

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

One Artist's 'Origin' Story

Brooklyn-Based Mickalene Thomas Mounts Her First Stateside Solo Exhibition

By KIMBERLY CHOU

On Tuesday afternoon on the fourth floor of the Brooklyn Museum, Mickalene Thomas was busily installing "Origin of the Universe," her first solo museum show in the U.S. A forceful portraitist of black women who often composes her pieces with paint, enamel and rhinestones, Ms. Thomas, who has lived and worked in Brooklyn for 17 years, conceded that she was "scared as hell." But only somewhat.

"Oh, it's great. It's fantastic," she said. "I don't know. I'm a little nervous about it."

She laughed a big, continuous laugh. "It's much easier to do something in California or somewhere else"—the exhibit originated in a smaller iteration at the Santa Monica Museum of Art—"but when you're doing it in your own back yard, it's like when you go back home to your parents' house, and your friends and cousins that you grew up with, you can't BS them, you know what I mean?"

Ms. Thomas is not known for BS. Leading a team of assistants in her studio, she works on several projects at a time, creating elaborate sets of decorated interiors where she photographs her models. From there, the photographs become collages, which in turn serve as the basis for her large-scale colorful paintings.



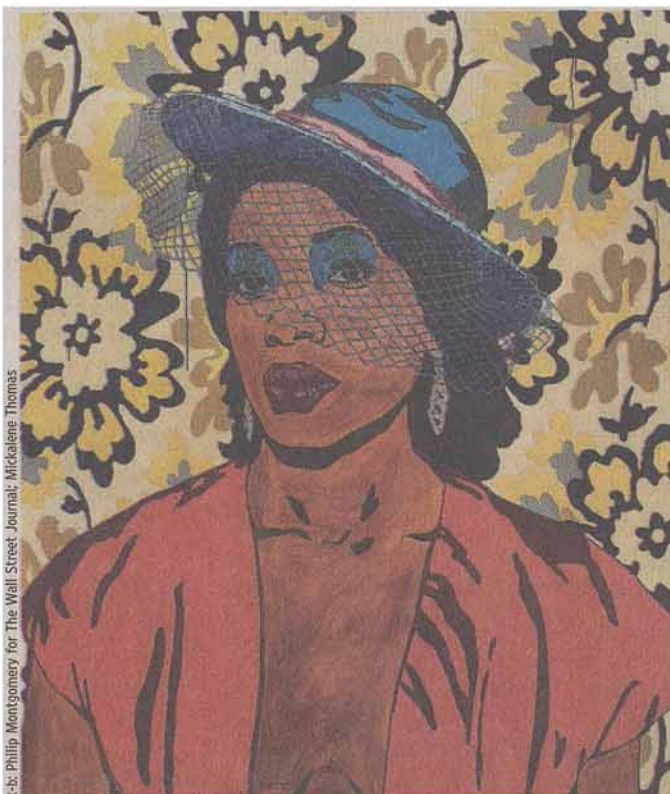
Above, Mickalene Thomas at the Brooklyn Museum, where her solo show, 'Origin of the Universe,' opens Friday. Below, Ms. Thomas's 'Qusuquzah, Une Très Belle Nègresse #2' (2012).

This summer, Ms. Thomas moved into a bigger studio in Clinton Hill, up the block from where she'd been for six years; before, she said, she had to do the photo shoots at night and on weekends, then wait for paintings to dry before moving them to make room for other work.

"Mickey has fashioned her studio as a very professional business, like an enterprise," said Ian L. Cofré, an independent curator who previously worked as Ms. Thomas's studio manager. "It's a company. She knows what she wants and what her goals are with each work and how to get there."

"Origin of the Universe"—the title is a play on Gustave Courbet's famously erotic work "The Origin of the World," which inspired two of the new paintings in this show—opens Friday and runs through Jan. 20. Initially, the idea was to mount more of a survey show, but she pushed to be able to exhibit all new work, including the large-scale, mixed-media portraits for which she is best known, as well as recent forays into landscapes and interiors. Most of the pieces were started in 2011 and completed in 2012. ("Four of them were finished last week," she said.)

For one thing, she feels "too young" for a survey: "I'm 40, but my career, I think, is just beginning. But also, I really think that a survey would not challenge the viewer and my own practice."



'I think it's the responsibility of the artist to reveal a little more of themselves.'

A native of Camden, N.J., Ms. Thomas began making art in the early '90s while a student in Portland, Wash. While there, she was deeply affected by a Portland Art Museum show of the pioneering black artist Carrie Mae Weems. She moved back east for art school, studying first at Pratt

Institute in Brooklyn, then at Yale for her MFA, where she eventually scrapped abstract work in favor of paintings of animals using glitter and rhinestones—a precursor to her portraiture, which she began to hone after her 2003 residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It's the portraiture, featuring costumed black women in a riotous mix of colors, patterns and textures, with rhinestones often filling space or edging a contour, that has since become her signature. Her most recent work, she said, draws from Chuck Close's large-scale portraits and David

Hockney's landscapes.

"She makes a range of references in her work. [It] questions the traditional cannon of Western art history," said Brooklyn Museum curator Eugenie Tsai, who organized this presentation of "Origin." "But I also appreciate how her work, with the rhinestones and the references to popular culture, appeals to a very broad audience. Someone who knows nothing about art can walk in and appreciate her work for the pure visual beauty and spectacle."

In past interviews, Ms. Thomas has said people respond first to the materials of the paintings—all those rhinestones—and sometimes view the paintings more as objects, "embellished" with the glitzy medium.

"The rhinestones are just as important an element in the painting as the paint that's used on them," she said. "How I approach these is all from formal aspects of painting. I felt there was only very few key people who would get that."

But that, she feels, has started to change, with her more deliberate uses of painterly materials and techniques—for this recent series of portraits, she returned to using oil paint—and by showing parts of her process. "Origin of the Universe" includes four installations that re-create the photography sets she uses in her studio, as well as a documentary she made about her mother (a frequent model for her work), and 50 of her collages hung salon-style. Last year she presented an all-collage show with the gallery that represents her, Lehmann Maupin.

"It was really formative and important for me and for my ca-

reer for people to see that [show] because they don't realize what goes into the work," Ms. Thomas said. "Sometimes I think it's the responsibility of the artist to reveal a little more of themselves."

On Tuesday, having finished for the day at the museum, Ms. Thomas headed to the nearby Barclays Center, where she is completing a mural of Brooklyn landmarks. Back in Clinton Hill, she's also working on new paintings for her November exhibition at Lehmann Maupin. First, though, she needs to open this museum show.

"I want people to walk away thinking that this was a good show to have at the Brooklyn Museum, for many things—for the community, for the type of artist that I am and [for] sort of really embracing Brooklyn artists, to say that this is one of our own and we believe in what she does," Ms. Thomas said. "Or they walk through these doors and they feel the way I did when I saw Carrie Mae's work in Portland—and it does something to them."