

## MICKALENE THOMAS

*Hotter Than July*, 2005

“Far more frequently you’re wearing perfume  
With you say no special place to go  
But when I ask will you be coming back soon  
You don’t know, never know”

- Stevie Wonder, from “Lately” on *Hotter Than July*, 1980

*Hotter Than July* is part of an early series of works entitled, *She Works Hard For The Money*. This painting pictures a woman alone in an interior setting, absorbed in her thoughts. This woman is a kind of muse. In Greek mythology, the three muses were viewed in relation to each other and inspired the work of artists in all genres. In the context of *She Works Hard For The Money*, the muse is part of a sisterhood that includes ancient goddesses and spirits, as well as more modern women.

*Instant Gratification*, 2005

*Rumble*, 2005

*Feel Like Making Love*, 2006

The *Brawlin Spitfire* paintings began as an exploration of the idea of the Amazonian woman. Originating in Greek mythology, the Amazons were described as a tribe of women warriors that were honorable, courageous, brave and represented rebellion against the dominant patriarchy. They were depicted in Amazonomachy, an art form that portrayed battles between the Greeks and the Amazons, who were trained in all types of weaponry and were especially adept in single combat. The Amazon woman resurfaced more recently in the mid-1900s as Wonder Woman and other female comic book heroes. Their form-fitting costumes could hardly conceal the strength and sexuality that marks these fictional characters as Amazons. As a female archetype, the Amazonian woman is particularly seductive, giving rise to limiting stereotypes as well as inspirational fictional characters.

The name *Brawlin Spitfire* comes from a magazine cover depicting two women engaged in sexualized wrestling combat. Historically, wrestlers have been sculpted, drawn and painted since ancient times

as a way of presenting both athletic combat and internal struggle. This rich tradition strongly influences the works in the *Brawlin Spitfire* series. Specifically, echoes of *Ercole e Anteo* (1475) by the 15th-century Italian sculptor, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, can be seen strongly in *Instant Gratification*. These paintings situate strong, seductive women in fierce wrestling positions, creating a context that alludes to the complexities of being perceived as a strong, fierce, sexual woman. I look at these paintings as semi-autobiographical, as a series of self-portraits. A close look at the paintings reveals that each pair of figures has only one face. In truth, all of the figures are wrestling themselves, acting out an allegory for the conflict between body and mind, perception and reality.

#### *Portraits of Quanikah, 2006*

*Portraits of Quanikah* continues the deconstructive work of self-portraiture begun in the *Brawlin Spitfire* series. Each panel spotlights a different aspect of my own personality in the guise of my alter egos – Quanikah and the Amazonian wrestler. This piece heralds a formal shift in the paintings, breaking the pictorial space into different physical planes and using the grid as an overt reference to Pop Art and Andy Warhol in particular. These formal developments carry into my later paintings, further complicating and enriching the subject matter of self, muse, and painting. While *Portraits of Quanikah* is unmistakably a self-portrait, representative of an historical genre with specific parameters and traditions, it is a self-portrait that reflects a contemporary conception of the bifurcated self.

#### *Baby I Am Ready Now, 2007*

#### *Collage Study for Baby I Am Ready Now, 2007*

In *Baby I Am Ready Now*, the profusion of different, shifting patterns dominates. This painting is the first that I made working directly from a source collage. The method of collage naturally encourages the fracturing of spatial planes and breaks up the linear flow of composition. The basis of the work, however, rests firmly in the photograph taken in the installation I created as a specific interior space for the model. As a diptych, the piece sets up two opposing but complementary fields. On one side is a figure in an interior space, absorbed in her thoughts. On the other side the space breaks down into abstract pattern without the centering presence of the figure.