



CULTURE MONSTER
ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

Mickalene Thomas, up close and very personal

The Brooklyn artist bares body and soul in her provocative and wide-ranging exhibit at the Santa Monica Museum of Art.



New York-based artist Mickalene Thomas works to finish the installation of her new show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in Bergamot Station on April 04, 2012. (Al Seib, Los Angeles Times / April 9, 2012)

By Jori Finkel, Los Angeles Times
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Mickalene Thomas is to contemporary painting what Daft Punk is to music: acclaimed as one of the more original remix artists working today.

The 41-year-old Brooklyn artist has borrowed images and poses from established masters such as Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, Edouard Manet, Henri Matisse and Romare Bearden in her paintings.

But her most recent work owes a particularly explicit debt to Gustave Courbet, the 19th-century French realist who famously painted a graphic (some say pornographic) close-up of a woman's spread legs and vagina in 1866 and called it "The Origin of the World."

Feminist art historians have since responded to the powerful image by researching its ownership history and trying to identify the woman behind the headless torso, believed to be Joanna Hiffernan, a lover of American painter James

Whistler. But Thomas has taken control of the image in a more sensual and personal way. She has inserted herself in place of the model, photographing and then painting herself in the same explicit — and now vulnerable — pose.

"I'm not trying to be controversial," she said this month while the painting was being installed at the Santa Monica Museum of Art as part of a larger show called "Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe."

"If I wanted to be controversial, I would have used photographs. But I'm not interested in being so literal and direct. Paintings give you more room for illusion and fantasy, more room to discover things."

She said she started thinking seriously about Courbet after seeing his 2008 survey at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She found herself going to his "Origin" painting, "struck by its beauty and the power of the cropped composition."

As for her decision to use her own body in the painting, which could be read as a cheeky way of asserting her own power as an artist and sexuality as a gay, black woman, she said it also offered a way of playing with the idea of portraiture.

"Why not use my own body? I wanted to put myself in this position as the sitter and also the artist, this mirroring sort of relationship," she said. She also painted a version in which her partner, artist Carmen McLeod, holds the splayed-legs pose as well.

The first attempt, which Thomas rejected as a work in its own right ("I didn't like the palette"), has become the centerpiece of a room-sized installation now in the Santa Monica museum that can be viewed only through a peephole, a nod to Marcel Duchamp's controversial "Étant Donnés" at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The other two works — one of herself and one of McLeod — hang in the exhibition alongside lush green landscapes, detailed home interiors and the subgenre that Thomas is best known for: portraits of fashionable black women with big hair, even bigger attitude and a 1970s vibe.

All works in the show are dated 2012 and have not been shown at the artist's galleries in L.A., New York or Chicago, where the Rhona Hoffman gallery was the first to give her a solo show in 2006. The idea for this new show grew out of Thomas' visit to the Santa Monica museum to give a talk in 2009.

It was a breakout year for Thomas, in which she received feature treatment by some art magazines, had her first show at Lehmann Maupin gallery in New York and was asked by the Museum of Modern Art to do a new painting for the window of its restaurant on West 53rd Street. She remade Manet's 1863 masterpiece "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe," replacing the pastoral picnic scene of two white men and their naked female companion with three mod-looking African American women.

When she first met the team at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the idea was to do some sort of a survey, but Thomas remembers "cringing, thinking my work is still growing."

Instead, they decided on a new body of work. Museum director Elsa Longhauser said it's a risk she has taken before — an "exciting risk" that reflects their confidence in the artist.

For Thomas, the risk carried performance anxiety. For the most ambitious pieces, she wondered: "What if I couldn't pull it all together?" But, she said, "I always want to challenge myself and the tools I bring to the work."

For the viewer, the biggest challenge might be finding connections between the types of works — from portraits to landscapes — (presented here as one series).

One thread that Thomas identifies is the notion of beauty and beautification, as the pictures remind us that we are artists of our own lives who are continually remaking our appearances and immediate surroundings. Thomas credits her residency last summer in Giverny, France — the home of Monet that also served as a stage set for several of his paintings — with bringing this idea into focus.

Thomas said she had never been to France when she got word from the Versailles Foundation that she had been nominated for one of its artist-in-residence grants at Giverny. "I think my experience there was an awakening of sorts," she said, "thinking about this artist who tried to re-create his own environment as a still life, and how one goes to extremes to develop a world to constantly get inspiration."

The notion of self-fashioning shapes the pictures of female beauty, such as "Din, une très bellee négresse, #2," which features a friend of the artist wearing blue lipstick, a bold floral dress and a rather knowing expression. "She is shy in real life," said Thomas. "But, boy, does she come alive in front of a camera, like a butterfly from a cocoon."

(Of the title, Thomas says, "I'm not interested in those traditional titles, like 'Woman Lounging.' Who is that woman? Although I do dress them and style them, they are real women. It's important for me to name them.")

Then there's the emphasis on styling found in Thomas' paintings of home interiors, for which she drew heavily from various spreads in "The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement," a 1971 series.

But perhaps the most visible thread connecting the various works in the show is Thomas' integration of paint and less conventional materials. For along with oil, enamel and acrylic, she consistently uses rhinestones and Swarovski crystals to define the surface of her wood-panel paintings.

The rhinestones are more than bling or some flashy bid for collectors' attention, says Santa Monica Museum of Art deputy director Lisa Melandri, who curated the show. "In portraits her use of rhinestones becomes this highlighting mechanism for the eyes and lips, creating shimmer or dynamism," Melandri says. "But in landscapes it's not just decorative — it makes spaces that move in and out and makes you think about the light on the furniture."

Melandri compares Thomas' work with rhinestones to the pointillism associated with the French impressionists — a style that uses pixel-like spots of colors as the building blocks of forms.

While pointillism is often considered a response to the advent of modern printing and photography, Thomas' own work has roots in photography as well. Raised in New Jersey by a single mother who modeled a while for magazines and catalogs ("She wanted to be a supermodel, but then she had us"), Thomas went to Pratt in New York after high school to do a dual program in interior design and painting. When she found out that the dual program no longer existed, she chose painting and later got her M.F.A. in painting at Yale.

During her first year at Yale her work opened up in interesting ways. "Unlike most schools," she said, the faculty there would send letters to some graduate students after their first term suggesting ways to improve their work. "It's really a required suggestion," she said, noting that she received a letter suggesting a photography course with David Hilliard.

"At that time it was horrible, you felt you were singled out as a failure," she said. "But in retrospect it was fantastic, and I've noticed that most of us who got those letters saw a dynamic shift in our work."

Over the last decade, photography became a major influence on her work. Her paintings of striking women, typically friends recruited for the job of modeling, start with daylong photo shoots in her studio. She builds the installation, dresses and styles the models, then photographs them. Art critics have compared the resulting paintings to the elaborately staged and costumed images by African photographers Malick Sidebe and Seydou Keita.

Of course, to find painters working from photographs today isn't unusual. What is unusual is that Thomas so openly acknowledges the debt. She often includes photographs in her exhibitions, and she pays homage to the medium through the surfaces of her landscapes, which mimic the picture-puzzle, multifaceted look of photo collages.

"Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires" is the most ambitious painting done in this style, bringing together a pale sky from South Africa and trees from New York to form the background for another image straight out of Courbet: two women, nude and asleep, entangled in an embrace.

Courbet's version, from 1866, shows two white women: a red-haired beauty nuzzling a darker-skinned brunet. In Thomas' version, the contrast between the skin colors is even more dramatic, with one of the lovers a dark black and her partner a yellow color.

This painting "felt like the next phase for me — bringing together figures in an interior and landscape," the artist said. "Even painting the skin this way instead of using fleshtones was a change for me."

As for her own attraction to Courbet, she said part of the appeal was his willingness to paint things "the world wasn't ready for. It's not always the upper echelon of society but also everyday beauty."

"But I don't think an artist should always know why they gravitate toward something or someone. You are just drawn to things, and that's OK."