

# Feeling Myself: Loving Gestures and Representation in *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*

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**Abstract:** This chapter looks closely at the photographic diptych “Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs”, as displayed in the 2016 exhibition “Mickalene Thomas: Muse” at Aperture Gallery in New York. Though previous exhibitions highlighted Thomas’s innovative use of materials, the approach to her subjects and virtuosity as a painter, “Mickalene Thomas: Muse” showcased the American artist’s engagement with photography—as a medium, a set of ideas, and an institutional history. This chapter excavates some of the ways in which Thomas’ photographic work creates space for relational articulations of self-love, self-representation, and divahood that frustrate controlling images of black women in Western art. After introducing the concepts of divahood and black feminist love politics, the chapter follows gestural resonances and evocations of self-love in the photographs and the exhibition. By engaging with self-love at the nexus of pleasure, care, and collectivity, the “Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs” and the “Muse” installation at large eschew representational associations of the black female body with exploitation, favoring feeling, sensual, and relational articulations images of the self in photographs.

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## 1. Introduction

A gilded wall greeted visitors to Aperture Foundation’s Chelsea gallery in early spring 2016. The exhibited photographs were identified via three stacked titles and two dense columns of text:

MUSE  
MICKALENE THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHS  
tête-à-tête

Here, you will see something historic, the didactic tells you. In this exhibition, “Mickalene Thomas, [who is] known for her large-scale, multi-textured paintings of domestic interiors and portraits” exhibits “the photographic image as a defining touchstone for her practice.”<sup>1</sup> Aperture framed the photograph as the boundary

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<sup>1</sup> *Mickalene Thomas: Muse* at Aperture Foundation Gallery, Introductory Wall Text. The validity of this being the first show of Thomas’ photographic approaches is questionable, considering her previous

setting medium for Thomas' work, a necessary space that helped create the visually sumptuous paintings of glamorous black female subjects. Years earlier, Thomas herself remarked on the significance of the photograph to her conceptual and aesthetic process as a painter: "I think the photograph defines my practice. It provides a connection between all the works. There's something about a photograph that I can never get in a painting" (Thomas in Melandri 2012, p. 37). *Mickalene Thomas: Muse* would provide the opportunity to highlight the photograph as the touchstone and connective tissue of Thomas' practice.<sup>2</sup>

So, it is notable then that the story of Mickalene Thomas and the photograph in *Muse* is set in a space—Aperture Foundation Gallery—with historic significance to the medium. This 3000-square-foot gallery space has been the exhibition home for Aperture Foundation since 2005, but Aperture has been involved in publishing and writing the history of the photograph in the United States for decades. The gallery is one of Aperture Foundations' major initiatives, which also include a book and magazine publishing arm. Since its founding in 1952 by influential photographer Minor White, Aperture has published the premier U.S. magazine devoted to photography, as well as hundreds of catalogues, monographs and edited volumes devoted to the medium. Today, the gallery showcases artists and artworks from forthcoming publications. The artworks and ideas circulated by Aperture's publications have played a significant role in defining the photograph in the United States and in shaping the meaning of the medium internationally. However, the historical boundaries of photography set by Aperture were distinctly white and distinctly male, and *Muse* is neither.<sup>3</sup>

Presenting a solo exhibition of artwork by a queer black artist identifying as a woman who pictures black female subjects is itself historic for Aperture. However, it is perhaps more important to note that the show also pushes against the limits of exhibition convention. Though technically a solo show, *Muse* is relentlessly relational. Thomas—who maintained curatorial control over all aspects of *Muse*—made this individual opportunity a space for the inclusion of subjects, resonances and artworks

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exhibition, *Mickalene Thomas: Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman*, which ran from June 20–October 19, 2014, at The George Eastman Museum.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition will be referred to as *Muse* throughout the rest of the chapter. For images see: <https://aperture.org/exhibition/muse-mickalene-thomas-photographs/>.

<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2014, the year in which preparations for *Muse* began, Aperture Foundation had published only four books of photographs by African American photographers, three of them by men: Carrie Mae Weems' *The Hampton Project* in 2000, Dawoud Bey's *Class Pictures* in 2007, Hank Willis Thomas' *Pitch Blackness* in 2008 and Stanley Greene's *Black Passport* in 2009. As best as I can discern, less than 40 of the 130 editions of the magazine published between 1986 and 2018 included any work by artists of color based in the United States. This publishing history highlights the lack of space for the photographic work by artists of color from the United States generally.

that are well beyond her.<sup>4</sup> Originally on view from January 28–March 16, 2016 at the Aperture Foundation’s gallery, *Muse* was composed of many parts. It featured a selection of 44 photographic artworks by Thomas, including collages, polaroids and large format inkjet prints, dating back to 2001. It also included a selection of 15 photographic artworks by other artists, distinguished as a separate micro-exhibition entitled *tête-à-tête*. For this private conversation made public, Thomas selected work by “several artists that,” in her words, “not only inspire and provide insight into my practice, but also contribute to a larger discourse by representing black bodies and perspectives that are deeply enigmatic or personal or that otherwise fall outside of the mainstream” (Thomas 2016, p. 82). The center of the gallery contained a three-walled living-room installation, fully decorated with wallpaper, wood-paneling, patchwork-patterned furniture and carpet.

Prior to *Muse*, Thomas was already well known for the depth of her citational practice, taking on the masters of the Western art historical canon as well as the iconography of blaxploitation films for example. Art Historian Derek Conrad Murray asserts that Thomas’ “inventive dexterity” of aesthetic references and “striking fearlessness” of form manifest a “radical and boldly empowered re-inscription of black female corporeality within the sphere of visual culture” (Murray 2015, pp. 113, 141, 116). Murray situates Thomas’ paintings and mixed media works in relationship to the historical legacy of black female representation in art and visual culture, specifically noting the ways in which Thomas rejects the policing of black female sexuality through images.<sup>5</sup> Through her irreverent and playful representations of black women, Murray argues that Thomas asserts a queer feminist desiring gaze:

“conceptual relentlessness that extends beyond an interest in punishing the abuses that Western culture has inflicted upon black bodies . . . Thomas advances something perhaps more incendiary, a queer feminist desiring gaze: a powerfully defiant and aggressively sexual representation of black womanhood that bears *the power of the look*”. (Murray 2015, p. 116)

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<sup>4</sup> The idea for the exhibition was initiated by Lesley Martin, Creative Director for the Aperture Foundation, but Thomas would retain control over both the exhibition and the accompanying book. Martin served as editor and helped narrow the checklist for the exhibition, but did not serve as curator. The ultimate selection and overall layout of the exhibition was determined by Thomas. Lesley A. Martin, Email Correspondence to author, April 15, 2019; Annette Booth, interview with the author, April 5, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the dominate modes of viewing sexuality via race and gendered representations, see Collins, O’Grady, and Hill Collins. Each specifically address sexuality and black female representation in Western art history, as filtered through discourses of power that render the black female subject excessive, deviant, or absent in order to reinforce racial hierarchy.

Building on Murray's rich foundation, this chapter argues that *Muse* provides another example of Thomas' conceptual and aesthetic virtuosity that more overtly points to the connection between articulations of a self as both individual and collective.

At the heart of the exhibition was a photographic self-portrait. Installed on the central wall of the living room installation, *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) depicts Thomas, reclined on a patterned sofa, face relaxed with her soft gaze directed at the camera. One hand supports her head while the other caresses the fabric between her legs. In this chapter, I argue that this gentle touch in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* is in fact a moment of crescendo for the whole exhibition and represents Thomas' powerful point of critique, because it does not stand alone in *Muse*. Significantly, for the first time, *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) was paired as a diptych with the photograph *Madame Mama Bush* (2006).<sup>6</sup> In deciding to hang these two individual portraits together, Thomas brings together two photographs—a sensual portrait of her mother, Sandra Bush, in *Madame Mama Bush*, and Thomas' own erotic self-portrait *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*—into one artwork.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond harnessing “the power of the look”, as soundly argued in Murray's scholarship, through a photograph installed in the middle of one of the major institutional centers of photography in the world, Thomas enacts divahood and situates loving gesture and connection at the core of the space she makes for sensual articulations of complex and self-loving black female subjects. Bringing the lens of divahood alongside Thomas' intersections with black feminist love politics helps to reveal the ways in which she works against tropes of representational history to create space for her innovative portraits.<sup>8</sup>

Through a close reading of context, gesture, and resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, this chapter excavates some of the ways Thomas creates space in *Muse* for relational articulations of self-love, self-representation and diva relations that frustrate controlling images of black women in Western art. After introducing the concepts of divahood and love politics as they relate to *Muse*, the chapter follows gestural resonances and evocations of diva relations and love politics to point to the representational space created beyond the photographs.

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<sup>6</sup> For images of *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) See the Studio Museum Permanent collection entry: <https://studiomuseum.org/collection-item/afro-goddess-hand-between-legs>; For images of *Madame Mama Bush* (2006) see the Minneapolis Art Institute permanent collection entry: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/136188/madame-mama-bush-mickalene-thomas>.

<sup>7</sup> This chapter is a portion of a larger project devoted to analyzing the intersection of the photograph and space making practice throughout all aspects of *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*.

<sup>8</sup> So, rather than a process of “reassessing” history, “reimagining” subjects or “reclaiming” space, this chapter views Thomas' work in the historically exclusionist space of Aperture Gallery as the creation of new space that makes innovative techniques and subjects analyzed in previous scholarship possible. See (Murray 2015).

## 2. Divahood

Divahood is a liberatory strategy in which space making is central to the practice of virtuosic expressions of selfhood in community. The concept of divahood comes from the work of poet and performance studies scholar Deborah Paredez, who uses it to articulate the relationships between performers such as Lena Horne and Judy Garland or the characters Celie, Sofia and Shug in the 2015 Broadway revival of Alice Walker's 1982 book *The Color Purple*. Paredez undermines the conventional representation of a diva as a woman who stands cut-throat and alone to reveal a diva's success to be the result of a mutually constitutive mode of excellence, especially for women of color. Through diva relations, each subject or performer:

“gains a deeper understanding of her own power and desires in relation to other divas (rather than in spite of them, as standard diva narratives go) and also acts as a force that generates, restores and reconfigures relations for the other divas within their respective communities. Divas here act as facilitators of female relationships that are otherwise foreclosed by racism and patriarchy. Divaness thus emerges as a radically reconfigured set of relations among women marked by the aspiration to occupy desire and the achievement of self-actualization rather than by the patriarchal constraints of (re) productivity or zero-sum-game competition”. (Paredez 2018, p. 44)

While each performer remains as a commander of her craft and singular in her abilities, her articulation of self occurs not at the expense of others, but through their connection to community.

Thomas' virtuosity as a visual artist, including her technical abilities, manipulation of materials and forms, and multidimensional and layered art historical and cultural references, place her squarely in the realm of diva. Concurrently, her success in the art world, via exhibitions and incorporation into major museum collections, as well as her public recognition as a contemporary artist—having her art and name used as a plot device in Fox's series *Empire* and as cover art for Solange Knowles 2013 EP *True*, for example—reinforces her position of artistic excellence.<sup>9</sup> Thomas' artworks then are the performance of craft, much like that of a stage performer. Of her artworks, Thomas notes: “They are this real extension of me, even when I use sitters it is about this desire ... to seek an extension of myself” (Thomas 2019). This extension of self through her art becomes even more tangled in her self-portraits. Limited readings of Thomas' self-portraiture—like the

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<sup>9</sup> In Season 2 Episode 9 of *Empire*, which aired November 24, 2015 on Fox, Lucious Lyon (played by Terrance Howard), pulls away Skye Summers' manager to see his new Mickalene Thomas painting, opening up space for Summers (played by Alicia Keys) and Lyon's son Jamal (played by Jussie Smollett) to get intimate, putting a major twist on the season and series.

conventional interpretation of diva—might claim that her work is “only navel gazing” or pejoratively self-centered, isolated in success. However, viewing the diptych *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* in the context of *Muse* reveals both the power of Thomas’ self-focus in a space that is inherently loving and relational. It also reveals that it is a power that extends beyond Thomas’ work to popular culture.

### 3. Love Politics

Like Paredez’s dismantling of the conventional portrayal of divas, African American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies scholar Jennifer Nash broaches the intellectual contributions of black feminism from beyond the conventional ground of the politics of identity. Black feminism is largely associated with theorizing the concept of intersectionality, or the understanding of identity as the culmination of multiple overlapping social identifications resulting in complex and interlocking experiences of oppression (Crenshaw 1995, pp. 357–83). This revolutionary concept is formed from decades of black feminist scholarship on the multiplicity of social identity and its shifting impact on experience for black women. As part of an effort to broaden the understanding of black feminist contributions beyond this groundbreaking theory, Nash moves to acknowledge the radical use of love as a politics of liberation by black feminist scholars and activists. Reading the work of Alice Walker, June Jordan and others, Nash highlights “pleas for love as a way of ordering and transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the self and for moving beyond the limitation of self-hood” (Nash 2011, p. 3). The significance of love, particularly self-love, across black feminism reflects the transformation of a personal journey to a form of social justice. Nash endeavors to extend the reach of black feminist theory in favor of a formulation of the public sphere that is “rooted in affiliation and a shared sense of feelings”, in which a “radical ethic of care, rather than an assertion of shared injury . . . can form the basis of a public” (ibid., pp. 14–15). Nash attempts to reconfigure our understanding of black feminism away from exclusively one of a politics of visibility or recognition towards one that is based on love politics as a transformative labor of the self, rooted in a shared commitment to self-love, self-respect and self-determination (ibid.). *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* broaches both black feminist representational legacy and the love politics outlined by Nash.

The mode of self-love that Nash identifies is both individual and collective. It echoes across black feminist literature and provides a guide through the particular articulations of self-love and collectivity in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* and *Muse*. For example, the Combahee River Collective conclude their influential manifesto, noting that their politics “evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle

and work" (Combahee River Collective in Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 2015, p. 212). In the range of definitions for womanism that Alice Walker poses in the opening of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, she states that a womanist is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually" and concludes with a definition that a womanist "Loves love, and food, and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (Walker 1983, pp. xi, xxii). Similarly, bell hooks places relationality and pleasure as central to self-love's importance. She advocates turning the kind of love yearned for from others on oneself: "Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give yourself" (hooks 2000, p. 113). Black feminism's link to pleasure, self-love and community is critical to analyzing the gestural resonances in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*.

Additionally, Thomas' artistic assertions of liberation through collective self-actualization and desire are built on the foundation laid by poet and scholar Audre Lorde. Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," posits the erotic to be used as a life affirming force, "a source of power and information in our lives" (Lorde 1984, p. 53). Lorde wishes to harness the erotic as an inwardly focused creative energy and sees it as a source of empowerment that privileges joy, love, and internal knowledge. Lorde is careful to distinguish that the erotic is to be shared, a radical form of self-knowledge and collective connection. It is a particular orientation to the world that puts the self and feeling at its center. It is "female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (ibid., p. 59). The essay is a call for "more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange" (ibid.). Here, we see the way in which Lorde frames the radicality of erotic power within the frames of the gaze, being brave enough to look without distorting the power or depth of knowledge grounded in the erotic.

Throughout *Muse*, Thomas crafts complex representations of black womanhood that echo 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. Yet, the duality of the diptych and the status of photographs speaks to Lorraine O'Grady's scholarship regarding a gendered binary perpetuated in Western art. O'Grady argues that the presence of women of color in Western art helps define femininity by acting as the inverse to womanhood generally. Representations of white women and black women cannot be separated, but work as a Janus figure: "White is what woman is; not-white (and the stereotypes not-white gathers in) is what she had better not be" (O'Grady 2019, n.p.).

According to O'Grady "the not-white female body" in Western art affords "its own brand of erasure", becoming invisible against womanhood (inherently white) that

it helps to define in opposition (ibid.). The gendered and racialized binary O’Grady interrogates is deeply rooted in the history of photography. For example, Sir John Herschel, one of the medium’s early figures who is credited with coining the terms “negative” and “positive”, also described those conditions in gendered and racialized terms.<sup>10</sup> In his recount of the particular qualities of the photographic negative, Herschel states: “Figures have a strange effect—fair women are transformed into negresses &c” (Herschel in Williams and Willis 2002, p. 1).<sup>11</sup> Through photography, Herschel describes white women and black women, or “negresses” as in binary opposition, one fair and the other a strange deviation, contrary to nature.<sup>12</sup> This language of deviation woven throughout the medium of photography binds it to the discourse surrounding black female sexuality and representation, making Thomas’ engagement with the medium even more significant.

According to scholars including O’Grady, a combination of historic script, conveyed via images and molded by dominant modes of viewing race, class, gender and sexuality overwhelm black female subjectivity, occluding it entirely. Instead, she advocates for a mode of rendering and viewing the black female body that exists beyond historic limitations: “The black female’s body needs less to be rescued from the masculine ‘gaze’ than to be sprung from a historic script surrounding her with signification while at the same time, not paradoxically, it erases her completely” (O’Grady 2019, np.). In addition to *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, *Muse* presents various iterations of self-portraiture that bring together representational politics and love politics to respond to the historic script. Thomas’ engagement with photography within an institution with historical significance to the medium is one such tactic. Furthermore, the circuit of relations outlined by the diptych exists in context with historic tropes but offers another representation of black female subjects beyond those which delimited the black female body to forms of labor or masculinist desires. Her photographs are all self-centered, but the nature of that self is determinedly relational and grounded in a shared or collective exchange. This reflects Thomas’ broad approach to interpreting self-representation

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<sup>10</sup> “To avoid much circumlocution, it may be allowed me to employ the terms positive and negative, to express respectively, pictures in which the lights and shades are as in nature, or as in the original model, and in which they are the opposite, i.e., light representing shade, and shade light. The terms direct and reversed will also be used to express pictures in which objects appear (as regards right and left) as they do in nature, or in the original, and the contrary.” (Herschel 1840, p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> Willis and Williams open their investigation of the black female figure in photography in the pairing of O’Grady against Herschel.

<sup>12</sup> The significance of O’Grady’s theorizations of black female representation for Thomas is evident in the 2018 exhibition catalogue for *Mickalene Thomas: Femmes Noires*. The most recent catalogue devoted to her work, it is composed largely of critical essays and excerpts by Black female authors and begins with Lorraine O’Grady’s essay “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity.” See (Andersson and Crooks 2018).

and the ways that the self is formed in relation to other people, artists and aspects of art history and photography.

#### 4. Touching Gestures

Designating the photograph as a “touchstone” for her work in *Muse* exhibition text is more than just an act of media attribution. It reflects Thomas’ deep critical engagement with the medium of photography, as well as the powerful undercurrent of the exhibition devoted to touch and gestural resonance that *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* reflects. The property of touch—of gesture—is a shot to the heart of the ideology of photography. The photograph’s relationship to reality—its enduring identity as a form of evidence—is grounded in the dense theorization of its status as an indexical medium (Trachtenberg in Sandweiss 1991, pp. 16–47; Solomon-Godeau 1991, pp. 103–23; Mitchell 1992). Regardless of technological advancements that have moved the making of a photographic image away from being the residues of the chemical reaction between the light that touched a pictured subject and paper, the evident qualities of photography remain. Late 20th century scholarship and theorization around the photograph have articulated the ways in which the medium’s particular relationship to proof worked hand in hand with culturally held norms surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and class to represent those categories as objective fact (Solomon-Godeau 1991, pp. 169–83; Sekula in Bolton 1989, pp. 343–89; Owens 1983; Sontag 1977). So, by situating the photograph as the “defining touchstone” of her practice, Thomas speaks to the ideological center of the medium from within an institution whose historic role helped reinforce the boundaries of that medium as distinctly white and distinctly male. Therefore, the diptych manifests her virtuosic expression of aesthetic and conceptual critiques.

Touch and gesture also provide key modes of connection, or relationship, between Thomas and her mother. She has mentioned encountering certain moments or “gestures” while on a walk or hike that articulated an embodiment of her mother, saying, for example, “that step was my mom.” Moreover, though *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* was not conceived of as a diptych originally, its form in *Muse* marks another such gestural resonance or connection. Thomas made *Madame Mama Bush* first, as part of a series of studio portraits the two did in the years following graduate school. For Thomas, Bush, who had worked as a runway model, was how she came to define beauty and glamour. Thomas photographed Bush in her studio and later, working alone with a point-and-shoot, Thomas created her series of *Afro Goddess* self-portraits, in which she actively tried to mimic her mother’s gestures and positioning to explore beauty in herself. Of the two processes of photographing, Thomas states: “in photographing my mother it was about dialogue and discovery. But I was in search of how to look at myself through her gaze. Of how I exist through my mother.” The pairing was also a way for Thomas

to get to know herself and to get to know her mother, in Thomas' words, "looking at her want to know who she is as a human being." Her choice to pair the two was to present a relationship as "Madonna and child, a maternalistic relationship", but through photographs that stress the complexity of the sitters and that speak directly to the space they hold in history (Thomas 2019).

Both *Madame Mama Bush* and *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* juxtapose textures; they place smooth skin against planes of pattern. The photographs are tightly cropped and lit in a way that flattens the sense of depth in the space portrayed, breaking the frame up into horizontal thirds. The flattening effect heightens the sense of the artwork as photographic, just as all visual planes amplify the significance of gesture and touch. In *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, the vertical lines of wood paneled wall lead down to the red, white, and blue cross hatched sofa on which Thomas lays. Even the leopard print fabric covering the foreground has seams that point toward the central figural plane. When paired with *Madame Mama Bush* in *Muse*, these lines also point up to her mother. The same striated animal print is on the floor in *Madame Mama Bush*, though configured at a different angle and a bright blue plane replaces wood paneling. Both women luxuriate on a covered sofa, assuming a relaxed and sensual pose. Compositional elements in *Madame Mama Bush*—shiny false leaves and an open plane of blue wall—direct the eye to the apotheosis of the diptych: Bush's gaze. The gold and brown print dominates the sofa under *Madame Mama Bush*, while it only peeks out at the base in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, connecting both distinct images.

Yet, the two differ from each other in the configuration of their gaze. Arm bent, with head turned, *Madame Mama Bush* denies the viewer her gaze, while Thomas looks directly at the viewer via *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. Bush's internalized focus in *Madame Mama Bush* is akin to bell hooks' reading of Lorna Simpson's 1986 photograph *The Waterbearer*: the subject of *Madame Mama Bush* is "not undone, not in any way torn apart by those dominating gazes that refuse her recognition." Instead "she creates her own gaze an alternative space where she is both self-defining and self-determining" (hooks 1995, p. 93). Countering the legacy of representation that only recognizes the black female figure in the context of a realm of labor for others, be it sexual or domestic, *Madame Mama Bush* opens up a representational space that is distinctly personal, about pleasure and self-awareness.<sup>13</sup> The self-oriented

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<sup>13</sup> Charting the interlocking oppressions of race and gender on black women's representations and experiences over time, Patricia Hill Collins largely outlines two general categories of images of black women: versions in which sexuality is absent and versions where it is deviant. Hill Collins calls attention to the enduring trope of "the mammy," her domestic labor and obedience justifying her exploitation and enslavement. Read as devoted and nurturing, this figure shared as many attributes expressed by the prevailing ideas of true womanhood as were accessible to a raced person. The image sits at the intersection of interpretations of blackness as inferior other, of women as necessarily

alternative space created in *Madame Mama Bush* is mirrored in Thomas' self-portrait. Though Thomas' gaze is directed outwardly at the viewer, her gestures—relaxed languid legs, one hand supporting her resting head and the other sensually caressing herself—are all for her own benefit, gestures of self-care and self-love. Thomas' gaze and the sensual placement of her hand provides a visual enactment of Lorde's articulation of the erotic as a source of power and hook's intermingling of self-image and experiencing love.

Thomas' hand placement in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* differs from a later self-portrait, *Origin of the Universe 1*, 2012, which is a take on Gustave Courbet's 1866 painting *Origin of the World*. Composed with a perspective that sweeps up from between a nude woman's legs, her face obscured by a yellow cloth framing her breasts, this portrait presents Thomas' genitals in rhinestones and paint. The cloth obscures the figure's arms and face, rendering her both invisible and hyper-visual, her body isolated for viewing. She is fully covered in the earlier *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. So, rather than presenting a shockingly intimate disclosure, the cloth draped between Thomas' legs in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* emphasizes the tenderness of her caress. Touch imbues *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* with a sensual and self-conscious charge not evident in the later painting. It is a self-contained, self-centered, tender eroticism in which the viewer is implicated—via Thomas' gaze—but is not dominating.

Additionally, while Sandra's hand placement is also central to the frame in *Madame Mama Bush*, its significance is amplified by what is cropped out of the frame. The lower left corner of the photograph features a part of Diana Ross's 1978 album *Ross*, bringing the renowned pop diva at least partially into the frame (Figure 1). The cover displays a portrait of Ross drawn and dressed vaguely in the style of 1920s. Though her makeup and nail polish are distinctly feminine, Ross's styling and her hair, pulled to one side, assume a more androgynous or even masculine association. Rather than serve a sexualized titillating function, Ross's raised arm emphasizes her lack of breast line, her flatness of chest, reinforcing the sense of gender ambiguity throughout the portrait. Again, this gesture, in combination with the gaze, harkens to a tension related to black female sexuality, and in this case gender. In *Madame Mama Bush*, Sandra Bush assumes a gaze that is in dialogue with Ross, but is restricted from the viewer. Her left hand both pulls her red robe taut across her pelvis and loosely fingers the bouquet of flowers that she casts aside. She is at once exposed

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subordinate, and of black women as inherently suited to low wage domestic labor, and it perpetuated the sense that black women were all these things. In these controlling images outlined by Patricia Hill Collins, a complex black female subject, namely in representing sexuality and femininity, is occluded by the various forms of labor that the black female body represents. (Hill Collins [1990] 2002).

and concealed, but her singular attention is directed inward, towards the self, not the viewer or another figure in the frame.

Finally, gestural resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* echoes the work of artist Carrie Mae Weems. Speaking on behalf of herself, Thomas and the 2012 exhibition *Mickalene Thomas: Origin of the Universe*, Weems asserted: “no I am not Manet’s type, I’m not. And he didn’t paint any of this shit for me. It doesn’t belong to me and my responsibility to myself, as an artist, is to make it for me, make the space for me and it becomes the most difficult thing to do but the truest thing and the most honest thing that I think you do with artwork” (Weems in Thomas et al. 2013). Weems stresses the importance of the creation of space for complex representations as an act of belonging, but also to resist a typology of beauty limited by Western art standards defined by whiteness. Thomas’ formal citation of Manet in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* is also a formal citation of Weems’ 1997 photographic polyptych *Not Manet’s Type*.<sup>14</sup> As in Thomas’ diptych, Weems uses multiple photographs, and self-portraiture that emphasizes the subject’s sensuality, all set in domestic interiors. Weems’ photographs progress from left to right like a sentence, and each is accompanied by text. In the final frame, Weems is pictured, reflected in a mirror, as lying nude across the bed in a now well-lit room. Unlike the other frames, she is posed at her own leisure, no longer agitated by the exercise of comparing herself with beauty as defined by Western art and photographic typology. In this frame, Weems depicts a reflection of black femininity as appreciated, as loved.



**Figure 1.** Album cover Ross, 1978, Motown. Photograph by the author.

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<sup>14</sup> For images of *Not Manet’s Type* see SFMOMA permanent collection entry <https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/2019.115.A-E/>.

## 5. Diva Relations and Self-Love

The intersection of representation, blackness, femininity, and sexuality is a critical framework for beginning to understand the radicality of Thomas' pairing *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* within *Muse*, but gesture leads to evocations of self-love. A love of self through relationship to beauty as known through her mother, is an assertion of self-confidence and self-worth, but also, Thomas' hand leads us to see links to bodily pleasure. Paired together as a diptych, the two individual portraits are as much overtly relational representations as they are sensual. In *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, Thomas' "hand between legs" directs the viewer to the fact that they are viewing a scene of visual and bodily pleasure. This punning also links the pair of images to the work of contemporary pop divas.

With the 2014 release of her album *Pinkprint* featuring the mega hit "Feeling Myself," (Figure 2) while Thomas was preparing for *Muse*, Nicki Minaj, with the help of Beyoncé, exclaims a self-love anthem, with a catchy chantable hook that unabashedly intermingles the erotic and psychological elements of self-love evident in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*:

I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' myself  
I'm feelin' my, feelin' myself  
I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my, feelin' my, feelin' myself  
I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my, feelin' myself  
I'm feelin' myself, I'm feelin' my (Minaj and Knowles-Carter 2014)

The repetition reinforces a message of self-confidence alongside the implication of repeated erotic touch.<sup>15</sup> With this song, Minaj and Knowles-Carter unleashed a declaration of self-love as positive, playful, and relational and enacted divahood for all the world to hear.

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<sup>15</sup> Any doubt about the song's references to masturbation are clarified by Minaj in the first verse when she references using a brand of vibrator "And I'm feelin' myself, jack rabbit/Feeling myself, back off, cause I'm feelin' myself, jack off" (Minaj and Knowles-Carter 2014)."



**Figure 2.** Still from Nicki Minaj featuring Beyoncé, “Feeling Myself,” 2014.

Notably, like *Madame Mama Bush* and *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, while self-centered, “Feeling Myself” never indicates that either singer is acting alone or that she does not need anyone else. The subject’s self-proclaimed excellence does not endure in isolation. The accomplishments, self-confidence and self-pleasure announced throughout the song emphasize their diva relations. We see a similar amplification through self-love occurring in the complex relationships and gestural resonances of *Madame Mama Bush* and *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*. Each self-centered, outstanding from their own frames, the subjects are nonetheless paired in relationship. Their confidence in self-expression and self-fulfillment is linked but not dependent upon each other. The diptych puts the sensual articulations of black female subjects in an enduring relationship. This assertion of self-oriented care(ss) in *Madame Mama Bush* and *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, offers a powerful visual engagement with the legacy of black feminist love politics. Both the song and the diptych are unabashedly about loving yourself and the sensations of touch. They are about the acts of looking as agentive acts, amplified by touch. They are about self-image as empowerment, and through their pairing create new space for powerful conceptualizations of black female subjectivity.

*Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, paired with *Madame Mama Bush*, also grapples with feminist art history in a way that, along with diva relations, eschews the patriarchal constraints of reproductivity and zero-sum-game competition. The diptych expands Amelia Jones’ concept of feminist narcissism. In her discussion of Hannah Wilke’s manipulation of the rhetoric of the pose, Jones argues that Wilke’s performance of the tropes of beauty and femininity are done in response to her

understanding that her anatomically female, and therefore culturally feminine, body exists to-be-looked-at or already as a picture. Through reiterative sensual posing and exploitation of tropes of femininity, Wilke turns the masculinist gaze back on itself, unhinging the power it wields in delineating makers and agentive desiring subjects as masculine. Wilke's radical feminist narcissism elides culturally limiting critiques of her work as "only navel gazing", because of its critical engagement and manipulation of the politics of gender and representation. Wilke's femininity might solicit "spectatorial desires through conventionally heterosexual codes of female desirability", but she "excludes the heterosexual male subject altogether from her self-relation" (Jones 1998, p. 181). In other words, Wilke's radical narcissism is an expression of her both as desiring subject and desired object; the art is her and she is the art. The resulting circuit of self-centered expression threatens gendered politics of the gaze and art making: "the female narcissist is dangerous to patriarchy because she obviates the desiring male subject (loving herself, she needs no confirmation of her desirability from him)" (ibid., p. 178). In her reading of female masturbation in *The Color Purple*, Linda Abbandonato finds a similar obviation of the desiring gaze through a racialized and gendered lens. "For Celie," she notes "the discovery of the clitoris (and of the possibility of sexual fulfillment with a woman) is accompanied by a whole range of other discoveries that relegated man to the margins of the world he has always dominated" (Abbandonato 1991, p. 1112). This scene of self-love, Abbandonato argues is a key part of claiming black female representation in narrative that, like Jones' assessment of Wilke's artwork, unhinges the limits of the patriarchal gaze.

The space in which Thomas' diptych hangs proposes an assertion of black feminist narcissism. The white heterosexual patriarchal gaze is present, for sure, wound through the densely knotted resonances with Western art and visual culture. However, as an articulation of black feminist representational politics, *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* further unhinges the power of the white heterosexual gaze.<sup>16</sup> The subjects of both images are defined in relation to white power structures in visual culture, but each alters the terms of those references through diva relations. Both images traffic in Western codes of femininity and sensuality that are formed in relationship to whiteness, but each eschew representations of

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<sup>16</sup> My use of the term "unhinge" is a deliberate reference to both Jones and the material structures of the photograph. Jones uses "unhinge" to grapple with the subversive possibilities of grappling with binary thinking in arguing that that "Precisely *because* feminist body artists enact themselves in relation to the long-standing Western codes of female objectifications (what Craig Owens has called 'the rhetoric of the pose'), they unhinge the gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production and interpretation (female/object versus male/acting subject)." Jones, 152. Furthermore, "hinge" is the adhesive that materially binds a photograph to its mat, to its framing. To "unhinge" a photograph is a careful act of material recontextualization, a literal reframing.

black female subject as for the desiring male subject or consumption, in favor of self-love, expressed by self-orientated pleasure. For Thomas, “The fact that the gaze in question is from one woman to another is more powerful, to me, than the male gaze” (Thomas in Landers 2011). Harkening to the black feminist theory of Lorde, the diptych references both a physical and internal focus, gesturing towards a disruptive form of self-knowledge and collective connection.

## 6. Conclusions

The day after *Muse* opened at Aperture, R&B artist Tweet recast the lyrics to her 2002 hit song *Oops (Oh My)* as being about self-love not masturbation. The song, supported by the music video, in which men are present only in service roles and are excluded from spaces of pleasure and in which Tweet, her dancers and Missy Elliot (who is featured on the track) get so hot with arousal they begin to melt the elaborate ice hotel setting, had been publicly interpreted as an anthem for female self-pleasure.<sup>17</sup> The chorus, echoed four times throughout the track, recounts a striptease in which Tweet, seemingly surprised by her own cheekiness and mounting pleasure, ultimately wonders at the source of her desire:

Oops! There goes my shirt up over my head, oh my  
Oops! There goes my skirt droppin' to my feet, oh my  
Oh! Some kind of touch caressing my legs, oh my  
Oh! I'm turnin' red. Who could this be? (Tweet 2002)

The song articulates heightening sensation and confusion, until a look over to the left and an exchange with Missy Elliot helps clarify that the source of Tweet's arousal is Tweet herself. Seeing herself with photographic clarity in a reflection, Tweet is overcome by her own image. However unlike the mythical experience of Narcissus, Tweet's love of her own image leads to a collective celebration of self-confidence and liberatory pleasure—and in the video the literal dismantling of the structure around her—rather than death from isolation. The song is a collaboration in which Tweet and Missy Elliot collectively express dual sentiments of self-love—both in terms of self-acceptance and bodily sensation.

Yet, in 2016, Tweet was keen to make the distinction that her authorial intent focused on self-love exclusive of physical pleasure: “People can take their definition of what any song means to them, but for me, the song wasn't about masturbation—it was about self-love,” she goes on, “It was empowering for me to write the song because I felt like I didn't love myself. I came from a time where my skin—being a dark-skinned woman—it wasn't really ‘in.’ I would always be teased for my

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<sup>17</sup> For more see (Bologna 2015; Houghes 2015).

skin color. I would always be called different names for my skin color, so I was empowering myself in writing the song” (Tweet in Krantz 2016). For Tweet, in 2016, the song was empowering because of its articulation of love for herself and her body’s image within a racialized and gendered context. The image of the black female body is central to Tweet’s 2016 reinterpretation, but separate from eroticism or sensuality. Tweet’s revision highlights a central tension in the representation of blackness, femininity and sexuality broached that same year by the display of the diptych *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with hand between legs* in *Mickalene Thomas: Muse*. To be “feeling myself,” per Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé, in the time leading up to *Muse* was positioned as both a radical act that could lead to dismantling structures, but that also existed in constant conversation with controlling images and the politics of representation.

When considered together, and in conversation with the other photographs of women on the walls of the Aperture Gallery, the larger feminine space of the living room, and the broader network of female representation represented by Carrie Mae Weems, Xaviera Simmons and other *tête-à-tête* artists work, *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* builds a womanist world through visual culture. In *Muse*, women gaze at women. The closed circuit, the focus on self-love, and the desiring self, “feeling myself” literally and metaphorically is presented as existing outside of male models of power, especially in the diptych. Moreover, the photographs chip away at the enduring legacy of photography and the policing and exploitation of black female bodies. Instead, they present eroticism as power, building on the lines of Lorde—“an assertion of life force of women; of that creative energy empowered” (Lorde 1984, p. 55). However, by engaging with a representation of self-love, the diptych and the *Muse* installation at large breaks open representational associations of the black female body and exploitation, in favor of a representation of a feeling, sensual articulation of the self in photography. The diptych exists in conversation with an exploitative representational legacy, but uses its tropes, to unhinge it, opening a new space for complex self-articulation.

Through *Muse*, Thomas makes space for herself in the history of photography that Aperture actively writes via its programming and publications arms. Moreover, she brings her friends and family with her, transforming the gallery space into a home for living lineages, both familial and artistic, loving, and powerful and relational. Through evocations of diva relations, love politics and gestural resonance in *Madame Mama Bush and Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs*, Thomas cracks the boundaries formed by representational associations of the black female body and exploitation, in favor of sensual articulations of a complex and self-loving subject in the world of the photograph and beyond.

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