



ART FOR ALL
Camden native Mickalene Thomas, who is lending celebrity and vision to expand the city's public art offerings.

The Art of Being Seen

Multimedia artist Mickalene Thomas on her hometown of Camden, honoring women, anchoring legacy, and making art for everyone. *By Ron Shipmon*

Few artists navigate the intersection of personal narrative, cultural critique, and community engagement as powerfully as Camden-born Mickalene Thomas. Known for her bold, intricate portraits that reimagine beauty, femininity and identity, Thomas has earned international acclaim by turning visibility into her medium, centering her work on those who are too often unseen in both public and private spaces.

In 2008, Thomas created the first individual portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama, a historic event that underscored her rising influence in contemporary art. This year, Thomas was named on *Time* magazine's list of the 100 Most Influ-

tial People in the world.

Educated at Pratt Institute and Yale University, she brings a deep academic foundation to a practice that is as intellectually rigorous as it is visually lush. Rooted in the traditions of 19th-century French painting and infused with the spirit of blaxploitation cinema, her work constructs a vibrant, feminist visual language—one that reveres the past while radically reshaping it. Across bold, patterned surfaces, Thomas places unapologetically sensual, self-possessed figures—most often women of color—at the center of a reframed cultural narrative.

Though her art resides in museums and private collections across the globe,

Thomas's latest endeavors bring her back home, into the heart of Camden.

Speaking from her Brooklyn studio near the Navy Yard, Thomas carries the conversation easily, weaving memories and speaking of her artistic practice as if they are inseparable. For her, home is still deeply connected to New Jersey, where her family's roots run through Camden. Childhood weekends were often spent driving from Newark and East Orange, where her family then lived. She remembers crossing the Betsy Ross Bridge toward her grandmother's apartment in the Northgate Towers, a public-housing complex in Camden.

"I loved it," she remembers. "For me, it was that feeling—being excited as a

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little kid, seeing the bridge, knowing we were close. Later, my grandmother moved to the waterfront near the aquarium, and I still drive by that area when I visit. My other grandmother lived on Westfield Avenue. Sometimes I'll just pass the old house. There's something grounding about that."

Her memories of Camden are layered with family, nostalgia and community, all of which shape her current work. This year, Thomas is collaborating with Philadelphia Mural Arts on a new mural in Camden, a project she describes as both personal and deeply necessary. Set to be unveiled in September, the approximately 20-foot piece will be installed at a local high school, the specific location yet to be announced. The mural will serve as a bold tribute to the women of Camden who have shaped the city through policy, activism and culture. Incorporating Thomas's signature collage and mixed-media techniques, it will fuse historical reference with contemporary aesthetics

for a large-scale visual statement.

"It's about paying tribute to the incredible women who have influenced Camden," Thomas says. "I want young girls to see themselves reflected in this mural. Not just now, but 50 years from now. That's the legacy—planting that seed."

Food is also part of that connection. "Every time I'm in Camden, I try to stop at Corinne's Place, a soul food spot," she laughs, adding, "I couldn't even tell you exactly where it is, but I always find it. The food, the energy—it's one of those places you carry with you."

She's also completing a large mural for the Ruth Bader Ginsburg Hospital in Brooklyn, part of a newly renovated entry space designed to celebrate the strength of women. Both projects are extensions of what Thomas does best: telling stories through images, honoring history, and making space for those too often overlooked.

But as she's quick to point out, art isn't just about murals or museums—it's

also about accessibility. "I believe artists have a responsibility to make their work reachable," she says. Through her partnerships with AvanteArte and JRP Editions, Thomas produces affordable prints designed to land not just in elite collections, but in people's homes.

"When you see images of yourself, your history, your people in your home—that's where aspiration begins," she says. "It's transformative. And when someone writes to me saying, 'I never imagined I could own a piece of your work,' that means everything."

That commitment to access extends to institutions that have championed her early and often—none more so than the Newark Museum of Art. "I feel deeply connected to the Newark Museum," Thomas says. "They've supported my work in such meaningful ways. They hold *Landscape With Camouflage* and my portrait of [model] Tracey Norman. Both pieces deal with identity and visibility, which are at the



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core of everything I do.” Tricia Laughlin Bloom, senior curator of American art at the museum, echoes that sense of mutual respect. “Mickalene has been a wonderful partner and friend to the mu-

representation. “It’s a smaller museum in size, but not in stature,” she says. “They do big things.”

Thomas’s approach to creation is fearless—a word she returns to often.

“When you see images of yourself, your history, your people in your home—that’s where aspiration begins.”

seum, from generously lending us her artwork to collaborating on the fabulous commissioned portrait of Tracey Norman now on view. Her work is so beloved by so many because it is beautiful, but also complex, incorporating pop culture and art history while speaking to themes of empowerment.”

Thomas speaks with reverence about the collections at the Newark Museum of Art and about what it means to be held, literally and figuratively, in a space that understands the cultural weight of

“I’ve learned not to care what people think,” the 54-year-old artist says simply. “You have to live for yourself. You may fail, but you have to try.”

Fear, however, is never far from the process. Thomas describes how her most emotionally raw work often comes from moments of anxiety. “The other side of anxiety is creativity,” she reflects. “That’s why I collage. When I’m afraid, I cut things up. I make something. It’s a release, and sometimes it’s not meant for anyone but me.”

Mentorship, she adds, is what keeps her grounded in that process. Her mother, grandmother, and the legendary artist Carrie Mae Weems are all figures she credits with shaping both her practice and her outlook. Says Thomas, “Carrie showed me how to be an artist in the world. Not just in the studio, but in the world—with grace, with power, and without apology.”

Today, Thomas sees herself not just as an artist, but as a cultural architect, a builder of systems and legacies that stretch far beyond the gallery walls. In her current collaboration with another Camden native, storyteller/writer Darnell Moore, and the Camden Cultural and Arts Project, they’re working as a team to embed art, writing and creative practice directly into the city’s ecosystem.

“We have to uplift art the way we uplift science or nature—like it’s essential to how we raise people,” she says. “Art makes us better. It teaches us to see each other and the world differently.

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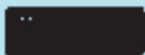


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That vision also extends to the stage. While going through old boxes during her recent studio move, Thomas rediscovered the script for *Put a Little Sugar in My Bowl*, a play her mother and friends once performed in Newark during the 1970s.

The three-act drama, written and directed by Oscar Rudy Sykes, with an original score by Allan Walker, explores a family’s intergenerational struggles. The title draws inspiration from Nina Simone’s 1967 song “I Want a Little Sugar in My Bowl.”

“It’s been on my mind for years,” she says. “Now that it’s resurfaced, I know it’s going to happen—I just don’t know when. But I believe in signs. The future is tomorrow, right?”

Recently, Thomas led a cohort of Camden leaders to Baltimore to see how that city integrates the arts into its governance. What stood out was Baltimore’s arts liaison, an advocate at the mayor’s office to represent the cultural community. “That model is exactly what Camden needs,” she says. “Arts need a seat at the table; someone who understands creativity and policy.”

Family, she says, keeps her honest. Her 12-year-old daughter frequently offers critiques of her work—especially her color choices. “She has a good eye,” Thomas admits. “She’ll walk into the studio and say, ‘That’s not the right shade of pink.’ And she’s usually right.”

Asked if she hopes her daughter follows her into the arts, Thomas shakes her head. “I want her to be whoever she wants to be. But I do want her to live creatively, to see the world that way. Whether she’s a lawyer, a scientist or an artist, creativity is the tool that helps us navigate life.”

When pressed to define herself in one word, she doesn’t hesitate. “Incomparable,” she says. “Because I’m willing to live, willing to take risks, even when I don’t know what’s next.”

After a pause, she adds, “What’s next is always the same. The work. The practice. The legacy. Art makes people better. That’s really what I hope I’m leaving behind.”

Ron Shipmon is an art collector, curator and certified appraiser with more than two decades of experience advising clients across contemporary, emerging and digital art markets.