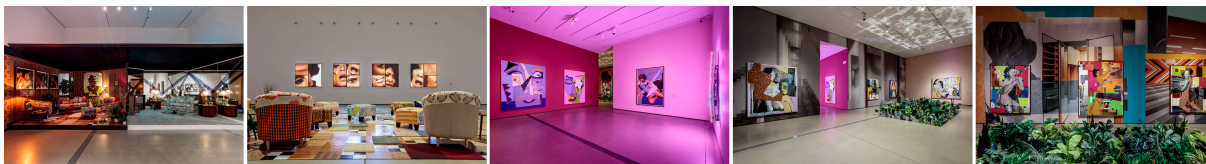


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Mickalene Thomas: 'All About Love'
Celebrating Black Bodies as Glittering Wonders
The Broad
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by Jody Zellen



The entrance to Mickalene Thomas' exhibition *All About Love* replicates the facade of her childhood home in Camden, New Jersey, complete with fake brick siding and windows lit from within. This exterior is also partially covered by a banner stating "I Was Born To Do Great Things." The first room in this ambitious survey exhibition is the 2014, aptly titled work, *I Was Born To Do Great Things*, which is comprised of living-room recreations that contain wood paneled walls, vintage furniture and records (including one 'playing' on a turntable), as well as enlarge family photographs, in addition to one of Thomas' signature painted figures.

Domestic interiors appear in many of Thomas' photographs and seeing one reconstructed contextualizes these works. Many of Thomas' projects celebrate and pay homage to the women who influenced her— beginning with her mother and including the writer bell hooks and the photographer Carrie Mae Weems. Throughout her career, Thomas has focused on the depiction of the female Black body, embracing self-empowerment and joy. These women are often larger than life, dressed in bold patterned fabrics, surrounded by glitter and unafraid to reveal their sexuality.

In addition to numerous remarkable individual works, what stands out in this exhibition is the emphasis on installation— as different series are displayed on colored walls or juxtaposed with large-scale photographic murals. Many of Thomas' early works were black and white photographs of female subjects in domestic interiors surrounded by patterned wallpaper and fabric coverings.

She also created small scale collages where she juxtaposed cutouts from style and fashion magazines (like the iconic *Jet Magazine*) often adding glitter and rhinestones to the compositions. It is interesting to see the ways these early images are transformed into the more recent larger, mixed media works. For example, the 2010 Type-C print *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires*, doubles in size to become the 96 x 120 inch, rhinestone and acrylic paint mounted on wood panel work *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires d'après Picasso* (2022).

Rather than the individual pieces, it is the ambiance created within the galleries and the conversation between works and series over time and through differing media that gives the exhibition its power. Centered in one "room" are an arrangement of chairs and ottomans, covered with mismatched bright African patterned fabrics. These are placed in the center of the large gallery on a section of concrete floor that has been covered with square carpet samples and assorted parquet floor tiles. A few plants, as well as piles of books make this an inviting space to sit, relax, converse and regard the works on the walls.

Here, Thomas installs *Ms. Celie's Blues* (2016), a multi-panel photographic and mirrored work inspired by the characters in *The Color Purple*. Spanning another wall is the 8-channel split screen video, *Angelitos Negros* (2016)— a collage of women's faces from close up set to Eartha Kitt's 1953 song. Opposite the video is a salon-style arrangement of Thomas' early photographs in varying sizes.

In another room, pixelated fragments extracted from the works fill the gallery walls from floor to ceiling, in addition to images of empty closets and abstract patterns and painted gestures. Over this bombastic collage hang works from a series of paintings where Thomas appropriated pin-ups from *Jet Magazine*, including *January 1976* (2019), *Jet Calendar 1977* (2022) and *February 1976* (2022). The room also includes a tightly packed floor display of plastic potted plants upon a mirrored surface. The relationship between these works and their surroundings is uncertain: perhaps Thomas is drawing parallels between the *Jet Magazine* women and artificial nature.

A series of large-scale ,more abstract and fragmented collages with glitter fill light and dark pink walls to create another room that glows with a saturated and overtly female aura. Another intriguing piece is the multi-media video *Me as Muse* (2016), where Thomas fragments her nude body across twelve separate monitors accompanied by an audio recording spoken by Kitt and historical references to odalisques in art and the fetishization of the Black female body.

Thomas often creates exhibitions combining individual works and installations that bombard viewers. The exhibition at the Broad traces highlights of her career while presenting a range of works in specific and varied contexts. The gist of the show and the motivations behind her creative pursuits attempt to shed light on the representation of Black women throughout art history (as well as their absence), and to celebrate their bodies as glittering wonders with a strong presence that cannot go unnoticed.

<https://artnowla.com/2024/07/25/mickalene-thomas-all-about-love/>