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Blake Allen

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Reflective Essay

In my personal experience writing has always been a daunting task to undertake, especially for large research papers. As a variety of information is now readily available with the proliferation of the internet, a question that plagues me is where to begin searching and how to obtain such materials if I find them? As an art major I had taken Art 130 back in Fall 2024 with the culmination of our discussions and reading being a research paper at the end of the quarter. Our topic was to pick a well-known Black artist with a multitude of scholarly sources to work off of with public sources to supplement at our disposal. I had done personal research into several artists, but came to the selection of Mickalene Thomas due to her emergence as a queer black artist with her unique blend of rhinestone and graphic mark-making style and empowering racial and feminist themes.

My approach in gathering resources about her and her work was primarily through the UCSB Library, specifically its online database and interdisciplinary loan system. I used it as a jumping off point, searching under the term “Mickalene Thomas” and looking through the results that came up with. Since my project required primarily scholarly-backed sources, the website was helpful in letting me filter the tabs to see what items they provided were peer-reviewed or not. For each listing that was provided, it also gave me a lot of useful information about each source that influenced me into strategizing if the content of said reference would be useful in my pursuits, whether it can be accessed online or physically, and the type of book that it is (i.e. photographs, article, exhibition review, etc). This made my research process seamless and

accessible, especially when I started creating an outline as I can access most materials at my fingertips and at any time that fits into my schedule. With its catalog of online sources, it provided me with links where I could access materials that navigated towards other useful results. An example of this being when I found the journal article, “Mickalene Thomas: Afro-Kitsch and the Queering of Blackness” through the library website that was able to be viewed through JSTOR. When looking into this source, I had found other JSTOR documents that related to my exploration and led me to find useful information in the recommended article of “Post-Black, Old Black.”

However, an issue that quickly became apparent was that because Thomas was an emerging artist, while there were plenty of resources I could find and use, not all of them were available online compared to other high profile artists. My biggest fear was approaching physical materials as I had less control over them such as if they would arrive on time or not. In the best interest of my paper, I had taken a personal leap forward and sought to loan several books that specialized on her, such as *Mickalene Thomas: Portrait of an Unlikely Space* and *Mickalene Thomas: All About Love* from UCLA and UCSD, to name a few. The library having an interdisciplinary loan program across all UC campuses was extremely helpful, especially in obtaining physical works that would otherwise seem daunting, expensive, and a long shipping process to securely acquire. These books helped in filling in gaps about information I had found through my online sources and gave access to photos of a breadth of her work that correlated to the written text. I do believe that having a comprehensive connection between schools that students like me can use helps make a project like my paper stronger.

Ultimately, the services that were provided in a simple and easy-to-use way from the UCSB Library acted as the beating heart to my research process and made writing as

comfortable as possible. I had learned of the vast connections and tools that made up this research institution that I did not know previously and could be utilized easily by students. They have benefited me through my research process that now made it the first tool I look into when I need to find sources for any future projects. Going into these subsequent projects, I can now enter the library system less unnerved.

University of California, Santa Barbara

Beauty from Within: Mickalene Thomas' Self-Love of Black Femininity

Blake Allen

Art 130

Helen Taschian

December 8, 2024

“The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is a black woman,” is one of the most famous quotes attributed to activist Malcom X in his lifetime that has continued to resonate. Within the intersectionality of race and gender is the strength that oppression holds and the conformist expectations placed upon them. Black women hold a unique space in bearing the brunt of these two forms of discrimination. But for an artist like Mickalene Thomas, she doesn’t follow the established societal rules that surrounded her. Rather, she uses her voice through art to express a salvation and pride in her identity that establishes a new structure of representation advocating for respect and introspection. In a post-black art world, Mickalene Thomas recontextualizes the western perception of black femininity through subversion that embraces and controls their own pleasure in the visual sphere. Through her aesthetics in style and empowerment in its structure, she aims to reject the fetishization of a black woman and define it in her own terms.

Being a black artist, Thomas finds herself at an interesting impasse of her identity, settled in a post-Civil Rights generation of artists that have the capacity to explore beyond the issue of race and how that’s constructed within the borders of their individuality. This has become known as post-black art, where the construct of race has been reevaluated by newer artists and determining what “blackness” means for them. For her and others, “the meanings that took their most recent form in the soul-era politics of respectability and black power, are too confining,” and in using their artistic practice can create a “black identity that [is] multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent” (Taylor 626). Thomas’ image is based not just on her race, but how that interacts with her status as a queer woman and fits in the mold of her definition of “blackness.” Her artworks are an extension of this post-black essence, as those principles put into question the

“ideological parameters and visual rhetorics of blackness as potentially alienating and non inclusive of gender and sexual difference” (Murray 9). From the outset, the black identity had an image created of nationalist pride and politics within race, that through movements of liberation and equality, its community rallied behind. However over time this “produced a set of values and visual expressions overly concerned with recovering black male dignity—by advocating for traditionally heterosexual archetypes of patriarchal strength, dominion, and virility” (Murray 9). Asserting their racial identity in an equitable manner meant that “black males cultivated and embraced the hypermasculine image” (hooks 206). The “perfect” image for blacks was promoted in following through binary gendered roles, but for Thomas it meant to redefine those roles as a “desire for creative freedom and a need to liberate oneself from the often-suffocating nature of racial polemics” (Murray 10). Her body of work is representative of subverting traditional rhetoric that separates race, gender and sexuality encompassing post-black art. As what will be further analyzed, Thomas becomes introspective with the facets of her identity that is inclusive of black womanhood in affirming the humanity of her race and gender.

Meaningful social change in women’s equality had long been an uphill battle amidst an established society built around a male-centric view of dominance in the world. This spread to industries such as art where patriarchal values have embedded itself into the functions of the art world, prioritizing works created by white males. It is a manufactured system of power that men “receive more attention and are given a greater authority of voice than works by women” from a visual aesthetic (hooks XIII). This has systematically made the production and perception of art viewed from a male gaze, attaching value based on these narrow criteria. Being a prevalent issue during the breakthrough of fellow artists, bell hooks and Thomas’ idol, Carrie Mae Weems, it has been steadfast enough to inspire her to use female subjects within her works to challenge that

consciousness. In a work like *Madame Mama Bush* (fig. 1, 2), it depicts a black woman lying with her shirt open and breasts partially out in a side position on a couch with her right arm assertively crossed to the side of her face. Her closed eyes reflect a visual expression that lacks the gratification of the viewer and confronts them with “the stereotypes and erasure of black women’s narratives,” that they initially held (Geldin et al. 34). With the male gaze used to objectify and sexualize women, this work deflects that sentiment by embracing a pleasure within the subject’s body for herself creating a divine figure. This muse radiates confidence as a source of self-acceptance that is indicative in both the photograph and the finished painting that details her rejection of any attitudes that a viewer might have for their own pleasure. It creates “her own gaze [in] an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining...[it] opens up a representational space that’s distinctly personal, about pleasure and self awareness” (Zelt 48). With the living area fulfilling that role, this in turn creates a safe space where they could “no longer, as they historically had been, under the gaze if a white male voyeur,” and find a level of comfort that is self-accepting in their demeanour that can exert back to the audience, a common theme throughout the body of her work (Contreras et al. 134).

In other instances, she takes the gaze and mirrors it back to the audience in a more direct approach. *Sista Sista Lady Blue* (fig. 3) features two women in a retro living area from different angles, one sitting crossed on a couch while the other is reflected through a mirror within the space. On the surface it can be discerned that since they’re in separate areas their viewpoint is directed towards each other. While this is true, in the context of the entire photograph it evokes a double meaning. With the viewer’s presence they become an active participant in the photo as the ambiguity of the eye direction makes the stare pointed towards them as well when prioritizing their gaze. This confronts the viewer about the discretion of their own pleasure and

reconsider how they are viewing the subjects. The 1970s-retro appearance of the scene is reminiscent of the aesthetics of blaxploitation and the moral crossroads a person viewing would have to consider, with the themes of sexual prowess and liberation of this era. On one hand, the scantily-clad clothing of the woman in red initially appears to invite a review in fetishization from a patriarchal lens, but in the theme of blaxploitation black women have been commonly used as heroines in empowering imagery subverting the male gaze (Sims). Even down to the setting, the sensibilities of that era portrayed craftily in the wooden panel and natural hues “holds its own against a cacophony of color and texture that takes nothing away from the women’s gazes as they command the viewer’s attention” (Contreras et al. 87). As such, the eye moves towards the woman in the mirror, her presence is empowering by knowingly playing a bait-and-switch on the viewer, rejecting their gaze in favor of a “visual pleasure” that is produced through, the eyes—and hands—of female (queer) desire and a polyvalent embrace of matrilineality and collectivity” (Contreras et al. 71). For her, having “the gaze from one woman to another is more powerful, to me, than the male gaze” (Zelt 53-54). Through either confrontation or the cold shoulder, Thomas rejects the male gaze from her works and embraces black feminine qualities for oneself.

However even with Mickalene Thomas subverting this male-desired trope, the patriarchal root is still engraved within the legacy of art history. These artists and their artworks are displayed and used as a framework to understand the artistic skills and era they were produced in, while still inheriting the unchallenged gender disparity that is presented. Thomas plays with historical paintings by revising them using her style and voice to exhibit black womanhood as anything but reserved, fetishized objects. Nicolas Poussin’s baroque painting, *Landscape with a Woman Washing Her Feet* (fig. 4) details a wide range countryside portrait featuring a young

woman engaged with reaching her arm and leg inside the pond, while a darker skinned woman behind her merely observes at the edge. All while being watched from behind bushes by a dark skinned man. Not only in Poussain's work does a woman enact in a vulnerable activity from the stealth observance of a man unbeknownst to her, but the only two people of color portrayed are sidelined, passive participants. By creating her own take on the painting that keeps its original title (*fig. 5*), Thomas turns the landscape into a geometrical field of similar colors and textures with rhinestones and patterns that removes explicit sexual interest through camouflage. The area where the three figures would be placed is instead made up of shapes of leopard and tiger prints harkening back to the blaxploitation aesthetic and a substitute for the presence of the woman of color. This form of camouflage addresses black erasure in Western art by leaving a bold mark of their presence within these artworks (Smith 52-53). Through a "strategy of deception" camouflage can "heighten 'topographic information' in her interiors to such an extent that these expansive surfaces register as interiority in a psychological sense" (Orgeman et al. 31). In the case of *Landscape*, writing, the practice uses "human subjectivity" of African prints that recall the viewer's mind and the context of the work in creating a "subject in space," that "functions as a spatial act in relation to the body's negotiation with a setting or landscape" (Smith 52). With the detail of the flora, the contrasting animal print harbors the black body.

Historically nudes have been a common subject in art, but the use of the female body can be a tricky line to balance from a naturalist display in an artistic perspective to an exploitation of female sexuality (Flournoy). One such work that has become re-evaluated that entails the latter is from another historical painter, Gustave Courbert and his work, *L'Orgine du Monde* (*fig. 6*). When viewed, people are greeted by the phallic sight of a woman's genitalia and breasts in a foreshortened perspective. Similarly with other historical works, Thomas takes the piece and

revises it by substituting the white subject in the original with a black body. Combined with her craft of paint and rhinestones, transforms it into a “project of détournement on beauty, visual pleasure, and the neoliberal human” (Smith 54). As with *Landscape* (fig. 4, 5), her take on his work, translated back to English as *Origin of the Universe I* (fig. 7), becomes a painting that speaks to the controversy of historical fetishization by shifting the focus of the woman as a figure of self-eroticism for themselves, as a “origin of the universe [that] expands [the] focus to explore the landscape and the interior” (Anonymous). However it is no longer just any woman’s sexuality, but attributing a racial tone undertaken with Thomas’ revisionism.

It’s confronting as it is striking, continuing the theme of black erasure highlighting a double meaning: advocating for accurate black representation in art but considers the dilemma of when they are included the potential for their bodies to be used for sexualization. The viewer is as implicit in their voyeurism in dehumanizing racial and gender remarks that allowed Thomas’ piece to stare back at them in its suggestive and explicit glory. But the dynamic qualities in its imagery that forces them to sit with the “disquieting feelings elicited by them” (Orgeman et al. 25). It’s a perception though, that advocates change allowing “afforded visual access to a Black subject and who sense, in the intimacy of the encounter, that they are accountable to the individual” (Orgeman et al. 25). This gives the ability for the work to reclaim the sanctity of black womanhood, or as Thomas explains the ““freedom to see woman’s breasts out”” (Pogrebin). It creates a space for the nude to be “erotic and sublime” in her work that values their sexuality (Geldin et al. 58). The open and liberating nature of her version of the painting mirrors her views that “many of [the women are] queer, bearing their bodies for her, a queer black woman (Flournoy).

Mickalene Thomas' signature mark in her practice that has been seen so far, is her utilization of rhinestones. Her most recognizable works consist of a collage media of flat acrylic paint, colorful textured rhinestones, and mixes of different patterns that adds visual interest while supporting the message of black feminism in its design. Take a work like *Hotter Than July* (fig. 8), as an epitome of her skilled craft. Her placement of the beaded material is consistently used as the contour of the figure and their clothing, their hair in several parts of the body, and on several patterns mixed throughout the piece or within the fabric itself. This idiosyncratic element elevates and emphasizes her themes of femininity with its texture and shape providing "an ebullient representation of women," that both materially and representationally are "physically and optically absorbing" (Contreras et al. 20). Rhinestones could be considered more feminine with their association with crafts and more womanly hobbies, a connection to the connotation of housekeeping roles. Its rejection devalues feminine traits as less prestigious in art. However Thomas acknowledges this idea in her application as the idea of "covering up, of dress up, and make up — [it amplifies] how we see ourselves (Pollack). Within the confines of "serious art," their use was "considered unsophisticated" (Flournoy). But her success dispels any notion that this practice and the topics they represent cannot be highly regarded in a masculine sphere.

The relationship between feminist ideas and embracing black womanhood that has been discussed collides through her artwork to create an essence that redefines these ideals in an anti-normative nature. She essentially queers the object of the black body by challenging the pre-existing ideas of what it represents. Doing so repositions the audience's understanding of the subject, in this case the black female body, acting as "an agent of social change [that] constructs...another way of living through the racial and the sexual" (Weiss 316). Going back to *Hotter Than July* (fig. 8), the unveiling of the black woman's nude in a poise and confident

stance uses Thomas' black female perspective as an instrument in sexual freedom. The imagery takes the "tropes of heteronormative sex images and rear-ticulates them through a distinctly queer-feminist desiring lens...rendering the black body strange: of giving it a signifying potential that allows the possibility for new meanings to be constructed" (Murray 11). Her intentions in casting an inclusive lens on gender, race, and sexuality falls in line with queer theory. This source of pleasure manifests itself in every element of her art that promotes self-love associated with queerness and expands to her identity for herself and her subjects.

There have been many approaches in tackling decolonizing art which has been left as an open question to theorize and reflect on. Looking closer at her body of work, one could view the common theme of embracing the divine nature of her race through sensuality as a form of self-love. Self-love can be used as a powerful form of recontextualization of the vitality of race in its purest form and the perceptions that can be passed down to other groups. Since desegregation, the curated image of African Americans has been pointed out to be used as a point of commodity and commercialization. bell hooks references this shift from the 1970s onwards with the "use of the black male body, mainly that of sports figures, in television commercials to sell products" (hooks 207). The authenticity of a movement of radical racial acceptance became sterilized through a capitalist drive that "diffused" the political agency through a "process of commodification that strips their bodies of dignity...that exploited and sensationalized political issues such as racial separatism, economic inequality" (hooks 207). To an extent, black folks gained some racial equality but through a narrow lens that only accepted a specific view on black men in the mainstream. In doing so, it suppresses the plight of the black woman, privileging the "masculine, cisgender, and heterosexual representations of what it means to hate the Black body" (Contreras et al. 58). To destigmatize, the person has to understand the

compassion of their identity that can make a connection with their people, and art is a form of establishing that root.

Through defamiliarization, can art “take us away from the real only to bring us back to it in a new way,” or use signs of familiarity to gain a new perspective (hooks 4). Love is an understood signifier of connection that recalls the authenticity of race from the period of social change. But as hooks advocates that “do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself” (Zelt 45). *La Leçon d’amour* (fig. 9, 10) reflects on Thomas’ self-love for her race and gender. The two women confidently embracing each other in a zealous but collected manner puts the bodies in direct conversation with each other transforming them in a form of expression where “there is no ‘other,’ only mirrored reflections made of multiplicity and self-determination,” a form of black feminism that Thomas refers she draws inspiration from (Contreras et al. 70). The blaxploitation aesthetic that mixes patterns, colors, and period pieces harkens to a familiar black culture as a “gift of love”, recognizable in a way that attracts her message of stigmatization of femininity that gives a “sense of validation of who [black girls] are” (Jones III 28). All of this reads to the “‘inventive dexterity’ of and ‘striking fearlessness’ of form manifest[ing] a ‘radical and boldly empowered re-inscription of Black female corporeality within the sphere of visual culture’” (Zelt 41). It’s a tone that is felt from every aspect of her practice showing the respect she holds for her identity. The essence of self-love that is evaluated through this work combines the feelings of these subjects from intrapersonal to relational, “reflect[ing] the transformation of a personal journey to a form of social justice” (Zelt 44). Her actions in self-love resonate with hooks’ call on art to “recover and claim a relationship to an African-American past in images” that breaks through the fabricated and stiff idea of blackness that became normalized towards fluidity and appreciation (hooks 6).

With a lot of Mickalene Thomas' art using elements of the past, it acts as a message for the importance in the politics of black womanhood in the modern era. Her creations act as urgency in the "intercultural dialogue she engages around the way black people depict themselves...aggressively claim agency and control over the female body in an oppositional act of self-representation" to redefine the black woman as social change continues (Murray 11). It's a mark in history that their placement in the world has always been challenged and marginalized, but within the context in post-black art, it's an effort in self-realization and reparation that could "introduce images that generations of Black women regarded as models of Black beauty" to a new generation that could be referred back to. Thomas says she uses predecessors like her mother as a "mirror image of what they are inspiring to become," and hopes to pass the torch down by honoring and inspiring.

Her aesthetics of the 1970s backs that up like in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires* (fig. 11, 12), with the reference photo having the focal point being three older black women that can be inferred to be from that time period which is then memorialized through Thomas' craft. Surrounding them in the painting are several layers of stylized fabric and flowers that acts as the foundation of the ground that constitutes a "atmosphere of exuberance, a sensual-vusal vernacular of abundance, an explicitly *enfleshed* Black feminist scopie choreography" (Contreras et al. 69). She exhibits the multitude of power of what black women hold even in that era where the politics weren't as inclusive, but the strength they could exhibit was achieved in numbers. With having three subjects closely linked, they act as support for each other as "community among Black women feels like both a lifetime and a mechanism of resistance," a "kinship" that needed each other as trailblazers to get to the point of where Thomas could make a work like this, and has to be acknowledged (Contreras et al. 57). She "echoes the

central ideas of Black feminist thought, in terms of approaching the field of representation as a space for critique, of favoring multiplicity and nuance in representation of Black womanhood, and in prioritizing self-representation and love politics” (Zelt 45).

Mickalene Thomas offers a unique perspective on where the ideas of race, feminism, and queerness converge together using structures of the past as a bridge towards perceiving marginalized identity for the future. She encompasses this throughout the entire process from the blaxploitation aesthetics to the subtlety of posture in her subjects to the materials used to the message itself, that defines the path for post-black art. The identity of blackness is not fixed and warrants a reevaluation that resonates with their contemporary peers. Sure, Thomas is black but her characteristics are more complex that can’t be dissected simply through the term “black.” This gives her the agency to value the individualistic reflecting in her pieces that is promoted in this era of post-black art. In doing so, she also examines and breaks down the discriminatory notion of the narrow view of what attitude of blackness is legitimized. Artworks that tackled race were only given the significant notoriety if they fit into that mold that were challenged by writers and artists like bell hooks and Carrie Mae Weems (Landers 32). It was hooks that called on new opportunities that would allow black people to explore a more broad and nuanced take on their identities, explaining the consequences of their “history increasingly becomes subjugated knowledge as black folks embrace notions of victimhood that suggest our reality can be defined only by the circumstances of our oppression” (hooks 150). But Thomas also uses her respect for the black women of the past that paved her way as a guiding light to a new inclusive attitude that embraces black womanhood for themselves by themselves.

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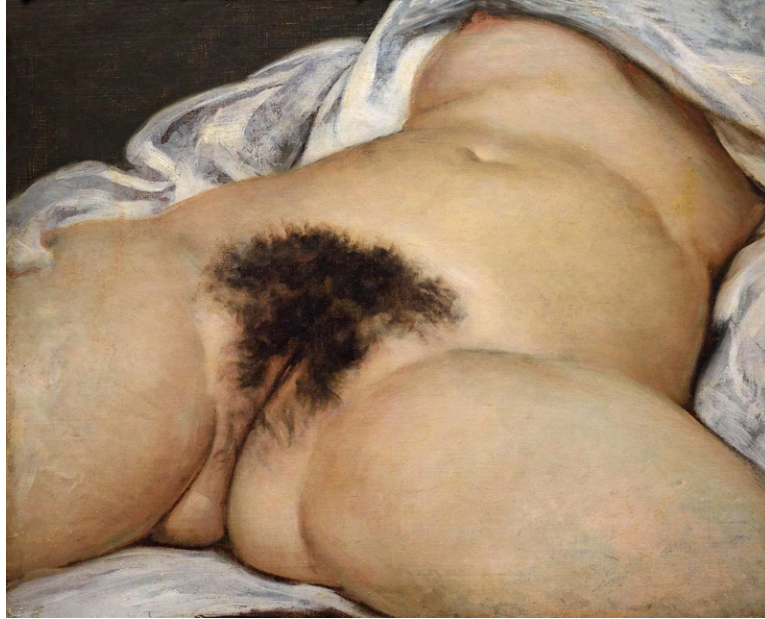


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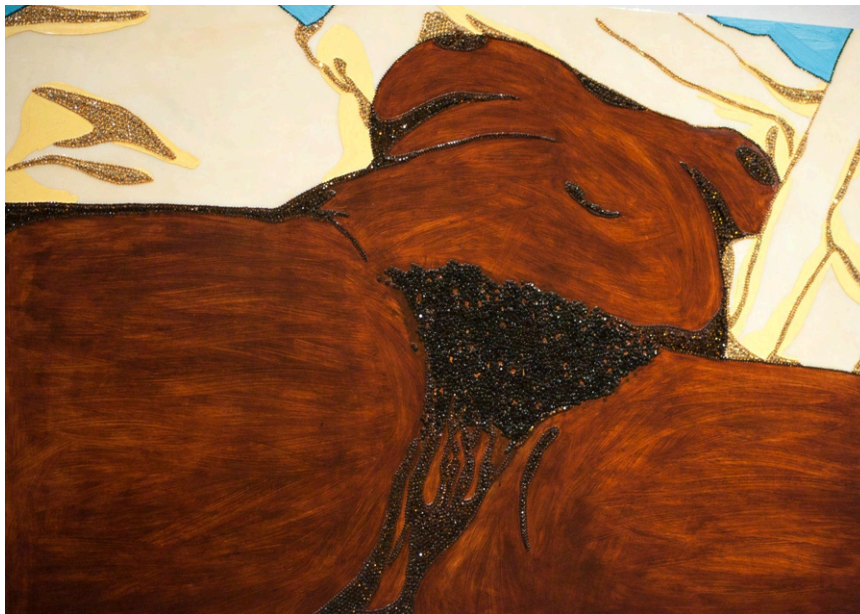


Fig. 7. Thomas, Mickalene. *Origin of the Universe I*. 2012. *The Progress*, <https://progressivepupil.wordpress.com/2013/03/09/imagining-a-black-universe/>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.



Fig. 8. Thomas, Mickalene. *Hotter Than July*. 2005. Rubell Museum, <https://rubellmuseum.org/30a-mickalene-thomas>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.



Fig. 9. Thomas, Mickalene. *La leçon d'amour*. 2008. Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/35442>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.



Fig. 10. Thomas, Mickalene. *La leçon d'amour (Pieta)*. 2008. MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/453706>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.



Fig. 11. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires*. 2010. Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/le-d%C3%A9jeuner-sur-l-herbe-les-trois-femmes-noires-mickalene-thomas/rQEufReZTVODGQ?hl=en>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.



Fig. 12. *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les trois femmes noires*. 2010. Smithsonian, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/mickalene-thomas-ushering-new-wave-contemporary-art-180967496/>. Accessed 7 Dec. 2024.