

MICKALENE THOMAS

November 29, 2018 – March 24, 2019

Known for her large-scale, multi-textured, rhinestone-encrusted portraits and domestic interiors, multi-disciplinary artist Mickalene Thomas creates a visual conversation about identity, beauty and representation.

Her art tackles issues of inequality, underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women of colour and the female body in Western art history. By reimagining popular works from the Western art canon, Thomas brings a diversity of representation to her art, provoking timely conversations about who is represented or ignored.

Drawing on inspiration from the 1960s and '70s, a period in which she was raised, Thomas incorporates unique objects, such as animal-print textiles, lamps and plastic plants, to carefully curate elaborate sets. Photography, initially used as a reference that inspired her paintings, is now integral to her conversation about image, identity and truth.

SUGGESTED LEVELS: Grades 7 – 12

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS: Visual Art, World History, English



Use the Critical Analysis Process to explore the works in this exhibition.

DESCRIPTION:

- What is your first impression?
- What captures your attention?
- How does this painting make you feel?
What does the painting remind you of?

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

- What do you think the theme or subject of this painting is? Why?
- What do you think is the purpose of this painting?
- What message or meaning do you think the painting communicates?

CULTURAL CONTEXT:

- What was happening in society during the time the work was created? Socially? Historically? Politically?

Mickalene Thomas, *I Learned the Hard Way*, 2010.
Rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on panel. 304 x 243 cm.

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Teacher Resource

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Mickalene Thomas, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires*, 2010. Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel. 304.8 x 731.5 cm. The Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann Collection. © Mickalene Thomas.

Thomas's monumental painting *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires* reimagines Édouard Manet's iconic 1863 portrait, *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*.

- What is the overall mood of (Thomas's) image? What prompts you to feel that?
- Look up Manet's painting. What similarities and differences do you notice between the two artworks?
- How does Thomas's representation of Black women challenge traditional perceptions?

In an interview, 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 difference gaze of woman-on-woman love that is well beyond the notion of exploitation."
– Carrie Mae Weems in *Conversation with Mickalene Thomas*, in *Muse: Mickalene Thomas: Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 2015, p.107).

Divide the class in two debate groups.

Have one group argue for: "Men make many images of women that seem distant and detached."

Have the other group argue for: "[T]here's a difference gaze of woman-on-woman love that is well beyond the notion of exploitation."

Present and discuss the male gaze and female gaze.

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