

**GALERIE NATHALIE OBADIA**

BRUSSELS

## **MICKALENE THOMAS**

### **I am your sister**

#### **tête-à-tête**

Derrick Adams / LaToya Ruby Frazier

Deana Lawson / Zanele Muholi

Malick Sidibé / Xaviera Simmons

Lorna Simpson / Carrie Mae Weems

19 November - 26 December, 2015

Rue Charles Decoster 8 - 1050 Brussels



Galerie Nathalie Obadia is very pleased to announce «I am your sister», the first solo exhibition by the American artist Mickalene Thomas in Belgium, following her first exhibition in France in 2014.

For this show, Mickalene Thomas, one of the most respected multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker on the contemporary American scene, offers a «double» exhibition at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels. Alongside a selection of her most recent paintings, photographs, and collages, Thomas has chosen to showcase works by a number of international artists linked together by elective affinities. This «tête-à-tête», in her words, is the new opus in a series begun in 2012.

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Mickalene Thomas' new exhibition continues to explore one of her favourite themes: femininity, in particular that of black women. Her embrace of this theme often questions the canonized history of painting, which has long spurned and mocked negritude. The title of the exhibition in Brussels is respectfully borrowed from one of the most famous texts by Audre Lorde (1934–1992), an emblematic figure in black American literature. The subtitle of the anthology of Lorde's works – *Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities* – offers an insight to the author's concerns, who was black, female and lesbian. These identities, shared by Mickalene Thomas, served as the foundation for Lorde's collection of prose written in post-segregationist America that helped to advocate revolution and change.

In addition to the notions of social liberalism and sexuality as illustrated by Audre Lorde in her writing, Mickalene Thomas' artistic universe also makes direct reference to the years 1950–present day which are synonymous with the Black Power movement and the assertion of the Afro-American socio-cultural status in America. The latter quickly became codified by a blazing, high-spirited Afrocentric aesthetic that is immediately recognizable in the backdrops of Mickalene Thomas' photographs, collages and paintings. In these re-imagined domestic environments, she places her muses centre stage, whose empowered bodies are skilfully set in vintage decors characterized by mixed media and rhinestones. Thomas then directs her models to resuscitate motifs from some of the most famous precedents in art history to idealize her contemporary vision of the American woman. Her points of reference include paintings by Courbet, Manet, Matisse, Balthus, and even Ingres with his *La Grande Odalisque*, with which she has re-appropriated a portrait of Shinique, one of her muses, in the famously languid posture (cf. *Shinique: Now I Know*, 2015).



Mickalene Thomas, *Shinique: Now I Know*, 2015.  
Rhinestones, acrylic and oil on wood panel, 243,84 x 304,8 cm (96 x 120 in.).



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Her paintings are the outcome of iconographic research that borders on archaeological precision. Along with the historical references she pulls from such prominent Impressionist and Realist paintings, she is also interested in the large numbers of motifs that are found in cult Afro-American magazines from the '60s, such as *Ebony* and *Black Tail*, as well as the 18 volumes of *The Practical Encyclopedia of Good Decorating and Home Improvement*, a bible of interior decorating in America published in 1971.

In 2013, such interests of retro interior were actualized into a three dimensional space when Mickalene Thomas transformed the Volkshaus in Basel into an «art bar installation» titled *Better Days*. This installation, which served as a venue for various musical performances throughout the duration of Art Basel Switzerland (June 11-15, 2013), filled with a group of guests that Mickalene Thomas invited herself. As the invitees' interactions activated the installation, Thomas continued to explore the themes of community in which artists, curators, musicians and creators of all trades were invited to connect and engage in conversations, exchanging ideas and narratives of their unique experiences.

Similar notions of «community» prevails in the «tête-à-tête» presented by Mickalene Thomas at the Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Brussels. The idea of an «exhibition within an exhibition» came about in 2012 following MoMA's «Conversations Among Friends» between Mickalene Thomas and the artists Clifford Owens, Derrick Adams and Xaviera Simmons (the latter two are included in the Brussels' tête-à-tête). Now in its fourth iteration, «tête-à-tête» features works by eight artists of African or Afro-American descent, that deal with various representations of black bodies.

Along with this collaborative effort, «I am your sister» emphasizes the importance of black identity and narratives, reflecting not only American history as a whole and all of its socio-cultural currents, but also the experiences of the people, muses, artists and friends by whom Mickalene Thomas is surrounded.

To coincide with this exhibition, the Wiels (Contemporary Art Center in Brussels) has scheduled a conversation between Mickalene Thomas and Elvan Zabunyan, a French art historian, to take place on Friday 20 November 2015 at 7pm, tackling the questions of the links between the artist's works and historical, political and cultural references that she calls upon in developing her visual works. Taking as a starting point the exhibition «I am your sister» and the dialogue she establishes with other artists, the conversation will consider the power of the gendered body in decompartmentalized representations.

The artist's catalog: *MUSE – Mickalene Thomas: Photographs*, the latest monograph on Mickalene Thomas, will be published in January 2016 by the Aperture Foundation (New York, United-States).

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**Mickalene Thomas was born in 1971 in New Jersey and lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.**

*She is a distinguished visual artist and filmmaker who has exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally since 2003. She is best known for combining art-historical, political, and pop-cultural references to create striking figurative and nonfigurative paintings. Her work stems from a long study of art history and classical genres of portraiture, introducing complex notions of femininity and challenging common definitions of beauty and aesthetic representation.*

*Thomas's first solo museum exhibition was in 2012 at the Brooklyn Museum, New York and Santa Monica Museum of Art, California. Recent solo exhibitions include George Eastman House, New York; L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, Monaco; and First International Contemporary Art Biennial, Columbia.*

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Her work has been shown in numerous group exhibitions, including at La Conservera Contemporary Art Center, Ceutí, Spain; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Hara Museum, Tokyo; National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC; and Saatchi Gallery, London. Thomas's work is in the permanent collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Brooklyn Museum, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art, as well as the Detroit Institute of Arts; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas; Seattle Art Museum; and Smithsonian American Art Museum, among many others.

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### ARTIST TALK

#### ***Gazing at the lens with subjectivity: the power of the gendered body***

A conversation between Mickalene Thomas and Elvan Zabunyan  
on Friday, November 20th at 7pm.

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#### **Galerie Nathalie Obadia Brussels**

##### **Mickalene Thomas**

*I am your sister*

19 November - 26 December, 2015

##### **Sarkis**

*Il Grido*

7 January - 11 February, 2016

##### **Sophie Kuyken**

18 February - 26 March, 2016

#### **Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris**

Cloître Saint-Merri

##### **Youssef Nabil**

*I Saved My Belly Dancer*

7 November, 2015 - 6 January, 2016

##### **Edgar Arceneaux**

*Cockeyed Eddie*

14 January - 6 March, 2016

#### **Galerie Nathalie Obadia Paris**

Bourg-Tibourg

##### **Jorge Queiroz**

*O Caso*

7 November, 2015 - 2 January, 2016

##### **Luca Dellaverson**

16 January - 6 March, 2016