

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Mickalene Thomas Delivers The Most Stylish Philosophy Lesson Of All Time

We like to think of Mickalene Thomas as an interior decorator of art history. Instead of delving into some drab real estate as a fixer upper, she sets her attention on the iconic, and very white, canon of art classics.



Untitled #1, 2014 acrylic, oil paint, glitter, rhinestones, oil pastel, dry pastel, graphite, and silk screen on wood panel 96 x 82 inches
243.8 x 208.3 cm Courtesy Mickalene Thomas and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and ARS (Artists Rights Society),

New York Photo by Elisabeth Bernstein

In 2012 her exhibition "The Origin of the Universe" spruced up the likes of Gustav Courbet and Édouard Manet, among others, trading in Romantic renditions of milky skin and auburn curls for glamorous black women, their nude forms replaced with bold, printed ensembles, playful wigs and electric makeup. Thomas' subjects aren't just the subjects of paintings, they're already all dolled up, literally *painted* themselves.

In these complex yet wildly appealing collage-like paintings, Thomas does far more than insert black women into an artistic narrative from which they were, for so long, excluded. The artist toys with the ways beauty and identity are historically transmitted through paint. In traditional portraiture, Odalisques and muses of the like glow with a sort of internal, perhaps ethereal beauty. Instead of gazing into a magic mirror, Thomas takes a hammer to it, letting her models' beauty crack and emerge in strange and unexpected formations.

In her works, blistering hot patterns pop up indiscriminately in wallpaper, furniture, ensembles, jewelry and makeup like an unruly and glorious infection. Switching seamlessly back and forth between subject and setting, each more ornate than the last, Thomas comments on the fluid and performative nature of the self, and the always already painted nature of femininity.

Now, Thomas zooms in. For her current exhibition "*Tête de Femme*," the artist created nine collages of women's faces, all models from her former works. For these colorful canvases, Thomas cracks the mirror yet again, taking her depictions to a greater level of geometric abstraction than ever before. Goodbye Courbet, hello Picasso.

"For me they are still very much related to my collage work and the Odalisque paintings I do," Thomas explained to The Huffington Post. "The technique is still the same, but it's a direct and closer look at the portraits. Deconstructing their images in a Pop and Cubist way. I was thinking about my collage work and how I make those images, and wanted to really pare down and remove the familiarity of the person and just focus on the structure of their faces, in the same ways you would looking at an African sculpture, thinking about those angles and forms."

Thomas turns the human face into a geometric playground that makes Matisse's "*Woman with a Hat*" look representational.

The color-happy collages are simpler than Thomas' previous work in the sense that they've been cleared of all excess -- leaving only eyes, mouth and vague reference of nose -- and yet they still seem more complex. Viewing the fractured faces up close feels like looking into a magnified mirror and noticing the weird looking pores that, you can only surmise, had been there along.

"It came out of the work I was making in my studio looking at the makeup of the models during my photo sessions and being inspired by Andy Warhol's Interview magazine and also Picasso's '*Tête de Femme*.' I'm always going back into history in some ways and trying to make some correlation to what I'm making at the moment. I had done this collaboration with my makeup artist for a particular show at the time. We were playing with makeup, and started cutting out shapes. From their we made some small collages. That's how it really started... I thought it was not necessarily a departure for me but sort of a growth, because it comes out of the making of my work. It's much more playful."

All but one of the works are untitled, yet each pertains to a distinct person. "There are specific colors for specific people to personify their personalities, their energy, their prowess, even the angles of their nose, the splatter of the rhinestones." In one piece, an eye looks relatively realistic while, for a nose, we get a glitchy waterfall of golden rhinestones. "I think there is an innate truth," Thomas said of her works' resemblance to their subjects. "It describes the energy of the person more than how the person looks in front of you."

Thomas' decision not to name all but one of her works -- "Carla" is the exception -- harkens back to the dual nature that characterizes much of her process. Just as the geometric faces are simple and yet complex, they're also specific and yet universal. "I wanted to remove that so that the familiarity that the viewer brings to the piece is their own and not what I'm telling them they should think." Thomas' reasoning goes beyond challenging her viewers' imaginations. "For me that's what is very exciting about this departure, although they're based on black women, we're all connected, they could be anyone. It's not necessarily rooted in the identity of blackness or black beauty but more beauty itself and the essence of a person."

If before we labeled Thomas art history's interior decorator, now we're imagining more of a plastic surgeon, splicing open art historical moments and glamming them up from the inside. Thomas' previous portraits turned her sitters into brazen shape-shifters, bleeding into their environments to reveal the slippery nature of identity and the profound influence of style. Now, Thomas shows the colorful patterns that we use to express ourselves via flashy blouses and bold furniture aren't on the outside seeping in, they were inside us all along.

What's outside and what's inside, what's flashy and what's deep. Thomas mixes and matches the seemingly disparate categories into transfixing patterns as if she's **power-clashing**. The resulting images are so dizzying we barely know what's what. Only Mickalene Thomas delivers a style tutorial, art history refresher and a philosophical breakthrough all at once. Fanciest philosophy lesson ever.