



OBSERVER *arts*

November 5, 2012

Origin Stories

'MATERIALIZING "SIX YEARS":
LUCY R. LIPPARD AND THE
EMERGENCE OF CONCEPTUAL
ART' AND 'MICKALENE
THOMAS: ORIGIN OF THE
UNIVERSE' AT THE BROOKLYN
MUSEUM; 'ROSEMARIE
TROCKEL: A COSMOS' AND
'JUDITH BERSTEIN: HARD'
AT THE NEW MUSEUM

By Maika Pollack



Gusuquzah Une Tres Belle Negresse 2 (2012) by Thomas at the Brooklyn Museum.

MUSEUMS A century and a half ago, Gustave Courbet painted a close-up, spread-eagled view of a woman's genitals and called it *The Origin of the World*. It is one sign of the extent to which women artists have taken ownership of such male-created images that no fewer than three major New York museum exhibitions of works by mid- and late-career women artists feature variations on Courbet's erotic classic. In the past year, both this newspaper and *The Economist* have reported on the lingering inequities between women's work and men's on the art market. That may still be true, but, at least in New York, museums are doing their part—and that may eventually set things straight.

At the Brooklyn Museum, Mickalene Thomas has not only upped the ante on Courbet by giving the title *Origin of the Universe* to her take on his painting—a black-power, pop-palette Venus vajazzled with rhinestones—but she has also given that title to her exhibition.

Ms. Thomas's massive, French-Impressionist-inspired,

Continued on page B10

Origin Stories

Continued from page B1

rhinestone-embellished paintings of black female nudes are gaudy fun, yes, but they are also enormously ambitious. Her other great subject is her mother, a woman who obviously relishes vamp-ing for the camera ("I always liked Pam Grier," she confesses in a video portrait). Ms. Thomas has found her voice as an artist in addressing and overcoming origins both artistic (French painting) and familial (her mother). Her paintings may be kitschy, but they are also, as she titles several of them, "très belle," and display a tremendous awareness of how personal the history of painting can be, or at least seem, for an artist. Four wood-panel and print fabric installations resembling sets for a 1970s sitcom, a colorful wall of miniature collages and a video (*Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman* from 2012, a biography of Thomas's mother) round out the display.