



Mickalene

Mickalene Thomas is a shifter of perception. The artist's multidisciplinary works carve a space in art history through celebrating Black femininity and sexuality, encompassing everything from race and power to beauty and the gaze. Her work lies at the intersection of seeing and being seen. The women she features, Naomi Campbell and Michelle Obama among them, as well as an oeuvre of friends, family, and lovers, exude a self-assurance that is captivating: "They demand to be seen and acknowledged."

Mickalene's work emerges from a discourse that combines art-historical, political, and pop-cultural references through the lens of Black and female identities. She aims to blur the distinction between object and subject, concrete and abstract, real and imaginary. The modes through which culture serves to shape perception across social, spacial, and ideological platforms is fundamental to her investigations. Shaped through portraiture, her explorations introduce complex notions of femininity, beauty, and sexuality, and challenge common definitions of beauty and aesthetic representations of women.

"The gaze to my work is unapologetically a Black woman's gaze loving other Black women," she says with a laugh that fills her studio in a video for Art Basel. Her subjects' only objectification is her desire to emulate their femininity, her wanting to possess that and embody it. "It is all about how they want to present themselves," she says. Her Black muses exist as influential figures that characterize the subjective, and often otherworldly, propositions that Mickalene envisions.

Her mother, Sandra Bush, is a significant muse. Many of Mickalene's works display the magnetism of this charismatic 6'1" (185 cm) woman, standing in her soft-spoken, statuesque strength. An epiphany was seeing African-American artist Carrie Mae Weems's images of a mother and daughter, which Mickalene remembers as the first time she ever saw herself in art. The following day, she walked into an

art-supply store, and the rest is (art) history. Mickalene also counts *Jet* magazine as a Black, American, cultural-media bible, and a fascinating early influence in her life. The magazine's "Beauty of the Week" section was "this first notion of beauty" that she viewed equally for who these women were.

Mickalene's genius is evident in her ability to think in collage, uncovering and playing with layers that reflect life and context, and her use of diverse, bold materials. "I wanted to be a painter's painter," she says. "But even working abstractly, I was using different fabric and cutting things and putting on surfaces, but I didn't really call it collage."

When oils proved not enough for the texture she wanted to incorporate, she used textiles reminiscent of her grandmother, adding glitter and rhinestones that evoked pointillism and Aboriginal dot painting, resulting in both expansive and intimate images. It was a decidedly political and cultural statement beyond corporeal matters, most evident in her first monumental canvas, *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, in 2007, featuring her then-girlfriend standing at an impressive