

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: BEAUTIFUL FICTIONS: COMPOSING THE
ARTIFICIAL IN THE WORK OF
MICKALENE THOMAS

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and Archaeology

This thesis considers three paintings by the contemporary artist Mickalene Thomas. I argue that Thomas uses collage to analyze and highlight the socially constructed nature of identities and surroundings. I propose that collage functions in three ways in Thomas's work: as a medium, an artistic strategy, and a metaphor for the multiple states of being in the world. Thomas refracts the art historical genres of portraiture, landscape, and still life through a black, queer, female lens that presents the complexities of black female subjectivities. However, the paucity of critical literature on Thomas's work is indicative of a broader problem in contemporary art historical discourse when interpreting works by Black artists and often requires these artists to foreground their cultural and physical differences. This thesis redresses the simplistic interpretations of Thomas's work by demonstrating the breadth and depth of her conceptual interests and in doing so argues that her works are propositions for the ways in which we might conceptualize the history of art.

BEAUTIFUL FICTIONS:
COMPOSING THE ARTIFICIAL IN THE WORK OF MICKALENE THOMAS

By

Tyler Shine

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
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Advisory Committee:
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Dedication

To the five beautiful women in my life: my mother, Tina; my aunt Phyllis; my sisters Teresa and Talisha; and my niece Araina.

Acknowledgements

It was almost two years ago when I first began thinking about Mickalene Thomas's work. Since then there have been numerous people who have been significant in shaping my thinking about this project.

I offer my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Joshua Shannon, for his generosity, patience, rigor, and continuous encouragement throughout this tumultuous process.

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Introduction: Origins of the Universe¹

Who made you the center of the universe?

Laura Mvula, “That’s Alright,” from *Sing to the Moon* (2013)²

“My mother is much sexier than I am” says Brooklyn-based, African American artist Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971).³ Around her thirtieth birthday Thomas discovered a photograph of her mother, Sandra Bush or “Mama Bush” as she preferred to be called, wearing a braided hairstyle and a leopard-print bathing suit.⁴ The photograph is like so many ordinary family snapshots and what it depicts is a common image from 1970s. However, like all family photographs, there is an elusive and intimate connection between those looking and what is pictured. Thomas took this familial connection a step further: she decided to buy a wig, put on that leopard-print bathing suit and photograph herself. Is it possible for a leopard-print bathing suit to create a new context for being?

Thomas found the photograph of her mother while pursuing her MFA at Yale University. At the time she was working predominately in an abstract and conceptual style under the guidance of artists like Mel Bochner and Sean Landers. But a shift occurred in her work when encouraged by the faculty to take a photography course with David Hilliard. Thomas reflects, “David encouraged us to ‘deal with ourselves.’ He wanted us to use ourselves and what was happening in our lives as the subject of

¹ *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe* was the artist’s first solo museum exhibition in 2012 and borrows its title from Gustave Courbet’s 1866 painting *L’Origine du monde*. First presented at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, the exhibition then traveled to the Brooklyn Museum of Art. I use the plural “origins” to suggest the many sources Thomas draws upon in her work.

² Laura Mvula, “That’s Alright,” from *Sing to the Moon*, 2013 (RCA Victor). Mvula is a British soul singer-songwriter.

³ Thomas quoted in Sarah Lewis “Mickalene Thomas on Beauty” in *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012), 10.

⁴ Ivan Lopez, “Mickalene Thomas: Public Debates on the Sofa” in *Mickalene Thomas: Something You Can Feel* (Murcia: La Conservera, 2009), unpaginated.

our art.”⁵ Hilliard told Thomas that the work had “to come from a place that’s really vulnerable” and in this vulnerable place she began to talk more about her mother. On one occasion Hilliard asked, “Why aren’t you photographing your mother?” At this moment Thomas began photographing her mother and the direction of her work completely changed.⁶ By using her mother as a muse Thomas transformed the artist-model relationship and foregrounded a collaborative view of representation shared between two generations of creative Black women.

Beginning to think more about her own body Thomas looked to the strategies used by artists such as Adrian Piper and Cindy Sherman to represent their bodies.⁷ While at Yale, Thomas met art historian Kellie Jones who encouraged her to take a course on performance art history that prompted Thomas to create her own alter ego, Quanikah—a nickname given to her by her cousins. These early performative photographs around New Haven such as *Negress with Green Nails* shows Thomas dressed as Quanikah in a chartreuse top holding her fingers in an awkward yet elegant pose (fig. 1). Thomas looks directly at the camera and her red lips part to form a smile. Through photography Thomas began working with notions of artifice, beauty, the self, and the precarious relationships between them. These ideas became recurring motifs throughout her subsequent works.

In her assorted body of work that encompasses painting, photography, collage, video, and installations, Thomas explores multiple definitions of beauty and its layers

⁵ Lisa Melandri, “Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” in *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica Museum of Art, 2012), 28.

⁶ I have limited my thesis to three paintings that survey Thomas’s broad artistic output and as an unfortunate consequence do not discuss images of her mother. An entire study could be devoted to the subject of Thomas’s mother in her work.

⁷ See John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011) and Johanna Burton et al, *Cindy Sherman* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).



Figure 1

Mickalene Thomas, *Negress with Green Nails*, 2005.

C-print, 31 x 48 inches, collection of the artist.

of artifice. She is fascinated by our desires to present the artificial as something natural.

Thomas is best known for her elaborate paintings encrusted with rhinestones that picture a spectrum of black women. These paintings command the spaces they occupy, exerting a physical presence through their monumental scale and unapologetic sensuality. Overflowing with stimulating details the paintings are seductive objects and present a potential problem with Thomas's images; they appear to embrace rather than critique the visual strategies that objectify female bodies and in particular Black women.⁸ Consider her 2007 painting *A Little Taste Outside of Love* (fig. 2).⁹ In the painting a nude Black woman with a large afro reclines on a patchwork of silver floral and geometric prints. She turns to look over her shoulder and directly meets the viewer's gaze. The painting references the languorous odalisques featured in numerous European paintings, but Thomas's image asks a set of questions and offers no easy answers about who makes images, who controls the gaze, and what kinds of bodies are seen as beautiful and desirable.

In this thesis I examine the compelling paradox presented in Thomas's work: the visual field is simultaneously the site of objectification and a space for countering that objectification. A key element in answering how Thomas negotiates this paradox is in her use of collage. When asked about her collage practice, she explained:

⁸ Some critics raise this point about Thomas's work. For one example see Sarah Valdez, "Crystal Visions" in *Art in America* 100, no. 9, (2012): 114-121.

⁹ The painting is titled after singer-songwriter Millie Jackson's song "A Little Taste Outside of Love" from her 1977 album *Feelin' Bitchy*. Thomas frequently titles her works after female disco, jazz, and blues singers' songs. Angela Davis discusses gender and sexuality of the women's blues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).



Figure 2

Mickalene Thomas, *A Little Taste Outside of Love*, 2007.

Rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel, 108 x 144 inches,

Brooklyn Museum of Art

I've always done collages—more than drawing or sketching—because that's how I learned to create my compositions. This was the case even when I made abstract paintings. The process of collage allowed me to navigate structure in an image: segmenting, deconstructing, pasting, and recontextualizing my ideas. I wanted to shift ways of seeing the image.¹⁰

This thesis will argue that Thomas uses collage to analyze and highlight the socially constructed nature of identities and the environments they occupy. I propose that collage functions in three ways in Thomas's work: first, as a medium that literally mixes disparate materials to create an image; second, as a process or artistic strategy that combines different historical and contemporary sources; finally, as a metaphor for the multiple states of being in the world that are constantly in flux. Through collage Thomas refracts the art historical genres of portraiture, landscape, and still life through a Black, queer, female lens that presents the complexities of Black female subjectivities.¹¹

There is a productive tension in this formulation of Thomas's work that requires further explanation. Her images are about race, but are about more than race. Thomas uses collage as a critically engaged process that continually repositions her relationship to images, history, and ideas. She sees collage as joining the fantasy created in painting and the manipulation of "truth" in photography. Thomas is interested in the construction of social categories like race and gender and her

¹⁰ Lisa Melandri, "Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas," 30.

¹¹ Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, Kimberly Wallace-Saunders, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002): 301-320; Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York: New Press, 1995): 242-251; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).

collages are the ways in which she explores the relationships between these social fictions. She subverts art historical categories through overlapping “Black,” “queer,” and “female” perspectives that resist monolithic interpretations. Although the notion of identity categories suggests a fixity they are, nonetheless, culturally and historically rooted phenomena. While it may be accepted that these categories are not biological they continue to have material consequences for those subjects who cannot completely avoid the imposition of such labels.

My thesis takes art historian Darby English’s recommendation to “displace race from its *central* location in our interpretations,” and turn to “the subjective demands that artists place on multiple categories they occupy...grant[ing] this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies.”¹² However, I do not propose that race is irrelevant to Thomas because it plays a significant role in how beauty and desire are framed. I want to permit Thomas’s work, and by extension the work of other Black artists,¹³ to have conceptual breathing room so that they may speak to a variety of concerns such as gender, sexuality, and history that intersect in significant ways with race. Thomas’s collage approach to images undermines the notion of the body and identity as coherent and instead revels in their malleability. A consideration of race in Thomas’s work is necessary in order to understand how its machinations affect our understandings of sexuality and beauty.

¹² Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 12. Emphasis added.

¹³ Throughout the text I will use the capitalized “Black” to refer to artists and women of the African diaspora. Although my discussion focuses primarily on African American women, I use Black to suggest the larger implications of Thomas’s images and the ideas surrounding them for women of the African diaspora. I also employ the term Black because of its historical weight in the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s and 1970s which Thomas frequently references in her work.

Although Thomas has received widespread attention in the art world there is a paucity of critical literature about her work. One promising example is a 2013 Master's Thesis that examines the use of collage in works by Thomas, Wangechi Mutu, and Ellen Gallagher.¹⁴ In her thesis, Kara Swami argues that Mutu, Gallagher, and Thomas's collage works are "site[s] for thinking about visibility and mass cultural imagery" that tests "the semiotic meaning of cultural signs."¹⁵ While Swami's study is a valuable contribution to a richer understanding of Thomas's work, the limited space of her comparative analysis does not allow her to elaborate on Thomas's complex use of collage. Similarly, current art criticism does not fully engage with Thomas's work and these writings have a tendency to focus on the representation of race that draws attention to the use of rhinestones and depictions of Black women.

Rhinestones are quickly conflated with "bling," which carries an association to hip-hop culture, a characterization that Thomas finds "lazy."¹⁶ While lauding her images of black women as "strong," "sassy," and "confident," commentators continue to perpetuate a narrow vision of black womanhood that limits black female subjectivities to a series of tropes. As a result these writings either ignore or briefly mention, only to dismiss, her interior scenes, landscapes, and installations. These

¹⁴ Kara Swami, "Destabilizing the Sign: The Collage Work of Ellen Gallagher, Wangechi Mutu, and Mickalene Thomas" (MA thesis, University of Cincinnati, 2013).

¹⁵ Swami, "Destabilizing the Sign," 1.

¹⁶ Andrea Blanch, "Mickalene Thomas: Seurat's Rhinestones." *Musee Magazine*. 2013: 70; Matthew McLendon, *Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip-Hop in Art* (Sarasota, Fla.: John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, State Art Museum of Florida, Florida State University, 2011), 116.

limited interpretations are not unique to Thomas's work but are symptomatic of a larger problem within art history when interpreting the work of Black artists.¹⁷

A dual pressure is exerted on Black artists from the commercial and museum spaces of the art world and from within black communities that require artists to foreground their cultural and physical differences. Darby English eloquently summarizes this situation when he writes, "Limiting our attention to what these artists have to say about blackness will surely 'keep the conversation going,' it will also prevent the conversation from going anywhere particularly new."¹⁸ Thomas's diverse body of work indicates not only the range of her conceptual interests, but also requires us to push the conversation in new directions. Therefore, a discussion of Thomas's use of collage is relevant to this complex engagement with representation in contemporary art discourse and provides an interpretive corrective to the current literature.

This thesis is divided into two chapters that focus on three paintings produced around 2012—the year of Thomas's first solo museum exhibition.¹⁹ The three paintings at the center of this study—*Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*, *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune*, and *Landscape with Camouflage*—are distinct within Thomas's oeuvre and encapsulate her fascination with artifice and beauty. Beyond

¹⁷ Howardena Pindell, "Art World Racism: A Documentation, 1980-1998," 1988 in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997); Michele Wallace, "Afterword: 'Why Are There No Great Black Artists?': The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, Michelle Wallace and Gina Dent eds. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992): 333-346; bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995).

¹⁸ English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 14.

¹⁹ I suggest the exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe* poses the question "Who made you the center of the universe?" to the allegorical women depicted in numerous European paintings, the male artists who created these images, and more broadly the hegemonic figures who exclude queer black women. The works in the exhibition are Thomas's visual rejoinders to this question. Sadly, in 2012, the artist's mother, Sandra Bush, passed away, adding a poignant layer to the complex and intimate works that were the result of collaboration between two creative women.

their collage appearance, each painting demonstrates a different relationship between how the body inhabits and relates to its environments. Thomas believes that all of her works are extensions of herself and regardless of the subject matter she approaches the work with similar ideas in mind. Therefore, her works need to be discussed in relation to each other.

In chapter one I examine the painting *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* as a means of self-definition and a means of claiming a space for the Black female body in the history of art (fig. 3). *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* is distinctive among Thomas's images of Black women because it pictures a singular nude Black woman while her other paintings tend to represent clothed female bodies. Throughout this chapter I consider the Black female body in relation to sexuality, the gaze, and desire. In chapter two I focus on two paintings, *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* (fig. 4) and *Landscape with Camouflage* (fig. 5). Thomas's interior and landscape paintings developed jointly during a 2011 artist residency in Giverny, France at the studios of French Impressionist Claude Monet (1840–1926). In this chapter I examine how the interior and natural landscapes are an extension of Thomas's larger project regarding beauty and artifice. In both paintings the body is absent, but is alluded to by its material traces in *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* and the camouflage print in *Landscape with Camouflage*. I consider domesticity and agency as they relate to the black female body and how bodies become (dis)oriented in spaces. Finally, I conclude by discussing Thomas's transformative experience after seeing an exhibition of Carrie Mae Weems's photographs at the Portland Museum of Art in the



Figure 3

Mickalene Thomas, *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*, 2012.

Rhinestones, acrylic, oil, enamel on wood panel, 96 x 120 inches.



Figure 4

Mickalene Thomas, *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune*, 2012.

Rhinestones, acrylic, oil and enamel on wood panel, 108 x 144 inches,

Brooklyn Museum of Art.



Figure 5

Mickalene Thomas, *Landscape with Camouflage*, 2012.

Rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel, 108 x 144 inches, Lehmann

Maupin, New York, NY.

early 1990s. I consider what Thomas's collage images offer to the larger visual field of American popular culture and contemporary art history discourse.

I do not present an exhaustive account of Thomas's oeuvre and I am wary of the tendency to position her in any one art historical lineage. As feminist critics have shown, the insertion of marginalized figures into a canon negates the analytical challenge to systems that function by privileging a normalized white, heterosexual, middle-class male as the creative agent. Using *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*, *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune*, and *Landscape with Camouflage*, I consider Thomas's work within the discursive spaces of popular culture, interior design, feminism, and queer studies in order to locate her shifting place in (art) history. Since little critical literature exists on Thomas's work, this study is informed by a variety of interdisciplinary scholars who have investigated the vicissitudes of gender, race, sexuality, and class. My thinking about collage in Thomas's work is informed by the insights these writers have made on the performance of race and gender, cultural identity and difference, photographic representation, and sexuality.²⁰

When creating her images Thomas is always fully aware of the historical references that she makes and chooses the language of collage to engage with history and images. In her earlier works Thomas used found imagery from *Ebony* and Black female pornographic magazines. After a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2003 she began to take her own photographs as source material and combined these images with color-aid paper, vintage wallpapers and fabrics. The collages are then translated into a large-scale painting. Although each of the paintings I discuss in

²⁰ My thesis is indebted to works of scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Judith Butler, Jennifer Nash, bell hooks, Huey Copeland, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Lisa Gail Collins, Judith Wilson, Stuart Hall, Deborah Willis, Kobena Mercer, Audre Lorde, and Richard Powell among many others.

this study has a collage, not all of Thomas's paintings have a collage companion. However, each painting begins as a photograph and I argue is conceptualized like a collage by the act of combining multiple historical and contemporary sources.

Collage was a significant twentieth-century art form that altered what materials could be designated as art and in its layered forms suggested the possibilities of new realities.²¹ Further collage is often thought of as giving visual form to the fragmentation of twentieth century life, but fragmentary for whom? A postmodernist view of fragmentation where individual subjects' lose their identities is not wholly sufficient to describe and analyze Black subjectivities. Artist and critic Lorraine O'Grady calls this situation "cruelly ironic" because "just as the need to establish our subjectivity in preface to theorizing our view of the world becomes most dire, the idea of subjectivity itself has become 'problematized.'"²² Historically the black female body has been understood and imaged in parts and these pieces of black female subjectivities exist in ethnocentric and patriarchal discourses that refuse to see black women as whole beings.²³ For black subjects fragmentation produces a psychic and material tension in the incoherent.²⁴

²¹ For a brief discussion of collage in the twentieth century see, Katherine Hoffman, "Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview" in *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989.), 1-37. See also, Kobena Mercer, "Romare Bearden, 1964 : Collage as Kunstwollen," in *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, Mercer, ed. (London: Institute of International Visual Arts; Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005); Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1961).

²² Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, Joanna Frueth et al. (New York: IconEditions, 1994), 154.

²³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* 2nd ed. (Hoboken : Taylor and Francis, 2014), 104; Barbara Omolade, "Heart of Darkness," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1995), 366.

²⁴ This cognitive dissonance or "double consciousness" is elegantly described by Frantz Fanon and W.E.B. DuBois. See, Fannon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

I propose that Thomas's images are perpetually in dynamic tension that and create a kind of pleasure in their endless possibilities and incoherence. Her collage approach displays the construction behind images for the viewer to see. The images retain pieces from their original discourses, but become queer, in the original sense of the word, thus enabling the possibility for new meanings to be created. Through their repetition, images perform their meaning and these meanings will change according to cultural and historical contexts. Thomas recognizes that a subject's sense of self is constantly being reconfigured and her collage images give form to the intersection of multiple elements that constitute identity. Collage interrupts, what O'Grady describes as, the "either:or" binary logic of Western culture by permitting multiple elements to mingle in unexpected ways.²⁵ O'Grady proposes that artists and theorists of color develop a critical flexibility that advances "both:and" arguments and by doing so she suggests marginalized subjects might discover, to borrow Audre Lorde's oft-cited phrase, their own tools in which to dismantle the master's house.²⁶

Queer cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz embraces O'Grady's call for disrupting binary paradigms in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Disidentification is a survival strategy for minority subjects that "works on and against dominant ideology" and "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it...[transforming] a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance."²⁷ Thomas's work can be

²⁵ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 160.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11-12.

productively viewed along these lines. The material and metaphorical capaciousness of collage highlights the complexity of Thomas's images that queer the Black body and space. Literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's describes "queer" as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically"²⁸ Thomas presents the multivalent realities of black female subjectivities through the body, interior spaces and objects that are imprinted with racialized, gendered, sexualized and classed meanings.

While Thomas is invested in understanding cultural perceptions of beauty she does not explicitly define "beauty" but invites us to expand our conception of the elusive idea. It is important to note that a discussion of femininity and beauty does not exclude men from the table.²⁹ Men are not immune to the racist, patriarchal, and homophobic system that both oppresses female subjects and limits notions of masculinity and male body image. Thomas's images have broader implications for multiple viewers because they address the uneven experiences of the social constructions that affect us all.

²⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

²⁹ Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997).

Chapter 1: An Impossible Presence to Reproduce: Representing the Black Female Body³⁰

“The skin is only the surface. We use our body to explore deeper questions of our humanity.” – Carrie Mae Weems³¹

Italian philosopher and critic Umberto Eco sets out in his 2004 survey *History of Beauty* to review the changing ideas of beauty over the centuries. He asserts that his objective is to, “identify those cases in which a certain culture or a certain historical epoch has recognized that there were things pleasing to contemplate independently of the desire we may feel for them.”³² But it is not possible to easily separate an idea of beauty from the desires a beautiful thing causes us to feel. Carrie Mae Weems addresses this perception of beauty and its connection to desire in *Not Manet’s Type* (fig. 6). In five intimate black and white photographs Weems reflects on the ways that Euro-American male artists such as Edouard Manet, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Willem de Kooning have defined beauty in their paintings. In the photographs Weems positions herself, clothed and unclothed, within a bedroom setting in front of an Art Deco-style vanity.

The five photographs look identical, but each are slightly different as the light shifts, Weems changes pose, and objects such as a white vase holding dried flowers move in each frame. In the first photograph, Weems stands in a black nightgown with her back to the viewer. She leans on the brass footboard of the bed with her shoulders slightly raised. A bold red text against a black mat below the photograph reads,

³⁰ I borrow this phrase from an article written by Carla Williams. “Mickalene Thomas: An Impossible Presence to Reproduce.” *Aleim Magazine*. June 25, 2014, <http://aleim.com/issue4/mickalene-thomas/>.

³¹ Carrie Mae Weems quoted in Jenny Che, “Philadelphia Museum of Art to Show Two Centuries of Black Artists.” *The Wall Street Journal*. December 12, 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/philadelphia-museum-of-art-to-show-two-centuries-of-black-artists-1418415540>.

³² Umberto Eco, *History of Beauty* (New York: Rizzoli, 2004), 10.

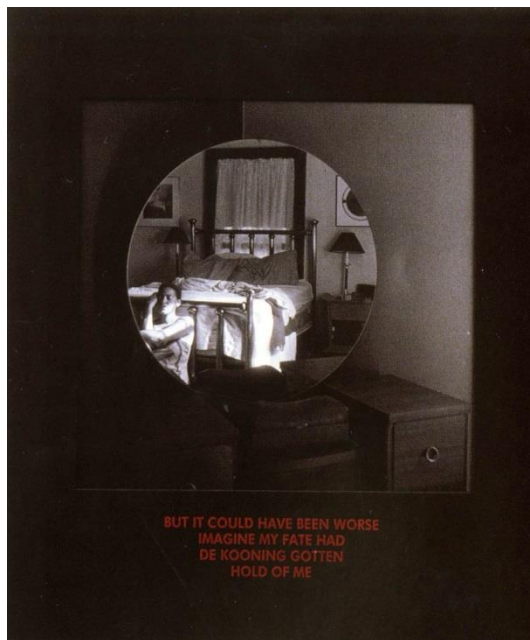
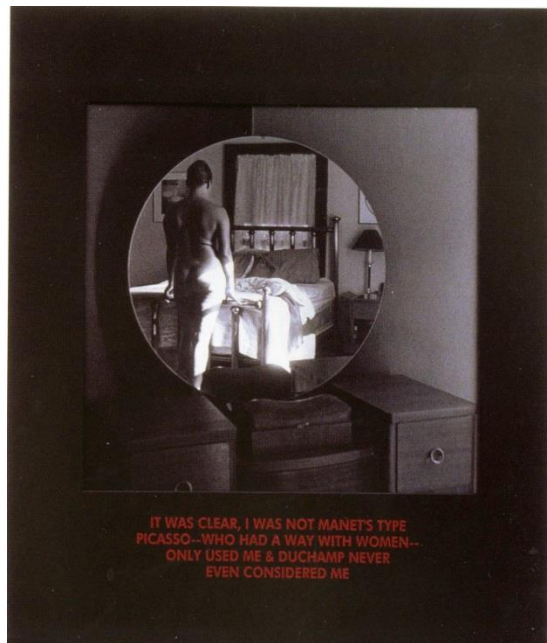
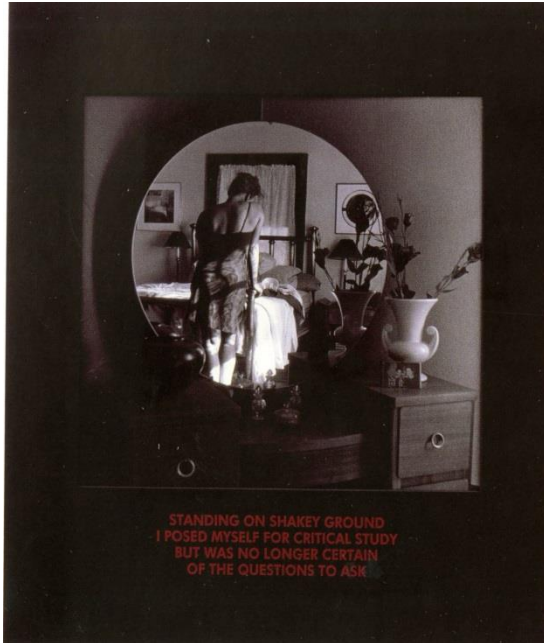


Figure 6

Carrie Mae Weems, *Not Manet's Type*, 1997.

Gelatin silver print with text on mat, 24 x 20 in (each).

“Standing on shakey ground/I posed myself for critical study/But was no longer certain/of the questions to ask.” The next photograph depicts Weems nude with her back to us and stands firmly against the bed, “It was clear, I was not Manet’s type/Picasso – who had a way with women –/only used me & Duchamp never/ even considered me.” The text continues in the next photograph, “But it could have been worse/Imagine my fate had de Kooning gotten hold of me.” With biting wit, *Not Manet’s Type* shows Weems’s vulnerability and her critical musings on her image as a Black woman whose very presence is often ignored or negated in history. Through the process of self-definition Weems uses her own body to tackle one of art history’s favorite categories and the epitome of beauty: the nude.

According to art historian Kenneth Clark nudity is distinct from nakedness where the latter suggests a lack of privacy and embarrassment when one is deprived of covering while the former is a category of artistic representation constructed to deliberately display the unclothed body.³³ Following Immanuel Kant’s ideas formulated in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790) that sought to distinguish between sensory and contemplative pleasures, Clark traces the history of the male and female nude from Greek antiquity to European modernism. However, his selective project reorients itself by eliminating the gender prefix attached to the nude. Thus, the female nude becomes *the* representation of the nude.³⁴ As art historian Lynda Nead

³³ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 23.

³⁴ A number of scholars address the male nude and masculinity. For instance see, Guy Cogeval, *Masculin/Masculin: L’homme nu dans l’art de 1800 à nos jours* (Paris: Musée d’Orsay, 2013); Edward Lucie-Smith, *Adam: The Male Figure in Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998). The Black male nude acquires a different set of meanings. See Cassandra Jackson, *Violence, Visual culture, and the Black Male Body* (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Thelma Golden’s controversial *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1994).

argues, “The *female* nude, then, is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is *the* subject, *the* form.”³⁵ The transformation of the uncontrolled matter of the female body by the male artist who gives her body the order of geometry comes to represent the idea of art itself. If, as Nead writes, art is defined by the containment of forms and obscenity is that which exceeds the limit of form, then this space beyond representation effectively describes the socio-historical situation of Black female bodies that have been always already spoken for and placed on the other side of the colon in an extreme binary.³⁶

What undergirds this aesthetic discourse is the production of a coherent and rational subject and it is *he* who becomes the universal subject position.³⁷ This omnipresent White male viewer permeates Clark and Eco’s projects as they channel the Kantian opposition between form and matter where aesthetic pleasure is deemed more sophisticated than physical forms of pleasure, such as eating, due to the involvement of the “higher” faculty of contemplation. Kant’s claim that aesthetic judgment should be disinterested thus positions the supposedly detached viewer’s desires outside the act of contemplation thereby proposing that there exists some sort of objective aesthetic experience.

Clark’s simple yet resilient statements about the nude resurface in unexpected ways in the present and have made it difficult to consider the nude or the body in art

³⁵ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 18. Italics in original.

³⁶ Lorraine O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” 160.

³⁷ Charles W. Mills explains in “Non-Cartesian Sums: Philosophy and the African-American Experience” some of the difficulties with western philosophical ideals applied to black subjectivities. *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998).

without contending with his definition.³⁸ The distinction Clark draws between nudity and nakedness ultimately proposes an act of regulation and the nude is the means in which the female sexual body is controlled. Governed by the conventions of art, the female nude adopts a different set of meanings when we consider a subject who is often, if not completely, barred from participating in this high art tradition: the Black female. If the female body is a contested site, then both the image and idea of the Black female body is an embattled territory.

Race continues to be used as the basis in which beauty and femininity are denied to Black women whose bodies are overburdened with historical tensions of race, gender, and sexuality.³⁹ These overdeterminations are evident within the two-hundred year history of visual art produced by Black artists in the United States where the category of the nude was consistently avoided and it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the nude became a permissible subject for Black artists to depict.⁴⁰ While there are scant examples in the history of art that represent the nude Black female there exists an abundance of depictions of Black bodies and specifically Black female bodies from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that highlight the perceived fundamental differences between Africans and Europeans.

³⁸ Recent publications offer surveys that attempt to grapple with the female nude. Frances Borzello, *The Naked Nude* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2012); David Ebony, et al. *Curve: The Female Nude Now* (New York: Universe, 2003); Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

³⁹ Jessica Dickerson, "Black Women Defend Viola Davis And Themselves Against Bogus Beauty Standards." *The Huffington Post*. September 24, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/24/less-classically-beautiful-black-twitter_n_5870758.html. See also J.N. Salter, "You're Pretty for a Dark-Skinned Girl." *Media Diversified*. July 25, 2013, <http://mediadiversified.org/2013/07/25/youre-pretty-for-a-dark-skinned-girl/>.

⁴⁰ Judith Wilson, "Getting Down to Get Over: Romare Bearden's Use of Pornography and the Problem of the Black Female Body in Afro-U.S. Art" in *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent and Michele Wallace, eds. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 114.

The history of art rarely offers a representation of the Black female body as a beautiful *subject*. Her sexuality is not her own, but the property of someone else to be manipulated, exploited, and consumed. Thomas's painting *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* is an interesting example within this fraught legacy of representing the Black female body because she presents a *painted* image of an individual rather than a mythic woman with sensuous care as both an object of desire and a subject who owns her sexuality (fig. 3).

Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée quotes reclining Venus images such as Edouard Manet's infamous 1863 painting *Olympia* (fig. 7).⁴¹ I want to use Manet's painting as a point of departure to discuss the ways in which Thomas's painting attempts to win back the position of the questioning subject.⁴² *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* is more than mere appropriation or the uncritical insertion of the Black body into the European tradition of painting. The Black female body in 2012 will not carry the same meanings as Manet's nineteenth-century nude European woman.

For black women, attempts to define their own sexualities and images are met with multiple challenges rooted within the patriarchal and racist histories of slavery

⁴¹ *Olympia* has become the subject of numerous parodies and artistic reimaginings, notably Pablo Picasso, *A Parody of Manet's Olympia with Junyer and Picasso*, ca. 1902; Larry Rivers, *I like Olympia in Black Face*, 1970; Yasamas Morimura, *Portrait (Futago)*, 1988; Vik Muniz, *Olympia (from Pictures of chocolate)*, 2000.

⁴² Lorraine O'Grady argues that winning back the position of the questioning is the "greatest barrier" Black women face. O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 160.



Figure 7

Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863.

Oil on canvas, 51 x 74 inches, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

and colonialism and the reverberations of these oppressive systems in the present.⁴³

When Europeans encountered bodies that had different skin colors, hair textures, sexual behavior, languages, religious practices, and values, they were compelled to *explain* why Africans appeared so profoundly different from themselves. The radical empiricists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries required proof of the fundamental differences between the races to substantiate their “scientific” theories about human hierarchies. What was necessary were case studies that illustrated plainly the racial inferiority of the Other compared to the beauty and superiority of Europeans.

This paradigm had to be rooted in unique and observable differences and the distinctions were drawn using medical models that classified the bodies pathological or healthy. Black bodies were signifiers of deviant sexuality by the eighteenth century and this point was reinforced when Black bodies were paired with White figures throwing into sharp relief the imagined differences between the two.⁴⁴ The Black female body became a metonym for Africa and an embodiment of “the dark continent’s” sexuality.

⁴³ Janell Hobbson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2005); Patricia Hill Collins, “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York: New Press, 1995): 338-357; bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Trinh T. Minh-ha offers a postcolonial feminist perspective in “Difference: 'A Special Third World Women Issue'” in *Feminist Review* 25 (Spring, 1987): 5-22.

⁴⁴ Sander Gilman, “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality,” in *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2010), 16.

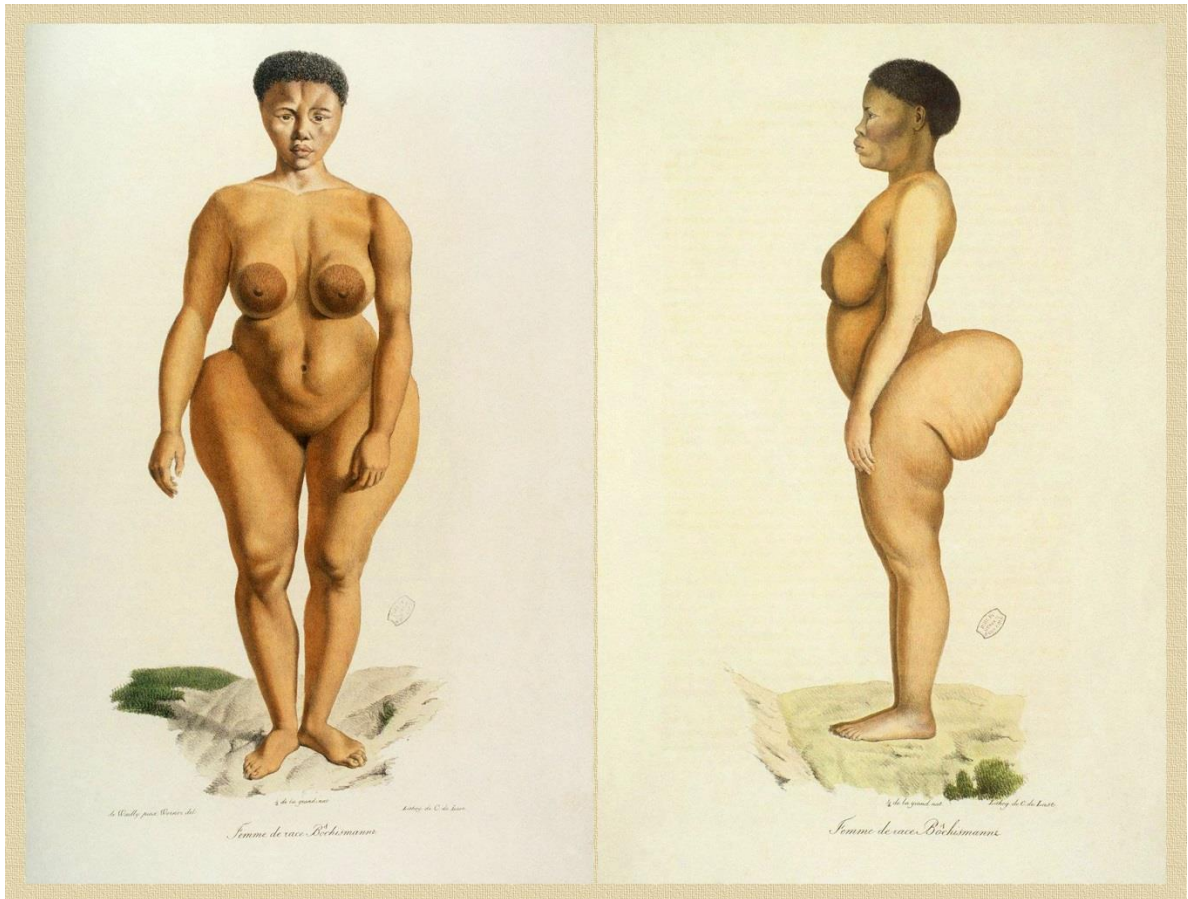


Figure 8

Unknown artist, *Femme de Race Boschimanne*, watercolor on velum, 1815 from Etienne Geoffrey Saint Hilaire and Georges-Frédéric Cuvier *Illustrations de Histoire naturelle des mammifères*, 1819, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Sarah Baartman, pejoratively known as the “Hottentot Venus” became the symbol of this pathological Black female sexuality (fig. 8).⁴⁵ The image of the prostitute in the nineteenth century stood for the ultimate embodiment of sexuality.⁴⁶ Cultural historian Sander Gilman argues in his well-known essay “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality” that the conflation of the images of the “Hottentot Venus” and the prostitute marked both the African woman and the prostitute as bearers of sexual difference and therefore pathology.⁴⁷ For Gilman, Manet’s *Olympia* “stands exactly midway between the glorification of the sexualized female and her condemnation.”⁴⁸ The prostitute’s image was merged with that of the Black female to express the dangers of unbridled sexuality. Manet draws a connection between the prostitute and the Black body by including Olympia’s Caribbean maid, Laure, in the shadows bearing a bouquet of flowers from an admirer. Although fully clothed Laure’s presence, according to Gilman, imbues the image with an illicit sexuality.⁴⁹ She is both Jezebel and Mammy and reinforces the imagined sexual and gendered differences between Black and White women.⁵⁰ But Gilman’s essay is not really concerned with the sexuality of Black women, but more interested

⁴⁵ Baartman was born in South Africa in 1789 and brought to England in 1810 to be placed on display. For over five years in London and Paris, Baartman was exhibited in a cage on stage and performed at parties. The nineteenth-century perception of the black female as possessing a “primitive” and unquenchable sexual appetite was based on the external signs of her difference. The marker of Baartman’s difference was her imagined steatopygia, or protruding buttocks and her elongated labia referred to as the “Hottentot apron.” A year after Baartman’s death in 1815 her body was dissected by French anatomist Henri Marie Ducrotay de Blainville then famously republished by French naturalist Georges Cuvier in 1817. Her remains along with her genitals and brain were preserved and placed on display in Paris’s Musée de l’Homme until the mid-1970s.

⁴⁶ S. Hollis Clayson and Charles Bernheimer discuss the prevalence of prostitution in nineteenth-century culture in *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989) respectively.

⁴⁷ Gilman, “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality,” 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵⁰ O’Grady, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” 153.

in explicating how the presence of a Black body activates the sexuality of Olympia and more generally White women. In this way the sexuality of the Black female body is only mentioned in order to discuss the *real* subject—the European woman.

Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée seems aligned with other images of the female body displayed for the consumption of the male viewer. The most apparent difference in Thomas's painting is the substitution of a Black body for a White body. Historically, depictions of the Black body have accrued specific meanings that disqualified it from being positioned as the central subject in high art.⁵¹ In this sense Thomas makes a revisionist statement that proposes to see the Black female nude on par with its European counterparts. However, this revision is less about competition and more concerned with how desire and beauty are inscribed on certain bodies. Thomas participates in this discourse through the medium of painting and she states, "The most important thing that an artist can do is join in and continue the conversation begun by his or her predecessors, while adding an entirely distinct and contemporary voice to the fray."⁵² By picturing the nude Black female body Thomas enters the tangled defeminizing *and* dehumanizing visual discourses surrounding the female and Black bodies. I propose that Thomas's collage approach to image making permits her to enter and reevaluate history at two different junctures: the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century, specifically the 1970s.

⁵¹ See the multivolume project *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Although not depicting women of the African diaspora, Paul Gauguin's representations of Tahitian women as beautiful are an interesting exception that seems to only prove the rule. Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Griselda Pollock, *Avant-garde gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

⁵² Mickalene Thomas, "Wesselmann seen by Mickalene Thomas," in *Tom Wesselmann*, Stéphane Aquin, ed. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), 66.

The rapid transformations in society during the nineteenth century ranging from industrialization and the invention of photography to the development of new systems of knowledge in academic disciplines such as anthropology, the abolition of slavery, the emergence of “popular culture,” and the twin projects of imperialism and colonialism contributed significantly to the ways that Black bodies were visualized. Similarly, the 1970s, a period characterized by an extreme upheaval in social and progressive politics marked the emergence of an increased visibility of white women artists, artists of color, and gay artists. These artists developed new strategies for reaching large audiences and challenged distinctions between “low” and “high” art and critiqued the institutional practices and structures that excluded them.⁵³

During the 1960s and 1970s, Black women found themselves in a problematic ideological position between racism and sexism. They were expected by their male counterparts in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements to prioritize racial inequities and ignore misogyny within these organizations. Similarly, in the Women’s Movement, Black women were expected to ignore the racism and class privilege underlying the feminist project. Yet this unique vantage point of marginality provides Black women with a platform to critique racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic hegemony.⁵⁴

⁵³ Christopher Reed, *Art and Homosexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Cornelia H Butler, et al., *WACK! : Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2007); Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, eds., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Lisa E. Farrington, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁵⁴ Bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Thought,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed. (New York: New Press, 1995), 282.

The transformation of a historical period into fashion implies a degree of control over the past and is a pernicious means of ideological erasure.⁵⁵ A reductive vision of the 1970s—emphasizing its excesses—dismisses the period’s profound impact on culture writ large. The reference to the 1970s in Thomas’s work is not out of nostalgia—she in fact has little recollection of the period—but is part of a recontextualizing process in her work.⁵⁶ Thomas uses the seventies as a point of reference to reinvent the experiences that she has no memory of and it is in this reinvented space that she asks questions about race, beauty, sexuality, and history. What Thomas finds compelling is the transformation of ideas and materials—specifically the black female body in art and rhinestones. Thus, a collage approach, both literally and figuratively, is a tool that enables Thomas to work with the representations and meanings of historical images and materials.

Thomas is concerned with the formal problems of painting, how line, shape, and color relate in a composition, but her work cannot be reduced to disinterested formalism. In *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*, Thomas dislodges Olympia from the center of the composition and figuratively positions her maid, Laure, in her place. Instead of the allegorical title “Olympia,” also a common name for prostitutes,⁵⁷ we are told in Thomas’s painting that this is an image of a specific Black woman, Marie. However, the colon in the title that separates Marie and *femme noire nue couchée* points to the fraught history of visually representing Black women. Marie is an

⁵⁵ Shelton Waldrep, ed., *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁵⁶ Landers, “Mickalene Thomas,” 35.

⁵⁷ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 86.

individual woman but has historically, culturally, and politically been reduced to a generic type, an anonymous *femme noire*.

Marie reclines on a luxurious pile of polychrome fabrics draped over a white sofa. Her pose is assured and seductive. With her bent legs overlapping, one foot with brightly painted red toes caress her ankle. She places one arm behind her head while the other gently rests at her side. The sinuous contour of her body, outlined in bands of rhinestones, offsets the squares and rectangles throughout the composition. Nested geometric forms such as the blocks of yellow, red, and green to the cube design on the fabric hanging in the background and the square cushions and pillows create a rhythm and order within the composition. Like the shallow depth in *Olympia* the forms in *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* are thrust close up against the picture plane. The overall flatness in both paintings draws attention to the constructed qualities of the image, how the artificiality of what the images depict is composed.

Beneath Marie's body are layers of multi-printed fabrics and these richly patterned surfaces recall the distinctive backdrops used in Malian photographers Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé's studios.⁵⁸ The different fabrics, the cluster of gold and silver rhinestones along with the bouquet of flowers also activate a sense of touch within the image that carries more of physical and sexual connotation when compared to sight. Multimedia artist C. M. Judge calls collage "an intimate artform" because "materials are set in space and time to either repel or caress one another; regardless of which of these are represented, the issue still remains one of attachment, of close

⁵⁸ Michelle Lamunière discusses the historical and cultural contexts of Keita and Sidibé's photographs in *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums), 2001.

physical proximity.”⁵⁹ The intimate sense of touch is crucial in femmage, a term coined by artist Miriam Schapiro in the 1970s. Femmage records the work of women in history who “sewed, pieced, hooked, cut, appliqued, quilted, tatted, wrote, painted, and combined materials using traditional women’s techniques to achieve their art activities (also engaged in by men but assigned in history to women).”⁶⁰ Schapiro adds that the meaning of Femmage changes with time and relates to issues of gender, language, and media as women continue to redefine themselves.⁶¹

Art historian Huey Copeland writes that Black women turned to the haptic as a reprieve from the historical determinations of the gaze and used the tactile practices of hairdressing, weaving, quilting, and performing as a means of self-definition and the transmission of memories and cultural values that otherwise would be lost in history. “Touch,” Copeland explains, “brings the world close without presuming to master it, allowing for a recalibration of the self and the object, the aesthetic and the vernacular, that disarticulates notions of quality, medium, and cultural hierarchy.”⁶² The combination of vision and touch in Thomas’s collage painting also takes a cue from other collage precedents such as Romare Bearden’s *Patchwork Quilt* (fig. 9). Thomas, like Bearden, is a critical consumer of art history.

⁵⁹ C. M. Judge, “Celebrating Intimacy,” in *Collage: Critical Views*, Katherine Hoffman, ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989), 290.

⁶⁰ Miriam Schapiro, “Femme,” *Collage: Critical Views*, Katherine Hoffman, ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989), 296.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁶² Huey Copeland, “In the Wake of the Negress,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, Cornelia Butler, ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 490. Lowery Stokes Sims has also argued that black artists use tactility as a means of transmitting cultural values, “African American Women Artists: Into the Twenty-First Century,” in *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists* (New York: Spelman College, 1996), 85.



Figure 9

Romare Bearden, *Patchwork Quilt*, 1970.

Cut-and-pasted cloth and paper with synthetic polymer paint on composition board,

35 3/4 x 47 7/8 inches, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Bearden combined his diverse interests ranging from Byzantine mosaics, Italian Renaissance paintings, and seventeenth century Dutch genre paintings to late nineteenth century and twentieth century painting, and African, Chinese, and Japanese art in his distinctive collages.⁶³ Exploring cubist fragmentation and jazz-inspired visual syncopation, Bearden merged high art references and pop culture images to represent Black history, experiences, and vernacular traditions.

In *Patchwork Quilt* Bearden depicts a nude black woman posed like an Egyptian goddess. Turned on her side, she lies on a gridded bed of fabrics: black and white polka dots, pastel florals, pink stripes, red and white gingham. The graphically flattened forms make the woman appear to float on top of the fabrics. Different shades of brown and black create the curved and angular forms of the woman's body and her mask-like head, wrapped in a pink fabric, rests on one arm while the other extends horizontally ending with the graceful lines of her fingers. Bearden's representations of women are complex and participated in the recuperative project of twentieth-century Black art in the United States to undo the erasure, marginalization and fetishization of the Black female body. Yet, as art historian Judith Wilson explores in her essay on Bearden's use of pornographic photographs, his female nudes recapitulate some of pornography's tropes such as a voyeuristic gaze, a romanticization of sex work, a reliance on dualistic stereotypes, and the connection of female body with nature. In *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* Thomas simultaneously quotes and pushes against Bearden and Manet's

⁶³ Sharon F. Patton, "Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940—1987," in *Memory and Metaphor: The Art of Romare Bearden, 1940—1987* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem; Oxford University Press, 1991), 19.

representation of the female body through her collage process by combining vision and touch.

The conventional signifiers of woman, femininity, and in the nude do not add up in Manet's painting. Art historian T. J. Clark writes:

[Critics] were perplexed by the fact that Olympia's class was nowhere but in her body: the cat, the Negress, the orchid, the bunch of flowers, the slippers, the pearl earrings, the choker, the screen, the shawl—they were all lures, they all meant nothing, or nothing in particular. The naked body did without them in the end and did its own narrating.⁶⁴

Olympia's naked body requires these other elements in order to narrate her meaning. Even if, as Clark suggests, the signifiers of "woman" and "femininity" do not align, their mismatch draws the viewer's attention to the academic conventions of the nude and the ideal form of beauty it is meant to represent. Because the notion of beauty is a particular construct, dichotomies are formed in order to distinguish what is beautiful from what is not. But beauty and ugliness form an inseparable dialectic. Lorraine O'Grady posits that in the West, white and Black female bodies are not unitary signs, but rather like two sides of the same coin. She writes, "The two bodies cannot be separated, nor can one body be understood in isolation from the other in the West's metaphoric construction of 'woman.'"⁶⁵ The women in Manet's painting are depicted

⁶⁴ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 146. Hair is one signifier of Woman in representations of the nude and has a fraught history in the perceptions of beauty for Black women. A large body of literature exists on the topic, but for two examples see, Susannah Walker, *Style & Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007) and Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵ O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 152.

as two different bodies, but they are understood as one where Laure is subsumed into Olympia's body and comes to represent the sexuality within her White counterpart.

Olympia's sexuality is recognizably modern and her prosaic realism defies the allegorical pretext of the nude. In this way, Manet exposes what art historian Linda Nochlin referred to as Olympia's "*elegant artificiality*."⁶⁶ The firm articulation of Olympia's left hand across her genitalia compared to the other vaguely rendered areas of her body draws attention to the gesture and suggests Olympia's control over who has access to her body—all contingent upon payment.⁶⁷ The bouquet Laure offers inverts Olympia's hand gesture. Wrapped in crisp white paper the flowers almost burst from Laure's arms suggesting the sexual availability of both women's laboring bodies. Bouquets of flowers are a recurring motif in Thomas's images and beyond the formal work the bouquets do in the paintings, they are subtle critiques of the nude tradition and in particular *Olympia*. In photographs the flowers are clearly made of plastic reflecting the lights in Thomas's studio and when they appear in paintings they are created by clusters of rhinestones to mark their artificiality. The Black female is no longer the unseen and silent servant without thoughts or desires relegated to the background or periphery. Marie drops the bouquet thus disconnecting herself from this caricatured image of the Black female body.

What unsettled so many of Manet's critics in 1865 was Olympia's forthright gaze. The nude does its work as a painting by addressing the spectator in some way and as T. J. Clark writes, "give[s] *him* access to the body on display."⁶⁸ Yet it was precisely Olympia's illegibility as a nude that prompted critics to sling hyperbolic

⁶⁶ Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (New York; Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), 203. Emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 119.

⁶⁸ T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 132, emphasis added.

diatribes at the painting, thus placing Olympia's body at the extreme end of a dichotomy of beauty and ugly. Critics did not seem to notice or chose not to see the relationship between *Olympia* and its quotation of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Francisco Goya's *La Maja Desnuda* (c. 1797-1800). Charles Bernheimer writes that Manet saturated "his picture of Olympia with elements constructed so that they mirror back to the male viewer his fetishistic mode of appropriating Woman" and this, Bernheimer explains, was "why the critics of 1865, faced with Olympia's challenge, repeatedly evoked cadaver fantasies: the painting offered them no avenues of escape from the their association of female sexuality with castration, disease, death."⁶⁹ As feminist critics have shown, femininity is a kind of deliberate performance that flaunts the conventional signs of the feminine in order to counteract the stability of the female image for masculine desire. Olympia's inconsistencies would seem to participate in this performance of femininity and sexuality by presenting her body for public display while refusing to offer the viewer any one image of her.

Marie's body is formed by animated brushstrokes that loop, twist, and pull across the surface of her elongated form. Her brown skin contrasts against the yellow fabrics and white sofa. Thomas presents the female body as a graphically flattened surface of color and texture where a rich impasto provides the body a three-dimensional quality. Marie's flatness denies the viewer complete access to the body. Instead this partiality counters the perceived totality or mastery associated with the gaze. Unlike Olympia, who looks defiantly out at the viewer, Marie's head is tilted slightly up and her facial expression suggests that her gaze is turned inwards to

⁶⁹ Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 125.

herself. In Thomas's other paintings the women often stare defiantly back at the viewer like Olympia. These images would appear to subvert the male gaze more directly than Marie. However, I am primarily interested in the ways in which Thomas participates in the tradition of the nude. Marie's look is similar to the dreamy expressions of other nudes, but I believe her contemplative look is a private moment that does not allow the viewer to fully know her thoughts. Like Olympia, Marie's look is her own.

Although Olympia's address, disconcerting to its audience in 1865, belongs to her, this bold look still caters to the presumed male viewer. As critical as Manet may have been about the tradition of the female nude, ultimately, his painting does not subvert the gendered terms of the gaze or the racial implications of this look. Thomas does not escape this problem either in her painting. If *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* is unsuccessful in subverting the male gaze, I propose that the painting's limitations are also its strength. Thomas presents an image that is unapologetically decorative and eroticizing. She is confronted with an art historical tradition, oriented towards specific bodies, that denies the beauty of Black women. In this way, the painting demonstrates the difficulties surrounding discussions of desire. Without knowing how the paintings are created, the images appear to collude with the objectifying practices of nineteenth-century painting. Thomas attempts to shift perceptions of art historical images and by picturing a Black nude female body she opens up discussion about the nature of desire through an objectifying representation.

Marie's audience is ambiguous. The painting simultaneously addresses multiple viewers and each viewer will bring his or her own ideas about beauty, race,

and sexuality to the image. The collaborative relationship between Thomas and her models also changes how we view these images because the women depicted express their agency by projecting how they wish to be presented. The female subjects of Thomas's paintings are a diverse group ranging from friends and family to women she meets at openings or other events. What she finds appealing about her subjects are their "confidence and self-awareness."⁷⁰ She does not overly choreograph the women; rather she works with the sitters "to capture a quality within them." She goes on to say, "They are presenting to me, through their lens, how they want to be represented. That's where the collaboration happens."⁷¹

Yet it could be argued that Marie's body is manipulated by Thomas's gaze. Marie is not totally without agency, but Thomas renders her body into a two-dimensional shape without body hair or blemishes and thus seemingly presents an idealized image of the Black female body. Thomas believes the female gaze directed at another woman's body is more powerful than the male gaze, but she adds, "the female body is still connected to the concept of the male gaze; we are all shaped by the dominant cultural norms."⁷² Indeed, one wonders, as cultural critic bell hooks does, if black women have absorbed or resisted dominant popular culture's images of black female bodies as expendable then what might a recognition of the "inconsistencies and contradictions within dominant traditions of representations" tell us about "what in other circumstances might be possible, visions of 'a world outside

⁷⁰ Sean Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," *BOMB* 116 (2011): 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 36.

the order not normally seen or thought about.”⁷³ Thomas does not completely avoid the possibility of objectification or fetishization of the Black female body and this remains one of the paradoxical aspects of many of her images of Black women.

The gaze, José Esteban Muñoz writes, “is never fixed but instead always vacillating and potentially transformative in its possibilities.”⁷⁴ Marie’s look shifts in the collage “sketch” for the painting where she looks out of the corner of her eye to match the viewer’s gaze (fig. 10). As a photographic image of Marie, this “sidelong glance”⁷⁵ is immediate like Olympia’s stare and acknowledges the presence of the viewer. In both cases, the collage and painting, embrace what Audre Lorde believes is the power of the erotic—a special kind of power and information that is rooted in unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. For Lorde, the erotic is a resource that lies within all of us and is particularly significant for women because it is perceived as a signifier of their irrationality and inferiority. The erotic is distorted in Western society and confused with pornography, but pornography “emphasizes sensation without feeling,” it denies the power of the erotic because it represents the numbing and suppression of true feeling.⁷⁶ Significantly “the erotic is not a question

⁷³ bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 2nd ed (Boston: South End Press, 2014), 126.

⁷⁴ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 27.

⁷⁵ I borrow this phrase from Krista Thompson. She examines how African diaspora art history gives Western representation a “sidelong glance.” This glance, Thompson writes, engages, expands, and explodes “Western notions of modernity and modernism, democracy and citizenship, objecthood and subjectivity, and the beautiful and the representable,” 8. Thompson, “A Sidelong Glance: The Practice of African Diaspora Art History in the United States,” in *Art Journal* (Fall 2011): 6-31.

⁷⁶ Audre Lorde, “Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.



Figure 10

Mickalene Thomas, *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*, 2011.

Color photograph and paper collage on cardboard, 8 ¼ inches x 10 inches,

collection of Angela Missoni, Mornago, Italy.

only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.”⁷⁷ Thomas’s images show that in order for Black women to assert their desirability, beauty, and sexuality they must engage with the traditions that have not only excluded them but insisted on their ugliness and inhumanity.

Opposite Marie in the lower right hand corner of the painting is an empty modernist chair. The unoccupied chair invites the viewer to enter the space and in doing so glimpse a private moment experienced by Marie. The viewer’s proximity to Marie’s body suggested by the empty chair creates a relationship that is simultaneously voyeuristic and intimate. However, it should not be assumed that this experience of looking at Marie’s body is one-sided. Lorde makes an important distinction about this divide between mutual experience and exploitation. For Lorde, the erotic functions as the shared experience with another person. It is the sharing of “joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, [that] forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”⁷⁸ Thomas incorporates this reciprocal experience of the gaze in *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée*. The vulnerability in revealing one’s body and the shared experience of the erotic allows a pleasure to exist in the injurious history of representations of the Black female body.

A variety of Black scholars have critiqued the visual strategies used to reduce Black bodies and specifically Black women to a collection of malleable parts

⁷⁷ Lorde, “Use of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 54-55.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

perceived to be signifiers of their hyperbolic sexuality.⁷⁹ These critiques often reveal a skeptical position or even an aversion to the visual. However, these attitudes often replicate and limit a view of the black body as either “negative” or “positive.” Thomas’s collages, photographs, and paintings resist easy categorization as negative or positive. Further, a binary view of images as either negative or positive often severely limits cultural criticism and assumes that popular culture’s primary goal is racial progress or uplift and to salvage denigrated images from a racist imaginary.⁸⁰ In this way cultural production is reduced to a situation that hinges on the failure or success in recovering the Black image from oppressive formulation and as a result the black feminist theoretical archive is oriented to the twin logics of injury and recovery.⁸¹ The story of Sarah Bartmann is frequently evoked by Black feminists to offer a larger critique of dominant visual culture illustrating the connection between past traumas and the current violence enacted on black female bodies in the unfolding present.⁸²

While Black feminists maintain various political commitments and treat visual culture differently the overarching position taken in their texts presumes the meaning of the Black female bodies lies in the visual field and it is representation in this field that causes injury. Pornography has implicitly structured Black feminism’s

⁷⁹ Concerning problems of visibility see, Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014); Judith Wilson, “One Way or Another: Black Feminist Visual Theory,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed., Amelia Jones, ed. London; New York: Routledge, 2010; Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Michele Wallace, Afterword: “Why Are There No Great Black Artists?” The Problem of Visibility in African-American Culture,” in *Black Popular Culture*, Gina Dent and Michele Wallace, eds. Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. 333-346.

⁸⁰ Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London; New York: Verso, 1990), 1.

⁸¹ Jennifer Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 30.

⁸² *Black Venus, 2010: They Called Her "Hottentot"*, Deborah Willis, ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2010).

conception of representation and indeed visual culture is often treated as a kind of pornographic violence. Jennifer Nash argues that because the black feminist archive largely takes an anti-visual stance towards representation it makes it almost impossible to theorize black female pleasures.⁸³ In her study of racialized pornography from the 1970s and 1980s, Nash explores the varied and multiple ecstatic pleasures of looking, being looked at, performing racial fictions, and inverting racial fictions. Her push to move beyond scholarship that either exposes the wounds inflicted by visual culture or recovers from those wounds is helpful when interpreting Thomas's images of women. Her images question what bodies are constituted as beautiful by incorporating (homo)erotic desire and the pleasures of black female spectatorship.

Thomas's paintings position the female body as both the object of the viewer's gaze and a subject. However, as Lorraine O'Grady rightly points out, with any attempt to critique dominant representations, "Self-expression is not a stage that can be bypassed. It is a discrete moment that must precede or occur simultaneously with the deconstructive act."⁸⁴ *Marie: Femme Noire Nue Couchée* interrupts an easy reading of the black female body as objectified and without agency. With its uneven edges and exposed seams the literal collage and painting of Marie reveal the artifice and hands-on process behind the creation of the image. Through collage Thomas navigates her relationship to historical visual discourses used to represent female bodies and offers an image of the black female body as both subject and object. The collaborative process of creating the image allows two Black women to share their

⁸³ Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, 31.

⁸⁴ O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 157.

intimate selves with each other. This relationship has queer potential, but more broadly is an opportunity for women of color and Black women in particular to talk openly about their sexualities and desires, to define for themselves how they choose to represent themselves in their full complexity.

Chapter 2: How To Organize a Space Around a Striking Piece of Art⁸⁵

Through her collage process Thomas deconstructs historical representations of the black female body. She employs similar visual strategies used in the history art to depict the female body and complicates these historical images with her use of materials, referential layering of meanings, and the introduction of the queer female gaze that are at once complementary and contradictory. This conceptual layering extends to her paintings of interiors and landscapes. In 2011 Thomas participated in a summer artist residency in Giverny, France at the studios of French Impressionist Claude Monet (1840–1926) and this residency coincided with the adoption of interiors and landscapes as motifs in Thomas’s work. She explains that her interest with these spaces has to do with “how we treat ourselves, how we present ourselves and how we want people to see us in the world”⁸⁶ and, like a portrait, the elements of an interior and landscape contribute to how a person defines him or herself.

While Thomas does not necessarily see the interior as a feminine or masculine space, the gendered terms of the home have affected how the narratives of modernism have been written.⁸⁷ The heroic male figures of modernity were not only symbols of the pursuit of progress and authenticity in a world tied to irrational beliefs and corruptible mechanisms of power, but also embodied new forms of *male* subjectivity. Seen in the public realm of city streets, cultural institutions, and political discourses

⁸⁵ “How To Organize a Room Around a Striking Piece of Art” was Thomas’s third solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin in 2012. The exhibition title comes from a section in the popular interior design anthology *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement* published in the early 1970s entitled “Ambience: How To Unify a Room Around a Striking Piece of Art.”

⁸⁶ Blanch, “Seurat’s Rhinestones,” 71.

⁸⁷ Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996).

these male subjectivities appeared free from familial and communal ties.⁸⁸ Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno proposed that modernity is a kind of “homelessness” because of its implications of change and rupture with the past that requires one to leave the home.⁸⁹ Thus, the conventional script of modernism grants agency to masculine subjectivities that embody the qualities of reason, dominance, and courage contrasted to the supposed passive and resistant roles of femininity characterized as nurturing and static and therefore associated with tradition and the home.

The traces of the body in domestic spaces and landscapes extend Thomas’s meditation on artifice and beauty demonstrating the elasticity of her artistic concerns and sources. Within the constructed environments of the home and natural landscape, Thomas’s collage process shifts her relationship to modernist representations of space. Like her portraits the interiors and landscapes reveal the agency of subjects as designers of their own appearances and environments.

Reimagining the Home: La Maison de Claude Monet and Better Days

The Giverny residency prompted Thomas to rethink her studio practice and she describes the experience as “an awakening of sorts.”⁹⁰ While at Giverny Thomas took multiple photographs inside Monet’s home and in the surrounding gardens that later became the source material for her collages and large-scale paintings. In the painting *Monet’s Salle à Manger Jaune* Thomas breaks apart Monet’s dining room to reveal the trace of the artist in the space through its objects and organization (fig. 4).

⁸⁸ Hilde Heynen, “Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions,” in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 2.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁰ Jori Finkel, “Mickalene Thomas, up close and very personal.” *Los Angeles Times*. April 20, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/20/entertainment/la-ca-mickalene-thomas-20120422>.

She deconstructs the room to show the skeleton of its design and in doing so alludes to the perpetual remaking of identity through domestic settings (fig. 14). Monet is a rich example because he constructed for himself a specific environment that connects to his particular studio practice that resembles Thomas's collage process. The gardens that Monet spent over twenty years creating are an extension of the artist that intimately connects his paintings to his home and family life. The same attention to color, light, mass, and line in the gardens is brought indoors and collapses the distinction between inside and outside. Like Monet, who created his own world that became the subject of his paintings, Thomas first constructs elaborately designed tableaux in her studio that function as the setting for her photographs that will later be transformed into collages and paintings.

Every aspect of the interior of Monet's home was carefully designed and complemented his studio practice. He established his home at Le Pressoir in Giverny in 1883 with Alice Hoschedé who helped care for his two sons as well as her own six children from her marriage to the collector and patron Ernest Hoschedé.⁹¹ Monet gradually made alterations to his home during the forty-three years he lived at Le Pressoir, but the general layout of the main house remained the same with a small central hall leading to interconnecting rooms. At the end of the 1890s, Monet added additional living quarters and a second studio to accommodate his increasingly large paintings on the northwestern side of the garden. In 1893 he purchased a piece of land beyond the railway line at the end of the flower garden and in 1901 he obtained

⁹¹ Marina Bocquillon-Ferretti, "Monet's Garden in Giverny" in *Monet's Garden in Giverny: Inventing the Landscape* (Milan : 5 Continents Editions, 2009), 11.



Figure 11

Monet's Yellow Dining Room at Giverny

permission from the municipal authorities to divert a portion of the Epte so he could enlarge an existing pond to create an extensive water garden. Between 1914 and 1916, Monet built a third studio on the northeastern side of the property where he could work on his large panels of waterlilies. The fragmented composition of *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* in part speaks to the record of Monet's transformation of Le Pressoir.

Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune shares a visual affinity with the kaleidoscopic works of Cubism, but Thomas renders the dining room in an ordered and almost grid-like composition that retains some illusion of perspective like the interiors of Romare Bearden.⁹² She manipulates the angles of the room to accentuate their color and form creating an oscillation between the flatness of the solid blocks of color and the three-dimensionally rendered objects. Although the painting is titled "Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune" Thomas only offers a partial view of the room perhaps to prompt the viewer to imagine the remainder of the space. By choosing this particular view of the dining room Thomas orients us to see certain objects over others. "To be oriented," Sara Ahmed writes, "is...to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us find our way."⁹³ Ahmed examines how directionality and orientations shape social spaces and the naturalization of certain directions. Thomas's fragmented composition does not present the dining room as it actually and through its multidirectional lines gestures to the many possible views and configurations of the space. Unlike Thomas's other paintings of Monet's home, *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* allows a

⁹² Ruth Fine discusses Bearden interiors and images of the rural American South in her essay "Romare Bearden: The Spaces Between," in *The Art of Romare Bearden*, Fine et al. (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003): 2-137.

⁹³ Sara Ahmed, Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 1.

glimpse into the other rooms on the first floor suggesting the connections between these spaces.

One design feature that joins these different rooms is the use of color. Thomas responded strongly to Monet's use of vibrant of color and explains that his choices were not motivated "just about what he would see, but how he wanted to *feel* and *live*, so even his interior spaces were visually constructed."⁹⁴ Because Monet began his paintings by working from life in open air, every moment of daylight was significant to him. Thus, the interiors and gardens complemented Monet's work routine and daily family activities. Monet fashioned his identity through the furniture, color, the art that hung on the walls and even the food and wine his family consumed. All of these elements coalesce to create a collage-like portrait of Monet.⁹⁵

Queer feminist scholar Sara Ahmed asks, how do we "inhabit spaces as if they extend our skin?"⁹⁶ The work of inhabitation, Ahmed explains, necessarily involves orientation devices that extend our bodies into space thus creating new contours of familiarity. Inhabitation, then, is a dynamic negotiation between the familiar and unfamiliar shaped by proximities and distances between bodies and things.⁹⁷ Part of what Thomas does in *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* is an attempt to figure out how a variety of spaces, bodies, and objects are connected. The fragmentary forms of *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* demonstrate Thomas's painterly concerns with

⁹⁴ Melandri, "Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas," 36. Emphasis added.

⁹⁵ Karin Sagner-Düchting, *Monet at Giverny* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 1994); Claire Joyes, *Monet's Table: The Cooking Journals of Claude Monet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

⁹⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 10.

⁹⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

making pictures and suggest the artifice underlying the negotiations between orientation and disorientation in the process of inhabitation.⁹⁸

The dining room is reduced to a juxtaposition of flat planes of blue, yellow, and green that mirrors the interwoven color palettes of the rooms on the ground floor. The bright yellow walls of the dining room are translated into different shades of yellow geometric shapes. Monet had the walls and furniture painted in two tones of yellow with the walls lacquered in a satin finish. This surface is replicated in Thomas's painting with the use of enamel and rhinestones that absorb and reflect the light. Rhinestones are used minimally in the painting and appear on the contour lines of the geometric shapes.

In the middle of the room, absent from Thomas's view of the space, there would be a large wooden table and chairs also painted in two tones of yellow that match the walls and moldings. Along the side wall are two Normandy cabinets that held the family's collection of blue and white china echoing the Rouen tiles of the mantelpiece. The low ceiling of the dining room, a typical design feature of Normandy farmhouses, was painted a crisp white to increase the size of the space and over the French doors leading to the veranda hung soft cream curtains that permitted sunlight to flood the room. Thomas plays with this sense of openness and lightness with the scattered placement of colors and forms in the painting that radiate outwards from the open door of the dining room thus extending the pictorial space.

⁹⁸ Orientation and disorientation are not evenly experienced. Ahmed discusses her own experience as an immigrant and aptly writes, "some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more 'involved' in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience." Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 159.

The flat colors and manipulation of geometry in *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* reflect the indelible mark of Henri Matisse and Romare Bearden.⁹⁹ For example, in Matisse's *Red Room (Harmony in Red)* an interior scene is pared down to a series of harmonious patterns and colors (fig. 12). The painting depicts a room covered in vibrant red floral wallpaper with a woman arranging fruit on a table. The walls and table represented in the same red color and deep blue pattern of curvilinear floral designs create a continuous decorative surface. Fruit and wine carafes arranged in a scattered pattern across the table connect the cropped chair at the left to the table and the woman on the right. Visible through the window a pair of curving trees in the background echo the twisting floral pattern of the tablecloth, wallpaper, and the woman leaning over the table. The subtle differentiation between space and objects in *Red Room* is thrown into sharp relief in *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune*. Evoking Matisse's harmonious mixture of design, color, and pattern, Thomas produces a similar effect with overlapping rectilinear forms and a contrasting warm-cool color palette.

As a result of the large scale of *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* the viewer is positioned inside the dining room and looks through the foyer into the blue salon. The viewer is not only situated inside the dining room, but sees the room from Thomas's point of view as she experienced the space. This illusion of depth is produced by the strategic placement of the cream and terracotta tiled floor at different angles. Thomas alludes to her presence through alterations to the space thus making it her own. Two empty chairs to the right of the dining room door—a motif used by several artists to

⁹⁹ Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," 34.



Figure 12

Henri Matisse, *Red Room (Harmony in Red)*, 1908.

Oil on canvas, 70.9 x 86.6 inches, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

signal the presence of the artist in a space—perhaps one way Thomas acknowledges both Monet and her physical presence in the room. Thomas takes Monet’s idiosyncratic vision of his home and recontextualizes the space with her own personal and art historical references. Thomas’s signature wood paneling appears on the bottom portion of the painting suggesting a connection between the décor of her childhood experiences and Monet’s pastoral home. Originally, Monet hung family portraits on the dining room walls, but replaced them with his personal collection of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints by Utamaro, Hokusai and Hiroshige in simple black frames.¹⁰⁰ Thomas replaces the woodblock prints with a rhythmic arrangement of squares and rectangles stacked salon-style.

These black and white shapes can be read visually in a number of ways: on the one hand they are reminiscent of Thomas early abstract paintings and become a personal insertion into Monet’s home; on the other hand the black and white squares are also reminiscent of the Suprematist works by Kazimir Malevich. Further, a black square leaning on a chair in the right corner of the dining room is perhaps a nod to the 1915 exhibition *0.10* in Petrograd where a black square hung in the top corner of the gallery, a common way to display of domestic icons (fig. 13). This referencing and effacing of the Japanese prints and religious icons relates to Thomas’s broader interest in the idea of masking surfaces. *Monet’s Salle à Manger Jaune* deliberately cites other modernist artists in in a kind of call and response where Thomas quotes their formal ideas, supplanting them with her own aesthetic contributions and subjective experiences, thus creating a palimpsest of art history.

¹⁰⁰ The prints date mostly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and depict a variety of subject matters ranging from landscapes, local flora and fauna to portraits of courtesans. Heide Michels, *Monet’s House: An Impressionist Interior* (New York: Clarkson Potter/Publishers, 1997), 34.



Figure 13

Photograph of the *0.10* exhibition, Petrograd, 1915

Through these references Thomas personalizes her sources and claims a space for herself in the history of art.

The design of Monet's home was the result of his subjective response to his environment and the reciprocal demands of his studio practice. In Giverny Monet constructed his own world from which he could constantly draw inspiration from to sustain his identity and paintings. Thomas creates a similar immersive world in her project *Better Days*, a weeklong "installation" for Absolut Art Bureau at Art Basel 2013 (fig. 14). Located on the second floor of Volkshaus No. 5, in The Galerie, the Art Bar *reimagined* the feeling of a 1970s domestic setting.¹⁰¹

Better Days was inspired by the parties Thomas's mother threw for her friends of actors, artists and musicians in the 1970s to raise money to produce plays and for charitable causes such as sickle-cell anemia. Thomas describes the project as an experiment rather than an installation, preferring to think of it as a "communal space, a space for congregating, where people can unveil themselves, engage in conversation, be a part of something."¹⁰² *Better Days*, like Thomas's collaged images, layer multiple sources and meanings, thus create a space of unknown possibilities that collapses the distinction between private and public spaces and the social relationships of domesticity.

Thomas asks, "How can I take the ingredients of who I am and put them into a painting? What does that look like? What does that feel like? What's the residue of

¹⁰¹ For a video preview of the opening see, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fX_XJlvKuc8. For other videos of the project see the *Better Days* website, <http://betterdays-basel.com/videos/>

¹⁰² Thomas quoted in Adrienne Edwards, "Better Days: A Mickalene Thomas Art Experiment," online. <http://betterdays-basel.com/essay/>



Figure 14

Mickalene Thomas, *Better Days*, 2013.

Site-specific mixed-media installation, Basel, Switzerland.

that?”¹⁰³ *Better Days* is a literal response to Thomas’s questions and functions like an interactive painting. Many of Thomas’s paintings begin with a meticulously designed tableau constructed in her studio. During a photo shoot Thomas looks for particular moments when her subjects are satisfied with the role they have adopted. The photographs attempt to capture the magnetism in the space and the performative moments of artifice that are signified in part by the rhinestones in the final painting. The energy and vulnerability that occurs during these studio sessions are amplified in *Better Days* where the viewer becomes both the subject of a moving portrait and a collaborator with Thomas in the creation of the *mise-en-scène*.

In Thomas’s earlier installations at the Santa Monica Museum of Art and Brooklyn Museum she invited viewers to become voyeurs in the interior space. She points out that the installations are not boudoirs, but living rooms, which she believes “calls to mind the nature of how we constantly want people to look at us and to know something about us.”¹⁰⁴ The platform and stanchions of the early installations, separating the viewer and the tableau, are removed in *Better Days* allowing visitors to interact with the space. Before entering the environment, visitors navigated a meandering corridor reminiscent of a back alley, permeated by the smell of patchouli incense, leading to four lounges and an outdoor terrace. Once inside visitors were greeted by Thomas’s signature *mélange* of fabrics, faux-wood paneling, mirrors, and wallpaper. In keeping with her exploration of artifice, the original architectural details of the Volkhaus remained visible through the corners of the room highlighting the layers of physical construction in the space.

¹⁰³ Landers, “Mickalene Thomas,” 35.

¹⁰⁴ Melandri, “Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas,” 40.

It is not necessary for the visitor to share Thomas's memory or experience of a space because, as she explains, "the memory is reinvented... What happens is everyone, whether they have the experience or not, can recognize it from their own point of view. There's something there that we can connect to."¹⁰⁵ Speaking about her past tableaux Thomas comments that, "an installation could pull from as far back as the '50s and all the way up to the '80s. For me it's about combining those elements and periods. All of those elements still exist, and we're constantly reinventing them."¹⁰⁶ The various objects in the space—lights, fake plants, candles, coasters, tables, candy jars, functioning American electrical outlets, and even the clothes the bartenders wore—were all sourced from flea market and vintage stores in New York. Thomas explains that these were objects that she could have found in Basel, but the decision to pack and ship the space across the Atlantic, she suggests, indicates that there is a "global familiarity" and that that is "in itself a global conversation."¹⁰⁷

The entire space of *Better Days* is an assemblage of different materials and historical references. Works by Thomas's friends and colleagues such as Derrick Adams, Duron Jackson, Jayson Keeling, Wangechi Mutu, Xaviera Simmons, and Lorna Simpson hung on the multilayered walls and were available for purchase. This temporary gallery created a visual dialogue between living artists and Thomas's art historical sources. Thomas is inspired by the ways that pattern can function on multiple referential levels while also serving as a strong tool for color and rhythm in a

¹⁰⁵ Melandri, "Points of Origin: An Interview with Mickalene Thomas," 34.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Stephanie Bailey, "Basel: Mickalene Thomas' 'Better Days' Absolut Art Bar." *Whitewall*. June 12, 2013, <http://whitewallmag.com/art/basel-mickalene-thomas-better-days-absolut-art-bar>.

composition.¹⁰⁸ The bold oscillating geometric and floral fabrics on the walls, armchairs, and loveseats call to mind the sumptuous spaces depicted in the imagined harems of nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings as well as the photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé. Large 1970s-era chandeliers suspended from the faux-copper ceiling in addition to candles, lava lamps, and dimly lit lanterns cast soft amber and rose tones throughout the space contributing to the intimacy of the setting. Black and white linoleum, parquet tiles, and carpets were cut and arranged in the spirit of Romare Bearden and Henri Matisse's interiors. Thomas's interiors are constructed memories of the spaces of her grandmother and mother's homes. Visitors sipped bespoke cocktails made in honor of Thomas's mother and punch named after soul singer Millie Jackson's song "Phuck U Symphony." Lounging throughout the space visitors talked, played board games, watched films on screens and televisions,¹⁰⁹ and listened to DJs spin interpretations of classic '70s music as well as guest performers like Solange Knowles¹¹⁰ and Sarah Reid (fig. 15).

The "social experiment" of Better Days was a success and Thomas mentions that several museums are interested in her concept. For Thomas it is important that the collaborative effort of the project is created on a larger scale.¹¹¹ The domestic intimacy of *Better Days* would be diminished if expanded to a larger space, but the potential social relationships that a larger space offers would create a kind of

¹⁰⁸ McLendon, *Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip-Hop in Art*, 117. See also Ellen Rudolph, *Pattern ID* (Akron, Ohio: Akron Art Museum, 2010).

¹⁰⁹ Thomas curated this selection of films including Ousmane Sembène's *La Noire de...* (*Black Girl*), features from *The Black Radical Imagination*, and some of her mother's favorite films such as *Killer of Sheep* (1981), *Mahogany* (1975), and *The Ladies Sing the Blues* (1988).

¹¹⁰ Thomas collaborated with Solange to create the cover art for her EP *True* and designing the set for the teaser trailer for the EP's lead single "Losing You." Solange Knowles, "Solange Interviews Mickalene Thomas". *Opening Ceremony*. March 20, 2013.

¹¹¹ Mickalene Thomas, "On Better Days, An Art Bar Installation" *ArtPhaire*. August 18, 2014, <http://www.artphaire.com/mickalene-thomas-better-days-art-bar-installation/>.



Figure 15

Sarah Reid performing at *Better Days*, 2013

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_i_8rE4B-Y#t=148

community. As a three-dimensional collage *Better Days* reworks the idea of interior spaces and social relations.

Adrienne Edwards calls *Better Days* “a queer utopia filled with potential...It is a cartography of aesthetics, feelings, and performances that structure an emergent social realm that will enable a wider range of social relations.”¹¹² Edward’s description parallels architectural historian Gülsüm Baydar’s proposition that the recognition of the agency of marginalized figures can shift the parameters by which we define domestic space and relationships to dwelling.¹¹³ When applying existing methods of spatial analysis to the domestic lives of women and men who do not conform to the model of the single-family household it becomes evident that a unified notion of domesticity is increasingly difficult to pin down.

Better Days requires the visitor to engage all five senses and asks participants to actualize the space with their presence, ideas, memories, and experiences. As Edwards succinctly writes, the visitor is “invited to infuse their presence into the work, thus completing and transforming its deep sensual dimensions.”¹¹⁴ Thomas translates her collage process into spatial reality creating an immersive environment for viewers to actively participate. *Better Days* is a spatial collage that unfolds in real time as visitors literally mingle and reposition themselves in relation to others and the environment.

¹¹² Edwards, “Better Days: A Mickalene Thomas Art Experiment,” online.

¹¹³ Gülsüm Baydar “Figures of wo/man in contemporary architectural discourse” in *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, Hilde Heynen and Gülsüm Baydar, eds. (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 34.

¹¹⁴ Edwards, “Better Days: A Mickalene Thomas Art Experiment,” online.

Inventing the Landscape: Masking and the Logic of Camouflage

While *Monet's Salle à Manger Jaune* and *Better Days* focus on the careful organization of the interior as portraits of their occupants, Thomas shifts her attention outside in works such as *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet* (fig. 16) and *Landscape with Camouflage* (fig. 5) to examine the artifice of the landscape. Monet's gardens were not only one of the painter's favorite motifs, but were a conduit for his radical artistic development that allowed him to create the landscape he imagined. His paintings were not an immediate response to the natural environment – the cliché of Impressionist spontaneity – but the result of a slow and methodical work process that gave the finished paintings an air of effortlessness.¹¹⁵ Thomas does not seek to hide the composed quality of her images, but rather she allows the viewer to glimpse behind the curtain at the painting's construction.

In *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet*, Thomas presents Monet's famed waterlily pond in a fractured collection of parts. A series of thick brown lines suggesting two trees frames the central pond that is broken into a conglomeration of polygons, triangles, and squares. The application of rhinestones in *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet* is slightly different compared to Thomas's previous work. Here the rhinestones are generously applied in large expanses across the composition. While some of the plants and flowers are painted in bold graphic lines, characteristic of Thomas's work, other parts of the pond are created by clusters of rhinestones glued directly onto the surface. Thomas, like Monet, deftly layers and juxtaposes color, texture, and form to produce complex iridescent surfaces. Monet would begin his process by painting from life,

¹¹⁵ Bocquillon-Ferretti, "Monet's Garden in Giverny," 19.



Figure 16

Mickalene Thomas, *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet*, 2012.

Rhinestones, acrylic, oil, and enamel on wood panel, 108 x 144 inches, Lehmann

Maupin, New York, NY.

applying a thick uneven layer of paint onto the canvas.¹¹⁶ He would then add several thin layers of color, gradually modulated to build up the surface. Thomas's rhinestones function in a similar way adding texture and depth to the painting's surface, but also signals the artifice of the scene. The richly built up surfaces of Monet's paintings required a drying period between the multiple layers of paint resulting in subtle and chromatic effects. The modulated rhinestones, impasto, and glassy slickness of the enamel in *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet* obtain a similar effect, enlivening the surface of the image and refracting the light as the viewer shifts focus (fig. 17).

The glittering luminosity and layered textures in many of Thomas's landscapes also reference Romare Bearden's late works of landscapes such as *In a Green Shade (Hommage to Marvell)* (fig. 18). Alluding to the poem *The Garden* by seventeenth century English poet Andrew Marvell, *In a Green Shade* depicts a silhouette of a woman bathing in a pool of water in tropical woodland setting. The graceful curve of the woman's body is sharply outlined against the foliage behind her while her mottled green form blends in with the aqueous layers of color. Diaphanous washes of intense blues, pinks, reds and greens run across the composition and stain the picture's surface. Despite an overall flatness, the different textures of photographic foliage and fluid layers of paint build up the surface of the picture

¹¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of Monet's painting technique see Robert Herbert, "Method and Meaning in Monet," in *Art in America* (September 1979):90-108. On Monet more generally see, Joseph Baillio, *Claude Monet, 1840-1926* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux: Musée d'Orsay; New York, 2010); Karin Sagner-Düchting, *Monet at Giverny* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 1994).



Figure 17

Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet, 2012 (detail)



Figure 18

Romare Bearden, *In a Green Shade (Homage to Marvell)*, 1984.

Collage of various papers with paint, ink, and graphite on fiberboard, 39 ¼ x 30 ¼ inches, collection of Yvonne and Richard McCracken, Charlotte NC.

giving the impression of a dense space filled with flowers and plants punctuated by birds, reptiles, and butterflies. Bearden frequently juxtaposed the nude Black female body with African diasporic folklore and religious imagery and seemingly conflated the female body with nature. His late work produced in the Caribbean could be dismissed as exoticizing, however, as scholars Sally and Richard Price suggest, “the American difficulty with accepting the Caribbean as a site of serious culture has created a void in the art world’s vision of Bearden.”¹¹⁷

The spaces of the rural American South, Harlem, and Saint Martin were intimately connected to Bearden’s identity as a modern artist. Thomas is interested in the ways that subjects relate to their environments and sees the disparate landscapes of Monet’s carefully orchestrated gardens, Bearden’s collages of his constructed memories of the South and the Caribbean, and the idealized forms of nature in paintings by the Hudson River School as “extensions of the body and beauty,”¹¹⁸ Thomas’s *Landscape with Camouflage* demonstrates the instability of the landscape as a transparent reflection of reality. Camouflage, as a pattern and idea, reinforces the ambiguity of these different invented landscapes by calling attention to the environment’s contrived qualities.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Sally Price and Richard Price, *Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension* (Philadelphia : University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 16.

¹¹⁸ Barbara Pollock, *Rhinestone Odalisques*, Rhinestone Odalisques,” in *ARTNews* 1 (2011), 98. Thomas frequently acknowledges her admiration for the Hudson River School and this point is mentioned in all of the press about her work.

¹¹⁹ Hanna Rose Shell explains the etymology of camouflage is twofold: “‘camouflage’ harkens back to the nineteenth-century French word ‘camouflet,’ which refers either to a primitive land mine that creates potent underground explosions without surface rupture or to a tiny smoke bomb that explodes when placed into the nose of an unwitting victim. ‘Camouflage’ is also related to the medieval Italian *camuffare*, meaning ‘to make up.’” *Hide and Seek: Camouflage, Photography, and the Media of Reconnaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 14.

The Hudson River School, a group of New York City-based painters, emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century under the direction of English émigré artist Thomas Cole (1801–1848). Lacking the castles, abbeys, and battlefields of their European counterparts, the artists of the Hudson River School sought to present a uniquely American identity through the distinct North American landscape that served as a platform for the burgeoning United States to distinguish itself from Europe while simultaneously crafting an image of itself as a competitor on the global stage.¹²⁰ Through close observation of nature the Hudson River School constructed metaphorically rich landscapes that were presented as natural.¹²¹

Many of Thomas's landscapes reference the visual devices used by artists of the Hudson River School and other Romantic painters to picture the awesome grandeur and individuality of nature. These visual strategies such direct observation from nature, the study of light, the use of the poignant panorama or meditative enclosure, and an economy of means enhanced the affective qualities of the scenes depicted. John Driscoll suggests that through this technical restraint Hudson River School artists seemed to breathe pigments onto the canvas and the result produced “a thin, smooth diaphanous surface of surpassing beauty” that “seemed to slow down—almost stop—time.”¹²²

¹²⁰ For a discussion of Manifest Destiny and empire in the United States in the nineteenth century see, T.J. Barringer and Andrew Willton, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹²¹ For a discussion of nineteenth-century American landscape painting see, John K. Howat, *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987); James F. Cooper, *Knights of the Brush: The Hudson River School and the Moral Landscape* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1999); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

¹²² John Driscoll, *All That is Glorious Around Us: Paintings from the Hudson River School* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 15.



Figure 19

Asher Brown Durand, *Kindred Spirits*, 1849. Oil on canvas, 44 x 36 inches,
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

A quintessential Hudson River School painting is Asher Brown Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (fig. 19). Durand's painting, a homage to Thomas Cole after his sudden death in February 1848, was commissioned by New York merchant and art collector Jonathan Sturges as a gift for poet William Cullen Bryant in gratitude for his moving eulogy at Cole's funeral. Sturges wanted the painting to capture the friendship between the poet and painter, thus the title "Kindred Spirits," a phrase from English poet John Keat's *Seventh Sonnet* that extols the ameliorative qualities of nature.¹²³ Enveloped by a canopy of trees, Cole and Bryant stand on a rocky promontory above a river that bisects the painting. The arching trees connect the various natural elements of the composition into a circle that opens like a window to a spectacular view of the Catskill Mountains in the distance. Durand depicts Cole with his sketch portfolio and recorder as he gestures into the distance suggesting that the two men might be discussing their fascination with geology or meditating on the beauty of the landscape.

The painting is a composite landscape – an idea that is undoubtedly attractive to Thomas – and offers a gazetteer of subjects Cole and Durand used in the Catskill Mountains. In the middle ground, the lower waterfall is identified as Fawn's Leap located on the south side of Kaaterskill Clove. Appearing in the background are the Clove and Kaaterskill Falls that could not be seen together in reality. Despite these alterations the painting originates from close observations of nature and the whole composition was the result of a trip Durand took to the Catskills in September and October 1848. The synthesis of geographical sites in *Kindred Spirits* is paralleled in Thomas's *Landscape with Camouflage* that combines photographs of lakeside hills,

¹²³ Barringer, *American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States, 1820-1880*, 68-70.

grasslands, and dense forests from Thomas's international travels in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

In the foreground, similar to *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet*, two "Y" shaped pieces of painted woodgrain form a pair of trees that frame the shallow space at the center of the painting. *Landscape with Camouflage* evokes the compositional devices of the poignant panorama and the meditative enclosure with the trees creating a visual path that leads the viewer's eye into the painting. The expansive horizon line is broken by a thin wedge of red at the center of the composition. Stacked patches of solid blue, red, and yellow shapes simultaneously mimic the gentle slopes of hills and overlap with painted cumulous clouds to form the sky. Tucked into the background, distant hills or mountains rendered in thin washes recall the atmospheric perspective used in Durand's painting. An elegant branch of a birch tree reaches across the top the composition in *Kindred Spirits* and a similar branch is repeated, albeit graphically flattened, in the upper left hand corner of Thomas's painting. Unlike the inviting composition of *Kindred Spirits*, access into the environment of *Landscape with Camouflage* is stymied by the flat planes of color and abstract foliage. The irregular forms with their jagged cuts, undulating curves, and rhinestone edges overlap to create a camouflage-like pattern on the painting's surface. This pattern flattens the image and produces a kind of barrier between the scene and the viewer. Thomas cites the various formal structures of Romantic landscape painting in *Landscape with Camouflage* to reveal the invention of beauty in the natural environment.

While the Hudson River School was ostensibly a "boy's club" there were several female painters such as Harriet Cany Peale, Susie M. Barstow, Elizabeth

Jerome, and Mary Blood Mellen among others who were able to achieve some success and independence through their art.¹²⁴ Thomas makes a direct comment on the gendered biases embedded in traditions of painting by including an oversized easel to display *Le Jardin d'Eau de Monet* and *Landscape with Camouflage* (fig. 20). “There’s definitely the bravado of knowing you can pull off a big painting,” Thomas explains, “And it is a boy thing. I like wrestling with those male notions of, ‘They’ve done it, why can’t I do it too? How will I do it?’”¹²⁵ The monumental scale of her work is a response both to the demands of her materials and ideas as well as the association of large-scale painting within the history of art to the masculine painter.

The performance of identity is itself an act of camouflage.¹²⁶ A camouflage print transforms the body into a landscape and the use of the pattern in Thomas’s painting implies the presence of a human figure. Thomas views the pattern as a visual device for examining the idea of artifice in the landscape in much the same way that the wigs, makeup, and costumes function in her studio portraits. The logic of camouflage, for both the civilian and the soldier, involves the relationship of vision to power. It is a way of “seeing into the world” and this “seeing” functions by rendering invisible the self. This sense of camouflage, Hanna Rose Shell suggests, is more than a printed pattern, but rather “it is meaningful as a way of seeing, being, moving, and working in the world. It is a form of cultivated subjectivity. As such, it is an

¹²⁴ Jennifer C. Krieger briefly describes the work of some of female Hudson River School in her essay “The Women Artists of the Hudson River School.” *Antiques and Fine Arts*. Spring 2010: 140-145. See also Linda Nochlin’s canonical 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” for the societal constraints faced by women artists. Reprinted in Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988):145-178.

¹²⁵ Andrew Maerkele, “Models of Agency,” *ART iT*. August 15, 2011, http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv_e/XsWaKLhzjmeVwCA6rx2v.

¹²⁶ For discussions concerning the performance of racial and gender identities see, Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, eds., *Black Performance Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).



Figure 20

Installation view of *Landscape with Camouflage* with easel at the Brooklyn Museum

individuated form of self-awareness that is also part of a network of institutional practices.”¹²⁷ Through Thomas’s collage practice she navigates the structure of images in order to present the layers of artifice built into representations. This idea is epitomized in Andy Warhol’s (1928-1987) series of self-portraits produced in the late 1980s such as *Camouflage Self-Portrait* that demonstrates the simultaneous construction and eradication of the self (fig. 21). In this premonitory self-portrait, produced a year before his in February 1987, Warhol appears as a disembodied head emerging from a dark background. He combines a Polaroid photograph of himself with a pink and red camouflage print layered over his face that highlights the contradiction between the perception of individuality in portraiture and the uniformity of camouflage. From behind the camouflage print Warhol stares blankly at the viewer and through the painting’s large scale the artist seems to confront the viewer.

Even in the intimate, self-revelatory genre of self-portraiture, Warhol presents himself only as a performance of surfaces. He unambiguously broadcasted the artifice of his identity and, as art historian Jonathan Katz notes, obstructed sympathetic identification through “his monosyllabic responses to inquiries, his schoolboy vocabulary,” and “his emotional illegibility.”¹²⁸ By the late 1980s Warhol’s image was completely fabricated. As David Bourdon writes in his biography of the artist, “the hair belonged to one of dozens of wigs, the skin had been dermatologically transformed and constantly tautened through the use of astringents, and the sunken cheeks had been smoothed out with collagen injections.”¹²⁹ Some viewers interpreted

¹²⁷ Hanna Rose Shell, *Hide and Seek*, 19

¹²⁸ Jonathan Katz, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2010), 47.

¹²⁹ David Bourdon, *Warhol* (New York: Abrams, 1989), 402.



Figure 21

Andy Warhol, *Camouflage Self-Portrait*, 1986.

Synthetic polymer paint and silkscreen on canvas, 6 feet 8 ½ inches × 6 feet 4 inches,

Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Warhol's camouflage self-portraits as *memento mori* while others saw them as metaphors for the multiple ways the enigmatic artist was perceived.¹³⁰

The camouflage pattern becomes a screen that offers the illusion of protection, but also implies imminent danger of exposure. Camouflage, for Thomas, is also a mode of self-protection rooted in the human instinct to blend into the environment. It is a form of masking oneself with the anticipation of the gaze. In Warhol's self-portrait his face becomes a mask the artist wears, but rather than concealing himself he is in plain sight highlighting the irony in camouflage—in order for camouflage to be effective the object being concealed must be readily identifiable to be able to blend in.

The use of camouflage as an idea in Thomas's work can be understood as a disidentificatory practice. José Esteban Muñoz proposes that disidentification recycles and rethinks encoded meanings in processes that “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications.”¹³¹ This paradox of invisibility and visibility is implicitly referenced in *Landscape with Camouflage* where the human figure is sublimated in the painting. Warhol and Thomas's camouflage images are not just cryptic or mimetic illusions but also use another form of camouflage, motion dazzle, which temporally confuses the observer

¹³⁰ Bourdon, *Warhol*, 402.

¹³¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

with a conspicuous pattern thus making the hidden object visible but momentarily harder to locate.¹³²

This second skin is especially significant for Black women. The edited collection of essays *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* examines how the gaze imposes a second skin of misconception and misrepresentation onto Black female bodies. Kimberly Wallace-Saunders writes, “This shell is both *skin deep*, as it emphasizes the most superficial versions of Black women, and *skin tight*, as it has proved to be nearly inescapable, even in Black women’s self-conception and self-representation.”¹³³ Silence or self-imposed invisibility has been a strategy Black women have used to shield themselves from sexual and symbolic violence. Although expressing agency by removing themselves from the harmful distortions of the gaze, a politics of silence, evasion, and displacement will only be a reprieve from this violence. Indeed, as Audre Lorde prophetically wrote, “Your silence will not protect you” because “it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.”¹³⁴

Black feminist scholar Evelyn Hammonds echoes Lorde’s sentiment and urges us to overturn the politics of silence and to develop instead a “politics of articulation” that would interrogate the possibilities for Black women to speak and act.¹³⁵ Visibility alone cannot be the end goal, for this does not challenge the

¹³² Jonathan Miller, “Visual Subterfuge in the Natural World,” in *Camouflage* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007), 11-35.

¹³³ Kimberly Wallace-Saunders, “Introduction,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4. Italics in original.

¹³⁴ Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 41; 44.

¹³⁵ Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” in *Skin Deep, Spirit strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, Kimberly Wallace-Saunders, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 316.

structures at play that determine what can and cannot be seen. The camouflage pattern in Thomas's *Landscape with Camouflage* blurs the distinction between what is real and what is not. Thomas's collage process answers Hammonds' call for a politics of articulation where camouflage becomes a multivalent sign that momentarily evades the gaze *and* demonstrates the limitations of visibility. It reveals the illegibility of the body and landscape's surfaces in providing concrete knowable information and transparent reflections of reality.

Conclusion: Objects In Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear¹³⁶

Thomas's paintings are conceptually like mirrors. In her collaged images she forces us to deal with what is in front of us on a deeper level and challenges us to reconsider our thoughts and relationships to beauty. "To see yourself, and for others to see you, is a form of validation," Thomas says, but this is not an easy task.¹³⁷ As Lorraine O'Grady aptly writes about the experiences of black women, "To name ourselves rather than be named we must first see ourselves... So long unmirrored in our true selves, we may have forgotten how we look."¹³⁸ A key moment that contributed to Thomas's development as an artist and Black woman occurred when she moved to Portland, Oregon to attend college. Seeing a small retrospective of Carrie Mae Weems's photographs was "instrumental," Thomas says, to her thinking. "It was one of the first times I'd seen contemporary work by an African American woman," Thomas recalls, "It made me aware of how you can use your experience as a person and make art out of it."¹³⁹ One body of work that Thomas saw was Weems's *Kitchen Table Series*, a suite of twenty black and white photographs presented as an extensive narrative-based drama and paired with fourteen text panels.¹⁴⁰

The photographs sketch intimate vignettes in the daily life of a woman. One photograph depicts the woman and her daughter sitting at a wooden table (fig. 22). A

¹³⁶ I borrow this title from the song "Objects In Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear" by the singer-songwriter and bassist Meshell Ndegeocello from her album *Weather* (2011).

¹³⁷ Wyma, "Mickalene Thomas on Motherhood, the Mirror Stage, and Her Brooklyn Museum Show," 24

¹³⁸ Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity," 154.

¹³⁹ Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," 32.

¹⁴⁰ Franklin Sirmans, "A World of Her Own: Carrie Mae Weems and Performance," in *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, Kathryn E Delmez, et al. (Nashville, TN: Frist Center for the Visual Arts, 2012): 42-53.



Figure 22

Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and daughter with makeup)* from the *Kitchen Table Series*, 1990, silver gelatin prints and screenprint text panels, 27 ¼ x 27 ¼ inches, The Art Institute of Chicago

triangular light suspended from the ceiling shines a spotlight on the two figures who gaze down at circular tabletop mirrors while applying lipstick. The matching actions of the woman and young girl along with their concentrated effort suggest, as Peg Zeglin Brand proposes, “a ceremonial sharing of information, an induction into the secrets and codes of beautification, a transference of power” from one generation to another.¹⁴¹ The empty chair on the left invites the viewer into the scene to partake in this ritual of artifice. To assume a spot at the table requires one to reveal him or herself and his or her ideas about beauty. Although frequently pictured, Black women are often not seen as complex beings and subjects of desire. Thus, it becomes a daily challenge for her to assert her presence in the world as her beauty is persistently denied. Thomas’s images of women offer a sense of possibilities that allow Black women to articulate their choices, failures, aspirations, weaknesses, strengths, fears, and desires.

“I believe that history is important,” Thomas says, “whether it is art history, political history, or cultural history—it allows you to gain an understanding of the language that has developed and where you might contribute to the discussion or dispute what has come before.”¹⁴² Thomas’s work intervenes in the history of art and she is a participant in shaping the contours of what that history might look like. To enter history Thomas uses the language of collage to engage in a series of series conversations with artists and other cultural producers that span the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹⁴¹ Peg Zeglin Brand, *Beauty Matters* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁴² Cheryl Riley, Mickalene Thomas: The Grand Project.” *aRUDE*. September 13, 2011, <http://arudemag.com/mickalene-thomas/>.

In this thesis I have argued that Thomas's unique collage approach to image making is a significant component in understanding her work. Regardless of what subject Thomas presents—a landscape, an interior, a still life, or a portrait—she uses the concepts of history, beauty, self-presentation, and fabrication. Thomas believes her work is not a reflection, but rather an *extension* of herself stating, “I am making my work as a personal journey a way of placing and navigating the world that I grew up in.”¹⁴³ It is important to note that Thomas's exploration of beauty, artifice, and identity formation is rooted in her particular narrative and while her experiences are bound to speak to other black women and others in more broadly, she makes it clear that she is not representing some defining identity for all black women in contemporary society.

An inchoate body of literature is forming around Thomas's diverse work and in recent years a scattered but encouraging group of projects and exhibitions have offered sustained engagement with her images.¹⁴⁴ However, race remains a prevalent issue and obstacle in the interpretations of artists from underrepresented groups. Providing Thomas's work conceptual breathing room is ever more urgent when considering the truncated presentation of Weems's 2014 retrospective at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—the first retrospective of an African-American woman at the museum.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ McLendon, *Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip-Hop in Art*, 117.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas participated in the 2009 ICP triennial *Dress Codes* which examined ideas of fashion. In 2014, Thomas's work was featured in an exhibition entitled *Domestic Unrest* at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London. The exhibition explored how Rosson Crow, Francesca DiMattio, and Thomas “subvert conventional depictions of domesticity by challenging the modes through which such spaces are traditionally represented” <http://www.houldsworth.co.uk/exhibition-view/domestic-unrest/1>. Thomas was also included in a recent exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum called *Pop Departures* which considered the legacy of Pop art in the work of several contemporary artists.

¹⁴⁵ For critiques of the exhibition see, Holland Cotter, “Testimony of a Cleareyed Witness

My thesis contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding this problematic situation facing many Black artists in contemporary art discourse and in that regard its aims are twofold. First, to redress the simplistic interpretations of Thomas's work by demonstrating the breadth and depth of her conceptual interests that are invested in issues of identity formation that include, but are not limited to race, as well her commitment to a critical formalism that engages the history of art. Secondly, Thomas's diverse body of work is not only concerned with the representational gambits of high art, but also extends to and investigates the products of popular culture such as film, music, magazines, and interior design. Therefore, Thomas's works are propositions for how we might conceptualize the history of art in an intimate relationship with popular culture. Taken together these two points illustrate that Thomas's work calls for critical writings that are just as complex as the images they analyze.

Thomas hopes that someone viewing her work might have the same feeling she experienced when standing in front of Weems's photographs. She describes that feeling as "*a sense of possibility and accessibility, that ignited a new awareness and willingness to create in my own voice*. That's the kind of influence that I can hope to inspire in someone"¹⁴⁶ It is this sense of possibility in Thomas's collage approach to images that makes her work a series of compelling propositions for viewing the history of art. Her portraits, interiors and landscapes reveal the agency of subjects as

Carrie Mae Weems Charts the Black Experience in Photographs." *The New York Times*. January 23, 2014; Maika Pollack, "'Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video' at the Guggenheim." *The Observer*. January 29, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Landers, "Mickalene Thomas," 38. In another interview Thomas remarks, "I'm interested in creating a space not only where I'm making my art, but also where I'm able to help other people make art and do what they want to do." Andrea Blanch, "Mickalene Thomas: Seurat's Rhinestones." 71.

designers of their own appearances and environments—their own beautiful and necessary fictions.

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