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Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe, Brooklyn Museum, New York

By Ariella Budick

Thomas's blend of tradition and wild fun is at once deeply serious and uproariously effervescent



'Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires' (2012) by Mickalene Thomas

In the past few years, Mickalene Thomas's work has taken a panther's leap forward, from shallow, restrained portraits to splendid, exuberant murals that bound from the walls. The Brooklyn Museum has put together an exhibition of Thomas's latest work, which sparkles even on a gloomy day. She is the rare artist who has achieved depth through glitter.

The Brooklyn-based virtuoso of rococo excess is omnivorous in her influences. Cindy Sherman, Monet, Courbet, Warhol, Manet, Hockney, Matisse, Seurat, Carrie Mae Weems, Ingres and Romare Beardon all simmer in her stew of references, but the resulting concoction is all her own. You want to dip a finger in it and touch the different textures of oil, enamel, acrylic and rhinestones. You want to taste the potent colours.

To highlight the sensual suggestiveness of Thomas's work, the Brooklyn show opens with a meal. Or maybe it's a dream of a meal, half familiar and half strange, but incredibly vivid. "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires" is Thomas's magnificent ode to an Impressionist masterpiece. She supplants Manet's two dandies and a nude with a trio of seductive black women tricked out in tall wigs, skimpy clothes, and glam cosmetics. Instead of picnicking in a bower, they sprawl amid shattered planes – on the floor of a fabric emporium, perhaps, munching their sequined lunch amid cuttings of floral, paisley, vegetal and animal prints.

Thomas's bold and good-natured homage fleshes out the backstory of another Manet character, the black maid who hovers obsequiously in the darkened background of "Olympia." Here we see her on her day off, decked with bling, chatting with friends, and enjoying the utter artificiality of her

environment. The conventional equivalence of woman with nature that suffused 19th-century painting doesn't apply.

Thomas exploits a similar strategy in "Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires," which is both a tribute and an admonishment to Courbet. The painting draws on two of his paintings that shocked 19th-century audiences. "Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine" provoked a scandal with its obvious post-coital lasciviousness. Critics at the time seethed at the sexual innuendo and the figures' weirdly foreshortened bodies, oversized heads and ungainly postures, which they considered a crime against feminine grace. Thomas conflates this painting with Courbet's far more explicit "Two Friends," which features two dimpled, spent nudes coiled together on a mess of rumpled sheets. She lifts the erotically entwined pair from the boudoir, changes their ethnicity, and drops them onto her unique evocation of the French riverbank, a decorative extravaganza of landscape shards – painted trees, faux-bois woods, and cubes of water – artfully assembled into quilt-like coherence.

To reduce Thomas's exquisite paintings to shrill statements of group pride – to see them as the hallmark of a Black Female Lesbian artist – would be to miss their essence completely. You can sense Thomas's affection for these ostentatiously fabulous women. They sport towering Afros, floral-print shifts, gold lamé belts, leopardskin pumps. Décolletage dips dangerously low. Lips and eyelids coruscate enough to light the way at night. When Thomas plays with stereotypes or flirts with vulgarity, she is not being ironic, but celebratory and nostalgic.

A sense of wistfulness permeates her work. Her models arrange themselves against meticulously constructed scenery that mimics suburban living rooms of the 1970s. A section of the Brooklyn Museum accommodates four of these stage set/installations, and they share the familiar iconography of the family den circa 1975: knotty pine panelling, LPs stacked against the turntable, psychedelic upholstery. Each "room" is a self-portrait through décor. In the show's catalogue, Thomas explains that wood walls trigger memories of "spaces where the women of my family would come together for intense dialogues. I would be just outside, with my ear to the door, trying to be a part of it when I should have been upstairs sleeping."

It's not surprising that the dream space of her youth forms the backdrop for invented memories, many starring her mother. It's only when you've made your way through the entire exhibition and seen the short film in the tiny last room that you finally understand the indispensable role that Mama Bush, as she is known, has played in her daughter's creative imagination.

"Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman: A Portrait of My Mother," makes plain that the sexy women splayed across couches and vamping extravagantly are all iterations of, and stand-ins for, the complicated woman who is Thomas's muse. A former fashion model and recovered drug addict, Mama Bush has clearly inspired Thomas's ambivalent esteem. The two were estranged for a time, but since their rapprochement more than a decade ago, she has posed for some 15 paintings and more than 150 photographs. In the video, made this year, she appears as a frail and afflicted shadow of the outsized personality her daughter documented, and the contrast is poignant.

It's worth looping back through the exhibition again after seeing the film, because suddenly Thomas's pedigree appears complete. High purpose and grand ambitions burden her work. The invocations of past masters, the outsized scale, the textured fullness, the sheer insistence on holding the viewer's gaze for as long as possible – all suggest her yearning to connect with the lineage of great men. But her paintings are also wildly fun, filled with delight in surfaces and great sunny swaths of cloth. Thomas has found a way to blend the patriarchal tradition with her mother's joy, and to distil an artistic personality that is at once deeply serious and uproariously effervescent.

Continues until January 20, www.brooklynmuseum.org