

# MICKALENE THOMAS: ALL ABOUT LOVE

Serving as a 20-year retrospective of the artist's work, a new exhibition highlights Thomas's expertise within several disciplines, from mixed-media painting and collage to installation and photography

By Okla Jones III



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The artist beams with pride amid the beauty of her works.



The word *love* has many definitions, and its meaning can vary depending on who you ask. For Mickalene Thomas, the word is a vehicle that has shaped her perception of relationships, family dynamics and even the way she creates. It's also the focus of her upcoming exhibition, the aptly titled *All About Love*. As a painter, collagist, photographer, filmmaker and sculptor, she is dedicated to exploring the visions in her mind and bringing them to her work.

"I like challenges," Thomas explains. "I like stepping into spaces that are unknown and figuring them out." That fearlessness helped her become one of the most respected artists in her field—and a North Star for anyone willing to push conventional boundaries. In the time since the completion of her M.F.A. at the Yale University School of Art in 2002, the New Jersey native has cultivated a career that has been heavily studied by enthusiasts—making this the perfect moment to unveil a comprehensive exhibition of her pioneering efforts.

Debuting at the Broad in Los Angeles, *All About Love* features more than 80 works made by Thomas over the past 20 years—and highlights how she conquered several disciplines, ranging from vibrant mixed-media portraits to large-scale installations. Additionally, this exhibition shares a few of its themes, as well as its title, with a notable publication by feminist author bell hooks. "She speaks in a way and says things that we know, but it's hard to



"NUS Exotiques #1," 2023, the Broad Museum, Los Angeles



"Portrait of Maya #10," 2017, the Broad Museum, Los Angeles

hear," the artist explains. Through her writings, hooks has come to be known as a truth-teller in matters of race and gender, along with other themes that embody the message Thomas also seeks to convey. She applauds the author's notion that, contrary to popular belief, love is an action rather than solely an emotion.

While drawing inspiration from hooks's pivotal text, this decades-long retrospective surveys the notions of beauty, sexuality and femininity. "I just felt like—I was reading the book, and the title, which is really palpable for me, just made sense," Thomas says. "And also, personally, I was going through my own journey of separation with a partner and was really looking at myself and understanding my experience through that lens as well, and asking what does that mean for how the work was made and why I made a lot of the work."

"It's a sense of me providing, as an artist, that gift of love through my creativity," she continues, "so that young girls can get a sense of validation of who they are, and seeing themselves and the light in which I see the empowerment of Black women."

In this same vein, the exhibit calls attention to the artist's earlier pieces and more recent endeavors, like "Jet Blue #54" (2023). With paintings such as "A Little Taste Outside of Love" (2007) and "Portrait of Maya #10" (2017), Thomas uses multiple layers of material and symbolic meaning applied onto one surface. These works often show women who are serene and self-confident, with the artist delving into the visual culture and the conversation of Black female representation.

Challenging the status quo and deconstructing false or oppressive stereotypes will forever be part of the fabric of Thomas's

artistic practice. Amid the accolades, the years of commitment and the resolute dedication to her craft, there is also an air of irony. Even though she was exposed to art at an early age, the pursuit of it as a career was something that didn't manifest until later on. "I grew up in a creative environment," she notes. "I had an uncle who was an artist, and my mother had a lot of creative people around her, whether they were musicians and performers—but I didn't really think that art was something that you do as a career. It wasn't a viable option for me."

It wasn't until she moved to Portland, Oregon, that she fully immersed herself in an artistic community. There, she discovered the work of Carrie Mae Weems, an artist who would forever change the trajectory of her life and her livelihood.

"Up until that point I'd seen art, but it wasn't really until then that I saw *myself* in art, where I said, 'I know what that looks like,'" Thomas says. "It felt very real and comforting. It was like, *Wow, this person is speaking of something that I can understand.*" A visit to the Portland Art Museum in 1984 opened up a new world for Thomas, giving her a glimpse into the



"Madame Mama Bush in Black and White," 2007, the Broad Museum, Los Angeles

craft's endless possibilities—especially when one creates directly from the heart.

Aside from the numerous messages

that *All About Love* examines, Thomas also hopes that the exhibit influences future practitioners of art—similar to the way Weems's work inspired her as a young creative, and how hooks's words encouraged the formation of this very exhibition so many years later. While describing the gravity of her profession, Thomas recalls a conversation she had with the Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman some time ago, in which he told her that artists are "Zen masters of the world." He believes this, he said, because they're the only ones who can take an idea from their imagination and bring it to reality for the rest of us—and that's the most powerful thing one can do.

"I thought that was very beautiful, because it's true," Thomas says of Thurman's poignant reflection. "When you think about it, you can have an idea, and you bring that to fruition, and it actually exists in the world—and you can make someone feel inspired, and you can create change. It does something. It really has an effect."

The special touring exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: All About Love* will be on display at the Broad Museum through September 29, 2024.



"Din Avec la Main Dans le Miroir et Jupe Rouge," 2023, the Broad Museum, Los Angeles

COURTESY OF MICKALENE THOMAS

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