



IT'S A HUMID FALL AFTERNOON IN THE BROOKLYN STUDIO OF MICKALENE THOMAS.

known for her rhinestone-studded portraits of African-American odalisques. The opening of her show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (through January 20, 2013) is less than three weeks away, yet Thomas and her team are still busy making work. The huge industrial space is abuzz, as one bleary-eyed assistant sands and primes wood panels in a tarp-covered space in the back, while others apply paint to pieces in progress in the front.

Interior: Blue Couch with Green Owl, 2012, by Mickalene Thomas, the subject of two museum shows and exhibitions at her New York gallery, Lehmann Maupin. Unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy of the artist, Lehmann Maupin Gallery New York and Suzanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. All photographs © Christopher Burke Studio

Only Thomas, wearing a paint-smeared pink shirt, seems fresh and focused — and so full of energy that she can't stop herself from painting while she talks. While showing me around, she suddenly goes up to a half-finished painting of a naked woman and casually tapes off a portion of the surface behind the figure's head. Then she grabs a few oil sticks and begins to work over the masked area, enthusiastically applying streaks of red, black and white.

Thomas explains while she works that she's recently been using thicker layers of paint and welcoming accidental drips, letting them remain instead of painting them out. "They create a depth of field that's really interesting to me," she says. She has also suddenly been possessed by the urge to create gestural marks, like the ones she's making now, which she describes as "a little de Kooning, a little Basquiat." It seems a complete contrast to the controlled, glistening compositions she became widely known for in 2009, when she became an art star seemingly overnight with her first solo show at Lehmann Maupin in New York. "I think it's allowing me to get

back to painting in a different way," Thomas says. Then she removes the tape and starts exulting. "It gives the figure more space behind her head," she says. "I'm so glad I did it! I've been thinking of doing it all day."

So why has she used oil sticks to make those marks, rather than a brush? "It has more of the effect of a child with crayons," Thomas says. It turns out that she was impelled to start using them just two weeks earlier, soon after her wife, the artist Carmen McLeod, gave birth to the couple's first child, Junya Rei.



Thomas says she is now approaching painting in a different way. Inset: the artist with her wife, Carmen McLeod, and their new baby, Junya Rei. Family photo by Carol Kino



Before her death this month, Sandra Bush was a longtime model and muse for her daughter. She's seen here in *Lounging, Standing, Looking*, 2003.

It's precisely that sort of intuitive move that has characterized Thomas's growth as an artist. When she began painting women several years ago, she focused on making portraits and photographs of her statuesque mother, a former model, and herself, looking like the glamorous model she had also been in her 20s. But then, feeling the need to remove herself from the work, Thomas turned her gaze onto other women, whom

she posed in elaborate costumes and wigs in a faux wood-paneled set in her studio. The move allowed her to develop the jazzy, flamboyant aesthetic she is known for today — one seemingly inspired by sources as diverse as Byzantine mosaics, the collage-like paintings of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, the sensuous nudes of Édouard Manet, and 1970s Blaxploitation films — while also exploring race and gender-identity issues.

Yet more recently, Thomas has focused on un-peopled landscapes and interiors, in which the pictorial space is fractured in a way that approaches Cubism. "The more I used collage as my tool for figuring out my composition," she says, "the more I started to really think about the spaces that are being created, about perspectival space and depth of field. I want the viewer to feel like they're being taken on a journey inside those different spaces."



Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires, 2012, was inspired by Courbet's Sleep from 1866.

Her own recent journey can be seen in "Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. It includes four new paintings (including *Melody: Femme Noire*, the one she was working on in the studio), a new installation and her first documentary video, as well as dozens of earlier paintings, photographs and collages.

The show, which originated as a smaller survey at the Santa Monica Art Museum last spring, also includes her *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, the 2009 painting that pushed Thomas in this direction. A reworking of Manet, populated by three women with Afros sitting in a colorful landscape of faux-wood paneling and gaudy fabric swatches, it was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art to hang in the window of its Modern restaurant. Thomas, taking the windowpanes into account, created a picture that looks as though it has been collaged with overlapping panels, each reflecting the next like a shattered mirror. "It was the beginning of me working in a different pictorial space," she says.

From top: the artist in her Brooklyn studio (photo by Carol Kino); an installation view of her current show at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, which includes *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, at right. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum of Art





Where Thomas is today, at 41, is visible in one of the newest paintings here, inspired by her 2011 residency at Giverny in France. Based on her own photographs of Claude Monet's yellow dining room, it plays tricks with foreground and background: Furniture seen through a far-off doorway is studded with rhinestones, so it seems to shimmer toward the surface of the field, while the framed artworks in the foreground appear to bump up against each other, like the jangling shapes of a Stuart Davis jazz abstraction.

Eugenie Tsai, the John and Barbara Vogelstein Curator of Contemporary Art at the museum, who organized the expanded Brooklyn version of Thomas's show, says this piece puts her in mind of the Abstract Expressionist forerunner Hans Hofmann "because of the push-pull and how she manipulates the surface. You're completely aware that it's a constructed surface, that it's a painting, not reality." Tsai adds that she was also surprised by Thomas's new developments. "Her works are becoming even more complex, where there seems to be even more layering of patterns," she says. "It's really quite remarkable, I've never seen anything quite like it." (A show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, opening on December 12, will also explore Thomas's handling of interior space.)

Din, une très belle négresse #1, 2012



The Brooklyn show includes four re-creations of the set in which Thomas often posed her models. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum



The Brooklyn exhibition includes four re-creations of the set where Thomas poses her models. If that installation moves the entire show into three dimensions, a final gallery pushes it into straightforward realism: That's where you'll find Thomas's very moving, 23-minute biographical documentary film about her mother, Sandra Bush, her primary model and muse until 2010, when Bush became too ill with kidney disease to continue posing. (She died of the disease earlier this month.)

"How to Organize a Room Around a Striking Piece of Art," Thomas's show at Lehmann Maupin's two New York galleries (opening today and running through January 5, 2013), will expand upon these themes, with the Chrystie Street space showcasing new paintings of Giverny landscapes and interiors, as well as a related film. The Chelsea gallery will present photographs of Thomas's mother, as well as another version of the flamboyantly decorated set, where visitors can sit and watch the documentary about her.

Mama Bush: (Your love keeps lifting me) higher and higher, 2009



In *Madame Mama Bush*, 2006, Thomas's mother becomes an odalisque.

As it happens, Bush began a month-long hospital stay the week that Junya Rei was born. She was discharged in time for the museum opening, and Thomas said she spent most of her time that evening watching the film, over and over.

“It’s a good feeling to know eons on that people will see me and read about me,” her mother can be seen saying in the film, her jaundiced eyes glittering like topaz jewels.

Throughout the narrative, Thomas stays in the background, allowing the camera to play over her mother’s skin, jewelry and clothes, and to highlight her erect posture and proud demeanor. In a sense, this show stands as her mother’s memorial — and also as testament to the fact that art can be larger and more lasting than life.

Sandra: She’s A Beauty, 2009

