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Chiffon THOMAS

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Today, April 9, Chiffon Thomas debuts their solo show at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles. Using techniques ranging across hand embroidered mixed media painting, collage, drawing, and sculpture, Thomas examines issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Identifying as a non-binary queer person of color, Thomas' works examine the difficulties faced by defining one's identity in contemporary society.

Antithesis, the name of the show, denotes the action of two opposing objects or bodies coexisting in the same environment or space, creating a utopia of their own design. With their art, Thomas presents a process of becoming—a metamorphosis.

Flaunt spoke with Thomas about the development of their art, and their way of repairing history.





What can you tell us about your new exhibit at Kohn Gallery?

The body of work that I recently completed for Kohn, for my solo show at Kohn Gallery, is a little bit different from the way I was previously working with fiber and embroidery. I think that some of the aesthetic qualities are still present in this body of work, but it's even more

explorative, as far as my use of material and also scale, also the work is incredibly 3-dimensional.

Pretty much everything that I created for *Antithesis*, which is the title of the entire exhibition, is sculptural work. There's a few drawings that I used as studies, but most of the work is sculptural and is dealing with that work, antithesis, in itself. What that means is basically having two opposing things exist in either one space, or one entity, or even it could relate to two opposing ideas finding a way to coexist in one environment.

I was just really drawn to that definition of that word, and I started researching it to see how other people talked about it through literature, and it just resonated with me as far as how I was feeling with this idea of still and split, psychologically, not just my background growing up and the principles that I raised upon but also holding on to them and allowing them to coexist with the way that I identify now, and the way I want to continue to grow as a person.

What makes your art unique?

It's interesting to think of my work as unique, I don't necessarily think of it as unique, I just think of it as a necessity to kind of just be as externally vulnerable as possible, and although I am using my body—a lot of representation in *Antithesis* are body casts from my own body that are fragmented—I am being very vulnerable in the way that I am showing parts of my body, and also blending body parts, that I want the viewer to not only see a representation of me but also see the possibility of being vulnerable, and what that does for a person, to have deeper emotional connection, and that's only possible by taking that risk to wear your emotions externally sometimes.

What message do you hope to send with this solo show?

I was talking about code switching and double consciousness, and what you have to do to put on this performance to be in different spaces, and when are you ever really able to be your authentic self. It doesn't even necessarily have to be something that's fully accepted by another person, but it's just something that is happening in space and in time and there may not be any judgement placed upon it, just the ability to just be. That is what I want people to get when they experience each piece. Each piece holds a space in this way that you just have to be with it. It's not about accepting it or belonging, just being.

It took a lot of energy out of me to create it, because it was coming from these deep messages within myself that I can't really put language towards, I just know how it feels.

What does the process of creating a piece look like?

A lot of the times I look for words, and I google search words out of whatever I am reading. I've been reading this book *The Right to May* for months, and it's taking me a lot of time to get through it, because it's really dense, and I just have to define some terms in it, and when I finally understand even just a sentence, I'll look up a word in this sentence to see what google would relate to that word, what images would relate to that word, what

does it look like to maintain a body. And it leads me to images, and artists, who have done this in the past, and I'll look at a couple of artists that deal with the uncanny, or I'll look at the term uncanny, and then I'll start to fragment the body in that way. I usually start with a drawing, which is why there's a lot of drawings in this exhibit, of me fracturing the body, and I'll take that drawing and I'll try to create it in material in some way.

This book, *The Right to May*, is talking about bio-politics, so it's the body and how the body is controlled through politics, and just that social construct, and I used parts of buildings or material that we construct with to echo what those things are, what they may look like, visually, and I am fusing the body, in its biological form, with the architectural structures. I started doing that, actually, my last year at Yale, and I was embedding the body part into these plaster columns I was casting from actual columns from the New England region, and it was my first time ever really experiencing those style of columns and understand their function, to be something to hold a heavy weight and how that's projected upon bodies of color or marginalized bodies often, to be this resilient figure, and be able to take abuse and be oppressed, and how it comes with this expectation, so I got really invested in what architecture can mean, and its history, and how colonization is entrenched in the history of those buildings.





What has been the biggest influence in your art?

The biggest influence in my art... just a lot of unresolved questions. Honestly, sour thoughts, thoughts that you have that are completely unanswered, just not coming to a place of resolution and being okay with that, but also deeply investigating why we have these social constructs and gender roles, and why is there such a necessity on placing so

much power, and hierarchy, and control on another being, why does that happen? I don't really understand those things, but just these questions that I had. I think even growing up in a household and not having a lot of resources to begin with, especially not being exposed to art, and just not being financially stable, just affected my thinking.

You combine photography and stitching as a way to preserve and repair history, can you expand on that?

At the beginning I was using embroidery as this therapeutic, repetitive practice, I would zone out while doing it, but it was actually really a relief to dig deep into those photographs that I was working from, and try to understand what these individuals in these images were feeling, a lot of them are my parents, my siblings, and yes, what were they dealing with during this time? Who was interested in capturing these moments? I'll look at the furniture, I'll look at how they built these places of comfort, and those are just things that I was using to come to an understanding of who I was. I think that I was lacking there, especially as I was developing into an adult, I got more interested in why was this individual, and why were these things happening around me growing up? And also I was just really nostalgic about being in those spaces too. When you grow up you grow apart, because you are invested in your own life, and be sustainable and stable as an adult, so I wasn't really around my siblings or my mom a lot, so I was nostalgic for this time period when we were all living under the same roof. So that was a reparative thing for me, to have an opportunity to project myself back into those places and spend long amounts of time in those embroideries.

But, right now, the work at Kohn Gallery, I also see that as an element of the repairing, because I look at it as, even with this idea of splitting, individuals split into multiple personalities so that they can confront trauma, and I think that when you are able to see it outside from an internal place, you have the opportunity to confront it and comes to terms with it. Not necessarily have a solution, or an answer, but at least you have the ability to address it, in some way, and that is a reparative practice for me. I am talking about body dysmorphia, and being a trans body of color, and what that experience is like. And it's hard to share that experience with another person but I can do it visually, and I hope that it comes across as something like that. I am just trying to share this element of empathy, how can another person be empathetic, cause they probably do have a similar experience with something else.

What can we look forward to in the future in regards to your art?

I've actually been playing with this idea. I love the ability to transform a space, or make a space immersive. I really love installation work, and I love activating work. Right before I came out to LA, me and my friend were attaching my sculptures to these lifting devices that can actually lift them and suspend them in air and space, and I thought that was such a submissive act for the sculptures to do. To be in this role of submission to this machine. And that it had no voice, and no say, as to if we lifted it up off the ground or we lowered it, or if we clamped it down, it just had no other option but to accept what we inflicted on it. I

think there is a message in that. I think I am going to continue to work sculpturally, I love doing stop motion animation. I feel like I am at a point where I am just trying to build environments but also have forms in the activism capacity in them.

Any last words?

I am really proud of this show, and I have to tell myself that. I think that that is important for people to say that to themselves. Celebrate yourself. You should be your biggest cheerleader. Be your biggest fan. I want to say this too: it is incredibly difficult to ask for help sometimes, but it is so important to ask for help.



