30 AMERICANS
EDUCATOR’S GUIDE
Exhibition at the CAC made possible by The Helis Foundation
Organized by the Rubell Family Collection, Miami

On view:
February 8 – June 15, 2014

The 30 Americans Resource Center and Public Programs are presented by:
MICKALENE THOMAS
(Born in Camden, NJ, 1971; Lives and works in Brooklyn, NY)

Baby I Am Ready Now, 2007
Acrylic, rhinestone, and enamel on wooden panel

ABOUT THE ARTIST
Mickalene Thomas is known for her elaborate paintings adorned with rhinestones, enamel and colorful acrylics. Thomas introduces a complex vision of what it means to be a woman and expands common definitions of beauty. Her work stems from her long study of art history and the classical genres of portraiture, landscape, and still life. Inspired by various sources that range from the 19th-century Hudson River School to Édouard Manet, Henri Matisse, and Romare Bearden, she continues to explore notions of beauty from a contemporary perspective that is infused with the more recent influences of popular culture and Pop Art.

Thomas earned her Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn in 2000 and a Master of Fine Arts at the Yale University School of Art in 2002. From 2000 to 2003, Thomas participated in a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York and a residency at the Versailles Foundation Munn Artists Program in Giverny, France in 2011.

Thomas has been included in numerous exhibitions worldwide. Her work is part of dozens of significant public collections. Her portrait of Michelle Obama was the first individual portrait done of the First Lady and was exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery’s Americans Now show.

ABOUT THE ART
Bold, glitzy, and exaggerated, Mickalene Thomas’s paintings highlight the confidence and overt sensuality of the women she portrays. Inspired by the social awareness and feminist liberation of the 1970s, Thomas’s subjects, such as the woman featured in Baby I Am Ready Now, are
empowered, emotive, and fearless. They seem to know what they want and are unafraid to acknowledge it to the viewer. Thomas formally emphasizes this self-assuredness through the brash colors and patterns that surround these women, as well as in their seductive postures and clothing choices. The rhinestone accents amplify the sexual appeal and seductive glitter of the artist’s subjects and add a little bling to her works. As Thomas has noted, “I’ve always been interested in…dressing up and beautifying…and what that meant to black women.” In her portraits she positions sensuality and seductiveness as positive attributes, tools of strength and power.

SUGGESTED DISCUSSION

- What is the story? We see the main character and the setting, what do you think is the plot?

- What influences of popular culture and Pop Art appear in this work?

VISUAL ARTS ACTIVITY

Thomas creates portraits that reflect the diverse appearances and personalities of her sitters—people who pose or model for a portrait. Working with a partner, identify a mood or feeling—such as melancholy, joy, anxiety, frustration, or humor—that you want to convey. Decide who will be the sitter and who will be the photographer. Using a cell phone or camera, the photographer snaps the sitter, and then the two will reverse roles so that both partners have a photograph from which to work. Each person then uses either a copy of the photo, or a rendering of it, along with various art supplies and found objects to create a collage portrait.