

Young and Beautiful (*Beneath the Moonlight*)

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The Comfort Of! Portrait, 2026
Rhinestones and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame

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As I first crossed the threshold from the lobby into the gallery space of the Shepherd, I felt the atmosphere shift. It was not quite otherworldly, but bordering on a more serene wavelength. There was the feeling of being sucked into something bigger, more powerful than yourself. As I weaved in and out of the smaller chambers and the grand, open room of the breathtakingly renovated old church, I noticed ambient details. Soft jazz was playing, candles were lit throughout, and crystals and plants were placed along shelves and in the peripheries like offerings.



Velvet Mary Janes in Black and White, 2026. Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Metallic



In Blue: The Odalisque, 2026. Rhinestones, glitter, and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame

The large scale collage-style paintings are presented as a sort of segway from Mickalene Thomas' previous works, which dealt primarily with feminine figures as their subject. This new body of work instead employs the Black male body as its focal point, exploring unconventional depictions of masculinity through the artist's signature style: larger than life photographs and painted images possessing rich, vibrant hues, and intricate adornments of dazzling rhinestones on their surfaces.

The architectural elements of the gallery, including elaborate Pewabic tile floors and grand colorful stained glass windows, function as more than just a backdrop to the artworks—their strong presence in the space reads more like a collaboration. A soft, cool light is delicately filtered through the ornate glass window compositions—competing side by side with the blue violet portraits. Their aggressively angular geometric implants distort the viewer's lens, breaking up what one would usually *expect* to see in a photograph, and adding a further layer of obscurity to the faces on display.

A small vitrine, placed unassumingly off to the side of the main gallery, houses the original collages used to create the large works. Their scale seems miniature in comparison, but the striking contrast of materials and textures, combined with their context as the original prototypes, gives them a significance and a personal touch—the presence of the artist's hand, that the main works seem to lack. This irrepeatable quality is replaced by the standard pristine finish achieved through the process of reproduction, an exchange of one value for another. The visibility of the real is sacrificed in order to achieve commodification—the perfect object.



Perfectly Purple Standing, 2026. Rhinestones, acrylic and oil paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame



Left: *Red Stockings and All*, 2026. Rhinestones and acrylic paint on canvas mounted on wood panel with mahogany frame

Right: *Dream Sideways with Red Lips*, 2026. Archival pigment print on Hahnemühle Metallic

The content within the compositions is altered with a similar treatment. A few lush photographic prints hold rawness among the clean luxurious ambience of the exhibition. However, whether the work truly reflects a deep dive into the complex territory of gender expression is hard to discern. Of course, there is no such thing as a neutral photograph, or a neutral subject for that matter, but the carefully aestheticized styling and depiction of the models in Thomas' figurative pieces seem to portray a particularly nuanced version of masculinity that leans only into its *softness*—one may argue that what we are observing is in fact a *feminized* masculinity. Just like idealized representations of the female body, here the concept of masculinity has been taken and molded to fit within a certain frame. Its unflattering parts have been stripped away and concealed. In other words, it has been successfully *beautified*.

Beneath the Moonlight by Michalene Thomas opened on June 6th, 2026 will be on view at The Shepherd through August 23rd, 2026.

<https://lscgallery.com/the-shepherd-bio>

*Images courtesy of Library Street Collective

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