

MUSE

*Mickalene Thomas Photographs
and tête-à-tête*

Education Resource

"The reality is, if I did have that conventional beauty I probably would have never come to this point and made the work I make. The world would have related to me in such a different way. I would have an air of entitlement, and I would have looked at myself in some completely different way. So it's through all of these things, through my mother, through my own journey and my own insecurities, that I'm able to make this work—and it keeps me making the work, because it's that growth within, that insatiable desire and hunger of looking at and loving women in my environment, looking at friends who I adore and love, and whether they are like the women from the 1980s Marla Gibbs sitcom *227* or not, they are a particular group of women in the world who exist and who I love. For me to be able to claim that space for them is very exciting, because that space is my space."

**Mickalene Thomas, interview in
Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs (p. 109)**

About This Resource

This resource introduces themes and topics explored by visitors to the exhibition, selected works to spark in-depth discussions, and additional contextual information compiled from outside resources, interviews, and conversations with Mickalene Thomas and the artists featured in *tête-à-tête*, a mini exhibition within the *Muse* exhibition for which Thomas has selected images by other photographers she admires.

Thomas and the *tête-à-tête* artists have sparked the visual dialogue; it is our goal as educators to extend it by providing a space for audiences of all ages to connect personally with the work, exchange ideas, and make meaningful interpretations.

About This Exhibition

Muse is Mickalene Thomas's first exhibition containing exclusively photographic work. Thomas's large-scale photographs, Polaroids, and collages along with the *tête-à-tête* collective create a space for open conversation about both personal and cultural topics. In some of the spaces to which the show travels, a three-dimensional tableau, reminiscent of a seventies-era domestic space, replicates the studio installation where Thomas and her models collaborate. Each feature in the show can be explored individually at length; however, visitors engage in a more meaningful way by comparing multiple works and discovering the numerous themes that Thomas and her contemporaries are addressing.

Thomas's Relationship to Photography

Thomas is a multidisciplinary artist, known for her large-scale, multi-textured, and rhinestone-encrusted paintings of domestic interiors and portraits. Initially, she used photography as a reference to inform her paintings. While she was completing her graduate degree at Yale University in the early 2000s, some of her professors recommended that she take a photography class. Through her photography explorations, Thomas discovered that her photographs elicited a different visceral response than her paintings that was equally worthy of examination. Thomas's photographs were "calls to reality," as opposed to the paintings, which were more fantastical, and the "truth" that photography brought as a medium allowed viewers to see the women as real people with stories.

Community of Inspiration

What is tête-à-tête?

Thomas has prioritized “a community of inspiration” throughout her work, which manifests itself in her relationship with her muses, her mother, and the tête-à-tête collective.

A 2012 panel discussion at the Museum of Modern Art, “Conversations: Among Friends,” sparked Thomas’s idea for tête-à-tête. Throughout the discussion with the other artists on the panel, including Derrick Adams and Xaviera Simmons, Thomas realized that she was the only artist on the stage whose process didn’t include collaboration with other artists. Although Thomas and her models collaborated privately in her studio, her practice was primarily solitary. She decided to expand her practice by inviting her contemporaries into visual conversation that would take place not only in person, but also in public spaces, in the form of a group show titled *tête-à-tête*.

Within this exhibition, Thomas has carved out a dedicated space for artists whose work she has placed consciously in dialogue with her own practice. This mini exhibition within the larger *Muse* show includes work that has inspired Thomas, and contains many of the same themes that are central to her work. Artists featured in *tête-à-tête* include Derrick Adams, Renée Cox, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, Hank Willis Thomas, and Carrie Mae Weems, whose interview with Mickalene Thomas you can find in the accompanying book.

The *tête-à-tête* exhibition creates a robust visual conversation about representation of the black body in today’s society, and can be used to deepen conversations surrounding many of the themes found in *Muse*. In particular, the selection included in this exhibition contains many references to motherhood and family.

Overarching Themes

Below you'll find four overarching themes that were repeatedly discovered and explored by our visitors during the exhibition at Aperture Gallery.

1. Gender and the Gaze

Thomas's work presents an opportunity to understand various representations of gender. The women in her photographs are self-assured and empowered, challenging and subverting the traditional "male gaze" typical of the art-historical canon. "A formerly exploitative gaze—Manet's *Olympia*, Matisse's *Odalisques*—becomes the frame for a kind of post-womanist self-consciousness."¹ Countless art historical references can be found throughout Thomas's work, reclaiming agency for herself as a female artist and for her female subjects.

In an interview with Carrie Mae Weems, Thomas explains, "Men make many images of women that seem distant and detached. I like to think that my love and attraction to women is represented in my photographs and paintings. I believe that there's a different gaze of woman-on-woman love that is well beyond the notion of exploitation."² "I'm queer," Thomas states, "but it's not necessary to always read my work as, 'Oh, Mickalene is a queer woman.'"³

2. Challenging Traditional Representations of the Black Body

The work in the exhibition repeatedly confronts and overturns traditional objectifying and stereotyping representations of the black body. Inextricably, the intersectional nature of being a *black female* specifically relates to Thomas's work, as it is impossible to examine oppressive institutions such as racism and sexism apart from one another. She references magazine centerfolds and hip-hop and pop-culture icons to challenge Western ideals of beauty and femininity and state that beauty should instead be defined by inner strength, gracefulness, boldness, and individuality within each woman. Each photograph encourages the viewer to "look at the body as opposed to thinking about the pathology of the body, which is how blackness has been considered for the most part," as stated by Carrie Mae Weems.⁴ Weems adds that Thomas has used all of what she knows of art history to "turn art history upon its head, as opposed to reinserting the black body into art history."⁴ Thomas's pictures, along with those featured in *tête-à-tête*, create a visual space for us to question and discuss how the black body is represented in today's society.

¹ Kara Walker, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB Magazine*, Spring 2009, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3269/mickalene-thomas>.

² "Carrie Mae Weems in Conversation with Mickalene Thomas," in

Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs (New York: Aperture, 2015), p. 107.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

3. 1970s Pop and Décor Culture

In addition to her mother, lovers, close friends, and artistic collaborators, Thomas draws inspiration from materials such as animal-print textiles, records, lamps, plastic plants, and seventies style and décor to create an atmosphere that is reminiscent of the time period in which she was raised. The furniture—some found at Goodwill, some passed down to her—was reupholstered by Thomas with a variety of fabrics she has collected over the years. The textiles, wood paneling, old television, wallpaper, and carefully situated objects, such as Diana Ross and Stevie Wonder albums, all create a comfortable space reminiscent of a homey family room. Thomas draws inspiration from 1960s and '70s “Black Is Beautiful” images, which encouraged women of color to embrace their natural beauty and reject traditional Caucasian or Western European standards of attractiveness. The seventies also saw the introduction of Blaxploitation films, a term coined to describe a genre that some critics condemned as furthering black stereotypes; others, however, praised these movies for offering audiences strong black female roles such as Foxy Brown and Cleopatra Jones. Film and music play a major role in contemporary popular culture, and by inserting the material culture of the seventies as subject matter, Thomas is challenging viewers to question whether or not visual representations and perceptions of black women have changed in the past forty years.

4. What Is a Muse?

muse (n): one who is a source of inspiration
muse (v): to consider something thoughtfully

The concept of the muse first emerged in Greek mythology. The nine female muses were goddesses who presided over science and the arts, particularly literature, music, and dance. Artists, musicians, and poets called upon their muses for creative inspiration. In classical art, the muse is typically represented as an ethereal female figure who guides the artist in their practice. Thomas’s exhibition builds on the classical meaning of the muse, while both challenging and evolving the definition to assert new conceptions of beauty and inspiration. “A few years ago, in response to a question about the qualities she looks for in her muses, Thomas explained that she is drawn to confidence and self-awareness, as well as to ‘beauty, a little uncertainty, perseverance, and a sort of hunger. All of the stronger qualities I feel I possess.’”⁵

Additional Themes Found in the Photographs

Each object in the exhibition offers a valuable opportunity to discover and discuss the following themes, vocabulary words, and concepts.

- adoration
- artifice
- attraction
- collaboration
- community
- confidence
- conformity
- cultural unity
- diversity
- empowerment
- femininity
- friendship
- gender
- identity
- individuality
- inspiration
- intersectionality
- love
- race
- representation
- respect
- role-play
- self-awareness
- societal pressures
- stereotyping
- storytelling
- truth

⁵ Jennifer Blessing, “Mother-Muse-Mirror: Mickalene Thomas’s Photographs,” in *Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 2015), p. 151

Selected Muses and *tête-à-tête*

Within the resource, you will find selected works from the *Muse* exhibition, accompanied by contextual information as well as related themes and guiding questions designed to help you lead meaningful discussions about the work. Relevant *tête-à-tête* and art-historical works are referenced at the bottom of each page as an option for pushing your dialogue further.

Thomas's work is rife with art-historical connections, textile history, and music references that can lead to a variety of exciting conversations. These connections add depth to the work, but shouldn't be prioritized as the "thesis" of the work. Thomas describes her references as being "woven together" and doesn't create a hierarchy of any one over another. The contextual information is not meant to decide among contending interpretations or to end the dialogue by providing "answers," but rather to add additional layers of meaning, and point out connections between works that viewers may not notice otherwise.

***Sandra: She's a Beauty* (pp. 10–11)**

***Remember Me* (pp. 12–13)**

***Negress with Green Nails* and *Quanika Goes Up* (pp. 14–15)**

***Lovely Six Foota* (pp. 16–17)**

Sandra: She's a Beauty

Thomas identifies her late mother, Sandra Bush, as her first muse. She first used Sandra as one of her models while a student at Yale when a professor suggested she photograph someone with whom she had a tenuous relationship. During Thomas's teenage years, Sandra struggled with addiction and an abusive relationship, which created a physical and emotional distance between the two. The process of photographing Sandra, however, transformed the once rocky daughter-and-mother relationship into an artist-and-muse collaboration. This exploration generated a collection of paintings and photographs known as the Mama Bush series. Thomas states, "I have always been astonished not only by my mother's strength and tenacity but also by her sustained elegance and charisma in spite of harsh obstacles."⁶

The central focus of the composition, Sandra gazes directly at the photographer (and by extension, the viewer) with a certain unwavering confidence and wisdom that many have associated with maternal figures. Even without any knowledge of Sandra and Thomas's history, viewers immediately recognize that this relationship is different from those portrayed in Thomas's other works. Unlike in her other photographs, where patterns, textures, and seventies memorabilia are abundant, there is little in the surrounding environment to distract the viewer from Mama Bush with the exception of a few details that some viewers interpret as symbolic of the artist's relationship with her mother. For example, note the tattered carpet, the shadow under the couch, and the right-hand tilt of the camera—causing the wood paneling to be not parallel to the frame. Some feel this photograph would be unbalanced if Mama Bush were not anchored in the center. She is composed and dressed fashionably in bright red and black and gold jewelry, tying everything together. Thomas states that "by being my muse, [my mother has] become the person she's always wanted to be"⁷ and "working with her as a model really helped me to understand how her charisma related to me, to my own femininity."⁸



Mickalene Thomas, *Sandra: She's a Beauty*, 2009/12

Guiding Questions

Mickalene takes pictures of women she thinks are beautiful. When you hear the word "beautiful," what do you think of?

The models that Mickalene takes pictures of are very close to her—they are not strangers. Do you have any ideas about who this woman might be?

What do you notice about Sandra's posture? Why do you think Thomas chose to position her mother in a way that does not reflect her six-foot-tall figure?

What do you think Mama Bush is thinking about? What do you see that makes you say that?

⁶ Mickalene Thomas, "A Different Type of Beauty: Painter Mickalene Thomas Eulogizes Her Late Mother," *Creative Time Reports*, February 24, 2014, <http://creativetimereports.org/2014/02/24/a-different-type-of-beauty-painter-mickalene-thomas-eulogizes-her-late-mother/>.

⁷ Blessing, "Mother-Muse-Mirror," p. 151

⁸ Katie Booth, "In Mickalene Thomas's Awe-Inspiring Portraits, a Meaningful Reflection of Black Women in Art," *New York Times*, January 29, 2016, <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/01/29/in-mickalene-thomass-awe-inspiring-portraits-a-meaningful-reflection-of-black-women-in-art/>.

Related Themes

Parent/child relationship

Closeness/distance

Mother/daughter collaboration

Body language

Going Further: Works in Conversation



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig. 1. Still from *Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman*, 2012.
Documentary produced by Mickalene Thomas. 23 minutes, color.
Fig. 2. Mickalene Thomas, *Lounging, Standing, Looking*, 2003

Fig. 3. Mickalene Thomas, *Madame Mama Bush*, 2012
Fig. 4. Renée Cox, *Yo Mama At Home*, 1992
Fig. 5. LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and Me*, 2005

Remember Me

Remember Me is one of the first portraits that Thomas made where the subject was someone other than herself or her mother, and features her girlfriend at the time, Maya. "I was photographing her in my apartment, and it was too much of a personal space. I didn't have enough critical distance. I didn't want to just photograph her as my lover in my bedroom. I wanted to separate that, my gaze toward her."⁹ This photograph marks the beginning of Thomas's evolution toward creating elaborate interior sets out of furniture and fabrics from Goodwill and props from her apartment. A detail worth noticing is the palimpsest of an athletic sock on Maya's left ankle. Thomas noted that when the photograph was first printed, her printer considered the mark an imperfection, and removed it. She insisted that it be put back into the photograph. "It's all pretend, this character, but there's a realness here," she explains. "I think of it as giving the viewer a symbol, a significant moment that these are real women, that they have day-to-day lives. She wears socks. There was a moment just before this."¹⁰



Mickalene Thomas, *Remember Me*, 2006

Guiding Questions

Who is this woman? What can you glean about her from her expression, her clothing, and her pose?

Take a look at the room. What details stand out to you? What time period was this photograph taken in? What do you see in the photo that makes you say that?

What do you think Thomas's relationship to this subject is? Read Mickalene's quote above. Why construct a scene to photograph Maya? What do you think she means by "critical distance"?

What would it be like to be photographed in this space? Note Maya's posture as it compares to the two portraits of Diana Ross on the album covers behind her. What similarities or differences can you note in their body language?

Look closely at the woman's left ankle. What could this detail tell you about the woman and the image?

Why do you think that the work is titled *Remember Me*? Does the title relate to what you can observe in the photograph?

⁹ Julia Felsenthal, "Mickalene Thomas on Her Photographic Muses," *Vogue*, January 28, 2016, <http://www.vogue.com/13393037/mickalene-thomas-muse-aperture/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Related Themes

Authenticity

Body language

Pop culture

Going Further: Works in Conversation



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Fig. 1. Diana Ross, *Ross*, 1978

Fig. 2. Diana Ross, *Diana Ross*, 1970

Fig. 3. Hank Willis Thomas, *Look Normal*, ca. 1980s;
from the series *Fair Warning*

Negress with Green Nails and Quanikah Goes Up

Both of these self-portraits were taken while Thomas was in graduate school studying for an MFA in painting at Yale. She began photographing herself in New Haven, exploring gender, race, and class and their stereotypical representations found in both New Haven and pop culture. "For a performance art-history class, she decided as her final project to embody her alter ego, Quanikah, which was her childhood nickname. In the staid wealthy precincts of Yale University, she presented herself as a sexy urban black girl, confusing fellow students who mistook her for a lost resident of New Haven."¹¹

Thomas's self-portraits mark early explorations of personal identity as it relates to representations and perceptions of black females in society. While these two works stand apart as a series, they contain a through-line with many of the themes in the rest of Thomas's *Muse* photographs. Notably, these works provide an opportunity to pick apart what truths about society can be revealed through constructed roles.

Guiding Questions

Negress with Green Nails

What do you notice about this woman? What does her expression tell us about what she might be thinking?

Why does Mickalene use the word "Negress" in the title?

Who do you think that this woman is? What might her relationship to Mickalene be?

Quanikah Goes Up

Where is she? What do you notice about the environment of this portrait compared to other portraits in the exhibition?



Mickalene Thomas, *Negress with Green Nails*, 2005



Mickalene Thomas, *Quanikah Goes Up*, 2001/2005

What do you notice about the composition of this photograph? Why might she be situated in the bottom third of the frame?

Knowing that the woman in both photographs is Mickalene Thomas, what do you think that she is trying to convey by dressing like this and assuming these different roles?

How do these early self-portraits connect with Mickalene's later work in the *Muse* series?

¹¹ Blessing, "Mother-Muse-Mirror," p. 148

Related Themes

Identity

Perception

Roles

Representation

Stereotypes

Going Further: Works in Conversation



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 1. Xaviera Simmons, *Composition One For Score A*, 2010

Fig. 2. Derrick Adams, *Crossroads*, 2012

Fig. 3. Mickalene Thomas, *Din, une très belle négresse #1*, 2012

Fig. 4. Zanele Muholi, *Thembitshe, Parktown*, 2014

Fig. 5. Mickalene Thomas, *Portrait of Mickalena*, 2010

Fig. 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978

Fig. 7. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled*, 2000

Lovely Six Foota

Lovely Six Foota presents an opportunity to discuss many themes, including attraction, sexuality, feminine power, and “the gaze.” Simply stated, “the gaze” refers to the concept that throughout the history of art, most works were created by male artists, for a male audience. The term is often used to describe the sexual objectification of women in visual art. The camera can be and has been used as an instrument of subjugation. However, in *Lovely Six Foota*, Thomas directly subverts the idea of the male gaze, as this woman gazes directly through the camera at Thomas, and in turn directly at the viewer.

Viewers often inquire about the relationship between Thomas and her muses. Her subjects are lovers or acquaintances, never strangers. The captions often imply the nature of the relationship, but Thomas has explained that “It’s not always clear, and it’s okay if the viewer doesn’t understand that relationship.”¹²

The body language of the subject in *Lovely Six Foota* has sparked extensive conversations among viewers. The subject’s legs are spread slightly, but Thomas intentionally cast a shadow between her knees, leaving room for mystery. Thomas has stated that the mirror is intended to symbolize the unknown between the subject’s legs that the viewer is not allowed to see. The mirror is enigmatic, and viewers interpret it in many different ways: a looking glass that symbolizes reversal and opposition, a blue void, or a portal to another dimension. In reality, the vanity reflects the opposite wall in Thomas’s studio, referencing both previous works taken in front of that blue wall and the fact that the entire scene has been constructed.



Mickalene Thomas, *Lovely Six Foota*, 2007

Guiding Questions

What is the overall mood of this photograph? What prompts you to feel that?

What does this woman’s body language say to you? What is she saying to Thomas?

Compare this woman’s posture to that of Thelma Houston’s, seen in the bottom right corner. How do these two representations of women work together? Why include this record in the frame?

Look closely at the mirror. Is it real? Why incorporate this into the space?

¹² Meredith Clark, “Beautiful Photos of Women Take on Stereotypes through High Art,” *Refinery 29*, November 2, 2015, <http://www.refinery29.com/2015/11/96793/mickalene-thomas-muse-photos#slide>.

Related Themes

Sexuality

“The gaze”

Attraction

Control

Feminine power

Going Further: Works in Conversation



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

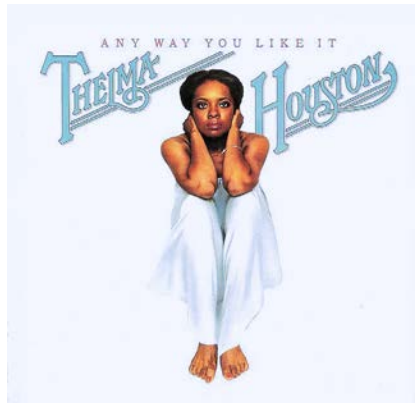


Fig. 4

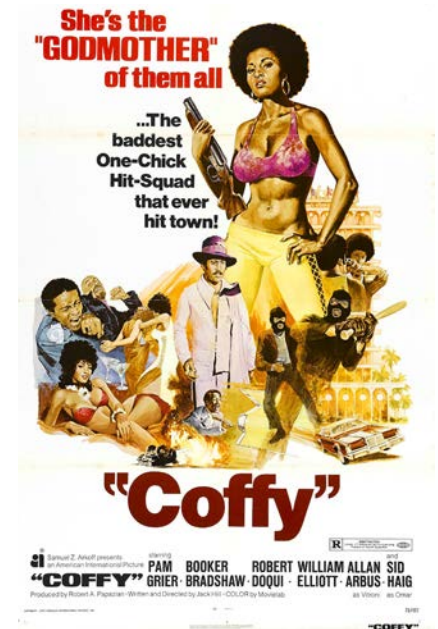


Fig. 3

Fig. 1. Renée Cox, *Yo Mama At Home*, 1992

Fig. 2. Mickalene Thomas, *Sista Sista Lady Blue*, 2007

Fig. 3. Film poster for *Coffy*, 1973. Directed by Jack Hill. 91 minutes, color.

Fig. 4. Thelma Houston, *Any Way You Like It*, 1976

Sources

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Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs (Aperture, 2015)

Additional Resources

Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman, a documentary produced by Mickalene Thomas, is an important tool that sheds light on Thomas's relationship to her mother, her first muse.

For additional resources, visit Mickalene Thomas's website: <http://mickalene-thomas.com/>

IMAGE CREDITS

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Mickalene Thomas (born in Camden, New Jersey, 1971) earned her BFA in painting at Pratt Institute in 2000 and an MFA at the Yale University School of Art in 2002. Thomas participated in residencies at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2000-2003, and at the Versailles Foundation Munn Artists Program, Giverny, France, 2011. Her work has been included in countless exhibitions worldwide, including at La Conservera, Ceutí, Spain (2009); National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. (2010); Hara Museum, Tokyo (2011); Santa Monica Museum of Art, California (2012); and Brooklyn Museum (2012-13). She is represented by Kavi Gupta in Chicago and Berlin, Lehmann Maupin in New York, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, and Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris.

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