



Mickalene
THOMAS

Going beyond the pleasure principle.

BY KATY DONOGHUE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY

This fall, Mickalene Thomas embarked on a major endeavor, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” a four-city, multi-venue series of blockbuster exhibitions. Opening first in New York at Lévy Gorvy was a three-floor presentation of new works derived from *Jet* magazine pinup calendars. More of those paintings were on view in London at Lévy Gorvy, as well as at Nathalie Obadia in Paris. A new group of “Resist” paintings as well as a video installation were on view at Lévy Gorvy’s Paris location, and at its Hong Kong home, Thomas showed paintings from “Tête de Femme.”

The project was the result of her new gallery partnership, a desire to make Thomas’s work more visible in Europe, and the opportunity amid much uncertainty to show as much as she could while she could.

The new paintings also serve as a full-circle moment of sorts, revisiting imagery from *Jet* magazine, as its “Beauties of the Week” were the subject of a performative piece while she was in grad school at Yale. While she wouldn’t revisit *Jet* as source material for years, the thread of the gaze, representations of the Black body, and a celebration of sensuality can be drawn throughout Thomas’s practice.

On the day of her openings in Paris, Thomas spoke with *Whitewall* from her studio about the impact of images, the role of jazz in collage, and her plans post “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

WHITEWALL: *Your exhibitions in New York and London at Lévy Gorvy feature new large-scale paintings sourced from Jet magazine pinup calendars. You’ve talked about the importance and role Jet magazine played in your life. And then in 2012, when your mother passed, you found boxes of Jet among her things. You didn’t use that as a resource in your work until later. What made you feel ready to engage with this material?*

MICKALENE THOMAS: In 2012 my mother died, and I inherited her box of *Jet* magazines. Prior to her death, I had already explored and created some images around the “Beauties of the Week” from *Jet* magazine while in graduate school as a performative project in Kellie Jones’s class.

I started experimenting with other ideas through photography by staging photo shoots of women in my life—my mother, myself, and my lover at the time. This experimentation cemented the ideas in my creative process; it wasn’t fully developed until now.

Now, at this point in my life, after my journey, after collaborating with muses, working with various sitters and models, it makes sense to look back at the pivotal moment where the first images provided a sense of validation, in beauty and recognition. These images created a platform of agency and became the central point of focus to why the concepts in my work are related to desire, beauty, and erotica.

WW: *So, the Jet “Beauties of the Week,” whether directly or not so directly, have been there all along for you. But the Jet pinup calendars were a new discovery for you, right? What about these images struck you?*

MT: Not until 2015 did I discover the pinups. I did not grow up with them, nor do I have memory of seeing them in my environment. It depends on the generation—not many women of my generation had heard of them. Researching with my team, we started collecting and buying different *Jet* magazines from the 1950s and they had the “Jet Calendar Girl,” but they were fully clothed, and presented as pageant girls. Different from what’s happening 20 years later, in the fifties they were identified, similarly to the “Beauties of the Week.”

Moving into the seventies and they are semi-nude, topless, they are insinuating some signifiers of desire, sexuality, and sensuality, blocking their vaginas with a propped plant. Their names aren’t revealed; there are no descriptions. I’m curious about those parameters around finding or presenting Black erotica, acceptability, and respectability.

WW: *So, once they expressed their sexuality, their identity was kept out.*

MT: Exactly. Perhaps for their protection, of course, but sometimes the mystery in desire is not knowing—there’s a degree of separation. There’s a myriad of reasons why that is necessary. But I’m interested in the dichotomy, related to art history, when we place the Black body in overtly erotic positions or servitude positions, that we don’t need to know who they are. So, when you look at the maid in *Olympia* by Manet, the Black woman is secondary; today we are identifying the women in these paintings.

However, another notion is that I think there’s something to owning Black women’s erotica—us owning our sexuality needs to be validated as we own and love our own bodies, and want to be desired. The Black female body is beautiful. Damn it, women’s bodies are sexy. Our bodies vary in size and shape. As it should be—who wants to have the same body as someone else? Unlike some of the images of women in the media today, who are starting to morph into looking like each other with the same type of lips, butt, and breasts. That’s unfortunate. It is really desirable to love yourself and accept your own body. It’s empowering, like Tina Turner loving and owning her sexy legs. Putting these images forward as a way of celebrating the Black body is imperative for young girls.

WW: *In the paintings, how did you want to make these images come alive again?*

MT: Trying to understand the archival images by collaging and deconstructing them. Thinking about them as if they aren’t vintage or archival photos by putting them through the same process that I would my own images—scanning, reprinting, resizing, coloring, distorting, and deconstructing. There’s a lot of experimentation, playing with form and formal aspects of the body. I’m shifting and editing, reimagining the image.

I like to think that I’m giving them agency over what’s revealed—it’s gazing into their eyes and speaking to them, having conversations with the image. Who are you? What are you doing? Where are you from?

Presenting their power and ownership so that these are not presented as fictitious women, that these are real women. They made the decision to be photographed in this way. To me, that’s empowering.

What’s so exciting about some of the images is how they present, in some way, this moment of possibility. Some images have them with a golf club, sitting by a luxury pool, cooking in an ideal kitchen, or with a tennis racket; there’s the possibility of desire either for the beautiful woman or the activity. It’s these moments of sexuality and possibility of what you are capable of doing, or being, in the world. *Jet* provided these desires on many levels.

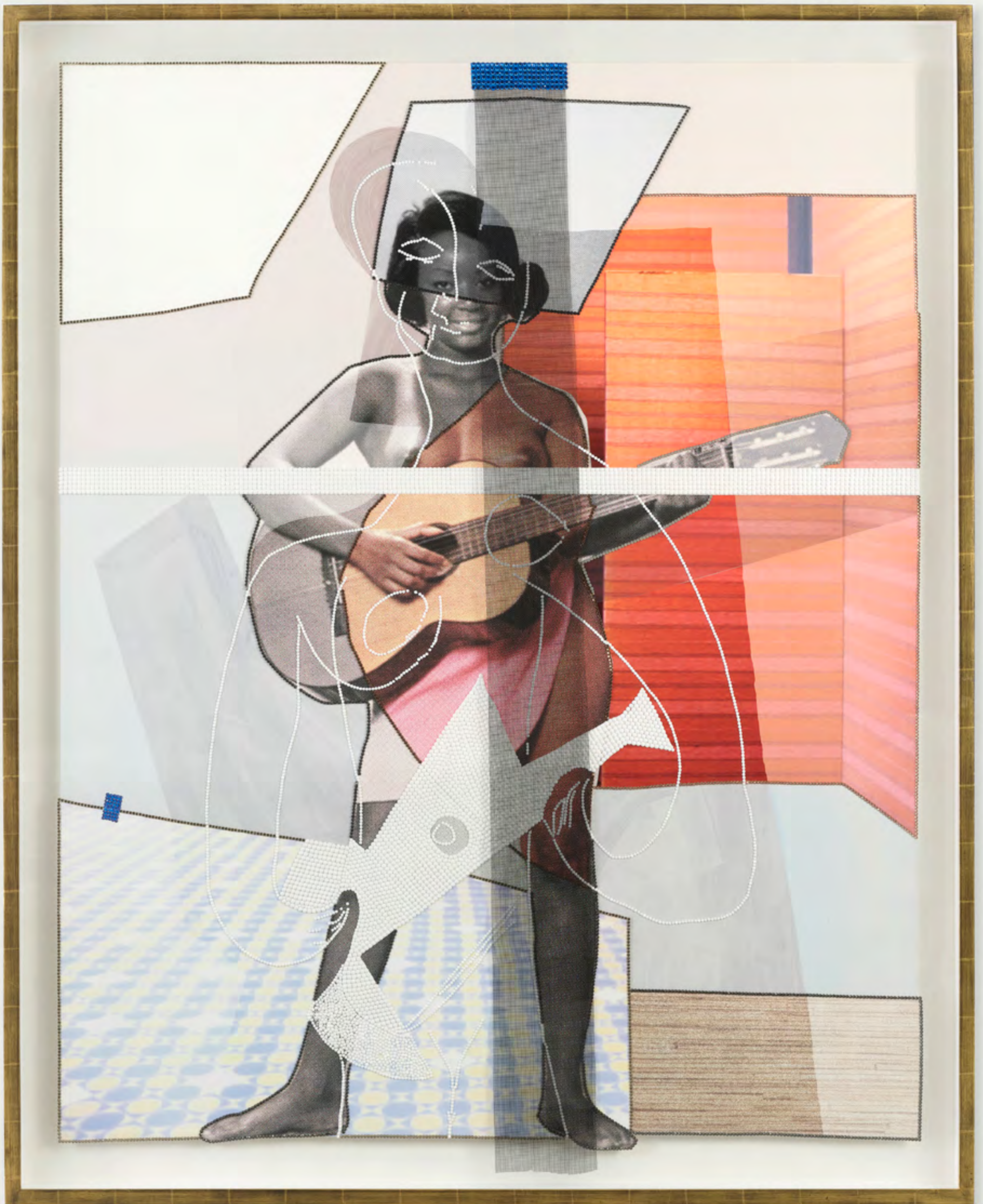
WW: *The installation of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in New York included stacks of books placed near different paintings. Can you tell us about those?*



Photo by Steve Benisty.



Mickalene Thomas, *Jet Blue #26*, rhinestones, fiberglass mesh, acrylic paint, chalk pastel, oil pastel, mixed media paper, and archival pigment prints on museum paper mounted on dibond with mahogany frame, 93.75 x 64.375 x 2 inches, © Mickalene Thomas.



Mickalene Thomas, *Jet Blue #43*, 2021, color photograph, mixed media paper, acrylic paint, rhinestones, fiberglass mesh on museum paper mounted on dibond, 61 x 48.25 inches, © Mickalene Thomas.

“It is really desirable to love yourself and accept your own body”

MT: The books for me in the installation act as this fundamental literary thread to how I'm giving context to my work through other authors and how they see or think about the Black body. Some of these writings inform my decision-making and ideas. I just delved into *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay. She's been incredible for me for thinking about my own empowerment and my place in the world—how it's okay not to have people agree with your ideas, and because you might enjoy your own bravado or notions of your sexuality, that could make you a “bad feminist.”

Not everyone is going to agree with my images. Not everyone's going to look at them in the way that I see them. Some people might find them problematic, and that's okay. It's okay to put works out there that are not always celebrated. It's okay to take risks and have the discourse be conflicted or complex or rub people the wrong way or disrupt the conversation about respectability. It's about bringing things to light and having full conversations about all the different ways of how our bodies are presented in the world.

Roxane Gay has been a really amazing literary resource for my work, in the same way that James Baldwin is for my “Resist” series.

WW: Mentioning your “Resist” series, those were on view at Lévy Gorvy in Paris. Can you tell us about creating these Guernica-inspired pieces?

MT: I'm creating particular images that deal with the dehumanization of Brown and Black bodies. I put sociopolitical elements in my work to create a palpable discussion around ways in which our society is still battling and dealing with the disproportionate attack on Black people, even when our Black excellence greatly contributes our culture to American society. The struggle still exists, the movement is real—we are still dealing with some oppression.

Considering Picasso, who is extremely prolific and complicated, I decided to use images from *Guernica*. He was an artist I could use as a connection with my other show at Nathalie Obadia in Paris, which was primarily the *Jet* pinup calendars and mostly seated women. Picasso had very controversial works that dealt with sociopolitical issues, as well as portraits of abstract, seated women. So, the thread moves back and forth between these ideas.

I was able to layer *Guernica* or the seated women as a ghost image to weave through the work. You see a hint of *Guernica*, but it's mostly about presenting Black Lives Matter and Black citizens that are dealing with inequities and prejudices—and not just in America but around the world. How people are protesting the inequality internationally.

We're resilient. We have Black excellence, we have Black joy, we have Black celebrity, we have Black success.

WW: And those paintings accompany a video, as well?

MT: The title of the video comes from the James Baldwin quote, “Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” It's a five-minute, 11-second, multi-channel video where I use my aesthetic of collage and apply it to filmmaking by creating a compilation of documentary footage from archival and news sources. It's featuring moments from the Black liberation movement, and a composition by Grammy Award-winning American jazz drummer, composer, educator, and producer Terri Lyne Carrington.

It's layered across five screens that are in various sizes, and each screen syncs up at different moments. The composition is this beautiful cacophony of movement and sound; it's like jazz and it's intense.

WW: How do you see your process in relation to rhythm and sound and movement?

MT: Collaging is about rhythm, shape, composition, and political movement. It's composing. It's about various elements from different sources or different perspectives and putting them together to create a narrative. You can do that with poetry, with language, music, and dance. I choose to use different genres of painting by collaging various images in my work. These various genres in my own process layer my paintings and videos. I'm always thinking about painting, I'm thinking about music, I'm thinking about poetry and dance. I'm thinking about how the viewer is going to move through, experience and engage with my painting—how do they physically respond?

WW: “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” is a global project, opening across four cities in several galleries in partnership. What was the starting point for such a monumental project?

MT: I really wanted to partner with a gallery that believes in my process, my vision, and my work, and was willing to take a risk with me. I want a partner. Lévy Gorvy seemed like the best gallery to develop this relationship with at this time. I haven't shown in Europe much; although, I have a gallery in Paris, this global exhibition allows me to show in spaces that have not been accessible in the past. This is my first solo exhibition in London.

WW: Really?

MT: Yes, really! It's been a long time coming. I knew Lévy Gorvy was the gallery to do this with me. Initially, I was only going to have a New York show, but the opportunity and monumental idea came about to make work for Paris, London, and Hong Kong. It was really the unknown. We were excited about things opening up and being ready to have this work to present to the world.

I think all the works are at the right places at the right moment for the right reasons. I think it's all appropriate for what's going on in Paris right now that the “Resist” paintings are being presented. It's the same with the works in Hong Kong, the works of “*Tête de Femme*,” the broad, bright faces with geometric shapes and color and gesture that explode on the canvas. They make you feel so joyful and happy, which is needed right now.

WW: After such a major output, what do you do next? Take a well-earned break, I hope?

MT: I think it's a combination of self-care at this moment, but also you get so pumped up by the energy of it all that these new ideas come from the growth of the work. Right now, it's a lot of research, writing ideas down, collecting, and gathering. I have some other projects and obligations to finish. Once these are completed, we'll close the studio for the holiday and take a nice long vacation and return, reassess, and see what's next. We're moving toward living our lives, having my studio open, the way Europeans do—away for August and for the holidays. I'm excited about this new organization and outlook on life.

I thought about this during COVID, reconsidering how I want to operate and manage my studio. There were some people that I had to let go. I have an intimate and loyal team. It's about us being a family, working together and supporting each other. I can't do this global show or any show of this magnitude by myself. I'm really appreciative and very generous to those who help me move this forward.



