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A Sky Filled with Shooting Stars
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"I think every artist would like to be a rock star." – Robert Ayers in conversation with Mickalene Thomas

No one walking along West 53rd Street on the way to MoMA this summer can miss Mickalene Thomas's remarkable installation *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* in the window of The Modern restaurant. What may come as a surprise to many MoMA visitors though, are the direct links that exist between her installation and the current Matisse show. She discusses them here and they prove utterly fascinating.

Since graduating her painting MFA from Yale in 2002 Mickalene Thomas has established herself among the most engaging individuals in contemporary art, at once intelligent and provocative. And her art is among the most complex. Her subject is the black woman, her almost invisible place in the history of art, and the broad range of cultural advantages and disadvantages that she currently faces. Her subjects – who range from her close friends to professional models to media celebrities – are mostly portrayed larger than life in photographs or videos or in garish enamels and glittering rhinestones and emerge as powerful, sexual, somewhat unnerving presences, staring brazenly out of the picture.

Mickalene Thomas has enjoyed solo exhibitions at La Conservera: Centro de Arte Contemporaneo, Murcia, Spain and at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Last year she had her first solo showing in New York, "She's Come UnDone" at Lehmann Maupin, and earlier this summer she exhibited "Put A Little Sugar In My Bowl", a solo show at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. In the summer 2010 issue of V Magazine she portrays Naomi Campbell in Swarovski crystals, but our long and thoroughly entertaining conversation focused, to begin with at any rate, on that piece on West 53rd Street.

Mickalene, your MoMA commission *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, has been getting a lot of attention. How did it come about?

It was spearheaded by Klaus Biesenbach, who's been a great admirer and supporter of my work. I was in the Greater New York 2005 show at P.S.1 and we first met then. He wanted to do a project with me, and so after my first solo show at Lehmann Maupin in 2009 (MoMA had just acquired a video and a painting) Klaus proposed that I do this commission in conjunction with The Modern restaurant. He really pushed me forward.

How did you feel when you heard you'd got the commission?

When I agreed to do it I wasn't sure where the piece was going to be located until Klaus told me. So I went to have a look and I thought, "Wow! This is really challenging!" It's a pretty large-scale window, about 12 feet by 28 feet, but I like to challenge myself, and push the boundaries with my work. It came at a time when I was working on the solo show I just had with my gallery in Los Angeles, and I had to

put that show on hold just to do this project. It was quite a feat!

How did you arrive at the subject matter?

I wanted to figure out a way where it wouldn't be just another painting, but a painting about my experience of MoMA, so I asked them if it would be possible to do something a little more site-specific. I really wanted to work from a photographic image that would be my response to MoMA, so instead of photographing the models in my studio, I wanted to photograph them at MoMA. I explored the different floors and when I was walking through the sculpture garden I saw they had the Matisse sculptures out there, and I thought that it would be a great opportunity to photograph these women looking at Matisse because he's a great inspiration for my work.

So I thought, "This will be really great, to do it right here in the sculpture garden!" So I chose the image of Manet's Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe (because I use Manet a lot in my work as well) and went from there. It was very site-specific: I brought the models in one Sunday evening, and they were all stylized with make-up and hair and clothing, and we photographed them right out there.

It's ingenious really, because the Matisse takes the place of the fourth figure in the Manet.

Exactly. I was trying to find a way of posing the models so that the Matisse could be in it, and I didn't have to try that hard because the Matisse sculpture became the woman in the Manet. When I was looking through the lens and trying to compose the image I wanted to have the depth of field that Manet has with the woman in the background, and it created that same environment, without me trying, really. Everything fell into place. Everything felt right. I didn't have to try reconstructing things or forcing things. I saw it and I responded and it worked. It was like, "Wow! There it is!" It was one of those things where you know that it was meant to be. But it was my decision to recognize it and use it.

One significant difference from the Manet is that in his version the figure to the right is looking at the other two figures, whereas in your rendition she's a typically Mickalene Thomas woman in that she's staring directly at the spectator with that confrontational gaze.

Yes, she is. And I did that for a reason because in the Manet there are two men who are dressed and one woman who is not dressed. That was very controversial at the time. And in my picture there are these two women who are lounging at a picnic and this woman who I wanted to address the viewer. There are very few of my paintings or photographs where the sitters are not looking out at the viewer, and the gazing is about how the sitter addresses the viewer so that the viewer responds by really looking at the sitter. I think that when the eyes meet there's a recognition and acknowledgement and validation: you see me and I see you. To me that's a very important quality in my work. The sitters are aware of their empowerment but also of the viewer's response to it.

Their empowerment?

I like my women to be presented as very conscientious, very empowered, very charismatic – strong women who are aware of their environment and their experiences. I'm not making them do anything. It's a collaborative effort, because I'm taking the image, I'm photographing them, but they're aware of me doing this with them. It's not as though the artist is explaining the sitter.

That's crucial, I think, particularly as people have accused you of exploitation.

I get a lot of people asking, "Are you exploiting these woman?" and it's something I think about: there's always the concern that the sitter is a kind of harem odalisque, where she has no control over what is happening, and it's all happening to satisfy the male gaze.

But what about the woman's power? Knowing that she's created this persona, and that it was a collaborative thing. The sitter has control over how they want to be presented, and the gaze is a multiple thing, with the artist, the viewer, and the sitter. It gets very complicated in terms of who is really in control of the gaze: is it the person who is taking the image? Or is it the sitter who is giving you that image? It's like holding up a mirror. Who has the lens? Is it the sitter or is it the artist? Or is it the viewer? The whole psychological idea of autonomy is brought into question, I think.

Is this affected by who sees your work? How do you feel about having the commission seen by that weird cross-section of people – everyone from tourists to businessmen – who walk along West 53rd Street every day??

I felt a slight disappointment when Klaus said where the painting was going to be. But then I reconsidered the context and the viewership it offered, and I thought how powerful that is: the opportunity for my work to be in a venue where it reaches a wide audience of people who never see my work and never get a chance to respond to it. When we were installing the work all sorts of people were walking by and responding: "Who's this woman? What's this work?" There was a young black family from Minnesota. They were tourists, bringing their kids here. They were saying, "I never saw work like this. I never saw black women in paintings like this before." So it totally reaches the territories that I would like my work to reach. People have the opportunity to see it, and that's a great power. Anyone – any businessman, or corporate person, or taxi driver, whoever they are – can experience this painting. For me that's very exciting. Isn't that every artist's dream? It's like being a rock star without … being a rock star! I think every artist would like to be a rock star. That feeling of being on stage and performing for an audience of thousands of people, that's an exhilarating experience, and this is what's happening.

Do you think there's something specifically New York about your work?

I think there is. I'm a product of the east coast. I grew up in New Jersey and I came to New York many a time as a young person. I use a certain type of woman from New York. There's this rawness and edge to them and for me that's very important. That rawness is something that people can identify with, and I prefer that. What I like is that

there's a realness and truth in the work. I like flaws in people, I like scars on people because they show the history of life, of experience, and for me that's the beauty of images. Beauty is not this pristine thing all the time; there's beauty in things that are flawed. Photography is a new thing for me and I work with some great printers and photo-retouchers, and every time I go to them with my work they want to take out things that they think are spoiling the image. And I prefer to keep those things in because they show that despite all these props and dress-codes I'm placing on these women, there's a truth there: these are everyday women coming with their own history and baggage and experiences. I like when that personality is exuded by the image because it allows some kind of familiarity for people: it's OK to have this scar or this big nose or whatever.

Everyone has their own sense of sexuality or what is beautiful. And for me what is beautiful is something that's a little odd to the eye. A lot of my work is not that pretty – I think that a lot of it is kind of ugly – even though people think that they're beautiful images. I like that there's this dichotomy of the yin and the yang and the positive and the negative rubbing up against each other and creating something new. Because that's our world. That's our life, and that's what makes us who we are. One side isn't better than the other. I'm a woman born and raised in Camden, New Jersey, the piss hole of New Jersey in many ways. It's very rough and very poor. But I'm also someone who's had education, went to some really prestigious schools, and who is well-read, and who has traveled and learned, and that is part of me as well. So I can only put that in my work because it's an extension of who I am. And that's what these images are – they're a representation, an extension of myself. If some of these women look a little harsh that's fine with me, because there are some of them who don't. They're all educated women themselves and they love playing these roles with me. Now I'm working with women who are transgendered men – women who were men earlier in their lives - and I'm interested in those ideas of artifice, and change, and what's real, and experience, and the frailty of beauty.

But you're also interested in a kind of appearance that can actually cloak reality, aren't you? I remember wonderful pair of portraits of Oprah Winfrey and Condoleezza Rice called *When Ends Meet* (2007). What attracts you to subjects like that?

That particular portrait series – which I'm still working on, actually – takes highly regarded women as a means of working with pop culture and infusing it with a more art historical sense. They're usually black women that I'm interested in because of their rags-to-riches story. Or the opposite. I've done portraits of Whitney Houston and Marion Jones, who both had acclaim in the world but who were then stripped of so much of their dignity. Whitney Houston was this fantastic singer with a huge fan base but then she became a drug addict and she married Bobby Brown, and now she's having to reconstruct her whole life and image. Marion Jones was a world class athlete, a three-time Olympic champion and gold medal winner, but then she was stripped of all of her awards and ended up with nothing: being persecuted, put in jail, and bankrupt.

So I was thinking about Oprah Winfrey, and first of all, Condoleezza Rice, and her image as a black woman. She was one of the first black women to hold that kind of high office in America which was very important. But everyone thinks that because

you're the first black person in a situation you have to think and live and believe like a Malcolm X or a Martin Luther King. That's the hope anyway because of our history here. You are the one who is going to spearhead the change in the divide that's been so crucial in America. But then you get this woman Condoleezza Rice, who is in the White House, and she's very strong, and very vocal and opinionated, but she even made a Freudian slip in calling Bush her husband one time!

And then you have Oprah Winfrey, who is regarded as this huge entity, this powerhouse, this conglomerate, this philanthropist. And whatever she says is golden, and everyone flocks to her and believes. So we have these perceived notions based on what they're doing, and based on their image in politics or social entertainment – in pop culture, whatever that may be. But what if Condoleezza is more like Oprah, and Oprah is more like Condoleezza? When these ends meet, you see. How can we have these bookends come together in our perception? Who is really who? They might be the same kind of person but because of what they do, we have this perception of who they are. I was thinking of the mirror again, and the gaze, and how we put images on people. I'm really interested in how people are, who they really are when they go home and they're behind closed doors. I'm interested in the shift between how they might be when they're in front of an audience, and how they are when they're not. That was my thinking about that piece, responding to these two powerful women who were coming from two completely different political positions, and shaping America in very different ways.

I remember a review that Roberta Smith wrote at the time of your "She's Come UnDone" exhibition in which she talked rather dismissively about your work, "pushing buttons regarding class, taste, race and gender." What did you feel about that?

I respect Roberta Smith a lot, and I thought her review was quite fair actually. I prefer a fair review to a glowing response, because it gives me a challenge and something to think about, or something to work against. Just like in art school: the people who are constantly praised about their work don't really get the room to grow. I think that what she did was to give me room to grow, and in that sense I really appreciate it.

But it's not the whole story. It's always easy to pigeon-hole people in a certain category, and not consider what's really happening. I'm a very history-based artist. My work's about looking at images of black women and reinserting them into the art historical canon. I don't really have a choice – that's where my work has to come from, using taste and class and the idea of femininity, because none of these things appear in art history in relation to black women. You still don't see them, because usually when you do see images of black women they're in a position of servitude. So for me it's just aligning these women with the other women who were presented in art history.

This is a great territory for me because I haven't even begun to do the things that I want to do in my work. It's just the beginning. I'm hoping that people will look beyond me just being a black artist – which some people do – and look beyond the style of my work, and the fact that I paint black women. Would the conversation change if I started painting white women? If I started painting men? What would that be about? Would that shift the conversation? It would create a new conversation, for sure.

[All Mickalene Thomas images courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York]