Mickalene Thomas has taken Blaxploitation images of the 70s and mixes them with her mother’s photographs from the late 70s. Thomas’ paintings are exciting, enchanting and invigorating. I met the artist in the Brooklyn studio where she makes her paintings, often in series—the “Brawlin Spitfire” images, portraits and the “Odalisques and She Works Hard For the Money” works. This is also where she takes her photographs and constructs her photo-collages. Most recently, she has begun experimenting with prints, working with silkscreen. In all these media, Thomas takes female sexuality in a sparkling new direction in her work.

One recent example of Thomas’s “Black Odalisque” images is the work I Can’t See You
Without Me, from this year. This painting is a six-foot square and the medium is acrylic on board, and is spectacularly ornamented with rhinestones. A woman reclines on a sumptuously decorated and pastiched surface, a resplendent place for her body. Thomas successfully defies the chromatic recession of dark colors on the figure’s body by treating it in mostly uniform passages. Some rhinestones are used to define lines and shadows on the body through some highlighting on the figure’s palms and lips. She has a blank expression, neither welcoming nor declining. She is also a vibrant figure with an ample physique. The placement of the figure against the wild array of patterns behind her only adds to her beauty and her sexuality. The unbuttoned shirt and the vibrantly patterned underwear help to both conceal parts of her body and draw the viewer’s eye directly to them. Thomas paints this woman, aware of a long tradition of partially clothed women as subject matter, and she does so in a way that highlights her sexuality without making the figure appear submissive, as so often happens at the hands of male artists throughout history. Thomas is giving us a new image of female power and beauty in paintings like this.

Growing up in difficult circumstances in urban New Jersey, Thomas took a while to find her way to art. Eventually, she landed at Pratt Institute of Art where she received her degree in 2000, and it was during those years that she spent her time studying aboriginal art in Australia. After this, she went to the Yale School of Art, a place renowned for producing some of the most notable artists of the 20th and, now, 21st centuries, and where she completed her MFA in 2002.

In particular, Thomas brings to her art a clear understanding of the representation of women in Western art history. The images of black power from the 70s are central to Thomas’s art. She incorporates a fascinating array of historical and contemporary references and filters them through her experience to make them into celebratory icons for today’s woman—be she black, white, yellow, red or brown. The kinds of references she utilizes are disparate: black power, Pam Grier and Blaxploitation, consciousness-raising, Diana Ross in Mahogany, Angela Davis, Roberta Flack, Aretha Franklin, women’s collectives, disco. All combine to form the backdrop for Thomas’ refreshing new images of black women.

The 70s was a period of discovery for African-Americans, a time when embracing Africa became a part of the road to freedom begun in previous decades by the Civil Rights struggle. Perhaps Don King’s “Rumble in the Jungle” of 1972, the much-touted boxing match between Muhammed Ali and George Foreman, gave young black men some access to Africa, and alongside Alex Haley’s book from 1976 and the subsequent, and widely viewed, 1977 television miniseries “Roots.” For young black women, the series included a cultural evolution while embracing black/African imagery, textiles, patterns and hairstyles. Color and lots of it enlivened the patterns and fabrics.

The evolution of black consciousness for women was complicated because not all women sought freedom from the constraints associated with traditional roles. Black feminism of the 70s, much of which continues today in the same form, was expressly concerned with the intersection of oppression prompted by class and gender differences. Women of color at that time sought ways to emphasize their beauty as a way to help make themselves visible, both to themselves and to the world. Alongside this new embracing of heritage, color, beauty and awareness of her sexuality was the omnipresent and omni-capable black woman, as represented by Pam Grier,
who was tough and beautiful, sexy and strong. Thomas’s paintings, such as this one, showcase images of black women who are similarly beautiful, sexy and strong, set against a lush backdrop, which recalls a specific cultural moment in the 70s. More recent sources for her work come from the popular culture of our contemporary period, as she draws on iconic popular images of the 70s in much the same ways that musicians, performers, and entertainers do today in television, movies, theater and music.

Thomas uses photographs as referents in making her works, but also considers the source photographs as discrete artworks. Her settings, positions and compositions recall African portrait photography, such as images by Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, who were commercial photographers active in Mali during the middle decades of the 20th century. However, this comparison is with the caveat that Thomas often shows her figures in partial or complete disrobes, which, of course, the African portrait photographers did not. Thomas culls her nude poses and moods from 19th century French Orientalist-inspired paintings, particularly from works by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, Edouard Manet and Paul Gauguin, all of which depict the female figure reclining.

Thomas’ use of decoration, in the rhinestones and textile designs she employs, only adds to the theatrical presentation. She has created a kind of feminist baroque portrait in which the extreme use of lighting draws the viewer into the delight of worshiping at the altar of female beauty. Thomas’ work transcends any possible accusation of narcissism because she has so effectively considered the mood and tone of her paintings. They convey an ebullient sensibility rather than a self-serving eroticism. She has accomplished something wholly pleasurable and refreshing in her art, something which will be exciting to follow.