

FRIEZE

Signs of Resistance in a New Painting by Mickalene Thomas

On the occasion of a major exhibition spanning four cities, Steve Locke takes a close look at a new painting by the artist

BY STEVE LOCKE AND MICKALENE THOMAS IN ONE TAKES | 06 SEP 21



Mickalene Thomas, *Jet Blue #30*, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Andrea Schwan Inc., New York

Mickalene Thomas does not have to prove that the women she depicts are beautiful, nor does her work give the sense of being a corrective project of imaging people who are not usually portrayed. Hers is a world whose ideals have existed for a long time: she is simply showing us what she knows about women, domesticity and the presentation of self. Thomas's series 'Jet Blue' (2018–ongoing) – titled after one of the most important Black magazines in the US, coupled with the 'blue' of erotica – purposefully explores the idea of the constructed image. The appropriated photographic figure in one of her latest additions to the series, *Jet Blue #30* (2021), is divided by patterns and chromatic slices of green, black and red – colours linked to the flags of Black and Palestinian liberation. Within this rift, the figure maintains the elegant contours and sensual confidence that all of Thomas's women exude. The artist then contrasts this by introducing a series of flat, linear elements onto the figure. The harshness of these lines suggests corrective annotations for a plastic surgeon, perhaps, or the boundary markings of a contested territory. But the model's wry smile and evident comfort as she reclines on the sofa's patterned cushions resists every effort to colonize her body. Even divided by line, colour, pattern and shape, this woman's energy – manifest in the silver glitter that hugs her like a forcefield – and beauty shine through the composition. Far from the cut-up constructions and ravenous male gaze that mark the cubist nude, Thomas's woman is somehow *more* intact despite the attempts to divide her. In *Jet Blue #30*, Thomas gives us a woman protected from outside forces by the sensual strength of her selfhood. I cannot recall a more complete image of resistance in contemporary art. *This article first appeared in frieze issue 221 with the headline 'Glitter Like a Forcefield'.*