

Female Gaze: Exploring the Work of Mickalene Thomas

Inspiration: Mickalene Thomas (American, b. 1971). *Clarivel with Black Blouse with White Ribbon* (detail below), 2016. Epson Inkjet print with HDR Ultrachrome inks; Published by the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in consortium with the Benefit Print Project; Edition of 25. Museum Purchase, 2019 ([2019.01](#)). © 2019 Mickalene Thomas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Ages: 5+ (through adult)

Duration: Open-ended

Materials: Paper, old magazines/newspapers, scissors, glue or tape.

Introduction: Art history is not only the academic study of the history and development of painting, sculpture, and the other visual arts. For contemporary artists like Mickalene Thomas, the field itself provides subject matter for inspiring questions, subversion, and the opportunity to pointedly highlight stories and images of and by people historically excluded from the way art history is traditionally studied in the Western world.



Look

Take a close look at *Clarivel with Black Blouse with White Ribbon*.

- What’s going on in this work?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can you find?

Think

- How do you think Thomas created this image? What materials did she use?
- How did Thomas use line, shape, and pattern in the work, and to what effect?
- What do you notice about the subject’s clothing, facial features, and expression? How does she make you feel?
- What would you ask the subject of this portrait if you were in the same room as she? Why?

Connect

Thomas creates portraits of Black women—often women whom she knows personally—that celebrate and center Black female identity in all its complexity within the traditional genre of portraiture. In *Clarivel*, Thomas’s admiration for the abstracted figural collage technique pioneered by Romare Bearden (1911–1988) is evident through her fusing of geometric sections of the white-bow pattern that make up Clarivel’s dress. The subject’s shoulders are exaggerated and sharply contrasted against fern and branch patterns to her right and wood paneling to her left, allowing her to pop into the foreground of the work as a strong and powerful presence. Thomas uses a similar technique in Clarivel’s face, juxtaposing a set of eyes cut from a different image on top of her visage, making the subject’s gaze at the viewer clear, direct, and unavoidable. We aren’t looking at Clarivel, she’s looking at us.

Thomas often brings pop culture references into her work that may tell us about her subject’s interests and may also comment on broader aspects of Black history and the Black experience in America. The second “hidden” portrait in this work, directly to the left of Clarivel, features Stevie Wonder’s 1980 album *Hotter Than July*, which includes the song “Happy Birthday,” written by Wonder to support making the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. a national holiday.

Do

1. Think of a person who is important to you that you want to feature in a collage of your own. Reflect on this person. What are their interests? What stands out about them physically, emotionally, or in terms of their personality?
2. Gather old magazines, newspapers, and other print materials as source material. Look for patterns, contrasting colors, faces, and

- features. What, if any, clues from contemporary or pop culture can you include to give your portrait more context or depth?
3. Cut out your selected images, colors, text, and/or figures. Experiment with different arrangements on the paper before gluing or taping the various elements in place. How can you arrange your source materials to emphasize your central figure visually and in terms of their impact on the viewer? How can you use color, shape, and pattern to bring the eye to specific parts of your composition?

Reflect

Was the process of making a more abstracted figural portrait out of collage easier or more difficult than drawing a portrait? How did your understanding of portraiture and composition (i.e., a seated portrait, a school portrait, a profile, a family portrait) affect your choices in arranging your collage? How did the process affect, or change, your understanding of portraiture?

Share

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MickaleneThomas and #MuseumFromHome, and tag @HudsonRiverMuseum.