

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe

September 28, 2012–January 20, 2013





Mickalene Thomas

Origin of the Universe

About the Artist

Brooklyn-based artist Mickalene Thomas was born in 1971 in Camden, New Jersey, and grew up participating in after-school arts programs with her younger brother at the Newark Museum and the Henry Street Settlement in New York. When she was twenty-three she saw a small retrospective of Carrie Mae Weems's photographs at the Portland Art Museum. The experience was instrumental in her decision to become a professional artist. Thomas recalls, "It was one of the first times I'd seen contemporary work by an African American woman. It made me aware of how you can use your experiences as a person and make art out of it."¹

Thomas continues to be inspired by personal memory, as well as the later years of the Black Arts movement in the 1970s. She also uses a host of art historical references, including works by Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse, and Romare Bearden, which she reinterprets to create collage-inspired portraits and landscapes that challenge and expand notions of beauty. She is best known for depictions of women that explore a spectrum of black female beauty and sexual identity, femininity, and power. Thomas has observed that "our culture is becoming so amalgamated. Everyone's taking something on, appropriating . . . whose language is whose?" She makes a conscious connection between this intentional use of borrowed elements and her choice to work in the medium of collage: "That's how I see collage," she says. "It's really wanting to play with these kinds of images and patterns and ask where did they come from and how were they incorporated and constructed?"²

About the Exhibition

Origin of the Universe is Thomas's first solo museum exhibition. It highlights recent artworks that examine interior and exterior environments in relation to the female figure. Several of the featured works were influenced by Thomas's recent artist residencies in Aspen, Colorado, and Giverny, France. The exhibition presents ninety works, including a mural, a film about Thomas's mother, and installations of furnished domestic interiors that were created specifically for the Brooklyn presentation.



Description of the Artwork

A Little Taste Outside of Love is a large-scale mixed-media portrait, painted with acrylic and enamel on wood. Rhinestones embellish some areas of the surface. The rounded corners of the wood panel are reminiscent of vintage photographs. Large sections of black-and-white floral prints and ochre areas run vertically across the background. Central to the composition is a reclining nude figure of a Black woman who looks over her shoulder and out toward the viewer. Black rhinestones have been added to her hair, which is worn naturally. Her skin is represented with a single shade of brown enamel paint and the contour of her body is lined with brown rhinestones. She reclines against a patchwork of large sections of neutral-toned animal and floral prints, also embellished with rhinestones.

About the Artwork

Inspired by images of African American women, emblems of the Black Power movement, and her mother's photographs from the 1970s, *A Little Taste Outside of Love* is one of Thomas's monumental artworks that explores and challenges the representation and objectification of women by male artists. Historically, male artists such as Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Édouard Manet depicted women as objects of desire for male viewers, a perspective often referred to as the "male gaze." Thomas chooses to redress

this power dynamic by substituting her own gaze. As a Black female artist who sees beauty in the female figure, she replaces women as passive subjects with Black women who demonstrate confidence in their sexuality. Thomas explained this choice in an interview: "I believe that the sitter has the power (or more power than I have) over what's being presented. I'm not overly choreographing the women I work with; I'm really trying to capture a quality within them. They are presenting to me, through their lens, how they want to be represented. That's where the collaboration happens. And the fact that the gaze in question is from one woman to another is more powerful, to me, than the male gaze. But I think the female gaze is still connected to the concept of the male gaze; we are all shaped by the dominant cultural norms."³

Thomas casts this African American woman as the main character in an updated version of a long-established visual archetype—a sexualized, nude female who passively reclines in her own beauty. For example, Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) depicts a white woman who was known to be a prostitute lounging in bed, attended by a Black maidservant (see illustration at right). Thomas upends this historic nude by replacing her with an African American woman. In doing so, she also indirectly challenges past representations of Black women as servants by claiming a role for them as empowered figures in charge of their own sexuality. Thomas also challenges European traditions of taste by adding clashing decorative patterns and the disco-glitz of thousands of rhinestones, a reference to the artist's own memories of growing up in the 1970s.



Thomas often begins her process by photographing models. Then she constructs small photo collages that serve as studies for a final artwork. In the study (right) for *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, she arranged carefully cut photographs and colored paper to determine the composition for the large-scale version.



Questions for Viewing *A Little Taste Outside of Love*

In a collage, different kinds of materials and images are combined and layered to create a single composition. Look carefully at the painting and photo collage versions of *A Little Taste Outside of Love*. What materials can you find? What evidence can you find of the artist's process?

Mickalene Thomas often uses photography and collage to help her plan the final composition. Compare the photo collage of *A Little Taste Outside of Love* with the finished painting. What is the same? What differences do you notice?

Describe the pose and facial expression of the subject in the study and in the painting. What do her pose and facial expression suggest about her mood?

Does the different choice of materials affect the mood in each artwork?

There is a long history of male artists creating portraits of reclining female nudes, including Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Look closely at these two works of art. What similarities do you notice? What differences can you find?

How has Thomas reinterpreted Manet's painting? Why do you think she chose this particular artist and artwork?



Description of the Artwork

In the center of the three large wood panels of *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, three black female figures sit together on a multicolored patchwork blanket. The middle figure sits the farthest away and faces forward with her shoulders square to the viewer. Her companions appear in profile, seated facing each other and with their legs extended. The woman on the right extends her right arm and holds a small gold-colored object. All three women turn their heads to look out at the viewer. They all wear white sleeveless dresses with multicolored patterns, large earrings, bracelets, colorful eye shadow, and lipstick.

This scene was painted with acrylic and enamel on wood panels. Rhinestones add additional texture and color to the fabric, hair, and jewelry. Collage-like color blocks of brown, orange, and blue frame the scene. The backdrop for the women is a combination of brown color blocks resembling wood panels with tree-like shadows. Jagged, pale lines cut across the picture plane in different directions, forming an outline around the figures.

About the Artwork

In 2009 Thomas was invited to create an artwork at the Museum of Modern Art. She chose to borrow the composition for her commission from Édouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). As part of her process, Thomas first photographed several models in MoMA's Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden. The use of photography is an important part of Thomas's practice. She says: "When I'm working with a historical image, I use photography as a way of capturing and reinterpreting the image. I take photographs and use them to create collages that further complicate my relationship with the historical source image."⁴ Using costumes and props, she then crafted the imagery to recall Manet's park setting. In order to include a reference to the original painting's fourth figure, a nearly nude bather, she included a sculpture by Henri Matisse in the background.

Questions for Viewing *A Little Taste Outside of Love* and *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*

Look closely at each painting. What does each woman appear to be doing? What's going on in each scene?

Describe the environment in each painting. In what ways are they similar? How are they different?

What is the relationship between the figures in each artwork and their respective environments?

A Little Taste Outside of Love was finished in 2008, three years before *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*. Has Thomas's style as an artist changed over time? What do you see to support your opinion?

Activities

Social Studies

An interpretation expresses an understanding or opinion about a work of art. Participate in a debate to explore an interpretation of *A Little Taste Outside of Love*. Divide the debate participants into two groups. Group A will defend and Group B will refute the following quote:

Mickalene Thomas is giving us a new image of female power . . . in paintings like this.

– Anne Swartz, NYArtsMagazine.com, 2008

Group A: Defend this comment by providing evidence to support Swartz's opinion. Record three talking points that argue in favor of Swartz's opinion.
Group B: Refute this comment by providing evidence to oppose Swartz's opinion. Record three talking points that argue against Swartz's opinion.

Closely examine Thomas's *A Little Taste Outside of Love* and find evidence in the painting to support your argument. Review works by other artists, including Édouard Manet's *Olympia* and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, as well as relevant people and moments in U.S. history and popular culture to collect supporting evidence. Examples include activist Angela Davis, actress Pam Grier, the feminist movement, and the Black Power movement.

Begin the debate with the presentation of three talking points by each group. Then allow time for each side to identify two talking points to rebut, followed by each group's rebuttal. When the debate is complete, discuss the merits of each point of view.

Art Making

Thomas creates portraits that reflect the diverse appearances and personalities of her sitters (people who pose or model for a portrait). Working with a partner, identify a mood or feeling (such as melancholy, joy, anxiety, frustration, or humor) that you want to convey. Decide who will be the sitter and who will be the photographer. Together, consider how the following elements of portraiture will help convey your choice of mood:

Pose

Facial expression

Setting

Costume

Props

Use a digital camera to take several photographs of different arrangements of the sitter in your chosen setting. Select and print the portrait that you like best on photo-quality paper.

Transform your photograph into a collage portrait. Print a high-quality image of your portrait onto heavy matte photo paper. Cut and arrange collage materials such as colored paper, fabric, paint, and sequins on the surface of the paper. Be sure to consider the original choice of mood or feeling. Experiment with leaving some areas of the original photograph uncovered or covering the entire surface with new material. Make your final selection and carefully adhere all of the materials. Share your finished artwork with your partner and discuss your artistic choices.

Language Arts

Many African American female authors have creatively expressed and reflected on their diverse experiences in works of literature. Novels such as *Passing* (1929), by Nella Larsen, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, *Sula* (1973), by Toni Morrison, and *Kindred* (1979), by Octavia Butler, and memoirs such as *Mama's Girl* (1996), by Veronica Chambers, present protagonists in dynamic settings that challenge readers to understand these characters in complex ways. Select a book written by and about an African American female. After reading the book, spend an extended period of time looking at *A Little Taste Outside of Love* or *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*. Write a short essay to compare and contrast the ways that Mickalene Thomas and the author of your choice represent experiences of African American women.

Resources

Melandri, Lisa, ed. *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*. Exh. cat. Santa Monica, Calif.: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012

This catalogue of the exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, organized by the Santa Monica Museum of Art, features color images of works from the exhibition, essays by Sarah Lewis and Denise Murrell, and an interview with Mickalene Thomas by Lisa Melandri.

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/mickalene_thomas

This is the Brooklyn Museum webpage for the special exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*.

<http://mickalenthomas.com>

Mickalene Thomas's professional website includes resources on her life and work, including a biography; images of her artworks; a list of her current, past, and upcoming exhibitions; and links to selected articles.

<http://www.sundancechannel.com/digital-shorts/#|artist>

This short video features Mickalene Thomas discussing her life, creative inspiration, and artistic process in her studio.

1. Sean Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB* 116 (Summer 2011), <http://bombsite.com/issues/116/articles/5105>.
2. Sarah Lewis, "Mickalene Thomas on Beauty," in *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, ed. Lisa Melandri, exh. cat. (Santa Monica, Calif.: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012), 11.
3. Landers, "Mickalene Thomas."
4. "Mickalene Thomas: More Than Everything," Lehmann Maupin, accessed July 17, 2012, http://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/2011-09-15_mickalene-thomas.

Cover (detail), pages 4, 10: Mickalene Thomas (American, born 1971). *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes*. Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel, 120 x 288 x 2 in. (304.8 x 731.5 x 5.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Page 2: Mickalene Thomas. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Pages 3, 7: Mickalene Thomas (American, born 1971). *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007. Acrylic, enamel, and rhinestones on wood panel, 108 x 144 in. (274.3 x 365.8 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Giulia Borghese and Designated Purchase Fund, 2008.7a-c. © Mickalene Thomas

Pages 3, 8: Édouard Manet (French, 1832–1883). *Olympia*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 51¼ x 74¼ in. (130.5 x 190 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Pages 3, 9: Mickalene Thomas. *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007. Mixed-media collage, 6½ x 10 in. (16.5 x 25.4 cm). Raphael Castoriano Collection

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