

Educator Notes

Mickalene Thomas Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities

March 10–June 12, 2016



Mickalene Thomas, *Screen Test: Joyce*, 2016 (still). Super 8mm film (black and white, silent); duration variable. Courtesy the artist, Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

About the artist

Mickalene Thomas was born in Camden, New Jersey, and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She received her BFA from the Pratt Institute and her MFA from Yale. A pioneering figure in contemporary art known predominantly for her lush, kaleidoscopic painting practice, Thomas recasts and reconfigures notions of beauty, gender, sexuality, race, and representation of the African American female body. Her work is held in many prominent museum collections including the Art Institute of Chicago, Museum of Modern Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

About the exhibition

As the Aspen Art Museum's 2015–2016 Gabriela and Ramiro Garza Distinguished Artist in Residence, Thomas has developed a body of new work in film, video, and silkscreen. Thomas uses the copy-and-paste sensibility of her paintings and collages to edit digital portraits of women together, creating a larger narrative of what it means to be a woman in the world today.

Much like her body of work, individual identity can be stitched together through our relationships with friends, family, and celebrities in pop culture. Featuring collaged video footage from YouTube, Super 8 film, and video shot by the artist herself, *Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities* explores the bonds between women, personal identity, and notions of femininity. Layering images from the film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* with performances from stand-up comedians like Wanda Sykes and legendary musicians like Eartha Kitt and Whitney Houston, Thomas subtly asserts herself as the conductor of a larger orchestra. The different components of her exhibition serve as her instruments or as an ensemble performing in harmony.

Questions for discussion

- I Who in your life has been a mentor or muse for you?
- I How has a character in a movie or a book changed how you look at the world?
- I If you were to make a collage of someone who has influenced you, what would you include?

Suggested activities

Setting the Stage

The artist creates portraits that reflect the diverse appearances and personalities of her sitters through photography, collage, video, or painting. Begin by arranging a backdrop, props, and setting for the photo shoot. Ask students to observe what kinds of props they notice in Thomas's work. Ask them to consider what they think inspired her decorative choices.

Have students gather around various pieces of furniture, props, a digital camera, printer, decorative papers, paint pens, glue, and scissors (optional: glitter and/or rhinestones).

After designing the photo shoot set, have students split up into groups of two or more. Using a digital camera, students can take several photographs of the chosen sitter(s) in various arrangements and positions. Then print a selected image onto photo-quality paper.

Using Thomas's splicing and edited video collages as inspiration, have students create a portrait collage. Students can cut and arrange the materials—such as decorative paper, paint pen designs, and glitter—with the photo portrait onto heavy cardstock.

Invite students to experiment with blank space between shapes and sections, or completely cover the surface of the photo with another material. Once all of the segments have been arranged, have students glue their finished work onto cardstock. Encourage students to discuss and share their artistic choices with each other and their families.

For more information, please contact the Education Department at 970.925.8050 ext. 133 or email education@aspenartmuseum.org

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