

MICKALENE THOMAS: FEMMES NOIRES

Thomas's mirror-based series build upon her ongoing engagement with Black female identity, presentation, and representation. These process-based works begin with a Polaroid culled from the artist's collection. Thomas pours bleach over the Polaroid negative, which removes the emulsion and creates marks that resemble painting. She then scans the bleached negative, photographs the image as it appears on her computer screen, and further reworks it in Photoshop. Finally, she silkscreens the image onto a mirror.



Mickalene Thomas, *Diahann Carroll #2*, 2017. Silkscreen ink on acrylic mirror mounted on wood panel, 72 x 60 x 2 in. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. ©Mickalene Thomas

“To do the work that I do, I am asking of and looking to my sisters of the world.”

—Mickalene Thomas

Mickalene Thomas puts Black American women at the center of her practice. Her work celebrates the complexity and diversity of Black female agency as she tackles issues of inequality and representation, filtered through a queer feminist lens. Thomas uses collage as a powerful tool, drawing on painting, photography, time-based media, immersive living-room tableaux and other forms to create her dynamic compositions. Her works reveal the composite ways of being for women in the global African diaspora. By reframing stereotypical perceptions and representations of Black women, Thomas deliberately challenges the Western art-historical canon and creates new possibilities for seeing a range of Black bodies.

“What I've attempted to do is establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic.”

—Romare Bearden

Combining a variety of materials and media, Thomas uses collage to realize works that disrupt Western notions of beauty and identity while simultaneously building on the traditions of art history. Collage comes from the French word *coller*, meaning “to paste, stick or glue.” This interplay includes infinite ways to cut, deconstruct, appropriate, fragment and repurpose elements to create a new work.

“I am an expression of the divine, just like a peach is, just like a fish is. I have a right to be this way I can't apologize for that, nor can I change it, nor do I want to.”

—Alice Walker

The Color Purple is a keystone work for Mickalene Thomas. Published in 1982, the award-winning book by Alice Walker was adapted into a film in 1985. In the story, the main character, Celie, connects with other Black women who play important roles in her life: her sister, Nettie; her husband's mistress, blues singer Shug Avery; and her strong-willed daughter-in-law, Sofia. Walker's characters find truth and empowerment through their relationships with one another.

Thomas has described her memories of the film: “My relationship to *The Color Purple* started when my mother took me to see the film when I was fourteen years old. I remember it vividly; we went to see it at a Times Square movie theater, and I remember feeling very emotional during the film. Looking back, it was because in some way, I related to Celie. The familial relationship ignited a strength and spirit in me that have stayed until this day. It is the interplay of power between all of the women through gender and language that is something I'm interested in exploring in my own work. The unheard stories of the women in my work related to that similar search within *The Color Purple*...All of these women through their strength and vulnerability oscillate at various moments in their lives, believing or not believing that they are worthy, smart, or beautiful.”



Mickalene Thomas, *Sister, Shug Avery Breakfast*, 2016. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on mirrored acrylic mounted on wood panel, 72 x 60 in. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. ©Mickalene Thomas



Mickalene Thomas, *Portrait of Aaliyah*, 2018. Polaroid, 48 x 60 in. Image: Courtesy of the Artist. ©Mickalene Thomas

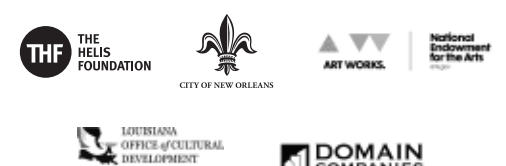
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November 2, 2019–June 14, 2020

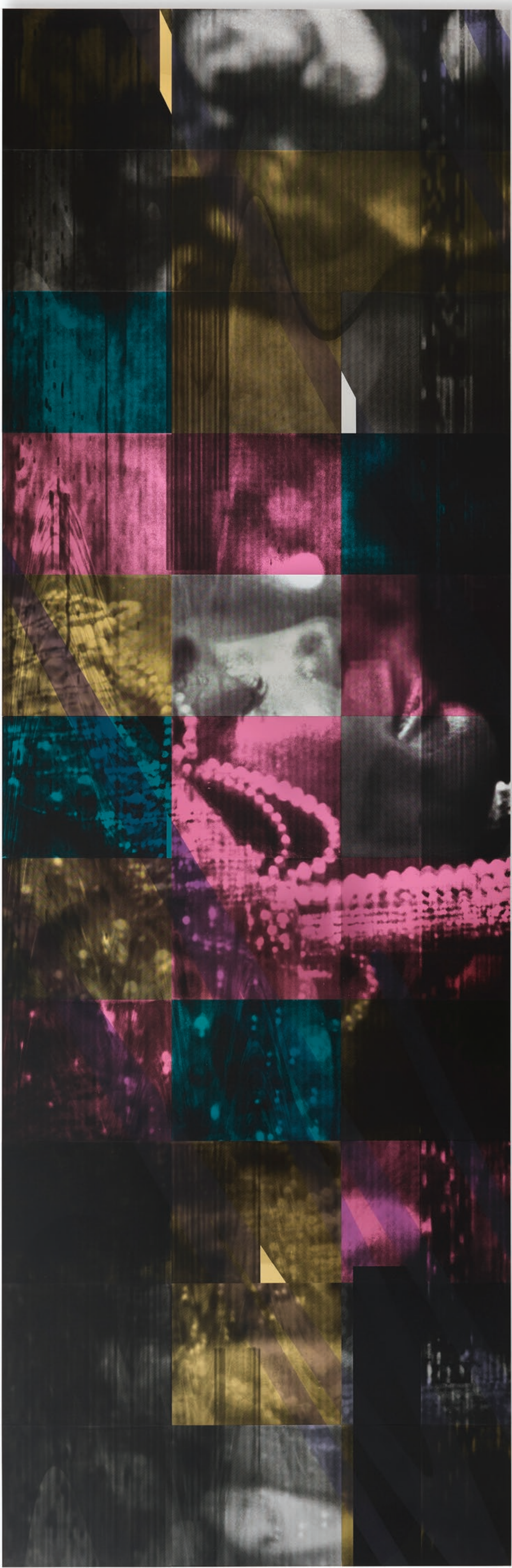
This exhibition is co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC), New Orleans, and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), Toronto. It is co-curated by Andrea Andersson, Ph.D., The Helis Foundation Chief Curator of Visual Arts at the CAC, and Julie Crooks, Associate Curator of Photography at the AGO.

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Mickalene Thomas, *Ms. Celie's Bites*, 2016. Silkscreen ink and acrylic on mirrored acrylic mounted on wood panel, 24 x 20 in., each panel (overall 72 x 220 in.). Image: Courtesy of the Artist. © Mickalene Thomas