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In Mickalene Thomas's awe-inspiring portraits, a meaningful reflection of black women in art

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Over the course of her trailblazing artistic career, Mickalene Thomas has drawn inspiration from prolific artists and pop culture icons alike, from 1970s supermodel Beverly Johnson to Edouard Manet's Odalisque figures of the 19th Century. From these influences, she's created a vast body of portraits that critically deconstruct definitions of beauty, race, and gender — specifically for black women — and redefine them on her own terms. Her work has been exhibited in major galleries across the globe and is included in collections at major museums, among them MoMA and the Guggenheim. She's won numerous grants and awards and over the past decade has been lauded as a leading figure in the art world.

Thomas is a chameleon of sorts: she's worked in a variety of mediums, from performance art to collage, but is best known for her monumental, rhinestone-embellished paintings, which are as multi-textured as they are multi-layered with symbolism.

The women in Thomas's portraits convey an absolute feminine power, their unwavering gazes channeling conviction and confidence. In compelling juxtaposition, they exude the kind of sexuality reminiscent of "blaxploitation" aesthetic of the 1970s. Surrounding them are bold patterns and prints inspired by Thomas's childhood, and references to art, literature and music.

Though inspired in part by a deep understanding of art history and culture, her most meaningful muses have been those women closest to her: an intimate circle of friends, lovers and relatives who she's collaborated with and photographed over the years. Now, a new photobook and coinciding exhibition at Aperture gallery, Muse, bring Thomas's muses together for the first time. The result is an inspiring collection of women who are as glamorous as they are real.

She may not be best-known for her photographs, but photography has played a pivotal role in Thomas's career. As an M.F.A. candidate at Yale in the early 2000s, her professors suggested she enroll in a photo class. In search of a willing subject, Thomas found her mother, Sandra "Mama Bush" Bush. The experience proved hugely impactful, helping her to better understand her own femininity and where it fit in relation to the prevailing images of black women in those years, including those embodied by female hip-hop powerhouses Lil' Kim and Mary J. Blige.

Thomas is celebrated for turning the tables on over-sexualized, objectified portrayals of the black female body in the media, and in their place, carving out an authentic and meaningful reflection of black women instead. As seen in Muse, they key in doing so has been to encourage viewers to see these inspirational women through Thomas's eyes: bold, beautiful, and undeniable. Over email with Women in the World, Thomas shared her thoughts on Muse, how the project got its start, and what she hopes viewers will take away from the exhibition and photobook.

Women in the World: You've named your mother as your first muse. How has she influenced your career as an artist?

Mickalene Thomas: Growing up, watching my mother work as a professional model during the '70s and '80s, I was always galvanized by her glamour, tenacity and gracefulness. When I first started taking photographs as a student at Yale, she was the only person that I could convince to pose nude for me and working with her as a model really helped me to understand how her charisma related to me, to my own femininity. Her tenacity not only continues to spark my career today, but her charisma is something that I always want to carry with me as well.

WITW: Is there a particular quality that unites all of your muses?

MT: Just like my first muse, my mother, all of my muses possess a profound sense of inner confidence and individuality. They are all in tune with their own audacity and beauty in such unique ways. They are unafraid to exude boldness and vulnerability at the same time, and most importantly, they are real.

WITW: How did you collaborate with these women? Tell us a bit about the process.

MT: A lot of these women are close friends, friends of friends, and lovers of mine. When a model first enters one of my installations, which act as a backdrop for these portraits, she immediately becomes engaged with the space just as an actress would as she enters a theatrical moment or a stage. By styling them and posing them, I'm engaged in a conversation with them, in a sense. The photo

shoots are always collaborative, and I prefer to relinquish some authority to my muse in hopes of allowing for her to own the space. By bringing real, genuine aspects of herself, I want the unique beauty and individuality to manifest. They're not just anonymous props to my work, but rather, real women who insist on their presence with their directness and gaze. Often times, I will title the work after the names of the muses too — I want their presence to be much more pronounced in the world, and not just in that of the arts.

WITW: How do the portraits in *Muse* approach and confront harmful, stereotypical portrayals of black women in art and the media?

MT: By portraying real women with their own unique history, beauty and background, I'm working to diversify the representations of black women in art. Around the time I started taking photographs in the early 2000s, there was a dominant stereotype of young, black, female bodies in the media. Women like Mary J. Blige, Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown who were at the forefront of pop culture, appearing in hip-hop magazines were often limited to depicting themselves as objects of desire. It appeared to me that as a black woman, I was subject to the same kind of limitations and framework in which they performed. To further explore these identities, I started to develop *Quanikah*, my alter-ego that I embodied in my earlier self-portraits. This performative process helped to make sense of the pre-existing notions of what it meant to be a black woman in the public eye. It led me to further challenge the stereotypes portraying real women, the women in my life, the women that I admire and respect.

WITW: Throughout your career your work has often been interpreted as feminist, though, so often, the experiences of women of color are left out of feminist discourse. Can you tell us how your work confronts that disparity?

MT: By selecting women of color, I am quite literally raising their visibility and inserting their presence into the conversation. I like to think of the portraits as mirrors, in reference to Lacan's mirror image theory. We are not validated until we see ourselves, and the mirror is a tangible object that works as an evidence to external appearance. Not only are we present, we demand that we be seen, be heard, and be acknowledged.

WITW: What are you hoping your viewers, specifically women of color, might take away from *Muse*?

MT: I want the same kind of strength and tenacity to shine through all of my viewers. Just as my muses insist on their visibility and identity, I want my viewers to feel present with fierceness and boldness. Through the act of seeing, I want them to feel validated just as much. I want them to claim their rightful space in the world.

WITW: In some portraits, you've incorporated elements of collage. Describe the role of these other materials in portraying your subjects.

MT: The backdrop of my portraits first started off as a blank wall. I started to play around with fabric just as I did with collages, then continued to incorporate materials that would provide a much more expansive environment. I've reupholstered various vintage furniture, and by inseting these elements into the set, they almost become collages in their own right, functioning in three-dimensional spaces. They're not intended to present a particular, actual period in history, but become activated as tableaux, creating a spatial collage that lends an opportunity to think about real spaces and real time. I'm interested in types of spaces that provide a certain level of intimacy. What kind of places offer room for political, thoughtful, engaging conversations, et cetera.

WITW: In your exhibition at Aperture, you've also curated a selection, or *Tête-à-tête*, of work by contemporary photographers that's inspired you. Can you tell us about one artist in particular and why he or she is meaningful to you?

MT: *Tête-à-tête* is a visual collaboration through a conversation of images I have with my peers. Each and every artist in this iteration is special to me in such unique ways, but if I specifically had to choose one artist, it would be Malian photographer Malick Sidibé. His work is a major influence in my use of pattern and studio photography, and I love that both of our works make reference to classical, figurative portraiture. It's inspiring to draw visual similarities between his work and mine, but simultaneously recognize the different types of intimacy that our subject occupy to confront the viewers.

Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs and *tête-à-tête* will be on view at Aperture Gallery in New York City from January 28 through March 17. The photobook can be purchased here. All images courtesy the artist; Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong; and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.