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HANK WILLIS THOMAS

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Hank Willis Thomas on the Image After the Image

Hank Willis Thomas returns to Paris with retroreflective works and monumental sculptures that change with the light, and with the viewer's position.

LAURENT MOÏSI

OCTOBER 24, 2026

At ***Galleria Continua*** Paris Matignon, ***Hank Willis Thomas*** returns to Paris after nearly twenty years with “Afterimage,” an exhibition that turns looking into an act of reconsideration. Across photography, sculpture and his distinctive retroreflective works, the artist asks what remains in an image, and what changes when we look again.

Returning to Paris



Courtesy of the artist & GALLERIA CONTINUA.



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, “The Toiler and Circe,” 2024, UV and silkscreen print on retroreflective vinyl, mounted on Dibond, 105.2 x 79.7 x 5.8 cm, © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

An image can tell us a great deal about the moment in which it was made. But it can also tell us something about the moment in which we are looking at it.

This is perhaps where Hank Willis Thomas begins.

At Galleria Continua’s Paris Matignon, “Afterimage” marks the artist’s return to ***Paris*** after almost two decades, and the beginning of his collaboration with the gallery. Yet there is little sense of a return in the conventional sense. Thomas does not look backward so much as he looks at how the past continues to move beneath the surface of the present.

His works have always occupied that space between image and memory, between what we think we recognize and what we have been taught to see. Photography, advertising, popular culture, sculpture, archival material: Thomas brings these languages together not to resolve them, but to make their contradictions visible.

The Afterimage



Hank Willis Thomas, “Afterimage,” exhibition views, Galleria CONTINUA, Paris Matignon, © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

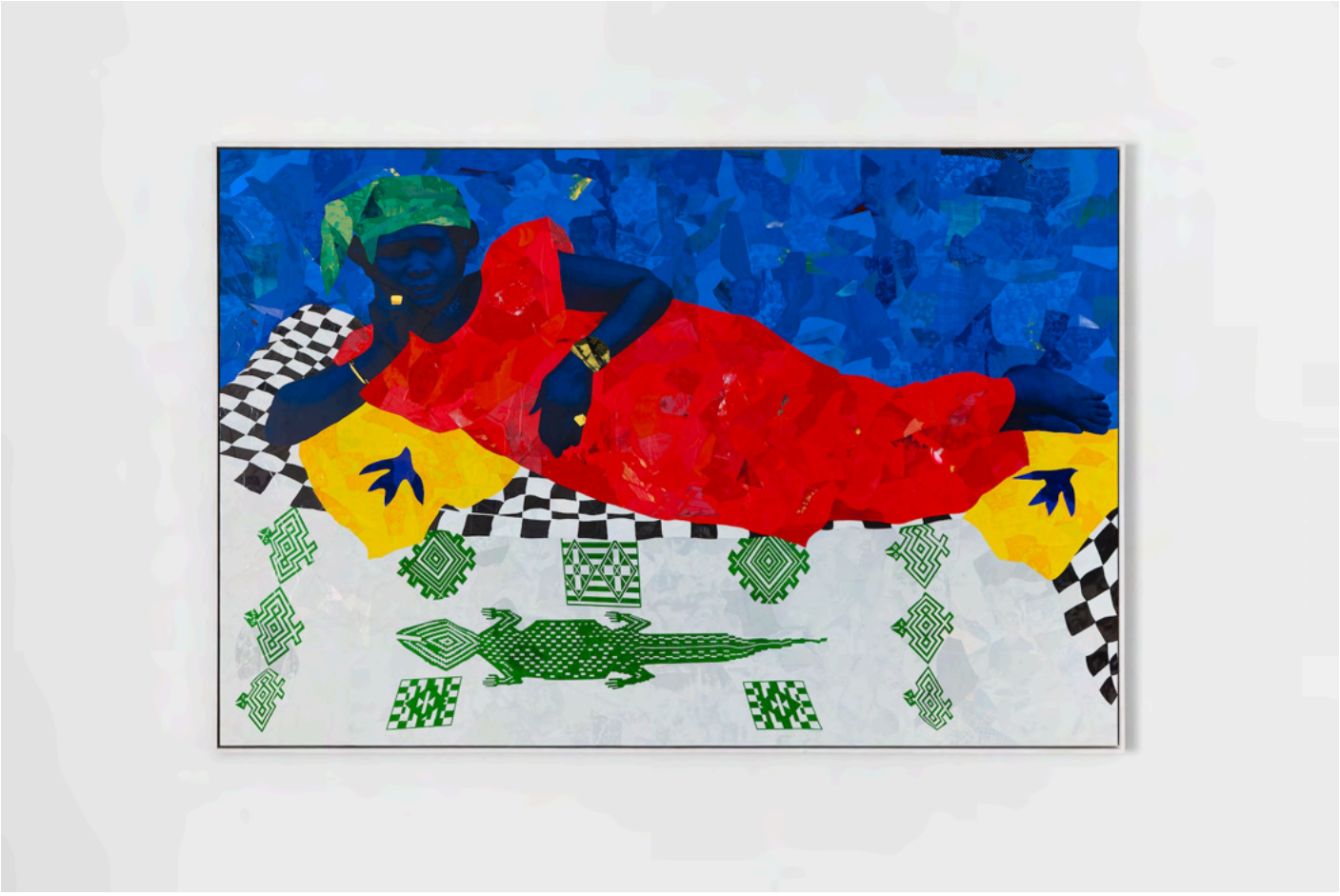
The title “Afterimage” is telling. An afterimage is what remains once the original image has disappeared. It is not quite memory, not quite vision. It is a trace that persists, sometimes more insistently than the image itself.

In Thomas's recent retroreflective works, this idea becomes almost literal.

Seen under ordinary light, the works present one image. When illuminated by a flash, another appears. Archival photographs emerge; fragments of demonstrations, marches and historical events become visible. The work seems to change in front of us, although, of course, it is our position that has changed.

Thomas has described his practice in terms of framing and context: where we stand determines, in part, what we see—and therefore what we understand as truth or reality. It is a deceptively simple idea, and one that feels increasingly relevant in a culture in which images arrive faster than we can interpret them.

Reframing the Archive



Hank Willis Thomas, artwork, Galleria CONTINUA, Paris Matignon, © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

There is something distinctly contemporary about this insistence on perspective, but Thomas's concerns are rooted in a much longer history of representation.

In *Woman in the Red Dress (After Keïta)*, he returns to **Seydou Keïta**'s celebrated portrait *The Odalisque*, photographed in Bamako in 1957. Keïta's portraits were already acts of self-definition: at the threshold of **Mali**'s independence, they offered images of African identity and individuality that existed outside the stereotypes imposed by colonial representation.

Thomas takes that photograph and places it within a wider constellation of archival images. The singular portrait becomes part of a collective history. The individual becomes inseparable from the social and political forces around him.

This is one of the quiet strengths of Thomas's work. He does not simply appropriate historical images; he makes us reconsider the conditions under which those images acquired meaning in the first place.

The same movement occurs in *The Toiler and Circe*, where references to **Aaron Douglas** and **Romare Bearden** meet archival photographs of civil rights demonstrations. The historical, the mythological and the photographic occupy the same field.

Here again, Thomas is interested in transformation. **Circe**, the figure from **Homer**'s *Odyssey* associated with metamorphosis, becomes an unexpected companion to images of protest and resistance. The retroreflective surface adds another transformation of its own: the photograph breaks apart, recombines, and appears differently according to the light.

History, Thomas seems to suggest, behaves in much the same way.

We like to imagine history as something settled a sequence of events that has already happened and therefore cannot change. But our understanding of history is continually being rewritten. New images emerge. Old images are reconsidered. Voices once excluded from the narrative become impossible to ignore.

The archive is never entirely neutral.

Monuments to Connection



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, Community (Rainbow), 2026, bronze, 81 x 84 x 17 cm, Photograph: © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, Community (Rainbow), 2026, bronze, 81 x 84 x 17 cm, Photograph: © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

That idea also gives particular resonance to Thomas's sculptures. Over the years, he has returned to some of the most universal gestures in human life: an embrace, a handshake, a raised fist, two hands reaching toward one another. By translating these gestures into marble and bronze, he gives them the weight and permanence of monuments.

But these are monuments to something different.

They are not necessarily monuments to individuals or victories. They are monuments to connection.

In *Community*, a circle of hands grips wrist to wrist, creating a continuous structure whose physical form expresses interdependence. The rainbow patina adds another dimension, suggesting plurality and the complexity of identity.

It is a remarkably direct image. And yet, like so much of Thomas's work, it becomes more complicated the longer one looks.

The same can be said of *Everything we see hides another thing*, whose two veiled figures recall **René Magritte**'s *The Lovers*. Here, the familiar gesture of intimacy becomes something less certain. Faces disappear. Identity becomes deliberately ambiguous. What might initially appear to be an image of closeness becomes a question about the categories through which we habitually read bodies, relationships and identity.

Thomas is interested in that moment when recognition begins to fail. Because perhaps that is where looking really begins.

Looking in an Age of Images



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, “The dawn of my return,” 2026, embroidered felt, 200 x 140 cm, Photograph: © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

His practice is particularly compelling today because we live in an age in which images have become both omnipresent and increasingly difficult to trust. We photograph everything. We document everything. We share everything. And yet the abundance of images has not necessarily brought us closer to a shared understanding of reality.

If anything, it has made the question of perspective more urgent. Thomas does not propose that art should tell us what to think. Instead, his work creates the conditions in which we might pause before deciding what we see.

That distinction matters.

From Paris to Italy



Hank Willis Thomas & Man Ray, “Tomorrow I shall contradict myself,” exhibition view Galleria Continua / San Gimignano, Courtesy: the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, Photographer: Ela Bialkowska, OKNO Studio.

It is also what makes the continuation of “Afterimage” in Italy so significant. At Galleria Continua’s San Gimignano and Rome spaces, Thomas enters into a dialogue with **Man Ray** in “Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself.”

The pairing initially seems separated by time, but the connection is surprisingly natural.

Man Ray understood early that photography did not have to be a passive record of reality. Through solarization, rayographs and other experiments, he turned the photographic process itself into a space for invention. Thomas takes that questioning of the image into another era, one in which the stakes of representation extend into identity, race, history and collective memory.

Thomas has spoken of encountering Man Ray’s work as a student and of being drawn to his willingness to push against the limits of the photographic frame. The Italian exhibition makes that lineage visible, bringing Man Ray’s experiments into conversation with Thomas’s sculptures and retroreflective works.

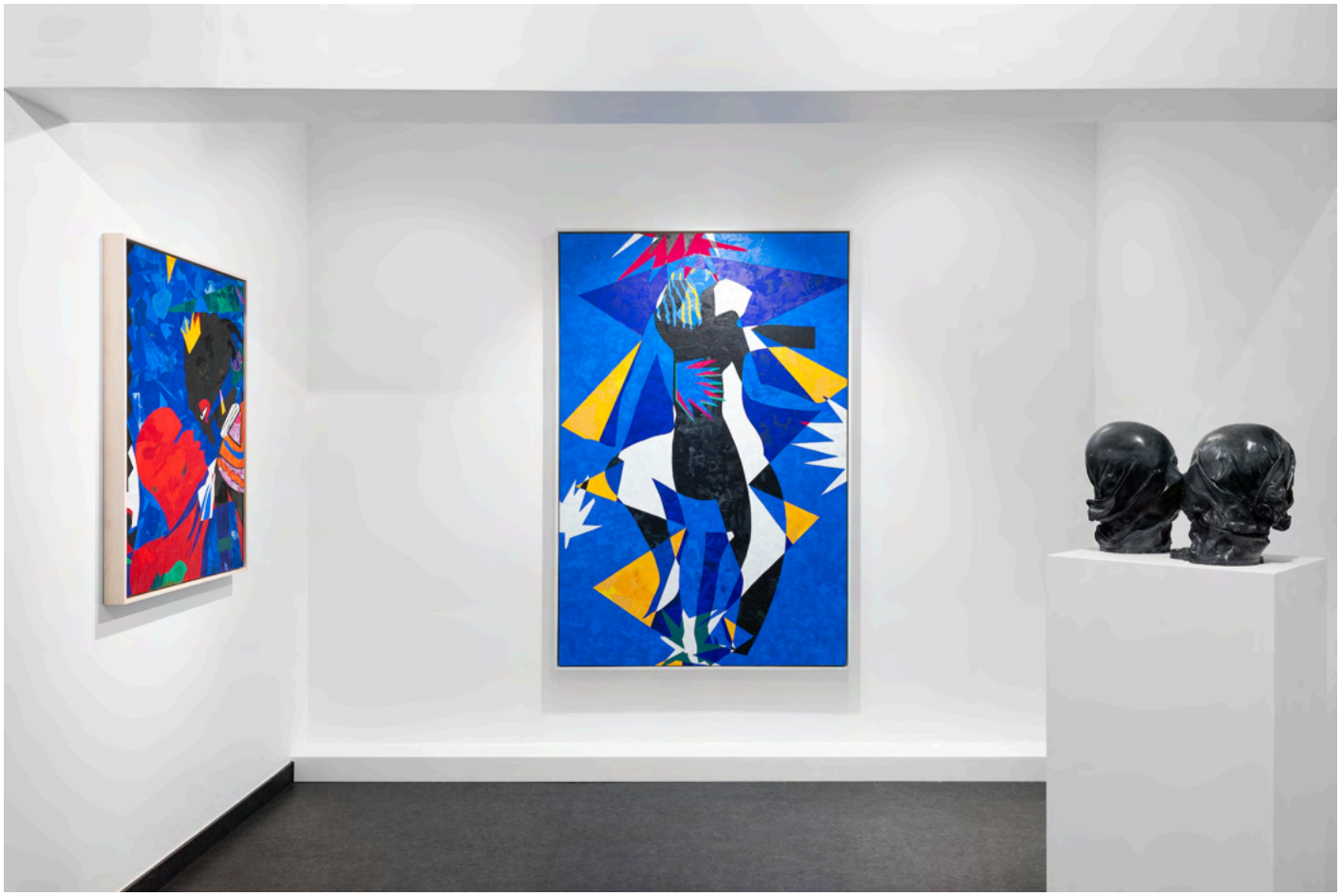
here is something fitting about this conversation taking place across Galleria ontinua's Italian spaces. The gallery itself has always resisted a single definition of what a contemporary gallery can be, its history moving between San Gimignano, Paris, Rome and its other international spaces, between generations of artists and very different artistic languages.

Thomas's work responds naturally to that kind of geography.

In ***Paris***, "Afterimage" asks us to look again at the images that have shaped our understanding of history. In Italy, the dialogue with Man Ray asks us to look again at the history of looking itself.

The two ***exhibitions*** become, in that sense, part of the same proposition. An image is never only an image. It carries the circumstances of its making, the assumptions of its time, the person who created it, the person who is represented, and the person standing in front of it decades later. It carries what we remember, and what we have forgotten. And sometimes, as Thomas reminds us, it carries another image beneath the first. We simply need to change the light. Or perhaps, more importantly, our position.

"Afterimage" is on view at Galleria Continua / Paris Matignon through November 28, 2026. "Hank Willis Thomas & Man Ray: Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself" continues at Galleria Continua in San Gimignano through January 31, 2027, and at the gallery's Rome presentation through December 31, 2026.



Hank Willis Thomas, “Afterimage,” exhibition views, Galleria CONTINUA, Paris Matignon, © Hafid Lhachmi, ADAGP Paris 2026. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas Studio & GALLERIA CONTINUA.

Texture
Beauty Seekers magazine

RÉGIS NORA · ARTS & ANTIQUITÉS · 3 OCTOBER 2026 AT 5:49 PM

In the Footsteps of Man Ray: Hank Willis Thomas's Journey of Self-Discovery



Photo © Artnet News — via https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hank-willis-thomas-man-ray-galleria-continua-2817048

The year 1976 marked a quiet transition in the history of photography: in Paris, Man Ray passed away, while in New York, Hank Willis Thomas was born. Fifty years later, this symbolic passing of the torch finds a tangible echo in the galleries of Galleria Continua. Through the two-artist exhibition "Tomorrow I shall contradict myself," organized in partnership with Territorio, the American artist's work meets that of the Surrealist master for the first time. This face-to-face encounter, unfolding between Rome and San Gimignano, does more than simply juxtapose two aesthetics; it traces a technical and conceptual lineage rooted in the intimacy of a kitchen transformed into a laboratory.

From the Harlem Kitchen to the Tisch School

For Hank Willis Thomas, his encounter with Man Ray did not take place in art history textbooks, but in the makeshift darkroom set up by his mother, the artist and historian Deborah Willis. It was in this domestic space that Thomas first learned to manipulate images. This early visual education was later formalized at New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts. During his freshman year, he immersed himself in the historical techniques that made Man Ray famous: rayographs (or photograms) and solarization.

From this apprenticeship, Thomas learned a fundamental lesson about the plasticity of photography. Man Ray viewed technique as merely a tool in the service of creative freedom, refusing to limit himself to a single medium. Painting, sculpture, film, and assemblage coexisted in his studio. Hank Willis Thomas has embraced this versatility, prioritizing material experimentation and curiosity over narrow specialization. For both artists, the work often arises from a physical manipulation of light and the medium, aiming to reveal what the naked eye does not immediately perceive.



Photo © www.galleriacontinua.com — via https://www.galleriacontinua.com/

Breaking the Frame: The Genesis of *A Thousand Words*

One of the key lessons Thomas attributes to Man Ray concerns the very structure of the image. By observing how the Surrealist managed to break the boundaries of the frame, the contemporary artist began to question the precise boundary where a representation begins and ends. This exploration of what lies outside the frame and the media context formed the foundation of his first major series, *A Thousand Words*. In it, Thomas deconstructs advertising and journalistic imagery, applying a conceptual rigor inherited from the deconstruction of forms cherished by the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century.

The exhibition's title, "Tomorrow I shall contradict myself," is, in fact, a direct borrowing from a statement by Man Ray. For Thomas, this assertion of the right to inconsistency and constant change is the ultimate expression of artistic freedom. It justifies a creative path that rejects repetition in favor of the search for new forms capable of challenging visual assumptions.

Light as a Revealer of the Invisible

The connection between the two artists is strikingly evident in their use of light as a tool of subversion. Where Man Ray "bent" light through solarization to alter the contours of reality, Hank Willis Thomas uses contemporary technologies to achieve a similar revelatory effect. His recent works rely on the use of retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond.



Photo © Artsy — via https://www.artsy.net/artwork/hank-willis-thomas-duality-pele-de-tigre

In a piece like **To Be Continued, Unnoticed** (2021), the image is initially static, almost partially invisible to the viewer. It is only when a directional light source, such as a camera flash, strikes the surface of the work that a second level of interpretation emerges. This technical process is not merely a gimmick: it compels the viewer to actively participate in the creation of the image and to become aware of the multiplicity of viewpoints. This luminous "revelation" echoes Man Ray's experiments, in which chance and darkroom manipulation brought spectral forms to the surface of the photographic paper.

A Decolonial Surrealism

The exhibition also highlights a more political dimension of this legacy. Thomas connects Man Ray's formal freedom and irony to the reflections of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. For the Césaires, surrealism was not merely an aesthetic exploration of the unconscious, but a radical revolution of the mind—a lever for dismantling colonial structures of thought.

By appropriating the codes of Surrealism, Thomas challenges the iconography of visual imperialism and collective memory. He uses détournement and juxtaposition to critique the way bodies and stories have been framed by official history. The dialogue established at Galleria Continua thus demonstrates how the tools of the historical avant-garde can be reappropriated to serve as a critique of contemporary society and its inherited representations.

Practical Information

The exhibition is spread across two separate venues. In Rome, it is on view at the St. Regis (Via Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, 3) through December 31, 2026. In San Gimignano, the works are on view in the gallery's historic space (Via Arco dei Becci, 1), with the exhibition scheduled to close in January 2027. In accordance with the policy of opening private contemporary art galleries for these events, admission to both exhibitions is free and open to the public.

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What Hank Willis Thomas Learned From Man Ray

At Galleria Continua, the dual-artist exhibition "Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself" traces a through line from Man Ray's darkroom experiments to Thomas's own investigations into image, gesture, and representation.



Installation view of work by Hank Willis Thomas in "Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself" (2026). Courtesy of Galleria Continua.

Italy's **Galleria Continua** has placed the American artist **Hank Willis Thomas** in dialogue with the pioneering 20th-century Modernist **Man Ray** for a new exhibition called "Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself." It is on view at the gallery's San Gimignano location, as well as at the **St. Regis Hotel** in Rome, the result of a collaboration with Terrirtorio. The show is on view in Rome through the end of 2026, and in San Gimignano through Saturday, January 30, 2027. By bringing together two temporally separated artists, Galleria Continua illuminates Thomas and Man Ray's shared creative concerns, as well as the similarities and differences in their processes.

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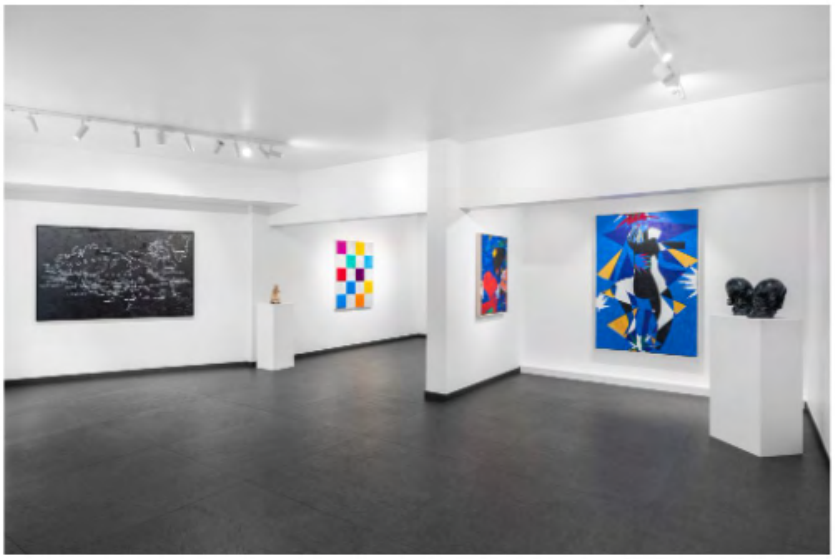
Hank Willis Thomas, left: *Duality* (2026), right: *Solidarity* (2026). Courtesy of Galleria Continua.

The artist pairing is a cogent one, as Thomas has noted the influence of Man Ray on his practice: Thomas studied Man Ray's photograms and solarizations as a student at **New York University**, and he's said he was particularly intrigued by the historic creator's penchant for pushing against the edges of the photographic frame. His interest ultimately informed one of his earliest projects, the 1997 photographic series "A Thousand Words."



Man Ray, left: *Man Ray* (ca. 1970s), right: *Solitary* (1972). Courtesy of Galleria Continua.

"Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself," whose title is drawn from a line written by Man Ray, sharply traces where Thomas and Man Ray align and diverge. Man Ray's rayographs, solarized photographs, and sculptural objects, for instance, are shown alongside Thomas's marble sculptures, pieces that take on a sense of monumentality by borrowing the material and scale of classical statuary while instilling the vocabulary of contemporary concerns. Seen together, a shift in time and place is apparent. Where Man Ray used chance and experimentation to unsettle the photographic image, Thomas extends that same instinct toward the visual and social structures that have shaped perceptions of history: who appears in the archive, who doesn't, and how those absences are codified over time.



Installation view of "Hank Willis Thomas: Afterimage" (2026). Photo: Hafid Ihachmi. Courtesy of Galleria Continua.

Within the show's framework, each artist still gets individual attention, with didactics tracing Man Ray's path from **Dada** to **Surrealism**, as well as Thomas's continuing engagement with colonialism, representation, and collective memory—themes he explores concurrently in the exhibition "Afterimage," his solo debut at Galleria Continua's Paris Matignon space. Ultimately, the San Gimignano and Rome presentations offer a rare chance to see a contemporary artist's work built explicitly in dialogue with a historical figure he consciously considers foundational, beyond just influential.



Installation view of "Hank Willis Thomas & Man Ray: Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself" (2026). Courtesy of Galleria Continua.

"Hank Willis Thomas & Man Ray: Tomorrow I Shall Contradict Myself" is on view at Galleria Continua, San Gimignano, through December 31, 2026.

TIME

TIME100 Art 2026



Makeda Sandford—The Washington Post/Getty Images

SEP 17, 2026

Hank Willis Thomas

Civically engaged

by Caroline Goldstein

In Philadelphia, a massive Afro pick with a handle in the shape of a clenched fist stands as a monument to Black resilience. The sculpture, titled *All Power to All People*, is emblematic of the work of Hank Willis Thomas, a conceptual artist whose practice often subverts the iconography of pop culture and mass media to, as he likes to say, "re-right" history. With art in prominent public spaces like the Boston Common and downtown Brooklyn, Thomas

embodies what civic engagement can look like for an artist looking to express the complexity of American society. For Freedoms, a collective he co-founded in 2016, has installed more than 500 artist-designed billboards around the country, which encourage people to vote and get involved in their communities. In October, Thomas unveiled a sculpture memorializing the enslaved people who built Davidson College in North Carolina. “The road to progress is always under construction.” Thomas told TIME in 2025. “We're trying to not go back.”

The Washington Post

THE CRITIQUE

Hank Willis Thomas sees what America can't say

In his art about race and freedom, he asks us to look closer, and think twice.



Artist Hank Willis Thomas in his Brooklyn studio on May 31. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)



By Robin Givhan

August 16, 2024 at 8:00 a.m. EDT

The artist Hank Willis Thomas reclines in a chair on the second floor of his studio in Brooklyn where he's surrounded by inspiring clutter — books about art and photography, as well as a model of one of his own monumental sculptures — and considers a question: How important are Black collectors in elevating the voices of Black artists? Thomas has benefited from the attentions of prominent collectors, most notably

the late Peggy Cooper Cafritz of Washington, one of his earliest champions. And for that, he is grateful. Still, he has a problem with the entire premise of the question.

His first worry is in ascribing outsize importance to a collector because that would suggest that those who don't have the financial resources to purchase original works but who nonetheless are deeply engaged with art, who are moved and changed by it, are *un*important. That concern we'll get to in a bit.

The bigger issue is the matter of race, which always leaves him in knots.

"The impacts of race are real, but race itself is a fabrication. So when I talk about race, I do it with a suspension of disbelief. I cannot talk about race without in some way upholding white supremacy, because race was created to say that certain people are better than others," he says. "A lot of people who want to pretend that race isn't real use it as a tool to ignore the impact of institutional racism and white supremacy.

"And so there I am: [Race] is not real. But the impacts are real! But it shouldn't exist. But it does!" He says this with an exasperated chuckle; his head whips from side to side as he mimes this philosophical tug-of-war.

"So therein lies the problem of attempting to talk thoughtfully about it," he continues. "It's kind of like saying: 'Don't look at the spot on my shirt. Don't look at the stain on my shirt.'" And as soon as he says this, the mark on his shirt becomes a magnet for your gaze. The more you try *not* to inspect what appears to be a dark splotch on his red shirt, the more desperate you are to stare at it. The more it becomes an obsession. But ignoring the stain doesn't mean the shirt is pristine.



Thomas's “The Cotton Bowl” (2011). (Hank Willis Thomas)

Thomas, 48, began his career in photography, where some of his most compelling work explored the inequities in professional sports, the commodification of Black bodies and contemporary colonialism. He examines race by settling into its complexity: from the absurdity of categorizing people by skin color to the terrorism that doing so has spawned. In a work titled “The Cotton Bowl,” from 2011, for example, Thomas positions two male figures across from each other — one a Black sharecropper, wearing a frayed straw hat, bent low in a cotton field, and the other a Black football player crouched down on the playing field. Their strikingly similar stances force uncomfortable questions. What’s the distance the country has traveled as measured by the livelihoods of these two men? How has Black muscle, pain and stamina fueled economic systems from one century into the next?

Over the years, Thomas has blossomed into a public artist. His large-scale sculptures, often inspired by photographs, are now part of landscapes across the country. He’s an artist in conversation with whole communities, not just gallerygoers and collectors. He’s quick to criticize this country’s institutions, but he still has great respect for them and is willing to engage on their turf. He loves mixing it up and posing questions; he has also suffered the slings and arrows of the body politic as well as social media.

After years of raising questions about the sports-industrial complex, Thomas accepted a commission from the NFL and created “Opportunity (reflection),” which was installed at the 2023 Super Bowl in Arizona. The 10-foot-tall stainless steel sculpture is composed of a single, disembodied arm reaching skyward to catch a football. The sculpture echoes the gloss of the Vince Lombardi Trophy; it celebrates the athletic body and its ability to uplift entire communities, yet it omits the athlete as a distinct and whole individual. That same year, “The Embrace” was unveiled in Boston. The monument to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King is based on a photograph of the couple hugging after he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

The sculpture depicts only the couple's arms, shoulders and hands. While some have found it moving, it has also been criticized as "awkward" and "aesthetically unpleasant." A cousin of Coretta Scott King even wrote that it resembled "a pair of hands hugging a beefy penis."

"I can't say that my ego wasn't a little bit hurt because I want everyone to love me and love everything — to see my best intentions," Thomas said. "There's artworks that I hated that, like, *now* that's a brilliant work of art. That's also why I give space for people who may have hated 'The Embrace' when they saw it online, or maybe they even hated it when they saw it in person, to imagine how they'll think about it in 20, 30, 40, 100 years."

Thomas explores the tensions that emerge between what people see and what's actually present. How people perceive places, individuals and ideas is dependent on where they're standing, whether it be from a position of privilege or disenfranchisement, wealth or poverty, curiosity or rigidity, the front of the line or the back of the crowd. In the moment or 20 years hence.



"The Embrace" honors the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, in Boston. (Heidi Besen/Shutterstock)



A detail of "The Embrace" from January 2023. (Craig F. Walker/The Boston Globe/ Getty Images)

At a time when we are tasked with inspecting the stability of our democracy, with finding the cracks, plastering them over and hoping that the whole will be made stronger after the mending, Thomas seems especially suited to our challenges. He has posed questions about some of the most pressing concerns facing the country. He's collaborated on a memorial for gun violence. He's an instigator of the For Freedoms project, which uses artwork to inspire civic engagement. He's one of the creators of the Truth Booth, a traveling exhibition that provides a space for people to document themselves as they speak honestly about … anything. And this year, he was named the Harman/Eisner artist in residence at the Aspen Institute.

Thomas strives to link our past to our future, to communicate urgent and difficult ideas when words fail us, when politicians make matters worse, and when moralists and terrorists all lay claim to God's unique favor. As we struggle to communicate across the divides — political, racial and demographic — perhaps a monumental sculpture or a disruptive photograph can help us better recognize each other's humanity.



Thomas in his Brooklyn studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

“Thought leadership does not solely come in the form of those who have written books and political commentators,” said art and cultural historian Sarah Lewis, who was onstage with Thomas at the Aspen Ideas Festival in June. “History shows us that many of the drivers of transformative change in the national discourse come from the work of visual artists. And I think Hank Willis Thomas is foremost among them in his generation.”

Yet despite his subject matter and the urgency of his beliefs, Thomas would not call himself an activist. It’s a term he says is often interpreted as synonymous with self-righteousness. “If I say I’m an activist, it’s like: ‘Oh, you know what’s right. You know what’s wrong.’ I don’t really know if I know what’s right or if I know what’s wrong. I know that there are questions I can ask that hopefully will get to a thoughtful answer,” he said.

“Artists at their core — the *best* artists — I think are asking really critical questions of the time.” The right questions can make us think deeply, broadly and empathetically. Thomas doesn’t claim to have all the answers, or really any answers. And that may be precisely what makes his work so illuminating.



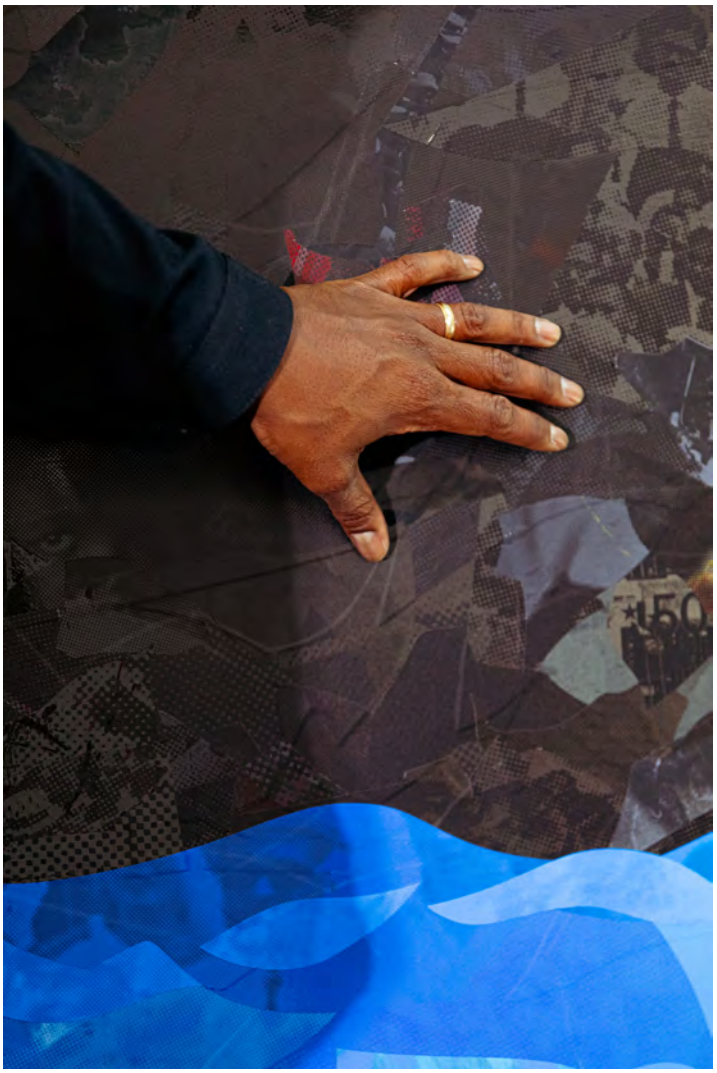
Inside Thomas's studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)



Casts of Thomas's face hang in his studio in May. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

Thomas's graffitied studio is in a neighborhood that once was described as part of working-class Bushwick but, as the area's fortunes changed, became known as East Williamsburg. It sits on a street that is often blocked by industrial trucks and filled with the sound of forklifts in reverse. It's an area where things are made: shelves, windows, doors. But it's also a neighborhood of ideas, emotions and possibilities. Artists work here.

Many of the pieces in his studio incorporate retro reflective sheeting. The material is commonly used for road signs. On a dark highway, they become visible only in the glare of a car's headlights. For Thomas, these pieces, which draw on archival photographs and historical texts, underscore his desire to challenge viewers to see what's right in front of them but not always obvious. At first glance, there's a blur of faces, maybe. A surreal landscape of coal-black sky and azure-blue sea. But if you shine a bright light on one of these works, a whole universe reveals itself. In one especially moving example, what looks like a fuzzy image of an American flag is actually a reimagined Dorothea Lange photograph of a group of schoolchildren in San Francisco reciting the Pledge of Allegiance before the Japanese American students were sent to a World War II prison camp. Quite simply, Thomas is inviting viewers to shine a light on the truth about our past.



Thomas works on “Untitled (Godspeed)” (2024) at his studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)



Many of his works draw on archival photographs and historical texts, challenging viewers to see what’s in front of them but not always obvious. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

“He’s engaged with this legacy, a much longer legacy, that really begins with Frederick Douglass and was reanimated with W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke and that is current today — that’s asking fundamental questions about what must art be in political life today,” said Lewis, author of “The Unseen Truth: When Race Changed Sight in America.”

“He’s studied the photographic archive of rights-based movements around the world and has grown up with the extraordinary [artist and historian] Deborah Willis as his mother. And what that’s given him as a conceptual artist is the dexterity and depth of knowledge to see what needs a spotlight on it. Scholars shine a spotlight on the archives through books; he’s doing so through the medium of the public monument.”

One of the most significant collections of Thomas’s sculptures is in Montgomery, Ala. They’re installed in each of the three Legacy Sites created by the Equal Justice Initiative — an organization focused on mass incarceration, racial inequality and the perilous aftereffects of slavery. Founded by lawyer Bryan Stevenson, whose life and work were depicted in the film “Just Mercy,” the nonprofit is best known as a law firm of last resort, one that has helped free the wrongfully convicted from death row.

“I see my work as a brushstroke in Bryan Stevenson’s masterpiece,” Thomas said.



Thomas's “A Luta Continua.” (The artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)



A detail from “A Luta Continua.” (The artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)



Another view of “A Luta Continua.” The title, which means “the struggle continues,” references a protest anthem from Mozambique’s fight for independence. (The artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

Many things distinguish the museum and the two monuments, but most significant is their refusal to view slavery as only a historical blight, one cut off from the present day and society's current woes. The museum follows the thread of slavery through to its 21st-century iteration as mass incarceration and disenfranchisement.

In the museum, in a room that addresses race and policing, guests can settle into a space modeled after the visitors room of a prison, pick up a phone and hear the story of an incarcerated man or woman. Thomas's "A Luta Continua" hangs nearby. The aluminum sculpture is reminiscent of a pillory with disembodied hands reaching through small, round portholes. The sculpture is based on a 1992 photograph by Catherine Ross of arrested demonstrators being driven away from the Supreme Court in Johannesburg during the fall of apartheid. The title, which means "the struggle continues," references a protest anthem from Mozambique's fight for independence. But the phrase has been used all over the world by LGBTQ+ activists and racial justice organizers.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which sits atop a grassy hill, within eyeshot of modest homes, honors the victims of lynching throughout this country. Oxidized rectangular boxes hang overhead. Each is engraved with the name of a county and the names of those known to have been lynched there. The vastness of the memorial makes clear that this was not simply a Deep South scourge. The memorial includes duplicate markers fashioned for local installation for a more intimate form of reckoning in town squares across this country. Long rows of them lie on a hill like coffins awaiting proper burial.



Thomas's "Raise Up" at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala. (Brynn Anderson/AP)

Just down the hill, on an expanse of lush grass, one finds “Raise Up.” Thomas’s 25-foot-long bronze-and-cement sculpture was inspired by a photograph from the 1960s of Black South African miners who were forced to endure a group medical examination in the nude. The sculpture has the men embedded in a cement wall up to their shoulders. Their arms are raised overhead. The gesture calls to mind the humiliations of enslaved Black men on the auction block in the 19th century. It speaks to the 20th-century rise of stop-and-frisk policies and the designation of a multitude of young Black men as persons of interest, suspects and criminals. Yet that same stance became an expression of rebellion during the racial justice protests of the 21st century. The men are not all the same height, and so some look as though they are just barely able to keep their heads above the wall of concrete. One, whose torso tilts forward, looks as though he might have the power to break free.

The third and newest site formally opened on Juneteenth. The Freedom Monument Sculpture Park abuts the Alabama River and is bounded by railroad tracks, the same tracks used to transport enslaved men, women and children to be sold into fresh horrors. The park narrates the story of slavery and its aftermath entirely through the questions posed by visual artists. Thomas’s work stands out, even amid extraordinary sculptures by Simone Leigh, Theaster Gates and Kwame Akoto-Bamfo. Thomas’s “Strike” is situated amid the site’s luxuriant trees and russet earth. “Strike” is almost blinding in the bright summer sun, as it’s formed from polished stainless steel. Two disembodied arms rise from the ground. One hand wielding a nightstick is grasped at the wrist by another hand. The result is a triangle of violence and resistance, a tension between what is and what doesn’t have to be.

Art can till the soil so change can sprout. It poses questions that have become verboten elsewhere.

“I saw the law and the expansion of rights as the primary way to advance justice, and I still think there’s obviously an important role for that,” Stevenson said. “But 15 years ago I began to realize we probably couldn’t win *Brown versus Board of Education* today. I’m not sure our [Supreme] Court today would do something that disruptive on behalf of a disfavored group.

“There’s a critical role for artists in cultural spaces and storytellers to play. Our legal system is still capable of doing all the things that justice requires, it’s just stuck. It’s having a moment where it’s losing its courage,” Stevenson said. “Some people initially see ‘Strike,’ and they see an act of violence. They see the baton and the hand. In my view, it’s a gesture of trying to stop violence, not just resist but to stop. It’s an effort toward moving us toward something nonviolent, something that is more like peace. It’s shiny, and it’s beautiful, and it’s big.”



Thomas at his Brooklyn studio in May. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

The artist himself is not a scene-stealer. He doesn't demand the attention that his work compels. With a modest build, a medium-brown complexion and close-cut hair, Thomas is a background player. He doesn't dress flamboyantly to muster attention, to make himself into a brand or to quietly signify power or cool. The first word that comes to mind to describe him is calm.

"Hank is eternally hopeful," said Lewis, the historian, who has known Thomas for some 20 years. "That's where the calm comes from. His calm demeanor drives his sense of possibility."

In a time of yelling, protesting and punching up as well as down, Thomas has the manner of a patient professor. He could almost get lost in a crowd were it not for his sizable reputation. His work speaks loudly and incautiously. "And One," a photograph depicting two young Black men in a basketball pas de deux, their arms outstretched toward a noose rather than a net, can make you gasp. His art can be simultaneously sleek and caustic, leaving you at a loss for words. What bubbles up can be anger, bemusement and recognition. They are questions masquerading as emotions.



Thomas's “And One” (2011). (Hank Willis Thomas)

Thomas is among a group of artists that includes Amy Sherald, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Derrick Adams, Devin Allen and Mickalene Thomas, who gathered this year at Cipriani, on a balmy evening in New York, for the annual gala celebrating the legacy of photographer Gordon Parks, who died in 2006. Parks’s artistry blossomed from the 1950s to the ’70s as he documented the civil rights movement and labor unions. Thomas and his cohort have turned their attention to environmental racism, imbalances in the criminal justice system and our shared but disputed American history, as well as the quiet protest inherent in displays of Black leisure and joy.

“Gordon Parks is an artist who opened so many doors for people like my mother,” Thomas said. “My parents’ generation was the first generation of African Americans to really get a crack at freedom. And many of them just knocked down so many doors and so many walls that people like me didn’t face nearly the amount of adversity that they did. And people behind us, they barely know it’s there.”

As Thomas and other artists table-hopped during dinner and took selfies that night, one of the older guests, herself a photographer, marveled at their freedom and confidence. This generation doesn’t seem to struggle with their place in the world of galleries, private collections and museums. They seem unencumbered by doubt. They’ve decided for themselves what a win looks like, and they’ve created their own opportunities. For many of them, the internet changed everything because it siphoned control away from traditional stakeholders.

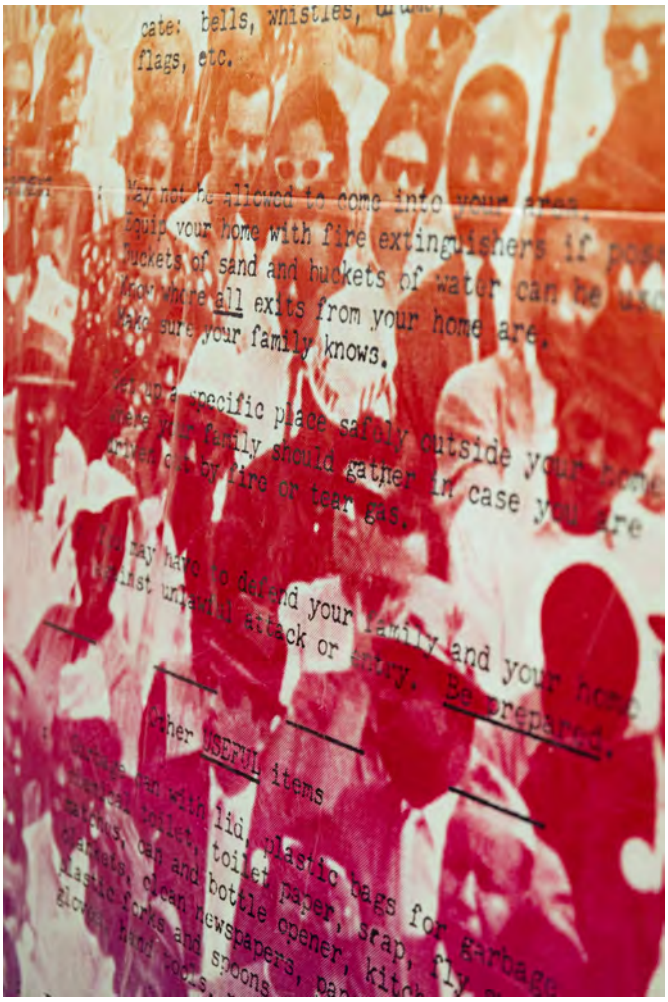


Artwork in the artist's studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

“Before social media and the internet, the gatekeepers had a lot of power,” Thomas said. “The entrepreneurial mindset that [social media] sparked in the past 20-plus years across the world has also been exhibited in the art world.”

Thomas, however, is more of an institutionalist — despite his significant presence on social media. He’s married to curator Rujeko Hockley. He does TED Talks with his mother. Institutions were part of his childhood. He was a beneficiary of them, and now he works within them.

Thomas, who was born in New Jersey, was the sort of child who was perpetually staring at the men and women who surrounded him. All children tend to have an uninhibited curiosity, but Thomas would let his gaze linger for an uncomfortably long time. He was fascinated by family photo albums filled with pictures of relatives he didn’t know, and he pestered his elders with questions about who they were but also about how the photographs were made. His eyes are the first thing you notice about the adult Thomas. They’re large, dark; they define his face. And he’s still asking questions. It takes a studio of more than a dozen people to facilitate all his curiosity.



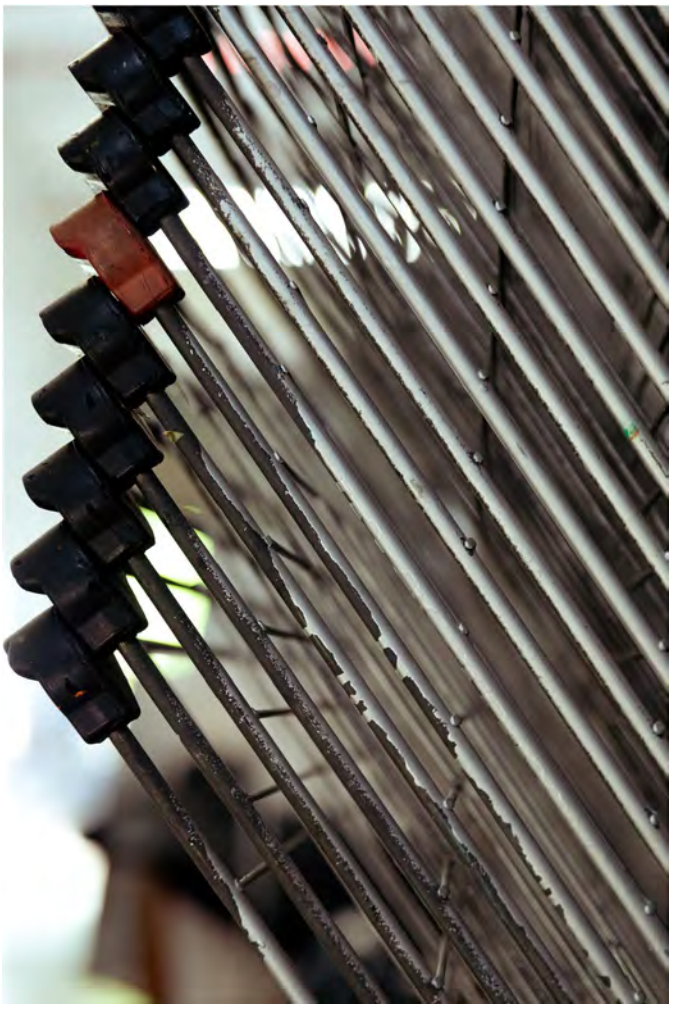
Inside Thomas's studio in May. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)



A maquette of "With These Hands, a Memorial to the Enslaved and Exploited," a public artwork opening at Davidson College in North Carolina next year. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

Thomas spent his high school years in Washington, where his mother worked for the Smithsonian Institution. He attended the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, which was co-founded by Cafritz, and where he did *not* aspire to be an artist. A close friend to his family, Claudine Brown, who led an advisory board for what eventually became the National Museum of African American History and Culture, also worked with the Duke Ellington School, which had recently launched a museum studies program.

"She invited me to be part of the first class of that program," Thomas said. "The luxury of it was that you didn't have to have any express talent, which meant that we were the laughingstock of the high school. But it also taught me something that most people don't really get in high school. We were taught critical thinking. We were given access to primary documents, to history, and were invited to curate exhibitions at the National Museum of American History."



In the artist's studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)



Detail of a prototype for a new sculpture titled "Community" (2024). (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

Thomas studied photography at New York University. He went to graduate school in Oakland, Calif., with the idea that he would go into the film industry, not as a director but as a Foley artist, the person responsible for the everyday sounds heard in movies such as the clickety-clack of heels on marble floors. In hindsight, it's as though Thomas was in constant conversation with the art world but unwilling to fully commit to it. He calls it being on a "path of curiosity." And then, his photography was noticed by New York's Jack Shainman Gallery.

"I didn't really know anything about New York galleries," Thomas said. "They were like: 'Oh, we like your work. Can we show it?' I was like, 'Okay!' The first pictures were sold for like five or six hundred dollars in 2004; I was like, if I sell a few of these a month, I can make a living."

He has done so by continuing on his path of curiosity and asking questions.



Thomas's “Unity” (2019) in New York. (Matthew Lapiska, NYC Department of Design and Construction)

How might future generations look back on these times? The Supreme Court has dealt affirmative action a nearly lethal blow. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act floats in limbo. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act has yet to become law. Discussions about systemic racism have become a source of legal battles and civic outrage. Our systems are stuck. Institutions are imperiled. But the artists … they continue their interrogation.

In Montgomery, each year since the first of the Legacy Sites opened in 2018, a half-million people have faced our country’s past as well as its present. They’ve been drawn there, in part, by Thomas and his artistic cohort.

“We’re all part of the problem we’re trying to fix,” Thomas said. “But that shouldn’t stop us from putting in our effort.”



Thomas heads downstairs in his studio. (Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post)

office



— Art

People Everyday with Hank Willis Thomas

July 02, 2025

People Everyday, on view at the Liu Shiming Art Foundation through July 31st, is a show that brings together two seemingly distant practices—those of Hank Willis Thomas and Liu Shiming—into conversation. One is a contemporary American artist working across photography, sculpture, and public art to interrogate media, history, and power; the other, a Chinese sculptor who quietly chronicled everyday life in 20th-century China through figurative bronze. What connects them isn't style or geography, but a shared commitment to representing ordinary people with clarity, care, and intentionality.

This conversation between Hank and I, moderated by journalist Andy Serwer, was a full-circle moment for me. Hank was one of the first artists who shaped my understanding of art as political and cultural work, and my own creative practice began in part through working with him

years ago. Here, we unpack not only our collaboration, but how this exhibition functions as a kind of counter-narrative—one that values nuance, connection, and shared humanity over spectacle. While the world feels increasingly fractured, *People Everyday* looks for echoes—between lives, between histories, and ways of seeing the world.

Introduction By Emann Odufu
Interviewer By Andy Serwer
Aritst Hank Willis Thomas, Liu Shiming
Photography By Elijah Mogoli





ANDY SERWER-So you guys working together is really interesting. Maybe that's a good starting point. Can you talk a little bit about your collaboration—how you two met, how far back does it go, and how deep is it?

EMANN ODUFU-It's actually really interesting how much of a full circle moment this is. I feel like I first started learning about Hank through a book titled Who We Be: The Colorization of America by Jeff Chang. That was around 2014. It was one of those books that shaped how I understand the intersection of art, politics, and culture. There was a chapter that focused on Hank and some other artists, but Hank really stood out to me. Later I saw a posting on NYFA for an internship with Hank. This was around 2016. I applied and got the gig. That's how I ended up in his studio. One of the projects I got to a on was In Search of the Truth — a public art piece that's a giant speech bubble you can walk into and answer the prompt: "What is the truth?" We toured it across the country during the 2016 presidential election. It gave me an on-the-ground understanding of how people felt about politics, identity, and more. And through that process, I really came to understand Hank's practice on a deeper level.

AS-So what year was that again?

EO-2016.

AS-OK, so nine years ago. So you cold-called him, basically?

EO-Yeah.

HANK WILLIS THOMAS-Emann is a man of many talents and deep curiosity. He always wants to engage and bring people together. The Truth Booth project was a great opportunity for that—we were literally inviting strangers to open up and be vulnerable. They took it to 35 different cities. I only made it to a few because I was also launching For Freedoms that year. But Emann and I stayed in

touch. He later interviewed me for Office Magazine, and I believe we've had at least one public conversation before this. I think he even curated some of my work for another project.

EO-Yeah, we brought a few of the Unbranded works into a prominent ad agency in NYC. It was about sparking dialogue around how advertising shapes perceptions and using Hank's work as a tool to disrupt that.

"We were literally inviting strangers to open up and be vulnerable."



AS-Hank, I want to ask you about your work—especially in conjunction with Liu Shiming. Your art clearly draws from both the modern and the historical. How do you see your art evolving in that continuum, and where does Liu's work intersect with yours?

HWT-One of the most profound things about Liu Shiming's work is how timeless it feels. Even though many of his pieces are decades old, they could have been made yesterday. The figures, the postures, the situations they reflect—they're still relevant. I come from a different background as a photographer, as an American. But like Liu, I've always been drawn to observing the everyday. My work often reframes historical moments—especially those involving people engaged in nonviolent civic action. In a moment where that kind of activism feels urgent again, I think there's a powerful resonance. Seeing Liu's work made me reflect on how subtle, poetic gestures can hold just as much weight as overt activism.

AS-That leads to a question about political identity in art. Some artists are labeled activists, some aren't. How do you see yourself? Is it binary, or more of a spectrum?

HWT-All art is political. In Western society, art functions like a kind of cultural currency. If it weren't political, cultural institutions wouldn't be seen as threats by governments. Even abstraction can be threatening—because it asks people to engage with their heart, not just their intellect. That alone makes it provocative.

AS-Emann, what about you?

EO-I wouldn't call this exhibition overtly political. But I do think it expresses a kind of quiet resistance. Liu Shiming's work often operates that way—it's poetic, reflective, rooted in a shared human experience. The political message is more implicit than explicit. And in that sense, it can sometimes reach people more deeply.

AS-Let's talk about curating this show. What was the process like? Where did you start?

EO-My brain naturally looks for connections. When I first visited the Liu Shiming Foundation and learned about the artist's work, one phrase kept coming up: "everyday people." That stuck in my mind.

Then I thought of the song "Everyday People" by Sly and the Family Stone. I kept playing it during the early stages of planning the show. I was also listening to the Arrested Development version, which samples the original. Both are calls for unity. Originally I wanted the show to be titled Everyday People. But Hank suggested flipping it to People Everyday, which felt more contemporary. It created a more active tone. And the title captures what ties these two artists together—their radical care for everyday life, for ordinary people.

"All art is political. Even abstraction can be threatening—because it asks people to engage with their heart, not just their intellect"





AS-Hank, what was your reaction to seeing your work alongside Liu's?

HWT-I was honestly moved. It's rare to have such a direct dialogue between your work and another artist. I saw echoes in form and theme that I hadn't expected. The wrestling pieces, for example, really resonated with my work The Embracein ways I didn't anticipate. It speaks to this idea that artists, across time and cultures, can tap into a collective unconscious.

AS-And this evolution of your practice—from photography into sculpture, public art, and more—how do you decide which direction to go next?

HWT-I studied photography at NYU, and right after I graduated, the iPhone came out. Suddenly everyone was a photographer. That shifted my relationship to the medium. My photos were always more conceptual anyway. So I started exploring other ways to express those ideas.

Take The Embrace, for instance. It's a 24-foot monument in Boston Common honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King. It's based on a photograph taken the day he received the Nobel Peace Prize. I focused on just the hug, turning it into a sculptural form. While I'm not sculpting in the traditional sense like Liu did, I am sculpting in my mind, using digital tools to render emotion and meaning in physical form.

AS-Does working in public space change how you think about your art?

HWT-Absolutely. When work is in a public space, it belongs to everyone. That's humbling. Most people won't stop to analyze it, but maybe they'll glance at it. In a gallery, it's more intimate. People come because they want to engage. That kind of attention is an honor. It means something.

AS-Emann, as a curator, what do you aim to accomplish? What resonates most for you?

EO-I see art making and curation as a form of storytelling, sublimation, and symbolism. The artist brings symbols into the work, consciously or not. As a curator, I add another layer of interpretation. And when I put two artists' works together, I'm creating new symbols and meanings.

For instance, someone might be drawn to the connection between Hank's Godspeed series and Liu's boat sculptures. Others might resonate with the pairing of The Embrace and Cutting Through Mountains to Bring in Water. The goal is to make space for layered interpretation, to let people find their own way into the show.

AS-Can you both speak about one of the specific pairings? Like Archimedean Solid and Measuring Land?

EO-The maps we use to navigate the world reflect man-made borders—constructs we've created. Liu Shiming's Measuring Land was one of his breakthrough works early in his career. It's such a foundational idea—literally, how we make maps: by measuring land, plotting, dividing. I thought pairing this piece with Hank's work spoke to how we think about territory and society today. It also made me reflect on how borders—whether natural ones like rivers and mountains or political ones—shape our lives. These lines aren't neutral. They're tied to current events and geopolitical tensions, both here and abroad.

AS-And what's the medium? What is that piece made from?

HWT-It's made from retro reflective vinyl. Like a lot of the work downstairs, this piece has two viewing modes. Under normal light, it looks one way, but when you shine a flash or a flashlight on it, you see it's actually a collage of hundreds of photographs—most of people participating in nonviolent civic actions around the world.

The shape is inspired by Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion Map. He was fascinated by the idea of using technology to measure and more accurately represent the Earth's surface. There's also this concept he explored called the "polydetahedron"—a series of 13 triangular forms used to rethink the world's shape. We usually think of the Earth as a sphere, but it's more like...a potato.

Andy (laughs)-Right—something you could unpeel.

HWT-Exactly. And all maps, to some extent, are distortions. The Mercator projection, which most of us are familiar with, was created by northern Europeans who exaggerated their own region's scale, which had lasting effects on how we perceive global importance. This piece tries to reimagine a more democratized version of mapping—something both Liu and I are exploring: how people shape space and reality through measurement.

"Artists, across time and cultures, can tap into a collective unconscious."





AS-Didn't expect we'd get into Buckminster Fuller. The geodesic dome guy, right? Love that. You were telling me earlier about discovering this reflective material. Can you share that?

HWT-Yeah. I hope everyone gets to see the show downstairs, if you havent already. The two-dimensional works down there are made using retroreflective vinyl—the same material found on street signs. It reflects light directly back to its source, so at night, a stop sign only lights up when a car's headlights hit it. I was interested in taking this material—used for wayfinding—and repurposing it to explore history. Because history itself can be distorted or obscured. Using light to reveal layers beneath the surface became a metaphor for illuminating forgotten or overlooked narratives. The first time I saw the material was in a sign shop. I had this epiphany: if I printed green ink on green retroreflective vinyl, it would disappear. But if I printed blue on blue, it would become visible. That sparked the idea of working with visibility and invisibility—literally and metaphorically.

AS-Do you have to prompt yourself to have these kinds of revelations? Is it a discipline, or do they just hit?

HWT-Good question. If I could prompt myself on demand, I'd probably be much happier. (laughs)

AS-Yeah, it's that pressure. You sit there thinking, "I have to come up with something."

HWT-James Baldwin once said the artist's struggle for integrity must be seen as a universal human struggle—to become truly human. That quote stays with me. In my work, I'm just trying to be the best version of myself—and often failing. But artists get comfortable with that—failing, and doing so publicly.

AS-Don't be so hard on yourself! But that's part of the territory, right? I avoided becoming an artist for that reason. Though my field has its failures too. Also, props on quoting Baldwin—that's no small

feat. His sentences just keep going! Okay, let's talk about the Embrace and the two Liu Shiming pieces you paired it with. Emann?

EO-Sure. One of the early connections I made as the curator was between Hank's The Embrace and Liu Shiming's Cutting Through Mountains, Submerging in Water. Both works subvert traditional notions of monumental sculpture. Historically, monuments have been about glorifying power—leaders, institutions. But Liu was doing something different. When he created Cutting Through Mountains, he was still at the academy in Beijing, and it was considered unusual, even frowned upon, to incorporate landscape into sculpture. He broke with tradition—kind of like Rodin's The Thinker, but instead of focusing just on the figure, he included the environment. And with The Embrace, Hank zooms in—not on a whole figure, but on a gesture. A hug. Instead of a towering heroic pose, he monumentalizes love. It honors Dr. King and Coretta Scott King, but also speaks universally. Anyone can relate to a hug. Just like how Liu's figures—riding bikes, working in boats—are universally resonant. So both works challenge the idea of what a monument can be—and who it's for.

HWT-Exactly. And when I look at Wrestling and The Embrace, I see echoes. These sculptures were made decades apart, but their forms resonate. I didn't know about Liu's Wrestling when I made mine, but there's an undeniable kinship. The tension in the arms, the closeness—it reminds me of The Thinker, but rendered in motion, in intimacy. And to cast that in bronze—a cold, static material—while still trying to convey warmth and vulnerability, that's a challenge I embrace.

AS-It's kind of Jungian, right? Like shared archetypes—Mayans and Egyptians both built pyramids without knowing each other. Maybe these gestures of embrace or struggle are just embedded in the collective unconscious.

EO-I love that. And it's fascinating—Embrace and Wrestling are almost opposites emotionally. One is love, the other is friction. But both involve touch, engagement, presence. Wrestling can be playful or aggressive, but it's still a connection. The forms are similar, but the emotions are flipped.

AS-Do you look at ancient or modern art for inspiration? Or do you try to stay in your own head?

HWT-I love history. Looking at historical art is like time travel. And if I can bring an idea like the Dymaxion map into the present, it feels like I've pulled an artifact through time.

AS-And what about current events? Are they influencing you right now?

HWT-Absolutely. I'm inspired by people taking to the streets, using their voices, standing up for democracy. That takes courage—especially in an age where our devices mediate almost all interactions.

We think we're connected, but these platforms are programmed—literally. We don't even understand the code that's shaping how we engage with each other. That disconnect worries me. So seeing people here today, putting their phones away, listening—that gives me hope.

"To cast warmth and vulnerability into bronze—a cold, static material—that's a challenge I embrace."





AS-Maybe that's what we're all craving, after so many hours on screens. Have you explored that idea in your work? Or maybe used AI?

HWT-I've experimented, but haven't made anything I felt needed to exist in the world. The tech evolves so fast—by the time you finish, it's already outdated.

EO-Same. I've used AI more personally—it's like a sounding board or even a kind of therapist. Which is weird, because it makes me wonder: if we're already so isolated, what does this added layer of mediation do to our humanity?

But on the flip side, I sometimes think about a utopian future where AI frees us from labor, so we can focus on deeper questions—healing the planet, understanding each other. Maybe that's naïve, but it's a vision I hold onto.

AS-Yeah, but the dystopian version always seems closer. I was just playing with Midjourney—type in a prompt and boom, you get this surreal image. Wild stuff.

HWT-I was just at a conference—Tesla's already building humanoid robots. They're supposed to roll out next year.

AS-Wild. I'm surprised they weren't in the parade this weekend... or maybe they were, who could tell? Last pairing: Hank's Icarus in Sunlight and Moonlight, with Liu's Greek Mythology.

EO-Right. So the Icarus works and Liu's Greek Mythology- Centaur made me think of the Silk Road—not just as a trade route but a cultural exchange. These artists come from different times and places, yet both explore Greek myth. That says something about how ideas move across borders.

HWT-The silhouettes in Icarus in Sunlight and Moonlight draw from Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry, but visually I was channeling Matisse and Aaron Douglas—who was a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Matisse actually visited Harlem and was influenced by the aesthetics he saw there. So there's this layered lineage—Douglas influences Matisse, Matisse influences me, and I connect it back to Greek myth. The figures shift depending on your angle—sometimes you see Douglas, sometimes Matisse, sometimes both. That multi-perspective is intentional.

AS-And the color? Red and blue, sunlight and moonlight?

HWT-Exactly. The red sculpture has a glowing heart—it's from Matisse's Icarus in his jazz series. The blue one uses a silhouette. I was also thinking about Keith Haring when I made these. It's a blend of influences.

AS-You mentioned Liu once said he wanted viewers to have a "silent dialogue" with his work. You said that resonated with your process?

HWT-Yes. When we make art, we're not thinking about legacy—we're just making. But then you imagine Liu's work being shown in New York decades later, and it reminds you that once you release the work, it has a life of its own.

AS-Okay, before we open up to questions, one last one for Emann. In Chinese tradition, "poetic quality" is considered the highest form of art. What do you see as the poetic quality in Liu's and Hank's work?

EO-Both artists embed community and symbolism in their work. That's the poetry—each piece holds multiple meanings. For example, Hank's Godspeed series, with water and hidden photographs, could represent actual rivers, but also life's flow—or the transatlantic passage and the trauma of displacement.

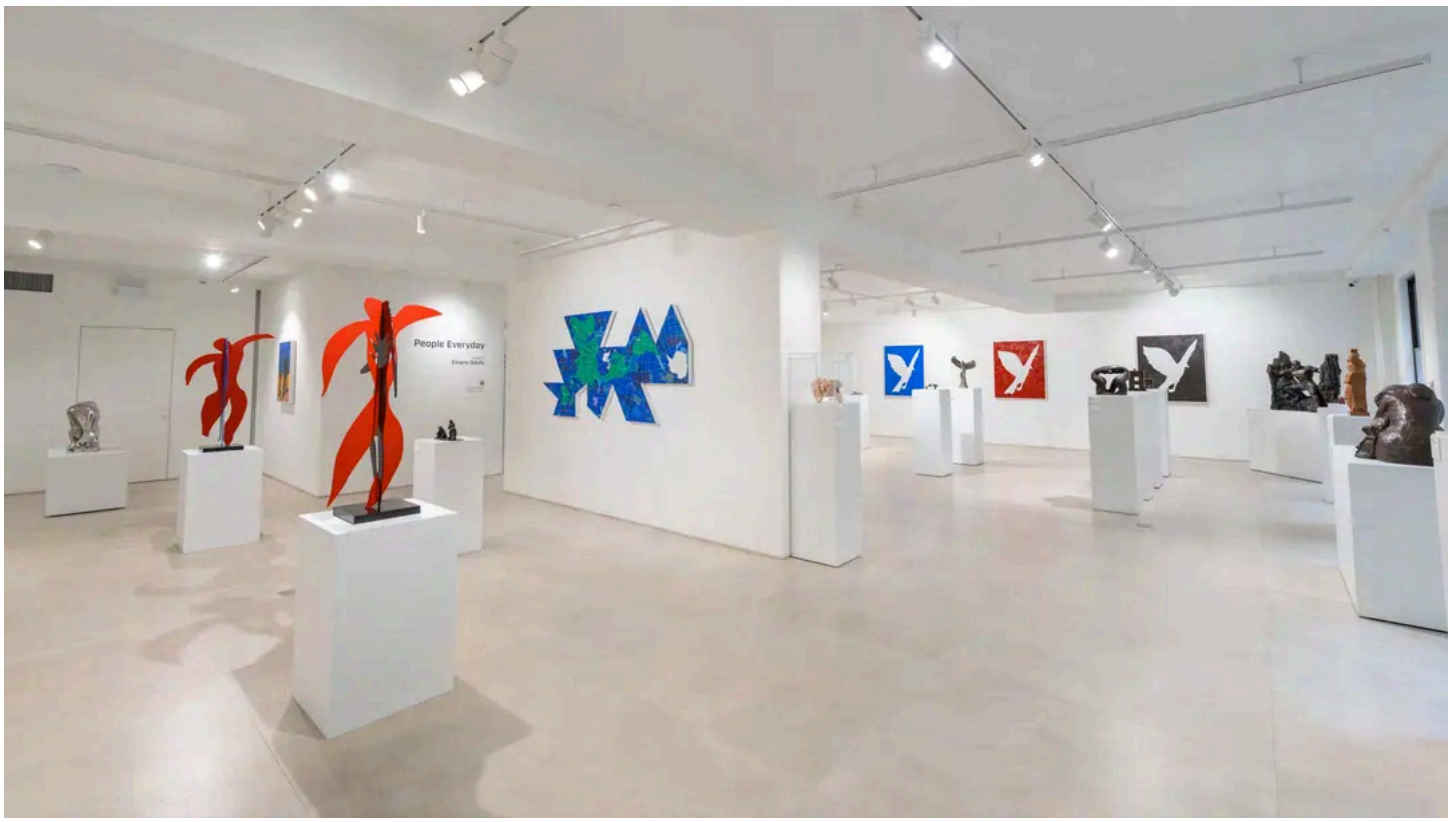
Liu's boat sculptures remind me of migration too—fresh off the boat, so to speak. These works are layered. A bird isn't just a bird—it might represent aspiration. That's the beauty of this show. It doesn't lead you to one answer. It invites you into a space of abstract reflection on what it means to be human.

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN | JULY/AUGUST 2025

Hank Willis Thomas & Liu Shiming: *People Everyday*

By Ekin Erkan

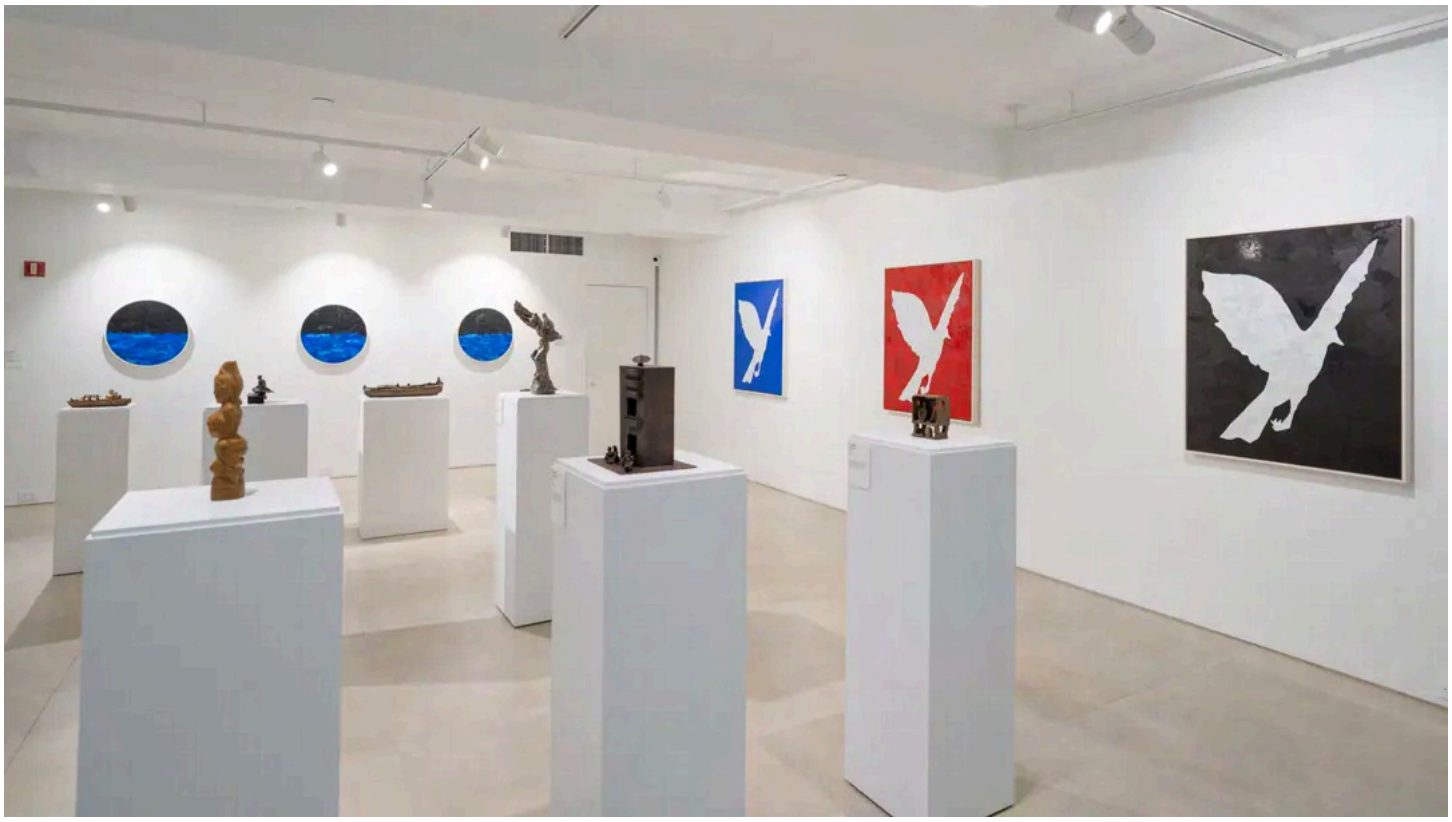


Installation image, *People Everyday* at Liu Shiming Art Foundation, New York, 2025. Courtesy the Liu Shiming Art Foundation.

Featuring works by Hank Willis Thomas and Liu Shiming, *People Everyday*, curated by Emann Odufu at the Liu Shiming Art Foundation, adjoins two artists whose work, at first pass, might strike the viewer as belonging to disparate traditions. Upon closer examination, however, one sees that although Thomas's practice more closely cleaves towards modernist devices than Shiming's, the two enjoy a common genealogy. In addition, Odofu's pairings reveal a set of formal homologies and evince shared thematic interests amongst the geographically discrepant artists.

People Everyday
Liu Shiming Art Foundation
May 27–July 31, 2025
New York

Whether it be his public artworks, small-scale sculptures, text-based images or photo-conceptual installations, Thomas's work is most immediately situated in the African-American visual-cultural tradition—one shaped by documentation, political critique, and tribute that countenances Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson, and Deborah Willis (Thomas's mother), amongst its antecedents. Thomas began his photography practice at age twelve, fostering his practice at Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Thomas, now forty-nine, continues to attend to epochal racial political and Black cultural memory, evidenced by his recent towering memorials such as his 2022 memorial, *The Embrace*, inspired by a photograph taken during the civil rights movement of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. embosoming Coretta Scott King. The 2019 *Unity*—a work that, by dint of its subject matter and geographical location (on the Brooklyn-side of the Brooklyn Bridge), became inextricably linked to the Black Lives Matter movement—finds a plumb sable arm pointed towards the heavens, its erect index finger signifying upward mobility. Although the Shiming Foundation show is punctuated by a number of scaled-down models of such well-known public sculptures, the stronger works are Thomas's self-standing mixed-media sculptures. *Untitled (Godspeed)*, *Untitled (Acanthus)*, and *Archimedean Solid I* (all 2024) apportion an anterior layer of images, including lapping cerulean water channels and rolling waves, which represent the Middle Passage and Triangular Trade. Underneath are a set of luminous posterior images that only properly reveal themselves via flash photography, which illuminates buried stone faces and heraldic crests, indexing those parties who directed and profited from the slave trade and subsequent colonial ventures. *Archimedean Solid I*, which purposes Buckminster Fuller and Shoji Sadao's Dymaxion Map projection's cartographic form, also indicates Thomas's coincident interest in modernist art history. This is also apparent in Thomas's Afrofuturist powder-coated incised steel silhouettes of Icarus mid-flight. In this series, bodies poised in dancerly steps are bisected by winged vermillion figures reminiscent of Henri Matisse's cutouts.



Installation image, *People Everyday* at Liu Shiming Art Foundation, New York, 2025. Courtesy the Liu Shiming Art Foundation.

Shiming (1926–2010) belongs to the first generation of Chinese sculptors trained by the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing. His early work was stoked by the period's subtending Maoist communitarian aspirations and the Chinese communist revolution's importation of Soviet Socialist Realism. Where Thomas presents fragmented body parts or flattened profiles, Shiming's reliefs emphasize the blazoned sinewy laborers whose bodies are presented in full. Mentored by Chinese sculptural pioneers such as Wang Linyi, Hua Tianyou, and Zeng Zhushao—all of whom also engaged with the coeval process of collective artistic production, negating individual authorship (a bourgeois conceit)—Shiming's sculptures from the late 1940s and early 1950s hew towards sympathetic depictions of the quotidian proletariat masses. One such sculpture, of significant historical relevance, is *Measuring Land* (1950). A trio of surveyors collaborate, one using a shovel to measure, another reading out the calculated lengths, and a third marking them on a tablet. Created as a student project at CAFA, where it was awarded the first prize accolade, the sculpture was published in *The People's Pictorial* publication in 1950. It was one of the first artworks produced in the People's Republic of China that exhibited internationally, circulating in Prague before entering the Czech National Museum's permanent collection. A miniature version of Shiming's best-known work, *Cutting Through Mountains to Bring in Water* (1958/70), is also on view. The sculpture finds a sinewy man plunging between a mountain pass, his arms and legs forming an X-shaped axis with the chiseled crags cradling him. The work, which was originally 13-feet high and showed at Zhongshan Park in Beijing shortly after Shiming finished it, was exacted from 1958 to 1959 during what the artist reflected on as "the energetic climate of the Great Leap Forward." In a short treatise on the piece, Shiming

remarks that, “at the time, the traditional view at the Central Academy of Fine Arts was that sculptures should not represent environments; they should be focused on the figure. Pieces like Rodin’s *The Thinker* were considered true sculpture. However, I boldly broke with this convention.” Herculean man is here presented in dexterous command of his raw environment, his limbs but technics with which to fissure mountains into apertures, therein figuring as a bastion for future generations.

Through the mid-1980s, much of Shiming’s sculpture practice is characterized by a populist vim that resounds of Mao’s “Yen’an Forum on Literature and Art,” according to which “all our literature and art are for the masses of the people and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers.” Works like *Woman Pushing a Wheelbarrow* and *Hu Water* (both 1983) sympathetically portray scenes of Chinese industrialization, with farmers, well-diggers, and quarrymen depicted mid-toil. Such scenes at once commemorate and lionize the proletariat. It should be noted that, because a number of Shiming’s works are bronze-cast multiples, their veneers have a waxy effulgence compared to ceramics like *Woman Pushing a Wheelbarrow*, which emit a more complex and captivating surface texture.



Installation image, *People Everyday* at Liu Shiming Art Foundation, New York, 2025. Courtesy the Liu Shiming Art Foundation.

In the late 1980s, Shiming began looking towards different traditions for source material, including Greek mythology. *Greek Mythology—Centaur* (1986), mounted close to Thomas's "Icarus" sculptures, is one of several points of synchronicity between the two artists, albeit the latter's appropriative practice, coordinated as it is to Matisse, is oriented towards modernism where Shiming's work is significantly more classical in execution. Shiming's *Dream to Fly* (1982), a bronze sculpture of a winged fantastical figure, and *Fuse (big)* (1992), which dovetails two bowed figures in an arc, are formally consonant with Thomas's "Icarus" sculptures and *The Embrace*. This serendipitous convergence perhaps speaks to a shared, formalism-attuned sense of taste between the two artists.

One could aver that the most striking through-line between Thomas and Shiming consists in the broader intellectual development of Maoist critique from the mid-to-late 20th century. Interpolated by the Third-Worldist movement of the 1940s–50s, French Maoism's cultural turn during the 1960–70s, and the subsequent prominence of the New Left, a mode of analysis once disposed to strictly class-based exploitation became oriented to questions of critique involving race, gender, and intersectionality. Were this exhibition to pair Shiming with purely class-oriented Socialist Realists—including of American stripe, such as Ben Shahn, Philip Evergood, and William Gropper—this historical development would be compromised. Pairing Shiming with Thomas clarifies points of confluence, such as sculpture's commemorative ethos, and departure, including Thomas's modernism-inflected leitmotifs and sensitivity to the politics of race.

Ekin Erkan is a writer, curator, and researcher whose writing has appeared in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, and *Hyperallergic*, among others.

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The First Art Newspaper on the Net | Established in 1996 | Monday, February 3, 2025

Lyman Allyn Art Museum installs new work of art in permanent collection gallery



Hank Willis Thomas, Blue Study No. 10, 2024.

NEW LONDON, CONN.- Lyman Allyn Art Museum announced the display and promised gift of Blue Study No. 10, 2024, a work of art by the prominent contemporary artist Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 1976). The retroreflective work has been installed in the Museum's American Perspectives permanent collection gallery in celebration of Black History Month, where it will remain on view.

Uncover the complexities of representation and perception. This book delves into Thomas's thought-provoking work, exploring themes of race, gender, and cultural identity. Find "All Things Being Equal" on Amazon now.

A conceptual artist based in Brooklyn, NY, Hank Willis Thomas explores themes of perspective, identity, commodity, media, and popular culture in his art. Over the last ten years, he has explored the retroreflective medium, creating mixed media works that reveal two distinct scenes when viewed with ambient and flash lighting. Seen from one perspective, these artworks present bold figurations, abstractions, and landscapes in saturated colors; seen from another, fragmented archival scraps from Thomas's other projects over the last decade are revealed. As these elements converge and transform, they shed light on new layers of images, ideas, and meanings that are hidden in plain sight. The central figure in this composition (most visible with flash) is taken from a portrait by Seydou Keïta (Bamako, Mali, 1921–2001), the celebrated African photographer and portraitist.

Hank Willis Thomas's wide-ranging art practice includes large-scale public sculpture, notably The Embrace, a 20-foot-tall bronze sculpture in 2023, commissioned for Boston Common. That work depicts the arms of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King in a tender embrace after Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Another prominent large-scale commission is the 2019 bronze sculpture Unity, installed at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Thomas holds a B.F.A. from New York University, New York, NY (1998) and an M.A. M.F.A. from the California College of the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2004). Thomas's work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad, including at the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, Hong Kong Arts Centre and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. Thomas is a recipient of the Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship (2019), The Guggenheim Fellowship (2018), AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize (2017), Soros Equality Fellowship (2017), and the Aperture West Book Prize (2008), among other awards.

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Museums & Institutions(https://news.artnet.com/art-world/museums-and-institutions)

Which Artists Dominate U.S. Museums Right Now? We Crunch the Numbers

Based on looking at hundreds of shows in U.S. museums for December 2024.



From left: Hank Willis Thomas, Ming Smith and Simone Leigh. Photo: Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post via Getty Images; Steven Ferdman/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images; Matt Winkelmeyer/Getty Images for LACMA

Ben Davis (https://news.artnet.com/about/ben-davis-93) December 9, 2024

Back in September, I looked (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/most-popular-artists-museums-united-states-2537555) at which artists were showing at the most museums simultaneously in the United States. I thought that was useful, so I'm doing it again.

The idea is the same: I looked at more than 200 museums, and counted which artists were on view any time during December (that includes a show like the Baltimore Museum's "Illustrating Agency," which closed December 1). The resulting list includes a little more than 3,400 artist names. Of these, only about 300 appear more than once—a tiny fraction. And of these, a very few repeat multiple times, giving a sense of which voices are most resonating with curators and institutions.

As I said back in September: Because I'm most interested in breadth of influence, I decided not to make any distinctions between bigger and smaller institutions. I rank career retrospectives and surveys highly, followed by special commissions or exhibitions that spotlight a specific body of work, biennial appearances, and then inclusions in thematic group shows.

Themes: All the most visible figures are Black and Indigenous. A rhetoric of speaking for and to historically marginalized identities surrounds a lot of the work.

More strikingly, multiple of these figures are nodes in networks of advocacy: Simone Leigh has organized events and conferences, including "The Loophole of Retreat (https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/loophole-of-retreat-venice-simone-leigh-rashida-bumbray-laura-raicovich-2315441)" in Venice, specifically for Black women artists and scholars; Jaune Quick-to-See Smith recently curated the touring show "The Land Carries Our Ancestors: Contemporary Art by Native Americans, (https://www.nga.gov/press/exhibitions/exhibitions-2023/5549.html)" which began at the National Gallery of Art.

Hank Willis Thomas has consistently stayed in the headlines (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/new-book-artist-billboards-for-freedoms-2498159) via a progressive artist organization he co-founded, For Freedoms, which organizes billboard campaigns and conferences. Ming Smith emerged from the collective activity of the Kamoinge Workshop, which has itself received museum attention (https://whitney.org/exhibitions/kamoinge-workshop) in recent years.

Media: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is known for painting (though she makes installations as well). Strikingly, three of the most influential artists emerge from the world of ceramics: Simone Leigh, Virgil Ortiz, and Rose B. Simpson. Back in December, textile art was similarly prominent, via figures like Marie Watt and Suchitra Mattai—though one of September's Museum Artists, Theaster Gates, also got his start in ceramics. A "social craft" upsurge, foregrounding traditional crafts in installations about cultural identity, is a major ongoing theme.

Crossover: Finally, it's worth noting that there's quite a bit of overlap in terms of exhibitions. Those that feature more than one of these big names include "By Dawn's Early Light" (about the legacy of the Civil Rights Act, at the Nasher Museum), "For Dear Life" (about illness and disability, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego), and "Making Their Mark" (spotlighting women artists, at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive).



Hank Willis Thomas in his Brooklyn studio, on May 31, 2024. Photo: Makeda Sandford for The Washington Post via Getty Images

5. Hank Willis Thomas

The Brooklyn-based Thomas (b. 1976) has become well known for work that serves as a prompt for civic engagement. Indeed, his art often feels like it is running for office.

With Boston-based MASS Design Group, he worked on "The Gun Violence Memorial Project," now on view at the ICA Boston, a structure made of glass bricks containing mementos to the victims of gun violence, originally a part of the Chicago Architecture Biennale (https://2019.chicagoarchitecturebiennial.org/current/contributors/mass_design_group_in_collaboration_with_hank_willis_thomas) back in 2019.

Less somber in tone—and much more literal in its theme of "provoking dialogue"—is *Ernst and Ruth* (2015), a sculpture in the form of a functional public bench shaped like a large empty speech balloon, inviting visitors to sit and talk together. It went up to promote reflection on citizenship in advance of the election at the Tang Teaching Museum.

SPOTLIGHTS:

—"The Gun Violence Memorial Project (https://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/gun-violence-memorial-project/)" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, through January 20, 2025
—"Ernest and Ruth (https://tang.skidmore.edu/exhibitions/641-ernest-and-ruth)" at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y., through January 31, 2026

GROUPS:

—"By Dawn's Early Light (https://nasher.duke.edu/exhibitions/by-dawns-early-light/)" is on view at Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, through May 11, 2025
—"Show & Tell: A Brief History of Photography and Text (https://noma.org/exhibitions/show-and-tell/#:~:text=Drawn%20from%20NOMA's%20permanent%20collection,invention%20to%20the%20present%20day.&text=This%20exhibition%20details%20a%20history,overlap%20between%20photography%20and%20writing.)" at the New Orleans Museum of Art, through February 16, 2025
—"Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture (https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/get-in-the-game/)" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, through February 18, 2025
—"Posing Beauty in African American Culture (https://www.taftmuseum.org/exhibitions/posing)" at the Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, Ohio, through January 12, 2025

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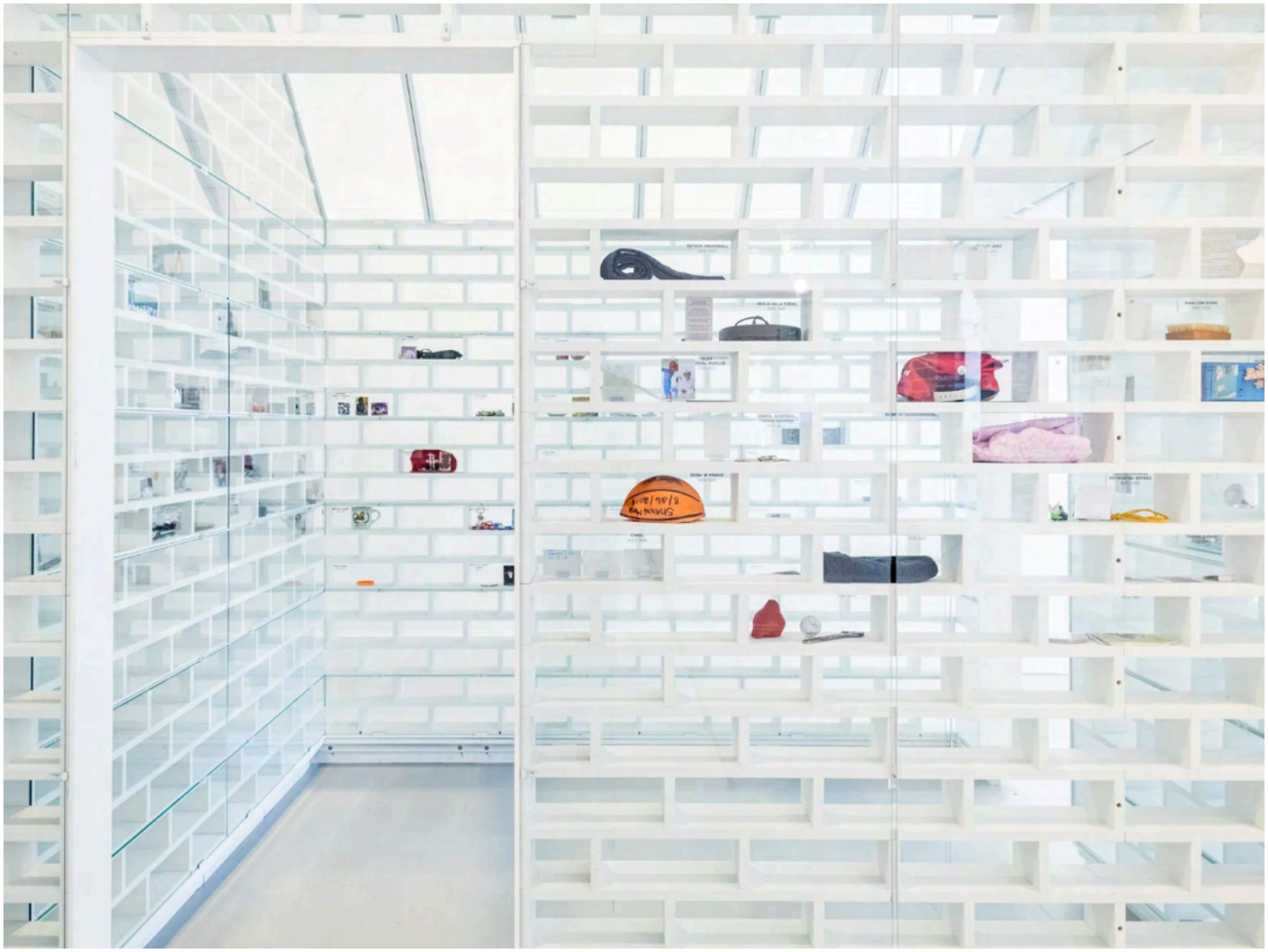
Ben Davis
National Art Critic

ARTnews Est. 1902

After Viral ‘Embrace,’ Hank Willis Thomas Is Tapped for Boston’s Next Public Art Program

BY TESSA SOLOMON

July 18, 2024 5:24pm



The Gun Violence Memorial Project by Hank Willis Thomas and MASSDesign Group, one of the temporary monuments that will be funded by this initiative.

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The city of Boston announced thirty new public art (https://www.artnews.com/t/public-art/) initiatives, including a slew of monuments

to underrepresented episodes of local history. The initiative is funded by a $3 million grant from the **Mellon Foundation (https://www.artnews.com/t/mellon-foundation/)**, the largest of such investments ever made into Boston's public art program.

"This investment in public art programs is groundbreaking and will support our efforts to highlight the many cultures, talents, and histories of our residents. It is an honor to see this innovation through art," Boston Mayor Michelle Wu said in a statement.

Seven artists and organizations have been commissioned to realize public art installations. A Trike Called Funk will work with local graffiti artists for an homage to local practitioners; the Kinfolk Monuments Project is invited to create virtual monuments to under-celebrated Black historical figures; Alison Yueming Qu and Jaronzie Harris have been tapped for an homage to Boston's Chinatown; artists Katherine Farrington, Roberto Mighty, and Ruth Henry, and LaRissa Rogers and Zalika Azim, are also set to participate, with more details forthcoming.

However, the most prominent artist to be involved may be **Hank Willis Thomas (https://www.artnews.com/t/hank-willis-thomas/)**, who will present *The Gun Violence Memorial Project*, a commemoration of the weekly toll of gun violence in the United States.

The project will be the latest major public art commission in Boston for Thomas, who was previously commissioned to create a monument to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife Coretta Scott King for 1965 Freedom Plaza which honors 4 local civil rights leaders from the 1950s through the 1970s. That monument, titled *The Embrace*, was unveiled in January 2023.

A 20-foot tall bronze monument composed of faceless, interlocking limbs that visitors can walk beneath, the monument recieved a **mixed (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/boston-martin-luther-king-statue-coretta-scott-king-hank-willis-thomas-1234653888/)** reception from critics and quicly went viral after some social media users said that the sculpture, seen from certain angles, appeared lascivious.

"It's important that I talk about how my practice is a conversation with the viewer," Thomas told ***ARTnews (https://artnews.com/art-news/artists/super-bowl-opportunity-statue-hank-willis-thomas-the-embrace-mlk-public-art-1234657023/)***. "To whatever degree there is adversity, it is also an opportunity for me to engage. How could I be upset or disappointed when a work about communal love is so well-embraced?"

The new program, titled “Un-monument | Re-monument | De-monument: Transforming Boston”, encompasses research grants for future projects, such as a monument to Ella Little Collins, Malcolm X’s older sister. Also under development is an interactive memorial reflecting on the Vietnamese diaspora experience; and a series of public interventions centered on the heroics of Crispus Attucks, a Black man and the first casualty of the American Revolution.

“Stone and bronze have been used for centuries to show what’s important and who matters. Thankfully, those kinds of monuments are increasingly being erected to people whose accomplishments have been left out of our shared origin story,” Mighty said in a statement. “New media presents artists and commissioning bodies with exciting ways of creating monuments that are at once site-specific, instantly available worldwide, and financially within reach.”

Boston has invested considerable energy in recent years to reimagine the purpose of its public art, after historians and activists urged city officials to include more representations of its influential Black residents.

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Artists Tried to Activate Voters With Billboard Art. Did It Work?

For Freedoms' billboards could surprise, comfort or confuse. Now the group is asking, Where do we go from here?

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By Travis Diehl
Reporting from Los Angeles and Philadelphia

Jan. 8, 2025

On Nov. 6, the day after the presidential election, the artist Hank Willis Thomas was at his studio in Brooklyn. His production assistants were poring over tables strewed with blobby red white and blue silk-screen prints of the words "Fragile/ Democracy / Handle With Care" in capital letters.

The design is one of Thomas's many riffs on familiar phrases, meant to spur voters toward civic engagement. One version of the print ran on the cover of The New York Times Sunday Opinion section on Nov. 3. Another raised $18,000 in an online auction to benefit the Democrat Kamala Harris's presidential bid. Several are on sale, for $10,000, to support For Freedoms, an artist-run group Thomas helped found.

Dancing between art, philanthropy and activism, For Freedoms addresses issues including racism, misogyny, violence and free speech, most visibly by commissioning artists to make billboards. They hope their imagery will provoke questions in people who see them.

It has been a Trump-era affair. For Freedoms began as a temporary artist-run super PAC timed to the 2016 presidential contest. After Donald J. Trump won that election, they reorganized as two corporations, one a nonprofit. They've since grown adept at fund-raising, coalition building, branding and publicity. The list of their partners, friends and funders has more than 1,000 names, among them the philanthropists Andrea Soros, daughter of George Soros; Agnes Gund, a Museum of Modern Art board member; and Alicia Keys, the musician. They've broadcast their messages on more than 500 billboards across all 50 states, from urban centers to prairies.

And with Trump's imminent return to office with solid margins, what now for the group?

"I feel confused," Thomas told me in his studio in Brooklyn. "I guess I feel a little bit let down. But I also feel responsible. I think some of us want democracy and liberation and community to be easy. Some of us think that the truth is good enough." He continued, "It's a time for reflection and re-evaluation."

But how do you evaluate something as subjective and mercurial as billboard art?



The For Freedoms Congress held a procession through the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in September, with artists, cultural institutions and civic leaders who were working to transform the political landscape through artist-led discourse and action. Mark Abramson for The New York Times

For Freedoms' founders, who include Wyatt Gallery, 49; Eric Gottesman, 48; Michelle Woo, 40; and Taylor Brock, 31, describe their organization as anti-partisan, despite individual members' leanings. "We've never really positioned ourselves as anti-Trump," Thomas said, although he concedes "people might imply that or assume that." Their group name refers to Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms"(freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear).

Yet they sync their campaigns to national elections, in part to build on people's sense of urgency. In 2024, they collaborated with the advocacy group Movement Voter Fund and the Center for Contemporary Documentation to mount new and old billboard designs in 25 cities, primarily in swing states, including Pittsburgh, Detroit and Charlotte, N.C.

I first interviewed members of For Freedoms in September, ahead of their public convening for donors and partners at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The mood was more sanguine. The insider crowd at the opening party at a modernist house in Baldwin Hills included a healer, a graphic novelist, a magician, a rapper. People in the For Freedoms orbit spoke in terms of "other kinds of currency," like love, time, positivity and culture.

For Freedoms' ethos of civic engagement and question-raising — and their nonprofit status — prevents them from engaging specific candidates or parties. Indeed, a persistent criticism is that their artistic approach evades urgent issues in favor of abstract or anodyne statements.

"I ran into this quite a few times in this campaign, actually, about this frustration with a lack of urgency — I wholeheartedly agree 10 million percent," Brock said two weeks after the election, adding that For Freedoms tries to think in longer arcs than current events.

Should a Billboard Provoke Anger, Even Fear?



"Make America Great Again," a controversial billboard commissioned by For Freedoms in Pearl, Miss., 2016. Some viewers were confused, and even angry, about its intent; It overlaid a Trump slogan on a photo of police threatening demonstrators. Spider Martin and For Freedoms; via For Freedoms; photo by Wyatt Gallery.

Thomas, 48, told me that when his group pictures success, they recall a CNN headline from 2016 about a For Freedoms sign: "Mississippi residents unsure of controversial billboards intent."

"That's the sweet spot," Thomas said.

The billboard, designed by Thomas and Wyatt Gallery, overlaid Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," on a civil rights-era photograph by Spider Martin of police menacing Black demonstrators in Selma, Ala. Residents who saw the billboard weren't just confused — some contacted For Freedoms to express anger or fear. The billboard was removed ahead of schedule.

Eight years later, the group is more careful — they say they're conscious that they're outsiders to the communities where their billboards appear. They've developed a series of panel discussions they call town halls (they've held over 300) where they answer questions about their messages or discuss challenges like food insecurity.

For Freedoms used to have a phone hotline, and people used it. Now, their audience offers feedback on Instagram. The majority of online comments are positive; there are mounds of encouraging emojis. The criticisms can be withering. One Instagram user ridiculed a sign about a historical Black train porters' union in Los Angeles: "Worst billboard ever created. I saw this today while driving. The text is small and doesn't get your message across. This is some type of pretentious tax scam."

Other comments from the last year or so decry the organization's lack of a clear stance on the war in Gaza and its mounting civilian toll. In October 2023, For Freedoms reposted a photo of a billboard by Christine Wong Yap, installed in Omaha in 2020. "How Do You Keep Your Heart Open?" it asked, in crisp handwritten letters. Nykelle DeVivo, an artist living in San Diego, excoriated the post in the comments. "Humanism isn't the answer to colonialism/white supremacy," DeVivo wrote. "Get your neoliberal head out of your ass."

In an interview, DeVivo described a split between a "new guard" of artists "that are more for burning it down or for creating new systems, versus trying to find ways to find peace within what the structures already are." DeVivo underscored their respect for For Freedoms — in 2017, they participated in a digital project the group co-produced. But if there's money for billboards, DeVivo said, "there's also the funding to do more radical messaging. But I feel like that would interrupt their funding sources."

Access to 'The Medicis of Our Time'



Eric Gottesman, a co-founder of For Freedoms, in Los Angeles at LACMA. Rather than didactic explanation about art and politics, billboards "provide a way for people to have conversations about it." Mark Abramson for The New York Times

The members of For Freedoms acknowledge the contradictions their project navigates. They solicit money for ad campaigns with subjective outcomes, encouraging civic engagement in ways that convey both nuance and mass appeal.

They even have mixed feelings about billboards as a medium. "Our attention is being grabbed by advertisers, by people trying to point us to do something, or buy something, or vote for something," Gottesman said. For Freedoms tries to co-opt those blaring ad spaces. As he put it, "That's an essentially artistic question. How do you participate in flawed systems, of which you are critical?"

We met one afternoon at Pace Gallery in Los Angeles in one of James Turrell's signature sky rooms, a rectangular space with a retractable roof offering views subtly altered by LEDs. Outside in the courtyard, fashionable guests gathered for a preview of For Freedoms' new monograph, "Where Do We Go From Here?," which catalogs their U.S. billboards through 2023.

Early on, Gottesman said, he and Thomas realized that the art world afforded them "access to the Medicis of our time." (Thomas is the son of the critic, Deborah Willis, and is married to Rujeko Hockley, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art.)

Gottesman, who is ready with talking points, said For Freedoms pushes against "the perception that art is elitist. I mean, here we sit." He gestured toward the skylight. "I think the way to mitigate that is to provide context, and not didactic explanation, but to provide a way for people to have conversations" about art.

I asked Gottesman how For Freedoms measures the success of its projects, particularly the billboards. "This question of impact or metrics or whatever. It comes up all the time," he said. Funders want to know what their money accomplishes. "Initially my answer was like, screw you for asking," he said. "We know art works. You wanna know how it works? Like, you measure it. But I'm becoming a little bit more nuanced about it."



Michelle Woo, a cultural producer for For Freedoms, and Eric Gottesman, an artist —both founders of For Freedoms — at the organization's Congress in Los Angeles last fall. Mark Abramson for The New York Times

Measuring Art's Impact

Billboard companies offer metrics like "eyeballs" on your ad. Online, you can measure clicks and attention. Museums can tally visitors. But how do you determine if, and how, someone has been affected by a work of art?

For Freedoms has tried. The group commissioned studies run by the think tanks Perception Institute, in 2018, and More in Common, in 2020. (A third study is in progress, Gottesman said.) These studies queried groups of U.S. adults, including self-identified liberals, conservatives and independents, and asked them to respond to For Freedoms materials, including billboard designs.

Perception Institute's study had 2,869 participants. Those shown For Freedoms materials reported the intention to vote at a higher rate than those shown images from the feminist activist group Guerrilla Girls, the artist Barbara Kruger and Rock the Vote, a nonprofit aimed at boosting turnout among young voters.

Rachel Godsil, a founder of Perception Institute who worked on the For Freedoms study, underscored that the intent to vote is a strong indicator of actual voting. But she also pointed out that other measures found no meaningful impact. For example, the summary of the report, which Godsil shared, notes that "the content of the campaigns did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward the arts in politics."

The roughly 100 participants in the More in Common study were shown For Freedoms content including billboards and social media posts and asked to respond.

Reactions varied, especially concerning abstract statements and visuals. The billboard by Christine Wong Yap — remounted in 2024 in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention — that asked "How do you keep your heart open?" appealed to survey participants; whereas another phrase, by Christine Sun Kim, "Why Doubt My Experience," raised questions.



Christine Sun Kim's public art message, in Hartford, Conn., asks, "Why Doubt My Experience." Some were confused by the message, but members of the deaf community understood. Christine Sun Kim; via For Freedoms; Photo by Colin Miller

"What we saw from people is they don't really know who this billboard is referring to and whose experience is being doubted," said Coco Xu, who worked on the More in Common study. "A lot of times people just wanted more context." While many "were also intrigued by the different billboards and visuals," she added, "there is a sizable minority who is just confused."

Kim, the Korean American artist, who is deaf, shared in an email that the billboard reflected personal frustrations. "When I call someone out as an ableist or racist, those around us often respond, 'Oh, they would never do that. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding.' This constant doubt in my words is exhausting and consuming."

She added that, on social media, her billboards "resonated with people, especially deaf Americans."

Feeling a Little More Powerful



"Love Over Rules," 2024, a billboard by Leslie Willis Lowery and Hank Willis Thomas, near Philadelphia. Leslie Willis Lowery and Hank Willis Thomas; via For Freedoms; Photo by Clifford Pickett

Two days after the election, I drove from New York to Philadelphia to see a billboard by Thomas and Leslie Willis Lowery, his aunt. I wanted to see For Freedoms' work in public. Although I had its location, I missed it on the first pass. On the second, I spotted it — backlit by the sun setting behind the skyline: looping, white-on-white script, styled like neon, that reads, "Love Over Rules."

Thomas has used the phrase several times over the years, including in public neon signs, to commemorate his cousin and roommate, Songha Willis, who was murdered in 2000 outside a Philadelphia nightclub. "Love Over Rules" were among Willis's last words. It's an intensely personal message for the artist. It may resonate differently, or not at all, with viewers passing in their cars.

I pulled into the arts district where the billboard stood in an empty lot. None of the employees I spoke with at a brewery with a slim view of the billboard had noticed it. One pointed out that Pennsylvania gets a lot of political ads in election years. He'd gotten pretty good at ignoring them.

On For Freedoms' Instagram I found a fan. RJ Rushmore commended the Philadelphia billboard — he saw it every day. He was also familiar with Thomas and For Freedoms; Thomas had contributed an image to a series of unsanctioned phone booth ads installed by Rushmore's own collective, Art in Ad Spaces. "You're calling to ask about what is it like to see in person," he said. "I don't know if that's the most important thing." On social media, he said, the billboards have an outsize reach.

But what if, rather than sparking conversations, For Freedoms is mostly bolstering what people already think? That's important too, said the Guerrilla Girls member known as Käthe Kollwitz.

"With this giant billboard, everyone sort of feels a little more powerful," Kollwitz added, "if it's speaking to you about something you care about." (Guerrilla Girls has produced many billboards since the 1980s, and two with For Freedoms in 2018 and 2020.)

The artists behind the billboards generally agree that more public art never hurts. "I used to be pretty anti-billboard," Wong Yap told me. "I came of age in the 90s and I was reading 'Adbusters,'" a seminal culture-jamming magazine. But the media landscape has changed, she said. "There's so much at stake right now in this particular moment. We don't have the luxury of being picky about the tools that we use."

For Freedoms has branched out into online videos, public forums and publishing. But the group says it will keep making billboards. For one thing, they said, journalists love them.

Produced in collaboration with Avant Arte.



Courtesy Of The Artist And Avant Arte

TEXT BY

Shawn Ghassemitari

Jul 26, 2024 557 0

The 2024 Paris Olympic Games are officially underway and American artist Hank Willis Thomas is releasing a special limited-edition print for the occasion. Produced in collaboration with Avant Arte, *The only bond worth anything between human beings is their humanness.* depicts legendary American track and field star Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, despite the racial discrimination set out by the Third Reich during both the tournament and in the years to follow.

Based on an original work Thomas is exhibiting in Paris, Owens is depicted racing towards the finish line in a black halftone effect, clad in a red and doily patterned white uniform amidst a collaged blue background — together representing the American flag.

At the time, Owens shattered the record for the 100m dash, logging in a time of 10.3 seconds at the Olympics. Owens' running ability was only half of the battle, however, as he, along with all athletes deemed of an "impure" background continued to excel, despite facing dehumanization by the Nazi party. Today, as it was yesterday, Thomas believes that "athletes are more than people who run fast, jump long ways, throw balls – they symbolize our greatest hopes and dreams."

The time-limited print will only be available during a 48-hour window, starting on August 7 at 9am PT. *The only bond* is a 10 layer textured UV pigment print with matt varnish seal on 410gsm Somerset Tub Sized Radiant White paper, which will come unframed for $720 USD and in a black or white frame for $1,081 USD.

Olympic Fever Lands at Almine Rech Paris

The group exhibition ‘Sport and Beyond’ presents new and existing works by American artists Jeff Koons, Laurie Simmons and Hank Willis Thomas.



Courtesy Of The Artist And Almine Rech

Art

July 15, 2024 507 0

As Copa America and the EUROS draw to a close, the sports world now descends on Paris for the Olympic Games. A number of galleries across the French capital have joined in on the festivities, from Gagosian’s spotlight on the competition’s art history to a new exhibition fielded by Almine Rech.

Housed at Almine Rech’s rue de Turenne flagship, *Sport and Beyond* comprises of new and existing works by American artists Jeff Koons, Laurie Simmons and Hank Willis Thomas. Known best for his shiny balloon sculptures, Jeff Koons presents a new entry in his *Gazing Balls* series, the latest work featuring a reclining male nude balancing 11 chromatic orbs that rest over and around the figure’s body. Inspired by the *Borghese Gladiator* (110 BCE) sculpture in the Louvre museum, Koons conflates past and present by showcasing manufactured artifacts that simultaneously reflect on antiquity and the visitor walking throughout the space.

Laurie Simmons revisits an earlier photographic series of swimming ballet dancers, but in her new work, she employs text-based AI prompts using DALL—E and Stable Diffusion to create several images that blend reality with fantasy. One of the resulting works depict a row of swimmers wearing floral caps, which is “corrected” by the New York-based artist using hand-appliqué additions.

Since the days of the Roman Colosseum, sports has shown to be a vivid reflection of the socio-economic structures of society. Hank Willis Thomas is acutely aware of this and has used his multi-disciplinary practice to investigate themes related to consumerism, community and identity. Thomas’ *Endless Column III* (2017) comprises of nine stacked soccer balls painted in a chameleon hue that changes with the viewer’s movement. “The work, erect like a totem,” wrote art critic Charles Barachon, “highlights the collective and combative spirit of sport, athletic heroism and victory, as well as the aesthetic and social issues that pop culture brings with it.”

Sport and Beyond will be on view in Paris until August 17, while the 2024 Paris Olympic Games commence from July 26 to August 11, 2024.

Almine Rech
64 Rue de Turenne,
75003 Paris, France

ART PLUGGED™



All Power to All People, 2023 Patina Bronze 98 x 42 1/2 x 2 1/2 in. | 248.92 x 107.95 x 6.35 cm © Hank Willis Thomas. All rights reserved. Courtesy Hank Willis Thomas, Goodman Gallery, and Pace Gallery

Share

Renowned US conceptual artist **Hank Willis Thomas** has been chosen to launch a new public art programme, **Level Ground**, which is debuting at Glastonbury Festival in 2024. Thomas' iconic sculpture **All Power to All People, 2023** focuses on racial identity and representation. The iconic artwork was initially inspired by the 1970s Black Power Movement and has since gained new iconographic symbolism for the recent **Black Lives Matter movement**.

Thomas' piece has been selected by Level Ground, a new non-profit organisation aimed to revolutionise and democratise public art by prioritising inclusion and representation. Towering over eight feet tall and weighing almost 800 pounds, *All Power to All People* is an enlarged Afro pick with a power fist cast in patina bronze protruding at a slight tilt. Glastonbury goers will be able to visit Thomas' colossal and memorable piece opposite the West Holts Stage.

The artwork takes symbolic references and cultural imagery from both past and present-day, examining their historic origins, and analysing how certain objects have acted as a pillar of fortitude and resilience – here, reimagining it at a large-scale.



Hank Willis Thomas
Photography Credit Jai Lennard

“This piece highlights ideas related to community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and resistance to oppression. I am honoured to present it at Glastonbury in partnership with Level Ground where it will be showcased on the world’s largest stage. The Afro pick today exists as many things to different people; it is worn as adornment, a political emblem, and a signature of collective identity. It is a testament to innovation that connects millions of people to the energy and joy of Glastonbury Festival.” – **Hank Willis Thomas**, featured artist.

The title of Thomas’ work ***All Power to All People*** powerfully mirrors Level Ground’s guiding mission; a purpose-driven arts organisation that aims to create a fairer, more inclusive, and more representative landscape for public art.

‘Level Ground is a radical new movement securing the future of public art. We believe art can and should be beneficial to society, and that arts organisations have a responsibility to make public art relevant and available to all. We have a bold vision and a practical system to achieve this change and, after several years of hard work, we’re ready to implement it across the UK.’ – **Simon Vaughn,** Level Ground Co-founder

We are always looking for ambitious partners who believe in a fairer, more inclusive approach to public art. If you would like to change art for the better, and support artists and communities across the UK. Let’s talk: here

All Power to All People sculpture will travel from Glastonbury to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, where the work will be on view through August 2025

Learn more

©2024 Level Ground, Hank Willis Thomas

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Art Plugged is a contemporary platform inspired by a relationship with the broader arts communities. We provide our audience with curated insight into the world of art, from exhibitions to artist interviews and more.

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ARTS & CULTURE | VANCOUVER

June 8, 2024 · ART & DESIGN

Hank Willis Thomas's new public artwork at Vancouver Art Gallery's Offsite captures empowerment and solidarity of last half-decade

Shown for the first time together and in water, three steel sculptures on West Georgia play with reflection

BY JANET SMITH



Hank Willis Thomas and his exhibition Offsite: Hank Willis Thomas, at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite to April 27, 2024. Photo by Vancouver Art Gallery

A SHINY STEEL arm rises from a reflective pool, muscles tense as it grabs an arm wielding a police baton. Behind it, in a gesture of love and support: two disembodied pairs of arms intertwine, one set lifting the other. Nearby, in a third sculpture, a limb hoists a peace sign out of the water.

New York City–based artist Hank Willis Thomas's new public artwork at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite, outdoors at 1100 West Georgia Street, speaks with heart to the social upheaval of recent times—to empowerment and protest. And it was obvious that it was connecting with the public immediately after its unveiling on Friday. Instagrammers held up the peace sign in front of the same massive gesture; tourists posed in front of the trio of sculptures; and rush hour traffic slowed as

drivers gawked at this silvery salute to agency and solidarity.

As Thomas said at an intimate press launch for the sculptures, the viewer is implicated in the works. A huge part of that is the material he has chosen: the polished stainless steel mirrors those who gaze into it. Because they're disembodied, the limbs also allow the viewer to fill in their own details of each scenario.

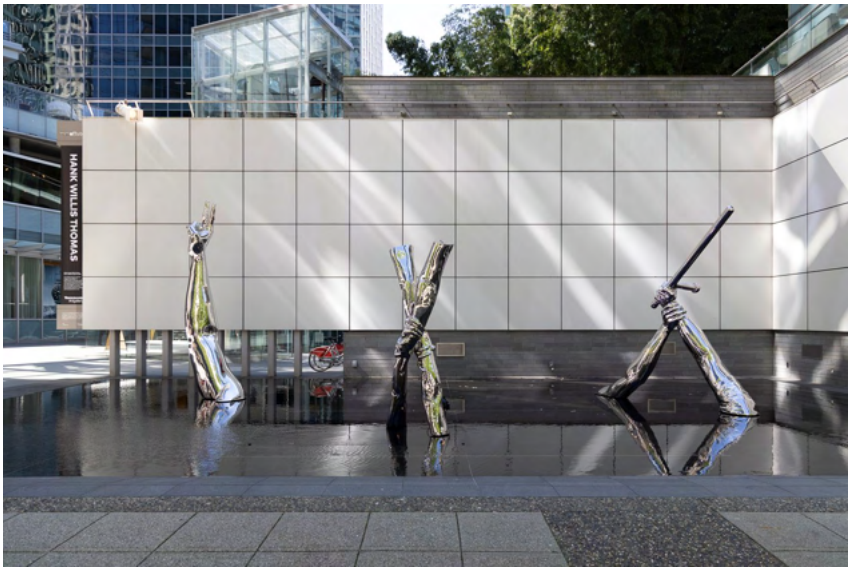
"It's a very cold, hard material," he said of the stainless steel, "but it makes you think about strength and power. So I love the duality of looking at something and seeing myself reflected in it and having warmth and intimacy and tenderness—in steel."

The three works, made consecutively in 2021, 2022, and 2023, sprung out of a period of seismic shifts in a postpandemic world. He reflected: "I made these in different mindframes—this concept of protest, play, and love."

This is Thomas's first solo exhibition in Vancouver, a result largely of his nine-year connection with Vancouver Art Gallery deputy director and director of curatorial programs Eva Respini. The three sculptures have never been displayed together before, and never been shown with water—an element that adds to their reflective power. The arms thrusting out of the pool also give a sense of surfacing, reminiscent of that old movie poster for *Excalibur* that depicted a fist pushing a glimmering sword out from underwater—making you think of emergence, coming up for air, survival, and exultation. At night, lighting allows the figures to throw magnified shadows across the modular highrise walls at the site.

On view for one year, the works assert a new kind of public “monument” in an era where old monuments are being toppled. Last year, Thomas unveiled *The Embrace*, a deeply moving 20-foot-tall sculpture, created in collaboration with MASS Design Group, that sits in Boston’s new 1965 Freedom Rally Memorial Plaza. It’s an homage to King's speech at the Common, his love for his wife Coretta, and the couple’s love for the world. Instead of a statue to a war leader, we see a monument to love and peace—two beautiful brown-bronze arms and hands intertwined.

Born in 1976 in Plainfield, New Jersey, and raised in New York, Thomas grew up surrounded by art and artists. He was raised by a mother, Deborah Willis, who was an art photographer and NYU art-history professor, and a father, also Hank Thomas, who was a jazz musician, film producer, and physicist. Being surrounded by creatives was so everyday to his existence that, counterintuitively, “I never even thought of a career as an artist,” he said Friday. That changed in adulthood, his work going on to sit in the collections of top American institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the National Gallery of Art, and to be exhibited around North America and Europe.



Offsite: Hank Willis Thomas, at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite to April 27, 2024. Photo by Vancouver Art Gallery

"I've been making a more and more conscious effort in my practice to find ways toward love and liberation."

Respini noted that Thomas's sculptural work reflects his background as a conceptual photographer and the way his images "crop" and "focus" in on an action—in this case body parts in gesture. The exhibit's most intense sculpture, 2021's *Strike*, was drawn directly from artist Louis Lozowick's 1935 lithograph *Strike Scene*, from the Whitney Collection: it depicts a Black man stopping the baton of a policeman during union riots. The fist at the wrist "pierced" Thomas when he saw it.

It's not hard to see why. Thomas's depiction of the conflict in closeup brings to mind not just George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, but also the police violence that stirred African American uprisings during the

1960s. Quoting Mark Twain, Thomas mused at the unveiling that “History doesn’t repeat itself; it rhymes.”

Thomas is driven, in a way, to counteract the art of advertising—the images we’re inundated with on a daily basis that tell us what to buy, what to wear, and who to be. “We have so little time to reflect,” he said, “so I think fine art really has a civic duty.”

In past work, the artist has appropriated and reframed advertising copy to provocative effect: Thomas’s 2006 *B®anded* series superimposed the ubiquitous Nike swoosh logo onto the bodies of Black men, commenting on the objectification of African-American men and alluding to the branding of slaves by their owners.

Ultimately, the gleaming silver forms in Offsite: Hank Willis Thomas vie for attention alongside the bus shelter ads and glowing store signs along West Georgia. Albeit here they demand an altogether different kind of attention, not just to the conflict and oppression raging around the world in this tumultuous last half decade, but also to hope. "Often we're much more comfortble talking bout the pain in our heart and sharing that pain in our heart," reflected Thomas. "And while I revel in that, I've been making a more and more conscious effort in my practice to find ways toward love and liberation."



Hank Willis Thomas and his exhibition Offsite: Hank Willis Thomas, at the Vancouver Art Gallery Offsite to April 27, 2024. Photo by Vancouver Art Gallery



Janet Smith

Janet Smith is an award-winning arts journalist who has spent more than two decades immersed in Vancouver's dance, screen, design, theatre, music, opera, and gallery

‘Our Medium Is American Democracy’: A New Book Compiles More than 550 Artist Billboards

The project features seven years worth of billboards commissioned by the artist collective and activist group For Freedoms.



Ai Weiwei, *Question Mark* (2020). Photo: Gabe Ford. Courtesy Ai Weiwei studio.

Brian Boucher (https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244) June 7, 2024

(https://www.addtoany.com/share#url=https%3A%2F%2Fnews.artnet.com%2Fart-world%2Fnew-book-artist-billboards-for-freedoms-2498159&title=%E2%80%98Our%20Medium%20Is%20American%20Democracy%E2%80%99%3A%20A%20New%20Book%20Compiles%20Mo Share

You read about it here first in 2016: when a foursome of artists launched For Freedoms, an organization that would mimic a political action committee and give artists a public voice in the run-up to the presidential election that pitted Hillary Clinton against Donald Trump, Artnet broke the news (https://news.artnet.com/market/artist-political-action-committee-441083).

Launched by artists Wyatt Gallery, Eric Gottesman, Hank Willis Thomas, and Michelle Woo, the group had among its aims “to expand what participation in a democracy looks like.” Said the artists at the time, “Our medium for this project is American democracy.”



For Freedoms, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, published by Monacelli | Phaidon and designed by Albert James Ignacio.

One of its trademarks has been artist-commissioned billboards. Now, the founders, along with For Freedoms associate director taylor brock, have authored the richly illustrated book *Where Do We Go From Here?*, which documents every billboard the group has commissioned, totaling more than 550.

The roster includes superstars like Shepard Fairey, Theaster Gates, the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, Rashid Johnson, JR, Carrie Mae Weems, Deborah Willis, and Ai Weiwei. For Freedoms created the book with the help of creative director Albert Ignacio, who has worked with the collective since its founding.



For Freedoms, *Where Do We Go From Here?*. published by Monacelli | Phaidon and designed by Albert James Ignacio.

Published by Monacelli, *Where Do We Go From Here?* is available for advance order (https://department-pr-dot-yamm-track.appspot.com/2yNyrJfkqrXxxH7WwTWUv0mRGDO58ixEXRJaqLmzKKi6oqOjpjwFrI-mGwdqN7PREcljOwNHM8QwMSU2RrZ2YsIlgQ7mCovPgLIzuhtr3k8VItpNr9pghid81p-TPUr7E86jTsFmivnwCD5xbz7grJCum0pPXxB5ftRTj3zu9--ekXBb1OoHzDuSLEfIdwz9MeW7Kz3ev1i8Is41JBCPyz7Mm1uJTg_tckPAT8IK6QHDPe7divdYvIllXubqD2yFPCrmb3g) with a publication date of October 15 (right before another election with Trump as the GOP standard-bearer).

The group's name plays on a pillar of Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address: that America offers freedom of speech and worship along with freedom from want and fear. The enterprise didn't manage to keep Trump from the White House, but it has since undertaken many types of programming, including town halls, public art installations, and exhibitions, across all U.S. states and some territories.



Christine Wong Yap, *How do you keep your heart open (For Susan)*

“The billboards go up and they come down a couple weeks later and are never seen again,” said Gallery in a video call, commenting on the impetus to create the volume. “Then they only remain present through photography, so the book is the main place where the billboards will live on and continue to have an impact.”

“Everything is fleeting in the digital area,” said brock of the impetus behind creating a book, adding that they asked, “How can we create a living archive?”



Derrick Adams, *Ode to Bayard Rustin,* (2018). Photo: Mike Butler.

The book features texts by contributors including Whitney Museum of American Art associate curator Rujeko Hockley and musician-activist-artist Nadya Tolokonnikova of Pussy Riot, as well as interviews with participating artists and behind-the-scenes stories of the organization.

For Freedoms has also teamed up with other organizations, like Landback.Art and Times Square Arts, and the book offers an overview of those collaborations.

At least at the beginning, the billboard project wasn't met with universal praise.



Shepard Fairey/Obey Giant, *Wake Up to Justice* (2020). Photo: Jeff Scroggins.

“Some of the criticism we got for doing billboards was that they were a private media space that makes the landscape ugly,” said Gottesman on the video call, “but in order to inject the kind of discourse we wanted, we have to engage with systems that are corrupted. Little did we know how corrupted the tools for communication are, and that’s becoming more and more evident.”



For Freedoms: Where Do We Go From Here? published by Monacelli | Phaidon and designed by Albert James Ignacio.

Injecting art into public space in an unexpected way has paid dividends, including in the form of phone calls and emails asking questions, including, said Gallery, “What side are you on?”



Mahvash Mostala, *Reflection of Woman* | (2022) .نزﺃساکعنا Photo: Austin Paz. Courtesy Even/Odd.

The book also delves into some of the challenges of collaboration, say the authors. Even determining what label to apply to the book has been difficult. They’ve been calling it a monograph, but it’s almost more of a multigraph, or a monograph of many artists. (With a laugh, they acknowledged that as a word, polygraph is unfortunately taken.)

The book focuses on the billboards not only because they’re the most visual project (more so than, say, town halls), but also because they’re the group’s most public-facing work. But they are hardly the group’s sole focus, Gallery emphasized.

“We’ve wanted to show everything we do,” he said. “That might be the second book.”



Brian Boucher

(https://news.artnet.com/about/brian-boucher-244)

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Hank Willis Thomas: *LOVERULES*

By Amelia Saul
JUNE 2024



Hank Willis Thomas, *All Lies Matter*, edition 201/400, 2019. Screenprint. Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. Courtesy Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation and Henry Art Museum. Photo: Aaron Wessling Photography.

On View

Henry Art Gallery
February 24–August 4, 2024
Seattle

In Hank Willis Thomas's *LOVERULES—From the Collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and His Family Foundation*, at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, the material is the spectacle of American media itself, and the most commercial parts of it: advertisements, sports, logos, slogans—in this place, the United States, at this time—now, or what passes for now, which in Thomas's hands includes the last four hundred years.

The Henry's first rooms are intimate, and the curation focuses on Thomas's text-based images in two facing rooms. In one, Thomas's use of lenticular printing (a print of two overlayed images laminated with finely grooved plastic refracting one image or the other, depending on your angle) winks towards kitsch but is not. At first, one image reads ALL LIVES MATTER, but as you move, the V in "lives" fades away. Hence the title *All Lies Matter* (2019). Across the room, Power becomes Powerless—the "less" hovers, threatens. I saw a few people swaying side to side. On another wall, advertising slogans sit in sublime glittery blackness: *It's long, It's still. It's elegant.* Thomas frequently removes advertising slogans, leaving the photograph naked, but here he leaves only text, font, and punctuation intact. So, just as if they were on a billboard, you read the words without choosing to, just because they are there. Your eyes move without volition. Thomas's choreography continues with every subsequent room, and we all move from foot to foot or duck around with a little flashlight, or become still, as if attending a memorial.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Be A Man*, edition 1 of 1, 2012. Liquitex on canvas. Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. Courtesy Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation and Henry Art Museum. Photo: Aaron Wessling Photography.

Through the next door one sees the austere painting *I Am Man* (2007). It's blunt like concrete poetry, black-on-white, sans-serif: I AM MAN. *Be A Man* and *I Am Your Man* hang on either side. Presented like this, these common phrases become existentially loaded and imbued with a reflection on the demands, and therefore the impossible binds, that Black men face. The typeface Willis is using is taken from the famous "I AM a man" placards carried in the 1968 sanitation workers' strike, so we may need to linger to consider its ramifications, as well as the plays on words with which Thomas engages. Only upon entering is *I Am 3/5 Man* visible. Here the violence becomes specific: the fraction references the Three-Fifths Compromise of 1787, which counted any enslaved person as a three-fifths person, denying slaves citizenship while allowing the Southern states to maintain outsized representation in Congress. But you have to step into the gallery to see the painting; you have to join to understand. And the drama in the reveal really does make your heart skip a beat.

One of the funniest effects of Thomas's work is that the basic function of the advertisements remains. The images still make you *want*: charisma, cigarettes, sex, babies, personal beauty, or whatever else they originally sold. The smiling (naked?) parents in *The Johnson Family* (1981/2006), and the couple in *Farewell Uncle Tom* (1971/2007)—that sublime gaze as she smokes!—are beautiful. Even as the potential of the title dawns on us and lands a gut punch, a little fire of greed alights. For what, though? The solution, the call-to-action—namely, buy this, smoke that, be like this, wear this shoe—is gone. The thing to buy is not on offer. You cannot get what you want. This makes the desire wander around aimlessly; one is left only observing the want, the void.

There is a lot of artwork out there about white women. And without looking away from the specific role of white women in American racism, Thomas's *Unbranded: A Century of White Women* is one of the most empathetic I've ever seen. For each year from 1915 to 2015, he selected an advertisement, removed the words, and enlarged it. The images, devoid of their phrases, brands, and logos, reveal a devastating conception of what white women are and should be. (Sexually available and pleasing—surprise!) Addiction, masochism, and sadism are all wordlessly encouraged in beauty advertisements, in jokes, in languid postures on chaises longues with Black butlers on hand, in punched eyes over wry cigarette smiles; the racism is overt in earlier years, covert later. None of it is new, but it's still shocking. It's eerily familiar to see an ecstatic ice skater lift her leg high enough for a full reveal, a woman lower her parted lips over an erect lipstick, a group of men surround and paw at a bikini-clad model. In fact, every image in the room is familiar, even nostalgic, making it terrifying to see them all together. *This is what we wanted you to be*. Thomas sifted through thousands of advertisements and researched their relationship to the respective year—and I'd love to know the backstory of each selection, even though it is all already encoded in my own conception of myself. T'is good this room has a couch.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Will not go dull and lifeless*, 1953/2015, from *Unbranded: A Century of White Women*, edition AP2, 2015. Digital chromogenic print. Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. Courtesy Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation and Henry Art Museum. Photo: Aaron Wessling Photography.

I went with a friend from Seattle, and when I spoke, she'd reply in a whisper—which added to the conceptual-art drama already at work. We were circling *Endless Column* (2017)*,* a stack of cast basketballs painted with iridescent purple-black auto paint, and I wanted to talk about monumentalism, about the fetish of the basketball player's body, about height measured in basketballs, etc. And then we shined little flashlights on *An All Colored Cast* (2019), and I wanted to know if she also felt the immense sadness in these eulogies—lost histories and forgotten luminaries—while also noting the formal critique of modernism. My friend kept whispering back, "Uh-huh."

I asked if we were allowed to talk. She said Seattleites tend to visit galleries quietly, even in silence.

Seattle is a segregated city, complete with a housing crisis, tent cities, and an ever-widening divide between its tech wealth/Amazon/Adobe/Google people and everyone else. Seattle has its own history, including a genocide of the Indigenous people who still live there. Seattle has a culture that needs, like everywhere else on this continent, to confront its origin. Far from requesting silence in these rooms, I think the artist would want us to be talking and listening, responding and thinking and discussing aloud and moving toward the edges of our individual vantage point. Through all this work, Thomas shows that criticality, anger, and unflinching remembrance are the core of empathy, healing, and escape into a different future.

Contributor

Amelia Saul

Amelia Saul is an artist who lives in New York.

Style / Arts

An artist reckons with the dangerous power of advertising and iconography

By Abigail Glasgow, CNN

5 minute read · Published 8:30 AM EDT, Tue May 21, 2024

3 comments



The artist Hank Willis Thomas' works emphasize how brands categorize and commodify consumers'

identities for their financial growth — and how those strategies influence how we interact with the world and our communities. Pictured here, a patchwork of political and identity-based flags in the 2021 piece "At the Twilight's Last Gleaming?" Aaron Wessling/Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

(CNN) — In Seattle's Henry Art Gallery, an open, oval room is covered wall-to-wall in women, the visuals spanning a full century from 1915 to 2015. The artist Hank Willis Thomas is pointing to one of the images: of two well-dressed, neatly coiffed men standing atop a cliff.

Below them, a woman is hanging from the peak with a rope.



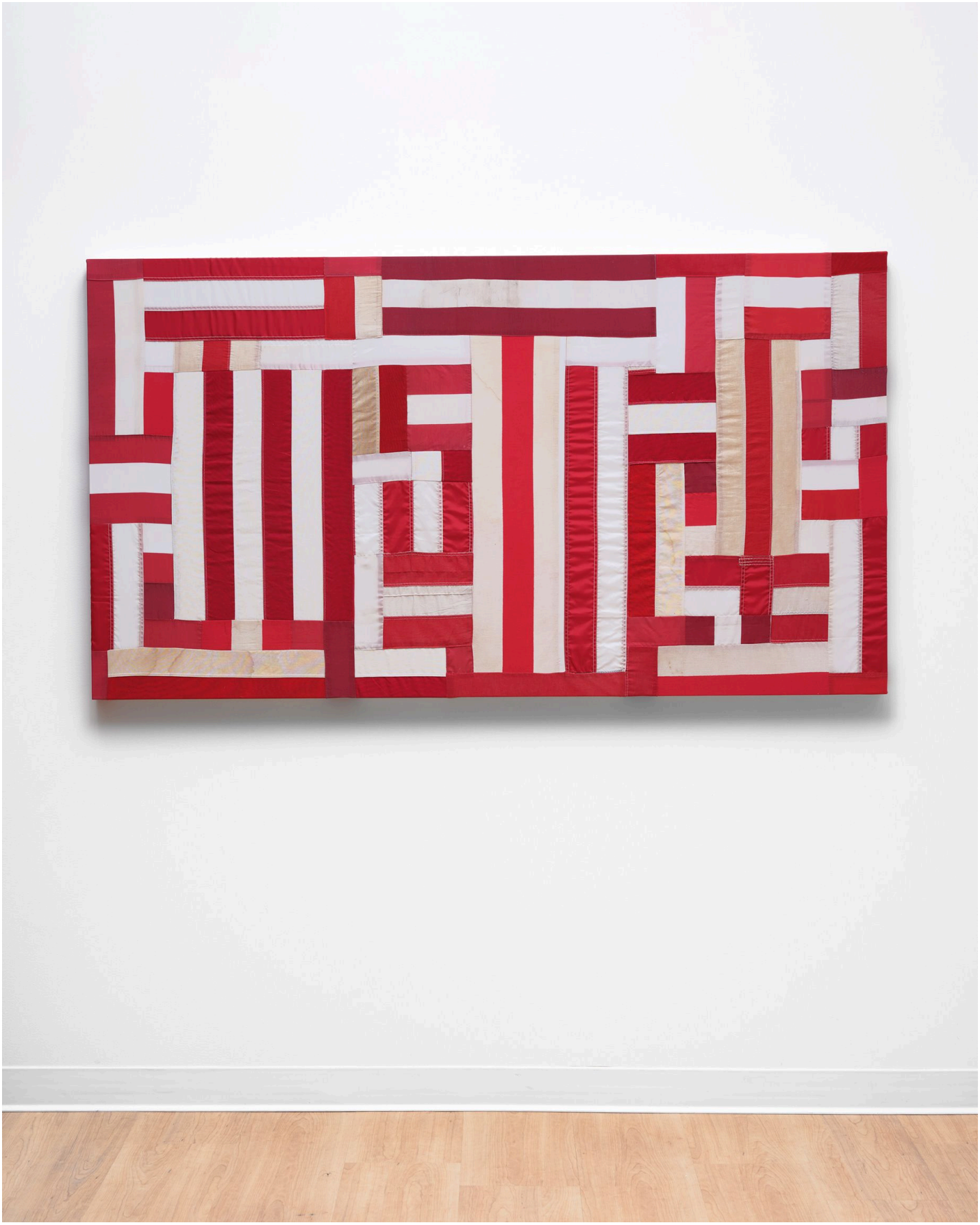
"She's Somewhat of a Drag," a 1959 advertisement Thomas repurposed in his series "Unbranded: A Century of White Women." Aaron Wessling/Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

"Anyone want to guess what this is an ad for?" he asks a group previewing his latest show, "LOVERULES," on the afternoon of its opening day. "Sweaters?" someone posits. Somehow, they're correct.

The piece is from Thomas' largest body of work, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women." The 2015 series — one of many resurfaced for the "LOVERULES" exhibit — features 101 print adverts (one ad per year), from which Thomas has removed the relevant logos and copy, inviting the viewer to reckon with historical records of femininity and its commodification. The aforementioned image — for Drummond Sweaters — was initially printed in a 1959 issue of "Esquire" magazine. A chorus of scoffs echo throughout the gallery room as Thomas reads its original text: "Men are better than women! Indoors, women are useful — even pleasant. On a mountain they are something of a drag."

"LOVERULES" threads together Thomas' most significant practices and themes, particularly the impact of corporate branding, the construction of gender and race, and the evolution of power struggles across movements for liberation. "What does it mean to look at an object that was made to have a three to six month shelf life 40 years later?" Thomas asked, speaking about the show with CNN.

For those in the gallery room, it means discomfort or even disgust when considering an image of a woman with mascara running down her eyes and what looks like a black eye, for example, or another stripped of her clothing surrounded by a group of men. (The former came from a 1963 ad for Tareyton cigarettes, appearing to make light of domestic abuse in its call for "aggressive loyalty" from customers; the latter, in its troubling depiction of what a viewer could all too easily interpret as men preparing to sexually assault a woman, is for pants.)



The pieces included in "LOVERULES" are from the collection of Jordan Schnitzer, the Oregon-based philanthropist who has purchased 160 of Thomas' works in the years since the two first met. "It's artists like Hank Willis Thomas that help us face our own values," Schnitzer told CNN. Pictured above, Thomas'

2021 work "Justice." Aaron Wessling/Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

Throughout the “Unbranded” series, the viewer is confronted with the values embedded in the ethos of advertising — namely, capitalism and the ways in which those who fuel it will tokenize groups and ideas for profit. “What is expected of us is very much informed by advertising, which typically has a specific agenda,” Thomas told CNN. (In other words, buying into the inferiority of women helped sell those sweaters or cigarettes.)

Over the last 20 plus years, Thomas has made a name for himself responding to culturally ingrained narratives of race, gender, class and their intersections in the United States through various mediums — from photo to fabric. Whether he’s mirroring a three-point stanced football player with an enslaved person picking cotton in “The Cotton Bowl,” or mimicking a maze made out of prison uniforms and American flag fabric in “Justice,” Thomas’ work successfully identifies patterns of oppression and asks us to consider how we participate in these systems.



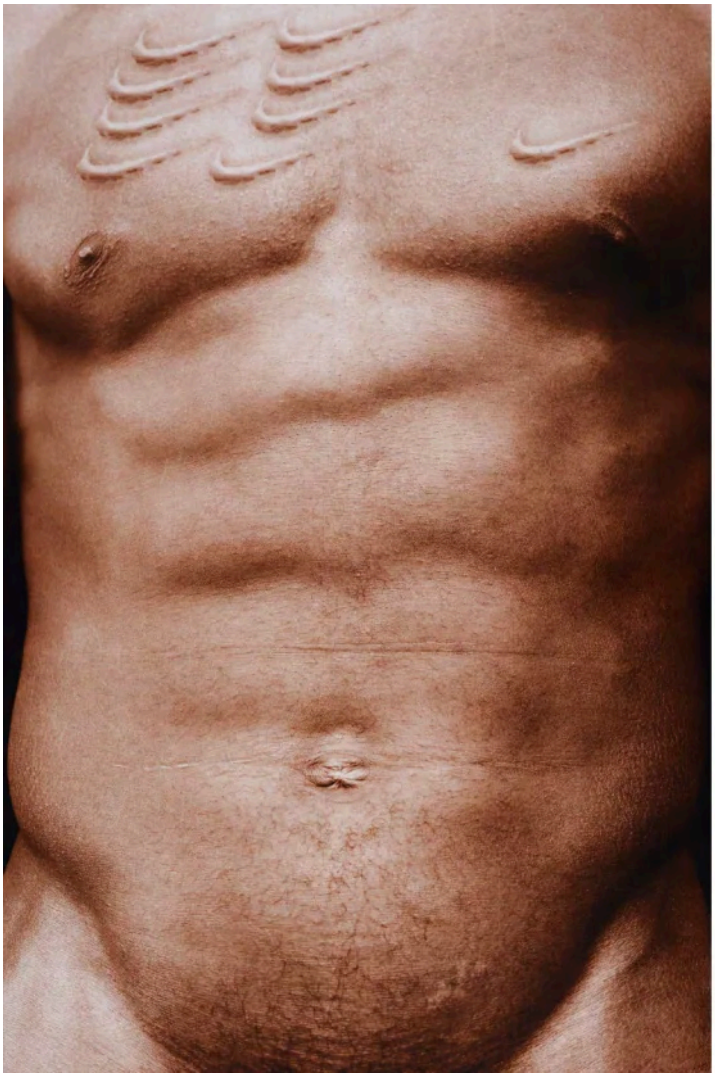
Across his work, Thomas reframes iconic and mundane imagery to connect viewers to historical moments of resistance and reshape our understanding of who counts in society. Here, a pro-football player appears to face off with an enslaved cotton picker, in Thomas' work "From Cain't See in the Mornin' Til Cain't See at Night." Aaron Wessling/Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Family

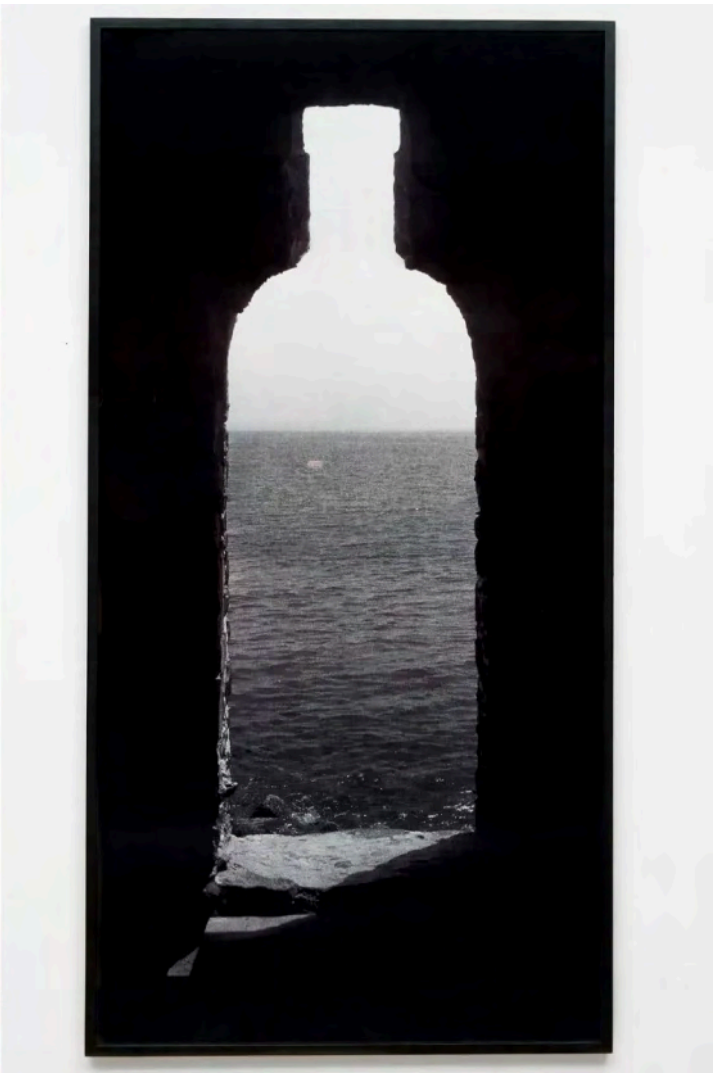
In the complementary series, “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America,” Thomas explores ways in which brands invest in or give attention to certain (and often marginalized)

explores ways in which brands invest in or give attention to certain (and often marginalized) communities when it becomes financially convenient — in this case, the corporate appropriation of Black culture. “Somewhere around the late ’60s, I believe as a result of heightened visibility through the Civil Rights movement, corporations started to pay attention,” Thomas explained of the series that assesses ads from 1968 to 2008 (and was intentionally capped when Barack Obama was elected). Before then, he continued, “people of color weren’t seen as a worthwhile demographic to market to, or to represent.”

Both “Unbranded” series assess advertisements as a channel for understanding the place (and power) of racism and sexism throughout American history. Thomas’ visual reflections of popular culture’s past demand an analysis of how corporations commodify belief systems for their own gain — and, in many cases, walk back or even denounce those same beliefs should their profit stumble. (Any focus on queer life ends after a Pride campaign, say, or the celebration of Black stories stops after February sales — in other words, investment in the bottom line will always supersede investment in people or movements.)

To Thomas, these tactics have become even more deceptive as ads have evolved beyond still frames. “With influencers and product placement, (this messaging) is a lot more subtle, more insidious,” he argued. “We’re consuming advertising information without even necessarily knowing it.”





"I've always been fascinated with how brands give us cues about our own self worth," Thomas told CNN. His body of work work reflects the observation — and, perhaps, a warning — that we have moved toward "existing in a society of branded consciousness." Aaron Wessling/Courtesy of Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

Even in instances when many of us are well aware of the manipulative tactics employed by brands, that doesn't always stop us from buying in. In his series "B®anded," part of which is also included in "LOVERULES," Thomas merges brand logos with altered photos or backdrops to examine how we are beholden to corporations: an Amex that reads "The Afro-American Express," its central photo of enslaved people crowded on a ship. Close by is an image of a chest covered in scars in the shape of Nike's logo, speaking to, as Thomas shared, "how slaves were branded as a kind of ownership, and (how) today we brand ourselves."

Also featured are two of his works reconfiguring the classic Absolut bottle silhouette, one of which resembles the Door of No Return, the symbolic gateway found in Sénegal's Gorée Island, known as the largest warehouse of enslaved Africans before they were forced onto ships abroad.

Reimagined as artworks, these advertisements are what Thomas deems "messages to the future" and epitomize the more platformed desires and tropes of their time. It begs the question, what of today's visual messages that we have accepted as normal should, in 40 years time, be interrogated and chastised?

Conversations

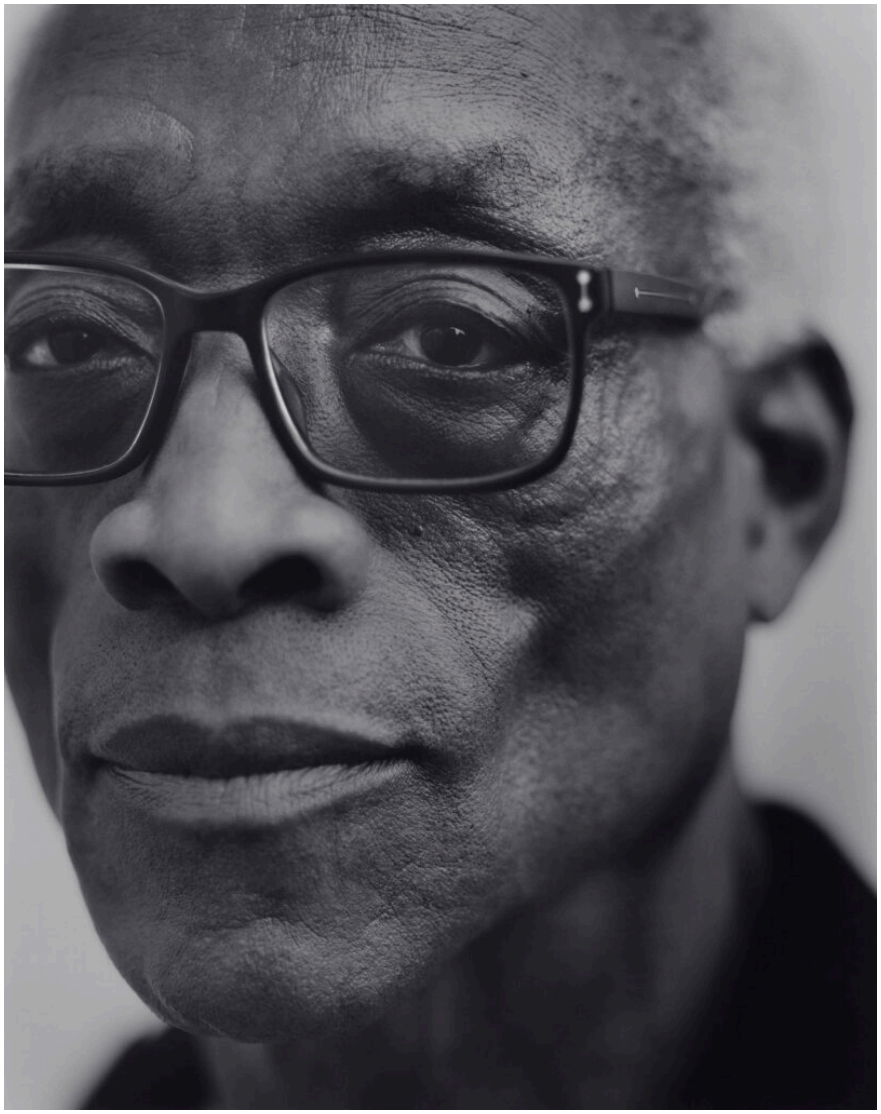
Bill T. Jones and Hank Willis Thomas reanimate creative freedom

Read time **15 minutes**

Text by **Maya Kotomori**

Photography by **Andreas Laszlo Konrath**

Posted **May 20, 2024**



Shirt, jacket, and glasses talent's own. Photographed at New York Live Arts.

The choreographer and conceptualist challenge the categories and moralities of the artist for Document's Spring/Summer 2024

"The body never lies," wrote Martha Graham in her 1991 autobiography *Blood Memory*. The mother of modern dance famously theorized in absolutes, with superlatives aplenty, when describing her novel approach to movement. "Martha Graham was known for her more categorical statements," says Bill T. Jones, renowned dancer and choreographer, with a knowing look. In his smooth baritone, he lists a series of his own categorical statements, some of which he holds sacred. Others "might make people think, 'Oh my god, that sounds like *bullshit*. It sounds like what he believes is mythical.'"

"We can poke holes in them later," Jones assures.

Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas smirks at the prospect. For him, one prevalent myth worthy of deflation is the idea of the artist as arbiter of good or bad taste, of right or wrong political views, of morality as such. Thomas and Jones's practices don't just oppose this kind of obligation, they obliterate it, using a radical sense of self as a compass.

Jones's hybrid spoken word choreography engages audiences in active aural and physical meaning-making, while Thomas's practice across a range of mediums, materials, and scales holds a magnifying glass up to contemporary culture. In Jones's seminal 1995 performance *Still/Here*, an ensemble of people suffering from illnesses translated their feelings into expressive movements which bled into an interpretive dance about the choreographer's own life story. The disjunction of form and content articulated by a *soutenu* following a spoken-word passage about someone dying from cancer, as with Thomas's prints made from prison uniforms to spell phrases like "land of the free" and "we the people," remind viewers of the tenderness that lies beneath the aesthetic. Black identity emerges in both artists' work not as a calling card, but as a visual language of history and love.

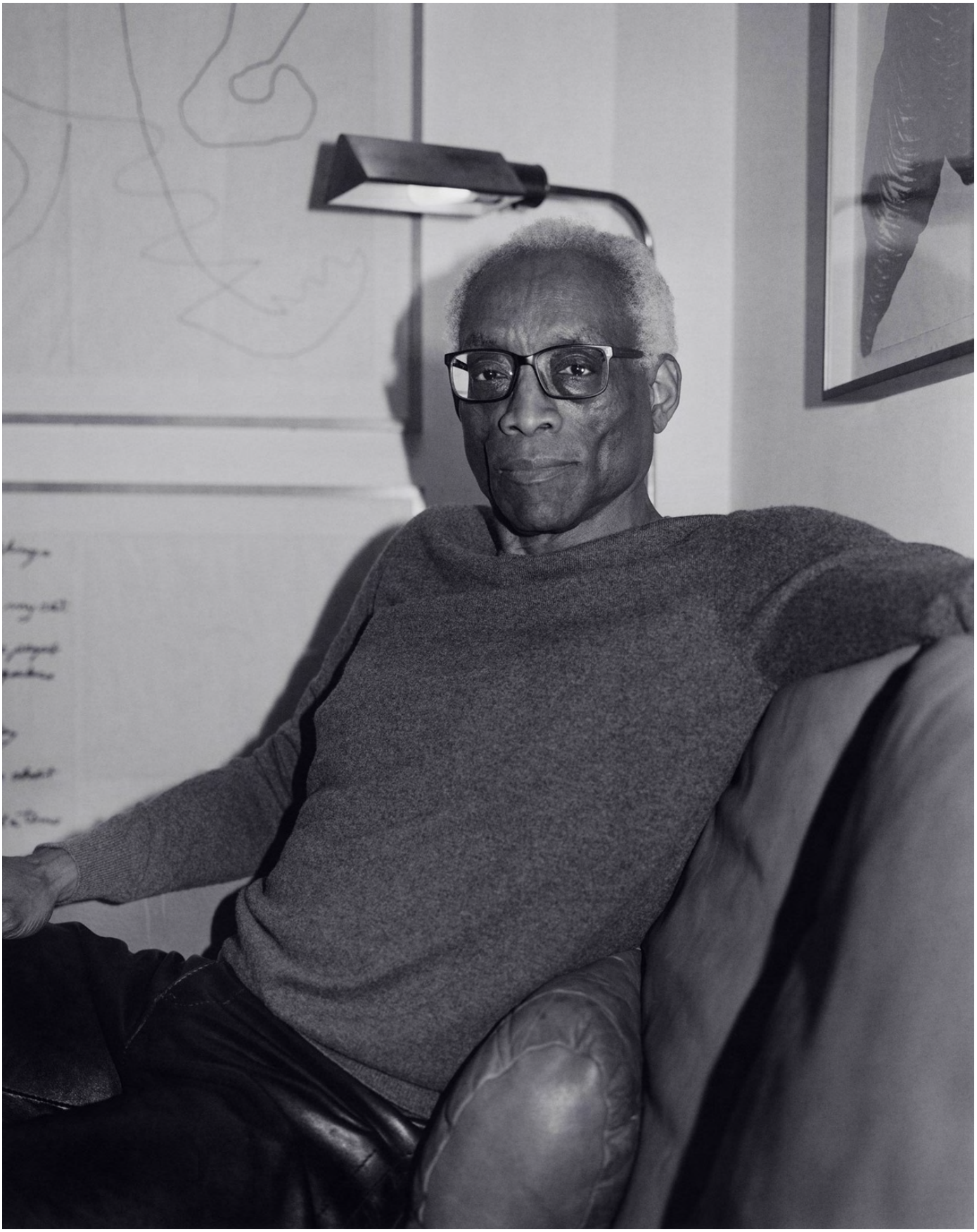
For Jones, the body is the meaning is the message. His love of dance comes from equal parts circumstance and access: In 1955, his parents relocated him and his 11 siblings from Bunnell, Florida, to New York's Steuben County for greater opportunities harvesting crops. An all-star track athlete in his teens, Jones would attend Binghamton University on scholarship in 1970. After falling in love with West African and Afro-Caribbean dance via

classes taught at his college, he switched his major and met Arnie Zane, his partner in life and dance, who died of HIV/AIDS in 1988. Throughout the ’70s and ’80s, Jones produced numerous works both independently and in collaboration with Zane as the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, which served as a home for like-minded, experimental dancers.

Today, Jones is the artistic director of New York Live Arts—an aggregation of his former dance company and Manhattan’s Dance Theater Workshop—and will be celebrating 40 years of the landmark venue Harlem Stage with his company in a two-night-only event this spring. He still lives in the house he and Zanes bought in Rockland County, New York, in 1979.

Born in Plainfield, New Jersey, in 1976, Hank Willis Thomas is the child of jazz musician Hank Thomas and photographer, artist, curator, and educator Deborah Willis. After cutting his teeth as an undergraduate at New York University and as a graduate student at California College of the Arts, Thomas synthesized his degrees in photography, Africana studies, and visual criticism into the carefully considered multimedia art he creates today. In addition to showing at institutions like the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim, in 2022, Thomas unveiled his largest work to date: *The Embrace*, a 20-foot-tall bronze sculpture in Boston Common inspired by how tightly Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King held each other when the late civil rights leader won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Both use their work as a challenge, employing the body alone and together, on stage, in the gallery, and on the street. Speaking together for Document, Jones and Thomas find meaning under myth—and tease apart the categorical declarations that underscore the persona of the artist.

“I’m going to ask, because I have made art the center of my life, am I fierce enough to play at that level? Or am I always trying to be good?”



Sweater by **Loro Piana**. Trousers and glasses talent's own.

Bill T. Jones: Art flies above societal questions of power, class, etc. Art has a sacred function. Martha Graham is known to have said, 'Dancers are acrobats of god.' Art should be free of capitalist principles. Art should be free of all hierarchies of value. That's my throw-down.

Hank Willis Thomas: One [myth] that I gained through you comes from James Baldwin: 'It seems to me that the artist's struggle for his integrity must be considered as a metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings.'

Bill: That sounds like Baldwin.

Hank: I believe that there is no culture without art, and that culture is what humanity is founded on. So art and humanity are indivisible. History doesn't repeat itself, it just continues and takes different forms. In other societies where we might have a shaman or a seer or a healer, here we have artists. Those are my efforts to reimagine the definition of history and artist so that it's connected to the continuum of the human spirit.

Bill: Well, I don't know what I expected, but that's kind of breathtaking, that list of things. Of course, I want to start quibbling about terms. What do you mean by *culture*?

Hank: Art and humanity are indivisible—built into that is the idea that there's no art without culture. Most of what we know about ancient Egyptian or Aztec or Mayan societies is through their cave drawings, through their art.

Bill: So that's not a myth. In your way of thinking it is an axiomatic truth that art and humanity are inseparable. I will say, I'm not sure what humanity is. And I'm not even sure that there is a 'we.'

Hank: Yeah, I don't believe there's a 'we.' I also relate to the individual framework. There is a book called *Finite and Infinite Games* written by a theologian named James P. Carse that was really life-altering for me. He says, in this book, there are two types of games. There are finite games that come to an end when there is a winner and a loser. But the goal of an infinite game is to remain in a state of play. And therefore, the rules always have to change. When I look at our society, I think about some of the people who are most reviled. They often are infinite game players, because they wind up breaking the rules so that they can

keep playing. Those of us who are so accustomed to the rules are like, *What's happening?* I think about our last president being one of those people who has broken all the rules so he can stay in the state of play, and the people who have played by the rules feeling cheated.

Bill: I've been thinking lately about the phenomenon of Elon Musk. Elon Musk will play a huge role in the future. Right now, he is for some of us, very disturbing. I want to use words like reviled as well... Is this a new myth, or an old myth: Art is free of morality.

Hank: Can you say more on that?

Bill: It doesn't matter if you are a sumbitch, as long as you make something that people want. Or even to go further than that, as long as you make something that moves the needle of humanity forward. The chips in the brain, Elon Musk's technology, promise some amazing things—I'm hearing today about paraplegics who are now able to use their computers because of this technology. To understand what a game changer that is, I have to get my morality out of the way. And therefore I'm going to ask, because I have made art the center of my life, am I fierce enough to play at that level? Or am I always trying to be good?

Hank: This reminds me of this South African artist, Nicholas Hlobo. He said we have to live in the 'tomorrow' because that way you won't be surprised when you get there. He said that the problem with South Africa post-apartheid was that people weren't living in the freedom they wanted. So when it came, they didn't know what to do with it. Someone asked him, 'Do you feel a responsibility as a Black artist to represent?' And he was like, 'It's up to me whether I want to be a comrade or sellout. I may not want to sing your song.' It is up to me whether or not I want to be a comrade or a sellout.

Bill: When he throws in 'sellout' he loses me. Is it possible to be a politician in the world of art, being able to get paid, and still be a valid artist? I think so. It's difficult work, but it's possible. If I'm getting him right—he sounds like a remarkable man—it sounds like he believes that there is a kind of right and wrong about it. My point was, when you talk about art, artists should be free of any concerns about being right.

Hank: I connect that with what he's saying. I think his interpretation of a sellout was from the person asking, 'Don't you feel this responsibility?' And if you don't, you're a sellout. There are people who are just like, 'I want to get paid and that's all I care about.' The morality of whatever else doesn't matter. As we saw with artists like Bert Williams and

Stepin Fetchit, and even to a different degree Hattie McDaniel—these people are Black artists who performed roles that many people saw as degrading, but also opened the door for so many other people. I think it's up to the art-maker. That's where I come back to.

Bill: Well this is a question I have for the editors giving us this expression ['New Mythologies']. Whose new myths are we talking about? Artists individually, or accepted myths in culture?

Maya Kotomori: That is the question, isn't it? Both are myths, however some are more widely accepted, more hegemonic, than others that only affect the individual. So with this conversation about who is able to break the rules, I'm thinking about these states of play you mention, Hank. And a shifting mythology of what responsibility is. Responsibility, I think, is this overarching sense of mythology here. So how has the idea of what is responsible in let's say, the mid-'90s—I'm thinking of your work *Still/Here*, Bill, and the response from white people specifically.

Bill: Most of the writers [responding] were white people. But you know, I never even heard Black people weigh in on it. *Still/Here* was decried as a work of 'victim art.' It was decried as a work wherein I was playing on the emotions of a willing public. As the person from *The New Yorker* whose name shall not be mentioned said, 'Don't go see this work, because he wants you to feel bad. And that's what these people do. They make this kind of work to make you feel bad. Don't go.' I'm glad you bring that up, because I'm trying to get us to make categorical statements as new myths.

So 'should.' What should artists do, or what should artists be? One thing we saw during the George Floyd era: Everybody was concerned about appropriation. You should not use the forms of people who are from another fill-in-the-blank—race, gender—than yours. I think that is wrong. I think artists should be free to do whatever they want to do. What do you feel, Hank?

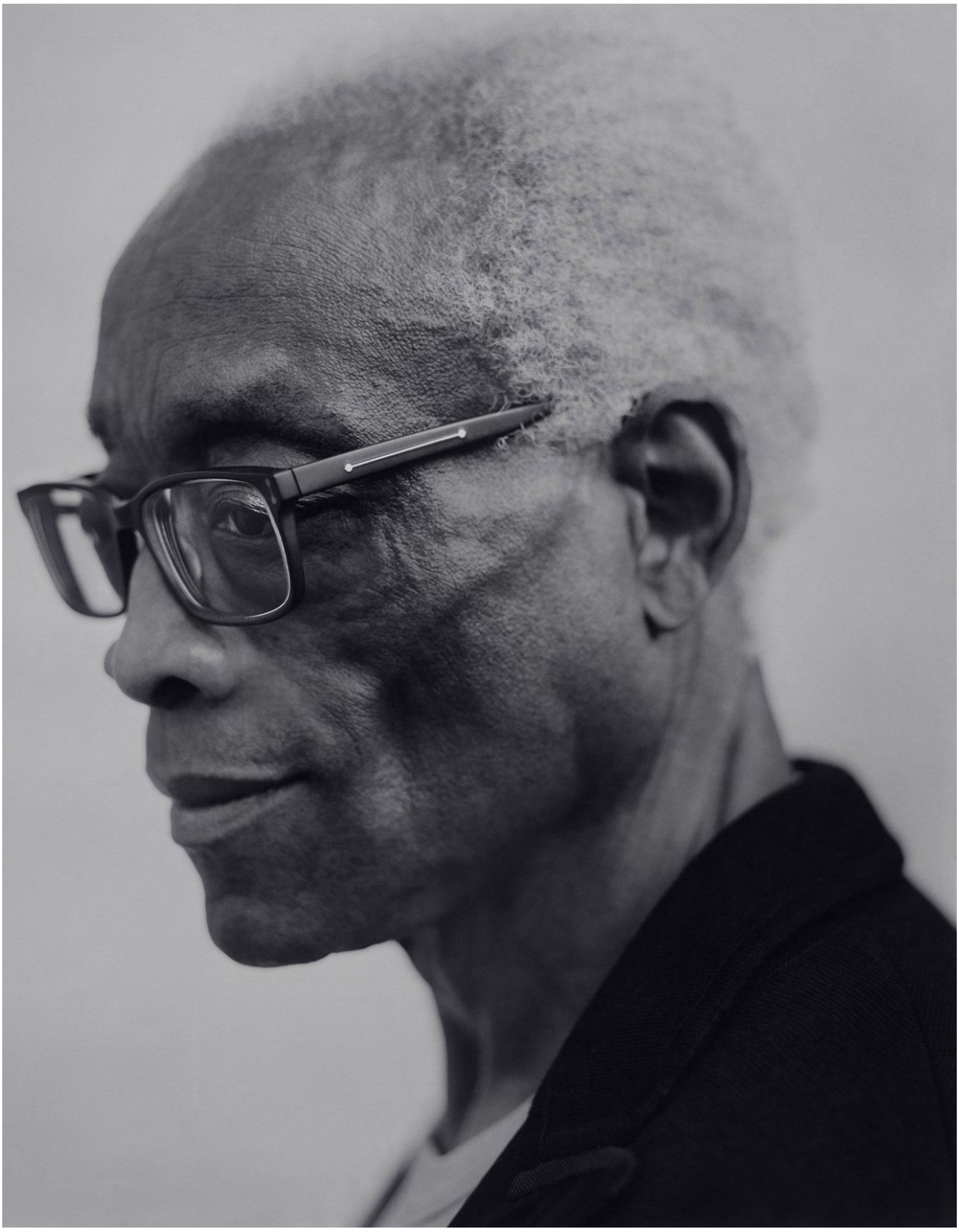
Hank: I believe in the idea that 'should' matters on a cosmic level as a myth.

Bill: How do you mean 'should' matters on a cosmic level?

Hank: I've been thinking a lot about space and time, and why we are here. And if we detach ourselves from the logical realm, does 'should' matter? When you're on stage, it doesn't appear that you're 'should'-ing. It appears that you're being. When I say cosmic, it's

just the only word I can use to define the wavelength that your audience is tapped into. We're not moving, but we feel moved. With other performers, there is a 'should.' When Beyoncé is performing, if she does something that she shouldn't do, it is clear, because everything is meant to be so deliberate.

"When I go into a performance—and lord knows I have a huge ego—saying, 'I'm gonna do something important,' the gods will slap your ass, you know."



Bill T. Jones wears shirt, jacket, and glasses talent's own.

Bill: Let's talk about the lady. I have great respect for her. There was a concert some years back where her husband showed up, and she, the feminist icon, sat down in a chair and let him come forward. At least the way I read it, I thought that she was signaling something

about a corrective to the dilemma of Black men and Black women. Even though they're both powerful, at that moment, she gave way to him and sat down. In my mind, I'm like, *Oh, she shouldn't have done that*. And I have no right to say that. If that's what you mean about when she does something she shouldn't do...

Hank: In that way, I think she set a standard of expectation that creates a lot of 'shoulds.' She, of course, finds freedom within it. She'll do a country album because she 'shouldn't.' If you think about Jay-Z, and even Beyoncé, these are young people who were not given much in life other than the love of their communities. And they created mythologies about who they were in pop, in hip hop. They gave themselves new names, they made sound and dance and fashion together. And the hype of 'who I am,' and the musical boasting that we know connects to Caribbean and African traditions, becomes a global mythology. So now, this person who was from the Marcy Projects named Shawn is Jay-Z.

Bill: Now she's more—here's an evil word—*middle class*, isn't she? I want to go back to something at the base of your very wonderful portrait of them. There's something about [the idea that] to have the goods to communicate, particularly in a soulful way, you've got to have paid your dues.

I remember an interview that Miles [Davis] did with somebody who implied that you can only play the blues if you have suffered. And Miles said, 'Hold up, man, my dad was a dentist. I went to Juilliard. I still play the blues.' In other words, he was trying to puncture a myth that for Black people to be authentic, they've got to have tasted firsthand the trauma of race in America. That's a myth, I think: 'You got to pay your dues and you got to suffer to really represent suffering.'

Hank: I agree. What do you think about this line from *1984* by George Orwell, where he said, 'Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past'?

Bill: I think that is so good. We should send that to Ron DeSantis.

Hank: This is also a part of the thing with cosmic mythology. Do we as artists sometimes not know that we are predicting the future? Even when you think about Dick Tracy and the [phone] watch, until someone imagines it and makes it seem possible, no one can actually make it happen.

Bill: This is interesting, that we're sort of shuffling between the public and the personal, which I guess, two artists 'should' do. [Laughs] My parents were potato pickers, I'm a migrant child. Some people would say, 'And you did what when you went to the university? You studied modern dance? Your people have been working to get out of the potato fields. You got to get a job where you can put down some serious dollars!' And the thing was, because of education I thought, *Well, what I do transcends those concerns*. I am making something that is spiritual [and] has a validity that is not about paying the light bill.

I'm the classic story of the trauma narratives and Black society, but I don't really accept that. When I go into a performance—and lord knows I have a huge ego—saying, 'I'm gonna do something important,' the gods will slap your ass, you know. You don't say, 'I'm gonna do something important.' You do it. And you trust that the powers that be—and as we know, you're a very successful artist right now, and it has to do with what the critics write, what the collectors do, all sorts of things—to determine if you're going to be the one that doesn't get forgotten, because artists come a dime a dozen. And some of them are pretty fierce. So how can I assume that what I do, no matter how wild it is, is important?

Hank: This is why I believe that the 'should' doesn't matter.

Bill: Yeah. These words like 'should,' they get us in trouble, don't they? But mythologies are based on 'should' and 'must.' 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice'—but we must bend it. Right?

Hank: Alice Walker said something like, 'Unless we change ourselves, we cannot be changed.'

Bill: Well, you believe that, huh?

Hank: Yes.

Tags

Art Bill T. Jones Dance
Hank Willis Thomas Issue No. 24

Alabama News Center

Published On: 04.04.24 | By: Alabama News Center Staff

Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery, Alabama, drawing international acclaim

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"Strike" by Hank Williams Thomas is among the major artworks in the new Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery. (Equal Justice Initiative)

The newly opened Freedom Monument Sculpture Park, which plumbs the legacy of slavery and the lives of enslaved people through contemporary art, first-person narratives and historical artifacts, is already drawing international media attention and scores of visitors to Montgomery.

The third “Legacy Site” constructed in the city by the nonprofit Equal Justice Initiative garnered pre-opening stories from The Guardian of London, CBS News Sunday Morning and NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, among others.

The New York Times said the sculpture park, which opened March 27, is designed to propel visitors on “an unflinching and moving journey” exploring slavery and its legacy, and the lives of enslaved people.

“There were 10 million people who were enslaved in this country, and much of what I hope we can do is honor those who struggled and suffered, and those who endured and persevered,” EJI Director Bryan Stevenson said on the organization’s website.

The 17-acre site overlooking the Alabama River includes dozens of sculptures from renowned artists, including Wangechi Mutu, Theaster Gates, Rashid Johnson and Kehinde Wiley. Historic artifacts and other exhibits include a whipping post and plantation structures where slaves once resided.

“I believe this will become a special place for millions of people who want to reckon with the history of slavery and honor the lives of people who endured tremendous hardship but still found ways to love in the midst of sorrow,” Stevenson said. “Many of us are the heirs to that extraordinary perseverance and hope. There is a lot to learn at this site and we want everyone to experience it.”



Slave dwellings, at the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park in Montgomery. (Equal Justice Initiative)

Sections of the park are dedicated to the transatlantic trade of African people and the domestic trade of enslaved people in the U.S., as well as the laws of slavery in America, the labor of enslaved people and resistance to slavery.

The final stop through the park is the National Monument to Freedom, which stands 43 feet tall and 155 feet long. Using information from the 1870 Census, the first in which formerly enslaved Black people could officially record a surname, the monument lists over 122,000 surnames that nearly 5 million Black people adopted and that tens of millions of people now carry.

Visitors can learn more about the counties and states associated with the names of formerly enslaved people and use kiosks at the visitor center to conduct genealogical research and trace family histories.



“There’s a narrative of triumph that we need to acknowledge and the monument is a gesture toward that, as a physical space but also as a way of naming names, making personal, making human this history,” Stevenson told the Guardian. “For people who are descendants to come and see that name, and have a tangible connection made to that legacy, is important and necessary.”

W Magazine wrote: “Visitors traverse a sculpture park unlike any other.” The sculptures are essential, Stevenson told NBC News correspondent Lester Holt.

“There’s not much in the visual record of that era that helps you get a sense of the humanity of these people. But artists have done an amazing job.”



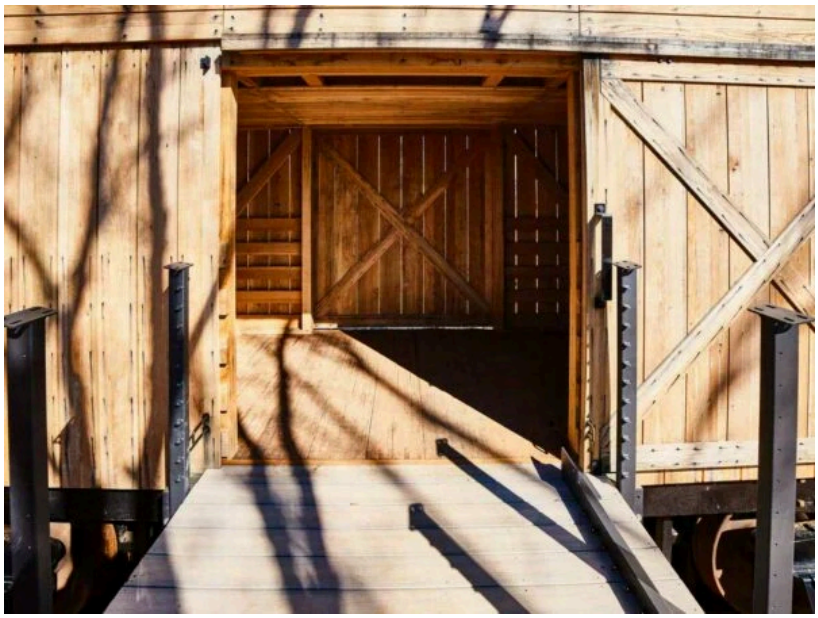
Bryan Stevenson, left, being interview by Lester Holt of NBC Nightly News. (Equal Justice Initiative)

In the park are newly commissioned works by Charles Gaines, Alison Saar and Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, alongside major sculptures from Wiley, Mutu, Gates, Simone Leigh, Rose B. Simpson and Hank Willis Thomas.

“Artists have the ability to depict the humanity and the dignity of people, even in the midst of something brutal and violent,” Stevenson told CBS. “It’s a tough subject. It’s a challenging subject. And we wanted to use art to help people manage the weight of this history and engage in a more complete way with the lives of enslaved people.”

The site of the park – along the Alabama River – is also significant. For centuries the river was essential to the life of indigenous peoples before Europeans arrived, which is acknowledged during the park experience. Also noted is how the river flows through Alabama’s Black Belt, where some of the largest populations of enslaved people in the country were forced to labor on cotton plantations.

The sound of trains can also be heard from the nearby rail lines. Rail became the most common way to move and sell enslaved people in the 1850s, with hundreds of slaves arriving in Montgomery each day during the height of the trade, according to the EJI’s account. By 1860, nearly 400,000 Black people were enslaved on or near the Alabama River, the EJI website states.



A railcar, like the kind that transported thousands of enslaved people, at the sculpture park. (Equal Justice Initiative)

The two original Legacy sites – the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice – draw about 400,000 visitors to Montgomery annually. With the new sculpture park now open, even more are expected to visit.

Learn more about all three sites and the work of the Equal Justice Initiative at eji.org.

Information from the Equal Justice Initiative website was used in this report.

Forbes

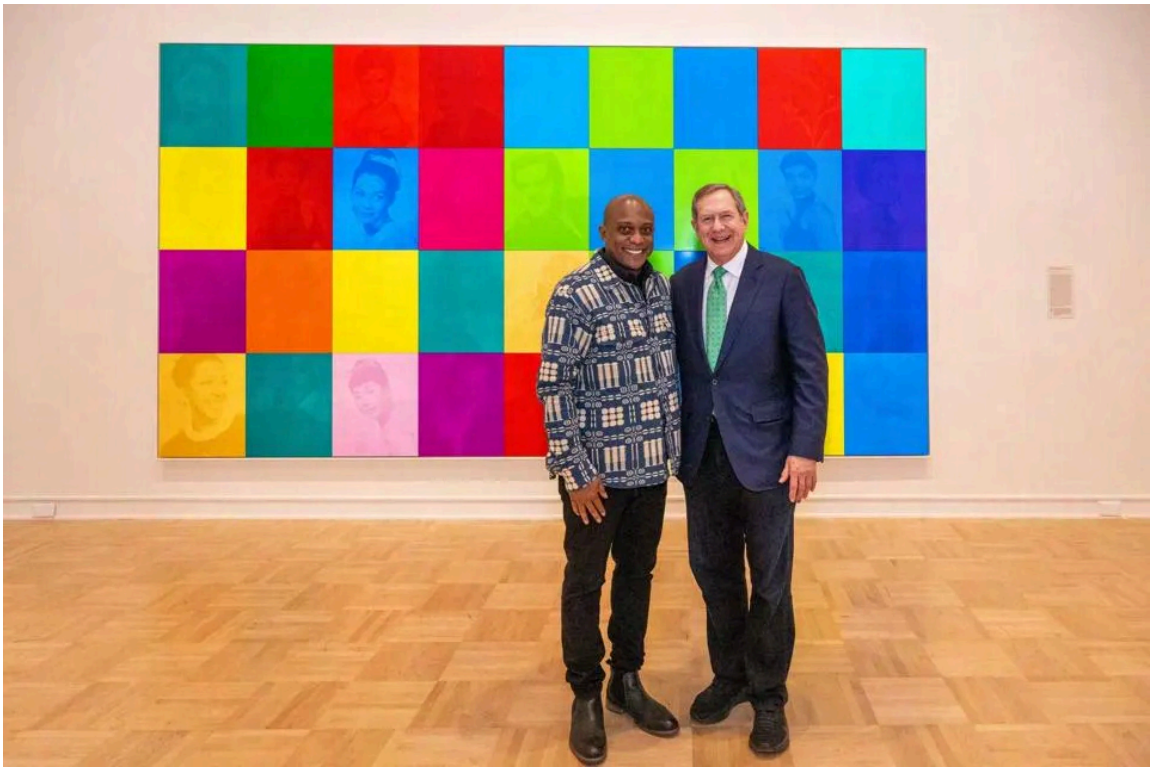
Artist Hank Willis Thomas' Friendship With Collector Jordan Schnitzer On View In Exhibition

Chadd Scott Contributor
I cover the intersection of art and travel.

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Mar 22, 2024, 03:42pm EDT



Hank Willis Thomas (left) with Jordan Schnitzer at the opening of "Hank Willis Thomas: LOVERULES" at ... [+] IMAGE COURTESY OF THE JORDAN SCHNITZER FAMILY FOUNDATION

Hank Willis Thomas never expected to meet Jordan Schnitzer. It wasn't access that he thought would prevent the meeting. As one of the most prominent contemporary artists of the past 25 years–downright famous–there's no one in the art world, particularly a collector like Schnitzer, who wouldn't pick up the phone if Thomas were on the other end.

"I didn't know that Jordan was a living person at first," Thomas (1976; Plainfield, NJ) told Forbes.com. "There was a show at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco (in 2014) of these incredible prints by Betty Saar, Alison Saar–this incredible collection of African American masters–Kara Walker, Julie Mehretu. When I saw (the artworks) were all from the collection of Jordan Schnitzer, (I thought) clearly this person is long gone. To

have had … such a broad collection, it didn't seem like it would actually be one person. I thought maybe Jordan Schnitzer was a company."

Jordan Schnitzer is a person and very much alive.

It would take years, however, for Thomas to realize that.

"I kept seeing the name," he remembers.

The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at the University of Oregon. The Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Washington State University.

Artworks from his collection have been used to stage nearly 200 exhibits in more than 100 cities across the nation–and counting–since 2017, with an incalculable number of loans from his 20,000-plus object holdings supporting other presentations.

"Finally, when I had the show at the Portland Art Museum (2019-2020) and got wind that Jordan was coming to New York, that's when I learned there was a living breathing person," Thomas admits. "He came by the studio and showed interest in the work, especially *LOVE RULES*, which was really exciting for me. I thought that was that, maybe he's interested in it; little did I know that relatively quickly he would become one of my dearest friends, but also probably my biggest collector."

Thomas' art made an impression on Schnitzer (b. 1951), a Portland native and globally recognized super-collector, and vice versa.

"I don't remember all the labels of every museum show that I've gone to, but the shows that included Jordan's collection left an impression on me that even 10 years later I'm able to call back to the memory of being so curious about the collection that I'm looking at the wall labels," Thomas said.

Their mutual interest has evolved into a full-blown "bromance"–Schnitzer's word–despite their different backgrounds, generations, races, and geography.

"In life you meet some people that you have more chemistry with than others," Schnitzer told Forbes.com. "Those magical things when you meet someone and you just feel good inside, and then you take 10 steps to get to know them and that's how friendships are built. I can't imagine any topic I couldn't bring up to him–or I would hope he could bring up to me–personal issues, kids, life, business, presidential race, anything."

Never Meet Your Heroes?



Hank Willis Thomas (American (b. 1976)), All Lies Matter,' edition 201/400, 2019, screenprint 24 1/8 ... [+] AARON WESSLING PHOTOGRAPHY

Schnitzer was initially hesitant about meeting the artists he admired.

“When I started collecting the work of the major post-World War II artists, I was always worried that if I met (Jasper) Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, whoever, and they were maybe temperamental, I thought I’d always be annoyed to love their work so much (while) they were a difficult personality,” Schnitzer said. “Now, over time, I have (met artists), and frankly, the older generation of artists, Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, among others, were incredible to be with–down to earth, wonderful experiences for me.

Schnitzer has always focused his collecting on prints, multiples and works on paper, and doing so in extraordinary depth and volume. Nearly 1,500 items from Andy Warhol alone. What began as a passion for post war artists evolved into emerging– and now blue chip– contemporary artists including Leonardo Drew, Jeffrey Gibson, Mickalene Thomas, Marie Watt, David Hockney, and Hank Willis Thomas, just to name a few.

Schnitzer has over 150 Hank Willis Thomas artworks in his collection.

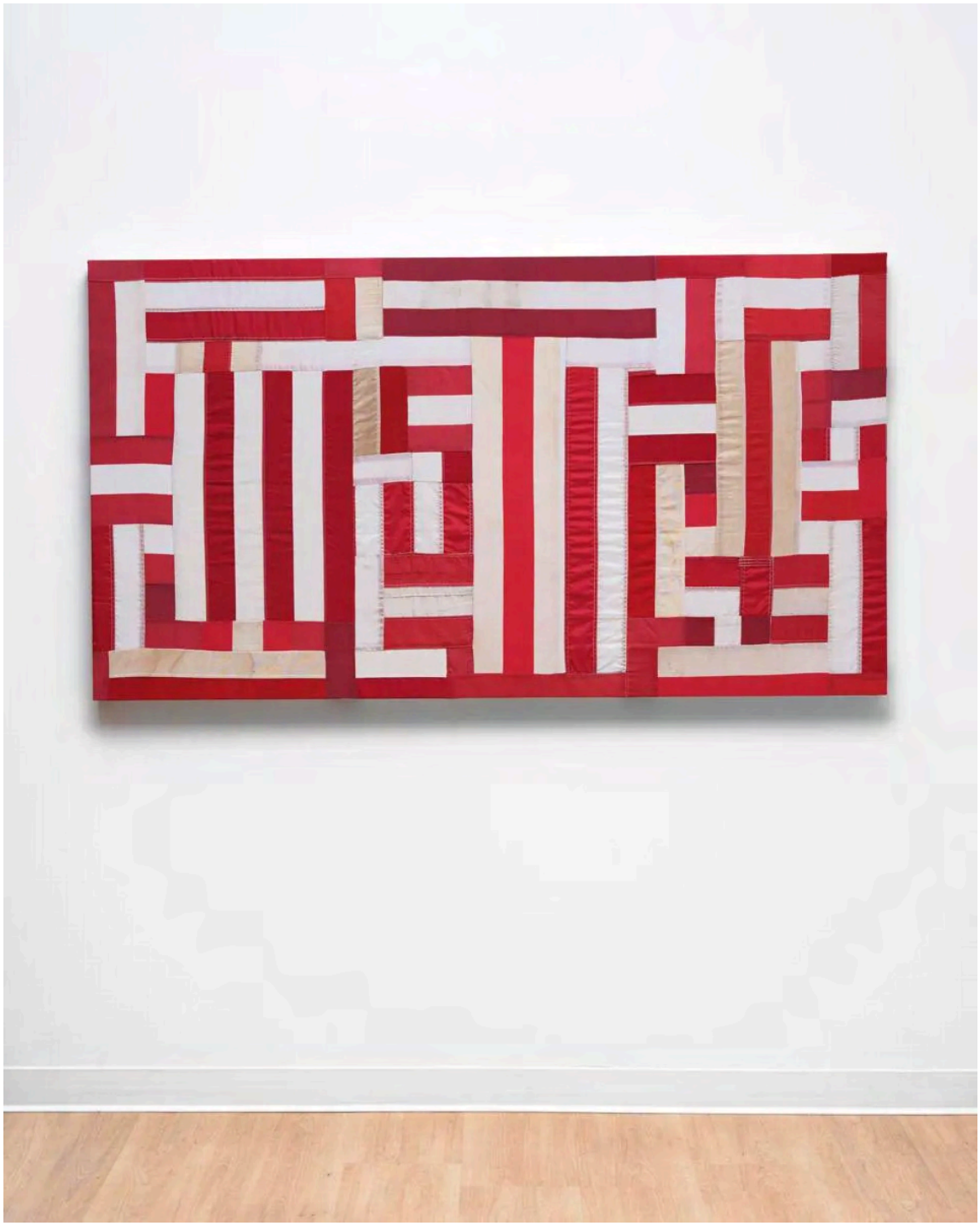
“Hank Willis Thomas, in his case–I can say this in front of him–I don't know what is more meaningful to me, the personal relationship, or the magical journey that I go on looking at each of his works, and feeling in every part of me the creative genius in him,” Schnitzer said.

Thomas and Schnitzer’s friendship evidences itself in “Hank Willis Thomas: LOVERULES,” at Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle through August 4, 2024. The exhibition represents one of the largest solo presentations of Thomas’ work to date, drawn entirely from the collections of Jordan Schnitzer and his Family Foundation.

Encompassing photography, print, mixed-media, sculpture, and neon–including *LOVE RULES*–”LOVERULES” covers over 20 years of work and touches on the artist’s most significant practices and themes: the impact of corporate branding, the construction of gender and race, and the struggle for liberty and equality.

“When I see his work, the first thought is, ‘wow!, how did he come up with those ideas,’” Schnitzer said. “You don't need to know anything about an artist to appreciate their work, but when you get to know more about what they were influenced by and how they came about doing what they're doing, it adds a greater dimension to the appreciation.”

True Friends



Hank Willis Thomas (American (b. 1976)), Justice (red), 2021; mixed media, including U.S. flags. 39 ... [+] AARON WESSLING PHOTOGRAPHY

A cynic might understandably think Thomas and Schnitzer's relationship is based on reciprocal manipulation. Schnitzer attempting to gain access to the cultural elite via Thomas, and Thomas using Schnitzer's wealth for a steady source of income. Listening to the men talk to each other, it's clear their friendship is genuine.

"What (Hank) doesn't know is when I walked in (to the exhibition) before he got there, I burst into tears. What I was feeling was (being) in the midst of not only someone who's a friend, but artistically, he is just that good," Schnitzer said, choking up again. "What's inspiring to me about art is when you're dealing with the best of the best, that level of excellence is inspiring to me. It makes me feel better about my gifts and what I can do in

areas that I am gifted. This is a man who has certain aesthetic gifts and has continued to push himself, one theme after another, different mediums, different ideas, different technology."

Occasionally, even artists of Thomas' esteemed stature can use an affirmation like Schnitzer's.

"Of course we talked about this (show) for years, we knew it was coming, we had Zoom calls, I knew all the work, but seeing it there gave me new life. It gave me new life to see my work–in a sense my spirit, my essence–shared through Jordan's passion and Shamim M. Momin's curation," Thomas said. "I thought, wow, I really like myself! I do some important things. It gave me gratitude for the gifts I was given, but also for the people who were willing to reflect back to me my own genius, which I sometimes discount because I don't feel extraordinary. I feel pretty regular and sometimes less than that."

Schnitzer was especially grateful to have shared the Henry Gallery opening with Thomas' family.

"We'd flown out together the previous week to Los Angeles with his wife and kids and he came to some events at the Getty (Museum) I was hosting," Schnitzer recalls. "Then he took his kids to Disneyland and he flew to Seattle, and I flew up later that week. I did not know that his parents were coming. For me, having his parents there–not that they haven't seen other exhibitions of his–I can only imagine how proud they are. Being there, with his parents there and his wife there and his little girls, sharing the exhibition really touched me."

'A Century of White Women'



Hank Willis Thomas (American (b. 1976)), 'Come out of the Bone Age, darling...,' 1955/2015, from ... [+] AARON WESSLING PHOTOGRAPHY

Originally trained in photography, Thomas' work resides at the intersection of art, politics and social justice. He regularly employs both archival and contemporary imagery from popular culture to take on urgent questions. What is the role of art in civic life? How do advertising and visual culture create narratives that shape our notion of value in society? The commodification of identity. The ways in which dominant cultural tropes shape notions of race and race relations, along with gender and socio-economic presentation.

His photographic series *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915 – 2015,* brings all of these themes together. One room at the Henry Gallery displays 48 of the 110 images Thomas created for the project–one for each year.

"It's about how we relate to each other, it's also about how we learn who we are in the modern era through marketing and advertising as much from our families or cultural backgrounds," Thomas said of the series which he considers his most ambitious project. "I am looking at the production of an identity group. One hundred years ago, women in the United States were just getting the right to vote. Gender as we know it, even in the 10 years since the project was completed, has changed a lot. We are having much different

conversations about what it means to be a woman now than we were 10 years ago, it's also beginning to be reflected in advertising and popular culture. Advertising and popular culture are fascinating windows into an evolution of society."

Thomas scoured thousands of magazines to construct the images of white women being advertised to, and themselves advertised, that he depicts in the series. Removing all text from the pictures challenges modern audiences to reconstruct what was attempting to be sold, and cringe at how.

Admission to Henry Gallery is free with a suggested donation. Schnitzer and the museum hope to travel the presentation to other venues, although none have yet been announced. *Follow me on Twitter or LinkedIn. Check out my website.*



Chadd Scott

The Seattle Times

At Seattle's Henry Art Gallery, a powerful exhibit by Hank Willis Thomas

March 4, 2024 at 10:00 am | *Updated March 4, 2024 at 11:00 am*



1 of 3 | Artist Hank Willis Thomas outside Seattle's Henry Art Gallery, where his exhibition "LOVERULES" runs through Aug. 4. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times)

By Gayle Clemans

Special to The Seattle Times

The neon sign outside of the Henry Art Gallery reveals different words as they illuminate in a cycle: LOVE. RULES. LOVE. OVER. RULES. This work of art from 2020 is by Hank Willis Thomas, the much-lauded, Brooklyn, N.Y.-based conceptual artist, and is also the title of a new, commanding exhibition at the Henry, featuring more than 90 works spanning 20 years from the collections of Jordan D. Schnitzer and his family foundation.

It's a powerful gathering of work from a brilliant artist and a not-to-be-missed opportunity to experience a range of materials and forms that incisively question how advertisements, consumerism and popular culture convey and define values, perpetuate bias and inequity, and shape identities, particularly within race and gender.

While conceptual art has been around for a long time, Thomas' deft mix of astute criticality with inviting accessibility — applied to some of the most important topics of our time — has led to national and international acclaim, numerous exhibitions, public art works (including "The Embrace," his sculpture in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King unveiled in Boston in 2022), and prestigious awards (including the Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship, the Aimia | AGO Photography Prize and the Guggenheim Fellowship).

Trained as a photographer, Thomas now uses found imagery (particularly old ads), textiles, sculpture, video and photographic works, and collaborative practices — whatever it takes to get us to look closely and think deeply.

"The content of any work of art can shape the form and the other way around," Thomas said in an interview before the exhibition's opening. "The medium is the message."



Hank Willis Thomas speaks during a press preview of his exhibition “LOVERULES” at Henry Art Gallery. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times)

That neon sign outside the Henry uses the flashy allure of a promotional form to convey an uncommodified and immediately accessible message while allowing the viewer to create other possible meanings depending on who you are and when and where you view it. It begs questions: Are we meant to choose love over rules? If so, what are the rules? Or does the sign proclaim that love overrules and, if so, over what?

Knowing the tragic inspiration behind the work adds personal and sociopolitical resonance. The words come from the last recorded lyrics by Thomas’ cousin, Songha Willis Thomas, shortly before he was killed in Philadelphia in 2000 in an incident involving the theft of a friend’s gold necklace. In a statement about this death and the art that stemmed from it, the artist wrote, “I want to question what makes these commodities so precious that they are worth defining, and more importantly, taking another person’s life.”

The questioning of value — and how it is shaped — is at the root of Thomas’ work.



Artist Hank Willis Thomas stands next to his work “The Johnson Family,” 1981/2006 from the series “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America.” In many of his works, Thomas digitally manipulates existing images to expose... (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times) **More**

In many works, Thomas digitally manipulates existing images to expose value systems. “Kama Mama, Kama Binti (Like Mother, Like Daughter)” is from one of Thomas’ most well-known series, “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America,” which involved sifting through hundreds of print advertisements geared toward Black audiences that ran from 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, to 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president. By removing the products from these ads, Thomas takes away the pernicious pull of consumerism to

reveal biased assumptions from corporate America, but also tender moments such as this one, which Thomas sees as an example of "generational love." The unbranded message of love overrules the original consumerist intention.

With "An All Colored Cast," Thomas used the relatively new media of UV printing on reflective vinyl to "expose the invisible histories of Hollywood," asking us to consider "what is seen and who is not seen." This large-scale work appears, at first, to be a minimalist grid of vividly colored panels. Looking closer, there are faint portraits in each one, and when viewed from certain angles or with a flashlight or flash, the faces snap into sharp definition.

Speaking literally and metaphorically, Thomas said, "Where you're standing shapes your perspective of history, reality and what's important."

Each panel reproduces an archival headshot of an actor of color, including Hattie McDaniel, Sammy Davis Jr. and Anna May Wong. Thomas conceived of this work while spending time in Los Angeles and thinking about the stereotyping and denigrating roles that these actors sometimes accepted in order to pave the way for others.

Thomas' largest body of work, with 100 images, is titled "Unbranded: A Century of White Women" and is owned entirely by the Schnitzer collection. In the current exhibition, the series is amply represented in a showstopper of an installation, with the large, manipulated archival ads hung floor-to-ceiling, frame-to-frame, in a swirling barrage of white women smiling, posing and being objectified for some now-removed product. Thomas says it's his favorite series to talk about because it demonstrates "how women were marketed and marketed to" and how "millions of minds were shaped by the values they represent."

Given that some of the ads, which go back to 1915, seem wildly inappropriate now, with their implications of domestic abuse, racial superiority and the exoticization of nonwhite cultures, the series also asks us to consider the advertisements of our time. As Thomas said, "What do we have now that appears 'normal'? These are powerful signifiers of culture."

Thomas has long credited his contextual and historical inclinations to the influence of his mother, Deborah Willis, an artist, writer and former curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem, N.Y., where, as a child, Thomas would join her after school. He continues to think about the importance of who is and isn't included in the historical record and in culture at large.

The exhibition at the Henry can be viewed as a thoughtful and representative archival sampling of a significant artist's work and as an example of how a private collector has chosen to obtain many works by a single artist, including buying an entire series, such as "Unbranded," so that it can remain intact.

The show, beautifully organized by the Henry's senior curator Shamim Momin, mixes up time periods to amplify themes rather than a straightforward timeline, offering a different kind of historical thinking. Art lovers who visited Thomas' retrospective at the Portland Art Museum five years ago can experience a divergent framework in "LOVERULES," along with multiple works — and recently created pieces — that weren't included in the 2019 show.

"Seeing the work all together is exciting," Thomas said. "It's an opportunity to look back and see how it can all be connected. It's also like a message to the future."

"Hank Willis Thomas: LOVERULES"

Through Aug. 4; Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 15th Avenue Northeast and Northeast 41st Street, Seattle; accessibility: henryart.org/visit/accessibility; $0-$20 suggested donation; 206-543-2280, henryart.org

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Gayle Clemans *is an art historian, writer and professor at Cornish College of the Arts. Connect with her on Instagram @gayleclemans.*

VANITY FAIR



Top row: Jerome Lagarrigue, Amy Sherald, Nick Cave, Jordan Casteel, Meleko Mokgosi, Nina Chanel Abney, Hassan Hajjaj, Titus Kaphar. Middle row: Alicia Keys, Kennedy Yanko, Odili Donald Odita, Deborah Roberts, Jarvis Boyland, Zohra Opoku, Kehinde Wiley, Arthur Jafa, Kasseem "Swizz Beatz" Dean. Bottom row: Tschabalala Self, Mickalene Thomas, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Qualeasha Wood, Derrick Adams, Hank Willis Thomas. Keys's jacket by **Balmain.** Dean's clothing by **Balmain;** watch by **De Bethune.** PHOTOGRAPH BY RENELL MEDRANO; SITTINGS EDITOR, NICOLE CHAPOTEAU.

FROM THE MAGAZINE

The Secrets of Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz's Museum-Ready Art Collection

With their envy-inducing holdings, the Dean Collection, the music-industry power couple have helped lead the way for a generation of collectors of Black art. The rest of the world is finally catching up.

BY NATE FREEMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RENELL MEDRANO

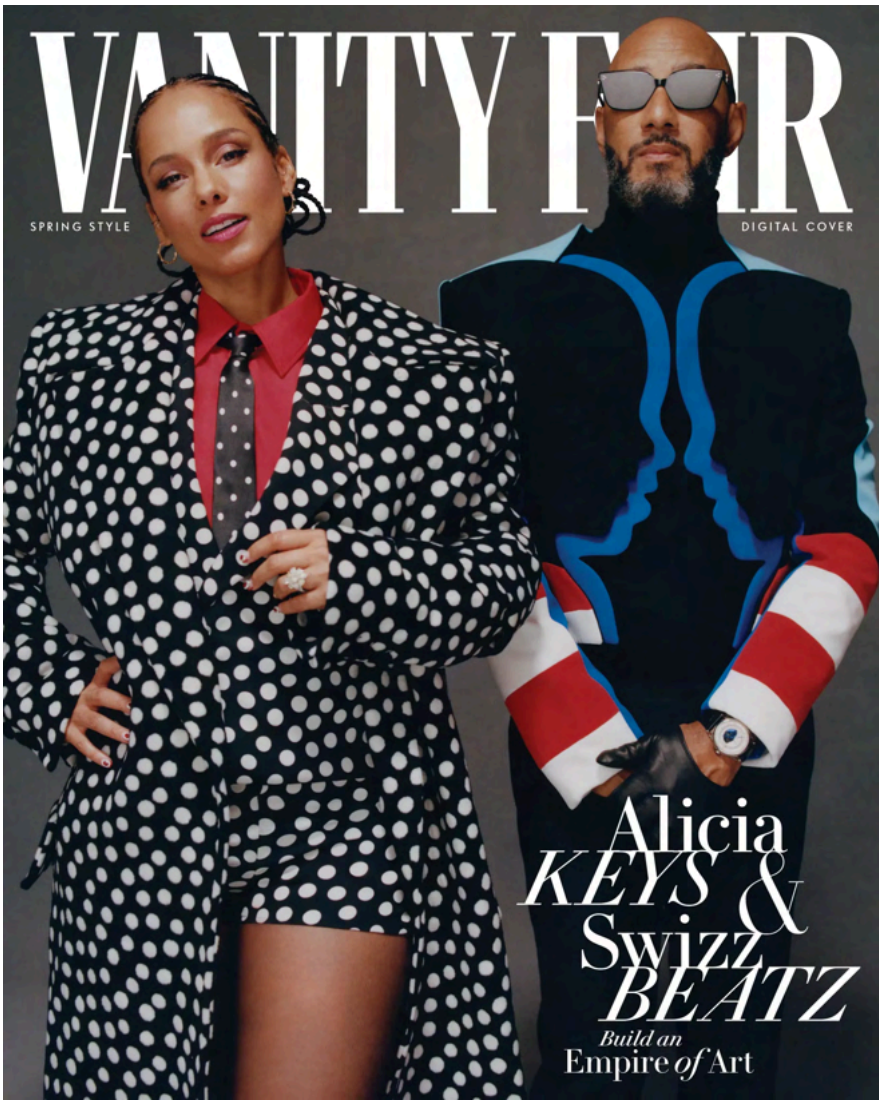
MARCH 19, 2024

SAVE

In early 2015, the musician Kasseem Dean, known as Swizz Beatz, went with artist Kehinde Wiley to see his retrospective, "A New Republic," at the Brooklyn Museum. Dean had been churning out hits as a hip-hop producer for more than two decades, propelling singles by the likes of Jay-Z, DMX, Busta Rhymes, and Beyoncé to global inescapability. But Dean, along with his Grammy-winning superstar wife, Alicia Keys, is also a contemporary-art patron who caught the bug well before his peers in the hip-hop game.

"A lot of people used to make fun of me collecting art—I won't say no names, but they're the *biggest* names," Dean told me recently.

"We were so hardcore in music, I was a Ruff Ryder, everybody was more in their street element, and so collecting *art*...." he trailed off.



Keys and Dean have been collecting art for decades and ramped up their buying in recent years. Keys's clothing by **Balmain.** Dean's clothing by **Balmain;** sunglasses by **Gentle Monster;** watch by **De Bethune.**

Walking through the Wiley show in 2015, Dean was already itching to move to the next echelon. The loaned works came from institutions all over the country but also a number of private collectors: a hedge fund executive, a manager at a different hedge fund, the manager of a tech billionaire's family office. Dean realized, reading the wall labels, that he saw "no last names of color."

Wiley and Dean walked in front of *Femme piquée par un serpent,* a 25-foot-long painting of a Black man in bed based on a sculpture in the Musee d'Orsay. "Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York," its label read, referring to Wiley's commercial gallery. Such wording is often a super-insider way to say, "This might just be for sale."

Wiley was hesitant at first. While Dean and Keys were globally famous musicians, they had not put in enough time dancing the art world tango of museum donations, gallery dinner schmoozing, gala hobnobbing, and eyebrow-raising purchases that moves burgeoning collectors up the waiting lists.

"I told him, 'Is this work better off going back into storage or being…where we can display your work for the audience that you're saying is lacking?' " Dean recalled.

He paused and looked at his wife.

"And Kehinde was like, 'Do you know what? I'm going to do it.' "



Wiley's gigantic 2008 portrait was added to the collection after Dean saw the work at the artist's 2015 Brooklyn Museum survey.
PHOTO BY GLENN STEIGELMAN/ THE DEAN COLLECTION COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

Nine years later, *Femme piquée par un serpent* is back at the Brooklyn Museum as part of "Giants: Art From the Dean Collection of Swizz Beatz and Alicia Keys," a show of nearly 100 artworks, about a third of the couple's total holdings, that's up until July. On a weekday in early February, as the Deans were preparing for its opening gala, I spoke with the couple about their collection's first major museum exhibition and the effort that brought it to being.

"We've done every single piece of the process, all of the layouts and the whole thing," Keys said. "But the thing that blows our mind the most is that, just like everybody else who's going to walk through these doors, we have never seen this collection hung, ever."

As visitors walk into the museum's center pavilion, there's Arthur Jafa's *Big Wheel I,* a 7,000-pound sculpture of a tire that rises 17 feet in the air. On one wall is Amy Sherald's *Deliverance,* a giant diptych that wowed at Hauser & Wirth during Frieze London 2022. There's an enormous three-part painting by Gagosian-repped multihyphenate Titus Kaphar that the couple acquired directly from the artist's studio and has never been publicly unveiled. The largest-ever work by Meleko Mokgosi, a 21-panel epic, takes up an entire room of the show. There's also a selection of photographs by Gordon Parks and pieces by a grab bag of some of the most exciting artists currently alive: Henry Taylor, Deana Lawson, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Mickalene Thomas, Jordan Casteel, Odili Donald Odita, Derrick Adams, and so on.

> “A lot of people used to make fun of me collecting art,” says Swizz. “I won’t say no names, but they’re the *biggest* names.”

And the first works that greet you as you enter are portraits of the collectors by Wiley. I mentioned to Keys that I’d never seen them before.

“We’ve never seen them either,” she said. “They’re still drying.”

“They’re still wet,” Dean added. “We’re not joking.”

The Deans have built strong relationships with the artists they collect, allowing them access to primo works that would otherwise be held for the world’s greatest collections. Nicola Vassell, who was the curatorial director of the collection for years and now has her own gallery in Chelsea, attributed their ability to build a world-class collection to “the trust and love that the artists have for them.”

“Say you have a group of three, four amazing collectors who could get a work,” Vassell said. “Sometimes what shifts the balance is the artist, who they hope can own the work, and the context in which the work will live.”



The Chicago-based artist Nick Cave is known for his “soundsuits,” so named for the rustling they would make when he wore them. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE/JWPICTURES.COM; FROM THE DEAN COLLECTION, COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

The Deans also were collecting Black artists, especially Black figurative artists, at a time when the art market has started to correct for decades of neglect. Dean was particularly struck by the contrast he saw between visits to the homes of old-guard collectors and his peers. It further fueled their collecting. (The couple put many of their largest-scale works on view at their homes—including a $20 million mansion in La Jolla, California, that is said to have inspired Tony Stark's house in *Iron Man 3*—and have never sold a work since the inception of the collection.)

"You have a Bearden, you have a Basquiat, you have this, you have that. You had Ernie Barnes, you had Gordon Parks," Dean told me. "Then I go to my friend's house, they didn't have none of those things."

In 2019, Dean and Keys made the *ARTnews* Top 200 Collectors list, the definitive ranking of global art buyers. With it came access to primary-market works usually reserved not for the top 200 collectors but the top 20. Sources indicated that the waiting list for one of the only four large-scale Sherald works at her first show with Hauser & Wirth was enormous, but the gigantic diptych went to the Dean collection.





Amy Sherald's monumental diptych *Deliverance* is one of the largest canvases in the Dean collection. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND HAUSER & WIRTH, PHOTO BY JOSEPH HYDE/ THE DEAN COLLECTION COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

Brooklyn Museum director Anne Pasternak has also had a front-row seat to the Deans' rise. Shortly after taking the job, she was at the Brooklyn Heights town house owned by board vice chair Stephanie Ingrassia, where she was introduced to Dean. After just a few minutes of talking, she and Ingrassia asked him to join the board.

"I will tell you that there were artists and others who were really skeptical, who would dismiss them from the get-go as just celebrities, like, 'What do they have to offer?' " Pasternak said. "They have absolutely proven themselves to be true and blue, and absolutely committed to the artists in a way that artists all see now—and they *all* want to be in this collection."

In the years since, the couple opened an artist residency in Arizona called Dreamland and an art-and-music festival called No Commission that pops up at art fairs like Art Basel Miami Beach. In 2019, they staged a selling group show at UTA Artist Space in LA called "Dreamweavers" that consisted partly of work consigned directly by artists, and "Gordon Parks: Selections From the Dean Collection" opened at the Ethelbert Cooper Gallery at Harvard. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Pasternak started thinking about putting together a show.



Deborah Roberts, *The Visionary*, 2018. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PHOTO BY GLENN STEIGELMAN/THE DEAN COLLECTION COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

"They call it the Dean collection—they imagine it to have its own wing in the museum at some point in the future," she told me. "My mind really started to think seriously about doing an exhibition, in part because he and Alicia have used their platforms as artists to celebrate and fight for the rights of other artists, with real passion."

When the show was announced, there were some grumblings about a major New York institution giving a private collection such cherished real estate. Pasternak dismissed the notion, citing the fact that "30 Americans," a show of work from the collection of Don and Mera Rubell, toured museums for years to great acclaim. In 2019, the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago staged an exhibition of work owned by Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida.

"Look at the Lauder collection at The Met, right?" she said.

Both Keys and Dean were born in New York and became young phenoms at nearly the same time. In Hell's Kitchen, Keys's mother would play the records of Billie Holiday and other jazz greats, which led Keys to a classical music education on the piano and, at 21, more Grammy statuettes than she could hold at once. Keys racked up several more platinum records in the years since—for the rest of time, you will not attend a Big Apple sporting event without her voice reminding you that New York is a concrete jungle where dreams are made of.

Dean grew up in the Bronx with a father who was close with DJ Kool Herc at the birth of hip-hop and two uncles who started the influential crew Ruff Ryders. After starting to DJ at age 12, Dean began messing around with beats at an Atlanta studio in 1998 and showed DMX the beat that would become "Ruff Ryders' Anthem," a harbinger of the kitchen-sink percussion-meets-earwormy sonic idiom he has since deployed.

The hits bought houses, and suddenly something needed to go on the walls. Dean grew up seeing street art in the South Bronx, where Keith Haring would put up tags. Keys, too, recalls having a poster of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* on the wall growing up and later discovering Ernie Barnes through the sleeve of a Marvin Gaye record.

"For those who don't know that, collecting art is a drug," Dean said. "It's a serious drug. And once you get hooked on to the drug, just like any drug, it's hard to get off."



The collection has large holdings of photographs by Jamel Shabazz, including this 2011 shot of break-dancers in midtown Manhattan. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, PHOTO BY GLENN STEIGELMAN/THE DEAN COLLECTION COURTESY OF SWIZZ BEATZ AND ALICIA KEYS.

By the time Dean and Keys married in 2010, they were completely devoted to collecting living artists in depth, visiting their studios, consulting them on the installation of the work, and hanging out as much as possible. Vassell, who has worked at Deitch Projects and Pace, pointed the couple toward emerging artists who would soon become young stars, including Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Ebony G. Patterson, and Tschabalala Self.

Those relationships were on full display at the Brooklyn Museum opening night, where the artists had gathered prior to the arrival of the board of trustees and other VIPs. Wiley's white-on-white Celine trainers zipped from one end of the room to the other as Dean came out to greet him with a bow and Keys emerged from behind a backdrop to yell "Hola!" at Nick Cave. Casteel came in with Ojih Odutola, and as I was chatting with Kaphar, he looked ahead and announced: "Oh, the *legend* just walked in." There was Mickalene Thomas. Jafa came in with Hank Willis Thomas, who was just with Kennedy Yanko and Sherald. Adams approached Nina Chanel Abney with a bit of a stutter step and embraced a number of the artists. Eventually, Jamel Shabazz showed up to snap pictures of everyone.

"This is like *my* Met Gala," said a Brooklyn Museum employee.

After a few minutes, Keys clapped and told the artists, "Everybody please join us downstairs, on the first floor, for a toast, at six on the dot—5:55, actually."

The crowd filtered downstairs. Most openings attract a few hundred museum members and guests; attendance of the invite-only bash would top 1,200, including the artist KAWS, Ford Foundation president Darren Walker, and Art Basel CEO Noah Horowitz.

Waiters passed around flutes of Hennessy Paradis for a toast, and Pasternak joined Dean and Keys on a riser to address the room. She suggested that, before the VIP crowds got to the museum, the artists in the show should join their collectors to see it—only Dean and Keys and the artists, no curators, no board members, no directors of the museum.

"Is that fair?" she asked.

It was deemed fair. Dean walked toward the door to the exhibition, with Keys strolling into the show with Ojih Odutola and Casteel, the three of them arm in arm.

Makeup and grooming, Fran Freeman (Wiley), William Scott (all others); set design, Lauren Nikrooz. Produced on location by Mei-Mei Butcher. For details, go to vf.com/credits.



Nate Freeman
CULTURE CORRESPONDENT

Nate Freeman is a culture correspondent at *Vanity Fair*, and his True Colors dispatch is a must-read investigation into the contemporary art world, and the way in which it infiltrates the luxury sphere, high finance, global politics, and pop culture. He's based in Manhattan, but the jet-setting nature of the… Read more

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NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



TRAVEL

These African American history museums amplify the voices too often left unheard

In these 'first-voice' museums, curators and leaders are part of the community the museum interprets.

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, features 800 steel slabs, inscribed with the names of more than 4,400 people lynched in the state from 1877 to 1950. It is one of dozens of United States cultural sites and museums sharing Black history fro... **Show more**

PHOTOGRAPH BY AUDRA MELTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

BY **SHEEKA SANAHORI**

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY 5, 2024

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the predominant opinion in the United States was that Black Americans had no history, says Joy Bivins, director of collections and research services at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York.

“Black history museums began to exist in the mid-20th century as a response to Black Americans not being in existing museums,” says Bivins.

Founded in 1925, the center was one of the first public spaces in the U.S. to delve into a history largely ignored or whitewashed by mainstream museums. It curated exhibits, protected artifacts, and shared first-hand perspectives from the Black community. It was a pioneer in what has become known as “first-voice” museums, says Malika Pryor, chief learning and engagement officer at the recently opened International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

She describes these museums as being born from community history rather than “stolen” artifacts—an initiative that sprouted with Indigenous communities. “We tell the stories of people who have either been completely left out of [mainstream] institutions or whose objects—as extensions of their lives—have been interpreted in a way that is not an [accurate] reflection,” she says.



Malika Pryor, chief engagement officer at the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, gives a tour at the new 150,000-square-foot museum devoted to Black history and culture.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRIS CARLSON/AP PHOTO

These sites, from Washington, D.C., to Alabama, offer travelers an unfiltered immersion into the often overlooked and underreported narratives of Black American history.

History retold

As more Black culture and history museums open across the country, each presents more nuanced stories unique to their communities. For example, Virginia Beach plans to open The Virginia African American Cultural Center in 2028, highlighting Black Americans' local contributions.



The *Raise Up* sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas, on the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to the victims of racial terrorism and their legacy.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUDRA MELTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

"That's the role of public history, to guide people through learning and understanding about what happened in the past, what's happening in the present," says Lauren Cross, executive museum strategist for the National Juneteenth Museum, scheduled to open on Juneteenth 2025, in Fort Worth, Texas.

(*In Charleston, Black history is being told through a new lens*.)

Where to visit

Travelers looking for first-voice museums that comprehensively examine the Black community's history and culture should start at Washington, D.C.'s National Museum of African American History and Culture. The newest Smithsonian Institution museum takes an unflinching look at the travails and triumphs of African Americans, illuminating more than 400 years of artifacts and historical information.

Other noteworthy museums include the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. Established in 1965, this museum holds the world's largest permanent collection of African American culture. Among the more than 35,000 artifacts, find displays on trailblazers in science and engineering and stained-glass windows by Samuel A. Hodge that depict stories of notable African Americans, from dancers to civil rights activists.





Left: Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture protects and displays rare Afrocentric artifacts, including a signed first edition of Phillis Wheatley's poems, unpublished manuscripts of Langston Hughes, and tens of thousands of pieces of art.
FROM THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Right: Writers Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou dance on the 89th birthday of the poet Langston Hughes on February 1, 1991. The photo is part of the new exhibition "The Ways of Langston Hughes," which opened at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture on February 1.
PHOTOGRAPH BY CHESTER HIGGINS, JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX

Atlanta's National Center for Civil and Human Rights uses three levels of interactive galleries to draw parallels between the U.S. civil rights movement and global human rights struggles. The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama, tells the history of racism in America—from the slave trade to the era of Jim Crow and racial terror lynchings to the current mass incarceration crisis. Virginia's Hampton University Museum, which opened as the first repository of Black culture in the U.S. in 1868, holds one of the world's oldest collections of Kuba art from Central Africa

Historic landmarks and cultural heritage sites also allow travelers to glean information about Black history. For instance, tours of the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House in Washington, D.C., immerse visitors in the life of the pioneering 20th-century woman who set educational standards for today's Black colleges and created space for Black people in government in her role as advisor to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ranger-led interpretive programs at the Little Rock Central High School National Historic Park in Arkansas educate travelers on the history of the Little Rock Nine and desegregation in education.

Bivins says travelers can also visit churches, restaurants, and other long-operating Black institutions to delve into culture.

"Our houses of worship are usually harbingers of history and stories. If you want to know who's who, it's there," she says. "Places that are sites of political activity, restaurants that serve the food of people of the diaspora. That's how you get into the story."

Andre Taylor, an oral historian at Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Virginia, says Mama Dip's Kitchen in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, serves up both southern cuisine and Black culture. "You go in there, you eat, but you'll quickly learn that this is a family institution, and individuals who know the different stories within the family will come out and tell you," he says.



After 20 years of planning, the International African American Museum opened in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2023. It's located on Gadsden's Wharf, where an estimated 40 percent of enslaved Africans first landed in North America between 1670 and 1808.
PHOTOGRAPH BY GREG NOIRE/ IAAM

(*As statues get torn down, which monuments should we visit*?)

Cross adds that if you're looking for more places to visit, the people who work at first-voice museums can recommend community-centered restaurants and other historic landmarks.

"The African American museums in your local community are an amazing resource and cannot be understated how important they are," Cross says.

Sheeka Sanahori is a freelance journalist and video producer based in Atlanta Georgia, who writes about travel, history, and culture. Follow her on X and Instagram.

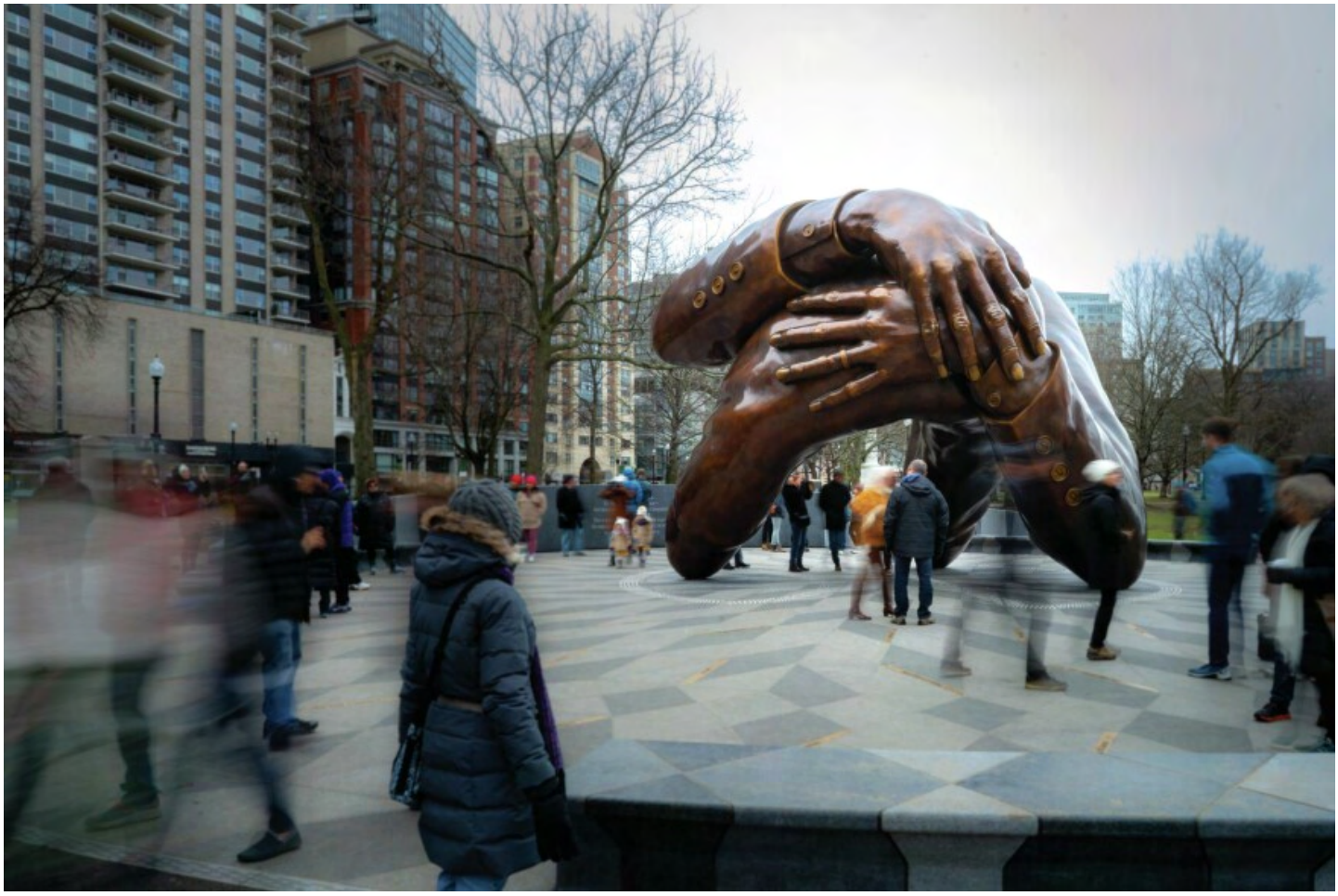
Posted on: January 12, 2024

DESIGN

Shaping Our Future: The Transformative Power of Public Memorials

How design can turn memories into monuments.

By JHA D AMAZI



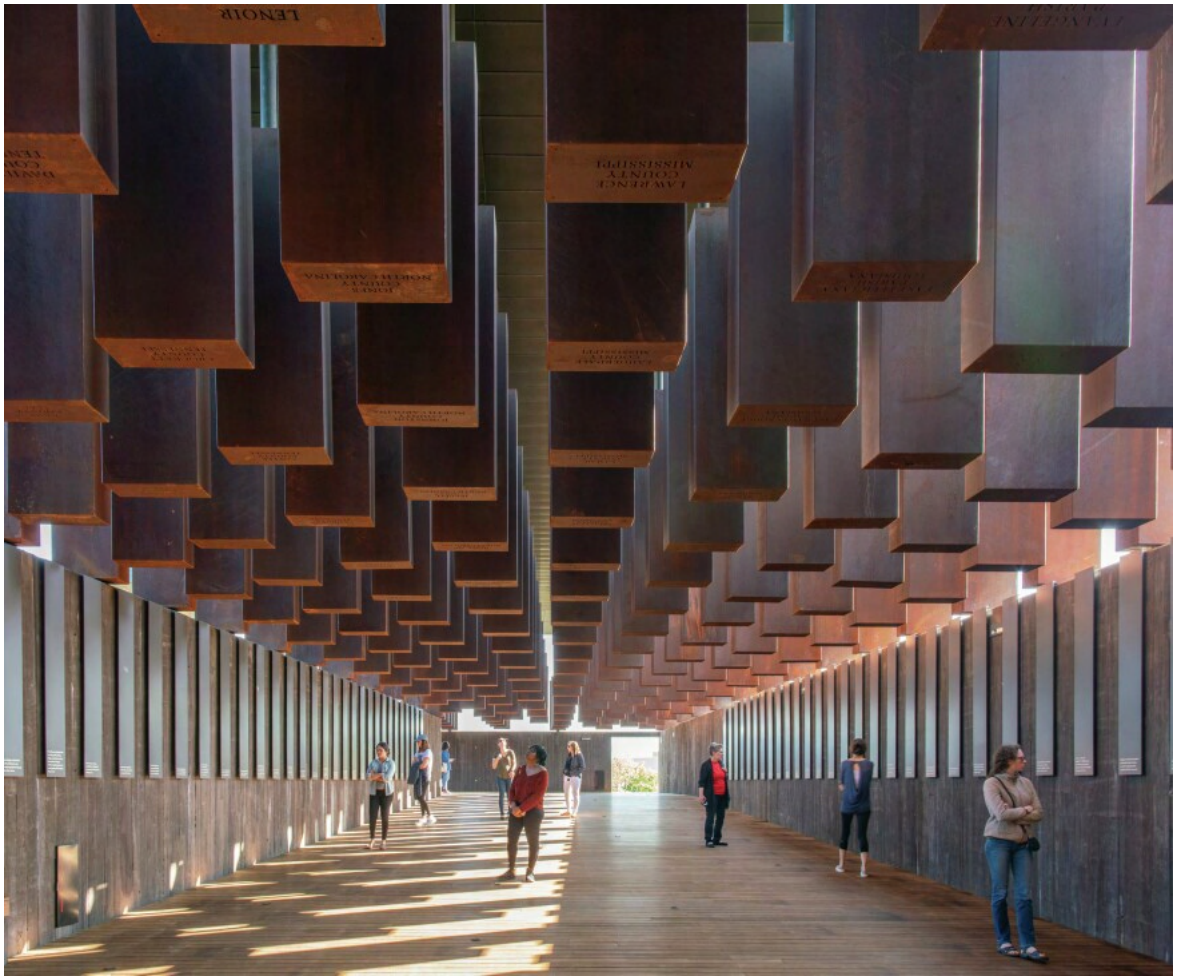
MASS Design Group

The Embrace, design by Hank Willis Thomas in collaboration with MASS Design Group and Embrace Boston, on the Boston Commons.

In recent years, a profound shift has been sweeping across our nation, reshaping how we remember, honor, and engage with our history. This transformation transcends mere intellectual exercises; it is a movement that breathes life into our communities, fueled by the unwavering passion of individuals and the resilience of communities, all driven by a deep commitment to truth-telling and reconciliation. It signifies a shift that goes

beyond the removal of old statues or the construction of new monuments; it is a journey towards redefining our collective identity and actively shaping the course of our future.

In my personal journey, I have witnessed the profound impact of community-led memorialization. Just last year, I stood at the opening of The Embrace and the 1965 Freedom Plaza—a monument and space in Boston dedicated to honoring the legacies of Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, and over 60 local civil rights leaders. Surrounded by hundreds of individuals, many of whom shared my heritage as a Black Bostonian, I felt a deep appreciation for the significance and elation that comes from being recognized, represented, and acknowledged in the public memory. This experience fortified my desire to participate in this transformative movement towards inclusive public memory, as a designer, a mother, and an educator.



MASS Design Group

The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, designed by MASS Design Group, in Montgomery, Ala..

In 2018, MASS Design Group (MASS) designed the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, located in Montgomery, Ala., in collaboration with Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative. This profound symbol of remembrance for victims of lynching in the United States challenged entrenched notions of what should be remembered and how it should be memorialized. Its inception ignited a groundswell of emotion and interest across our nation, rallying individuals, groups, and entire communities to the cause, stirred by the imperative to bring untold stories and histories to light.

This demand for change has been underscored by groundbreaking research like the Monument Lab's National Monument Audit and preservation efforts led by the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund. The translation into transformational action is nurtured through major investment, foremost by the Mellon Foundation. Their $500 million Monument Project initiative is “aimed at transforming the nation’s commemorative landscape to ensure our collective histories are more completely and accurately represented.”

In response to this growing interest, MASS launched the Public Memory and Memorials Lab, founded on the belief that the act of spatializing memory holds the remarkable potential to mend wounds and ignite collective action for generations to come. Our memorials work has grown exponentially to nearly 30 projects in development worldwide. These initiatives are not directed by remote authorities or institutions; they are firmly rooted in community-led initiatives, deeply connected to local histories, and driven by an unwavering commitment to truth-telling and societal transformation.

Through our work, we have come to recognize the profound influence of design, which can transform not only narratives but also culture and, ultimately, policy. As we endeavor to reshape a landscape marked by segregation with spaces for collective gathering and healing, we shift the focus onto whose stories are told within our public sphere. We have the capacity to design spaces that contribute to the common good. We are not merely creating physical structures; we are shaping participatory spaces that ignite a call to action and instigate change that resonates globally. Our approach to developing living memorials must be grounded in a regenerative process, designed to inspire collective action for generations to come, and is founded on three key principles:

People are the History Makers



MASS Design Group

Site of the future home of Foot Soldiers Park in Selma, Ala..

Many memorials originate from the passion of individuals who lead and drive projects. They are the keepers of history, initiating and propelling memorial endeavors while bringing their passion and stories from the heart to the forefront. Foot Soldiers Park, in Selma, Ala., is one such example. Established in 2021 by JoAnne Bland, a Selma native and lifelong advocate for civil rights and racial justice, the park pays tribute to the Foot Soldiers of the 1960s who marched from Selma to Montgomery, bridging the gap between historical social justice movements and those of the present. As a child foot soldier during the historic events of 1965 in Selma, Bland was arrested 13 times during protests by the age of 11, dedicating her life to educating others about the significance of the Civil Rights Movement.

Through collective community action Bland's vision for Foot Soldiers Park is becoming a reality. Our role as designers commences with the process of accompaniment and engagement; by gathering diverse and sometimes conflicting perspectives, we move closer to understanding what the impact of a project could actually look like. If we aim to design for action, it must begin with personal stories, addressing pain points, and embracing hopes and aspirations.

Place Matters

Memorials wield significant influence by offering a unique spatial encounter with narratives shaped by decisions made by various stakeholders, including planners, policymakers, politicians, and designers. Decisions related to location and materiality primarily aim to ensure both public accessibility and permanence. However, as we contemplate the significance of contested space in an evolving memorial landscape, it is crucial to use design to encourage proximity and participation.



Elman Studios LLC

Close up from The Gun Violence Memorial Project, on display at The National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

Consider the Gun Violence Memorial Project (GVMP) as an example of this notion. Given that gun violence is a nationwide issue, the GVMP is not limited to a single static location; it is designed to be mobile, beginning in Chicago, moving to Washington, D.C., and will open in Boston in August 2024. Its very essence is participatory, inviting families and communities to engage in its evolution. This mode of engagement emphasizes the profound idea that our stories and societies are continuously evolving. The mobility of the memorial is integral to the project's mission.

Slowing Down: Let the Healing Happen

As designers engaged in this work, we must find a delicate balance between the time required for navigating the traumas associated with radical truth-telling and the urgency to rectify and address historical injustices that have impacted communities across our nation. Time is a crucial element in memorial work, and it's imperative not to underestimate the significance of allowing ourselves and our partners the space to pause. By slowing down, respecting room for healing, and fostering restorative conversations, we acknowledge the need to grieve, process, and address lingering questions. Sometimes, this occurs as an integral part of our engagement process, while at other times, it may need to precede our engagement and accompaniment

process entirely. As Adrienne Maree Brown, author of “Emergent Strategy,” aptly states, we must move "at the speed of trust."



MASS Design Group

Photograph taken from site visit at Graball Landing on the Tallahatchie River, in Glendora, Miss., where Emmett Till's body was found following his lynching by two white men in 1955.

Jerome G. Little, the first African-American president of the Tallahatchie County Board of Supervisors, advocated for the creation of the Emmett Till Interpretive Center as a means to break the national silence surrounding the death of Emmett Till, the African American teenager whose murder catalyzed the emerging civil rights movement. The first step involved a profound engagement with the community, co-facilitated by Susan Glisson, The Welcome Table Collaborative founder and executive director. Only after dedicating time to healing and conversation could the design work proceed. The Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley National Monument, declared a national monument by President Biden in 2023, confronts the injustices of our past, but is firmly grounded in a process that prioritized pausing, slowing down, and waiting for the community to be ready.

Elizabeth Alexander, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation president, said “Our built environment is in motion. Memorials, like history, are never truly complete. We bear the responsibility of shaping our future by looking to the past and reflecting our present.” History is not static. It is layered, complex, and continually evolving. The narrative of a memorial is similarly dynamic, transforming over time and calling us to action. When we designed the National Memorial for Peace and Justice with Bryan Stevenson five years ago, displaying 800 markers from counties complicit in lynching crimes, we never imagined change in the form of legislation would follow. But it did and in 2022, The Emmett Till Antilynching Act was signed into law by President Biden, making lynching a federal hate crime.

SURFACE

ART

Hank Willis Thomas Speaks on the Work That Remains

The artist and For Freedoms co-founder was recently presented with the 2023 Medal of Arts award by the First Lady and the U.S. Department of State. He views the honor not as the destination, but rather a milestone on his mission to reframe art as a catalyst for change at the highest levels.

BY JENNA ADRIAN-DIAZ

September 22, 2023



Hank Willis Thomas receives the Medal of Arts award at the White House, with Dr. Jill Biden and Deputy Secretary of State Richard Verma. Credit: Erin Scott

It's been a big couple of weeks for Hank Willis Thomas. On September 13, he became one of four recipients of the 2023 Medal of Arts, a prestigious accolade created by the U.S. Department of State's Art in Embassies program and awarded to him by Dr. Jill Biden. This week, he participated in panels about the role of art in diplomacy and civic engagement at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Not incidentally, the museum is the first stop of the traveling exhibition "A More Perfect Union: American Artists and the Currents of Our

Time." Reinterpretations of Norman Rockwell's New Deal–era *Four Freedoms* paintings, created by the artist collective and former super PAC For Freedoms (which Thomas helped co-found), will feature prominently in the show. Later this week, the Brooklyn-based artist will celebrate his mother, the artist, scholar, and MacArthur Fellow Deborah Willis, as the Smithsonian Museum of American Art unveils a room dedicated in her honor.

"I'm just following in her footsteps," Thomas said when congratulated by *Surface* for his week of recognition. In her remarks, Dr. Biden commended the artist's role in creating imagery that better embodies contemporary America. A conceptual artist, Thomas enlists media including sculpture, photography and collage to pose questions of identity, history, and culture. Together with fellow artists and friends Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo, and Wyatt Gallery, he co-founded For Freedoms in 2016, which employs creative expression as a mechanism for civic engagement. To many, Thomas's identity as an artist is inextricably linked to his identity as a co-founder of the organization. "Dr. Biden dedicated the entire opening of her speech to For Freedoms, the organization, and the photos," executive director Claudia Peña told *Surface*. "She was also honoring Hank, of course, but there's so much overlap. Any time he's being honored, For Freedoms ends up being mentioned."



Deborah Willis, Sanford Biggers, Hank Willis Thomas, and Deborah Kass speak on a Democracy Day panel moderated by Ambassador Randi Charno Levine at the Smithsonian Museum of American History. Credit: Tori See.

At the same time, Thomas is hesitant to speak on behalf of For Freedoms, redirecting a question about how the State Department's perspective of art as a "soft power tool" aligns with how For

Freedoms views its own work, to his fellow co-founders. To see a Cold War–era diplomatic term used in such a modern and even liberal context might give some whiplash, but not to Gottesman. “Because culture is [now] so much a stronger power than it was when the term was created, art is the sharpest tool for cultural shift that we have,” Gottesman says. “It’s moved more towards hard power. It would be very difficult to find a diplomatic mechanism or way that countries are interacting with one another that doesn’t involve creative production.”
Below, Thomas weighs in on legacy, artists as “the future of society,” and optimism in the face of impending doom.

In the past two weeks, the highest levels of leadership have facilitated conversations about your work and For Freedoms on a national scale. Do you feel like you’ve accomplished what you and your co-founders aspired to in 2016?

In many ways we’ve exceeded our expectations, and also, we have a lot more work to do.

How is there now more work to do?

We started this project in 2015 and launched in 2016. A lot of the realities that are now familiar were unfathomable. It seems that we didn’t do enough, and that we have to work really hard to continue to elevate the conversation and complicate simplistic narratives that lead us to fall into traps of division and the revision of history.



Left: Freedom from Fear; Right: Freedom from Want. Credit: For Freedoms. Art in Embassies U.S. Department of State, Permanent Collection. Gift of Ellen Susman.

Has anything changed—for better or worse—in the five years between when you, Emily Shur, Eric Gottesman and Wyatt Gallery created that photo series reimagining *Four Freedoms*?

What if I said: nothing? I tend to be an optimist but also I am not a determinist. Objectively, things are getting better around the world in various ways, but the threat of imminent doom seems to overshadow that at every moment [laughs].

That is true.

Good art asks questions and good design answers them. The quality of the questions impacts the quality of the answers, and if we look at artists as the questioners and lawmakers and politicians as the designers of our society, I'd say maybe we can just continue to ask better questions.

The fact that we're having the work in the collection of the U.S. government, and that we're having the First Lady, Congresspeople, judges, and senators engaged with the work, as well as the millions of Americans who go to the Smithsonian, we believe that is a longer arc. Rarely does an artwork make its greatest lasting impression in its first few years. What tends to be the

greatest art stands the test of time. It's amazing that five years later, it seems like we're just getting started. As this seeps into the psyche and vision of America that the government is promoting, the greater impact it will have. I'm excited to see that.



Left: Freedom of Speech; Right: Freedom of Worship. Credit: For Freedoms. Art in Embassies U.S. Department of State, Permanent Collection. Gift of Ellen Susman.

When you co-founded For Freedoms, did any of this seem possible?

To call oneself an artist is to live in the realm of the impossible. Most of the things that we do on a daily basis are not imaginable to us moments before, so it felt like anything's possible.

Do you feel the First Lady's word choice of "cultural diplomat" describes what you do?

As an artist, I see myself as a cultural diplomat. I don't think we recognize that artists are important political figures in every society, and that most of what we know about past societies is through the art they left behind. Reason would suggest that we're the future of our society. When I travel and make work—and often my work is about the United States —I'm doing my part to tell some of the stories of our country: some of the triumphs, many of the struggles that we are yet to overcome, and have overcome. If we can do this without being damning or condemning, *that* is what every artist or person who can say "I am," should be doing.

The power of art and image is tremendous, and with Rockwell's *Four Freedoms*, he agreed to adhere to the *Saturday Evening Post*'s policy of banning images of people of color unless they were depicted in servitude. Do you think about the legacy of those original paintings?

I'm not sure history will judge me as generously as the present does. Looking back, it's easy to point fingers and critique the way a person lived their life, or saw the world, within the context of the world that we can relate to. I do my best to time travel, but I try not to flap my wings too hard and really see it as a privilege to be able to look at that window and gain as much context as I can. I would hope that in 75 years, these images are antiquated and out of touch. That someone else will see them and be like, "Wait, this isn't what we are. This is who we were then. Update that!"

y!news

UPI

White House honors Int'l Medal of Arts award winners for promoting cultural diplomacy

Sheri Walsh

September 13, 2023 · 4 min read

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Sept. 13 (UPI) -- First lady Jill Biden presented this year's 60th International Medal of Arts awards at a White House ceremony Wednesday night to five artists who have promoted cultural diplomacy around the world.

"For 60 years, the State Department has recognized the diplomatic power of art, distributing works to American embassies and deploying over 200 U.S. artists as culture envoys to local communities," the first lady told the audience.

The five recipients of this year's International Medal of Arts awards -- presented by the State Department's Art in Embassies program -- are Tony Abeyta, a Diné contemporary artist from a family of Navajo artists; Sheila Hicks, who has painted in Chile and documented archeological sites throughout South America; Robert Pruitt, who paints life-sized portraits of Black figures referencing hip hop and African artistic forms; Suling Wang, who is known for her large-scale, abstract paintings; and Hank Willis Thomas, a conceptual artist who focuses on perspective, identity, commodity, media and popular culture.

"In embassies and ambassadors' residences in countries across the globe, the art of our five incredible medalists hangs on the walls. And as guests enter, their works are not only a declaration of who we are, they're an invitation to a conversation and an opening for connection," the first lady said.



First Lady Jill Biden applauds as Deputy Secretary of the U.S. State Department Richard Verma awards Hank Willis Thomas a medal Wednesday during the 2023 International Medal of Arts Ceremony in the East Room of the White House in Washington, D.C. The award, selected by the U.S. State Department as part of the Art in Embassies program, honors those who have aided in promoting cultural diplomacy efforts worldwide. Photo by Bonnie Cash/UPIMore

In addition to creating art, exhibited in embassies around the world, the artists have spent their time speaking at workshops and exhibitions.

"Each of our recipients today -- each of you -- has done our world a service," Biden added. "In other cities and other countries, you've woven more threads into that same tapestry of connection and fellowship. Because diplomacy isn't only about the government-to-government relationship; it's people to people, heart to heart."

Each artist was presented with a medal at the ceremony, as their works were displayed on a screen along with the embassies worldwide where their art can be enjoyed.

"Art is about connection. Art is the evidence and expression of our humanity. And even when it's easy to get caught up in differences, art can unite us," Biden said.

"Connection is what diplomacy is all about."

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Hank Willis Thomas Dives Into the Rivers of History

Using retroreflective material, the artist's latest works look at the way that rivers both carry and conceal as a means of examining history.

AX Mina August 16, 2023



Hank Willis Thomas, "I've known rivers" (2023), with flashlight (all photos AX Mina/*Hyperallergic*)

LOS ANGELES — Over the past year, it's been fascinating to learn about **the sorts of things emerging in rivers** that are drying up due to climate change. **Dinosaur tracks**. **Buddhist statues**. **Human remains**. Rivers both carry and conceal. The poet Langston Hughes wrote eloquently about their social significance in "**The Negro Speaks of Rivers**":

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

"I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset" is the title of a screen-printed and UV-printed retroreflective vinyl work by Hank Willis Thomas. Each piece in ***I've Known Rivers***, on view at Pace Gallery, is titled after a line from the beautiful Hughes poem, which was written in 1921. In "I've seen," the view indeed looks muddy, an all black work apparently composed of interesting shapes and cutouts. Shine a flashlight at eye level, though, and the work turns golden in the sunset, showing people wearing sunglasses, looking upward, smiling, young and old, in a rich collage.

In "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it," a figure leans back, one hand supporting their head; in the background are a golden-black river and dotted pyramids. A black sun shows through in the upper left-hand corner. Flash the light, and those rivers reveal another collage of people, this time more obviously engaged in historic collective action, such as the US Civil Rights Movement.

"I see myself as a visual cultural archaeologist," Thomas noted of his work **in a video statement about the installation**. "And I'm often using archival research as part of my art practice, so there are images from all of these massive collective movements where people often demonstrated that they were human beings through showing up together and challenging the status quo."



Hank Willis Thomas, "I've known rivers" (2023), without flashlight

Part of the joy of these works is how they move in multiple layers. Even without a flashlight, pieces like those in the *Ancient, dusky river* series represent the rich color-scapes of rivers, which shimmer and glow as they reflect the landscapes around them. In "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," a figure appears to rest in the lush blue waters off the bank. The enveloping natural light and open space of the gallery enhance the vibrancy of these artworks, which stand on their own with this first layer alone.

The retroreflective material, which beams light directly back to its source, makes the second layer of each piece visible only when you shine the light near your eyes; just a little lower, and this layer's details barely emerge. Online, the works appear as a binary — flashlight on or flashlight off — but in person I found myself shining the light into different areas, as if searching a real body of water. While Thomas has engaged with retroreflective materials for years, the river theme feels especially apropos, capturing the multifaceted nature of trying to look at and understand a fluctuating body of water.

"We are taught history in a very linear way," Thomas noted, "but the reality is that people have been moving around for millennia, and each person has their own story. So there's never a grand narrative about what happened."



Hank Willis Thomas, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (2023), without flashlight



Hank Willis Thomas, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers” (2023), with flashlight



Hank Willis Thomas, “I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (2023), without flashlight



Hank Willis Thomas, “I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (2023), with flashlight



Close up of retroreflective surface



Installation view of Hank Willis Thomas: I've Known Rivers at Pace Gallery, Los Angeles. Pictured: "Ancient, dusky river" (2023)

Hank Willis Thomas: I've Known Rivers *continues at Pace Gallery Los Angeles (1201 South La Brea Avenue, Mid-Wilshire, Los Angeles) through August 26. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*

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CULTURED

ART

Artist Hank Willis Thomas Makes a Monument for the 21st Century

The Brooklyn-based artist lands in Miami with *Duality*, a public sculpture unveiled today at The Underline's River Room.



Duality, 2023, on view at The Underline's River Room in Miami. Image courtesy of Friends of the Underline.

The V sign, more commonly known as the peace sign, has in the past century achieved a level of uber-ubiquity afforded to only the most universal of gestures. It's rare to stop and think when someone flashes one, unless you're from the U.K., Australia, or New Zealand and read it as offensive. But what happens if you sit with it? Hank Willis Thomas is bringing that question to Miami with the unveiling of his sculpture *Duality* as a permanent public installation at The Underline's River Room. The Brooklyn-based conceptual artist has already embedded gestural monuments that find the universal in the specific, and vice-versa, in Boston and New York. To

mark *Duality*'s Miami debut, *CULTURED* called up Thomas to talk about the inspirations and aspirations behind the work.

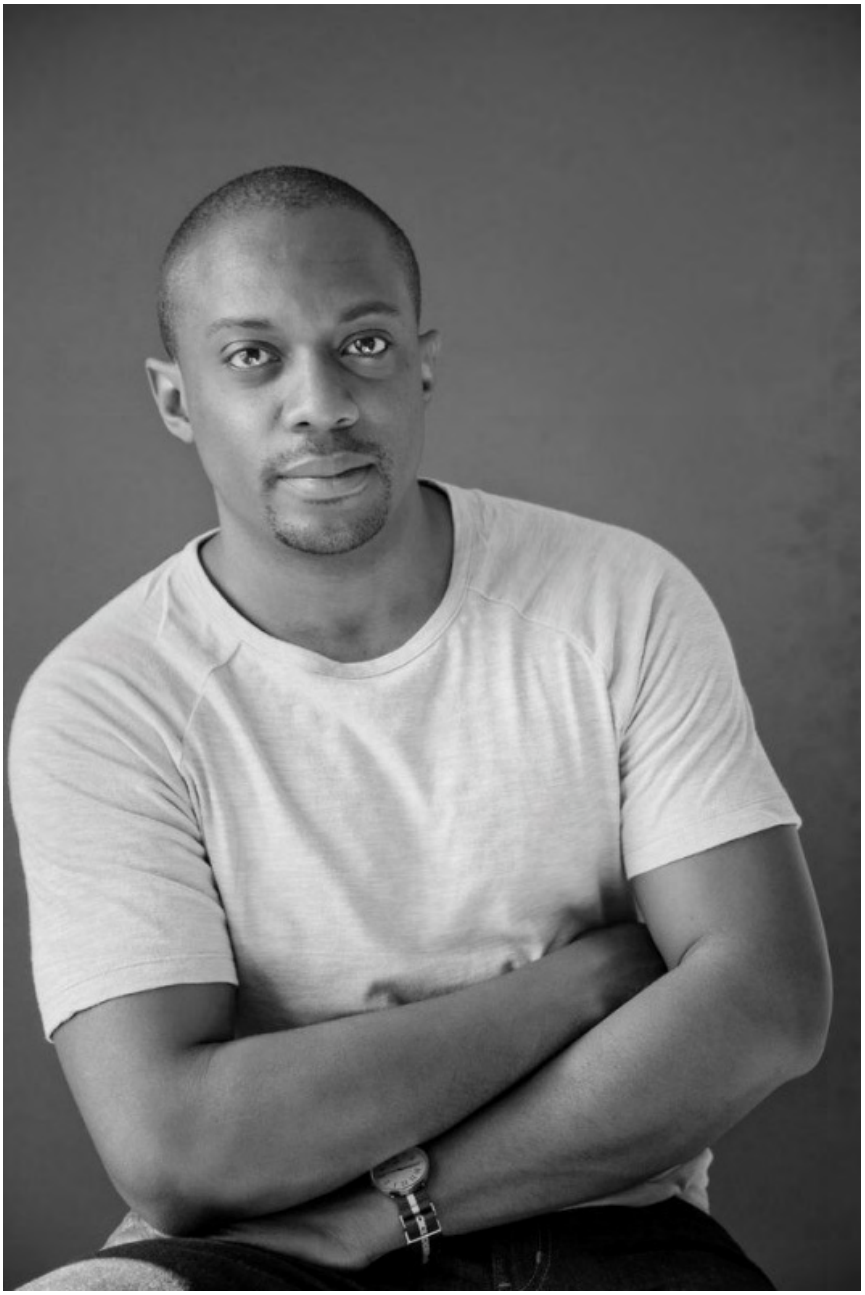


Image courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas.

CULTURED: How are you feeling ahead of the unveiling of *Duality*?

Hank Willis Thomas: I'm really excited to be able to present a work in Miami, where in many ways my career as a fine artist began. That's where I had my first solo exhibition, my first collectors and, of course, I was in the exhibition, "30 Americans'' at the Rubell Museum, which

really changed my life. So going to South Florida and actually knowing that a work of mine will be on display there indefinitely is a pretty amazing homecoming experience.

CULTURED: I can imagine! How are you thinking about *Duality* inscribing itself in Miami's landscape?

Thomas: I have really been focusing on spaces for public intimacy in my work over the past seven or eight years, and I feel like gesture and body is related to that. The symbol of *Duality* can be read in various ways depending on your cultural standing, your physical positioning, where you are in your life, or your historical knowledge. I love making work that can be interpreted in various ways but also appears to be addressing the viewer directly as an individual. At a time when public monuments have been contentious for the past decade, being able to make a public monument for the 21st century is really exciting.

CULTURED: The word "duality" can mean so many things, especially in the context of the United States. What does it mean to you today?

Thomas: It means flexibility, reflexivity, and multiplicity. I have really been challenged as an artist who studied photography to be aware of multiple perspectives, right? To not necessarily evaluate everything equally, but to acknowledge the multiplicity of anything that I'm supposed to be presenting.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Duality* (detail), 2023. Image courtesy of Thomas.

CULTURED: What kind of research about the peace sign was involved in the making of the work?

Thomas: That's really what led me to it. I forgot that it could be V for victory, or an offensive gesture, or an innocuous gesture. It can be a number. The way this sculpture is made is through 3D scanning. I was interested in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and the notion of the "punctum," which is the part of the photograph that sticks with you. There were so many moments and photographs where this gesture was used that pierced me as a viewer. I wanted to represent that through this work.

CULTURED: What information or feeling do you want the public to carry away from seeing *Duality*?

Thomas: I've come to learn the hard way that the intention of the artist is insignificant to the interpretation of the receiver. Whatever message I put out, the receiver has the power to interpret it on their own terms. Beyond that, I don't believe that we have very many pictures or monuments to love, to peace, to community in our society. That is what I hope to do, to create a more balanced public display of values which aren't just about heroes, men, or horses—which is who we've celebrated for the past 300 years in Western culture. For hopefully at least 300 years, people will be receiving and witnessing gestures like *The Embrace*, 2022, *Unity*, 2019, and *Duality* that call us to believe in a more humane version of ourselves.

Duality is on view at The Underline's River Room in Miami starting today.

The New York Times

Creator of Divisive King Monument Builds Sculpture for Super Bowl

The steel sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas features a football and will be displayed outside State Farm Stadium on Feb. 12.



"Opportunity (reflection)" by Hank Willis Thomas. Its reflective surface resembles the Vince Lombardi Trophy given to the winning Super Bowl team. Hank Willis Thomas Studio

The New York Times

By Kalia Richardson
Published Jan. 31, 2023Updated Feb. 12, 2023

A new work by the artist who recently unveiled a much-discussed sculpture of a hug between the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King will be displayed outside the Phoenix-area stadium hosting the upcoming Super Bowl.

The 10-foot-tall stainless steel sculpture by the artist, Hank Willis Thomas, shows an unidentified player's extended arm reaching to catch a football. Titled "Opportunity (reflection)," it draws inspiration from his 2015 sculpture "Opportunity."

"The ball is a metaphor for the present moment and what we do with it," Thomas said. "In team sports, it's all about what the collective does with the present moment toward achieving a goal against sometimes unlikely and unseemly odds."

The sculpture was commissioned by the N.F.L. and will be displayed outside State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz., on Feb. 12, the day the Philadelphia Eagles and the Kansas City Chiefs face off in Super Bowl LVII. (Fans can get an earlier view of the sculpture inside the Phoenix Convention Center; the work will later be on loan at the Arizona State University Art Museum.)

In January, Thomas's 19-ton bronze monument to the Kings — inspired by a photo of the couple after Dr. King won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 — was criticized and mocked online. Titled "The Embrace" and now a permanent fixture on Boston Common, the memorial features the Kings' arms and does not show their faces, leading some observers to compare the pose to a sexual act.

Seneca Scott, a cousin of Mrs. King, wrote an essay that described the work as "rather insulting." But Thomas pointed out that the sculpture was meaningful to the Kings' descendants, including Yolanda Renee King, the civil rights leader's granddaughter, who called the work "love 360." After the backlash, Martin Luther King III said on CNN that he was moved by the depiction of his parents.

"I really felt like if it was just showing their faces, it would really ground in the past," Thomas said, "where this piece is rooted in the past but is also about the present and with an eye toward the future."

Thomas, a Brooklyn-based conceptual artist, fused sports and identity into his work before producing "Opportunity (reflection)" for the Super Bowl. That work included "The New Black Aesthetic," a quilted piece dedicated to basketball greats for last year's N.B.A. All-Star Weekend, and "The Cotton Bowl," which depicts a mirror image of a crouching college football player and a sharecropper picking cotton.

And a 22-foot bronze sculpture of an arm, “Unity,” located near the Brooklyn Bridge, echoes his 2015 “Liberty” sculpture, which was inspired by a photo of a Harlem Globetrotter.

Jonathan Beane, senior vice president and chief diversity and inclusion officer for the N.F.L., said that the league was looking to amplify Black voices, and that Thomas’s sculpture encapsulates the different emotions fans experience while watching football.

“When I look at it, I say, ‘It’s also access, it’s also opportunity, it’s also success, it also could be failure, it could be hope, it could be struggle,’” Beane said. “There’s a lot in that image, and that’s what we’re about.”

“Opportunity (reflection)” is part of Thomas’s “Punctum” series, which refers to the photographic theory by the French essayist Roland Barthes that describes how a detail in an image “pricks” or “bruises” a viewer’s subjectivity.

The sculpture’s reflective surface resembles the Vince Lombardi Trophy given to winners of the Super Bowl, and the work will sit adjacent to the encased trophy on game day. Nicki Ewell, the N.F.L.’s senior director of events, says the mirrored surface allows the viewer to step into the scene of either a winning catch or a tough loss.

Thomas welcomes football fans to form their own interpretations of his work.

“You can’t do a monument to love or monument about opportunity that is in some way inspiration or hopeful without also confronting the adverse,” he said.

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

Hank Willis Thomas Memorializes MLK and Coretta Scott King's Love

The sculptural tribute was installed in a Boston park, the city where the couple first met.



Billie Anania January 15, 2023



"The Embrace" (2023) by Hank Willis Thomas at the Boston Common (photo by Skanska, courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery)

A new public memorial by Hank Willis Thomas honors the love and sacrifices of Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr. in the city where they first met.

On Friday, January 13, the Boston Common — which is the nation's oldest public park — unveiled its first permanent memorial in 60 years, titled "The Embrace" (2023). The 22-foot-tall **bronze sculpture** shows King

and Scott's arms intertwined in a hug, which Thomas based on a 1964 photograph of the moment they learned that King won the Nobel Peace Prize. Rather than recreate the entire scene, Thomas isolated their points of contact, leaving space for visitors to stand within.

A collaboration with MASS Design Group, Walla Walla Foundry, and the local nonprofit Embrace Boston, the rounded sculpture at Boston Common commemorates not just King's political contributions but Scott's often underappreciated role in the Civil Rights movement.

In an **interview** with local news, Embrace Boston Executive Director Imari Paris Jeffries emphasized Scott's invaluable role in solidifying King's legacy.

"Mrs. King is on the bottom of the hug, and you could see the joy and the love in the photo, but you could see Mrs. King literally holding the weight of Dr. King in her arms," Jeffries said. "And it also speaks to the power of Black women and women in general, being the anchors and the keepers of movements in this country."



An alternative view of the new public sculpture (photo by Skanska, courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery)

Scott and King both grew up in the South, but they first met in the early 1950s while respectively attending the New England Conservatory of Music and Boston University. Scott **claimed** that on their first date, King said he planned to "kill Jim Crow," and the couple married in Alabama just 16 months later.

In 1955, in the aftermath of the Selma march, King **returned** to Massachusetts to lead 20,000 people from the city of Roxbury to the Boston Common, which became the first Civil Rights march in the Northeast; that same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation began its surveillance of King that persisted until his assassination in April 1968. During his last trip to Boston, he gave an impassioned speech at Ford Hall **claiming** that the "estrangement of the races in the North can be as devastating as the segregation of the races in the South."

In his **first book**, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, King praised Coretta Scott for providing the "love, sacrifices, and loyalty [without which] neither life nor work would bring fulfillment." Mere weeks after his death, she **stood in** for her late husband at anti-Vietnam War rallies and **helped launch** the Poor People's Campaign. In the years following, she founded the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change and **headed a coalition** to establish a national holiday in his name. Scott died in 2006.

At the "Embrace" **unveiling ceremony** on Friday afternoon, surviving members of the King family gave speeches alongside Massachusetts Rep. Ayanna Pressley, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Governor Maura Healey, and a land acknowledgment from Massachusett Ponkapoag elder Elizabeth Solomon. Rev. Liz Walker of Embrace Boston detailed her childhood experience attending one of King's speeches in Little Rock, Arkansas.

"I will never forget the electricity of that moment, when ordinary people felt inspired to take extraordinary measures in the name of love," Walker said.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King in 1965 (via **Wikimedia Commons**)

King and Scott's son- and daughter-in-law, Martin Luther King III and Andrea Waters King, spoke alongside their daughter Yolanda Renee King, the late couple's only granddaughter.

"They both loved this city because of its proud heritage as a hotbed of the abolitionist movement, and its unique intellectual and educational resources," Martin Luther King III said. "And indeed, Boston became the place where they forged a partnership that would change America and make a powerful contribution to the Black freedom struggle. That is what I see in this beautiful monument."

"I feel that they are somehow with me, that our spirits are joined in the quest for a just, loving, and peaceful world," Renee King said. "There is a sense in which we are all children and grandchildren of Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King, and we are all challenged to carry forth their unfinished work. This monument is almost like love 360, because we all really need more love in this world."

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artnet

Art World

Standing Two Stories Tall, a Hank Willis Thomas Sculpture Honoring Martin Luther King Jr. Is Unveiled on Boston Common

The statue is a poignant symbol of the power of love.

Sarah Cascone, January 13, 2023



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace* in the new 1965 Freedom Plaza by design firm MASS Design Group at Boston Common. Photo courtesy of the artist.

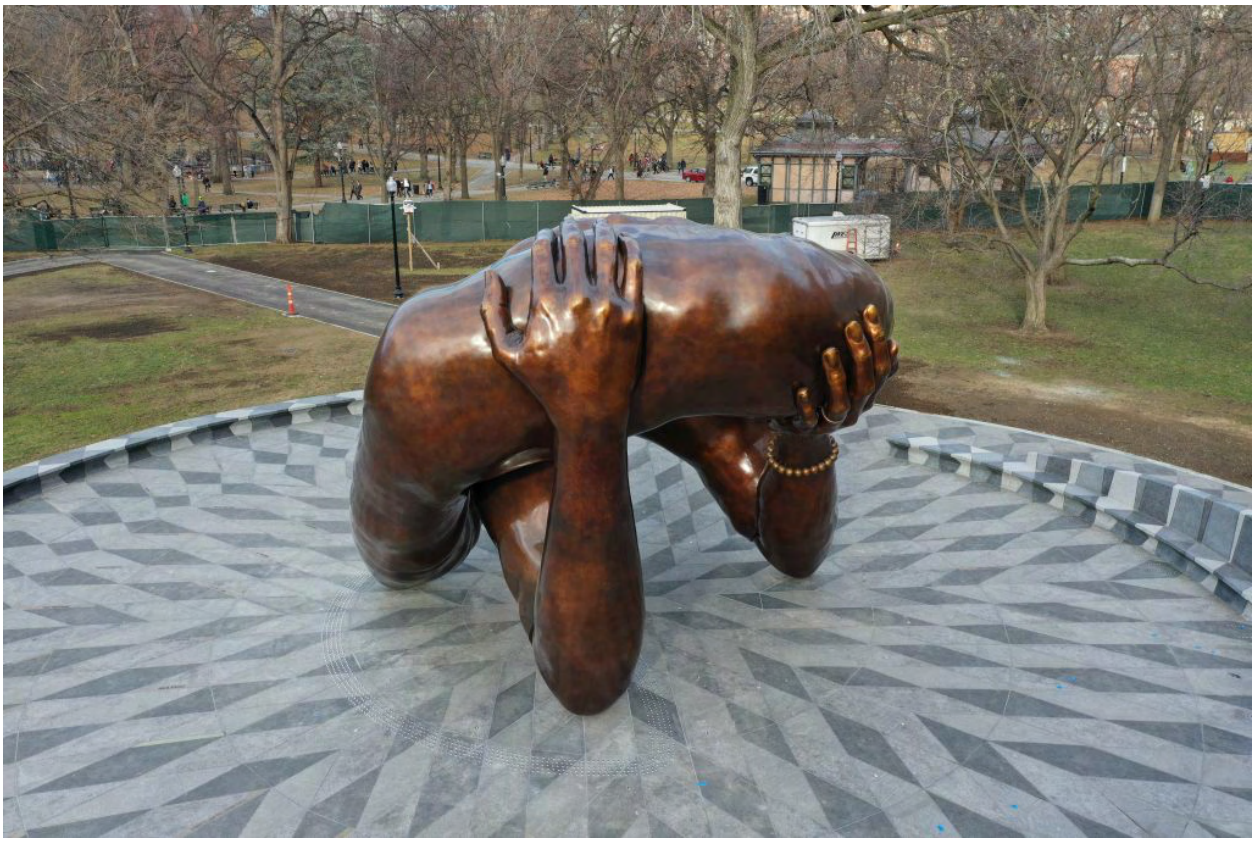
In celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the city of Boston has unveiled its newest monument, a Hank Willis Thomas sculpture that now sits on the grounds of Boston Common, the nation's oldest public park.

Titled *The Embrace*, the bronze statue is a pair of larger-than-life interlocking arms, inspired by a photo of King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, hugging after he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Representing the mutual love and support that

made the Kings' activism possible, it is 40 feet wide and 20 feet tall—about two stories high—and weighs 38,000 pounds.

Cast in 609 pieces from a 3D-printed model at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington state, the massive work was fabricated, transported across the country, and installed in Boston against all odds.

"This was not supposed to happen—literally, there was a global pandemic in the middle of us trying to do a piece called *Embrace*," Thomas said during the opening ceremony for the monument, which has been in the works since 2016. (His design, with MASS Design Group, was selected from 125 proposals.)



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace* in the new 1965 Freedom Plaza by design firm MASS Design Group at Boston Common. Photo courtesy of the artist.

A leader in the civil rights movement known for his nonviolent activism, civil disobedience, and powerful speechmaking, King was assassinated in April 1968. In recognition of his birthday, January 15 has been celebrated as a federal holiday on the third Monday of every year since 1986. He would have been 94 this year.

But the new memorial also highlights the contributions of Coretta Scott King to the civil rights Movement—which she was involved in prior to meeting her husband, and remained a leader of after his untimely death.

The city of Boston is an important part of the Kings' family history, as they met there as students in 1952, just a year before their marriage. King returned in April 1965, addressing a joint session of the Massachusetts legislature about the importance of desegregation. The next day, he gave a speech at a Freedom Rally on Boston Common, after leading some 22,000 activists in a civil rights march from nearby Roxbury.



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace* in the new 1965 Freedom Plaza by design firm MASS Design Group at Boston Common. Photo courtesy of the artist.

"Little did I imagine that such a day was possible when I walked through this same Boston Common as a student 10 years ago," King told the crowd. "This will go down as one of the greatest days that Boston has ever seen."

That history was honored today at an over-two-hour event marking the installation of *The Embrace*, which sits at the center of the new 1965 Freedom Plaza, designed by MASS Design Group. The floor features bronze name plates amid the titles honoring 69 local civil rights leaders, nominated by community members.

The city of Boston hopes the work will become a major tourist attraction akin to the Statue of Liberty, with Massachusetts Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley telling the assembled crown that people will travel from all over the world to pay tribute to the Kings and see the "profound work of art—like their love, a masterpiece."



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace* in the new 1965 Freedom Plaza by design firm MASS Design Group at Boston Commons. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The program featured speeches by dignitaries Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey, and former Governor Deval Patrick, as well as Imari Paris Jeffries, executive director of Embrace Boston, the nonprofit that spearheaded the $10.5 million project—he spoke with tears in his eyes, overcome by the moment.

But it was King's only granddaughter, 14-year-old Yolanda Renee King, who stole the show, speaking after her parents, Martin Luther King III and Arndrea Waters King. Clearly an impressive young orator in the making, Yolanda was unruffled even when the wind nearly blew away the notes of her prepared speech.

And when NBC10 Boston anchor and the event's master of ceremonies Latoyia Edwards asked the young girl to tell the crowd more about herself, Yolanda spoke off the cuff in impassioned tones about continuing her grandparents' work striving for justice no matter what, and praised the statue memorializing their legacy.



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace* in the new 1965 Freedom Plaza by design firm MASS Design Group at Boston Common. Photo courtesy of the artist.

"This is almost like love 360, because this monument is dedicated to their love, and we really need more love in this world," Yolanda said.

Thomas agreed, embracing—pun intended—Love 360 as an alternative title for the work, which allows viewers to stand inside the arms, as if encircled by a hug. He hopes the monument will be seen a manifestation of the Kings' love and the power of that emotion. It is also a visible symbol of the Black experience and Black joy, despite generations of struggle faced by the Black community.

"It's really about the capacity for each of us to be enveloped in love," Thomas said.

A group show of Hank Willis Thomas's art collective, For Freedoms, "Let Love Quiet Fear" is on view of Praise Shadows Art Gallery, 313A Harvard Street, Brookline, January 12–February 12, 2023.

Art

Hank Willis Thomas on His New Monument to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King

Zoë Hopkins

Jan 12, 2023 1:29PM



Hank Willis Thomas, installation view of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

On a winter afternoon in 1952, a love story began when Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King took a stroll in Boston Common. More than a decade after this fateful first date, Dr. King returned to the Common to address the over 22,000 people who marched with him from Boston's Roxbury neighborhood. This January 13th, some 70 years after Martin and Coretta's stroll, the park will be christened with a monument attesting to the love this couple shared with each other—and with the world itself.

Titled *The Embrace*, the 20-foot-tall sculpture was designed by artist Hank Willis Thomas in collaboration with MASS Design Group, and stands in the new 1965 Freedom Rally Memorial Plaza, which is named as an homage to Dr. King's aforementioned speech at the Common. The site is a historically loaded one: It neighbors the Crispus Attucks Monument, dedicated to the Black man who was the first American killed in the American Revolution during the Boston Massacre, as well as the memorial to Boston abolitionist Robert Gould Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the first Black regiments to fight in the Civil War. Boston Common, the oldest public park in the U.S., remains a locale where people gather for protests and rallies.



Hank Willis Thomas, installation view of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

The story of Thomas's sculpture began in 2017 when the artist submitted a proposal to a competition sponsored by the nonprofit King Boston (now called Embrace Boston), which led efforts to install a memorial honoring the Kings. While monuments to Dr. King are numerous—he is the fourth-most monumentalized figure in the U.S., according to Monument Lab—this is the first dedicated to the couple, a sentiment that animated Thomas. "It was really through the choices that they made together and the embracing of each other that we today are kind of living in the ripple effect of their love," Thomas said during a studio visit in December 2022.

Like much of Thomas's sculptural work, *The Embrace* sprang from a photograph. After extensive research into images of the Kings, Thomas landed on one of relative obscurity. In it, Martin and

Coretta are pictured in a moment of tender celebration after the former was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. The two stand enfolded in one another, their facial expressions a mixture of joy, pride, and love.



Hank Willis Thomas, detail of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Thomas boils this moment down to its affective essence—the tangle of the couple's embracing arms, a bold gesture towards recognizing that, at the foundation of the Kings' politics, was a decentering of the individual and an affirmation of the *all*. While *The Embrace* honors the Kings specifically, the absence of their faces makes room for the broader ideas that their legacy holds. "I want to acknowledge *them* in the work but also wanted to make something that was universal," Thomas said.

As such, *The Embrace* teeters between figuration and abstraction, between the two individuals it memorializes and the power of their collective vision. This ethos surfaces again in the pathways leading to the Freedom Rally Memorial Plaza, which are inscribed with names of people who participated in the Boston civil rights movement.



Hank Willis Thomas, installation view of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

In its very form, *The Embrace* suggests the possibility of a universal love, or what Dr. King might have called "worldwide fellowship": It is quite literally all-embracing. Unlike most monuments, it does not assume authority over its viewers, but rather welcomes us into its fold. We can also inhabit it, living in its embrace. For Thomas, who described the sculpture as an "eternal message, an infinity loop," *The Embrace* not only invites us to be inside it, but also to be moved by it, to participate in the values that it embodies.

"I feel like this piece is a call to action," Thomas mused. "Love is a verb. And so when people walk into *The Embrace*, I want them to be called to action, perhaps to embrace one another." While the work is a memorial to activists of the past, it is also very much a living vessel of interrelation—an active site for envisioning the future of loving mutuality that the Kings so resolutely committed themselves to.



Hank Willis Thomas, detail of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

As a monument to these possibilities of tender insurgency, *The Embrace* is powerful on its own terms. But its importance is thrown into sharp relief when read against the history of monuments in this country, where sculptures in celebration of violent people and ideas seem ubiquitous. “Most of the monuments all over the country are monuments to heroes of war or victims of war,” Thomas remarked. “There are very few peace monuments and there are even fewer love monuments.”

In a country where monuments are so often linked to iconographies of violence, and in a time when they remain a topic of contestation, *The Embrace* is not only a refreshing counterpoint. It is also a provocation towards refiguring what defines the power of the monument—a reparative offering that asks what might shift in our cultural norms when we create monuments to love.



Hank Willis Thomas, detail of *The Embrace* at Boston Common, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

During my interview with Thomas, he paused mid-sentence to share the last three pages from Dr. King's final book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967), published the year before his assassination. Thomas and I dwelled in particular on the opening lines of the last paragraph, in which King names love in the present as the force that will sustain us in the future: "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of *now.*"

The Embrace echoes King's prophetic poiesis. It offers an ethic to live by today, and as it lives into the future, it will continue to tell of the urgency of love now, tomorrow, and in the eternal afterlife of that which the Kings—and all those whom they moved and were moved by—knew was possible.

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September 7, 2022
By Stephen Wallis | Photography By Andre D. Wagner for WSJ. Magazine

Hank Willis Thomas Sees His Art as a Call to “Loving Action”

With a major new show, the artist continues to confront today's most divisive issues—violence, racism, polarization—in hopes of inspiring mutual understanding and positive solutions.



Artist Hank Willis Thomas at his Brooklyn studio. His show “Everything We See Hides Another Thing” opens September 8 at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.

Throughout the summer, drivers on Long Island’s Route 27 between Southampton and Water Mill have been passing the words “Remember Me” emblazoned in large neon script across the side of the Parrish Art Museum. A yearlong installation by the artist Hank Willis Thomas, those two words radiate with a sense of profound, if uncertain, meaning. Are they a plea? A provocation? An exhortation?

Maybe the answer is all of those things and more, suggests the Brooklyn-based Thomas, 46, who spends a lot of time thinking about the potency and relative truth of words, symbols, gestures and images. The source material for the Parrish piece was an old postcard with a picture of a young rifle-carrying Black man in a hat worn by the 19th-century U.S. cavalry regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers. “Remember me” was scrawled on the back. The fact that the phrase was handwritten “personifies it, activates it,” says Thomas. “We all want to be acknowledged and remembered.”

Remembering, in many ways, is the core of Thomas’s art. Trained as a photographer, he has spent much of his career mining advertising, sports and pop culture images as well as documentary photos of protest, especially from the Civil Rights era. By incorporating these images into his work, Thomas reframes often overlooked historical narratives and highlights their intersections with contemporary issues of race, freedom and justice.

“In these extremely fractured times, Hank Willis Thomas is an invaluable convener of people and ideas, with a genuine desire to connect and foster dialogue, always with an eye to a path forward,” says Parrish curator Corinne Erni, who oversaw Thomas’s facade commission. She also worked with him to organize *Another Justice: US Is Them*, on view at the museum through early November. The exhibition features works by Thomas and 11 of his collaborators in the For Freedoms initiative, which he co-founded in 2016. A forum for artists to participate in public discourse, For Freedoms continues to expand its outreach and mission, which has extra resonance in this midterm season.



The flash version of the 2021 piece “Freedom Riders on Colors for a Large Wall,” left, next to a falling-figure retroreflective work.

In addition to the Parrish exhibition, Thomas’s New York gallerist, Jack Shainman, is turning over both of his Chelsea spaces to a show of recent work, opening September 8, and the artist is finishing multiple public art projects, including a memorial on Boston Common to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

“What I love about his work is, on the one hand, it punches you in the gut, and on the other hand, it’s very forward-thinking,” says Shainman, who has worked with Thomas for nearly 20 years. “Hank is an optimist, I do believe.”

That optimism is reflected in the artist’s sculpture for the King memorial, *The Embrace*, a 20-foot-high circular bronze that depicts the Kings’ arms intertwined, based on a detail from a photograph of the couple embracing after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. The monument is slated to be officially unveiled in January 2023, on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.



Models and 3-D prints for various works, along with the stainless-steel sculpture “Everything We See Hides Another Thing” (2021) and a small bronze model for “The Embrace.” The backdrop is part of “Out (Blue)” (2022), made from old prison uniforms.

Created with MASS Design Group, Thomas's frequent collaborators, the memorial is literal and specific in its references—honoring the Kings' commitment to their social justice work and to each other—but at the same time, the gesture is abstract and universal. "Not everyone can hug, but I'm pretty sure everyone has been hugged," says Thomas. The design encourages visitors to walk into the center of the memorial, where an oculus opens to the sky above, "and they will be in the heart of the embrace," the artist says. He likes to imagine the work as "the largest monument to love in the United States of America."

Composed of some 600 pieces that were first 3-D printed before being cast in bronze, *The Embrace* is being fabricated at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington state, where it will be welded into five segments and shipped across the country. The granite plaza beneath it will take the form of a labyrinth, or peace walk, designed with elements of African-American quilt patterns as well as plaques inscribed with the names of 65 local Civil Rights activists, all of whom participated in the Kings' 20,000-strong march from Roxbury to Boston Common in 1965.

"Our proposal was to say, hey, what if we make this plaza its own memorial…to the '65 march and elevate some of the unsung heroes of that period, the foot soldiers, the people locally who fought for economic and social justice," says MASS Design founder and executive director Michael Murphy. "This could be a catalyst for something bigger and not just something frozen in time, not just one story, but the beginning of hundreds of stories that we have yet to fully find out." Murphy, who also worked with Thomas on the Gun Violence Memorial Project currently at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., adds that "one of Hank's strengths is not just understanding how to tell stories but also demanding that we ask of those stories something greater than ourselves."

"What I love about his work is, on the one hand, it punches you in the gut, and on the other hand, it's very forward-thinking."
— Jack Shainman

A five-foot-high version of *The Embrace* is included in the Shainman show, which is on view through the end of October, alongside several other sculptures and some of Thomas's largest so-called retroreflectives to date. Printed on retroreflective vinyl, these works feature photographs—mostly historical—overlaid with washes of color, graphic patterns or painterly marks that partially obscure the primary image. Thomas plays with the fact that retroreflective surfaces appear most clearly in bright light. (Think car headlights on a stop sign.) What observers can see shifts as they move around the work, with the latent image only fully revealed by using a phone's camera flash or flashlight held near one's chin.

"Part of what I'm fascinated by with this work is that the viewer is constantly aware of their positioning and their orientation towards what they're looking at," says Thomas. "There's a lot of passive viewing in photography, but in this case, the viewer becomes a photographer in a sense, using flash photography to actually make the picture."

Some of the new retroreflectives combine Civil Rights protest images with references to celebrated artists of the era. In one, portraits of Freedom Riders emerge from the squares of an Ellsworth Kelly–style color grid. Another features a photo of Malcolm X beneath a re-creation of Roy Lichtenstein's *Mirror #2 (Six Panels)*, a work that was itself playing with visual representation and illusion. "I'm thinking a lot about these masters of art who figured out visual language graphically but have often left content wanting to be implemented," says Thomas. "I've tried in my own way to take content that I was interested in and mixing that into these."

Thomas also explores more recent politically charged imagery, superimposing a TV color bar pattern on a photo of the January 6 riots at the Capitol. He notes that without context, isolated images from that day can be hard to distinguish from other historical protests. "I've been fascinated with this concept of what gets people out of their houses to come together for something that they believe," he says, "carrying symbols and signs to let the world know that they want to be seen."

Most of Thomas's new sculptures in bronze and stainless steel continue his exploration of gesture, depicting arms and hands variously clasping, grasping, reaching or, in one case, giving a peace sign. That work, titled *Duality*, is something of a corollary to his well-known sculpture *Unity*, a 22-foot bronze arm with the index finger pointing skyward that was permanently installed at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge in 2019.



. Thomas with a model of “The Embrace,” a sculpture memorializing Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King.

The show at Shainman also includes a small-scale version of a commission Thomas created in collaboration with artist Coby Kennedy for Chicago O’Hare International Airport. The 49.5-foot-long work, *Reach*, features a pair of arms extending toward each other, their hands about to touch. It will be installed in the airport’s parking and car rental center. “The desire to connect with another is definitely a running theme,” Thomas says.

Perhaps no body of work is more personal to the artist than his series *Falling Stars*, which was inspired by the death of his cousin Songha Willis, a close friend and mentor who was killed in a shooting in 2000. Oversize flags embroidered with thousands of stars—one for every person murdered by guns in the U.S. in a particular year—are hung from a wall, cascading onto the floor below. The three in the current show represent 2018 (14,916 deaths), 2019 (15,433) and 2021 (20,923).

“We have computer chips that can connect us with everyone across the world, but we can’t stop killing each other. That’s probably a crisis of imagination, and that’s where I think art plays a role,” says Thomas. “Say what you want about the power or impact of art at a gallery, but it is part of my attempt to bear witness, to call into loving action, and also to look sternly at who we are and ask the question of what do we truly represent?”

Ask Thomas for his take on the grim mood in the U.S., with polls indicating that a majority of Americans, regardless of political affiliation, believe things are heading in the wrong direction, and he doesn’t hesitate. “The polls don’t ask the important follow-up question, which is, What are you going to do about it?” he says. “Are you going to keep demonizing people who you disagree with? Are you going to just huddle and try to protect your little version of your safe community, or are you going to actually try to become an active participant in enhancing the things that you care about?”

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

ArtSeen

Hank Willis Thomas & For Freedoms: *Another Justice: US is Them*

By Joyce Beckenstein



Hank Willis Thomas, *Remember Me (Amérique Forms in Space)*, 2022. UV print on retroreflective vinyl, 63 x 46 inches. Courtesy the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Gary Mamay.

In 1943, the painter-illustrator Norman Rockwell created a series of paintings to illustrate the aspirational "Four Freedoms" defined by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in his 1941 State of the Union Address: freedom of speech and of worship; freedom from want and from fear. Rockwell's painting, *Freedom from Want* (1943), today referred to as the "Rockwell Thanksgiving," portrays a stereotypical gathering of smiley white kin

gathered around a table set with fine linen, china, silver, and a succulent turkey. There is no want. Fast forward to 2016, when a coalition of artists, academics, and organizers, including Hank Willis Thomas, founded the organization For Freedoms, the title riffing on Rockwell's mid-twentieth century portrayals of mostly white entitlements. For Freedoms aspires to engage the arts as a means of helping people reconsider how we as a people view and mete out justice. It's a huge sweeping mission, but one that the exhibition, *Another Justice: US is Them—Hank Willis Thomas & For Freedoms* (US refers to the United States) manages to distill to intimate size and scale.

The twelve artists in this show summon humor, irony, and sensitivity to encourage viewers to rethink the self-serving interpretations of American justice that have so unjustly reigned throughout our history. They do so by quietly tapping into personal perspectives and cultural prejudices, their messaging more oblique than explicit. There is, for example, a 55-foot neon sculpture reading "Remember Me" spanning the museum's exterior southern wall. The signage sends an enigmatic message to drivers-by who, if they visit the exhibition, will learn that these words and script replicate a hand-written note on the back of a vintage WWI postcard. The postcard bears the portrait of a Black soldier holding a rifle and sporting an American flag on a hat associated with the Buffalo Soldiers—a Black cavalry US Army regiment begun in 1866. Thomas immortalizes this otherwise anonymous soldier by transferring the postcard photograph onto a UV print, titled *Remember Me (Amérique Forms in Space)* (2022), one of several multi-media "flags" by Thomas featured in this exhibition. Each flag deconstructs the iconic American banner we more typically see waving in the breeze:
In *Freedom* (2021), Thomas reconfigures the flag's horizontal red and white stripes into a labyrinth that spells out the word "Freedom"; in *Imaginary Lines* (2021), a progression of vertical red and white stripes suggest prison bars. As these works conflate the American flag with symbols of confinement and anonymity, so do they expand the meaning of the refrain "Remember Me," letting it refer to the hopeless fate of incarcerated prisoners, most of them people of color.

Kambui Olujimi also deals with the way America's racially disproportionate incarceration rate marginalizes the magnitude of white responsibility for violent crime. He upends the whitewash in a moving series of monochromatic ink drawings titled "Redshift" (2018). These depict the likenesses of white Americans—John Wilkes Booth, Lee Harvey Oswald, and John Hinckley Jr. among them—who with some success sought to assassinate American Presidents. Exhibition curator Corinne Erni intersperses these assassin portraits with Olujimi's more recent renderings of the January 6, 2021 insurrection, and with his portraits of Republican election deniers advocating the overturn of the 2020 election. Like Thomas's flags, Olujimi's minimalist imagery effectively damns a tradition of media coverage that consistently diminishes white responsibility for crime and violence.

Zoë Buckman and Joiri Minaya deal with gender injustice, both artists choosing fabric to metaphorically merge medium and meaning. Referencing "women's work," as well as conflicting perceptions of female fragility, vulnerability, and vengeance, Buckman embroiders on delicate vintage fabrics, foils for the sharp sting of a needle piercing fabric, something we viscerally feel in works such as *Rose's boat* (2022), a self-portrait sewn on a lace doily. Buckman's scraggly threads of "hair" seem pulled from the surface, her eyelashes and facial lines aggressively stitched. Meanwhile, Minaya's *Away from Prying Eyes* (2020) grapples with the eroticization of the Caribbean female body, equating the hot, lush, and untamed jungle with female sexuality. Minaya's photographs chronicle performances in which she dons a landscape-patterned bodysuit and then struggles to escape from it. This shedding of her superimposed "skin," photographed against a background of tropical floral wallpaper, expresses her determination to liberate herself from an ethnocentric idealization of femininity.

US is Them literally homes in on the theme of injustice as an endemic condition rooted in early American history. Just a casual stroll around the open windswept fields of The Parrish Art Museum reminds us that this building, like most all East End, Long Island architecture, whether public or private, sits on land stolen from Indigenous people by white seventeenth century settlers. The exhibit activates this history with a series of digital posters intermittently flashing on one of a pair of controversial six-story illuminated advertising billboards, monuments that the Shinnecock Indian Nation erected in 2019 on a small remaining patch of their land. These enormous towers flank the east and west lanes of Sunrise Highway, the main conduit through a string of upscale Hampton hamlets that runs past the famed Shinnecock Golf Course, a site built over ancient Indigenous burial grounds. Many consider the monuments' size, design, and continuous beaming of commercial advertising—an important source of revenue for the Nation—as "out of character" with the Hamptons' aesthetic.

Though a thread of poetic justice runs through the Nation's successful perseverance during this controversy, a more significant triumph lies in the collaboration between the museum and the For Freedoms Landback Public Art Initiative. Four artists—Jeremy Dennis, Jeffrey Gibson, Koyoltzintli Miranda-Rivadeneira, and Marie Watt—have each created a digital poster supportive of the rights of Indigenous people, now displayed on a Shinnecock billboard. It is this kind of partnership that affirms the power of art to raise our consciousness as we reflect on our perceptions of justice.

artnet

Galleries

13 Buzzy Back-to-School Gallery Shows to See During Armory Week, From a Red-Hot Group Show to Rick Lowe's Gagosian Debut

It's "back to school" for the art world—here's a guide to the best openings on tap this week.

Sarah Cascone, September 6, 2022

"Hank Willis Thomas: Everything We See Hides Another Thing" at Jack Shainman Gallery



artnet

In his latest outing, Hank Willis Thomas presents a selection of large-scale sculptures, mixed-media textile works, and his unique retroreflective prints, their latent imagery activated by the flash of your cell phone camera. The show also features Thomas's ongoing "Falling Stars" series, of massive blue flags featuring one embroidered star for every U.S. death from gun violence in a year—14,916 in 2018, 15,433 in 2019, and 20,923 in 2021.

On view at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street, September 8–October 29, 2022; opening reception, 6 p.m.–8 p.m.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Marvin Gaye-inspired exhibition to inaugurate Rubell Museum in Washington, DC

The exhibition will feature nearly 200 works from Don and Mera Rubell's collection



Hank Willis Thomas, from the *Unbranded Series B, A Natural Explosion! Afro Sheen® Blowout Creme Relaxer* (1973/2007).
Courtesy Rubell Museum.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

The forthcoming Rubell Museum will inaugurate its long-awaited outpost in the US capital next month with a sprawling exhibition focused on topical political and sociopolitical discourse.

The exhibition *What's Going On* includes nearly 200 works by an eclectic mix of around 40 well-known contemporary artists from the collection of the Miami-based art collectors Don and Mera Rubell, from Carrie Mae Weems and Hank Willis Thomas to Maurizio Cattelan and Richard Prince.

The title of the show references Marvin Gaye's seminal 1971 album of the same name and its anthemic titular single, which decried injustice and other social ills. Gaye was a student at the long-closed Randall Junior High School, which has been converted by the New York-based firm Beyer Blinder Belle Architects to house the new museum.

A centrepiece of the exhibition is Keith Haring's *Untitled (Against All Odds)* (1989)—a series of 20 ink and gouache drawings Haring said he completed in one day while listening to music by Gaye and Bob Marley. Made shortly before Haring died from Aids-related complications in February 1990, central themes of the series include environmental destruction, war, oppression and discrimination.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

The Rubells, who are known to work closely with the artists in their collection, hold a significant number of works by Haring. An expansive exhibition titled after the same series was held at their former space in Miami between 2005 and 2006, and Haring's work is often prominently featured in their new Miami complex's galleries.

The 32,000 sq. ft Washington, DC complex will open to the public on 29 October. Last month, it was announced that the former art dealer Caitlin Berry was appointed the director of the museum.

The Rubells hold a collection of more than 7,000 contemporary artworks. The couple opened the Rubell Family Collection in 1993 in the Wynwood neighbourhood of Miami and relocated to Allapattah in 2019 in an Annabelle Selldorf-designed space.

EYE CANDY

A Visual Appreciation of Fine Artists Appropriating Commercial Photography

by **Stephanie Eckardt**
09.05.22



The Los Angeles County Museum of Art didn't have to look too deep into its collection to find source material for "Objects of Desire: Photography and the Language of Advertising." The degree to which artists have appropriated advertising techniques to further agendas of their own—since the 1970s in particular—is so prominent that the bulk of the works on view through December 18 come from within the institution itself. Featuring 34 artists such as Barbara Kruger, Hank Willis Thomas, Sara Cwynar, and Roe Ethridge, the Rebecca Morse-curated exhibition highlights what she describes as an "under-recognized" relationship between commercial and fine art photography. And indeed, while we're all aware of how Andy Warhol carried what he learned as an ad illustrator over to his fine art practice, you may be surprised by how many have manipulated the visual codes of capitalist marketing to their advantage in the decades since.

Divided into five categories—Stock Photography, Product and Color Photography, Image and Text, The Magazine, and Humor—the show breaks down the many ways in which the aforementioned overlap has manifested in recent memory. There are excerpts from series like Hank Willis Thomas's "Fair Warning," which reimagines old cigarette ads, and Sandy Skoglund's "Food Still Lifes," which turns imagery from commercials of yore into spotlights of the anti-fascist Yugoslavian women who fought against the Nazis. And if you're familiar with Sarah Charlesworth, it'll come as no surprise that the late artist is among those whose work is featured: "Objects of Desire" was also the title of the seminal posthumous '80s series that made it clear why she was just as key to the Pictures Movement as names like Cindy Sherman.

A can't-miss kickoff to this fall's packed arts season, take a look inside "Objects of Desire," newly on view at LACMA, here.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Believe It*, 2010.

HYPERALLERGIC



New York City continues to be a global hub of culture, and nowhere is that energy and vitality as evident as in the city's vibrant art scene, which includes dozens of museums, hundreds of art galleries, countless nonprofit spaces and temporary venues, and a cornucopia of public art.

Contemporary art is in the DNA of this city, and it is where Pop Art, Minimalism, graffiti, digital art, and so many other influential styles and movements got their start, eventually going on to have a major impact on global culture.

To understand the real beauty of New York, look no further than its inclusiveness. There is something for everyone in this great metropolis. My suggestion is to go out and see it all!

Why not take a stroll in Central Park and check out the beautiful fountains, bridges, and public art projects throughout, or visit the commercial art galleries of Chelsea, Tribeca, or the Lower East Side to see some work by emerging and established artists on display? Or better yet, check out the wealth of museums the city has to offer.

This guide is focused on the art institutions that help make this city great, and it highlights the breadth of venues throughout the boroughs, as well as a few beyond in the Greater New York region for those adventurous enough to go on a day trip. Art in New York is truly unlike anything else in the world.

— *Hrag Vartanian, editor-in-chief*

HYPERALLERGIC



Hank Willis Thomas, "Remember Me" (2022) in *Another Justice: US is Them* at the Parrish Art Museum, white neon with black painted front, 95 × 624 ½ inches (© Hank Willis Thomas, photo by Gary Mamay, courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

Another Justice: US is Them

"Remember Me," urges a sweeping neon by Hank Willis Thomas affixed to the Long Island museum's exterior. The exhibition continues inside with work by artists involved with For Freedoms, a nonprofit co-founded by Thomas to foster civic engagement.

Parrish Art Museum (parrishart.org)
279 Montauk Highway, Water Mill, New York
Through November 6

i-D





ART | By Ashley Tyner | 17 August 2022, 11:36am

The artist collective questioning the true meaning of justice

A show at The Parrish Art Museum, curated by Hank Willis Thomas and For Freedoms, features poignant works by artists meditating on liberation.

“Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, the freedom from want and the freedom from fear.” These are the four freedoms President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined in his historical 1941 State of the Union Address, as the United States prepared to aid Britain in a second World War that was steadily unfolding. For the Saturday Evening Post, artist Norman Rockwell interpreted the speech with a series of paintings showing everyday Americans embodying liberation.

Seventy years later, with that dream so far from reality for so many in the US, artists Hank Willis Thomas, Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo and Wyatt Gallery have formed an artist collective called For Freedoms, an art-led civic organization “that centers art and creativity as a catalyst for transformative connection and collective liberation.” Their interpretation of Roosevelt’s vision outlines “justice, listening, healing and awakening” as the freedoms demanded by our modern social and political climate.

For Freedom’s latest offering is an exhibition at The Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, New York, titled Another Justice: US is Them. Curated by Hank Willis Thomas, it runs through November 6th. Last week, the museum partnered with global arts club The Cultivist and Chantecaille for an afternoon tour, inviting viewers to meditate on what justice must look like in this time of upheaval. It was led by Zoe Buckman, one of the featured artists whose work is shown alongside Hank, Pamela Council, Jeremy Dennis, Jeffery Gibson, Eric Gottesman,

Christine Sun Kim, Muna Malik, Joiri Minaya, Koyoltzintli Miranda-Rivadeneira, Kambul Olujimi and Marie Watt.



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, "A NEW CONSTELLATION," 2021



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, "REMEMBER ME (AMERIQUE FORMS IN SPACE)," 2022.

Part of a larger campaign by For Freedoms called ‘Another Justice: By Any Medium Necessary,’ the show spans both the Parrish galleries, and the museum grounds — showcasing a piece of Hank’s installed on the side of the building that reads ‘Remember Me’ in bold neon lights.

Within the galleries, highlights include Zoe’s embroidery work complicating feminism and sexual violence, Kambul’s watercolors of presidential assassins, textile works by Hank that reimagine the American flag, Christine’s wall paintings uplifting American Sign Language and sculptures by Pamela exploring her family ancestry.

The Indigenous artists of the group collaborated on a series of 62-foot digital billboards on the Shinnecock Monuments on Sunrise Highway, which also serve as an extension of the show. Most of these works were created for the exhibition, and all of these artists will be participating in a residency at the nearby Watermill Center, aligned with public programming and town halls with local community members around justice and equity. Their main aim is to actively bring the show’s message out into the community.

Robb Report

Artist Hank Willis Thomas Co-Curates a New Show Exploring the Fraying Fabric of America

On display this Saturday at the Parrish Art Museum, the show includes sculptures, paintings and photographs.

By JULIE BELCOVE



Jeff Vespa

Back in 2016, as the country's political divide cratered into an abyss against the backdrop of a bitter presidential contest, a quartet of art-world friends came together to found For Freedoms. Playing on Franklin Delano Roosevelt's famed "Four Freedoms" speech and Norman Rockwell's subsequent series of oil paintings celebrating the freedoms of speech and worship and freedoms from want and fear, the collective sought to promote more civic—and civil—engagement via art.

For Freedoms continued its mission through another election cycle, and now one of the founders, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, has co-curated Another Justice: US Is Them, an exhibition at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, NY, on view until November 6. "We believe artists often are on the forefront of critical thought in our society and are the ones who introduce us to ideas and concepts that we might otherwise be averse to," Thomas says. "This exhibition is just the beginning of that

conversation. We say good art asks questions and good design answers them, and the quality of questions dictates the quality of the answers."



An installation view of Hank Willis Thomas's Remember Me, 2020, white neon with black painted front
Courtesy of the Artist/Jack Shainman Gallery/Photo by Gary Mamay

The artworks span from sculptures and paintings to prints and photographs, and the exhibition even extends beyond the Parrish campus to the Shinnecock Monuments, 62-foot-tall electronic billboards owned by the Shinnecock Indian Nation on its ancestral land along what is now Sunrise Highway, where the work of several Indigenous artists, including Jeremy Dennis, Jeffrey Gibson, Koyoltzintli Miranda-Rivadeneira and Marie Watts, will be displayed. Dennis's contribution is pointedly titled Return Our Stolen Sacred Shinnecock Hills (2022). Thomas says it was a priority that Dennis, a member of the Shinnecock Nation, and other "voices of the local community" take part in the show.

Thomas's own pieces in the exhibition include Remember Me (2022), a 55-foot-long neon sign installed on the Parrish's façade since the late spring. Its words quote a postcard sent from a Black soldier during World War I and even replicate his penmanship. "It's a beautiful homage to people who served this country but often aren't recognized," says Corinne Erni, the senior curator at the Parrish who organized the show with Thomas and Carly Fischer.

Inside the Herzog & de Meuron–designed museum, Christine Sun Kim, who was born deaf, is making site-specific drawings based on sign language that will cover two facing walls, and Zoë Buckman will address violence against women with pieces such as like home like something (2022), for which she embroidered boxing gloves that dangle like festive ornaments. Several of Thomas's recent mazelike quilts stitched from scraps of American flags will also be on display; if you look closely at one, for example, it spells freedom. "The fabric of our nation seems to be fraying," he says, "and this investigation into the

various pathways and confusing methods we take to get to the ideals we subscribe to is what a lot of the work is attempting to reflect upon."

"This is a really good moment to reflect on what it means to be American," Erni adds, noting that one of Thomas's works is made with remnants of not only the Stars and Stripes but also prison uniforms.

Muna Malik, who was born in Yemen, immigrated to Minnesota at the age of 10 and now lives in Los Angeles, offers her own take on migration and American identity with abstract paintings inspired by current events. She rendered one piece during the US military's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan last summer and a second amid this past spring's spate of mass shootings. Malik says she painted the works not with the intention of exhibiting them but as an "emotional release."

"Essentially, the process is watching consistent news coverage and the stories being told about these major events that often have drastic outcomes for victims," she explains before becoming choked up. Thomas steps in: "So they're basically time capsules."

Despite the stereotype of artists holding progressive views, Thomas, who will also take part in a slate of public programs during a residency at the nearby Watermill Center beginning in September, is adamant that For Freedoms is nonpartisan and traces the left-wing/right-wing binary to the extremism of the French Revolution. "I feel that we are at a moment in our society where we have to reevaluate everything we know and the way we used to do things," he says. "The pandemic was an invitation into a new world and a new worldview. If we change the course of the future by one degree, it might give us millennia more of existence."

SAN ANTONIO CURRENT

San Antonio's McNay Art Museum adds 7-foot bronze snail sculpture to its outdoor collection

Hank Willis Thomas' History of the Conquest features a young girl perched atop an ornately decorated snail.

By Caroline Wolff on Tue, Jul 12, 2022 at 9:36 am



Courtesy of McNay Art Museum

Hank Willis Thomas, History of the Conquest, 2017. Bronze. Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Museum purchase with funds from Ben Foster in memory of Raye B. Foster, 2021.42.

San Antonio's McNay Art Museum recently unveiled the newest addition to its outdoor sculpture collection, which — despite possessing the likeness of a giant snail — has proven to be quite the

opposite of sluggish and mundane, drawing hoards of visitors with its monumental scale and eye-catching decorative shell.

Located in the museum's Mays Family Park, History of the Conquest by Hank Willis Thomas stands over 7 feet tall and features a young girl perched atop an ornately decorated snail, holding a bow in one hand and a pair of reins in the other. The snail's shell shines with a bronze finish and includes detailed engravings.

History of the Conquest is a reimagining of a 17th-century German sculpture — currently on display in the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut — and references Europe's profuse harvesting of the nautilus shell off the eastern coast of Africa.

"Thomas' sculpture is a captivating critique of the prejudiced, historical depictions of people of African descent," the McNay said in a press statement. "By enlarging the Wadsworth Atheneum's 17th-century sculpture to a grand scale and interpreting it in bronze, the artist simultaneously draws attention to past representations and reclaims them."

The sculpture's acquisition was made possible by a generous donation in memory of Raye B. Foster, a former McNay docent and member of the McNay Board of Trustees from 1998-2009.

The McNay's Head of Curatorial Affairs René Paul Barilleaux describes the acquisition of History of the Conquest as an important contribution to the museum's goal of "expanding its collection of artworks by contemporary artists of color — both indoors and outdoors."

It is the museum's first work in any medium by Hank Willis Thomas.

Black Power Afro pick sculpture is about as good as public art gets: Doug MacCash's review

"All Power to All People" was meant to help celebrate the Juneteenth holiday



A hair pick sculpture called "All Power to All People" by artist Hank Willis Thomas stands across the street from Gallier Hall in Lafayette Square park in New Orleans, Tuesday, June 21, 2022. (Photo by Sophia Germer, NOLA.com, The Times-Picayune | The New Orleans Advocate)

Sophia Germer

BY DOUG MACCASH | STAFF WRITER
JUN 20, 2022 - 1:59 PM

The gigantic steel sculpture of an Afro hair pick that appeared on St. Charles Avenue in the CBD last weekend is everything a public artwork ought to be. At 28 feet tall, the sculpture — decorated with a peace sign and topped by a clenched Black Power fist — demands attention and makes a clear statement that pretty much everyone can understand.

The towering piece, titled “All Power to All People” recalls a half-century of the Black Civil Rights Movement, from so-called radicals defiantly raising their fists in the 1960s to Black Lives Matter activists marching in the streets in recent years. And it does so with a whisper of wit, a nod to nostalgia and an evocation of peace.

Artist Hank Willis Thomas, the Brooklyn, New York-based artist who designed “All Power to All People,” was born in 1976. In a recorded statement, he said his grandmother was a hair stylist who “jammed” a pick through his hair to inflate it to the proper proportions. The pick had a Black Power fist on top.

“As a kid,” Thomas said, “I just thought of it as how you comb your hair.” But as he came of age, he recognized that the pick “was an icon of African American culture and history.”

The image of Grandma’s pick stuck in his head.

As an aspiring young artist, Thomas said he encountered, of all things, a four-story-tall clothespin in downtown Philadelphia. The absurd sculpture was by world-famous 1960s pop artist Claes Oldenburg, who created monuments devoted to the most ordinary stuff, like typewriter erasers, shuttlecocks and … clothespins.

Oldenburg’s oversized clothespin stuck in Thomas’ head, too.

A few years back, Thomas blended the pick and the clothespin concepts into a 9-foot preliminary version of his “All Power to All People” design. But it had to be bigger. “It has a different reverence when you have to look up to it or be in the shadow of it,” he said.

The towering “All Power to All People” artwork is part of a traveling exhibit of outdoor sculptures called the "Monumental Tour," which has had previous stops in Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland and even the Burning Man art fest in Black Rock, Nevada. The arrival of “All Power to All People” in New Orleans was meant to help celebrate the Juneteenth holiday and the upcoming Essence Festival.

"Monumental Tour" director Marsha Reid said she’s the one who chose the location of the big Afro pick. She said that Lafayette Square was perfect because there was no fence around it, so people had unfettered access, plus the park is frequented by locals instead of tourists, and it’s in the center of city politics, with the modern City Hall and the federal courts not far away.

She didn't have the old Gallier Hall on her mind when she positioned “All Power to All People,” Reid said. But in ways, Gallier Hall, located across the street, is the perfect backdrop.

The old City Hall was finished in the 1850s. It had doubtlessly been built with slave labor and was a signature piece of architecture of the pro-slavery society of the time. Its neoclassical design venerates ancient Greece and Rome, also slave states.



An enormous sculpture by Hank Willis Thomas, shown Saturday, June 19, 2022, in Lafayette Square in New Orleans, recalls the Black power movement of the 1960s, when silhouettes of hair picks and raised fists were symbols of racial identity and political activism.

STAFF PHOTO BY DOUG MacCASH

Which makes it — intentionally or not — a symbolic foil for a sculpture that speaks to the African identity of much of the population.

There's no erasing the past, of course. But you can certainly have a conversation with it, and that's just what's going on down on St. Charles Avenue right now. The city's picturesque streetcars rumble between the two aspects of history, the unchallenged White rule of the past, and the ongoing striving for Black equity.

In art terms, that dialogue is a beautiful thing.

And that means "All Power to All People" is a beautiful thing, too. On one hand, it's a smile-evoking selfie-op based on a ridiculously enlarged comb that was popular with a past generation. In a way, it's comforting. On the other hand, it's a spark plug of social issues that's not supposed to make us comfortable at all. As Picasso supposedly put it, good art "ought to bristle with razor blades."

Neither City Hall nor Reid would disclose the cost of the "Monumental Tour" project.

COMMENTARY

‘In the heart of their hug’: Hank Willis Thomas on his ‘Embrace’ tribute to the Kings

As part of the inaugural Embrace Ideas Festival, the artist spoke in depth about his long-awaited memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King. The 20-foot bronze sculpture is set to be unveiled on Boston Common on MLK Day next year.

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff, Updated June 16, 2022, 5:05 p.m.



Hank Willis Thomas, the artist behind "The Embrace," the long-awaited memorial to Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr., spoke at the ICA Wednesday as part of The Embrace Ideas Festival. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Hank Willis Thomas reclined in a plush armchair on stage Wednesday at the Institute of Contemporary Art and smiled. The artist, who conceived “The Embrace,” the enigmatic, towering 20-foot bronze memorial to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King destined for Boston Common next year, had just finished his first in-depth public discussion about the project. It was a long, animated, and often playful conversation with King Boston executive director Imari Paris Jeffries — “we became Zoom BFFs over the past couple of years,” Jeffries said — and the floor had opened for questions.

The occasion, King Boston’s inaugural Embrace Ideas Festival, was triumphant. After pandemic delays, the memorial’s installation was set: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2023. The crowd was expectant, the mood ebullient. The first question, about Thomas’s creative process for the piece, brought the artist forward in his chair. “The process,” he said and laughed, “was, ‘We’re never going to get this, so let me just come up with some ideas.’”

Thomas’s proposal for the King memorial, made jointly with Boston-based MASS Design Group, wasn’t exactly a surprise winner when it was chosen among a field of five finalists in a design competition held by King Boston, the memorial’s sponsor, three years ago. The proposal was both bold and unconventional, traits not typically associated with major public art commissions, which too often set the low bar of being the least challenging to the most people.



Hank Willis Thomas, the artist behind "The Embrace," the long-awaited memorial to Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr., spoke with King Boston Executive Director Imari Paris Jeffries at the ICA Wednesday as part of The Embrace Ideas Festival. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Thomas and MASS Design Group had great credentials, the artist with a history of frank, incisive work that digs at the heart of American racial division; and MASS Design Group with a portfolio of socially conscious projects, most prominently the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Ala., dedicated to the thousands of lives lost to racial violence in America. Still, Thomas had his doubts. Not showing his subjects' faces in a memorial, Thomas said, made their chances "one in a million. But here we are."

In an interview earlier that day, Thomas told the Globe that what made the piece a long shot, in his view, was also its core strength. "When we recognize that all storytelling is an abstraction, all representation is an abstraction, hopefully it allows us to be open to more dynamic and complex forms of representation that don't stick us to narrative that oversimplifies a person or their legacy, " he said. "And I think this work really tries to get to

the heart of that.”

A young Martin and Coretta met here in Boston in 1952 while she was a student at the New England Conservatory of Music and he was a doctoral student at Boston University. They were a pair of idealists with a vision to change the world, and “The Embrace” captures a major step on that path. Its source is a 1964 photograph taken right after Martin Luther King Jr. was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In a moment of elated exhaustion, the picture shows the beaming Martin slumping into Coretta’s arms; she holds him, eyes closed. The memorial renders in three dimensions the tangle of his and Coretta’s arms and his hands resting on her shoulder.





Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. hugs his wife, Coretta, during a news conference following the announcement that he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. BETTMANN

“I wanted to make something that really talked about love,” Thomas told the audience Wednesday. “I saw in that moment, how much of his weight was literally on top of her. And I thought that was a really symbolic idea: That she was literally holding his weight. And that’s true in so many relationships, and especially relationships of that era with men and women, where the wives had to carry the burden of the man who was getting the award.”

Thomas’s and Jeffries’s conversation was the keystone event of “The Saving Power of Culture,” the theme of the third day of the five-day festival, which also included a panel discussion on the changing nature of monuments amid the social upheavals of the day. Thomas explained how he chose to make an emotional portrait of the Kings, not a literal one, a profound decision that defies every convention of permanent public memorials. Off-the-rack monuments to “great men,” often on horseback, usually en route to or from one war or another — look around town; we have plenty — are the norm. “The Embrace,” with its couple entwined, debunks simplistic ideas about anyone being singular and achieving greatness alone.

Thomas, who grew up in New York and Washington, D.C., has spent a lot of time thinking

about art in the public sphere. "For Freedoms," his ongoing, artist-led collaboration with Eric Gottesman, Michelle Woo, and Wyatt Gallery, holds public forums and makes temporary interventions all over the country on billboards and overpasses, pinned to the political realities of the moment. "I think all art is activism," Thomas told the crowd. "I think all consciously lived lives are activism. If you wake up, and you say 'I am, and I can,' you're already an activist."

"The Embrace" — which is currently being fabricated at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington state — is different from anything he has done. It is prominent, destined for what's considered the oldest public park in the country; meant to be permanent, as memorials tend to be; and huge, big enough to pass underneath and see sky through its clenched arms. "That's really the core of it: When you walk inside of it, you will be in the heart of their hug," Thomas said.



Rendering of "The Embrace," the memorial monument and plaza dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King on Boston Common. The completed project, created by Hank Willis Thomas and Mass Design Group, will be installed early next year. DESIGN BY HANK WILLIS THOMAS AND MASS DESIGN GROUP. IMAGE BY MASS DESIGN GROUP.

Thomas remembers showing his first sketch to Michael Murphy, executive director of MASS Design Group. "The idea that we thought was least likely to get [chosen] was the one that spoke to our hearts," Thomas said. "It was this reality that the thing that scared us, that way

that it felt a little bit haunting, is why it felt like it was what needed to be made."

Thomas is willing to buck at least one more convention of the public memorial: permanence. "I think we have to ask: Will this be important in 100 years? When do we get to review this?" he said in conversation with Jeffries. "To create a greater balance and equity for future generations, [to] make sure that nothing is put up that doesn't have a question mark attached, about how it's contributing to society."

With more than half a year left before the piece is unveiled in its at-minimum very long-term home on the Common, he can allow himself a moment to exhale, and dream.

"There's something really amazing for me to think about these two young lovers, who met here in Boston, walking in that park, and for all I know, embracing steps away from where this monument will be, and having that resonate not only all over the world, but also throughout space and time," Thomas said. "And I hope that other young lovers will be walking in this space, and remember that when they embrace one another, that they also could be embracing the world."

Murray Whyte can be reached at murray.whyte@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @TheMurrayWhyte.

Show comments

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Believe It

— Art



April 20, 2022

I first came across the work of visual artist Hank Willis Thomas reading a book called Who We Be: The Coloriza- tion of America by Jeff Chang. The year was 2013 and, at the time, I was a community organizer in my hometown of Newark, New Jersey. But I was beginning to find limitations to the impact traditional models of organizing could have in my community. It was the beginning of a personal renaissance where I revisited Black art and images as a tool for helping to mend the psychological effects of years of neglect and abandonment and the disenfranchisement of American urban communities and their inhabitants by the powers that be. The first piece by Hank that I can honestly say I really appreciated was Strange Fruit, 2013. In it, there's a basketball player with a ball in hand hanging from a noose—an image that references the brutal history of lynching in America.

Growing up in an urban environment, sports and specifically basketball were very important to me in my formative years. In Hank's Branded series, I saw him posing similar questions that I was having about what it meant to be a Black man coming of age in America. Hank has continually returned to images of sports players and the peculiar role they inhabit in the American psyche throughout his practice. His work has continuously examined the complex relationship between sports, capitalism and the Black body, showcasing the glory associated with sports stardom, but also critiquing the power structures at play.

In Hank's Unbranded series, he deconstructs advertisements, showing how our identities as Americans are often shaped by the media and the roles corporations have prescribed to various racial, ethnic and gender groups. Look- ing at his artwork sparked within me a passion for looking beyond the surface, and questioning the purpose of vari- ous institutions, ideas and cultural practices that I previously never considered.

In 2015, I applied for a role in his studio, met Hank, and witnessed the brilliance of his mind and work in person. I was able to see firsthand how his artworks were created and get to know the small but passionate group of collabo- rators who worked with him at the time helping to bring his vision to reality. Working in the studio, I was given the opportunity to participate in a four-person team that toured his public art project, In Search Of the Truth, across 35 states and 43 cities during Donald Trump's first presidential run. Traveling around the country in a tour bus, engag- ing with Americans from all over, and meeting artists and curators from some of the country's most elite muse- ums opened up a new world of possibilities for me as a creative. It changed the way I perceived myself as a Black man, as an American, and even the way I perceived the concept of 'truth.'

My connection to Hank's work is much more than just an aesthetic conversation—it's about the ideas that engag- ing with his work has sparked within me. For me, interviewing Hank for this article is the culmination of a

practice in the future.





Coat LUAR, pants SUPREME NEW YORK, shoes DENIM TEARS X UGG, sunglasses FLATLIST

EMANN ODUFU—When I think of the evolution of your practice, it is constantly evolving, and you are always reinventing yourself and the type of work you create. Obviously, a framework permeates throughout your practice and your oeuvre. Still, I would like you to speak to your process of reinvention, especially when I look at your work from the late 2000s to now. Is this something that you're thinking about as you create, or does it natu - rally manifest as you change with the times?

HANK WILLIS THOMAS—For me, change is necessary for growth, and as the times are rapidly evolving, I also need to do that. The core of my work is still there, but the methods and mediums that I use to express the import - ant things have had to evolve. Also, who I'm talking to and how I'm speaking to them has changed by demand. I went from talking about brands in the early 2000s to creating brands through projects such as Question Bridge, For Freedoms and Truth Booth. They are all my own take on what a

and marketing and how our processes engage them.

EMANN ODUFU—Collaboration is something that is very important to your practice, even harkening back to In Search of the Truth, which was a collaboration between you and three other artists. With For Freedoms, Writ - ing on the Wall, and the Wide Awakes, the work you did took this collaborative aspect to a whole new level. One of your works that comes to mind is from your I am a man series, specifically the piece that says, 'I am many.' Especially when working in your studio, I noticed that your work was the product of a village of creatives and collaborators working to capture your vision. What is the importance of collaboration and community in your practice?

HANK WILLIS THOMAS—Everything we do in life is a collaboration because no one lives or works in a vacuum. A lot of the ways in which we talk about our lives are as if we're the only ones affected by whatever we're expe - riencing. So, I've always collaborated with other artists in addition to making my own work, to remind myself and others who I care about—and even people I don't know—that we all have a stake in what each other does. Creativity is an outlet and opportunity for us to think about ourselves, the things we care about and each other differently. EO—From my perspective, that process of collaboration evolved into something even larger with works like For Freedoms and the Wide Awakes, which were these mass collaborations that sparked a national movement. I'm curious to know why you, as an artist, decided to create these works?





Jacket TELFAR, pants and shoes BALENCIAGA

HWT—For Freedoms and the Wide Awakes were inspired by my desire to work with and celebrate the work of other artists. With For Freedoms, we did activations in exhibi- tion halls and a national billboard campaign that allowed us to engage audiences that none of us individually could reach. We did this by engaging billboards and public space as an artistic medium. The Wide Awakes built on this idea because it is not an organization. Instead, it is a very loose and organic collective. It was a more liberated attempt at doing the same things we were doing with For Freedoms. But there was no centrality to the collab- oration this time, so all the participants were creating it. There's an excitement to that. There's also no barrier to entry or gatekeepers. The only gatekeeper is the person themselves.

EO—How do you balance being a fine artist and being concerned with the formal applications of the creative process with your burgeoning role as an activist, a community builder, and even as a political voice?

HWT—I do that through working with the people in my studio. I'm also collaborating outside of my studio in the streets of the world and on the Internet. The people in my studio help me focus on maintaining and clarifying the messages in my work. That is an aesthetic conver- sation as well as a content conversation.

EO—Well, whatever you're doing, it's working. The seeds that you and your creative team are planting have been harvested to make an impact that

the collec- tions of esteemed museums and influential collectors. So, what keeps you motivated to go into the studio and keep creating? What's inspiring you at this moment?

HWT—I read a book in 2019 called Finite and Infinite Games by James Carse, which really helped me to understand my purpose. Carse talks about finite games as being played for the purpose of winning and infinite games as being played for the purpose of continuing the play. A finite game is to be won by someone, and it must come to a definite end. An infinite game is a vision of life as play and possibility. So, I realized that I'm play- ing an infinite game and I am not trying to win. I'm trying to stay in a state of play. We live in a world with the illusion that there is some form of finality, and for me, play- ing an infinite game is continuing to expand and chal- lenge the limitations of the world that you know and the person you are. That's what keeps me going. When we say we're going to take an inflatable speech bubble across the country where strangers would come and share their truths, there's not really any finite rewards. The reward is the journey. The exhibition is an artifact, but the artwork is the actual journey itself.

EO—One thing I'm thinking about consistently is how the creative world has drastically transformed in the past 20 years. In my opinion, there are no boxes—or fewer boxes for creatives—and the lines between creative realms are blurring. Artists are not staying in one lane anymore, and the best example of that is probably Kanye West. He started off making music, and now he's a leader in fashion and breaking into the tech world. Even for you, I see you existing between creative fields and between realms. Can you speak to this changing atmosphere? What opportunities does it bring for a multifaceted creative like yourself?

"What is for sale are the complex ideas that are at

HWT—The world is constantly changing. I think you're right that the past 20 years have appeared to be radi- cally and rapidly evolving, asking each of us to reeval- uate who we are, what we are, what we do and how we do it. But I don't think that's limited to the creative field. From my experience, it's how we're experiencing gender, how we're experiencing race, how we're experiencing class, even how we're experiencing nationality. Over the past 20 years, the way we look at things that have been relatively fixed has become much more complicated. I don't separate the way that I live and what I do into work and not work or art and not art. It's all my life. I'm an eclectic person who has a broad range of interests, and this is something that a lot of people of African descent negotiate. We negotiate being multifaceted, complex people and being expected to conform or live within a box already prescribed for us. I don't think that's just people of African descent, but I think that the pressure of the box feels more confining for many of us in this country. So, for me and I imagine many others, excelling outside of the place where we first gained 'validity' is a way of finding some form of liberation or emancipation.

EO—I really dig that answer. I want to delve into your recent exhibition, The New Black Aesthetic. We've talked a little bit about this before, but throughout your practice, you often return to images of sports players, examining the complex relationship between the sports industry and Black men. In some of my favorite works of yours, especially the older pieces, you made powerful critiques on the sports industry. Your Liberty sculpture almost presents a different perspective when you look at it—it's more of an uplifting or aspirational type of feeling that I get from looking at it. On one end, you're celebrating the upward mobility created through these athletes' ascent into superstardom. On the other end, we see a critique of the power structures that permeate them. Can you speak to this duality and the nuanced way you enjoy and participate in the spectacle of sports, or I guess any system, while also understanding some of the deeper implications?

HWT—This question makes me think of Guy Debord's book, The Society of Spectacle. In it, he describes the spectacle or what we would call the modern-day media machine as an instrument to distract and pacify the

human interaction. Carce says 'the spectacle is not a collection of images rather, it is a social relation among people, mediated by images.' [Debord's] book is a multi- faceted and shifting gaze on the spectacle and spec- tator. It embodies some of my thoughts in a lifelong process of finding myself in relation to the spectacle of sports and the NBA and any other spectacle in which I might be participating. In my work, I'm engaging in this conversation, acknowledging the allure of the spectacle and breaking down these symbols and images to help the viewer and myself make sense of what you called 'the deeper implications.'

EO—When I applied for a role in your studio years ago, I remember stating that I saw you as the 'Black Rich- ard Prince' in my cover letter. I'm not sure if you read the cover letters or if someone else read them...

HWT—No, I read the cover letters.

EO—I like to think that was part of the reason why you guys were like, 'Okay, we'll give him a shot.' Obviously, you and Richard Prince have entirely different practices. Still, I think I was speaking to the ability you just referenced to take images and symbols that are recognizable in our society, deconstructing them in a way that questions the way our world operates. I view you as a social psycholo- gist and even a cultural healer. In a hundred years, when we look back at your practice, what impact do you want it to have on people on a social and psychological level?

HWT—Isn't it enough to just be remembered? That's my answer to that question, but I can expand on it.

EO—I would absolutely love for you to expand on it!

HWT—One hundred years from now, will there even be a world as we know it, based on the catastrophic forecasts we are learning about? I want people to be alive, safe and healthy in a society where the work that I/we make is still relevant. If those circumstances exist, I would hope they are somewhat proud of who we are and what we have done. Think about it: this generation knows that the world is overpopulated and that our lifestyles are creat ing irreparable harm to all future societies. This gener ation has had more privilege than any other generation of human beings collectively, yet has not overcome the desire to kill and maim other human beings and has

my work, which is my life, I would love for future genera tions to think that I cared about them... But it would also be enough just to be remembered.



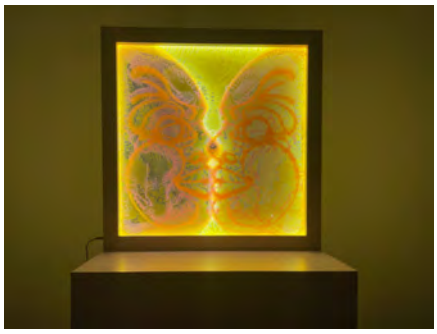
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Art

Opaque News

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OPINION

REDESIGNING AMERICA'S FLAG

Six New Takes on Old Glory

This essay is part of “Snap Out of it, America!,” a series exploring bold ideas to revitalize and renew the American experiment.

The American flag is a potent piece of national iconography, but its design shifted frequently until the early 1900s. What if it were redesigned today? We asked artists and graphic designers to try. The flags they came up with reflect a mix of approaches. Some are functional designs, others artistic renderings; some represent America as it could be, others how the artist sees the country now.



Hank Willis Thomas
“Lift Every Voice and Sing”
Black lives matter
Don’t tread on me
In God we trust
A thin blue line
Under God, our vindicator
Keep America great
Progress pride

PHILLY VOICE

SEPTEMBER ,

Monumental Tour features sculptures examining themes from Black history

Four temporary art installations can be found throughout Center City through January



BY **HANNAH KANIK**
PhillyVoice Staff

The traveling onumental Tour landed in Philadelphia this week, bringing art that honors African

American history to iconic landmarks across the city.

culptures from Arthur afa, oby ennedy, hristopher yers and Hank Willis Thomas will be on display until an. 1 at four locations near the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and elaware iver waterfront.

indred Arts, the tour organi ers, said the works examine themes of coloni ation, oppression, privilege, Black middle-class labor and Black pride.

The sculptures delve into various aspects of the African American experience, "from the first slaves brought over in the 1 th century to the present-day prison pipeline, and the struggle of liberation in between," according to a press release.

Philadelphia is the sixth stop on the nationwide tour, but this marks the first time that the four sculptures are being displayed at the same time.

The tour also will showcase ulian Francis Abele, Philadelphia's first African American architect who helped design iconic buildings like The Philadelphia useum of Art.

ichael pain, director of education at the enter for Architecture and esign, will host a walking audio tour through all of the featured sculptures.

Here is a look at the featured sculptures



COURTESY/ALBERT YEE

'All Power to All People,' by Hank Willis Thomas is located on Eakins Oval, near the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"All Power to All People"

Hank Willis Thomas' sculpture, "All Power to All People," is a 28-foot tall Afro pick with the Black Power salute emerging from the handle. Its title is a reference to the Black Panther Party slogan.

Thomas, a conceptual artist, said the piece is a symbol of community, strength, perseverance, comradeship and belonging. He has had work exhibited across the country and abroad.

The sculpture is on display at Eakins Oval, 2451 Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

WHYY PBS npr
PLAN PHILLY

Traveling 'Monumental Tour' brings art to four iconic Philly spots

By Ximena Conde · September 21, 2021



Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People" stands 28 feet tall and weighs 24,000lbs. It is installed in Eakins Oval as part of the Monumental Tour, made up of four large sculptures installed in celebrated public places. (Albert Yee/Kindred Arts)

A touring exhibition designed to challenge colonial ideas of power, community, and incarceration has landed in Philadelphia, bringing four art pieces to some of the city's most prominent public spaces.

The pieces that make up the "Monumental Tour" have rotated through New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, and other cities. The traveling art aims to affirm people across Philadelphia's diverse communities while creating spaces where those willing can learn about other lived experiences. This is the project's second stop in Philadelphia.



Kindred Arts Director Marsha Reid, who curated Monumental Tour, speaks at the unveiling of Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People" on Eakins Oval. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Familiar to the city will be a 28-foot-tall Afro pick with raised fist capping the handle. A symbol of "community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and belonging," the pick sits on the base of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway with the Art Museum as the backdrop. Named "All Power to All People," the sculpture by artist Hank Willis Thomas was first seen in 2017 as part of the Monument Lab project.

Parks and Rec unveiled its Parkway installation Tuesday. It brought a jolt of new energy to a historic space steeped in old ideas of institutional power and now undergoing a long-awaited reinvention.

Commissioner of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Kathryn Ott Lovell said it's only tting to have "All Power to All People" on the parkway as the department tries to make it a vehicle for community building and civic expression. e exhibit is a reminder art should enhance the aesthetic of shared spaces, while challenging previously held assumptions, said Ott Lovell.

The New York Times

Getting Soccer Fans Into Art? That's the Goal.

A new gallery at the stadium of Tottenham Hotspur, a top London club, is presenting contemporary works to visitors, with mixed results.



By Alex Marshall

Aug. 16, 2021

LONDON — Annie Lawrence, 8, was looking excited on Sunday afternoon. She was about to see Tottenham Hotspur, the soccer team she supports, play its first game of the English Premier League season — but her exhilaration wasn't entirely because of the impending game.

Lawrence was standing in OOF, a gallery dedicated to art about soccer that opened last month in a building attached to the club's stadium gift shop. Some of the works on display seemed to be making her as happy as a Tottenham win.

OOF's opening show, "Balls" (until Nov. 21) features 17 pieces of contemporary art made using soccer balls, or representing them. There's one made out of concrete, and another in silicon that looks like it's covered in nipples.

Pointing at a huge bronze of a deflated ball by Marcus Harvey, Lawrence said, "I'd like that one in my bedroom." The artist said in a phone interview that the work might evoke anything from Britain's decline as an imperial power to the end of childhood.

Yet for Lawrence, its appeal was simpler: "It looks like you could sit in it, like a couch," she said.



"Endless Column III," a 2017 work by Hank Willis Thomas, on display in the exhibition space, which is called OOF. Alex Ingram for The New York Times

CHICAGODEFENDER
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Arts and Culture

The Monumental Tour Art Exhibition Comes to Englewood.

Danielle Sanders, Interim Managing Editor
June 24, 2021

When people speak of the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago, they rarely mention art, culture, walking trails, or sustainable food. Anton Seals, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Grow, Greater Englewood is working to change that.ÀWith the Monumental Tour, an outdoor installation featuring the works of acclaimed artist, Hank Willis Thomas, and Arthur Jafa, Anton Seals hopes this latest project continues to lift and empower the Englewood community.

On display until the end of August, Hank Williams Thomas, “All Power to All People” will be located in Englewood Square at 5801 S. Halsted and Arthur Jafa’s “Big Wheel” will be in Bronzeville at the Blanc Gallery at 4445 S. Martin Luther King Jr., Drive.ÀThe monumental tour is a national tour that brings iconic monuments across the United States for the purposes of advancing the demand for racial equity.

Hank Willis Thomas’ *All Power to All People* is a provocative artwork combining the Afro pick and the Black Power salute, both icons of Black identity and empowerment. At approximately 28 feet tall, the work stands as a symbol of community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and belonging. The sculpture’s title references a legendary Black Panther Party slogan—its arrival to Chicago, where the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party was headquartered, is a celebration of Chicago’s contribution to civic engagement and the advancement of social justice. *All Power to All People* is illustrative of the artist’s longstanding investigation into the role public art plays in shaping collective discourse and societal values.

“Art has always been the dialogue of revolution, pushing urgent issues to the forefront of culture,” said Marsha Reid, Director of Kindred Arts. “We believe these monumental symbols of identity and empowerment, by Thomas and Jafa, have a critical role to play in our historical moment in time.”

Arthur Jafa’s *Big Wheel* is a spacious, yearning, and open-ended installation comprising four gargantuan, seven-foot tires originally made for monster trucks. Each is laced with a mesh of iron chain; in lieu of hubcaps, abstract medallion sculptures are 3-D printed from melted chains. Like industrial chakras, they manifest Jafa’s obsession with the culture of monster vehicles that has fascinated him since his Mississippi childhood. The heavy manufacturing evokes America’s economic changes, notably the deindustrialization and transition to the service economy



that Jafa’s generation watched unfold and that dashed so many Black middle-class aspirations. The installation features a sound component consisting of a loop of Teddy Pendergrass ballads that emit from floor speakers. The songs are as much an authentic product of late-industrial America as are the tires and gantry.

“Wide Awakes Chicago’s intention is to respect the value of Black spaces by placing the artists’ works directly within the sight of residents from the Bronzeville and Englewood communities,” said Wide Awakes Chicago member, Mario Smith. “The Chicago leg of *Monumental* will also spark dialogue and reintroduce some of Chicago’s finest visual artists, DJs, and musicians to the city as we begin to reopen.”

Established in 2014, Grow Greater Englewood works to build a community in which all people can live safe, happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives, now and into the future. Grow Greater Englewood is a social enterprise that works with residents and developers to create sustainable, food economies and green businesses to empower residents to create wellness and wealth. Anton Seals spoke about the importance of the Monumental tour in the Englewood community saying, “when this opportunity came, we wanted to be able to toy with this notion of what does it mean, to have black spaces. So, this becomes an opportunity. We started in the farmers market there on Halsted, which used to be a big vacant lot. There is beauty in our own community, and we just do not want to talk about it, we must demonstrate it.ÀIn addition, we have a farm, we are building with Chicago architecture biennial site as well. There will be a plaza area that we are in the middle of constructing that will be on the other side near Halsted. So, there is a lot that is going to be synergized. We thought this all power

to all people would be a good conversation starter for drawing attention to what does it mean to have black spaces”?

He continued saying, “with the MonumentalTour, just having these black artists of note display their pieces in our communities, that is significant. These artists sell their pieces for millions of dollars, and they are on display around the world but for them, they said, yeah that is nice but what does that do for the black aesthetic? That is our responsibility, but it is also a mirror back to the community.ÀWhat is it that we really want and what is already here and how do we connect those dots?ÀThat is where people who are weavers, like me, come in.ÀI am a weaver. I am a leader, but I am also a weaver. I like to weave and bring and create platforms for others and institutions because that is the only way that we are going to survive”.

Those interested in learning more about the Monumental Tour can visit the exhibit virtually at Àwww.monumentaltour.org or in-person from a motor vehicle. For more information on Grow Greater Englewood visit www.growgreaterenglewood.org.

OBSERVER

An Open Letter Signed by Hank Willis Thomas Asks the U.S. to Take in Afghan Artists

By Helen Holmes · 08/25/21 10:52am



A Taliban fighter walks past a beauty salon in Kabul on August 18, 2021. WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images

In the wake of reports that the Taliban has unilaterally taken over Afghanistan, prompting thousands of people to desperately attempt to leave the country and sparking dire worries about Afghanistan's cultural heritage, over 350 artists and cultural figures have signed an open letter imploring the United States to make moves to protect Afghan creatives. Published on Tuesday, the letter, which was put together by the Arts for Afghanistan group, has been signed by luminaries including Hank Willis Thomas, Susan Meiselas, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz and Coco Fusco. The document also includes suggestions in terms of concrete steps American officials can take in order to "facilitate the departure from Afghanistan of at-risk Afghans, and to include artists, filmmakers, performers, and writers in that category."

For example, the letter suggests that the US government "immediately include cultural workers in the categories being used to refer at-risk Afghans for evacuation lists," and "keep the Kabul airport open until all at-risk Afghans who wish to evacuate have done so, and allow chartered, commercial, and humanitarian flights to operate out of the airport under the protection of the US."

"Even before the Taliban's takeover, cultural workers took grave risks in depicting the experiences and articulating the aspirations of Afghans, with the encouragement—and, often, direct support—of the US government," the letter reads. "Now, the vocation of truth-telling has become much more dangerous, and many of our peers see no choice but to leave the country."

Indeed, Afghans and other cultural commentators alike have already expressed concern that Afghanistan's new regime could negatively impact cultural artifacts and cultural workers. "We're all waiting to see what the general position is going to be," Bastien Varoutsikos, the director of an organization that digitizes vulnerable heritage sites, told *The Art Newspaper* recently. "From a political standpoint, it's unclear if the Taliban will engage in destructions of high value heritage landmarks considering the new narrative they're attempting to build."

ARTFORUM



Demonstrators in Rotterdam rally on behalf of Afghans protesting and fleeing the Taliban. Photo: Donald Trung Quoc Don/Wikipedia Commons.

August 25, 2021 at 5:16pm

HUNDREDS OF ARTISTS SIGN OPEN LETTER CALLING FOR US TO OFFER ASYLUM TO AFGHAN CULTURE WORKERS

More than 350 cultural workers including artists Coco Fusco, Joyce Kozloff, Susan Meiselas, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz, Martha Rosler, Hank Willis Thomas, Cecilia Vicuña, and Martha Wilson, as well as writers Teju Cole, Hari Kunzru, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Lynne Tillman, have lent their signatures to a fiery open letter from Arts for Afghanistan demanding that the US government "do everything in its power" to assist at-risk Afghans fleeing the country in an attempt to escape the newly ascendant Taliban rule. According to the authors of the letter, released August 24, the members of this group—among them artists, curators, writers, filmmakers, and performers—were in a precarious position even before the militant Islamist coalition's

swift rise to power, thanks to their efforts in illuminating Afghans' daily lives and aspirations often with the approval and assistance of the US government, which has now effectively abandoned them.

In the letter, Arts for Afghanistan calls for the US government to expedite visas for cultural workers and drop the stipulation that the visas be processed in a third country. Reaching out to countries beyond the United States, the missive's writers additionally "call on governments of all nations to facilitate the evacuation and resettlement of Afghan refugees by offering asylum and aid," asserting, "We insist on the protection of all who have devoted themselves to fostering free expression and civil society in Afghanistan."

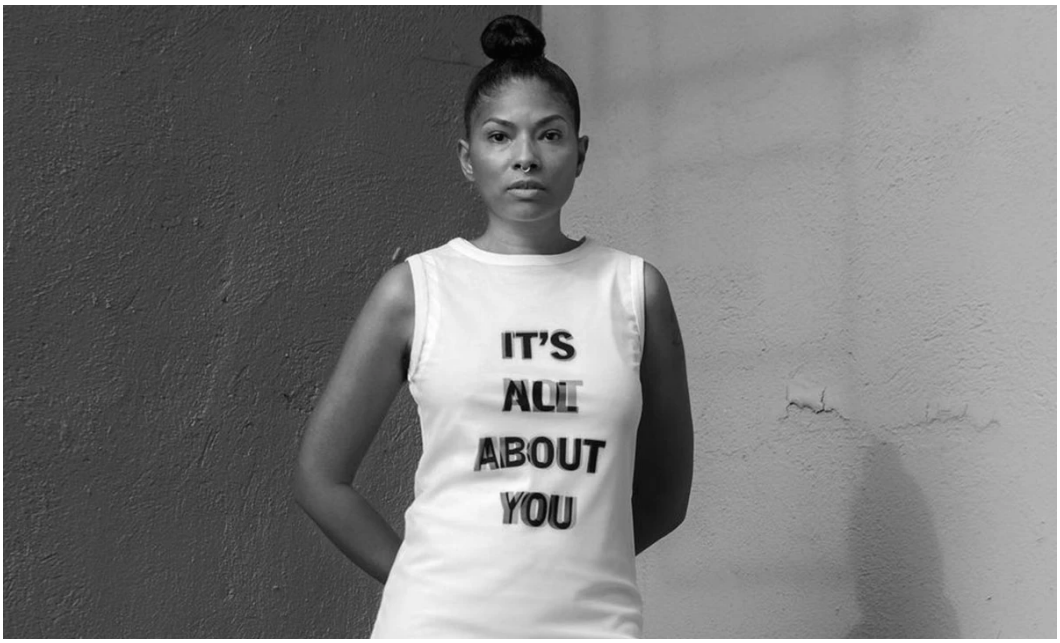
"Art is a proxy for humanity," said Eric Gottesman, a political scientist and one of the letter's coauthors. "As we can see unfolding in real time in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world, the voices of artists are considered dangerous because they speak truth to power."

Also signing the missive were arts and humanitarian organizations the Authors Guild, CECArtsLink, Creative Capital, For Freedoms, Magnum Foundation, and PEN America, the last of which recently called on the US government to protect its writers in Afghanistan after two Pen Afghanistan members were murdered by the Taliban.

ILLINOIS NEWS LIVE

Helmut Lang and Hank Willis Thomas announce limited collection

. davidloudos • 2 weeks ago



Good style usually follows a subtle line between being yourself and appealing to your appearance.New collection by Helmut Lang And conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas did the difficult task of encapsulating this constant pull and pull.

Named "It's All About You / It's Not About You," this exclusive collection is inspired by Thomas' 2010 lenticular work, "It's All About You." The words "It's All About You" and "It's Not About You" are displayed in block letters on 10 points of hoodies, T-shirts, and dresses, and different messages emerge depending on the position of the viewer.

These changing messages are expressed by a unique garment technique inspired by the Spring 2004 Helmut Lang Reverse Cowboy T-shirt.

"Helmut Lang has developed a technology that changes what people see, based on their physical relationship with the person wearing the shirt," said Thomas. WWD"Invite viewers to think about how their position affects what they see."

Limited collection released today June 3rd HelmutLang.com15% of the proceeds from this collection will be donated to the Incarceration Nations Network, a think tank focused on global prison reform efforts.

Helmut Lang and Hank Willis Thomas announce limited collection.

COOL HUNTING®

CULTUREWORKS' MILESTONE, IN-PERSON FRIEZE NEW YORK PROGRAMMING

WIDE AWAKES, ANTWAUN SARGENT, THE PHILIP GLASS ENSEMBLE, TOM OF FINLAND AND MORE ANCHORED A WEEK OF IN-PERSON EVENTS

David Graver 11 May 2021

Tracey Ryans, Tanya Selvaratnam, Hank Willis Thomas, Larry Ossei-Mensah

Frieze New York did more than put people in front of art, together, after we all spent 14 months at home. The acclaimed fair and its ancillary events allowed people to find inspiration, contribute to conversations and recreate a sense of community for those eager to gather safely. At the forefront, CultureWorks, the union of the collaborative creative space NeueHouse and future-forward photo museum Fotografiska, championed the return to in-person events with powerful talks, riveting performances and private dinners that proved New York's broader curatorial scene no longer remains dormant.



As Fotografiska welcomed guests to the opening off its glossy, often candy-colored Miles Aldridge exhibition, it also hosted a standout talk by author and Gagosian director Antwaun Sargent, as well as a dinner to celebrate the Tom of Finland Foundation and its "Darkroom" presentation. Fotografiska also activated its hidden cocktail-haven, Chapel Bar, and glowing fine-dining restaurant, Verōnika. Programming at NeueHouse started with many people's first in-person panel discussion in more than a year, which was delivered by members of the Wide Awakes. The change-making, open-source network brought such gravity to their talk, it empowered guests, who were timid at first to be in a room with so many others (even though we all wore masks).

Chief Brand Officer of NeueHouse and Fotografiska, Jon Goss tells us that this thoughtful and joyous conversation—between Hank Willis Thomas, Larry Ossei-Mensah, Tracey Ryans and Tanya Selvaratnam—came to be a part of their Frieze roster because "art and activism have always been a pillar of NeueHouse's cultural programming DNA. Cognizant of the importance of art in advancing social causes and our relationship with some of the founders of the Wide Awakes, we wanted to support their mission to 'create a new culture in pursuit of liberation.'" In collaboration with the Wide Awakes, NeueHouse will continue to produce a series of roundtable discussions "featuring prominent creatives to explore current cultural, political and societal topics and themes" which they'll then share through NeueJournal.



Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy of BFA

"This first talk in our new Madison Square Gallery space—with Hank, Larry, Tanya and Tracey—was a free-flowing and empowering conversation to witness in non-digital form, and truly lived up to the moment," Goss says. It's a sentiment with which we concur. He adds, "NeueHouse spaces

The Tribute to Vision & Justice is more than just a section, it's a fair-wide project. More than 50 art galleries and institutions will focus on showing artwork that deals with justice as a tribute to Lewis, an art history professor at Harvard University, and her work with the Vision & Justice Project.

It's an education and art platform she founded, which takes its inspiration from Frederick Douglass' civil war speech Pictures and Progress, centering in on the power of images to create a new vision for the country.



▲ Sarah Elizabeth Lewis. Photograph: Stu Rosner

“I see professor Lewis’ role as a scholar and educator, and as the founder of the project, being honored because of her work,” said Loring Randolph, the director of programming at Frieze New York.

“She is also an inspiration as an intellectual mind, a trailblazer, a professional, and hopefully by paying tribute to her and to the Vision & Justice Project, her mission becomes more visible and more heard.”

To Lewis, museums are integral for defining and redefining the narratives that shape history. But art fairs?

They are typically where one goes to buy art. For heady theory, that’s biennale territory. Go to Mainfesta or Documenta if you want to think. “This is not just about the fair, but about looking all around us,” said Randolph.

Lewis is not necessarily a guest curator, but each gallery is responding to the questions she’s asking with her project. “I’m young, in terms of academia. The tribute feels - I was startled by it,” said Lewis. “The only way I found to engage others was to pay tribute to those before me.”

There will be talks based on justice and new commissioned artworks by Carrie Mae Weems and Hank Willis Thomas. Pieces by Wynton Marsalis, Ava DuVernay and others will be on view.

The project is known for hosting ongoing discussions on topics related to images with mass incarceration, civic engagement and the arts, as well as algorithmic bias and the environment. In one talk, Chelsea Clinton discusses the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.



▲ Melvin Edwards, Song of the Broken Chain, 2020. Photograph: Valerie Shaff/Image courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associate

Lewis, who served on Barack Obama's National Arts Policy Committee, and is known for bringing the project into the spotlight in 2016, when she guest edited an issue of the photography magazine Aperture, entitled Vision & Justice. In response, the magazine issue helped inspire a conversation in American arts about the role of photography in race and justice.

"The overwhelming success of the project shows just how willing multitudes of people need and want to be a part of the conversation around equity and justice in our society right now," said photographer Dawoud Bey. "It also provides a sense of how rigorous art practice and work with a strong social content are not mutually exclusive."

Lewis helps the public understand the roots of visual literacy in relation to African American civic life, and that visual images can be an agent for change with the narratives of black life. "It's thinking of the social function of the arts historically and over time," she explains.

It all started as a class at Harvard. When Lewis stood before her Vision & Justice class, a jam-packed room of 300 students, one of the key things she initially asked was: "What is our nation of arts and culture for enlarging our notion of who counts and who belongs in society?"



▲ Dawoud Bey – Braxton McKinney and Lavon Thomas, Birmingham, Alabama, 2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

And: “If representation is a fundamental right in democracy, what is the function of visual representation in that work?”

“It’s a question you can ask over centuries when you think about the inception of citizenship through the Naturalization Act of 1790,” Lewis explains. “Where do you see culture shifting narratives? Who counts and who belongs?”

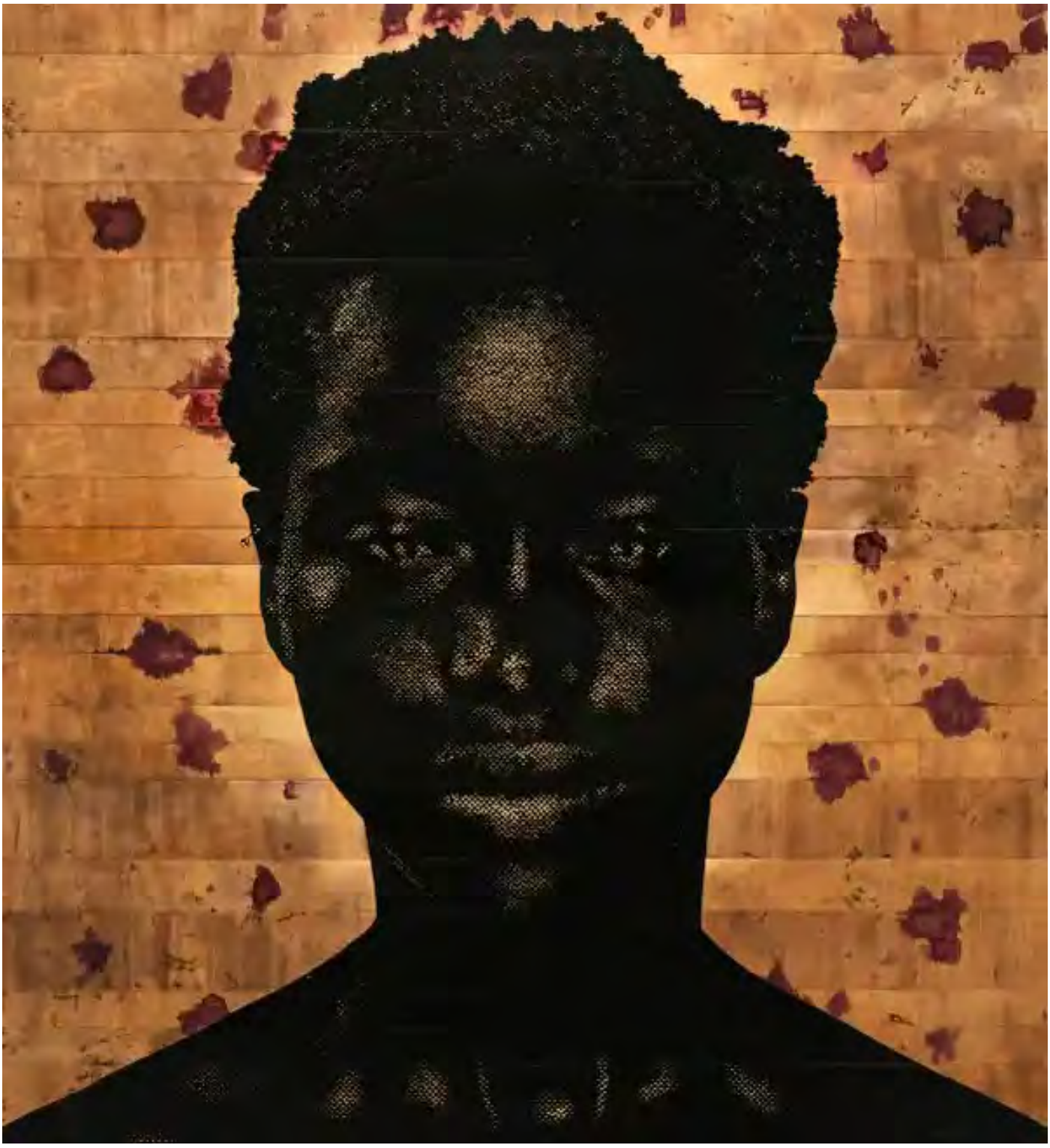
By asking these questions, it points her audience to a set of artworks, events, case studied, history and artistic practices.

“These are fundamental questions I’m asking students, and it’s a fundamental question to the Vision & Justice Project,” said Lewis. “And now at Frieze art fair through the tribute effect.”

She isn’t the curator of the fair but part of an overarching theme. “What interested me was seeing what galleries themselves would offer in response to this prompt to engage with the Vision & Justice Project,” said Lewis. “What you have on display is precisely that. I think that’s a better snapshot of our current moment in cultural history.”

David Zwirner gallery’s booth is showing artworks by Stan Douglas, whose Penn Station’s Half Century project illustrates the liberation of Angelo Herndon, a black coal

miner and social activist for workers' rights, who was arrested for possession of communist literature in the 1930s. He wrote a book at the age of 24 called Let Me Live.



▲ Alexis Peskine – Sequita, 2020. Photograph: Courtesy of October Gallery

London art gallery Tiwani Contemporary is hosting a zoom discussion between artist Dawit L Petros and academic Teresa Fiore on the topic of Italy's historic relationship with Africa.

The New Museum features a curatorial video tour of their current exhibition, Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America, while the Museum of Modern Art's Forum on Contemporary Photography pays tribute to Carrie Mae Weems in a two-hour discussion featuring Thelma Golden, among others, talking about the impact the artist has on contemporary culture.

"Carrie Mae Weems, in her art-making practice, is a 21st-century oracle," said Lewis. "She makes images we need to see that speak to our common humanity. She shows how artists innovate forms that can go past rational arguments to get us to see our common humanity.

"This is the first art fair in the midst of a pandemic in the US, it sends an enormous and powerful signal around how we consider the force and advocacy of platforms, going forward," said Lewis. "Can we use an art fair to gather around with the central questions for our day? I hope that we can. I hope this isn't a one-off. I hope what Loring Randolph has done can hopefully create new models of gatherings in the arts, going forward."

Smartphones have clearly changed our relationships to images, digital or otherwise. This iteration of Frieze New York invites viewers to step back, slow down and think again about what we see. The takeaway is how we reflect on art.

"It's often a private encounter with something that has aesthetic force that can change your perceptions of the world and the narratives you use to describe it," said Lewis. "That private encounter usually leads to the public work of justice. And that can happen, even at an art fair."

OCULA

Hank Willis Thomas to Exhibit NBA Quilts Ahead of All-Star Game

By Sam Gaskin
Cleveland
17 February 2022

Hank Willis Thomas will show quilts sewn together from NBA jerseys in an exhibition that opens in Cleveland from 17 to 20 February.

The exhibition, which anticipates the NBA All-Star Game on Sunday 20 February, includes six quilts depicting basketball greats and one large-scale stainless steel sculpture.

The quilts portray basketball greats Kobe Bryant, Wilt Chamberlain, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Bill Russel, and Jerry West, whose silhouette was used to create the current NBA logo in 1969.

The Jerry West work, entitled That's Game (2021), was commissioned by the NBA and online sports magazine Bleacher Report last year in celebration of the organisation's 75th anniversary. That work sparked the creation of the other five, which were created independently by Thomas.

The exhibition's sculpture is a large version of the artist's Liberty sculpture, a disembodied arm spinning a basketball on a single finger, which was inspired by a 1986 Life Magazine photograph that showed Harlem Globetrotter Meadowlark Lemon performing the same trick in front of the Statue of Liberty.

Sport and its influence on our identities is a major focus of Thomas's work. In 2017, for instance, he made a series of quilts from soccer jerseys using designs based on warrior flags made by Ghana's Fante people in response to the arrival of Europeans.

The exhibition's title, The New Black Aesthetic, comes from a 1989 essay by Trey Ellis, who described the emergence of a new cultural identity informed by the success of African American athletes, artists, and academics.

The New Black Aesthetic exhibition will be held at the Caxton Building, just three blocks from Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse where the All-Star Game will be played. —[O]

Sewn together from NBA jerseys, the quilts portray Kobe Bryant, Wilt Chamberlain, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Bill Russel, and Jerry West.



Hank Willis Thomas, *No. 8* (2021). Mixed media including NBA jerseys. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Erika Kapin.



Hank Willis Thomas, *No. 13* (2021). Mixed media including NBA jerseys. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph: Erika Kapin.



OPINION

REDESIGNING AMERICA'S FLAG

Six New Takes on Old Glory

This essay is part of “Snap Out of it, America!,” a series exploring bold ideas to revitalize and renew the American experiment.

The American flag is a potent piece of national iconography, but its design shifted frequently until the early 1900s. What if it were redesigned today? We asked artists and graphic designers to try. The flags they came up with reflect a mix of approaches. Some are functional designs, others artistic renderings; some represent America as it could be, others how the artist sees the country now.



Hank Willis Thomas
“Lift Every Voice and Sing”
Black lives matter
Don’t tread on me
In God we trust
A thin blue line
Under God, our vindicator
Keep America great
Progress pride

PHILLY VOICE

SEPTEMBER ,

Monumental Tour features sculptures examining themes from Black history

Four temporary art installations can be found throughout Center City through January



BY **HANNAH KANIK**
PhillyVoice Staff

The traveling onumental Tour landed in Philadelphia this week, bringing art that honors African

American history to iconic landmarks across the city.

culptures from Arthur afa, oby ennedy, hristopher yers and Hank Willis Thomas will be on display until an. 1 at four locations near the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and elaware iver waterfront.

indred Arts, the tour organi ers, said the works examine themes of coloni ation, oppression, privilege, Black middle-class labor and Black pride.

The sculptures delve into various aspects of the African American experience, "from the first slaves brought over in the 1 th century to the present-day prison pipeline, and the struggle of liberation in between," according to a press release.

Philadelphia is the sixth stop on the nationwide tour, but this marks the first time that the four sculptures are being displayed at the same time.

The tour also will showcase ulian Francis Abele, Philadelphia's first African American architect who helped design iconic buildings like The Philadelphia useum of Art.

ichael pain, director of education at the enter for Architecture and esign, will host a walking audio tour through all of the featured sculptures.

Here is a look at the featured sculptures



COURTESY/ALBERT YEE

'All Power to All People,' by Hank Willis Thomas is located on Eakins Oval, near the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

"All Power to All People"

Hank Willis Thomas' sculpture, "All Power to All People," is a 28-foot tall Afro pick with the Black Power salute emerging from the handle. Its title is a reference to the Black Panther Party slogan.

Thomas, a conceptual artist, said the piece is a symbol of community, strength, perseverance, comradeship and belonging. He has had work exhibited across the country and abroad.

The sculpture is on display at Eakins Oval, 2451 Benjamin Franklin Parkway.

WHYY PBS npr
PLAN PHILLY

Traveling 'Monumental Tour' brings art to four iconic Philly spots

By Ximena Conde · September 21, 2021



Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People" stands 28 feet tall and weighs 24,000lbs. It is installed in Eakins Oval as part of the Monumental Tour, made up of four large sculptures installed in celebrated public places. (Albert Yee/Kindred Arts)

A touring exhibition designed to challenge colonial ideas of power, community, and incarceration has landed in Philadelphia, bringing four art pieces to some of the city's most prominent public spaces.

The pieces that make up the "Monumental Tour" have rotated through New York City, Atlanta, Chicago, and other cities. The traveling art aims to affirm people across Philadelphia's diverse communities while creating spaces where those willing can learn about other lived experiences. This is the project's second stop in Philadelphia.



Kindred Arts Director Marsha Reid, who curated Monumental Tour, speaks at the unveiling of Hank Willis Thomas's "All Power to All People" on Eakins Oval. (Emma Lee/WHYY)

Familiar to the city will be a 28-foot-tall Afro pick with raised fist capping the handle. A symbol of "community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and belonging," the pick sits on the base of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway with the Art Museum as the backdrop. Named "All Power to All People," the sculpture by artist Hank Willis Thomas was first seen in 2017 as part of the Monument Lab project.

Parks and Rec unveiled its Parkway installation Tuesday. It brought a jolt of new energy to a historic space steeped in old ideas of institutional power and now undergoing a long-awaited reinvention.

Commissioner of Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Kathryn Ott Lovell said it's only tting to have "All Power to All People" on the parkway as the department tries to make it a vehicle for community building and civic expression. e exhibit is a reminder art should enhance the aesthetic of shared spaces, while challenging previously held assumptions, said Ott Lovell.

Nerman Family Members 'Get Joy' Sharing Work By Artists Of Color In Kansas City Art Institute Exhibit

KCUR | By Anne Kniggendorf

Published September 18, 2021 at 5:45 AM CDT



Hank Willis Thomas' "Refusal" uses reflective vinyl which changes the image depending on the light.

A never-before-seen collection of work featuring artists of color collected by the Nerman family is showing at KCAI's gallery through October 17.

The Nerman family adopted an unusual modus operandi years ago: search, secure, and share. They're a family of art collectors, starting with the late Jerry and Margaret who began the tradition before World War II, and Lewis and Sue leading the way now.

"I get joy when we acquire the work, but I also get an equal amount of joy in sharing. I really do," Lewis Nerman says.

They're *the* Nermans of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College.



Nerman Museum Of Contemporary Art

From left: Lewis, Sue, Margaret, and Jerry Nerman at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

For them, art collecting is partly about the search, the thrill of the hunt; Lewis and Sue have collected hundreds of disparate pieces from all over the world during the course of their lives, and now they are responsible for the elder Nermans' collection as well. When asked, they declined to answer how many works in total.

Prior to Jerry Nerman's deployment to France during World War II, he and Margaret hung art from old calendars on their walls. During the war, he mailed home street art, which has been lost to time. Once they had the means from founding and successfully running Arrow Truck Sales, the elder Nermans began to collect in earnest, teaching their children about the thrill.

But just as thrilling as the hunt is sharing the work.

The joy of sharing

Most often, the sharing has taken the form of opening their home to art enthusiasts or loaning pieces to galleries nationally and internationally. Currently, three pieces from their personal collection are on loan to the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art which are simultaneously staging a retrospective on Jasper Johns.

But what the Nermans have not done until now is publicly show a curated portion of their collection. Through October 17, the Kansas City Art Institute Gallery is displaying "All Things Being Equal," 16 featured works by 12 artists.



"Pain and Privilege" 1-4 by Harold Smith is on display at the KCAI Gallery.

Sue and Lewis Nerman thought of the title themselves, then collaborated with curator and gallery director Michael Schonhoff to figure out which pieces to include.

Once the couple decided to show works by artists of color, titling it was easy.

Sue says, “We mean that no matter who the artist is, there’s no difference between art by artists of color and art by artists of anything.”

Lewis jumps in to clarify and says, “When you walk in our home, you see Jasper Johns, and you see [Robert] Rauschenberg, and you see Chuck Close and all these very famous people. And then hanging next to those pieces are these pieces that are in this show.”



Curator Michael Schonhoff with one of Nick Cave's Soundsuits.

The 12 artists featured are formidable and include Nick Cave, Kerry James Marshall, Hank Willis and Fred Wilson.

“Works by artists of color or any underrepresented group, we can’t show enough,” Schonhoff says. “I think there’s so much work to do there. And I think this builds on momentum, both what’s happening at the school, locally, regionally, nationally, that sort of thing.”

One of the newest pieces in the Nerman collection is Fred Wilson’s 2019 “Black Rain.”

Schonhoff explains that Wilson gained fame by looking at cultural objects, especially as part of the Black experience, and “reframing history and positioning them all in a different way, looking at colonialism, looking at slavery. It was never done before in a museum, and it just really kind of turned upside down what collections are and how we look at them.”

Schonhoff says that Wilson created a new narrative with objects that people weren’t used to seeing.



"Black Rain" by Fred Wilson is showing at the KCAI Gallery through Oct. 17.

“Black Rain” is a continuation of that line of thinking, and though it’s more “poetic,” as Schonhoff says, than some of Wilson’s previous work, the idea is the same: encourage viewers to extrapolate meaning based on their own experiences, the context of the show, or however else they might contextualize it in their own lives.

He says, “I think each one of those pieces holds up very nicely by those particular artists. Each one has its own unique message. I hope people come and see it and enjoy it as much as we do.”

Correction: Michael Schonhoff's name was spelled incorrectly in an earlier version of this story.

"All Things Being Equal: Selections from the Nerman Collection" at the Kansas City Art Institute Gallery through Sunday, October 17 at 4415 Warwick Blvd, Kansas City, MO 64111. Free and open to the public with registration.

The New York Times

Getting Soccer Fans Into Art? That's the Goal.

A new gallery at the stadium of Tottenham Hotspur, a top London club, is presenting contemporary works to visitors, with mixed results.



By Alex Marshall

Aug. 16, 2021

LONDON — Annie Lawrence, 8, was looking excited on Sunday afternoon. She was about to see Tottenham Hotspur, the soccer team she supports, play its first game of the English Premier League season — but her exhilaration wasn't entirely because of the impending game.

Lawrence was standing in OOF, a gallery dedicated to art about soccer that opened last month in a building attached to the club's stadium gift shop. Some of the works on display seemed to be making her as happy as a Tottenham win.

OOF's opening show, "Balls" (until Nov. 21) features 17 pieces of contemporary art made using soccer balls, or representing them. There's one made out of concrete, and another in silicon that looks like it's covered in nipples.

Pointing at a huge bronze of a deflated ball by Marcus Harvey, Lawrence said, "I'd like that one in my bedroom." The artist said in a phone interview that the work might evoke anything from Britain's decline as an imperial power to the end of childhood.

Yet for Lawrence, its appeal was simpler: "It looks like you could sit in it, like a couch," she said.



"Endless Column III," a 2017 work by Hank Willis Thomas, on display in the exhibition space, which is called OOF. Alex Ingram for The New York Times



Fans making their way to Tottenham Hotspur's stadium on Sunday for the club's first match of the English Premier League season. Alex Ingram for The New York Times



The futuristic Tottenham Hotspur stadium viewed from a window of the gallery. Alex Ingram for The New York Times



Annie Lawrence, 8, posing in front of one of her favorite works in the show: “Kipple #2” by Dominic Watson. Alex Ingram for The New York Times

Lawrence then took her father upstairs and looked at a piece called “The Longest Ball in the World,” by the French artist Laurent Perbos. “It’s looks like a sausage!” she said, before grinning for photos in front of another piece that features a papier-mâché soccer ball rotating in a microwave.

Not everyone was so enthusiastic about the works on display. Downstairs, Ron Iley, 71, looked at the ball covered in nipples by the Argentine artist Nicola Costantino. “Load of rubbish,” he said, then walked out.

The worlds of art and soccer don’t necessarily mix. The most well-known recent work to combine both is a bust of Cristiano Ronaldo, the Portuguese player, that made headlines when it was unveiled in 2017 because it looked nothing like him. Other pieces, like Andy Warhol’s acrylic silk-screens of Pelé, are little more than simple tributes to great sportsmen.

Eddy Frankel, an art critic who founded OOF with the gallerists Jennie and Justin Hammond, said he wanted to show that art about football, as soccer is known in Britain, can be exciting, complex and thought-provoking. “We’re using football to express ideas about society,” Frankel said. “If you want to talk about racism, bigotry, homophobia, or if you want to talk community and belief and passion: All of that, you can with football.”



A visitor photographs Nicola Costantino’s “Male Nipples Soccer Ball, Chocolate and Peach.” Alex Ingram for The New York Times

Frankel said he used to keep his passion for soccer quiet in Britain’s art world, since “you can’t really get away with being into both.” That changed one night, in 2015, when he was at Sotheby’s to report on an auction of a monumental painting by Gerhard Richter, the German painter. The sale clashed with a game featuring Tottenham Hotspur, the club Frankel supports, so he started watching the match on his phone. Soon, about 15 people behind him were leaning over to get a view, he said.

“I just went, ‘Oh, so there are people who care about football in the art world like I do,” Frankel said.

In 2018 he launched OOF as a magazine that explored the intersection of his passions. “We thought we’d maybe get away with four issues,” he said. The biannual magazine is now on issue eight.

Setting up an exhibition space seemed the logical next step, Frankel said, adding that he initially wanted to open it in a former kebab shop near Tottenham Hotspur’s stadium, which is in an area about eight miles north of London’s traditional gallery districts. But when he and his partners approached the local council for help, they suggested contacting the club instead, which offered a 19th century townhouse that sits incongruously outside the club’s futuristic stadium and is attached to its gift shop.

Most of the works on display at OOF are for sale, with some pieces worth up to $120,000, yet the gallery has a much higher footfall than most commercial galleries. More than 60,000 fans come to the stadium on game days, and on Sunday, a few hundred spectators peeled off from the crowds for a look around, many dressed in Tottenham Hotspur’s uniform.



OOF is located in a 19th-century townhouse owned by the club that can be reached via the stadium gift shop. Alex Ingram for The New York Times



Abigail Lane's "Self-Portrait as a Pheasant" is made from a football, bird wings, oil paint, painted wood and glass. Alex Ingram for The New York Times

"We're basically running a museum, without a museum budget," Frankel said.

A tongue-in-cheek sign at the entrance asks visitors not to kick the art, but not everyone had complied, Frankel said: On a recent visit, Ledley King, a former Tottenham Hotspur captain, had given "The Longest Ball in the World" a light boot.

Pebros, the artist behind the work, laughed when told about the incident in a telephone interview. "Maybe he doesn't go to many galleries, so he didn't know," he said.

The current squad, including its famed striker Harry Kane, had not yet been to visit the gallery, Frankel said. The players were trying to keep social interactions to a minimum during the pandemic.

"Obviously, we're a commercial gallery so it'd be nice to sell some art," Frankel said. "But the real success is if we can get loads of people through the door, and get them to engage in contemporary art, who normally wouldn't," he added.

Many of the several hundred visitors on Sunday fit that bill. "We don't go to galleries if we're honest," said Hannah Barnato, 27, there with her partner. "But it's interesting. It's different," she said.

Sam Rabin, one of three guides in the gallery who talk the fans through the works, said that was a common reaction. "I've never heard the phrase, 'It's different,' more than I have working here," he said.

But many visitors, especially children, showed a deep connection with the art on display, he said, adding that this proved soccer and art were not the separate worlds they might seem. "They're both emotional experiences," he said. "They're both worthwhile experiences."

OBSERVER

An Open Letter Signed by Hank Willis Thomas Asks the U.S. to Take in Afghan Artists

By Helen Holmes · 08/25/21 10:52am



A Taliban fighter walks past a beauty salon in Kabul on August 18, 2021. WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP via Getty Images

In the wake of reports that the Taliban has unilaterally taken over Afghanistan, prompting thousands of people to desperately attempt to leave the country and sparking dire worries about Afghanistan's cultural heritage, over 350 artists and cultural figures have signed an open letter imploring the United States to make moves to protect Afghan creatives. Published on Tuesday, the letter, which was put together by the Arts for Afghanistan group, has been signed by luminaries including Hank Willis Thomas, Susan Meiselas, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz and Coco Fusco. The document also includes suggestions in terms of concrete steps American officials can take in order to "facilitate the departure from Afghanistan of at-risk Afghans, and to include artists, filmmakers, performers, and writers in that category."

For example, the letter suggests that the US government "immediately include cultural workers in the categories being used to refer at-risk Afghans for evacuation lists," and "keep the Kabul airport open until all at-risk Afghans who wish to evacuate have done so, and allow chartered, commercial, and humanitarian flights to operate out of the airport under the protection of the US."

"Even before the Taliban's takeover, cultural workers took grave risks in depicting the experiences and articulating the aspirations of Afghans, with the encouragement—and, often, direct support—of the US government," the letter reads. "Now, the vocation of truth-telling has become much more dangerous, and many of our peers see no choice but to leave the country."

Indeed, Afghans and other cultural commentators alike have already expressed concern that Afghanistan's new regime could negatively impact cultural artifacts and cultural workers. "We're all waiting to see what the general position is going to be," Bastien Varoutsikos, the director of an organization that digitizes vulnerable heritage sites, told *The Art Newspaper* recently. "From a political standpoint, it's unclear if the Taliban will engage in destructions of high value heritage landmarks considering the new narrative they're attempting to build."

ARTFORUM



Demonstrators in Rotterdam rally on behalf of Afghans protesting and fleeing the Taliban. Photo: Donald Trung Quoc Don/Wikipedia Commons.

August 25, 2021 at 5:16pm

HUNDREDS OF ARTISTS SIGN OPEN LETTER CALLING FOR US TO OFFER ASYLUM TO AFGHAN CULTURE WORKERS

More than 350 cultural workers including artists Coco Fusco, Joyce Kozloff, Susan Meiselas, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz, Martha Rosler, Hank Willis Thomas, Cecilia Vicuña, and Martha Wilson, as well as writers Teju Cole, Hari Kunzru, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Lynne Tillman, have lent their signatures to a fiery open letter from Arts for Afghanistan demanding that the US government "do everything in its power" to assist at-risk Afghans fleeing the country in an attempt to escape the newly ascendant Taliban rule. According to the authors of the letter, released August 24, the members of this group—among them artists, curators, writers, filmmakers, and performers—were in a precarious position even before the militant Islamist coalition's

swift rise to power, thanks to their efforts in illuminating Afghans' daily lives and aspirations often with the approval and assistance of the US government, which has now effectively abandoned them.

In the letter, Arts for Afghanistan calls for the US government to expedite visas for cultural workers and drop the stipulation that the visas be processed in a third country. Reaching out to countries beyond the United States, the missive's writers additionally "call on governments of all nations to facilitate the evacuation and resettlement of Afghan refugees by offering asylum and aid," asserting, "We insist on the protection of all who have devoted themselves to fostering free expression and civil society in Afghanistan."

"Art is a proxy for humanity," said Eric Gottesman, a political scientist and one of the letter's coauthors. "As we can see unfolding in real time in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world, the voices of artists are considered dangerous because they speak truth to power."

Also signing the missive were arts and humanitarian organizations the Authors Guild, CECArtsLink, Creative Capital, For Freedoms, Magnum Foundation, and PEN America, the last of which recently called on the US government to protect its writers in Afghanistan after two Pen Afghanistan members were murdered by the Taliban.

SURFACE

ART

A Memorial to Victims of Gun Violence, Told Through Their Keepsakes

BY RYAN WADDOUPS

April 13, 2021

At the National Building Museum, Hank Willis Thomas and Mass Design Group conceive a house-like memorial that pays tribute to shooting victims through mementos donated by their family members.

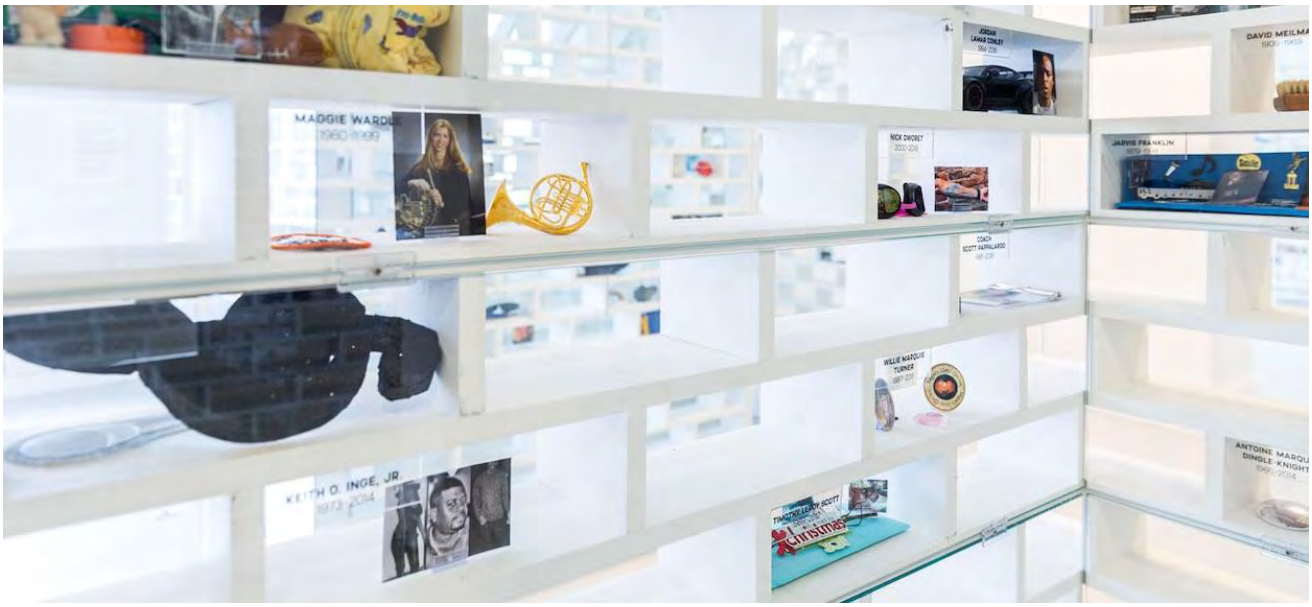


According to the nonprofit research group Gun Violence Archive, nearly 0,000 Americans succumb to gun violence every year—an epidemic of such great magnitude that it often reduces victims to mere statistics. Though many of their stories remain forever untold, some are being permanently enshrined in the *Gun Violence Memorial Project*, a poignant memorial to victims conceived by the conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas and Mass Design Group in partnership with gun violence prevention organizations Purpose ver Pain and Everytown for Gun Safety at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

The project "provides a space for people to share their stories and give voice to the human side" of the gun violence crisis, says Michael Murphy, founder of Mass Design Group. It comprises four house-like structures built from 700 glass bricks, referencing the weekly death toll from gun-related violence in the U.S. Each brick contains a remembrance object—photographs, baby shoes, graduation tassels, and prayer books among them—donated by victims' family members to preserve their individual memories and communicate the enormity of the gun violence crisis in built space. "It's an ever-changing testimony to love, loss, and life," continues

Murphy. "With each story, the entire memorial changes and grows." Also featured are e cerpts from *Comes the ight*, a forthcoming documentary directed by Haroula Rose and produced by Caryn Capotosto about the devastating effects of gun violence.





For Thomas, the project takes on an acutely personal touch. “My family felt the effects of gun violence firsthand when my cousin was murdered during a robbery in 2000,” he says of his late relative, Songha, the namesake of the public art practice Songha Company. “My life, and by extension my artistic practice, has been influenced ever since.”

Thomas previously meditated on the crisis through a monumental sculpture, *1,719* (2018), shown at his mid-career survey at the Portland Art Museum, in which strips of blue fabric reminiscent of the U.S. flag were hand-stitched with one white star for every person nationwide who died from gun violence that year. They descended from the museum’s soaring atrium, creating a chapel of loss that questions the second-amendment patriotism that many mistake for the right to kill. “The most likely way for young African American men to die is by gun violence,” Thomas told the *New York Times*. “But all you have to be is alive in America and you can fall victim.”

Mass Design Group, a nonprofit Boston-based design collective, has risen to prominence for architectural projects such as hospitals in Rwanda, a cholera treatment center in Haiti, and a “waiting village” for pregnant women in Malawi that advocate for human dignity, social justice, and healing. In 2018, the firm completed

the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, that honors more than ,000 victims of racially motivated lynching. For the *Gun Violence Memorial Project*, the firm strove to “communicate the enormity of the epidemic while also honoring the individuals whose lives have been taken,” says senior associate Jha D. Williams. “The recognizable form of the wood lattice and glass houses are but the framework in which the more intimate narrative is shared the

memorial is the willingness of families to share personal artifacts and stories of their loved ones.



The *Gun Violence Memorial Project* is being presented alongside "Justice Is Beauty: The Work of Mass Design Group," a retrospective of the firm's work, through September 25. It previously appeared at the Chicago Cultural Center during the 2019 Chicago Architecture Biennial, though plans are underway to find a permanent location as a national memorial. Murphy hopes it will mark the "beginning of a multi-year initiative to collect objects from across the country" that will display in 52 houses—a number that symbolizes weeks in a year and the number of U.S. states and territories—on the National Mall. His vision isn't unlike the NAMES Project's AIDS Memorial Quilt, which displayed there in 1987. (Julie Rhoad, former president of the NAMES Project Foundation, is now a senior director of Mass Design Group.)

And if you can't attend in person, check out Everytown's Moments That Survive, a digital campaign that lets people share their stories and build community among fellow survivors.



(All images courtesy of the National Building Museum)

CHICAGODEFENDER
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Arts and Culture

The Monumental Tour Art Exhibition Comes to Englewood.

Danielle Sanders, Interim Managing Editor
June 24, 2021

When people speak of the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago, they rarely mention art, culture, walking trails, or sustainable food. Anton Seals, Co-Founder and Executive Director of Grow, Greater Englewood is working to change that.ÀWith the Monumental Tour, an outdoor installation featuring the works of acclaimed artist, Hank Willis Thomas, and Arthur Jafa, Anton Seals hopes this latest project continues to lift and empower the Englewood community.



On display until the end of August, Hank Williams Thomas, “All Power to All People” will be located in Englewood Square at 5801 S. Halsted and Arthur Jafa’s “Big Wheel” will be in Bronzeville at the Blanc Gallery at 4445 S. Martin Luther King Jr., Drive.ÀThe Monumental Tour is a national tour that brings iconic monuments across the United States for the purposes of advancing the demand for racial equity.

Hank Willis Thomas’ All Power to All People is a provocative artwork combining the Afro pick and the Black Power salute, both icons of Black identity and empowerment. At approximately 28 feet tall, the work stands as a symbol of community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and belonging. The sculpture’s title references a legendary Black Panther Party slogan—its arrival to Chicago, where the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party was headquartered, is a celebration of Chicago’s contribution to civic engagement and the advancement of social justice. All Power to All People is illustrative of the artist’s longstanding investigation into the role public art plays in shaping collective discourse and societal values.

“Art has always been the dialogue of revolution, pushing urgent issues to the forefront of culture,” said Marsha Reid, Director of Kindred Arts. “We believe these monumental symbols of identity and empowerment, by Thomas and Jafa, have a critical role to play in our historical moment in time.”

Arthur Jafa’s Big Wheel is a spacious, yearning, and open-ended installation comprising four gargantuan, seven-foot tires originally made for monster trucks. Each is laced with a mesh of iron chain; in lieu of hubcaps, abstract medallion sculptures are 3-D printed from melted chains. Like industrial chakras, they manifest Jafa’s obsession with the culture of monster vehicles that has fascinated him since his Mississippi childhood. The heavy manufacturing evokes America’s economic changes, notably the deindustrialization and transition to the service economy that Jafa’s generation watched unfold and that dashed so many Black middle-class aspirations. The installation features a sound component consisting of a loop of Teddy Pendergrass ballads that emit from floor speakers. The songs are as much an authentic product of late-industrial America as are the tires and gantry.

“Wide Awakes Chicago’s intention is to respect the value of Black spaces by placing the artists’ works directly within the sight of residents from the Bronzeville and Englewood communities,” said Wide Awakes Chicago member, Mario Smith. “The Chicago leg of The Monumental Tour will also spark dialogue and reintroduce some of Chicago’s finest visual artists, DJs, and musicians to the city as we begin to reopen.”

Established in 2014, Grow Greater Englewood works to build a community in which all people can live safe, happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives, now and into the future. Grow Greater Englewood is a social enterprise that works with residents and developers to create sustainable, food economies and green businesses to empower residents to create wellness and wealth. Anton Seals spoke about the importance of the Monumental Tour in the Englewood community saying, “when this opportunity came, we wanted to be able to toy with this notion of what does it mean, to have black spaces. So, this becomes an opportunity. We started in the farmers market there on Halsted, which used to be a big vacant lot. There is beauty in our own community, and we just do not want to talk about it, we must demonstrate it.ÀIn addition, we have a farm, we are building with Chicago architecture biennial site as well. There will be a plaza area that we are in the middle of constructing that will be on the other side near Halsted. So, there is a lot that is going to be synergized. We thought this all power to all people would be a good conversation starter for drawing attention to what does it mean to have black spaces”?

He continued saying, “with the Monumental Tour just having these black artists of note display their pieces in our communities, that is significant. These artists sell their pieces for millions of dollars, and they are on display around the world but for them, they said, yeah that is nice but what does that do for the black aesthetic? That is our responsibility, but it is also a mirror back to the community.ÀWhat is it that we really want and what is already here and how do we connect those dots?ÀThat is where people who are weavers, like me, come in.ÀI am a weaver. I am a leader, but I am also a weaver. I like to weave and bring and create platforms for others and institutions because that is the only way that we are going to survive”.

FRIEZE



Featured in
Issue 219

How Artists Are Re-Imagining Basketball

Kevin Beasley, Suzanne McClelland and Hank Willis Thomas use sports jerseys to consider the game's politics of gender, race and class

E BY **EMILY STAMEY** IN **PROFILES** | 28 APR 21



Although invented in 1891, basketball only became a widespread cultural obsession in the US in the 1980s and '90s with the rise of cable television. The game's fast pace and visual dynamism appealed to fans watching from home, while its accessibility meant they could easily play scrimmage at the park or in their driveways. In turn, multi-billion-dollar team franchises leveraged the star power of their players for elaborate promotions and branded apparel: this was the era of Nike's Air Jordan sneakers and films such as *He Got Game* (1998). As a phenomenon that transcends sport and touches pop culture from film to fashion, basketball appears in the work of a number of contemporary artists, who treat it as emblematic of American society and, in particular, its dynamics of race and gender. Kevin Beasley, Suzanne McClelland and Hank Willis Thomas all incorporate basketball jerseys into their work as signifiers of the game and the individuals – especially women and people of colour – who might find their own stories reflected in it.



Hank Willis Thomas, *South Bend*, 2012. Courtesy: the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Comprising more than a dozen women's jerseys, McClelland's slyly titled *Well Hung* (2004) pays tribute to the early accomplishments of the US Women's National Basketball Association. When she completed the piece, the organization was less than a decade old but had already expanded to 13 teams and attracted more than 50 million fans. Yet, as McClelland told me when I spoke to her about the work, on visiting the NBA flagship store in New York, she found that 'women's jerseys were relegated to one messy circular display rack near the bathrooms in the basement'. *Well Hung*, in contrast, is triumphant: embellished with pearls, sequins and feathers, the jerseys form a raucous celebration banner.

Rather than sewing her jerseys together, McClelland fastened them with safety pins and bows. Those fragile ties refer to the work's political context: in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, McClelland considered both the military and sporting connotations of the term 'draft'. Drafted soldiers' service is compulsory, but all they know is that they will be fighting for their country. Drafted sports players' participation is voluntary, but they do not know for which team they will ultimately play. Team cohesion in both circumstances can be mentally and emotionally tenuous; bonds can be severed as soldiers are sent to new assignments or players traded elsewhere. Of course, both soldiers and players also wear uniforms to reinforce their collective identity. In her pinned and tied-together assemblage of jerseys from different teams, McClelland underscores both the power and fragility of such unions.

Although likewise constructed of jerseys, Thomas's *South Bend* (2012) represents Division 1 schools: the powerhouses of intercollegiate athletics in the US. While McClelland's jerseys extend horizontally, like so many players lined up for a team photo, Thomas's composition is decidedly singular, its vertical span of 1.9 metres akin to the height of a player. Geometric segments cut from jerseys are sewn together, leaving a fractured central motif of half-square triangles, known among quilters as the 'broken dishes' pattern. According to some historical accounts, this design was hung from windows as a signal to guide escaped slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Throughout his practice, Thomas draws parallels between the commodification of Black bodies in slavery and in professional sports. In his 2016 essay, 'What Goes without Saying', he notes with unease: 'For so many African American men [...] the idea of ascending is chained to ascending through sports and entertainment.' With that in mind, *South Bend* reads as a warning to Black men not to see their path to success as limited to sports. Thomas's poignant use of college jerseys evokes the unpaid labour of student athletes, the majority of them Black, in those programmes that generate millions of dollars for their universities. Notably, in Thomas's assemblage of jersey fragments, the players' names are absent, giving the impression of so many interchangeable bodies as mere cogs in a money-making machine.

Repetition likewise plays an essential role in Beasley's *Harden* (2017), albeit to different formal effect. The imposing artwork comprises a panel of burgundy acoustic foam covered in multiple jerseys with the name and number of star player James Harden, then with the Houston Rockets. Split along their sides and stretched out so that both front and back are simultaneously visible, the jerseys can be read as a makeshift bandage or a joint effort to protect the form beneath. This distention, coupled with the jerseys' bloody hue, could also be interpreted as the aftermath of a physical conflict. As with the work's shapes and colours, Beasley's title invites multiple interpretations. 'Harden', when taken as a word rather than a proper name, underscores the literal rigidity of the jerseys, which are sealed in polyurethane resin. It also has an emotional tenor, evoking the hardening of one's resolve in a fight or, even, of the heart against pain. In the wake of the 2020 protests for racial justice, *Harden* retrospectively might be seen as a call for collective resolve.

That tension of unity in the face of division defines basketball itself, a game played by opposing teams. Deploying the sport's broad cultural appeal, Beasley, McClelland and Thomas create works at once familiar and unsettling, asking us to consider the ways we must come together despite the fractures that keep us apart.

SOHO HOUSE

Hank Willis Thomas wants America to wake up



The New York member and artist discusses his new installations and taking his investment in social change beyond gallery walls

By Osman Can Yerekeban   Monday 2 November, 2020

On 3 October, thousands marched through Manhattan, slicing the island all the way from Harlem through Downtown, in colourful capes, make-up, and accessories. It was a beautiful fall day, an afternoon of joy and pride, manifested in colours, music, and one united slogan. They were the 'Wide Awakes', a vibrant network of artists, musicians, social workers, community organisers, educators,

and healthcare operators. Stilt walkers on towering poles, breakdancers and chorus singers all took to Manhattan's wide streets to fight injustice and call for action before the presidential election.

At the crowd's forefront was artist Hank Willis Thomas, waving a flag decorated with a large eye fully open – widely awake – in his black oilcloth cape dotted with bright colours. For Freedoms, the art and social justice organisation he cofounded with fellow artist Eric Gottesman, was an organiser of the march, where the energy in the eyes radiated over every mask. Thomas is an artist who continuously asks what emancipation in the 21st century means and looks like, and there he was spearheading a movement that adopts its name and mission with a group of 19th-century abolitionists. 'We have to radically imagine the world that we want to live in for it to exist,' he had told me before the march. 'We can learn from the past, study the past, yet also not fall as a way to avoid the traps.'

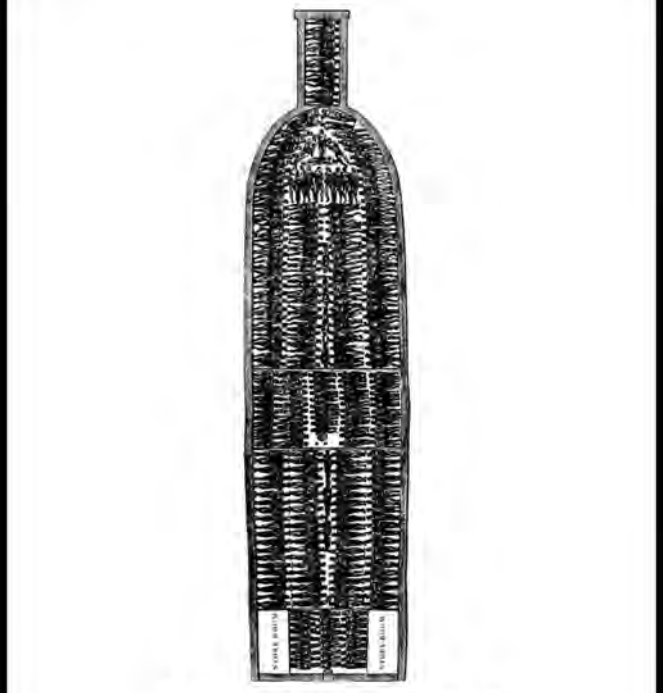


The art world has always established its own vanguards, but Thomas, in recent years, has been a particular mastery of social activism. This has been embodied through art in all forms, from billboards on highways to projections over government buildings. He has been crafting ways of social engagement and community action against structural inequalities, as well as the increasing acts of racially charged police brutality. If art-making is foremost a gesture, Thomas' has been defined by activism, a dedication prompted by the nation's precarious profile of social justice. 'Race, colonialism, capitalism and industrialisation are finite games, designed to create boxes for limitation and scarcity,' he says. 'The infinite game is about abundance.' Hope will lie in the core of his practice, and he believes in the power of change through alliance.

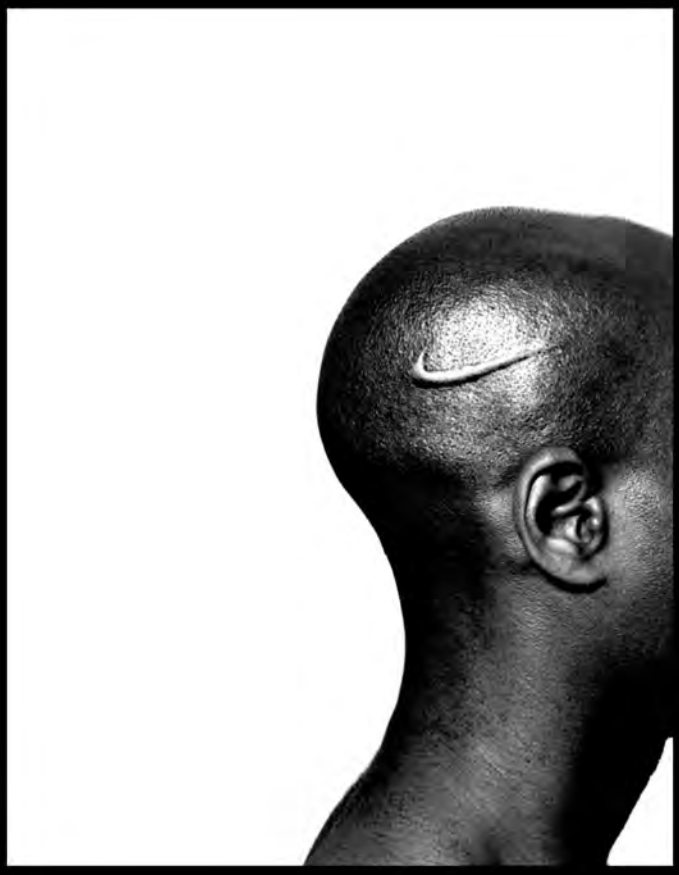
During the 2018 midterm elections, For Freedoms launched its 50 States, 50 Billboards project to bring attention-calling billboards to every American state, each designed by an artist with support from 2,221 Kickstarter backers. Proving museums can go beyond exhibiting art, Thomas and his team collaborated with 220 institutions across the country to support the billboards' mission with town hall meetings. Local communities came together with artists, scholars and activists for think-tanks on how democracy and freedom could walk hand in hand.

From marches attended by thousands to town hall meetings, Thomas' invitation has been an open one to join the discussion, a get-together of all voices to talk and listen. 'I don't tend to subscribe to ideas about division. I understand race as a fabrication designed to divide and conquer,' he says. 'Race is in your tongue the moment you open your mouth. You've been classified and racialised to demoralise you or make you feel better.' He believes in the power of speech where everyone has equal entitlement to a voice. And he's committed to carve that space, be it making a larger-than-life speech bubble sculpture for anyone to jump inside to speak up, or projecting testimonies from inmates onto the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington or the Manhattan Detention Center.





ABSOLUT POWER.

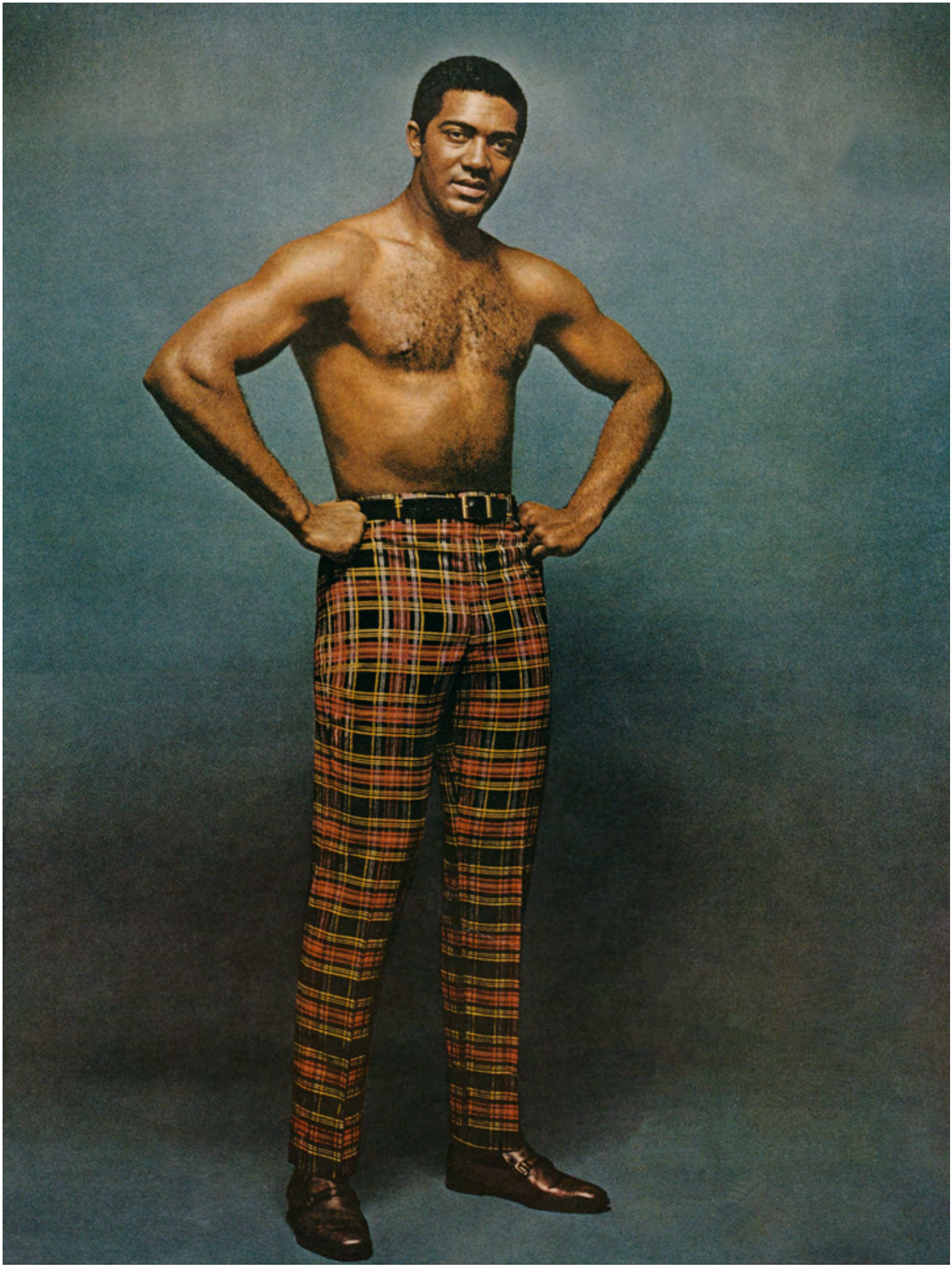


‘The idea in the USA of building a perfect union suggests both its failure, desire and necessity always to improve it‘

Thomas’ investment in social change goes beyond museum walls. For over a decade, he has been playfully revealing how visual languages of popular culture, advertising and media shape, chronicle and institutionalise racial bias. He handles visual, local, historical and institutionally rooted aesthetics through fibreglass, bronze, steel sculptures or photographs, which manipulate society’s fixed notions on class and power.

A currently travelling mid-career survey of his work, which kicked off last year at the Portland Museum of Art and has recently opened at the Cincinnati Art Museum, is titled All Things Being Equal…, aptly left with an ellipsis. The answer to why the title is kept open-ended is evident in the works. ‘Absolut No Return’ (2008) manipulates the image of a doorway in a slave house in Goree Island, Senegal, which led the enslaved onto ships that set sail to the New World. The doorway here resembles the recognisable shape of a bottle of Absolut Vodka. In an earlier version, titled Absolut Power (2003), the vodka bottle is the slave ship, in which innumerable dark-skinned bodies lie stacked inside. According to Thomas, the work communicates ‘how a simple idea about someone else can enable others to take horrific action in the name of commerce.’ Similar to other 90-plus works on view, this image reflects on our purpose by heralding the work of our ancestors who kept our species alive before we created industrialisation.





With his sculptures, the artist repositions the familiar into the uncanny and provides his audience with the tools to become voluntary thinkers and activists, capable of achieving their own political and social envisioning for a just new world. His monumental travelling sculpture, 'All Power To All People', is presented by Kindred Arts and marks the journey of a 25-foot steel ploy combining a black Afro comb with the Black Power fist salute across various public locations in the US, as divided states await the presidential election in November.

'I'm interested in the iconography of everyday objects,' is Thomas' way of explaining how the oversized beautification tool came to hold court at the Human Rights Campaign headquarters in Washington DC for all to see. The display's closing coincided with the anniversary march commemorating the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King Jr uttered his 1963 'I Have a Dream' speech that changed Black public consciousness forever. Therefore, its significance highlights the artist's concern for assembling citizens and voters among American youth to make use of their democratic rite for good, similar to his mission with the Wide Awakes march. The sculpture, the march, or his overall practice, attest to and recharge Black communities' unwavering ability to persevere, command justice, and rise to worth in areas that have worked to erase them.

Members By Members highlights



There’s something about Miranda July

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An afternoon w

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English (US)

SOHO HOUSE
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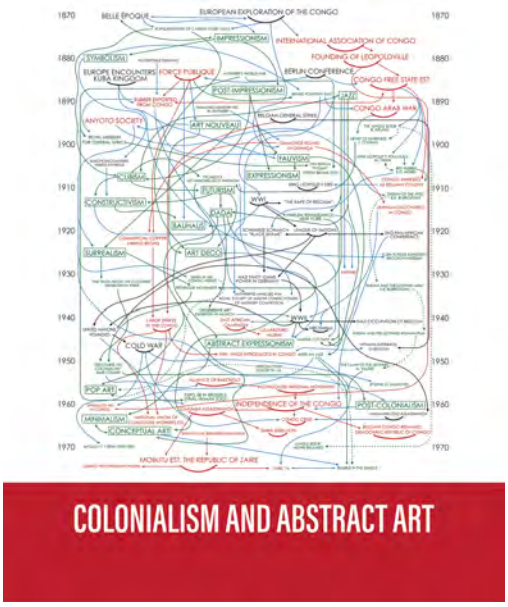
HYPERALLERGIC

PHOTO ESSAYS

Hank Willis Thomas Gives an Infamous Modern Art Diagram a Postcolonial Update

The conceptual artist provides a much needed update to Alfred J. Barr, Jr's well-known chart.

Hrag Vartanian October 1, 2020



Hank Willis Thomas, Colonialism and Abstract Art, 2019) (image courtesy the artist)

The 1936 "Cubism and Abstract Art" graphic by the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Alfred J. Barr, Jr., has become the stuff of legend in art circles. In it, Barr presents a very pared-down history of art that condenses many movements into a teleological chart that reinforces the importance of Cubism and its ilk. Like colonialism itself, this version of history is in service of one thing: justifying the dominance of modern European civilization, even if, as in this case, it is focused on a particular cultural movement.

Artist Hank Willis Thomas has updated the arcane image for his exhibition at Maruani Mercier Gallery in Brussels, Belgium. He's expanded the image to not only bring it forward to the year 1970 but has also incorporated the structural realities of society that Barr consciously ignored. Because of the location of the show, the emphasis is understandably on Belgian history. Some connections may seem obtuse at first, but slowly they make sense, like the connection between copper mining and Art Deco — I mean, all those shiny metals used for streamlined details and forms, as well as radios and electronics, had to come from somewhere, right?

In this image, the power relationships and structural oppression easily mingle with academic art terms, and all together they look like a web of relationships that can be as contradictory and confusing as Barr's chart is simplistic and naive.

Thomas's graphic demonstrates how we can alter myopic visions of art in ways that continue to engage with historical works while not allowing them to eclipse the larger and evolving histories that help us understand our world.

Belgium and Congo were forcibly connected for a century — with one of those nations clearly benefiting at the expense of the other. So, one wonders, what does that mean for art? When we look at a painting by Belgian Surrealist René Magritte should we also consider how Congo factors into his work?

Sep 23, 2020, 01:50pm EDT

Hank Willis Thomas Asks And Answers America's Toughest Questions About Race At Cincinnati Art Museum

Chadd Scott Contributor

Arts



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), 'The Cotton Bowl,' from the series, 'Strange Fruit,' 2011.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS.

Every single one of Hank Willis Thomas' searing artworks on view now at the Cincinnati Art Museum has a "ripped from the headlines" feel. Thomas

examines, explores, interrogates and lays bare the Black experience in America with the varying subtlety of a scalpel and a sledgehammer.

Every piece seems to directly address one or more of the tragedies experienced throughout 2020 by America's Black community. Take your pick from the recent police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Damien Daniels to the recent police shootings of Willie Henley and Jacob Blake, the modern day lynching of Ahmaud Arbery, the disproportionate burden of Covid-19 deaths, the widening wealth gap, a resurgence in overt, public expressions of white supremacy or a throwback, race-baiting president sent from the Jim Crow-era.

This artwork, however, wasn't inspired by 2020.

These pieces weren't created in 2020.

Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… is a retrospective. The almost 100 works on display were created over the past 20 years. Thomas' work reminds us that while millions of new advocates to the equal rights movement have been made in 2020, the traumas which have moved contemporary converts to action are nothing new to those suffering them directly.

The same traumas have been taking place for decades. Generations. Centuries.

"Hank Willis Thomas asks us to see and challenge systems of inequality that are woven into the fabric of contemporary life; he asks us to participate and

understand that our participation in a gallery is continuous with participation in the world," Nathaniel Stein, Associate Curator of Photography at the Cincinnati Art Museum, told Forbes.com. "His work invites us to look at history, be unafraid of the lessons it holds for our future, and–paraphrasing him–listen for the parts of each of us that are in others."



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), 'Guernica,' 2016. Mixed media, including sport jerseys, ...
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS.

This show represents the first comprehensive mid-career survey of Thomas' work. Included are early photographic series, sculptures and multi-media works reinterpreting the photographic record of historic twentieth-century events, monumental textile works constructed from reclaimed prison uniforms and athletic jerseys, interactive video installations and public art projects. Twenty years of artistry are encompassed during which Thomas has explored how the visual languages of popular culture, advertising and media shape society and individual perspective, structuring and trading upon notions of race and gender.

"Thomas's work asks us to see and be critical about the roles we play as participants in systems that support inequality, yet it also tells us that the reason for this hard examination is that we have the power to build fuller life together," Stein said.

“Hard examination.”

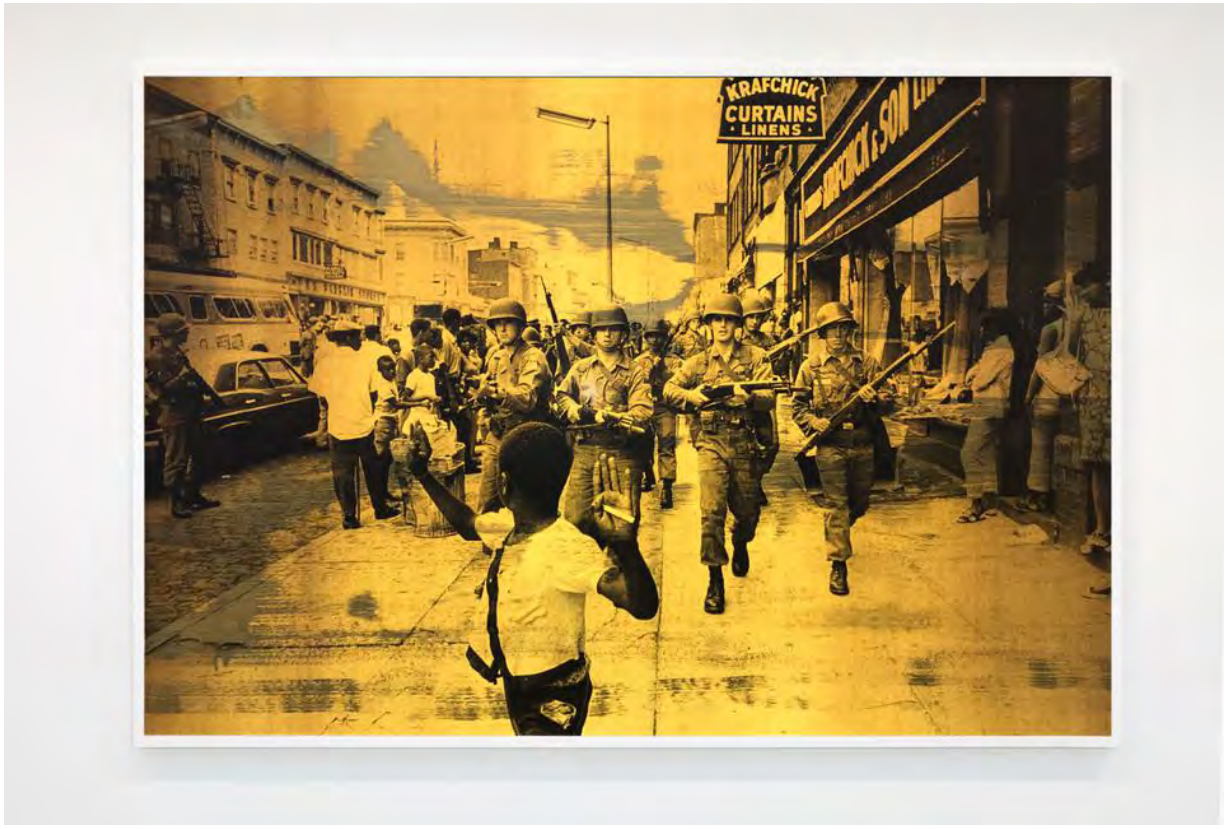
Thomas’ work requires it. You won’t find still lifes of peonies or bucolic landscapes here.

Absolut Power recreates the horrors of slave ships inside an Absolute Vodka bottle. *The Cotton Bowl, Strange Fruit, Futbol and Chain, Branded Head, Guernica* and others expose stomach-churning through lines connecting slavery to the prevalence of African-Americans in sports. *Public Enemy (Black and Gold)* lives with onlookers long after it has been experienced.

Thomas’ art is a workout.

It’s also necessary.

Necessary considering how millions of Americans continue to deny that Black lives matter. Necessary where a legal system from policing to prosecution and incarceration continues to disadvantage Black people when compared to whites. Necessary when Americans across the country feel it compelled to take to the streets and protest for equality, and necessary where state governors vow to enact harsher punishments for those protestors while completely failing to address the conditions which drove them to the streets.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), 'Public Enemy (Black and Gold),' variation with ash, ...
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), 'Public Enemy (Black and Gold),' 2017. Screenprint on ...
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS.

But joy can also be found in Thomas' work if you know where to look.

“One of the artworks that says this to me, personally, most movingly is *I Am. Amen*, a 20-panel painting that moves us through historical and personal permutations of the phrase ‘I am a man,’” Stein said. “That proclamation, taken from signs held aloft by marchers in the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers strike, shouldn’t be necessary, but it was and is, the last panel of Thomas’s artwork changes the phrase to ‘I Am. Amen.,’ a profound–and joyful—affirmation of existence and individual consciousness in a world that sometimes wants to extinguish both.”

This exhibition has been realized in collaboration with a Community Committee. Composed of volunteer thinkers, activists and artists recruited locally, the Community Committee has illuminated the artwork anew with their voices and views, which visitors will encounter both in the gallery and in public engagement programs. This initiative responds to a common complaint aimed at art museums, where even when displaying the work of minority artists, that work is most often curated by a white curator, for a white museum director and ends up consciously or unconsciously programmed to white audiences.

“We approached the project this way because the artist’s work calls us to, and out of personal and professional conviction among the project team to push the field away from established, sometimes exclusionary methods,” Stein said.

In response to a summer of Covid-19 deaths and Black Lives Matter activism, the museum and committee are reimagining a collection of public programs exploring pressing questions raised by the exhibition while following evolving public health and safety guidelines. Details about digital, on-site and off-site programming will be posted to the musuem’s website throughout the fall.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), 'I Am. Amen.,' 2009. Liquitex on canvas, 25 1/4 × 19 × 1/4 ...

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS.

“The pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives both focused acute attention on the question of what is considered essential in our society, who gets to define and speak loudest about that question, and in what forums,” Stein said. “We reoriented our thinking around what we could contribute to pressing needs regarding trauma and healing; political process and civic discourse; and envisioning the future. With our community partners, we devised programs that address each of these areas.”

What has the result been?

“I’ve seen visitors break out into applause, I’ve seen them feel angry, I’ve seen people feel heard and represented, I’ve seen them cry,” Stein said. “I see visitors telling their circles it is necessary to come to the exhibition; I see them truly engage—which is the most important thing.”

Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… can be seen at the Cincinnati Art Museum through November 8.

Wake up call: artist Hank Willis Thomas wants to spur voter turnout with the Wide Awakes group

Based on the 1860 Wide Awake movement that mobilised against slavery and helped elect Lincoln, the new network of artists and creatives has launched Kickstarter's largest collaboration to date

WALLACE LUDEL and MARGARET CARRIGAN

16th September 2020 19:16 BST



Wide Awake members attend a Juneteenth celebration in Harlem.

A group known as the Wide Awakes, originally launched in January by Hank Willis Thomas, is now working to organise a large network of artists, cultural workers and activists in hopes of fighting injustice and getting out the vote in the lead up to the 2020 presidential election.

Comprised of artists like Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Arthur Jafa and rafa esparza, along with organisations such as Creative Time, For Freedoms and the Guild of Future Architects, the Wide Awake network takes their name from an outspoken group of 19th-century

itself as “a network of like minds who create in the name of liberation, artist sovereignty, and the evolution of society" that aims "to radically reimagine the future and enable self-emancipation", according to its mission statement.

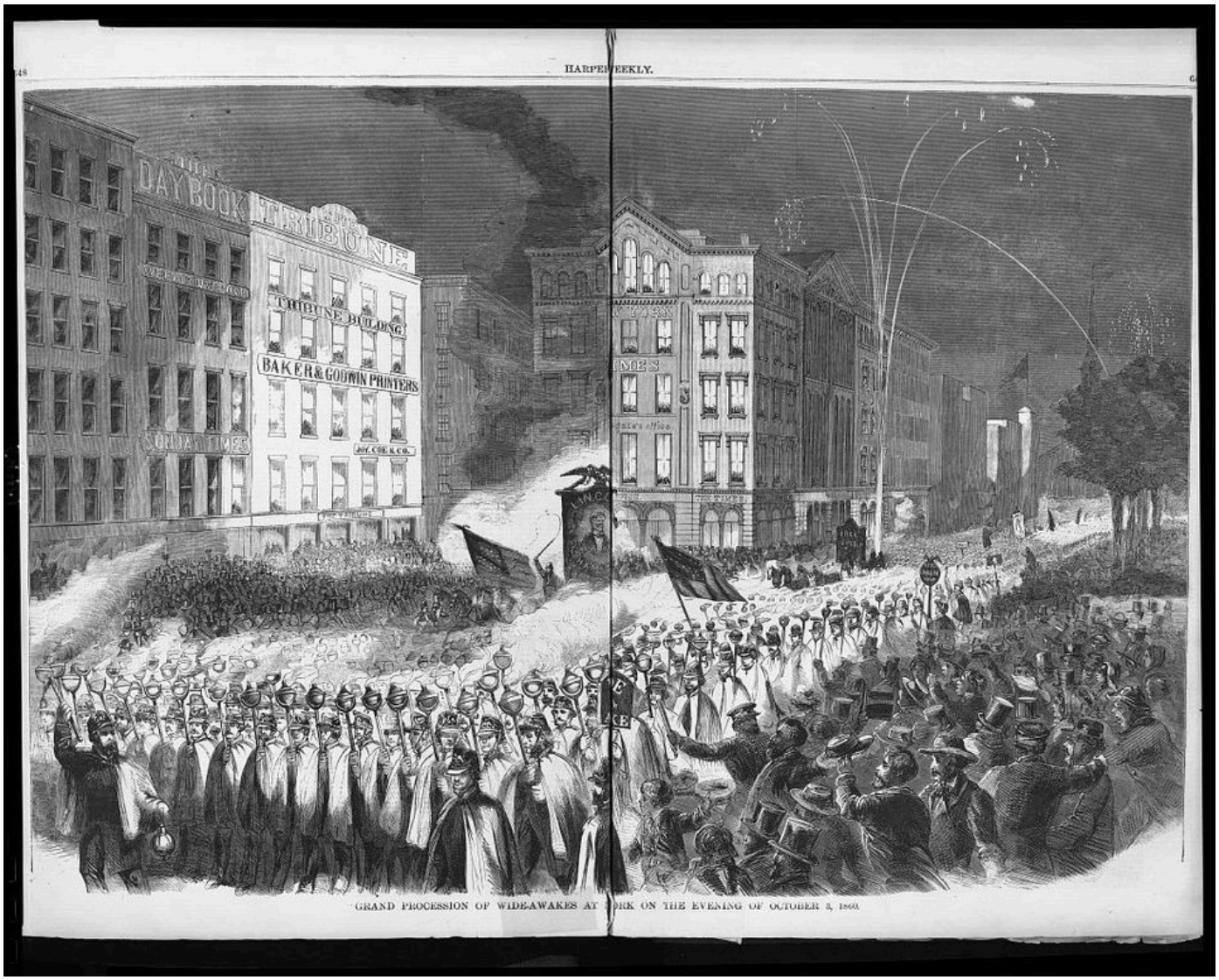


Artist Wildcat Ebony Brown is part of the Wide Awakes, a group that is encouraging people to get out and vote. Benjamin Lozovsky

While most of their events so far have been spontaneous at marches and rallies that had already been planned, the Wide Awakes are now planning their first coordinated march on 3

Awakes, in which 10,000 protesters marched through New York City in advance of Lincoln's election. The event will be held in cities across the country as well as virtually.

Additionally, 14 members of the Wide Awakes have launched a Kickstarter that will fund 14 projects across the US, from town halls to dream up new inclusive policies to artistic interventions to combat voter suppression in the lead up to the 2020 presidential election. It marks the largest collaboration of cultural leaders Kickstarter has ever seen on its platform.



An illustration from an 1860 edition of Harper's Weekly depicting the original Grand Procession of Wide Awakes in New York. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

“I was a mixture of curious and eager to find out what new collective he had envisioned,” says Patton Hindle, Kickstarter’s Head of Arts, of her initial meeting with Thomas in January. “It was immediately clear that he had a powerful and historically rooted movement on his hands, fuelled with joy and inclusivity in a way that no other is, which is exactly what we need in this moment and our future."



An original Wide Awake flyer from 1860 inspired Amplifier's 2020 version.

The original Wide Awakes were led by young men—and some women, who did not yet have the right to vote—and cultivated by the Republican Party (Lincoln's political party) during the 1860 presidential election. Appearing at popular social events and distributing promotional comic books and art ephemera, the group appealed to a younger generation of voters beleaguered by the partisan infighting of the 1850s and offered northerners a much-needed political identity in the face of regressive southern policies.

As a wave of racial reckoning swept the US, the Wide Awakes held large rallies in northern cities such as New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, turning out in distinctive uniforms consisting of a black cape under standard banner depicting the image of a large eyeball. After Lincoln’s inauguration, when political tensions escalated to civil war, many of the Wide Awake members were among the first wave to join the Union army.



The original Wide Awakes wore oilcloth capes, which have inspired the artist-designed capes emblazoned with eyes Thomas's Wide Awakes group has created. Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library

The 21st-century reincarnation of the Wide Awakes comes complete with capes inspired by the original oilcloths and designed by artists Wildcat Ebony Brown, Anya Ayoung Chee, Kambui Olujimi and Coby Kennedy.

The group has been active since before the Black Lives Matter protests began in late May but, since then, members have popped up at a Juneteenth celebration in Harlem; Fourth of July protests in New York, Berlin and Chicago; a 19th amendment rally at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn, and at the March on Washington commemorating the Dr. Martin Luther King's march for civil rights. On Election Day, 3 November, the Wide Awakes will also hold a virtual poll party.



Wide Awakes updated cloak designs. Jeff Vespa

Funds raised from its Kickstarter will be divvied up between the 14 organisations, which include Kindred Arts, In Plain Sight, Amplifier and more. A full list can be found at the Kickstarter page, where donations can also be made. Pledges made to the Wide Awakes come with varying rewards. At the smaller donation level, a $15 pledge yields a Wide Awakes pin while a t-shirt by Jenny Holzer is available for $45. For donations over $7,500, donors can receive an original rafa esparza sculpture, a work of art by Michele Pred or a silkscreen by Thomas, produced in an edition of five. Black capes with the Wide Awake eye are available for an $85 pledge.

More News Topics US politics Wide Awakes Hank Willis Thomas Rafa Esparza Michele Pred Jenny Holzer For Freedoms Creative Time Kickstarter Black Lives Matter

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The Art Angle Podcast: How Hank Willis Thomas Is Making Politics an Art Form

On this week's episode, artist and political activist Hank Willis Thomas explains how he strives to address society's injustices in his art.

Artnet News (https://news.artnet.com/about/artnet-news-39), July 10, 2020



Hank Willis Thomas is a busy man. The 44-year-old photographer, sculptor, filmmaker, and writer was already a force within the rarefied world of visual art before he decided to embrace politics on a large scale. But during the landmark presidential race of 2016, Thomas and fellow artist Eric Gottesman co-founded an "anti-partisan" political action committee (https://news.artnet.com/market/artist-political-action-committee-441083) called For Freedoms (https://forfreedoms.org/) to empower artists to channel their creative energy into civic engagement. Along with facilitating major public artworks such as murals and artist-designed billboards (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/fall-artist-made-billboards-will-installed-50-states-1296806), For Freedoms has since grown into a larger nonprofit organization that has held townhall meetings, organized voter-registration drives, and even assembled its own multi-day national Congress (https://news.artnet.com/opinion/for-freedoms-congress-1767150) in Los Angeles. Not bad for a side hustle.

The son of renowned art historian and photographer Deborah Willis, Thomas first rose to prominence for his early photography, which used the visual language of advertising to address systemic injustices such as the exploitation of professional athletes, the scourge of mass incarceration, and the original sin of American slavery. Years before the latest wave of activists (https://news.artnet.com/the-art-angle/art-angle-podcast-christopher-columbus-monument-1889696) began toppling statues (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/colonial-monuments-topple-europe-1880991) of Christopher Columbus (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/monuments-across-the-united-states-re-emerged-as-targets-of-fury-over-a-weekend-of-widespread-protest-1876542), Robert E. Lee, and other problematic figures in US history, Thomas also began questioning the validity of such monuments with his own large-scale sculptures, often creating alternatives to honor the individuals whose sacrifices have been overlooked by mainstream historical narratives.

Thomas once said that his personal experiences prompted him to create art that could "change the world in a more intentional way," and now more than ever, he is doing just that. Through July 16, he and his Los Angeles gallery, Kayne Griffin Corcoran, are teaming with Artnet Auctions to present "Bid for (https://www.artnet.com/auctions/bid-for-peace-0720/)*Peace (https://www.artnet.com/auctions/bid-for-peace-0720/),"* a single-lot sale of Thomas's striking sculpture *Peace* (2019). All proceeds from the auction including the buyer's premium will be donated to G.L.I.T.S (https://www.glitsinc.org/), Gays and Lesbians Living in a Transgender Society, a non-profit organization that protects the rights of transgender sex workers.

A few days before the opening of "Bid for *Peace*," Thomas joined Andrew Goldstein on the Art Angle to discuss the evolution of his studio practice, artists' importance to bringing about civic transformation, and whether you might someday see his own name on a ballot near you.

HYPERALLERGIC

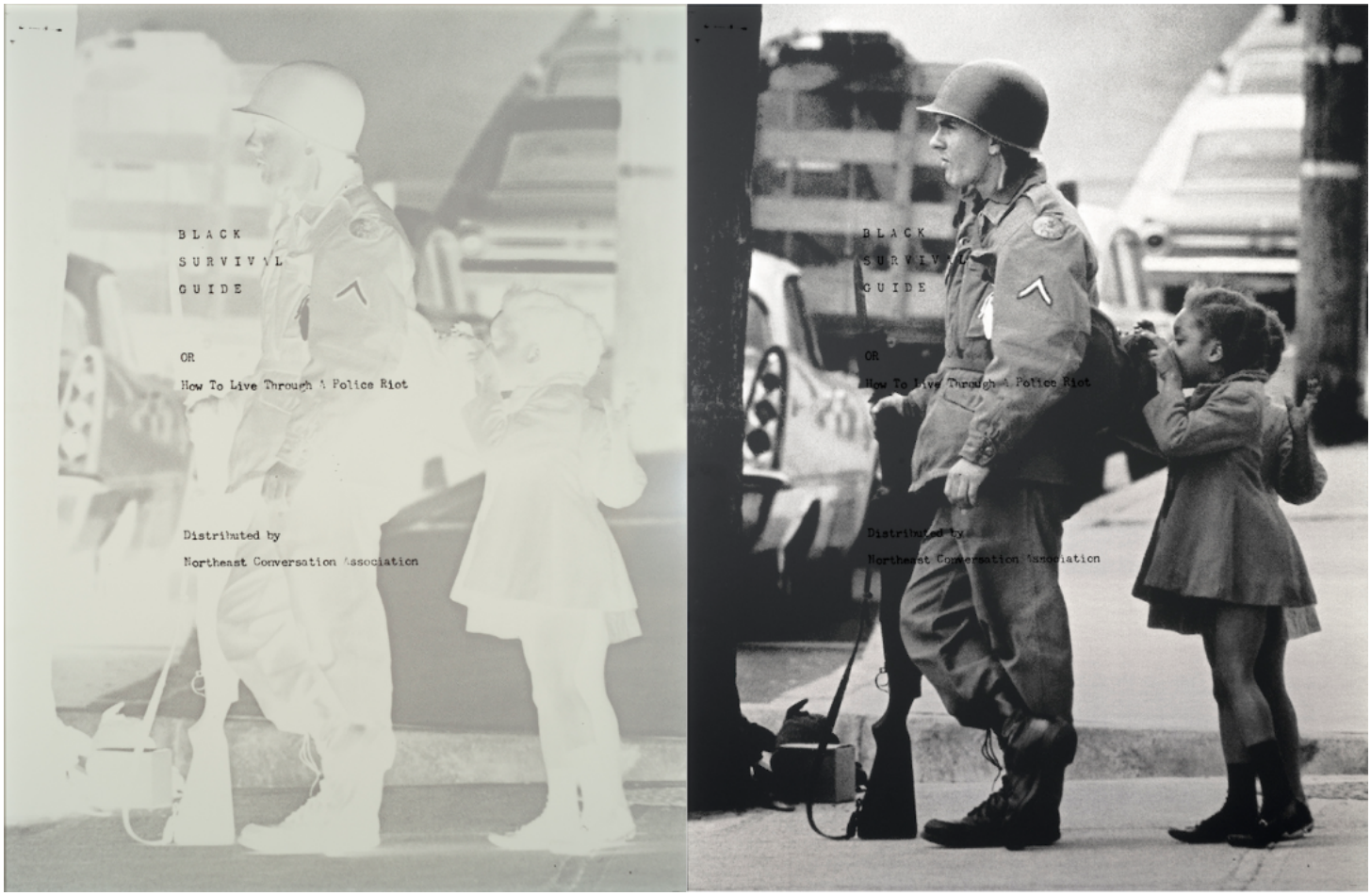
Art Interviews

Hank Willis Thomas on *Black Survival Guide* and Creative Civic Action

Thomas and fellow artist Ebony Brown talk about interdependence and *How to Live Through a Police Riot*, an archival handbook that inspired his 2018 series.



Karen Chernick August 21, 2020



Hank Willis Thomas, "First stages" (2018), from *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot,* screen print on retroreflective vinyl with aluminum backing, photograph of Wilmington riots and National Guard occupation by Frank Fahey, 1968 (courtesy of the News Journal), text from Northeast Conservation Association, *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot*, c. 1960s (courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society), 62 x 48 inches; commissioned by the Delaware Art Museum (© Hank Willis Thomas; all images courtesy the artist and Delaware Art Museum)

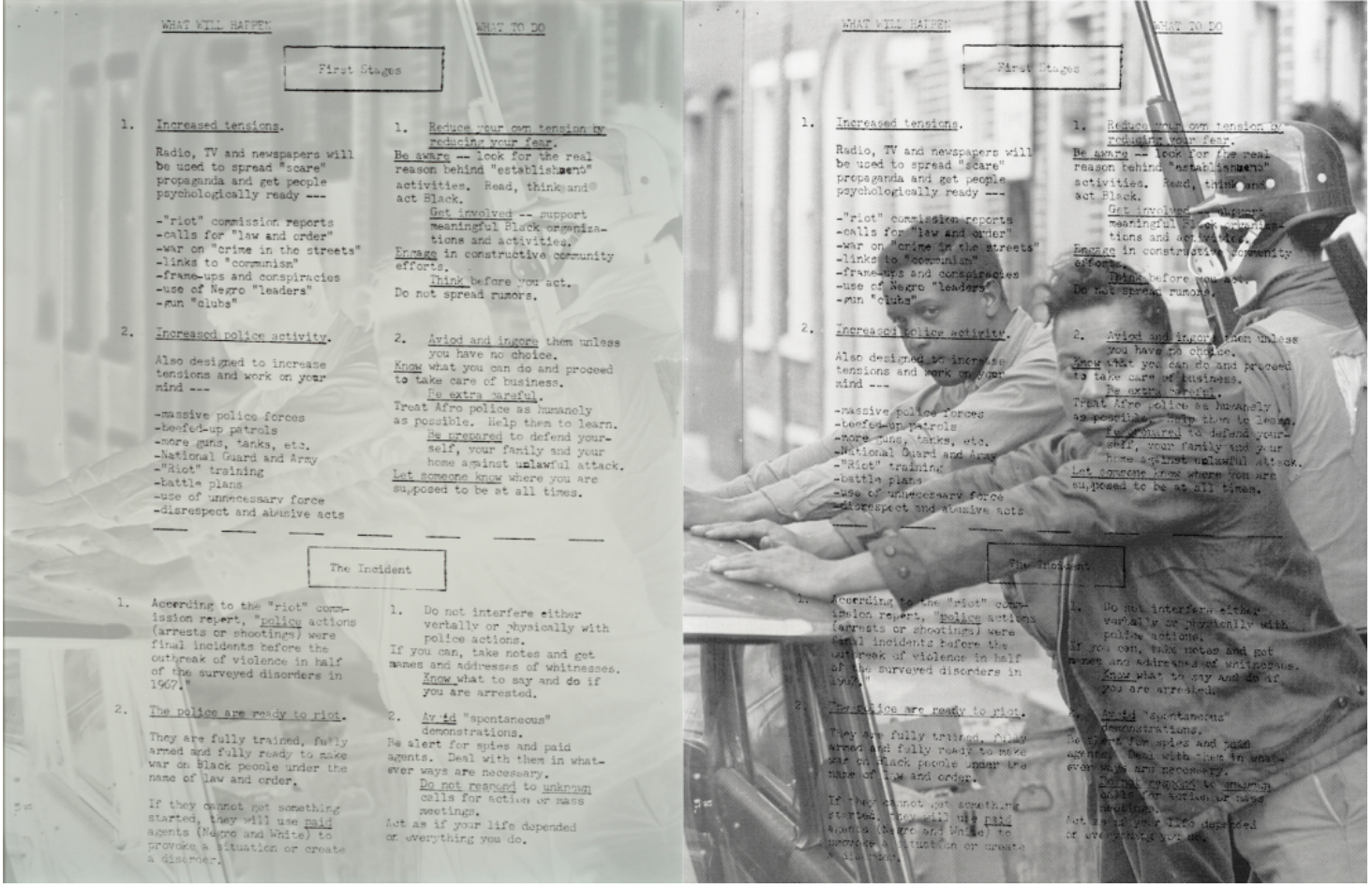
"IMPORTANT," asserts the opening line of a pamphlet that contemporary conceptual artist **Hank Willis Thomas** found a couple years ago at the Delaware Historical Society. "Because you are black, this booklet is important to you. It may help save your life."

Thomas was doing research for a **2018 commission from the Delaware Art Museum** (DAM) to mark the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination and Wilmington's grief-stricken public response, followed by a nearly unprecedented **nine-month-long occupation of the city by National Guardsmen**. The artist had seen photographs of the **1968 occupation** of Wilmington but was surprised by this 13-page handbook titled *BLACK SURVIVAL GUIDE OR How To Live Through A Police Riot*, typewritten on 8 1/2-by-11-inch office paper.

The guide was full of detailed practical information for worst-case scenarios, like how to stop bleeding and identify heart attacks, ways to communicate if telephone service was cut off, how much water to stockpile per person per day, and the importance of knowing all ways to exit one's home. The pages were a testament to violence, fear, and perseverance.

Thomas transformed the pamphlet into a screen printed series on retroreflective vinyl called "Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot" (2018), overlaying the complete text over images of the Wilmington occupation. When the DAM exhibited the series in 2018, it coincided with exhibitions of **Danny Lyon**'s photographs of the Southern Civil Rights Movement and **drawings of the Montgomery bus boycott by Harvey Dinnerstein and Burton Silverman**. The museum recently reinstalled "Black Survival Guide" when it reopened to the public in early July, in response to the recent wave of Black Lives Matter marches and protests.

I spoke with Thomas about the series this week over speakerphone, as he and his friend, artist **Ebony Brown**, were in a car headed to Brooklyn. They were going to an event organized by **The Wide Awakes** collaborative commemorating the ratification of the 19th Amendment with music, art, and voter registration assistance. This interview has been lightly condensed and edited for clarity.



Hank Willis Thomas, "How to Live through a Police Riot"(2018), from *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot,* screen print on retroreflective vinyl with aluminum backing, photograph of Wilmington riots and National Guard occupation by Godfrey C. Pitts, 1968 (courtesy of the News Journal), text from Northeast Conservation Association, *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot*, c. 1960s (courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society), 62 x 48 inches; commissioned by the Delaware Art Museum (© Hank Willis Thomas)

Hyperallergic: *What was your research process for the* Black Survival Guide*? What archival materials did you look at, and how did you decide to use the booklet and photographs?*

Hank Willis Thomas: I was invited to do this installation at the Delaware Art Museum, and I didn't know much about Delaware or Wilmington even though it's really close to Philadelphia which is where my family is, where my mom grew up. My mother, **Deborah Willis**, she's a historian and artist, and I grew up in libraries and archives. Through my mother's work I learned that there's so much hidden information in archives. So I asked the museum, and they shared with me all these photographs that they had from the newspaper.

The context was it being the **50th anniversary of the longest occupation of federal troops in an American city since the Civil War**, after the assassination of Martin Luther King. So we went to the [Delaware] Historical Society to find images that we thought would be really good for that. We wound up in all these boxes and I pulled out this thing that said "Black Survival Guide" and I was like, what? What is that? It was literally a handbook on how to survive a police riot.

That was such a revelation that not only was the movement organized, but it was prepared for the worst at all times. That gave new context to all the photographs I saw of police and National Guardsmen occupying this neighborhood in Delaware. I wanted to highlight them both, and so I printed in black-on-white the text of the Survival Guide and then I printed white-on-white the photographs that I collected. I printed on a material called retroreflective vinyl,

which allows the viewer to see both images when you take a flash photograph. So to the naked eye it'll look like black text on white, whereas if you take a flash photograph a latent image is exposed.

H: *You've **used retroreflective vinyl in a number of your works**. Was there a specific reason that you wanted to use that material in this series, or something specific you wanted the viewer to experience here?*

HWT: There was no other way to show the photographs with contemporaneous content that was designed to respond to this police occupation. I've been working with retroreflective for a while because I love how it makes the invisible visible. And a lot of history, of course — most of it if not all of it — is invisible, truly.



Hank Willis Thomas, "Cherry Island" (2018), from *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot,* screen print on retroreflective vinyl with aluminum backing, photograph of Wilmington riots and National Guard occupation by Frank Fahey, 1968 (courtesy of the News Journal), text from Northeast Conservation Association, *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot*, c. 1960s (courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society), 62 x 48 inches; commissioned by the Delaware Art Museum (© Hank Willis Thomas)

H: *What would a contemporary Black Survival Guide look like?*

HWT: I have no idea because I'm not the kind of person who could write a handbook. I would definitely ask an organizer that question. Maybe that's a good question for my friend Ebony — she/we are doing an event around joy and positivity as core tenets to what would probably be a guide. Or maybe joy and positivity as the guides themselves to all the destructive forces that keep us separated and divided in this movement. Here's my friend "Wildcat" Ebony Brown, from The Wide Awakes.

Ebony Brown: The first thing that comes to my mind is my grandmother and knowing that you are protected. Knowing that there is someone watching over you, that your ancestors are always with you. That is, for me, a reminder that there are forces at work always guiding us and protecting us. We can always remind ourselves of that. It's a guide and it's also nurturing and comforting, and provides a source of sustenance that at some times we may not feel like we have.

HWT: Especially in facing unexpected adversity. I feel like connecting with the ancestors, it doesn't have to be written. It looks like us under strike and stress and pain, and feeling connected.

H: *Going back to your series,* Black Survival Guide*, what are your thoughts about it being re-exhibited now? It was originally created for such a specific place and anniversary.*

HWT: Actually, it was shown for the reasons that Ebony pointed out. There was already a need, and there was already a space and opportunity for that need to be addressed. What I inferred from them wanting to re-show it was, 'oh great, someone else has tapped into this, as Ebony puts it, this cosmic connection.' And so I've been thinking it, but someone at the museum was like, 'yeah, this is why we did that work.'



Hank Willis Thomas, "How to Live through a Police Riot" (2018), from *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot,* screen print on retroreflective vinyl with aluminum backing, photograph of Wilmington riots and National Guard occupation, 1968 (courtesy of the News Journal), text from Northeast Conservation Association, *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot*, c. 1960s (courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society), 62 x 48 inches; commissioned by the Delaware Art Museum (© Hank Willis Thomas; photo by Carson Zullinger)

H: *What are you working on now?*

HWT: We're working on a project called **The Wide Awakes**. It's a federation of artists and activists — just heart-led people — building positively towards our evolution through creative civic action. And it's an extension of a collaboration called **For Freedoms**, except it's much more autonomous.

EB: Today we're celebrating the ratification of the 19th amendment which gave some women the vote, not everyone.

HWT: The problem is universal suffrage.

EB: So today we're gathering at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn and we've been creating events to share this concept of interdependence. That's the understanding that we cannot live and survive in this society alone, it takes all of us working together for us to progress and evolve and heal. I think that's where we need to be. All of these protests and rallies and marches are very necessary and effective. It's also equally as important to balance it with harmony and joy as an act of resistance, and uplift the community and bring people together using music and art.

Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot *continues through September 27 at the Delaware Art Museum (2301 Kentmere Parkway, Wilmington, Delaware). The museum is currently open, with COVID-19 health & safety procedures in effect.*

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The New York Times

Protesting U.S. Immigration Policies, Artists Aim for the Sky

This Independence Day, 70 artists are having messages of solidarity and defiance typed in the sky to highlight the plight of immigrants held in detention centers.

By Zachary Small

July 3, 2020

The Thunderbirds and Blue Angels that President Trump plans to send flying over the National Mall this Fourth of July will have some stiff competition from a group of 70 artists looking to spread their own messages across the nation's skies.

Two fleets of five skytyping planes each are set for takeoff across the country this Independence Day weekend armed with calls for the abolition of the immigrant detention in the United States as part of the project "In Plain Sight." (Developed from older skywriting technology, skytyping planes inject oil into their exhaust systems to produce a white smoke that is released into the sky by a computer-controlled system to produce precise letter-writing.) Phrases like "Care Not Cages," "Unseen Mothers" and "Nosotras Te Vemos (We See You)" will momentarily hover above 80 locations — including detention facilities, immigration courts, prisons, borders and historic sites like Ellis Island — before dissipating into the atmosphere. And some of the messages will be skytyped in nearly 20 languages, including Hindi, Kurdish, Lakota and Punjabi.

The project started a year ago when the artists Cassils and rafa esparza teamed up with a goal of forming a coalition of artists and activists determined to address the ills of mass detention. The initiative's members include the lawyer Chase Strangio; a founder of Black Lives Matter, Patrisse Cullors; and the artist Hank Willis Thomas — alongside 10 partner organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, Raices and the Immigrant Legal Resource Center.



An AR still of "Soy Paz Soy Más," one of the phrases that will momentarily hover above locations like detention facilities, immigration courts, prisons and borders before they dissipate. Maria Gaspar



An AR still of “Nosotras Te Vemos.” The skytyping will appear in 19 languages. Zackary Drucker

“As a lawyer, I am often constrained by the structural and discursive limits of the law,” said Strangio, who’s using his corner of the sky to memorialize Lorena Borjas, a transgender immigrant activist who died of Covid-19 in March. “I believe that art and artistic disruption are essential components of movements for social transformation.”

For the artist Alok Vaid-Menon — whose message “God Brown America” will be skytyped above the Montgomery Processing Center close to Vaid-Menon’s hometown, College Park, Texas — the project represents a commitment to elevating the stories of migrants and gender-nonconforming people. “As a descendant of refugees, it’s really important for me to help with this cause,” Vaid-Menon said. “I want to make sure people of color and immigrants in Texas feel like they belong.”

But the challenge of putting art into the sky has also required the legwork of a medium-sized production team led by Cristy Michel, who is also Cassils’ life partner. They found one company that does skytyping, she said, referring to Skytypers, which does the vast majority of the business in the United States. “And this is not something the pilots have done before,” she said. “Usually what they write looks like ‘Geico, Geico, Geico.’”

“When I sense the skytypers getting nervous,” Michel added, “we get into a discussion about how art helps the mind expand and think about future possibilities.”

Speaking by phone last week, Cassils and esparza described the artistic impulses behind “In Plain Sight.”

These are edited excerpts from that conversation.

In recent years, artists have spread their political messages on billboards, filled museums with agitprop and even started their own activist groups. How did you decide to bring your project into the clouds?

CASSILS About a year ago, rafa started a conversation with a bunch of artists in Los Angeles about issues surrounding migrant detention. We were trying to counter feelings of hopelessness and wondered what we, as artists, could do to visualize the issue on a massive scale. I’m a performance artist who is often given a pretty modest budget; there are often limitations to what’s possible. But what if artists like us could plan something bigger? What if artists had the same budget as a shoe company does for its brand promotions, but rather than selling

objects, we would be promoting a constructive dialogue? Then, we thought about the air shows that typically happen on Independence Day. Was it possible to usurp this traditional display of patriotism and retool it to bring attention to harmful migration policies? There's no censorship in the sky. It would be a perfect platform for mass engagement.

ESPARZA There were simple questions: How do you let incarcerated people know that you care? From there, our approach broadened by working with a cohort of artists and an advocacy impact team. We also have a film director working on a documentary about the project.



An AR still of "Modeerf," above a corrections center in Baldwin County, Ala. Sonya Clark

How has the project changed since the coronavirus pandemic? Has the outbreak forced you to alter your approach?

CASSILS The urgency of "In Plain Sight" has become paramount as people began to die from Covid-19 in detention camps. We had initially planned for this project to occur without any press, but when the pandemic hit, we launched our Instagram page that features short interviews with our artists and calls to action. It's been a great opportunity to take action. In recent months, I've had 11 exhibitions canceled or paused. Almost every artist I know has, too.

There is a rich history of artists looking toward the sky for inspiration. Yves Klein used it as inspiration for his conceptual blue paintings. Recently, the artist Jammie Holmes flew George Floyd's final words above five cities across the country. What other works have inspired your skytyping project?

ESPARZA "Repellent Fence" (2015) by the art collective Postcommodity was particularly important for us. They created a metaphorical suture along the migration path between the United States and Mexico with tethered balloons to speak about land art in relation to permanence and shifting landscapes. In the same way that they used the land to talk about the divisive power of colonial structures, we are hoping to index the sky as a symbol of inspiration and hope. And the sky is able to migrate messages across borders. When our message is skytyped above San Diego, the words will likely drift into Tijuana. And when our words are written above Los Angeles, they will have a shared orbital path, allowing phrases like "Abolition Now" and "Stop Crimigration Now" to coalesce into a circular message.

CASSILS We are also thinking of artists who have used the language of advertisement to get their points across. Artists like Lynda Benglis and Barbara Hammer. The AIDS Memorial Quilt was another important reference because it demonstrates how people can come together through a patchwork of activism.

Many artists involved with the project are also queer, which may or may not be a coincidence. We are thinking about the words of José Esteban Muñoz, who wrote in 2009 that "queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future." We see a liberation for queer, migrant and Black communities as deeply bound together because they are all rooted in the issues of white supremacy and colonization. Our jobs as queer artists is to imagine the future.

ESPARZA And we are putting the proposal of care, which is central to many queer communities, at the forefront of this project. We want to imagine what care looks like for people who are impacted by migrant detention and Covid-19.

CASSILS Bringing the skytypers into the fold has also been a unique experience. And with some messages being written in Cree, Farsi and Urdu, this will likely be the first time many people will see their own languages in the sky. There has also been a challenge to imagine how to write languages in the sky that don't use the Roman alphabet. Skytypers usually work in fleets of five planes each, so any image or letter must exist along a five-point matrix. For artists on the project, that means experimenting with the grid and drawing out words like "freedom" in Farsi or Urdu. It's interesting to note the challenges of what we can put into the sky, and how we might overcome those barriers.

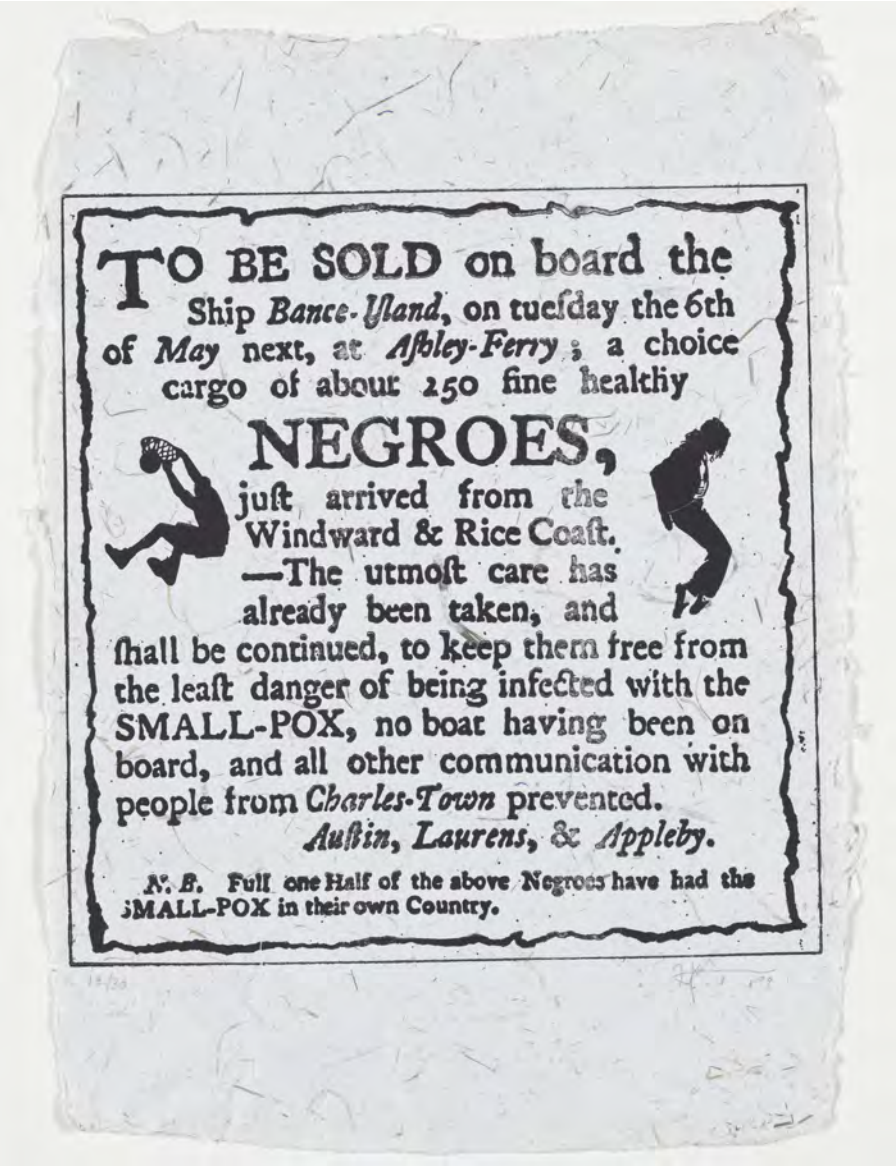
In Plain Sight

Find out how to see the art at: instagram.com/inplainsightmap/

Harvard Art Museum

Reflecting on Freedom

June 30, 2020



2018.33.60

Hank Willis Thomas, American, *To Be Sold*, 2009. Laser-cut relief print on handmade paper. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Margaret Fisher Fund, 2018.33.60. © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

to enslaved African Americans that they were free. And yet the promises of Emancipation, and of the constitutional amendments that followed, have not been fully realized. While Black Americans have made extraordinary achievements over the intervening century and a half, racial discrimination, terror, and violence continue to be leveled against them.

Seeking to foster continued discussion around this longstanding and ongoing injustice—in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, Dion Johnson, Rayshard Brooks, and so many others—this final installment in our three-part series considers a selection of works by modern and contemporary Black artists who, over the last few decades, have addressed the history of systemic racism and the inextricable relationship of past and present. In print and in paint, these artists reflect on the Black American experience by synthesizing historical narratives, popular culture, and personal stories.

Legacies

With the print pictured above, made during a residency at the Brandywine Workshop in Philadelphia in 2009, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas re-creates a 1760 advertisement for a South Carolina sale of 250 enslaved African men, women, and children. Thomas reproduces the ad's text verbatim but replaces its schematic renderings of African figures with the silhouettes of two modern celebrities: Shaquille O'Neal and Michael Jackson. This provocative juxtaposition of past and present, enslavement and success, raises questions about the legacy of slavery and the continued commodification of Black bodies. In connection with works like this one, Thomas has remarked on the spectacle of the enslaved, abused, and lynched in relation to that of the athletes and performers on

trademarked while still in college. The work stands both as an ‹nowledgment of Black achievement and as an indictment of a society that still fails to value all Black lives.

To hear Hank Willis Thomas speak on the intersection of art, race, and justice, watch a conversation with him at Radcliffe's Vision & Justice program in April 2019.

Joanna Sheers Seidenstein, Stanley H. Durwood Foundation Curatorial Fellow, Division of European and American Art

ARTFORUM

DIARY

WASHINGTON POSTCARD

June 19, 2020 • Washington, DC • Kriston Capps on art and protest in the capital



Hank Willis Thomas and Baz Dreisinger's *The Writing on the Wall* projected onto the US Department of Justice building. All photos: Liz Gorman.

A VIDEO PROJECTION on the facade of the US Department of Justice building played to an audience of one for its debut last week in Washington, DC.

Moments after the light beam touched the limestone, an agent from the US Department of Homeland Security arrived, demanding to know who the projectionists were with. They weren't "with" anybody, one of the four of them said. The agent made a call on a radio. He put his face in their faces. He shouted. Military jeeps swept down Pennsylvania Avenue, but they glided past the tense nighttime scene.

The standoff lasted only minutes. The projection squad relented, wheeling their cart away from the DOJ. They were followed by an SUV marked "Federal Protective Services: FPS," one of the countless abbreviations still patrolling the District of Columbia as part of a federal occupation of the city that has stretched on for two weeks.

Eventually, the projection team landed, blocks from the Capitol, at what was once the Newseum, where a fifty-ton marble slab bearing an inscription of the First Amendment hangs over the now-empty building. In a desultory gesture, the crew projected the visual installation, which illuminates the grotesque excesses of the justice system, over the seven-story text of the First Amendment, this time to an audience of no one in particular—not even an agent on the hunt for Antifa.

The Writing on the Wall, a collaboration between Hank Willis Thomas and Baz Dreisinger, capped off the second week of conflict in the nation's capital in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police. The projection comprises letters, poems, drawings, and other ephemera produced by incarcerated people, a testament on behalf of the 2.3 million Americans who currently reside in prisons, jails, and other correctional facilities. The text crawls as if it's pinging off a typewriter, revealing sing-song verse about solitude and confinement, even an ode to Harriet Tubman. Sometimes the words appear as legible poetry, but more often in overlapping patterns. There is far too much text to read, but enough to register a mass refrain of suffering.



Signs on the fence surrounding the White House.

"We've been talking about 2020 being a year of Great Awakening," Thomas said. "It's not a coincidence that this global movement comes out of a period of great pause and self-reflection by humans all over the world about what's valuable—literally the preciousness of each breath."

The Writing on the Wall drew crowds last year as a physical installation of art and letters on the High Line, New York's notorious public promenade, where the piece had it both ways as an offering to and commentary on the crowds taking a stroll; the piece has been adapted as a projection for touring in a pandemic landscape in which viewerships most likely belong to Instagram. Its context is doubly changed by the worldwide uprising over police brutality. On Juneteenth, the piece travels to Columbus, Ohio, where it will be projected at three locations around the city just after dark, a display to underscore the direct historical passage from slavery to mass incarceration.

“America exported this system of mass incarceration onto the world in this cut-and-paste fashion,” said Dreisinger, a City University of New York professor who serves as the executive director of the Incarceration Nations Network. “It’s our duty to deal with this in a global context.”

In the District, *The Writing on the Wall* punctuated a weekslong back-and-forth between citizens and state over the boundaries of speech. The game of one-upmanship started on June 1, when federal law enforcement agents used tear gas to clear out Lafayette Square so that President Donald Trump could walk the breezy block to St. John’s Church unfettered in order to hold up the Bible, the Word of God, as his standard. Then the White House dug in, erecting a nearly two-mile-long fence around Lafayette Square to wall off federal grounds. District Mayor Muriel Bowser clapped back on June 6 by emblazoning “BLACK LIVES MATTER” on the stretch of 16th Street leading up to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave—a mural maneuver that has been replicated by cities all over the nation. Protesters amended the mayor’s stunt the next morning, painting “DEFUND THE POLICE” as an extension of BLM Plaza and a rebuke to the mayor.



Black Lives Matter Plaza.

At every step so far, the lines in this public confrontation have been demarcated by text art. Much of the fence around the public parks of Lafayette Square and the Ellipse has since come down, but not before demonstrators covered its surface with art, signs, ribbon, balloons, and other forms of graphic testimony to spell out the wages of police brutality. The poetry along the perimeter wall surrounding the White House came to resemble the artifacts that make up *The Writing on the Wall*: psalms of despair, notes of triumph, portraits, and inscriptions of too many names to count.

Once, most viewers may have responded to a piece such as *The Writing on the Wall* with passive introspection or distracted compassion. All that has changed with the mass protests over police brutality, which have ignited a public fire to abolish every part of the criminal justice system. Matthew Wilson, an artist and curator whose work with the project started while serving time at the Otisville Correctional Facility in New York, hopes that people who walk away from the piece can put themselves in the shoes of the

individuals who contributed to the exhibit; that seems much more likely in an environment in which the viewers are breaking down the walls as fast as they come up.

With the federal occupation of the District winding down, shop owners are painting over graffiti on boarded-up storefronts, leaving little abstract blotches of color all over the city. Unidentified out-of-state soldiers have returned to their bases, taking their Humvees with them in long caravans streaming out of the city after dark. *The Writing on the Wall*, while seen by no one, was felt by many. The hope behind the piece, and the protests, is that the testimony won't disappear when the text does. "The abolition movement isn't over," Thomas told me. "This is part of that continuum."

— *Kriston Capps*

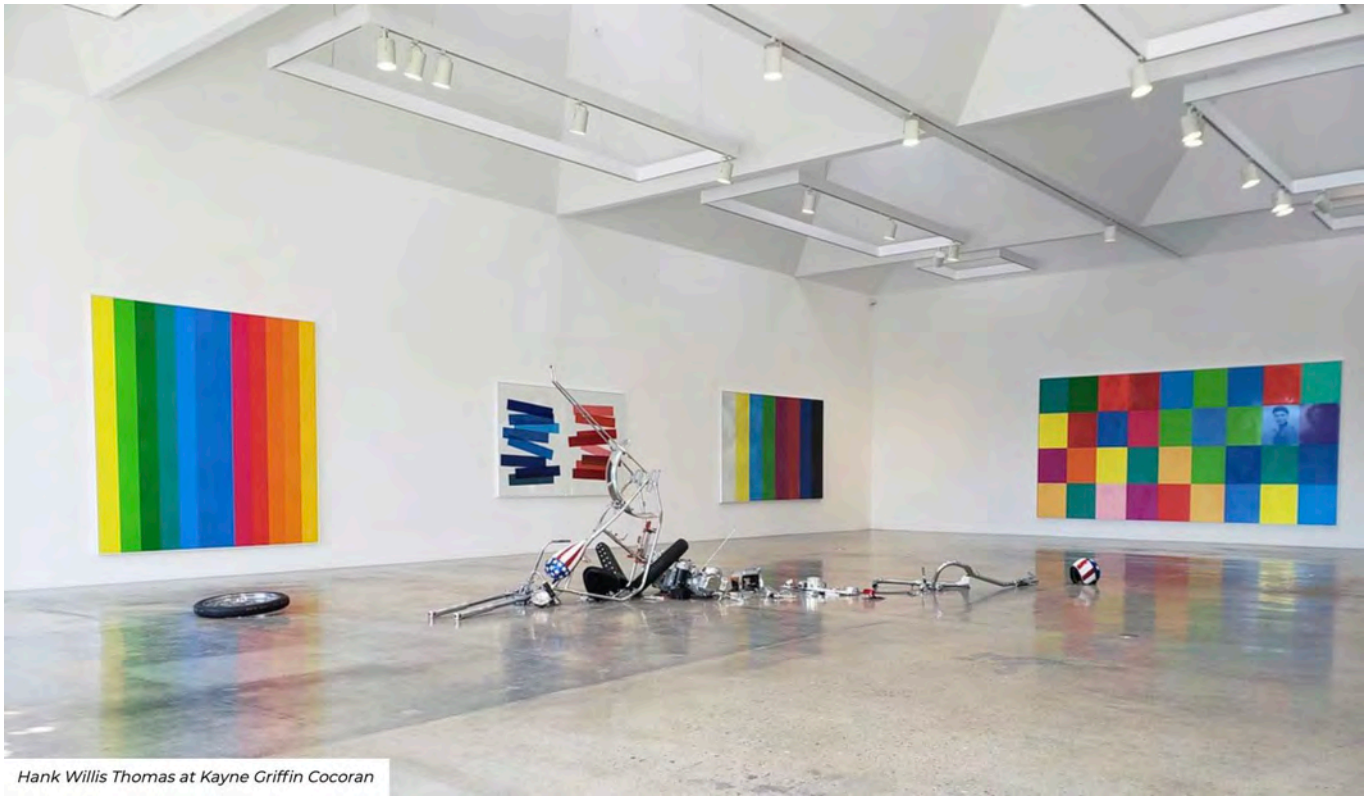
Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

By CAROLINA A. MIRANDA
STAFF WRITER

MARCH 5, 2020
8 AM

Here are nine exhibitions and events around Southern California to check out in the coming week:



Hank Willis Thomas at Kayne Griffin Cocoran

Last Chance

Hank Willis Thomas, "An All Colored Cast," at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. In his first solo show in Los Angeles, Thomas explores the nature of color while also exploring the nature of representation in Hollywood. The pièce de résistance is a sculpture inspired by the General Lee, the car that appeared in television's "The Dukes of Hazzard," the Dodge Charger painted with a Confederate flag that was at the center of the action — an object of television nostalgia that also evokes histories of violence against African Americans. Through Saturday. 1201 S. La Brea Ave., Mid-Wilshire, Los Angeles, kaynegriffincorcoran.com.

Galerie
Spring 2020

BACKSTORY

Freedom of Expression

CONCEPTUAL ARTIST HANK WILLIS THOMAS AND GALLERIST JACK SHAINMAN DISCUSS 15 EXCITING YEARS OF COLLABORATION



Artist Hank Willis Thomas (left) and gallerist Jack Shainman in front of Thomas's work *Frosted Yellow Willows (or Anna May Wong) Hidden Colors* (2019).

WAYNE LAWRENCE

Hank Willis Thomas is in demand more than ever, with his traveling museum survey now on view at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, and public art commissions in the works for the Brooklyn Academy of Music and Boston Commons. But 15 years ago, gallerist Jack Shainman took a chance on the then young, unknown photographer and has nurtured his career ever since.

How They Met

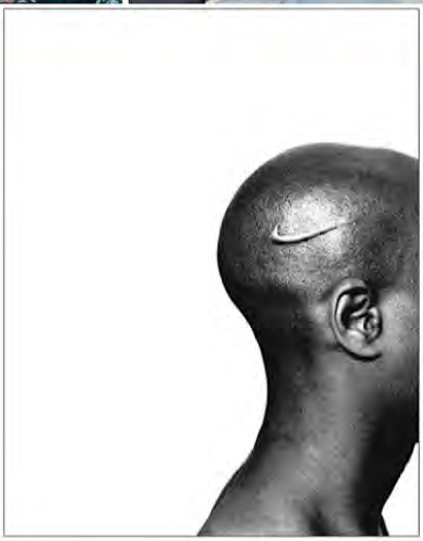
Jack Shainman: It was through Claude Simard, my partner in the gallery who passed away—he found Hank in 2004 through an art handler who had gone to school with him.

Hank Willis Thomas: I was living in San Francisco. I knew zero about commercial art galleries because I was a "photographer" and there were so few focused on photography. Claude just called me up, with his very thick

BACKSTORY







Clockwise from left: *Guernica* (2016) was part of Thomas's recent exhibition "All Things Being Equal . . . " at the Portland Art Museum. Thomas's *Unity* is a permanent installation in Brooklyn. *Branded Head* (2003).

French-Canadian accent, and said, "I like your work. Can you send me some so I can see it in person?"

Shainman: The day the photograph *Branded Head* arrived, Claude was ready to give him the whole gallery. We immediately hung it in the office. We were really interested in the subject matter that Hank was working with—advertising and branding, oppression, race—and the fact that it looked like nothing I had ever seen before.

Thomas: When I made that image, I was a grad student. I was like, "What, you want to sell it?" Do you remember how much that picture cost? It was $600. I was like, "Wow, $600!"

Their First Show

Thomas: We'd been working with each other for a couple of years, but I hadn't had a show yet. I happened to be visiting the gallery from San Francisco in 2006, and another artist had just fallen through.

Shainman: So we just offered him that show, "Hank Willis Thomas: B*ANDED," while he was standing at the front desk. As it opened, we were still waiting for the work to arrive. We had put in an order with the printer months earlier, and the work got delivered kind of late. I always say to people, the first show—it's just the beginning.

Life Change

Thomas: Around 2008, Jack called me. I was living in San Francisco peacefully, enjoying my life. Jack said, "Hank, it's time that you move to New York. It's nice to see you every few months, but I think it will really make a difference." I moved back to New York because of Jack. And he was right.

Shainman: I like to encourage artists to push themselves.

A Unique Collaboration

Thomas: In the last presidential election season, I was telling Jack that my friend Eric Gottesman and I were thinking about starting a super PAC. Jack said, "You have to do this. You can have the gallery." We turned the 24th Street space into our headquarters for the summer of 2016. We started doing advertisements, billboards, town hall talks in the gallery, an exhibition and titled it "For Freedoms." We had top artists like Carrie Mae Weems. We put Nina Chanel Abney, who was then still an emerging talent, in the show. Jack gave us carte blanche.

Shainman: Hank helped me cross one thing off my bucket list. I had always kind of been jealous of Chris Ofili and Andres Serrano; that getting denounced by the right wing catapulted them to the top of the art world. I saw pictures of Dread Scott's piece *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday* and said, "Bring that over." We put that flag out in front of "For Freedoms." The next day Fox News called for an interview, which I naively actually did, and we started getting death threats. It was horrible. But I was able to cross a second bucket list thing off: *The New York Times* had a story about the show and Dread Scott's flag.

How They See Each Other

Shainman: Hank is super generous. A lot of artists are not interested in other artists' work. Hank loves to support artists and give them a chance. Over the years he's shown me so many people—one of them was Toyin Ojih Odutola.

Thomas: Something that I've always loved about Jack is that when I want to do something crazy that I've never done before, he's like, "Okay." *hankwillisthomas.com, jackshainman.com* —HILARIE M. SHEETS

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK (2); COURTESY OF NYC DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION/MATTHEW LAPISKA

culture type

The Year Ahead in African American Art: What to See and Do in 2020

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* Feb 26, 2020 • 10:58 am

THE YEAR IN BLACK ART is off to a fascinating start. In January, Helen Molesworth organized a Noah Davis (1983-2015) exhibition at David Zwirner gallery in New York, a rare look at more than 20 paintings by the late Los Angeles-based artist and founder of the Underground Museum. The Johnson Publishing Company art collection was sold at Swann Auction Galleries, introducing more than 24 new African American artists to the auction market and setting records for an additional 27 artists, according to Swann.

There is much more to come as the year unfolds. Recognizing the 100th anniversary of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote, a number of institutions are planning exhibitions and events reflecting the historic milestone, none more ambitious than the Baltimore Museum of Art where all of its 2020 programming is focused on women artists, including Mickalene Thomas, Valerie Maynard, SHAN Wallace, and Shinique Smith.

Across the United States, major photography exhibitions are opening featuring Dawoud Bey, Deana Lawson, and Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop. South African photographer Zanele Muholi's first major UK survey opens at the Tate Modern in April. Solo shows at major institutions are celebrating artists such as Jordan Casteel, Tschabalala Self, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Christina Quarles, and Deborah Roberts, who focus on portraiture and black figures. Huge events are also happening in Bentonville, Ark., with the debut of a new arts space, and New Orleans, where Prospect.5 opens in October.

Following is a selection of more than two dozen important exhibitions, events, and happenings to look forward to in 2020:



HANK WILLIS THOMAS, "Icarus," 2016 (quilt, 56 1/2 x 85 1/4 X 2 inches). | © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

EXHIBITION | "Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition" @ Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. | Feb. 29-May 24, 2020

Exploring the complicated influences of European modernists on African American artists active in the 20th and 21st centuries, this show brings together works by more than 50 artists including **William H. Johnson, Pablo Picasso, Romare Bearden, Bob Thompson, Felrath Hines, Henri Matisse, Sam Middleton, Carrie Mae Weems, Ellen Gallagher, Winold Reiss, Vincent van Gogh, Mickalene Thomas, John Edmonds,** and **Hank Willis Thomas.** Curated by **Adrienne Childs,** the exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog.

ART, EVENTS, YORKVILLE

Gracie Mansion's largest art exhibition explores social justice and inclusion

POSTED ON TUE, FEBRUARY 25, 2020 BY DEVIN GANNON



All photos by Michael Appleton/NYC Mayor's Office

A new art exhibition is open at Gracie Mansion, the fourth and final installation of Mayor Bill de Blasio and First Lady Chirlane McCray's tenure. *Catalyst: Art and Social Justice*, which will also be the largest ever hosted at the historic home in Yorkville, features more than 75 works created by over 50 artists since the 1960s. With a focus on inclusion, the exhibit explores the connection between art, justice, and the social change movements behind it all.

"Catalyst highlights the triumphs and difficulties, internal and external, of people as individuals and members of movements and communities as they wrestle with climate change, racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, and more," McCray said in a press release. "Catalyst puts us in the middle of urgent national public conversations. This exhibition is certain to upend perceptions, expand awareness, and fire the imagination."

Seven themes are on display at the exhibit: Affirming Self; Concepts of Justice; E Pluribus Unum/Out of Many, One; The Habitable Earth; Health, Wellness and Universal Access; A Livable City; and Pursuit of Equality. Artworks, mainly by living artists, reflect initiatives spearheaded by the administration, including Pre-K for all, the Unity Project to aid LGBTQ youth, and the She Built NYC project.

Highlights include Jeffery Gibson's I am A Rainbow Too, Tattfoo Tan's S.O.S. Free Seeds Library, Teresita Fernández's Small American Fires, Gordon Parks' March on Washington, and Martine Fougeron's South Bronx Trades.

The installation was curated by Jessica Bell Brown, who serves as the associate curator of contemporary at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Brown also organized Gracie Mansion's last exhibition, She Persists: A Century of Women Artists in New York 1919-2019.

"First Lady McCray has breathed new life into Gracie Mansion over the course of her tenure," Brown said. "Never before have the extraordinary works of such diverse and inter-generational groups of artists of our time been front and center at Gracie. Artists time and again are witnesses to the truths of life, liberty and justice. They hold us accountable to each other as neighbors, as citizens, and as members of a wider collective."

TIME
INEQUALITY

Behind the Making of TIME's Martin Luther King Jr. Cover



Thea Traff for TIME

BY **ANNA PURNA KAMBHAMPATY**

FEBRUARY 20, 2020

After TIME created a virtual-reality version of the 1963 March on Washington, we asked artist Hank Willis Thomas how he would translate that immersive experience onto a magazine cover.

In answer, at a Jan. 19 photo shoot in Los Angeles, Thomas—a co-founder of For Freedoms, a platform for artistic civic engagement—photographed actor Ty Brittingham, who served as a stand-in for King. A team of digital-human experts at visual-effects studio Digital Domain used those images as a foundation for posing and lighting the 3-D digital re-creation of King from *The March*—the work of a diverse team of VFX artists who were tasked with recreating the civil rights leader exactly as he looked on the day of Aug. 28, 1963. The two-dimensional rendering of that virtual reality figure became the March 2, 2020, cover.

The session itself was a learning process, says Thomas. "When we got approached to do this kind of groundbreaking portrait of one of our heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., who has been inspiring us for decades, I was super excited," he says. "There were a lot of unknowns about the technology, about how you can do digital face mapping to produce images. It was a really amazing kind of learning experience for everyone involved."

"The shoot wonderfully captured Hank's collaborative approach to making art," TIME's director of photography Katherine Pomerantz said.

Thomas says he understood the need to convey both King's standing as a historical figure and his legacy. The idea of bringing past movements into the present is one with which Thomas is familiar: One of his reimaginings of Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms" paintings was featured on the Nov. 26, 2018, cover of TIME, and his latest project creates a similar sense of time warp.

From Feb. 28 to March 1, the For Freedoms team will be gathering artists, activists and other creators for a series of events in Los Angeles to emphasize the relationship between creative collaboration and civic action. Thomas hopes those events are just the beginning of a larger movement inspired by the "Wide Awakes" chapters that rallied behind Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election, and that used public demonstrations and other tactics to encourage young Americans to be politically engaged.

"Our team has always been about collective projects and really aiming to bring people together and unite their culture and art," says Christina Caputo, a For Freedoms adviser, "instead of kind of focusing on projects that divide them."

This article is part of a special project about equality in America today. Read more about The March, TIME's virtual reality re-creation of the 1963 March on Washington and sign up for TIME's history newsletter for updates.

Want a print of TIME's Martin Luther King Jr. cover? Find it here.

CULTURED

PARTIES

CELEBRATING HANK WILLIS THOMAS AT KAYNE GRIFFIN CORCORAN

CULTURED MAGAZINE

02.19.2020



HANK WILLIS THOMAS. PHOTO BY OWEN KOLASINKI.

On February 14th, Artadia, *LALA* and *Cultured* celebrated Artadia Awardee Hank Willis Thomas with a garden brunch hosted by Capital Group and private walk through of his solo exhibition “An All Colored Cast” at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. A crowd gathered at the mid-city gallery to share breakfast before hearing the artist discuss his latest body of work. The show’s pièce de résistance was a recreation of the famed Confederate Flag-adorned car from Dukes of Hazard, which was installed nose-down on the gallery’s lawn. Among those in attendance were Allison Berg, Ron Finley, Cultured Editor-in-Chief Sarah Harrelson, Kyle DeWoody, Laura Hyatt, Jamie Manné, Iris Marden, Shula Nazarian, Tracy O’Brien, Tina Perry & Ric Whitney, Azadeh Shladovsky, Lesley Silverman and Autumn Williams.

NEWS
Monday, March 09, 2020

For Freedoms Community Conversation: Freedom of Speech

Feb. 17, 2020

In honor of their newest temporary exhibition, *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal…* and the ongoing efforts of For Freedoms, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art will present a series of four community conversations to deepen our understanding of issues affecting Northwest Arkansas communities.

The first will be about the freedom of speech from 1-3 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 29, in the Great Hall of Cyrstal Bridges in Bentonville.



Photo Submitted

For Freedoms Community Conversation: Freedom of Speech

Crystal Bridges invites you to participate in these conversations with a diverse group of local speakers including artists, city officials, and community leaders in the sharing of personal stories and work in relation to the topic. Each event will focus on one of the four freedoms, asking universal questions to spark conversation such as: "What does truth mean to you? What does an adequate standard of living mean to you? What does safety mean to you? What does love mean to you?"

The stories shared in this program are meant to bring different voices from the community together in a shared non-partisan space. All are welcome to participate and we ask you to come with a spirit of reciprocity.

In this community conversation, freedom of speech will be viewed through the frame of "What does it mean to speak your truth?" Speakers and audience members will be asked to recall a time when you first understood what speaking your truth meant, and to reflect on how that experience helped frame the way you saw/see the world. Universal questions may include: How does art challenge or demonstrate truth? What impact does freedom of speech have on someone else's truth?

This conversation will be led by the following speakers:

- **Rev. Sekou**, Memphis-based musician of the Freedom Fighters band and artist from For Freedoms Collective
- **Srividya Venkatasubramanya,** president of Ra-Ve Cultural Foundation, a local Indian performing arts organization
- **Stephanie Orman**, mayor of Bentonville
- **Rebecca Ellis**, Bentonville High School student who participated in the gun violence walkouts.

This event is free with online registration, and registered attendees will receive a free admission ticket to *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal…* at the event. The programs will be moderated by fellows from the University of Arkansas IDEALS Institute.

Please note that a Crystal Bridges member will be taking photos and videos at this event. This footage may be used for internal purposes, such as promoting the next event or archiving. If you would prefer not to be photographed or recorded, you may opt out at the event.

CONTACTS

Rickey Lee Booker Jr., associate trainer
IDEALS Institute
479-575-4223, rbooker@uark.edu

John Post, director of academic communications
University Relations
479-575-5555, johnpost@uark.edu

artnet® news

In LA for Frieze Week? Here Is Our Guide to 33 Inspiring Gallery Shows to See Beyond the Fairs

See what LA galleries from Gagosian to Honor Fraser are showing across the city.

Sarah Cascone, February 10, 2020



Hank Willis Thomas, "People just like to look at me" (Spectrum IX), 2019 (variation without flash). Courtesy of Kayne Griffin Corcoran.

"Hank Willis Thomas: An All Colored Cast" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran

Through March 7

Continuing to probe issues of race, gender, and identity, Hank Willis Thomas looks to Hollywood history for his first show with Kayne Griffin Corcoran, featuring sculptures and retroreflective prints activated by flash photography and based on found images from film archives. The exhibition is inspired by screen-color calibration charts, which were designed to make white people look good on camera; the works ask the viewer to reconsider loaded language like "color correction" and "white balance."

Kayne Griffin Corcoran is located at 1201 South La Brea Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

Wallpaper*

ART | 4 DAYS AGO | BY HARRIET LLOYD-SMITH

Gun violence memorial created by Hank Willis Thomas and Mass Design Group in Washington

In Washington, DC, a poignant installation honours victims of gun violence in America



According to the nonprofit research group, Gun Violence Archive, almost 40,000 Americans are killed by gun violence each year, a tragedy exacerbated by recent economic issues related to Covid-19. Staged within the National Building Museum in Washington, DC, *The Gun Violence Memorial Project* was conceived by American conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas and Mass Design Group in partnership with gun violence prevention organisations Purpose Over Pain and Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund.

Free to the public, the poignant installation comprises four white houses, each constructed with 700 transparent glass bricks, a tribute to each person killed by guns each week in the US. The houses are already home to hundreds of personal artefacts, including photographs, baby shoes, graduation tassels and jewellery.





Over time, cavities will be filled with deeply personal objects of remembrance donated by the families of victims. Using the design as a prototype, the ambition for the project is a permanent national memorial that pays tribute the lives of those killed by guns.

'My family felt the effects of gun violence first hand when my cousin was murdered during a robbery in 2000,' says Thomas, who is also artistic director of Songha & Company, a conceptual public art practice named after the artist's cousin, Songha Thomas Willis. 'My life, and by extension my artistic practice, has been influenced ever since.'

The exhibition will also display excerpts from *Comes the Light*, a forthcoming documentary film exploring the effects of gun violence created by Haroula Rose and Caryn Capotosto.





The Gun Violence Memorial Project will be on view physically and online until September 2022 and is presented in conjunction with 'Justice is Beauty: The Work of Mass Design Group', a timely new show surveying the work of the socially conscious nonprofit architecture firm.

'As the recent tragic shootings in Colorado and Georgia sadly underscore, gun violence isn't an abstract concept, but an epidemic that strikes every American community,' said Brent D Glass, interim executive director of the National Building Museum. ✱



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READ — CULTURE

INTERVIEW: ARTIST HANK WILLIS THOMAS

THE PROLIFIC ARTIST ON HIS RETROSPECTIVE, "ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL," AS IT MAKES ITS FINAL STOP IN CINCINNATI

Karen Day 3 September 2020

Black lives matter. While this chant began in 2013 as a response to the murder of teenager Trayvon Martin, it's a sentiment steeped in the USA's history and one that artist Hank Willis Thomas has been exploring for two decades. His work takes a careful look at the messages we intercept every day—from advertising to sports to art and beyond—and reconfigures it to expose some essential truths about ourselves, what we allow to influence us and who we are as a collective humanity.

Thomas may be someone who flies under the radar due to his quiet, humble nature, but his oeuvre speaks volumes about the way he views the world. And it's not just limited to his personal output, which is collaborative in its realization but inspired by his own curiosities; Thomas is also the co-founder of For Freedoms, an organization for creative civic engagement, and the Wide Awakes, a super-current platform for community- and creativity-driven understanding of mobilization and participation.



Hank Willis Thomas “Public Enemy (II)” [variation without flash] (2017) Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

It makes sense, then, that Thomas was due for a mid-career retrospective. The homage to one of our greatest living artists began in Portland at the end of last year, where his work was curated by Julie Dolan and Sara Krajewski for the exhibition *All Things Being Equal*. After stopping in Bentonville, Arkansas, the show is now on its last leg in Ohio, at the Cincinnati Art Museum, where they’ve added to it by tapping the local community to participate.

Thomas’ work feels more relevant than ever, so we checked in with him about what has changed, and what has stayed the same throughout his 20 year career.



Hank Willis Thomas “All Things Being Equal…” (2010) Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

How has the way you think about things changed in the last six months, if at all?

I think there’s definitely a greater response and a greater resonance to the work that I’ve always been doing. My specific concern is, “Where do we go from here?” And I believe that peace and justice will prevail. I also think that this is a pretty frightening time when it comes to—I mean, look at what’s happening in Portland, where the show started. It’s a serious moment, and someone’s got to put an end to this in a positive way.



Hank Willis Thomas “Guernica” (2016) Private Collection. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

Do you label your work as protest art?

I don’t. I think it does highlight protest, it’s about protest, but all of it is not protest art. I’ve been looking at protests as a creative form of civic engagement and proactive advancement of society. For the past four years I’ve kind of reshaped the meaning of that work, which is largely around things that happened in the mid-20th century. So now 60 years later, those same images, those same stories being so relevant to oppression, there is that sense that history is repeating itself or at least that we haven’t learned our lesson.



Hank Willis Thomas “I Am. Amen.” (2009) Collection of Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

How do you describe your work?

I think my work is very much my life. So it’s a product of my search, my quest for personhood. My quest for my own specific voice to be clear and to understand the world and make sense of it.



Hank Willis Thomas “The Cotton Bowl” from the series Strange Fruit (2011) Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, W. Hawkins Ferry Fund. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

What’s your process like?

I was always fascinated by the power of advertising to shape and influence our notions of what’s important, who’s important and who we want to be. And so for me, that has been the journey and it became more clear when I did the *Unbranded* series that I could look really critically at how advertising used prejudice to inform and shape our version of yourself through playing on our stereotypes and our need to be simple, clear and beautiful. And I wanted, more and more, to encourage myself and others to really engage deeply with the kind of, if not brainwashing, the potency of advertising and its ability to control our values through seductiveness.

You work as an artist, but you also have your ideas in other places, from fashion to billboards to museums.

Yeah, and I'm learning new mediums. It's such a learning process; the world has changed so dramatically in the past six months that all options have to be on the table for us to really get through this carefully.

How do you stay "conceptual" when reality is so crazy?

One of the pieces in the show is "Art Imitates Ads/ Imitates Life." That's it, that's all of it.



Hank Willis Thomas "Strike" (2018) Private Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

How does your personal work differ from For Freedoms?

My studio practice is all about me, right. Even when I don't do it all—all my work is collaborative—and For Freedoms and the Wide Awakes are ways to kind of more publicly collaborate, and people don't presume that my voice is the leading voice and think that I'm the only one doing this work because in reality, there are thousands of artists doing similar work that inspired me and have inspired me. My studio practice is just in that continuum, so we've been doing exhibitions

and billboards and town halls, collaborations with artists and organizations across the world as a way to stake a claim for artists and civic life, and to make our work collectively something that people can see as an alternative to the typical propaganda that is that we've grown used to in our society. Because we add creativity to political speech it actually opens up doors and online on how we actually might engage in legislation and political life.



Hank Willis Thomas "Wounded Knee (red and gold)" [variation without flash] (2018) Private Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

Last year you became a father. How has that changed you?

So that has been pretty enlightening, to say the least. The generational levels of it, I don't know, but like big dad and being not just me—I'm part of a legacy I would hope. And that will hopefully

outlive me and live on for generations. And that the work that I make is speaking to someone else's life in a very different way than it was when I made it. I didn't conceive that my work might be something that someone 10 have 20 or 30 years ago might have to relate to and engage with it. It's part of my own biography. It also changes the way that I think about myself, even as a citizen at this time.

What's surprised you most about your career?

That somehow I've made a living doing it. I've just been following my dreams and trying to be genuine somehow, you know; I've been able to continue to do that for almost 20 years.

All Things Being Equal opens tomorrow at the Cincinnati Art Museum and runs through 8 November 2020.

Hero image "Public Enemy (II)" [variation with flash] (2017) by Hank Willis Thomas Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

KAREN DAY



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The Guardian



Hank Willis Thomas: 'The work will not be complete in our lifetime'

The artist talks about the Black Lives Matter movement, his latest timely sculpture and why it's more important than ever for artists to use their voices to challenge power

Nadja Sayej

Thu 30 Jul 2020 10.56 EDT

In Atlanta, the BeltLine Eastside Trail recently saw a new addition to its landscape: a new public artwork by the Historic Fourth Ward Park, close to the birthplace of Dr Martin Luther King Jr.

Until 11 August, pedestrians will see a 28ft tall, 7,000lb Afro pick.

It's a sculpture by the New York artist Hank Willis Thomas called All Power to All People. As part of his project with Kindred Arts, the sculpture will tour cities across the US ahead of the presidential election in November.

“To me, the work is a celebration and a provocation,” Thomas told the Guardian. “It’s a symbol of community, strength, justice and belonging that aims to inspire action and demand social change.”

After its time in Atlanta, the sculpture will travel to Washington DC from 15-28 August, coinciding with the forthcoming Get Your Knee Off Our Necks: Commitment March on Washington on 28 August, led by the Rev Al Sharpton; the event marks the 57th anniversary of King’s I Have a Dream speech. The sculpture then travels to Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia. It previously appeared on display outside the Africa Center in Manhattan last year.

In light of the Black Lives Matter protests and racist Confederate monuments and memorials removed in recent months, some wonder what the future of public art and monuments will look like. “Public monuments have a higher charge now,” said Thomas. “With all the things that have been happening with monuments across the country, this felt more important than ever.”

The first Afro comb was patented in 1969 by two African Americans, Samuel H Bundles Jr and Henry M Childrey. It was popularized by the Black Power movement and often designed with a clenched fist and a peace sign.

“The peace sign has been an element of black power. It was a time of the radical redefinition of beauty, the growing of our hair and the celebration of culture that was underappreciated,” said Thomas.



The sculpture in Atlanta. Photograph: Marc Turnley

The fist was added to many Afro combs as a nod to the Black Power salute that was popularized by the Black Panther party. At the time, it was known as the Black Power Afro pick hair comb and was manufactured by Antonio’s Manufacturing, founded by Anthony R Romani (who designed the Afro rake comb and the peace sign Afro pick in 1972).

“It is a uniting motif, worn as adornment, a political emblem and signature of collective identity,” said Thomas. “In light of ongoing, anti-black police brutality and a pandemic that disproportionately affects black individuals, it’s an urgent public art piece serving as a symbol of unity, pride, strength, perseverance, justice and belonging.”

The key, he says, is the peace sign at the heart of the Afro pick. “Even with the Black Panthers, what they wanted was peace, but there was a war on the community, so it was called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense,” he adds. “I wanted to highlight this idea of the Black Power movement as always being a peace movement.”

Thomas is known for his recent public art projects, including Incarceration Nations: Writing on the Wall, where the artist and Dr Baz Dreisinger have projected writings by prisoners fearful of catching the coronavirus on to Manhattan’s criminal justice buildings. He is also working on the ongoing project, For Freedoms, an ongoing country-wide billboard art initiative co-founded with Eric Gottesman and Michelle Woo, which has provoked a debate around voting.

The new sculpture was inspired by the artist’s 2017 project, All Power to All People, a 9ft Afro pick the artist made for Mural Arts Philadelphia and Monument Lab.



Thomas's All Power to All People sculpture in Philadelphia.
Photograph: Matt Rourke/AP

It sat near Philadelphia City Hall, next to the monument of Frank Rizzo, the controversial conservative mayor and police chief who attacked the Black Panthers in the 1970s. The Rizzo monument was removed in June. “After that sculpture was removed, there were recent calls for my pick piece to take its place there,” said Thomas.

It traveled, too, to Burning Man, the annual event in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, last summer. “The sculpture was at its best at Burning Man because there are less rules, so people could climb up inside it,” said Thomas.

“We had LED lights that made it change color at night. There was also a soundtrack that went along with it called Black Righteous Space, which has speeches and music from Afro Caribbean and African American movements of the past,” he adds. “Burning Man isn’t the most culturally diverse place, so it was monumental as a statement.”

Despite the recent wave of public art as a mere selfie op for Instagrammers, Thomas still believes that it can spark action, that art can influence the public vote. “We see how political public space is. What’s exciting about this work is that it’s very much a rallying call,” he said. “Having it tour during this election has extreme potency and power.”

Thomas’s first major retrospective will open 4 September at the Cincinnati Arts Museum. He recognizes that this new sculpture is timely amid the social upheaval storming the globe, even

though he has been making political art for the past 20 years.



Photograph: Andrea Blanch

“It’s something I’m still reconciling with,” said Thomas. “It’s heartbreaking to think that it takes several murders by the people who are hired to serve and protect us in order for there to be true movement to understand, acknowledge something so basic, which is that black lives matter.

“I’ve always struggled with the necessity of even having to say that because it’s so obvious,” he said. “I am looking forward to the moment where a lot of things I’m talking about are the norm. How do we continue to redefine and open new doors for other people to get more access to liberty and justice?”

Many Americans are looking forward to changing the course of the country with the election, but Thomas says that might not be the ultimate answer. “A single election doesn’t matter,” he says. “Everything helps - even the current president helps because he helps show what’s at stake when we don’t engage.”

Thomas believes artists have an ability to see the future, that they can channel what they have seen through their artwork.

“It isn’t just artists, it’s activists, as well,” he said. “We may not see or be there for the final moment, as Martin Luther King Jr said on the night he was murdered: ‘I’ve seen the mountaintop. I might not get there with you.’

“I feel like that’s so prophetic, so frightening, but I understand more about what he’s saying,” said Thomas. “The road towards progress is always under construction. The work will not be complete in our lifetime.”

This article was amended on 5 August, 2020 to add Michelle Woo’s name to the co-founders of For Freedoms

America is at a crossroads ...

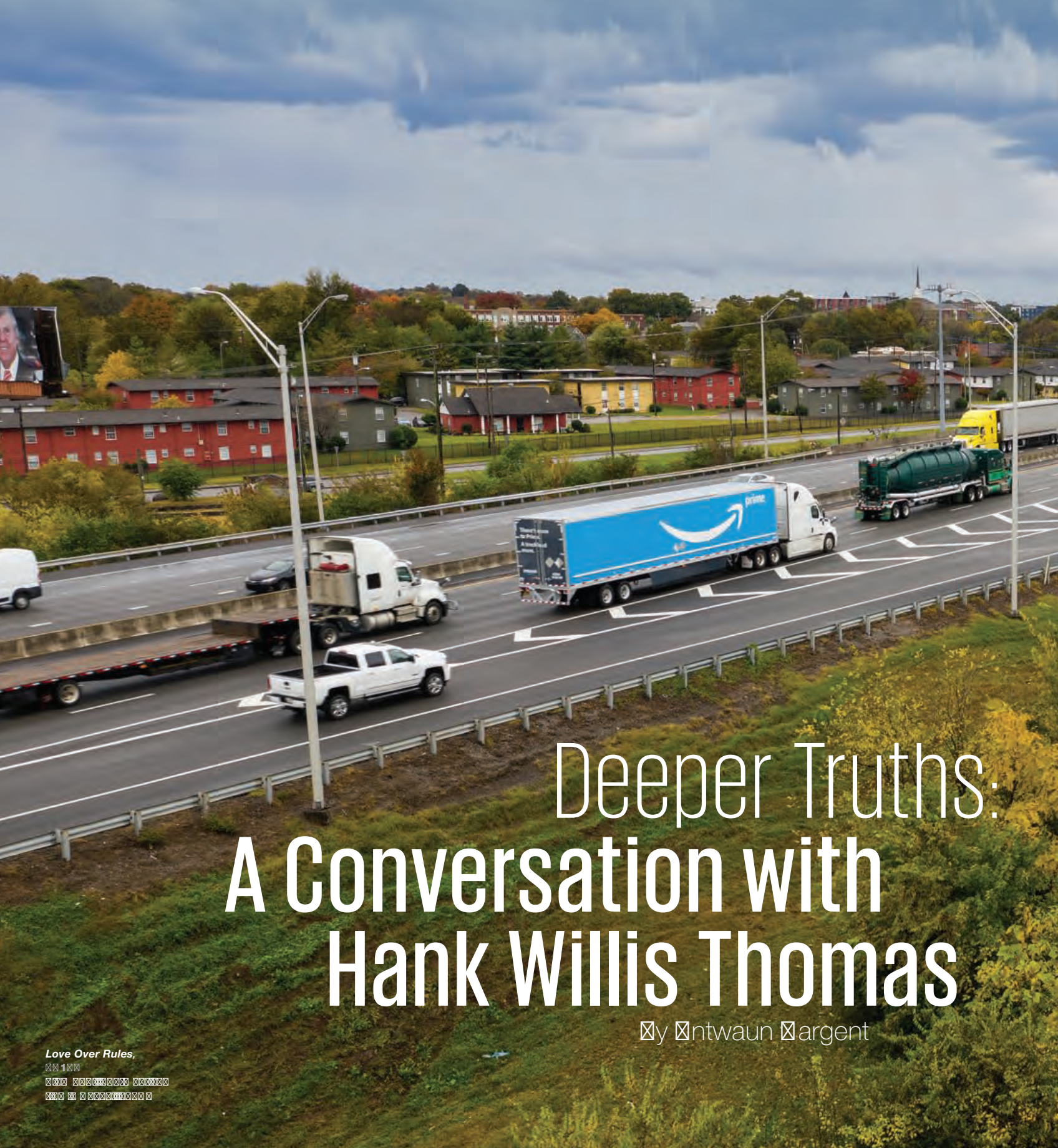
... in the coming months, and the results will define the country for a generation. These are perilous times. Over the last three years, much of what the Guardian holds dear has been threatened - democracy, civility, truth.

The country is at a crossroads. Science is in a battle with conjecture and instinct to determine policy in the middle of a pandemic. At the same time, the US is reckoning with centuries of racial injustice - as the White House stokes division along racial lines. At a time like this, an independent news organisation that fights for truth and holds power to account is not just optional. It is essential.

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As our business model comes under even greater pressure, we'd love your help so that we can carry on our essential work. **If you can, support the Guardian from as little as $1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**



Deeper Truths: A Conversation with Hank Willis Thomas

By Antwaun Sargent

Love Over Rules,
2018
[illegible]



COMMERCIAL BICKETT ADVERTISING | EARLOM STORE | HARRIS THOMAS COURTESY THE ARTIST | JACOB SHAMBERG | ORTRAITBUREAU | ARCH

Hank Willis Thomas, who was recently awarded a uggenheim Fellowship, has emerged as one of the most prolific artists of his generation. Formally trained as a photographer, over the last years, he has considered the relationship we have to images and what they say about our priorities and privileges, focusing primarily on popular, found imagery from history, sport, and fashion. He recontextualizes so effectively that his work has changed how we see images that we often passively consume. In the early "Unbranded" series, for instance, he removed the language and logos from advertisements, leaving only the images. The gesture focused attention on the outsized influence corporations have in shaping common notions of race, gender, beauty, and sexuality.

The idea is to get at "a deeper truth," says Thomas, who recently co-founded an art political-action committee called For Freedoms. This impulse has increasingly driven him to use photographs as the basis for a burgeoning sculptural practice rooted in social engagement. For him, "It's all one Form is nothing more than an extension of content' is what one of my professors once said." *he r th B th*, an interactive installation that has traveled across the world, allowed participants to dialogue about questions concerning their communities *er t e e*, a monumental fro-pick planted outside City Hall in hiladelphia in , was a poignant reminder of self-determination and other sculptures, such as *Str e, ert* , and *e as et Brand he ass rt st B rn* , often fabricated in fiberglass, steel, and bronze, isolated gestures and iconic moments found in photographs to draw attention to acts of destruction, power, and love.

Antwaun Sargent: I was reading through *ll hins ein ual*, the monograph published in conunction with your survey exhibition, on view at the ortland Art Museum in regon through anuary 12, 2020, and I came across the statement, 'I'm much more influenced by Beyonc than icasso.' What do you mean by that?

Hank Willis Thomas: ven though my mother's a curator and art historian, that wasn't the driving force in my social identity. ou and I, we grew up in what's called the MT eneration. We take our cues from people in popular culture. The audacity and, some might say, perfection that Beyonc represents are qualities that I've always taken inspiration from.

AS: ne of the strategies that you've employed across your career is the use of image archives—online, in libraries, in museum collections, and in magazines. How do you see your relationship to the found image?

HWT: I studied photography in the analog days and was really into it. My mother's a photographer and a photo historian. But, in so many ways, I see myself as a product of my generation. Within about three years of graduating undergrad, the whole landscape shifted to digital. I had to reconsider not only my relationship to the camera, but also to images, because there were more photographs being taken in a split second than one could make sense of. ow everyone has an equal-quality camera in their pocket, and so everyone has the capacity to become a photographer. What does this mean in relation to making images, to understanding them, and how do they impact our lives? o we think about the ubiquity of photographs and how we can start to distill meaning from them and maybe reshape them? Most of what we know about ourselves and our culture is really shaped through commercial images, through advertising and popular culture. I have used those images as the basis for my investigation of my own identity as well as the identity of this moment.

AS: *It's ll a uestion of Luc* (2010) is a diptych of osephine Baker and another black woman. The uxtaposition creates a dialogue between the images in which you can see the influence of Baker on the culture and the ways in which black femininity is portrayed over time. I always think about your work as a conversation with the ways in which blackness is represented and the power or powerlessness in that representation. When you are creating works like *It's ll a uestion of Luc*, how are you thinking about questions of representation?

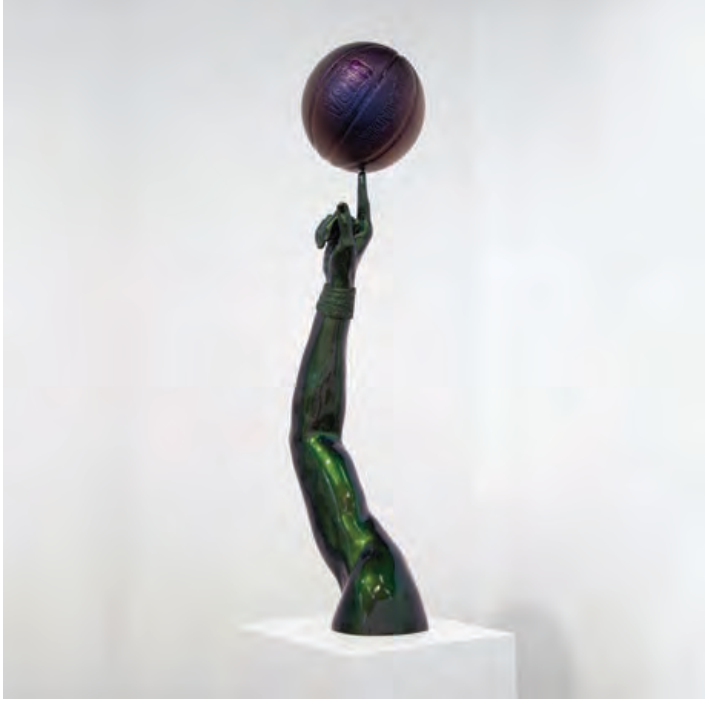
HWT: I'm always wondering, are we recycling old ideas or are we actually innovating? Is it exploitative or actually revolutionary? The story of osephine Baker is in part about someone who'd been overlooked,

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especially as a black woman. She had to leave the United States and exoticize herself in order to be seen as beautiful. I'm also trying to excavate, looking beneath the layers to see what is the influence of making that image a real image.

AS: ver the last several years, you've used images that have shaped our imaginations and possibilities of identity to create sculpture. How has your changing relationship to the camera and its images informed this shift?

HWT: We live in a moment of scanning and capture, motion capture, and mechanical reproductions. I guess there's a question I am trying to pose through the sculptures Is it possible to have a phenomenal relationship to a historic or iconic moment? My first years making sculpture, I was looking at images from apartheid South frica and trying to rationalize and relate to the tension in them—the sculptures were very much me trying to get myself and viewers a little bit closer to the history that we mostly see in two-dimensional black and white images from a "long time ago." The works make you as a viewer present with whatever moment is being chosen or captured.

AS: In thinking about your shift to sculpture, the recent activity of your art political-action committee, For Freedoms, comes to mind. The 50 State Initiative, a campaign to bring artist-designed billboards to every state in America, operates in an in-between space. When you were conceptualizing that pro ect, were you thinking sculpturally about how those billboards might consider an existing landscape?

HWT: ublic advertising is very much an art form. It's not what we might call a high art form, but I think part of what we wanted to do, which included town halls, exhibitions, and billboards, was to encourage viewers and ourselves to reconsider public space and institutional space. By making these billboards as artworks, we were trying to change the meaning of what a billboard is and how it should function.

AS: What were some of the conversations that you wanted to have with the public through those particular ob ects?



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HWT: I think the question that I asked was literally, "What does the question look like in public space?" Meaning, most of these commercial advertising spaces are used exclusively to tell people where to go, what to buy, and who to be. ur billboards are framed as political, but most of what the artists do within their work is ask questions. We did not direct the billboards. We were just creating space for artists to do what they already do in their private studio practices but to present it in a new way. "Where o We o From Here?" is one of the questions on ric ottesman's billboard. We are interested in rethinking the discourse that members of the public can have with an artist. With most art, these exchanges are supposed to happen in what people often see as exclusive white cubes or museums. But in this case, the same works found in museums are in public space. Hopefully they are raising the level of critical engagement around the images and the works we see in public space.

AS: The impression is that your work has shifted from being focused on subliminal language and messages carried in advertisements and popular imagery—in the Branded and nbranded series and *hite Imitates lac* (2009)—to being more concerned with overtly political images and messaging in *Raise* (201) or For Freedoms.

HWT: ll art is political. The question is How do we define "political," and how do we define "art"? I guess some people would see *Branded Head* and *Scarred Chest* both , which preceded "Unbranded," as even more political. I think about the extraction of the political when we think about the billboards. ne of the billboards that got censored by the billboard companies was dam endleton's work. They felt they couldn't understand it on the surface, so therefore it was a threat.

AS: *he word wallower* (2017) and *i Off* (201) continue your fascination with sports. In these sculptures, you make the politics of sports the subect of the games, but it seems like you are drawn to the spectacle, too.

HWT: It's the spectacle, but sports is also a highly political landscape. When you think about many of the major

advancements for disenfranchised people— frican merican, ative merican, Latino, and women—many of those happened through sports. When you think about Billie ean King and even Michael ordan, im Brown, and Muhammad li, it was really through their undeniable beauty, integrity, and creativity that the public was forced to engage with them as human beings.

AS: What's interesting to me is how the work grapples with multiple notions of what is political in society and art.

HWT: It's really about highlighting the fact that all art is political. When we talk about icasso, why is his work important years later? What's become centered as valuable, and who originates or seemed to originate ideas that are central to our society, is political. Most of what we know about ancient reece and ancient gypt, and even the enaissance era, is through the art. So what is seen as art, who is seen as a valuable artist, and what is preserved are not only important but also hyper-political.

AS: *Raise* is situated in Montgomery, Alabama, on the grounds of the ational Memorial for eace and ustice, which is dedicated to those who lost their lives to lynching. I find the placement to be a significant gesture, both a political and poetic representation of a history of black struggle and freedom. When you are thinking about the installation of your sculpture in situ, what is that process like?

HWT: In that space, my sculpture is a small part of Bryan Stevenson's vision. ven though he doesn't see himself as an artist, his craft and his storytelling obviously create the platform and the opportunity for my work to be seen. It was his idea to place that specific sculpture within the context of the ational Memorial for eace and ustice. I had originally conceptualized the sculpture to be that size, but I never could've imagined that a few years later there'd be someone thinking more thoughtfully about its placement than I would.

AS: You're designing Boston's Martin Luther ing r. memorial. It will feature the arms of ing and his wife, Coretta Scott ing, embracing in bronze. It is an untraditional monument in that it does not capture the



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VICTOR RIVERA, HAS A BIG IS THOM AS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACOB SHAMOSH ARCHIVE, NEW YORK



> **“I’m always wondering,** are we recycling old ideas or are we actually innovating? Is it exploitative or actually revolutionary?”

full likenesses of these Civil Rights icons.

HWT: I was inspired by a photograph that highlights the intimacy that they had with one another and the fact that they fell in love in Boston. How do we talk about, in a memorial, more than just two people? I was interested in their capacity for love and commitment and partnership. Their love shifted society. The way in which his arms are wrapped around hers was something I thought could be a poetic reminder for us to reflect on the greater history of partnership and love that is critical to freedom movements.

AS: It’s almost an abstraction of their love, of black love.

HWT: Unfortunately, we’ve become so accustomed to hearing Martin Luther King’s name that we no longer see him when we see images of him. We don’t recognize him as someone who was seen as the most dangerous man in the country at the peak of his impact. How do we connect the deeper part of his legacy, which is in part the partnership with Coretta Scott King? I didn’t want to make it about idealistic, perfect people, but about their bond. I felt that by focusing on the arms, I could focus more clearly on the bond.

AS: It reminds me of *Love Over Rules*, a phrase that has come to define your life in a lot of ways. It was the theme of your wedding, and you subsequently made it into a neon light installation, installed in downtown San Francisco and in the lobby of the Brooklyn Museum. Both of these works emphasize the ways in which your practice is also an investigation of language.

HWT: I think about a For Freedoms billboard I saw in September that said, “words shape reality.” What you choose to photograph, make into a sculpture, or tell in a story in many ways dictates our understanding of things. If we’re not questioning those words or reconsidering those meanings, we could also not be understanding deeper truths about what we’re hearing or seeing. How do you reconsider and reimagine our relationship to everyday objects or overused tropes? How do we start to give ourselves new meaning or understanding? That’s exactly what I try to do. I try to bring history forward and to take the things we already know or think we know and show them in a new light, to not only view them but also to broaden understanding.

AS: The newer retro-reflective vinyl works of iconic protest images in some ways do exactly that—they stand out as a way of telling the viewer to engage history. To see the work, you have to flash a light on it. The images are confrontational. You flash a light on *“I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd” #1* (2017) and there’s Elizabeth Eckford integrating Little Rock Central High School in 1957. The crowd is washed out in paint, so you have to focus on the enormity of that moment in history.

HWT: The images are printed on material that only works by being illuminated through the perspective of light from a specific angle or view. I’m interested in how what we choose to shine light on affects what’s visible—that’s extremely relevant when we think about historical images. Sometimes you can make something invisible unless you shine a light on it, and then it becomes highly visible. I’m playing with the tension of hyper-visibility and invisibility. It’s about the narratives we shine a light on and the ones we don’t, and the people we shine a light on and the ones we don’t.

AS: What questions do you still have left to ask?

HWT: What are we buying into when we choose to buy products based off an image that’s telling us who and what is important? What are we relinquishing when we allow notions of ourselves and others to be shaped by corporate agendas?

Department of Design and Construction

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Artist Hank Willis Thomas’ “Unity” Takes Its Place In Downtown Brooklyn

About DDCNewsContact

Artist Hank Willis Thomas’ “Unity” Takes Its Place In Downtown Brooklyn

Commissioned through the City’s Percent for Art program as part of a broader revitalization of the Tillary Street corridor

DDC: Shoshana Khan, 718-391-1251, KhanSho@ddc.nyc.gov

(Brooklyn, NY - November 12, 2019) The NYC Department of Design and Construction (DDC) and NYC Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) today announced the installation of “Unity,” a new, monumental public artwork that was commissioned as part of the ongoing reconstruction of Tillary Street in downtown Brooklyn. Installed on Saturday, November 9, on the western median of the Tillary Street and Adams Street intersection, the piece welcomes travelers from the Brooklyn Bridge and creates a new landmark at this high-profile location.



"Unity" points skyward in downtown Brooklyn

The sculpture was commissioned under the City's Percent for Art program, and is part of the comprehensive reconstruction of the Tillary Street area that DDC is managing for the NYC Department of Transportation. The $46.5 million, two-phase effort will simplify street geometry, create substantial protected space for pedestrians and bicyclists by widening sidewalks, install planted medians throughout the area and create a new public plaza at the intersection of Tillary Street, Clinton Street and Cadman Plaza West. There will also be upgraded water mains, traffic signals, street lighting, hydrants, manholes and wayfinding signs throughout the project area.

This large-scale sculpture of a bronze arm communicates a myriad of ideas about individual and collective identity, ambition and perseverance. The piece measures 22.5 feet in height, emerges from the ground and points towards the sky, echoing the Statue of Liberty's iconic gesture.



A crane lowers “Unity” into place on Tillary Street in Brooklyn

“Many DDC projects include a ‘Percent for Art’ component as a way to beautify our urban environment,” said **DDC Commissioner Lorraine Grillo**. “The Tillary Street reconstruction projects will also calm traffic and add pedestrian space, making the area safer and more inviting to pedestrians and keeping with Mayor de Blasio’s Vision Zero goals.”

“Works of public art shape and define open spaces across New York City,” said **Kendal Henry, Director of the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs’ Percent for Art program**. “With ‘Unity,’ Hank Willis Thomas captures a huge range of meaning with a simple form, conveying a sense of uplift, hope, and a little bit of Brooklyn attitude at this prominent site. We are thrilled to join our partners at DDC and DOT to install this instantly iconic work of public art.”

“This sculpture is an homage to and celebration of the unique and multi-faceted character of the borough of Brooklyn,” said **artist Hank Willis Thomas**. “The spirit of Brooklyn has always been about upward mobility and connection to roots. The large-scale sculpture of a bronze arm pointing toward the sky is intended to convey to a wide audience a myriad of ideas about individual and collective identity, ambition, and perseverance.”

“Brooklyn is a borough of history, character and distinction,” said **City Council Majority Leader Laurie Cumbo**. “With over 2 million people shaping the culture and vibrancy of our great borough, I am so delighted that Hank Willis Thomas’s ‘Unity’ sculpture lives in Downtown Brooklyn, to remind us of the importance of togetherness, persistence and possibility. As Brooklynites, I encourage us to view this new landmark as a renewal of that Brooklyn pride which we carry daily. Let it also call us to walk the path collectively toward success, growth, and enhanced unity.”

The artist worked closely with UAP Polich Tallix, located in Rock Tavern, New York throughout the fabrication of “Unity.” The foundry was provided with a 3D file of the artwork, which was then milled into 10-pound foam patterns. UAP Polich Tallix then used multiple fine art bronze casting processes to create the sculpture, which subsequently received a patina finish and was transported from their facilities directly to the installation site. The Downtown Brooklyn Partnership will be responsible for ongoing maintenance of the work.

"It's wonderful to have permanent public art of this caliber, by a Brooklyn-based artist, at a location where so many make their entrance to the borough," said Downtown Brooklyn Partnership President Regina Myer. "Hank Willis Thomas' monumental Unity will serve as a memorable landmark, and as a symbol of Brooklyn's triumphant spirit. The City's ongoing investment into the area's public art is recognition of Downtown Brooklyn's transformation into a thriving destination, and we are thankful to DCLA, DDC, and DOT, for their work and commitment to the project."

About the NYC Department of Design and Construction

The Department of Design and Construction is the City’s primary capital construction project manager. In supporting Mayor de Blasio’s long-term vision of growth, sustainability, resiliency, equity and healthy living, DDC provides communities with new or renovated public buildings such as such as firehouses, libraries, police precincts, and new or upgraded roads, sewers and water mains in all five boroughs. To manage this $14 billion portfolio, DDC partners with other City agencies, architects and consultants, whose experience bring efficient, innovative and environmentally-conscious design and construction strategies to City projects. For more information, please visit nyc.gov/ddc.

The Inquirer

There's a giant sculpture of Joel Embiid's arm ... in Brooklyn?

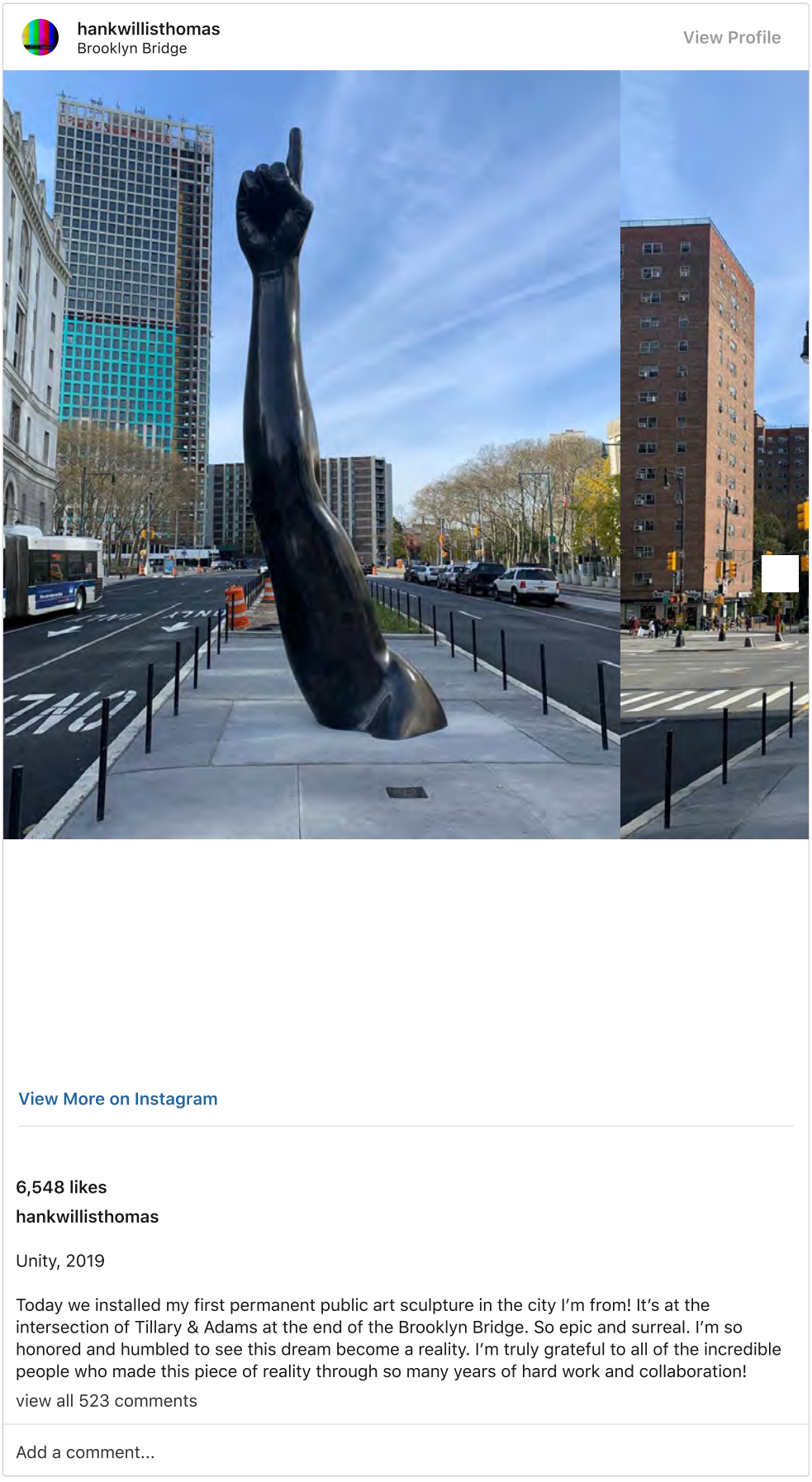
by Nick Vadala, Updated: December 6, 2019



CHRISTINA HORSTEN/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

Joel Embiid may not have had the best performance in Thursday's game against the Washington Wizards, but the Sixers power forward has been been immortalized forever thanks to a new sculpture in Brooklyn — or, at least his arm has.

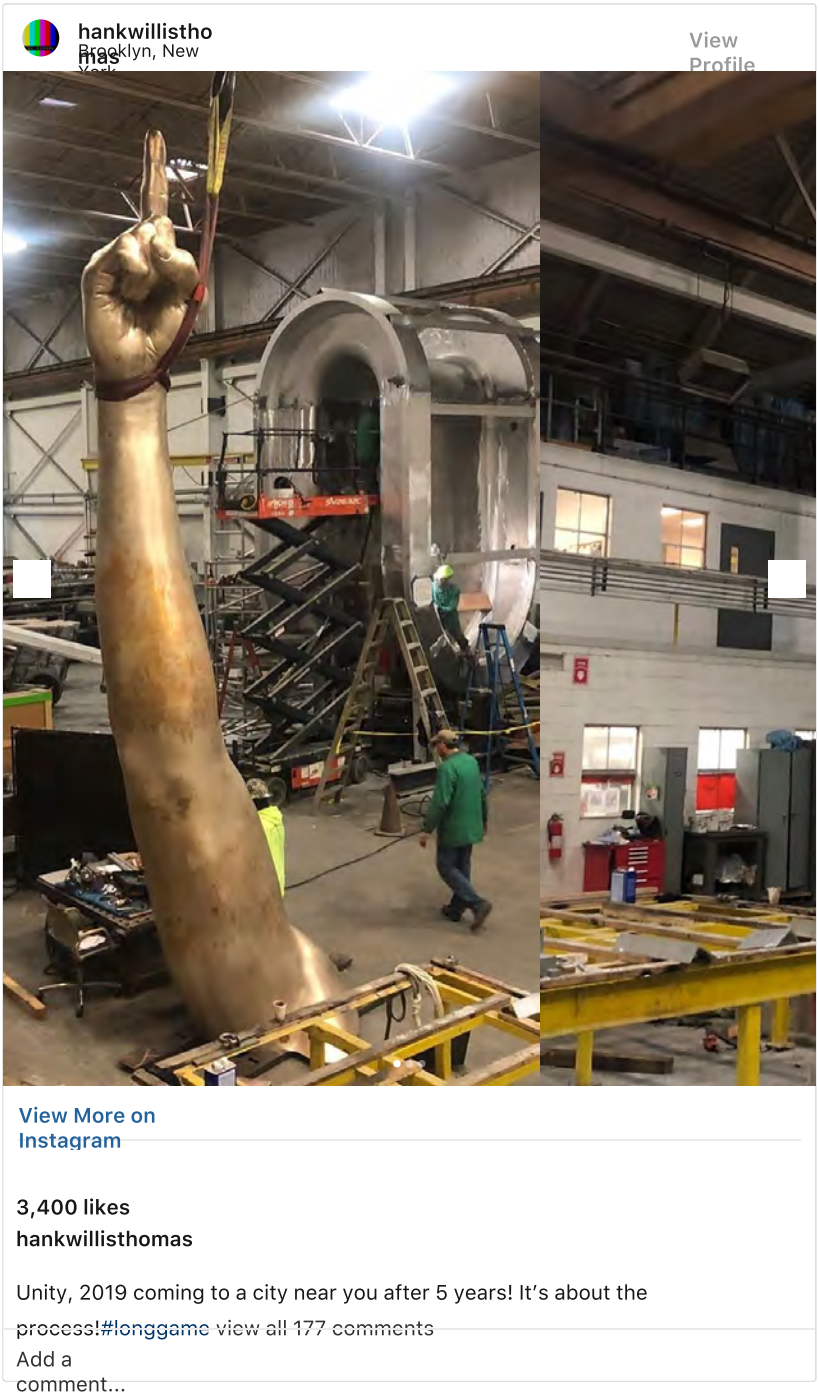
New York City debuted artist Hank Willis Thomas' *Unity* in downtown Brooklyn last month, Brooklyn Paper reports. The sculpture depicts a 22-foot arm pointing to the sky with a finger raised, and was modeled from a three-dimensional scan of Embiid's right arm.



Unity uses the Philly-based Cameroonian's appendage as an "homage to, and celebration of, the unique and multifaceted character of the borough of Brooklyn," Thomas said in a statement.

“The spirit of Brooklyn has always been about upward mobility and connection to roots,” Thomas said. “The large-scale sculpture of a bronze arm pointing toward the sky is intended to convey to a wide audience a myriad of ideas about individual and collective identity, ambition, and perseverance.”

As Thomas wrote earlier this year on Instagram, work on the piece began in 2014 — the same year Embiid signed his rookie contract with the 76ers. Thomas later told the New York University Tisch School of the Arts that Embiid wound up being involved almost by chance.



“I had a studio visit with some people and they saw that I was doing a sculpture, so I was doing molds and casts with body parts of NBA players. They were like, ‘Do you need anybody else?’ and I was like, ‘Sure!’” Thomas said. “Then they said, ‘Well, there’s this kid, he hasn’t started playing yet, but I’m pretty sure he’s gonna be good. You should reach out to him.’ And that was Joel Embiid.”

The project reportedly cost $284,000, and will remain on display in Brooklyn for at least 30 years, Brooklyn Paper reports. Now, missing out on Embiid starring alongside Adam Sandler in a movie doesn’t seem so bad.

Thomas has his own Philadelphia roots: In 2017, he created a sculpture of a 12-foot Afro pick, called *All Power to the People*, which was displayed near the controversial Frank Rizzo statue in Thomas Paine Plaza during the Monuments Lab project. While installing the sculpture, he told The Inquirer that his maternal grandfather was a Philadelphia police officer who was in the Police Academy with Rizzo.



Posted: December 6, 2019 - 11:53 AM
Nick Vadala | **@njvadala** | **nvadala@inquirer.com**

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Hank Willis Thomas: How to unmake race

The Portland Art Museum has staged the first retrospective of Hank Willis Thomas, who addresses the complexity of race in America in "All Things Being Equal..."

December 3, 2019 // CULTURE, FEATURED, VISUAL ART // Laurel Reed Pavic

The neon above the main entrance of the Portland Art Museum reads "LOVERULES." Illuminated in different combinations, it reads both "love overules" and "love over rules." The neon work, loaned by Jordan Schnitzer, sets the tone for Hank Willis Thomas's show *All Things Being Equal…* that opened October 12 and will run through January 12, 2020.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Loverules*, 2019. Neon. Courtesy of Jordan D. Schnitzer. © Hank Willis Thomas, photo courtesy of Portland Art Museum

Thomas is a photographer and conceptual artist whose work explores race, the language of advertising, and the power of images to shape culture and historical narrative. *All Things Being Equal…* is his first major retrospective. It brings together 15 years of the artist's work and cements Thomas's role as an artist who asks questions and poses answers about American history and the American present.

The show is a big moment for the Portland Art Museum and co-curators Julia Dolan and Sara Krajewski. To host this sort of retrospective for an artist of this status establishes the museum as an important venue for contemporary art. The show has been written up in the New York Times, Artnet, and the Observer, which stated "this show unequivocally places the Portland Art Museum in Oregon on the contemporary art map." It is the culmination of several years of work for Dolan and Krajewski, who, in addition to curating the show, secured funding from multiple prestigious sources and co-authored a handsome catalog with Aperture. It is equally an opportunity for viewers to consider images and race in a different way.

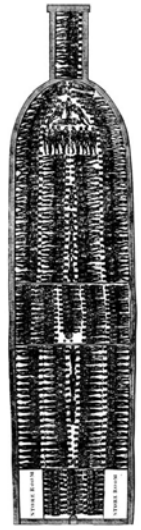
Though his work deals with race and Thomas contends that there is no stronger power in the universe than Black joy, he is equally adamant that race is an invention or myth designed to justify inequality and to propel stereotypes into widespread assumptions about how people are. Thomas says of race, "it is only real because we were taught to make it real."

Krajewski and Dolan have divided the exhibition into thematic rather than chronological sections, though the trajectory of the exhibition suggests some sense of progression in the artist's career as well. The first section, *Branded*, displays mostly older work, and the gallery directly before exiting to the gift shop, *Trouble the Water*, showcases more recent work. Some works, such as the lenticular prints and neon sign in *Pitch Blackness/Off Whiteness*, are clearly contained, but others intermingle, and in general the divisions and their significance are not always clear.

Branded displays the advertising and some of the sports-related works with which Thomas is most associated. The clever recasting of advertisements piques the viewer's interest with a sense of "oh yes, I remember that" and then hits them with an "oh, but not like that," with the familiar ads altered by historical fact. *Absolut Power* from 2003 fills the bottle silhouette from the vodka brand's long-running marketing campaign with a diagram of a cargo hold of a slave ship. *Afro-American Express* of 2004 is a credit card using the green background and font of American Express but substituting the central image for an image of slaves and medallions of the famous "Am I not a man and a brother?" kneeling figure. Chained slaves serve as a border.

Advertising features prominently in Thomas's early works. He graduated with an MFA from California College of the Arts in 2004 and the early works in this show date from about the same time. Of the advertising works, *Priceless #1* serves as a bridge between *Branded* and *Remember Me* and takes the form of the MasterCard "Priceless" campaign, listing a bunch of things that can be bought and one that can't, and identifying the last intangible as
"priceless." Set at a funeral, the sparse ad listing includes a three-piece suit, new socks, and a gold chain but also a 9 mm pistol and a bullet for 60 cents. The intangible is "picking the perfect casket for your son."

Though it uses the language of advertising, *Priceless #1* is shaped by the artist's immediate biography. The backdrop of the ad is a personal photograph taken at his cousin Songha Willis's funeral after he was murdered over a gold chain in Philadelphia. Songha's death in 2000 changed Thomas's life and shaped his career and understanding of art: "The word 'art' means something different to me now. It offers a little bit of hope for answers, or at least poses better questions." In the same space as *Priceless #1* is the video *Winter in America,* in which Thomas and co-creator Kambui Olujimi use G.I. Joe action figures to restage the interactions and robbery that led to Songha's death.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Absolut Power*, 2003. Inkjet print on canvas, 53 × 34 inches. Collection of Williams College Museum of Art. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

There are two other works in the show directly related to Songha's murder, though the link is established by content rather than proximity. The landing of the main staircase houses *Bearing Witness: Murder's Wake*, 38 portraits of people directly affected by Songha's death. In the sculpture court is *14,719 (2018)* which consists of 16 banners with stars representing the 14,719 people who were shot and killed by someone else in the United States in 2019. The banners engulf the viewer. Standing in the center of the overlapping rings of banners, the banners make the enormity of the plague of gun violence in this country inescapable. Each star represents one life cut short, but that life connects to so many others. In Thomas's words, "It is impossible to measure the magnitude and impact of this societal loss."



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *14,719 (2018),* 2019. Embroidered fabric panels. © Hank Willis Thomas, photo courtesy of Portland Art Museum.

The section *What Goes Without Saying* includes works from Thomas's *Unbranded* advertising series: *Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008* and *A Century of White Women, 1915-2015*. The *Unbranded* series followed Thomas's earlier *Branded* work: Rather than altering ads, here Thomas strips away the advertising copy and product identification and leaves only the images of the people. The resulting enlargements of the ads then can focus on the ideas presented rather than the products on offer. "I realized that ads are never really about the product," Thomas explains in the catalog: "It's about what you get people to buy into through the language and the images and the stories you tell. ÀTho as re eals the ay that i ages naturali e ideas about gender or race the lack an ith no shirt and plaid pants the hite other baking muffins, the Black man with the cigar on a rattan throne flanked by two white women.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Slack Power/Unbranded: Reflections in Black Corporate America 1968–2008*, 1969/2006. Chromogenic print. 34 × 30 inches. Private Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

It may be tempting to claim that the ubiquity of advertising or the rapid circulation of digital images has enabled this outsized capacity of images to shape cultural norms, but this is far from a modern phenomenon. In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great made sure that everyone in his empire knew he was destined to rule by distributing coins stamped with his (probably embellished) likeness and his fabulously flowing locks. People overwhelmingly think Jesus was white because artists in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance depicted him that way—against any reasonable understanding of geography and skin tone.

Images have played an outsized role in the United States in the perpetuation of racial stereotypes. In his article "Creating an Image in Black: the Power of Abolition Pictures," John Stauffer recounts that in the mid-19th century, the famous former slave and abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, hailed photography as a tool in the fight in combating the belief in Black inferiority that characterized the antebellum era: "The vast majority of white artists degraded or dehumanized blacks when representing them. Most white Americans in the antebellum era believed that blacks were innately inferior, incapable of self-government, and thus unable to participate in civil society. They used pictures–though *not photography*–to show it." Photography, in contrast, offered a more authentic or true representation.

Douglass lauded daguerreotypes because of their objectivity and ability to "penetrate the perceiver's soul as well as his mind." In retrospect this seems woefully optimistic, but photography was a new technology and even in our jaded regard for images, it is possible to understand Douglass's viewpoint.

The belief that photography was able to eradicate racial distortion had lost some of its luster by the turn of the century, but W.E.B. DuBois maintained that photography could be instrumental in changing societal views on African Americans. In fact, the exhibit that DuBois put together for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, *The American Negro Exhibit,* included photographs of African Americans as well as data charts illustrating the Black experience. A selection of photos and data charts from DuBois's groundbreaking exhibit is on view at the Portland Art Museum as part of *Color Line: Black Excellence on the World Stage*. This small show opened in June as a corollary to the *Paris 1900* show but remains open through the end of the Thomas show. It is an illuminating pairing here as it offers viewers another opportunity to consider how images construct society.

Examining this multivalent power of pictures is one of the great strengths of Thomas's ork. While any of the orks in the second oor galleries center on advertising, the bulk of the works in the first floor galleries show Thomas's engagement with the photographic archive and how it shapes history and historical memory. Thomas may have been predisposed to this field as his mother, Deborah Willis, is a photography curator, historian, and author of (among other things) a book titled *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*.

Dolan and Krajewski have titled the larger section *Trouble the Water*, and it includes Thomas's *Punctum* sculptures, his *Retroreflectives* series, and other works that use photographs as a point of departure. *Trouble the Water* is also the name of a 2013 work by Thomas that takes its

title from a spiritual whose lyrics are thought by historians to be a code for people fleeing slavery via the Underground Railroad. Thomas's composition arranges triangular fragments of a photograph from a 1949 Pentecostal baptism to create a quilt pattern. The quilt pattern further associates the work with the Underground Railroad—patterned quilts were used as a coded signal system to communicate during the flight northward. This work and the others in the second gallery use photographs in ways that extend their immediate point of reference.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Trouble the Water*, 2013. Mounted digital c-prints and stained African Mahogany, 53 × 53 × 2 3/4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

The *Punctum* sculptures use philosopher Roland Barthes's idea of the "punctum" of a photograph, the detail that "pierces" the viewer and continues to affect even after viewing. The sculptures isolate a component of an unseen photograph, leaving only the affecting detail. *Amandla* (2014) consists of a white-cuffed forearm and raised fist thrust out of a yellow metal door. The disembodied gesture conveys defiance, especially against the indication ofÀinstitutional po er e oked by the paneled door. The title "amandla" means "power" in the Nguni languages of south Africa and associates the work with the struggle against apartheid.

Apartheid in South Africa is the inspiration for two other works from the *Punctum* series: *Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passbook Must Burn!)* from 2013 and *Raise Up* from 2014. Until 1986, Black South Africans had to carry identity passbooks that restricted their travel and job prospects. Burning these passbooks was a frequent occurence at anti-apartheid protests. In *Die Dompas Moet Brand!* bronze arms hold the detested booklets over a pile of ashes. Even without a familiarity with the South African passbook system, the sculpture is affecting.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passbook Must Burn!)*, 2013. Bronze and copper shim, dimensions variable. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

Part of the "pierce" of both *Amandla* and *Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passbook Must Burn!)* is the life-sizedness of the gesturing limbs. In *Amandla,* the forearm/fist is made of silicon, which gives a realistic fleshiness against the cold metal door. The hands in *Die Dompas* are made of bronze but still capture the disdain with which the disembodied hands dangle the fluttering pages over the ashes.

Raise Up, from 2014, demonstrates the ability for the meaning of images to evolve and change. The source for the sculpture is a 1967 photograph by Ernest Cole called *Mine Recruitment*. The photograph shows 13 Black men, all but one of whom are nude, standing against a wall with their arms raised above their heads. Taken during a group medical exam for employment in a mine, the photograph shows figures stripped of dignity and humanity. *Raise Up* reduces the number of figures to 10 and crops the figures so that the focus is the top of the mens' heads and their arms raised overhead.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *Raise Up*, 2014. Bronze, 112 1/5 × 9 4/5 × 4 inches. Private Collection. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

Thomas made this sculpture in early 2014 based on the 1967 photograph. The gesture of arms raised overhead gained urgent contemporary resonance in the summer of 2014 when 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The raised-arms gesture, along with the phrase "Hands up, don't shoot," became a protest cry associated with Black Lives Matter. Thomas's sculpture took on new meaning, so much so that now the connection to the original photograph and apartheid in South Africa is somehow secondary. The version of the sculpture in Portland is smaller than life-sized, and while it pierces the viewer, the full-sized version recently installed at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, is devastating.

The relationship of the viewer to the image and its potency is equally at the heart of Thomas's *Retroreflectives* series. Viewers are encouraged to take out their phones and shine their flash on the image. That reveals a salient detail and blurs out the rest of the composition. Upon flash exposure, *Refusal* (2018) highlights a single figure with his arms crossed in a crowd giving the Nazi salute from a 1936 photograph. *Freedom for Soweto* (2018) uses a photograph from 1976 and focuses attention on a boy with his arms raised and hands showing V or peace signs.

At first blush, the phone manipulations seemed gimmicky to me, an excuse for people to use their phones in the museum—like bowler hats for selfies in front of a Magritte or something. But taken in conjunction with Thomas's other work and the general direction of his line of inquiry, I'm inclined to say instead that it is another strategy for thinking through images—how they work, how people relate to images of history, and how the images create historical memory.

The flash reveal is not the only strategy Thomas employs in his consideration of this line of inquiry. In *Two Little Prisoners* (2014), the figures of a crouching white police officer and two standing Black children are cropped out of a photograph and set against a large mirror. Viewers necessarily become part of the scene by positioning themselves to look. *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around* (2015-2016) is a collage of photographs on smaller mirrored panels that mimic the reflective metal surface of early daguerreotypes and also incorporate the viewer's reflection into the scene. In *Wounded Knee (red and gold)* (2018), Thomas obscures a 1973 photograph with undulating strokes of paint.

All are ways of asking viewers to examine their own role in interpreting a photograph: by manipulating with a flash, by being incorporated in a mirror, or by peering through a distortion. Seeing is never passive or neutral, and neither is what we remember or how those memories build up upon one another to make history.

Although the artworks directly pulled from the photographic archive provide ample fodder for thought, my favorite departed from the source image a step further than the *Retroreflectives* works. *I am, Amen* is inspired by a photograph from 1968 taken by Ernest Withers at a sanitation workers strike in Memphis, Tennessee. The photo bears special significance in the history of the civil rights movement as Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis for the sanitation workers strike and was assassinated only days later. In the photo, a phalanx of Black striking workers hold identical signs emblazoned with the words "I am a man." Thomas uses the framework of the original sign to make two rows of 10 signs each that read left to right as a poem that begins with "I am ⅗ a man" and ends with "I am. Amen." The final statement is on a banner on the front of the museum along with the neon *LOVERULES*.



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976), *I Am. Amen.*, 2009. Liquitex on canvas, 25 1/4 × 19 × 1/4 × 2 1/4 inches each. Installation view. Collection of Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. © Hank Willis Thomas

Advertisements are not just about what is being sold, and images of the past aren't about historical events. Instead, they reveal interpretations of historical events that shape the present and ideas about how the world operates: What pierces? What do you remember? What do you build a worldview on? Thomas's statement about advertisement—"It's about what you get people to buy into through the language and the images and the stories you tell"—rings just as true when applied to the photographic archive as it does to advertisements.

The Portland Art Museum has gone to great lengths to reach out to the Black community in Portland around the occasion of this exhibition. Ella Ray, the Kress Interpretive Fellow/Community Partnerships Coordinator, has created a robust schedule of programming and events including the opening night Critical Conversation. Partners throughout the exhibition include The Numberz (96.7 FM), Oregon Justice Resource Center, King School Museum of Contemporary Art (KSMoCA), Portland in Color, Don't Shoot Portland, and We + Black. There is a Community Partners in Residence Space in the upper gallery that includes an exhibition and zine titled *An Altar to Alter: A transcendent experience in Black Feminine Art and Healing* that features photographs by Portland artist Intisar Abioto.

On the occasion of a major exhibition that deals with race, Portland is eager to engage with the issues raised by Thomas's work. The city wants to live up to its liberal and inclusive image and is cognizant of the many ways that ideal is thinly gilded onto an uglier past. Tickets to the opening night Critical Conversation in the sunken ballroom in the Mark Building sold out; there was overflow in the Whitsell Auditorium. People are turning out to see the exhibition in droves. There are big flashing letters on the front of the building! Love overrules!

But our good intentions are not enough. In the Q&A section at the end of the Critical Conversation, in one of the last questions of the night someone asked the artist how he felt having his work shown in "the star of the white utopia" of Portland, Oregon. The person pointed out that the majority of the people in the audience were white and suggested that Black people were only welcome in the city "as long as we are artistic or entertaining." The murmurs of assent confirmed this was not an outlying opinion.

Thomas responded that he didn't believe in race, that one can't know anything by looking at the color of someone's skin and continued: "What I'm trying to struggle with is knowing that my ideas won't save me but also that my anger won't either. The only thing that will save me is my love for other people and my ability to see beyond all the things I've been trained to hate." He finished that statement with "But I don't live here," opening up the possibility that unseeing race may be harder to do in Oregon than other places.

I do live here and was one of the many white faces in the audience. Racism is an abstraction for me but I am intimately familiar with the naive optimism of white liberals. We want to believe that we couldn't possibly be racist, which was a problem of the past or in other less enlightened places. We want to believe the fact that this exhibition is here and so well attended exonerates previous bias in the museum or us for benefitting from white privilege. It's the same hope that led us to claim that Obama's 2008 election heralded a post-racial society.

Even in the face of events like Ferguson in 2014, we shared the photo taken in Portland of Devonte Hart embracing Sgt. Bret Barnum. That photo, first published by OregonLive, of a Black child hugging a white police officer was shared on Facebook 440,000 times. It tapped into our dream that race problems have a fix. If we all just hugged each other more, it would be fine. But the irony of that viral photograph is that while it seemed one thing in the moment and it was shared as what we wanted it to be, reality proved otherwise. Institutional racism is a fact and cannot be fixed by a hug or a Black Lives Matter yard sign. Good intentions don't erase our naïveté.

Race is a fiction, but that fiction has been propagated and circulated and layered upon in events and memories in this country for so long that it is a reality. Thomas's work asks us to consider the mechanisms that conspired to make race so we can better understand how to unmake it in the future.

The title of the show, *All Things Being Equal…* ends with an ellipsis signaling that it is the beginning of a statement, something must follow for the thought to be complete. It is as appropriate for a mid-career retrospective as it is for the Portland Art Museum or for Portlanders. The conversation has been opened but the conclusion remains unknown.

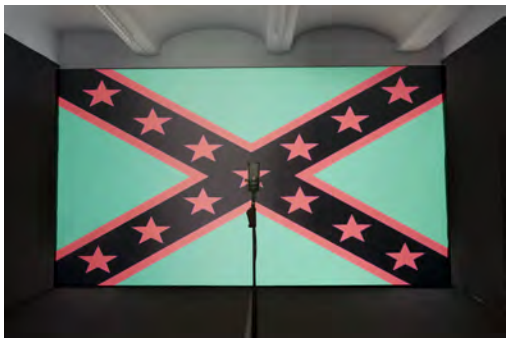
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Hank Willis Thomas Opens Up Space for Interpretation, Which Is Sometimes Risky

When we have more opportunity to interact with art on our own terms, there are more places to hide from its difficult truths, particularly viewers who have the privilege to do so.

Erin Langner November 26, 2019



Hank Willis Thomas, "Black Righteous Space" (2012), interactive video, dimensions variable, installation view (Private Collection, image courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, © Hank Willis Thomas)

PORTLAND, Ore. — The night I went to see *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal…* I found the Portland Art Museum flooded with people museums often hope to draw in: a visibly diverse, casually fashionable set of 20- and 30-somethings — a group I rarely encountered at PAM on past visits from Seattle. They brought a palatable excitement to the first mid-career survey of the Brooklyn-based artist Hank Willis Thomas, who rose to prominence in the early 2000s through his conceptual photography and has become increasingly public-facing in his work.

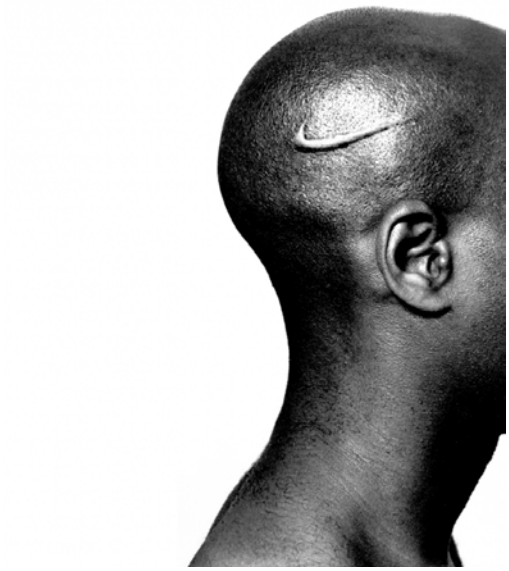
I experienced a marked shift from the exhibition's buzzy atmosphere inside a darkened room adjacent to the exhibition's entrance, where projected distortions of an animated Confederate flag flashed across a screen. Thomas's deeply layered installation "Black Righteous Space" (2012) filtered the flag through the red, black, and green colors of the Black Power Movement, its pulsating, kaleidoscopic patterns controlled by a playlist of songs, speeches, and dialogue by over 50 Black

speakers and performers, ranging from James Baldwin to Kanye West. Standing before the screen was a microphone — an invitation for words and disruptions from viewers during intermittent pauses between recordings.



Exhibition entrance, *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal…* (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

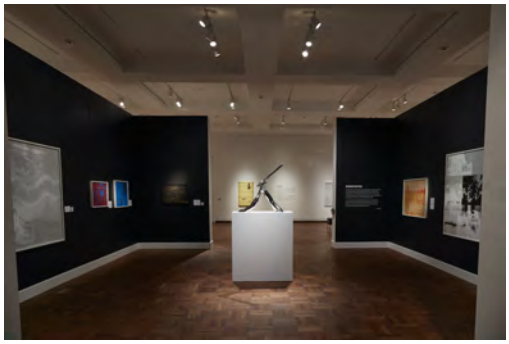
I watched visitors read the label, settle into chairs, whisper among themselves. But, other than a man who approached the mic and flashed a peace sign for a photo, no one took up the artist's invitation to participate. I wondered how much this had to do with being in Portland. As the exhibition's co-curator Julia Dolan articulated, "In terms of Oregon's complicated history with race and, in particular, with Blackness and the exclusionary laws that were written into the constitution… this is an ideal city for the types of messages Thomas calls to in his work." In light of this, I wondered if the interactions might have differed when this piece was shown somewhere associated with political activism like San Francisco, or in Norfolk, Virginia, where the work was previously on view and opened two days after the Charleston church massacre. Were people there more willing to take ownership of the space Thomas opened for us?



Hank Willis Thomas, "Branded Head," from the series *B®anded* (2003), Chromogenic print, 99 × 52 × 3 inches (Private Collection, image courtesy the

artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, © Hank Willis Thomas)

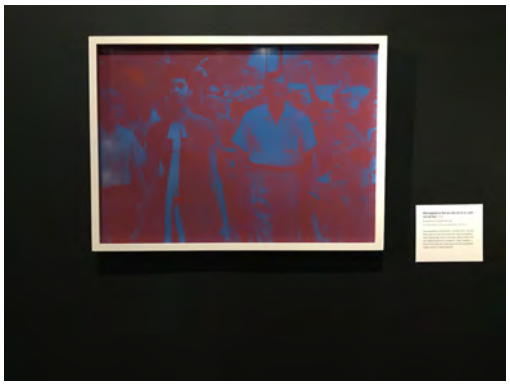
Moving through the thematically arranged presentation of over 90 works, including photographs, videos, installations, sculptures, and other conceptual pieces, I found myself returning to the evolving nature of space that Thomas creates for his viewer — the fluctuations in how much room he withholds or allots for us to participate and generate our own meaning within his work. At one end of the spectrum were the *Branded* photographs, a series in which he adapts commercial ads to question their motivations and histories. These pieces illuminate what exhibition co-curators Dolan and Sara Krajewski told me about their approach to interpretation in the exhibition: "The work does the work." Krajewski elaborated, "Thomas's work is accessible because the visual system he's calling upon is one accessed by people in their daily lives." Among the most moving of these is Thomas's iconic "Branded Head" (2003), a glossy, oversized, black-and-white photograph in which a Nike swoosh brands the scalp of a faceless African American man — an image that tears apart the familiar language of advertising and seamlessly reconstructs it in a way that attunes our eye to its previously invisible power dynamics between the sports industry, Black athletes, the history of slavery, and us, as image consumers. But, I also found myself breezing through some *Branded* images because their message felt so clear, there was no "work" — no active engagement — required of me beyond a passive consumption.



Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… installation view (image courtesy the Portland Art Museum)

When I asked Thomas about his work's relationship with the viewer, he said, "I think it's become more intentional for me to try to encourage and implicate the viewer in the making of the work. Viewer participation is what gives work value and credibility." This intention came through clearly in Thomas's more recent *Retroflectives* series, for which archival photographs are reproduced as screen prints coated in a vinyl surface of light-reflecting glass beads the artist uses to obscure the original images; their full contents can only be seen as the viewer illuminates them, typically by taking flash photo. The experience is startlingly affective in works like "What happened on that day really set me on a path (red and blue)" (2018), which appears to depict a man and young woman walking among a crowd. However, my flash exposed

Douglas Martin's photograph of Dorothy Counts on her way to a previously all-white high school in 1957 and the mob of angry white men surrounding her — and a potent feeling of naivete for ever believing the image existed without them.



"What happened on that day really set me on a path (red and blue)" (2018), (without flash) (© Hank Willis Thomas, photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



"What happened on that day really set me on a path (red and blue)" (2018), (with flash) (© Hank Willis Thomas, photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Cultural critic Hanif Abdurraqib once wrote, "Nina Simone opens her mouth and an entire history is built before us, where there is nowhere for anyone to hide from the truth as she has lived it." These words speak to Thomas's work, as it builds entire histories before us; they also highlight the risk of opening more space for the viewer. When we have more opportunity to interact with art on our own terms, there are more places to hide from its difficult truths, particularly viewers who have the privilege to do so.

In the simplest terms, anyone who doesn't illuminate the *Retroflective* images won't experience the details that complete them. But this concern became more complicated when I stood in a room with *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*, a series in which Thomas removed the texts of advertisements targeted to white women. The selection of 14 photos included from the series of 100 largely focuses on "the persistent association of white femininity with motherhood and domesticity, fair-skinned beauty, rosy youthfulness, and sexual availability," as the text articulated. Yet, a darker, more nuanced tension boils beneath their surfaces — particularly when considered in tandem with another gallery featuring Thomas's *Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008*, for which he applied the same treatment to ads targeting African Americans.

Situated in connected but separate galleries, I had the urge to bring the two series together. Speaking to the history behind them, Thomas said to me, "There was a parallel women's rights movement happening at the same time as the civil rights movement. They were not completely segregated but they definitely were not as in alignment as they could have been." I wanted to physically confront this



Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… installation view (image courtesy the Portland Art Museum)



Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… installation view (image courtesy the Portland Art Museum)

relationship also fleetingly touched upon in a label for "Give your daughter a daughter" (1971/2015), an uncanny image of a white woman, young girl, and her doll smiling from a rattan throne chair — a cultural symbol associated with Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton. The label, written by Ella Ray, the Kress Interpretative Fellow for the exhibition, notes, "…the possession of this visual space at the peak of the Black Power movement marks white women's role as disruptors of Black Liberation."

This struck me as a particularly important moment of the exhibition for the majority-white city of Portland, when the more difficult, less discussed questions of white women's roles as both oppressors and tools of oppression could be brought to the fore. Yet, with the exception of Ray's label, this issue was largely left as a gap for viewers to bridge on their own. I would like to think that some people grabbed the microphone after I left that night, that some implicated themselves in making the deeper, harder connections. Those who did are certain to have left *All Things Being Equal…* taking to heart Thomas's provocation: "The most revolutionary thing a person can do is be open to change."

Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal… *continues at the Portland Art Museum through January 12, 2020. The exhibition will travel to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art (February 8–April 20, 2020) and Cincinnati Art Museum (July 10–October 11, 2020).*

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African American Cultural Center
"We Inspire Urban Generations!" (since 1958) 350 Masten Avenue Buffalo NY 14209 716.884.2013



African American Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas' Bold Black Beautiful Statements in Public Art

November 18, 2019 TheChallengerNews publicart, blackartist

Hank Willis Thomas who works primarily with themes related to perspective, identity, commodity, media, and popular culture has remained constant in his effort for not only delivering meaningful

and impactful messaging through his work but undoubtably creating change in the public domain and within how we communicate and see ourselves in the world.

He has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad in countless museums, art institutes among other accomplishments.

His latest public art projects include two indelible public installations, the most recent being UNIT , (2019) new powerful and permanent 22 foot tall bronze sculpture of an arm with the index nger pointing skyward that stands at the newly constructed intersection of Tillary and Adams Street in Brooklyn N. . near the exit from the Brooklyn bridge commissioned by New ork City's Percent for Art program.

The artist also has a highly anticipated sculpture set to unveil on Boston Comons in Boston honoring Martin Luther ing and Coretta Scott ing . Thomas entitled it, The Embrace, a stunning 22 ft. tall sculpture that represents the hands of Martin Luther ing and Coretta Scott ing, evoking images of the couple and other protesters arm-in-arm in peaceful marches for civil rights as well as the power of physical togetherness in declaring resistance against injustice.

Some of his collaborative projects include uestion Bridge Black Males, an innovative transmedia art project that aims to facilitate a dialog between Black men from diverse and contending backgrounds and create a platform for representing and rede ning bBack male identity.

In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth)that did a 50 State Tour, and For Freedoms, an artist-run platform for civic engagement, discourse, and direct action for artists in the United State Thomas co-founded as well as other permanent public artwork unveiled "Love Over Rules" in San Francisco, CA and "All Power to All People" in Opa Locka, FL.

He lives in N C with his newborn and wife curator Rujeko Hockley, one of the orignial organizers of traveling exhibition We Wanted A Revolution Black Radical Women that exhbited at Buffalo's Albright Knox Art Gallery in 2018. Thomas currently has his first comprehensive survey, Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal, open at the Portland Art Museum.

The New York Times

Scul ture or roo l ns e Golden ge

Hank Willis Thomas strives for nit in his p blic art ork at the rookl n ridge.

By Martha S h e e er

. 10, 2019

Standing at the newly constructed intersection of Tillary and Adams Streets, near the exit from the Brooklyn Bridge, is a new, 22-foot bronze arm with the index finger pointing skyward. Commissioned by New York City's Percent for Art program, the permanent sculpture was created by Hank Willis Thomas and is titled "Unity" (2019). Is this outstretched arm a new greeting at the threshold of Brooklyn, like the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor?

Giant arms and hands aren't a new thing in public sculpture. Head to Rome and you can see a giant right hand, originally from a 4th-century A.D. colossal sculpture of the Emperor Constantine. Paris has (finally) Jeff Koons's 41-foot hand holding a bouquet of tulips, his tribute to the victims of terrorist attacks. isit Trafalgar Square in London, and you can gaze upon David Shrigley's "Really Good" (2016), a sculpture of a hand with the thumbs-up gesture — with the thumb grotesquely disproportionate to the hand, suggesting everything might not be supergood in Brexit-era London.

Mr. Thomas's "Unity" is more polite than Mr. Shrigley's sculpture. Muscular and appropriately proportioned, it suggests the arm of an athlete, echoing a smaller sculpture of an arm spinning a basketball on the tip of a finger that Mr. Thomas conceived in 2015. That work, called "Liberty. " inspired by a photograph of a Harlem Globetrotter and cast from the arm of one-time NBA All-Star Juwan Howard, is now in the Brooklyn Museum. Over the course of his career, Mr. Thomas has created other sculptures of hands and arms, with titles like "Promise" (2016).



Hank Willis Thomas Kyle Johnson for The New York Times

Sports and the black body have been in the center of Mr. Thomas's work since he began exhibiting photographs a decade and a half ago that showed shaved heads or chests branded with Nike logos. (He also created series of photographs in the vein of appropriation artists like Richard Prince, who rephotographed advertising imagery). Mr. Thomas, who studied photography at New York University and worked in commercial photography and television, brings to attention the way products are marketed to African-Americans, as well as the historical lack of representation of black people in the mass media.

Mr. Thomas's move into sculpture, though well-received, has been, to my mind, much less exciting. The sharpness and astuteness of his photography is often absent from three-dimensional objects, particularly the large-scale works that mimic sculptors like Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, who created outdoor installations based on everyday objects. Mr. Thomas takes this formula and overlays it with African-American motifs, like an Afro-comb stuck in the ground, titled "All Power to the People," which has appeared in Philadelphia and at Burning Man.

The best project in recent years by Mr. Thomas — and one that strives for actual unity — is “For Freedoms,” founded in 2016 with Eric Gottesman as a “platform for civic engagement.” It produced collaborative exhibitions, installations, public programs, and billboard campaigns across the country. Inspired by Norman Rockwell’s 1940s paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear), the billboards created through this project utilize Mr. Thomas’s photographic and advertising acumen in a smart, productive way. (Mr. Thomas lives in Brooklyn and is married to Rujeko Hockley, a co-curator of the last Whitney Biennial).

Politics has often been the point in public sculpture from ancient Rome to Mr. Oldenburg’s earliest public works, such as a phallic lipstick wheeled like a tank onto the campus of Yale University during the ietnam War, to Mr. Shrigley’s absurd thumbs up.



“Unity,” 22 feet tall, being installed near the intersection of Adams Steet and Tillary Street in Brooklyn. Kyle Johnson for The New York Times

“Unity” was originally called “We’re No. 1,” a more assertive title, perhaps recalling the historical competition between the boroughs that reaches back to the 19th century. “Unity” is a traditional and fairly conservative work, accompanied in the official news release by a statement that sounds politician-worthy “This sculpture is a homage to, and celebration of, the unique and multifaceted character of the borough of Brooklyn,” Mr. Thomas says. “The spirit of Brooklyn has always been about upward mobility and connection to roots.”

Perhaps Mr. Thomas is saluting the new Brooklyn — the one of rising property values and more anodyne art. A raised fist, like the black power gesture at the 1968 Olympics that inspired and galvanized so many people, appears on the handle of Mr. Thomas’s comb sculpture, “All Power to the People.” That bold attitude feels more like the Brooklyn of yore.

Not having walked the Brooklyn Bridge in several years, I decided to cross on Saturday after seeing “Unity” installed. When I reached the Manhattan side there were vendors selling tchotchkes, including a sign that said, “No Stupid People Beyond This Point.” As a longtime resident of Brooklyn, I would be perfectly happy to have a 22-foot bronze sign with that message posted at the entrance to Brooklyn.

Make that a 100-foot sign.

WILLAMETTE WEEK

Hank Willis Thomas' "All Things Being Equal…" Cuts Deep Into the Psyche of our Society

The exhibit is currently up at Portland Art Museum, featuring over 90 works by the artist meant to awaken our awareness of how pop culture, advertising, and social dynamics shape our identities and scales for success.

By Lauren Yoshiko | Published November 6 at 3:36 PM Updated November 7 at 3:40 PM

No two people experience an art exhibit the same. So much of our reactions are affected by nature, nurture, and whatever TV shows we watched in between. But if you live in America; if you watch professional sports or listen to hip hop anywhere in the world; if you've ever seen a commercial or heard a gunshot ring out in your city, Hank Willis Thomas' will stick with you long after you leave the tranquil halls of the Portland Art Museum.

The exhibit features a collection of poignant pieces, including photographs, film, and sculptures, meant to awaken our awareness of how pop culture, advertising, and social dynamics shape our identities and scales for success. Thomas' work in this expansive exhibit is simple and direct, and the cunning bluntness is what makes it cut the deepest.

The conceptual artist is an East Coaster, born in New Jersey in 1976, and currently living and working in Brooklyn, NY. He has exhibited all over the world, screened films at Sundance, and created permanent installations in San Francisco, Miami, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. is the first major retrospective of Thomas' work, opening here in Portland and gracing only two other cities with the collection of over 90 works of photography, sculptures, quilted textiles, video, jewelry, found advertising memorabilia, and even a custom light-up liquor store sign emblazoned with "ABSOLUT POWER," showing the textbook sketch of slaves packed into the bowels of a ship within the vodka bottle's silhouette.

The exhibit is varied in the media and themes shown, with pieces that highlight different issues within popular culture, advertising, race, gun violence, and our relationship between past and present. These are all unified under Thomas' effort to challenge the visual systems that institute discrimination and inequality.

To illustrate these themes, Thomas often draws directly from personal experiences as a black man living in America. In he repeatedly addresses the prominent subject of gun violence, stemming from the sudden loss of his own cousin when robbed at gunpoint. In PAM's two-story entrance hall, sixteen enormous blue banners covered in stitched stars resembling the American flag hang from the ceiling down to the floor—14,718 stars to be exact. Each represents a person shot and killed by someone else in the U.S. in 2018. In a photograph on the second floor titled Priceless #1, overlaid text like that old MasterCard commercial reads: "new socks: $1," "gold chain: $400," "9mm pistol: $80," "one bullet: $.60." "Picking the perfect casket for your son: Priceless." The image is a photograph taken by Thomas at his cousin's funeral.

It's powerful photographs like these that strike you the most throughout the exhibit. In the large, vertically aligned photograph titled (2011), a shirtless black man in Nike basketball shorts and shoes seemingly hangs from one arm, positioned up as if to shoot a basket. A noose sits around his wrist as though the ball is a human's head, while his own head faces away from the camera, drooping down in a chillingly lifeless fashion. With the lighting and the angle, the ball looks more lively than the body, as if to remind the viewer that in the eyes of pop culture, the ball matters more than the replaceable black body to which it is attached.

The Cotton Bowl (also from the Strange Fruit series, 2011) features two black men crouched opposite each other at a yard line of a football field, one a football player in cleats and pads, his face obscured by the helmet, the other a cotton picker of times past, a straw hat obscuring his face as well. They mirror each other's stance, presenting the modern football field and cotton field as different reflections of the same playing field, creating a sort of effect that forces one to think about what concepts like freedom, work, success, and choice mean on both sides of that yard line.

Across the photographs, regardless of whether depicting visuals from past or present, everything is hyperreal and clear, blurring those lines of "now" vs. "back in the day" with HD focus. It gives every image more power, eliminating the way the sepia-toned, fuzzy look of aged visuals helps us separate ourselves from the past even as it still very much affects modern lives.

You don't have to be an art history buff to appreciate the emotion in Thomas' take on *Guernica*, inspired by Picasso's famous painting of the same name. Instead of an oil painting, Thomas' *Guernica* is a collage-styled quilt made of different professional basketball jerseys cut up and sewn together to replicate the distorted shapes of humans and animals in anguish depicting the overwhelming, chaotic suffering of war. It puts the famous colors of the Lakers and Knicks and hallowed names like Durant and Bryant in a light that questions ideals of success, sacrifice, aggression, and state of mind.

Thomas' simple delivery of layered, provocative questions is perhaps best demonstrated in the series of Lumisty film pieces towards the end of the exhibit. Three words in enormous, all-caps font alternately read "HISTORY IS PAST" / "HISTORY IS PRESENT." In another, the message alternates between "WHITE IMITATES BLACK" and "BLACK IMITATES WHITE." With these simple yet stark words, in plain black font and white background (and vice versa, depending on where you stand in the room and, conceptually, where you stand philosophically), Thomas captures the essence of sprawling debates around dozens of issues that surround race relations, social dynamics, cultural shifts and the progression of time.

Somehow Thomas does pirouettes on the fine, high-wire line between polarizing specificity and digestible commentary on complex, personal and emotional themes. He has an uncanny ability to make deeply poignant commentary stated so plainly, clearly and directly conveying rich and nuanced ideas in a manner that everyone can understand. At , Thomas challenges us to self-reflect about society and images we consume en masse in a most inclusive and expansive form—not to mention in our own backyard at Portland Art Museum. Don't miss this show.

ll hings eing ual ***is up now until Jan. 12, 2020 at Portland Art Museum. There are a series of events surrounding the exhibit, including film screenings, workshops, and talks. Go to portlandartmuseum.org/exhibitions/hank-willis-thomas/ to learn more.***

THE ART NEWSPAPER

‘Public art is propaganda, frankly’: Hank Willis Thomas discusses gun violence and the urgent need for alternative memorials

A host of the artist’s exhibitions and public projects open in various locations across the US open this year

CHARMAINE PICARD

31st October 2019 10:27 GMT



Hank Willis Thomas © Andrea Blanch

Hank Willis Thomas is making some of the most urgent, timely art in the US. With a knack for adopting popular icons and signs, whether in the form of sporting imagery or memorable photographs of historic events, he takes on key issues, including racial injustice and gun violence, and the historic events underpinning them, like colonialism and slavery, as exemplified in his photographic series *Strange Fruit* (2011). His work assumes numerous forms – from photographs and video to public sculpture – and the breadth of his work is reflected in his first-ever museum survey, which has just opened at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon. Meanwhile, he has an array of public projects being unveiled this year—on the High Line in New York and at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge—and next, in Boston and Seattle.

The Art Newspaper: Mass shootings in US cities like Gilroy, El Paso and Dayton are on the rise. Can you talk about your commissioned work on gun violence at the Portland Art Museum?

Hank Willis Thomas: There are beautiful memorials to presidents and to victims and fallen soldiers of foreign wars on the Washington Mall. Here in New York, we have World War I and World War II memorials, and we have yet to have a memorial for the American soldiers and civilians who died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we lost nearly 10,000 American soldiers in the past 20 years. During that same time, more than 200,000 people have been shot and killed in this country. And there is no discussion about how to memorialise the lives of American citizens who fall victim to weapons of war at home.

Since my cousin, Songha Willis Thomas, was murdered as a victim of gun violence in 2000, I've been asking myself: "How do you measure life? How do you memorialise life?" The Portland commission is a flag-based work, where each of the 14,719 five-pointed stars commemorates a person who died from gun violence in 2018. These stars represent our American mythology and iconography.

The number of fatalities from military weaponry in the US is staggering. How can you bring increased awareness and humanise the problem?

MASS Design Group and I have been thinking about how you conceptualise and build a national movement to honour the victims of gun violence. I worked with the design group on Brian Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative, and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Alabama. Brian's call to action is: "This is an American tragedy, and a very integral part of American history, and we need to have a place to come to terms with it." So we're building on that idea, and we're piloting a potential national memorial. We're working with the organisation, Everytown for Gun Safety, which has been collecting objects from family members of those who've been shot and killed. The objects are put into glass bricks that have been used to make four glasshouses. The installation is travelling to the National Building Museum in Washington, DC in 2020.



The Cotton Bowl, from the series Strange Fruit (2011) Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

The Gordon Parks Foundation awarded you a 2018 fellowship that supports artists working with themes of social justice and representation. What images from the foundation's archives are you working with?

I grew up at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, where my mother was the curator of photography, and also at the Smithsonian's National American Museum Project, and I interned at the National Museum of American History twice when I was in high school. The legacy of Gordon Parks is everywhere. Gordon Parks stands out because he was an outlier for a generation of African Americans. He was able to build a career in Chicago as a fashion photographer and travel the world for *Life* magazine, and be employed by the US government with the Works Progress Administration, but also to be the first African American to direct a major Hollywood film.

The film*, Shaft?*

He directed *Shaft* in 1971, but I'm looking at his 1969 film, *The Learning Tree*, based on a book that he wrote about his life as a young black man living in Fort Scott, Kansas. Through my research, I learned that the first Great Migration of African Americans from the south following the Civil War was not to the north but to the west. They migrated to places like Kansas and Nebraska and Oklahoma. I'm weaving some of the film-set photography together with images of migrants who travelled during the 1879 Exodus and were known as Exodusters. **Did you have a relationship with Gordon Parks?**

My dad had a relationship with his son, Gordon Parks Jr, who directed the film *Superfly*. He was generous with his time to young people like my mother, who was making her way in the field of photography which, as you know, wasn't seen as an art form. If it weren't for people like Gordon who broke the mould, it wouldn't be possible for people like my mother to break the mould, and people like me to ride the wave.

Your *Punctum* sculptures are powerful reminders of radical acts of rebellion. Where did you find the source material for *Resistance (Leopard Man Punctum)* (2019)?

Colonial Africans suffered rape, abuse, murder and pillaging, and in reaction secret societies were formed as a type of rebellion. I like to call them African Ninjas because they would sometimes do what we would think of as horrible things, assassinate people and intimidate people, but they also worked to disrupt the incredible oppressive force of colonialism. Most of what we know is inspired by an article in *Popular Science* magazine in 1943.
The sculpture is based on a rendering of a famous work in Belgium of a leopard man preying on a person who's a colonial collaborator. In a later movie, *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* (1946), the actors are clearly Europeans. Most of our interpretations of African popular culture are filtered through European mythology about Africans, and it has nothing to do with Africans at all.



Resistance (2019) Courtesy of the artist and Maruani Mercier Gallery

You've mentioned that the claws may have been an inspiration for Wolverine and other superheroes.

You can't help but think there was some influence since these movies were being made, and these books were being written between 1916 and the 1940s. Jack Kirby and Stan Lee were kids at that time and were reading fantasy novels. Is it possible that Black Panther or Wolverine may have been inspired by the books they read and the movies they saw as children? It's impossible to believe that those ideas were not there. If it's all mythology, like most of what we know about Africa is, then why can't we embrace it and start to tell different stories?

What alternative stories would you like to tell?

Most of the beauty of the Black experience in America is the incredible joy and vibrancy that lives in the spirit and the soul, in spite of all that's been done to crush it. I think my mom's work, where she's been looking at photographs taken by African Americans since the dawn of photography, shows the other side to the story rather than the story that was put out there.

You've used the field of sports to highlight Black excellence. Joel Embiid, an NBA player from Cameroon, modelled for *Unity* (2019), a monumental sculpture to be installed later this year at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge. Would you say there is a link between sports and politics?

People sometimes say sports are not political, but if you really think about it, sport is a global industry that intersects with everything from mining to farming to development to urban planning to college and universities, to legal policies around health. What would America be if it weren't for Jim Thorpe, a Native American Olympian who helped put the American spirit on the map on a national stage? Or Jesse Owens or Wilma Rudolph or Billie Jean King? If you're not going to allow me to excel in school and in business, and I can play this game, I'm going to play it better than anybody else, and I'm going to try harder than anybody else.

Public sculptures like *Unity* (2019) and *The Embrace*, a commission for the Boston Commons honouring Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr, offer positive, uplifting messages. How do you want to activate the public space with these works?

I think public art is propaganda, frankly. Most of the public art we grew up around was white men on horses looking down on us. The question of the day is, how do we imagine new public art? A new way of championing the spirit of people who we find inspiration from – athletes, activists, yes sometimes maybe soldiers. But we have so many memorials for war and so few for peace. That can't be by accident, and it's not sustainable for our psyche.

Do artists have a role to play as civic leaders by engaging a broader public?

I see art, history and politics in everything. For me, artists are civic leaders. It also depends on who you call an artist. My grandmother was a beautician. That's an art form. Cooking is an art form. I try to encourage people who don't see themselves as artists to think creatively. Projects like the *Truth Booth*, *Question Bridge* and *For Freedoms* [see key works box] invite members of the public who don't see themselves as artists to collaborate in the creative process.

Biography

Born: 1976, Plainfield, New Jersey

Training: MFA Photography/MA Visual Criticism, California College of the Arts, 2004; BFA Photography and Africana Studies, New York University, 1998

Selected prizes: Gordon Parks Foundations Fellowship, 2018; Guggenheim Fellowship, 2018;

Key shows: *Black Survival Guide or How to Live Through a Police Riot*, Delaware Art Museum, 2018; *Blind Memory and Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful*, SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia, 2017; *Strange Fruit*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2011

Represented by: Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles; Ben Brown Fine Arts, London and Hong Kong



Raise Up (2014) Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Key works

Raise Up (2014)

The monumental bronze and cement sculpture is based on a photograph by Ernest Cole of 13 South African miners as they undergo a humiliating group medical examination in the nude. The piece is permanently installed on the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, a site dedicated to the legacy of slavery and mass incarceration. It stands as a reminder of police brutality and racial bias in the US criminal justice system.

Four Freedoms (2018)

Inspired by Norman Rockwell's 1943 series of paintings representing an idealised version of American life, Thomas, together with the photographer Emily Shur, updated the imagery with a more representative picture of American diversity. Rockwell's paintings were based on President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime speech outlining four essential rights: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. The works are part of a larger artist-run platform called *For Freedoms,* launched by Thomas and Eric Gottesman in 2016, that promotes civic engagement through Town Hall meetings, exhibitions, billboard campaigns and artist residencies.

I Am a Man (2009)

This 20-panel work is based on Civil Rights-era protest signs. Each painting offers a variation, such as, "I Am 3/5 Man", "You The Man," and, in the final canvas, "I Am. Amen"—a declarative statement of power and agency. According to Thomas: "I was amazed that just eight years before I was born, it was necessary for people to hold up signs affirming their humanity."

• *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal…*, *Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon, until 12 January 2020, touring to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 8 February-20 April 2020, and the Cincinnati Art Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, 10 July-11 October 2020;* *Exodusters*, *Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, New York, until 31 January 2020;* The Gun Violence Memorial Project *with MASS Design Group, Chicago Architecture Biennial, Chicago, until 5 January 2020;* The Writing on the Wall*, in collaboration with Dr Baz Dreisinger and MASS Design Group, High Line Art, New York, 31 October-10 November;* Unity*, a public art commission for Percent for Art, Brooklyn, NY, opens this autumn, date to be confirmed*



FOR FREEDOMS CO-FOUNDERS TALK REMIXING ROCKWELL — AND THOSE POLITICAL BILLBOARDS

FOR FREEDOMS CO-FOUNDERS TALK REMIXING ROCKWELL — AND THOSE POLITICAL BILLBOARDS

OCTOBER 31, 2019 | GILLIAN EDEVANE
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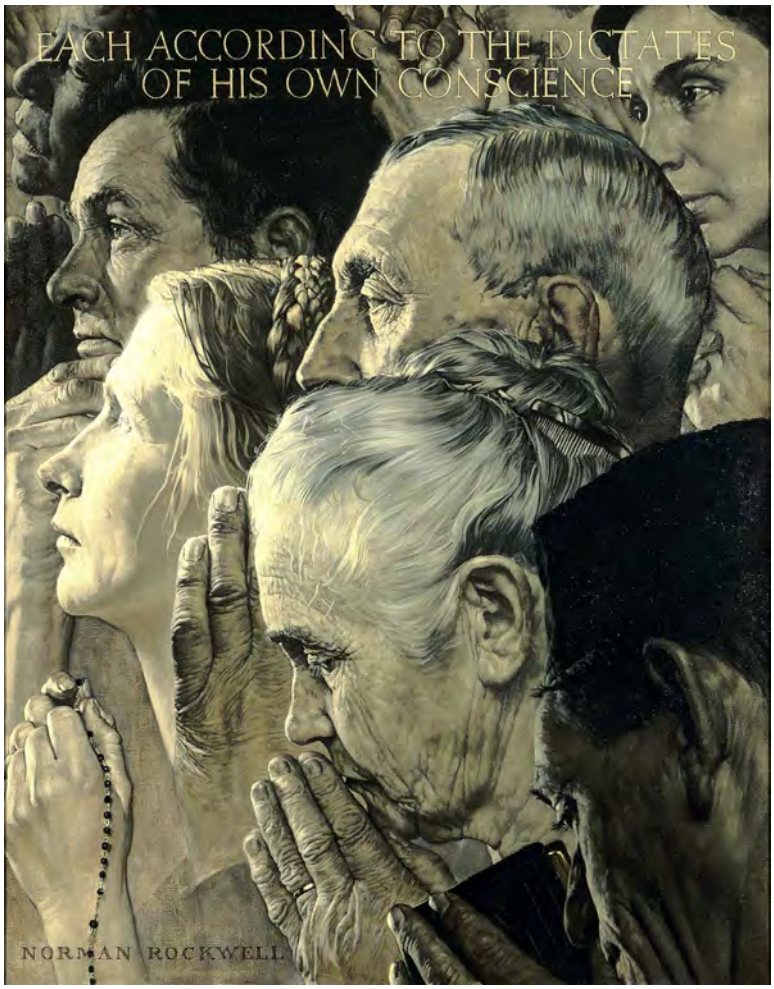


ank Willis homas , Eric ottesman and aria rito R discuss For Freedoms in the ct. 3 episode o " he Files with aria rito."

hen longtime friends ank illis Thomas and ric Gottesman set out to create a political action committee in 0 , they knew they wanted their organi ation to li e at the intersection of art, politics and public participation.

" e think that art is always politics, and all art is political," Gottesman said in a recent episode of "The - iles with aria rito." "And public policy is a re ection of our culture, which art creates. So we wanted to expand what it meant for people to be politically engaged *and* ci ically engaged."

The duo began looking at past examples of art that re ol ed around those themes, finding their first olt of inspiration in Norman Rockwell's " our reedoms." irst published as a rallying cry for the war effort following ranklin . Roose elt's State of the nion Adress in , the series depicted Americans or rather, a mostly-white cohort of Americans exercising four fundamental human rights freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear.



Norman Rockwell's original "Freedom to Worship" illustration, rst published in the Saturday Evening Post in 1943.

After looking at the 80-year old portraits, it was clear to Gottesman and Thomas that Rockwell's interpretation left out a huge swath of Americans.

"Not only were the freedoms limited to four, but also the definition of who was entitled to those freedoms as Americans was pretty limited," Gottesman explained. "... So we were interested in blowing out that idea of who is included, and who is considered to be leading our society."

The result was the creation of " or reedoms," which the two describe as a platform for creating ci ic engagement through the arts. n an homage to Rockwell's series, the A 's first ma or pro ect was reinterpreting his illustrations to re ect the aried demographics of the people who ha e long-called this country home.

" e wound up doing 8 ersions of Rockwell's ' our reedoms' images," Thomas said. " think you'd be hard-pressed to not find representati es of people you consider to be part of your community."



ank Willis homas and Emily Shur's updated version o the Norman Rockwell classic, created or For Freedoms.

The success of their Rockwell adaptation has since led to a series of other pro ects, the most large-scale of which launched in 0 8 under the title "The 0 State nitiati e." As part of the art acti ation, or reedoms and the scores of artists who work with the A designed a series of ague, yet nonetheless arresting, billboard ads.

ne erected in New ork ity, designed by Thomas, states " o e erRules" in white lettering against a glossy, brick-red background. Another simply asserts " AR T AST R " in bold font that resembles the cautionary signs that border construction ones. The idea, according to Thomas, was to use public space in a way that would challenge the status uo or pro oke thought about deeper societal issues.

" e are in an age where branding trumps e erything," Thomas said. " hat's really interesting about art is that it asks uestions that are often unsettling. So, what would it mean to put billboards across the country that didn't necessarily sell anything, other than an idea that we wanted to put out into the world "

The answer, it turns out, was engagement. Since its inception, the " 0 State nitiati e" has maintained a presence in all .S. states and uerto Rico and ashington . ., spreading into a series of town hall e ents and other opportunities for public discussion.

atch the ideo below to hear the co-founders explain the pro ect in more detail and find out about their plans for the future.

artnet® news

On iew

Hank Willis Thomas's New Portland Art Museum Show Exposes the Manipulative Power of Advertising in the City Where Nike Was Born

The artist hopes that Nike adverting executives will make time to visit the exhibition.

Rachel Corbett, October 28, 2019



Hank Willis Thomas at his survey at the Portland Art Museum. Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum.

For the artist Hank Willis Thomas, one of the highlights of having his mid-career survey at the Portland Art Museum is that it's in the same city as the head uarters of Nike.

Thomas has long been influenced, and seemingly troubled, by the effects of the company's branding, elements of which appear throughout his work. In fact, the show's promotional banner hanging from the Oregon museum's facade features Thomas's 2003 photograph of a black man's head, branded with the Nike swoosh logo.

Years before Colin Kaepernick took a knee and ignited the sports industry's intensely politicized new era, Thomas was making work about the plight of college athletes like his cousin Songha Willis, one of the many young men who "spend their whole life trying to get this opportunity, and then there could be an injury, or a life-altering decision about where to go, and the school and everyone's making money but the players," Thomas told artnet News.



Hank Willis Thomas's *randed Head* (2003) at the Portland Art Museum.

The sports industry's exploitation of African American labor is a dynamic that recurs throughout the exhibition. Thomas compares it explicitly to slavery in photographs like those of a sneaker chained to a basketball, or a football player crouching across a yard line from a cotton picker, or a player dunking a basketball into a noose.

Despite the apparent condemnation in much of Thomas's sports-influenced work, the artist considers himself a fan of Nike's ads, which are created largely by the Portland-based agency Weiden and Kennedy. "I got to tour their offices and the Nike offices," he said. "It was really cool."

Thomas admires the potency of advertising, if not always its ends. "I grew up in what they call the MT Generation,' and I realized then that advertising is a completely powerful language, but it's usually a one-way language," he said. Companies use it "only to get us to buy something, but there's not as much use of that language to talk about other issues."



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Cotton owl* (2011). Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Hank Willis Thomas.

Thomas decided he wanted to use this form of messaging to "sell ideas, rather than just be driven by product." In 2016, he and fellow artist Eric Gottesman formed the For Freedoms Super PAC. But instead of raising money for a political candidate, they generated artist-designed advertising, such as billboards by Marilyn Minter, Rashid Johnson, and others that appeared in all 50 US states during the midterm elections of 2018.

For Freedoms is currently in the process of transitioning from a political action committee to a nonprofit, but it will still be active during the 2020 elections. Its plans are yet to be determined, but Thomas said that "we want to do a different version of the 50-state initiative in 2020. Hopefully it'll include billboards."

The Thomas survey in Portland will travel to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas and the Cincinnati Art Museum in Ohio. But before it does, Thomas hopes that some of the Portland area's advertisers will be able to pay a visit.



Hank Willis Thomas's *uernica* (2016) is made from cut-up and restitched sports jerseys. Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum.

"Being that my work is so influenced by Nike and Apple advertising, and Weiden and Kennedy—the company that kind of opened all those doors in all our minds, setting the gold standard—it's exciting that people from those companies will be influenced by my work," he said.

He pointed to a print in the show that features, in lenticular optical-illusion text, the phrase "ART IMITATES LIFE IMITATES ADS IMITATES ART" and said, "it's a vicious cycle of art directors and graphic designers coming to museums to be inspired by art and then filtering that into the ads that they make and filtering those into the world to imitate."

Hank Willis Thomas All Things eing qual is on view through anuary 2, 2 2 , at the Portland Art Museum.

Portland MERCURY

VISUAL ART OCT 24, 2019

Portland Art Museum's Hank Willis Thomas Retrospective Invokes Black Joy: The Strongest Force In the Universe

by Cameron Hawkey



"Crossroads," 2012. Chromogenic print, plexiglas, and Lumisty film © HANK WILLIS THOMAS

During a boozy opening night dialogue with Danielle McCoy and Ragen Fykes of Wieden+Kennedy, and assistant professor Dr. Derrais Carter from the Pacific Northwest College of Art, Carter asked conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas how he got someone to give themselves a Nike scar for his photograph "Branded Head." Thomas replied, "Uh, this is Photoshop."

It was surprising to hear someone take Thomas' photo as truth, but also appropriate, as a major theme in his work deals with the "truth" of photography. In a brief conversation I had with Thomas about the retrospective, he stressed, "Truth is the most potent battleground there is."

Thomas' early work focused on the production of fictional corporate products; more significantly, he used corporate advertising and careful redaction of logos and brands' to examine what the ads were really selling. Eventually going beyond advertising, Thomas explored all manner of images, isolating singular gestures and remaking them in sculptures of fingertips grazing basketballs and passports turning to ash. These works and more are all part of , the Portland Arts Museum's new retrospective of Thomas's work, which brings together old and new pieces of incredible variety—including Christopher Columbus' credit card, gold chains, button pins bigger than stop signs, and an enormous scrap quilt of Picasso's "Guernica" made from sports jerseys.



"Guernica," 2016. Mixed media, including sport jerseys, 131 × 281 inches. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS

The contrast of pointed shallowness and hidden depth in Thomas' work is stunning. The height of these extremes comes in "Winter in America," a harrowing stop-motion video reenacting the 2000 murder of Thomas' cousin, Songha Willis, with G.I. Joe action figures.

The show makes for an intense experience that could spark any amount of brainy critique. But instead of curatorial insights, the descriptions accompanying the artworks are ususally quips from students at Martin Luther King Elementary. I found the children's reactions as profound as any art critic's.

This is the first survey of Thomas' work and the biggest PAM show in years. And they know it. There are **loads of events attached**, but I'm particularly excited to check out the Numberz on Thursday, November 7, where DJ Ambush will curate a DJ set soundtrack within the exhibition and as a live broadcast on 96.7 FM. Also worth noting are **films selected by Thomas**, which will be shown throughout the exhibition's run. John Carpenter's already screened, but next up is *Ja* (Oct 27, 2 pm, Northwest Film Center Whitsell Auditorium). On Saturday, December 14, there's free museum admission and you can catch the PBS documentary .

Quite plainly, this show rocks. It's tragic, intense, sincere, and slick, with surprising and unforgettable fusions of feelings and ideas. That the show has so much heart reflects Thomas' extraordinary intention, which he seemed to comment on at the end of **the opening night discussion**. "There is no stronger power in the universe than Black joy," he said. "Because it has been tested and never been destroyed."

CULTURED

ART

ONE ON ONE: ADGER COWANS AND HANK WILLIS THOMAS

10.24.2019



ADGER COWAN OUTSIDE OF THE ODEON, 2019. PORTRAIT BY NONA FAUSTINE.

Adger Cowans has lived and made photographic history for more than 50 years, starting with his job as an assistant to Gordon Parks when he first arrived in New York in 1958. With a new book out and works on view in "Soul of Nation," which heads to San Francisco's de Young Museum this fall, the polymathic artist is among the forces who opened doors for the next generation, including Hank Willis Thomas, who is now leading the pack of today's imagemakers. Willis Thomas took time out of preparing for "All Things Being Equal," his solo show on view at the Portland Art Museum, to talk with Cowans about his life and work.

Hank Willis Thomas: I've always wondered how it felt as you were making your long and broad career. Did it feel like you were making history?

Adger Cowans: No, not in the beginning. There were no history books on photography in the '50s, so photography wasn't really considered an art. For me, the glory was being a photographer, like Eugene Smith, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, guys like that. They were sort of my heroes. Of course, I really liked the prints of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. That was kind of the seed of what they called fine art.

HWT: Growing up in Ohio, how did you come into contact with Edward Weston?

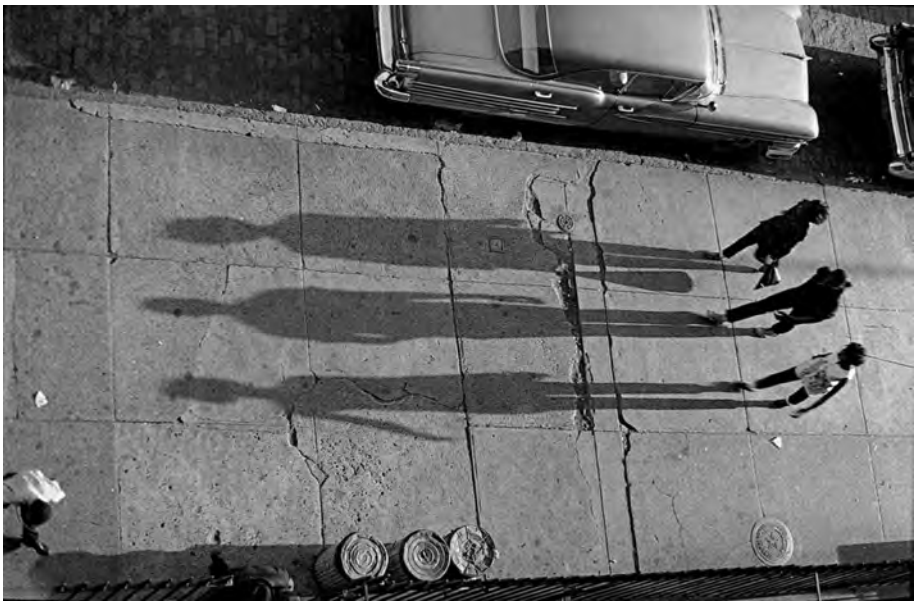
AC: My teacher at Ohio University, Clarence H. White, was the son of Clarence H. White senior, who was an important photographer and knew Group f/64 with Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. I got to see actual prints by them because they were in his collection. When I came to New York in 1958 I worked with Gordon [Parks]. Nobody was talking about photography as art. Journalism was the route—to be a photojournalist—and Magnum was the big company for that. If you did anything else, they called it artsy-fartsy.

HWT: When did you start showing your work?

AC: I had my first one-man show at the Heliography Gallery in 1962. The Heliography Gallery included photographers like Paul Caponigro, Carl Chiarenza, Walter Chappell, Marie Cosindas, Scott Hyde and W. Eugene Smith. They were not commercial photographers; they were photographers who thought of photography as art. I related to that because at university, my teachers were concerned about your input in the photograph, as opposed to just taking a picture of something. So I had some foundation for a philosophy of personal expression.

HWT: That seems like an exciting time to be in New York, especially as a young creative person.

AC: We had big fights with the art guys, the painters, because they were saying that photography wasn't art, it was craft. Photographers and painters and sculptors would get together and have these big discussions about whether photography was art or not. I think photography finally officially became art when Ansel Adams sold his picture Moonrise Over Hernandez for $1,500 and they put a photo of him on the cover of Time magazine. People thought it was crazy! Nobody had ever paid that much money for a photo.



ADGER COWANS'S 3 SHADOWS SHOT IN THE BRONX IN THE 1960S.

HWT: I saw that photograph in someone's house recently, an original print, and no one who was born in the past 25–30 years can really understand how incredible a feat it was to not only make that picture, but to make that print the way Ansel Adams did. Now there isn't the same stigma around the idea of photography as craft as there was earlier, but now the craft is lost—especially the dark room because of digital photography. How do you feel about that, having done so much in silver and then seeing how this medium has changed so dramatically, from black and white to color to digital to now seeing most of our images on screens?

AC: For me, it's always about the image, no matter what you're using. Whether you're using film, digital, print-making, it's all about the emotion in the photograph or painting or whatever. Capturing those feelings that come through you—if you're honest and true, it translates so that other people can feel them. It's not so much the technique as how much emotion you get into it. I think digital is great. I'm able to take old negatives and really make them come alive. I'm for all of it, I'm not against any of it.

HWT: When you arrived in New York, there was the Beat movement happening in the Village, jazz was in its golden age and the Civil Rights movement was starting to catch a lot of national attention. Was that all when you were—

AC:
I was in the middle of all of it, but for me, it was always about moving the art forward more than it was about racial consciousness, though I was one of the founding members of Kamoinge and I was also in AfriCOBRA and we really stressed the possibility of arts for our people and showing them in a positive light. I was concerned most about the art. I got out of advertising and photojournalism in 1968 and I went to Brazil. And when I came back from Brazil, everything changed in how I approached my work.

HWT: What was happening in Brazil?

HWT: What was happening in Brazil?

AC:

AC: Well, nothing! [Laughter.] I just wanted to get away from advertising. I had a studio and an agent and everything, but I was tired of doing ads for toothpaste, or the army, Con Edison, all those kinds of things. The commercial world was unapologetically

white; there were only a couple of black guys working on that level back then. HWT: You don't hear so many stories of African- American artists who were like, I'm tired of doing these big jobs so I decided to go to Brazil. You hear of artists going to Europe, Paris—but you went to Brazil. What was that like? That was also a great moment in music and culture in Brazil. AC: It was fantastic. It opened up a whole thing for me because of the Afro-Brazilian thing. I lived in Bahia. I had originally gone there to do a job for Esquire, and the guy who was my contact said he was only going to give me part of the money because he wasn't going back to America. After I was there for a while and saw how beautiful Brazil was, I decided I wasn't going back to the States either!
HWT: So you were on your own journey then? AC: Yeah, I got there and after I met all of these different people, I felt comfortable and ended up staying almost a year. I wasn't ready to come back but I had to. I had my work, business and everything. I came back to New York, and for two or three weeks I was just depressed!

HWT: What made it so special for you?

AC: I just felt all the different colors of the different people—the Indian with the African and the African with the Italian and the Brazilian—it was just a beautiful culture. I felt a blend of love among the people. I was living on Afonso Celso Street, which is a black part of Bahia, and there wasn't all that racial tension. It was there, but it wasn't as overt as it is now. I felt at home. I met Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, all of those guys. They were young kids at that time and they came to our house because we were American— me and my friend Roz Allen—and they wanted to know about America and what was going on with the Black Arts Movement. At first they thought I was Stokely Carmichael. I ended up going on television and talking about what was going on in America, but I was trying to escape all of that stuff; I didn't want to be bothered. I did go down south after Medgar Evers was killed. The NY Herald Tribune had a grant for artists, so I got a grant to go down there and photograph what was going on, but I wasn't so much concerned about trying to document. I was more about the things that were happening internally with me.

HWT: I'm fascinated by the breadth of your work—there's your political work and commercial work, like photographs of people like Mick Jagger, Jane Fonda, Katharine Hepburn. Was there anything you did not want to do? Very few people have such a broad legacy.

AC: I didn't want to work commercially, and I didn't want to work for assistants and worked with a lot of the important photographers in New York at the time, including Lillian Bassman, Gordon Parks and others. Gordon said to me: you don't want to work at Life magazine because you already have a point of view and a style, and if you work at Life magazine, they'll kill that. I also went to Ebony magazine and met Moneta Sleet Jr. He was a really nice guy and he said, you don't want to work at Ebony. I said, I need a job! And he said, you have your own style already; if you work at Ebony they'll kill you like a work horse, 'shoot this, shoot that.' That kind of took me out of the magazine business.

HWT: And that's why your book is called Personal Vision.

AC: It's called that because it's my vision, what I feel and think about images and photography, painting, the whole thing. I realized that was really the way I was trained, even though I was in school with journalists like Paul Fusco and James Coralis. We were in class together at Ohio University where we had a class of about 10,000 students and out of all of those students there were only 22 black students, so we all knew what we were doing and kind of hung out together because Ohio was still racist

at that time. We couldn't get haircuts in the town, so we started cutting each other's hair, and there were places we couldn't go because we were black. We started integrating places and being very revolutionary, and they called the National Guard at one point because we started real trouble by sticking in the barber shop and not moving and going into places where we would have to go around back to be served—so we would go around back and get our beer or whatever and then we'd go in the front door and sit down. Of course, they went crazy and called the police. All of this wasn't necessarily making the news, but we were really angry about the way things were going. It had nothing to do with taking pictures, nothing to do with art, just the fact that we were black students. A lot of these kids that I went to school with came from good black families. They didn't grow up in the hood; these were the kids whose parents were educated, whose parents were doctors and lawyers. It wasn't about being ashamed of being black—we were proud to be black. This was before the Black Arts Movement. I had a black family with a lot of love—Thanksgiving, Christmas, there was 20 people at the table, aunts, uncles, cousins, everybody. I experienced a lot of love growing up, so I knew who I was.



FAYE DUNAWAY IN 1970 FOR THE
MOVIE PUZZLE OF A DOWNFALL CHILD.

HWT: Did you know that you were part of a historical moment? That you were living through and making history? All the names that you were interacting with and the things that you were doing are things people read about now.

AC: No, I didn't think about it that way. Not until much later. I was probably 50 years old before I realized that the things I had done and the things I had lived through were a part of history. I was just concerned about being a photographer. I didn't care about the other stuff. I didn't want to take any time away from the work I wanted to do. I loved taking pictures from the time I was 15 years old. I never thought of it as a job, or an art, or anything. It was just something that I really loved to do.

HWT: What would you say to a younger version of yourself—if you were able to say to yourself at 18 years old that you'd be an internationally renowned artist who traveled the world and shot films and ad campaigns.

AC: When I was 18, I wouldn't have believed that I would have the career that I've had. I've been working on my website now and my agent is putting things together and she called me and said, "Jesus Christ, you lived two lifetimes already!" I've never really thought about it, which is to a fault in some degree, because there's a lot of stuff I didn't write down. For me, it was about living my life, not a life that was prescribed to me by the government or whatever. I thought my life was important because the connections I had with my spirit let me know that I had something to do.

HWT: You were part of Kamoinge and AfriCOBRA, which are very community-oriented movements. It took 40 or 50 years for people to catch up to what you guys were imagining then. Photography wasn't even seen as an art form when you were starting — much less was there a space to be a black artist photographer. You have an ability to see beyond what the world thinks you can and should be, and that's part of what you talk about in terms of being on this spiritual quest of self-expansion and exploration, but you've also stayed rooted to the African- American community, and the international African diaspora community as well.

AC: I look at it like this: I was born black and then I became an artist. A black man living, born and raised in America, and that's enough. I don't have to say that I'm doing pictures of black people, or that I'm socially involved—I'm a black man. Whatever is going on, I'm involved. I can't not be involved. I don't have to make a point of it. I'm proud, I'm black, I grew up that way. I don't have to go on talking about it and screaming about it. With Kamoinge, I didn't want to use that name, because it was a label. I like the name we first had, which was Camera 35. I liked that name because it dealt with photography, and that's what I wanted to stay with, so I fought everybody. [Laughter.] Ray Francis and I ware the only ones who went against it.

HWT: I knew all of you through my mother [Deborah Willis] and her work at the Schomburg Center. The only photographers I knew growing up were the black photographers: Moneta Sleet Jr., Gordon Parks, James Van Der Zee, you and Roy DeCarava. When I went to college, I learned about W. Eugene Smith, and maybe I knew a little bit about Ansel Adams beforehand. I actually had an almost reverse education about photographic history. I really feel privileged to be able to witness the broadening awareness of our society, of the work that people have been doing for more than half a century, and I'm really grateful because I don't think my mother would have had the audacity to do a lot of the work she did if it weren't for you all. So many of us are in the legacy of Gordon Parks, just by him going places he wasn't supposed to and refusing to be marginalized.

AC: All of that is true. And Deb's history book was huge—nothing like that existed before. Nothing. You had a really good grounding before you went to college. You already had it going on before you found out about all of these other guys.

HWT: You've always had this signature smooth look—the scarf and the hat. [Laughter.] Is that intentional?

AC: It's energy. You ever meet somebody for the first time and you shake their hand and they give you that limp hand and you go, ugh, and just don't get a good vibe? And then you meet somebody else, and it's a great vibe, and you get along right away? That's the energy that's coming from that first person and coming from you, and it's invisible to the naked eye, but it's a very real energy. One of the things that kept me in photography was the fact that I could take a picture and show it to somebody and they would talk about whether they liked it or whether they didn't, and to me, what they said about the work was a window into who they were. If I went to a top magazine to

show my work, and usually they were white people, whatever they said about my work, I listened because it told me who they were.

HWT: At 83 years old, you seem as passionate about making images and doing work as—

AC: Oh, yes! Look, I had Romare Bearden, I had Jacob Lawrence, I had Norman Lewis, I had all these guys around me. All these guys worked right up until the end. They did not slack off. These were my heroes. When I came to New York, I met these guys and they were the people to know, to be friendly with, to find out about. They were carrying on something, but hardly anyone was paying attention. I had a show at the Kenkeleba House Gallery, and it was great. I felt so good to be there. I felt that I had arrived. I didn't care about what uptown was doing! I was with the guys who I felt were the most powerful artists on the planet.

HWT: Are these the things you talk about in your new book?

AC: Yeah, I tell stories. How I grew up and when I came to New York, the different people I met, what I did, my experience living as a photographer, as an artist. You can read it in one sitting! I'm getting good comments from people, regular folks, they love it.

HWT: I'm grateful to get this opportunity to talk to you. It's given me a chance to see things I hadn't seen and known before.

AC: Cool, because I appreciate what you're doing, man. Question Bridge was a great concept! And the other stuff you are doing is great too—the Nike series with the branding and the body and the basketball and the chain—all of that is great.

HWT: It means a lot to me to hear you know about this stuff.

AC: It deals with society to a certain degree, but it's your vision. That's what I think a lot of these young photographers are missing— they have to deal with their own vision. I call a lot of the younger photographers today visual entertainers.

HWT: I know what you mean. Thinking about what you've experienced since 1958 when you came to New York, do you have any advice for someone who is arriving in the same city now with their camera and their hopes and dreams the same way you did?

AC: Listen to your inner voice or to your spirit or whatever you want to call it. That's where you'll find your originality—you won't find it looking outside, you'll find it looking inside. It's good to look at other people's work to see how things are done or how really good photographs have meaning and last through the ages, but until you get in touch with that spiritual part of yourself, nothing will happen. We need each person to express what is going on with them, and it has to come from inside. To thine own self, be true, and that can be very hard, because if you stand still in one place, you'll get the good, bad, depression, no money, a lot of money— you're going to get everything that people are moving around doing, even if you're standing in one place. So get out there, get into life. You have to understand living and dying to be an artist and you have to live through the pain and the joy. To be an artist you have to be able to express emotion. You use the good and bad experiences in life. Great art lives beyond its time because it has emotion, and emotion goes beyond life and death. Work has to have life in it. Expression is what will keep you going. Don't let anything stop you from

what it is that you want to do, your dream. Dreams become realities. They may not come right away, and if they did you'd probably abuse them.

HWT: You wouldn't appreciate it.

AC: Yes! You wouldn't appreciate it. You have to make that experience in life. But if you're passionate about it, and you love it, then you're halfway there already.

NEW YORK Amsterdam News

Hank Willis Thomas' art to change the world

NJERI MCPHERSON | 10/24/2019, 2:36 p.m.



Hank Willis Thomas Contributed

Artist Hank Willis Thomas is leaving his mark in the art community, being featured in art exhibits all over the states as well as Spain, France and China. Specializing in photography, Thomas expresses a range of ideas in several ways. Moreover, he has given other artists the opportunity to do similar work with the organization For Freedoms.

Thomas was born in New Jersey, but raised in the upper west side of New York City. Coming from a very creative family, he has always had some interest in the arts.

"My parents were both creative oriented, and traveled a lot with their work. My mother is a curator and photographer, and my father is a man of many talents: a physicist, filmmaker, jazz player, [etc.]," says Thomas. "My mother being an artist and an art historian, I grew up following in her footsteps."

Art has always played a part in Thomas' life. Attending Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Thomas leaned into Museum Studies, focusing on how art was presented rather than creating art himself. But, he later went to school for photography, and this changed his creative trajectory.

"I never really learned painting, or drawing, or how to play an instrument; I never saw myself as an artist. I have just always followed my curiosity, and I was lucky enough to go to school for photography—I could just look at the art and stare, I never really thought I could make money off it," explains Thomas. "I had friends that worked at galleries that thought my art was worth showing."

Thomas' curiosity has led him to create art from multitudes of inspiration all over the world. Growing up in New York, and residing in Brooklyn today, it would be easy to assume that Thomas gets most of his inspiration from NYC's vibrant streets. However, in his opinion, we live in a "global society."

"Artists in South Africa, Peru, Japan [etc.] also inspire my work—because we live in a world of social media you don't have to live in a particular area to be inspired by what people do," says Thomas.

He has found great inspiration from a variety of cultures and mediums, however, what he finds most inspirational is the idea of evoking change in society. From this motivation, Thomas founded For Freedoms, an organization where art and public discourse can meet. For Freedoms is a place a place for artists to express art delving into topics of civic issues,Thomas hopes to make art a stronger force for change.

“Artists have a lot to say that could and should be shaping our political views and society,” says Thomas. “Fine art at its best challenges us to rethink norms that we have gotten used to; we need creative solutions to create meaningful change in our society.”

The artist has deflnitely presented art capable of sparking engaging discourse. With much of his work bringing attention to issues of race in the U.S., Thomas has made an impact with striking images that evoke in-depth thought. Still, with all of his success, he still feels insecurity in his creative process.

“I think there is always a question of if I am doing something important, something relevant to be done—a concern that my work is worth people’s time,” says Thomas.

Still, he continues to produce art that he feels is relevant and meaningful.

“I hope that my work asks good questions about the society we live in and talks more about the things we take for granted, whether that be what we consume, the news, history—not giving in to the narrative that is sold to us,” says Thomas “I hope to express that there is always more to the story than what is in the frame of the camera. I see art in everything, I think at it’s best we don’t separate art from life.”

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.



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."

artnet news

Art World

Art Industry News: A Feminist Monument With Racial Tensions Gets Narrowly OKed for Central Park + Other Stories

Plus, Hong Kong arts professionals are running for public office and Klaus Biesenbach recalls getting scolded by Susan Sontag.

artnet News, October 23, 2019



Sculptor Meredith Bergmann's design for the winning Central Park monument. Courtesy of Monumental Women.

Art Industry News is a daily digest of the most consequential developments coming out of the art world and art market. Here's what you need to know on this Wednesday, October 23.

NEED TO READ

Hong Kong Culture Workers Are Running for Office – Hong Kong artists and cultural workers are running for public office as thousands of young people continue to take to the streets in the city (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/hong-kong-protests-and-future-of-hong-kong-art-identity-1600474). The artist Clara Cheung, who is the co-founder of art nonprofit C&G Artpartment, and curator Susi Law have both entered the district council race as independent candidates. Cheung says that fighting for democracy means "sometimes you have to come out of your comfort zone and do more." The district council elections will be held on November 24. (*Art Asia Pacific* (http://artasiapacific.com/News/HongKongCulturalWorkersRunIn2019DistrictCouncilElections))

Saudi Arabia Plans a Modern Art Museum – The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia now wants a museum of Modern art as well as an edition of the Desert X biennial (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/desert-x-saudi-arabia-1673542). An official announcement by the Ministry of Culture last week confirmed that the Saudi Museum of Modern Art will be built on the outskirts of the capital, Riyadh. Details are minimal but according to a statement, the planned museum will be designed "according to a modern creative concept influenced by the traditional local architectural style." It will be located near the UNESCO world heritage site of At-Turaif. (*Forbes* (https://www.forbes.com/sites/dominicdudley/2019/10/22/saudi-modern-art-museum/#51c882435790))

Feminist Central Park Monument Gets Approval – A controversial sculpture for New York's Central Park commemorating American women (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/sojourner-truth-added-statue-central-park-1623946) who led the fight for female suffrage has been narrowly approved. Three of the 12 panel members—including the artist Hank Willis Thomas—abstained from the vote. The monument's sculptor, Meredith Bergmann, has revised her design to hint at the political and racial tension among campaigners Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth. (Anthony and Stanton made black women like Trush stand at the back at rallies.) This is the second design revision: the first one added Truth after backlash that the proposal included just two white women. The $1.5 million statue, the first celebrating great women in the park, is due to be unveiled in August 2020. (*New York Post* (https://nypost.com/2019/10/21/central-park-to-get-its-first-statue-honoring-women/?utm_source=twitter_sitebuttons&utm_medium=site%20buttons&utm_campaign=site%20buttons))

A Lawsuit Pits a German Firm Against an Art Dealer – The German financial services firm Fine Art Partners is suing London- and Miami-based art dealer Inigo Philbrick (http://www.artnet.com/galleries/inigophilbrick/) for allegedly withholding $14 million in art by stars including Christopher Wool (http://www.artnet.com/artists/christopher-wool/), Wade Guyton, and Donald Judd (http://www.artnet.com/artists/donald-judd/)—as well as a Yayoi Kusama (http://www.artnet.com/artists/yayoi-kusama/) "Infinity Room." The firm wants Philbrick to return the art, which he had been tasked with selling. The complex legal drama also involves accusations of a fraudulent auction guarantee. (*ARTnews* (http://www.artnews.com/2019/10/22/inigo-philbrick-lawsuit/))

ART MARKET

Dawoud Bey Joins Sean Kelly – The Chicago-based photographer and MacArthur "Genius" (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/njideka-akunyili-crosby-trevor-paglen-genius-grant-1112516) has joined Sean Kelly. Bey will have his first show at the New York gallery in late 2020. The artist, who was previously represented by the now-shuttered (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/mary-boone-is-sentenced-1464904) Mary Boone Gallery, also has a touring retrospective opening at SMOMA next year. (*ARTnews* (http://www.artnews.com/2019/10/22/dawoud-bey-sean-kelly/))

Christie's Offers a Futurist Gem – A late, posthumous cast of Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* heads to auction at Christie's New York on November 11 with an estimate of $3.8 million to $4.5 million. It is from an edition of ten bronzes cast in 1972, six of which are in public museums. One of the original 1931 casts, meanwhile, is a celebrated work in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (*Art Market Monitor* (https://www.artmarketmonitor.com/2019/10/22/christies-brings-a-bit-of-moma-the-tate-to-the-auction-block/))

The Painting JFK Never Lived to Receive Goes on Sale – A landscape by the Texan artist Porfirio Salinas with a historic provenance is heading to auction. The artist was due to present *Rocky Creek* to President John F. Kennedy as a gift from vice president Lyndon Johnson on November 23, 1963,

PHOTOGRAPHY & IMAGING (/PHOTO)

NEW MURAL FROM DPI ALUM HANK WILLIS THOMAS AT BROOKLYN NAVY YARD

WEDNESDAY, OCT 16, 2019



FOR FREEDOMS' ORIGINAL BILLBOARD DESIGN FROM 2016 BY HANK WILLIS THOMAS AND JON SANTOS

For Freedoms (https://forfreedoms.org) is a non-profit organization co-founded by DPI alum **Hank Willis Thomas** and Eric Gottesman. As part of their 50 State Initiative, they commissioned billboard designs from various artists--one for each state. Their THEY ARE US/ US IS THEM billboard mural is on view in the Brooklyn Navy Yard through November 30, 2019. This is one of For Freedoms' original billboard designs from 2016 by Hank Willis Thomas and Jon Santos. You can find it at the intersection of Flushing Ave and Waverly Ave in Brooklyn, NY.

New Orleans Museum of Art's Amazing Sculpture Garden Expansion Opens to the Public

NEW ORLEANS, Louisiana / May 15, 2019



Hank Willis Thomas, History of the Conquest, 2017. Bronze.



Image by R. Alokhin of Teresita Fernández's commissioned pavilion feature wall.



Sean Scully, Colored Stacked Frames, 2017. Stainless steel, paint.

(ARTFIX*daily*.com) The New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) has opened its newly expanded Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden after 18 months in construction. The six-acre addition builds on the existing five-acre garden within New Orleans City Park and includes innovative architectural elements and showcases 27 new, recent, and commissioned large-scale sculptures. The sculpture garden is free and open to the public, seven days a week.

“Congratulations to the New Orleans Museum of Art on the expansion of the Sydney and Walda Besthoff Sculpture Garden,” said Mayor LaToya Cantrell. “This project makes the site more environmentally sustainable going forward, and it will help ensure equitable access to beautiful outdoor art for generations to come.”

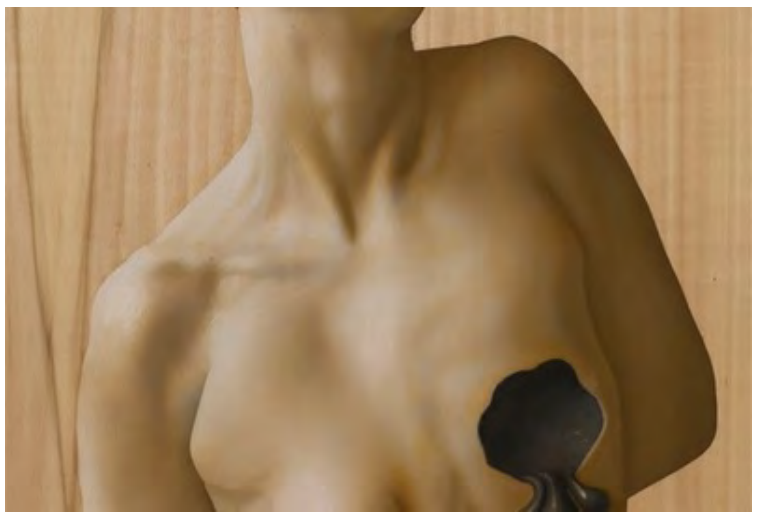
“Sydney and Walda Besthoff, along with the NOMA Board of Trustees and museum staff, view this breathtaking garden as a gift to the city of New Orleans,” said Susan Taylor, NOMA’s Montine McDaniel Freeman Director. “This project further advances our efforts to unite, inspire, and engage the New Orleans community with the wonder of sharing landscape and art as one distinctive experience.”

With environmental impact at the forefront of planning, the sculpture garden expansion emphasizes the distinctive character of the Louisiana landscape while incorporating architectural elements such as the first canal link bridge of its kind in the United States designed by landscape design partners Reed Hilderbrand, an outdoor amphitheater and stage, and a sculpture pavilion created by Lee Ledbetter & Associates.

New commissions include a sculptural drawing by artist and architect **Maya Lin,** a 60-foot-long mosaic wall by artist **Teresita Fernández**, and a glass bridge by **Elyn Zimmerman**; along with sculptures by **Larry Bell**, **Tony Cragg**, **Johan Creten**, **Katharina Fritsch**, **Frank Gehry**, **Jeppe Hein**, **Georg Herold**, **Thomas Houseago**, **Shirazeh Houshiary**, **Baltasar Lobo**, **Robert Longo**, **Gerold Miller**, **Beverly Pepper**, **Pedro Reyes**, **George Rickey**, **Ursula von Rydingsvard**, **Sean Scully**, **Yinka Shonibare**, **Frank Stella**, **Hank Willis Thomas**, **Bernar Venet**, and **Fred Wilson**. A work by **Ugo Rondinone** will be installed in the garden in late 2019.



Artworks by Picasso, Csaky, Brianchon are part of Andrew Jones' successful May 18-19 auction



REJEKT Gallery announces Hybrid Prophecy: a solo show of controversial Polish artist Kle Mens



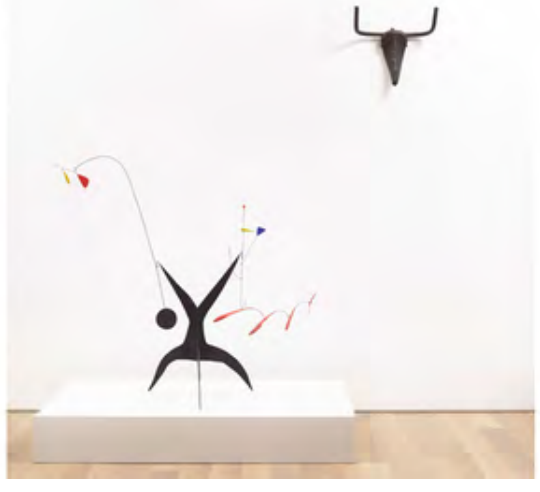
Mead Schaeffer Leads Swann Illustration Sale with Moby Dick Design



Swann Graphic Design Offers a Tour Through History



"Primary Colors" Online Art Competition Announced by Art Gallery



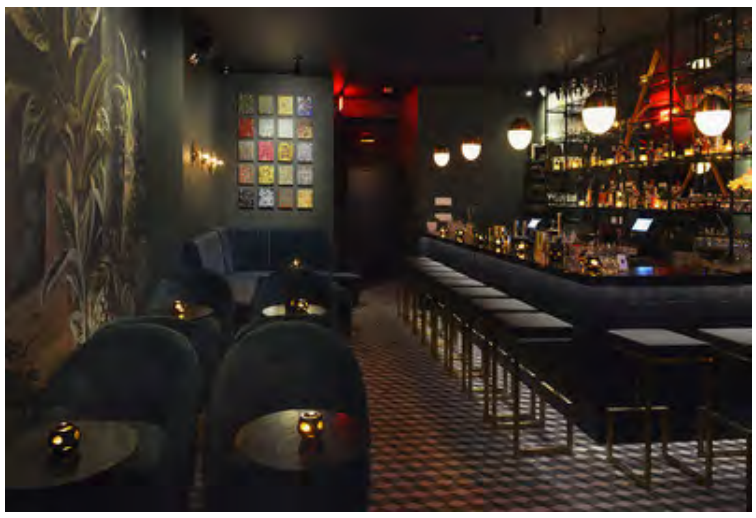
Traveling Exhibition 'Calder-Picasso' Explores the Connections Between Two 20th-Century Masters and Is Curated by Both Artists' Grandsons



Lines, Shapes & Objects Art Competition



Saint-Gaudens National Historical Park Opens for Season as Saint-Gaudens Memorial Celebrates Centennial Year



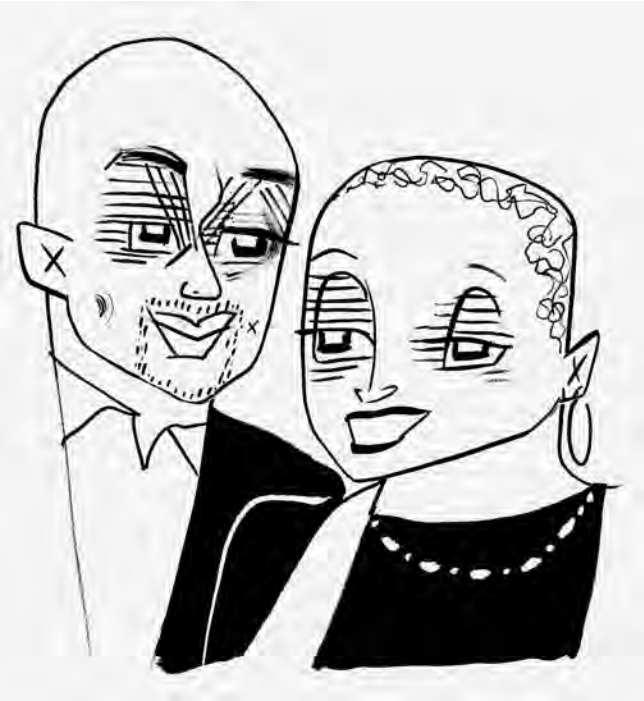
SUGAR MONK - AN INTIMATE COCKTAIL ESTABLISHMENT WILL OPEN SOON IN THE HISTORIC HARLEM COMMUNITY

THE NEW YORKER

Growing Up in a Black-History Archive

For the mother-and-son artists Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas, the Schomburg Center, in Harlem, is more than a research resource.

By Julie Belcove



Hank Willis Thomas and Deborah Willis

Illustration by Tom Bachtell

The mother-and-son artists Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas stopped by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, in Harlem, the other day. Thomas carried his mother's tote bag for her as they walked through an exhibit titled "Black Power!"

An F.B.I. most-wanted poster caught Thomas's eye. The hunted man, identified as Hubert Gerold Brown, had a prominent Afro and wore dark glasses. Thomas, who makes politically charged conceptual art, said, "Strange to see sunglasses in a mug shot."

Then he noticed the same figure wearing the same shades in a photo of civil-rights leaders. “I’ve never heard of him before,” Thomas said.

Willis, who is seventy and first visited the Schomburg Center as a photography student, before returning as a curator, peered at the image. “That’s H. Rap Brown,” she said, using the man’s activist moniker. (Brown, who once declared, “Violence is as American as cherry pie,” has since changed his name to Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin.)

“Oh! He was a political prisoner.”

“He still is,” his mother corrected.

Willis smiled as she passed a picture of Joan Baez marching with James Baldwin. “I was asked to direct a music video on Joan Baez’s new album,” she said. “I called Hank. He said, ‘Mom, you’re doing too many things. You don’t have time.’ ‘But it’s *Joan Baez*.’ Of course I had to do it.”

They continued to stroll, and Willis nodded at several of the photographs, which she had acquired for the center in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. “Sweet memories,” she said. That was before she won a MacArthur Fellowship, in 2000, as a historian of African-American photography, and became the chair of N.Y.U.’s department of photography and imaging. “I had to work late, and Hank was in pre-K,” she recalled. “I would pick him up and dash him back here.”

“When I was old enough to find my own way, I would come myself,” Thomas, who is now forty-two, said. He would ride the bus from P.S. 87, on West Seventy-eighth Street, to 135th Street.

“It was a different time,” Willis said.

“It was a much more *dangerous* time,” her son said.

“He knew which bus to take: the No. 7 bus; he was seven. I followed him a couple of times to make sure he could do it.”

Thomas’s gaze wandered toward the phone in his hand. His thumb made a repetitive motion. His mother tapped his arm. He didn’t respond. Giving up, she listed a few of the groundbreaking figures who had passed through the Schomburg during her tenure: Gordon Parks, Maya Angelou, Arthur Ashe.

Thomas looked up. “I was playing with my G.I. Joes then. Didn’t think much about it.” Nor did he give much thought to becoming an artist.

“He’d say, ‘Mom, all your friends are broke,’ ” Willis recalled. She said she replied, “Yeah, but they’re having fun.”

Thomas spent hours in the center's research stacks. "Growing up in the archive, I just became hyperaware of the missing images in our society—the images that aren't shown, the stories that aren't told," he said.

Near the F.B.I. poster was a shot of the 1971 prison uprising at Attica, the inmates raising their fists in the air. Thomas used the picture in his latest body of work, which is currently on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery. The series features photographic images of twentieth-century protests—in favor of women's suffrage and the Equal Rights Amendment, against segregation and apartheid. "It's really a reminder that the road to progress is always under construction," he said.

He printed the archival pictures on retroreflective sheeting, a material that obscures the images except when they are struck with direct light, such as a camera flash. "Like on the highway—when signs are dark unless your headlight hits them," he said. "It makes things visible from your unique perspective only if you are shining a light on them. That's kind of a metaphor for history."

Thomas checked his phone again—the latest Trump headlines this time, and his calendar—and reported that Willis's next photography exhibit was scheduled to open two days before his show, at the Shine Portrait Studio, in Newark.

"You're sure on that phone," his mother chided.

"Multitasking. I'm here."

Willis's new series explores people's closets. "I was curious about what made people happy about their clothes," she explained. "My husband said, 'Ask people what they don't like in their closets.' Not one person disliked anything in their closet. That says a lot. They can't wear it anymore—it's too tight, too short. But they have good memories in those clothes."

"You're looking at the closet as an archive," Thomas said. "It's the images we keep, the stories we keep. It doesn't have to be in a library or a museum to be a historical record." Willis beamed.

"See, people don't think I'm paying attention," Thomas said. "I'm always paying attention." ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the April 30, 2018, issue, with the headline "Paying Attention."

hindustantimes

Hong Kong's iconic harbour-front has a new sculpture park

ART AND CULTURE Updated: Feb 24, 2018 08:56 IST

Hong Kong's harbour-front is known for glistening skyscrapers and the sight of containerships navigating busy shipping lanes — but a new art project has added a giant pumpkin, a map of the stars and a pair of disembodied legs to the famous skyline.

The Harbour Arts Sculpture Park, which officially opened on Thursday, is a collection of works by 19 local and international artists including Britain's Antony Gormley and Tracey Emin, Japan's Yayoi Kusama, as well as Jenny Holzer and Hank Willis Thomas from the United States.



New York-based US artist Hank Willis Thomas poses in his sculpture Ernest and Ruth. (AFP)

The series of installations aims to increase public access to art in a city known for its exclusive high-end galleries and lucrative auctions. "I think public art is a unique place to make a statement and I wanted to make a work that people could inhabit and basically become a part of," said Willis Thomas, perched inside a large metal speech bubble.

The work, Ernest and Ruth, is one of two sculptures in the project, which was organised by the non-profit Hong Kong Arts Centre in collaboration with local partners. On the harbourfront, intrigued visitors had already begun taking pictures of themselves with Kusama's oversized pumpkin sculpture on Thursday afternoon, while children played among the other works dotted on the grass.

THE ROOT

Artist Hank Willis Thomas Shines Spotlight on the Power of Protest

P.J. Rickards
5/27/18 10:00am • Filed to: BLACK ARTISTS

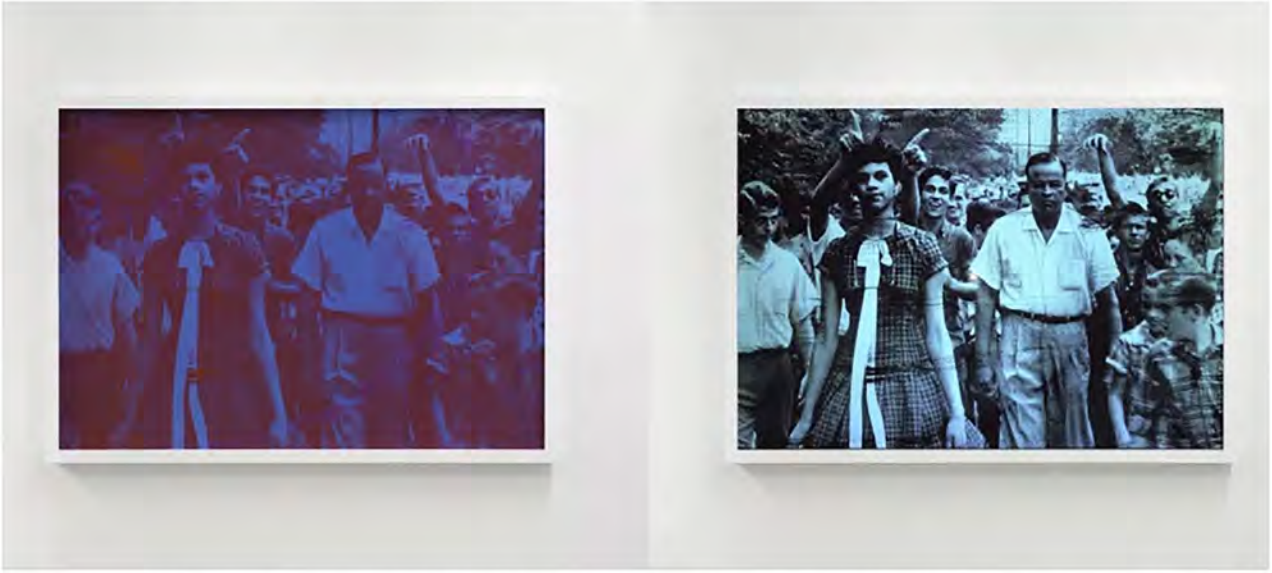


America's No. 1 protest artist? Forget Banksy—meet Hank Willis Thomas. The African-American conceptual artist challenges ideas and oppression through themes of pop culture. He's gained a huge following in the art and celebrity community, among them art lover Swizz Beats. Whether it's photography, sculptures, installations or video, the messages are deeper than they appear on the surface.



Rise Up, 2014
Photo: Hank Willis Thomas & Jack Shainman Gallery

"All art is political. A mistake that we make is thinking that just because it doesn't look political that it isn't," Thomas says. "The role of art is to actually challenge us to think differently about who we are and our role in our society. And if the questions are too easy, the answers are too easy, and therefore we run the risk of not really kind of evolving."



"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.
Photo: Hank Williams & Jack Shainman Gallery

His most recent exhibit, "What We Ask is Simple," is focused on 20th-century protest movements and the everyday people who make up those movements, many of whom never get the spotlight. But how Thomas shines that light is even more interesting. Images might appear one way to the naked eye but change when light is added or angles change.



A man takes a selfie with Hank Willis Thomas' All Power to All People sculpture in view of a statue of former Philadelphia Mayor and Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo in Philadelphia on Sept. 14, 2017.
Photo: AP Images

NORTH by NORTHWESTERN

Hank Willis Thomas's *Unbranded* is a haunting take on American culture

By Kathryn Rothstein
8:04 p.m. May 17 2018



Hank Willis Thomas, Travel light!, 1940/2015, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

The exhibit brings together about 40 photographs from two of Thomas' series – *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America* and *Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015* – both consisting of advertising images stripped of their original copy text and context.

Thomas worked on *Reflections in Black by Corporate America* from 2005-2008. He pulls images from advertisements targeted toward African Americans that originally ran from 1968, the year of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, to 2008, the year Barack Obama was elected president.

A Century of White Women traces the way white women were represented in print advertising images from 1915, five years before they gained the right to vote, to 2015, the year Hillary Clinton announced her campaign for the presidency.

The original source and circumstances of Thomas' images are left ambiguous. Each photo was given its own title, and each title includes the date the advertisement originally ran and the date Thomas "unbranded" it. Other than that, no information is given. There are only three wall texts in the exhibition, which provide broad, explanatory statements about the two series and Thomas' process.

The images are arranged relatively by theme. The first images in *Century of White Women* arrangement show seemingly independent women embarking on tasks alone. Thomas cheekily titled an image of a woman behind the wheel, "She followed his directions and took a right onto Equal Ave..., 1920/2015," while a woman confidently strutting away from planes, trains and automobiles in the background of an image against an idyllic blue sky is titled "Travel light!, 1940/2015."

On the opposite interior walls, *Reflections in Black* unfolds. The images show African Americans interacting with their white counterparts in a way that is absent from the advertising images on the other side of the room. In two of the images, a white man is waiting on the African Americans in the image. In "Just for the Taste of It, 1989/2007," a Black couple dines under the Eiffel Tower while being served by a white man; in "Membership Has Its Privileges, 2006/2008," an older white man holds an umbrella in the rain for a young African American boy exiting a car.

The second side of the room features images that use exoticism, orientalization and appropriation, especially in *Century of White Women*. There are white women dressed as Egyptian pharaohs posing for the camera, women's legs chained together as a man smoking hookah looks on and women in the jungle, one of whom is in a cage next to a man. These images are troubling for their appropriative and sexist content, but also for their banality.

The last image, "She's all tied up...in a poor system, 1951/2015," struck me as one of the most impactful and disturbing. It shows a woman in some kind of shirt or straightjacket with her arms constrained, bucked in, seated at a typewriter, yelling in apparent anguish. This is the only image where a woman is in visible pain, but in a way, it seems to speak for the rest of the images.

After absorbing the entire exhibit, the lack of detailed labels or explanation for each image seems very intentional. Without the protection of copy text, the images alone tell some of the darker stories about American life, appetites and cultural norms through the way advertisers thought the American public aspired to see themselves. The way the images are separated from their original context ads an unsettling element.

Both sets of advertisements espouse similar themes – the nuclear American family, heterosexual norms and traditional beauty norms. And in both series, these themes are similarly disturbing. Examining the vignettes as a group reveals how deeply ingrained themes of racism, sexism and white supremacy are to the American psyche. Although the images were poached from a period of many perceived milestones for women and African Americans, they also make it clear that there are still many milestones to go.

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.

The Spartan
York College of Pennsylvania

Decontextualized: A Review of Works by Hank Willis Thomas

By Heather Outwater and Morgan Barnett

"Ads really aren't about the products. It's about what myths and generalizations we can attach." This is a quote by Hank Willis Thomas, the artist behind *Ubranded: A Century of White Women 1915 – 2015*, the extensive gallery show that currently occupies both the galleries here on campus and those downtown at Marketview Arts. This idea is hard to take in, because ads are used to market products, right? That's the reason we make them. However, Thomas challenges this with the work that he does. *Ubranded: A Century of White Women 1915 – 2015* is a collection of advertisement images from the last 100 years that solely follows trends in the media focusing on white women. More importantly, these ads are void of any text or logos to inform the viewer of which product the photograph was initially taken for. By doing this, the viewer is left with the photograph only and isn't influenced by anything except for their own experiences.

As is true for a multitude of artistic work, the meaning often changes within the eyes of each viewer. This is also true for Thomas's work in this show. One person's impression of an image can be completely different from another's, and everyone has their own experiences, whether they're influenced by their childhood, where they grew up, or what generation they are a part of. The beauty of these images, being stripped from a commercial theme, is that "You take the context away and you're left with something that you have to deal with," says York College Gallery Director, Matthew Clay-Robison. Furthermore, some of these advertisements are very well known and by one look, one might know what the product is. This influences that person's opinion of the image. However, they still might see it in a different light without the product information telling them what to think. Through personal perspectives, each viewer has their own experience with the art and takes in different aspects of it. It's difficult to explain this phenomena to a person who hasn't seen the stripped images for themselves.

There is a wide variety of themes, scenes, and messages in this collection of Thomas's work. While viewing these "unbranded" images, one can see both the idea of women oppression and women empowerment. *She's all tied up… in a poor system* is an image from 1951 showing a woman in a

straightjacket. She looks appallingly at her typewriter but without any reference, one does not know if this is a comment on women in the workplace or she is merely frustrated at what's in front of her. Another image is *Aggressive Loyalty (1963)*. To those who know what this image is for, it can be seen as powerful; she would rather get in a fight than give up her cigarette. However, without prior knowledge, one could assume abuse was involved. *This guy's the limit* is a more recent example from 2000. There is a depiction of a dominant male figure straddling a woman who seemingly has no power and an idealized body. An image that shows a woman in a difficult and powerful position is *Failure is not an option*, from 1997. One can tell that she is among soldiers and she looks determined and serious about her role. Thomas explores these themes and more in this extensive collection.

Behind all of this, Hank Willis Thomas is a black man commenting on a history of white women. One might ask, why does he have the authority to curate history in this way? One of the reasons is that one of the biggest marketing campaigns is race and for years and years, companies marketed whiteness to get the public to buy from them. Also, the values associated with an advertisement are deeper than the surface and he wanted to explore that in this body of work by taking the context away and leaving only the values. Lastly, this conversation about women and the fight for equality needs to continue, and it's a topic that everyone should be trying to spread.

Thomas allows us to learn about our culture by stripping common advertisements into the bare bones of a single image. "Art is here to challenge us to ask questions. That is something that is really lacking in our media and cultural landscape. We are afraid to ask questions." – Hank Willis Thomas





VULTURE

Is Political Art the Only Art That Matters Now?

The art world is going to war with Trump. If it doesn't shoot itself in the foot first.

By Carl Swanson 7/17/2017

The protests started almost immediately after the presidential election. An artist named Annette Lemieux emailed the Whitney Museum and asked that her installation Left Right Left Right — a series of life-size photographs of raised fists turned into protest signs — be turned upside down. The artist Jonathan Horowitz and some friends started an Instagram feed called @dear_ivanka, attempting to directly appeal to the soon-to-be First Daughter and shame her into pushing her father away from the Bannonite brink. The artist Richard Prince refunded her money for a piece that she bought, then put out a statement that was intended to de-authenticate it.

Sam Durant's light-box sculpture, which read END WHITE SUPREMACY, was hoisted onto the façade of Paula Cooper Gallery in Chelsea (where it first appeared in the remarkably different context of Obama's election in 2008), and another edition of it was set up by the gallery Blum & Poe to greet visitors at the Miami Beach Convention Center for Art Basel the first weekend of December, where the usual luxury-brand-fueled jet-set bacchanal seemed a bit muted and anxious and Nadya Tolokonnikova, founder of Pussy Riot, delivered a lecture by the pool at the Nautilus hotel on the dangers of authoritarianism.

As the inauguration approached, the art world's desire to make a statement increased. Many museums across the country went free on January 20, which was seen as a more productive response than shutting down, as a movement called J20 Art Strike called for, and the Whitney did a day of programs in partnership with the group Occupy Museums. The Guggenheim planted a Yoko Ono Wish Tree on the sidewalk out front, letting passersby record their hopes — perhaps that peace and tolerance might prevail. A collective of artists started a platform called 2 Hours a Week, which connects people with political actions they can take while still holding down their jobs. Gallerist Carol Greene teamed up with artist Rachel Harrison to rent buses to bring a group to the Women's March, armed with social-media-friendly signage.

And it hasn't let up. Each Trump proclamation has seemed to inspire a new round of agitation and action. When the president announced the first iteration of his ban on immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries, Davis Museum at Wellesley College covered or removed about 120 works that had been either made or donated by an immigrant. The Museum of Modern Art hung work from its collection by artists who come from three of the excluded nations.

Establishment Chelsea gallerist Andrea Rosen decided to shut down her gallery, in part to focus on political activities. The anti-Establishment (or, anyway, far less established) Christopher Stout Gallery in Bushwick, which specialized in "feminist, queer, anti-Establishment, hyperaggressive, mystic and/or joyously sexual" art, rebranded itself the ADO (Art During the Occupation) Project. Awol Erizku, the photographer best known for having taken Beyoncé's maternity portrait, just announced his "anti-Trump" art show "Make America Great Again," at which he will sell baseball caps featuring that slogan superimposed on the image of a black panther ("to have something affordable in the show"). And the Public Art Fund in New York commissioned Ai Weiwei for a citywide proposition titled, with pointed irony, "Good Fences Make Good Neighbors."

For the first 100 days of the administration, MoMA PS1 has given over a gallery to "For Freedoms," a collaboration by the artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman for which they set up a super-PAC. The name was inspired by Norman Rockwell's paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" speech in 1941 and sought to co-opt the image of a simpler age, as Trump had. Last year, the super-PAC put up a billboard in Pearl, Mississippi, with the words MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN superimposed on the famous 1965 photo of civil-rights protesters on the bridge in Selma, Alabama, moments before state troopers unleashed tear gas and beat them with billy clubs.

The billboard is on display at PS1, its meaning having shifted after the election. Intensified. This happened often with artworks made in the run-up to the election; they just looked different afterward. Maurizio Cattelan's solid-gold toilet, titled America, which was installed at the Guggenheim last September, suddenly felt spot-on. As did the punk-rock political caricatures in the Raymond Pettibon show at the New Museum. What might have been a quiet show of Alice Neel portraits of her multiethnic friends at David Zwirner became a rallying point of sorts for empathy. (See Cyrus, the Gentle Iranian.) The Dumbo nonprofit space Art in General's eerie night-vision installation by the collective Postcommodity, whose members live and work near the U.S. border with Mexico, built around conversations the artists had with Border Patrol agents about how they use decoys to catch people trying to cross the border, now seems extra ominous.

Most prominent of all is the Whitney Biennial (in which both Postcommodity and Occupy Museums have pieces), which was skillfully planned to map the various cultural currents of the recent past as embodied in art. But in these highly charged times, it went from being almost universally well received for its political engagement to being the center of protests when an abstracted painting by the white artist Dana Schutz of the body of Emmett Till was condemned as an example of insensitive cultural appropriation. That reaction would have happened anyway, more than likely, but it ignited into something more rancorous (enough so to end up being discussed on The View) because, right now, the art world is on a perpetual boil. Whether this ideological high alert will produce good art is one question; whether the art will do any good is another.

"The left," says the artist Marilyn Minter when we start talking about the Till controversy, "always eats its own." We are at her studio in the West 30s. She's invited over some members of the protest cell she's a part of, Halt Action Group (which is behind @dear_ivanka), made up of members of the art world and those in its near orbit. While we're waiting, one of her assistants finesses the design on her computer for a banner with the word RESIST emblazoned across it, for the upcoming Creative Time "Pledges of Allegiance" project, which asked artists to make banners expressing what they feel America stands for, or should. Another assistant sits at a table next to us painting one of Minter's almost shockingly sincere commemorative plaques with Trump's face embossed above the full text of his "grab them by the pussy" swordsman's soliloquy in elegant gold type, like a historical marker for a Civil War battle on the side of a road.

Famous for her glittery, glamorously grotesque paintings and photographs of lips and eyes and shoes, Minter, at 68, has become one of the more beloved figures in the art world — a little bit Courtney Love and a little bit Auntie Mame. Her politics are passionate, generous, and of course very much of her generation. (For a while, in the 1990s, she was on the outs among certain feminist critics for being a bit too pornographic in her work, which at the time meant she was considered sexist.)

"I was born in Louisiana and grew up in Florida," she explains. "I was radicalized because of civil rights." She's old enough to recall when her doctor wouldn't give her birth-control pills because she wasn't married — so she went to Planned Parenthood. Then, a couple of years back, she heard about the draconian new Texas and Ohio laws restricting access to abortion. The right to an abortion — she'd once had one herself — is something she remembered people not having. The idea that people might not, again, seemed inconceivable to her. And so she started fund-raising for the organization, getting other big artists (including "the boys" like Richard Prince) to donate pieces for auction. Among many things she finds unacceptable is Trump's crusade against Planned Parenthood.

Her latest retrospective, "Pretty/Dirty," opened the week before Election Day at the Brooklyn Museum. The show was to kick off that institution's cavalcade of progressive programing called "A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism," with the stated goal of "expanding feminism from the struggle for gender parity to embrace broader social-justice issues of tolerance, inclusion, and diversity." It was timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, but it was supposed to be well timed in other ways, too: We were about to elect the first woman president!

After Trump won, the meaning of the "Year of Yes" became the "Fear of No." Minter was contacted by a few friends whom she'd worked with on Planned Parenthood fund-raising, and soon an ad hoc group had formed. They decided to target Ivanka Trump, who had over the years studiously exfoliated her father's vulgarity to establish herself as a hardworking, clean-living Manhattan heiress, earnest and anodyne enough to be friendly with Chelsea Clinton and concerned enough with her social position as a person of taste and enlightenment to collect art. They did a protest next to the Puck Building, which Ivanka's husband, Jared Kushner, had redeveloped as luxury housing, and launched @dear_ivanka. A Halt volunteer who is a psychotherapist helped fine-tune the group's posts to push Ivanka's buttons. The first one, with a picture of her in a red dress, read: "Dear Ivanka, I'm afraid of the swastikas spray painted on my park."

Was all this maybe a bit too blunt, even juvenile? Possibly. But Ivanka, like her father, seems to want to be liked. "I know Dear Ivanka is working," says Minter. "She's not following me on Instagram anymore and she used to."

The project got press (and 25,000 followers), and Minter and her friends began gathering other art-world pooh-bahs who wanted to be involved. They're thinking of what they'll do next. Horowitz has since left and started another anti-Trump Instagram feed, @dailytrumpet. The rest of Halt wants to sell the plaques in the Brooklyn Museum's gift shop to raise money for more activities. There are plans to go national, with Halt L.A. and Halt Austin. "I don't think I'm trying to reach the Trump supporters," Minter tells me. "I think we're trying to reach the 90 million people who didn't vote. If we become the tea party from the left, we're going to kill them."

Gina Nanni, the prominent arts publicist, and artist Xaviera Simmons arrive at the studio. Both are Halt members.

“I remember making politically engaged art two, three years ago, and you were a little on the outs” among collectors, curators, and the chattering critic class, says Simmons. “And now you can’t get money in the door fast enough from the creative class.”

“Don’t you think that this election has changed everything for all of us?” Nanni asks. “I don’t look at fashion shows anymore. Who cares?”

“Art about art just isn’t working anymore for me,” says Minter.

“It’s not okay to just write a check. It’s all-out war,” says Nanni, who had been part of a different politically motivated arts collective, Downtown 4 Democracy, which in 2003 raised money to defeat George W. Bush. Many of the members were Howard Dean supporters (Nanni liked Bernie Sanders this time around). “Our goal was to get our cultural heroes involved, to get people off their butts. Lou Reed, Susan Sontag …” In other words, make politics cool again for the rigorously over it. “We did a lot of artists projects,” she says. “We got Marc Jacobs to do political T-shirts. I remember a New York Times reporter called me — someone not very friendly — predicting Marc Jacobs’s demise for doing this. But the opposite happened. People were lined up down the block. People just didn’t know what to do then: Nobody knew how to participate. You were just arguing over the dinner table.”

“What do you guys think of the people who say that this was the best thing that’s happened to left?” asks Simmons. “It woke us up.”

“Madonna said that,” Minter points out, at an event she did at the Brooklyn Museum, the day before the inauguration (Minter had invited her). “Well, the resistance is working. That must give you some hope.”

It’s not that the art world had been asleep, exactly. Groups like Occupy Museums tried to call people’s attention to a supposedly liberal system’s hypocritical inequities: its class and race problems, its being in the general service of its plutocratic and corporate patrons, however well meaning those patrons may be. But the Obama years were very good ones for contemporary art, and not always, if you thought about it too hard, for the best reasons. Maybe even for some of the reasons that Trump and the other populists and neo-nationalists point to as justifying their rise. As the global rich got more globally rich, they bellied up to contemporary art’s movable feast. Prices went up, as did attendance at an expanding and well-publicized global itinerary of art fairs, biennials, and museums, many of them privately owned, often in alliance with luxury brands. Kanye West and Lady Gaga and, yes, Madonna wanted to be involved. The aesthetic or intellectual novelty and subversiveness of the art itself often became muted by its plush setting, its intentions hard to discern while downing Ruinart Champagne from the cart that plied the aisles of Art Basel in Miami Beach.

None of this is new: Most artists, like most of us, want and enjoy success and like to live well. But did the boom ruin art’s ability to have moral authority? Can you resist while also being on the VIP list? As one dealer of multimillion-dollar art put it to me, “The art world just doesn’t feel as relevant. They don’t go to the places that voted for him. Lena Dunham doesn’t know these people. Posting on Instagram isn’t resistance; it just means that you pose as resistance.”

That’s the danger — that the art feels like posturing more than protest. “We know how trendy the art world is,” Hank Willis Thomas says. “And this is just on trend. After 15 years of doing art in one way, it’s great to be on trend. What happens when the trend is over is the question.”

There is a larger conceptual problem for artists protesting Trump, which is how to actually go about effectively doing it. What can the artists themselves do to go up against the policies of a president who is, in many ways, a kind of performance artist himself? How do the discontented, visionary weirdos muck with our reality when creating alternative realities is now the purview of our say-anything postmodern mad king? What do clever artists do when the world itself has become so darkly clever?

It doesn’t help that the fringe and the center seem to have switched places, that the person in the White House and his most noxious supporters have cast themselves as the true outsiders. Last October, Lucian Wintrich, a preppy provocateur who now has press credentials at the White House, put on what was billed as a pro-Trump art show in Chelsea called “#DaddyWillSaveUs: Make Art Great Again!,” featuring work by Milo Yiannopoulos and Martin Shkreli. It was boorish and desperate, but he had a point when he later told The New Yorker, in all seriousness, “Good art should be transgressive. These days, it seems, the best way to be transgressive is simply to be a white, male, proudly pro-American conservative.”

The Whitney Biennial at first seemed like a precisely calibrated response to those white male conservatives (not that most of them would ever see it). The show had been conceived under the subtle assumption that Clinton would likely win, and yet its themes — racism, inequity, censorship — were even better suited to our current political moment. But then, on March 17, the first day the show opened to the public, an African-American artist named Parker Bright stood in front of Schutz's painting with a handmade T-shirt reading BLACK DEATH SPECTACLE on the back. It was a statement perfectly suited to Instagram, and it was widely distributed. Soon after, another artist, Hannah Black, wrote an "open letter" on Facebook calling for Schutz's painting to be taken down and destroyed, explaining: "It is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun."

The internet — most of which had not had a chance to take in the biennial and, for that matter, never will — reacted as the internet does: marshaling preexisting worldviews and arguments with imperious take-a-side disdain. The New Republic published a much-circulated anti-Schutz perspective; Hyperallergic was more skeptical ("Hannah Black and company are placing themselves on the wrong side of history"); Whoopi Goldberg chimed in (against censorship) on The View. Kara Walker, on Instagram, took the long view ("The history of painting is full of graphic violence and narratives that don't necessarily belong to the artist's own life"). And the artist Chris Ofili checked in with The New Yorker ("Seeing a painting and talking about a painting are two different things. One should not confuse sharp eyes with a sharp tongue"), which ran along Calvin Tomkins profile of Schutz, who sounded a bit tentative and abashed about the whole episode: "I knew the risks going into this. What I didn't realize was how bad it would look when seen out of context."

The museum stood by the painting, although it acknowledged the controversy on the wall text. Mostly its curators pleaded with people to see it in the full sweep of depictions and concepts in the show, which is hardly one-note. On April 9, the Whitney's director, Adam Weinberg, hosted a program to address the criticism and provide perspective. "Against the background of the current political climate," Weinberg said in opening, "the exhibition touched a nerve."

To say the least. The politics of the art world don't always make sense to people not scrapping for intellectual cred as it is defined by the art world, and the situation is made more complicated by the ease of ricocheting commentary and the quick-to-arise mob moralisms of social media. But the worst outcome of the Schutz controversy would be if artists became afraid of that. As Thomas tells me, "I learned that you have to be willing to get your hands dirty if you really want to make an impact. You have to run the risk of being misinterpreted."

In the circulating images of protest that have thronged social media since January, I've been particularly struck by the placards declaring GOD HATES IVANKA and FAGS HATE TRUMP, which took their graphical inspiration from those of the loathsome Westboro Baptist Church (known for protesting the funerals of soldiers and owning the URL "godhatesfags.com"). It turns out they were made by the artist Paul Chan and his small art-book publishing company, Badlands Unlimited.

I visit him and his crew at their offices in a walk-up on Rutgers Street, where Micaela Durand shows me a photo shoot they did of young people brandishing the signs. She explains the idea: "This is A Clockwork Orange, but with minorities taking the lead," she says. "The whole purpose of the shoot is to inspire a type of new courage on the street. They're kind of a look book to try to start a national campaign. To move the signs to the red states."

It's a refrain I heard a lot. Everyone in the art-"resistance" set is interested in doing something that could have an effect on the rest of the country, even those who joined up with the art circus precisely because they were running away from the dreary red state they were from. Chan was born in Hong Kong but grew up in Nebraska. He's not new to politics, but usually his points are more oblique. In 2007, he worked with Creative Time to put on Waiting for Godot in the streets of New Orleans: "Two years after Katrina, everyone there was waiting for something," he says. His exhibition at Greene Naftali, which closed April 15, included some of his "breezies" — ghostly comic-ominous sculptures animated by fans; some of them looked a bit like Klansmen.

After the election, his mind turned to Westboro's signage, which can seem so bizarrely and pointlessly vituperative as to read as parody in the same way Trump and his fans on Breitbart News can. It gave him an idea: Troll the trolls. "We thought: We were angry. It should be hate against hate. The Westboro are hateful motherfuckers. They are really savvy and hateful. And their visual design is so iconic." He made the first signs for the Women's March. Reactions were not uniformly positive. "They were a big hit," Chan says. "People loved them and hated them in equal measure, basically. The liberals were the ones who really hated us."

"They were like: 'God doesn't hate anyone,' " says Durand in a slight singsong.

"We had Evangelicals trolling us and leftists trolling us," Chan says. "Which I think is a good sign. We're doing something right." He paused and reframed. "We're not looking to make peace. We're looking to make everyone else feel just as unsafe as we feel."

Badlands has in its office a map of the country with pushpins in it: The idea is that the group will sell the posters in places like New York and Los Angeles, at artist-run bookstores, then use the profits to fund donations of the posters in the hinterlands. It keeps making more of them; the favorite at the moment is TRUMP LOVES RAPE. The artists are premiering the signs at different rallies.

"We hear a lot about how we shouldn't only preach to the converted," Chan says. But he also sees that the complacency of New York is only beginning to be shed. "Just because you are against homophobes doesn't mean you will step up when someone is being bothered on the subway. What the converted need is more courage, and the people who voted for Trump need a little more fear."

They send me on my way with a TRUMP LOVES RAPE poster, colored pink, yellow, and orange.

*This article appears in the April 17, 2017, issue of New York Magazine.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

Artist Sews Together Sports and Geopolitics

By GEORGE VECSEY OCT. 4, 2017

As an American conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas has often referred to worldwide themes like power and money and colonialism.

Now Mr. Thomas is using the spectacle of international sport for his first solo exhibition in Britain — "The Beautiful Game," which will be on display at Ben Brown Fine Arts in Mayfair, London, starting on Thursday.

Mr. Thomas, who was trained as a photographer, has diversified into artistic forms like African tribal quilts, totems and sculptures. In this show, which runs through Nov. 24, he depicts the colors and energy of sport, often suggesting the deeper forces at play in games like soccer, rugby and cricket.

With African players flocking to western European soccer leagues in the last generation, Mr. Thomas used his art to link that with the colonization of Africa by European powers.

Mr. Thomas worked with his associates in his airy studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, cutting out soccer symbols and names for a series of quilts, based on "the function and aesthetic of Asafo flags, which have been made from the colonial period to today by the Fante people of Ghana, developed in relation to African contact with Europe starting in the 18th century," according to the notes from the Ben Brown gallery.

The quilts incorporate techniques used by Picasso and Matisse, who were influenced by African art and symbols. Mr. Thomas points out that the Asafo flags borrowed symbols from the western invaders and colonists — yes, even the Union Jack — in their own military flags, to intimidate rival tribes.

Mr. Thomas's interest in the overlap between sport and national interests also shows in his sculptures of a powerful-looking arm or an implement like an oval rugby ball or a flat-faced cricket bat.

His eclectic references are also seen in his sculpture "Endless Column, 22 Totems" — with 22 painted resin soccer balls, stacked on top of each other and pointing toward the sky — which will be on display in the annual summer exhibit in Frieze Sculpture Park in Regent's Park in London through Sunday.

Mr. Thomas and Ben Brown said that the work was inspired by Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column," which celebrates the survival of Romania, the artist's homeland, after World War I.

Social issues are never far from the surface. Mr. Thomas, 41, has sometimes used photographs of American athletes who spoke out.

"I can't ignore that there were very many other people active in civil rights, but Jackie Robinson not only integrated baseball but was also part of a World Series team here in Brooklyn," he said. "It changed the world, right?"

He expressed admiration for Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who refused to stand for the national anthem and is out of work, and noted that athletes are part of the national conversation. "They're not supposed to be political," Mr. Thomas said. "They're supposed to do their job. They don't get paid for speaking. If Ali, if Jim Brown, if Paul Robeson hadn't spoken, what would the world look like?"

Mr. Thomas's work often suggests the dangers hiding behind the rewards and fame of sport. One of his photographs depicts a noose looming just above an athlete about to dunk a basketball.

"Strange Fruit," he said, invoking one of Billie Holiday's trademark songs, about the frequent image of lynching victims.

His blend of art and political awareness reflects the influences of his life. He said his father, Hank Thomas, has been "a physicist, Black Panther, jazz musician and film producer." His mother, Deborah Willis, has a doctorate from George Mason University and is a professor and chairwoman of the department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where Mr. Thomas did his undergraduate work.

He was a student at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, where he became interested in what his mother does, but he said he wanted to be "more than a photographer."

Much of his work about violence and black lives alludes to his mourning of his cousin, Songha Willis, a former basketball star at Catholic University, who was murdered in a robbery attempt outside a nightclub in Philadelphia in 2002.

In an interview in early 2009 in NY Art Beat, Mr. Thomas said that his earlier work, "Winter in America" and "Bearing Witness: Murder's Wake," came after his cousin was murdered "and after years of trying to find out creative ways to talk about issues that were related to that for myself."

Mr. Thomas recently married Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator at the Whitney Museum, whose mother is Fadzai Gwaradzimba of Zimbabwe, the assistant secretary general for safety and security at the United Nations, and whose father is Trevor Hockley, an Englishman who roots for West Ham of London. (The Hammers' distinctive colors, claret and blue, are among the team references in one of Mr. Thomas's quilts.)

Mr. Brown, in a telephone interview in mid-August, praised Mr. Thomas for adhering to an artistic tradition while examining the powerful presence of sport in today's society.

He had seen Mr. Thomas' work at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, which has been handling Mr. Thomas for over a decade. When they met, Mr. Brown suggested a London show with a sports motif.

"I don't think there is much overlap between art and sport," Mr. Brown said, referring to the artists Damien Hirst (with his love of snooker, a form of pool) and Jeff Koons (who often uses basketballs and other sports objects) and Andy Warhol (whose informal Polaroid photos of sports stars were recently included in Gail Buckland's well-received show, "Who Shot Sports," at the Brooklyn Museum).

"You don't see much of it," Mr. Brown said, musing that sports stars should be patrons of the arts. "I don't know what the footballers do with their cash," he said, referring to wealthy people from "finance, hedge funds, the dot-com world. But sport

is very rare."

However, Mr. Thomas is hardly tailoring his work to depict the glory of sport. More likely, he is suggesting the athlete, however wealthy, is just another rower in the galley.

"Sport can also be seen as a proxy for war," Mr. Thomas said. "And it's not a coincidence that the World Cup came around at the same time as colonialism. A lot of football clubs in England were part of the Industrial Revolution because workers needed some kind of leisure time."

One of Mr. Thomas's firm ideas is put in his low-key, thoughtful way: "Art gives clues about our values in society. Art is timeless. Your art will outlive you."

He added, "I believe all art is political. I certainly believe all sports are political. Not only because of the amount of money spent. You have to pay attention to it."

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SURFACE

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ARTIST HANK WILLIS THOMAS WOULD CONSIDER RUNNING FOR OFFICE

October 19, 2016

IN THE LEAD UP TO THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THE NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST AND SUPER PAC FOUNDER HANK WILLIS THOMAS REVEALS WHAT MAKING ART TAUGHT HIM ABOUT THE ART OF POLITICS.

BY SPENCER BAILEY
PHOTOS BY EMILY ANDREWS
VIDEO BY SOPHIA LOU



You co-founded For Freedoms, the first-ever artist-run super PAC, earlier this year with the artist and academic Eric Gottesman. What was your impetus for starting it?

Eric and I have been friends for a long time, and we've always bonded around our interest in politics. Every four years we're having extended conversations about strategy and what we think should be going on. When we started thinking about 2016, we thought it would be a great opportunity to spark a conversation within the art world about the issues at hand, and draw attention to Citizens United [a 2010 Supreme Court decision that made it possible for corporations and unions to spend freely on behalf of candidates without donating to them directly] and some of the problems with alternative fundraising within elections.

Where do you stand on this year's election?

Where do I *stand*? Am I standing? Am I kneeling and praying? It's probably the most exciting election that any of us have been witness to because it's reality TV meeting reality. That's a hell of a show. I still think at least Donald Trump was the best choice we had on the Republican side. I'm not sure about Hillary Clinton on the Democrat side. I'm not sure, of the candidates, we had that many better options. Which I think is a bigger problem than being for or against one person.

The thing that's fascinating about Donald Trump is that we just don't know what he thinks. Hillary Clinton has had the luxury and the misfortune of having so much experience. For Freedoms is about the complexities. I think finally we're starting to get to a place where we can deal with the reality that there is no simple solution or perfect answer.



Thomas with a poster advertising "For Freedoms," an exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery that showcased commissions made for the super PAC.

Your art deals a lot with identity and popular culture. But this year your projects have really focused on politics. Is this in part because you've seen a merging of popular culture and politics?

For Freedoms is my art project; it's not my *art*. It's a collaborative project with about 200 other people. The reasons why I wanted to start a super PAC—because I have my own ideas I wanted to put out there—didn't happen. Instead, we wound up facilitating a space for other artists to use their voices, and for people who don't see themselves as creative to get creative. I've been saved by not having to make specific works of art around the political discourse of this time. What often happens when you

[as an artist] enter political discourse is that [your art] becomes dated. Part of the reason we wanted to have fine art enter the conversation is that a great work of art is never really dated. We're trying to figure out how to manifest that.

Would you ever run for public office?

I would. That was actually one of Eric and my first ideas, that maybe I should run for office. He's actually the more wholesome one, so maybe he should run for office and I'll be the guy behind the scenes whispering in his ear. I don't think politicians are any more gifted than the rest of us. They're just determined to actually have their voices heard.



Thomas sitting below his sculpture "Counterbalance" (2015).

That idea sounds like it relates to your other ongoing project, "The Truth Booth." Much like a politician, it's a traveling kiosk that's inflated for public appearances. Once inside, participants, on camera, are asked to say what they think "the truth is." What did you imagine that would accomplish?

I come from a photography background, and one thing every photographer is hyper-aware of is their perspective, because of the camera lens, but also their position to the subject. A different angle could give you a totally different insight on the truth of that moment. I think that runs through all of my work: It's all about framing and context, that whoever's framing gets to tell the story. The truth is a contentious space. We thought that by creating a modern-day confession booth, where people can go to tell the truth from their perspective, we'd be instigating and claiming a space for speaking your mind, but also listening to others. Since June, the booth has been to almost 35 states and thousands of people have participated.

Which encounters have resonated with you the most?

One video I saw, recorded in Detroit, was of a little boy who was making a case for his faith, Islam. It was frightening to see someone, at such a young age, feel the need to justify their belief. He was saying, "It's a religion of love. All we want is love, like everyone else. We worship the same god that you worship." What world do we live in that a little boy—who couldn't be older than 8—feels the need to tell the world that he is not a threat? That was pretty powerful.

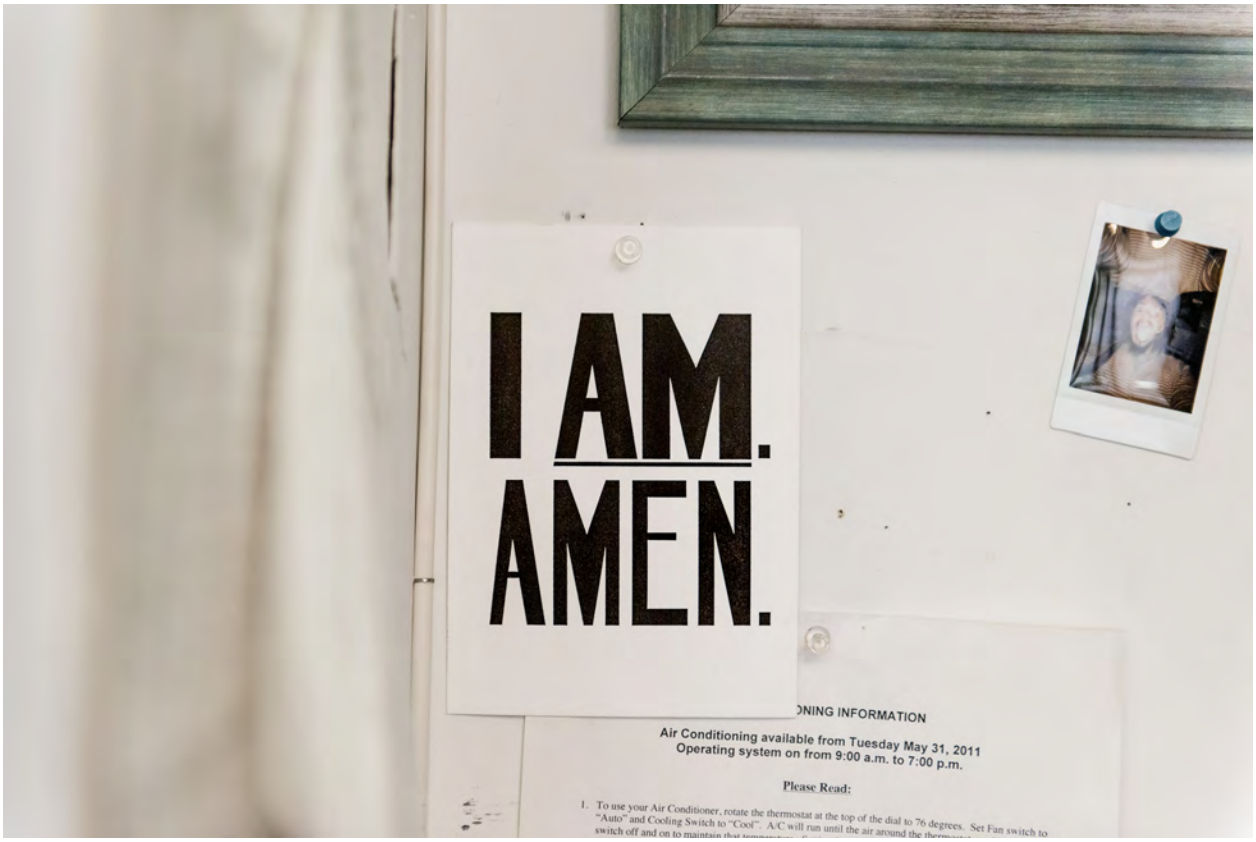
I wonder what Hillary or Donald would say.

I don't think they're capable of telling the truth. I don't think it's the responsibility of a politician to tell us the truth, because we can't handle the truth. That's the reality.

I have two requirements for my president: One, I want to think they're smarter than me, and two, I want to be pretty sure they're not crazy. That's it. I think you can be a good person before you're President of the United States, and I think you can be a good person after you're President of the United States, but while you're president it's not your job to be a good person. It's a falsehood for us to think that you can have that much power and be "good" in the traditional or moral sense.

A lot of your artwork deals with race and what it means to be African American. What do you think has been President Obama's impact on culture and politics?

I think our current president is a fascinating subject, because he's the first clearly multi-ethnic president we've had. He was born in Hawaii, which is two percent black and whites are not in the majority. The binaries we see in the mainland United States of black, white, and other is different than what he grew up with. Then he went from Occidental to Columbia to Harvard to the south side of Chicago, which is a route that very few people take. For a long time, he talked about himself as "multi-ethnic," and even referred to himself as a mutt. People say he's the first black president, but he was not raised by black people and his black parent is not the descendant of a slave. His notion of race is different. What's great about our president is his openness to nuance; he's seen how nuance shapes everything. In my work, that's what I've been interested in. Nothing is black and white; everything's grey. Nobody's black or white—my skin is brown. He's brought conversations that have needed to be had to the forefront—about same-sex marriage, about interracial relationships, about police misconduct, about criminal justice. Until Obama, you could speak in dog whistles and say these really offensive things in code. No one can get away with that anymore.



An "I Am Amen" postcard inspired by a sign used by black sanitation workers during a 1968 strike. Thomas created a series of paintings, titled "I Am A Man," based on these posters in 2009.

Where do you want the projects that you've started this election cycle—For Freedoms and "The Truth Booth"—to go?

When does an artwork ever end? This year, I've devoted my time mostly to collaborative projects: "The Truth Booth"; For Freedoms; "Question Bridge," which just opened at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.; and "The Writing on the Wall," a project that highlights writing by people in prisons. All give me the opportunity to listen more than speak. So what's the 2.0? They say the actual true measure of a good leader or a good project is if it can live on after the founder has moved on. I hope people will see these models and improve and build on them.

Have you decided whom you're going to vote for this year?

Yes. But I don't think I have to say, based off of my criteria that I want my president smarter than me and not crazy. Every election, that's who I vote for. Not the person I want to have a beer with.

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.

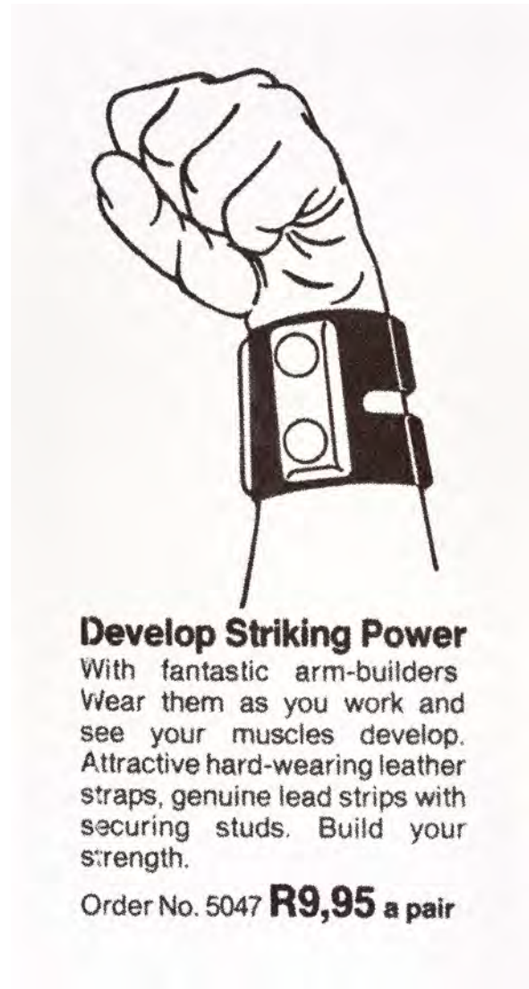
Unsurprisingly, then, hands also play a prominent role in recent histories and studies of apartheid, several of which Thomas encountered as he developed his South African work (Thomas previously showed in South Africa in 2010). The Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, for example, grants much of a wall 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.

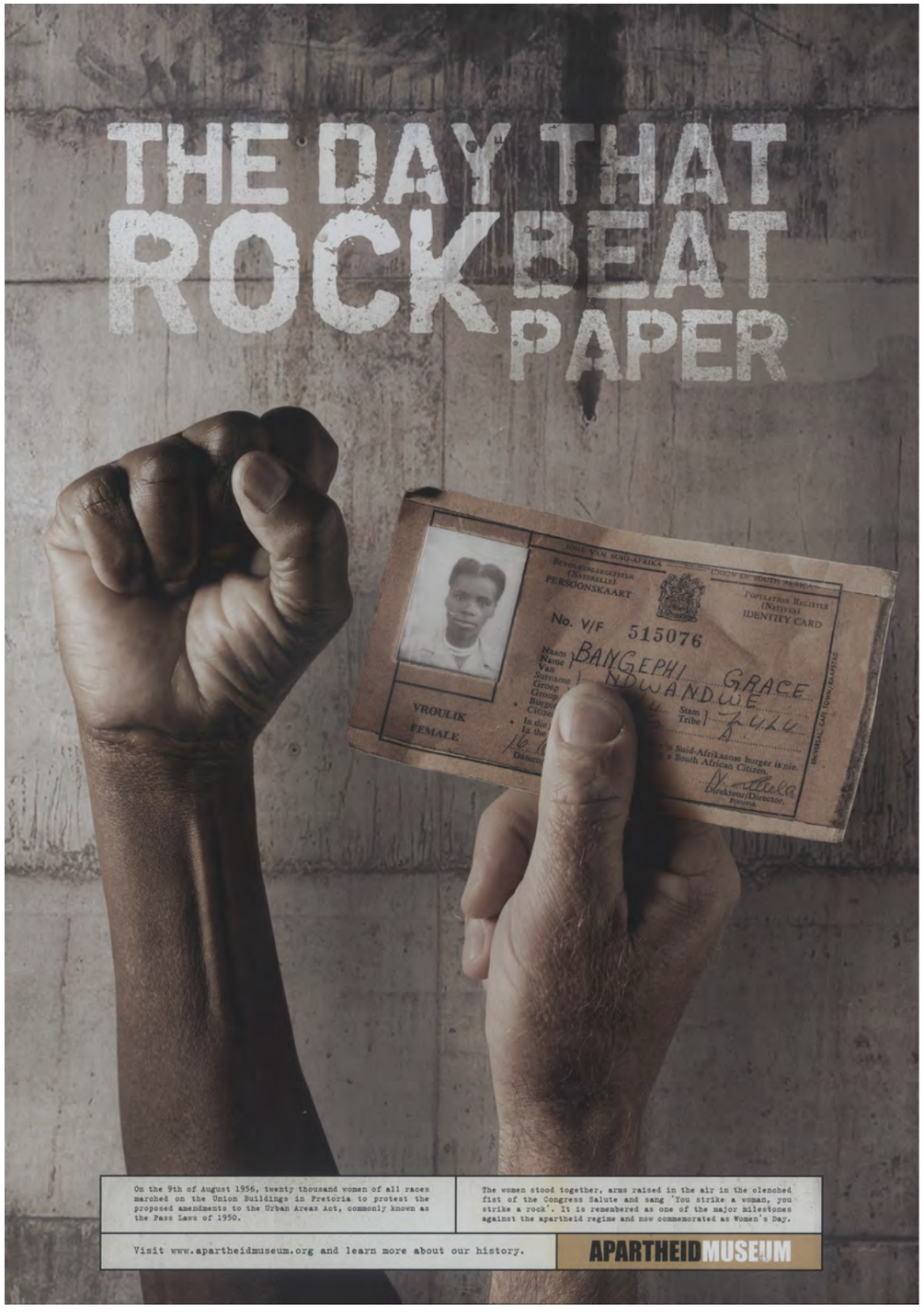
Usage of the sign by South Africans during the apartheid era points to a related degree of semantic flexibility. The activist Zithulele Cindi, for instance, has recalled his arrival as a prisoner on Robben Island and his confusion at the older, longtime prisoners' lack of enthusiasm for the clenched 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.

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

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BRANDED

On the Semiotic Disobedience of Hank Willis Thomas

by Sonia K. Katyal

In July of 2007, the exterior wall of the Birmingham Art Museum displayed a haunting image. In its center was a photograph, depicting a classic MasterCard advertisement, but with a few key differences. Rather than the traditional picture of a beaming couple embarking on an adventure, ("There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's MasterCard."), the photograph displayed a radically different scene. There, in the background and foreground, stands an African American family, of varying ages. They surround a devastated father and mother clad in brimmed hats, glasses, and overcoats, seated, at the funeral of their twenty-seven-year-old son.

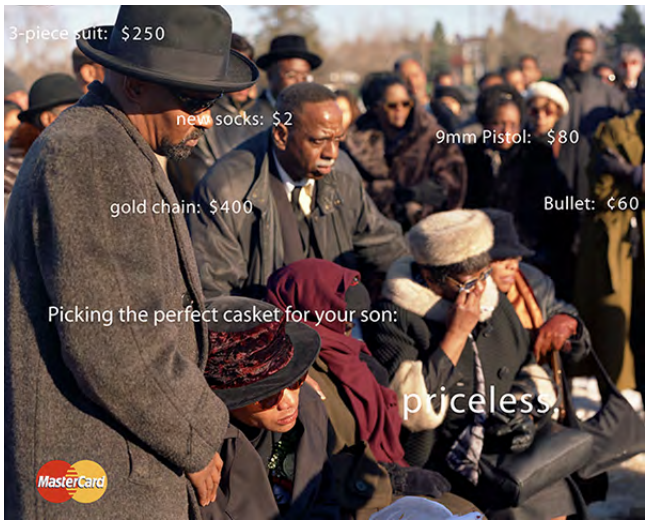
The familiar MasterCard logo sits toward the lower left corner of the photograph, and the text scattered across the image reads:

> 3-piece suit: $250
> new socks: $2
> gold chain: $400
> 9mm pistol: $79,
> bullet:.¢60
> Picking the perfect casket for your son:
> Priceless.

On February 2, 2000, Songha Willis Thomas was murdered, execution-style, during a robbery in front of dozens of individuals outside of a Philadelphia nightclub. He did not resist. He was murdered, apparently, for the thick gold chain worn by the friend who accompanied him. There was no other reason. The image of his grieving family constitutes the subject of *Priceless #1* (2004), a work by Songha's cousin, roommate, and best friend, Hank Willis Thomas.

At any other point in history, Songha might have become part of a sobering, yet monolithic, set of statistics regarding black males in America. But it happened that the artist, Hank Willis Thomas had decided that Songha's memory would stand for something else. So he created the image—

photographing his own family at the funeral, grieving over the loss. By juxtaposing the image with the familiar slogan made popular by the MasterCard advertising campaign, he compels us to examine the meaning, the presence, and the absence, behind the very idea of pricelessness.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Priceless #1*, 2004. Lambda photograph/dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

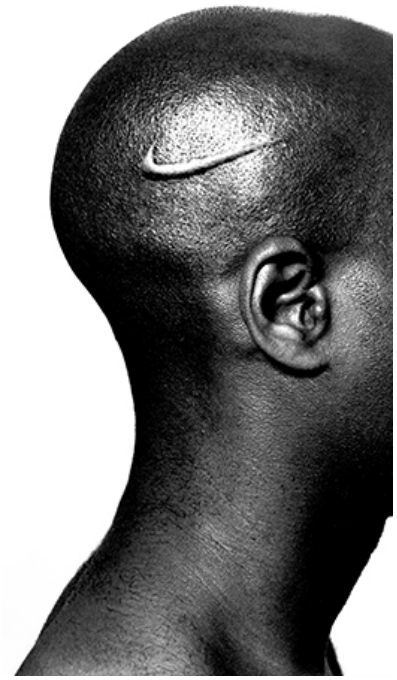
After the Birmingham Museum acquired the photograph, it was displayed on its exterior wall. Almost immediately, the piece sparked a citywide controversy, largely because many of its residents mistakenly thought that the photograph was an actual MasterCard advertisement disparaging African Americans. The picture, after all, looked just like a regular MasterCard advertisement. If it wasn't meant to critique MasterCard, then why did the artist use the logo? To confuse the public? Or to send a different message? Initially offended by the image while driving on her way to work, a local reporter broke the story, embroiling the community in a debate about advertising, consumer confusion, and the limits of artistic freedom.

In response, the artist wrote an editorial that appeared in the Birmingham local newspaper. "In the '80s and '90s," Hank Willis Thomas explained, "a lot of young African American men were getting killed over Michael Jordan sneakers. Today, they're getting killed over gold chains, looks, and words." If Songha had died for a piece of jewelry, Thomas explained, *Priceless #1* ensures that the image of his grieving family will live forever in our collective memory. "It is this idea," Thomas expressed, "that someone could be killed over a tiny commodity [...] I want to question what makes these commodities so precious that they are worth defining, and more importantly, taking another person's life?"

The intersection of advertising, race, and consumerism is an issue that has long concerned Thomas, a gifted photographer whose work has won both critical and popular acclaim. In other projects from his series "Branded," Thomas juxtaposes the image of a black male with a series of Nike "Swoosh" logos, explaining that he aims to draw a connection between "how slaves were branded as a kind of ownership, and [how] today we brand ourselves." His works are testaments to advertising's power to draw a subtle and powerful connection between the branding of slaves, marked as human commodity, and the way in which we willingly undertake the same task.

However, although Thomas's artworks display powerful critiques, they also run the risk of falling within a legal gray area. Here lies a curious irony. According to the Supreme Court, artistic expression is entitled to the highest possible First Amendment protection, equivalent in power and protection to that of the purest political speech. Yet the picture suddenly changes when brands—literally—enter the fray. While the law normally protects the freedom of individuals to speak and to express themselves, those freedoms can often stop short when they conflict with the intellectual

property rights of others, particularly where brands are concerned. Since *Priceless #1* and *Branded Head* (2003) display appropriated logos, those companies might argue that these works lead consumers into thinking that the works are officially sponsored by the company, confusing the public as a result. And even when court judgments reflect strong protections for artistic freedom, those pronouncements rarely find their way into the army of cease-and-desist letters some artists receive after appropriating a company's brand.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Branded Head*, 2003. Lambda photograph/dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Hank Willis Thomas's dual act of artistic expression—and indeed, some might argue, political protest—represents today's modern version of civil disobedience: a massive worldwide phenomenon that I call semiotic disobedience. Today, aided by the power of digital media, thousands of artists, activists, and ordinary citizens across the world—and the internet—routinely reverse the power of advertising, transforming ads and logos into a global conversation between corporation and consumer. For this reason, Thomas's work accomplishes a sort of double irony: not only does he critique the constant pull of branding and advertising, but he also risks being targeted for violating the very properties within the advertising he criticizes. In this sense, his work continues in the tradition of artists like Andy Warhol and Richard Prince, all of whom appropriated recognizably commercial images in order to say something more profound about modern America and its romance with consumption. But while artists like Warhol often escaped being sued for the images they appropriated, in the past, many artists and activists like Thomas can be far more vulnerable than previous generations have ever been.

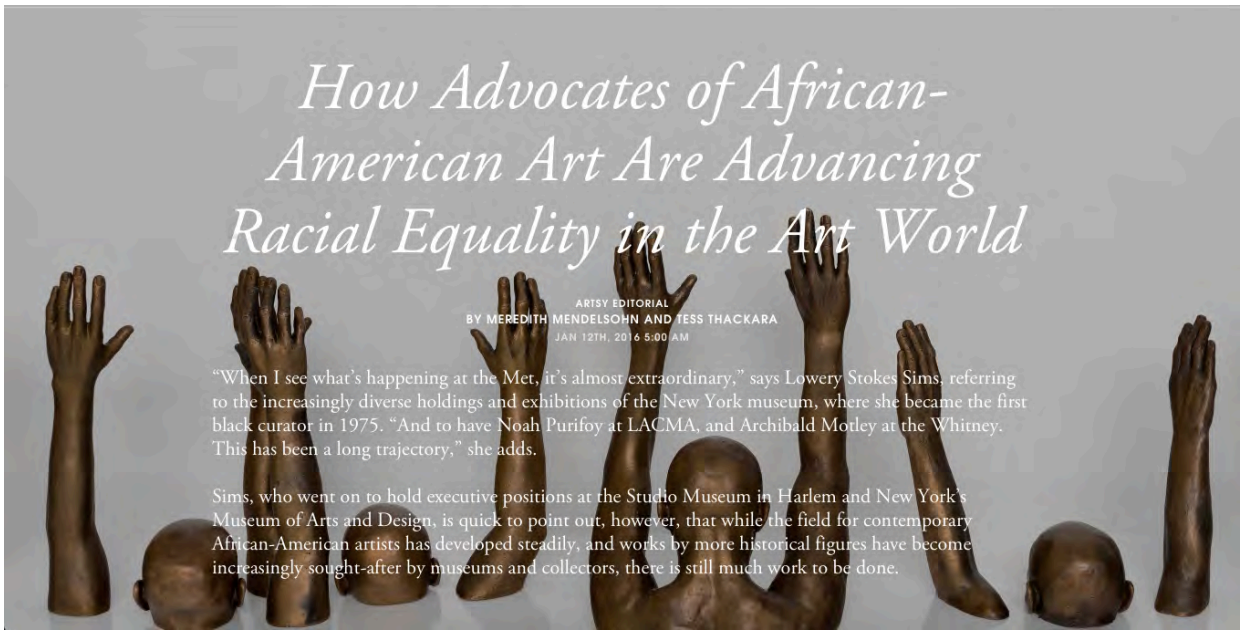
CONTRIBUTOR

Sonia K. Katyal

SONIA K. KATYAL is Chancellor's Professor of Law at UC-Berkeley Law School, where her work focuses on art, intellectual property, and civil rights (with a special focus on race and sexuality). Professor Katyal is the co-author of Property Outlaws (Yale University Press, 2010) (with Eduardo Peñalver), which studies the intersection between civil disobedience and innovation in property and intellectual property frameworks. She is also the first law professor to receive a grant through the Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation for her forthcoming book, Contrabrand, which studies the relationship between art, advertising, trademark, and copyright law.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

ARTSY



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.”

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

Noah Becker's
WHITEHOT MAGAZINE
of contemporary art TM

Hank Willis Thomas at MetroTech Commons



Hank Willis Thomas and Public Art Fund curator Andria Hickey

The Truth and Nothing But the Truth: Hank Willis Thomas at MetroTech Commons

By PAUL LASTER, AUG. 2015

Since its first appearance at the Galway Arts Festival in Ireland in 2011, the Cause Collective's traveling art project In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth) has been exhibited in Afghanistan, at the Cleveland Museum of Art, at Burning Man, in South Africa, and at Art Basel Miami Beach, and it's racked up more than 5,000 videos of people telling what the truth means to them.

Now this bouncy-castle-turned-confessional, that's been made to look like a giant cartoon bubble with the word "Truth" posted on it, is making its way around Brooklyn as part of Hank Willis Thomas's Public Art Fund exhibition "The Truth Is I See You" at MetroTech Commons.

When I interviewed Thomas for the New York Observer in Miami last December he said, "People have talked about failed relationships, about love, and family. They've talked about the notion of the truth, about dishonesty, about what's happening to them right now, politics. The truth is ageless and timeless. The youngest participant is three years old and the oldest ones are probably in their 80s. They're speaking about the same thing from their perspective and no one can take that away from them. That's what I like about it. You're right no matter what you say, if you tell the truth."

While the Truth Booth was at MetroTech on the opening day of the show and will appear at other Brooklyn locations throughout the run of the exhibition, new works by Thomas and his Cause Collective collaborator Ryan Alexiev continue to take center stage on the commons. Twenty-two "truth bubbles," that simulate speech bubbles from comic books and graphic novels, have been installed as signs on the light posts along MetroTech's Myrtle Promenade. Lines from Thomas and Alexiev's Truth Poem, such as "The truth is I fear you" and "The truth is I judge you," are written on one side of the signs in English and on the other side in

one of the myriad languages spoken across Brooklyn.

Two steel benches in the shape of thought balloons and a fabricated metal tree with puffed up truth bubbles at the end of the branches that ask “The truth is I love you?” complete this thought provoking exhibition.

The Truth Is I See You is on view at MetroTech Commons in Brooklyn through June 3, 2016.

Scroll through the photos below to see some of the art world players who came out for the August 4 opening. WM



Art critic and Instagrammer Robin Cembalest, Forest City Ratner Companies COO David Berliner and Mad. Sq. Art curator Brooke Kamin Rapaport



Art advisor Katie Howard and her Instagramming dog Miss Pickle



Public Art Fund director Nicholas Baume and collector and art advisor Sue Stoffel



Isolde Brielmaier, director of the Contemporary Art Initiative at Westfield World Trade Center and independent curator and Columbia University professor Kellie Jones



Sutton PR publicists Jen Mora and Madeline Woods



Artist Jose Parla and School of Visual Arts publicist Folake Ologunja



Artist Teresita Fernandez and Kimberly Drew, Associate Online Community Producer at The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Art critics David Colman and William Simmons with Visionaire publisher Cecilia Dean and Colman's dog Gogo



Writer Antwaun Sargent and the Met's Kimberly Drew



Photographer, curator and photographic historian Deborah Willis and Metropolitan Museum of Art education chairman Sandra Jackson-Dumont



Instagrammers Gabriela Jimenez, Stephanie Strasnick, Rebecca Taylor, Susi Kenna and Armani Smith



Artist Chloë Bass, NYC Commissioner of Cultural Affairs Tom Finkelpearl and Brooklyn Museum curator Eugenie Tsai



Paul Laster is a writer, editor, independent curator, artist, and lecturer. He is a New York desk editor at ArtAsiaPacific and a contributing editorat FLATT Magazine and ArtBahrain. He was the founding editor of Artkrush.com and Artspace.com; started The Daily Beast's art section;and was art editor of Flavorpill.com and Russell Simmons OneWorld magazine. He is a frequent contributor to Time Out New York, Art in America, Modern Painters, ArtPulse, Flash Art, Newsweek, Bomb Magazine, ArtInfo.com, TheDailyBeast.com.

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“Greater New York” Is a Bellwether—And It’s Time for Critics to Eat Their Words

ARTSY EDITORIAL
BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER
OCT 9TH, 2015 10:42 PM

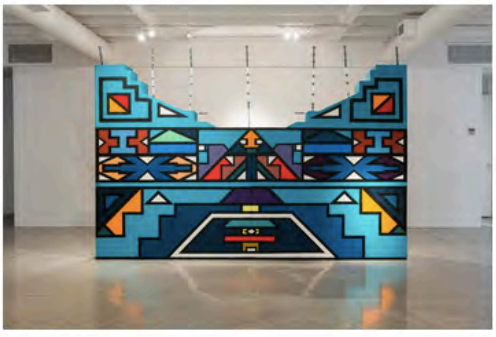
“Youth-besotted,” “a pineapple ice cream soda,” and “a flashpoint” aren’t exactly descriptors that encourage reverence. And “Greater New York,”MoMA PS1’s quinquennial survey of emerging New York-based artists (which unveils for the fourth time this Sunday) hasn’t exactly inspired a legion of critical camaraderie. Nor has it inspired much curatorial approval. Ironically, it was none other than Peter Eleey, the chief curator of this year’s show, who 10 years ago described it as a “flashpoint” in a *Frieze Magazine* review. Yet looking through the past exhibitions’ rosters, from 2000, 2005, and 2010, the majority of the participants were featured at a crucial moment in their careers, a moment when they either blasted off or faded into obscurity. And most blasted off.

Featured in the inaugural 2000 “Greater New York,” Do Ho Suhexhibited with Lehmann Maupin in September of that year, and has remained with the gallery ever since—not to mention being labelled the “Art Innovator of the Year” in 2013 by the *Wall Street Journal*. That same year, Shirin Neshat peeled back the New York art world’s provincial bias against Middle Eastern art (in her case, photography), as did Ghada Amer, whose sexually charged paintings would find their way into Gagosian’s hands.
Five years later, the cards were stacked similarly with Carol Bove. That year’s show also included then-rising artists Wangechi Mutu, Paul Chan, and Dana Schutz, who in 10 years time have won legions of awards and major institutional surveys.

The last go-round was anything but amiss, too. Hank Willis Thomas? You’ve heard of him. And Ryan McNamara, Rashaad Newsome, Darren Bader, and LaToya Ruby Frazier—who also just won a MacArthur Genius Grant. Yet the prevailing critical view is resoundingly scathing. As*Village Voice* critic Christian Viveros-Faune once spouted, “I am reminded of the words of Samuel Johnson: ‘There is nothing uglier than that on the verge of beauty.’” But beauty—and, really, self-actualization—isn’t necessarily the point of these sorts of surveys, even if this one’s title locates it in aesthetic greatness.



Hank Willis Thomas
Successful Woman / Angry Men, 2010
Goodman Gallery


Hank Willis Thomas
Freedom in our lifetime, 2014
Goodman Gallery

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There's often a schism between critical and market reception. But "'Greater New York' functions, as Roberta Smith put it, as a big-ring circus," quips Fabienne Stephan, a curator at Salon 94, which showsJimmy DeSana—another featured in this year's show. "I get to watch and concentrate on an act and delve in if I want to. I do look to spot talent in the show." The gallery brought on David Benjamin Sherry after his trippy photographic self-portrait and landscape series exhibited in the 2010 edition. "That's where I first was impressed by Huma Bhabha," says Stephan. "The piece she had in the show, *Untitled* (2005), was then reinstalled in her solo exhibition at PS1 three years ago and she is participating in 'Greater New York' again this year, 10 years later."

The expanded criteria for 2015's installment—mid-career, established, and previously exhibited artists—may seem to belie the pathos of the exhibition. After all, it is, as Parker says, "always viewed as a platform for younger, largely unknown artists." However, as Thomas says, "survey shows have their place. They revitalize energy within the art world and they take a pulse of the time." And in the New York area, with some 140,000 practicing artists living within its five boroughs, whose median age is 38, suffice to say that many artists here aren't exactly spring chickens.

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While PS1 and MoMA have lately been reviled for their corporate pockets and distracting celebrity-chasing curatorial strategy, the artists seem not to care. "I was more excited about the relationship of my work to viewers and audiences than I was thinking about my career, which probably wasn't the smartest move on my part," laughs Thomas. For all the drama "Greater New York" has engendered, it's guaranteed to garner a large audience for its current roster, which looks promising.

"The New York art scene is so large and fractured, I don't think one museum exhibition could ever accurately represent it entirely," Parker says, "but from the list of artists included it seems that it is reflective of work made in New York over a specific time period and which may reveal itself to be more contemporary than we anticipate." To quote Samuel Johnson, "The future is purchased by the present."

—Julie Baumgardner

The Boston Globe

GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

o ma er he era or co n r ar is s im rin he ro es



HANK WILLIS THOMAS

Hank Willis Thomas's "Raise Up" (2014).

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 09, 2015

A raised fist, an open hand, arms crossed over the chest. The singular poetry of body language expresses plenty before a word is spoken. Hank Willis Thomas, in a multimedia exhibition at Brown University's David Winton Bell Gallery, focuses attention on bodily gestures, especially in the context of societal power and oppression.

“Hank Willis Thomas: Primary Sources” whips along on many conceptual engines. Thomas creates sculptures based on photographs of historic events, lofting searing documents into the realm of metaphor as he pulls their imagery into three dimensions. He deploys the figure as a choreographer might, making physical gesture explicit and potent. His work, which deals with race, couldn’t be timelier.



JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

“Amandla” (2013) at the David Winton Bell Gallery.

Thomas made the bronze tableau “Raise Up” only months before a police officer shot unarmed black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. The image comes from South African photographer Ernest Cole’s Apartheid-era shot, “During group medical examination, the nude men are herded through a string of doctors’ offices.” In it, several black prisoners stand naked, facing a wall, hands raised. Their treatment luridly objectifies them. The photo witnesses that, and sadly also extends it.

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Hank Willis Thomas talks about black lives and the meaning of truth

Hank Willis Thomas's public art installation explores what's true from your point of view

By Howard Halle
Posted: Tuesday August 18 2015



Photograph: David Williams



Photograph: David Williams

The old saying, "truth is in the eye of the beholder," is taking on a literal meaning thanks to Hank Willis Thomas's public artwork public artwork for Brooklyn's MetroTech Commons, "The Truth Is I See You."

The outdoor art project consists of several components, beginning with a series of signs shaped like cartoon-speech bubbles hung on lampposts. Each carries a phrase beginning with, "The truth is…," followed by, "I love you, I hear you, etc." in a variety of languages. Another set of much larger outline bubbles set on the ground serve as park furniture. There's also a flatscreen playing videos of people from around the world, telling their stories by beginning with "The truth is…." These testimonials come courtesy of the *Truth Booth*, a collaboration between Thomas and Cause Collective. A roving confessional in the form of a giant speech-bubble inflatable, it's equipped with a camera and will make three appearances at

MetroTech throughout the show. Over coffee Thomas talked about origins of the piece, his practice and how an early work was inspired by a family tragedy.

Is it fair to describe your work as a critique of the way African-Americans are portrayed and shaped by the media? I'm thinking of pieces such your image of a black man with the Nike swoosh branded on his shaved head.
I've done a lot of stuff about the imaging of African-Americans in pop culture and history, but I'd say I also have done a lot of work that's totally unrelated to that. And in a lot of my very early work, I was wrestling very specifically with the murder of my cousin.

That's terrible. How did it happen?
He went to a club with two friends who were wearing diamond and platinum chains. They were robbed, and the guys who did it made my cousin lay face down and shot him in the back of the head.

Why?
I don't know. My roommate at the time said that the worst part was that we didn't have to ask whether the killers were black.

So how does all of that factor into your Nike swoosh piece?
While I was a kid growing up in New York, a lot of black men were getting killed over Air Jordans and such. I began thinking about how our ancestors were brought here as commodities, and now, our people are killing each other over sneakers. A lot of that was the result of multinational corporations making money by marketing black bodies.

Is the MetroTech project also inspired by personal experience?
Yes. In 2006, I participated in a residency upstate, which focused on international artists. It was during the Israel-Hezbollah war, and the residents included an Egyptian, a Lebanese-Palestinian and an Israeli. When war broke out, they seemed to go to opposite sides of the room. But after a week or so, you'd see them talking to each other, sharing news. I realized they were the only people with skin in the game, so I said, Let's play a game of telephone. The Egyptian person started it off by whispering an Arabic word into the next person's ear. Most everyone else couldn't speak Arabic, but it still came out sounding like in Arabic.

What was the reaction?
The Israeli said, 'That's funny, that sounds like a product in Israel. It's amazing that our countries are at war, but commerce still takes place.' Her observation was a revelation for me: That people who were enemies could share a bond no one else understood. So I started to imagine star-crossed lovers on opposite sides of the wall they were building in Jerusalem at the time, where one screams, 'The truth is I am you in Hebrew,' while the other screams, 'The truth is I love you in Arabic.' But all anyone else can hear is screaming. So I used phrases like those for a series of helium-filled speech-bubble balloons I made for Socrates Sculpture Park. That's how it started.

A lot of the speech-bubble signs you've put up here are in different languages.
Yes, we took the 22 most spoken languages in Brooklyn—Yiddish, Haitian Creole, Serbian, Urdu, etc. And under each sign in another language, there's a placard that shows you how pronounce what the sign says phonetically in English. The idea is that if you can learn to say just one thing in someone else's language, it would bridge a gap.

The way the speech bubbles are hung overhead, they look like the words are coming out from people beneath them.

Yes! It's awesome to see things like a couple sitting under one saying, 'The truth is I balance you,' and they don't even notice it.

I bet a lot of selfies will be taken with them. Let's talk about the *Truth Booth*. It seems to be a big part of the project, but it's only here for brief intervals, because it travels around the world. Where has it been?
We started out in Ireland, which was great because it's a Catholic country and the project is sort of like a confessional. Then it went to Afghanistan during the country's election. So it was a time there when people felt a real urgency to speak their minds.

How many people have used it?
In Ireland, we got 1, 000 people in one week. At Miami Art Basel, 1,300 people went through it. It's an attention-grabbing thing.

That's true. What drew you to mounting the project at MetroTech?
I just love how people use the space. I'd been coming down here on and off for 20 years, and now I live just around the corner.

In one of those new high-rises?
Right, in of those towers I used to despise.

But you don't anymore.
I mean, it's gotten as expensive here as Manhattan, so I figured if you can't beat them, look down on them.

Since you mention how expensive Brooklyn has become, what do you say to the criticism that public art can aid and abet gentrification, and that money could be better spent on practical services?
Well, I think it's kind of an insult to say certain people don't deserve beauty, because beauty is a basic service. And everyone's attracted to beauty—rich people, poor people and everyone in between. The hope is that everyone will feel welcome regardless of whether you have five dollars in your pocket or $5 million in the bank.

Hank Willis Thomas, "The Truth Is I See You" (http://www.timeout.com/newyork/things-to-do/hank-willis-thomas-the-truth-is-i-see-you) is at MetroTech Commons (http://www.timeout.com/newyork/outdoor/public-art-fund-at-metrotech-center-commons) through June 3.

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 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 .

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The Boston Globe

FRAME BY FRAME

Hank Willis Thomas's slick image masks closed door

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 30, 2015



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

HARTFORD — Is it an ad? Is it a protest poster? Is it art? And anyway, what's the difference?

This photograph by Hank Willis Thomas, 39, an African-American artist born in New Jersey, hangs in the new postwar and contemporary galleries at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. It's part of a celebrated series of photo-based works that address, with wryness, precision, and visual panache, the implications of stereotypes pushed by commercial sport.

This work is called "Basketball and Chain." And while it is clearly a brilliantly effective political statement, it is impossible not to notice that it is also as slickly distilled as a Times Square billboard.

In fact, everything about it suggests a weird marriage between Malcolm X and Don Draper. You can almost imagine an advertising executive pitching it to potential clients, with suitably widened eyes, and smug follow-up smile.

"An African-American man . . . a basketball player . . . but you don't see his head, or in fact any of his body. . . . Only part of one leg and his feet . . . BRAND NEW sneakers. . . . It's pitch black behind him. As if he's in space. And he's jumping. (Think Michael Jordan. Think LeBron.) He's jumping so high that he's burst through the frame.

"But wait. Is he rising? Or is he actually being dragged down?

“Because here’s the thing: Attached to one ankle is a chain. A manacle. Think prison, folks. Think, if you will, slavery. The chain is taut. And at the other end is a ball.

“Ball and chain?” Significant pause. “Basketball and Ch ain.” Pause again. “Thank you.”

That’s a parody, by the way. I’m only trying to tease out a layer of Thomas’s work that is easy to overlook, because the image itself is so devastatingly succinct.

Thomas is using the visual language of advertising very deliberately. He knows — and is subtly reminding us — that this language is heavily implicated in the political realities that his art addresses. It permeates everything.

Advertising is about maximum legibility. It’s about achieving a kind of clear reduction of the opaque and obstinate messiness of real people, real lives, and real predicaments, in order to lubricate and maximize commercial possibilities.

In the process it promotes a few (a very few, if you are African-American) seductive ready-made identities. These may be something for some people to aspire to; they may bring riches, respect, a seraglio of self-actualization. Good luck with that.

They may also, for most real African-Americans, work more like the idea of justice in Kafka’s parable, “Before the Law” — a parable that ends with the announcement: “This door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it.”

BASKETBALL AND CHAIN

By Hank Willis Thomas

At: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

860-278-2670, www.thewadsworth.org

Sebastian Smee can be reached at ssmee@globe.com.

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THE AGORA CULTURE™

APPRECIATION

Mother as Inspiration, Mother as Collaborator

Author: Ian Cofre

Posted On: May 10, 2015

Highlighting Hank Willis Thomas, Mickalene Thomas, and Jacolby Satterwhite, curator Ian Cofre explores the complexity of portraying mothers in art through collaboration and inspiration.



DEBORAH WILLIS and HANK WILLIS THOMAS, "Sometimes I See Myself in You", 2008, Digital C-Print
Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas and Jack Shaman Gallery, New York

In art, classical depictions of mother and child almost exclusively belong to the specific religious history of the Madonna, or Virgin and Child. Historical examples, which include a multitude of masterpieces, represent idealized maternal love and protection, and approach the status of a near-universal symbol. To celebrate Mother's Day, though, is not an exercise in abstract concepts and generalities, but a call to honor the individual. The three artists presented here—Jacolby Satterwhite, Mickalene Thomas, and Hank Willis Thomas (no relation)—have done just that, capturing portraits that reveal the complexities of the women that raised them. The selected works go beyond mere representations of mother as inspiration and speak to a different level of engagement. In fact, they are collaborations between the artists and their mothers, helping to edify their influence through a shared practice.

Asked about the visual history of Hank Willis Thomas's collaborative portrait, Sometimes I See Myself in You (2008), he said, "It consciously comes from following in her footsteps and being told almost daily that I look like her." Those footsteps belong to his mother, the towering figure of Deborah Willis, artist, historian, curator, and author. He continued, "[I'm] not sure I'm ready

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ian Cofre

Ian Cofre is an independent curator and writer based in New York City, working with emerging and established artists, locally-based and from Latin America. He has previously worked as Director for a Lower East Side gallery, Studio Manager for Mickalene Thomas (2011-12), and most recently as US Director for the 2013 PINTA NY art fair. Recent projects include barriococo at The Royal Society of American Art (Brooklyn, 2014); TEN at Cindy Rucker Gallery (New York, 2014) as one of ten curators; and Bigger Than Shadows, DODGEgallery (New York, 2012) with Rich Blint.

More Info From Ian Cofre

to compare myself to Jesus, yet," but that for him "it's an amalgam of the residue of popular culture imagery manifesting in my subconscious." The photographic transition in the image makes for an honest and powerful selves-portrait, where the physical transformation implies a psychological space divided and doubled, the work shared and compounded through mutual borrowing. Willis Thomas added, "I've assisted her on several projects throughout the years [and] I think this would be the first time we were somewhat on equal footing."

Equal exchange is also important for Jacolby Satterwhite, whose mother Patricia draws prolifically as one way of coping with her diagnosed schizophrenia. Those sketches become inputs for objects that take on a new life in the animated worlds that he has become known for, but Satterwhite went further, highlighting them in his 2012 New York debut exhibition, The Matriarch's Rhapsody. In the titular video, Satterwhite juxtaposes and contextualizes his mother's drawings alongside his digital recreations and family photographs. The meditative video is both an index and display of the commercial products, viable or no, that Patricia Satterwhite invents and designs for TV shopping channels, woven together with memories and moments of personal history that expand through the younger Satterwhite's visual associations. Because of Jacolby's collaborative practice and continued support, the Studio Museum in Harlem's then-Assistant Curator Thomas J. Lax subsequently included both artists' work alongside each other in the 2014 exhibition, When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South.



MICKALENE THOMAS, Still from "Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman," 2012, Digital Video, 23 minutes,
Courtesy of Mickalene Thomas and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York & Hong Kong

Finally, what can be considered one the most emotionally forceful works of recent times is Mickalene Thomas's heartbreaking documentary, Happy Birthday to a Beautiful Woman (2012), a portrait of her mother made prior to her passing that same year, and which represents a final collaboration with her first and most important muse. Mickalene's mother, Sandra Bush, was an early subject of her work, as she recounts, "I started working with my mother for a photography class at Yale. She'd been a professional model when I was young (in the late 70s and early 80s)—she was absolutely gorgeous, 6" 1', full of energy, and the only person I could convince to pose completely nude for me." The longstanding influence and working together "served as a way for me to understand how they relate to me and my own femininity."

Earlier works such as Lounging, Standing, Looking (2003) and Madame Mama Bush in Black and White (2007) attest to some of the qualities in Sandra that Thomas "always admired and wanted to emulate," like "her glamour." In the film, though, as we become aware of the subject's frailty, her body continuing to shut down in front of the audience, there emerges a clear portrait of "her strength and tenacity, and her sustained elegance and charisma in the face of obstacles." On one side of the camera, Thomas "thought of the film as a painting," explaining that she "was thinking about the lens moving like a brushstroke, painting a portrait through a character's voice and story," and "[....] about the complexities, composition, formal aspects of color, shape, space, depth of field, rhythm, texture, and all the things you consider when you're making a painting." On the other side, Sandra speaks to the camera and directly to Mickalene in her own voice about her feelings of accomplishment and fears, rounding out a persona from the represented muse. Thomas frames the distinction of this work by explaining, "Art from the late 19th and early 20th century is of particular interest [...] because it marks the time when female models started to assert their own identities and presence through the gaze. Around this time, at least in the contemporary discourse, the sitters for the classic genre nude ceased to be anonymous props and began to insist on their individuality with their gaze."

These three artists successfully use new mediums and in-depth collaboration with their mothers to highlight a fresh perspective on this personal relationship, the results of which are some of the most interesting interpretations of mother and child in contemporary art. They are compelling works not only because of the complicated and loved figures that have had outsized influences on the artists' lives, but also because as an audience, we have been allowed to enter three unique, longstanding dialogs of mutual respect and growth together.

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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

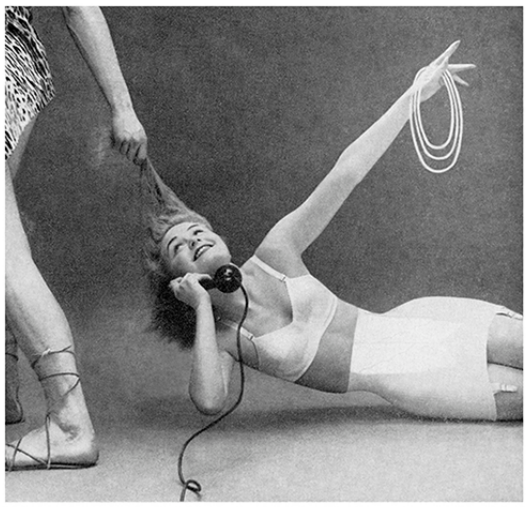
my ambition was to become an advertising photographer. I studied photography at NYU and some of the first jobs I did were assisting advertising photographers and commercial photographers. Also, when I graduated I worked at Saturday Night Live's film unit where they sometimes made these fake commercials. 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.

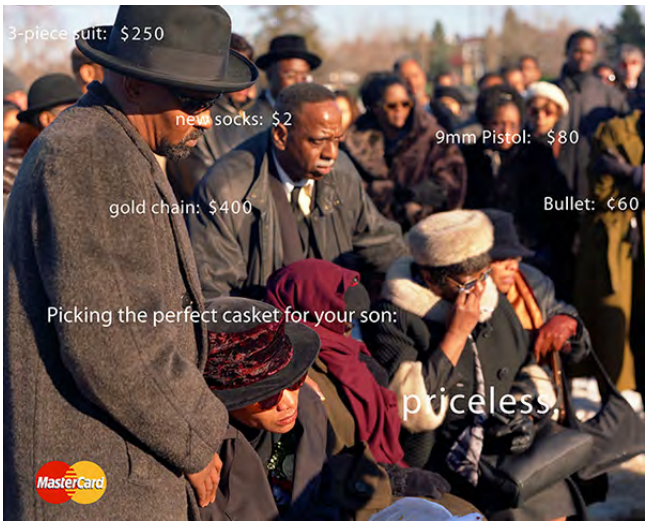
With Yao Ming you have the Chinese giant—he's about seven feet tall—so they clearly had no idea what to do with that. So let's just throw everything "oriental" into the image—the rising sun, yin-yang. Reebok was like, we got this! It is crazy that nothing here makes sense. This is what made me start 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?

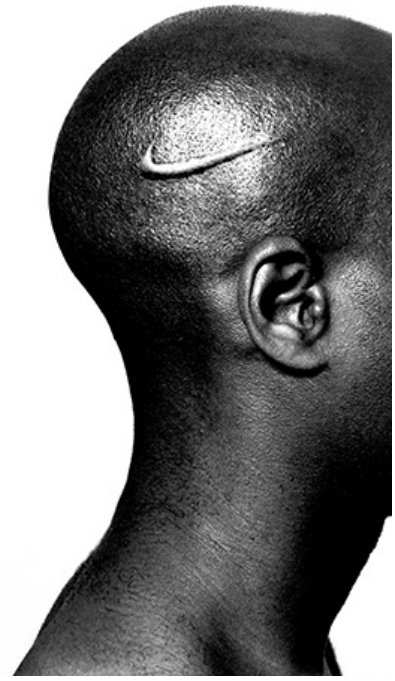
Rail: I wonder, then, how it felt to show your work in Bench Marks, which was your first public art project, carried out last year. Your photographs were inserted into the fabrication of benches situated at bus stops, on the street, in a neighborhood of Chicago. When your appropriated adverts were positioned 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.

CONTRIBUTOR

Allie Biswas

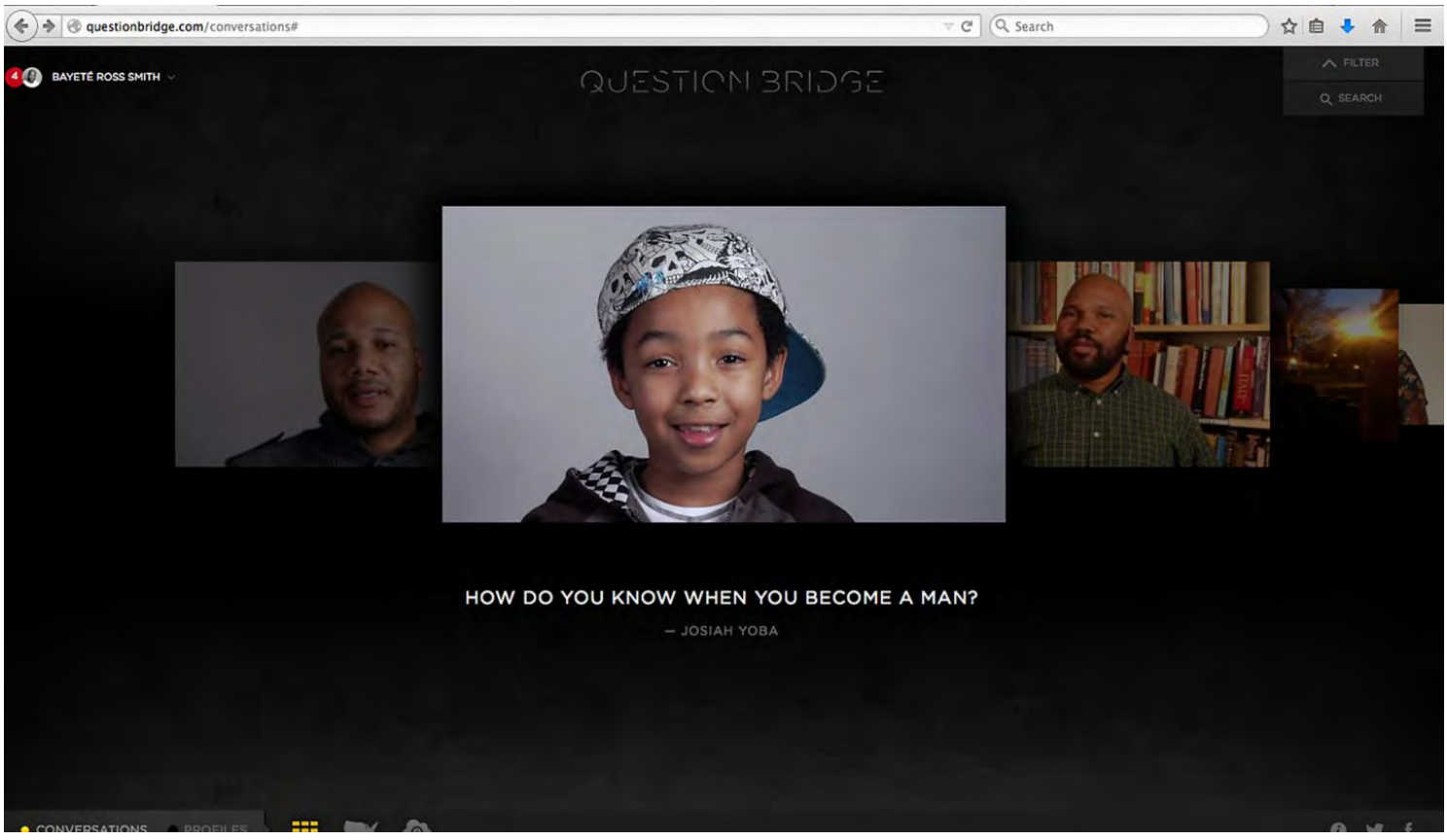
ALLIE BISWAS writes on the arts and is based in London. Recent features include interviews with Cecily Brown and Zhang Enli and a profile of Piero Fornasetti.

INTERVIEW WITH HANK WILLIS THOMAS FOR QUESTION BRIDGE

ICP Curator Pauline Vermare Talks to the 2015 Infinity Awards Recipient for New Media

INTERVIEW

Apr 30, 2015





Screenshot from *Question Bridge: Black Males* website.

What inspired your turn to photography?

I came to photography through my mother, Deborah Willis, and I really think it is almost through osmosis that I became a photographer, because pictures and cameras and darkrooms were everywhere when I was growing up.

How did *Question Bridge* come about?

The idea of Question Bridge as a project came from my collaborator Chris Johnson, who realized that video could be used as a way to facilitate a conversation between people in communities that don't talk about certain issues very well. *Question Bridge: Black Males* is a way to talk about there being as much diversity within any demographic as there is outside of it. Asking African American men—or people who identify as African American men—to ask and answer each other's questions, we realized that they're actually very different people, and that each person is an individual, and that starts to call into question the necessity of defining people based on narrow group identity, or demographic identities.

***Question Bridge* is a brilliant art installation as well as an amazingly important social project. How was it received?**

We premiered it in five places at once, including the Brooklyn Museum and the Sundance Film Festival. We've now traveled the show to more than 38 venues around the country, and also done about 50 screenings of it, so it's been extremely well received, as an art installation, curriculum, website, etc. And we've had over half a million people interacting with the project to date. The fact that it's transmedia, that it doesn't just exist in one or two forms but actually exists in five forms, means that people can approach it from a variety of perspectives and spend different kinds of time with it. That's what we love.

Was social media an important tool for the project?

Yes, more and more recently, after we launched the website. We were able to use social media as a way to engage people in the conversation, and it's been really exciting to see the response that people have and also having people log on and create their own identity profiles and Question Bridges.

What is the future of *Question Bridge*?

We shall see. One idea is to build other Question Bridges that aren't race or gender specific, so that people can make a Question Bridge about whatever communities they see themselves being part of.

A few words about ICP?

I've been going to ICP since my childhood, since it was on Fifth Avenue uptown, and I have maintained relationships with the staff, especially our dear Lacy Austin—so many wonderful staff and curators—and I've even had the opportunity to be a visiting professor at ICP. As I've traveled around the country and also around the world, I have so many friends who are amazing photographers, whose entry into the photography world was through taking classes at ICP. And so I see ICP not only as an exhibition space but as an education space, an outreach in creative thinking kind of resource in the city for photography. It's been extraordinarily important and essential. And not to mention that my mother's won the Infinity Award and I got to be there when she won it, and it was really exciting (Infinity Award for Writing, 1995). I never thought that I would receive such an award.

Question Bridge: Black Males was created by Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. The Executive Producers are Delroy Lindo, Deborah Willis and Jesse Williams.

SHARE

examiner.com

Hank Willis Thomas looks back on 100 years of white women

April 16, 2015
7:14 AM MST



Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas and the Jack Shainman Gallery

The Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea is currently presenting a collection of work by Hank Willis Thomas for the exhibition *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915—2015*. For his fifth solo show at the gallery, Thomas unveils 101 photographs relating to different generations of white women and how they've portrayed in popular culture over the past century. Thomas chooses images that represent each individual year between 1915 and 2015 where explores notions of virtue, power, beauty, privilege, and desire that many of these women possess.

One of the earliest images in this show *No Anxious Moments* (1918) perfectly captures the charm of mother and child bonding as it illustrates a woman in her kitchen kneeling down in front of her oven to take out a tray of muffins as her young daughter stands next to her

beaming with her rosy cheeks and wearing a long apron. The girl very much resembles the iconic Little Debbie, the namesake of brand of desserts whose products include cupcakes and brownies. Similarly, *Give Your Daughter a Daughter* (1971) also highlights notions family bonding as it depicts three generations of women. A woman sits in a large wicker chair as her young daughter with pigtail braids sits on her lap as a baby doll with curly blonde hair, blue eyes, and wearing a light pink dress sits on the child's lap.

Another theme that's examined in the show is that of women being allowed to embrace their sexuality. *The Taming of the Shrewd* (1966) symbolizes the suppression of desires features a beautiful blonde woman wearing a leopard skin swimsuit trapped inside a cage in a jungle as though she were an actual live animal being locked up as her male companion leans his back against the cage and looking over his shoulder in amusement. On the other hand, *The Natives Will Get Restless* (1976) depicts a woman swinging on a rope in the jungle, wearing a bikini, as though she's finally breaking free from societal constraints.

The most recent image in the show *Just As Our Forefathers Intended*, (2015) pays homage to Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's iconic *Washington Crossing the Delaware* painting with two groups of women standing on a wooden board in the place of George Washington's army as they make their journey across the Delaware River. The first group of women are standing in front of a red flatbed truck pulling another group of women piled onto a boat.

At the **Jack Shainman Gallery**, 524 W. 24th St., and 513 W. 20th St., through May 23. The gallery is open Tuesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m.

SUGGESTED LINKS

- **Philemona Williamson explores adventures of adolescence at Soho gallery show**
- **Rose Wylie's perceptions of people and animals at Chelsea gallery show**
- **Alma Thomas' Earthly drawings and paintings on view at Chelsea gallery**
- **Dena Schutzer illustrates 'Local Encounters' at Chelsea gallery show**
- **Aaron Johnson's sock paintings on view in East Harlem**



Alison Martin
NY Fine Arts Examiner

Hank Willis Thomas Recalls the Past Century

A new exhibition looks at the last hundred years of white women in print advertising.

April 13, 2015 7:36 PM | by Antwaun Sargent



Hank Willis Thomas, 2005. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

As Hillary Clinton gears up for her second run for the presidency, artist Hank Willis Thomas new photo series, *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015,* explores how popular images of women's roles have changed over the last century. "As I started to think about what's happening now leading up to the election, I thought a lot about the conversation surrounding Hilary Clinton, and the idea that we might have our first woman President, " he said the other day at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea. "I wanted to look at how perceptions of women's roles and 'whiteness' have changed over the last century."

Building on ideas first tackled in his fascinating project, *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008,* Thomas's new show examines how

race, class, and sexuality has evolved in mainstream America. Starting with a 1915 cream of wheat ad that shows two white women being served by a black man, Thomas removes the original ad copy to "unbrand" it and remove it from its original context. In this way, his images reveal their not-so-hidden messages. Touching on gender roles, notions of beauty and desire, Thomas selected only one quintessential advertisement for each year between 1915 and 2015. "None of us fit into the definition of our demographic," said Thomas. "By looking at this specific demographic a story emerges about how our society values have changed," he explains. An ad for Drummond sweaters shows a man dangling a woman by a rope off the side of a mountain as he warmly chats up another young man; in another ad from the film *Mr. Mom*, a woman heads off to work in a suit as her male partner stays at home with the kids. "But you have to wonder how far have we really come." He was standing in front of the famed *Sex and the City* ad of a nude Sarah Jessica Parker but nowhere was there a reference to the TV show. Thomas had retitled it, *When I'm good, I'm very good, but when I'm bad, I'm better, 1998/2015*. "We don't want to deal with the reality," he said. "We only want the fantasy."

Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915 – 2015 is on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery's two outposts in Chelsea through May 23.

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW

Hank Willis Thomas



Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

A five-channel video presentation of a work in process, "Question Bridge: Black Males."

By HOLLAND COTTER
Published: August 1, 2013

Jack Shainman Gallery
524 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 23

This show includes some recent sculptures and photographic pieces by an artist who has consistently made the pathologies of racism his subject. And he has been particularly astute in examining the workings of what W. E. B. Du Bois called double consciousness, the condition in which people see themselves reflected, often negatively, in the view of others and end up molding their lives to confirm that view.

Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review—Hank Willis Thomas" (Jack Shainman Gallery exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 2 August 2013: C25, illustrated.

The phenomenon is repeatedly addressed in the show's most significant piece, the five-channel video installation "Question Bridge: Black Males," made up of deftly edited and interwoven interviews with some 150 African-American men. Students, retirees, businessmen, teachers, prison inmates and artists, the speakers grapple, optimistically and pessimistically, with questions about why racism in America exists, whether it can be changed and, whether it can or can't, how they can change themselves.

There are wonderful voices and a lot of wisdom this project, which was created by Mr. Thomas and three collaborators, Chris Johnson, Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair. It is currently showing in museums, galleries and schools across the country and is a work in progress. An interactive online version, questionbridge.com, is scheduled to appear in January; whoever signs up can contribute an interview, join the conversation. The semi-wraparound gallery presentation is a more passive experience. But the material is so compelling, and so much of the moment, that you feel pulled in and part of what's going on.

A version of this review appeared in print on August 2, 2013, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: Hank Willis Thomas.

Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review—Hank Willis Thomas" (Jack Shainman Gallery exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 2 August 2013: C25, illustrated.

Hank Willis Thomas on Photo-manipulation, Instagram, and Hybrid Identities

ARTSY EDITORIAL

APR 8TH, 2013 2:42 PM



Hank Willis Thomas
Zero Hour (from Wayfarer series)
Goodman Gallery

Hank Willis Thomas unabashedly points his camera toward issues of identity, race, and class. In this candid interview, he discusses a range of topics relating to his practice, from voyeurism and Instagram to photo-manipulation, stereotypes, and hybrid identities.

Artsy: When, and why, did you first pick up a camera?

Hank Willis Thomas: My mother, Deborah Willis, is a photographer, photo-historian, author, and educator. Cameras have been part of my life since I can remember.

Artsy: You use photography to raise questions on violence, race, class,

and identity. How is the medium conducive to presenting these issues in such a powerful way?

HWT: In the United States, every photograph of a person speaks to issues of race, class, and identity. My fine art photography is simply less misleading about its intentions. Photography has influenced, manipulated, and distorted most of our relationships to reality, history, the representation of others, as well as ourselves. We passively accept most things we see in photographs as evidence or "truth".

I use photography to approach these issues because I already know that the public's eye is trained to subconsciously imbibe images on a massive scale. For this reason, it is the perfect medium by which to problematize these things in order to inspire dialogue. And then there is Instagram, which just makes me feel like my life is more interesting than it is every time I get a "like" from a stranger. It's kind of weird how voyeurism and exhibitionism have become married in such an explicit less shameful way in recent years.

Artsy: A lot of your work addresses the way pop culture propagates certain stereotypes. How can we move beyond these paradigms?

HWT: I personally believe that as long as we believe in race, we are racists. It may seem provocative since the idea of race has very real consequences for so many of us. We try to pretend racists are devils while ignoring the societal and institutional foundations of racism. But at the end of the day, like most things, it's just a figment of our imagination. That became so much clearer to me as I've traveled around the world, especially in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Race was created by western Europeans to explicitly perpetuate their dominance over other peoples and cultures. It's worked like a charm in the U.S. especially. But times are a-changin'. I believe we can start to challenge these paradigms by becoming more active lookers. Historical consciousness, flexible thinking and visual literacy are key. When we start to view images as text, we can start to see the kind of visual coding taking place. All images are messages. We just need to become active in the discourse rather than simply being receptors or consumers of images, which is how the public is trained by popular culture media. Did you ever watch this speech by Walter Mosley? (see video)

Artsy: You recently photographed Sanford Biggers in half black, half white makeup. Can you talk about the concept behind this project, as well as your decision to shoot the images personally?

HWT: There is so much to that piece, it's hard to summarize and make sense. First, I am most known for manipulating photographs, but my training is as a photographer. I've always kept this as part of my practice. The idea for the "Wayfarer Series" comes from an archival image I found

while doing photo research. It spoke to the idea of hybridity and double-consciousness. Sanford has explored this in his work for years and I felt like that collaboration with him would allow me to ponder these ideas on a different level. Today, nearly everyone is a cultural hybrid. We can't just look at skin color to tell us very much about their beliefs, values, and traditions. I love collaboration because it gives me a chance to think bigger and in more complex ways about everything. On some level, all of my work is about framing and context. How and where we are standing, who is "holding" the frame affects how we perceive the world.

Artsy: What are you up to next?

HWT: I've got a lot of things coming up! I'm really excited about the range of projects I've been involved in. I just completed at 70 foot video installation called "The Long March" with other members of ©ause Collective at the Shuttlesworth- Birmingham International Airport. I am a co-executive producer on my friend Terence Nance's film*An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* which is out later this month. My collaborative project Question Bridge: Black Males is continuing to travel the country and we are in development of an interactive website with the support of the California Endowment and Tribeca Film Institute. Natasha Logan and I just curated an exhibition "White Boys" at Haverford College featuring a number of peers I admire. And later this year the Cleveland Museum of Art and Transformer Station in Cleveland are doing a large survey of my work, which will include the traveling of the Truth Booth around the city. I'm very excited to see how all of these projects will evolve. [**So are we! Follow Hank on Artsy and Twitter for updates**]

Portrait by Alexis Peskine

Special 110th Anniversary Issue

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Hank Willis



In full costume and make-up, Sanford Biggers balances in a one-footed pose for Hank Willis Thomas. It's the last set-up of a day-long shoot.

Thomas Stages a Photo Shoot



PHOTOS ©2012 REBECCA ROBERTSON PAGES 112-117

HOW SANFORD BIGGERS CAME TO STRIKE A POSE AS A TWO-FACED DANDY

By Rachel Wolff
Photos by Rebecca Robertson
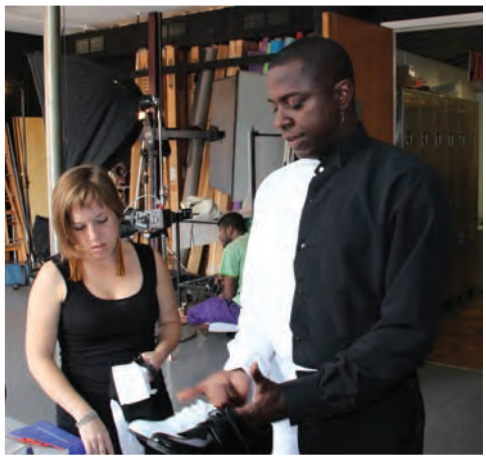
It's not always quite this bustling, Hank Willis Thomas tells me as we make our way into his small, fifth-floor studio located in Midtown Manhattan; it's just when he's gearing up for a major project or a show—which, these past few years, has been more or less his perpetual state.

With posters, postcards, fabric samples, and mock-ups pinned haphazardly to the walls, bicycles parked in a corner, and a handful of cluttered workstations (each anchored by an iMac or a MacBook Pro), the tightly packed space could be home to any young, energetic, creative New York start-up. And, in a sense, that's what it is, with Thomas installed as CEO.

Four assistants mill about the room. Some tend to administrative duties (e-mail,

Rachel Wolff is a New York–based critic, writer, and editor.







Shane Aslan Selzer steams wrinkles from the custom-made suit (left) and compares shoes with Biggers (center). Thomas and Selzer inspect the costume.

scheduling, and the like); others are helping Thomas digitally plot out potential new works (quilts made out of sports jerseys, a mosaic of triangular, glass flag cases filled with brightly colored spices). They're friends or friends of friends for the most part. And, of course, they are artists, working in media ranging from sculpture to graphic design to computer programming to film.

"We're all ethnically different, we come from different places, we have different cultural backgrounds, we have different expertise and different interests," Thomas says. He frequently asks his assistants for their input—what they see, what they like, what they feel, what they think. "It's important to have heard a diverse group of voices," he adds. "Especially when you're making work that is political or about race and gender."

The artist, who trained in photography (first at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University and then at the California College of the Arts in Oakland, California), has expanded his practice to include text-based pieces, interactive installations, and reworked and repurposed ads. He focuses, for the most part, on the ways in which race and gender are mediated through language, advertising, and popular culture. Thomas's 2005–8 series "Unbranded," for instance, features ads, geared toward African American consumers, stripped of their logos and text so that the corporations' carefully staged vignettes of black life in America are all that remain. His 2001–11 "B®anded" is a series of composite images that shrewdly connect the commodification of the African American male body today via sports and advertising with that of the slave trade. In one image, a muscle-bound chest is speckled with Nike swoop-shaped scars reminiscent of those left by a whip's lacerations.

Thomas takes me up to the tenth floor, where he has rented an even smaller, second space just for the run-up to his solo exhibition at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery (on view through November 17). The tiny light-filled room contains stacks of vintage *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Jet* magazines and a vitrine made out of Lumisty, a thick, foggy, Plexiglas-like material used in commercial displays. One assistant is busy executing a series of text paintings based on Civil Rights–era campaign buttons, featuring phrases like "Keep the Faith Baby," "I Am A White Agitator," and "100% Efficiency Man." As for the Lumisty, Thomas likes the effect—the way it blurs, abstracts, and sometimes hides the image or object behind it, depending on the angle from which it is viewed, but he's not yet certain of how best to use the material.

Indeed, at this moment, Thomas is most excited about two printouts pinned to the wall. One is a sepia-hued, full-length







A noose and chain are among the day's props (left). Makeup artist Toby Klinger touches up Biggers's black-and-white face paint (center). Lisa Fairstein holds up one of the images that inspired the project. She and Thomas compare it to Biggers's pose (right).

portrait of a late-19th-century African American performer, dressed in top hat and tuxedo. The right side of his face, hat, and suit are white, while his left side is presented in black, creating a sharp, vertical line dividing him in two. The original image is part of Emory University's massive holdings of photographs documenting African American life.

The picture appeals to Thomas for its "kind of dandyism, but also its hybridity," he says. He's interested in the subject's motivation. "We talk about being 'post-racialism' now, but this is somebody who's unknown and dealing with those things in the late 19th century."

The second image is a reasonably well known, albeit somewhat tone-deaf, late-1950s advertisement for Knoll furniture. It depicts a top-hatted, white chimney sweep lounging in a luxe red Eero Saarinen "Womb" chair, resting his ash-covered face on his sooty right hand. Brushes dangle from the fingers on his left hand, and a noose-evoking rope is coiled loosely around his left arm. The ad ran in the anniversary issue of the *New Yorker* every year from 1957 until 1971.

"It's a little bit about blackface and minstrel-sy," Thomas says. "I couldn't figure out what the context was, except for *Mary Poppins*, which was out around the same time. But still, there's this thing about white men with black covering them. It's tens of years away from the minstrel era, and it's only slightly different. Race has always been somewhat about class."

Thomas wants to build his own take on the subject by combining the two images, riffing on this idea of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic hybridity, and fleshing out the deceptively complex characters embedded in each. He has enlisted fellow artist Sanford Biggers to collaborate and pose.

"I think Sanford's work has been very much about cultural hybridity," Thomas says. "He has done stuff with B-boys and hip-hop and Buddhism. He's frequently engaged with that, and I thought he could be a kind of lens to talk about these issues."

Biggers quickly got on board. "I think it's an American knee-jerk response to equate black and white with literally blacks and whites. I want to find a way for it to be more nuanced," he says. "And, in fact, I think it did that because this photograph and the character in it become more about duality and a more multifaceted being. It's about the yin and yang, and pathology and moralism, and life and death. And superego. Those types of things. Which are things I've really been exploring in my recent work as well."

A month and several brainstorming sessions later, in early August, the two artists are together on set in a modest photo studio at NYU (Thomas's mother, Deborah Willis, is now the





Thomas shoots with a digital Hasselblad H4, which is connected to a laptop and monitor (left). He and Kambui Olujimi examine the images (right).

chair of the department of photography and imaging at Tisch) along with a crew of seven gaffers, producers, and assistants. When I get there, Biggers is stealing bites of an egg sandwich between brushstrokes as the makeup artist applies broad swaths of black and white pigment to his face; she keeps the source image of the 19th-century performer firmly in sight.

The set itself is relatively quiet. Thomas is working with a few members of his production team on a shot list in a nearby classroom while his lead gaffer and camera assistant (close friends and frequent collaborators Kambui Olujimi and Will Sylvester) take test shots against the white paper background and tweak and retweak and retweak the lights.

When his makeup is done, Biggers slips on the rest of his costume: a tuxedo complete with tails, gloves, and a top hat, all bisected down the same line as his face—half-black, half-white—and stitched together by Thomas's friend, pattern-maker Hilary Smith, from goods produced from the Garment District and the Internet. Thomas steps behind the camera, a rented Hasselblad H4, and takes some test shots of his own as Biggers gets a feel for the lighting and the set. "It's pretty weird already," Thomas says. To which Biggers replies, "That's a good sign."

Biggers moves through a series of theatrical and balletic poses as Thomas snaps away. Some mimic the source figure's dandyish posture, others seem drawn from Kabuki theater, Grace Jones, Charlie Chaplin, or Fred Astaire. The makeup artist pops up every so often to touch up Biggers's face, and Thomas's team tugs, tapes, and adjusts his suit between shots to smooth out any bunching or folds.

Thomas gives direction throughout: "Half smile." "Look up proudly to yonder." "Face me a little more." "Turn another few degrees." "Exaggerate your foot position." "Suck in your stomach and puff out your chest." "Let the coat flow a little bit—let's see some wagging of the tail."

The crew orders Thai food for lunch and reconfigures the studio for the second set-up. They've rented the exact same red Saarinen "Womb" chair that appears in the Knoll ad, but instead of chimney brushes and a utilitarian rope, Biggers will clutch a noose, a pair of shackles, a chain, two crosses, and a red-and-white Nike Air Jordan sneaker in various combinations. Thomas sets the scene: "You're exhausted. You're in the most comfortable chair, and you're content."

The third and final set-up involves rented backdrops of a marbled facade and tiled terrace that suggest the courtyard or





Using late afternoon sunlight instead of strobes, Thomas took the camera off its tripod to shoot Biggers as he moved fluidly against a faux-marble backdrop (this page).
Two final works, digital C-prints from the shoot, both *Untitled*, 2012 (following spread).

garden of an upscale estate. Thomas opts for natural lighting, asking his crew to strike the blackout shades coating the studio's wall of windows. He takes several close-ups and asks Biggers to hold a series of geometric poses with his leg extended behind him. "You're really good at that," he tells Biggers while reviewing his last shot. "It must be all that yoga."

Two weeks later, I'm back at Thomas's studio. Many of the same assistants from the shoot are manning their respective MacBook Pros. Sylvester is working on an animation for the Jack Shainman show that starts as a variation of the black nationalist flag and changes kaleidoscopically in response to the intonation of one's voice. It will be screened with rousing Civil Rights–era rhetoric as voiceover.

Thomas has called in his friend Wyatt Gallery, a photographer, to help him sort through the some 600 shots he snapped of Biggers that day at NYU. He has trimmed the selection in half and spliced together a few stop-motion-style films of Biggers in action. Thomas says he'd like to find a way to use them. At this point, he's still not sure what final form the piece will take, though he's leaning toward an editioned platinum print, which would fit in the context of the original 19th-century shot.

Thomas is pleased with the results, though, as is Biggers, who stopped by a few days later to see the images himself. The two even think this "avatar" could manifest himself in other scenarios, too—a short film, perhaps, with more of a narrative-driven approach.

Thomas has come up with something fairly ingenious by the time we speak the following week. After printing 22 selects (drawn mostly from set-ups one and three), he inserted several of them into lightbox-style frames made from Lumisty—the material I saw in the studio several weeks before. The effect is remarkable. From the front, the portrait of Biggers is crystal clear, yet as one moves around it, the image becomes increasingly blurred, ghostlike, and hardly recognizable as a human being—a fuzzy totem in black, white, and gray.

It is, in that sense, a perfect metaphor for the increasingly blurry lines of race itself. "I've always felt more comfortable in the gray space," Thomas says. "I think it's closer to the truth of any given scenario. And that was some of the challenge with this work itself, being half-black, half-white. With my work in general, I'm very interested in seeing if it works at all and seeing if what I was looking at was valid and then from there getting into a deeper idea." ■

FOLLOWING SPREAD: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK (2)





art nouveau ART. CULTURE. SOUNDS.

Strange Fruit: Interview with Hank Willis Thomas

March 23, 2012 | by Ilysha McMillan



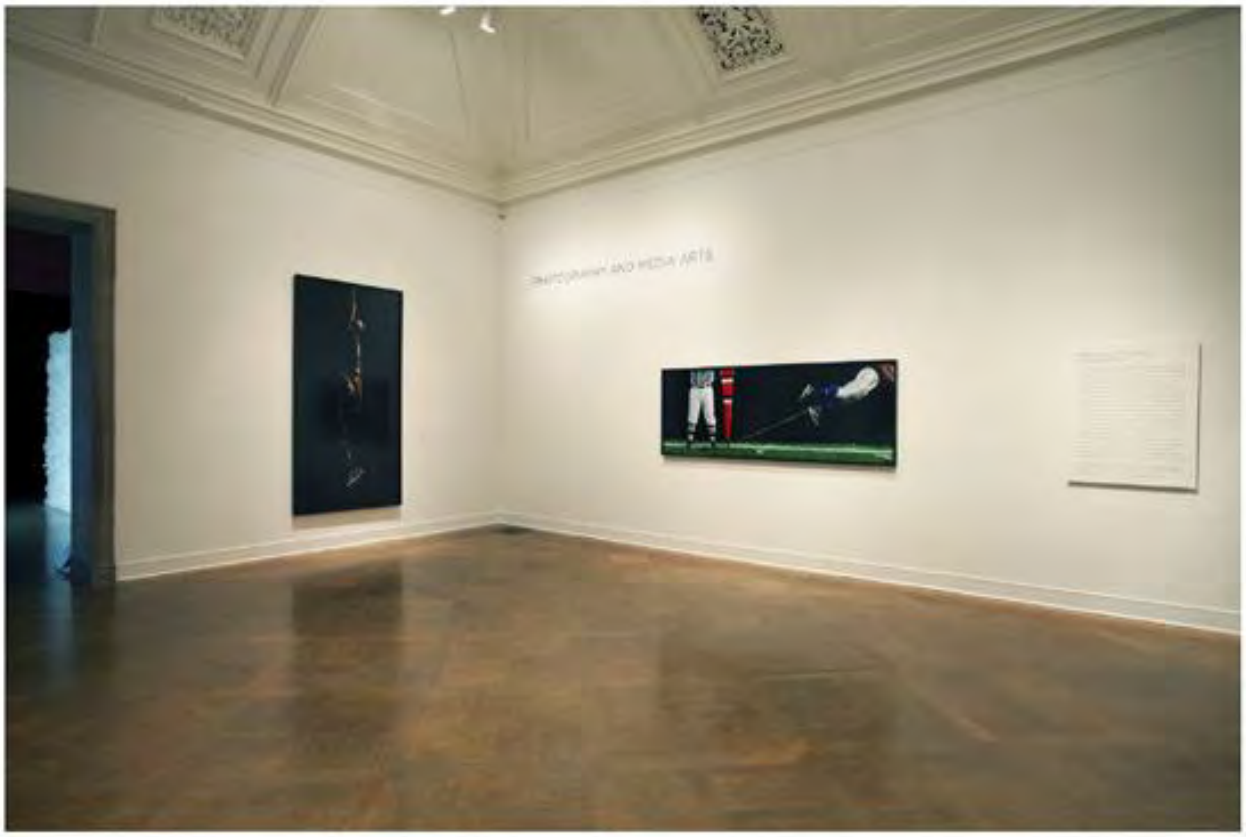
Hank Willis Thomas latest body of work *Strange Fruit* expresses the historical truths blacks had to endure throughout their journey here in the United States. Hank created vivid comparisons of black perception between the pre-slavery era and post-Civil Rights Movement. The irony that drips and oozes from his canvas, visually gives a voice to those in history who didn't have one. Hank's symbolism exposes the role media plays in the down fall of our popular culture. This creative genius shed light on the method behind his madness.

Read writer Ilysha McMillan's conversation with Hank Willis Thomas, exploring images from his recently released Strange Fruit body of work.



"…Popular culture influences the way we as a culture learn and perpetuate stereotypes about ourselves."

– Hank Willis Thomas



Art Nouveau: Which piece came about first and what triggered you to develop that idea into your newest collection?

Hank Willis Thomas: My work is primarily concerned with popular culture, history, and race in America, and many of the pieces in this show are building on themes found in older work. I created the piece "Hang Time" over a year ago, but had always wanted to photograph more images for the series. The rest of the work is a meditation exploring this issue of African American's complicated history with the noose. The opportunity to create a new body of work around these themes was given to me by the Corcoran Gallery of Art with support from Jack Shainman Gallery.

AN: Was there any research done before or during the making of this collection and if so, what did you spend most time on? Why?

HWT: Much of the inspiration for my work comes from history, and the ways cultural history is told. I spend a lot of time with archival materials, including texts, magazines, and images from the last 100 years. The most important book I referenced was *Without Sanctuary.*

Art Nouveau: What role do you believe the media plays in bringing to life the symbolism you used throughout your *Strange Fruit* collection?

HWT: *Strange Fruit* is a series of works that is questioning how the media represents and portrays black bodies, particularly with regards to their physicality. To me, popular culture influences the way we as a culture learn and perpetuate stereotypes about ourselves.



AN: What influenced you to use the graphics you did for the 4 hanging blacks in the "Martyr" piece?

HWT: Martyr: Lige Daniels, Aug 3, 1920, Center, TX, 2011

Martyr: Laura Nelson, May 25, 1911, Okemah, OK, 2011

Martyr: Unidentified Man, 1925, 2011

Martyr: Clyde Johnson, Aug 3, 1935, Yreka, CA, 2011

The "Martyr" piece includes images from documentation of lynchings that occurred across the southern states of America in the early part of the 20th century. 1940s. The photographs were distributed via postcards and collected as paraphernalia. I wanted to see what would happen if we were to place victims of lynching in the same way we treat martyrs and religious icons. We preserve them in churches windows with stained glass.

AN: What does the noose represent in our current society? What do you believe needs to get accomplished so that we can one day remove the noose from our around our throats?

HWT: I wonder what it means to you. I'm still investigating that myself. In some of the work in*Strange Fruit*, I was trying to reinterpret the noose–what does it mean when a black man powerfully and easily dunks a basketball through a noose?

AN: What are your views on the reoccurring NFL/NBA lockouts and in what ways do you represent your views in your recent collection?

HWT: I believe the lockout somehow brought about the rise of Jeremy Lin.





McMillan, Illysha. “Strange Fruit: Interview with Hank Willis Thomas.” *Art Nouveau*, 23 March 2012.

NEW YORK ARTS

Hank Willis Thomas — *Strange Fruit* — and redefining the Black male identity



By Mira Gandy
Artist & Scribe

HANK WILLIS THOMAS was born in Plainfield, New Jersey in 1976. His mother is a photographer and an historian of African American photography and his father is, amongst other things, a jazz musician.

Thomas is a photo conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history and popular culture. He received his BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and his MFA in photography, along with an MA in visual criticism, from California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco.

Thomas has acted as a visiting professor at CCA and in the MFA programs at Maryland Institute College of Art and ICP/Bard and has lectured at Yale University, Princeton University, the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

His work has been featured in many publications including *Reflections in Black* (Norton, 2000) *25 under 25: Up-and-Coming American Photographers* (CDS, 2003), *30 Americans* (RFC, 2008). Thomas' monograph, *Pitch Blackness*, was published by Aperture in 2008. He received a new media fellowship through the Tribeca Film Institute and was an artist in residence at John Hopkins University.

He has exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the U.S. and abroad including Galerie Anne De Villepoix in Paris, the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco and the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. Thomas' work is in numerous public collections including The Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, The High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Museum of Fine Art in Houston.

His collaborative projects have been featured at the Sundance Film Festival and installed publicly at the Oakland International Airport, The Oakland Museum of California and the University of California, San Francisco. Recent exhibitions include Dress Codes: The International Center for Photography's Triennial of Photography and Video, Greater New York at P.S. 1/ MoMa, Contact Toronto Photography Festival and Houston Fotofest. Thomas is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.

Recently, I caught up with the iconic artist in D.C. to discuss his photographic exhibition *Strange Fruit* on view at Corcoran Gallery of Art and his innovative trans media project *Question Bridge*.



Hank Willis Thomas, And One, 2011



Hank Willis Thomas, Strange Fruit, 2011

MIRA GANDY: What was the impetus for your *Strange Fruit* series?

HANK WILLIS THOMAS: I am interested in archival imagery and what other stories photographic images tell. How can an image speak to a larger issue? I was trying to figure out how do I contend with these images of lynchings? I wanted to find a new way to present and read them. I have always been haunted by Nina Simone's version of the song Strange Fruit; the way she kind of lets so many of the words linger. I remember when I was younger, having that song in my head. During that time it was still legal in the NBA to make a slam dunk and hang from the rim. It was as sign of triumph. I thought there was something interesting about these "Black bodies swinging." And how lynchings were major public spectacles of that time and sports games are major public spectacles. I thought there might be this strange connection to the Black bodies being the object in both. I was also thinking about ways to combat the image of the noose and thought, what if someone was trying to dunk on the noose.

This symbol of Black male power and triumph confronting the noose. All this imagery was in my mind and I thought there was something interesting that could be represented there.

GANDY: Tell me about your collaborative project *Question Bridge*?

THOMAS: The original concept came from Chris Johnson who was commissioned in 1996 to create a video piece for the Museum of Photographic Arts in San Diego, CA. He wanted to make a piece that encouraged different aspects of the African American community to communicate with one another. He saw there was a fissure between those people, who after integration were able to leave the community and have a certain kind of success and those people who were stuck in the "hood." He wanted to figure out a way to have them have a revealing conversation. He thought it might be more fruitful to have conversations mediated through video to ensure people listened more effectively. In 2006, we revised the project to focus on Black men. I realized in the construction of the Black male identity there seemed to be no virtues left. The only virtue that was left was physical and sexual prowess, if you can call them virtues. What's sad is that you can tell by the way men of my generation presented themselves they latched onto that. Obviously, there is a whole range of Black men that live outside of that. I wanted to use the *Question Bridge* model of Black men asking questions of other Black men to show there is just as much range within any given demographic as it is outside of it. So Chris, Bayete Ross Smith and I started to travel the country and ask Black men if they had a question for another Black man.

They would ask the question, and then I had to figure out who could answer their question. The most challenging question for me was from guy who said, "What is so cool about selling crack?" How do you answer that question? Through this exchange, of a stranger asking a question of another stranger, there is not just one answer but infinite answers. The project has now grown into a campaign to represent or redefine Black male identity. As collaborators, we don't all agree about what Black identity is. But we do agree that a question is more generous than an answer because a question provides someone else with a platform for expression.

In January 2012, *Question Bridge* will travel to the Salt Lake Art Center, the Oakland Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, Atlanta and the Sundance Film Festival as an installation and a 9-12th grade curriculum piloted in Atlanta, Oakland and New York. For more information visit: *www.questionbridge.com* and *www.corcoran.org / strange fruit* and *www.hankwillisthomas.com*

(Photo Credits: Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, © Hank Willis Thomas)



Hank Willis Thomas ***(Photo by Rashid Johnson)***





Hank Willis Thomas, below, donated the photo *Strange Fruit*, right, to an exhibit of artwork that will be auctioned in November to benefit The Africa Foundation.

The NEW BLACK

AN ARTIST EXPLORES RACIAL IDENTITY AND STANDARDS IN AMERICA

Art for Africa New York will be on display at Sotheby's New York, 1334 York Ave., beginning Nov. 12, and will conclude with an auction Nov. 17. africafoundation.org

Artist Hank Willis Thomas, whose works often focus on themes of identity, history and pop culture, is one of 40 contemporary American and African artists whose work will be displayed and auctioned during Art for Africa New York. The event, sponsored by The Africa Foundation, assists orphaned and needy children in southern and eastern Africa. A longtime supporter of the foundation, Watch! caught up with Thomas, whose works are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Art in Houston, to talk about his creative process, inspiration and life experience. — *Carrie Mackin*

***Watch!*:** Why did you choose the title of Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" for the photograph that you donated?

Hank Willis Thomas: The photograph is very much about race. I recently read a book about the black body as spectacle, and it made me think about what happens to black athletes who step out of line, such as Tiger Woods or Kobe Bryant, and how there's a different standard in which black athletes are criticized in the media, opposed to, say, someone like Ben Roethlisberger. So the work is really trying to talk about the complexities of that.

***Watch!*:** Your *Branded* series and monograph *Pitch Blackness* was a reaction to the shooting of your cousin in 2000. How did that affect your work?

Hank: It inspired me to start making work about things that really affect real people. I was interested in violence and experience as related to the black male body and commodity culture, so my cousin's murder really inspired me to explore that.

***Watch!*:** Your background is in photography, although you do work in other mediums as well. Do you prefer one to the other?

Hank: I've started thinking of myself less as a photographer and more of a photoconceptual artist or new media artist. I want to make work that speaks about popular culture but isn't limited to just being about one medium, although I have the most fun with photography. I can retouch or remove text or objects or images as a way of retelling history.

***Watch!*:** You've traveled to Africa over the past several years. How do you interpret race relations there, and has that influenced you?

Hank: I've been to Ghana, Angola, Senegal and South Africa, and those countries have very different relationships to race or blackness, specifically because there are so many diverse ethnicities on the continent. I feel that South Africa's relationship to race is understood the same way as it is in the U.S., due to its relatively recent relationship with apartheid, whereas in Senegal there isn't such a highly visible class of Europeans who dominated the culture and identity. My first trip to South Africa really made me realize that blackness is a cultural fabrication; when one country or countries don't agree what it means to be black, there has to be something wrong with the notion. That's when I started to question the relevance of race defined by others.

Tuesday, April 19, 2011 | By Hanifa Haris

Erasing Type: Hank Willis Thomas on What Advertisements Are Really Saying



Hank Willis Thomas
Things That Make You Go Hmmmmm?!!
Year: 2000
Original Photographer: Unknown
Original Ad: Nissan Cars

"This was the first of the series because someone gave me this image and said I should do something with it. It became clear to me that truth is stranger than fiction and that by merely removing the text and logo from the advertisement you would never know this was an ad for a Japanese car."

Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008," part of a new installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, is a project by artist Hank Willis Thomas. Appropriating ads that have targeted the black audience over the last 40 years, Thomas uses their images to explore identity, history and popular culture.

By “unbranding” photographs—digitally removing the logos and text—Thomas allows the viewer to view the image, now stripped of its sale pitch, to take hard look at the way the advertising industry—and society at large—uses photography to reinforce generalizations about race and gender.

In an interview with TIME, Thomas shared his inspiration, process and technique:

What inspired you to start working on this project?

The *Unbranded* project is a response to a project of mine called *B®anded* [In that project, Thomas took ad copy and superimposed it over photographs, for example taking MasterCard copy and pasting over a photograph of a funeral]. There I was thinking about how black bodies were branded as a sign of ownership during slavery, and how their descendants bodies are branded today through corporate advertising. *Unbranded* came about when I realized that I could say more by using real ads as a form of cultural critique.

What is interesting to you about that time period?

With the murder of Martin Luther King, 1968 became the symbolic end of the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted to track “blackness” in the corporate eye during this amazing period of progress, which is book-ended by the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the election of Barack Obama.

Can you tell us a bit about the provenance of the photographs you picked?

Most of the people making decisions in advertising then, and now, are white males. I was interested in how white male interpretations of “black” identity shaped aspects of African American lives. The photographers of most of these images are unknown. I feel its integral to understand that these images are essentially created by our society, and that I did not contribute to, nor claim any authorship, of them.

What sorts of advertisements were you most drawn to?

I chose two ads for every year, trying to find as broad a range of ads as possible from films, foods, clothing, cigarettes and alcohol. What I'm most interested in these ads is not only how other people see black Americans, but also how we see ourselves. Part of advertising's success is based on its ability to reinforce generalizations developed around race, gender and ethnicity which are generally false, but [these generalizations] can sometimes be entertaining, sometimes true, and sometimes horrifying.

While selecting ads and seeing the recurrence of common threads in advertisements, what did you find most intriguing?

I saw a lot ads for cigarettes, alcohol and hair care products. And themes of romance, family, and seduction and humor were common in all. I find it most intriguing that most of the ads appear to have nothing to do with the product once they are unbranded.

To view more work by Hank Willis Thomas, visit hankwillisthomas.com