The New York Times

In Portland, Falling Stars Shine a Light on Gun Violence

A personal loss, in part, drives the artist Hank Willis Thomas to confront one of the biggest fears among African-American men.

Hank Willis Thomas's "14,719," is part of his first major museum survey, in Portland, Ore. Hank Willis Thomas, via Portland Art Museum

By Hilarie M. Sheets

Oct. 23, 2019

In the soaring atrium at the entrance to Hank Willis Thomas's exhibition "All Things Being Equal..." at the Portland Art Museum, a circle of 28-foot-long blue banners stitched with rows of white stars descends to the ground. Titled "14,719," this immersive chapel of falling stars echoes elements of the American flag and

commemorates the number of individuals shot and killed in the United States in 2018.

"The most likely way for young African-American men to die is by gun violence," Mr. Thomas, a conceptual artist, said in his Brooklyn studio on the eve of his first major museum survey. The Portland, Ore., show, which opened this month, includes some 90 photographs, sculptures, installations, videos and collaborative public art projects that shine a light on painful American stories and the aspiration for social justice. "But all you have to be is alive in America and you can fall victim to gun violence," Mr. Thomas said.

This urgent societal issue is acutely personal to the 43-year-old artist, who in 2000 lost his first cousin — with whom he shared an apartment in New York at the time — to robbery and murder. "I remember Songha and I joking about being 21 and black and, like, we made it," said Mr. Thomas, ruefully. His grief and search for catharsis have been formative to his development as an artist, one who often co-opts familiar cultural imagery to pose nuanced questions about black male identity.

While at the California College of the Arts, where he received his master's in photography and visual criticism in 2004, Mr. Thomas began "Branded," his ongoing series of digital "C-prints." He embossed the Nike swoosh logo repeatedly across a bare torso like whipping marks in "Scarred Chest" (2003), one of his many images drawing parallels between the violence to black bodies during slavery and the physical labor of black athletes generating revenue for universities and team owners.

"Branded Head," 2003, is one of his works linking the violence of slavery with the labor of athletes.
Hank Willis Thomas, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

"Hank uses the language of advertising, whether it's actual words or the visual language, to think about the underpinnings that move throughout our culture and how those messages can either uplift or

in many cases reinforce biases or racist practice," said Julia Dolan, who curated the Portland exhibition with Sara Krajewski.

With his childhood friend and fellow artist Kambui Olujimi, Mr. Thomas used the G.I. Joes they once played with to re-enact the last five minutes of his cousin's life in the 2005 stop-motion animation "Winter in America," on view in the exhibition. "As boys in the United States, we're given action figures with guns and encouraged to create scenarios based around violence," he said. "We then turn around and say it's a shame when gun violence happens."

Mr. Thomas remembers playing with G.I. Joes in the stacks at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, where his mother, the MacArthur-award-winning curator and photographer Deborah Willis, worked in the 1980s. "Growing up at the Schomburg couldn't have been a greater subconscious educational experience," Mr. Thomas said.

In his youth, he met groundbreaking artists including Gordon Parks, the first African-American staff photographer for Life magazine, and credits his mother with spurring his interest in working with archival images — "recognizing an alternative visual history of America than the one that mainstream society celebrates," he said.

Mr. Thomas's work is fueled, in part, by grief over the loss of a first cousin to violent crime.
Nate Bajar for The New York Times

Reprinting Spider Martin's 1965 photograph of Civil Rights protesters facing off against police on a weathered glass mirror, for instance, Mr. Thomas inserts the reflection of the viewer in the narrative and conflates the past and present. Screening other images of social unrest on retroreflective vinyl, he highlights defiant figures and searing details while shrouding the rest as latent negative.

Only when the viewers use the flash on their phones to alter the silvered surface of these halftones (as they will be invited to do in the exhibition) is the full image revealed.

"Depending on where you stand, the image will look different," Ms. Krajewski said. "It makes us think about our relationships to these histories, how our backgrounds have positioned us in our lives."

"Public Enemy (Black and Gold)," 2017, uses a 1967 news photo by Don Hogan Charles, originally published in The New York Times. Hank Willis Thomas, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Mr. Thomas's sculptural works, too, are based on powerful gestures excised from photographs, including an image of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrapping his arms around his wife, Coretta Scott King.

In the artist's memorial to the couple to be installed next year on the Boston Common, their disembodied embrace will be cast at 22 feet tall in bronze. "We have so many monuments to war and very few monuments to peace and love," said Mr. Thomas, who lives in Brooklyn with his wife, Rujeko Hockley, co-curator of this year's Whitney Biennial, and their baby daughter.

The artist was also awarded a fellowship this year by the Gordon Parks Foundation in Pleasantville, N.Y. There, Mr. Thomas's new retroreflective images based on Mr. Parks's 1969 autobiographical film "Learning Tree" are on view. "Hank is living and breathing in the footsteps of Gordon Parks," said Peter Kunhardt Jr., executive director of the foundation.

Mr. Thomas has layered stills from the film dramatizing Mr. Parks's impoverished childhood in segregated Kansas with ghostly

pictures of him as a renowned artist on the set of "Learning Tree" and looking back at his own life through the camera lens. This framing and context is illuminated with the viewer's flash.

"I'm always interested in the story behind the pictures," Mr. Thomas said, "and encouraging myself and viewers to think beyond the surface reading."

The artist's longtime friend and colleague Wangechi Mutu said she admired the "emotional elasticity and empathetic breadth" that Mr. Thomas brings to whatever idea and medium he tackles, as well as his ability to collaborate.

Ms. Mutu is one of some 800 artists who have contributed billboard designs, among other public artworks, exhibited across all 50 states in civic spaces as part of "For Freedoms," an artist-run super PAC founded in 2016 by Mr. Thomas and Eric Gottesman.

"Hank's thinking about the political landscape of the U.S. and the constituents of various space that are in need of the art and activism he charges his work with," said Ms. Mutu, whose billboard Africa's Out! was exhibited in Trenton, N.J., during the midterm elections.

Mr. Thomas's struggles to deal with the death of his cousin, and of so many other African-American men, precipitated another collaboration begun in 2010 called "Question Bridge," a five-channel video-mediated dialogue between more than 150 black men. He teamed with Chris Johnson, Bayete Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair to fan out across country, meeting African-American men who would pose questions to their peers on camera, such as, "I wonder, black man, are you really ready for freedom?"

"We had five people answer that question and each one answered it dramatically differently," Mr. Thomas said. "We were on a mission to try to define black male identity, because it's so often spoken about in our society, but actually showed that there's as much diversity that exists within any demographic as there is outside of it."

The New York Times Style Magazine

THE STORY OF A THING

G.I. Joes Taught This Artist About Storytelling

Hank Willis Thomas on how playing with action figures shaped his childhood — and still informs his work today.

Hank Willis Thomas in his studio in Brooklyn, New York. Matthew Novak

As told to Emily Spivack

June 13, 2018

In this series for T, Emily Spivack, the author of "Worn Stories," interviews creative types about their most prized possessions.

The conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas' work moves fluidly between politics and pop culture. Here, Thomas — whose show, "Black Survival Guide, Or How to Live Through a Police Riot," opens at the Delaware Art Museum on July 14 — reflects on how the time spent with his friends playing with G.I. Joe action figures influenced the work he makes today.

I started collecting G.I. Joe figures with Kung Fu Grip when I was 5 years old. They were given to me for my birthday, for holidays, or I'd trade with a friend. I have over a hundred of them.

The way you played with G.I. Joes was shaped by what you understood the character's history to be. The figures were grown — they were representations of adults, typically in military uniforms, who had specific names, back stories, and jobs. You could manipulate their bodies, bending their arms and knees, rotating their hips and shoulders, and sometimes even their hands and necks. So you become both omniscient, but also a manipulator of existing situations.

A handful of G.I. Joe action figures from Thomas' collection of over a hundred of them.
Matthew Novak

It was the early '80s, this time of gung-ho Americana. Music and culture from the late period of the Cold War was pervasive. Then these G.I. Joe action figures, *real American heroes*, were giving children license to author scenarios based around violence before they could even read.

There was no consequence to that violence. Death was insignificant. You could always revive Storm Shadow, Duke, Lady Jaye or Hawk by picking them up and bringing them back to life. If you needed someone to get saved, you'd bring them to Doc, who was a black doctor, the only doctor, which was an interesting choice to me.

A group of my friends would get together where I lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to play with G.I. Joes. We'd figure out the set-up — what was happening, who was going to be relevant to the story, how it was different from last time, and which characters would die. That seems like a lot of work. I'd love to watch what it was like now. It's not like we were actually doing physical activity; it was us telling each other a story collaboratively.

One of the G.I. Joe action figures from Hank Willis Thomas' collection. Matthew Novak

Maybe it seems cliché, but I do a lot of that now, collaborative storytelling. I even used these action figures in 2005 to make a short film with my friend Kambui Olujimi about my cousin's murder, called "Winter in America." From the elements of pop culture to the way I critique American identity and values in my work, playing with G.I. Joes was my training ground.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

The New York Times

SPRING GALLERY GUIDE

12 Galleries to Visit Now in Chelsea

By Roberta Smith

April 26, 2018

Pit stop: The High Line's picturesque setting is perfect for post-gallery ruminating, or for budding photographers inspired by their gallery tour. Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Chelsea may be the New York art neighborhood that many people love to disdain. It also may be approaching a tipping point, where new apartment towers outnumber galleries. But the place is not monolithic. Its scores of galleries come in all shapes, sizes and annual budgets, and as usual they offer a ton of art to be seen. Here is but a small sample.

Hank Willis Thomas's "We want equal — but … (II)," also below, after being illuminated. His works are on view at both locations of Jack Shainman Gallery. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY *through May 12; 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, jackshainman.com.* Hank Willis Thomas's art always hits its mark, but the question is, does he aim high enough? "What We Ask Is Simple," his especially ambitious show suggests a steeper angle. Seen in dimmed lighting, it occupies the gallery's two spaces, and its most plentiful works are wall pieces on glass that lead double lives. Initially they look mostly blank — some have textures suggesting abstract painting, others have fragments of figures. Shine a cellphone flashlight on one or flash-photograph it, and crowded, sometimes violent vintage photographs appear. They show various civil rights protests — Birmingham and St. Augustine (anti-segregation), London (women's suffrage), Nuremberg in 1933 (anti-Nazi). The shock is magical yet emotionally unsettling, reminding you of people's courage in the face of oppression, history's erasures, and the way the past recedes into darkness. The problem is that the images and the history they preserve gets a little lost in the brilliant, if slightly gimmicky, technique.

Double lives: Mr. Thomas's seemingly blank canvases yield crowded, sometimes violent vintage photographs after being illuminated by a smartphone flashlight (or better yet, a camera's flash). Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

THE NEW YORKER

NEWS DESK

A DEVASTATING, OVERDUE NATIONAL MEMORIAL TO LYNCHING VICTIMS

By Alexis Okeowo April 26, 2018

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opens this week, in Alabama, forces visitors to face the country's history of racist terror.

Photograph by Audra Melton / NYT / Redux

The list of petty transgressions used to justify the lynching of African-Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was cruelly and exhaustingly long. Caleb Gadly was lynched in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in 1894, for walking behind the wife of his white employer. David Walker was accused of using inappropriate language with a white woman in Hickman, Kentucky, in 1908; he, his wife, and their four children were lynched. Ballie Crutchfield, a woman, was lynched in Rome, Tennessee, in 1901, by a mob searching for her brother. Hundreds, sometimes thousands, of white spectators would show up to watch. They wore their Sunday best, posed for photos with their children, ate snacks, and drank soda and lemonade. Afterward, the body might be dragged through the streets of black neighborhoods. Often, body parts were cut off and collected as souvenirs.

This week, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice opens in Montgomery, Alabama. Designed and built by the legal-advocacy group the Equal Justice Initiative, or E.J.I., it is an outdoor exhibit devoted to victims of lynching. Eight hundred and five rusting steel columns are geometrically arranged on a grassy hill. Each column is inscribed with the names of lynching victims and the county in which they were murdered. The columns are suspended from the ceiling above them, starting at eye-level and then rising as the wooden floor slopes downward, evoking lifeless bodies hanging from trees. The accompanying Legacy Museum describes the history of American racial injustice, from enslavement to mass incarceration, and illustrates lesser-known aspects of that narrative, like the domestic slave trade.

Alabama, my home state, is a place obsessed with its history and its founding myths. Whenever I fly into Montgomery and get on I-85 to drive to my parents' home, I pass a highway exit sign advertising the "First White House of the Confederacy," the former residence of Jefferson Davis. On a recent drive to northern Alabama, I saw a Confederate flag flying near an off-ramp, planted there by an organization celebrating the descendants of Confederate veterans.

Yet the state, especially its capital, has often overlooked its slave-holding origins. In 1860, two-thirds of the Montgomery county population was enslaved. Downtown Montgomery was once the site of slave warehouses and markets. Enslaved people were unloaded on Commerce Street at one end on the Alabama River and marched to auctions in Court Square. In 2013, E.J.I. installed historical markers at both places, but the scale and ambition of the memorial and museum are much greater. "Despite how dominant and central enslavement is to the history of this country, we don't address it," Bryan Stevenson, the founder of E.J.I., told me. "The visuals that most people carry around about slavery are very benign, very muted: enslaved people are depicted as happy and well fed and well treated."

E.J.I. has identified more than four thousand four hundred lynching victims, many of them unnamed, from eight hundred and five counties, mostly in the South. All lynchings occurred between 1877 and 1950. The organization says it is still receiving information about previously unknown murders. During its investigation, the group interviewed members of communities where the crimes took place and talked to relatives and descendants of people who had been killed.

"Raise Up," a sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas, on the grounds of the memorial.

Photograph by Audra Melton / NYT / Redux

James Johnson, a retired schoolteacher in Abbeville, Alabama, told me that the memorial was "bittersweet" and overdue. His distant cousin, Wes Johnson, an eighteen-year-old tenant farmer, was accused of attacking a white woman and lynched in 1937. More than a hundred of his fellow-townsmen kidnapped him from jail, shot him, and hung him. Johnson's mother told him about the murder when he was a child. "She told me I had a cousin who was lynched, and she told me his name. As a little boy, I didn't know what the word 'lynched' meant," he recalled. "But it was a way of her telling me to be very careful. There are just certain things I can say, certain ways I'm supposed to look at people. I'm not supposed to touch certain people. It was for survival purposes." After the lynching, Johnson's relatives mostly stayed silent and kept to themselves, scared for their lives; some moved away. In the aftermath of a recent "60 Minutes" story on his cousin that featured him, Johnson said that he received several supportive, apologetic messages from white neighbors.

From a distance, the lynching memorial appears serene, an architectural feat on a green knoll. But, as I entered the dense space, the serenity mutated into uneasiness. By the time the ground gave way, so that the monuments hovered above my head, the experience was devastating. Stevenson said one of the goals with the memorial is to force visitors to face the country's past. "It's so much easier to not be burdened by the history of slavery if you don't see anything that's burdensome or disruptive," he said.

The memorial has prompted a kind of reckoning in Montgomery. The Montgomery *Advertiser*, founded in 1829, recently began a series examining the way it had covered lynching in the past. The first installment demonstrated how the newspaper often engaged in empty moralizing on the violence of the act as it tried to justify the targeting of black Alabamians. "All right-thinking people deplore lynchings, but it is wise to utter a solemn truth, with the old, old lemon brought home again, as long as there are attempts at rape by black men, red men or yellow men on white women there will be lynchings," an editorial from 1919 read. The coverage assumed black people were guilty, and so ultimately deserving of murder.

It is a source of simultaneous pain and pride that Alabama's progress has often been the result of force, of violent push and pull, among conflicting visions of the state, from the Civil War to the civil-rights movement and beyond. Throughout, the burden of guilt has usually been on black people to bear and to somehow escape. Now, a visitor to Montgomery can take a leisurely walk from the state capitol to a museum on the Confederacy, to another museum on the Freedom Riders. The memorial to the victims of lynching is a necessary addition to that landscape, if only to remind Alabamians, and other Americans, that the terror it represents will no longer be overlooked.

Newsweek

CULTURE

WOULD YOU STAND UP FOR YOUR BELIEFS? NEW HANK WILLIS THOMAS SHOW ASKS JUST THAT

BY MARY KAYE SCHILLING ON 4/12/18 AT 11:00 AM

Artist Hank Willis Thomas. His show is up at Jack Shainman's two Chelsea galleries in New York and runs through May 12. It features 15 works based on photographs of 20th century protest movements around the world.

Hank Willis Thomas came across the photo in 2014. The artist, whose work deals with identity, history and popular culture, often employs vintage images in his art. This one, taken in 1936, is of a crowd of Germans in a Homberg shipyard. Adolf Hitler has arrived to christen a ship, and as thousands "Seig Heil" the führer, one man stands, arms folded, a solitary figure of defiance in a sea of complicity.

Willis learned the man's name, August Landmesser, and that he was married to a Jewish woman. Somehow, Landmesser survived the war, and his gesture, captured nearly 80 years ago, was a spark for "What We Ask Is Simple," Thomas's latest show. "What I think about when I look at the photo is that if I had been standing in that place, would I have that courage?" the artist says. "When everyone around me is doing the same thing, would I stand up for what I believe in? That is what this whole body of work is about."

The show, divided between Jack Shainman's two Chelsea galleries in New York and running through May 12, features 15 works based on photographs of 20th century protest movements around the world. ("What We Ask Is Simple" is a phrase from an American Civil Rights protest sign.) Images include the 1913 funeral procession of militant suffragette Emily Davison; a black 15-year-old who carried the American flag 54 miles through Alabama, from Selma to Montgomery, in 1965; members of the American Indian Movement seizing Wounded Knee in 1973; and South Africa's 1976 Soweto uprising. In that last devastating work, a black student holds up his arms in supplication as snarling police dogs strain at their leashes.

In Thomas's "We want equal—but...(II)," retroflection hides the white mothers picketing desegregation at a Baltimore high school in 1954, instead highlighting the heroic black students being escorted by the Reverend James L. Johnson.

COURTESY OF HANK WILLIS THOMAS/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Thomas became familiar with many of these images when he was a child. His mother, Deborah Willis—a photographer, photo historian and MacArthur “Genius” Grant recipient—worked as a curator at New York’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Thomas spent hours in the archives, as entranced by 20th-century photography as other children are by Legos. When he grew up, he trained as a photographer, and his conceptual work often entails years of patient research. “As my mother’s son, I’m very interested in looking at the past through the lens of the present.”

For his 2010 show at the Brooklyn Museum, “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008,” Thomas appropriated ads from the year of Martin Luther King’s assassination through the election of Barack Obama, stripping away text, logos and any branding to showcase how advertising has commodified the African-American male body. He repeated the idea in 2015, this time focusing on white women. That advertising is racist and sexist wasn't surprising; the revelation was how insidious and political that messaging can be, and how much of it we miss or take for granted.

“All my work is about framing and perspective, history and context,” Thomas says. “And I thought, How do I shine a light on history in a different way, making the moments feel current and allowing a new relationship to them? And then I was looking at this material called retroflective—even the name implies looking back.”

The material is the coating commonly used to increase the nighttime visibility of traffic signs and clothing. For the new show, Thomas employed a process of silvering, half-tone screen printing and 3-D image capture (“I still barely understand how it works,” says Thomas with a laugh) that allows each work to be viewed in multiple ways. When dimly lit, only selected elements or figures, like Landmesser, are visible, surrounded by a ghostly field of white; as the light brightens, or if you take a flash photograph with your phone, the entirety of the original image—its context—is revealed. The retroflective, while dramatically highlighting moments of extreme courage, also, to some extent, allows the viewer to step into the role of image-maker.

For his latest show, Thomas was first inspired by a 1936 image of a German man unwilling to salute Hitler. "Refusal" incorporates that image.

COURTESY OF HANK WILLIS THOMAS/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

It isn't lost on Thomas that the result recalls the dying art of film processing, which began disappearing with digital photography. "For me, it's partly about making these images fleeting and precious in a way that I used to feel emotionally when I was printing," he says. "It's almost like the revelation of the darkroom experience, where the images come out of nowhere."

Thomas's work often emphasizes the perennial fight for equality, and how perception can trump reality when it comes to change. "What We Ask Is Simple" is certainly timely as intolerance and extremism surface yet again. And, yes, asking yourself if you have courage is simple enough. It's the answer that's hard. You can't know "until you're tested," says Thomas. "It's often people in the weakest positions who choose to put themselves on the line. And they are so easily erased—some might say whitewashed—and written over."

The Standard

MAY 02 2018

Hank Willis Thomas Shines a Light

NEW YORK-ART

Hank Willis Thomas is having quite a moment. In the past year, the conceptual artist has won two major art world prizes (a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Aimia | AGO Photography Prize), presented work in dozens of museum shows, and installed public art projects around the world.

Thomas's engagement with the politics of identity, history, the history of art, and popular culture is particularly apropos in today's political climate. His newest body of work—currently on view at both locations of Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea—somehow manages the feat of being both extremely thoughtful, and intrinsically Instagram-ready. It's the rare show you have to see with your own eyes, *and* special glasses, *and* your phone, with none of those entirely taking precedence.

Last week, The Standard sat down with the artist at The Standard, High Line to talk about his new body of work, as well as an installation slated for debut at this week's Frieze New York art fair. All of these projects reflect a rigorously researched, intensely considered artistic practice committed to exploring the intersections of visual arts, civil rights, and activism.

THE STANDARD: While primarily based on appropriated archival imagery from 20th century protests worldwide, What We Ask Is Simple is very much a mixed media show. Can you elaborate on the techniques you use?

HANK WILLIS THOMAS: Sure, the show has three main materials: stainless steel sculpture, retroreflective prints, and mirrored glass. In each of the processes, the approach to making the work was pretty uncommon. The sculpture was 3D scanned, router cut, digitally printed, casted, and printed in stainless steel. It's based off a lithograph called *Strike Scene* (1935) by Louis Lozowick which I saw in the Whitney Museum collection protest show that is currently up. I use selectively toned glass to make mirrors that have photographs in them or that we mount images behind. The goal is to have the viewer both look at the work and through the work at the same time and see their own reflections. The whole show is a huge revelation because these are materials I've been working with in various ways over an extended period of time, but this is the first time I've been able to make a show *around* it.

The work requires many different ways of looking. What are you asking of the viewer?

I think "ways of looking" is a good way to put it. The work in the show is really about how we approach looking at specific images or objects and trying to encourage the viewer to be hyperaware of their agency, but also of their unique perspective. Some of the work can only be seen if there is a light mounted to your head, or if you're taking a flash photograph. Even still, moving around them changes your perspective. I think there is a metaphor for history and that sometimes we need to shine light on certain things to see them in a new way or to remember them. A lot of the images that are used and the people in them are not the people who normally get the light shined on them; and so it's really a reminder for myself, as well as for the viewers, to look deeper and not just for what's visible on the face reading.

What is the significance in obscuring the viewing experience in this way?

There is an elusiveness. What you see with the glasses is not completely the image and what you see without the glasses is not completely the image. It's like having two truths exist in the same space but not being visible at the same time. I thought about opacity in the fact that the printing process on the retroreflective is really about what light gets shined through when you shine your light on it from your perspective. It reflects back where the light is allowed to shine. There's a really interesting metaphor in physics for this kind of research and the searching I hope many of the viewers who go see the show have. We often go to a show and just take a picture and don't look at the work. In this show, if someone does that, they're walking away with something different than what they saw with their eyes and so they have to reconcile that. People sometimes say, "Oh, can you send me pictures" or "I saw it online." Well, you didn't see it because I was there and even I didn't really see it, but I made it. I have revelations in looking at the work all the time.

What's the relationship between abstraction and realism in this work?

One of the challenges I've always had with archival images is that if it's a news photograph or something that we've seen as a "document," there's an expiration date on the relevance. We put them in boxes and never look at them again. When you call something "art," it allows people to engage it differently because art hopefully—well, definitely—will outlive us but it has this perennial sense of worth and value. When you take images that are seen as current events and easily dispersed and use the language of art history and lauded artists to frame them differently, I hope it gives these images new life. Abstraction is one of the tools that allows people to be drawn into it and you might see something on the surface and not see any image but under certain light and under certain circumstances there is more to it.

"Almost all of my work is really about trying to reconcile how, in this great country, we continue to allow things that are so antithetical to our values to exist."

Can you tell us about the fabric banner installation with stars that represent victims of gun violence that you are planning for Frieze?

I went to high school in the Washington DC area and on the National Mall there's the Jefferson Memorial; there's the Lincoln Memorial; there's the Vietnam War Memorial, the World War II Memorial; there's the Korean War Memorial. There are memorials all over the country for the civil war, but there is no memorial for the victims of

gun violence in this country. The fact that more people have been killed in the past 15 years here than were killed in all of the wars since World War II is scary. And all these soldiers who gave their lives for this country are going to be memorialized, and rightfully so. But, what about the others? How do we memorialize them? This is something that is not going to change over night and it's not a fixed story, so maybe that's why we don't have 20/20 vision... And then there's the flag, the stars and bars. I've looked at the bars part for a long time. We imprison more people than anyone else in the world. I also feel the need to look at the stars and these people are like fallen stars. My cousin was a victim of gun violence. Almost all of my work is really about trying to reconcile how, in this great country, we continue to allow things that are so antithetical to our values to exist.

Speaking about memorials, your work will be included in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and you're part of New York City's public design commission, which recently removed the controversial J. Marion Sims sculpture from Central Park. What are your thoughts on monuments these days?

Future generations will define and try to understand us by the art that we make and celebrate, so it is critical to be part of that conversation, if one can, but also to redefine what we call art. So I created Four Freedoms with my friend Eric Gottesman which started off as a political action committee [PAC]. What happens when a political organization is made in the interest of a creative practice and art? Can we blur the lines between art and politics so that we don't just have uncreative people building and shaping our nation? What does it mean to make space for people who you might like but don't agree with, or people you don't like but do agree with and, hopefully, have them approach you with that same generosity, in the spirit of creative citizenship and patriotism?

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Frieze New York diary: Scarlett Johansson and John Krasinski arrive at the VVIP preview and more gossip from the fair

Famous faces fraternise at Frieze

THE ART NEWSPAPER
4th May 2018 13:30 GMT

Now you see it... Hank Willis Thomas and his work I don't remember them walking two steps behind anybody (blue tidal wave) (2018) © Gareth Harris

Seen in a flash

The US artist Hank Willis Thomas was spotted telling visitors at Jack Shainman's stand that his work, I don't remember them walking two steps behind anybody (blue tidal wave) (2018), needs to be seen in a special light—one that is typically verboten for art. The retro-reflective piece is activated by flash photography. Snap-happy fair-goers can access its hidden content—the civil rights leader Gloria Richardson brushing off a National Guardsman during a 1963 demonstration—using their mobile phones. "It's like seeing history in a flash," commented one impressed onlooker. Cue shudders from every museum warden tired of telling visitors "no flash photography".

ELEPHANT

11 Apr 2018

Hank Willis Thomas Takes On Politics and Provocation in New York

"The road to progress is always under construction." In his latest exhibition, Hank Willis Thomas explores new ways of seeing through images of protest. Words by Holly Black

Power to the People I'm too Young to Vote (blue and gold), 2018, (flash)

Hank Willis Thomas is on a constant investigation to understand how we perceive the imagery and communications that surround us, and the myriad ways that differences in race, gender and social status impact those reactions. He has doctored advertisements to highlight representations (and stereotypes) around identity, invited a broad public to air their views in The Truth Booth and collaborated (through the artist super PAC For Freedoms) on a billboard that combined an image of the civil rights march in Selma in 1965 with the contemporary political slogan "Make America Great Again".

In his new show at Jack Shainman in New York, he has used utilitarian, reflective materials to present archival protest images that have varying levels of visibility, depending on the viewer's interaction with them. Many are "activated" by using a flashlight or the viewfinder of a smart phone, which suddenly reveals the wider context of the action taking place.

You are using a very specific reflective material in many of the works on display. What is its significance?

The show is a different journey for me because I'm primarily using one material. There's a retroreflective screen, which is rarely used in fine art. It's an industrial material used for "stop" signs and to make other forms of public wayfinding. I'm trying to use it as a method to illuminate images, stories and parts of history that are often overlooked or have become so lost in the landscape of hyper-consumption of photography, through mediums like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. These limit our capacity to actually look closely, because we're trained to scroll past, and we're constantly trying to discover the next best thing.

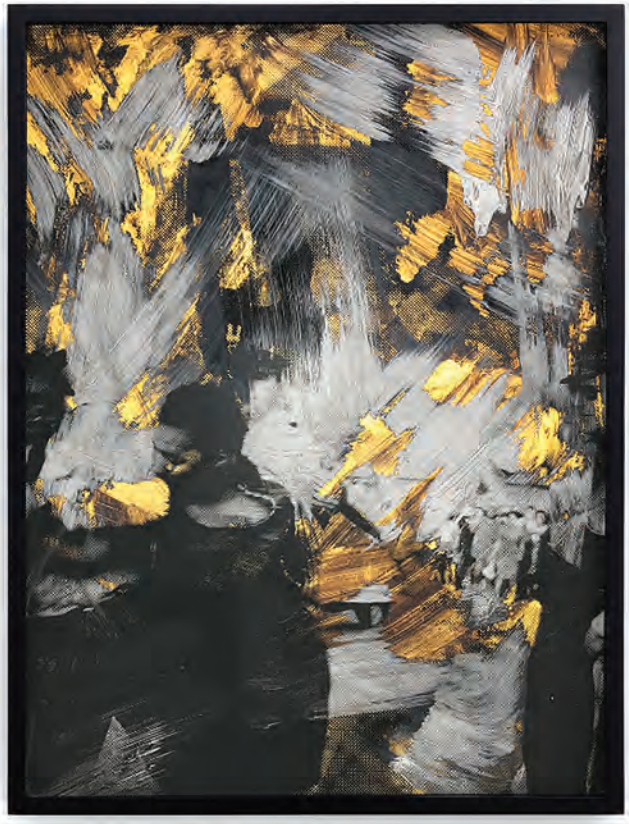
I Tried to see a friendly face, 2018 (no flash)
I Tried to see a friendly face, 2018, (flash)

The show is an opportunity for provocation; for myself and viewers to pause; to reflect and to see things in a new way and maybe discover things we should have seen. A lot of images are about protest, mostly in the United States and around civil rights. I was trying to connect them to a greater narrative of the past.

It's the kind of work that, even when you're looking with your own eyes, you wonder, "Am I really seeing it?" The work demands that the viewer moves around in order to see it. For example in photographs of Turbulence, which features an image surrounded by gold, it would almost never look like that to the naked eye. It would only look that way if you were staring at it with the sunlight right behind you, or with a flash.

The way that you view the work in person, with all these different ways of seeing, seems so prescient at this point in time. We need to be so careful about the information we are digesting.

Yes, for sure. I've always been interested in framing and context and how depending on where you stand it affects your notion of the truth and reality. You can see that in other work that has been discussed by Elephant, like Unbranded: A Century of White Women. Also, the Truth Booth project, where it's really about how, by removing one small element, you can actually reveal an underlying truth. I'm really interested in both me and the viewers becoming investigators and explorers; helping to create a greater curiosity about the information we're getting, how we get it, and how we react to it. It's about not taking anything at face value. We're also in a period of political rhetoric that relies heavily on slogans and advertising methodology.



Turbulence (whitewash), 2018 (flash)

That's a tried and true strategy in politics. Just look at the Third Reich, that was all about branding and getting people to buy into a notion about themselves and the world. If we think about Volkswagen, that's a product of Nazism. It was designed as "the people's wagon", and we think about [the car] as apolitical, as a product. But it's the product of a political regime's branding strategy.

"There were times when photographs were especially revered, because of the unique perspective that they gave us on life."

Have you worked with existing protest images from your archive for this show?

Yes, I've worked with a couple of the images before, but they're all brand new pieces. I have a constantly growing archive. I'm a photographer and a photo historian, so that research has been an important element of my life from before I can really remember. It is a form of navigation and making sense of the world. Photographs are often seen to document our representations of the truth. They can also challenge these ideas.

We want equal - but...(II), 2018, (no flash)
We want equal - but...(II),, 2018 (flash)

It seems like we're also making our own truths, through live-streaming events or otherwise documenting actions that might not otherwise be seen. There's an element of that, in the fact that people need to view your work through a device, in order to experience all of its different facets.

Correct; how do we see again? There were times when photographs were especially revered, because of the unique perspective that they gave us on life. We could pontificate and learn about ourselves and the world. I guess I'm trying to reawaken that—the revelatory feeling.

It almost looks as if something has been physically wiped away from some of the images you have used as if it is being uncovered. Is there deliberately more noise and texture?

I'd say some of them, not most of them, are more painterly. There are more mirror works in this show as well, and a stainless-steel sculpture. So, you could argue that the entire show is about reflection. It takes a different effort, working in the more painterly way. But maybe doing that calls attention to the manipulation that is going on by me, the relationship with the photographer, and the medium itself.

Freedom Now (red and gold), 2018, (flash)

I think the concept for the show is actually really simple. It's about the ongoing, perpetual and never-ending quest for equal rights. The weed is constantly growing. One of my catchphrases is, "The road to progress is always under construction." We're always trying to reach this plateau where we think everything will be okay and we'll all be on equal footing; that justice will be served. But every time we get there we realise that these people were left out or forgotten, that they weren't part of the calculation. I think the question is: "What is it that we want, what does equality look like, and what does that mean in the future?"

a LEGACY UNCEASING

Hank Willis Thomas doesn't separate art and activism – it's all just life.

STORY BY *Britt Julious*
PORTRAIT BY *Michael O'Neill*

DON'T CALL HANK WILLIS Thomas a political artist.

Although some media sources use the term for his perceptive, quietly confrontational art, Thomas says his work operates from a broader place. "I would describe my art in the context of my humanity, because it is hard for me to separate the work that I do as an artist from anything else I do in my life," Thomas says. "I often don't introduce myself as an artist. I say I am a person."

For nearly 20 years, Thomas has used his platform as an artist to examine how images manipulate our understanding of identity and history, particularly as they relate to black people and black life. He is an observer and explorer, soaking in the stories of the people around him, deconstructing their narratives to find hidden meanings and universal truths.

Thomas, born in 1976, earned a BA in photography and Africana studies at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in 1998, then an MFA in photography and an MA in visual criticism from California College of the Arts in 2004. Those initial areas of interest grew into his current artistic practice. He works in various mediums – photography, film and video, installation, sculpture – and is not tied to a particular technique or approach, instead choosing whatever fits the project. In *South Bend* (2012), for example, he used cut-up, realigned basketball jerseys to create a quilt more than 6 feet tall. In his Blind Memory series at Savannah College of Art and Design, Thomas examined the region's history of slavery, filling glass cases with four agricultural products – cotton, indigo, rice, and tobacco – fueled by the antebellum slave economy.

One of Thomas' best-known pieces, 2014's *Raise Up,* is a bronze sculpture of black men's heads and arms emerging from a white base.

ABOVE:
South Bend (2012), of mixed media and sports jerseys, is Thomas' comment on the link between "the idea of buying and selling of bodies in slavery with the trading of bodies in sports." The title refers both to the Gee's Bend quilters and the Indiana home of Notre Dame.

RIGHT:
The viewer's gaze (here, the artist's) is front and center in **Target with Four Faces (Johns)** (2017), in this portrait within a portrait.

Bend photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery / Portrait in collaboration with Hank Willis Thomas

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Michael O'Neill (2)

ABOVE, LEFT: Thomas makes "retroreflective prints," enhanced photographs whose images look different in darkness and light. **Bombingham (Moore Warhol Kline)** (2017, left) refers to explosions in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights movement.

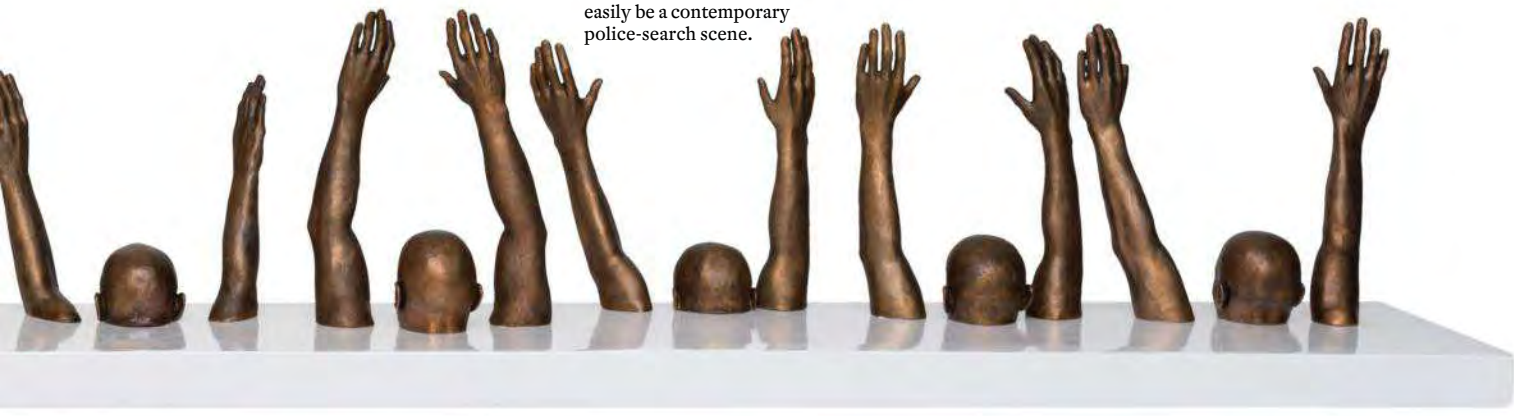
The sculpture is a three-dimensional interpretation of a famous apartheid-era image by pioneering South African photojournalist Ernest Cole, showing naked miners with arms raised during a medical exam.

The image evokes the conditions and circumstances of contemporary black life: It's easy to see the men of *Raise Up* as young black men in the United States with arms raised during a police search. The result is searing, confrontational – and hauntingly familiar. Here, Thomas suggests, little has changed.

Many of Thomas' sculptures are in conversation with photographs, his own or others'. "Photography gave me justification for something I was already always doing," he says, "which was looking for the truth."

Thomas credits his mother – a photographer, collector, and educator – for his interest both in art and in his subject matter. In her capacity as a historian, she developed a keen focus on the exploration and preservation of marginalized and ignored populations, especially people of African descent. "I think I developed a great appreciation for alternative histories and how what's going on outside of the frame of a camera shapes our notion of the truth just as much as something that's inside the frame," Thomas observes.

Steve Weinik, courtesy of Philadelphia Mural Arts



Raise Up (2014) is based on an apartheid-era photo of South African miners, but it could just as easily be a contemporary police-search scene.

The Afro pick, Thomas notes, "exists today as many things to different people: It is worn as adornment, a political emblem, and signature of collective identity." He installed the 8-foot **All Power to All People** (2017) across from Philadelphia's City Hall.

Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas and Ben Brown Fine Arts London

Blind Memory photos (4): John McKinnon, SCAD

"I often don't introduce myself as an artist," Thomas says. "I say I am a person."

Blind Memory (2017), at the Savannah College of Art and Design, points to the region's history, with four crops long cultivated using slave labor – rice, tobacco, indigo, and cotton – displayed in prominent glass cases.

At first, Thomas was a reluctant student – but his mother would not be easily deterred. "She was more forcing me to do it," he remembers, "and by the time I realized I was being played, so to speak, I was already following in her footsteps."

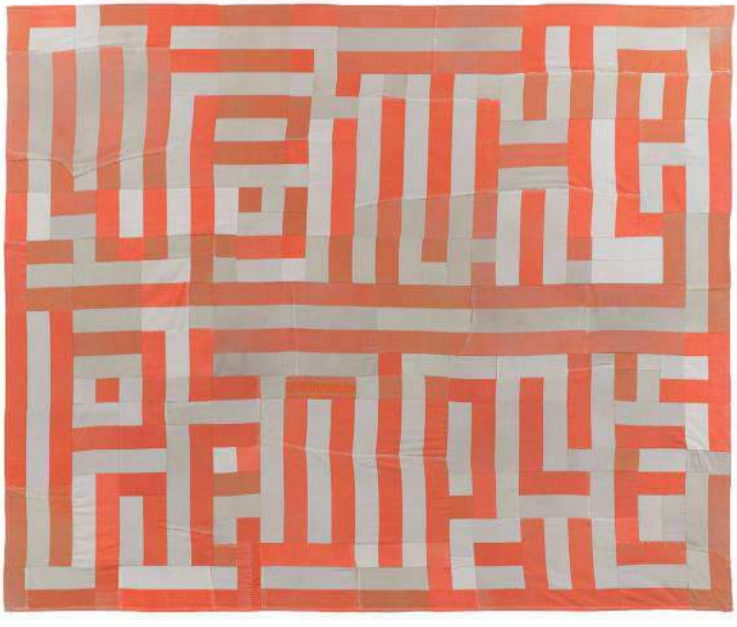
Thomas' father held many jobs – soldier, chemist, physicist, film producer, jazz musician – and Thomas says that

continual reinvention inspired him. "I think his constant search for new beginnings and new opportunities and new ways to explore the world was something that I witnessed pretty closely," Thomas says. "I think I warmed up in a similar style in my work, which is eclectic, and it's reflective of both of my parents in their approaches to the world – to life."

For one such exploration, 2017's *All Power to All People,* Thomas built an 8-foot-tall, 800-pound aluminum and stainless steel Afro pick, with a clenched fist topping the handle, placed across from Philadelphia's City Hall on Thomas Paine Plaza. In his artist statement, he notes, "As an accessory of a hairstyle, [the Afro pick] represented counterculture and civil rights during

Much of human history has been told in terms of "us versus them," Thomas notes, including the sports world. **Will You Fly or Will You Vanish** (2017) incorporates soccer jerseys into an *Asafo* flag, a Ghanian art form that connotes military companies – another "us versus them" division.

Thomas credits his parents – a photographer and a Renaissance man – for his exploratory approach.



Thomas used decommissioned prison uniforms for the large quilts **You Shouldn't Be the Prisoner of Your Own Ideas** (2017, above) and **We the People** (2015, right). The colors – leafy green and citrus orange – form a boxed-in pattern that suggests incarceration.

one of the most important eras of American history. It exists today as many things to different people; it is worn as adornment, a political emblem, and signature of collective identity. The Afro pick continues to develop itself as a testament to innovation. This piece serves to highlight ideas related to community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and resistance to oppression."

Now Thomas aims to take these ideas, and those of fellow artists, to the political world. In 2016, Thomas co-founded For Freedoms, the first artist-led super PAC. If all art is political, he wonders, why is art so far removed from the political process? Super PACs are "political advertising agencies," Thomas says, and For Freedoms aims to advertise artists' ideas to the decision-makers in public office. "I thought that by creating For Freedoms," Thomas says, "we would be able to hopefully propose the idea of art having a necessary role in civil society, but also encouraging the ideas throughout the world, and not just in museums and galleries."

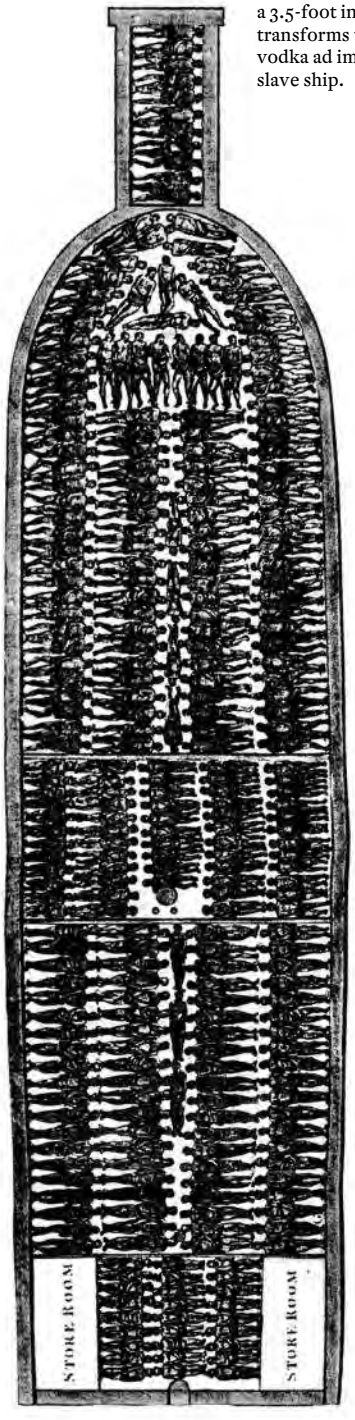
This is a new kind of project for Thomas, but it is also the continuation of a lifetime of exploration. He was raised not to be afraid of breaking artistic barriers, to view challenge as opportunity. It is a lesson he has never forgotten.

✚

hankwillisthomas.com

Britt Julious is a journalist and essayist in Chicago.

Photos: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery



BELOW:
Absolut Power (2003), a 3.5-foot inkjet print, transforms the familiar vodka ad image into a slave ship.

ABSOLUT POWER.

ABOVE:
And One (2003) is part of Thomas' Branded series, which confronts racial codes in advertising imagery and America's athletic-industrial complex.

BOMB

Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi

Apr 3, 2018

Interview

Art

#143

ISSUE

Hank Willis Thomas, *My Father Died For This Country Too. I Am An American Also.*, 2018, screenprint on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond exposed to flash, 60 × 48 inches. All images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery unless otherwise noted.

Hank Willis Thomas and I have been friends for nearly twenty-five years and have collaborated on numerous projects, including the films *Winter in America* (2005) and *Am I Going Too Fast* (2014) (in collaboration with Christopher Myers). In 2016, Thomas curated an exhibition of my large-scale sculptures, prints, and drawings entitled *Solastalgia* at the CUE Art Foundation in New York City.

We met up at Hank's studio to discuss some of the intersections in our practice and process, as well as our different articulations of neighboring concepts, such as historical doppelgangers in photography, time as a projection of power, and finding idiosyncratic agency. Our conversation focused on Thomas's upcoming exhibition, *What We Ask Is Simple*, at Jack Shainman Gallery, and my recent solo projects, *Zulu Time* (2017) and *Where Does the Time Go ...* (2017)
—Kambui Olujimi

Kambui Olujimi
It's good to be back in your studio, man. I haven't been here in a couple months.

Hank Willis Thoma
Thanks for coming by.

KO
What are you working on right now?

HWT
Several things. My next solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea will open in early spring. It's my first show there in three years, so I'm definitely very nervous. And then a new ambitious initiative for *For Freedoms*, the artist-run Super PAC I cofounded with Eric Gottesman in 2016. We're trying to do exhibitions, town halls, and billboards in all fifty states in the fall of 2018.

KO
What are you thinking for your show at Jack's?

HWT
We're still sorting it out. The working title is *What We Ask Is Simple,* and it's a show focused on the ethos behind many of the critical moments in human and social rights movements of the twentieth century. I'm trying to revisit them through archival photographs that I reproduce in new ways, to encourage the viewer to consider the old as new. I'm thinking about the past as present, looking at how things we believe long past are still current. While we think we're dealing with new situations, we're actually revisiting cycles and need to learn from past successes and mistakes.

KO

There's also this idea of the past not being a singular place. Like, Which place? Ten years ago, we learned something; five years ago, we learned something else, and so on. So, is it a question of where are we in terms of progression and also in terms of stagnation?

Hank Willis Thomas, *Make America Great Again*, 2016, vinyl billboard, 10.5 × 36 feet. Photo by Wyatt Gallery/For Freedoms. Courtesy of the artist and *For Freedoms*.

HWT

Yes. Those are critical questions. We're living in what feels like an incredibly singular time, but I wonder if it's any more concerning than the forty years of the Cold War or life under Jim Crow or during the Civil War. There have been so many different moments, and depending on who you were as an American, you might have felt an equal level of tumult and concern for the world.

KO

So, in what way are you unpacking this? What kind of archival images are you thinking about?

HWT

Well, we live in an era in which there are more images produced in a single second than any of us can make sense of in our entire lives. Now we're used to scrolling, looking past images. Images less familiar to us, say, from the '60s and '70s, seem to have so many topographical layers of visual sediment on top of them that we don't even really see them anymore. I'm trying to get myself and then other people to dig below the layers of popular culture and media distraction and blurring of vision, so that we can see certain things more clearly and think about how we can position ourselves and look at our current moment with a certain amount of hindsight because, as I said, the past is present.

Hank Willis Thomas, *Meschers*, 2017, quilt made out of decommissioned prison uniforms, 75.25 × 57.625 × 1.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

KO

Interesting. Two things jump out: hindsight as a form of clarity, where that time-shift happens through the language surrounding the moment. Clarity materializes as the moment is metabolized, when the present is past. Maybe we'll loop back around to that.

The other idea that jumps out to me is blurring. Images are being created so fast that no one can digest them. There's probably four million cat pictures produced daily, so there's a redundancy in that production. How many people are recreating an image of the sunrise yesterday, today, and every day following? In relation to your show, how much of the work breaks that historical chain letter? Like the way fire hoses and German shepherds become shorthand for an era of brutality without us actually seeing the assault. I'm excited to see how your work grapples with legibility in the now and interrupts the redundancy of that signifier.

HWT
Yeah, I mean, you and I have known each other for almost a quarter century. When we studied photography, there were no digital cameras, and there was still things that hadn't yet been done. Color film was still a little bit fresh.

KO
We're not that old! It was the '90s. There were digital cameras, but I know what you're getting at.

HWT
Ten years earlier, no one was using color film. It's true. Only William Christenberry, Stephen Shore, and—

KO
—William Eggleston and Ernst Haas.

HWT
Yeah, those dudes. But it wasn't that long before.

KO
Okay. There had been about 150 years of black-and-white photography versus four or five decades of art photography in color. I'm with you.

HWT
Color was still a new frontier. Then, digital photography enabled so many more people to create images; there's an infinite number of photographers now. The canon of photography that we learned is, to a degree, irrelevant today because there's more great, fine art photography than we can even conceive. So, as photo lovers and people trained in photography, we don't even really see pictures for what they are anymore. It's rare that I see an image and I'm like, Oh, wow, this is something new. I can still appreciate images that are powerful, amazing, strong, but I'm also thinking, Do I take a picture of a picture because I have a camera in my own hand? Do I swipe past it?

I don't really have that same kind of phenomenological experience of asking myself: How did you get there? How did you make that image? Who are you because you took this image?

KO

Do you think that's partly due to the physicality versus immateriality of the images?

HWT

I think immateriality is part of the alienation. We used to take hours to set up one shot before we even took a Polaroid to preplan an image. Now, you go in and take a picture, see what you like, frame it, throw something else in, frame it, take another picture. I might take a hundred pictures before I even take the real picture. And then I might take another hundred after that. There's no consequence to overshooting, and that's why people tend to be less detailed in the making of images and also in their consumption of them.

So, how do I get myself or the viewer to pause and stop and, even if it's an old image, see it as if it's new, with a degree of wonder? What interests me most in all my work, be it photography or sculpture or video or text, is reflexiveness. I think the viewer needs to be the photographer now. Meaning, when I make work, I'm asking, How will what the viewer sees affect their relationship to the object or image that I'm making?

KO

This goes back to your undergraduate work with the frame; you would go out and have people hold a physical frame and ask them to use it to frame an image. Then you would compose another image that included both and what they had framed. You were already thinking about this idea of active viewership, which is experiential.

With your lenticular prints, an image is only revealed when the viewer changes position in relation to it. For your new work with the archive images, the viewing also involves a spatial dimension.

HWT

Are you talking about my retroreflective prints?

KO

Exactly. With the retroreflectives, it's the viewer's rephotographing with a flash that completes the imaging process. This is a really interesting way of placing that archive squarely in a contemporary moment.

Hank Willis Thomas, *Operation Soap*, 2017, screenprint on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond in ambient light, 60 × 48 inches.

HWT

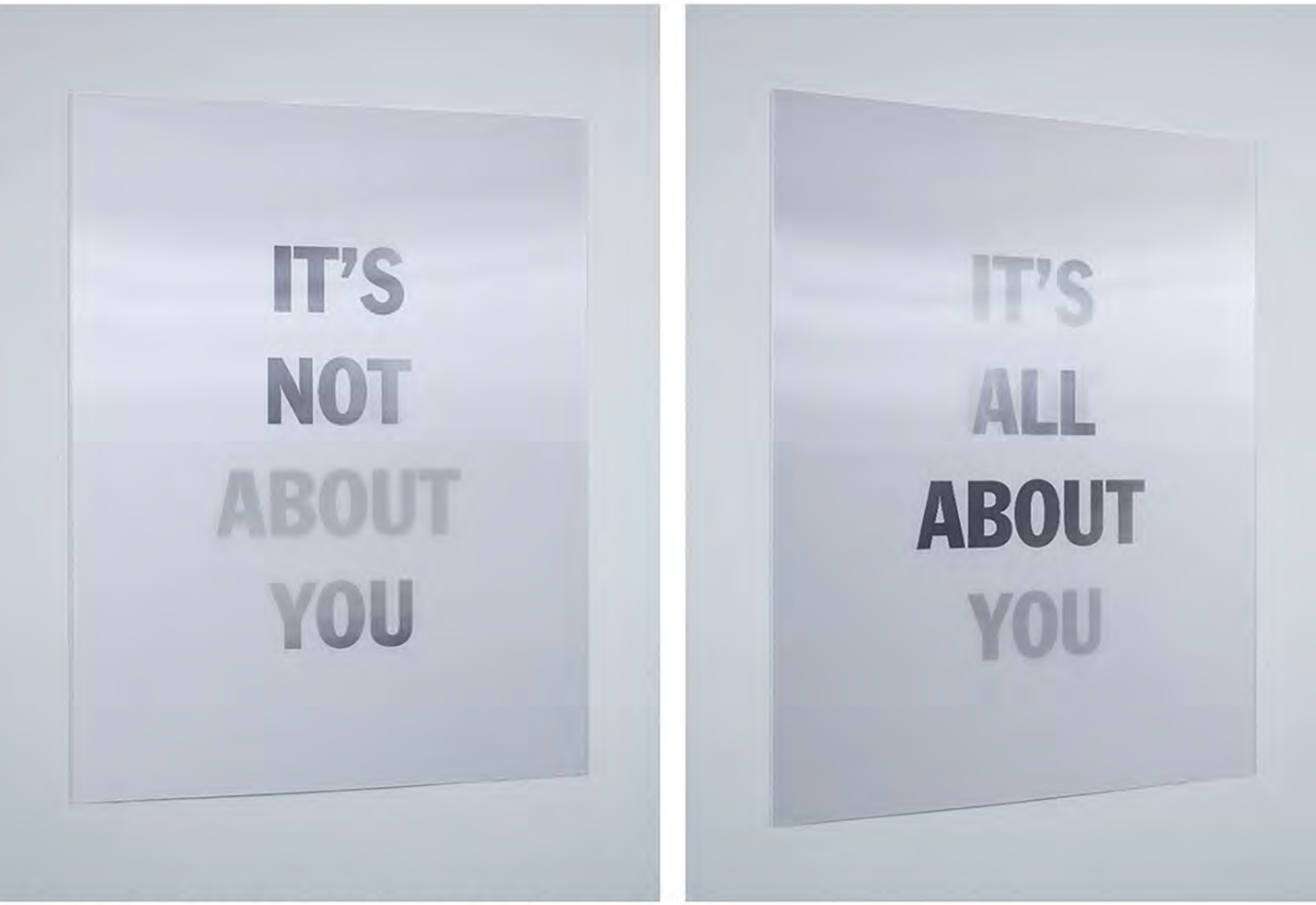
Yeah, hopefully viewers are having a revelation the same way I do when I'm digging through an archive. I find an image and want to keep it, take it with me, save it. I want viewers to do the same with the work.

KO

Tell me about the overlap, like when you see these doppelgangers. The images of the riots in Baltimore in '68 look eerily similar to the ones from 2015. If they're in black and white, you can't tell those pictures apart.

HWT

Yeah, that's why I say then is now and now is then. The images of Ferguson in 2014 look like images in Newark in 1967. Other artists, like Sheila Pree Bright, are looking at the '60s and now. There's something I'm still trying to understand about these particular moments. That people in St. Augustine, Florida, have had to work together to integrate the beach concerns me. Here in New York, we take going to the beach with our friends of different ethnic backgrounds for granted. All progress in our country for people who weren't already benefitting from the system when it was founded—all that progress was fought for, nothing was granted, and nothing was given. I have to acknowledge that the road to progress is always under construction. I have to recognize that even the littlest things were fought for, and so the big things also have to be fought for. We have to think big.



Hank Willis Thomas, *It's All About You*, 2010, lenticular, 57 × 43 inches.

KO
I think it's not so much that the little things have to be fought for, but that we get in our own way. Oppression is a human construction, and it's abundantly apparent when you look at what you've pointed out—integration of a beach. A beach is nature, completely outside of these bullshit constructions of humans. This is one of the pillars of your work: pointing out the arbitrary and fully constructed nature of race. The notion of race being mediated through landscape—that's ridiculous. You shouldn't have to fight to experience this thing that predates humans.

HWT
Exactly. I'm curious about our extinction. So, could you talk to me about *Zulu Time*?

(*doorbell rings*)

KO
Hopefully that's not the extinction coming for us! (*laughter*) *Zulu Time* is a project where I was thinking about time as a construction.

HWT
What is *Zulu Time*?

KO
It's a shorthand term for the standardized mode of tracking time used across the world, commonly known as *Coordinated Universal Time* (UTC). Specifically, it references the time at the prime meridian (longitude zero degrees)—the invisible and ultimately arbitrary line from which all global time zones are calculated—that runs through Greenwich, UK. When latitudes and longitudes were mapped out, the United Kingdom was the biggest bully on the block. They had the most powerful navy and they literally set global time, by claiming the zero-degree longitude prime meridian as running through the Royal Greenwich Observatory.

I was interested in this idea of Zulu Time because time is a projection of power. We still shape our lives around this notion of time that's based on the British Empire. The British tried to colonize the Zulus in the late nineteenth century—

HWT
They colonized time! When I asked what *Zulu Time* was, I was talking about your art project. (*laughter*)

Kambui Olujimi, *Sheltered Wish* from the series *InDecisive Moments*, 2017, hand-blown glass and water, 22 × 6.5 × 6.5 inches. All images courtesy of the artist.

KO

Well, you get to the art project once you understand what Zulu Time is. So, looking at time as a projection of power, I was asking: What are the things that interrupt that seemingly innocuous unchecked system that we are taught represents time? What happens when we acknowledge the inconsistency of time? Every day is not experientially twenty-four hours. Like in the summer, daytime is so much longer than in the winter. But we still say four o'clock is four o'clock regardless of those different experiences.

So, my exhibition *Zulu Time* is a collection of sculptures that look at and intervene in the unchecked condition of time. *T-Minus Ø* (2017) is a series of thirteen double-sided flags with collaged images of failed rocket launches and failed shuttle attempts, like *Challenger*. These huge explosions were so fleeting, yet seared into our memories forever. The flags are set up in a kind of UN-like array, and they also make us think of our own nation's precarious position right now.

HWT
I see this parallel to what we were talking about before—photography and time and the past being present. You're thinking about time being colonized—

KO
Or as a colonial power.

HWT
And I'm thinking about the way that colonialism is actually manifested in fine art through this notion of appropriation. Appropriation is something I do in my work. However, artists like Picasso or Marcel Duchamp appropriated African art and concepts of African art related to space and time at the same time that Africa was being colonized by the Europeans.

KO
When we were talking about nature you mentioned extinction. In *Zulu Time*, I made a series of hourglasses—handblown glass with these iceberg cavities inside and filled with water. They are their own kind of time-space system. The title *InDecisive Moments* (2017) is a collision of the Henri Cartier-Bresson book *The Decisive Moment* and the willful ignorance of nations regarding global warming. We're at a tipping point, when doing nothing will literally doom the planet. These works are a reminder of a time that is not concerned with us. This four-and-a-half-billion-year-old planet and its ecosystems don't privilege us. As much as we are destroying and meddling in it, we are still gnats—human "civilization" goes back only 6,000 years. Hopefully the work offers some perspective and gives us pause to think about what werre doing to the environment around us and, more directly, to each other.

HWT
How does that tie into space exploration? Isn't that another form of colonization?

KO

(*yelling*) BOOM! Yes, it is. One of the pieces in *Zulu Time* is *The Black That Birthed US* (2017), which is a wall of wheat-pasted images of our galaxy with small shelves, each holding a digital clock set to a different time with a found black-and-white portrait of people on top of it. Deep time, time since the formation of the universe, dwarfs us, and yet it is the context in which we live. By engaging deep time we remove ourselves, as humans, from the center of time. Perhaps this shift can recalibrate us on a macro scale.

As to space exploration as a form of conquest, the flags in *T-Minus Ø* are very much about that. We poured so much of our resources into getting to the moon first. That wasn't about knowledge; that was about conquest. So, unfortunately, part of this search for connection to a bigger experience, finding our place in the solar system and in the universe, is marred by bullshit like nationalism. It's a shame that the apparatus for that connection pivots around political entrenchments. But the past few decades of cooperative efforts have given us the International Space Station and the Cassini–Huygens space probe.

HWT

So, I guess you always took issue with the notion of "Space, the final frontier."

KO

No, why would I?

HWT

Because frontiers are there to be conquered.

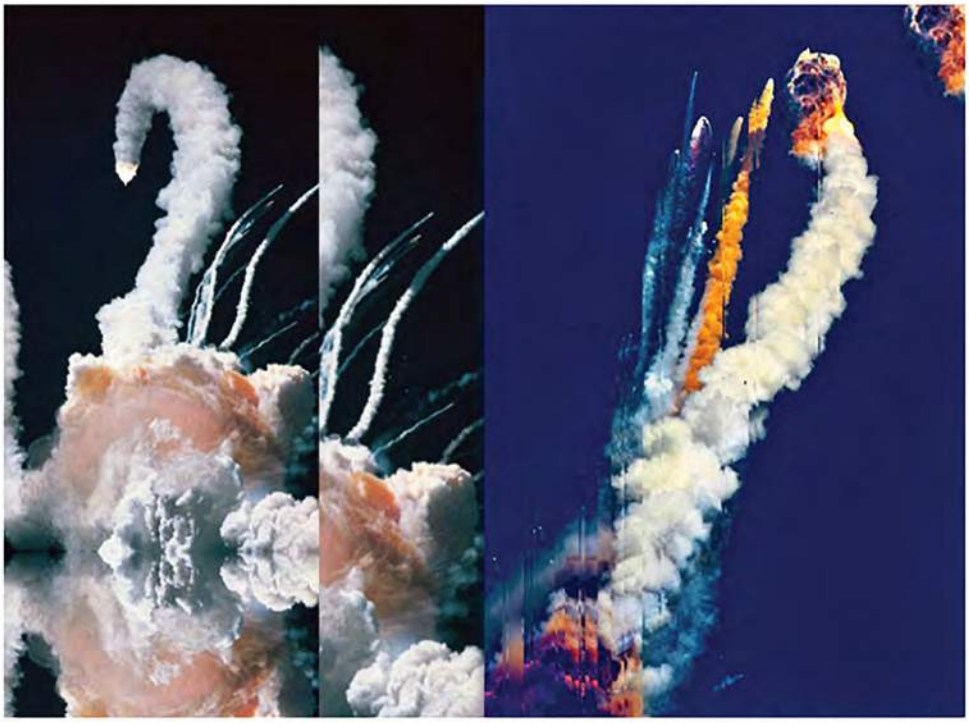
KO

More pie to slice up… I never thought I would say this, but Nixon wrote this beautiful speech in 1969. When we went to the moon, NASA was essentially saying: "We can get the astronauts there, but getting them back is pretty much fifty-fifty. And, Mr. President, you need to have a speech ready in case they get stranded there."

And in his speech, Nixon talks about the pursuit of truth as being one of the noblest endeavors of humankind:

In ancient days, men looked at stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood. Others will follow, and surely find their way home. Man's search will not be denied.

Kambui Olujimi, installation view of *T-Minus Ø* at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison, Wisconsin, 2017.



Kambui Olujimi, front and back of untitled from the series *T-Minus Ø*, 2017, fabric, ink, and aluminum, 24 × 36 inches.

KO

More pie to slice up… I never thought I would say this, but Nixon wrote this beautiful speech in 1969. When we went to the moon, NASA was essentially saying: "We can get the astronauts there, but getting them back is pretty much fifty-fifty. And, Mr. President, you need to have a speech ready in case they get stranded there."

And in his speech, Nixon talks about the pursuit of truth as being one of the noblest endeavors of humankind:

In ancient days, men looked at stars and saw their heroes in the constellations. In modern times, we do much the same, but our heroes are epic men of flesh and blood. Others will follow, and surely find their way home. Man's search will not be denied.

HWT

So, you're saying Richard Nixon was talking about the pursuit of truth being noble?

KO

(*laughter*) Yeah. I know it's hilarious. But sometimes I feel that just because people do wrong doesn't mean they don't know what right is. That's part of the tension in my work. What outer space might allow for is a moment outside ourselves. Like when a Brooklynite leaves New York City, they're a New Yorker, when a New Yorker leaves the country, they're an American, and so on. The farther from home you get—

HWT

—the larger your home becomes, both in your mind and maybe in your reality. Another pursuit I have, so do you, is idiosyncratic agency—meaning that I don't want to be seen as the large archetype of American, or the large archetype of black American, or of black male American, or black male American artist, or black male American artist who is the son of an artist. I want to be seen as the most microscopic, idiosyncratic version of myself. Because that's where I get to be me. If this large concept of who I am or where I come from precedes me when I walk into the room, or before I open my mouth, or even after I open my mouth, then what does it mean to be free?

KO

Yeah, I call having to contend with that projection the *specter of being* _____ and you can fill in the blank. You're being measured in relationship to prescribed—

Kambui Olujimi, installation view of *The Black That Birthed US* at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Madison, Wisconsin, 2017.

HWT
Prescribed notions, yeah.

KO
But you inhabit various locations. You are black, you are an artist—

HWT
But not in this room with you.

KO
I know where you're going, but that's not the way *that* construction of blackness gets made. It doesn't get made by black people. It doesn't get historicized by black figure skaters, black nerds, black millionaires, or black scientists. That's not the construction of blackness expected of us out there. For me, it's not about denying those spaces, but they're just rooms. And those rooms ain't shaped the way they say they're shaped. And they all have doors. I just move between them, or I'm in all the rooms at the same time and in some other rooms, in fact. The more different voices you have, the more that construction of blackness is challenged, disintegrated, and reconstituted.

HWT
I've been thinking a lot about America because of *For Freedoms*. It was initially started as a Super PAC to put critical discourse into political discourse using fine art thinking, which is really about creative problem solving, and taking simple ideas and complicating them, or taking complex ideas and abstracting them.

KO
Do you want to give us examples of past projects?

HWT
I could. But I'm more interested in thinking about *why* we started *For Freedoms*. The projects aren't the art. The art of *For Freedoms* is the Super PAC. So the projects, you could say, are like the paintbrush, or the individual strokes of the paint on the canvas. But the canvas for us is the political and cultural and geographic landscape of the United States. I think a lot about the critical words in the early writing of our country, such as "We the People," the preamble to the Constitution. I'm really invested in wondering who counted as "we" when it was written and getting us to acknowledge that.

KO
And in shifting who is included in the we?

HWT

Yeah, and to your point, the more the we gets bigger the more we understand who we are and where we come from. Phrases like "All men are created equal" and "We hold these truths to be self-evident" seem very simple, direct, and explicit on the surface, but have a lot of complexity in how they affected and shaped the value system, laws, and course of our country. We can never take for granted even the simplest phrase; rather, we must consider how it can be twisted in ways that conflict with our greater self-interest. Wrestling with tough questions is what I find really exciting about being an artist. I'm constantly trying to rethink what I already know and reframe things that I've become too familiar with, visually or verbally.

KO

Yeah, I hear you. I'm interested in what happens when we take unchecked conventions and perceived inevitabilities out of the realm of the implicit and bring them into this world. You're able to examine something as innocuous as time or, in your case, history and these doctrines of our nation.

Kambui Olujimi, stills of Irungu Mutu from *Where Does the Time Go...*, 2017, color digital video, 22 minutes.

HWT

I think that question of expansiveness, in terms of time and space, might tie into projects that you're working on. So, what's coming up next for you?

KO

Well, *Zulu Time* is traveling from the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, where it originated, to the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin. I'm also expanding the *Wayward North* project, a work I made from 2010 to 2013 as an Art in General commission. It was comprised of large-scale star maps and a series of sculptures, photographs, and drawings that center around a book I wrote by the same name. This mythology was a mix between personal biography and historical as well as current events. Recently, the Newark Museum commissioned me to create a short film for their planetarium based on the *Wayward North* mythology. I'll be working on an animation with digital-effects designer Fionna Mariani, whom I recently collaborated with on my film *Where Does The Time Go...* . The museum will also debut a set of twelve of lithographs derived from the narrative. This opens in October 2018.

HWT

And will the film be displayed in a planetarium?

KO

They have a small planetarium, and the animation will be projected in 3D for 360-degree viewing. It'll be a hybrid of live action and digital collage. I'm working on some test designs, a ton of compositing and layering.

HWT
That's crazy.

KO
Yeah, it's gonna be bananas.

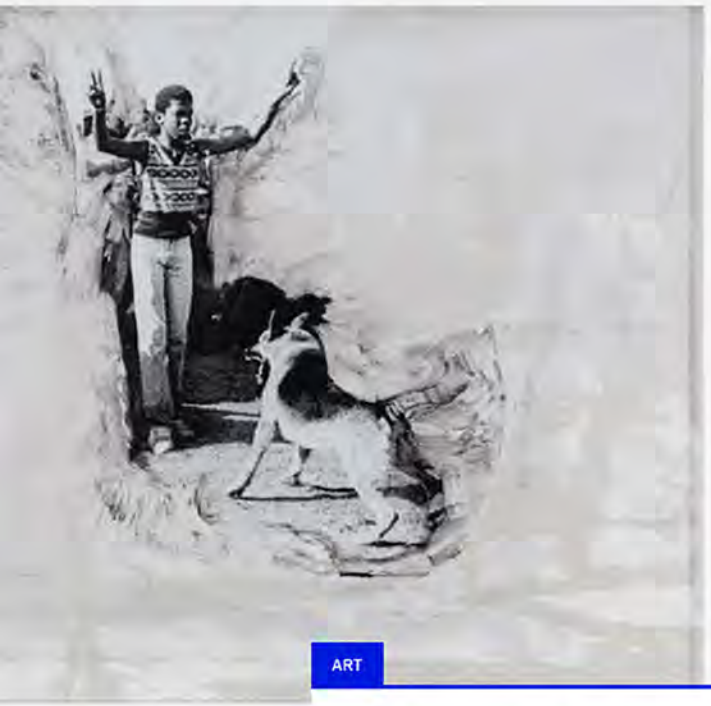
In another work of mine, *The Clouds Are After Me* (2007–9), I'm thinking about the perpetuation of fear in order to build consensus, and the absurdities and arbitrariness of these spaces. What happens when we confront these specters that we're simultaneously hunting down and running from?

How are you dealing with the current political moment?

HWT
Like most people, I'm looking with baited breath at the news and wondering, Will there be a tomorrow? And what will it look like? And how will the current moment look in hindsight? I try to imagine a world that I'd feel better about than I do today. And that's the world I'm trying to manifest. I try to be visionary and not reactionary. I'm using my imagination and my capacity to see through not only time zones but time spans to get greater clarity about who I am and who we are in this place we call home.

Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist working with themes related to identity, history, and popular culture. His work has been exhibited at the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, among others. His collaborative projects include Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth), *and* For Freedoms. *He lives and works in New York City.*

Kambui Olujimi is a New York–based visual artist working across installation, photography, performance, tapestry, works on paper, video, sculpture, and painting. His artwork reflects on public discourse, mythology, historical narrative, social practices, exchange, mediated cultures, resilience, and autonomy. His most recent projects include the film Where Does the Time Go… *(2017) and the exhibition* Zulu Time *(2017) at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art.*



ART

Hank Willis Thomas's New Show Literally Shines a Light on Whitewashed Histories

JULIAN A. JIMAREZ HOWARD

Apr 2 2018, 5:33pm

The works at Jack Shainman Gallery require light-equipped glasses or a camera flash to reveal the whole image.

What We Ask Is Simple, Hank Willis Thomas's new show at Jack Shainman Gallery, is anything but straightforward. Mining the iconography of 20th-century protest, this body of work reflects the realities of the present as much as it looks to the past.

When I visited Shainman's two Chelsea spaces, I was encouraged at the front desk to pick up a pair of clear safety glasses equipped with lights, and to set my phone for flash photography. The 20th street space opens with a text applied to mirror reading "What You See Here/What You Do Here/What You Hear Here/What You Leave Here/Let it Stay Here." The words are lifted from a sign in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a community secretly built by the Manhattan Project to refine uranium for the atomic bombs later used by President Truman to indiscriminately murder over 200,000 people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; it's a text also frequently read at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to establish a "safe place" for those in recovery. The statement introduces a sense of mysterious conspiracy as much as it offers an indictment of the viewer staring down their own reflection.

What You See Here, What You Do Here, What You Hear Here, What You Leave Here, Let it Stay Here (What You See Here), Hank Willis Thomas, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

The exhibition is dark in more ways than one, but there's literally just enough illumination to distinguish the images on the walls. Getting close exposes their interactivity—when lit by the glasses at certain angles, or by your camera's flash, they reveal hidden, second images. Screen-printed onto retro-reflective vinyl and mounted on an aluminum composite material, these works have the shimmering indeterminacy of a lenticular print. In *All Deliberate Speed*, you see an American flag, sideways, cropped against a plain white background; shining your light reveals that this is Stanley Forman's Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of a white teenager attempting to impale civil rights activist and lawyer Joseph Rakes with the tip of the flag pole, shot at a 1976 Boston protest for school desegregation.

All of the screen-printed photographs depict protests and direct actions of 20th century social movements: South African apartheid, the American Indian Movement, women's suffrage, and the American civil rights movement, among others. Some of them appear more conventionally photographic while others could be paintings, the images obscured by the silk-screening process. There are also several mirrored works in addition to the opening text; in one wall-sized piece, a young woman is hauled away from a protest by two police officers, the enormous image lit by a single bulb is reflected onto the gallery's floor. A stainless steel sculpture, *Strike*, reproduces the main action from a 1935 drawing by artist Louis Lozowick, in which an African American worker resists a strike breaker's truncheon by grabbing the other man's wrist.

What happened on that day really set me on a path (red and blue), Hank Willis Thomas, 2018; left image without flash, right with flash. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

But despite their historical significance, viewers might struggle to identify each image's source. In an interview at the gallery, Thomas himself noted his own unfamiliarity with many of them prior to the inception of this project. Thumbnails have been compiled into a reference list accompanied by a brief didactic text, so that viewers can dig a little deeper into their context; still, the contrast between the legibility of the images as protest photography against our own unfamiliarity with each scene underscores the way these events are comprehended *en masse* by society. Thomas provides a counterpoint, isolating and revealing the images, piece by piece.

This desire for sincere engagement with these histories explains Thomas's use of reflection—what could be seen as a gimmick instead breaks the fourth wall, implicating us in these historic scenes, forcing us to complete them. In some instances, he reveals the whitewashing of history by literally erasing context, selectively cropping the image, covering part of the scene in a white made transparent only when light is applied to reveal the image underneath.

Yet this body of work subverts easy consumption as much as it solicits participation. It is impossible to capture the retro-reflective works with just one image due to their unique properties, and any attempt at a mirror selfie will render the figure in silhouette. Thomas noted that the rise in digital photography and the proliferation of images on social media has left him feeling alienated from the artistry and expertise photography once required. The works' beauty, perhaps a happy product of Thomas's enjoyment of the process, is equally an indictment of the superficiality that abounds in today's disposable and overexposed visual culture. The obfuscation of these poignant images is an ironic gesture that throws our own selective processing back at us, refusing an easy reading.

Wounded Knee (red and gold), Hank Willis Thomas, 2018; left without flash, right with flash. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

One of the more experimental works at 24th street at first appears to be a Richter-esque swipe in oranges, yellows, and reds, like a loose cross-section of the planet Saturn. Illuminated, it reveals an image from the American Indian Movement where Oglala Lakota reclaimed Wounded Knee, demanding the impeachment of corrupt Tribal President Richard Wilson and protesting the US government's failures to fulfill treaty promises.

Thomas's works offer provocations more often than answers. Their power comes from their ambiguity, recontextualizing familiar images to produce something new. By implication rather than explication, he is able to subvert the immediacy of images and draw out their complexity. But the efficacy of this power is suspect, especially given how little has changed since the end of the 20th century. Walking through the spaces, **Gil Scott Heron's Comment #1** comes to mind, his closing obloquy echoing Thomas: "Who will survive in America…?"

What We Ask Is Simple *is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery through May 12.*

I tried to see a friendly face, Hank Willis Thomas, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

JUXTAPOZ ART+CULTURE

PAINTING

WHAT WE ASK IS SIMPLE: A STUNNING HANK WILLIS THOMAS SHOW OPENS @ JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Mar 29, 2018 - May 12, 2018

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas just opened a new exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York this past weekend, investigating reflection with mirrored materials and darkroom printing experiments. What first grabbed us was a preview image labeled *To Be Titled (Woman Biting Cop)*. In a timely and relevant exploration, Thomas sources protest imagery from the twentieth century, enabling viewers to face their own participation in demonstrations, willingly or not, as the reflective surfaces stare back.

The source imagery is isolated, cropped, and abstracted, so that only a gesture, or a shift in movement is captured, symbolic of swift, focused efforts to motivate change. Success by protest is often indiscernible, and yet there is still a reminder to maintain hope and band together, much like Hank's shining, neon-lit statement, *Love Over Rules*, recently unveiled in a new public art installation in San Francisco. Revered by his peers, Hank Willis Thomas has ushered many other artists into the light when given the chance, continuing to surprise his attentive audience with powerful, community-focused work, the kind that can shift perspectives and promote the truth we should all be standing for. —*Kristin Farr*

NEW YORK

New York's 50th Anniversary Public Art Project Debuts This Week

By **The Editors**

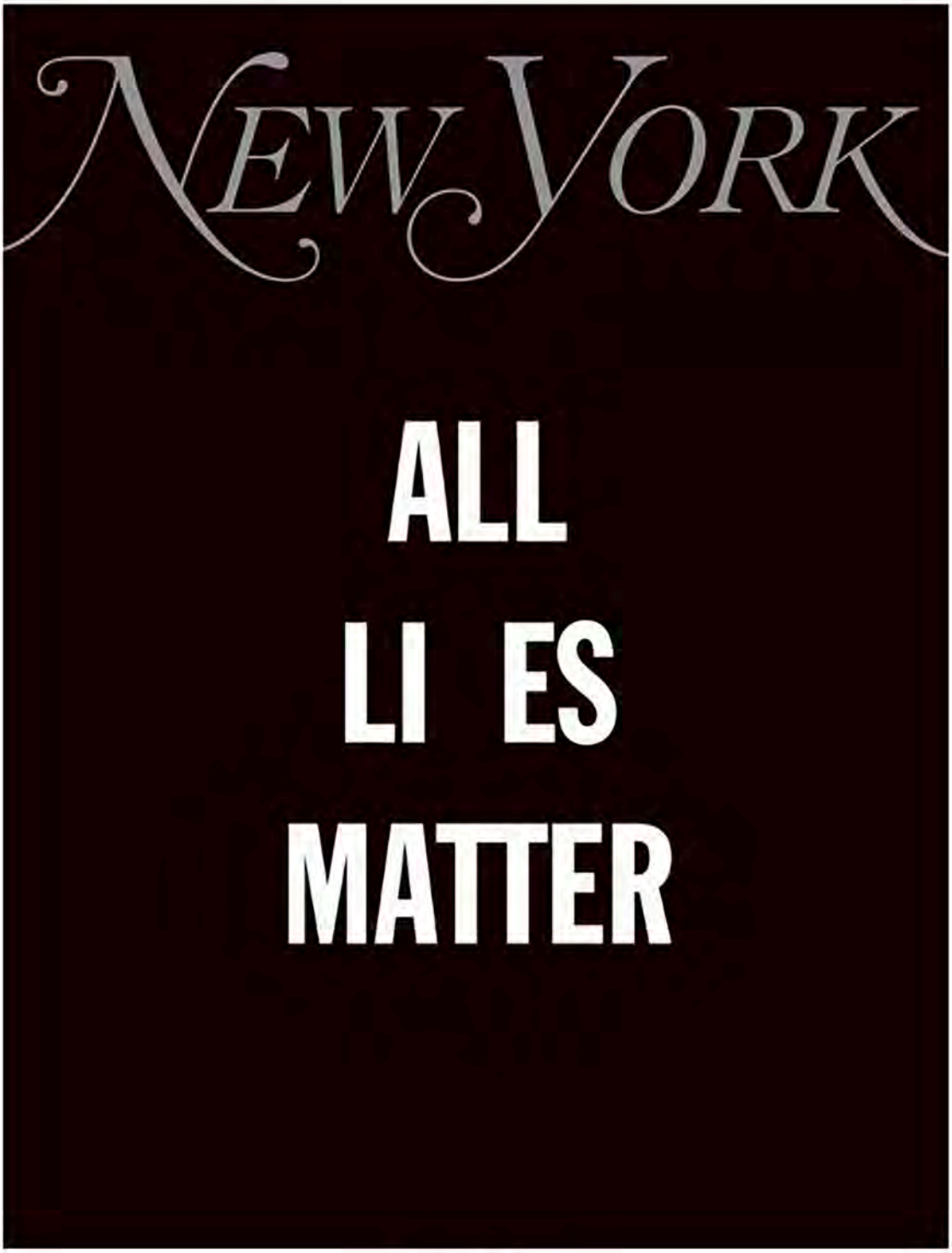
January 21, 2018
8:30 pm

A giant version (illustrated here) will appear later this year, too.

"It seems so obvious," says Hank Willis Thomas, the artist who made the ALL LI_ES MATTER poster seen below, "that many people are lying when they say 'All lives matter.' If you believe all lives matter, then you'd also acknowledge that black lives matter, and those same people would be marching alongside if they believed that." Obvious, perhaps, but certainly not universally believed, which is why Thomas applied his signature approach (eliminated letters, missing type) to that bland yet brutal slogan.

His is among the visual statements contributed by 50 artists to *New York* as part of a project marking the magazine's 50th-birthday year. The first of them, by the nonagenarian Alex Katz, appeared on our cover last fall, and is a drawing he did on the subway, an echo of those he made underground in the 1940s. The others also, in their own ways, celebrate the spirit of life in New York City, a place of solidarity

— whether on packed trains or in political marches. On January 22, you will begin to see them pasted on walls around town; in the coming weeks, you will encounter various other parts of this project all over the city, including an installation at Smorgasburg and a show on the High Line. In a few locations that will be announced on Twitter (at @NYMag), we're putting up ten copies stacked like a pad of paper, so (if you're one of the lucky people to get there first) you can tear off a poster and take it home.



Hank Willis Thomas.

ARTFORUM

POSTED DECEMBER 18, 2017

Hank Willis Thomas Wins Canada's AIMIA Photography Prize

The 2017 winner of one of Canada's largest and most prestigious contemporary photography awards, AIMIA Photography Prize, is Hank Willis Thomas. The New York–based artist's work explores consumerism, class, and race. Thomas will receive $39,000.

Since AIMIA's inception in 2007, the award has been granted to artists based on a public vote. This year's finalists were Liz Johnson Artur, Raymond Boisjoly, and Taisuke Koyama. They will each receive $4,000, and their work will be displayed alongside Thomas's at the Art Gallery of Ontario until January 14. Among the pieces by Thomas in the show is his series of archival images from the American civil rights movement, which can only be seen with night-vision goggles.

"I might consider myself a photographic archaeologist, or a visual culture archaeologist," the artist said. "I believe that all the content in my work is really about framing and context, about calling the viewer to think about how their position affects what they see."

Each year, AIMIA also grants around $20,000 as part of a scholarship program. This year, three undergraduate students studying photography will be given an award in support of their final year of study.

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

A NECESSARY CAUTION

Kerr Houston

In itself a clenched fist is nothing and means nothing. But we never perceive a clenched fist. We perceive a man who in a certain situation clenches his fist.
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

Can we take a few minutes to think about Hank Willis Thomas's use of hand gestures in his recent Goodman Gallery show? The show, titled *History Doesn't Laugh*, was recently on view (in slightly different permutations) in both Johannesburg and Cape Town. And, as Michael Smith noted in a review in *artthrob*, it was conceived quite emphatically for the South African venues: it featured two dozen new works that were rooted in apartheid-era visual culture.[1] Print enlargements of mid-century mail order advertisements from *True Love* shrilly proclaimed the value of stretch mark cream and weighted bracelets. A monumental reproduction of a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) button in fiberglass commemorated the cause in a finish fetish idiom. And several cast sculptures, made of a variety of metals, gave details from iconic apartheid-era photographs by a three-dimensional reality. Even as the work thus offered an extension of themes in Thomas's earlier oeuvre—the social construction and commodification of the black male and an acute, critical use of archival materials and popular visual culture—it now had a distinctly South African cast.

Hank Willis Thomas. *Raise Up*, 2014. Bronze, 285 x 25 x 10 cm. Installation view of *History Doesn't Laugh* exhibition, Goodman Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Then, too, there were those gestures. Each of the four photo-based pieces, for instance, centered on hands. *Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passbook Must Burn!)* focused on the decisive, resolute hands of protestors in Eli Weinberg's photograph of pass-burning from the early 1950s. *Raise Up* emphasized the uplifted arms and hands of miners undergoing a medical inspection in a routine that was first captured and published by Ernest Cole. *A Luta Continua* and *Amandla*, meanwhile, granted solid form to the hands of demonstrators in a police van following a 1992 protest that was photographed by Catherine Ross.

The accent upon gesture was hardly limited to the photo-based sculptures. On a nearby wall, *Develop Striking Power*, a C-print enlargement of a classified ad, offered a single, simple graphic: a clenched fist. The clenched fist was also on display in *Victory Is Certain*, a staff made of assegai wood that recalled, in form and materials, Zulu examples but eschewed their conventional finial motifs, opting instead for a closed hand. The magnified COSATU button, too, pictured the raised fists of workers. Finally, another button (shown in Johannesburg but not Cape Town) pictured four hands clenching the wrists of their partner—forming, in the process, a powerful square. History may not laugh, we gather, but it is conversant in the idiom of gesture.

Indeed, it always has been—or, at least, the visual record of apartheid implies as much. Look through a copy of a magazine or book of photos from the era and you'll soon gain a sense of the expressive ubiquity of hands. There are the remarkable photographs from December 1956 of assembled onlookers giving a vigorous thumbs-up to the anti-apartheid militants as they are driven to trial. There are Miriam Makeba's hands, elegantly and provocatively pressed

Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passbook Must Burn!), 2014. Bronze and copper shim, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

against her thighs, on the cover of the June 1957 issue of *Drum*. There's Noel Watson's remarkable image from 1980 of a 17-year-old Thabo Sefatsa raising both hands in a V-shaped gesture of peace as a police dog snarled at him only a meter away.[2] There's Graeme Williams's shot of Nelson and Winnie Mandela, thrusting their fists into the air upon his release from prison in 1990. And then, too, there are all of the unphotographed moments: Robert Sobukwe, for instance, letting dirt trickle through his hands as a means of communicating his sense of solidarity to other prisoners passing his cell on Robben Island. Hands mattered in the apartheid era. They were tools; they were signals; they were terms in a larger syntax.

Unsurprisingly, then, hands also play a prominent role in recent histories and studies of apartheid, several of which Thomas encountered as he developed his South African work (Thomas previously showed in South Africa in 2010). The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, for example, grants much of a wall to a huge print of Cole's photograph of miners, their hands in the air. In related published materials, moreover, the museum has occasionally isolated symbolically potent gestures. In its ambitious educational booklet, for instance, the museum paired the image of the miners with another photograph by Cole (also from *House of Bondage*) of two handcuffed black hands joined at the wrist. The resulting juxtaposition is understated but eloquent: the positions of the hands in each photograph speak to what Allan Sekula once called the everyday flows of power and the microphysics of barbarism.[3]

Or consider the terrific and ambitious catalogue to *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, the sprawling show of photographs curated by Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester. In his introductory essay, Enwezor remarks upon the importance of gesture and points to an important evolution: following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960, anti-apartheid protestors abandoned the thumbs-up sign for the clenched fist.[4] Just when the African National Congress turned from a nonviolent strategy of resistance, in other words, hands expressed a comparable move from passive support to active defiance. The accompanying images bear this point out and clearly communicate, again, the potent and mutable place of gesture in apartheid-era visual discourse. Watson's 1986 photograph of a workers' strike in Durban includes no fewer than fifteen raised hands: most of them are tightly clenched fists, but two thrust their index fingers proudly upwards, and another lifts a copy of a union paper into the air

In turn, as Thomas drew on archival and historical materials, he too accented gestural details, but often did so by means of active editing, or simplification. In his photo-based sculptures, for instance, he eliminated numerous secondary details. Many of these were incidental, but some were arguably not: think of the touching pairing of shod and bare feet in Weinberg's original photo of pass-burners, or the papers—the signs of the bureaucratization of labor—that rest at the feet of each miner in Cole's iconic image. Similarly, in the enlarged COSATU button, he eliminated the organization's slogan and created an image, in the process, in which the raised hands of the figures did not have to compete with text. Such decisions allowed Thomas to grant hand gestures a distinct visibility. But they also, inevitably, implied an attendant process of abstraction and decontextualization. Shorn of their original context, the gestures become floating signifiers.

Those floating signifiers are assigned novel meanings in Thomas's work. Take, for example, *Raise Up*. To be sure, the gestures of the men were already overdetermined before Thomas used them; since they were published by Cole as a part of a book in 1967, they have been repeatedly reused and given distinct new contexts. Indeed, Darren Newbury has remarked on the complicated status of the reproduction of Cole's photograph at the Apartheid Museum, where page spreads from the book are paired with enlargements of single images. "[T]he status of the original artefact," Newbury has noted, "and the fact that one is confronted here with its replica rather than the real thing combine to unsettle its position in the narrative of apartheid."[5] We might question Newbury's use of the phrase *real thing*—was any copy of the book more real than Cole's negative, which he smuggled out of South Africa? But his central point is a fair one: in the context of the museum, the miners' gestures are given a new inflection or narrative context. Similarly, in Thomas's show, they are isolated and assigned a title—*Raise Up*—that invokes insurrection and resurrection, rather than the base humiliation of the procedure documented by Cole. Gestures of passive, powerless conformity are thus converted into gestures of defiance.

A comparable process of revision is visible in the five works that center upon clenched fists. In Cape Town, the works were shown without any accompanying wall texts (a list of works was available at the desk). As a result, the images of raised fists seemed almost to belong to a common, transhistorical lineage: shorn of their fuller context and unlabeled, the fists congealed, by implication, into a coherent and constant motif. The fist, in other words, seemed a common unifying element in what is otherwise a contested history, linking mid-century classified ads to trade union buttons of the 1980s and early-1990s demonstrators. And what if one did pause to investigate the titles of the works? The sense of a transhistorical universalism was only reinforced. *A Luta Continua*, for example, depicts the hands of protestors arrested at the South African Supreme Court on July 22, 1992, but through its use of a pan-African slogan (coined in Mozambique, it has since been used in Nigeria and Uganda in relation to various causes) as a title, situates those hands as part of a wider and more abstract continental pattern of resistance. Although Thomas's sources were distinctly historical then, his use of gesture drifted toward the ahistorical. The fist was treated primarily as a leitmotif embodying a consistent lineage of resistance.

Develop Striking Power, 2014. Inkjet print on museum etching paper with carborundum flocking, 29.92 x 19.69 in. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

But as Enwezor notes in the catalogue to *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, gestures are in fact complex and evolving signs, dependent upon local variables for their effect. "It is necessary," he writes, "to underscore the potent iconographical discourse of the image of the fist, as it travels from gesture to representation, from symbol to sign, from signifier to signified."[6] Indeed, and in fact the clenched fist has never been a completely stable symbol in South African discourse. After all, by the time that it was embraced by South African blacks in the 1960s, it already bore a range of associations. It had been used by German laborers in the strike waves of the 1880s, when it often connoted a readiness to fight. In 1917, the Industrial Workers of the World transformed it into a symbol of solidarity. By the 1930s, in turn, it had acquired anti-fascist connotations in much of Europe.[7] In 1956, *Life* ran an image of Pietro Nenni, an Italian communist leader, raising a clenched fist at a rally, and in 1957 it published a photograph of a Haitian using the same gesture to salute Daniel Fignolé.[8] Clearly, the gesture embodied a degree of semantic flexibility: it could convey a wide range of meanings and affiliations. But that very semantic flexibility meant, in turn, that local variables mattered intensely.[9] The clenched fist never had a simple, static meaning.

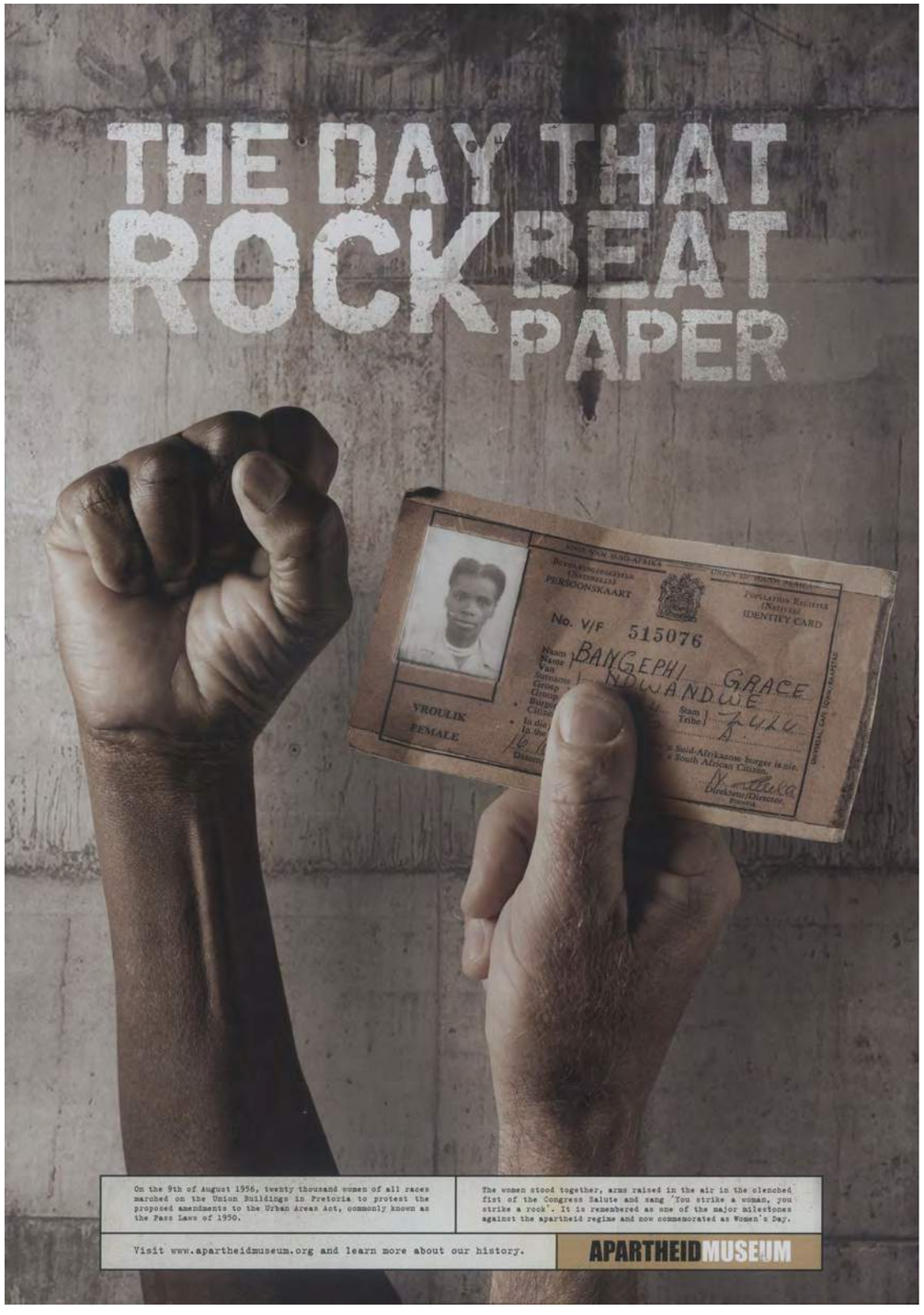
Usage of the sign by South Africans during the apartheid era points to a related degree of semantic flexibility. The activist Zithulele Cindi, for instance, has recalled his arrival as a prisoner on Robben Island and his confusion at the older, longtime prisoners' lack of enthusiasm for the clenched fist, a tendency he attributed to a culture of deference fostered in the prison. "So we then had to embark on a defiance," he later said, "now of the warders. We would say, hey, black style [clenched fist up] and they'd say 'keep quiet.' And we'd say there's nothing wrong in greeting . . . this is our form of greeting. . . . The point of it was to restore their dignity."[10]

Cindi's anecdote is a reminder that local context matters and that the associations of the sign were mutable. Indeed, by the 1970s the clenched fist had become broadly associated with the black consciousness movement and also with the American civil rights movement (where it was given dramatic prominence at a 1966 rally by Stokely Carmichael).[11] Chief Kaiser Matanzima, for instance, embraced the gesture as a sign of black power and once raised a clenched fist in the legislative assembly of the Transkei, only to cause, according to one report, considerable bewilderment.[12] Enwezor has observed that "it is not only a symbol of power, it signifies self-affirmation, subjecthood and subjectivity."[13] In turn, this wide range of associations meant that the gesture, by itself, was ultimately drained of some of its initially acute force, which explains why the Publications Appeal Board had come to feel, by 1987, that "the clenched fist is not undesirable as such because it has lost its inciting effect."[14] As with all signs, context matters.

Image and Metaphor, Hand and Fist

Given these complexities, it is tempting to call Thomas's isolation and abstraction of the clenched fist naïve, or historically simplistic. But of course artworks do not necessarily purport to be reliable historical documents; they belong, we might say, to a distinct discursive field. And yet, an artistic context does not simply obviate historical realities, and it is easy to think of examples in which an artistic usage of documentary materials toward a universalizing end can spark heated controversies. The debate regarding white South African artists' use of archival materials in the mid-1990s offers one relevant example.[15] But also relevant here is *The Family of Man,* MoMA's vast, 1955 show of photographs that was curated by Edward Steichen and accented, in his words, "the universal elements and emotions in the everydayness of life."[16] Dozens of photographs of birth, work, and death taken in a variety of contexts suggested certain basic common human denominators. But the show was promptly skewered by a number of critics, including Roland Barthes, who vigorously objected to its emphasis on shared experience. The photographs, Barthes argued, depicted a superficial diversity but finally insinuated an underlying humanism that flattened difference and ignored socioeconomic variables. "From this pluralism," he complained, "a type of unity is magically produced."[17] As with Thomas's use of the fist, local differences and historical specificity yielded to an implied consistency.

Interestingly, a recent strand of scholarship has convincingly shown that South African responses to



National Women's Day poster, 2009. Designer unknown. Courtesy the Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg, South Africa

The Family of Man, which arrived in Johannesburg in 1958, varied considerably.[18] Many liberal viewers in South Africa saw the show's acknowledgement of a common humanity as exemplary: a corrective to the system of apartheid that denied the humanity of a majority of the country's residents. And some young South African photographers found themselves challenged or inspired by the images on display. Ultimately, though, many South Africans also came to view the show as problematic, laced with what David Goldblatt called an "ideological twist that was . . .not altogether admirable."[19] Or, as Tamar Garb has since observed, "there is a necessary caution about a generalising humanist vocabulary of suffering and experience; the need to assert the particularity, the historicity of the local, and the camera's capacity to capture that."[20] It is critically important, in other words, to heed disparate inflections and local circumstance.

What does this mean in practice? A poster produced by the Apartheid Museum as part of a 2009 campaign developed to commemorate National Women's Day offers an example. The poster depicted a clenched black woman's fist next to a white male hand holding an identity card; above the hands, a block of text reads, "The Day That Rock Beat Paper." That text referred to a song chanted by the tens of thousands of women who had marched in protest of the 1950 pass laws on August 9, 1956: "*Wathint' abafazi Wathint' imbokodo*" ("Now you have touched the women: you have struck a rock").[21] In bold visual terms, the poster evokes the slogan by means of a creative metaphor: the clenched fist, of course, signifies the rock in the game of rock, paper, scissors. The paper passbooks of the apartheid government are trumped in an inversion of the traditional rules of the game. And yet, on a different symbolic plane, the image is curiously ahistorical. Again, as Enwezor has pointed out, the clenched fist was not used by South African protestors in the 1950s. The poster thus collapses historical time. It denies, to use Garb's terms, the historicity of the local and accents instead a generalizing vocabulary of experience. It privileges, rather, metaphor.

And is that a problem? In his 1929 essay, "Surrealism," Walter Benjamin thought in some detail about the relationship between metaphor and image and their places in a committed political art. "Nowhere," he argued, "do these two collide so drastically and so irreconcilably as in politics." He then recommended the expulsion of moral metaphor from politics, urging the Surrealists "to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images."[22] But Benjamin was far from optimistic that this would actually happen. Rather, he seems to have felt that the Surrealists hesitated in transcending mere contemplation and in applying its practice. And he does not seem to have been alone in this regard. In a pair of photographs published by E. L. T. Mesens in the Surrealist journal *Marie* in 1927, we see two fists, each outfitted with a pair of brass knuckles. In the first image (labeled "as they see it"), the knuckles are pointed inward, ineffectively and self-defeatingly; in the second ("as we see it"), by contrast, the knuckles are worn correctly. As Sherwin Simmons observed, "the images appear to allegorize a public view of Surrealism as inwardly directed self-destruction and the movement's own view of itself as aggressive social critique."[23] To put it in Benjamin's terms, the Surrealist image, printed in a limited-circulation avant-garde journal, was merely contemplative, and comfortably removed from the sphere of political action.

And so we return to the white cubes of the Goodman Gallery, where we comfortably contemplate Thomas's show in the rarified context of a handsome art gallery. We contemplate the process by which images of gestures of protestors are abstracted and transformed into metaphors of victory and struggle. We ponder the conversion of Cole's searing photograph of apartheid labor—a photograph banned by the South African state—into a collectible bronze. We stare at the workers in the glossy reproduction of the COSATU logo and realize that this button, devoid of any evidence of facture, will never be worn in any contested public arena. In the process, perhaps, we recall Tom Crow's claim, regarding 1960s protest art in Europe:

> [T]he street-level activism of the late 1960s had raised the stake beyond what any gallery-bound art could offer . . . It was one thing to fashion arresting visual emblems of emancipated perception and response; it was an entirely different—and unattainable—thing to break free from the space of contemplation and the posture of sympathetic witness into the arena of action using the cumbersome means of monumental sculpture.[24]

The analogy is, admittedly, not exact. But as we study the translation of icons of the struggle against apartheid into an art gallery and find ourselves urged to contemplate the actions of protestors in an ahistorical mode, an aesthetic context, and a monumental format, it is difficult to avoid a certain thought. If historically rooted gestures possess what Benjamin Buchloh once termed a certain sanctity, then it has yielded, here, to something else entirely.[25] Something abstract; something, Barthes might say, magically produced. Something, arguably, in need of a certain form of caution.

Kerr Houston *is a professor of art history and criticism at the Maryland Institute College of Art.*

Notes

1 Michael Smith, "Struggle Kitsch? A Review of Hank Willis Thomas's *History Doesn't Laugh*" *artthrob: Contemporary Art in South Africa*, artthrob.co.za/Reviews/Michael_Smith_reviews_Struggle_Kitsch_A_Review_of_Hank_Willis_Thomass_History_Doesnt_Laugh_by_Hank_Willis_Thomas_at_Goodman_Gallery.aspx.

2 For the identification of the boy's identity, see Sipho Masondo, "*City Press* readers find one of our 'History Boys,'" *City Press*, February 14, 2014, m24arg02.naspers.com/argief/berigte/city-press/2014/02/19/7/CP-019-StoryB_30_0_210931485.html.

3 Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 3–64: 64.

4 Okwui Enwezor and Rory Bester, eds., *Rise and Fall of Apartheid: Photography and the Bureaucracy of Everyday Life* (New York: Prestel, 2013), 36–38.

5 Darren Newbury, *Defiant Images: Photography and Apartheid South Africa* (Unisa, South Africa: Unisa Press, 2009), 288.

6 Enwezor and Bester, *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 38.

7 Gottfried Korff and Larry Peterson, "From Brotherly Handshake to Militant Clenched Fist: On Political Metaphors for the Worker's Hand," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 42 (Fall 1992):70–81. Korff and Peterson concentrate primarily on the gesture's German resonances. For a brief analysis of the fist's anti-fascist significance in Spain, see Eugene Cantelupe, "Picasso's Guernica," *Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (1971), 18–21: 21, n. 24.

8 Emmet John Hughes, "Nenni's Strong Italian Hand," *Life* 40, no. 24 (1956), 45–46: 45; Lee Hall, "The Mob and Its Man Take Over in Haiti," *Life* 42, no. 23 (1957), 41–44: 41.

9 Indeed, the gesture's flexibility seems to have prompted, in certain cases, a move toward a more specific vocabulary of usage: in some contexts, the specific orientation of the raised fist also mattered. See Sherwin Simmons, "'Hand to the Friend, Fist to the Foe,'" *Journal of Design History* 13, no. 4 (2000), 319–339: 334.

10 Fran Lisa Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 116.

11 For a discussion of the rally, which occurred on June 17, and the significance of Carmichael's gesture, see Andrew Lewis, *The Shadows of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 207.

12 Timothy Gibbs, *Mandela's Kinsmen: Nationalist Elites and Apartheid's First Bantustan* (Woodbridge, UK: James Currey, 2014), 81. Matanzima also declared at one point that the raising of a clenched fist would be the symbol of the Transkei National Independence Party. See D. A. Kotzé, *African Politics in South Africa, 1964–1974: Parties and Issues* (London: C. Hurst, 1975), 92.

13 Enwezor and Bester, *Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 38.

14 J. C. W. Van Rooyen, *Censorship in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1987), 109. For an important review of the book, see J. M. Coetzee, "Censorship in South Africa," *English in Africa* 17, no. 1 (1990):1–20. Of some relevance here, too, is the discussion regarding variations in South African signed language. As Debra Aarons and Philemon Akach have noted, for instance, "It is a very plausible hypothesis that as a result of apartheid education and social policies, different signed languages developed in South Africa." See Aarons and Akach, "South African Sign Language—One Language or Many? A Sociolinguistic Question," *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics* 31 (1998), 1–28: 11. Ultimately, though, the authors argue that "there are a number of facts that cast doubt on the veracity of this hypothesis" and contend instead that "although there are certainly different varieties of the signed language used in South Africa most Deaf people in the country control many of these varieties." There is no doubt, however, that various national systems of signed language are mutually unintelligible. See Aarons and Akach, 2 and 14–15.

15 For a summary of the debate, and for a qualified insistence that artists are bound by a certain ethics when it comes to the use of archival materials, see Okwui Enwezor, "Remembrance of Things Past: Memory and the Archive," in Jan-Erik Lundström and Katarina Pierre, eds., *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art After Apartheid* (Umeå, Sweden: Bildmuseet, 1998), 23–27, esp. 27, on "the responsibility of art as being not just an interpretation or facsimile of history, but a moral force in the production of a new reality and hope for a damaged society."

16 Quoted in Marianna Hirsh, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 49.

17 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), 100.

18 See, for example, Newbury, *Defiant Images*, 154–159, Tamar Garb, *Figures and Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl and V&A Publishing, 2011), 39, 269, 273, and Tamar Garb, "Rethinking Sekula from the Global South: Humanist Photography Revisited," *Grey Room* 55 (Spring 2014):34–57.

19 Garb, *Figures and Fictions*, 269.

20 Garb, *Figures and Fictions*, 273. She then adds: "But at the same time, the particular is always haunted by our own sense of our humanity."

21 The phrase was later popularized as "You strike a woman, you strike a rock."

22 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz and trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Shocken Books, 1978), 191.

23 Simmons, "Hand to the Friend," 334.

24 Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (London: Laurence King, 2004), 150.

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THE ART OF POLITICS

ERIC GOTTESMAN AND HANK WILLIS THOMAS WANT YOU TO SUPPORT THEIR SUPER PAC

SUMMER 2016

THE BODY POLITIC

Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman are disrupting the nation's political landscape with the first-ever artist-run Super PAC.

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE
PORTRAIT BY LANDON NORDEMAN

Eric Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas at Jack Shainman Gallery with a new work included in "For Freedoms," the show organized by Gottesman, Thomas and Wyatt Gallery.

Every four years, I catch myself staring at the TV in horror and fear caused by the level of absurdity in the conversations around the political theater," says Hank Willis Thomas. "It's so rarely about the issues and with all that's at stake, it's really dangerous." Moved by the prescient political gestures of artists like will.i.am and Shepard Fairey in previous election cycles, Thomas decided—after discussing some ideas with his old photographer friend Eric Gottesman—to face his fears head-on by forming the For Freedoms Super PAC in January. It's a hat tip to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famed 1941 State of the Union address, which laid out the "four essential human freedoms" of speech, to worship, from want, and from fear—and also led to the titular oil paintings (and later posters) by Norman Rockwell.

"For me, art is living and the idea came up as I started realizing you could raise money to say basically whatever the hell it is you want under the guise of political speech—it just seemed so absurd," says Thomas, pointing to Stephen Colbert's short-lived Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow Super PAC as an inspiration. "I thought that was an interesting way to motivate people through humor. The reason people feel so disassociated with art is because the ideas are out of context and ahead of their time, and I realized a lot of the conversations we were having in the '70s, '80s and '90s—gender inequality, multiculturalism and immigration, or LGBTQ issues—are just hitting the mainstream today."

In the past year alone, Thomas tackled the "ideal feminine type that has been marketed to individuals across gender, racial and socio-economic lines" in his fifth solo show, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015," at Jack Shainman Gallery. He also launched his Truth Booth (where visitors complete the sentence, "The truth is…" for an aggregating video project) on a 50-state tour, and curated the acclaimed "March Madness" survey at Fort Gansevoort where he installed works by David Hammons, Robin Rhode, Paul Pfeiffer and many others to tease out the corruption, violence and racism behind big sports. During that time, he also managed to plot the rollout of For Freedoms with Gottesman, whom Thomas met while he was studying at the California College of the Arts.

"At the beginning of our friendship, right after 9/11, we actually had this salon where we'd meet every month or two at my house to share work and have all these conversations about politics in art. It was something that stuck with me even as Hank and I went different ways," says Gottesman, whose photography projects have taken him to the East Coast, Africa and the Middle East. "We talked for a while about doing something like this, and we had one idea about running an artist for office and using the campaign as a medium for a project."

"He thought I should run for Senate," Thomas interjects.

"I believe Hank said, 'I probably couldn't keep my mouth shut,'" says Gottesman with a laugh. "We eventually got more interested in the intersection of art and politics."

The two reconvened last year at the Black Portraiture[s] conference in Florence, Italy, and got to talking about the election, which led to researching nonprofit organizations, political parties and Super PACs. They decided on forming the latter because, as Gottesman notes, "It's the height of insanity within the current structure of the electoral system."

After meeting with a Washington, D.C., lawyer in January, the artists established For Freedoms, whose debut group show at Jack Shainman Gallery's 24th Street location runs through July 29. The show includes multimedia works from artists like Marilyn Minter, Matthew Day Jackson, Carrie Mae Weems, Alec Soth, Bayeté Ross Smith and Fred Tomaselli. "We don't see this show as the end, we see it as the beginning," says Thomas, noting the works may later take the form of print, billboard, online, video and television advertisements.

"To go out and tackle the subject of white women and now this Super PAC, Hank just goes outside of his comfort zone all of the time, and he's an amazing collaborator," argues Shainman, who is giving the artists carte blanche to use his space in whatever capacity they want, though he hopes it will be an immersive environment that takes the shape of a political headquarters/installation/salon for artists, curators and visitors off the street. "It's so important that Hank is using the Super PAC to examine itself because most people don't really understand what a PAC is, but it's a way for wealthy people to control elections. All the politicians are so worried about middle-class values, but what about poor people? Who is going to do something for them?"

In addition to creating print or video campaigns featuring pro/con arguments within the space of a single advertisement, For Freedoms addresses the disenfranchised vote at the gallery—where Thomas and Gottesman are, in turn, giving artists carte blanche (even if they disagree with the politics of a specific work). Most notably, Dread Scott is using the headquarters to produce 30-second political ads and later launch a software program to tabulate votes in real time for individuals who are directly affected by U.S. policy—like prisoners or Afghan civilians—but left without a vote to help influence political outcomes.

"I thought the proposal was strong and immediately had an idea for what I would do," says Minter, who is working from an archive of images from her book "Plush." "It touches on censorship and will raise some money, hopefully."

Matthew Day Jackson was so moved after reading about the PAC that he contacted Thomas directly about participating. "So much of the space they're interested in occupying is often neglected," says Jackson, whose collection of posters traces the arc of reality television to social media as a foundation for thinking, and how the shape of violence follows the same timeline. "Hank and I were talking about how Donald Trump was a reality television star and the things I'm interested in thinking about is how the average person, unremarkable in their every being, can become extraordinarily famous and occupy so much space in our collective media conscience and now in our collective political reality. It's really profound."

At some point, Thomas hopes to remake the Four Freedoms posters in ways that confront Islamophobia, wealth disparity, gay marriage or the concept of one person's freedom conflicting with or subverting another's. Rockwell's estate is even planning to donate a piece to the show. "They're very interested in collaborating, and they do a lot of stuff with different artists and high schools reimagining what the Four Freedoms might look like today," says Gottesman, who is personally trying to work with the Department of Homeland Security to plan a naturalization ceremony inside a museum or gallery.

"Maybe the Super PAC itself is the update," he adds. "Maybe that's more representative of the Four Freedoms in the Rooseveltian sense. It's that multiplicity that might be the revision of Rockwell."

Thomas agrees: "The art project is the PAC itself—the fact that we are fundraising, the fact that we are making statements and then trying to take them away and reframing them at the same time, the fact that we're talking to real art collectors and working in the context of an art gallery but also trying to be earnest about change. We have to be constantly flexible and make adjustments. It's really interesting as an art piece."

If nothing else, it will prove Thomas' mantra: All art is political.

Gottesman and Thomas with members of the For Freedoms team: Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, Wyatt Gallery and Michelle Woo, photographed by Gallery at the Super PAC's campaign headquarters. (Not pictured: Design Director Albert James Ignacio.)

The Boston Globe

Inflatable 'Truth Booth' is art that lets you speak your mind

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

The Truth Booth in Cape Town, South Africa in 2014.

By David Filipov | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 08, 2016

Boston has witnessed an uptick of giant inflatable objects in recent months. Five illuminated rabbits loomed over the Lawn on D last summer; a red "Breathing Flower" bloomed at the Museum of Fine Arts last month; and on Friday, a 23-foot-tall "Fruit Tree" grew at Faneuil Hall.

its pumped-up predecessors can: It invites you to enter it and speak your mind. The results can be thought-provoking, heartbreaking, and uplifting.

Called “In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth),” it’s a white, inflatable video booth that prompts those who step inside to complete the phrase, “The truth is. . .”

On Monday, the installation — “The Truth Booth” for short — will open for two days near Fenway Park at The Verb Hotel, before setting up from Wednesday to Friday on the Rose F. Kennedy Greenway across from Hanover Street in the North End.

The 14-foot-tall by 23-foot-wide Truth Booth looks like a big, white speech bubble with the word “Truth” inscribed over its entrance. It opened in Ireland in 2011 and has since traveled to Afghanistan, South Africa, and other US cities. Its creators, artists Hank Willis Thomas, Ryan Alexiev, Jim Ricks, and Will Sylvester, of a group they call The Cause Collective, have sorted through some 6,000 video recordings to compile the responses into video art.

Thomas said the inspiration for The Truth Booth came from Alexiev's projects that try to "put the public in public art."

"The idea of a modern-day confession booth that allows people to express their values and unique perspectives is what we were most drawn to," Thomas said Wednesday. "Especially in the political arena, 'the truth' is so loaded, we wanted to democratize that conversation and make it more individual and universal at the same time."

A Cause Collective video compilation of Truth Booth responses from around the world, commissioned by New York-based Public Art Fund, certainly reflects differing political realities.

"The truth in Afghanistan, I'm sorry, but there is none," a man with a long white beard says into the camera in Afghan Dari, with English subtitles. "There is only deception and fraud, and helping yourself to power."

"The truth is basically that humanity is born into slavery," says a young man with an Irish accent, who produces what appears to be a piece of paper currency. "Humanity is slavery to this: money, scraps of paper with numbers printed on it."

There videos also display a haunting, universal continuity.

JIM RICKS

The Truth Booth in Bamiyan, Afghanistan in 2013.

“The truth is, being a girl and living in America, I get so many wonderful rights, and I don’t think it’s fair that girls who live in other countries don’t get those,” a young girl says in American English.

“By the name of God, the truth is Afghan girls, especially in Herat province, have no liberty at all,” a young woman, her face covered except for the eyes by a niqab, says in Afghan Dari.

And the truth is, many of the responses are raw, personal confessions that reflect wounded souls.

“The truth for me is it’s probably going to be hard for me to go two minutes without crying, because my life is not at all what I thought it would be,” says a middle-age American man, who then breaks into tears as he speaks about his divorce.

“The truth is, I fear every day, walking down the street,” says a young American man, who then brightens visibly. “The truth is, I love everyone. I find the greatest things in the most flawed people.”

Lucas Cowan, public art curator for the Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy, said The Truth Booth will serve as an artistic medium to represent the voices of residents and visitors.

“It’s going to create an interesting portrait of the community of Boston,” Cowan said. “They’re creating an ethnographic portrait of the city.”

The Truth Booth attracted long lines in Miami in December 2014 and in Brooklyn last August through October. In Boston, volunteers will help people use the booth, said Dina Deitsch director of curatorial projects for GT Public, which partnered with development firm Samuels & Associates and the Greenway Conservancy to bring The Truth Booth to Boston.

The booth is simple to operate, Sylvester said. Inside, a touch screen prompts you to start your statement with “The Truth is.” Under the phrase is a media waver, and a record button. Once you start, you have two minutes to record. When you’re done, you press a stop button.

It’s easy enough for children to operate. Which they sometimes do.

“The truth is, I think The Truth Booth is a wonderful idea,” says an American girl who can’t be much older than a kindergartner. “I mean, it’s fluffy, it’s fun, and you can tell what’s really inside your heart.”

The Truth Booth will be open at The Verb Hotel Monday from 11 a.m.-7 p.m. and Tuesday from 11 a.m.-6 p.m. It will be open on the Greenway Wednesday through Friday from noon-7 p.m.

Cause Collective: In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth) from Public Art Fund on Vimeo.

David Filipov can be reached at David.Filipov@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @davidfilipov.

NEW YORK OBSERVER

In the Craziest of Election Years, One Artist Formed a Super PAC to Fund Art

Hank Willis Thomas will use the funds to print artworks as political ads

By Guelda Voien • 04/05/16 11:42am

Hank Willis Thomas.

It has been a bewildering election cycle, for sure. And while American politics have surely become a sideshow before,

the 2016 presidential race is firmly in the running to be the most surreal political spectacle in memory. Artist Hank Willis Thomas didn't want to miss out on the absurdity.

For his latest project, Mr. Thomas' has formed his own Super PAC, called For Freedoms (more on the name later) with two collaborators, he told the Observer. The PAC will engage artists, who will make work that will later be published as advertisements (PACs must disburse funds contributed to them in election activities, though that is loosely defined) and eventually displayed in an exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery's 24th Street location, opening June 7. So far artists Carrie Mae Weems, Jim Goldberg, Alec Soth and Rashid Johnson are confirmed participants. And the PAC is already raising money.

The impetus for the work, also named *For Freedoms*, was Mr. Thomas' feeling that so many conversations are dumbed down in our current culture, including those in the realm of politics as well as art, he said.

"I would like to invite the public

become more familiar with the ways we

as artists try and solve problems," he said. "I want to engage a higher level of discourse. Who knows if that's possible or how successful it will be."

The name of the PAC/ artwork refers to the "four freedoms speech," President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 state of the union address, made with World War II on the nation's horizon. It posited that people should enjoy four basic freedoms: of speech, of worship, from fear and from want. As Mr. Thomas points out, those freedoms not only sound very different in the contemporary political context, they also weren't even intended at that time to refer to "everyone," such as African-Americans, or, during the war, Japanese-Americans.

So Mr. Thomas' project looks at where we stand now on these freedoms and what they might mean. It's about "what happens when your freedoms conflict with my freedoms." He is hoping art collectors will see fit to fund the Super PAC and he is looking forward to placing the ads/works funded by it out in the world via newspapers, magazines and websites' banner ads. He is aided by collaborators Wyatt Gallery, a photographer, artist Eric Gottesman

and Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, a director at Jack Shainman.

The process of setting up a PAC, something for which the definition is rather unclear, Mr. Thomas said, has been "a crash course in all of the good and all of the bad," inherent in American democracy. Indeed, he has unwittingly become a political fundraiser—the very role he is also satirizing.

So far, Mr. Thomas estimates he is spending between $1,500 and $2,500 per month to maintain the PAC, between accounting and lawyers' fees.

But that's really just the tiniest drip in the ocean of political finance, he reminds us.

"Super PACs have raised more than $1 billion already so far this election season," Mr. Thomas said. At least a tiny fragment of that money is going to artists?

FILED UNDER: 2016 ELECTION, ALEC SOTH, CARRIE MAE WEEMS, HANK WILLIS THOMAS, RASHID JOHNSON, SUPER PAC

artnet®

PEOPLE

Can an Artist-Formed PAC Sway the Presidential Election?

Brian Boucher, Friday, March 4, 2016

Hank Willis Thomas.
Photo: Tim P. Whitby, courtesy Getty Images.

The current presidential campaign is proving to be like none other in recent memory. A real estate magnate who has referred to immigrants as rapists and who has been slow to disavow the KKK is poised to seize the Republican nomination. On the left, meanwhile, a Democratic Socialist is giving the nation's first female presidential contender, a member of one of the nation's most powerful political families, a run for her money.

Artists Eric Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas are also marking a first by

jump-starting For Freedoms, an artist-founded political action committee (PAC). The name contains a punning allusion to the “four freedoms" articulated in 1941 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. “Our medium for this project is American democracy," say the artists on the project's website.

Eric Gottesman.
Photo: courtesy the artist.

The organization's headquarters will be set up this summer at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, which represents Thomas.

PACs have been a symptom of the runaway influence of big money on politicians; Gottesman and Thomas aim to turn the very entities used to drown out the voices of the people into a service for voters. The funds raised will go to commission artists (whether by invitation or open call, which is yet to be determined) to create political advertisements in the form of billboards, yard signs, and radio and TV spots advocating for candidates for office at state and national levels. If the first phase of the project is successful, the artists hope to extend it beyond the current election cycle.

Thomas and Gottesman hope to change the way we do politics.

Gottesman and Thomas have known each other since the 1990s, when

they both lived in San Francisco and were involved in political organizing against the American invasion of Iraq. In 2004, Gottesman went deeper into electoral politics. "I ran my father's campaign for a New Hampshire state Senate office," he said. "He won by 137 votes." The artist and organizer currently is in Ethiopia on a Creative Capital fellowship. His first book, *Sudden Flowers*, created with children in Addis Ababa who were orphaned by AIDS, was published in 2014.

Gottesman concedes that other activist-minded public figures have taken to politics, but maintains that those efforts are often more in the vein of performance art than For Freedoms, which has higher ambitions.

“Stephen Colbert and Lawrence Lessig have tried to make the super PAC into something that would crumble into itself," Gottesman said. “But we're actually looking to engage deeply and improve political dialogue. How can artistic tools for critical thought allow real conversations to take place?"

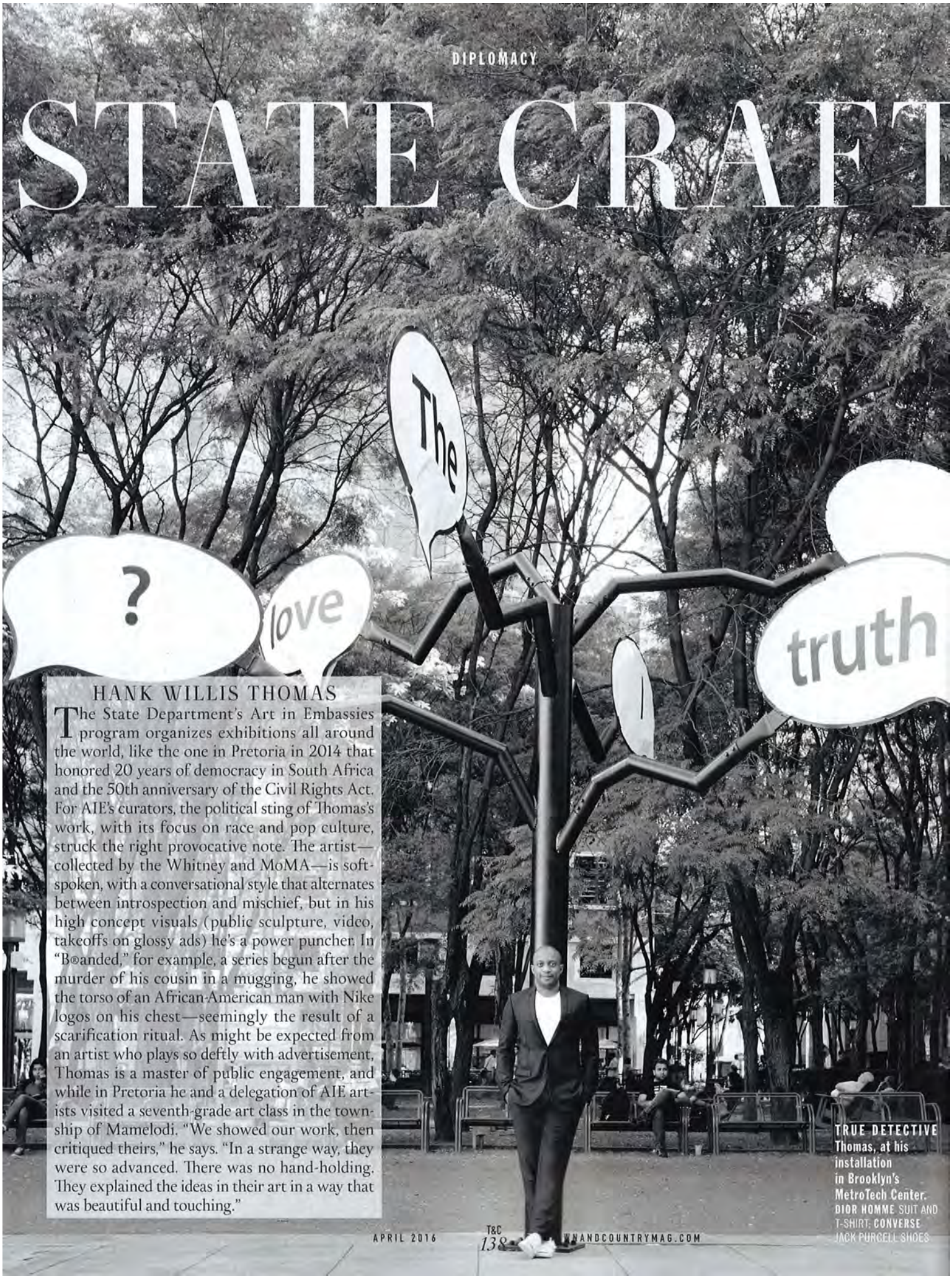
Thomas is also known for his politically-charged works, but his hit closer to home. A sculpture that was on view at Shainman's booth at Art Basel in Miami Beach in 2015 was later highlighted on Beyoncé's website. It depicts black men with their arms raised as if in surrender, in the “hands up, don't shoot" position that has marked recent protests against police brutality.

"If I'm going to spend all my time obsessing about political issues, I might as well make art out of it," Thomas told artnet News in a phone interview about the PAC.

For Freedoms, say the artists, will be a non-partisan organization. Could they support just any candidate, though?

"We could even make pro-Trump ads," Thomas said, "they just might be horrible ones."

STATE CRAFT



HANK WILLIS THOMAS

The State Department's Art in Embassies program organizes exhibitions all around the world, like the one in Pretoria in 2014 that honored 20 years of democracy in South Africa and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act. For AIE's curators, the political sting of Thomas's work, with its focus on race and pop culture, struck the right provocative note. The artist—collected by the Whitney and MoMA—is soft-spoken, with a conversational style that alternates between introspection and mischief, but in his high concept visuals (public sculpture, video, takeoffs on glossy ads) he's a power puncher. In "B©anded," for example, a series begun after the murder of his cousin in a mugging, he showed the torso of an African-American man with Nike logos on his chest—seemingly the result of a scarification ritual. As might be expected from an artist who plays so deftly with advertisement, Thomas is a master of public engagement, and while in Pretoria he and a delegation of AIE artists visited a seventh-grade art class in the township of Mamelodi. "We showed our work, then critiqued theirs," he says. "In a strange way, they were so advanced. There was no hand-holding. They explained the ideas in their art in a way that was beautiful and touching."

TRUE DETECTIVE Thomas, at his installation in Brooklyn's MetroTech Center. **DIOR HOMME** SUIT AND T-SHIRT; **CONVERSE** JACK PURCELL SHOES

Usually the term *art world* is a grandiose touch, a misnomer that really means, depending on the circumstances, famous artists and museum personnel, people who attend art fairs, the 200 or so blessed souls who bid on record-setting lots at auction, or the folks who claim to understand what's written in *Artforum*. But for the lean, low-profile outfit known as Art in Embassies, the global connotation fits. A cadre of career employees of the U.S. Department of State, AIE maintains operations in more than 170 countries, and the annual visitor count at the many temporary exhibitions and permanent collections it is in charge of easily exceeds those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art combined. It is, in short, one of the most influential and farthest-reaching programs on earth.

Created during the Kennedy administration, AIE can claim those attendance figures because of a simple reality: U.S. foreign service offices granted 9.9 million visas in the last year on record, and artworks installed by the program are in view of applicants. In the new embassy in Santo Domingo, for example, which processes more than 55,000 visas a year, a huge AIE commission faces the sunlit hall where visitors wait for appointments: a vibrant portrait by Kehinde Wiley (*right and below*) of four aspiring artists from the Dominican Republic.

"Initially we called ourselves a global museum," says chief curator Virginia Shore, who, with her staff of seven, is based on the sixth floor of the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations in Arlington, Virginia. "And we soon realized that's exactly what we're not. Whatever these spaces are, they're not a museum, and this is part of the appeal for the artists we work with." ➳→

NAVY MEN
When Secretary of State John Kerry presented Kehinde Wiley with the State Department's Medal of Arts in 2015, he told the artist, "I need to get that suit."

PATTERN LANGUAGE
Wiley in his Williamsburg studio.

In the program's 15 years under Shore, out of sight of most Americans, AIE has expanded its mission and vastly multiplied the value of its holdings. When she started, as an intern in the last year of the first Bush administration, the total value of works on loan was roughly $10 million; now the value of works on loan to the State Department and those acquired for permanent collections in new embassies (as the Wiley was) is approaching half a billion dollars. "We believed that art could be more than just an accent or part of ambassadorial furnishings, which is how some people saw us for a long time," Shore says.

Starting in the late '90s, she and the other curators began to talk up the program to museums, galleries, art collectors, and artists, urging them to lend pieces and commissioning new ones. Artists, they argued, are a type of ambassador, ones who specialize in inspiration and who can express American ideals, culture, history, or identity in places where such messages are critical.

The expansion coincided with a building boom for the State Department. After the 1998 bombings of embassies in East Africa, which killed more than 200, Congress passed the Secure Embassies Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA), which set aside billions for more secure facilities. In one of the first embassies built to the new standards, in Moscow, AIE installed its first permanent collection, with works by 13 artists, including Pat Steir (an American of Russian heritage), and 12 glass sculptures donated by Dale Chihuly. That precedent has now been institutionalized, and one half of one percent of the building budgets is set aside for the program.

That percentage is not an arbitrary figure; it's the amount the General Services Administration allots for art in government buildings at home. And since the costs of the new, highly fortified embassies—with their mandatory hundred-foot setbacks from the nearest road, their bombproof walls and ballistic glass—can be

"I CAN'T TELL YOU THE NUMBER OF TIMES OUR VISITORS *HAVE BEEN TAKEN ABACK*," SAYS PATRICK GASPARD: "'THIS IS NOT THE ART I WOULD EXPECT IN THE *HOME OF THE U.S. AMBASSADOR*.'"

MICKALENE THOMAS

Many of the strands that run through Thomas's work—her signature glitter and rhinestones, the collages of brash patterns, the heroic female figures, the graphic energy of 1970s album covers—seem to draw on nostalgia for basement hangouts of the past. This is no coincidence: In more than one series the artist has used her childhood homes as stylistic inspiration, depicting her mother as muse. Thomas has instilled the same spirit into her do-overs of art history, presenting the current First Lady à la Andy Warhol (*Michelle O*) or importing three women in Donna Summer–esque outfits and hairdos into an arrangement drawn from Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. When AIE approached her to create a mosaic mural for the public space outside the new U.S. embassy in Dakar, Senegal, she traveled the country, taking pictures, visiting artists' studios, translating the inspiring sights—the beautiful landscape, the vendors in the markets—into her own visual language. "I felt well connected to the people. And the blue of the sky and the red earth reminded me of landscapes at home that I respond to," says Thomas (no relation to Hank Willis Thomas). "I'm a black American, and I'm proud to represent who and where I'm from—unapologetically. There's no shame in my game."

astronomical (the price tag of the new embassy in London, slated to open in 2017, is rumored to be nearing a billion dollars), the sliver that goes to AIE is nothing to sneeze at. Still, as anyone who follows the art market will realize, even 5 percent of a billion dollars will not buy a lot. And, of course, the biggest budgets go with the largest embassies. London's will cover 500,000 square feet, more than twice the size of the new Whitney Museum.

One way AIE has adapted to budgetary constraints is by presenting an encyclopedic range of American art, including works by quilters, sculptors, potters, photographers, glassmakers, Native American weavers, lithographers, and muralists. Key pieces by well-known regional artists—say, Barbara Ernst Prey, a Maine watercolorist—take the place of comparable works by pricier artists. Another budget stretcher: Artists who command high prices will lend works for extended periods for next to nothing, as Jeff Koons did with his sculpture *Tulips* outside the embassy in Beijing, or they'll work for well below their standard fees, as Mark Bradford (page 139) is doing for the new embassy in London.

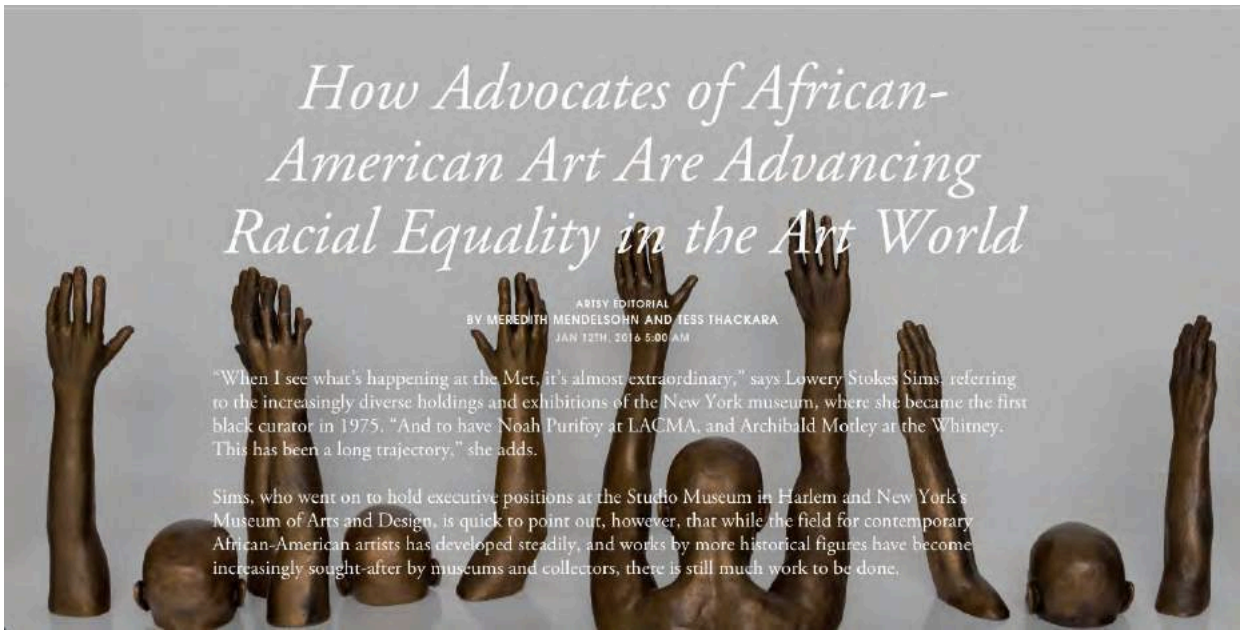
The program is so extensive that you can easily spot currents in American art, one of the most important being the internationally collected African-American artists photographed for these pages, all of whom have responded with significant works. Their motives for signing on vary. They're proud to represent their country or eager to engage with a new audience; they're fans of the art or a particular country, or devoted to certain principles that fit well with America's diplomatic message. But all were particularly responsive to AIE's cultural exchange programs, which sometimes pair the work of U.S. artists with local ones in exhibits at the embassies or link artists in collaborations. When Mickalene Thomas (page 144) got a commission to create a mural on the fortified walls outside the new embassy in Dakar, Senegal, the work grew into a collaboration with an emerging Senegalese collage artist called Piniang. "I wanted people walking by to feel as if this façade, this huge wall that divides the people and the embassy, was really not a division but an extension of welcome," Thomas says.

MOD SQUAD
The AIE team (*from left*): Jamie Arbolino, Imtiaz Hafiz, Sally Mansfield, Welmoed Laanstra, Sarah Tanguy, Camille Benton, chief curator Virginia Shore, and director Ellen Susman. ALL CLOTHING BY **BROOKS BROTHERS**; SHOES BY **JIMMY CHOO, PAUL ANDREW**, AND **CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN**. FOR DETAILS SEE PAGE 175.

These cultural exchanges also dovetail with one of AIE's original mandates: to provide art for the homes of ambassadors, one of the great perks of the job. Incoming ambassadors meet with the program's curators to discuss their diplomatic priorities and how art might complement their messages. Some take a straightforward approach: They'd like art that looks like home. Others are more idiosyncratic. When Republican senator Dan Coats of Indiana was ambassador to Germany, he asked for help organizing an exhibition, "Art from the American Heartland," that he hoped would cover themes of family, faith, farming, and fun. Some appointees are already sophisticated collectors, and they collaborate with AIE's curators to create wide-ranging contemporary exhibitions. James Costos, a former HBO executive who is now ambassador to Spain, has in his residence works by Robert Rauschenberg and Josef Albers, and Glenn Ligon's neon *America* is opposite Julie Mehretu's *Plover's Wing* in the formal dining room.

What many ambassadors are coming to realize is that the impact of art can be profound; it can even prove useful in advancing an agenda. In Madagascar an exhibition of landscapes by two *National Geographic* photographers provided the occasion for the U.S. ambassador to discus environmental efforts with the Chinese ambassador. Patrick Gaspard, the ambassador to South Africa, set up a series of talks in Cape Town and Johannesburg with Ellen Susman (then AIE's director), South African artists, and several African-American artists whose works were in his home; their discussions on race drew overflow audiences, both black and white.

"This is a tool that needs to be further exploited," Gaspard says. "When you walk into the foyer of our home, two dramatic works greet you: a Rob Pruitt portrait of a young woman and a Kehinde Wiley portrait of a young man with a goatee and a little bit of bling. I can't tell you the number of times our visitors have been taken aback: 'This is not what I would expect in the home of the U.S. ambassador.' For young black South Africans, it lets them know immediately how much of a shared experience there is between us." «



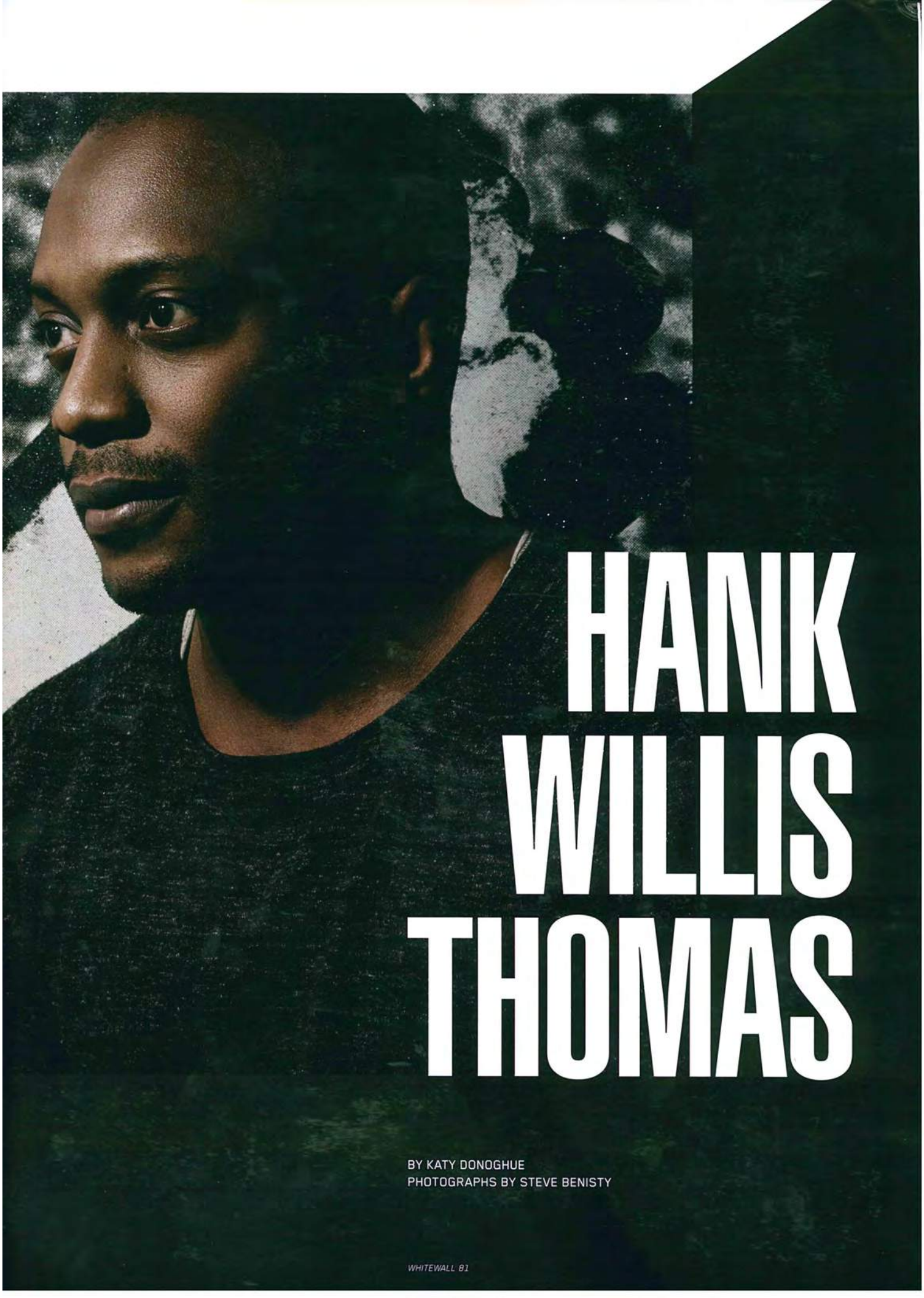
Finding Platforms Beyond the Institution

While mainstream museums have moved at the slow pace typical of large institutions, galleries have used their relative agility to maneuver and respond to the public's increasing interest in African-American artists. Only a handful of those artists—Mark Bradford, Glenn Ligon, and Julie Mehretu among them—have made it into the upper reaches of the market with works that fetch millions of dollars at auction. But contemporary art galleries like Jack Shainman, Papillion Art, Sikkema Jenkins & Co., and James Cohan are bringing increasing visibility to emerging and mid-career African-American artists. And Michael Rosenfeld, a lifelong advocate for and dealer of work by African-American artists, among others, continues to provide a platform for historical black artists.

Interest, Rosenfeld says, has developed incrementally around an older generation of artists like Barbara Chase-Riboud and Alma Thomas, who served as inspiration for a younger generation of better-known contemporary artists. "Even Chase-Riboud is now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars—in some cases over a million dollars," says Rosenfeld. "However, if one looks at them in relation to other great artists of that generation, there is still a lot of room for growth." And in a climate where museum solo shows by black artists still proportionally lag far behind those of their white counterparts, galleries have stepped in to create institution-worthy exhibitions. Among those was a show by Nick Cave—the Chicago-based sculptor, dancer, and performance artist known for his wild, Afrofuturist "Soundsuits"—which inaugurated Jack Shainman's upstate venue, The School. "That show was stunning and should have been picked up by MoMA," says the Washington, D.C., collector Peggy Cooper Cafritz, known for her prescient taste in work by young black artists.

Left: Portrait of Corey Baylor, Jack Shainman, and Hank Willis Thomas. Right: Portrait of Jacolby Satterwhite Photographs taken at the home of Corey Baylor by Emily Johnston for Artsy.

Hank Willis Thomas, a conceptual artist whose work addresses the construction and use of race in America, also resists this categorization. “I could be a black artist, but I’m also many other things. All of us inhabit multiple identities at once,” says Thomas. “The craziest thing about blackness is that black people didn’t create it. Europeans with a commercial interest in dehumanizing us created it. Five hundred years ago in Africa there weren’t black people. There were just people.”



HANK WILLIS THOMAS

BY KATY DONOGHUE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY


HANDLE
WITH CARE

Hank Willis Thomas was inspired by two things to become an artist: the price of a Sam Taylor-Wood photograph and Lil Wayne. In 2006 he was at Jay Jopling's White Cube booth at Art Basel Miami Beach and realized that if a photograph—which he describes as a good one—could be sold for $50,000, he had to be worth at least 1 percent of that. The same went for Lil Wayne: if a teenager could get a word like "bling bling" into the dictionary and have one million fans, he thought he had to be able to find at least 10,000 fans. "It's that kind of competitive cockiness, where I'm like, 'I am at least 1 percent as good as you are,'" Thomas told us when we visited his studio earlier this year.

We were there to speak with him about his *Truth Booth* project, an inflatable and portable speech bubble that serves as a recording booth for the public to speak its truth. Across cities and towns in Ireland, the United States, Afghanistan, and South Africa, people go in the booth and are asked to finish the statement "The truth is" for a two-minute recorded video. Responses range from "The truth—I believe—is Legos. Legos are very small but they allow you to think big!" to "The truth is black women need to write our way back into humanity." The project started in 2011 and is a collaboration between Thomas and the artists Ryan Alexiev and Jim Ricks.

Over the years, thousands of people recorded their "truths," but it wasn't until they were invited by Montblanc to create a short film for the brand's "Power of Words" project, which involved the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Tribeca Film Institute, that they edited the footage together. Last November in South Africa, on the anniversary of Mandela's passing, the film for *Truth Booth* premiered.

Thomas spoke with *Whitewall* about the "Power of Words," his current show, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women," at Jack Shainman Gallery, and balancing commercial and public projects.

WHITEWALL: *You have brought the* Truth Booth *to dozens of cities in Ireland, Afghanistan, the U.S., and recently South Africa for Montblanc's "Power of Words" project with Kewku Mandela and the Tribeca Film Institute. How did you edit down all that footage—was there a theme you came up with?*

HANK WILLIS THOMAS: I've been to South Africa a lot, I have a gallery there, and I was really inspired by this documentary called *Long Night's Journey into Day* about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Kweku Mandela wanted to use quotes from Nelson Mandela [for the "Power of Words"]. Will found the quote by Nelson Mandela, "The truth is we're not yet free." A lot of the issues that Mandela spoke about are universal issues.

Hank Willis Thomas
Protoype of *Jet People*
2010
Photo by Steve Benisty
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Opposite page:
Hank Willis Thomas
Black Hands White Cotton
2014
Photo by Steve Benisty
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

WW: *For this project, and the initial idea for the* Truth Booth, *why did you want to film people talking about the truth, as opposed to doing something else like writing it down?*

HWT: Well, this project was specifically through Tribeca Film Institute, and I think social issue documentaries and short form documentaries are becoming something that people are paying more and more attention to because you can reach broader audiences and in faster ways. That's why I do other projects, because unless you're in my studio, or the museum or the gallery, no one really always has the time to go see the work. Our point was trying to bring the work to the people. Just the statement, where we were in South Africa, right outside the parliament, the idea of this big balloon that says "The Truth" in some of these contexts is kind of a potent statement anywhere. That's as an installation as much as it is what people do inside the booth.

I'm a big believer in letting people show their face. And that's what was scary and fascinating with Afghanistan, especially with the young women, because we don't hear their voices. We hear all women in Afghanistan have this one experience, but, for instance, that one woman talking about getting an education was not nearly as covered, and you saw one woman who was fully covered and she was using her voice in a very articulate, explicit way, talking about issues and what she felt women need and deserve. You could write it, but it's not the same—even if I couldn't understand what she was saying, I could feel the passion in her voice along with reading the subtitles; there is a dynamism of that.

I can talk all day about things that I think are important, but what I liked about this project is that it gave me an opportunity to curate all this footage around these people's voices. It's rare that we have human engagement as an artist. Musicians engage with the people, but with artists, most of the people who have seen my work I will never meet.

WW: *Was there a point at which you were showing work in galleries and museums, and then realized you needed to do something beyond that? Something where you engaged with the public?*

HWT: I was traditionally a photographer. In photography, the medium changed so fast that everything that I learned in school became irrelevant from a technical perspective in three years. And what I loved about photography was first being out in the world, having to engage with strangers, taking pictures and then being in the darkroom in solitude. When I started having to look at screens all the time, I realized, "I'm not talking to people; I'm not engaging," and so the idea of doing projects like the *Truth Booth* came from this need of interaction in the creative process. We do give them the two-minute time frame and an initial prompt, but they own it and they control it. The people who aren't afraid to use their voices get heard. That goes back to this idea of the power of words: Use your voice, because if you don't, other people will use theirs and you're going to be listening rather than being a part of the conversation. And it's important to do both.

The thing about being an artist, I think, is it's one of the few careers where we would gladly pay to do our job. No one cares if I make art or not, and I'm going to do it anyway. And then if nobody likes it, I'm just going to hold on to it for the next thirty years and maybe somebody will want it. I do think by and large you have to make a living, a career; as an artist you have to pay, you have to buy equipment, and it's not just about the time you spend with it. With that level of investment it's harder to distinguish what's for sale and what's not for sale at the beginning [*laughs*], but then you realize certain things make money, but certain things make a different kind of impact. And you can't put a price tag on impact.

WW: *You work in so many different mediums: sculpture, photography, video, sound, collaboratively . . . How do you decide which material will best translate your idea?*

Installation images of the *Truth Boot*, courtesy of the Cause Collective.

HWT: It depends on the piece and the space. I really think that the idea needs to kind of take its own form. I would be a lot richer if I just did one thing. And I could also just be good at it. [*Laughs*] For me, I'm always like, "I don't know how to do that," "Let me try this," "Let me do that!" The *Truth Booth* and my other project *Question Bridge* are about democratizing history and what's important and trying to show that just because you don't have the degrees or you're the famous person doesn't mean that your voice isn't important. So how do you make that message that everyone has the opportunity to make a difference? That's what I think I'm trying to slowly do in my work.

WW: *Did any of that feed into your show at Jack Shainman this summer, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015"?*

HWT: I've always been interested in how ideas about who we are, are shown by society. I think the issue of "black male identity" is that it's life-threatening. That even though black people never had anything to do with creating it, we've got to play by its rules, and many of us are put at risk by it. I think what's interesting for "white women" is that it's actually more violently policed, and more constricting, in a way not always to your deficit, but it's interesting to think about. So in 1957 Emmett Till was killed because he supposedly whistled at a white woman. She's supposed to be so precious that someone else couldn't even whistle at her, so how do you ever have freedom or agency [as a woman]? Maybe you want to be whistled at? Maybe you flirted? So there are all of these levels of confinement. Even the fact that black men technically, even though it wasn't legally enforced, had the right to vote for 60 years before white women. Or that weird conversation about when it was Obama and Hillary, "Are you a feminist? or "Are you not racist?" There are these weird kinds of things that come up in these binary ways, and I wanted to talk about the complexities of that. I think people get confused that they think that because I'm a black man that that's all I really care about. But really, I think, I'm using blackness as a signifier. I mean, it's just a very obvious one because my skin is brown, but we call me black. Your skin is all kinds of colors, but it's not white. So what are these definitions?

WW: *In the gallery show, you've removed all text and branding from old advertisements featuring women and for women's products. What was the idea there?*

HWT: Advertising is never the product, if you think about what myths and generalizations you can attach to the product through branding. What I like about this project is you bring the information to it. I'm just showing you a picture, and whatever you read into it is your own prejudice or whatever it is. It's all the same to me; it's all trying to talk about these universal messages, but to approach them in different ways.

That's what the *Truth Booth* is about and the "Unbranded" series. I would like to be seen as a person. You could say I'm a black male, but you could also say I'm a New Yorker, I'm a hundred and one other things as well. If I say I'm an artist who lives with his mom, which isn't true but has been true [*laughs*], that's different than, "He's a black man," "He's an international traveler," or, "He's an educator," or he's any number of things that I might say. I just want to be seen as a person first, not to have any other kind of value placed on my life ahead of that.

The *Truth Booth* is really about that. My voice is not more important than the thousands of other voices created. All this work is about how when I stand next to this piece, and you stand next to this piece, we're seeing different things. You're always having to recognize that someone else's perspective is equally as important as yours. You have to be conscious of your perspective.

WW: *You've said, "I like thinking about history from various perspectives. I'm interested in how the perception of what's real can be different depending on where you're standing." Your mother is a photo historian, and the chair of the photography department at NYU. I wonder how much her work and being raised around her interests affected your perspective early on?*

HWT: My mother is why I know about that photograph [*referring to a work on the wall in the studio that references a historic photograph*]. When she was a junior in college and wanted to do an independent study project about black photographers, her professor was just like, "James Van Der Zee? Were there black photographers?" So she wound up doing a research project that became her first book, *Black Photographers 1840–1940: An illustrated bio-bibliography* [1985], which showed that there were black people making photographs as early as 1839, when photography was "invented." We were all told about the "black experience," that before the abolition of slavery everyone was illiterate, downtrodden. But if there were people making photographs in 1839, what you had to know about science, chemistry, not much less about the camera, that was some complicated stuff! So the fact that there were people of African descent in America at the time making photographs really forces you to rethink, which history? Obviously those people were photographing African Americans in very different ways than mainstream society, because at the time, mainstream society's vested interest was to let people think that black people couldn't do anything. So that's where the idea of where you are standing affects what you see, is really relevant. Which history?

WW: *Was it intimidating, going into photography then with a mother who knew so much about the medium?*

HWT: And my father. My parents are both pretty dynamic. People tend to remember my dad. My father was raised in the segregated South; my mother, even though she was raised in Philadelphia, was told by her guidance counselor that the best she could hope to be was a secretary at city hall.

I had this dentist in New York, but who grew up with my dad in the South, and he was like, "Man, your dad was the first black man to bag groceries at the A&P, Florence, South Carolina. We used to just stand outside and slap him five." I was like, "You're a dentist! And your father was a dentist! And you guys would slap someone five for bagging groceries for white people?" To think in their lifetime things could change so dramatically, and they didn't play by the rules. I think that is why choosing to become an artist as a career seemed to come more naturally to me. They couldn't tell me what I was supposed to do because they didn't.

"THE FACT THAT THERE WERE PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN AMERICA AT THE TIME MAKING PHOTOGRAPHS REALLY FORCES YOU TO RETHINK, WHICH HISTORY?"

THE NEW YORKER

AUGUST 13, 2015

INSTAGRAM'S MARK ON PUBLIC ART

BY ANTWAUN SARGENT

Hank Willis Thomas's latest show continues the artist's decade-long fascination with truth, with black-and-white, comic-book-inspired speech-balloon signs that span the promenade of the MetroTech Commons park.CREDITPHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JAMES EWING / THE CAUSE COLLECTIVE

Last Tuesday, the Public Art Fund assembled a group of art-world Instagram "influencers," in the middle of the park at MetroTech Commons, in downtown Brooklyn. They were there to get a first look at the artist Hank Willis Thomas's new show, "Hank Willis Thomas: The Truth Is I See You," which is on view through June, 2016. This latest show continues the artist's decade-long fascination with truth, with black-and-white, comic-book-inspired speech-balloon signs that span the promenade of the park. The twenty-two large signs display statements like "The truth is I judge you," and "The truth is I love you," in a myriad of languages spoken across Brooklyn. "We live in a world where English is the most dominant form of communication and so much is lost in translation or overshadowed. You know some languages don't even have a word for the truth," Thomas told the crowd.

"Does everyone have their phones?" Thomas called out as he sat inside "Ruth,"one of two steel benches shaped like the speech-balloon signs that he created for the show. "When I was at N.Y.U., my photography professor would say, 'If you sent eight photographers out to shoot one thing, they would come back with eight different stories,' " he told the crowd. Using the hashtag #PAFmeet, for Public Art Fund, the group set off to stage the perfect photographs for their followers. Andria Hickey, the exhibition's curator, explained to me that one of the conceptual goals of the project is to have Brooklyn residents visit the park and try to pronounce

the truth phrases in a language other than their own, to start a conversation about communication and celebrate the diversity of the city.

Gatherings like Thomas's are called "Instameets," and they are designed to give Instagram enthusiasts with large followings a chance to creatively capture and share photos, in an effort to drum up visibility for art exhibitions. It is a method that has spread throughout the art world. The Guggenheim Museum regularly holds #EmptyGuggenheim Instagram previews, along with traditional openings. In June, for the opening of their summer group show, "Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim," a select group was allowed in the museum before it opened, and invited to Instagram more than a hundred newly acquired works. The week before Thomas's opening, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Tom Finkelpearl took a group of Instagrammers on a bus tour, to show off Brooklyn's public art. "Before this administration the Department of Cultural Affairs had no digital strategy. We are trying to get the word out," Finkelpearl told me.

In the early two-thousands, Thomas began manipulating popular-print advertisements as a way to expose what he saw as the truth about ads' power to create false narratives about race and sexuality. For his 2006 exhibition, "B®anded," he inscribed scars in the shape of the Nike swoosh on the chest and head of a black model—a metaphor for Thomas's belief that corporate America, by way of its attempts to advertise products to niche markets, perpetuates stereotypes and corrupts identity-formation. He followed that series with "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008," and "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015." In both shows, Thomas digitally removed logos and text from popular-print advertisements he found in magazines. "Unbranded," represents Thomas's attempt to untie the knot that he tried to draw our attention to in "B®anded."

The August meet-up was Thomas's first opening organized around Instagram. But the artist who built his career manipulating photography is a prolific userand has more than thirty-seven thousand followers on the site. "I use it as a diary and somewhat of a sketchbook, and then as an exhibition space," Thomas told me. "Because I know I do work in all of these different mediums and all over the country and in different parts of the world, most people I know won't have a chance to see the work."

Using Instagram as a digital-marketing ploy to promote art helps to increase the attendance and visibility of artists and exhibitions. And it's easy to hope that the desire to take a photo of a piece of art would inspire a wider interest in the art work. But the photographs shared from MetroTech Commons generally lacked the didactic nature of the sculptures that hang throughout the park. One photo shows a visitor posing with her mouth open, pretending to eat a sign that says "truth" on it. Another one shows a woman holding her dog in the air underneath a "love" sculpture. The whole practice calls into question the role of art in society: Should it always be educational? Is there a right way to engage with art? Since 2011, Thomas has been using the hashtag#InSearchOfTheTruth. "People used to make marks on trees to signify that they been somewhere—now we have hashtags for that," he said. Perhaps, for Thomas, being there, and showing other people, is enough.

Miss Pickle is a French bulldog who has a burgeoning Instagram following and who only takes photos in front of works of art. Thomas and Miss Pickle posed on a speech-balloon bench, as the dog's owner convinced her with relative ease to look at the digital camera. Thomas lay down on the bench, put his sunglasses on, and smiled.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Random Invitation to Share Truth

Hank Willis Thomas's public-art project, 'The Truth Booth,' at MetroTech Commons

Artist Hank Willis Thomas in front 'The Truth Booth,' part of his solo exhibition 'The Truth is I See You,' a public-art project at MetroTech Commons. PHOTO: ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

Updated Aug. 4, 2015 7:17 p.m. ET

The truth was both real and inflated in downtown Brooklyn—at least inside a public-art project installed Tuesday at MetroTech Commons.

"The Truth Booth," part of an array of works by New York artist Hank Willis Thomas, rose up on MetroTech's plaza in the shape of a giant white-and-black thought bubble.

With the single word "Truth" emblazoned in large block letters, it invited passersby inside, where they are asked to complete the sentence "The truth is..."

A curtain hides them from view, while a video camera records their private moments for posterity.

"I think of it as a generosity project: People offer things to others who they'll likely never meet or even see," said Mr. Thomas, whose art often focuses on matters of diversity and subjective truths.

Created in collaboration with members of the Cause Collective, a group of artists and designers, the booth is part of wider exhibit of Mr. Thomas's art titled "The Truth Is I See You," on view at MetroTech until next summer, in a presentation by the Public Art Fund. Other elements include thought bubbles with truthful messages hung on light posts and related sculptures.

One of the thought bubbles hanging from a light post. PHOTO: ANDREW HINDERAKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Started in 2011, the inflatable vinyl "Truth Booth" has toured the world, with stops in Afghanistan, South Africa, Ireland and sites around the U.S. So far, more than 5,000 people have filled it with confessions and thoughts.

After its one-day Brooklyn debut on Tuesday, the booth will appear again on Sept. 26 at Atlantic Center Terminal and at MetroTech once more in October, with a fourth date at a still-to-be-determined location next spring.

Participants' responses live on via video documentation shared online—in archival logs at the project's website insearchofthetruth.net and at publicartfund.org—as well as on

an outdoor screen on the MetroTech plaza. It shows selections from past "Truth Booth" runs and will be updated with Brooklyn participants as the project continues elsewhere.

Thoughts as to what constitutes the truth Tuesday varied.

"We were really truthful—about our environment, work, our political situation," said Keya Branch, who stopped with a friend while on lunch break from a communications job. "It was fun. It was random."

“The truth is, I’m scared,” said Jessa Fisher, visiting from Park Slope. “That’s not the reality I want to be living in every day, but I guess it must be deep within me because it came out.”

She feared for her 2-year-old son, she said: “He’s so innocent, and it makes me wonder what the world is going to be like when he’s in his 30s.”

Kwesi Manwarin, a teacher from Canarsie, took a more lighthearted tack. “The truth is I love women,” he said, beaming. “And I love being black.”

“The truth is God loves each and every one of us,” said Andrea Campolo-Baez, who was struck by the display screen showing past iterations of the booth. “The truth is here, but only if you look for it.”

Giving voice to different perspectives is part of the project, said Mr. Thomas.

“Certain languages don’t even have a word for ‘truth,’ ” the artist said. “Something so simple and direct in English can have so much nuance in other languages.”

To make that point, his thought bubbles on the light posts include declarations of truth translated into 22 languages, with pronunciation guides on signs underneath. The goal: to get people in a global city in dialogue, across cultures and social constraints.

“I imagine star-crossed lovers yelling across the divide,” Mr. Thomas said.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Review: ‘Image Object’ Looks at the Relationship Between the Virtual and the Physical

By KEN JOHNSON JULY 16, 2015

When contemporary art ventures into the public realm, outside the protective walls of galleries and museums, the question arises, “Who is this for?” Its potential audience is no longer viewers who are already interested; now it includes passers-by of many dispositions, not all of whom have the time or the inclination to reflect on the aesthetics and knotty ideas that artworks may put in their paths.

Few of the works in “Image Object,” a show of conceptually complicated and visually unprepossessing sculptures at City Hall Park in Manhattan, are likely to stop busy pedestrians in their tracks. But for those who aren’t rushed and are given to philosophical rumination, they can be rewarding to ponder. Weather permitting, this beautiful little park is an excellent place for that.

A Public Art Fund production organized by the fund’s associate curator, Andria Hickey, the exhibition presents sculptures by seven artists who have all exhibited internationally. It’s meant to address a particular condition of modern life: On the one hand, technologically mediated imagery constantly impinges on us from every direction; on the other, images are perpetually being turned into real things, like fancy cars and tall buildings. The exhibition’s introductory text panel explains, “As images are rendered into objects, and objects are circulated as images, the boundaries between the physical and the virtual are blurred, challenging us to rethink how we see the world around us.”

The two-way relationship between image and object is most clearly illustrated in works by Jon Rafman and Alice Channer. Mr. Rafman’s piece, “New Age Demanded,” features two blobby shapes in white marble vaguely resembling sculptures by Henry Moore. Mr. Rafman made them by distorting a digital photograph of a Greco-Roman bust and rendering the resulting images in stone, using computerized machinery.

Ms. Channer went through a similar sequence of converting object to image and image to object to create “Rockfall,” a set of sculptures mimicking jagged rocks. She began by taking photographs of small chunks of concrete rubble, which she then digitally altered. Those images were turned into three-dimensional molds by computerized machines, and the final works, much larger than the original objects, were cast in concrete, aluminum and Cor-Ten steel.

Like Mr. Rafman’s works, Ms. Channer’s sculptures are both objects and images. So what’s the difference between an image and an object? For the purposes at hand, an object is a unique, physical thing. An image is a nonmaterial pattern that can be physically incarnated or reproduced in multiple ways. Most artworks, it can be argued, are fusions of imagery and objecthood.

Because images are constrained only by the limits of imagination — unlike objects, which must obey the laws of physics — they often idealize what they represent, asserting social and political meanings. Works by Hank Willis Thomas and Amanda Ross-Ho exemplify this.

Mr. Thomas is known for Pop-Conceptual works about black identity and racism. His contribution here, “Liberty,” features the cast-bronze arm of an athlete spinning a basketball on his index finger. Resembling a fragment of an

ancient Greek sculpture, it's mounted on a truncated pyramid, and the whole assemblage is coated in candy-purple auto body paint.

According to the exhibition label, Mr. Thomas took the image from a 1986 photograph of a Harlem Globetrotter with the Statue of Liberty in the background. Considering that a few black athletes are among the most celebrated people in the world, while many black people feel that they are still struggling for equality and liberation, Mr. Thomas's ostensibly triumphal sculpture exudes an unsettling ambiguity.

Ms. Ross-Ho's monumental sculpture "The Character and Shape of Illuminated Things (Facial Recognition)" has a female mannequin head, much larger than life, flanked by a cube and a sphere; all three elements are painted gray and elevated on a big oblong pedestal.

Ms. Ross-Ho took the image from an old instructional book on photography. Her rendering of it plays with implied feminist skepticism about the fantasy of the perfect woman. A glowing green neon rectangle framing the mannequin's face adds a tangential complication by referring to facial recognition software, which invites another question: Can machines "see" the way humans do? Doesn't seeing require consciousness? But that's a line of inquiry for another exhibition.

Ideological skepticism also animates Timur Si-Qin's "Monument to Exaptation," three tall, sleek panels with the word "Peace" spelled in neat white letters on each panel's sides under a round symbol resembling a yin-yang sign. The panels look as if they were produced for corporate advertising.

The titular word "exaptation" is crucial. It refers to an evolutionary trait that comes to serve a different purpose from its original function. Mr. Si-Qin's sculpture alludes to how the once-radical style of Minimalist abstraction is often co-opted to create deceptive images of moral universality for capitalist enterprises.

As for the remaining works, Lothar Hempel's suffers from obviousness, and Artie Vierkant's from obscurity. Raised on a tall pole, Mr. Hempel's piece "Frozen" is an enlarged cutout of a 1970s photograph of a woman skateboarding, which he lifted from the web. Attached to it is a glowing, revolving rainbow-colored pinwheel, the familiar cursor on Apple computers signifying "Wait." The assemblage comments simplistically on the Internet's bewildering compression of time, memory and history.

Mr. Vierkant's sculpture is an abstract construction of geometric metal planes partly painted in hard-edged sections of color. One of a series of works called "Image Objects" (the source of the exhibition's title), it's the product of a self-cannibalizing process by which Mr. Vierkant turns digital images of his finished works into new pieces.

That procedure and its import aren't readily evident in the present sculpture. Nevertheless, determined philosophical viewers might extract from it illuminating ideas about creative thinking in today's increasingly digitized and mechanized world.

"Image Object" continues through Nov. 20 at City Hall Park, Manhattan; publicartfund.org.

A version of this review appears in print on July 17, 2015, on page C24 of the New York edition with the headline: From an Object to a Picture, and Back Again .

A highlight of the ten-month-long public exhibition will certainly be the appearance of the *Truth Booth*, which kicked off a world tour at the Galway Arts Festival in Ireland in 2011. The 16-foot-tall by 23-foot-wide video booth is shaped like a giant speech bubble, and prominently features the word "TRUTH" written above its entrance. Upon entering, visitors are prompted with the phrase "The truth is…" and given the opportunity to record their thoughts with two-minute a video response.

In December, the Observer encountered the *Truth Booth* during its run at Art Basel Miami Beach, in Miami's Collins Park. The project has recorded nearly 5,000 visitors' responses to date.

The *Truth Booth* will launch at the opening of "The Truth Is I See You" at MetroTech Commons and make pop-up appearances at two other Downtown Brooklyn locations, including Target Center Plaza on Atlantic Avenue, before the show closes next June.

FILED UNDER: CONTEMPORARY ART, DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN, HANK WILLIS THOMAS, PUBLIC ART, SCULPTURE, THE PUBLIC ART FUND, TRUTH BOOTH

TIME

TheView

'THE PIPE WORK IN THIS BUILDING IS AN ARSENAL OF WEAPONS.' —PAGE 27

The debate over Dolezal raises the question of whether racial identity can be a choice

CULTURE

Let Rachel Dolezal be as black as she wants to be

By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar

I SYMPATHIZE WITH RACHEL Dolezal, the former head of the Spokane, Wash., chapter of the NAACP whose parents maintain that she is not any part black, as she has claimed. See, I too have been living a lie. For the past 50 years, I've been keeping up this public charade, pretending to be something I'm not. Finally, in the wake of so many recent personal revelations by prominent people, I've decided to come out with the truth: I am not tall. Although I've been claiming to be 7 ft. 2 in. for many decades, the truth is that I'm 5 ft. 8 in. And that's when I first get out of bed in the morning.

Just goes to show: you tell a lie often enough and people will believe you.

The evidence against Dolezal does seem pretty damning, though she maintains that "I identify as black." But despite all the strangeness, you can't deny that Dolezal has proved herself a fierce, unrelenting champion for African Americans politically and culturally. Perhaps some of this sensitivity comes from her having adoptive black siblings. Whatever the reason, she has been fighting the fight for several years, seemingly doing a first-rate job. Not only did she lead her local chapter of the NAACP, but she taught classes related to African-American culture at Eastern Washington University and is chair of an oversight committee that monitors fairness in police activities. Bottom line: the black community is better off because of her efforts.

At no time in history has the challenge of personal identity seemed more relevant. Olympic champion Bruce Jenner struggled for years with

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANK WILLIS THOMAS

gender identity and only at the age of 65, as Caitlyn Jenner, seems to have come to some peace with it. The same goes for many in the gay community who have battled to embrace their true selves. The difference is that these people face a biological imperative rather than a choice of orientation.

Dolezal chose to identify with a racial group she was not born into. But the thing about race is that, scientifically, there is no such thing. As far back as 1950, UNESCO released the conclusions of an international group of anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists and psychologists that stated that the concept of race was not a scientific entity but a myth. Since then, one scientific group after another has issued a similar conclusion. What we use to determine race is really nothing more than haphazard physical characteristics, cultural histories and social conventions that distinguish one group from another. But for the sake of communication, we will continue to misuse the word, myself included, in order to discuss our social issues so that everyone understands them.

As far as Dolezal is concerned, since there is technically no such thing as race, she merely selected the cultural group with which she most identifies. Who can blame her? Anyone who listens to Isaac Hayes' "Theme From Shaft" wants to be black—for a little while anyway.

Al Jolson, once considered the most popular entertainer in the world, rose to fame wearing blackface. He also used his considerable influence to help blacks. Jolson admitted that when he performed the same songs without blackface, he never felt he did as good a job. Some critics say it's because while singing in blackface, he was singing for all downtrodden people, including his own Jewish people. He found his strength and passion and power while identifying with another culture.

So does it really matter whether Rachel Dolezal is black or white? Dr. King said we should be judged by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin, which is what makes this case so difficult. On the one hand, yes, it does matter. Lying to your employers and the public you're representing is a deficit in character. However, the fight for equality is too important to lose someone as passionate as Dolezal is and someone who has accomplished as much as she has. This seems more a case of her standing up and saying, "I am Spartacus," rather than a conspiracy to defraud. Let's give her a get-out-of-jail-free card on this one and let her return to doing what she clearly does exceptionally well—making America more American.

She's given me the courage to say, "I am Spartacus. All 5 ft. 8 in. of me."

Abdul-Jabbar, a TIME *columnist, is a six-time NBA champion*

ArtReview

June 2015

Hank Willis Thomas *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*

Jack Shainman Gallery, West 20th and West 24th streets, New York 10 April – 23 May

When on 12 January 1915 the US Congress voted to reject a constitutional right to vote for women, Representative Stanley Bowdle of Ohio made a speech. '[Women's] beauty is disturbing to business; their feet are beautiful; their ankles are beautiful, but here I must pause – for they are not interested in the state.' The vote was a minor setback for suffragettes – women eventually gained the franchise in 1920 – but it is an apt beginning for Hank Willis Thomas's *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*, an exhibition that explores the use of the white female form to sell products.

Arranged chronologically in Jack Shainman's two Chelsea galleries, each of the works in this exhibition represents a single year in the 100-year span designated in the show's title. Each work begins with an advertisement, which Willis strips of its original branding and text, and then adds his own titles. His intended message is usually trite. *There's no hiding from it, 1982/2015* (all works 2015) depicts a beautiful woman's face split in half: on one side she is youthful, and on the other covered in wrinkles. (Fear of ageing sells products! Who doesn't know that?) *You'll never guess our deep, dark, delicious secret, 1984/2015* reflects the subject position of the artist, who is a black American male. In the work, a white model holds the index finger of her right hand up to her lips; in her left, she clutches a melting chocolate popsicle.

As individual pieces, Thomas's works lack the grotesque punch of, say, Mark Bradford's collages. His digital chromogenic prints read as grainy and flat, like reproductions one might easily find at a poster sale on a college campus. It is only when they are seen together that they have power. And what they reveal is terrifying. As much as we think that women have made advancements towards equality with men in the past century, the way we have been and continue to be depicted in advertisements reflects the opposite.

In the images from the early twentieth century, women are generally depicted as having some sort of set role: they serve, they mother, they are kind to disabled soldiers, they dance, they even drive. The epoch of their empowerment arrives during the Second World War, when capable, fully clothed females transmit virtues such as bravery, sacrifice and industriousness. *But she has other important uses as well, 1944/2015* depicts a pretty woman wearing a bandana, and working in a metal factory, for example.

Starting in 1952 with *Only in America... 1952/2015*, an image that depicts a Miss America type in a red skirt and bra, females are pictured partially disrobed and stay that way until, in the 1990s, they are naked. Stripped not only of their dignity but also of any profession, women become nothing but sex objects. *Obsession for men, 1994/2015* shows Kate Moss lying facedown on a couch, her ass just waiting for someone to lay something on top of it. Women are redeemed somewhat in the 2000s: *She keeps me warm, 2014/2015* shows two fully clothed women taking a selfie. But Thomas takes care to rip down any illusions of progress with *Just as our Forefathers intended, 2015/2015*, which depicts a parade of bikini-clad *Sports Illustrated* models floating on a barge with two pickup trucks in a bay full of melting icebergs. It's a vision of the future of which women are well served to be reminded – in this case, by a black male, whose kind is also losing the battle for equality. *Brienne Walsh*

You'll never guess our deep, dark, delicious secret, 1984/2015, 2015, digital c-print, 117 × 102 cm, edition 1 of 3 + 2AP. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Art in America

June 2015

NEW YORK

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

Jack Shainman

Hank Willis Thomas: *Aggressive loyalty, 1963/2015*, digital C-print, 40 by 42⅜ inches; at Jack Shainman.

Hank Willis Thomas has created a body of work over the last decade that attempts to unravel issues like identity and race in popular culture. Until now, he has looked most closely at representations of African-American men. His bronze sculpture *Raise Up* (2013)—a row of cast bald heads and arms raised in the hands-up "don't shoot" gesture—was on view at Jack Shainman's booth in Art Basel Miami shortly after the Staten Island grand jury decision not to indict officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner. The collaborative video project *Question Bridge: Black Males* (2012), which won the International Center of Photography Infinity Award for new media this year, shows black men of different ages and backgrounds talking about their experiences of everyday life in America. In the series "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008," Thomas stripped ads featuring black bodies of their text and logos to obscure the product being marketed. In doing so, he made clear what kinds of other things were being sold—underlying assumptions about race, class and gender, tapped into in order to sell beer, cigarettes, cars and sneakers.

Thomas has reprised the same technique in his latest series, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," which occupied both of Jack Shainman's Chelsea spaces. For this series, Thomas selected one advertisement from every year between 1915 and 2015 and removed all the primary text from it, giving the viewer (via a wall label) only the year in which the ad was made. One gallery showed images from 1915 to the 1940s and the other had shots from the subsequent years. Following the pictures chronologically, viewers could track the constructed character of the white woman, as she moved from the home to the workforce, from virtuous damsel to wild, frighteningly sexual creature (literally caged in an image from 1966, originally promoting Martini & Rossi vermouth).

The conceit is effective, not to mention timely. As Thomas has noted in several interviews, "Reflections in Black" concluded the year that the first black president was elected. The span of the new series ended just when Hillary Clinton officially announced her candidacy. The coincidence made the show's 1952 Maidenform ad in which a woman wearing only a skirt and bra dreams of being elected seem especially dated. Until, of course, you came to the 2015 ad for a Ram truck: referencing the 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, it features a bevy of bikini-clad women in place of the brave revolutionaries.

Exoticism, racism and sexism are rampant throughout the images. Some shots (like those involving phallic lipsticks and cigarettes) are made funnier stripped of context, while others are less amusing: a 1967 ad for a brand of pants called Broomsticks shows a girl in a bikini surrounded by five clothed men, laughing and grabbing at her. Thomas's message in this series isn't a new one, but it reminds us to consider the extent to which the "white woman" is a social construct, used and reinforced by corporations.

—Jean Dykstra

HYPERALLERGIC

The (Un)Changing Portrayal of White Women in 100 Years of Advertisements

by **Jillian Steinhauer** on May 20, 2015

View of 'Hank Willis Thomas, Unbranded' from outside Jack Shainman Gallery's 24th Street space (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

The idea is so ingenious, it almost seems obvious: take advertisements and remove the text that makes them so, leaving only a string of images behind. This was the process thatHank Willis Thomas undertook for *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008*, a series of appropriated ads that covers the period between the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the election of Barack Obama, with one ad representing each year. Shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 2010–11, Thomas's images laid bare looked alternately bizarre, sinister, and deeply surreal.

The same holds true of the images in his newest series, *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*, currently on view at Jack Shainman Gallery. As with the previous body of work, Thomas has once again stripped advertisements of their advertising, this time turning his attention to the ways in which corporations market their products to white women — and in turn market white women as products themselves. He has again chosen one image per year of the period in question, and the images are arranged as a timeline, split nearly in half between Jack Shainman's two Chelsea spaces.

Hank Willis Thomas, "The Breakfast Belle, 1915/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 48 7/8 x 40 in (paper size), 50 x 41 x 1 3/4 in (framed) (image courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York) (click to enlarge)

Allow me to spare you the suspense (spoiler alert!): it's not clear if we white women start off or end the century in a better place. In 1915, Thomas's chosen ad shows a white woman sitting down to eat with, presumably, her husband (who looks like a caricature of Robin Hood or a knight). She is dressed well enough, doted on by a parrot, and doesn't appear — to modern eyes, at least — so much oppressed as like an oppressor, considering the grinning black man in an all-white cook's outfit and polka-dotted bow tie who serves her. In 2015, meanwhile, there are no men in sight — which would be great if it weren't so oppressively clear that they (the straight ones) are both the makers of and the intended audience for a picture in which a phalanx of white women "cross the Delaware" (yes, after Washington) while wearing skimpy bikinis and stilettos and striking playmate poses against a red pickup truck. I am a white woman. I see the marketing every day. And still this image makes me want to punch something.

Hank Willis Thomas, "Just as our Forefathers intended, 2015/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 27 7/16 x 61 x 1 3/4 in (framed) (click to enlarge)

What's simultaneously most appealing and depressing about this latest edition of*Unbranded* is the way it gives us a sense of history as a series of waves or cycles, rather than that long arc we so like to imagine. 1920 was the first year that women were able to vote in this country, and Thomas's ad shows a sensibly dressed white woman behind the wheel of a car; the following year she's prettily dressed, done up, and a little sad, the object of a male gaze and a bizarre comparison with an Ancient Egyptian goddess. In 1944 and '45, ads show white women joining the war efforts both at home and abroad — but by 1946 she's back to wearing dolls' clothes and teaching her daughter (who's dressed the same) how to vacuum ('you just move it around and it sucks up dirt!,' says the voice in my head).

Hank Willis Thomas, "She followed his directions and took a right onto Equal Ave... 1920/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 42 1/4 x 40 in (paper size), 43 1/4 x 41 x 1 3/4 in (framed)

Installation view of 'Unbranded' showing, clockwise from top right, works for 1943–46 (click to enlarge)

The schizophrenia persists through the second half of the series: in 1967, just as the women's liberation movement was heating up, Thomas's ad shows a deeply uncomfortable scene of a woman in a bra and underwear being handled by five men. (It's actually an ad for pants, and Thomas says he was "uneasy" about using it.) As the years pass, the images show signs of progress — a white woman bodybuilder, another leaving for work while her husband stays home with the kids — interspersed with a headache-inducing number of scenes of white women as sex objects — in bathing suits, naked, inside frying pans and martini glasses!

Installation view of "Unbranded," with images from 1965–67 from right to left (click to enlarge)

Installation view, 'Hank Willis Thomas, Unbranded,' showing the years 1983–88 (click to enlarge)

That advertisers traffic in sexist and racist stereotypes is not, admittedly, the deepest of revelations. And there may be, for some viewers, a quality of obviousness to the exhibition, particularly in the parts with which your own identity most closely aligns (I found the earlier half of the show, at the 24th Street space, far more engaging for this reason). But knowing of something's existence doesn't mean you've examined it, and that's precisely what Thomas is encouraging us to do. It's notable that his focus differs from that of other artists known for appropriating ads — he doesn't treat these images as artistic raw material (John Baldessari) or use them to raise questions about authorship (Richard Prince); rather, he finds, alters, and then carefully re-presents them, *still as ads*, as a means of unearthing the politics hidden in a field where they're

meant to stay buried. Advertisements bombard us from nearly every space and medium imaginable these days; they're images we see every day but rarely look at. Thomas is doing the necessary work of pointing out just how insidious that white noise can be.

Hank Willis Thomas, left to right: "Bounce back to normal, 1933/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 44 9/16 x 40 in (paper size), 45 7/16 x 40 15/16 x 1 3/4 in (framed) and "Wipe away the years, 1932/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 40 x 48 1/16 in (paper size), 40 15/16 x 48 15/16 x 1 3/4 in (framed)

Hank Willis Thomas, left to right: "Come out of the Bone Age, daring....1955/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 40 x 41 7/16 in (paper size), 40 15/16 x 42 7/16 x 1 3/4 in (framed); "It's not what it seams, 1954/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 42 1/16 x 40 inc (paper size), 42 7/8 x 40 7/8 x 1 3/4 in (framed)

Hank Willis Thomas, "When I'm good, I'm very good, but when I'm bad, I'm better, 1998/2015" (2015), digital chromogenic print, 51 1/8 x 40 in (paper size), 52 x 40 15/16 x 1 3/4 in

Hank Willis Thomas, Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2010 *continues at Jack Shainman Gallery (524 West 24th Street and 513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 23.*

THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

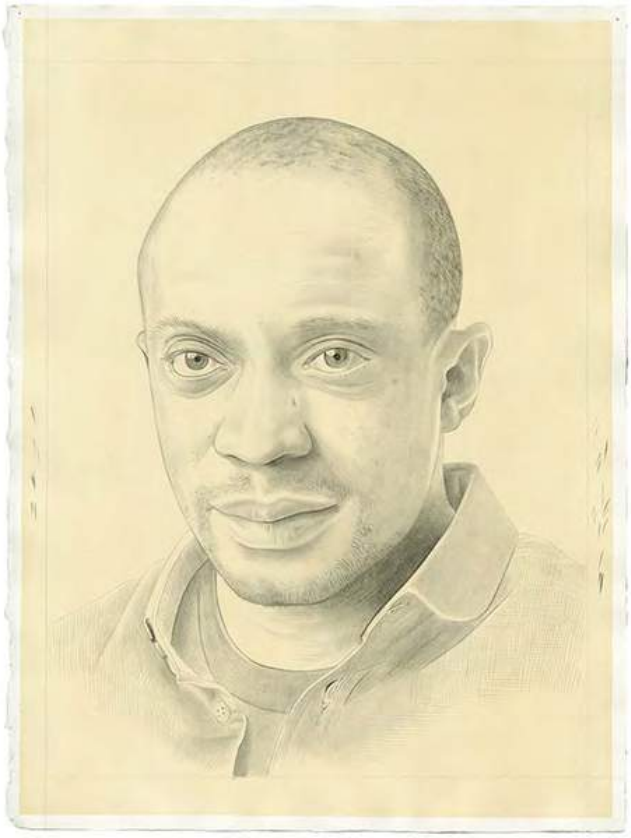
Art May 6th, 2015

INCONVERSATION

HANK WILLIS THOMAS with Allie Biswas

Hank Willis Thomas has spent the last 10 years using the history of advertising as a primary reference. Working directly with print adverts, the artist uses his technique of "unbranding"—where every trace of advertising information is erased, leaving only the original image—to challenge perceptions of identity, commodity, and representation. Thomas's fifth solo exhibition with Jack Shainman Gallery, Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015, on view through May 23, 2015, occupies the gallery's two spaces. This new body of work continues to explore Thomas's interest in how we respond to commercial images that have been emptied of their original function, and removed from their intended context.

Allie Biswas (Rail): Adverts have formed a central role in your work. Where did this interest come from, and at what point in your life did you begin to recognize the implications of this kind of imagery?



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui. From a photo by Taylor Dafoe.

Hank Willis Thomas: I would say I first became interested in ads as a very, very young child, as almost all of us are. Those of us who grew up in the '70s, '80s, and '90s are probably more influenced and hyper-aware of advertising than previous generations. So I guess I would say that as far back as I can remember I appreciated advertising as a language, and as a brilliant medium for exposing and sharing ideas.

Rail: When did the process of examining adverts in depth begin? Was it when you were studying art at college?

Thomas: Yes, basically as a student. Probably part of

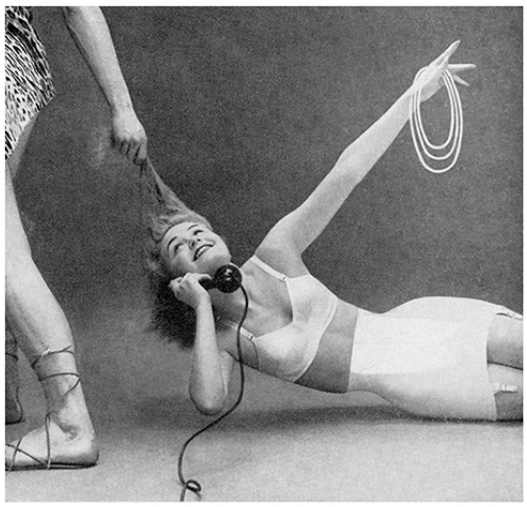
my ambition was to become an advertising photographer. I studied photography at NYU and some of the first jobs I did were assisting advertising photographers and commercial photographers. Also, when I graduated I worked at Saturday Night Live's film unit where they sometimes made these fake commercials. I did an internship with The Chris Rock Show, where they also did that. But in the earlier jobs, I was assisting on adverts for Victoria's Secret, DKNY, and Tommy Hilfiger. Being part of the crew, you see a different side of things. I recall realizing how much work was being done to make something seem normal or trivial. That fascinated me.

Rail: When you were working as part of these advertising teams, would you say that you were looking at what they were producing as an outsider? Were you critical in your perspective?

Thomas: Unless you've got a camera in your hand, or you're in front of the camera, you can't help but look around and think about all of the coordination, all the people that are coming together to make this thing. Most of what you are doing is about setting something up, or about dressing it up.

Rail: What about more specifically in relation to the conceptual aspect of the adverts? The way that you approach adverts now within your work is distinctly political. You manipulate them to make a statement or raise a question, for example. Were you applying that way of thinking to these adverts? Were you looking at an advert for DKNY and thinking, who is this for and what are the problems with it?

Thomas: All I was really thinking was, wow, there are 20 people in this room, and it's all just to make two people look like they are relaxing in bed. It was more the practical side of things. Why was there so much effort going into making something seem—you know, there are these two models who are already presumably beautiful, right? All that kind of pomp and circumstance, and organization and staff—the setup for an advert to show a couple in bed in their underwear. So I think that was just fascinating to me, to see all that goes into making Laetitia Casta or Heidi Klum or Adriana Lima seem beautiful.



Hank Willis Thomas, "Come out of the Bone Age, darling..." (1955/2015). Digital chromogenic print, 40 × 41 7/16″. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Rail: You were still thinking critically about photography, though.

Thomas: Yes, I was thinking critically about photography at that time, how there is as much going on outside of the frame of the camera as there is in the frame of a photograph. That is what a lot of my work was like when I was at college. I was just hyper-aware of things around me. Having those other jobs at SNL and The Chris Rock Show helped, where the adverts were still commercial, but were making fun of that form of

commerce. I think doing all of that stuff at the same time probably was what helped me to formulate my thoughts and approaches. I've also since then shot ads myself, worked for friends on ads, and been in ads. It's kind of a crazy world.

Rail: When did you have these jobs?

Thomas: It was for a couple of years. From '98 to 2000.

Rail: B®anded was your first major work. Did you make this directly after finishing college?

Thomas: That was around 2003 to 2004. In my mind there was no relation, ironically.

Rail: So there was a small gap between working for these commercial companies and making your first important photographs that employed an advertising style and the technique of appropriation. What happened during this transitional phrase? How did you arrive at B®anded?

Thomas: I was in graduate school, and I was reading a book called Michael Jordan and the New Global Capitalism (1999). It talked about how Nike went from being a $10 million company when he signed, to being a $10 billion company 20 years later, and how all of these industries expanded their ability to market Michael Jordan. I was thinking about black bodies. Bodies like his would have been traded on a market at a different period in time. Now when these bodies are traded today I was thinking about how much money is made from them. So we go from slaves being branded as a sign of ownership, to black bodies today being branded as a way to make money. These were the things that I was thinking about and reading about.

Rail: That was your real impetus, then, to go and make your own photographs.

Thomas: Yeah. I started thinking about logos as our generation's hieroglyphs, and how they can be imbedded with so much meaning, and I really wanted to play off of that.

Rail: What do you think logos mean at this point in time? Has their role changed as such?

Thomas: I think the graphic logos that became so popular are somewhat less popular now. Logos are also just more integrated into our lives. Nike is no longer an apparel company. It is a computer company, and a software company, and a lifestyle company. When I open up my phone, it is already branded, and so I'm branded from the moment I wake up every morning. Then I open the apps, and I'm using corporations as a portal to actually interact with other people. So I think, in a certain way, our lives have become more intertwined with logos, and the language of advertising has become intimately engaged in popular culture.

Rail: You have appropriated the Nike swoosh as a scar on a male body ("Branded Head" [2003], and "Scarred Chest" [2004]), and it is also shown on the clothing of athletes you have

photographed (“Basketball & Chain” [2003], and “Football and Chain” [2012]). I wonder if, particularly in those earlier works, the logo was at its strongest, in visual terms. Has the potency of the swoosh even decreased?

Thomas: Well, Michael Jordan isn’t playing any more. [Laughter.] There is just so much more to compete with now because of the explosion of the Internet. You can now sell the same products without having to put the brand onto somebody in a big way. You can just put a couple of colors together and you’ll basically trigger an idea or an image that’s related to a corporate brand. Almost all of us walk around advertising. You’re advertising right now.

Rail: That’s true.

Hank Willis Thomas, “The common enemy” (1941/2015). Digital chromogenic print, 51 13/16 × 40″. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Hank Willis Thomas, “Bounce back to normal” (1933/2015). Digital chromogenic print, 44 9/16 × 40″. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Thomas: And I noticed your watch.

Rail: This is old.

Thomas: It’s an advertisement though. It just may be more subtle. You said, “This is old.” That’s pretty good. [Laughs.] “This isn’t an ad, this is old.”

Rail: Would you say that you are—either consciously or unconsciously—looking out for what people are “advertising” through their clothing and so on?

Thomas: Yes. But maybe I do it subconsciously, particularly when we are talking about this project or any of my related work.

Rail: The next series you made was Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008. This was the first time that you had solely used adverts—already established images—to generate a body of work.

Thomas: Yes. At that time someone gave me an advert, because they had seen B®anded. They told me that I should do something with it.

Rail: What was the advert?

Thomas: They gave me an ad for a Toyota Rav4. I'll show it to you actually. It's funny how somebody can just give you something and it changes your life forever.

Rail: So they showed you something that then instigated a strong response?

Thomas: I think it's more that I was making work that was about branding and logos, and things like that, and they gave me this ad and I just thought, what can be done with this? After looking at it for three or four years, I started to realize that the last thing you would think this ad was selling was a Japanese car. Then around the same time I saw this ad (50 Cent in a Reebok advert from 2005) that was all over New York. I was shocked because—what do you see this as an ad for?

Rail: 50 Cent.

Thomas: But what's for sale? What is the product?

Rail: I wouldn't be able to decipher what they're trying to sell.

Thomas: Do you know who the "they" is?

Rail: Reebok.

Thomas: You got that much—because it shows a RBK logo. You see three letters as part of a logo, and that's all that tells you it's a Reebok ad. 50 Cent is actually wearing a G-Unit shirt—he's not even wearing the Reebok product!

Rail: He's not even wearing the Reebok product in the Reebok ad.

Thomas: I thought it was amazing that we'd reached a point where you can actually sell a product without the product in it, or without someone that is even related to the product, or an idea that is related to the product. So I went online to see what else was being produced. The Reebok series included Yao Ming. He's shown as a monkey on a basketball. Jay-Z is shown referring to his past as a drug dealer. They have Allen Iverson as the devil. First of all you wonder why the first iteration of this campaign has so many black men, because they're like five percent of the country's population.

With Yao Ming you have the Chinese giant—he's about seven feet tall—so they clearly had no idea what to do with that. So let's just throw everything "oriental" into the image—the rising sun, yin-yang. Reebok was like, we got this! It is crazy that nothing here makes sense. This is what made me start to think about what happens when you look at real ads and you remove the advertising information—the text, the logo. Would you be able to guess what is for sale, and, if you could, it's probably because of a signifier. So I started this project, Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008, where I'd take an ad and remove all the advertising information. Then I always like to ask people what's for sale. What's this ad for?

Rail: What is your methodology for researching and selecting adverts?

Thomas: I just try to find as many ads as possible. With Unbranded I chose 1968 as the start date of the timeframe because it was symbolic of the civil rights movement, the year Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were killed. I ended at 2008 simply because it was 40 years later, but then the series ended up being bookended by the election of Barack Obama.

Rail: How did Unbranded help you to develop your practice?

Thomas: I think it made me realize that there were things that I couldn't tell in my own images, and that as much as advertising was a great language for me to use, and with which to make statements, it was still limited. What's interesting to me about adverts as a material is that there are so many voices embedded in the advertisement.

Hank Willis Thomas, "Priceless #1" (2004). Lambda photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Rail: What about the role of digital manipulation? Your method of altering photographs has been described as "unbranding." What does the removal of text and logo initiate?

Thomas: It encourages inquisitiveness. It encourages us to really question and evaluate values. What are the things we care about? What are the messages we are trying to articulate? The logo and copywriting distracts you from the real message, which is often more nefarious than we might think. What I love about "unbranding" is that it opens up a conversation on a huge level about what it is that we really care about. Why is this important? How did this become normal? Because presumably, when something has made it to the level of mass media, it has been vetted for public consumption.

Rail: How much are you purposefully aiming for your work to contain a political element?

Thomas: It depends on the work. If we take this sculpture behind us ("Lives of Others" [2014])—it's based on a photograph of someone standing on top of the Berlin Wall touching someone on the ground when the wall came down. These disembodied arms are a cropped moment—this is similar to how I think about cropping a photograph. I like the idea of referring to what has been left out of any photograph, or any historical document. It is not the whole. It's what has been prepared and presented, or what has been deemed worth saving, or exhibiting. So I try to point that out in my work, even when I talk about historical things. I think one of the reasons I chose to do more "unbranded" work after B®anded was because it was harder for me to find specific things that would stand the test of time, as far as I could make comments using logos. Whereas with Unbranded it isn't even me making the comment—I'm just finding things that are already there, and I'm revealing what lies underneath.

Rail: You talked about the impact that Walter LaFeber's book on capitalism made on you early on. Were there any texts that were influential when you were making Unbranded?

Thomas: Harvey Young has been influential—his book —Embodying Black Experience. I was interested by how the black body functioned as a political landscape. The bodies that were measured and counted and policed, primarily in the 19th century and early 20th century, through slavery—those same bodies were overcoming certain oppressive forces through the agency they demanded in sports and entertainment, although a lot of the history came with it. Roland Barthes's books Mythologies and Image Music Text and Empire of Signs are important to me. He writes about the images that we consume, through advertising, and how they become integrated into our way of understanding ourselves. Especially in Image Music Text where he deconstructs the advertisement.

Rail: The spaghetti advert is a good example.

Thomas: Exactly, Panzani. So that really had me thinking about what would happen if I literally, visually, did that.

Rail: So literary or cultural texts have often been a significant factor in instigating or developing an idea?

Thomas: Yes. Or, like I said, someone will just give me something and I'll save it. I've been called a packrat before.

Rail: Let's talk about your current exhibition at Jack Shainman. You've taken 100 adverts produced between 1915 and 2015, and "unbranded" them. I'm interested in the way this series deals specifically with how white female identity has been represented, and how "femininity" has been constructed over the past century.

Thomas: I think one of the things I've come to understand and accept is that it's all mythology,

right? We've become more accustomed to acknowledging racism, but we also need to recognize gender, as we know it, in mythology. But this series is like Unbranded, as in, that wasn't about black men, per se, it was about people. This project just allowed me to explore another side of what I feel is the same coin. One of the pieces that really stuck out to me was this advert from 1979, which is part of Unbranded ("So Glad We Made It" [2006]). What is this for?

Rail: McDonald's.

Thomas: And what things do you see happening in this ad?

Rail: Social interaction?

Thomas: Yes. But what are the men doing?

Rail: They're playing backgammon.

Thomas: And what are the women doing?

Rail: Cooing over them.

Thomas: Right. And then you look at the woman on the left.

Rail: She's feeding the man, literally. Placing a burger near to his mouth.

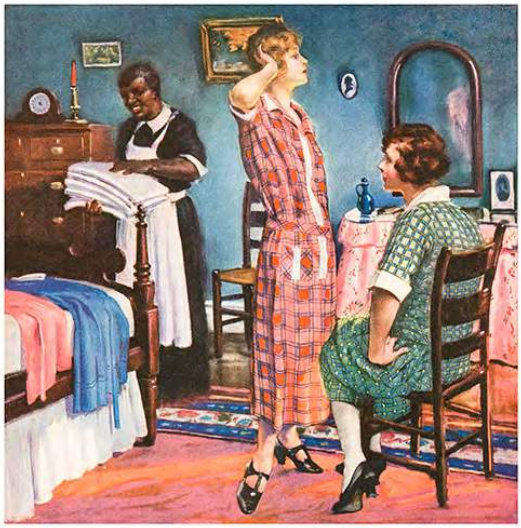
Thomas: And then you look at the guy, and what is positioned immediately next to his right hand? A burger!

Rail: A burger that he can't pick up himself, because he's too busy playing backgammon. So it's naturally the woman's duty to feed him and make sure he is comfortable as he sweats it out over backgammon.

Thomas: So bizarre! They are supposed to be middle-class black people. So they're doing something that middle class people do, but it is the men who are playing and the women are only allowed to watch them. And she has to feed him a burger, even though he has his own burger. This is another advert, which is in the current show ("The Results Are Obvious" [1925/2015]). Here is the original advert.

Rail: It says "Where Do Crows Feet Come From?"

Thomas: The product is for eye health—correcting your eyesight. So they are suggesting that crows feet are a result from having bad eyesight, and that might motivate women to have their eyes tested. I noticed that we get to this point after the Depression where there is this period of luxury. Here is



Hank Willis Thomas, "There ain't nothin' I can do nor nothin' I can say" (1924/2015). Digital chromogenic print, 40 3/8 × 40″. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Hank Willis Thomas, "Smokin' Joe Ain't J'Mama" (1978/2006). LightJet print, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

another advert that is in the exhibition ("Wipe away the years"[1932/2015]). This is the original version.

Rail: It's amazing how much text there is on this one, a couple of paragraphs in really small font.

Thomas: Did you read it? It's an advert for floor polish, and they are marketing it as a beauty treatment. As a white woman, you weren't supposed to do your own housework. Or, at the very least, you weren't supposed to be seen to be doing your own cleaning. I just think this is the most brilliant ad ever. How do we get these women to buy our cleaning product? What if we constructed it as a beauty treatment?

Rail: It is very seductive, though.

Thomas: Yeah, at the same time it is. During the 1930s they started to catch their stride and they became much more clever with it. It makes great moments like this. Here is an ad for sweaters from 1959 ("She's somewhat of a drag" [1959/2015]).

Rail: The woman is literally hanging on for her life, whilst the two men casually watch from the top of the cliff.

Thomas: This, to me, is like, if you want freedom, this is how we're going to give it to you. You know, this is at the same time that people of African descent are being killed for looking at a white woman in the wrong way. And we find an image here of white men essentially brutalizing a woman.

Rail: Was there any particular incentive to make this series right now?

Thomas: Well, we're at the beginning of an American electoral cycle and all the big news is about Hillary Clinton. We might be electing our first female president. Considering that women in this country didn't have the right to vote a hundred years ago, I thought it was interesting to consider what happened in advertisements as a way to track societal notions of a specific gender—how it belongs and what its role should be in our society. I wanted to take advertisements and go through the century, using one ad for every year to create an actual timeline.

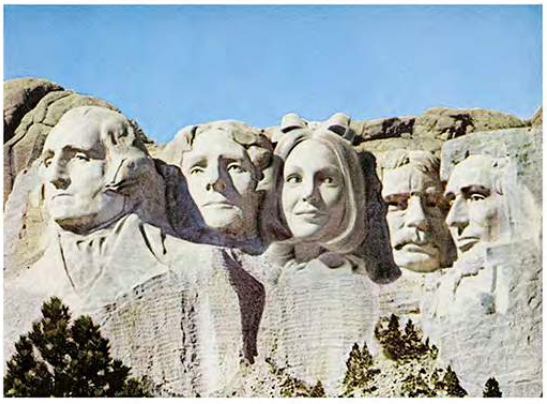
Rail: What criteria did you use for the final selection?

Thomas: I don't know if there was a full logic. I tried not to use ads that were high fashion ads because those tend to be—they need to be kind of provocative. I wanted to find ads that spoke to the general spirit of the times, or things that were happening historically.

Rail: Where do the adverts originate from, in particular the older ones?

Thomas: I found them mostly in books and in magazines, and through archives.

Rail: I enjoyed seeing the transformation of the medium. The adverts start out as what look like watercolors—they are very obviously paintings and drawings—and then we see the transition to photography.



Hank Willis Thomas, "Behind every great man..." (1973/2015). Digital chromogenic print, 38 5/8 × 50″. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Thomas: Magazine advertising was really just beginning at the start of the 20th century. Now it's coming to be a century old and possibly on its way out.

Rail: As the images are organized using this chronological device, one of the first things that you're thinking is, does the story change? Is the advert from 2015 essentially advocating the same message as the advert from 1915? Was it an intention of yours to make viewers ask this type of question?

Thomas: My intentions are to reveal what I found. These are all, for the most part, mainstream ads. They're mostly mainstream messages that are aimed at women, to kids, to guys. And if these are the people who are considered to be the most valuable in our cultures—as far as the standard of beauty and virtue goes, often based around these kinds of notions of white female integrity—well, this is how they're treated. So how does that relate to the rest of us? I think it's fascinating to consider. As the white female body works and fights for its own sense of agency and independence, there's a whole lot of work that seems to be done to prohibit and—

Rail: To undo all of that progress.

Thomas: Yes. I'm really eager to hear what people have to say about it. This is just my own opinion. Some people have liked the images in my work for different reasons and that's also an issue. When you see images that, say, to me, feel very sexist—having my name on them, some people will think that I made them. I'm like, no, we made them. I didn't make them. We, as a society, made them.

Rail: I had the opportunity to view the original adverts alongside your re-worked versions. Did you ever consider showing the originals in the exhibition?

Thomas: I did consider this, but I want people to really think about the images we are producing. The originals are a distraction from what is really for sale.

Rail: Do you ever think about the ethical implications of your work? Do you feel any sort of responsibility, in that sense?

Thomas: I think there are all kinds of ethical implications. I mean, who owns the images? I don't know. Clearly they aren't, technically, mine. But I really don't know who owns these images. What gives someone the right to own an image that's made for public consumption? It's really delicate, so I think the whole project is rife with ethical questions. Does re-showing or re-presenting these adverts reiterate meanings? Is there another way to talk about this stuff without presenting them in this way?

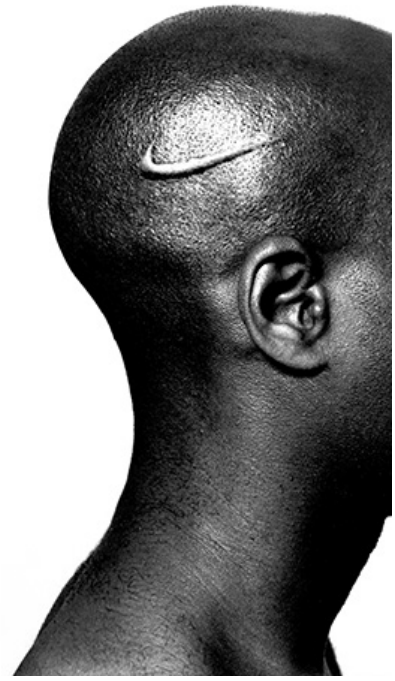
Rail: I wonder, then, how it felt to show your work in Bench Marks, which was your first public art project, carried out last year. Your photographs were inserted into the fabrication of benches situated at bus stops, on the street, in a neighborhood of Chicago. When your appropriated adverts were positioned onto a public bench, they became used almost as an advert in their own right. Do you agree with that?

Thomas: Yeah, there was no direction with them. I think it's important when you make work that is about media and popular culture to put it outside. Whenever you have an opportunity to put it out into the public, it really speaks differently than when it is shown in a gallery. It's harder to get feedback. People vandalize it and you learn different things, but I realize, in that situation, you just don't know who's seeing it and you don't know how they're interpreting it. I don't have any control. Also, I think it's important in our culture to have images out there that aren't a call to action. They're not commerce-related images. They are in the same vein, but they are not saying, go and buy this product, or do this, or do that. I love that kind of usage of public space.

Rail: How about the way in which you are represented as an artist in the public sphere? Is that something you feel you have control of? You were recently included in two group exhibitions: Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet and Contemporary Art at The Studio Museum, and the travelling show 30 Americans organized by the Rubell Collection. Did you consider how your identity would be viewed within these curatorial premises, for example?

Thomas: Well I think 30 Americans is called that instead of 30 African Americans because they were trying to posit it as a show that's about America, even though 99% of the artists in that show are African American. You could argue, obviously, when you learn that the exhibition is mostly of African American artists, many of whom are dealing with themes about American history, that it is related to that subject. You might consider that as the exhibition's theme. But it's a little bit of a sleight of hand. I think that's what happens in that kind of case.

Rail: You don't really have a say in how you're defined, then.



Hank Willis Thomas, "Branded Head" (2003). Lambda photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Thomas: You never do. Once you make work, and put it out there, you have very little say. I could say all I want, but people can do whatever they want with the work, if they have access to it and I don't. I think it's important to be seen in a multitude of contexts. Some people have issues with that, but I guess I grew up in a particular setting. My mother is a curator, she worked at the African American Museum Project and Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. So, I don't know. If I were only presented in one way or another, I probably would have a bigger issue. But, having had my work presented in various contexts, I think I'm just happy that people want to show and see the work.

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Interview

ART

UNBRANDING BRANDS

By EMILY MCDERMOTT
Photography HAO ZENG

Flipping through 100 advertisements that are stripped of all words and context and guessing what they mean is an exercise for the brain. Nevertheless, last week, for more than an hour, we sat in artist Hank Willis Thomas' midtown Manhattan studio doing just that. The images we viewed compose his most recent body of work, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," which will go on view today at Jack Shainmain Gallery in Chelsea, and delves even further into the artist's previous explorations of power, beauty, privlege, and desire in America.

When viewed as a whole, the 101 images collected from the last century (one from each decade), as Willis Thomas says himself, become akin to looking at a brief synopsis of cultural history. The mixed media artist removes language and recognizable symbols, leaving only the original photographs for consideration. Throughout the series, the portrayal of women reflects cultural developments, and oftentimes the lack thereof—some are empowering (on Mount Rushmore), others horribly violent (a man literally dragging a woman by her hair), and others sexualizing the woman's body (women flaunting bikinis standing in a truck bed; a woman scantily clad sitting in a martini glass). By isolating the images from context, Willis Thomas begs the viewer to consider the subliminal messaging of advertisements, as well as how they

reflect, or hinder, society's progress—a concept he has used before.

Prior to "A Century of White Women," Willis Thomas presented "Unbranded: Reflections in Back by Corporate America, 1968-2008," in which he employed the same overall process, but used two advertisements from each decade that were all geared toward an African American audience. Although Willis Thomas forges his own artistic path, it begins where his mother, Dr. Deborah Willis, the Chair of the Department of Photography at NYU, left off. Following his year and a half of research and completion of this project, and prior to the opening of "A Century of White Women," we met the New York-born, bred, and based artist at his studio to discuss all things past and present.

HANK WILLIS THOMAS: It's interesting how ads become a narrative of the cultural time. That's one of the things that I think is interesting—the project kind follows all these amazing moments in American history. You can see the progress! [laughs] You can also see some things we haven't quite let go of.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: Like sexualizing women.

WILLIS THOMAS: Which wasn't there really, early on. It almost emerges after WWII.

MCDERMOTT: You see that women want a freedom in the postwar era, but we're still tied to our gender identity.

WILLIS THOMAS: It's like your agency is partially through what you can show.

MCDERMOTT: What made you want to work with women and whiteness, opposed to African Americans as in your previous projects?

WILLIS THOMAS: All of my work is about framing and context. Compare this image with another from 15 years before—look at her body. [points to moles on the woman's body in the older image] These were called beauty marks at some point, but they're gone now. And whose face looks like that? It's even, toned, polished. We're all conditioned to learn our standards of beauty through these images. You realize that even the people who are "supposed" to epitomize it, they don't even look like that. The sexiest models—she's blonde-ish, but still has to have a fake face! [laughs] And god knows what else. How can you best investigate or critique these beauty standards, or our entire value system, without really looking at the images we are conditioning—not just each other but children, future generations—to value? And also, we see dramatic shifts from pretty much every decade, as far as what's appropriate, what's valued, what's respected.

The reason I've talked about blackness in a lot of my other work is because, to a certain level, it's easy to designate or to define. I think of race as the most successful advertising campaign of all time. Someone brought up the irony of statements like light skinned and black. Like, what does that mean? I'm black, right? But I'm brown, clearly.

MCDERMOTT: But then brown is Indian.

WILLIS THOMAS: Or Latino. And [my studio manager's] yellow. There's all of these divide-and-conquer strategies that race is based off of, but the differences are arbitrary. You can make differences about height; you can make it about eye or hair color; you can make it about tone of voice. I think about whiteness as being this relatively new construct, but also, what it meant to be white in 1920 or 1915 is very different than what it means to be white today.

MCDERMOTT: Meaning Lithuanian, Italian, Irish people, they weren't considered white.

WILLIS THOMAS: Right. Lithuanians really snuck in there. Armenians are making their way. I think of whitness as the blob; it's this thing that you can slip into. That's what I'm trying to call attention to with the project: the problematics of race and gender positioning, the problematics of demographic marketing, and what are the standards to which we understand what we're looking at, what we desire, and what we buy into.

MCDERMOTT: I read a story from when you were younger and saw the image of Jordans at the shoe store and then really wanted them. When did you first start really thinking about advertisements and their meanings?

WILLIS THOMAS: I guess you could argue it was then. We are the cable and MTV generation. I think I became aware of the power of ads through my youth. It's entertaining to look at ads, to try to decode… There's a movie called They Live. It made a huge impact on me. I'm sure you have no idea what it is.

MCDERMOTT: No, I don't.

WILLIS THOMAS: Well, you've seen the residue of it all over. It was a movie starring Riley Roddy Piper, who was a WWF wrestler. He was the bad guy at first and became a good guy. In his good guy phase, he became an actor, and in his actor phase he did an action movie. The movie is in L.A. and basically the world had been taken over by aliens [and] they're putting messages everywhere. He finds this package of sunglasses and when you put the sunglasses on, you can see who the aliens are, but also the real message behind all the ads. So all of a sudden you realize there's something that lies beneath all these things.

I was, like, 12 when it came out, but you realize how ads really aren't about products. Every advertisement has a subliminal message, even if it's not direct and overt. What I like about unbranding is it forces us to really start to ask the questions—take off the disguise and look at the image.

MCDERMOTT: Are you looking for answers or just questions?

WILLIS THOMAS: I think art is always about the questions. The design is about the answers. When you unbrand it, you turn it into a question; that's when it becomes art. I think advertising is the most ubiquitous language in the world. How can you ignore it? I think it's underused for it's actual power

and potency to deliver a message. Mining it is so important for artists working in the 21st century.

MCDERMOTT: Your mother also clearly works with a lot of the same themes. Do you think you would be as committed to this if it wasn't for her?

WILLIS THOMAS: No. My mother's work made me realize the power of photography to tell a narrative. Whoever is holding the camera or the paintbrush is creating the history, telling the story. The erasure of Africa—it's such an incredible campaign, the way they've tried to erase Africa's history. You wonder how much was erased when you see the few things they couldn't destroy, like ancient Egypt. Where's Egypt?

MCDERMOTT: In North Africa.

WILLIS THOMAS: But you're in the Met, and it's African art this way, Egyptian art that way. People in Egypt were like us, but everyone had a different complexion because it's a cornerstone where people are having sex. But we see movies like Exodus [: Gods and Kings] with Christian Bale. There's one thing we can be absolutely sure of as far as historical accuracy: there were no Anglo-Saxons or Nordic people in Mesopotamia or Africa. That's a hundred percent positive, but they're like, "Not in our stories!" That erasure; that's what race is about.

When the tombs were found in the 1920s, the King Tut was a hairstyle, part of the low-cut bob. That is another thing about globalization and exoticism: it's appropriation, to the degree that if you try to do a movie about ancient Egypt with dark skinned people, other people are going, "I don't get it. That didn't happen." So you wonder, what happened to the other cultures that did not build huge structures that you can't just obliterate?

MCDERMOTT: It points to the fact that by and large we refer to Africa as Africa, not 52 individual countries—how many of those can someone actually name?

WILLIS THOMAS: Right. Tunis is even different from southern Tunisia. But that's the thing. If people hadn't been having sex for generations, for centuries, there's all of this kind of stuff that I'm trying to start to talk about through my work. What makes one person white? What's the definition of a continent? [pauses] Tell me.

MCDERMOTT: I've seen something where you say that Europe is really a part of Asia, because continents are divided by imaginary lines that we put in place.

WILLIS THOMAS: Exactly. You can make an argument that North and South America are different continents, but Europe is definitely a part of Asia. The fact that Europeans were able to create the story, they're like "Those people are in the East. They're in the Orient." It's like, ‘There's more people over there and they've hand a longer continuous history, but they are the ‘others' over there in the East." Then on all the maps, Europe's in the center. That's the power of being able to tell your story.

MCDERMOTT: One of the first classes I took at NYU was

your mother's, The Making of Iconic Images—

WILLIS THOMAS: That's the thing—frequently, I'll be doing stuff and I'll find out later it would've been much easier if I had just talked to my mom, taken her class, read all her books. And Shelley [Rice, who wrote the introduction for the exhibit and also teaches at NYU], she talks a lot about how images are placed in advertisements, that juxtaposition.

MCDERMOTT: I took her classes too, and I wanted to ask you about something similar. In one class, we looked at two advertisements for the same brand of alcohol, but one was geared toward an African American audience and one toward a white audience. The white image had one or two drinks, the woman was wearing a ring, and they were conservatively dressed. Whereas, the African American one had four drinks or so, there were no rings, and the woman was dressed more suggestively. Would ever consider working with comparisons?

WILLIS THOMAS: Yes. There are so many things like that I am interested in. Another thing is [an advertisement's] art historical roots. Every advertisement has an anatomy, whether it's the gesture of someone's hand, or the background, or the lighting, and you could probably find it all in art history. I'm interested in that, in looking at all the ancestors to a specific image.

MCDERMOTT: Growing up, who was one of the first artists that you became acquainted with that motivated you pursue art?

WILLIS THOMAS: I would've say I ever pursued art, ironically. Art pursued me. You know, I didn't go to openings because I wanted to; I went to openings because my mom dragged me. The artists there were my mom's friends and I didn't want to be like them because they were all broke. [laughs] The lives of 99 percent of artists are not luxurious, so it did not look great to my 12-year-old brain. Even apartments in SoHo, I noticed it was kind of big, but I was like, "It's all rickety!" [laughs]

But my mom, one of her closest friends is Carrie Mae Weems —I recognized her work in the context of the house and I saw how she was dealing with the female body. Her and Lorna Simpson would both use text in their work. It's hard to decipher… I really only started think about this when [the] photographer Larry Sultan, one of my professors in grad school, was making art and photography. Him and Mike Mandel would get billboard companies to just give them a billboard space to do whatever they wanted. I started to realize how you could use advertising space in different ways. He shot some ads, actually, when I was in school. I recognized that you can be critical and participate at the same time.

MCDERMOTT: So how did you move from photography to working with all of these various mediums?

WILLIS THOMAS: When I went to grad school at NYU, there was only one other photo major my year, so we ended up having to have an interdisciplinary practice because when I had critiques with painters and drawers, they'd be like, "I like the colors in this picture. I like the fact that you printed it

big." There wasn't any critical dialogue. So I was thinking about the logos and things like that in popular culture. I scanned some logos from some clothes I had and started thinking about them as hieroglyphs. I made clipart in Microsoft Word to make some stuff and that became something to have a conversation about; they could talk to me about the meaning of symbols next to each other. That led me to realize that I didn't have to use one medium to talk about topics I wanted to talk about. I almost had to learn another language.

MCDERMOTT: Do you find gratification in working on commercial projects?

WILLIS THOMAS: Yeah, it's fun. You don't have to care. As long as you don't mess up, it's like, "What? You get $50,000 and you just have to make things look pretty?" [laughs] When we make this work, we have to be so much more thoughtful; it has to stand the test of time, whereas a good ad just needs to mean something for three months. When you're supposed to make something that's important 10 or 20, or hopefully 100 years from now, that's a much taller order.

MCDERMOTT: Can we talk a bit about Question Bridge? It's the first work of yours that I saw, actually, when your mom took us to the Brooklyn Museum.

WILLIS THOMAS: [laughs] People are always like, "She's always talking about her son!" But for me, none of the work is about race. It's about people and what happens when people are put into groups—how they relate to the group that they've been put into and how they see themselves. Can they find agency or not within these groups? So Question Bridge, by asking all these self-identified African American males to ask and answer each other's questions, we were showing there's as much diversity within any demographic as there is outside of it. Because, if you show the same question to five people, even if they have the same gender and skin complexion, you can guarantee they're not going to answer the same way if it's an open-ended or targeted question. That was the reason for doing the project, to really highlight that.

MCDERMOTT: That was one of the first times you worked with video. How did you then start to incorporate sculpture?

WILLIS THOMAS: I realized that to do some of the things that I want to do, it [had to become] a collaborative process, on a certain level, that is led or directed by me. I'm not an expert carpenter. I will find materials and the person who is the best to do it, and I'll work with them to help realize whatever I want to do. It's not a pretty process. [Everything starts with research] and typically takes a year at least, usually a couple years to fully mature.

MCDERMOTT: When you're involved in these years-long projects, do you find that they consume your entire life, or that you can come to the studio, do your research, and then go home at night?

WILLIS THOMAS: My entire life is always consumed. The projects never stop. I think for all of us, but I think for me as an African American artist, you don't want to be pigeon holed. I have made a lot of work about race and blackness and

gender, so working in different mediums, working in different themes, is important. Race, blackness, and gender are not all I care about and you could easily get the wrong impression by just looking at a few pieces.

MCDERMOTT: A lot of your work deals with this idea of untruths. Would you say that one of your goals is to reveal truths?

WILLIS THOMAS: Well, yeah, it's about truths, trying to show there are different perspectives. It's all about point of view and how your point of view is your avenue to interpreting and understanding the world. The truth is that I can only see a little bit of what is going on in this room.

MCDERMOTT: Another theme is this idea of double consciousness.

WILLIS THOMAS: It's the same thing, that awareness of these are things I value, but I also value other things. People might presume what I value based off of what they see, and I might be aware of that, but I'm not going to be dictated by that.

"UNBRANDED: A CENTURY OF WHITE WOMEN, 1915-2015" WILL BE ON VIEW TOMORROW, APRIL 10 THROUGH MAY 23 AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.