

ARTFORUM

Mickalene Thomas

THE INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ART / BOSTON
100 Northern Avenue
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Comprising five glittering, large-scale paintings, Mickalene Thomas's latest exhibition flaunts both the presence and the absence of her African-American female subjects in boldly patterned domestic interiors. *Sandra: She's a Beauty*, 2009, centralizes its sitter, the artist's mother, whom she posed and photographed amid clashing fabrics and cushions; Thomas then cut and reassembled the photograph into a collage that served as the basis for the painting. Swarovski rhinestones affixed to the canvas accentuate the jewels on Sandra's arms but also the skin of her neck and the shape of her makeup, adding color, shading, and texture to the surface of the painting. While Thomas's figures have a commanding presence, so do the backgrounds she places them in, as suggested by the diptych *Baby I Am Ready Now*, 2007, one half of which depicts a woman and the other half an interior. In repose, legs apart, chin resting in hand, a female figure stares at the viewer, a single earring and arched foot carefully outlined with rhinestones. In the second half of the piece, Thomas accumulates a dizzying abundance of floral print fabrics, faux wood panels, zebra print, and jarring yellows, oranges, and pinks rendered in a mixture of beads, enamel, acrylic, and oil paint on a curved wooden support.



Mickalene Thomas, *Sandra: She's a Beauty*, 2009, rhinestone, acrylic, and enamel on wooden panel, 72 x 72".

Even without a central figure, Thomas's paintings remain primarily interested in a strong feminine presence, embodied by the deliberately cacophonous 1970s decor. Into works like *Interior: Bedroom with Flowers*, 2012, Thomas integrates scanned patterns from *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement* (1970). She inserts abstract geometries, messy surfaces, and swaths of flattened, unexpected colors into her collages, which fracture the composition and reorient the space. Such patterns are also protagonists in the work, as in *I'll Still Be True*, 2010, which features a smiling subject who gazes at the viewer, with a mirror in hand. Rather than reflect the artist, spectator, or world beyond the piece, the mirror instead refracts unexpected bright, clashing prints, redirecting us back into the heady materiality of Thomas's painting.

— Lori Cole