Cultural Daily

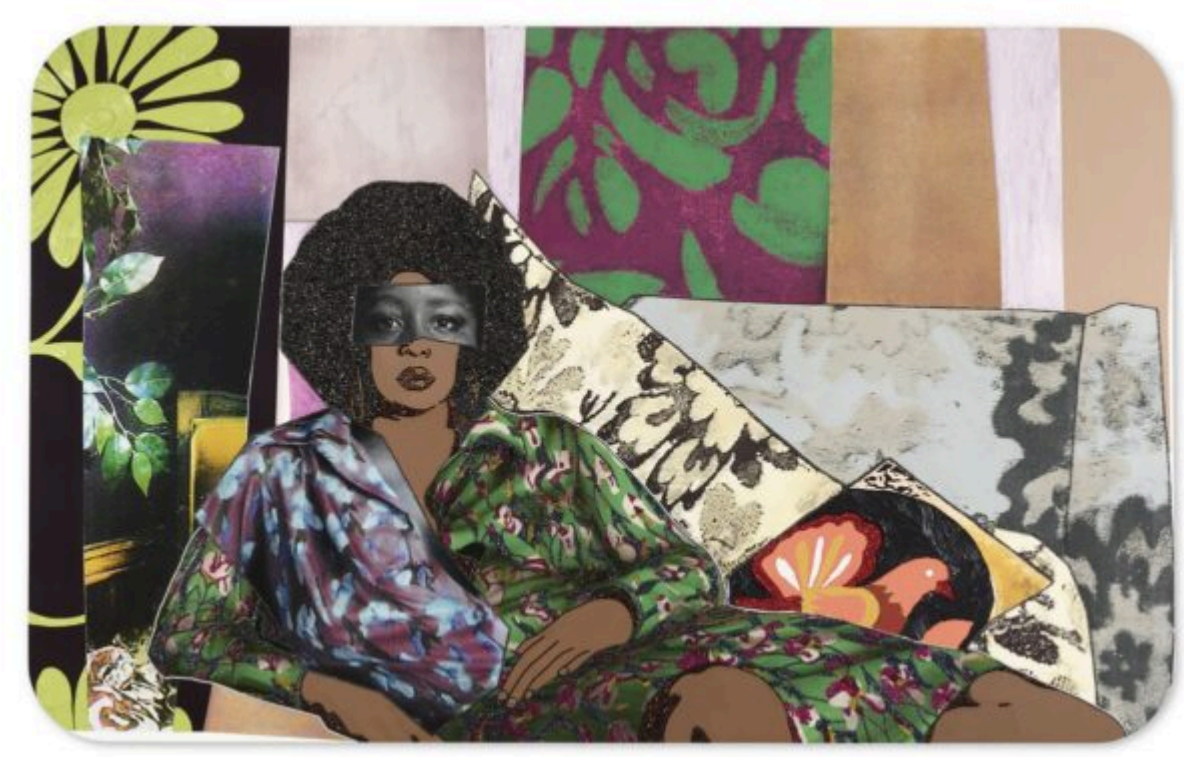
Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# Mickalene Thomas's Sexy, Sophisticated Pictures

Stephen West · Sunday, June 2nd, 2024

*Mickalene Thomas: All About Love,* the latest exhibition at the Broad museum in Los Angeles, offers a splashy introduction to the artist's work over the past 20 years.

The show features more than 80 works, including a handful of pictures that harken back to Thomas's upbringing in New Jersey and to artistic influences such as the French Impressionists. Yet most of the works focus on her identity as a Black queer woman and the other women who populate her world. There are lots of nude portraits, lots of sexy scenes, and lots of glitter, literally.



*Afro Goddess Looking Forward,* 2015, rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel; courtesy of the artist.

In a self-portrait from 2015, *Afro Goddess Looking Forward*, Thomas leans back on a sofa and stares straight ahead at the viewer. She wears a green print dress and is surrounded by colorful pictures and pillows. The rich brown paint of her face, hands, and legs seems intentionally flat, while the area around her eyes is depicted with a collaged black-and-white photograph. Her hair, a big Afro that frames her face like a black halo, is decorated with pasted-on shiny rhinestones. The composition draws the viewer to her eyes, which stare back with unusual intensity. It's one of the

strongest pictures in the exhibition.



*Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires (Luncheon on the Grass: Three Black Women),* 2010, installation view, rhinestones and acrylic paint on canvas, mounted on wood panel; courtesy of the artist; photograph by Joshua White/JWPictures.com.

Trained at Pratt Institute and the Yale Art School, Thomas sometimes makes updated versions of classic paintings, such as *Luncheon on the Grass, Three Black Women After Picasso* of 2022. Thomas's version of the picnic retains Picasso's basic composition, with the woman on the left raising her hand to her face and the woman on the right extending her hand to offer a morsel to eat. (Picasso's version is based on Manet's famous Impressionist painting of 1863, which in turn is based on a work from the Italian Renaissance attributed to Titian.)

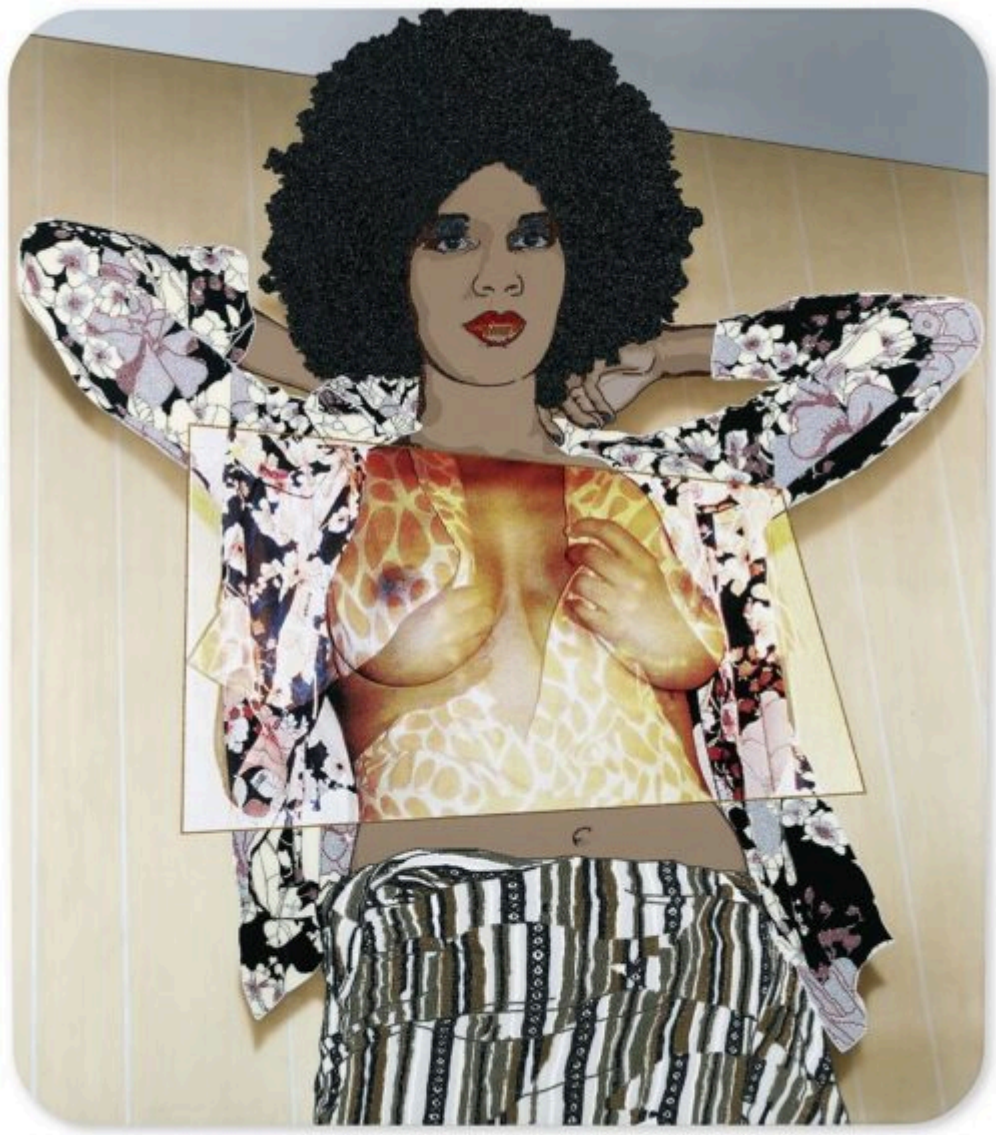
Thomas employs a similar visual strategy for *Luncheon* that she used in *Afro Goddess:* black-and-white photo fragments are inserted into brightly colored painted sections, all surrounded by a jumble of patterns. She also decorates the women with plenty of glitter in their hair and strings of tiny pink beads that function as additional lines of emphasis.



*Monet's Salle A Manger Jaune (Monet's Yellow Dining Room),* 2012, rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel; Brooklyn Museum, A. Augustus Healy Fund.

In 2011, Thomas spent the summer in residence at Monet's studio and garden in Giverny, France, and the following year she completed *Monet's Yellow Dining Room,* one of the few paintings in the Broad exhibition that doesn't focus on black women. The visual style is almost Cubist, with three separate spaces decorated with a variety of wall colors and floor patterns receding from the viewer. The walls are covered with pictures, all of which are blank. It's one of the most interesting, and visually sophisticated, works in the show.

Still, Thomas's main focus is on the women. There's an amusing series based on Jet magazine's monthly calendar girls, with cheerful Miss November 1971 dressed only in an apron and lots of sparkle in her hair and lips. As she reaches up to open a kitchen cabinet, her bare nipple is covered by a strategic square of blue painter's tape.



*Portrait of Maya #10,* 2017, rhinestones and acrylic paint on canvas, mounted on wood panel; The Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles.

The subject of *Portrait of Maya #10* of 2017 is less bashful about herself. With her hands held behind her head, her floral blouse is wide open to reveal one of her breasts, which are shown in a color photograph that contrasts with the monochromatic painting of the rest of the picture. A closer look also shows a ghostly pair of hands, like a double exposure, caressing her breasts. Is she thinking about last night's lovemaking? Or imagining tonight's? It's impossible to say, but it adds an air of mystery to a very sexy portrait.

***Mickalene Thomas: All About Love*** **runs through September 29 at the Broad, 221 South Grand Avenue, Los Angeles. The exhibition then travels to the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and the Hayward Gallery in London. A catalog of Thomas's work is available.**

*Top image:* Afro Goddess Looking Forward, *2015, rhinestones, acrylic, and oil on wood panel; courtesy of the artist.*

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