

OPEN STUDIO ANYWHERE



The Art of Mickalene Thomas



Use this kit to learn about Mickalene Thomas, her story, and her artwork. Inside you'll find prompts, projects, and more to help you create your own art!

To learn more about Artists Creating Together, visit our website at artistscreatingtogether.org

Who is Mickalene Thomas?

Mickalene Thomas lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Her artwork includes paintings, collages, photography, video, and installations. Thomas is best known for her elaborate paintings composed of rhinestones, acrylic and enamel.



"I couldn't always afford oil paint, but because I was in a school and still had to make work, I had to figure out ways in which to make my art and not limit myself to 'I can't make my art because I don't have oil paint or acrylic paint'. So I gravitated toward non-traditional materials that were considered, for some maybe, a "low art", but also to others a high art...

So I began going to Michael's craft stores because I could afford felt and I could afford yarn and I could afford these little bags of rhinestones.... and I could get an abundance of those versus a tube of paint."

Watch: [Meet the Artist: Mickalene Thomas on Her Materials and Artistic Influences](#)

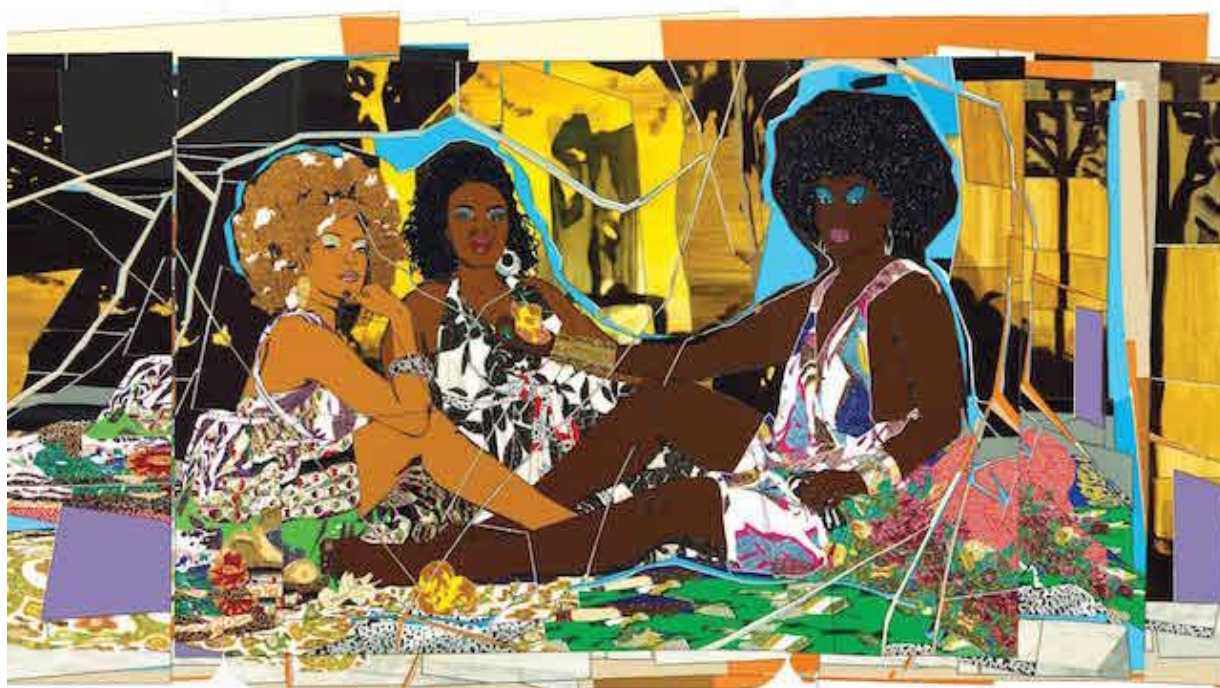




Art History Reinvented

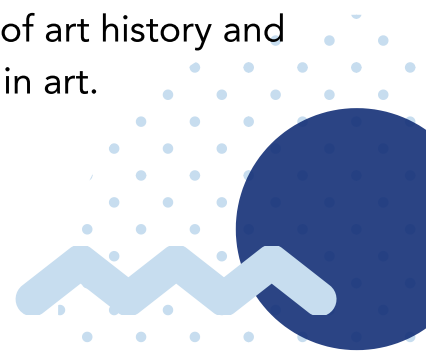
Thomas responds to something called "the gaze" in her art. "The gaze" may be a funny phrase that may not make sense at first, but it really means that when we look at art we want to think about not only what is going on in the picture, but who would be looking at the picture.

When trying to think about "the gaze" we can ask ourselves: who painted the picture? Who paid them to paint the picture? Who was the audience for the picture?



This piece is called "Le Déjeuner Sur L'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires"

You may be thinking, "That's an unusual name, and why is it in French!?" It's because it was made in response to a famous French painter named Manet, and his 1863 painting "Le Déjeuner Sur L'herbe". Thomas named and styled it after this painting on purpose. She uses the style and language of art history and reinvents it to give underrepresented groups a place in art.





Representation & Space

Would you rather have someone who knows and understands you paint your picture, or a stranger you don't have much in common with?

You would probably be more comfortable with the person you know, than with the stranger. Because they understand you and your life and your story, they are able to depict you in a way that feels more authentic.





Starting Our Project

Thomas' art process oftentimes involves a lot of steps - and we are going to follow them all! Something that sets Thomas apart is that oftentimes, these steps all end up on display in museums. Each step of her process is part of a bigger piece of art, but they can all stand on their own as individual pieces at the same time. Ready to get started?

Here's what you will need:

A Room - it can be your bedroom, a shared space in your home, or anywhere you have access to!

Camera - nothing fancy required! It can be a phone, a digital camera, or whatever you have available

Paper or Cardboard - any type you have available, the bigger the better! This will be your canvas for your artwork.

Paint - any kind of paint will work! If you don't have paint, don't worry, use markers, colored paper, crayons, etc.

Scissors

Tape and/or Glue

Rhinestones, glitter, beads, buttons, fabrics, felt, and anything else you can find!



Step 1: Creating an Installation

Take a look at this picture - looks just like a living room you would find in someones house, right?



This is actually a piece of Thomas' art! She creates whole rooms, sometimes from memory, sometimes from her creativity - sometimes a mix of both. She creates these rooms in her studio, photographs people inside them, then creates painting and other work from those photographs

Your Turn!

1. Decide on a section of your room to feature
2. If you are able, rearrange any furniture you can - be careful and ask for help!
3. Add decorations and items like pictures, pillows, blankets, or some of your favorite things.



Step 2: Photographing your Subject



Mickalene Thomas photographs the people who are closest to her. She has photographed her relatives, partners, and friends. Now we are going to do the same!

You can ask a parent, a sibling, a roommate, or anyone else living with you. If you live alone, you can do a self-portrait!

Your first step is to ask them to sit for a portrait! You can explain your project and inspiration by sharing this kit with them.

Your next step will be to style them and their portrait! You are the artist in charge of how the photo looks. Consider: what clothes they should wear, how they should do their hair, how they should sit in the scene, where they should look, and what emotion they should convey!

Once you have your subject all ready, take a lot of photos! Then you can look through them to find your favorite.



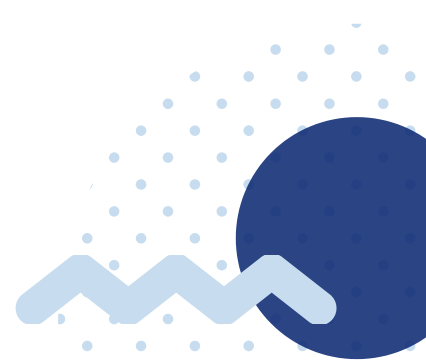
Step 3: Your Photo is Your Guide: Paint, Collage & Mixed Media

Now you should have chosen your favorite photo from your portrait session!

1. Look at that photo and start to notice the shapes, colors and textures in the scene!
2. Sketch out your scene on your background.
3. Choose colored paper, fabric, or recycled materials that will match the colors, fabrics, and textures from your photographed scene.
4. Use paint (or markers, colored pencils, etc.) to fill in other details, such as your portrait subjects skin or clothing.
5. Once your paint dries, attach your colored paper, and other materials using tape or glue.
6. Finish small details such as hair, eyes, and lips with small things like rhinestones, beads, buttons or glitter using glue or tape!



Here, Thomas uses rhinestones for her mom's hair, as well as for her eye makeup, lips, hair, and earrings!





Learn more about Mickalene Thomas:

<https://www.mickalenethomas.com/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/arts/design/mickalene-thomas-baltimore.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/28/arts/design/mickalene-thomas-origin-of-the-universe-at-brooklyn-museum.html>

https://artbma.org/exhibitions/a_moments_pleasure.html?slug=2019_mickalene-thomas-a-moment-s-pleasure

<https://nmwa.org/art/artists/mickalene-thomas/>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZK_kiAkIIHA

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mickalene-thomas-ushering-new-wave-contemporary-art-180967496/>

<https://www.vogue.com/article/artist-mickalene-thomas-on-her-film-happy-birthday-to-a-beautiful-woman-her-mother-and-creativity>

