space against a flat space and a perspective space. Flatness versus perspective. I was considering the edge of things, how certain elements of an edge can determine what's in a foreground or a background. A lot of my earlier works were very central and very flat, and oriented the image more graphically. I was really interested in how flatness could appear flat, but once you deal with the edge of it, you could create depth-of-field. That came about through working with my collages—the tactile, hands-on considering of the materiality of how I could transform a collage into a painting. I'm not sure if I'm always successful, but I'm trying to transform the essence of a collage into a painting.

**SK: It seems like you approach your landscapes more from a collage perspective.**

**MT:** Yeah, I think it's partly that, but I think the landscape informs more of the collage element, because it allows me to work with the image itself and juxtapose all the contrasting elements I am working with on a flat plane without a figure. Because in the beginning, I was thinking those ways, but it would always become convoluted in my creative mind because the figure held such importance for me and was so much more significant in relationship to the center—there wasn't enough critical distance where I could just think about formal aspects of the image, there was a different connection. So I think working with the landscape allows me to be more free in how I approach the process. That transition in how I

approached my studio practice opened up new ways in how I was working and looking at the images that I'm interested in.

**SK: You have a painting from 2007 called *Baby I'm Ready Now*...**

**MT:** Yeah, I did that for a 2007 show at Caren Golden Gallery. It was a two person I did with Shinique Smith. The title of the show was *Prime Time*, and *Baby I'm Ready Now* was a title that I took from a song by Mille Jackson. It's an image of my friend Aisha Belle. The painting is a play on the idea of the availability of this black woman's sexuality, of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of a specific stereotypical idea of black women's sexuality. I used that as a way of creating that image. For me, that was probably one of the first paintings where I really started thinking about the interior space or core, and about how the figure, the model sat in that space. It no longer became centralized graphically, but became more about how she resided in that space, her body language, how the control of her environment, her own situation and her gaze, and how she was situated in that space. I guess it's a diptych, but I look at it as one painting. And it was the first time where one side of it was without a figure and was mostly abstracted space—I think it's the left side—and that was very exciting for me, it was like, 'Ok I'm going to try this, I don't know how this is going to work, but...' I was very interested in creating a space that has a figure in it, and how that space relates to or responds to the figure but in an abstracted way—just have it be like a one painting next to a bigger painting and see how those two things work together. It was the beginning of me experimenting with allowing my collages and what's happening in my collage work translate into

painting with the tools of painting, if I could. It was very exciting that in some ways it worked for me. In the craft of it there were some parts that were flat and in the foreground and then the space receded and the way she sat in it you really got a sense of her being in the environment that I create in my studio where I photographed her. So for me that painting had great significance because it was a drastic shift in my work from 2005 to 2006, and it opened the door for a lot of works from 2006 that incorporate the way I make my collages. I really wanted to keep some of those edges and force that in a way, and play with it in the sense that, 'OK, I'm doing this in the collage, why am I not doing it in the painting?' I was removing things and omitting things so much that, once I got to the painting, I didn't feel like things were evolving in the direction that I wanted them to. But I try to have my studio practice inform the evolution, the process of my work in the direction that it's going to go, just to have it be very organic, it's very important to me because of a lot of things change from one body of work to the next, but it's not some drastic jump or shift, it's a slight progression of where the works going and what I'm thinking about. It all comes from work I do in my studio and playing with different materials.

**SK: When you're doing a collage, you're working in the studio, but you're envisioning something outside of it, but your interior work is always manufactured in the studio.**

**MT:** Yeah, I have an interior up in the studio right now. I feel like it's best, it's my process from start to finish. I guess for some it could seem quite laborious, but for me, through every aspect of the work I'm thinking about constructing the paintings, the composition of the paintings, the sitter in the painting



(clockwise from top left)  
**Landscape Majestic**, 2011  
 Woodblock, silkscreen and  
 digital collage print,  
 52x68 5/8 in.

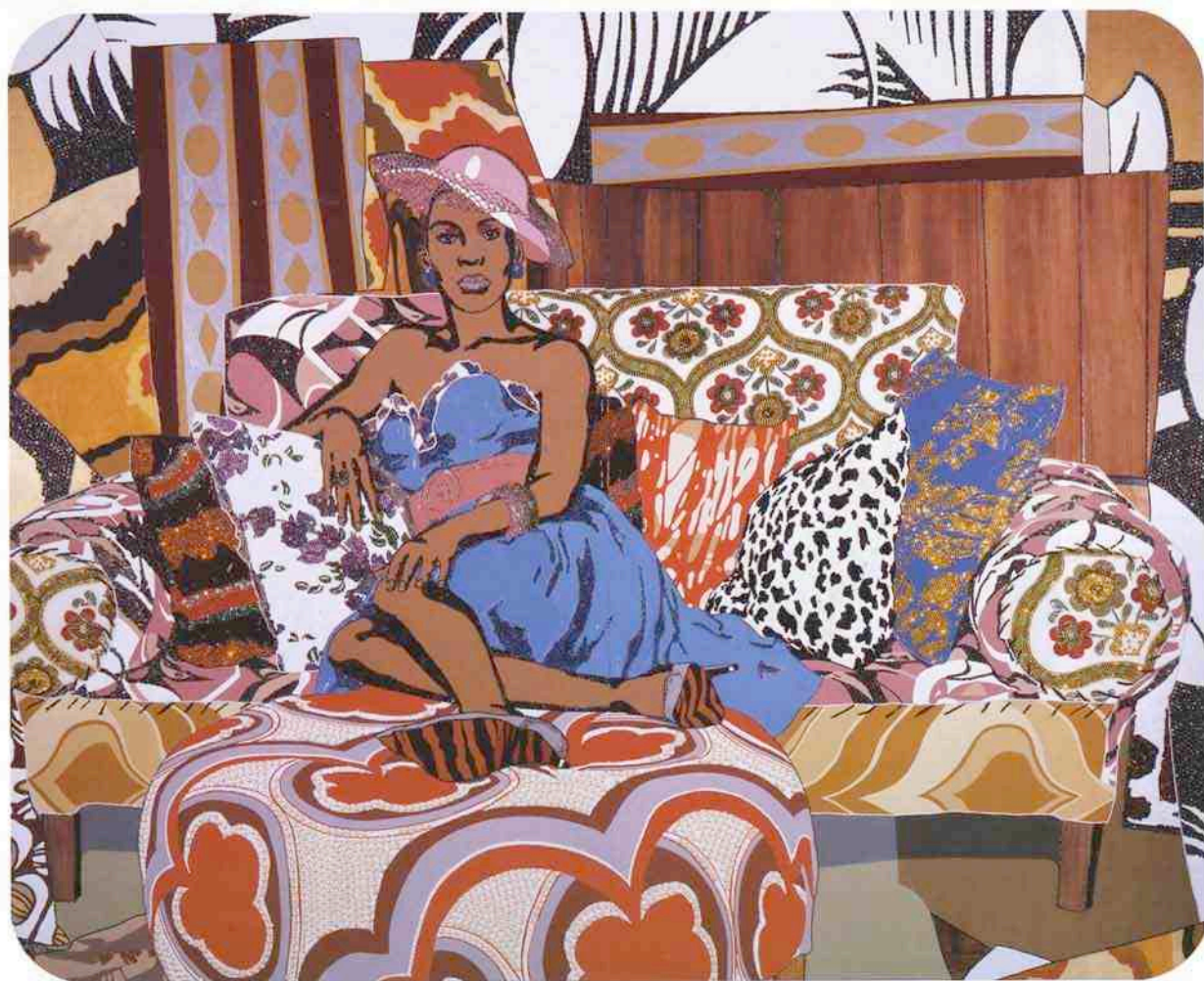
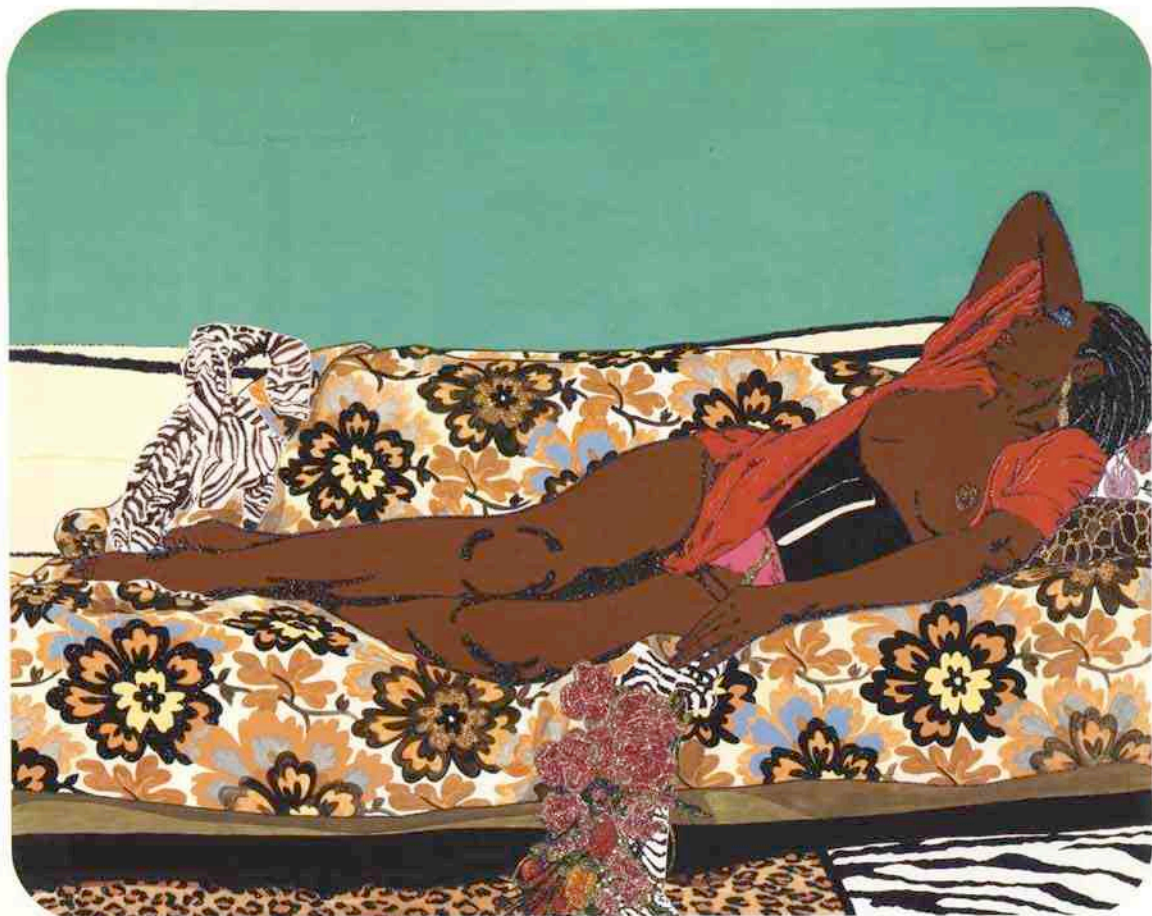
**Portrait of Madame Mama  
 Bush 1**, 2010  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 84x108 in.

**Something You Can Feel**, 2008  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 96x120 in.

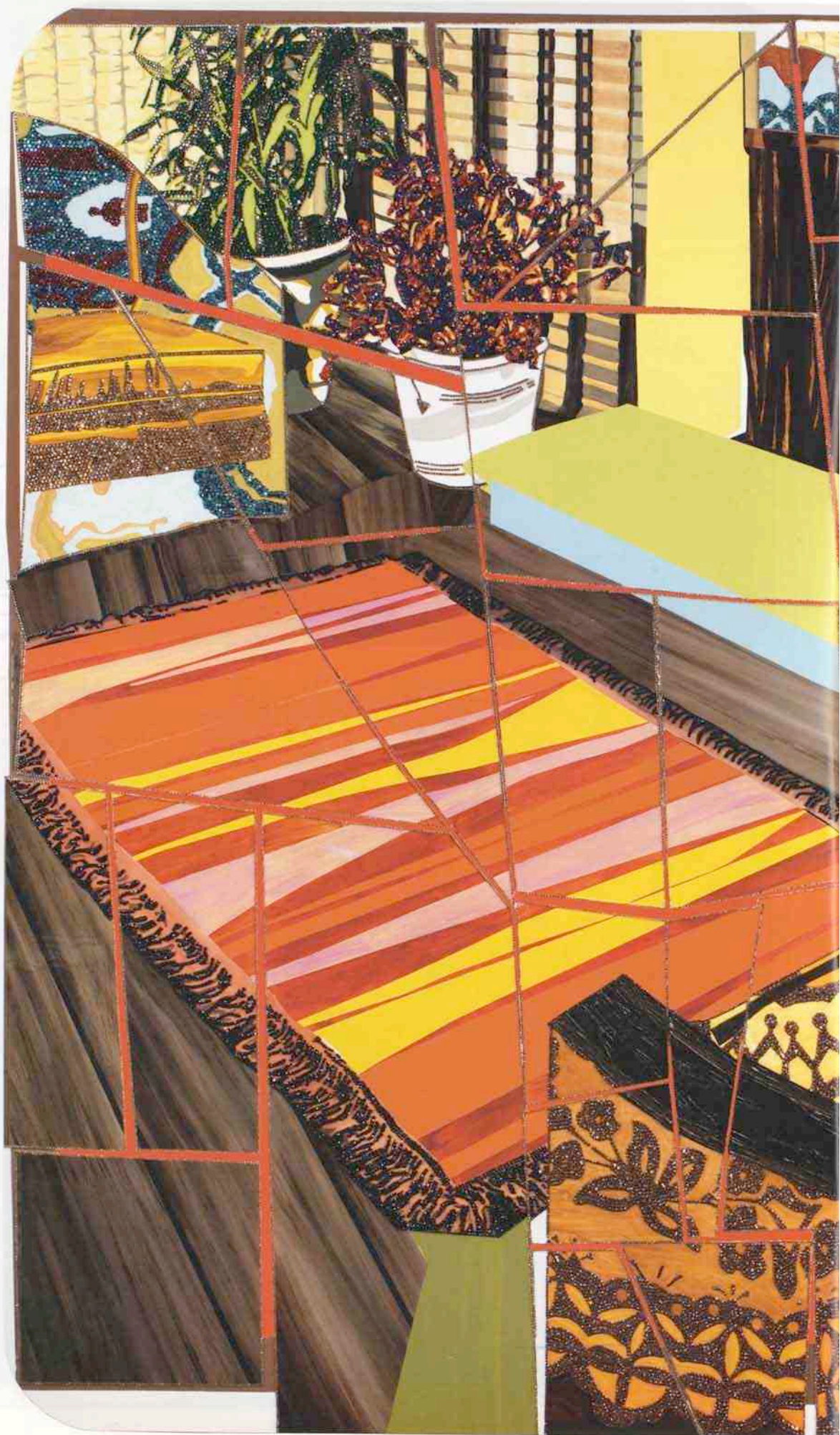
**Three Graces Les Trois  
 Femmes Noires**, 2011  
 Rhinestones, acrylic and  
 enamel on wood panel,  
 108x144 in.



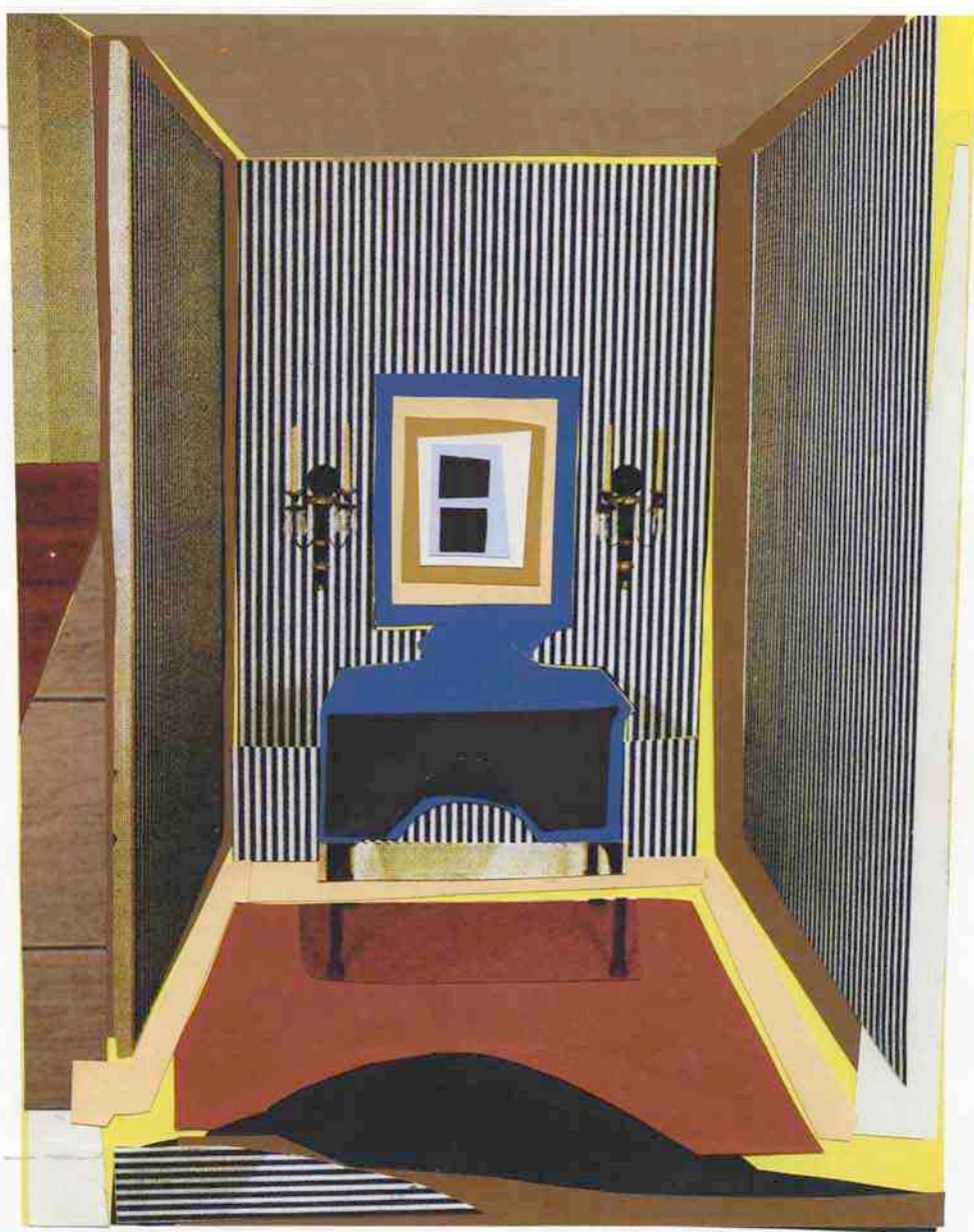












**Interior: Striped Foyer, 2011**  
Color photograph and paper  
collage, 11x8 1/2 in.

**(opposite)**  
**Interior: Two Chairs and a  
Fireplace, 2012**  
Rhinestones, acrylic and  
enamel on wood panel,  
96x72 in.

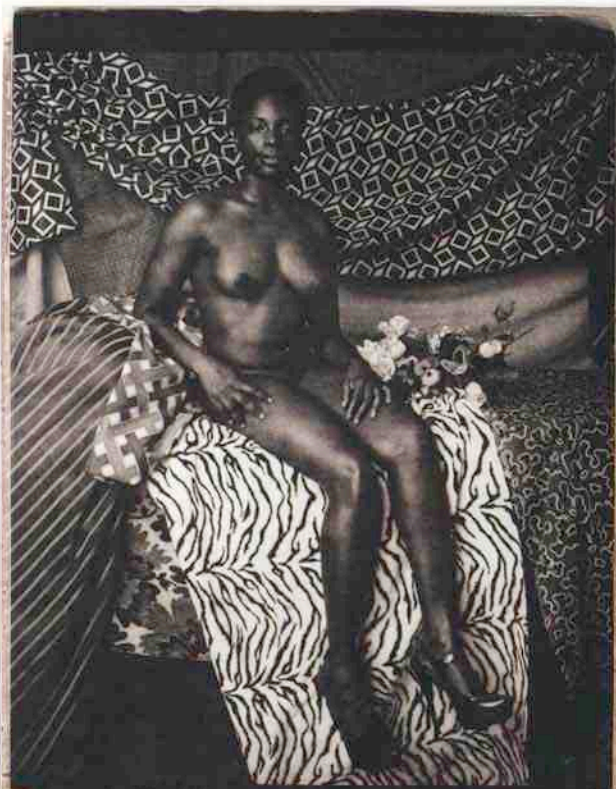
— for me, I enjoy the tangible thing, so I really need to visually construct the space so I can start thinking about how I want to create the painting. It goes as far as where I do build up the installation, I throw wall paneling up, wallpaper, the coats are arranged, the linoleum, the carpet and all that. It's creating a real environment, so when I photograph the models, it's exciting and fun, and they're not just sitting in front of a fabric that's on the wall. They really become part of the space and engage with the space. From those photographs I then select which ones I want to print and cut up for my collages. I make a series of collages. My collage work is more like a way of drawing, of figuring out what kind of relationships I want in the painting, as far as the flat planes of color, the wood-paneling what's the rhythm of the painting. I then I choose which collage I want to transform into a painting. Sometimes it works, and then sometimes I have to reference one of the collages that I didn't use because the color's better and it changes. But it allows me to work a lot of things out first before I go to the painting. That's not to say that once you start painting that things don't change — they do. Not everything that works in a collage works well in the materials that I'm working with when I'm making a painting.

**SK: Your work also seems to have shifted in its temporal focus—your new show has fewer references to '70s or '60s style.**

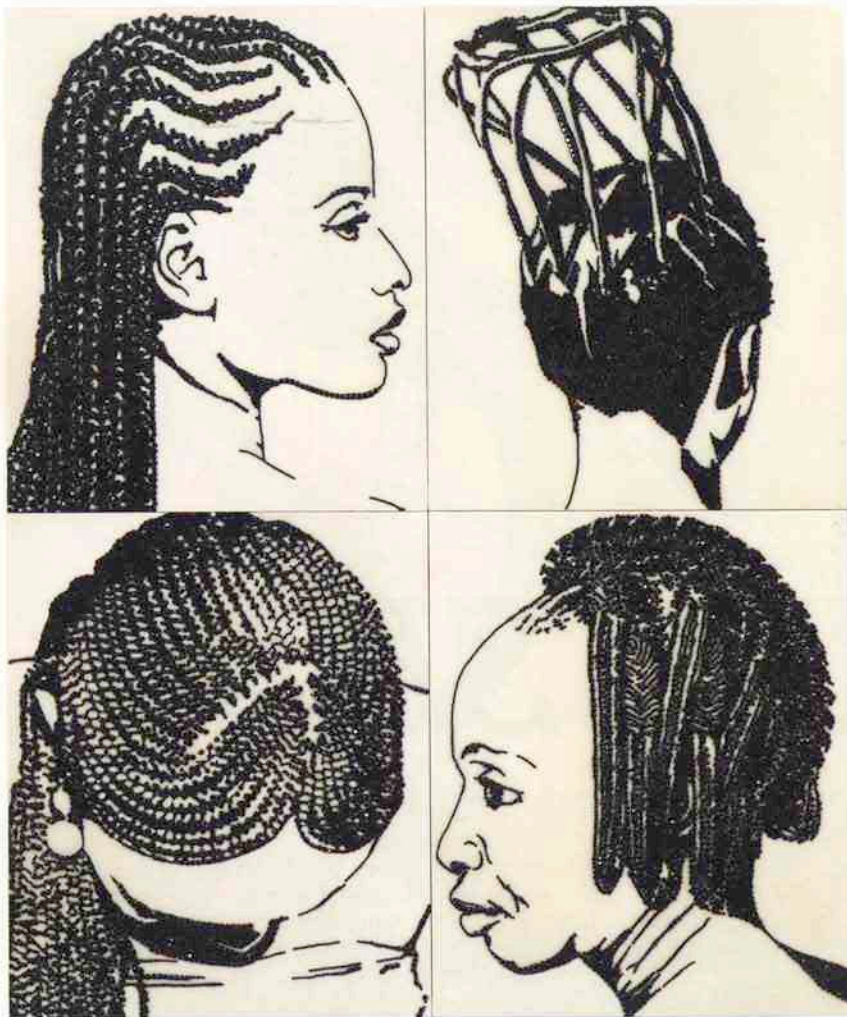
**MT:** Well, when I was invited to do this show with Lisa Melandri, when my gallery Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles spoke with the Santa Monica Museum

about doing a solo show, initially they wanted to do all loaned works, borrowed works for the show. I thought that was exciting, because of course that's what museums want to do, they want to see if they can curate an idea around works that already exist. I had a conversation with her, and you know I was playing with a lot of ideas in my studio and I started changing some of the material I was working with, I began working in oil paint. I spoke to Lisa and I said, you know I want to do some new works. I want to shift my painting in a new direction but still have it conceptually be interesting to me, to still have it come from some my ideas from the '70s and concepts that I have, but to bring in new ones. It was an opportunity for me to try these things and put it out there and play around. As an artist, I think it's important to have my work not be about just one thing. As I develop and my work changes, my ideas do to. I'm interested in many things, and I hope to bring some of those experiences and those ideas into the work, so that those aspects are prevalent and people can get a piece of where I'm at, and where I think I want my work to go. The interiors in the show were inspired by a show that I saw at MOCA on interiors of the 50s and 60s that I really enjoyed, as well from a book that I found years ago called the *Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement*. When I found one of these volumes, I thought 'Himn, I'm creating some of these in my studio,' and so I went on Amazon and got the entire edition. I wanted to figure out how I could incorporate some of these images into my own works.









**Hair Portrait #7**, 2012  
Rhinstones and acrylic on wood panel, 48x40 in.

(opposite, clockwise from top left)  
**Portrait of Marie. Sitting in Black and White**, 2012  
Photogravure 21x16 3/4 in.  
From an Edition of 20 and 8 Artist's Proofs

**Put Something Down On It**, 2009,  
C-Print, 60x48 in. From an Edition of 5 and 2 Artist's Proofs

**Hot Wild Unrestricted**, 2009  
C-Print, 24x30 in. From an Edition of 5 and 2 Artist's Proofs

I began to scan them in and get photographs printed of them, and then started collaging them, mixing them up with other images that I had.

**SK:** You're specifically talking about the interiors in the show, the Striped Foyer painting and Blue Couch with Green Owl?

**MT:** Yeah, those come from images from the encyclopedia and photographs of landscapes that I've taken, from my own photographic resources and my installations. I wanted to recreate an interior environment that was removing the figure. Artificial spaces that appear to be real environments, but they're not. None of those spaces exist—they're all fabrications of spaces that I would imagine, or spaces that I would create if I could with the actual materials. It was easier to do it with the collage and then make paintings of them. And I wanted to do something without the figure—it's as simple as that.

**SK:** You also went in the other direction, with close-ups of the figure in your updating of Courbet's *L'origine du monde*. Was that a counter-balance?

**MK:** Absolutely. It's a way to have all these aspects of my work in the show. It's also just about having fun with painting. Sometimes I can get bogged down with certain things and images, so for me, I just want to have fun with the painting and creating the image. I think working abstractly without a figure, it's just easier sometimes, you know, figure painting and portrait painting you get so attached to that person that it doesn't allow you to really think about a painting.

And I started looking at a lot of other bodies of work that I never really truly considered before—I became really interested in Stuart Davis and how these flat planes of color, how he created these flat planes and geometric shapes of color to create space. I found those very interesting and wanted to use some of those elements in my own work. And that's why every once in a while you'll see these big sheets or shapes of flat color. He creates a different type of collage of shapes that I find very interesting. There's a rhythm that I'm

interested in. It reminds me of Jacob Lawrence. So those are some new things that I'm playing with in my own work. I'm interested in that way of painting right now. I think I'm interested in genres and formalities of painting more than the concept behind it.

**SK:** In general, your work seems very joyful and positive.

**MT:** It does? That's nice.

**SK:** I wonder if you really think of it that way, as opposed to this dark heavy thing where you're working out demons...

**MT:** Yeah, the world's already full of that. You know, I'm interested in beautiful images and things that make people feel good. I actually like that you think that my images are positive. If I was to start working with dark and heavy ideas or images, I would probably get depressed. I think some people can work with those things, but I can't. It's not how I live my life and I think my work has all aspects of who I am as a person. Artwork and creativity are an extension of the person. It's up to us to make works that make the viewer see the world in our way. That could be political, or controversial—whatever aspects that person is interested in, it's up to them to be as authentic as they can with their creative work.

**SK:** Courbet's *L'origine* has a long history controversy and censorship—I was reading the other day about how it is currently banned on Facebook.

**MT:** You can't post mine there either. You can't even print them in newspapers or use them for press.

**SK:** You've encountered problems with that already?

**MT:** Yeah. It's really funny. I think when as a society we allow women to have control over our own reproductive rights, that's when we are going to allow a female nude to exist in the world the way it should be. We still have a long way to go when we have our government determining what a woman can and cannot do to her own body. We still have problems. The female nude in that sense, it's like c'mon now, where are we? Where are we living? It's

so much deeper than an edict of female genitalia. That image will always be very powerful, it will always be controversial because of the problems we have in the world. It's like, there's other issues that require our attention much more than a created, secondary image that's of an expression in an artistic form that's about the illusion and fantasy that's trapped into the provocative notions of what we're dealing with. There are other ways that we could deal with this issue than banning certain expressions of creativity. Those things, these images are harmless. The restrictions they put on women's reproductive rights are harmful. I have problems with them not letting the image up on Facebook. They think people aren't able to deal with certain images. There's such a waste about female sexuality. You know, I'm glad to know that my body has so much power in the world that people cannot deal with that, with looking of female sexuality. America—we're complacent and lazy. It just makes me really sad somehow that we can't use certain images in 2013. That's why it's important for artists to keep making what they're going to make. Because there may be some time when we may not be able to. We may be jailed or fined or stoned. So I'll stick to my pretty images for a little longer. I'm not ready to have a fight. That's why I love Tracy Emin's work. She did a sort of *Origin of the Universe* but with her neon lights. So colorful, just a line form, saying so much with so little. But those were banned too.