

Mickalene Thomas

a biography



Brooklyn-based artist Mickalene Thomas was born in 1971 in Camden, New Jersey, where she and her brother were raised by their mother in an extended family. When Thomas was a child, her mother enrolled her in after-school programs at The Newark Museum of Art, although as a teen she aspired to become a lawyer. At 18 years old, she became more open about her sexuality as a gay woman, but was unprepared to share this reality with her mother. Seeking a fresh start, Thomas moved with her girlfriend to Portland, Oregon, where she worked in a law firm while waiting tables in coffeehouses, a job that introduced her to the local art scene. She began reading art books and visiting museum exhibitions, and quickly developed an appreciation for prominent African American artists, including William H. Johnson (1901–1970) and Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953). After a friend convinced her to attend an art therapy class, Thomas produced her first drawings—oil pastel portraits of family and friends—which were displayed at a local coffeehouse. These early drawings garnered attention and, in 1995, another friend convinced Thomas to attend a portfolio review, during which art schools would recruit new students. Despite her reservations, she attended the review, cementing her desire to go to art school. Wanting to be closer to home, Thomas chose Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York.

Upon enrolling at Pratt, Thomas was self-conscious about being a 24-year-old undergraduate, but eventually found the school a good fit. She immersed herself in abstract painting, taking inspiration from Brice Marden (b. 1938) and Color Field painters, such as Kenneth Noland (1924–2010) and Gene Davis (1920–1985). Thomas also developed an appreciation for Australian Aboriginal painting while studying abroad at Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia, in 1998. During her undergraduate studies, the artist began using craft materials—such as felt, yarn, and rhinestones—in lieu of expensive oil and acrylic paints. Thomas was drawn to these materials because of their association with so-called “outsider art,” as well as with the historical connection between women and creative pursuits regarded as “craft.” In 2000, Thomas’ unconventional paintings embellished with these materials propelled her into the Master of Fine Arts program in painting at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

Yale proved a challenging environment for Thomas, who has discussed how her fellow students and professors encouraged her to consider for the first time why she was drawn to specific subjects and techniques and what they meant. She began making figurative work, including photographs of her mother and self-portraits in which she poses as pop musicians and subjects from art history, such as Leonardo da Vinci’s (1453–1519) *Mona Lisa* (ca. 1503–1519).



After completing her master’s degree in 2002, the artist returned to Brooklyn and worked a variety of part-time jobs so that she could focus on painting while making a steady income. In 2002, she entered the residency program at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where she developed her now iconic depictions of strong African American women decorated with collages and rhinestones. Regarding her work in the context of contemporary art, Thomas has explained, “What’s happening in art and art history right now is the validation and agency of the Black female body. We do not need permission to be present.” Her approach to portraiture is grounded in the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists, including Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Edouard Manet (1832–1883), and Romare Bearden (1911–1988). She balances these historical influences with inspiration from 1970s fashion and contemporary popular culture. This unique style was quickly recognized, and in 2006, the artist had her first solo exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago. Two years later, she created a screen print of First Lady Michelle Obama inspired by Andy Warhol’s (1928–1987) famous pictures of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to commemorate the inauguration of President Barack Obama. In recent years, Thomas has expanded her painting repertoire to include landscapes and interiors. She has organized exhibitions of her photographs and ventured into video with works such as her 2012 tribute to her mother, *Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman*. An exhibition of Thomas’ work at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada, in 2018–2019, featured an installation consisting of four large television monitors playing one of the artist’s videos and a living room decorated with boldly-patterned fabrics reminiscent of the artist’s paintings. She has also completed large-scale projects including murals for the Queens Museum in New York (2015) and the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal (2016). Thomas’ practice and subject matter have become more diverse, and her work is held in numerous public and private collections.

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Mickalene Thomas, 2019, © Chad Kirkland; Mickalene Thomas (American, b. 1971), *Michelle Q*, 2008, (Printer: Brand X Editions, Inc., New York) color screenprint, 16 x 13 1/2 in. (40.6 x 34.3 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Jeanne and Stokley Towles, 2009.4372, Courtesy of Mickalene Thomas, Brand X Projects, New York and Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York; Mickalene Thomas (American, b. 1971), *Baby I Am Ready Now*, 2007, acrylic, rhinestone, and enamel on wooden panel, 72 x 132 in. (182.88 x 335.28 cm), Courtesy of the Rubell Family Collection, Miami. Photo by Chi Lam.

Mickalene Thomas’ portraits, such as *Din, une tres belle negresse 1* (French for “Din, a beautiful black woman 1”), feature glamorous, confident African American women who embrace their gender and skin color, projecting a vision of black femininity, sexuality, and power. The artist describes Din, a young woman she first began using as a model in 2008, as a shy medical student who transforms “like a chameleon” when she models, becoming self-assured and bold. Din’s afro and exuberant makeup, along with the vibrant patterns adorning both her dress and the wall behind her, command the viewer’s attention. At the same time, the sitter confidently addresses her audience, challenging the historical notion that female portraiture models are passive subjects, intended to appease the male gaze.

While Thomas painted most of Din’s figure using enamel and acrylic, she used rhinestones to embellish aspects of the portrait, such as Din’s bright blue lips and pink eye shadow. Enamel and acrylic paints are traditional media, yet they also reference the materials used to create nail polish and artificial nails. By contrast, rhinestones typically adorn clothing and crafts and are not often used in painting. These references to do-it-yourself artistic practices reflect on the long-held discriminatory belief that art by women approximates “craft” more than it does “fine art.” Thomas challenges this perception by bringing unconventional materials into the realm of “high art.”

By depicting Din facing forward and from the chest up, a classic pose favored by artists like Edouard Manet (1832–1883), Thomas also references the history of the portrait in Western art. The artist reinforces her kinship with Manet in this painting’s title, which is pulled from the French master’s description of his model Laure—a black woman who was a sitter in several portraits—as “une tres belle negresse.” By drawing attention to one of the few black female models in the history of Western portraiture, Thomas highlights their otherwise conspicuous absence. The artist has stated that rather than attempt to provide commentary on this absence or signal a departure from it, her work instead reclaims agency for the black female subject in the context of the art historical canon.



Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), *Din Facing Forward*, 2012, c-print, 60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm), Mickalene Thomas, LLC

Discussion Questions

How would you describe the sitters’ attitudes in Mickalene Thomas’ portraits?

How does Thomas draw on the history portraiture in Western art? How does she challenge it?

How and why does Thomas use craft materials in her paintings?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster’s related academic standards and lesson plans.

Timeline

1970

1971 Mickalene Thomas is born on January 28 in Camden, New Jersey

1980

1989 Moves to Portland, Oregon, to work in a law firm; begins creating her first drawings

1990

1995 Accepted to San Francisco Art Institute but enrolls in the Pratt Institute in New York instead

1998 Studies abroad where she is inspired by Australian Aboriginal art

2000

2000 Receives her BFA from the Pratt Institute

2002 Receives her MFA from Yale University

2002–2003 Participates in the residency program at the Studio Museum in Harlem

2006 First solo show at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago

2008 Creates the first ever individual portrait of a First Lady of the United States with a screen print of Michelle Obama

2010

2012 First solo exhibition at a major museum, *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, opens at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, now reestablished as the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA)

2020

IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), *Mama Bush: (Your love keeps lifting me) higher and higher*, 2009, rhinestone, acrylic and enamel on panel, 84 x 72 in. (213.4 x 182.9 cm), LM12190; Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), *Hudson River On My Mind*, 2009, color photograph and paper collage on archival board, 8 1/2 x 11 1/2 in. (21.6 x 29.2 cm), LM 12848

Women in the History of Crafts

The distinction between fine art and craft has been contentious throughout the history of Western art. Scholars have construed “art objects” as having no function beyond aesthetic value. Conversely, “craft” is often defined by objects’ practical applications. Therefore, scholars have typically thought of paintings and sculpture—whose main purpose is associated with their appearance—as “art,” while considering textiles and pottery, which serve a useful role in everyday life, as “craft.”



Mickalene Thomas acknowledges and inserts herself into this history through her paintings, making extensive use of materials and techniques that are typically associated with craft rather than traditional portraiture. In *Untitled #10* (2014), for example, she uses collage to bring together the components of the model’s face and accentuates her nose and eyelashes with glitter and rhinestones. In this way, the artist rejects the distinction between “art” and “craft” and calls attention to the denigration of women’s artistic production that has resulted from this false dichotomy.

Mickalene Thomas (American, b. 1971), *Untitled #10*, 2014, acrylic, oil paint, glitter, rhinestones, oil pastel, dry pastel, and graphite on wood panel, 96 x 72 in. (243.8 x 182.9 cm), LM19711

Beginning in the eighteenth century in Western Europe and the United States, craft came to be associated with women and domesticity. Women practiced a variety of crafts, including embroidery, collage, needlework, painting on silk and paper, and papier-mâché. These activities allowed women to turn industrially-produced raw materials, such as yarn, into objects with personal significance, while also making use of leisure time and providing an outlet for creativity. Occupying roles as homemakers, women were also expected to beautify and personalize their dwellings, and crafts provided the opportunity to accomplish this important task. Despite the ingenuity and skill that many women demonstrated in their handling of materials, the concepts of art and craft were regarded to such an extent that women’s work was regarded as “mere domestic handicraft,” distinct from “high art,” which was understood as the purview of men exclusively.

While Mickalene Thomas’ portraits draw on a variety of influences from the history of Western art, her primary subjects—black women—have a complex relationship with this history. For many centuries, male artists depicted women, especially nudes, as objects meant to be consumed by men. As seen in paintings such as *Return of Spring* (1886) by William Adolphe Bouguereau (1825–1905), female nude subjects were often rendered as passive and seductive, but not empowered. Women of color, when depicted, are relegated to minor positions in portraits. This trend began to change in the nineteenth century as European citizens had increased contact with African and Asian peoples through colonialism. Artists began to paint women of African descent both in solo portraits and as companions to white models. One of the most notable examples of this approach is Edouard Manet’s (1832–1883) *Olympia* (1863), a double portrait of a white, nude prostitute and her black maidservant.

Many nineteenth- and twentieth-century portraits featuring both white and black females suggest a hierarchy in which the white subjects are depicted as more beautiful than their black counterparts. British artist Edwin Long’s (1829–1891) painting *The Babylonian Marriage Market* (1875), for example, presents women being auctioned for marriage in an



The Black Female Body in Portraiture

imagined scene from the ancient world. The women are seated in a line in the foreground of the painting, with those seen at the far left side of the canvas proceeding to the auction block first. Long implies that these women are the most beautiful, and he paints them accordingly, with the small, delicate features and lily-white skin that adhered to standards of beauty at the time.

In stark contrast, the women at the right side of composition, who are slated to be sold last, have notably darker skin and exaggerated facial characteristics. Long’s depiction of this scene demonstrates how the notion of black inferiority was perpetuated in visual culture for generations.

Thomas’ portraits critique the conventions represented in Long’s painting while also borrowing from the history of art. Countering the objectification of women in Western art, she portrays women who are confident and in control of their identities. In *Portrait of Mnonja* (2010), the sitter reclines on a plush couch, exuding self-confidence and dignity, rather than simply being subjected to the viewer’s gaze. In this way, Thomas claims a space for black female bodies in the portraiture tradition. The artist explains:

I draw a lot of inspiration from the canonized images in the history of art, and part of that drive comes from a desire to claim these celebrated images of beauty and reinterpret them in my own way. I’m inserting the figures of black women, who have largely been forgotten or marginalized throughout the history of Western art. I am creating the context I want my work to be viewed within; rather than my work being considered as a commentary or even a departure, I actually want to take some ownership of or participate in the conversation when we talk about Matisse, Manet, Romare Bearden, Balthus, Courbet, or even Warhol and Duchamp.

IMAGES (CLOCKWISE): Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971), *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, 2010, rhinestone, acrylic and enamel on panel, 120 x 288 in. (304.8 x 731.5 cm), LM12816; Mickalene Thomas (American, b. 1971), *Portrait of Mnonja*, 2010, rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel, 96 x 120 in. (243.8 x 304.8 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2011.16; Edwin Long (British, 1829–1891), *Babylonian Marriage Market*, 1875, oil on canvas, Royal Holloway, University of London, Purchased for Thomas Holloway, 1882, acc. no. THC0039

Some images are not available online
due to copyright restrictions.
Contact Joslyn at (402) 342-3300
to borrow this teaching poster.

MICKALENE THOMAS
American, b. 1971

DIN, UNE TRÈS BELLE NÉGRESSE 1
2012, acrylic, oil, enamel and mixed
media on wood panel, 102 x 84 in.

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, gift of The Sherwood
Foundation, 2019.6