

tête-à-tête

Mickalene Thomas

in conversation with Carmen McCleod

Carmen McCleod: Viewing *tête-à-tête* at Yancey Richardson Gallery, I was struck by the diversity of works presented. For a show specifically concerned with ideas of representation of the black body through photography, there was an incredible visual variety. How did you balance the divergent practices of the artists with the desire to create a coherent visual statement with the exhibition?

Mickalene Thomas: Well, what really generated the selection of artists was more about my conception of collaboration in art. My own practice is very collaborative between myself and the models I work with, and I was interested in exploring the ways in which other artists approach collaboration. In part, this impulse came out of a panel I participated in last January sponsored by The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, "Conversations: Among Friends," with Derrick Adams, Clifford Owens, and Xaviera Simmons. During the conversation, we talked about a lot of different ways in which collaboration can come about with an artist's practice and ways it can extend beyond the individual practice and into community. I was already thinking of how organizing an exhibition is a sort of collaborative effort; how I am basically creating a call-and-response. When Rhona Hoffman approached me to put together an exhibition for the spring, I thought it was a perfect opportunity to test the idea—I put out a call and the response was incredible! What was really great was that a lot of the artists were able to travel out to Chicago for the opening and we all got to spend some time together.

CM So did you select artists because you saw a degree of collaboration in their work?

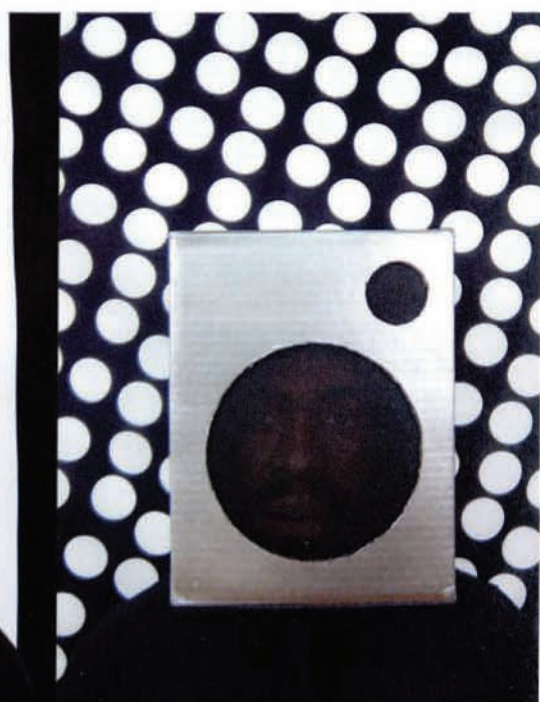
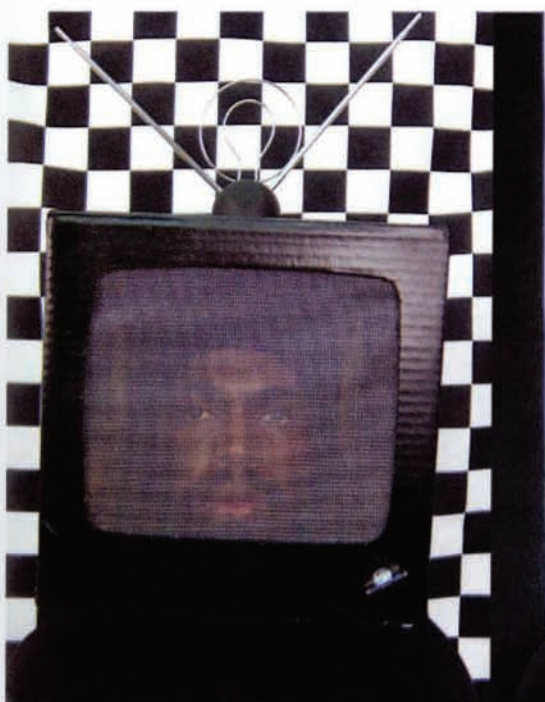
MT No, the selection was more personal than that. I was interested in selecting a group of artists that are already generating a dialogue for me that would be heightened by bringing them into the same room. Most of the artists in the exhibition know each other or at the very least are aware of one another's work. As an artist, you are

constantly pulling from and reacting to other artists' work, and this includes your peers. The artists in this show represent one of the conversations my work is engaged in—the black body in photography—but not necessarily the defining one. I would say the same holds true for all of the artists in the show; while aware of one another's work and responding to varying degrees to one another, each artist is also involved in many other conversations and communities specific to their own practice.

CM With the inclusion of Malick Sidibé's and Zanele Muholi's work, the exhibition covers multiple generations and continents. How do these two artists fit into your conception of the show?

MT Although I started out thinking of the show as a group of closely connected artists, I quickly decided that I wanted to broaden the net somewhat. I had been following Zanele Muholi's work, and her series of photographs of black South African lesbians opened an interesting conversation with Deana Lawson's intimate and intensely psychological photographs. And Zanele is clearly strongly influenced by Malick Sidibé, especially in this series. For that matter, a lot of the artists in the show are strongly influenced by Sidibé, including myself. It was important to me to give the show some historical perspective with the inclusion of Sidibé as a way of showing the precedent for a lot of the formal decisions of the included artists. I thought it was important to include the artists that I felt would create the most interesting dialogue, regardless of their nationality. I don't think that it's always necessarily productive to divide African and African-

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Jason Keeling, *Untitled*, 2004/2011, pigment print, 30 x 30 inches [courtesy of the artist and Third Streaming, New York]
OPPOSITE TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Deana Lawson, *Thai*, 2009, pigment print, 31 x 36 inches [courtesy of the artist]; Zanele Muholi, *Zimaseka 'Zim' Salusalu, Gugulethu*, Cape Town, 2011, gelatin silver print, 22.25 x 18.25 inches [© Zanele Muholi; courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg];
OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: Derrick Adams, *STATIC/DISTORTION/INTERFERENCE*, 2011-2012, c-print, 27 x 60 inches [courtesy of the artist]



American artists into separate conversations—there is a lot of influence that goes in both directions, and artists have this dialog based on a mutual interest in photography regardless of nationality. Of course, the context that an artist is working within is important, but it varies widely within a single nation, just as much as it does around the world.

CM The exhibition has a real sense of openness, conceptually; there are many different interpretations available in viewing *tête-à-tête*. Once you had decided on the group of artists for the exhibition, how did you go about selecting the works to be included?

MT I approached each of the artists to find out what works they had available, but I had in mind particular pieces or bodies of work for each of them. The artists in the show have incredibly divergent practices that, collectively, question the traditional methods and uses of photography and I was looking for connections between them. I ended up selecting work that I thought would create a group of conversations that might all come together into one sort of multilevel conversation song. For example, I knew that I would be including my most recent group of photographs, *Polaroid Series*, that consist of re-printed Polaroid test prints from my photo shoots over the last several years. The sense of staging, pattern, and repetition in these works find an echo in Derrick Adams's *STATIC / DISTORTION / INTERFERENCE*, 2011-2012, but with an entirely different result that then brings to the foreground ideas about performance. Almost all of the work in the show deals with performance on one level or another.

CM I'm curious if you see a connection between the various methods used by the artists in the show and the multiple ideas of black identity that are represented or alluded to by their work.

MT So that ended up being the main idea behind the show as it came together, this idea of a variable sense of identity and the complexity of working that out through photography, video, and performance. What I love about all of these artists' work being in one room, one show, is that it makes it clear that there is no one way to represent the black body. Historically, the black body in art is relegated to the sidelines or missing completely and these artists either push back against that history or dismiss it altogether. For example, Xaviera Simmons gives us a version of classic storytelling with her photographs that brings questions of individual journeys to a level of mythology large enough to not only encompass specifically black experience but all human experience. Really, all of the artists in this show make work that touches on broader human experience, but some make a point of retaining or confronting a classic idea of black identity along the way.

Tête-à-tête was curated by Mickalene Thomas and exhibited at Rhona Hoffman Gallery from March 29 to May 5, 2012 and Yancey Richardson Gallery from July 12 to August 24, 2012.

CARMEN MCLEOD is an artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York. Most recently, a solo exhibition of her sculpture and paintings were shown at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago. In September 2011, McLeod had her first New York solo exhibition at CRG Gallery. The exhibition was reviewed in *Modern Painters* and included both paintings and sculptures. Her work has been exhibited in group shows at, among others, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, CRG Gallery, Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco; Caren Golden Fine Art in New York; the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts in Wilmington; and Nathan Larramendy Gallery in Ojai, California.

MICKALENE THOMAS has exhibited widely both nationally and internationally. Most recently, her exhibition *Origin of the Universe* traveled to the Brooklyn Museum after its debut at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in California. Other recent exhibitions include *Mama Bush: One of a Kind Two* at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, Japan; *30 Americans* at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C.; *Americans Now* at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.; and *Something You Can Feel* at La Conservera Contemporary Art Centre in Ceuti, Spain. She is currently preparing for an exhibition encompassing both the gallery spaces of Lehmann Maupin, New York, and a solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Mickalene Thomas lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

OPPOSITE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Mickalene Thomas, *Polaroid Series #5*, 2012, digital Polaroid prints, 3.5 x 4.2 inches each [courtesy of the artist]; Xaviera Simmons, *Landscape (2 Women)*, 2007, color photograph, 30 x 40 inches [courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery]; OPPOSITE, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Jason Keeling, *Untitled*, 2004/2011, pigment print, 30 x 30 inches [courtesy of the artist and Third Streaming, New York]; Clifford Owens, *Anthology (Nsenga Knight)*, 2011, archival pigment print, 40 x 60 inches [courtesy of the artist]

