

# DAZED

30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue

Rihanna photographed  
by Rafael Pavarotti

**The  
Reign  
Never  
Stops**



**Rihanna**

# Mickalene Thomas

**Reimagining the past with the edge of a razor, Mickalene Thomas's kaleidoscopic oeuvre poses timely questions about Black agency. Now, she's back with a new invitation to remake, remodel and resist in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – a radical exploration of sex, gender and the Black body politic**

## TEXT CAMILLE OKHIO

Recrafting the limited narratives that exist around Black women in popular culture, Mickalene Thomas slices her way through pervasive images, tropes and cultural touchpoints, reassembling her findings in succinct, earnest narratives that look to a more honest future. The artist, who works mostly in collage and painting, centres her work on her own lived experience, as well as those close to her and the imagined identities and agency of women she will never get to meet.

"My mother, as well as my grandmothers and aunts, were such amazing role models," says Thomas. "My [mum], whom I featured extensively in my earlier work, showed me how to unapologetically love my body." Ownership over the body is a theme that Thomas returns to again and again in her work across a variety of media, which she has honed and experimented with over the last two decades. Her vision is atemporal, looking at the past, its flaws and its lessons just as it presents ideas for what might come next, if we allow it.

The conviction with which Thomas speaks is reflected in her work. Her paintings are loud, at times brusque and always urgent. A wave-crash of colour, texture and pattern. Her collages pack a similar punch, their patchwork quality calling to mind the velvet textures and all-over-prints of a 1960s interior. You fall into her compositions like a conversation, lulled into a sense of comfort by saturated tones and familiar prints, only to be electrified by the intent of the work.

Thomas's trajectory has been inspiring in its irregularity. Her journey began in Portland, Oregon, where she studied law and theatre with eyes set on a more traditional, pragmatic career path. "[Port-

land] is one of the whitest places on earth, but they have an amazing, supportive Black community," she says of her time in the city. "Things came full circle when I did a talk [at Portland Art Museum in 2017]. The Black people showed *up!*" The artist's following has steadily grown, in both size and enthusiasm, since she graduated with an arts degree in 2000. Thomas went on to earn a masters from Yale in 2002 and from there began the difficult ascent to prominence, taking odd jobs to make ends meet. "Even after grad school and my residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem [from 2000-2003], I still worked full-time in retail and even cleaned houses for a bit. I did that because I needed to make money and support my studio practice, but didn't want to have the type of job that distracted from my art."

Buzz around the artist grew after her residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, with an early milestone coming in 2010, when she was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art to design an installation for the windows of its restaurant, The Modern. Two years later, Thomas's aria reached a crescendo. "In 2012 I was preparing [my first solo exhibition at] the Brooklyn museum, doing my first large-scale mural for the Barclays Center and opening a two-gallery show with Lehmann Maupin [the gallery that represents her]," she remembers. Since then, there hasn't quite been a year as ripe with public projects... until now.

This autumn, the artist will open a series of shows in four locations around the world with gallerists Lévy Gorvy. The partnership is a unique one – Lévy Gorvy is known for its old-school approach, selling the work of Alexander Calder, Francesco Clemente and Yves Klein to name a few, and has historically done little to push the conversation around contemporary American art. Regardless,

**"I don't think I've resolved anything... that's why I keep making the work!"**

opposite page: June 1977 (2021), rhinestones, acrylic and oil paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame. ©Mickalene Thomas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





they presented Thomas with an attractive offer – the space and resources to do her work justice. First in line is a show in the gallery's New York space, which will host new additions to Thomas's *Jet* series from September. The *Jet* paintings are among the artist's larger-scale works and take their title from the Black periodical *Jet*, from which Thomas pulls images to serve as focal points in her paintings.

"With these particular archival images, I was thinking of the women in *Jet* magazine's calendars," says Thomas. "Who was dictating how they were to be seen or be presented in the world?" The women in these calendars remained anonymous, unlike the 'Beauties of the Week' Thomas remembers poring over weekly when her family would get new issues in the 80s. Beauties of the week were given careers, stories and came from all walks of life. The women in the calendars just had their bodies, but were complex nonetheless. Regardless of the scant information available about these women, Thomas has managed to mine their expressions and positioning, using her imagination to incorporate them into new and compelling visual narratives.

Many of the paintings that will be on view are seven by five feet or larger, bringing together rhinestones – a signature of Thomas's discovered during her undergraduate studies – acrylic paint, chalk pastel and paper, in addition to archival materials. The archival materials have the effect of hooking the past into the present, granting Thomas space to subtly reinterpret and represent. More paintings from the series will be on view in Lévy Gorvy's London space, while in Hong Kong there will be paintings from the artist's *Resist* series, which more explicitly explore the political and social intrigues at work in our world, restricting, terrorising and snuffing out Black lives. In multilayered paintings incorporating overlaid silk-screened images, archival photographs, oil and acrylic, anecdotes from the civil rights movement of the 1960s and contemporary racial justice movements interweave, uttering a specific call to action.

Finally, in Paris, Thomas will present pieces from her *Tête de Femme* series, a playful and pointed riposte to Picasso and other early modernists' plundering of so-called 'primitive' African art for their work. In the series, Thomas places herself confidently within a western art-historical canon, borrowing compositions from Andy Warhol, Fernand Leger and Édouard Manet and transposing Black women in place of the exclusively white figures that occupied the original works. The works could be perceived as conceptually simplistic, but viewed contextually within Thomas's oeuvre, they reveal an unresolved consideration of identity. "I don't think I've resolved anything," says Thomas of the series, "which is why I keep making the work!"

The show takes its name, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, from a conflation of Sigmund Freud's psychological concept and Janet Jackson's 1986 single of the same name. "I was thinking mostly about how our pleasures in the world are dictated by an individual's journey," says Thomas, "but also by societal norms, and how these norms often determine what we find suitable for pleasure and what we do not." Through that lens, Thomas explores ideas around sexual agency, 'sexiness' and how it's read and communicated and, perhaps most interestingly, respectability politics (the controversial moral discourse around what is appropriate for Black and marginalised people to wear, say and do, if they are to gain the ever-elusive support and respect of their white counterparts). The title of Thomas's upcoming show is one of many thought-provoking elements in a career that has been singular in its focus, pace and scale – and perhaps a meta-symbol for the vital force of agency as displayed by both creator and creation.

*Mickalene Thomas: Beyond the Pleasure Principle is at Lévy Gorvy in New York, London, Paris and Hong Kong from September*

opposite page: September 1977 (2021), rhinestones, glitter and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame. ©Mickalene Thomas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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