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The only museum in the nation emphasizing art by women of the African Diaspora

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January 31, 2017

Spelman College Museum of Fine Art Launches 2017 with a Solo Exhibition by Acclaimed Artist Mickalene Thomas

Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities

February 9 – May 20, 2017



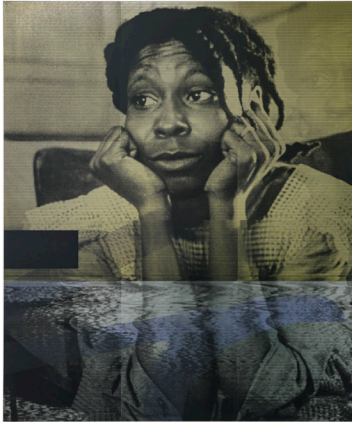
ATLANTA (January 31, 2017) – Spelman College Museum of Fine Art is proud to present *Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities*, an exhibition featuring new work by acclaimed painter, photographer, sculptor, and filmmaker Mickalene Thomas, as a highlight of its 20th anniversary celebration. This solo exhibition, which is organized by the Aspen Art Museum, features photography, mirrored silkscreen portraits, film, video, and site specific installations. Thomas edits together rich portraits of herself and iconic women from all aspects of culture—performers, comedians, dancers, and other entertainers—at play in her life and in her art.

The exhibition encourages viewers to consider deeply, how personal and public figures have reflected, re-imagined, and altered their own self-image to create a larger narrative of what it means to be a woman in today's society.

The exhibition makes its Southeast debut February 9, 2017, and will be on view at the Museum through May 20, 2017. *Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* continues Spelman's emphasis on serving as a cultural hub for the community—forging meaningful collaborations with renowned artists such as Thomas.

Thomas, whose work was included in the Museum's 2013 exhibition *Posing Beauty in African American Culture* and 2009 presentation of *Undercover: Performing and Transforming Black Female Identities*, is inspired by a range of sources including art history, popular culture, and feminist thought. By creating, manipulating, and collaging the images and voices of a wide variety

of women who inspire the artist, Thomas investigates and deconstructs conventional definitions of beauty, race, and gender, challenging stereotypes of how the female body is portrayed in the media. However, through collaging the women together—women she personally knows as well as women she admires—the exhibition can be seen as a portrait of the artist’s personal world, literally and physically showing the artist alongside her own mentors, muses, and celebrities.



Sister: Shug Avery Breakfast, 2016
Silkscreen ink and acrylic on mirrored acrylic mounted on wood panel
9 panels total 24 x 20 inches per panel,
72 x 60 inches overall
Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin,
New York and Hong Kong and Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

Do I Look Like a Lady? (Comedians and Singers), a two-channel video projection, is one of the highlights of the exhibition. Through this chorus of sound bites by Black female comedians and singers such as Whoopi Goldberg, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, Wanda Sykes, and musical icons Josephine Baker, Whitney Houston, Eartha Kitt, Nina Simone, and among others, Thomas creates moving and at times riotous portraits that explore the relationship between language, gender, race, and power.

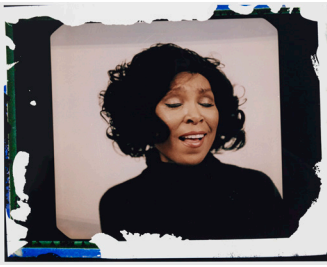
Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities includes several noteworthy video-based works. *Angelitos Negros*, for example, features Eartha Kitt, who Thomas has revisited several times throughout her career. In her 1953 emotional performance about racial discrimination, Kitt demands that painters “Paint me some Black angels now,” a remake of a song by Andrés Blanco Guzman based on *Pintame angelitos negros* by Venezuelan poet Andrés Eloy Blanco. By manipulating Kitt’s performance, Thomas subtly asserts herself as the conductor of a larger orchestra, as she selectively cues different video montages at a time. The selected footage then serves as her instruments, or as an ensemble, wildly performing in harmony.

Me as Muse is a multimedia video installation in which Thomas challenges and disrupts historical perceptions of beauty, fictional spaces, and traditional gender roles. In this video, Thomas incorporates her own reclined nude body; she rehearses the very act of painting and stretches the boundaries of art history itself. As such, she introduces new spaces for Black women to occupy.

Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities introduces *Screen Tests*, a series of silent films that are inspired by Andy Warhol’s *Screen Tests*. In these experiments, she pushes the boundaries of her practice and constructs a psychological examination of women subjects, allowing the viewer and sitter gazes to interlock.

The exhibition also presents a new body of mirrored silkscreen portraits that are informed by the movie adaptation of *The Color Purple*, which Thomas initially saw with her mother when she was 14 years old. The interplay between all of the women in the film ignited an interest in gender and language that she regularly explores through her work. These mirrored silkscreen portraits feature layered, superimposed stills of the principal characters that capture their emotion, gestures, and reactions, and literally reflect the complicated, shifting, and overlapping roles and perceptions of women who represent diverse types of beauty, intelligence, and strength.

Thomas transports viewers, inviting them to dwell in the dimly lit 1970s inspired interior settings including chairs, ottomans, and large floor pillows designed by Thomas. Situated throughout the exhibition, these lush salons include books by influential Black writers including Lorraine Hansberry, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and many others. Within these tableaux without walls, Thomas makes the rich discourses which are available to visitors, and further encourages them to engage, read, reflect, and discuss their personal relationships to the images and ideas on view.



Polaroid series #13, 2016
Polaroid C-Print
20 1/2 x 26 inches paper size
Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin,
New York and Hong Kong and Artists
Rights Society (ARS), New York

“*Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* exemplifies the commitment that the Museum has had to championing the aesthetic and technological innovation made by Black women artists since it opened in 1996,” noted Museum Director Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, Ph.D., C’93. “Thomas’ continued and rigorous engagement with Black women muses resonates deeply with the intellectual, creative, and activist charges that the Spelman College community continues to lead.”

Thomas created the works in *Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* in 2016 while she was the Gabriela and Ramiro Garza Distinguished Artist in Residence at the Aspen Art Museum.

Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities is curated by Courtenay Finn, curator at the Aspen Art Museum. According to

Finn, “*Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* is a timely and important celebration of the Black female body. The women in Thomas’ work meet the camera [and the viewer] head on, simultaneously embodying boldness, vulnerability, and power. In creating this collage celebrating diverse types of beauty, strength and intelligence, Thomas reminds us all of the multitude of ways to be a muse, mentor and celebrity.”

Thomas states, “The women in my work put up a formidable barrier to the cliches traditionally laid on them, specifically Black women in art. They look right back at the viewer with self-knowledge demanding to be seen while creating the impression of seeing right through the viewer. By depicting women of color, I’m raising their visibility and inserting their presence into an art historical conversation, portraying real women with their own unique history, beauty, and background. I’m working to diversify the representation of Black women in art. I’m hoping that someone standing in front of my art will get the same feeling I got when I stood in front of the work of Carrie Mae Weems: a sense of possibility and accessibility. Just as my muses insist on their visibility and identity, I want my viewers to feel present with fierceness and boldness. I want them to claim their rightful space in the world.”

Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities aligns with #BeYourOwnMuse, the Museum’s 20th anniversary interactive campaign, which encourages viewers to define their own voices and creative potential.

Due to mature content and adult language, visitor discretion is advised.

Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities is organized by the Aspen Art Museum. Spelman College’s presentation is made possible by the Wish Foundation and the LUBO Fund.

RELATED EVENTS

Opening Reception ART PAPERS LIVE

On Thursday, February 9, the Museum and Art Papers magazine in collaboration with Atlanta Celebrates Photography will host **ART PAPERS LIVE**. Mickalene Thomas will be in conversation with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Ph.D., C’66, a Black feminist scholar, the founding director of the Women’s Research and Resource Center at Spelman College, and the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies and English. They will discuss the compelling body of work in the exhibition, the array of topics that inform Thomas’ work, the role of artists as storytellers, current projects, and much more. Admission is free. However, capacity is limited and registration is required through museum.spelman.edu.

Throughout the run of the exhibition the Museum will host several exhibition-related programs including Yoga in the Museum, a panel discussion with artists, Community Conversations, film-screenings, and more. Please see museum.spelman.edu for the complete list of programs.

About the Artist

Mickalene Thomas is a 2015 United States Artists Francie Bishop Good & David Horvitz Fellow and a distinguished visual artist, filmmaker, and curator whose work has been exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally. She is known for paintings that combine art historical, political, and pop-cultural references. Her work introduces complex notions of femininity and challenges common definitions of beauty and aesthetic representations of women.

Thomas holds a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Pratt Institute. She's held solo museum exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, Santa Monica Museum of Art, George Eastman House, New York, and L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, Monaco. Recent solo exhibitions include *Mickalene Thomas: Do I Look Like a Lady?* at MOCA Grand, Los Angeles, *Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* at Aspen Art Museum, *Waiting on a Prime-Time Star* at Newcomb Art Museum, and *Muse: Mickalene Thomas Photographs* at Aperture Foundation, New York, which is scheduled to travel to several venues across the United States through 2018, featuring her notably curated exhibition tête-à-tête. Her work has been a part of numerous group exhibitions, including *Us is Them* at Pizzuti Collection, *Eye Pop: The Celebrity Gaze* at Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, *Fifty Years After: Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, LaToya Ruby Frazier* at James Barron Gallery and the continued traveling exhibition *30 Americans* which is organized by the Rubell Family Collection, Miami, and has been featured at many institutions since 2008. Thomas' work is in many permanent collections including San Francisco MoMA, Brooklyn Museum, Guggenheim, Seattle Art Museum, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, MoMA PS1, New York, among many others.

Mickalene Thomas is represented by Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong; Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago; and Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris and Brussels. She lives and works in New York, and serves on the boards of the Brooklyn Museum, Children's Museum of the Arts, MoCADA, MoMA PS 1, BOMB Magazine, and Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation.

About Spelman College Museum of Fine Art

In "Six Reasons to Love Atlanta," CNN.com praised the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art for its "fantastically curated exhibitions" that focus on art by and about women of the African Diaspora. Since the Museum opened in 1996, it has established an impressive track record for organizing first-rate, mission-specific, art exhibitions that expand art offerings in Atlanta and the southeast region. It has garnered a reputation for organizing exhibitions that merit national and international attention. Milestones include being selected as the first institution from the United States that jointly (along with the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston) represented the United States at the 2012 Havana Biennial in Havana, Cuba. The Museum is poised to continue its trajectory of pursuing ambitious relevant projects that have a lasting impact. For more information visit museum.spelman.edu.

About Spelman College

Founded in 1881, Spelman College is a highly selective, liberal arts college widely recognized as the global leader in the education of women of African descent. Located in Atlanta, the College's picturesque campus is home to 2,100 students. Outstanding alumnae include Children's Defense Fund Founder Marian Wright Edelman; Sam's Club CEO Rosalind Brewer, Broadway producer Alia Jones, former Acting Surgeon General and Spelman's first alumna President Audrey Forbes Manley, Harvard professor Evelyn Hammonds, author Pearl Cleage; and actress LaTanya Richardson Jackson. For more information, visit www.spelman.edu.