

Black Beauties

American artist Mickalene Thomas, who has changed the way we look at Black bodies, is presenting her life's work in New York, London, Paris and Hong Kong this autumn

By Zabrina Lo

IMAGE: FREDRIKE HELWIG/TRUNK ARCHIVE





Jet Blue #17 (2021), which is on show this month at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris. **Previous page:** Mickalene Thomas

Walking through the corridor of Mickalene Thomas's studio in Brooklyn is like being transported to a mini version of the sort of collection of African American art you expect to see at a big gallery. At least, that's how it feels as Thomas's business manager,

Susan Grogan, takes me on a virtual tour of the space during a video call in late August. But far from being the servants and erotic figures so often seen in such exhibitions, the Black women in Thomas's paintings are strong, elegant figures covered in vibrant colours and glittering rhinestones. Draped in fashionable fabrics and at times topless, these models, with their steady gaze and self-assertive poses, exude a confidence which both causes viewers to become transfixed and compels them to shy away. Since her 2006 debut, her provocative works have stunned the art world, exalting femininity and LGBTQ and Black identities, and examining how Black bodies, especially women's, are represented in art.

This autumn, having laid low for "a couple of years, because of Covid and all that", Thomas returns with one of the biggest projects of her career, presenting her work at Lévy Gorvy's galleries in New York City, London, Paris and Hong Kong. She is also showing ten new pieces at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris, a long-time partner gallery. Collectively titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the shows feature new paintings, installations and video works. Taking inspiration from Sigmund Freud's 1920 essay of the same name, the exhibition features work that alludes to her artistic influences, and explores sexuality, respectability, politics and the notion of "how what we deem acceptable is completed by so many different things within our environment".

The first of the four exhibitions opened last month in New York City, and debuts her latest large-scale paintings from her *Jet* series. They recontextualise Black women's images from the pin-up calendars of the vintage

Jet magazine, a publication that promoted progressive African American cultural and political ideas. Later this month, the gallery in London's Mayfair will show the *Jet Blue* series, pieces also based around the magazine's images that redefine beauty for a contemporary audience. Opening in October, Paris's *Resist* focuses on female Black American civil rights activists from the 1960s to the present day. Also in October, Hong Kong's *Tête de Femme*, which pays tribute to legends such as Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol, will feature recent and never-before-seen works.

While the subjects are diverse, the shows are interconnected. "The Black female body is the centre of all that [I am portraying], even though the paintings are completely different," Thomas says. "Using 'Resist' as a component in relationship to some of the conceptual stuff that *Jet* magazine was harbouring connects all these bodies of work. When you think about *Tête de Femme* in Hong Kong, where the series' abstract faces are still related to the Black body, they're paintings of faces [of] my various models ... It's really important for my bodies of work to have conceptual threads but be executed differently."

Many of her ideas have a foundation in her upbringing, which was highly influenced by progressive attitudes to how African Americans were perceived as she was growing up. Born in New Jersey in 1971, Thomas has from a young age looked up to outspoken individuals such as singer Eartha Kitt, whose hard-earned career was nearly left in shambles after she spoke out against the Vietnam War at a White House luncheon; Diahann Carroll, the first Black woman to star in her own sitcom; and Tina Turner, the first Black and first female artist on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. "These are women who have been the first, who have persevered or broken through barriers, or have a sense of resilience within themselves," she says.

"I grew up in a matriarchal family of very strong, educated Black women. I look to these figures when I'm creating works around the Black women in my life and



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Mickalene Thomas. Opposite page: *Untitled #15* (2015), part of the *Tête de Femme* series which is on show at Lévy Gorvy in Hong Kong

think of how they can be positioned and considered in the same vein,” Thomas says. “Most of my models were friends and family members,” she says of the figures that appear in her works. Her mother, Sandra Bush, was a 6ft 1in runway model, and Thomas’s first muse, starting when Thomas was in graduate school at Yale until her mother’s death in 2012. That vision of her mother as glamorous—“My mother ... had an impeccable sense of style,” she says—was what kickstarted the artist’s portrayal of Black women as sexy and fashionable. Style is an important part of her work, but her influences are less about what’s in vogue and more about childhood memories, which are reflected particularly in the patchwork-like techniques used in many of her artworks.

“My grandmother used to buy from the Salvation Army or secondhand stores to patch up worn furniture. So my aesthetic is inspired from that particular childhood of seeing the women in my family quilting and crocheting,” she says. “The choice of materials I use in my art represents many of the concepts she used to embody in the work like the artifice, the construction of ideas and narratives, and the ways in which we perceive beauty.”

After her mother died, Thomas moved on to working with friends, romantic partners and models, most recently her life partner Racquel Chevremont, an art collector and curator. The artist started *Tête de Femme* (“Head of a Woman”, named after Picasso’s series of the same title) in 2014, and has been working for a year and a half on the series that will show in Hong Kong. In it, she takes inspiration from how Picasso captures his muses’ beauty in fragmented cubist shapes based on his perception and memory of them; from Warhol’s photorealism through using silkscreen; and from Henri Matisse’s shapes and colours. Diverging from their practices, Thomas added oil paint, acrylics and rhinestone-studded fabrics to fragmented images of her



IMAGES TATJANA SHOAN (PORTRAIT), © MICKALENE THOMAS (PAINTINGS)



September, 1977 (2021), which is on show at Lévy Gorvy in New York

own muses, additions she believes create a contemporary lens through which to celebrate Black beauty and glamour. “Gesturally my work functions completely differently and adds a new dialogue to the discourse of those particular artists,” she says. “It’s important for me as an artist to look at those artists who’ve made those works before and where I can align, have a dialogue and start where they may have left off.”

Thomas’s art transcends the personal. In elevating the image of Black women and celebrating their beauty in her *Jet* and *Jet Blue* paintings, she also stimulates conversation about oppressed groups. The weekly *Jet* magazine, launched in 1951 by Johnson Publishing, was one of the first publications to depict what was happening among Black and Brown bodies in the Fifties, and fuelled Thomas’s desire to portray current affairs in her art. The magazine gained national attention with its graphic coverage of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955. The magazine went on to chronicle the burgeoning civil rights movement and its leader Martin Luther King Jr, as well as the fashion trends rooted in the Black is Beautiful movement of the Seventies. “Not only [are they] celebrating and uplifting Black artists, intellectuals and celebrities; they are a current events magazine that challenges common perceptions within American society,” Thomas says.

In paintings where she merges art and mass media, the artist recontextualises some of the vintage *Jet* cover stars’ images by adding silkscreen and oil and acrylic painting techniques so that the beauty, strength and individuality of these anonymous women live on in her contemporary works.

Decades later, Thomas finds herself speaking out about many of the same problems *Jet* covered, saying Black Americans are often treated as second-class citizens. “Economically or health-wise, there’s all these disparities. Black women in America are still the underbelly of America. That Black women’s kids are being shot down in the street is a big sign of how they feel about Black women in America. You don’t see white women’s kids being shot down in the streets by the

police,” Thomas says. “My art reflects this time in history [simply] by me dealing with the current events.”

Take *Resist*, the Paris show, as an example. It responds to issues around Black and Brown bodies, from the Tulsa race massacre in Oklahoma in 1921 to the Black Lives Matter movement that was born in 2013 as a protest over racially motivated violence against Black people. Instead of graphic pictures of assaults, Thomas’s paintings take a gentler approach, overlapping silk-screened images of protesters and other archival photos from the civil rights movement with oil and acrylic painting, the finished works juxtaposing images of women who have long led the fight for with ideas of relentless violence and the dehumanisation of Black and Brown bodies.

But the lack of violence doesn’t mean her work isn’t a protest. “My paintings put out positive images and celebrate Black women. That, in its act, is a revolutionary gesture,” she says. “I don’t think I necessarily need to show images of brutality in Paris. It’s more important for me to come from my [perspective], as someone in America, [to depict] what we’re experiencing. People can relate in the same way to a police baton going over someone’s head in America, Europe or Hong Kong. There are different issues that may not be as directly paralleled, but they’re coming from people being resilient against things that are making them feel less than empowered. These works are very powerful in the sense that they’re very political and allow people to think, see and question the world around them.”

Thomas’s global exhibitions have indeed raised many questions about redefining the Black identity. And despite the approbation she has won for her depiction of Black bodies in both the art world and beyond, she says her work is far from done. After this autumn’s four shows at Lévy Gorvy, the 50-year-old has a new project with Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris next summer, and says she will continue to explore issues related to women. “Art is always a beautiful, incredible and safe space to use your voice,” she says. “If we get rid of that, our civil liberties and rights are taken away.”