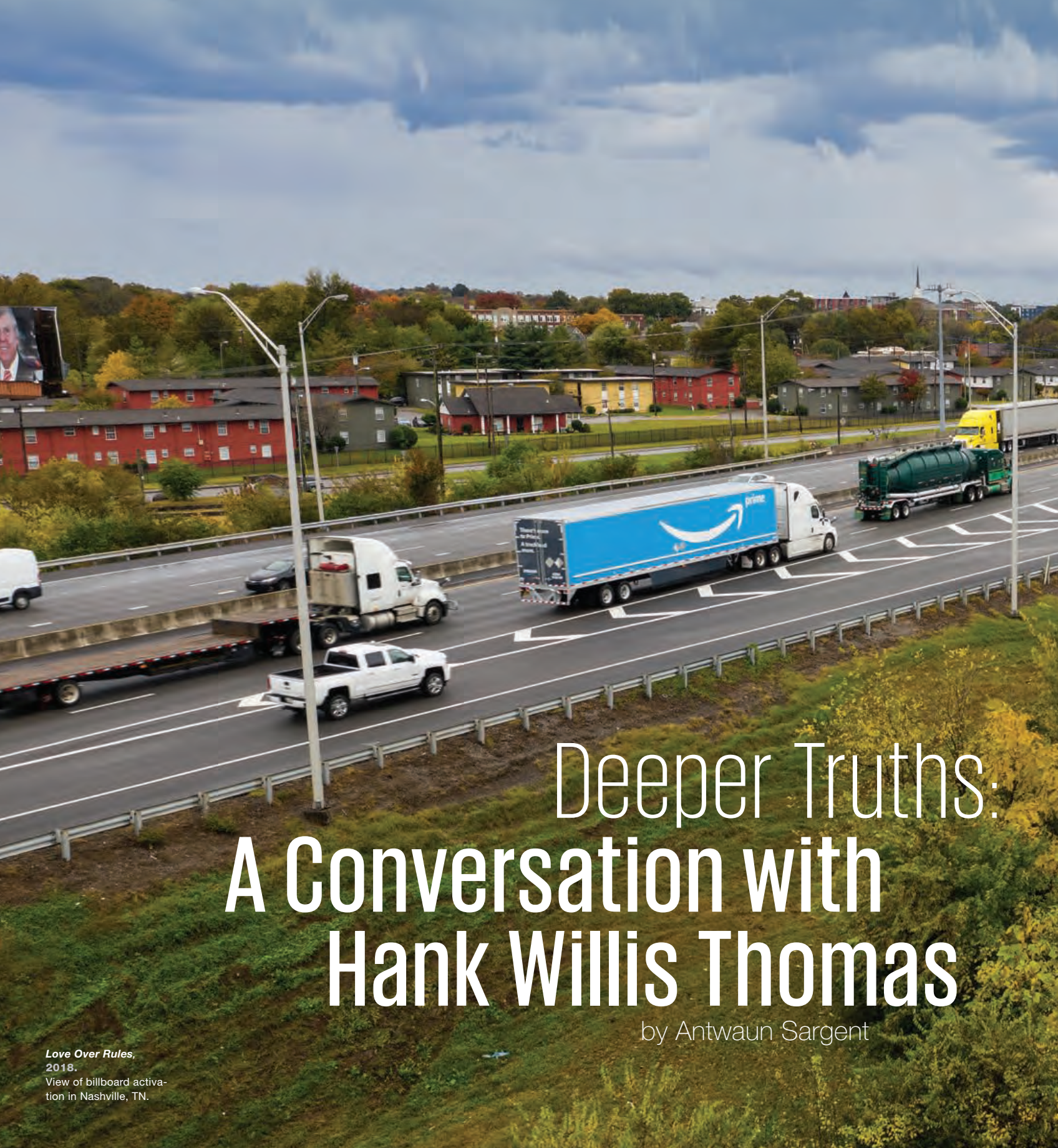

# Deeper Truths: A Conversation with Hank Willis Thomas

by Antwaun Sargent

***Love Over Rules*, 2018.**
View of billboard activation in Nashville, TN.

# q/a

CLIFFORD PICKETT AND ALYSSA MEADOWS, © HANK WILLIS THOMAS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK. / PORTRAIT: ANDREA BLANCH

**Hank Willis Thomas,** who was recently awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, has emerged as one of the most prolific artists of his generation. Formally trained as a photographer, over the last 15 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." *The Truth Booth*, an interactive installation that has traveled across the world, allowed participants to dialogue about questions concerning their communities; *All Power to All People*, a monumental Afro-pick planted outside City Hall in Philadelphia in 2017, was a poignant reminder of self-determination; and other sculptures, such as *Strike, Liberty*, and *Die Dompas Moet Brand! (The Passport Must Burn!)*, 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 *All Things Being Equal…*, the monograph published in conjunction with your survey exhibition, on view at the Portland Art Museum in Oregon through January 12, 2020, and I came across the statement, "I'm much more influenced by Beyoncé than Picasso." What do you mean by that?**
**Hank Willis Thomas:** Even though my mother's a curator and art historian, that wasn't the driving force in my social identity. You and I, we grew up in what's called the MTV Generation. We take our cues from people in popular culture. The audacity and, some might say, perfection that Beyoncé represents are qualities that I've always taken inspiration from.

**AS: One 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. Now 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? Do 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 All a Question of Luck* (2010) is a diptych of Josephine Baker and another black woman. The juxtaposition 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 All a Question of Luck*, 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 Josephine Baker is in part about someone who'd been overlooked,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
***The Truth is I Love You*, 2015.**
Aluminum lamppost sign with vinyl graphics on both sides, view of installation at Metrotech Commons, Brooklyn, NY.

***All Power to All People,* 2017.**
Aluminum and stainless steel,
98 x 43.5 x 2.5 in.

***Strike,* 2018.**
Stainless steel with mirrored finish,
32.5 x 31 x 7.5 in.

***Liberty,* 2015.**
Fiberglass and chameleon auto paint finish,
35 x 10 x 10 in.

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT: JAMES EWING / ALL: © HANK WILLIS THOMAS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK


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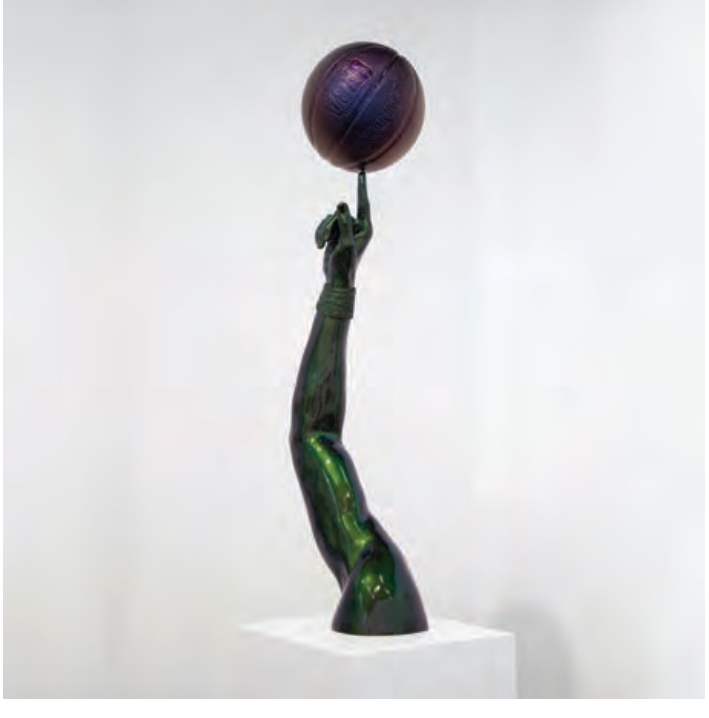
is
you



“**Sports is also a highly political landscape.** When you think about many of the major advancements for disenfranchised people—African American, Native American, Latino, and women—many of those happened through sports.”




FROM ABOVE:
***White Imitates Black,* 2009.**
Lenticular print,
40 x 30 in.

***Branded Head,* 2003.**
Lambda photograph,
30 x 20 in.

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: Over 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 3D 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 Africa 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 project, were you thinking sculpturally about how those billboards might consider an existing landscape?**

**HWT:** Public 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 objects?**

# hank willis thomas


For Freedoms,
***Four Freedoms,***
**2018.**
View of billboard
activation in
Des Moines, IA.

JEFF SOROCCHINS. © HANK WILLIS THOMAS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK


**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. Our 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 Do We Go From Here?" is one of the questions on Eric Gottesman'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 "Unbranded" series and *White Imitates Black* (2009)—to being more concerned with overtly political images and messaging in *Raise Up* (2016) or For Freedoms.**

**HWT:** All 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 2003), which preceded "Unbranded," as even more political. I think about the extraction of the political when we think about the billboards. One of the billboards that got censored by the billboard companies was Adam Pendleton's work. They felt they couldn't understand it on the surface, so therefore it was a threat.

**AS: *The Sword Swallower* (2017) and *Tip Off* (2014) continue your fascination with sports. In these sculptures, you make the politics of sports the subject 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—African American, Native American, Latino, and women—many of those happened through sports. When you think about Billie Jean King and even Michael Jordan, Jim Brown, and Muhammad Ali, 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 Picasso, why is his work important 100 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 Greece and ancient Egypt, and even the Renaissance 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 Up* is situated in Montgomery, Alabama, on the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, 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. Even 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 National Memorial for Peace and Justice. 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 King Jr. memorial. It will feature the arms of King and his wife, Coretta Scott King, embracing in bronze. It is an untraditional monument in that it does not capture the**

COURTESY MASS DESIGN GROUP, BOSTON AND HANK WILLIS THOMAS STUDIO

***The Embrace*, 2019.**
Rendering of Boston's Martin Luther King Jr. memorial.


Hank Willis Thomas and Light Work, ***US IS THEM THEY ARE US,*** **2018.** View of billboard activation in Syracuse, NY.

VICTOR RIVERA, © HANK WILLIS THOMAS, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, 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?**

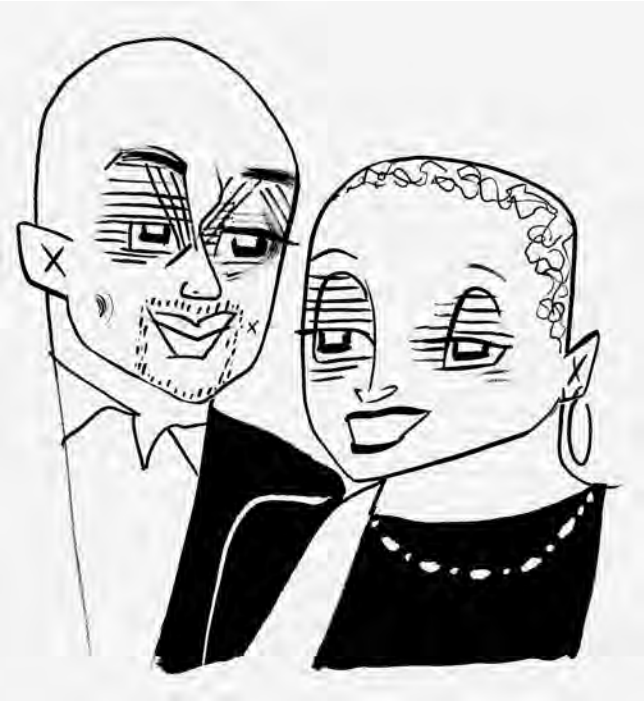
**HWT:** What are we buying into when we choose to buy products based off an image that’s telling us who and what is important? What are we relinquishing when we allow notions of ourselves and others to be shaped by corporate agendas?

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."*

The New York Times Style Magazine

THE STORY OF A THING

# G.I. Joes Taught This Artist About Storytelling

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

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

**As told to Emily Spivack**

**June 13, 2018**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

The New York Times

SPRING GALLERY GUIDE

# 12 Galleries to Visit Now in Chelsea

By Roberta Smith

April 26, 2018

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

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

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

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


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

THE NEW YORKER

NEWS DESK

# A DEVASTATING, OVERDUE NATIONAL MEMORIAL TO LYNCHING VICTIMS

By Alexis Okeowo April 26, 2018

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

Photograph by Audra Melton / NYT / Redux

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

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

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

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

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

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

Photograph by Audra Melton / NYT / Redux

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

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

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

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

Newsweek

CULTURE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**COURTESY OF HANK WILLIS THOMAS/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY**

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

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

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

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

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

**COURTESY OF HANK WILLIS THOMAS/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY**

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

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

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

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS:
# Black Archival Memory & Its Conceits

*by Nico Wheadon* *May 1, 2018*

JACK SHAINMAN | MARCH 29 – MAY 12, 2018

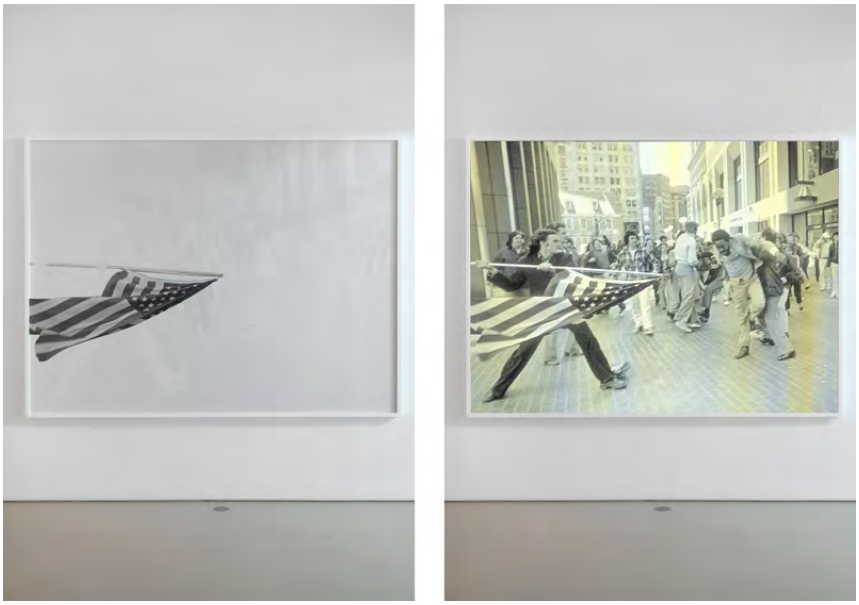
Hank Willis Thomas, *I Don't Wanna Fight With My Fists*, 2017. Screenprint on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond, 20 × 28 inches. © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Over the past decade, the community of artists of color who retell American history by remixing and repurposing its archives has reached fever pitch. From Derrick Adams's inventive adaptations of politically-charged designs by black fashion pioneer Patrick Kelly, to Firelei Báez's reimagining of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* to grant women of color their rightful seat at the table, artists are resurfacing visual languages from the past to comment on contemporary socio-political culture. Notably, these temporal investigations and reclamations also serve to uplift the long lineage of African-American changemakers who are all too often omitted from the archives altogether.

In this way, archives—which find home in our public institutions, private residences, and online—have come to embody sites of radical imagination. Now more than ever, artists are critically engaging the cultural objects, ideas, tools, and ephemera that have shaped—and take the shape of—our inherited past. Celebrated conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas has long tapped the well of popular media images, illuminating trends in

American consumption across socio-cultural spheres, and prompting us to take stock of our *investments*. In *What We Ask Is Simple,* Thomas turns to international activism, sourcing iconic protest photographs from "libraries, historical archives, and years of online research,"[1] to undergird this impressive new body of work.

It's difficult to recount the experience of viewing these works without first describing their odd context—dimly lit galleries with wall signage that, in what might be an art historical first, actually *encourages* flash photography! While light is well understood to erode the surface qualities and archivability of an artwork, Thomas presents a series of polydimensional screenprints on retroflective vinyl whose formal qualities are markedly *enhanced* by iPhone torches and light beams. If you are a science novice such as myself, *retroflective* materials are typically used to increase the nighttime conspicuity of something or someone—a poetic metaphor for drawing meaning out of the dark, or illuminating a subject who might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Once aglow, these seemingly abstract images pull into sharp focus, foregrounding historic African-American change agents—such as Shirley Chisolm, Dorothy Counts, and Gloria Richardson—amidst the metallic, painterly brushstrokes. As the viewer moves around and between the works, heightened levels of detail emerge.



Hank Willis Thomas, *All Deliberate Speed*, 2018. Screenprint on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond, 72 3/4 × 97 5/8 × 2 inches. Left: no flash; right: flash. © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Thomas forges an alternative universe in this exhibition, whose rules of engagement center black protagonists, and activate technology as a political device for reframing historical narratives. The more time spent free-falling into the depths and dimensions of works such as *I Am an American Also (flash)* (2018) the less simple one's questions become. For example, in *We want equal—but…(II)* (2018), how is it possible that white figures can emerge from black space, and black figures from white space, all within the same frame? And what does this transposition say about the historical assumptions that have been projected onto the binary construction of race in this country? In this

moment of questioning I became hyper-aware of the role technology has played—both then and now—in helping to *right*, write, and rewrite the history that contextualizes the archive.

As I riffed on the conceptual intersections of archives, activism, and the American dream—and imagined the now-digital archives of protest imagery we create every day—the myth of American progress felt more real than ever. From Facebook Live videos of black men, women, and children slain in broad daylight, to viral tweets of videos depicting police brutality against unarmed civilians, technology has become increasingly important in documenting social injustices and holding oppressors accountable. And it, like archival memory, is fortified by collective use—#blacklivesmatter, #sayhername, and #itcouldhavebeenme have become tragic yet vital repositories of personal images that help us to collectively remember those we've lost.

In works such as *Four Little Girls (blue and white)*, *Pledge*, and *Power to the People / I'm too Young to Vote (black and gold)*—all 2018—I was struck by the hope and heartache I felt as I encountered images of children advocating for an equitable future that has yet to come. I wondered how the brave and resilient young people pictured engage the struggles of America today, and grew angry as I traced the waves of so-called change spawned by the 20th-century movements Thomas so powerfully re-postures. And for a brief moment, the writer and the artist in me joined as one to proclaim that the narratives we construct bear the same cultural weight as the images that capture them. For those like Thomas who dare to engage the complex, conceptual terrain between the fact and fictions of history, archives—in both their analog and digital forms—become a powerful medium, that empowers artists to author distinct and fresh accounts of what *was*, what *is*, and what might become.

The Standard

MAY 02 2018

# Hank Willis Thomas Shines a Light

NEW YORK-ART



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MUSÉE
VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE

MAY 10

# Exhibition Review: What Hank Willis Thomas Asks is Simple

REVIEWS

Don't Let us Down (no flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

By Emma Coyle

It is impossible to walk through the Jack Shainman Gallery without catching a glimpse of yourself or other people investigating Hank Willis Thomas's new solo exhibit, *What We Ask Is Simple*, as they are literally reflected in his work. This new exhibit focuses on placing the viewer directly in the middle of the work using silvered glass mirrors combined with archival news images "of a hard-fought, perennial battle for equality". His current show is Thomas's sixth solo exhibit at the Jack Shainman Gallery, and there is definitely a reason that they keep coming back to this 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship award winner. It is well worth exploring the exhibit in these last few days before it closes on May 12th.


Don't Let us Down ( flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

There is a physicality to Thomas's retroreflective works in that initial moment of reflection captured as each person steps up to the appropriated archival footage. Swiftly, the viewer takes on the mantle of photographer to expose the concealed image, with their camera flash blending their relationship to each photograph. As the work is approached, there is an abstract quality to the unaffected images. Streaky white lines on a black background or images of lone figures hold a peaceful quality.

Every photograph is perceived in two moments; before and after engaging with it. When the context of the image is revealed, its initial impression is contrasted with the violent conflict that was previously hidden. Equally alluring are the vibrant colors that are now exposed. Rich yellows and reds appear where before there was a faded quality inline with the found images used. As they walk through the gallery, each individual is left with the knowledge of how they can affect a moment, a scene, or events destined to become historical. What is our role in these moments? To merely view or to go forth and engage? It is the same question confronted in the moments of conflict that Thomas has spent his career exploring.

Wounded Knee (no flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

Wounded Knee (flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

The influence of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Mirror Paintings* on Thomas's silvered mirrors is apparent in both the use of reflection and the clear bend towards activism that centers the audience in the work. Thomas blends his "focus on framing and context" with the idea that spectatorship can have the agency to enact change on the environment it observes. The mirrors are hung at eye level, creating an intimacy between the subject and the viewer. That intimacy is paramount as frames containing images of people seem life-size, reachable, touchable, people that could be spoken with. The only difference between them and the audience is the quality of the image. Aged and often in a limited color palate, whereas those wandering the gallery bring multihued modernity into the image with their reflection. Bold font printed on a mirror says "what you see here what you do here what you hear here when you leave here let it stay here" but it is impossible to leave this exhibition's impact behind.

I Tried to see a friendly face (no flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

I Tried to see a friendly face (flash) © Hank Willis Thomas

The theme of reflection is inescapable, and it's a theme that moves from the physical to the introspective, and it's a theme that can also be seen in Willis's previous work including his recent 2017 exhibitions *Blind Memory* and *Freedom isn't Always Beautiful* at the Savanna College of Art and Design Museum of Art. Personal reflection in the face of conflict is a key element to the experience, which continues Thomas's investigation of social activism and the tumultuous history of black twentieth century protest.

ELEPHANT


11 Apr 2018

# Hank Willis Thomas Takes On Politics and Provocation in New York

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


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

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

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

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

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

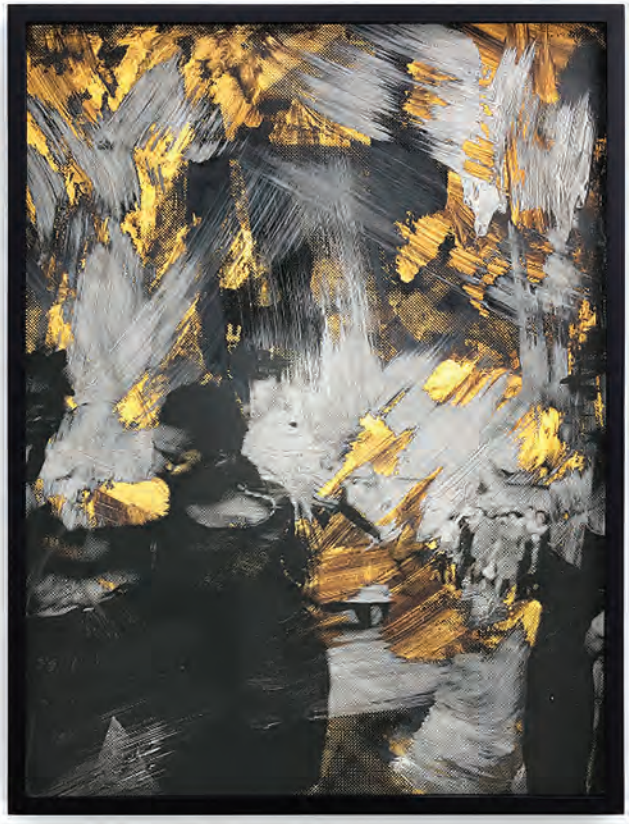
I Tried to see a friendly face, 2018 (no flash)
I Tried to see a friendly face, 2018, (flash)

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

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

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

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



Turbulence (whitewash), 2018 (flash)

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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


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

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

# a LEGACY UNCEASING

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

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

DON'T CALL HANK WILLIS Thomas a political artist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Michael O'Neill (2)

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

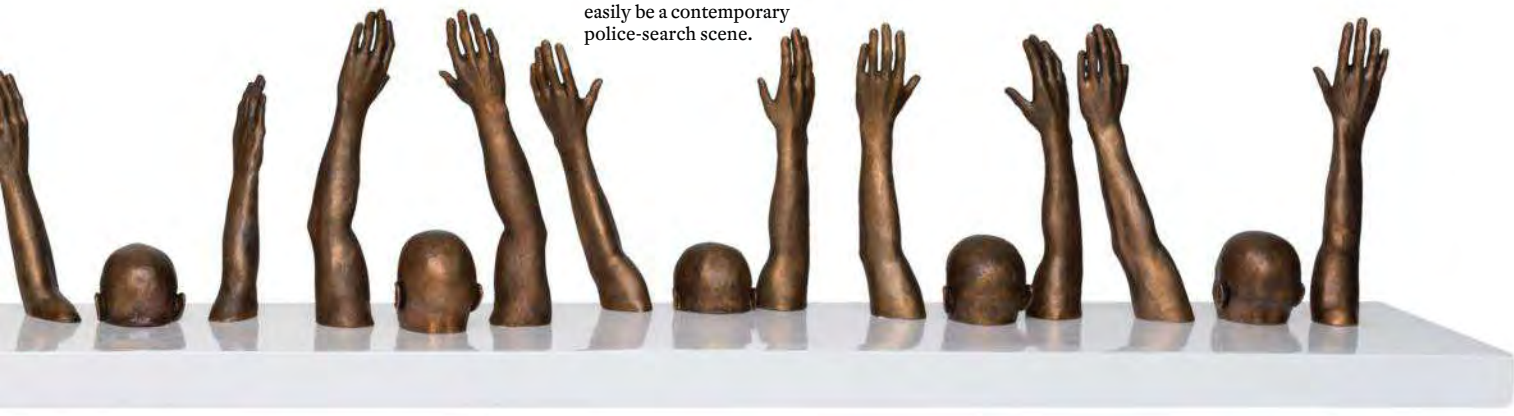
The sculpture is a three-dimensional interpretation of a famous apartheid-era image by pioneering South African photojournalist Ernest Cole, showing naked miners with arms raised during a medical exam.

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

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

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

Steve Weinik, courtesy of Philadelphia Mural Arts



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

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

Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas and Ben Brown Fine Arts London

*Blind Memory* photos (4): John McKinnon, SCAD

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

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

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

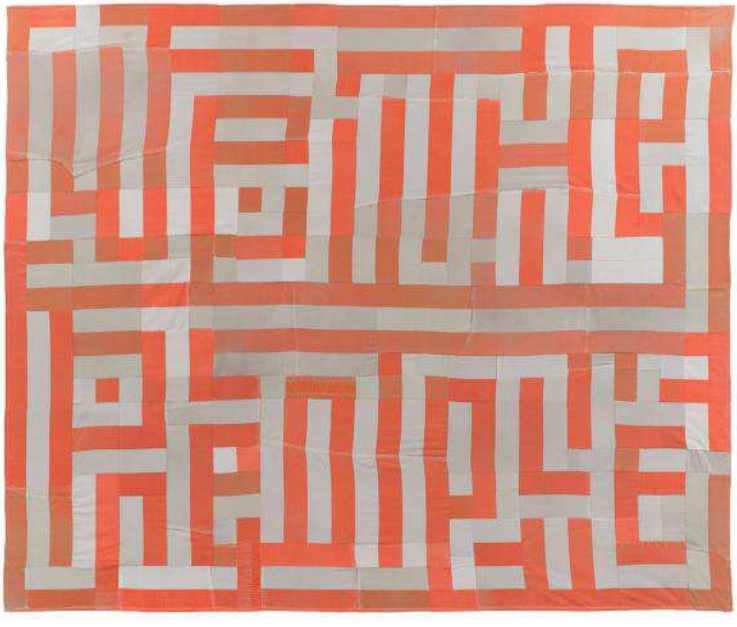
Thomas' father held many jobs – soldier, chemist, physicist, film producer, jazz musician – and Thomas says that

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

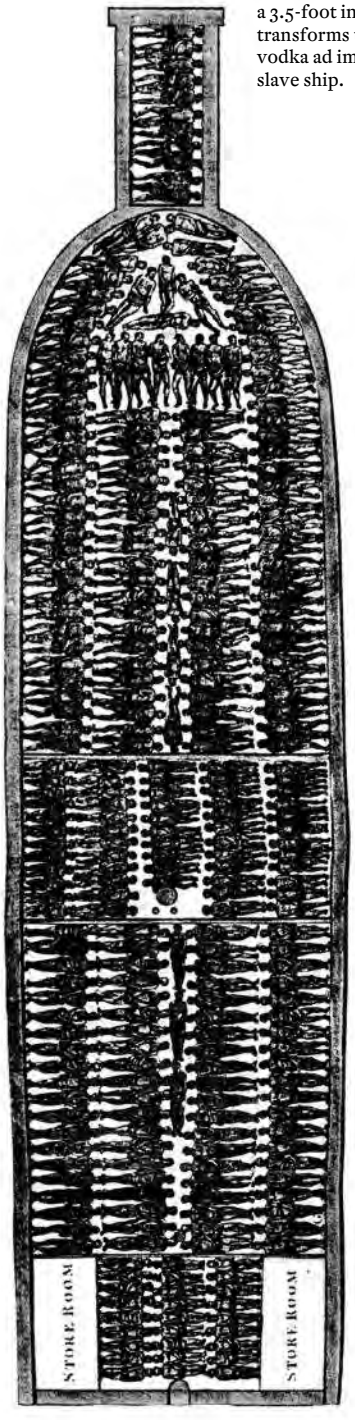
This is a new kind of project for Thomas, but it is also the continuation of a lifetime of exploration. He was raised not to be afraid of breaking artistic barriers, to view challenge as opportunity. It is a lesson he has never forgotten.

✚

hankwillisthomas.com

*Britt Julious is a journalist and essayist in Chicago.*

Photos: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery




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

# ABSOLUT POWER.

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

BOMB

# Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi

Apr 3, 2018

Interview

Art

#143

ISSUE

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

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

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

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

**Hank Willis Thoma**
Thanks for coming by.

**KO**
What are you working on right now?

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

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

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

**KO**

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


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

**HWT**

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

**KO**

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

**HWT**

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


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

**KO**

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

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

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

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

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

**KO**
—William Eggleston and Ernst Haas.

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

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

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

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

**KO**

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

**HWT**

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

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

**KO**

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

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

**HWT**

Are you talking about my retroreflective prints?

**KO**

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

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

**HWT**

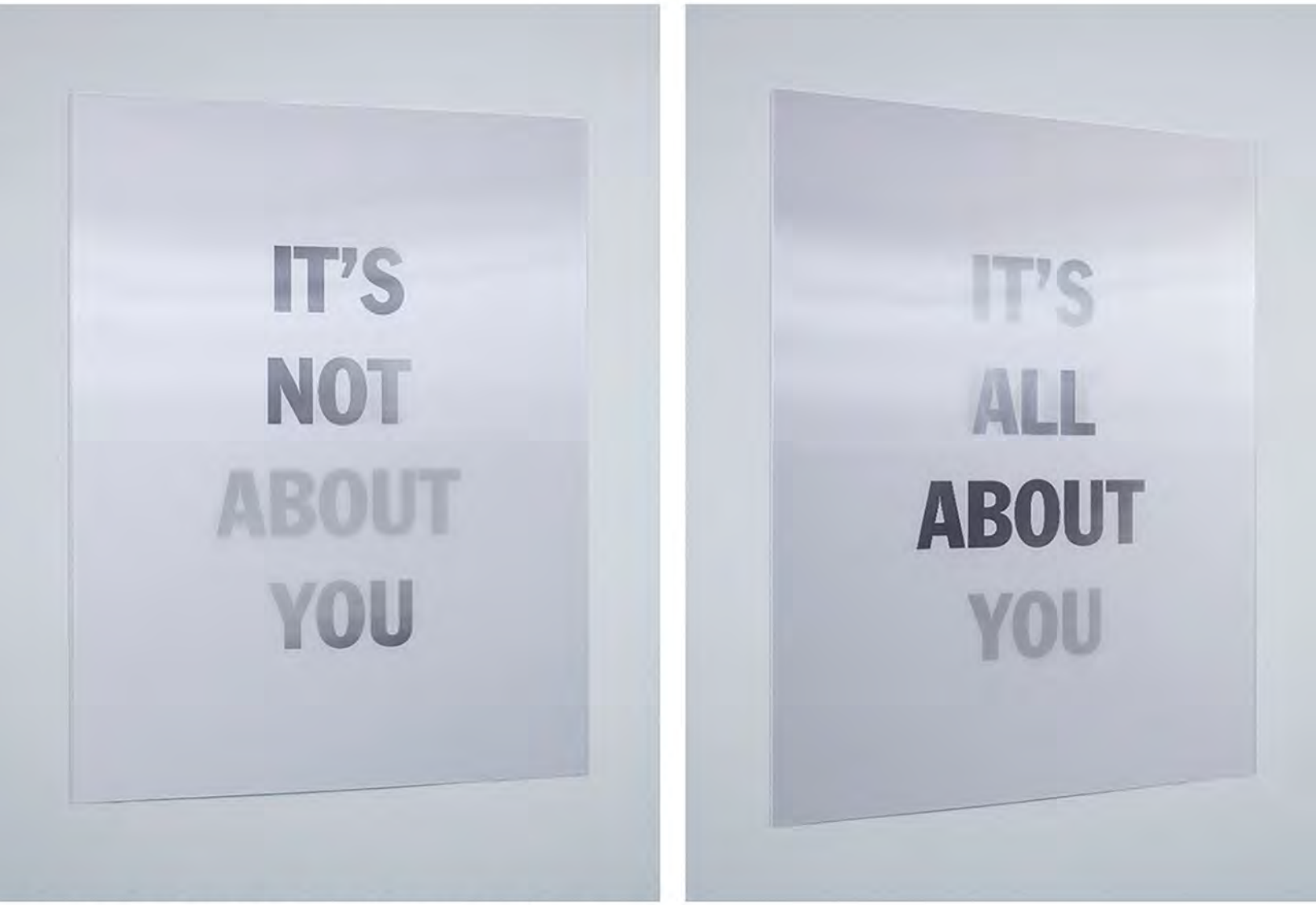
Yeah, hopefully viewers are having a revelation the same way I do when I'm digging through an archive. I find an image and want to keep it, take it with me, save it. I want viewers to do the same with the work.

**KO**

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

**HWT**

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




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

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

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

(*doorbell rings*)

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

**HWT**
What is *Zulu Time*?

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

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

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

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

**KO**

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

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

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

**KO**
Or as a colonial power.

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

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

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

**KO**

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

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

**HWT**

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

**KO**

No, why would I?

**HWT**

Because frontiers are there to be conquered.

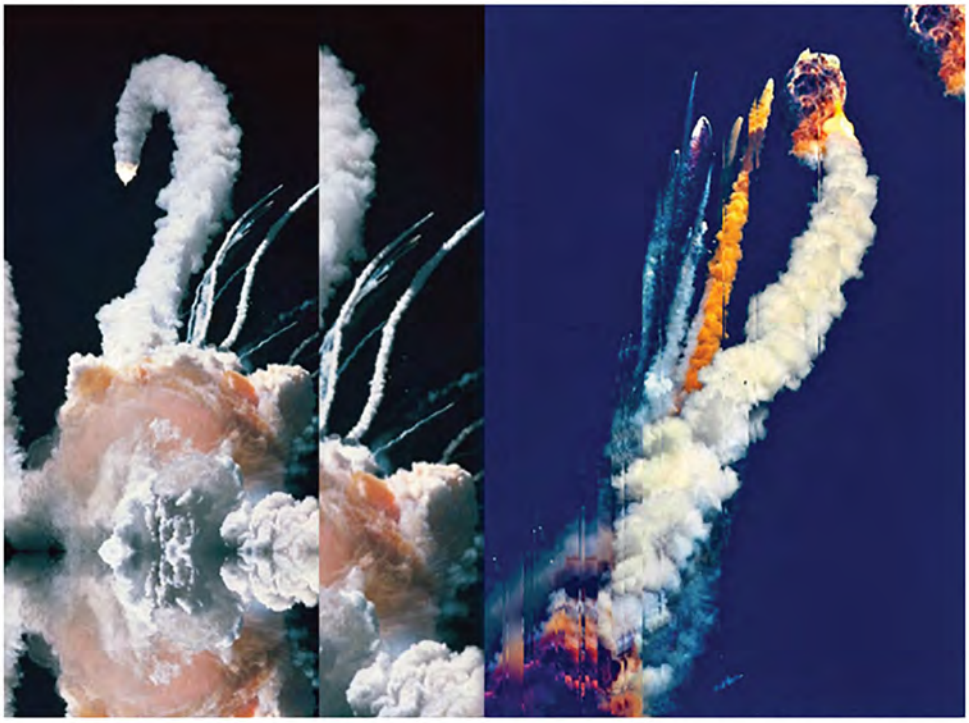
**KO**

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

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

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

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



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

**KO**

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**HWT**

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

**KO**

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

**HWT**

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

**KO**

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

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

**HWT**
Prescribed notions, yeah.

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

**HWT**
But not in this room with you.

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

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

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

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

**KO**
And in shifting who is included in the we?

**HWT**

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

**KO**

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

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

**HWT**

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

**KO**

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

**HWT**

And will the film be displayed in a planetarium?

**KO**

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

**HWT**
That's crazy.

**KO**
Yeah, it's gonna be bananas.

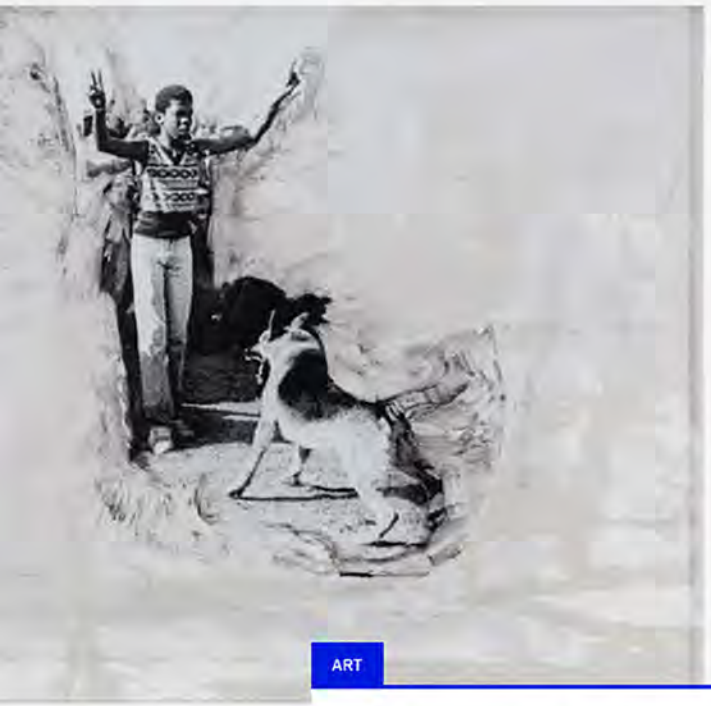
In another work of mine, *The Clouds Are After Me* (2007–9), I'm thinking about the perpetuation of fear in order to build consensus, and the absurdities and arbitrariness of these spaces. What happens when we confront these specters that we're simultaneously hunting down and running from?

How are you dealing with the current political moment?

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

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

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



ART

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

JULIAN A. JIMAREZ HOWARD

Apr 2 2018, 5:33pm

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JUXTAPOZ ART+CULTURE

PAINTING

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

Mar 29, 2018 - May 12, 2018

Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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

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

artnet® news

**Events and Parties**

# Editors' Picks: 14 Things to See in New York This Week

Here are this week's top art events.

**Sarah Cascone**, March 26, 2018

**Thursday, March 29–May 12**

Hank Willis Thomas's *Freedom Now (red and gold) (no flash)*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

**7. "Hank Willis Thomas: What We Ask Is Simple" at Jack Shainman Gallery**

This is a body of work that simply must be seen in-person. Thomas has translated documentary style photography into painterly screenprints, and in this series, has taken photographic works taken with and without flash, and screen-printed them onto retroreflective vinyl—resulting in surreal, ghostly images that can only be seen in their true form by taking a flash photograph of the work.

**Location:** Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street
**Price:** Free
**Time:** Opening reception, 6 p.m.–8 p.m. at 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street

*—Caroline Goldstein*

# March 29: Hank Willis Thomas | What We Ask Is Simple

Hank Willis Thomas' "What We Ask Is Simple" opens Thursday, March 29th at Jack Shainman Gallery. Please join us for an opening reception Thursday, March 29th, from 6-8pm at both gallery locations. The exhibition will remain on view through May 12, 2018.

"What We Ask Is Simple" investigates 20th century protests in Africa, North America and Europe. These works remind us that the societal tumult we witness in the news and in the streets is part of a hard-fought, perennial battle for equality; and that we should not forget to acknowledge the overwhelming mass of people who use their creativity, courage, and community to inspire change.

San Francisco Chronicle

# Oakland Museum celebrates hip-hop's freestyle fashions

By Tony Bravo | March 15, 2018 | Updated: March 20, 2018 11:07am


Photo: Oakland Museum

IMAGE 1 OF 11
"Black Power," Digital C-Print, 2006 by Hank Willis Thomas. Part of the Oakland Museum of California's new exhibition "Respect: Hip-Hop Style and Wisdom."

Almost 40 years after the first beats were laid down, hip-hop music remains a major force in America's cultural dialogue. The Oakland Museum of California's new exhibition, "Respect: Hip-Hop Style & Wisdom," tells the story of the music scene's ascent both locally and globally.

"In general there's an under-recognized history of the Bay Area we want to highlight and flesh out in the origin story of hip-hop," says René de Guzman, the exhibition's curator. "The traditional story is New York-based, but the truth is it was a national phenomenon. There was a regional urban culture that kids were responding to at that time all over."

Key to understanding hip-hop's continued influence since the 1980s is understanding its ongoing cross-pollination with fashion.

Oakland's earliest contribution to the hip-hop aesthetic, de Guzman says, is a certain kind of "street-hustler style, both in attitude and dress," derivative of the East Bay's funk scene of the 1970s. The style was typified by a colorful, pimped-out kind of maximalism that also drew on earlier Bay Area musical artists like Sly and the Family Stone.

“Hip-hop style is so rich,” says de Guzman. “It could cover everything from the mack daddy or the hustler on the West Coast to East Coast Italian mafia style with fedoras and suits.” In Los Angeles’ hip-hop scene, he cites the influence of Latino “gangsta” style with its signature baggy pants, white T-shirts and bandannas. Then there are cross-coastal trends, including “working-class references with Timberland boots and the Run-DMC athletic wear.”

In the 1980s-’90s time frame that is the exhibition’s primary focus, everyday wardrobe pieces like sneakers, bomber jackets and tracksuits were customized and became signatures of hip-hop style. These items were later re-appropriated by the fashion industry and marketed as part of a hip-hop-influenced lifestyle by the same brands.

For de Guzman, the importance of customization for both artists and fans is a statement of “I am an agent of my own world; I’m so skillful and powerful I can take the products of corporate America and make them mine.” Trends like adding thicker laces to sneakers, graffiti motifs on clothes and lettering and “bling” (gold chains and sparkling stones, both real and costume) to pieces resulted in fans “creating your own power by customizing,” he says. “Like the way lowrider culture is about personalizing a Chevy, it’s the same way Run DMC says, ‘This is my Adidas,’ when he does it to a tracksuit.”

Among the authentic hip-hop fashion in the exhibition is a red and white striped Troop tracksuit with rapper LL Cool J’s name. The sweatsuit and suede pant zip-up jacket set is one of several pieces on loan to the museum by Bay Area collector and rapper Eric Robles, a.k.a. EBONE415.

“You’d find something like this at an urban specialty hood store back then,” Robles says, naming the now closed Harputs on Fillmore Street in San Francisco as an example. “LL (Cool J), MC Hammer — a lot of rap groups wore Troop.”

The tracksuit, and athletic apparel in general, especially sneakers, remain key pieces in hip-hop style today, including in hugely successful clothing lines by hip-hop artists like Sean Combs (Sean John), Pharrell Williams (G-Star Raw) and Kanye West (Yeezy).

“It’s about the youthful exuberance of physical style,” de Guzman says. “It’s the relationship between sports culture and music culture.”

Also featured in the exhibition are designer fashion and accessories influenced by hip-hop style, including bejeweled headphones by Dolce & Gabbana, a spray-paint can purse by Jeremy Scott for Moschino and a costume pearl “headphone” necklace by Chanel.

Susan Barrett, the lender of the items and the exhibition’s fashion specialist, says the fashion spread beyond the original community and into mainstream and high fashion as hip-hop rose in popularity, both aided by the growth of the Internet. The genre’s celebration of success via status symbols like bling and prominently logoed designer goods also made it ripe for style crossovers.

Unlike other antiestablishment music genres, “Hip-hop is unabashedly pro money and making money,” Barrett says. “Punk was anti-establishment and anti-capitalism; hip-hop is the opposite. But it’s not just about success in the preexisting system. These artists made their own system.

“There’s always a tension between hip-hop and fashion, about who is using whom,” Barrett says. “Look at the example of Dapper Dan.”

The Harlem custom clothier, once vilified and sued by luxury houses like Louis Vuitton for using their logos (without permission) in his designs for musicians, is now a featured collaborator at Gucci. The Gucci x Dapper Dan limited collection was announced after Gucci designer Alessandro Michele was called out for heavily referencing a Dapper Dan logo puffer coat in the house’s 2018 cruise collection.

“The story of Dapper Dan is fascinating in that Dapper Dan was copying all the designers and redoing it,” Barrett says. “That’s exactly what the hip-hop DJs of that time were doing: stealing, or sampling. That’s what Dapper Dan was doing. This has been going on since day one. Anytime there’s a cool street music, designers take it as inspiration.”

Ultimately, for de Guzman, the core of hip-hop style in any incarnation is rebellion.

“The idea of the antihero, the hustler, the gangsta is an essentially American idea,” says de Guzman. “America and hip-hop both have rebellious roots around oppression. In America it was King George and the British Empire; for hip-hop folk it’s issues of racial justice. It’s reflected both in the music and the clothes.”

NORTHWESTERN NOW

# Artist Hank Willis Thomas 'unbrands' ads to reveal questions about cultural values

## Exhibition opens April 14 at Block Museum and continues through Aug. 5

**April 05, 2018 | By** Stephanie Kulke

Hank Willis Thomas, "Bounce back to normal" (1933/2015). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

EVANSTON - Who is responsible for the meaning of an advertisement? How do ads reflect society's hopes and dreams at a moment in time, as well as popular ideas about race, gender and class?

Renowned conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas (b.1976) has built his career investigating issues of American consumer culture, particularly as it relates to African-American subjects. The **Block Museum of Art** at Northwestern is proud to present **"Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded,"** showcasing some of Thomas's most well-known works interrogating how advertising images reproduce and reinforce the changing American ideals of race and femininity.

"Unbranded" opens April 14 and continues through Aug. 5 in the main gallery of the Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive, on the Evanston campus.

The exhibition includes selections from two related bodies of Thomas' work, drawing directly from the visual repertoire of American print advertising from the past century.

Within the images, Thomas digitally removes slogans and product names from historical and contemporary advertisements, "un-branding" them and asking us to confront the impact of images on the popular imagination.

*Hank Willis Thomas, Farewell Uncle Tom, 1971/2007, LightJet Print, 55 x 46 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.*

"Hank Willis Thomas uses appropriation as a strategy to catalyze thinking about the value system operating within images that circulate in consumer culture," said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum's Ellen Philips Katz Director. "How does advertising shape our collective sense of self and individual sense of self-worth? How does it commodify race and gender?

"Northwestern is home to renowned programs in marketing and communications and, our students will one day hold decision-making positions in these fields," Corrin said. "We hope this presentation of Hank's work will be a springboard for lively discussion of these questions."

The first series represented in the exhibition, *"Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America,"* explores 50 years of print advertising that targets African-Americans. The series starts with 1968, a year of heightened social and political protest that saw the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and continues through 2008, the year of the election of the first African-American president. Thomas digitally stripped these advertisements of all text, including product names and slogans, allowing the impact of their images to be felt more acutely.

The second series, *"Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015,"* ends with the year in which Thomas finished working on the series and stretches back to five years before American women gained the right to vote. Like "Reflections in Black," the selected advertising images are stripped of text, heightening viewers' awareness of cultural assertions about beauty, desire, virtue and ideal white femininity.

"I think what happens with ads — when we put text and logos on them, we do all the heavy lifting of making them make sense to us," Thomas told NPR in 2015. "But when you see the image naked, or unbranded, you start to really ask questions. That's why we can almost never tell what it's actually an ad for, because ads really aren't about the products. It's about what myths and generalizations we can attach and the repetition of imagery of a certain type."

*Hank Willis Thomas, The Taming of the Shrewd, 1966/2015, 2015, digital chromogenic print, 40 x 47 1/16.Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.*

Curator Janet Dees, the Block Museum's Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, selected 35 works for the exhibition to represent the larger series from which they are drawn as well as to make conceptual connections across both bodies of work.

"There are photographs in both series from the 1970s that share visual elements and themes. This gives viewers an opportunity to think about how issues of beauty, gender roles and interracial dynamics play out across the series in a way that wouldn't be possible looking at the series separately," Dees said.

"Thomas' work fits squarely into Block Museum's mission of presenting programming that sparks discussion about broader issues and ideas. Our hope is that 'Unbranded' will inspire visitors to be more critical of the way representations in our popular media, not just in advertising, shape the way we view ourselves and others," Dees concluded.

A prolific artist and activist, Thomas is co-founder of For Freedoms, a political action committee formed by artists in 2016. Thomas' recent Chicago exhibitions include "Question Bridge: Black Males," a 2014 media installation at the DuSable Museum of African American History. A collaboration with artists Chris Johnson, Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair, the work is an accumulation of interviews with hundreds of African-American men throughout the United States documenting their views on family, love, education and community during the Barack Obama administration. In 2015, Thomas worked with Chicago-based arts producer Project& to present "The Truth Booth" at Expo Chicago. In 2017, he installed "Love Over Rules," a permanent, site-specific light installation in San Francisco.

HYPERALLERGIC

NEWS

# Barbara Kruger, Yoko Ono, and Other Artists Create Covers for *New York* Magazine

As the magazine enters its 50th year, it is commissioning 50 New York artists to create cover designs, including Marilyn Minter, Mel Bochner, and more.

Elena Goukassian 2 days ago

To celebrate its 50th birthday, *New York* magazine invited 50 New York artists to design covers for the magazine. The first program in its year-long "My New York" series of special events and "activations," "50 *New York* Covers: A Public Art Project" will display and distribute the covers "in a variety of formats and sizes — from wild postings to street lamp banners" throughout all five boroughs, according to an official announcement, culminating in a gallery exhibition in the fall. The first eight covers — featuring designs by Mel Bochner, John Giorno, Alex Katz, Barbara Kruger, Marilyn Minter, Yoko Ono, Rob Pruitt, and Hank Willis Thomas — were revealed this week, with the rest to be rolled out in batches throughout the year.

New York Media, which publishes the magazine, worked with Culture Corps to find artists "with a meaningful relationship to New York, whose work could translate successfully to the confines of a magazine cover, who might be excited about engaging the idea of New York City, and in aggregate a diverse portrait of the New York City artistic community," David Haskell, the company's Editor for Business and Strategy, told Hyperallergic in an email. "The direction was to make a cover that reflects what New York City looks like to them now. We always try to avoid clichés with our covers — things like apples and Statues of Liberty — and so we gave the same guidance to the artists, though in some cases they played with clichés and came up with something very witty. (Like, say, Rob Pruitt.) And in general we encouraged the artists to make a cover that communicated an idea — to use their visual language to make a statement."

Rob Pruitt's play on clichés involved re-articulating a well-worn phrase with emoji. "I started by thinking about Milton Glaser because he is the designer of the *New York* magazine logo and also the designer of I <3 NY," Pruitt told Hyperallergic in an email. "I started with those two things and then I thought about our devices and that this is how we consume media these days, as opposed to the printed page. Like everybody, I love emojis and was especially interested in how with this limited set we can create a language that imbues messages with our own personalities."

Of the first eight covers, half are of a text-heavy, overtly political nature, particularly Marilyn Minter's "Home of the Resistance," Barbara Kruger's "Prump Tutin," and Hank Willis Thomas's "All Lies Matter" (Mel Bochner's "Obliterate" is a bit more open to interpretation).

"Since the 2016 election, I've been working to make the Trump presidency as short as possible," Marilyn Minter told Hyperallergic in an email. "I've been working behind steamed and frozen glass since 2009. I like the accidents that happen as the frozen glass starts to melt. ... My model is my friend and co-conspirator on *Anger Management* at the Brooklyn Museum. Her name is Andrianna Campbell and she is an art historian and curator."


"My New York Artist Covers: Rob Pruitt" (left), and "My New York Artist Covers: Hank Willis Thomas" (right)

In a phone interview with Hyperallergic, Hank Willis Thomas said he came up with the idea of eliminating the "v" from the slogan "All Lives Matter" slogan in a kind of eureka moment. "Thinking about what comes to mind when I think of New York, there's all this complexity," he said. "There's the New Yorker-in-chief — the president the slogan speaks to — and then the mythology New York is built on." Thomas explained the New York mythology as the brashness of the people and the mystery of the city that never sleeps. "It's where truth and deception are constantly in flux," he said.

"I suppose it's not surprising that a lot of artists chose to make a political statement," Haskell noted. "What I like about the collection so far is the range of emotion that's expressed: from anger to joy to cynicism to defiance to a very intimate kind of solitude. I think you'll see more of all of that in the months to come."

AD

ART

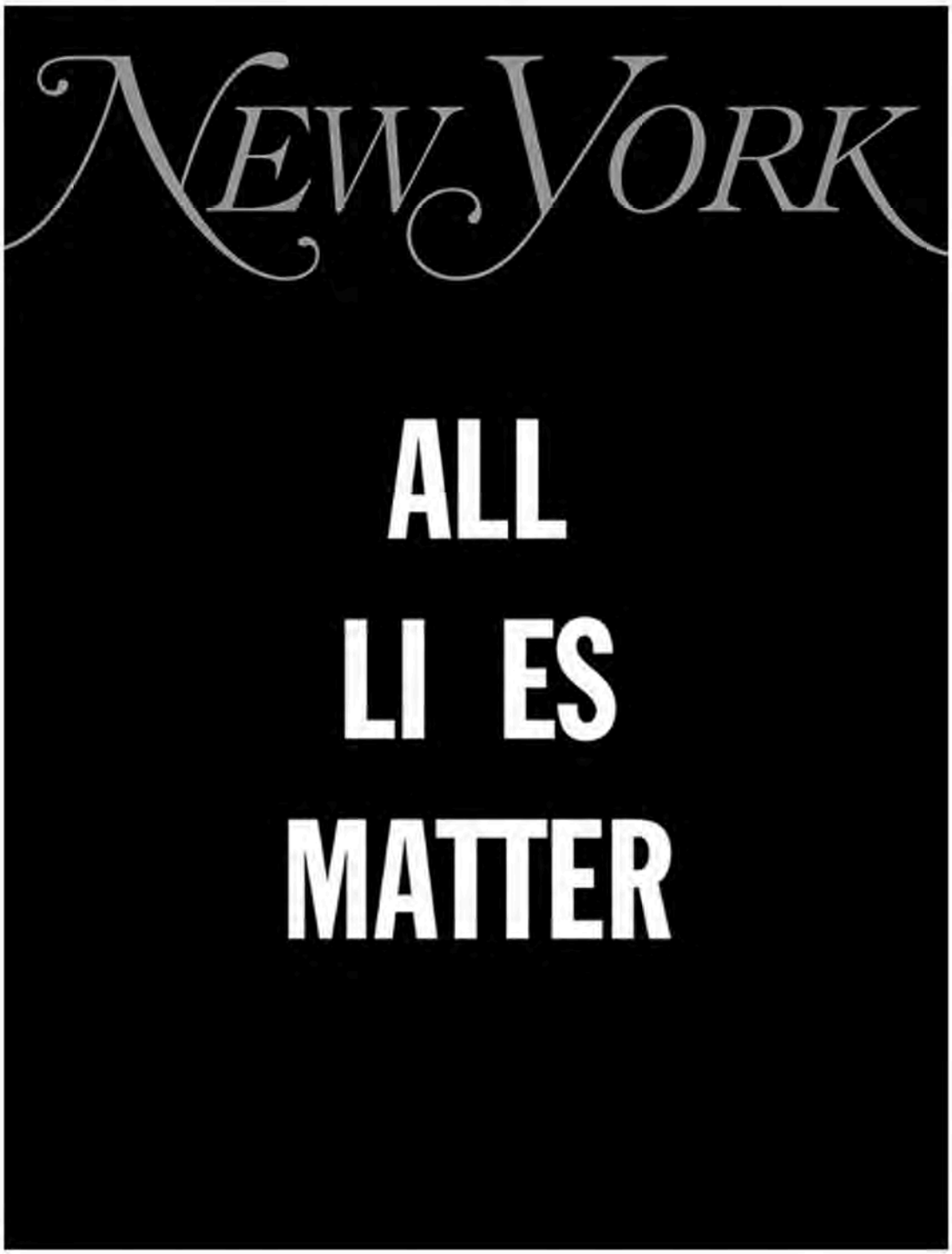
# Yoko Ono, Mel Bochner, Marilyn Minter, and Other Top Artists Come Together for Year-long Public Art Show

50 top artists designed covers for *New York* magazine that will be displayed around New York City throughout the year

TEXT BY KATHERINE MCGRATH · Posted January 24, 2018


Work by Mel Bochner. Courtesy of New York Media.

This past fall marked the start of *New York*'s 50th anniversary, and to celebrate, the magazine is painting—well, plastering—the town. This week saw the kickoff of the year-long celebration, appropriately named "My New York," with a public art project featuring specially commissioned *New York* covers, created by 50 of the top artists working in New York City today. The covers, to be installed in stages throughout the year, will be displayed around town in a variety of formats and sizes, from wild postings on boarded-over construction sites and the sides of buildings to dive-bar bathrooms and public parks. "We looked for real estate, in the loosest sense of the word," says David Haskell, business and strategy editor for New York Media, "where we can put these covers and give people a momentary experience of surprise, pleasure, anxiety: all of the emotions that you hope to elicit from a ***public art*** project."




The artists were given one simple prompt: What does New York City look like to you right now?

Work by Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of New York Media.

The first eight covers, up now, feature work by Mel Bochner, *Yoko Ono*, Barbara Kruger, Rob Pruitt, Hank Willis Thomas, Alex Katz, John Giorno, and *Marilyn Minter*. Covers by Kerry James Marshall, Will Cotton, and Maurizio Cattelan, among other well-known New York artists, will be unveiled later in the year. (The artists receive a small honorarium, according to Haskell, and the bulk of the project is being funded by New York Media, although other sponsors are helping to fund aspects of the campaign.)

The project stemmed from a series of special covers Alex Katz created for the anniversary issue, for which the magazine asked him to revisit some of his work from earlier in his practice. Katz, now 90 years old, is perhaps best known for his brightly colored figurative and landscape paintings, but when he was a student at Cooper Union in the '40s, he created simple black-and-white sketches of his fellow passengers on the subway. To create a special anniversary issue cover, he revisited that practice, and the magazine was so taken by the resulting work that they expanded it into the collective public exhibition that it is today. The artists were given little direction save for a simple but useful prompt: Describe what the city looks like to you right now. The resulting work is a mix of politically and culturally oriented art that, together, reads as a visual love letter to the city.

Artist cover contributions are not a new venture for the magazine; past issues have featured work by KAWS, Barbara Kruger, and others. But while the artists involved in "My New York" are of particular note to the New York art scene, Haskell stresses that the recognizable names are not the crux of the exhibition. "This isn't a project for the art world, this is a project for all of New York City," he tells *AD*. The culmination of the project will be a gallery show featuring all 50 covers, though the aim is to show the works in a space that doesn't traditionally function as an art gallery, so as not to alienate anyone who might otherwise feel intimidated. The covers are for meant for every New Yorker and visitor to experience and engage with, whether that's on tourist-heavy Fifth avenue between 46th and 47th streets, in the East Village on 10th Street between Avenues B and C, on the West Side's Clarkson between Hudson and Greenwich, or scattered throughout Brooklyn. The project will eventually populate all five boroughs.

The public art exhibition is just one of many installations, activations, and events that will make up the year-long "My New York" celebration, which will bring together the city's best writers, musicians, comedians, chefs, and filmmakers, among others, throughout 2018. While many of the additional projects have yet to be revealed, the collective art exhibition sets the visual tone. "The assemblage of all 50 [covers] could paint a pretty interesting portrait of what the New York artist community looks like right now," says Haskell.

NEW YORK



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

By **The Editors**

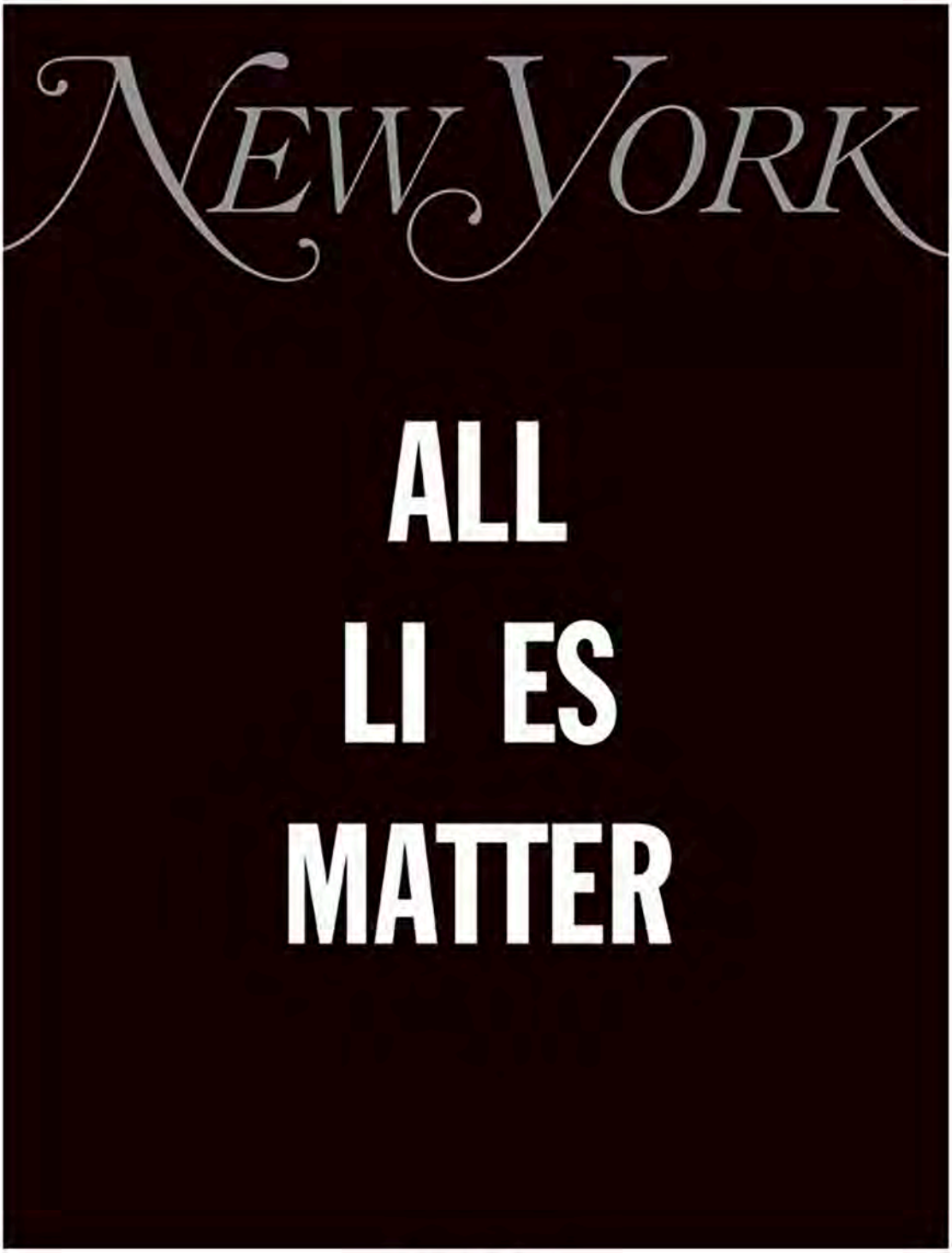
January 21, 2018
8:30 pm


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

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

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

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




Hank Willis Thomas.

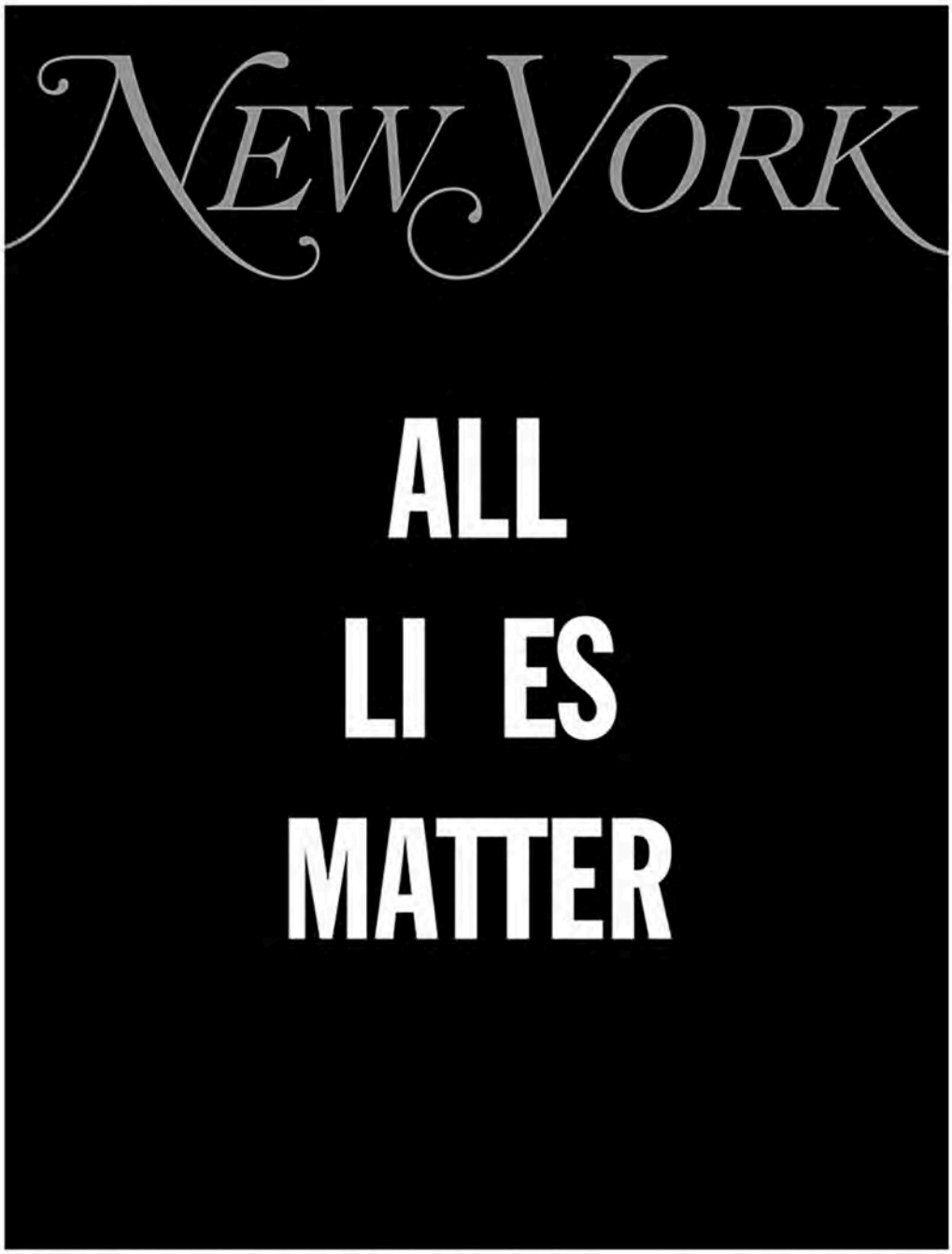
HYPERALLERGIC

NEWS

# Art Movements

This week in art news: South Korea's former culture minister was jailed for two years, two members of Pussy Riot sought asylum in Sweden, and the Louvre closed some of its galleries after the Seine flooded.

Tiernan Morgan January 26, 2018




Hank Willis Thomas's contribution to *New York* magazine's "My New York" campaign (courtesy the artist and New York Media)

CURBED
NEW YORK

NEWS

# ‘New York’ magazine covers become public art in citywide installation

*Look out for magazine covers-turned-posters by Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger, and more*

By Hannah Frishberg | Jan 22, 2018, 2:30pm EST

In honor of *New York* Magazine’s 50th anniversary, the publication is launching a year-long exhibit showcasing specially-designed *New York* covers by 50 renowned artists, called simply “A Public Art Project.”

Today, the first eight covers—created by Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger, Rob Pruitt, Alex Katz, Hank Willis Thomas, Mel Bochner, John Giorno and Marilyn Minter—were unveiled and rolled out at 25 locations across the five boroughs. The covers are displayed in various sizes and formats, including “wild postings,” on street lamp banners, and giant versions; they’ll continue being rolled out through the fall when, come October, an exhibit of all 50 will debut.

“When it came to thinking about our anniversary, and the theme of everyone’s own ‘My New York,’ we suddenly got very excited about what might happen if 50 artists used the confines of a *New York* cover to say something about what the city looks like to them right now,” New York Media’s business and strategy editor, David Haskell, told artnet News.

In addition to 50 *New York* covers, the magazine will further celebrate its golden anniversary with a variety of special art, music, comedy, film, and food events, to be announced throughout the year, according to a press release.

All but two of the initial batch of covers center largely around politically-minded, minimalist text, with the outliers—by Katz and Pruitt, respectively—featuring a line drawing of a man on his phone and Milton Glaser’s “I ♥ NY” design written out in emoji. Katz created a number of similarly styled line drawings which featured on *New York*’s 50th anniversary cover back in October.

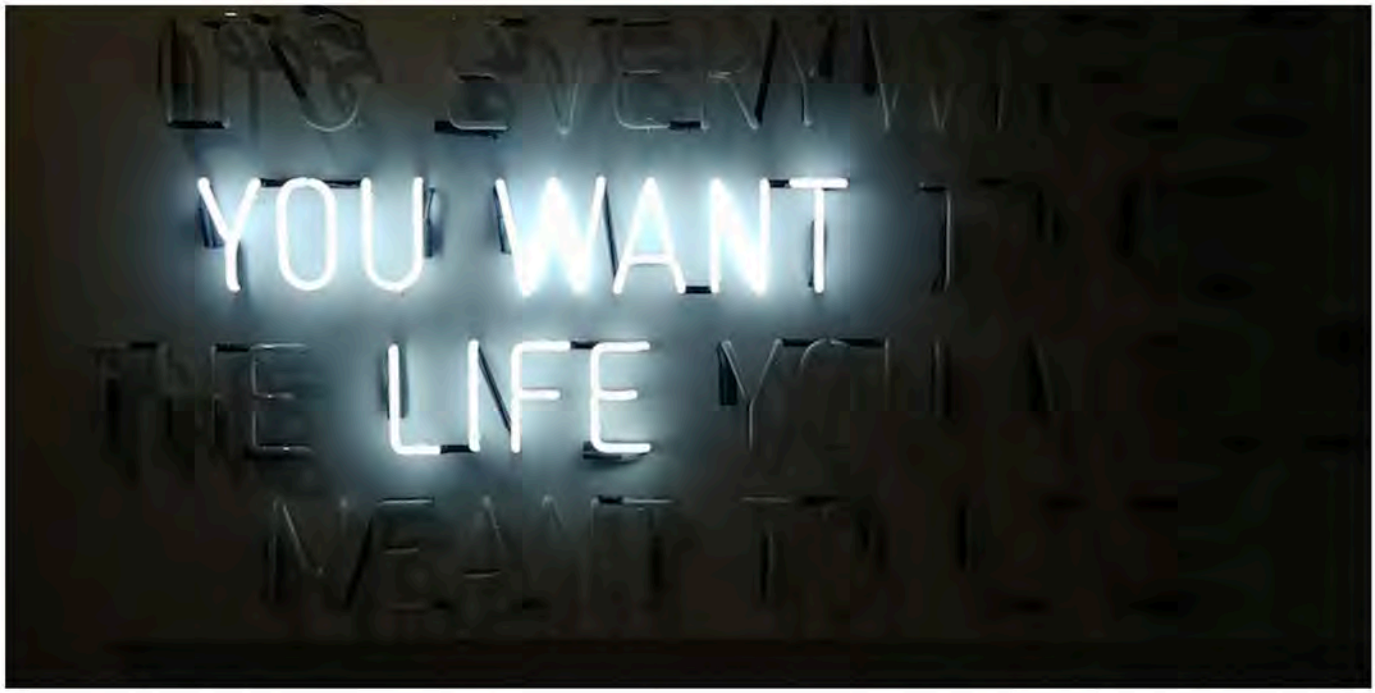

My New York Artist Covers: Rob Pruitt | Image courtesy of Rob Pruitt and New York Media

SRQ

# Advertising and Identity Intertwine at Ringling Museum

*Gallery*

BY PHILIP LEDERER SRQ DAILY FRIDAY WEEKEND EDITION FRIDAY FEB 9, 2018




In a world full of advertisement, people grow numb to the everlasting bombardment of slogans, snapshots, flashing neon lights and PhotoShopped persuasion that is daily life—or at least they think they do. Opening this Sunday, February 11, in the Monda Gallery of the Ringling Museum of Art, a new exhibition showcasing the work of conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas will make audiences look at this daily deluge in a new light. Curated by Ringling Museum Curator of Photography Chris Jones, the exhibition includes work from three separate series, and ephemera not previously shown.

Beginning with *Caesar's Visa*—a sculptural piece recreating the Visa and Caesar's Palace slogans in neon lights, then mish-mashing the two into various and often loaded phrases by blinking individual words on and off—Thomas' work immediately displays both humor and pointed craft, letting the audience know what's in store. Moving forward, the artist pulls no punches.

With images from one of Thomas' earlier series, *Branded*, the artist explores the evolution of African-American identity and the impact of advertising on how it is understood and viewed. One image shows the faceless torso of a black man, the famous Nike swoosh literally branded in welted scars across his chest. "A lot of our early formation of our identity happens around the same time that we become aware of brands," says Jones, and thus, especially for the young, branding and advertising can hold enormous power. For Thomas, that brand was Nike, which became near synonymous with black athleticism by tying the brand to Michael Jordan, among others. In another image, a similarly faceless black football player dives with the ball but chains lashed to his ankle hold him back, evoking a history of slavery while reminding that black male identity remains defined by the physical power of the body.

Through two other series featured—*Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008* and *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015*—Thomas more directly explores and challenges the language of advertising. Selecting advertisements through history, he removes all ad copy, slogans and brand names, leaving only the raw image to speak for itself. Arranged in a collection, they lay bare much about the thought processes of the time, and how they have or have not changed. "And because there is no one author of each of these images," says Jones, "[Thomas] sees them as bellwethers—they reflect collective ideas and social values." And savvy viewers will make note of the dates chosen as endpoints for the two projects.

And while selections from *Reflections in Black by Corporate America* reveal racist attitudes from the Blaxploitation era and beyond, it's the more extensive collection from the latter series, charting the evolution of marketing to white women from the height of the suffragette movement to modern day, that most completely reflects the scale of Thomas' concept. Showing an image from each decade, shifting attitudes towards women through history become apparent, as they are seen at different times as delicate creatures, part of the war effort, a burden and, often, an object of sexual desire.

In the center of the room, encased in glass, visitors can see some of the original ads, on loan from Thomas and never before shown alongside the artist's work. Some help make sense of the images, others further bewilder—and some brand names will be surprising. "I hope it provokes us to think," says Jones, "and makes us pay attention to consumer culture and the messages that circulate even today."

Opening February 11, the Hank Willis Thomas exhibit runs at Ringling Museum through June 10.

*Pictured: "Caesar's Visa" by Hank Willis Thomas. Photo by Phil Lederer.*

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.

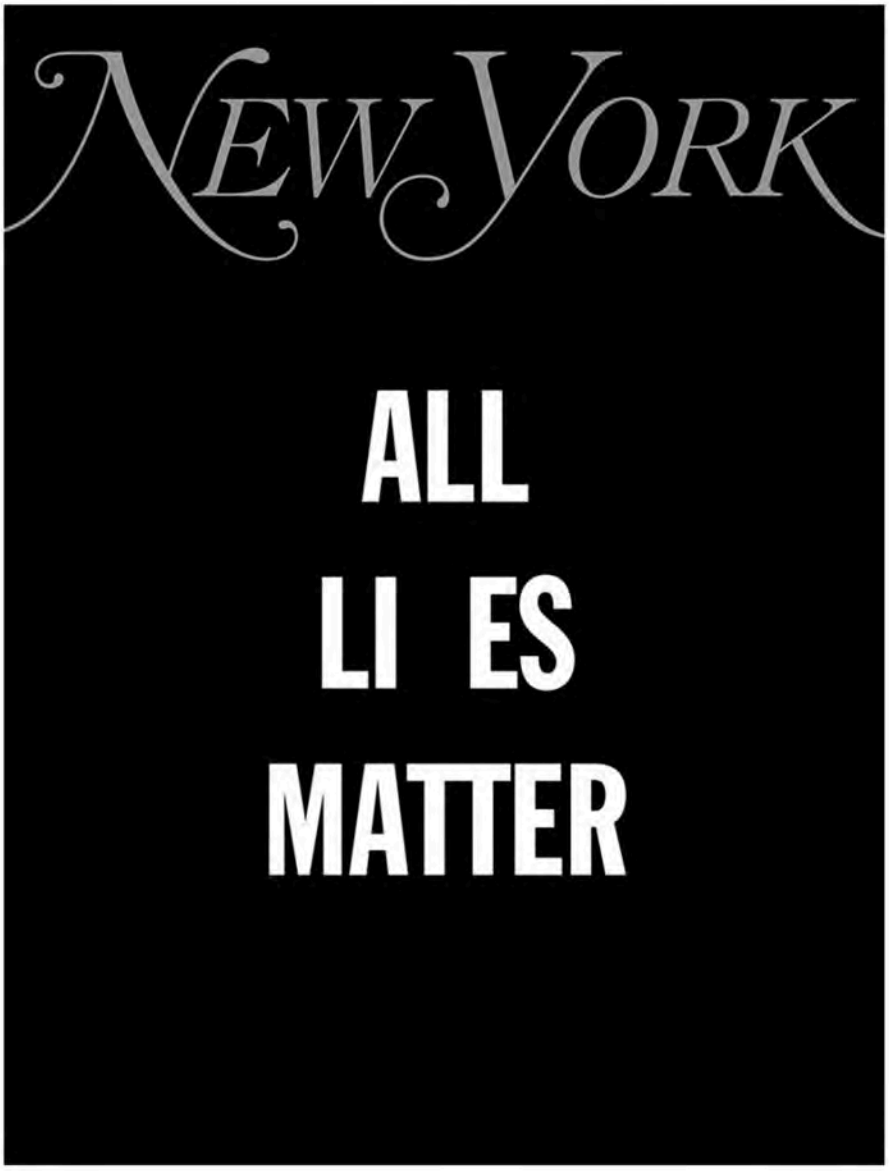
HYPEBEAST

# Yoko Ono, Barbara Kruger and More Design 'New York' Covers

In time for the magazine's 50th anniversary.

By Jake Silbert / Jan 22, 2018 / Arts

2,228 Hypes 6 Comments




To commemorate its 50th anniversary, *New York Magazine* has tapped fifty artists for one unique cover apiece, debuting throughout the year until October.

Ranging from Barbara Kruger and Hank Willis Thomas' text-focused pieces to the expressive works of Mel Bochner and Marilyn Minter, the first selection of covers ranges from the contemporary to the referential. Kruger's "PRUMP/TUTIN" and Thomas's "ALL LI ES MATTER" touch on political hot topics, while Rob Pruitt and John Giorno nod to New York itself, touching on the iconic "I ♥ New York" motif and directions to a *New York Magazine* box in East Village, respectively. Mel Bochner's cover features "OBLITERATE" stamped vertically, Alex Katz sketches a man holding his smart phone and Marilyn Minter showcases a photograph of a young man who scribbled "HOME OF THE RESISTANCE" into a fogged-up window.

Later issues will feature artwork from the likes of Kerry James Marshall, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Nina Chanel Abney, alongside other artists yet to be disclosed.

Elsewhere in New York, artists ranging from KAWS to Jeff Koons take part in a large scale sculpture exhibit.

HYPERALLERGIC

EVENTS

# A Pop-Up Show for Social Justice Organized by Hank Willis Thomas, Michelle Woo, and Others

*Into Action* is a nine-day long pop-up exhibition that aims to reinforce the connection between art and social justice, activism, and cultural resistance.

Matt Stromberg January 8, 2018


Frohawk Two Feathers, "Etranger (stranger)" (2017), acrylic, graphite, and spray paint on canvas 84 x 84 inches

The more closely the art world aligns itself with the upper echelons of global capital, the less it seems like a potential force for radical social change. Enter *Into Action*, a nine-day long pop-up exhibition that aims to reinforce the connection between art and social justice, activism, and cultural resistance.

Organized by Hank Willis Thomas and Michelle Woo (of For Freedoms), Glenn Kaino, Yosi Sergant, and Favianna Rodriguez, the project features artwork and installations by dozens of visual artists, performances, panel discussions and workshops on topics ranging from civil disobedience to climate change, and criminal justice reform. Notable participants include John Legend, Patrick Martinez, Shepard Fairey, Van Jones, SWOON, Andrea Bowers, and many more. *Into Action* is free and open to the public. Check the calendar for a full list of events.

**When:** Opens Saturday, January 13, 10am–10pm
**Where:** 1726 N. Spring St., Chinatown, Los Angeles

into-action.us

SHAGGY

# PERSON ORT DING

***Shaggy, was ist Ihr Lieblingsgegenstand?***
Ich habe viele Gegenstände, die ich liebe. Aber man kann alles Materielle ersetzen… Ohne lange drüber nachzudenken, würde ich vielleicht sagen: das Mikrofon.
***Weil es Ihren Beruf symbolisiert?***
Mehr als das! Es steht für alles, was ich im Leben erreicht habe.
***Erzählen Sie!***
Ich bin ja nicht zur Musik gekommen, weil ich eine Eingebung hatte oder ein Riesentalent besass oder glaubte, irgendeine Botschaft für die Welt zu haben. Es war mehr so: Ich kam nicht in die angesagten Klubs der Stadt. Aber wenn du der bist, der ans Mikrofon soll, dann öffnen sich wie durch ein Wunder die Tore, dann darfst du gratis trinken, und am Ende der Nacht gehst du mit dem heissesten Mädchen nach Hause.
***Männer am Mikrofon haben ein begrenztes Haltbarkeitsdatum…***
Könnte man meinen, ja. Aber Hartnäckigkeit zahlt sich in dieser Branche aus: Als die Party vorbei war, habe ich einfach weitergemacht: Studio, Promo, Tournee. Auch als es schlechter lief. Heute bin ich 49 Jahre alt, habe eine Familie, eine wunderschöne Frau, wunderschöne Kinder, ein wunderschönes Haus und lebe im schönsten Land der Welt. Aber mir ist jeden Tag bewusst, dass ich ohne das Mikrofon nicht zu dieser Welt gehören würde.

*Shaggy ist Jamaikas moderner Bob Marley. Nächste Woche spricht der Popstar Cro über seine Lieblingsperson: sich selbst.*

Gespräch MIKAEL KROGERUS

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

# GNADE VOR RECHT


Bliebe alles, wie es ist, spekuliert der Künstler Hank Willis Thomas in silbernen Lettern, dann würde sich auch an der juristischen Ungleichbehandlung von Minderheiten nichts ändern.

Kürzlich hatte ich in Miami eine der bemerkenswertesten Begegnungen des Jahres. Bei einem Lunch wurde ich einem Mann namens Bryan Stevenson vorgestellt. Ich fragte ihn, was er mache, und er sagte mir, er sei Rechtsanwalt und habe die Equal Justice Initiative gegründet. Und dann erzählte er: dass er in sehr bescheidenen Verhältnissen aufgewachsen sei, dass seine Urgrosseltern noch als Sklaven in Virginia gehalten wurden und sein Grossvater ermordet wurde. Dass er ein Stipendium für die Harvard Law School bekam und im Laufe der Jahrzehnte – in denen er kostenlos für Arme, Angehörige von Minderheiten und vor allem für Kinder, die vor Gericht standen, die Verteidigung übernahm – das amerikanische Rechtssystem gründlich kennen lernte. Und er gewann daraus zwei Erkenntnisse: Das Gegenteil von Armut ist nicht Wohlstand, sondern Gerechtigkeit. Und: Jeder Mensch ist wertvoll, egal welch schlimmes Unrecht er begangen hat.

Vor drei Jahren hat er ein Buch über seine Erfahrungen als Rechtsanwalt geschrieben, das im englischen Original den schlichten Titel «Just Mercy»* trägt. Nur ein wenig Mitleid, nur ein Funken Gnade sind nötig, um das Recht dort, wo es besonders hart ist, menschlich auszulegen, ohne es verfälschen zu müssen. Dass es bei Minderheiten, vor allem der afroamerikanischen Bevölkerung, in der Regel übertrieben hart ausgelegt wird, davon berichten die Fallbeispiele in Stevensons Buch, das ich auf dem Rückflug geradezu verschlungen habe. Eine zentrale Figur darin ist Walter McMillian, ein Afroamerikaner aus Monroeville, Alabama, der beschuldigt wurde, eine weisse Frau ermordet zu haben. Obwohl er ein belastbares Alibi hatte und obwohl die Jury «nur» eine lebenslange Freiheitsstrafe forderte, verurteilte ihn der Richter zum Tode. Stevenson rollte das Verfahren in den Achtzigerjahren neu auf und erwirkte McMillians Freispruch.

Der Sieg vor Gericht machte Stevenson über Nacht berühmt, vor allem aber, wie er sagt, wütend darüber, dass nur diesem einen Mann geholfen werden konnte, aber viele der mehr als zwei Millionen Inhaftierten in den USA, deren Fälle weniger spektakulär sind als jener McMillians, weiter zu Unrecht in Unfreiheit gehalten werden. Desmond Tutu, der südafrikanische Friedensnobelpreisträger, hat Stevenson den Nelson Mandela Amerikas genannt und jeden Menschen der zivilisierten Welt dazu aufgerufen, dieses Buch zu lesen. Ich kann mich Tutu da nur anschliessen.

**Bryan Stevenson, Ohne Gnade. Polizeigewalt und Justizwillkür in den USA. Piper Verlag 2016*

HANS ULRICH OBRIST ist künstlerischer Direktor der Serpentine Galleries in London.

DAS MAGAZIN N°1/2 — 2018 BILDER S.7: LUKAS MAEDER/13 PHOTO;
DAS MAGAZIN N°1/2 — 2018 HANK WILLIS THOMAS ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL, 2010 © HANK WILLIS THOMAS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

# 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.

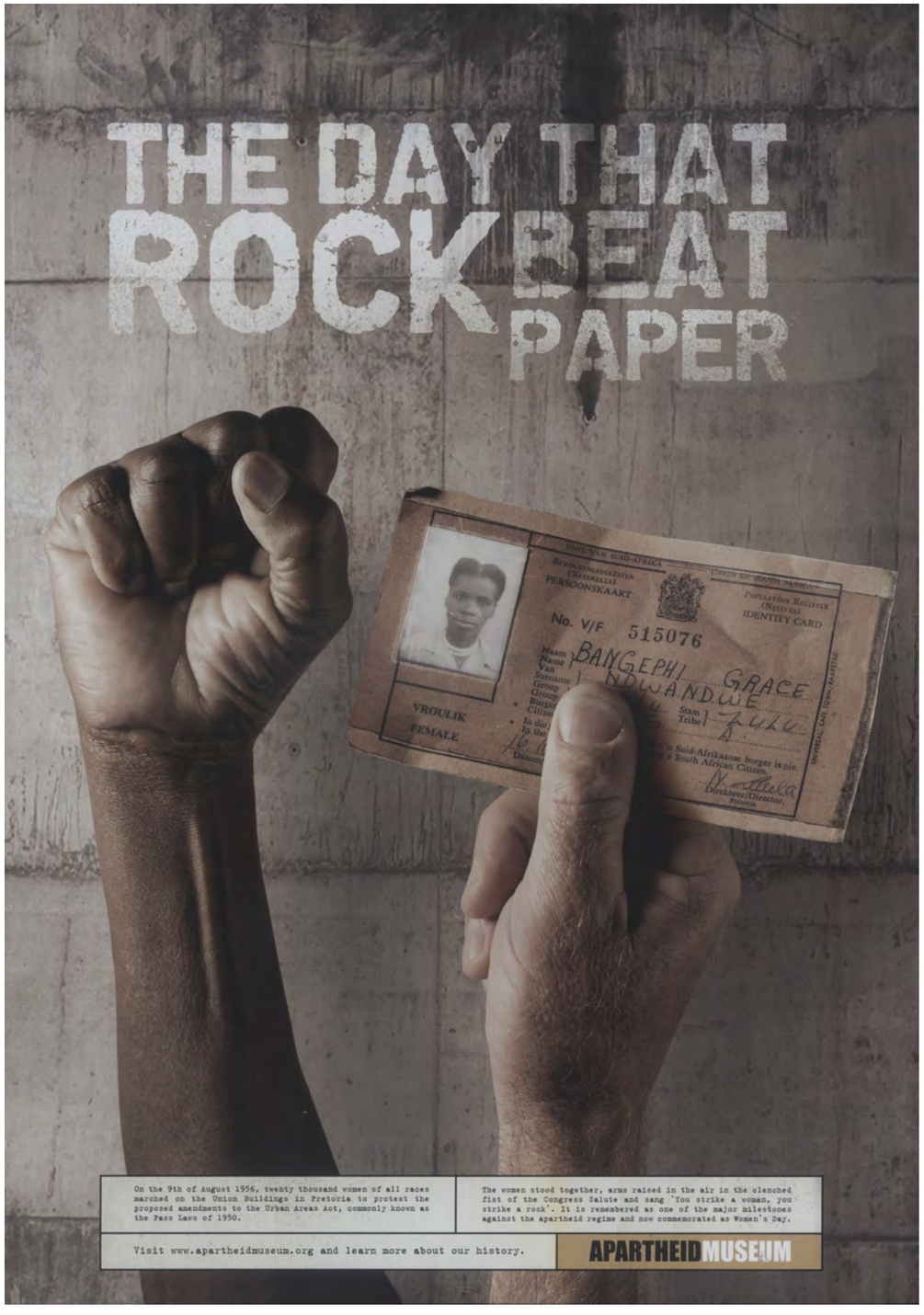
Usage of the sign by South Africans during the apartheid era points to a related degree of semantic flexibility. The activist Zithulele Cindi, for instance, has recalled his arrival as a prisoner on Robben Island and his confusion at the older, longtime prisoners' lack of enthusiasm for the clenched 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.

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***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 New York Times

April 25, 2016

# A 'Super PAC' Where Art and Politics Converge

By CELIA McGEE

An unusual new "super PAC," run by artists, has cropped up on the political landscape — and it's one that says it won't support (or oppose) candidates or parties.

The super PAC, For Freedoms, which registered as a political action committee in January, is raising funds for national advertising, much of it based on original artworks, offering diverse views on issues such as campaign reform, racism, gender equality, gun control, reproductive rights and freedom of expression. The artworks are planned to be shown in a gallery exhibition.

Founded by Hank Willis Thomas, a photographer and conceptual artist, and Eric Gottesman, a video artist and activist, the super PAC is named after Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" wartime address in 1941 — a call to safeguard the freedoms of speech and worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear.

Contributing artists and photographers include Carrie Mae Weems, Rashid Johnson, Xaviera Simmons, Alec Soth, Bayaré Ross Smith, Fred Tomaselli and Marilyn Minter. Their works will be used for billboards, building signs, subway advertising, Internet memes, social media and select print advertising, potentially even yard signs, and ultimately an art show at the Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea. Mr. Thomas, 40, said in a telephone interview that the founders were also looking for media buys "in the heartland, where they're cheapest."

Mr. Gottesman, also 40, added, "We don't have Koch brothers' or Priorities USA Action money."

Super PACS typically raise unlimited sums from any donor and are inherently partisan. "They function to influence elections like advertising agencies," Mr. Gottesman said, adding that For Freedoms and its projects are intended to "elevate and expand the dialogue that no longer exists in our sound-bite culture, its 'gotcha' tactics, or in its oversimplified conversations."

As more artists join, more divergent views will be seen. "There are not just two sides, conservative or liberal, black or white," Mr. Thomas said. "The country is increasingly confronting how one person's freedom may impinge on someone else's."

Mr. Smith, for example, who has taken over the super PAC's Instagram arm, has made a series of photographs of gun owners extolling their favorite weapons. The artist Will Steacy, who describes himself as a "former union laborer," makes collages that reveal a stance closer to Libertarianism.

For Freedoms has raised $5,687 toward its $50,000 goal through its website, forfreedoms.org, and an additional $15,000 from art collectors and patrons such as Barbara Alfond, John and Sharon Hoffman and Damany Weir. Its donors, ideally, are "people interested in art and politics," Mr. Gottesman said.

Mr. Thomas said that he was intrigued by the influential series of magazine covers for The Saturday Evening Post based on four paintings that Roosevelt's speech stirred Norman Rockwell to create. For the For Freedoms show, he is finishing a series of four highly stylized, staged photographs reinterpreting Rockwell's imagery.

"We want people to think deeper," he said, adding that the artists, evoking Rockwell, hope to "give voice to ordinary Americans."


ALEC SOTH

In that vein, For Freedoms' first outing began on April 10, when members of its partner group, the Postcards From America photography collaborative, loosely affiliated with Magnum Photos, left Memphis for a road trip through the Mississippi Delta and along the Gulf Coast, with the Postcards' co-founder Jim Goldberg, Gilles Peress, Mr. Soth and others.

The Postcards From America series includes, top, a Jim Goldberg photograph from the Memphis site where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed (now a civil rights museum); and left, an Alec Soth creation from found objects in Cairo, Ill.

It is modeled, through a contemporary lens, on the Farm Security Administration commission by its director, Roy Stryker, to a now-legendary team of photographers during the Depression to chronicle the myriad, everyday facets of life across the country.

Christopher Klatell, a lawyer and contributing writer to the Postcards' project, said in an email from the road: "The photographers are moving through the world and trying to make a certain sense of it. We're certainly not looking for pictures of poverty, for instance." Mr. Klatell added: "One would have to put all one's effort into looking away not to see them. At the moment we're trying to be open, not closed, about what that work could look like, and what it might invoke."

The contributed works and Postcards From America photographs will go on view at the Shainman gallery on June 7, the last Super Tuesday of the presidential primary campaign, when the For Freedoms headquarters will open there as well. Donors who contribute between $10,000 and $50,000 will receive limited-edition portfolios. In an arrangement unusual in the commercial art world, a percentage of the proceeds from all sales will be split among For Freedoms, its artists and the galleries or dealers that represent them.

**Invoking Franklin D. Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' speech.**

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## THE ART OF POLITICS

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

SUMMER 2016

# THE BODY POLITIC

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

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE
PORTRAIT BY LANDON NORDEMAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

# Inflatable 'Truth Booth' Will Let Americans Vent About This Crazy Election

Hank Willis Thomas and Cause Collective are begging people in the U.S. to tell the truth.

04/12/2016 01:26 pm ET

**Katherine Brooks**
Senior Arts & Culture Editor, The Huffington Post.


TRUTH BOOTH/KICKSTARTER

Hank Willis Thomas' "Truth Booth" is shaped like a giant cartoon speech bubble. Also known by its longer moniker "In Search of the Truth," the 14-foot high inflatable sculpture has a door, and inside that door is a video recording booth. The booth has traveled throughout places like Ireland, Afghanistan and the U.S., welcoming passerby to record a two-minute video inside. All they need to do is

complete the sentence, “The truth is...”

The booth, Thomas and his collaborators — Jim Ricks, Ryan Alexiev, Will Sylvester, together known as Cause Collective — claim, is an ideal platform for finding out what people are thinking during critical times. “What is a critical time, exactly?” you might ask. Suffice it to say, this American election period counts.

“Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump have definitely shaken everything up and made it no longer business as usual,” Thomas explained in an email to The Huffington Post. “I think everyone is sitting on the edge of their seats even more than in the past because it is like a thriller movie.”

Citizens of the United States are used to hearing about the election via politicians and pundits. It’s hard to glean an accurate and representative idea of how civilians — from New York to Los Angeles and everywhere in between — are actually feeling. “Every election season we hear politicians and pundits speaking for and about the citizens in sometimes simplistic and generic ways,” Thomas added. “We know that the American public is much more nuanced and complex. We also know that everyone has the capacity to express themselves articulately about the things that they know and care about.”

Enter “Truth Booth,” which, after touring several countries and gathering thousands of statements, is headed back to the U.S. for a 50-state run. Thomas and Cause Collective members have taken to Kickstarter to raise $75,000 to haul the booth around the country, just in time for this critical election.


The booth is, as Thomas outlined, meant to be a safe space for generosity and vulnerability; an invitation to the public to express itself. Once inside, people are encouraged to do and say whatever they want. “The best thing about art is that it

grows in unexpected ways and gains new meaning in the context it is presented in," Thomas said. "We have learned not to try to anticipate what will happen and what people will say [inside the booth]. We just get to listen and witness the incredible wisdom and creativity of total strangers."

To compliment the booth, Cause Collective will create an interactive website that will allow people to follow the tour and view truths from the traveled locations. "Throughout this long-term project, the video footage will be compiled and edited into a video installation to be exhibited in galleries, museums, and public viewings," the "Truth Booth" Kickstarter page states. "It is our hope that viewers, as we have, realize that there are common things that people struggle with. That things like loss, love, hunger, and the feeling that you are worth more than society suggests are universal. That we all share truths."

> **"The truth is I don't think I have enough money to finish college." - Hofstra University 2012**

Thomas is no stranger to socially-conscious art. His past exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," explored the ways advertisements "created" the White American Woman. His series "B®ANDED" addressed the commodification of African-American male identity. "I believe that all art is political, whether or not we decide to call it that," he said. "It is a form of free speech that people have, and continue to fight for its value and place in society. I think fine art has the capacity to unify and open minds like nothing else in society. It can do this because it can take some many different forms."

Cause Collective has 30 days to raise funds for its campaign. You can check out more from the Kickstarter here, but in the meantime, if you were wondering how Thomas would complete his own prompt:

"My answer changes from moment to moment, but right now I will say: The truth is that it is better to speak for yourself than to let someone else speak for you."

*See more "truths" below:*

> **"My truth is that my father died a year ago, a Vietnam vet from Agent Orange exposure and we miss him a lot and wish he was here. My other truth is I've been separated from my husband for four long years and they have been the hardest and most difficult of my life and I would give anything for us to get back together again because I still love you Herman. You're the**

love of my life and me and our daughter miss you lots. Thats my truth. That's all I got to say." - Brooklyn 2015

"The truth is, um, I've been dealing CRPS Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome since I was 10. And now I'm 14 and I am done with it. I've come to realize that I don't want to have to deal with it anymore. Now I'm here in Cleveland, Ohio at the Cleveland clinic for regional pain and they've gotten me from a wheelchair to walking, well hardly walking, in a matter of three weeks. Now I'm staying an extra week so [I can] get the extra touches put back in place and I'm really excited to go back to my normal life. So the truth is you never should give up because we all have a story and people don't know that story until you actually tell them and you're a fighter and you just gotta fight until you get what you deserve. So that is the truth for me." - Cleveland 2014

"The truth is that I'm still 11 years old but I really do believe in unicorns. I know I sound super crazy but I believe unicorns are real, also mermaids, also fairies, and all of those sort of things. I love magic. You can't take that from me. I also love the Percy Jackson series and I am never going to stop loving them no matter what my mom says." - Miami 2014

"The truth is that Afghanistan will be all right one day. Then people will live together in a free and healthy environment again. I want to make clear that if all Afghans join hand-in-hand and raise capacity and the level of knowledge they can defeat poverty and solve the problems that

**exist in our country and rebuild the nation. Then all our problems will end. Thank you." - Afghanistan 2013**

**"The truth is not to be discovered because it was there before we were born. It hid itself when we were born and it only comes out once we are dead. I am nearly dead so the truth will shortly emerge." - Ireland 2011**

The Boston Globe

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


HANK WILLIS THOMAS

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

**By David Filipov** | GLOBE STAFF APRIL 08, 2016

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There videos also display a haunting, universal continuity.


JIM RICKS

**The Truth Booth in Bamiyan, Afghanistan in 2013.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

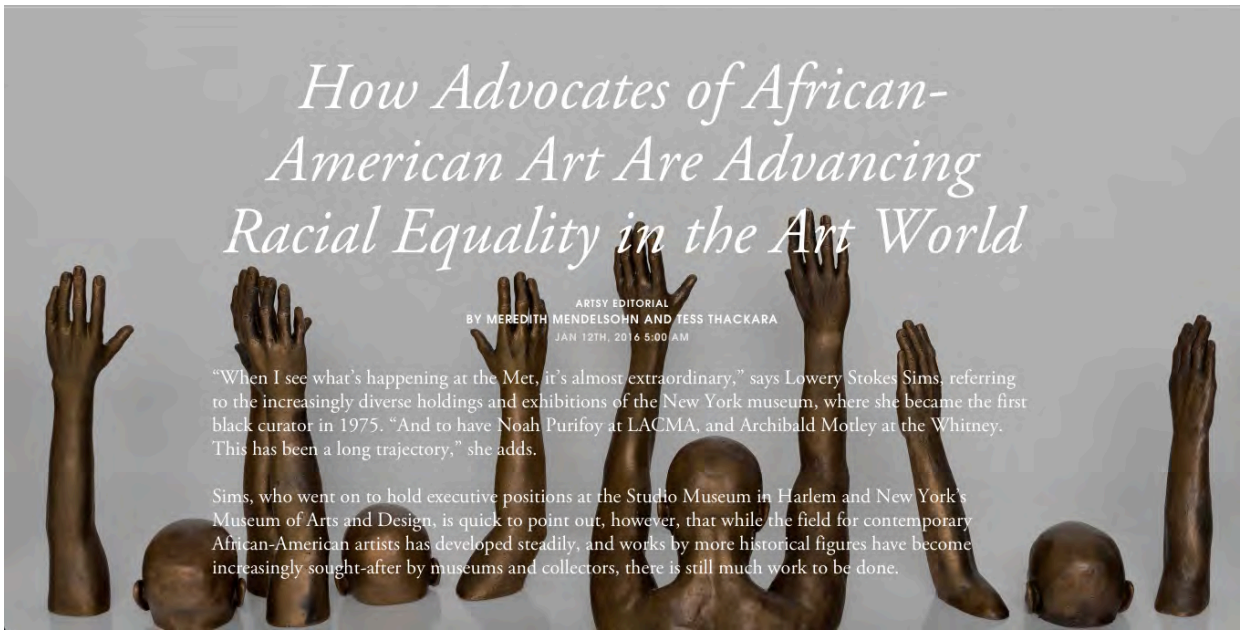
“The truth is, I think The Truth Booth is a wonderful idea,” says an American girl who can’t be much older than a kindergartner. “I mean, it’s fluffy, it’s fun, and you can tell what’s really inside your heart.”

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

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

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

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.”

# whitewall

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2015

THE DESIGN ISSUE

HANK WILLIS THOMAS - OLAFUR ELIASSON - PIOTR UKLAŃSKI - ROB PRUITT

# THE DESIGN ISSUE

As this issue goes to print, the summer art season already feels like it's in full swing. The 56th **VENICE BIENNALE** opened over the weekend to, from what we can tell thus far, fairly positive reviews and lots of FOMO-inducing Instagrams. During the week we are writing this letter, **FRIEZE NEW YORK** is about ready to open on Randall's Island, alongside satellite fairs like **ART MIAMI NEW YORK** and **NADA**. It's also a big time for design—the first **MAISON&OBJET AMERICAS** is taking place this month in Miami, and a number of events are happening in New York, such as **COLLECTIVE DESIGN FAIR**, **WANTEDDESIGN**, and **ICFF**. And before we know it, everyone will be heading to Europe for the reigning king of fairs, **ART BASEL**. There's a lot going on this summer, and if you can't make it to everything, which few of us can, let our pages take you there and maybe even inspire you for a future trip.

We've got a close look at **JOAN JONAS** and what she's done with MIT for the U.S. Pavilion in Venice. Don't fret if you aren't at the Biennale opening week. It's open through late November, and in our opinion, it's better to go once the art crowd and the summer tourist season is over. There are no lines, no events to run to, no nonsense—just art, which is really what the Biennale is about.

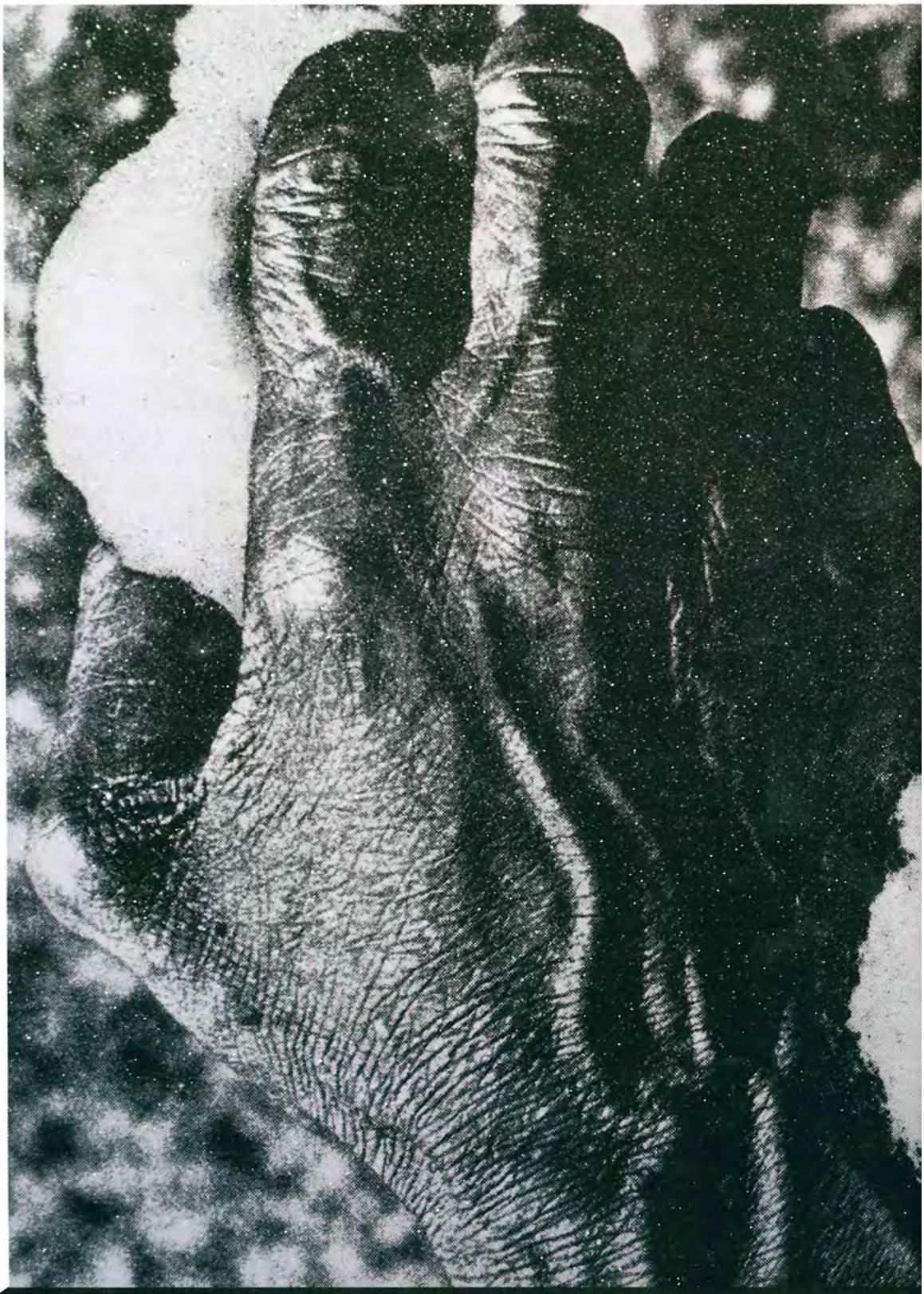
Our conversation with **NICHOLAS WEIST** of the Shandaken Project and **NORA LAWRENCE** of Storm King Art Center will have you gathering a group of friends for a day trip to the Hudson Valley to commune with giant public works by Richard Serra, Mark di Suvero, Alexander Liberman, and the like. Our studio visit with **HANK WILLIS THOMAS** may just change your mind about going to Burning Man this August (he nearly changed ours), in addition to getting you to question what "the truth is" for you, and which history you're being told. The trippy and hypnotic installations of **OLAFUR ELIASSON** we show here may have you hopping on a transatlantic flight to Paris to visit the brand-new Fondation Louis Vuitton. Or perhaps it will be our conversation with the foundation's architect, **FRANK GEHRY**.

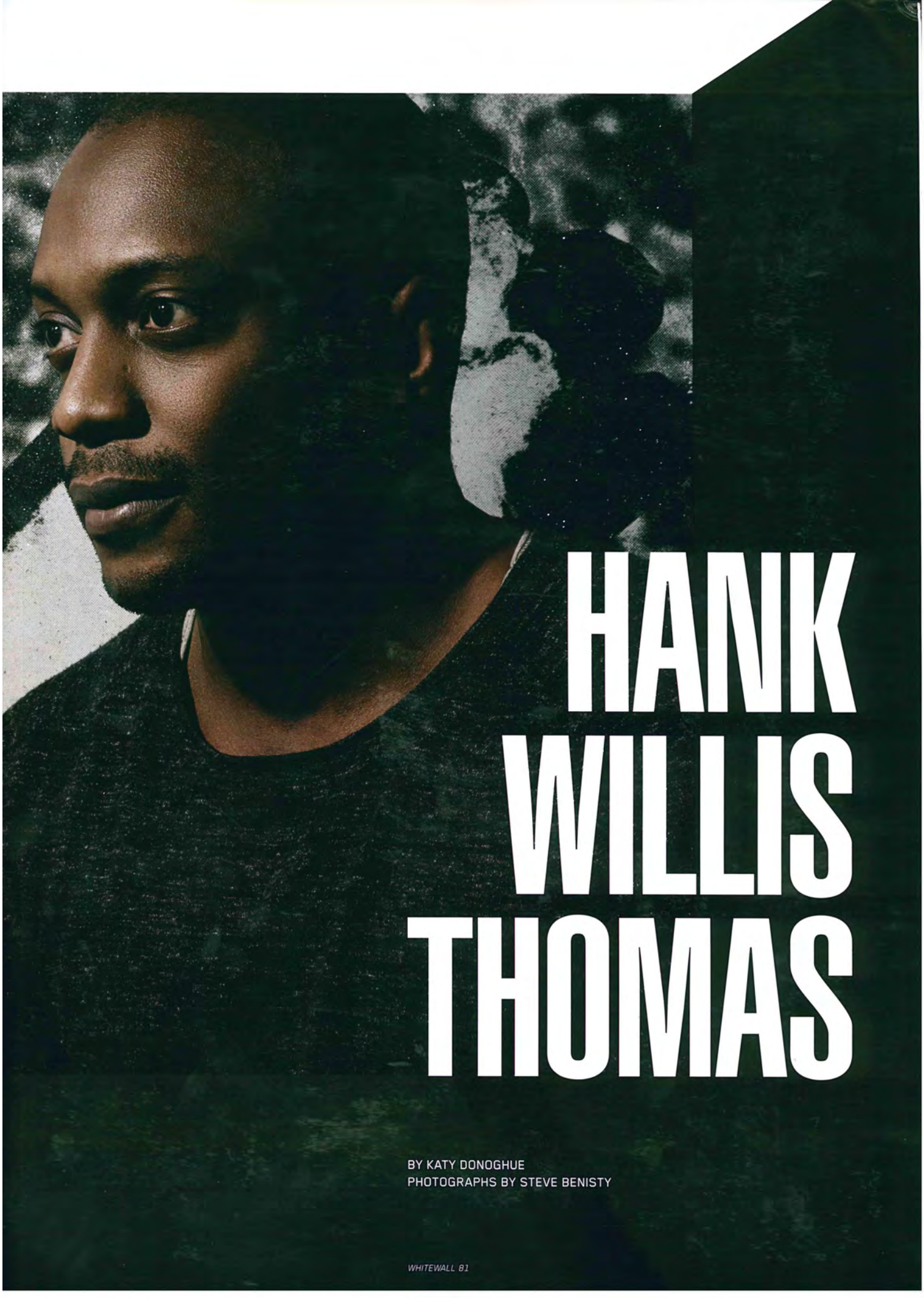
But there's also a lot locally here in New York that you'll want to stick around for. There's **PIOTR UKLANSKI**'s solow show at the Met, which includes an exhibition of his photography (even though he works in many mediums) and a curated selection from the Met's collection across dozens of departments. We also give you a look at **ROB PRUITT**'s studio chock-full of stuff—some of which you can even buy off his eBay store. With a quick train ride up to Greenwich, Connecticut, you can see his show at the Brant Foundation, which is really just a garage sale. Well, not your typical garage sale, because it's made up of discarded items from members of the Brant family, like Stephanie Seymour, Harry, and Peter II.

This is also our design issue, and we've packed quite a few profiles in to get you totally up to date on what's happening now in furniture, interiors, and architecture. We tour the Brooklyn-based studio of **HELLMAN-CHANG**, the duo making a name for luxury-made furniture in the United States and changing the DIY perception of the ultra-hip borough. We also talk to **ELEONORE CAVALLI** of Visionnaire and to the more-is-more designer **JUAN PABLO MOLYNEUX** about his maximalist vision.

So whether you'd like to daydream of ornate interiors or a summer escape to a city that just might be the next Berlin (Budapest), we think you'll find some satisfaction or stimulus here.

**KATY DONOGHUE**
EDITOR IN CHIEF





# HANK WILLIS THOMAS

BY KATY DONOGHUE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE BENISTY


HANDLE
WITH CARE

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

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

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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







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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Boston Globe

GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

# No matter the era or country, artists imprint the protest

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.

# Art

Edited by
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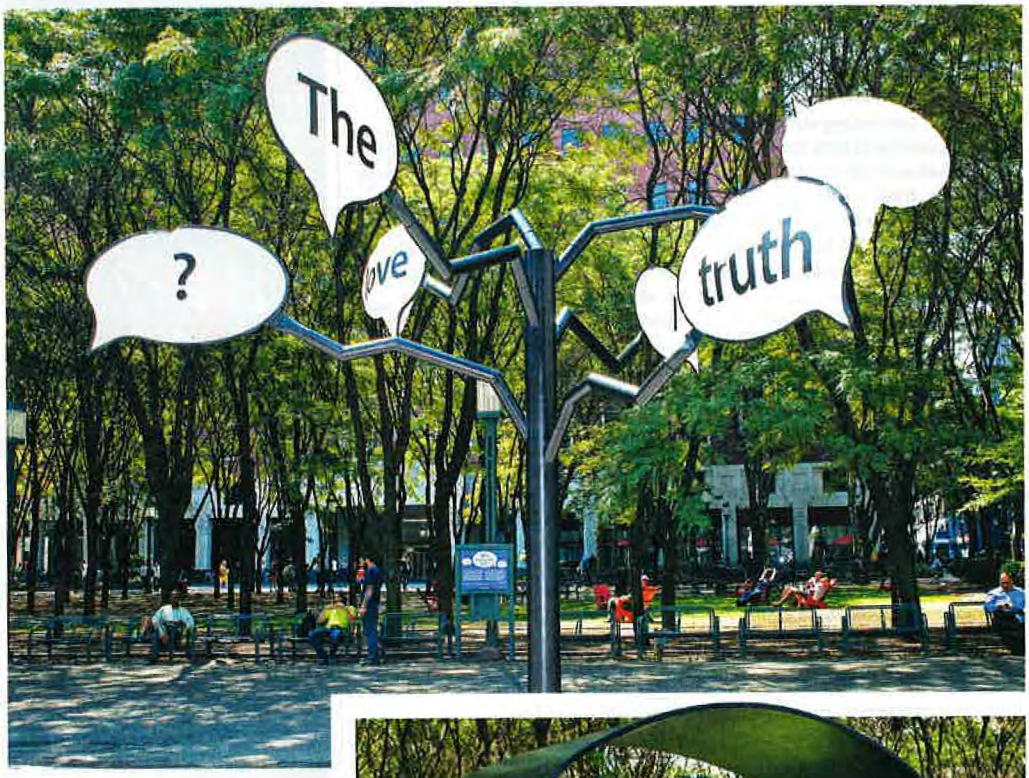
## You can handle the truth

Hank Willis Thomas's public art installation explores what's true from your point of view. By **Howard Halle** Photographs by **David Williams**




Can a game of telephone inspire art? Yes, if it's Hank Willis Thomas's ambitious public artwork for Brooklyn's MetroTech Commons, "The Truth Is I See You."

Thomas was one of the few Americans at a residency for international artists in Johnson, New York in 2006, during the Israel-Hezbollah War. The group included an Egyptian, a Lebanese-Palestinian and an Israeli, and when conflict broke out, tensions among them grew thick. "They went to opposite sides of every room," Thomas recalls, over coffee. To defuse the situation, he suggested playing telephone. The group passed along an Arabic word, which, according to the Israeli, came out sounding like the name of an Arab product sold in Israel; the Palestinian was familiar with it too. "It was a revelation," says Thomas, "that people who were enemies at birth had a bond no one else knew about." That discovery, about the things that divide us and unite us depending on our point of view, became the basis for his MetroTech project.

The piece starts with signs shaped like cartoon-speech bubbles, hung on lampposts. Using one of 22 languages spoken in Brooklyn (Yiddish, Urdu, Hindi, to name just a few), each sign is marked with a phrase beginning with THE TRUTH IS... followed by I LOVE YOU, I HEAR YOU, etc. Another group of much larger outline bubbles set on the ground serve as park benches.

There's also a flatscreen that plays video clips of people from around the world telling their stories by beginning with "The truth is...." An American talks about his painful divorce, for instance, while an Afghani woman describes how women in her country are oppressed.

These testimonials come courtesy of the *Truth Booth*, a collaboration between Thomas and the group 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 during the show.

Thomas is known for deconstructing how African-Americans are shaped and exploited by the white-owned media but adds that he doesn't want to be pigeonholed. "I've done a lot of work that's totally unrelated to that," he says. His real interest, he adds, is a diversity that embraces everyone, regardless of race or class.

What about the criticism that projects like Kara Walker's Domino Sugar Factory sphinx have been aiding and abetting gentrification? "I believe beauty is a basic service, and it's kind of an insult to say certain people don't deserve beauty," he says. "I want everyone to feel welcome, regardless of whether they have $5 in their pockets or $5 million."

**To read about more about Thomas, and how his upbringing influenced his art, visit timeout.com/newyork/art**

**Hank Willis Thomas, "The Truth Is I See You" is at MetroTech Commons through June 3, 2016.**

DAILY AD

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS'S NEW INSTALLATION ABOUT TRUTH POPS UP IN DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN

Text by Alexa Lawrence | August 14, 2015


*In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth),* 2011–15, Hank Willis Thomas.
Photo: Liz Ligon/Courtesy of the Public Art Fund, NY, and the Cause Collective

With "The Truth Is I See You," artist Hank Willis Thomas invites the people of Brooklyn, to join his ongoing investigation into the nature of truth. For the next ten months, a series of comic book–esque speech bubbles will hang overhead from various lampposts along the MetroTech Promenade, espousing "universal statements about truth" with the hopes of sparking conversation. Phrases include "The truth is I respect you," "The truth is I welcome you," "The truth is I need you," "The truth is I am you," each drawn from a poem composed by Thomas and fellow artist Ryan Alexiev.

But Thomas's concern is with truth across cultures, and his dialogue is not limited to English: With the help of a large network of multilingual friends, Thomas has translated the essence of the statements into 22 of the many languages spoken in Brooklyn. "In Wahrheit brauche ich dich," reads one. "La verdad es que te elijo a ti," another. Each bubble is accompanied by the original English phrase and a pronunciation guide.


*The Truth Is I Love You,* 2015.
Photo: James Ewing, Courtesy of the Public Art Fund, NY, the artist, and Jack Shainman Gallery

Other pieces around the park include two steel speech-bubble benches, where passersby can stop and rest, mull over the meaning of truth—or snap a cartoonish selfie. Large steel trees with branches sprouting speech bubbles announce indiscriminately to all who pass, “The truth is I love you.”

And in case none of these “universal statements” resonates with your understanding of the truth, The Truth Booth will also make four appearances during the exhibition. A collaboration with Alexiev and Jim Ricks of the Cause Collective, this piece consists of a video recording booth in which visitors are invited to create a new ending to the statement “The truth is . . . ,” adding their own verse to Alexiev and Thomas’s protean poem.

Through June 3, 2016, in downtown Brooklyn, New York; publicartfund.org

Time Out New York

# 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 WALL STREET JOURNAL.



# A Random Invitation to Share Truth

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


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

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Thoughts as to what constitutes the truth Tuesday varied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Brooklyn Paper

August 4, 2015 / GO Brooklyn / Downtown / Art

# Truth feller: Honest artist tries to bridge cultural gaps

By Eric Faynberg
*The Brooklyn Paper*

The truth is up there.

A new art installation at MetroTech creates a moment of truth every 45 feet. The exhibit, "The Truth Is I See You" features comic book-style word balloons and thought bubbles hanging from light poles around the plaza, each presenting a different "truth" for passers-by to consider. The word balloons, on display until June of 2016, feature phrases like "The truth is I know you," and "The truth is I love you," printed in English on one side, and in one of Brooklyn's 22 most-spoken foreign languages on the other.

The Brooklyn artist behind the project hopes it will lead people to learn about each other's cultures.

"It's a great opportunity to learn more about other people's perspectives and truths," said Hank Willis Thomas. "It's a chance to think differently about how you navigate the world around you and understand that multiple truths exist on the same plane."

A placard under each balloon offers a phonetic transcription, so English speakers can attempt the foreign-language phrase. Thomas hopes the language-spanning truth bubbles inspire people to learn more phrases from other languages.

The truthiness experiment resonates with some MetroTech patrons, especially those who can read both sides of the word balloons. A Polish-born Flatbush resident sitting beneath the English and Polish balloon "The truth is I balance you," said the artist's attempt to reach across cultures resonated with him.

"It makes sense," said Lukasz Grygiel. "I wasn't born here so I can relate to that."

Another plaza visitor picked up on the installation's message from the start, and offered his own thought-provoking truth.

"I figured it was an artist trying to prove a point about culture," said Michael Lambert. "My message would be that the truth is gray."

Not everyone in the plaza knew what to make of the bubbles, however.

"I was just trying to figure out what this was about when I sat down," Charlotte McSweeney said. "I really have no idea,"

The installation also has three other components: two large benches in the shape of word balloons; a "sign tree" with a collection of truth bubbles, and a video recording project called the "Truth Booth." The inflatable booth (also in shape of a word bubble), invites truth-tellers to step inside and record their own "The truth is…" statement. The booth, part of a multi-year project called "In Search Of The Truth," has traveled across the United States and to Afghanistan, Ireland, and South Africa, recording more than 5,000 truths along the way. It will stop for only a moment of truth in Brooklyn, however, with appearances on MetroTech Commons on Aug. 4 and Oct. 15, and at Atlantic Terminal Plaza on Sept. 26.

*"The Truth is I See You" at MetroTech (MetroTech Center 1, between Jay Street and Flatbush Avenue in Downtown) on display until June 2016. The Truth Booth [www.insearchofthetruth.net]. Aug. 4 and Oct. 15 at MetroTech Commons, and Sept. 26 at Atlantic Terminal Plaza, noon–8 pm. Free.*

*Reach reporter Eric Faynberg at (718) 260–2508 or by e-mail at efaynberg@cnglocal.com. Follow him on Twitter @ericfaynberg.*



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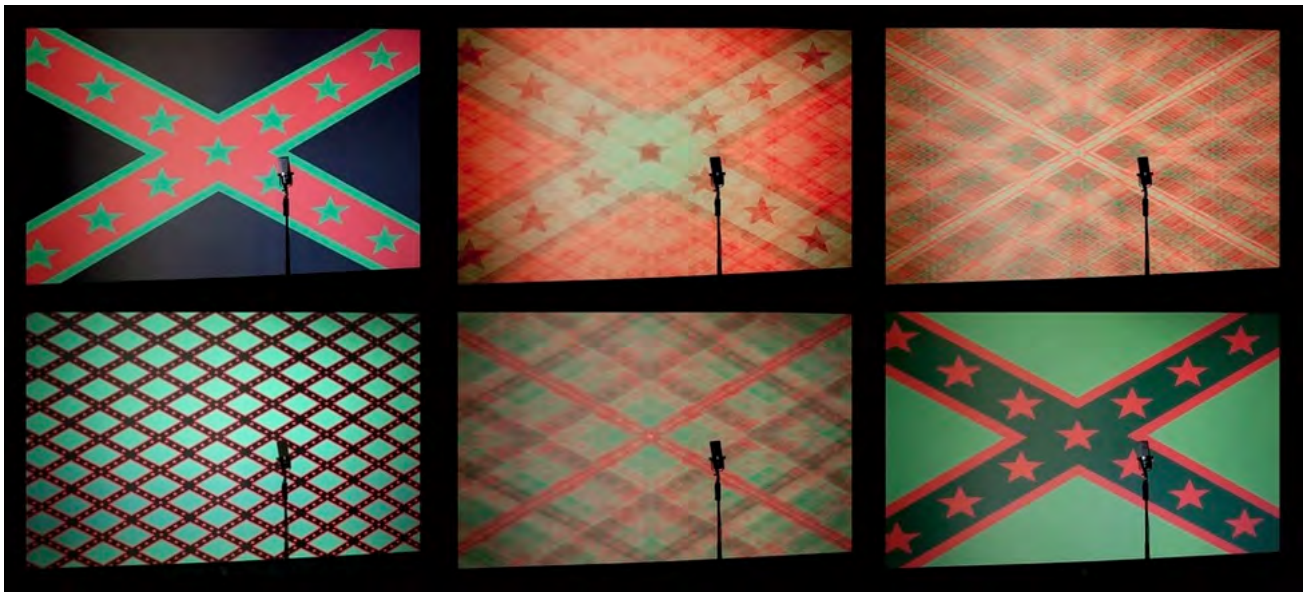
# Artist Hank Willis Thomas's Reimagined Confederate Flag Invites Conversation at Chrysler Museum of Art

NORFOLK , Virginia July 20, 2015

American art (/tag/American_art) contemporary art (/tag/contemporary_art)



Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 19 76 ) Video s till from Black Righteous Space , 2012 Interactive video installation, DVD (playlist and video installation), Mac mini, and microphone ; a pproximately 60 min. © Hank Willis Thomas. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

***Artist's Provocative Interactive Installation Invites Exercise of First-Amendment Rights Through Live Personal Participation and Social Media***

Come speak your piece, as the Chrysler Museum of Art becomes a platform for personal expression with **In The Box: Hank Willis Thomas' Black Righteous Space.** The artist's interactive installation immerses visitors in contemporary African-American culture, then invites visitors to voice their own opinions.

Black Righteous Space features a looping soundtrack that combines songs, speeches, and dialogue from more than 50 noted black speakers, singers, and spoken word artists. Among the leaders, musicians, ministers, poets, and celebrities represented are Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Gil Scott-Heron, Funkadelic, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Mos Def, and Richard Pryor.

As they share their observations on racism, equality, injustice, and life in America, their views range from profound to profane, impassioned to inane, comic to uncompromising. Kanye West critiques the response to Katrina. Alice Walker reads Sojourner Truth. Public Enemy "Fight[s] the Power." Marian Anderson sings "My Country, Tis of Thee" at the Lincoln Memorial." The Watts Prophets rail on tenements. Stokely Carmichael questions "black unity." Morgan Freeman "solves the race problem" with Mike Wallace in less than a minute. And Chris Rock drops a fair number of F-bombs as he defines "the one time white people can say n*****."

Some of the soundclips are lyrical. Others are inflammatory. Each is punctuated with a throbbing rush of visual force. On the screen, as they speak, a barrage of patterns—including a recurrent Confederate flag recolored in hues of the Black Power Movement—flashes on the screen, pulsing in time to the rhythm of the voices and music. The kaleidoscopic imagery turns the words and music into a continuous visual flow. The artist explains that his work references a lengthy struggle for black civil and human rights.

"I'm using this sound to disrupt historically oppressive symbols," Hank Willis Thomas says of Black Righteous Space. "By pairing the soundtrack of these speakers with the reverberating, altered flag, the installation explores the idea of taking control of symbols and their meanings."

(/images/pr/July20_flag.jpg)

Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 19 76 ) Video s till from Black Righteous Space , 2012 Interactive video installation, DVD (playlist and video installation), Mac mini, and microphone ; a pproximately 60 min. © Hank Willis Thomas. Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

(/images/pr/July20_hank.jpg)

Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 19 76 )

(ArtfixDaily.com (http://www.artfixdaily.com/)) “Black Righteous Space questions who gets the last word in history,” says Chrysler Museum Director Erik Neil. “By blending such contested symbols and invested voices into an abstraction, Hank Willis Thomas leaves that answer open-ended. Given recent debates, his awareness of the lasting potency of the Confederate flag couldn’t be more timely.”

Additionally, a microphone at the center of the show keeps the conversation going. This interactive component is a keynote of the exhibition. During randomized periods of silence in the audio track, Thomas encourages visitors to speak or sing into the mic, contributing their own voices and views to his Black Righteous Space. Visitors can also enhance their experience of the exhibition and connect with others by sharing their opinions, as well as photographs or videos of themselves in The Box, on social media. Twitter posts using the hashtags #CMABox and #BlackRighteousSpace will appear on the Chrysler’s live feed online and outside the exhibition.

Black Righteous Space is on view at the Chrysler through October 4, 2015. Admission is free.

**KEY PROGRAMMING**

**Meet the Artist: Hank Willis Thomas**

**Third Thursday, September 17, open until 10 p.m.**

Hank Willis Thomas returns to Norfolk for this very special Third Thursday focused on his Black Righteous Space. The acclaimed artist, who was featured in 30 Americans at the Chrysler in 2012, leads

an exploration of his exhibition here in The Box at 6 p.m. Afterward, enjoy the high-energy street sounds of Hampton’s The Fuzz Band from 7:30–9:30 p.m.

Cost: Free for Museum Members and students with current school ID, $5 for all others. Cash bar

**ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976, Plainfield, N.J.) regularly tackles issues of pop culture through the lenses of race, identity, advertising, and corporate branding. He earned a B.F.A. in photography and Africana studies from New York University, and an M.F.A. and M.A. in photography and visual criticism from the California College of Arts. His photographs, videos, conceptual installations, sculpture, and mixed-media work have earned him critical praise as one of the top visual artists working in America today. His exhibitions are in demand worldwide, and his art is included in the collections of many of the country’s finest museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the High Museum in Atlanta, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The recipient of numerous grants and awards and a published author, Thomas works in New York City and is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery. He maintains an active web and social media presence at www.hankwillisthomas.com (http://www.hankwillisthomas.com) and @hankwthomas on Twitter.

For more information on exhibitions, events, and programs, visit www.chrysler.org (http://www.chrysler.org) or call (757) 664-6200.

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 .

NEW YORK OBSERVER

# Confess! Artist Hank Willis Thomas' 'Truth Booth' Headed for Brooklyn

## Get ready for another art installation likely to inspire lines

By **Alanna Martinez** | 07/15/15 12:50pm


***In Search of the Truth (The Truth Booth)*. (Photo: Courtesy of the Cause Collective)**

A special, in some ways very intimate, exhibition of public art by New York-based conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas will be hitting the streets of Brooklyn August 4.

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

In December, the Observer encountered the *Truth Booth* during its run at Art Basel Miami Beach, in Miami's Collins Park. (There were long lines to get it.) The artist told us: "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." There were long lines to enter the booth in Miami. The project has recorded nearly 5,000 visitors' responses to date.

The artist will hang 22 signs on light posts at MetroTech with phrases written in languages spoken across the borough.

The Public Art Fund and Barclays Center developer Forest City Ratner will present the solo show of brand new works, plus the Booth, a collaboration with artists Ryan Alexiev and Jim Ricks of The Cause Collective.


**A rendering of Truth signs for "The Truth Is I See You." (Photo: Courtesy Public Art Fund)**

"As a site that's changed so drastically over the past 20 years, MetroTech seemed like the perfect place to do a project that at its core encourages cross-cultural understanding. Fittingly, Hank's project really speaks to the changing diversity in Brooklyn today," Public Art Fund curator Andria Hickey told the Observer.

Other works to be shown include two benches, seven-feet-tall and nine-feet-wide, shaped like hallow speech bubbles with the interior space open for seating. A third work at the site will be a large-scale tree sculpture with small speech bubbles dotting its branches like leaves.

"Hank Willis Thomas: The Truth Is I See You," will be on view until June of next year.

Mr. Thomas' artwork has often utilized the form of the speech bubble, commonly used in cartoons and comics, to display sentiments related to his ongoing exploration of the theme of truth.

"This newly commissioned body of work, his most significant public installation to date, extends both his artistic practice and its engagement with the richly layered Brooklyn community," Nicholas Baume, Public Art Fund Director and Chief Curator said in a statement provided exclusively to the Observer.

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

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

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

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

The Boston Globe

FRAME BY FRAME

# Hank Willis Thomas's slick image masks closed door

By Sebastian Smee | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 30, 2015

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.

WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

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

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TIME

# TheView

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

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

CULTURE

## Let Rachel Dolezal be as black as she wants to be

**By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar**

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

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

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

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



PHOTOGRAPH BY HANK WILLIS THOMAS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ArtReview

June 2015

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Art in America

June 2015

NEW YORK

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS

## Jack Shainman

Hank Willis Thomas: *Aggressive loyalty, 1963/2015*, digital C-print, 40 by 42⅝ inches; at Jack Shainman.

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

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

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

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

—Jean Dykstra

HYPERALLERGIC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

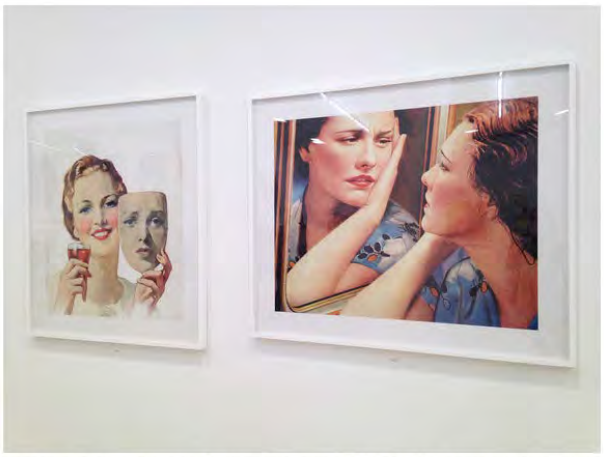
The schizophrenia persists through the second half of the series: in 1967, just as the women's liberation movement was heating up, Thomas's ad shows a deeply uncomfortable scene of a woman in a bra and underwear being handled by five men. (It's actually an ad for pants, and Thomas says he was "uneasy"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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

# What Makes A White Woman A White Woman?

## Artist Hank Willis Thomas looks at advertising's role in shaping white womanhood.

May 18th, 2015 Ernest Hardy

*You can learn as much about a culture from reading an ad as you can from reading a book."* – Hank Willis Thomas

Few contemporary visual artists mapping the intersection of capitalism and identity (the ways the former shape the latter) do so with the fierce wit and intelligence of Hank Willis Thomas, perhaps best known for his *Unbranded*/*Branded* projects. In *Unbranded* (2008) he took ads from magazines that target Black readership and reworked them, stripping text and sometimes iconic logos to get at what was/is actually being sold or subtly reinforced. That was followed by the brilliant *Branded*series (2011) in which he explored the shared/similar practices of the slave trade and the American professional sports industry, manipulating the visual language of advertising to underscore his points

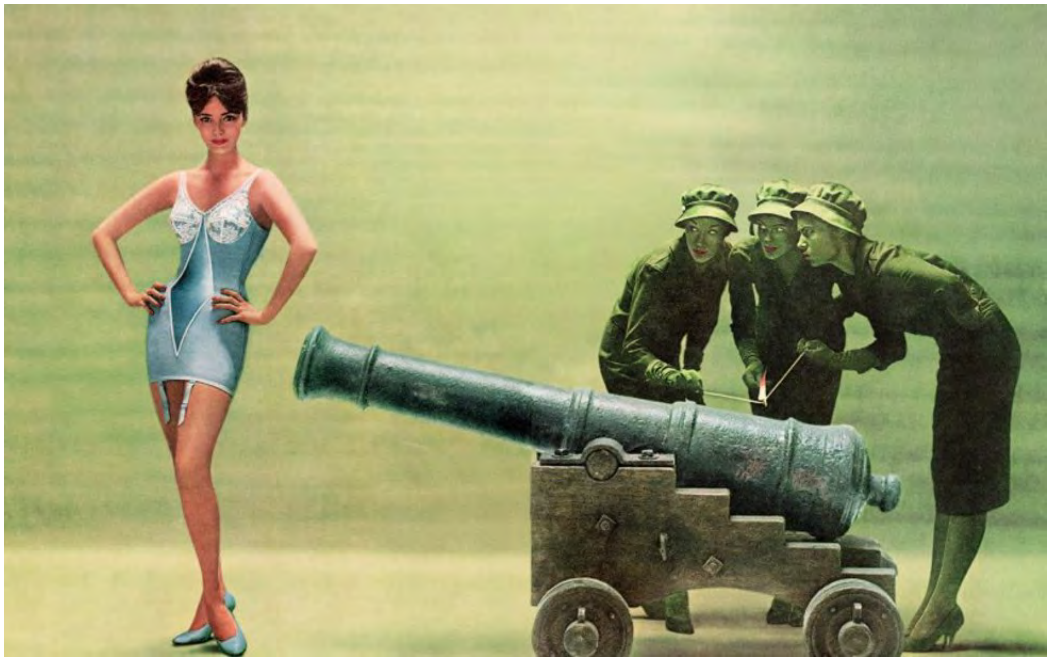
His latest dissection of race, identity, and the role of the marketplace in shaping attitudes and beliefs is his exhibition *Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015*, showing at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York through May 23. In it, he tracks the attitudes – what is sacrosanct, what is

malleable – about white womanhood as it has been painstakingly constructed / exploited / manipulated / policed over the last century of advertising.

The work underscores the insidious power of advertising to not only elicit desires for products we don't really need, but the ways in which it also has long turned identity itself (in this case the raced and gendered bodies of white women) into a product that is always just out of reach for the very women (and men) being appealed to in the ads. The ways white (ostensibly hetero) men and black people (men and women) are used as props in the ads speak volumes about real world race and gender attitudes.

In a recent interview with the *Daily Beast*, Thomas poses a question that encapsulates the overall thrust of his body of work thus far, while also speaking about what specifically links the current exhibition to his past output: "What is an authentic female representation, an authentic black representation, when it's made up by people who don't know them and who are motivated by commercial interests?"

TRIBECA



CALL SHEET ARTICLE

# TFI ALUMNUS DEBUTS PROVOCATIVE NEW EXHIBITION

BY THE EDITORS

Hank Willis Thomas, a 2012 and 2014 TFI alumnus, has debuted a pertinent and provocative new solo exhibition at the Jack Shainman Gallery entitled Unbranded: a Century of White Women, 1915-2015.

The exhibition, which runs through May 23rd, illustrates Thomas' belief that race is a false construct, "a fabrication," as he puts it in this profile from The Daily Beast, by stripping away the texts of retro advertisements featuring white women in order to examine their visual representations. It's a project similar to the black artist's 2011 series Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, which applied the same task to early advertisements featuring black people.

Whether or not you agree with Thomas' surely divisive beliefs, this risky and remarkable exhibition is a must-see for those who like their art to rouse, challenge, and maybe even change their everyday perceptions.

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

Art May 6th, 2015

INCONVERSATION

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS with Allie Biswas

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

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

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

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

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

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

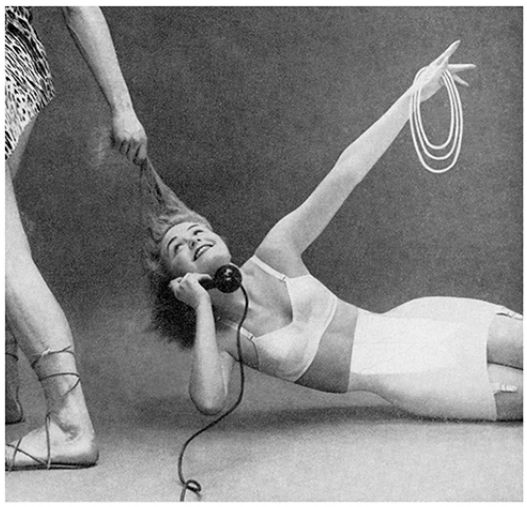
my ambition was to become an advertising photographer. I studied photography at NYU and some of the first jobs I did were assisting advertising photographers and commercial photographers. Also, when I graduated I worked at Saturday Night Live's film unit where they sometimes made these fake commercials.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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Rail: When did you have these jobs?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: That’s true.

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

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

Thomas: And I noticed your watch.

Rail: This is old.

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: What was the advert?

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

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

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

Rail: 50 Cent.

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

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

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

Rail: Reebok.

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

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

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

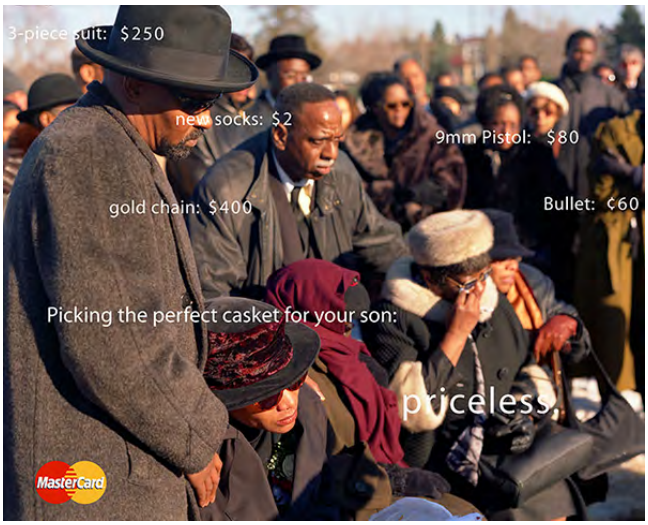
With Yao Ming you have the Chinese giant—he's about seven feet tall—so they clearly had no idea what to do with that. So let's just throw everything "oriental" into the image—the rising sun, yin-yang. Reebok was like, we got this! It is crazy that nothing here makes sense. This is what made me start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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: The spaghetti advert is a good example.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: McDonald's.

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

Rail: Social interaction?

Thomas: Yes. But what are the men doing?

Rail: They're playing backgammon.

Thomas: And what are the women doing?

Rail: Cooing over them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: It is very seductive, though.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rail: To undo all of that progress.

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

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

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

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

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

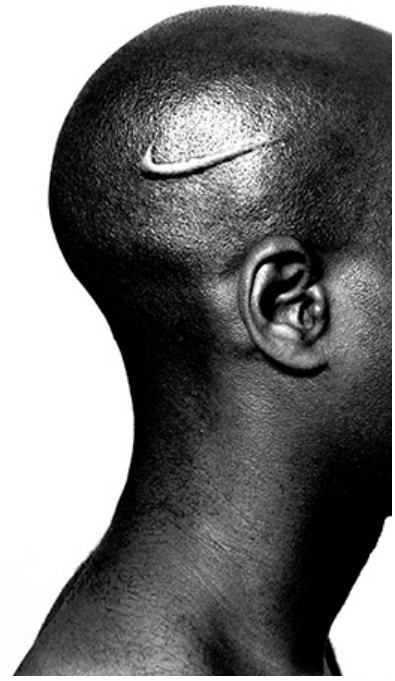
Rail: I wonder, then, how it felt to show your work in Bench Marks, which was your first public art project, carried out last year. Your photographs were inserted into the fabrication of benches situated at bus stops, on the street, in a neighborhood of Chicago. When your appropriated adverts were positioned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

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

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

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

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



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

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

ATLANTA BLACKSTAR

# NY Art Exhibit Exposes the Racist, Sexist Messages Hiding in a Century of Ads

May 1, 2015 | Posted by Taylor Gordon

Tagged With: art exhibit explores sexist ads, Black women in ads, Black women in media, Hank Willis Thomas, Racist Ads, sexis ads

The representation of Black women in TV and film is a topic that has garnered much discussion and attention for years but less frequently explored are the subliminal messages that also plague the world of advertisements.

Artist Hank Willis Thomas is hoping to change that with his latest exhibition, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," showing at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York until May 23.

The exhibit strips advertisements from the last century of their text and branding in order to draw attention to the raw images that are ubiquitously displayed throughout pop culture.

Withoug the distracting logos and catchy slogans covering the advertisements, all that's left are racist, sexist images that glorify the image of white women when compared to their Black counterparts while also ensuring women aren't portrayed in a way that makes them equal to men.

The majority of the advertisements supported three troubling ideas: Black women are subservient to white women, women will always be competitors rather than companions, and even as women make strides towards equality they will still continue to be measured by their sexuality and physical attributes.

"A lot of the ads in the exhibition show women with their husbands, or their daughters, or their lovers," The Guardian writes of the New York exhibit. "But there isn't a single ad that shows female friends together, enjoying each other's company while fully clothed."

When women did appear to be happy in a group together, they were flaunting bikinis or other scantily clad displays that seemed to be ripped from a man's fantasy.

Then there were the collection of ads that served as a troubling reminder for women to not feel too comfortable about the strides they have made in garnering equality in the workplace and society as a whole.

As women were finally getting the right to vote and were taking up roles in the military and holding down full careers, the ad world exploded with messages that objectified them.

“This is particularly evidenced in the 1960s where many of the ads show women decapitated, bruised, caged, or being pulled apart by men,” The Guardian explains. “You can count your freedoms, the images seem to say, but the sum of a woman still boils down to aging skin and sexual orifices.”

One of the cringe-worthy photos has a petite woman in her underwear as she is surrounded by a group of men in business clothes tugging away at her arms.

Eerie smiles have crept across their lips as the woman’s hair swings down in front of her face.

In the sea of misogynist ads breaking women down to little more than the objects of fantasy and cattiness, racism also makes its presence known.

The ads have a stunning lack of Black women present overall, but when they do make an appearance their purpose is clear.

They are typically serving a white woman or meant to represent something exotic and “other.” They are never merely a part of the community at large.

“As blatant racism gets less socially acceptable, the message becomes coded,” The Guardian states. “An ad from 1974 shows a spectrum of female faces going from black at the bottom to white at the top: a hierarchy in which blacker is definitely not meant to be better.”

Fortunately, more modern ads did finally incorporate more positive representations of Black women with the help of well-known figures like Serena Williams

In one ad she is seen accepting a gift from a white woman kneeling in front of her for a Tampax advertisement.

Thomas noted that “the rise in appreciation” for these Black women can be credited not only women like Serena but also Michelle Obama and Beyonce.

As such figures rose to popularity, it forced ads to take a different look at the underlying messages they tried to send in their ads.

The exhibit marks yet another time that Thomas has explored the messages in advertisements.

In 2007 he highlighted the presence of Black men in ads with “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2000.”

Join us in our effort to change our world with Empowering Narratives. Share this empowering narrative on your social network of choice and ask others to do the same.

NEW YORK POST

# 7 hot NYC artists you need to know right now

By Barbara Hoffman, David Kaufman and Marisa Mazria-Katz

May 12, 2015 | 5:51pm

A new generation of star artists is taking charge in NYC — and the world is paying attention.

These virtuosos include a landscape artist who's grown a grove of reflective trees in the middle of Gotham.

A Brooklyn pioneer with serious celeb cred. A prize-winning portraitist who's a favorite of the first lady. And a heroic satirist challenging race and class to wild acclaim.
They're changing the face of New York's cultural scene, and luring curators from across the globe just in time for Frieze.

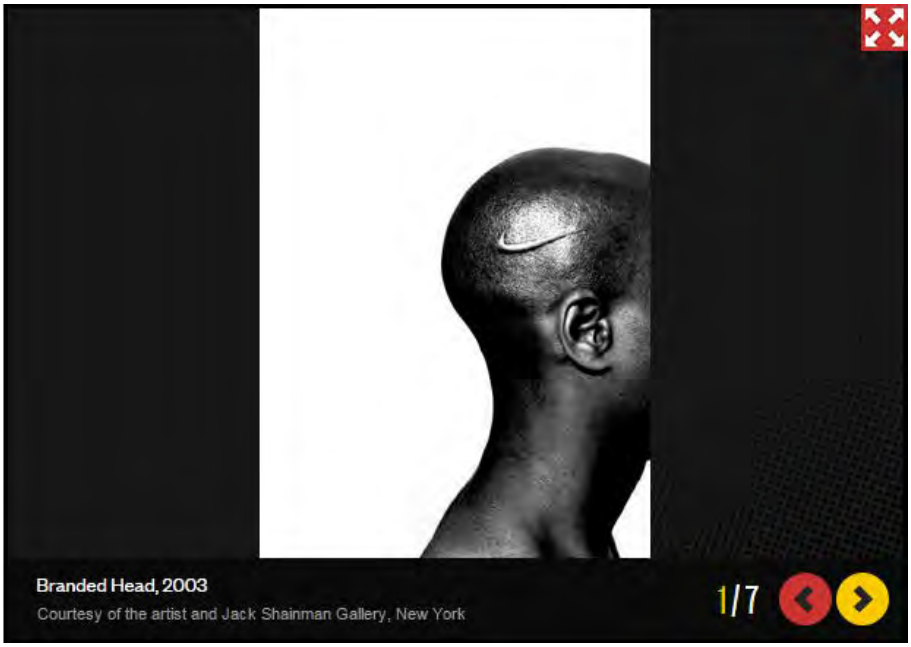
Read Alexa's exclusive interviews with these sensational seven inside.

## HANK WILLIS THOMAS
## 39, multimedia artist

**ART CRED:** It's already been a banner year for conceptual artist Thomas, who nabbed a prestigious International Center of Photography award and was appointed by Mayor Bill de Blasio to the NYC Public Design Commission. Thomas' electrifying work, the latest of which is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, has been acquired by dozens of institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim and the Whitney.

**STRONG ROOTS:** With parents like MacArthur Award-winning photographer Deborah Willis and physicist and Black Panther Hank Thomas, inspiration was never far. "To have two parents that never lived by the rules society dictated put the onus on me to create my own path," he tells Alexa. "They taught me to be free and not fearful of the world."

Thomas kicks back at his Midtown studio, in front of his “Lightsaber (Diamond)” piece. Photo: Victoria Will




**ON FRIEZE:** For Thomas, Frieze is a much-needed respite from a merciless winter. “The fair is a breath of fresh air manifested through creativity,” he says. The New Jersey-born artist, who will have photo-derived sculptures in both the Goodman Gallery and Jack Shainman Gallery’s booths, is anticipating a bevy of “blooming flowers on the island surrounding a refreshing group of young and contemporary artists.”
*— Marisa Mazria Katz*

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.

photograph

May/June 2015



Hank Willis Thomas, *Are you the Right Kind of Woman for it?, 1974/2007.*
Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

*We asked* **Hank Willis Thomas** *to tell us about a picture that meant something to him, and why. Thomas's exhibition* Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015 *is at Jack Shainman Gallery through May 23.*

What does an ad look like naked? I first came across this image in a book about 1970s era advertisements. I was immediately struck by the provocativeness of the image for the time. It is reminiscent of the iconic photograph of Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton taken just a few years earlier. The handsome, dapper African American man is dressed for a safari and holds a whip in his lap. The women sit on either side of his throne like proud concubines.

Wasn't this just six years after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Weren't interracial unions still illegal in many states? Could an ad like this have existed ten years prior? If not, what had changed? Was it Civil Rights? Black Power? Blaxploitation films? Or was this just ordinary life? What was this an ad for anyway?

Then I read the ad copy: "Are you the right kind of woman for it? The Mistress Collection by Funky." This was an ad for dresses? I was perplexed, offended, and amused. It seemed that exotic tropes and references to savage "jungle love" were being employed to sell dresses to upper income "White" women who weren't afraid to take a walk on the wild side. There were so many assumptions that had to be made about race and gender in order for that image to make sense in an advertisement for women's attire. If it weren't for the text, the average viewer would probably be lost. It made me wonder about what would happen if I blew it up, removed the text, and presented it as a work of art. This was one of the inspirations for my project *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008.* I realized that ad images rarely have anything to do with the products they're selling, and by removing the text, the ulterior motives of the advertisers are revealed. It also says so much about bodies as signifiers of value and virtue. We find racist, sexist, and ageist messages being transmitted. I see ephemera of popular culture as potent material for making art about the past and the present.

THE ART OF CHANGE
A Ford Foundation Project Exploring the Intersection of Art and Justice

IDENTITY

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

VIA HYPERALLERGIC

**IMAGE CREDIT:** *She's all tied up...in a poor system*, 1951/2015, Jack Shainman Gallery

DATE June 15, 2015

POSTED IN Diversity, Identity, News Feed

VIA Hyperallergic

By stripping a century's worth of ads of their copy and context, Hank Willis Thomas exposes insidious stereotypes that have become visual shorthand for a particular subset of femininity.

## By Jillian Steinhauer at Hyperallergic:

> The idea is so ingenious, it almost seems obvious: take advertisements and remove the text that makes them so, leaving only a string of images behind. This was the process that Hank Willis Thomas undertook for *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008*, a series of appropriated ads that covers the period between the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the election of Barack Obama, with one ad representing each year. Shown at the Brooklyn Museum in 2010-11, Thomas's images laid bare looked alternately bizarre, sinister, and deeply surreal.
>
> The same holds true of the images in his newest series, *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015*, currently on view at Jack Shainman Gallery. As with the previous body of work, Thomas has once again stripped advertisements of their advertising, this time turning his attention to the ways in which corporations market their products to white women – and in turn market white women as products themselves. He has again chosen one image per year of the period in question, and the images are arranged as a timeline, split nearly in half between Jack Shainman's two Chelsea spaces.

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This story was originally published on May 20th, 2015.

THE DAILY BEAST

Hank Willis Thomas Studio

COLOR CODED

05.03.1512:01 AM ET by Emily Shire

# The Black Artist Who Thinks Race Is Fake

Hank Willis Thomas believes race is a construct, and his latest exhibition, using a century of advertising featuring white women, illustrates his thesis at its most complex.

“I don’t really believe in race. It’s a fabrication,” Hank Willis Thomas tells me.

His words initially shock me for a few reasons. One is that when I meet the acclaimed African-American artist, it’s just a couple of days following the death of Walter Scott, a black man, killed after being fired on repeatedly by white officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina.

That came mere months after Michael Brown and Eric Garner died at the hands of white cops. As I write this, Baltimore is reeling over the death of Freddie Gray.

Of course race is *real*, I think. It’s at the nexus of so many social currents and tensions. What on earth is he talking about?

Thomas' declaration is all the more perplexing to me because he says it as we walk along Tenth Avenue, in New York's West Chelsea, between the two venues housing, *Unbranded: a Century of White Women, 1915-2015*.

Thomas' exhibition, which is currently on display at the Jack Shainman gallery through May 23, specifically examines depictions of white women in advertising. If race isn't real, what is the point of this show?

The exhibition follows the 39-year-old artist's 2011 series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America*, which similarly took advertisements depicting black people and stripped them of the text to scrutinize the visual representation.
His 2008 monograph, *Pitch Blackness*, examined black-on-black violence following the shooting death of his cousin, Songha Willis, when he was robbed at gunpoint in Philadelphia in 2000.

Race is intrinsic to his work and is even featured prominently in the very first piece in his latest exhibition. A 1915 Cream of Wheat ad shows a white woman sitting across from a white man being served by the brand's iconic black cook in his chef's hat.

When Thomas shows me it, he talks about how in 1915, black men had the right to vote (on the books, in reality it was very different) and white women didn't. "Technically, as a man, his [the black cook's] status is higher than hers," he says. But, as the visual demonstrates, "in reality, she still had a higher stature and more power," he says.

"What is an authentic female representation, an authentic black representation, when it's made up by people who don't know them and who are motivated by commercial interests?"

So, how exactly does Thomas not believe in race when it is a topic whose complexities and nuances he has doggedly and dynamically tackled throughout his artistic career?

"I try to tackle it because I'm trying to get rid of it," Thomas tells me.

There are not many black people in the one hundred advertisement images selected for this series, and they are almost exclusively depicted as some form of help. A black maid toils in the background in a 1924 ad for laundry starch, while two white women in front more prominently fawn over their wardrobe.

A 1949 advertisement for Budweiser shows a disturbing nostalgia for the Antebellum South, with a black man serving a white woman in full-on Scarlett O'Hara regalia a slice of ham. "Hospitality is quickly recognized," was the accompanying text, Thomas says.

Even when a black person is not present, Thomas contextualizes the depiction of white women in terms of the racial climate in the U.S. when it was made.

A 1955 ad shows a smiling white woman in a bra and corset being dragged by her hair by a white man; his veiny hand and muscled calf is all we see.

“Come out of the bone age, darling…” was the accompanying text in this ad for Warner’s lingerie. While it was meant to sell a modern take on undergarments—ditch the antiquated bone corsets—the brute violence is the standout message in 2015.

The violence is startling enough, but then Thomas points out that this ad was publicized the same year Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy, was kidnapped and murdered by an angry gang of white men after he whistled at a white woman.

“You see this violence [against white women] that’s really clear at the same time Emmett Till was killed for whistling at a white woman,” says Thomas.

“It’s publicly sanctioned violence,” he says of the Warner ad. “But of course, if it’s a white way of doing it, it’s okay.”

Yet, he is adamant that race is not real, despite the violence, discrimination and exploitation that occur all around us today with race seemingly at its roots.

“Black people were created by white people. Five hundred years ago in Africa, there were no black people. It was just people,” Thomas says.

But then, how does he make sense of racial profiling, stereotypes, and discrimination and their horrendous, sometimes lethal effects?

“The problem is people believe race is real. Trayvon Martin wasn’t seen as [just] a person walking through a neighborhood. He was seen as a young, black person, a kind of person that must be read as a threat,” he explains.

From Thomas’ perspective, racial oppression and strife exist in the U.S. because we buy into the construction of race.

To Thomas, race is a concept put together by outsiders trying to make a generalized message, just like Madison Ave executives trying to sell you a Maidenform bra or Coppertone sunscreen.

*Unbranded* takes an ad from every year of the 1915-2015 period, but the text is removed from each ad.

The only captions in the galleries are of the years in which the ads were published, with no indication of what products were actually being marketed. By doing this, Thomas suggests that the items themselves were incidental to selling a vision of white womanhood.

Thomas knows how much money and sheer manpower goes into creating advertisements. After graduating from NYU with a BFA in photography and Africana studies and an MFA in photography and visual criticism from the California College of Arts, his first jobs were working on advertising campaigns.

“I recall working on a shoot for Tommy Girl perfume. There were three models and about 100 crew. How much money could you spend to make a scent look attractive? It was fascinating to see how much went in from the back end making a picture that is supposed to represent a lie,” Thomas says.

The more he worked for and thought about advertisements, the more he realized how powerful they are. “You can learn as much about a culture form read an ad as you can from reading a book,” Thomas tells me.

He recognizes that advertisements do not directly mirror reality. Rather, one has to think about the messages being put forth and who is creating them. “What is an authentic female representation, an authentic black representation, when it’s made up by people who don’t know them and who are motivated by commercial interests?” he says.

Some of his early work involved creating “images that look like ads but say things I didn’t think advertisers could responsibly say.” His chilling 2004 *Priceless* is a play on the popular MasterCard advertisement, taking the photo of a black family in tears at a funeral with the text, “Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless.”

Thomas began to toy with a new media critique while still relying on the medium of ads.

“At some point, I thought that instead of making images that look like ads, it might be interesting to use real ads. Truth may be better than fiction.”

It’s important to acknowledge that just because Thomas is working from original advertisements does not mean they are the “truth”—and it would be selling his latest series short to say that they were.

He doesn’t merely remove the text from an ad and slap it on the Chelsea gallery walls. He blows it up and zones in on specific elements or features that tell (or, maybe more accurately, reveal) a message that the advertisers didn’t intend.

While the sexism, the racism, and the objectification is often glaringly obvious, Thomas’ works are most jarring when he puts his artistic spin on modern ads we’ve probably never thought about twice.

I immediately recognized a 1998 advertisement for HBO’s *Sex and the City*, a naked Sarah Jessica Parker shielded only by her laptop with the Manhattan skyline behind her.

While certainly salacious, I never thought of the advert as particularly exploitative to women. But, stripped of the text and close to 20 years after it originally ran, I couldn’t help but wonder (to steal a line from Carrie Bradshaw) how much did HBO trade on Parker’s body and sexuality to sell the series?

Overall, Thomas’ selection of advertisements emphasized the limits to the changes in mainstream conceptions of white women. Thin, leggy, busty white women abounded.

They depressingly suggested that the prime change in hundred years of white women in advertising was the liberty to show more flesh and be more obviously sexual in the tone of objectification.

Which is not to say Thomas doesn’t showcase an arc of improvement.

He also selected ads and played with the images to show the punctuated progress that came in small bursts, often fleeting ones.

World War II has long been considered a period of tremendous growth in financial and social independence for women, who were forced to take on roles as breadwinners and protect the home front while men were at war.

Thomas’ ad choices speak to this new freedom for women. The ad for 1942 shows a woman in flying gear smoking a cigarette, a bold, brashy gesture.

The 1944 one shows a woman doing intense manual labor, untangling thick coils of wires, presumably in the service of some military effort. In previous years, a company would not dare to show a white woman involved with such vigorous physical work.

In 1945, three women in full military gear stare straight forward, away from the camera. It is a sharp, defiant refusal to pose and primp.

But women were quickly ushered back into traditional roles when men returned home from World War II— and Thomas' series shows that. Immediately following the strong trio of women in 1945 is an ad featuring a blond woman in a dress and apron as she instructs her matching young, blond daughter in vacuuming.

When we approach the 1960s, Thomas points out how an ad from 1961 shows a woman eagerly mapping out her driving route from Beaumont to Houston, emblematic of creating her own path.

The 1962 ad next to it shows a woman's smiling disembodied head on the floor as she looks up at a man, who we only see from the waist down, gigantic in comparison (it was apparently, an advert for men's pants, Thomas tells me).

The juxtaposition between the two ads shows how messy the path towards social progress is. "I call it one step forward, two steps back," Thomas tells me.

Even after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the establishment of the National Organization of Women, and the right for a woman to have an abortion secured in *Roe v. Wade*, Madison Avenue did not process that the lives of women—especially white women who tended to have greater privileges by dint of their races—were changing.

The 1970s and 1980s are a blur of mostly blond women in bikinis or various seductive poses. My personal favorite is a 1984 ad of a fair-skinned woman with perfectly polished nails, holding a single finger to her lips to convey a sexy secret while she holds a chocolate pudding pop with a bite missing.

Thomas tells me that this ad came from Jell-O when Bill Cosby was the spokesman. The accompanying text was: "our deep, dark delicious secret." That bit of knowledge transformed that ad from merely exploitative to eerily prescient and creepy.

In addition to the nude Parker, the 1990s selection included an even more naked Kate Moss. The first ad representing the new millennium featured a woman on her back in a bikini, her breasts bursting out of her top as a man stood over her with a martini glass in his hand.

A 2003 ad simply featured a woman sitting in the martini glass. It's hard to think of something more objectifying than portraying women as substances for consumption.

But there are some striking improvements when we hit the 21st Century, especially in the representation of same-sex relations.

There are two ads featuring lesbian couples. One in 2006 shows a couple lying together in bed. The more powerful one is from a 2014 Tylenol ad. It is a shot of a lesbian couple embracing by an urban skyline as they take a selfie.

I smiled when I saw this image and assumed it was the final one to cap off the century— a resounding image of social progress and equality.

One of the gallery employees corrected me and took me to what was *actually* the final image: about a dozen models in metallic bikinis wearing tri-cornered hats, crammed in a boat and positioned to recreate the famous 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze. It's wryly titled *Just as our Forefathers intended, 2015*.

Two steps forward. One step back.

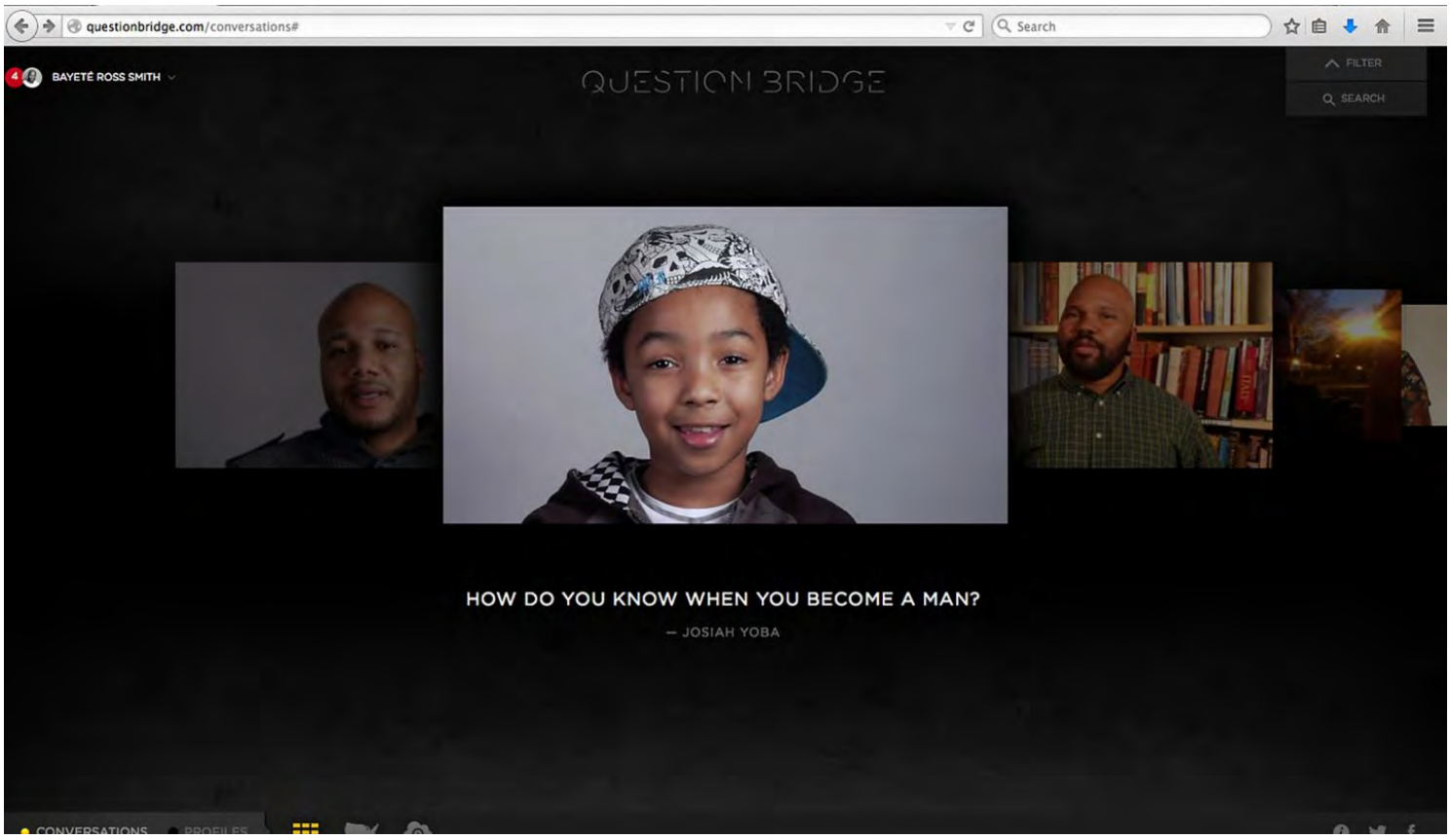
Unbranded: a Century of White Women, 1915-2015 *runs until May 23 at the Jack Shainman Gallery at 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street.*

# 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.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

# 10 Galleries to Visit in Chelsea

By ROBERTA SMITH APRIL 16, 2015

NO gallery scene is static, but lately Chelsea's has been especially in flux.

Its maze of galleries — New York's most populous — now has the new Whitney poised on its southern edge. Yet towering apartment buildings are rising on nearly every block and rents are escalating, along with rumors. This makes it hard to tell what the future holds for galleries that don't own their spaces — which is most of them; already some have closed, others have merged or moved. And one of the anchors of the neighborhood, the commodious brick building at 548 West 22nd Street that once housed the Dia Art Foundation, and recently played host to art fairs, is now slated for development. And yet, the neighborhood can still feel like a perpetual art fair — in a good way — with galleries of all sizes and orientations sifting through past and present in exciting ways.

**DON'T MISS**

At JACK SHAINMAN Hank Willis Thomas's archival tour de force, titled "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," presents 100 carefully culled print ads that trace the halting progress of feminism and — by omitting nonwhite women — the even more dispiriting state of racial equality in this country (513 West 20th Street, through May 23).

A version of this article appears in print on April 17, 2015, on page C31 of the New York edition with the headline: A Maze of Art Endures in the Shadow of Towers.

catalogue

# This Artist is Unpacking How Ads Affect the Representation of Women

In his new exhibition, *Unbranded: A Century of White Women.*
By Courtney Sanders, 20 Apr 2015

*Wipe Away The Years, 1932/2015*, by Hank Willis Thomas

It is a truth universally acknowledged (thanks Jane Austen!) that advertising imagery does more than simply sell us particular products. Advertising imagery has to make us want those products, and in order to make us want those products, it has to make us feel certain things about ourselves, including, but not limited to making us feel insecure.

Enter Hank Willis Thomas, a 39 year old American conceptual artist, who is using real advertisements from the past century, featuring women, to detail how we've been represented in society during this time. By acknowledging that the underlying imagery in advertisements speaks far louder than the overlying copy, Hank Willis Thomas has removed the latter in order to reveal the imagery's true meaning and message.


Image: *Unbranded: A Century of White Women*

Speaking to the Huffington Post about *Unbranded: A Century of White Women*, Hank Willis Thomas said of advertisements, "We read them before we're even aware that we saw them, because most of us now are immediately literate. I first was making works that looked like ads, and then started to realize maybe truth was better than fiction. So I actually use real ads as a way to talk about how advertisements

shape our notions of reality, our notions of ourselves and especially our notions of others".

Hank Willis Thomas is interested in understanding the dichotomy between the facts that, for the past 100 years, on the one hand white women are represented as pure and important, but on the other hand white women have also been disenfranchised and are discriminated against. "...a hundred years ago women in the U.S. didn't have the right to vote. And, even though African American men technically did, everything was done to make sure they didn't. I'm interested in how white women -- who are often seen as the most valuable -- are at the same time marginalized", Hank Willis Thomas told the Huffington Post.

Image: *There ain't nothing' I can do nor nothing' I can say, 1924/2015* digital chromogenic print (framed)

Hank Willis Thomas has previously explored the representation of African-Americans in advertising, in his project, *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America*.

Hank Willis Thomas' exhibition is timely, considering we're currently analysing how women are represented more thoroughly than we have before, particularly on social media. Instagram, for example, have just updated their policy on nudity, no doubt in part due to criticism they have received about the representation of women on the platform.

Image: *Home Front, 1943/2015* digital chromogenic print

Recently, Canadian artist Rupi Kaur's image, featuring a fully-clothed woman with a little bit of menstrual blood on her trackpants, was removed by Instagram, and we have unpacked how Instagram is perpetuating The Beauty Myth, and also asked why, when they remove images like Rupi Kaur's, they haven't done anything about the pro-Bulimia hashtag #Mia?

Via the Huffington Post

*Unbranded: A Century of White Women,* runs from April 10th to May 23rd at Jack Shainman Gallery.

TOWN&COUNTRY

# 101 Years of White Women in Ads

*Hank Willis Thomas fills the Jack Shainman gallery with a hundred and one images taken from ads from 1915 to the present, takes away the words, and reveals shifting attitudes toward a rising force.*

APR 20, 2015 @ 9:59 AM BY KEVIN CONLEY

To call Hank Willis Thomas an artist is true enough—works that he makes in his studio show up at art fairs and galleries. His new show, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," is now on view at both of Jack Shainman's New York galleries, on 20th and 24th Streets in Chelsea, through May 23. But the job title isn't entirely tailored to what he really does. It's like calling Walt Disney a cartoonist or Winston Churchill a memoirist, true but not quite true enough. In person, Thomas is a wry presence, curious and softspoken and quick witted. His studio feels more like a magazine office, with production schedules on dry erase boards and various support specialists at computers scattered about the room, than it does a Parisian atelier. To call him a "conceptual artist," the art world subcategory he'll most likely be slotted into in art history classes, seems like a

further reduction in scale. His real talents lie somewhere between those of a magician and a philosopher.

His most famous work, perhaps, is a masterpiece by way of subtraction, its spirit of revelation created by whisking away a central element, like a sleight-of-hand artist pulling out the tablecloth at the Waldorf Astoria. That work, "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008," digitally erased the words in ads aimed at black audiences, leaving only the underlying set pieces. He picked two images from each year, starting in the year Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, and scrubbed out the copywriting, exposing a hidden realm of myth and hucksterism, fear and sex and fetish and awkwardness.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK
ARE YOU THE RIGHT KIND OF WOMAN FOR IT?, 1974/2007

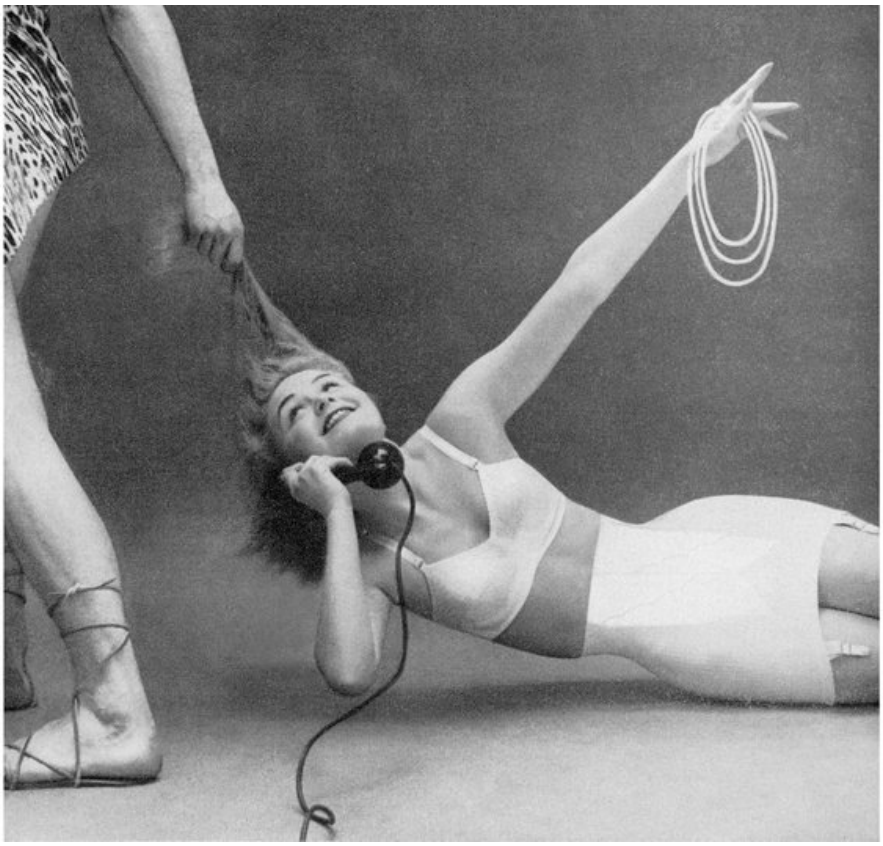
This time out, he has adapted the strategy to another segment of the population now perhaps on the threshold of the White House, women—and white women in particular (although as the years progress he can't resist including a prism of faces—a skin cream ad originally—in gradations from coffee to cream, and a few years later, an unmistakable but unidentified Serena Williams). Since the span of years is broader, he's only chosen one for each year, but there is a similarity in the range of misfires and misperceptions. Here too there are howlers of jaw-dropping condescension mixed in with occasional rah-rah scenes of empowerment (a woman at the wheel of a large automobile from the year that half of humanity finally got the vote).

As with the earlier work, as you wander through the whole series there's a cumulative effect that feels as much like a novel or work of theater as it does a traditional discreet work of art. "It's almost like a time capsule, a time machine," Thomas says. "Ads are a reflection of society's hopes and dreams at a given time." Individual images arrest the attention—Thomas has chosen some that are downright surreal—but through it all you sense the slow progress (and at times regression) of woman's changing roles.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK
THAT CARELESS LOOK, 1948/2015

# Wordless Ads Speak Volumes In 'Unbranded' Images Of Women

APRIL 18, 2015 7:43 AM ET



*Come out of the Bone Age, darling....1955/2015*, 2015, Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Advertisements don't need any words to say a lot about a culture.

That's one of the messages that shines through in the work of artist Hank Willis Thomas. In 2008, Thomas removed the text and branding from ads featuring African-Americans, creating a series he called Unbranded, which illustrated how America has seen and continues to see black people.

In the run-up to the 2016 election — and the possibility of a white woman being nominated — he's mounted a new exhibit, featuring women in print. It's called Unbranded: A Century of White Women, and it features images from mainstream commercial print advertisements from 1915 to today.

> "Ads really aren't about the products. It's about what myths and generalizations we can attach."
>
> *- Hank Willis Thomas*

Stripping away the normal elements of an advertisement and reducing it to pure image is powerful, Thomas says.

"I think what happens with ads — when we put text and logos on them, we do all the heavy lifting of making them make sense to us," he tells NPR's Linda Wertheimer. "But when you see the image naked, or unbranded, you start to really ask questions.

"That's why we can almost never tell what it's actually an ad for, because ads really aren't about the products. It's about what myths and generalizations we can attach, and the repetition of imagery of a certain type."

## Interview Highlights

### More From Hank Willis Thomas

AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

Writers Explore What It Means To Be 'Black Cool'

Read An Excerpt From Thomas' Essay "Soul"

On what surprised him when he laid out the advertisements chronologically

I actually was amazed to look at how advertising can function as a mirror for the hopes and dreams — or the anxiety — of a society at a period of time.
The one that really kind of struck a chord with me was this image from 1955 of a woman being dragged by her hair in a corset and holding a telephone. When I first saw the ad I was struck by the violence in it — it's a man, kind of dressed like a caveman ... dragging her. And the text said, "Come out of the Bone Age, darling." And the suggestion was that corsets were made with bones, and that if you wanted to be advanced, like a modern woman, you would wear synthetic [materials].

But at the same time that that image was produced, Emett Till was killed in the United States for whistling at a "white woman." And I found it fascinating that her virtue could be so challenged and maybe besmirched by him whistling at her, allegedly, but it would be OK in the public to present images of white women being dragged by their hair by white men.

You don't have to try so hard!, 1958. Artist Hank Willis Thomas and NPR's Linda Wertheimer used this "unbranded" ad from 1958 — with a man mischievously smiling as a woman laps up beer — as an example of the growing sexualization of women in ads from the late '50s.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

On how in the late '50s and early '60s the images became more s exualized

I also think that it's amazing that it really happens almost immediately after World War II. And I think this sexualization in mainstream ads, which is what I use, was part of this need for women to be kind of put in a place.

On whether it got any better for women as decades passed

Mr. Mom came out [in 1983], and we see that kind of switching of positions. And then the '90s is where I think things start to get more diverse — and then into the aughts it gets, I think, crazier. Because we see really sexist images, but we see images where African-Americans appear for the first time as equals to white women, we see men being kind of in a lesser position than women in certain images, and we even see same-sex couples.

But the final image is an image from 2015 for a Ram truck, where it looks like — it's based off an image of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" ... and there's all these women in bikinis in the cold. It really speaks to the ridiculousness of it.


A detail from Hank Willis Thomas' Just as our Forefathers intended, 2015; the full image is in the slideshow at the top of the page.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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.

**Alison Martin**
NY Fine Arts Examiner

BLOUIN ARTINFO

# Reading Between the Lines: Hank Willis Thomas's "Unbranded: A Century of White Women"

BY NOELLE BODICK | APRIL 13, 2015

Hank Willis Thomas's "The Taming of the Shrewd," 1966/2015.
(Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

"Even if she doesn't win," the artist Hank Willis Thomas said in an interview last week, "the conversation about women and rights will be central in the next 18 months."

Thomas was speaking, of course, about Hillary Rodham Clinton's run for the White House, the political moment coinciding with his new show at Jack Shainman Gallery, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015"(through May 23). The 39-year-old New York-based artist, who frequently looks at the insidious effects of advertising, has enlarged 100 magazine ads of white women, one from each year in the timespan noted in the show's title, and scrubbed the photos of all advertisement copy. (It's a follow-up to his series "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008," which concluded with the year Barack Obama won the presidency.)

"Literally, we are able to read between the lines," Thomas said of the text-less images, manipulated via Photoshop.

What we see are women caged, handcuffed, straight-jacketed, dragged around by the hair — with no zingy writer's copy to expiate. Sometimes the offenses are subtler, but no less vexing, achieved through endless repetition of a predictable — and mostly fictional — body type. You don't need to be familiar with the work of John Berger or any particular feminist theory to recognize that the images are heinous. And although these ideas have long animated feminist discourse, it doesn't make this show any less revelatory — or devastating — as a visual statement. Take away the words, and the message is only made clearer.

"Whenever you market to a demographic, you act with prejudice," Thomas explained. It's the job of the advertiser to determine that a group cares about this, not that, effectively slotting people into categories. And during the "golden age" of advertising, we all know who conceived of these groups, often with brute bigotry. "Whoever is taking the picture has the power to create history," Thomas said, adding that these images indoctrinate us into "the matrix." "We don't know how to find an authentic self then, because society is constantly trying to put us back into a box."

The show spans both gallery spaces, on West 24th Street and West 20th Street. (It's chronological, so when visiting, begin on West 24th.) Starting in 1915 and the years that closely follow, many of the women cut soft, rosy-cheeked, demure figures. They sweetly pop muffins in the oven and lounge in fields of flowers and butterflies, eyes docile and heavy. (Many of these images were originally ads for hosiery, wrinkle ointments, and cigarettes.) Women transform, however, into more winningly dynamic presences around World War II, donning military uniforms, working in the office, or, quite inexplicably, cowering before a really big carrot. ("Women and Carrots have one enemy in common," reads the original ad, which promotes an air-conditioned ice refrigerator. "That enemy is *dryness*.")

Racism plays into Thomas's story, too. In 1955, the same year the 14-year-old Emmitt Till was brutally murdered for looking at a white woman, we see an image of a white man playfully dragging a woman across the floor by her hair, while she continues to chatter happily on the telephone, wearing only a bra and slip.

“You can’t look at ‘our’ women, but we can do what we want with them,” Thomas said, describing the mindset behind the image. In this way, the public abuse of African Americans parallels the symbolic and psychological abuse of white women in the media, he said.

The last piece in the 24th Street showroom, from 1959, pictures two men on top of a cliff, totally indifferent to the woman dangling below, struggling to ascend the craggy rock. (“Men are better than women!” reads the original ad, for Drummond sweaters.)

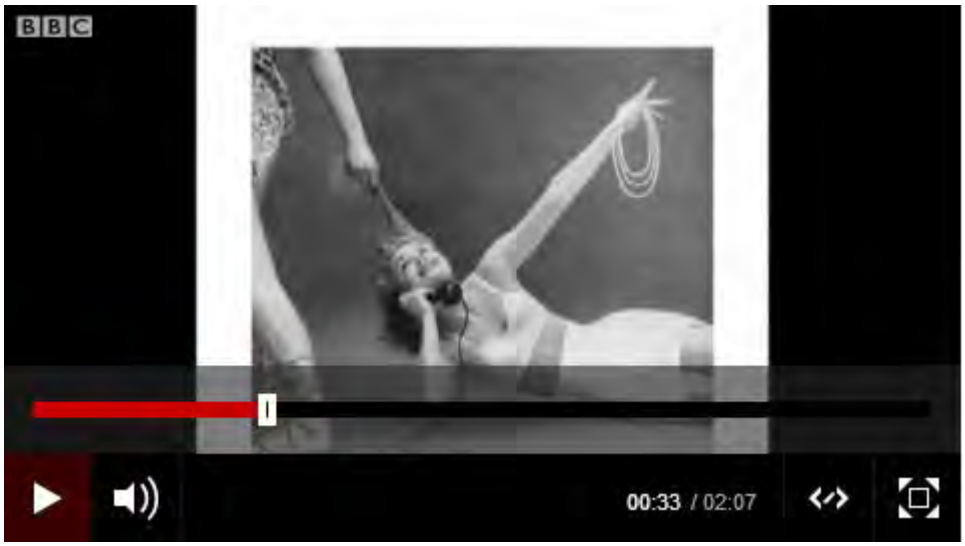
At 20th Street, the story picks up in the 1960s, when any step forward is met by violent pushback. Thomas drew our attention to a particular image from 1976. Blonde and bronze, the model Christie Brinkley swings from a tree, sporting a green bikini and a seashell armband and necklace. (The original ad is for suntan lotion, “Tropical Blend, the Savage Tan.”) “This is the year I was born,” Thomas said. “This was the psychology, the mentality of our country. These were acceptable ways to depict people.”

And today? What’s an acceptable way to depict women? The show concludes with a fleet of svelte young women floating on a platoon through the icy arctic sea. The panorama is staged after the epic painting “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” 1851. Only all of the girls filling in for General George Washington and his troops stand around a Dodge Ram in strappy bathing suits.

“The standard of beauty is literally making people into cartoons,” Thomas said of the contemporary airbrushed ads. “And I think it is something as a society that we should evaluate. When we call it art, it gives us permission to critique it, in a much more thoughtful, deep way.”

Notably, these images aren’t just consigned to the gallery white box — Jack Shainman has placed ads for the show in subway stations around New York. The gallery sent over some pictures for reference. Instantly, I realized that just the day before I had rushed past one on my way to MoMA. It didn’t even register. But why should it? An ad with a hot girl in a compromising position? Even today, it’s nothing that makes you turn your head.

Good luck, Hillary.




# US exhibit shows women as objects and adverts

**14 April 2015** Last updated at 00:04 BST

The way Americans depict race and gender has been a constant theme in photographer Hank Willis Thomas' work.

In 2008, as Obama was mounting a campaign to be the country's first black president, Willis produced an exhibition tracking black identity through adverts.

This year, days before Hillary Clinton announced her intention to run for president, he unveiled a new project - this one focused on the identity of white women in the United States.

Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015 examines 100 advertising images free of text or graphics. The newly "unbranded" images are stark in their portrayal of the dynamics of power, race, and sexuality. The exhibit is showing now at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

The BBC spoke to Thomas about his latest project.
*Video by Anna Bressanin. Production assistant: Madeline Welsh*

All images are courtesy of the artist and of the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

# 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.*

# SEE: Hank Willis Thomas's "A Century of White Women"

By Sehba Mohammad on April 9, 2015

"Ads reflect a society's aspirations and fears," says New York photographer, sculptor, and performer Hank Willis Thomas in reference to his latest body of work, Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915 – 2015.

"The Unbranded series speaks to the power of advertising, creating ideas about who were are, who we are not, and who we want to be," Thomas continued.

For the series Thomas scoured decades of print ads featuring white women from the past 100 years. He selected one ad from each year and stripped them of any text or indicators that they were selling a product. Viewing the series in its totality, one sees a legion of gorgeous, fit, sexualized white women, always smiling with lustrous hair, presenting a somewhat distorted reflection of the times.

The cut-out from 1920, the first year women could vote, portrays a crop haired woman behind the wheel of a car. The clip from 1945, the last year of World War II, depicts men cheering on three female soldiers. In 1973 a lady's face appears on Mount Rushmore, and in 2007, still slightly objectified, she stands next to a seemingly pregnant man.

Advertising is presented as the perverse side of art: it creatively reflects our times, but instead of freeing us, it perpetuates social constructs about race and gender. Thomas sees it more objectively, remarking that "these images tell a story of how the collective consciousness about demographic takes shape and morphs throughout a century. The project explores how ideas about identity, beauty, class, virtue and power are constantly in flux."

The 101 works from Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915 – 2015, will be displayed, in chronological order, across Jack Shainman Gallery's two sprawling spaces in Chelsea.

See highlights below:

1917 – Delicious as dreams of home (1917/2015)

1921 – 3000 years ago-and tonight (1921/2015)

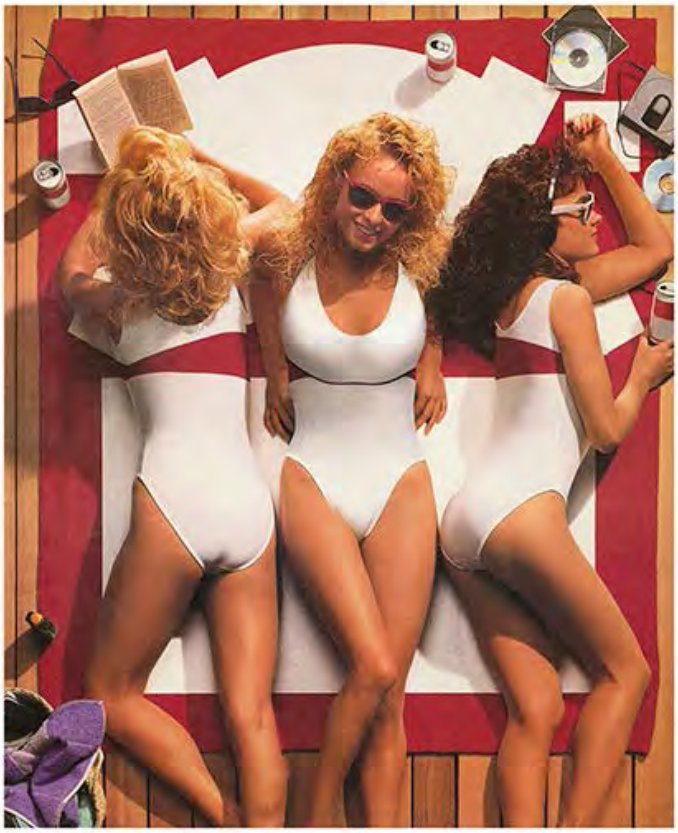
193**3 –** Bounc**e** bac***k*** t***o*** normal (1933/2015)

1944 – But she has other important uses as well, (1944/2015)

1954 – It's not what it seams (1954/2015)

1977 – True to form, as usual (1977/2015)

1987 – Soak it all in (1987/2015)



1990 – The Refreshest, Part II (1990/2015)

2007 – The big payback (2007/2015)

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Sehba Mohammad is a Staff Writer at Flavorpill, follow her on Twitter at @SehbaM.

Interview

ART

# *UNBRANDING BRANDS*

By EMILY MCDERMOTT
Photography HAO ZENG


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

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

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

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

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

EMILY MCDERMOTT: Like sexualizing women.

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

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: But then brown is Indian.

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: No, I don't.

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

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

MCDERMOTT: Are you looking for answers or just questions?

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: In North Africa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

your mother's, The Making of Iconic Images—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MCDERMOTT: Another theme is this idea of double consciousness.

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

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

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

# How 100 Years Of Advertisements Created The 'White American Woman'

**Priscilla Frank**
Posted: 04/09/2015 9:57 am EDT Updated: 49 minutes ago

*The images above appeared as print advertisements in the 1950s and 1960s, which Hank Willis Thomas "unbranded," removing all text and logos to reveal the message underneath.*

When we digest a printed advertisement, whether it's for a skin cream or an underwear brand or a fast food joint, the actual commercial good being plugged is often irrelevant. Behind the logo, messages such as *this is how you want to look* and *this is how you want to be seen* bubble beneath the surface, instructing us all how to look, act and speak in order to be accepted, valued, loved.

For the past decade, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas has been fascinated with the rhetoric of ads, how they sell not just products, but desires, stereotypes and dreams. It wasn't long before Thomas realized that the true message of advertisements was not in the text or the logos boosting a product -- so, he erased them, letting the not-so-latent subtexts come to the foreground.

"I've always been interested in the power that advertising has on language," Thomas explained to The Huffington Post. "We read them before we're even aware that we saw them, because most of us now are immediately literate. I first was making works that looked like ads, and then started to realize maybe truth was better than fiction. So I actually use real ads as a way to talk about how advertisements shape our notions of reality, our notions of ourselves and especially our notions of others."

The Breakfast Belle, 1915/2015 digital chromogenic print 48 7/8 x 40 inches paper size 50 x 41 x 1 3/4 inches (framed)

Thomas, a 39-year-old New York-based African-American artist, first delved into the archives of ads with a project entitled "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America," in which he examined how race can become a branding strategy. In an interview with his mother, photographer Deborah Willis, Thomas explains: "I always like to stress that the craziest thing about*blackness* is that black people never had much to do with actually creating it. It was actually created with commercial interest in order to turn people into property. The colonialists had to come up with a subhuman brand of person and that marketing campaign was race."

For the project, Thomas collected advertisements printed between 1968 and 2008 -- coincidentally, Thomas noted, the years between Martin Luther King's assassination and Barack Obama's election. He selected one ad per year, one he felt accurately captured the atmosphere of mainstream society at the time, and then, he "unbranded" them, removing all texts and logos from the ads. "They become naked in a way," he said. "You're looking at what's *really* being sold. The message that's sometimes being hidden by the logo and the copy."

In his upcoming exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015," Thomas directs his attention towards the evolution of the mythical white woman, packaged and sold by advertisements throughout the past hundred years. She's precious, she's innocent, she's privileged, she's pure -- and yet she's disenfranchised and oppressed.

There ain't nothin' I can do nor nothin' I can say, 1924/2015 digital chromogenic print (framed)

"Whiteness is something I'm fascinated with because it's ever evolving," Thomas explained. "One hundred years ago a lot of people we call white today would not be considered white. And also, a hundred years ago women in the U.S. didn't have the right to vote. And, even though African American men technically did, everything was done to make sure they didn't. I'm interested in how white women -- who are often seen as the most valuable -- are at the same time marginalized."

While Thomas' 2008 exploration of blackness in advertising coincided with the election of President Obama, his current exhibition conveniently overlaps with the looming potential election of a female president. "In the last presidential cycle,

Wipe away the years, 1932/2015

there was this whole debate where people were going back and forth between Hillary [Clinton] and Obama, questioning are you more racist or more sexist? That's a way of dumbing it down, obviously. But I realize that we might be on the verge of having our first female president, a white woman," he said. "I want to look at how someone like her might have been looked at or treated or spoken to back then, and today."

Over the course of a year and a half, Thomas poured over hundreds of vintage advertisements. In an ad from 1924, two flapper-esque ladies romp before a vanity mirror while a black maid, smiling, transports folded sheets. The original slogan, which Thomas erased, read, "How To Make Even Ordinary Cotton Goods Look And Feel Like Linen." Thomas notes the transition of black women's roles in white women's advertisements as time progresses, from subordinate to equal. Another ad, from 1963, depicts a smiling woman coolly holding a cigarette, toting a black eye. "Us Tareyton smokers would rather fight than switch!" the caption cheerily reads. Without it, the sunny image of docile domestic abuse is spine-chilling.

"When you market towards any demographic, you have to be prejudiced," Thomas explained.

Home front, 1943/2015digital chromogenic print

As the years progress, you can see the gradual evolution of the fictional "white woman," as she slowly becomes sexualized in the '20s, temporarily empowered during World War II, violently punished in the years that follow. "In a way, the project unfolds like a narrative. You're watching this character through the times," Thomas noted. Aside from depicting the changes in white femininity, the image cycle also traces the rise and fall of print advertising itself. "When the project started in 1915, print advertising and especially photography were very new. Graphic design and images were having a revolutionary moment. By the '30s and '40s, you can tell advertisers and graphic designers had kind of figured out something." He continued:

And with the golden age of advertising -- which is kind of what Mad Men is about -- you see this intense pushback about putting a woman in her place. And at the same time, more and more women are getting places in the board room or are at least taking part in the conversation, so there's progress in that sense. For every two or three sexist images you'll find one that's somewhat progressive. But then again, something that's seen as progressive at the time may seem marginalizing and sexist today. That's something I think is interesting. In trying to read this images, it's almost like you have to go into a time machine to really understand what it was like for the people seeing these for the first time.

The cycle wraps up in 2015, ending with a Ram advertisement riffing off Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze's 1851 painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware," with a lot of women in bikinis on top. Despite the slightly disheartening finale, other images -- such as 2014's Tylenol ad featuring a lesbian couple taking a selfie -- show just how far we've come. "One thing I can say definitively is that it's much more complicated and diverse now than it was 100 years ago," Thomas said. "Now you see the same sex couples, the over-sexualized people, the family person, the business person. It's much more diluted than it once was."

Will not go dull and lifeless, 1953/2015
digital chromogenic print

As a whole, Thomas' series presents a fascinating and haunting narrative of the "white woman," from buttoned-up Gibson girl to bikini-clad Revolutionary war biddies. Thomas identifies at least one thread connecting the disparate imagery. "They say: if you want to be valued or respected or cared for, you have to look *this way*."

"Most people of color are very used to society not respecting them for any number of reasons. But there is also this huge population of white women who will never fit into the standards of value that society has created," Thomas said. A second unifying factor, we would add, is that the goods being publicized are often impossible to determine. What's really being sold is something far more convoluted.

Using printed archives as his medium, Thomas has developed an unorthodox artistic process that works to ensure our past belief systems and accepted behaviors are not easily forgotten. "I like to think of myself as a visual culture archeologist, or a DJ," explained Thomas. "I'm using these materials that have been discarded or forgotten, and am trying to elevate them to give them new life, new conversation and new purpose, that speaks to the original mission of selling a product. It's interesting because you can rarely tell what the original product was for. The image and the product rarely have anything in common."

print paper size

For a future project, Thomas mentions digging into the archives of South Africa under apartheid, exploring how ads marketed to black and white individuals. "I think ads are very much a reflection of the hopes and dreams of a culture at a particular moment in time," he said, "and that's why they're so powerful and potent as historical documents and artistic works."

At the close of his artistic investigation, Thomas hesitates to provide any all-encompassing summary to the depiction of "white woman" manufactured and honed in the United States over time. "I learn as much from what other people have to say about it as what I have to say about it. I guess I would sum it up by saying the work is not really about white women, it's about people," he said. "How people are put into a group and how complicated and ever-evolving the notions of club membership and authenticity in the group are. It's weird to look at 'white women' and see this."

It certainly is.

Aggressive loyalty, 1963/2015 digital chromogenic print

*"Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015" runs from from April 10 until May 16 at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York.*

ARTNEWS

# ‘ADVERTISING IS FUELED BY PREJUDICE': AN HOUR WITH HANK WILLIS THOMAS

BY ***M.H. Miller*** POSTED **04/07/15 12:18 PM**

Hank Willis Thomas, *Only in America...*, 1952/2015.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Hank Willis Thomas was in his studio near the Port Authority bus terminal in Midtown Manhattan showing me a ten-year-old advertisement featuring the rapper 50 Cent.

“We’ve become media-literate,” Thomas said. “We’ll consume an ad before we even look at it. Like this. Do you know what this is an ad for?”

One half of the image was devoted to 50 Cent staring carefully at the camera, wearing a camouflage cap tilted sideways and an impressively sized stud in his ear, the other half to a sheet of inky fingerprints from a police report. Across the spread was the tag “I Am What I Am.” In the corner was what looked a little like a lopsided “X” and three letters: “RBK.”

“Reebok,” I said.

“Yes,” Thomas said. “Even you have been pierced! So you can see three letters and a symbol and automatically you know.”

Talking to Thomas, who is 39 but looks maybe ten years younger, was like being the only attendee at a lecture by an enthusiastic media studies professor. For an artist under the age of 40, he has already produced an incredible body of work ranging from conceptual sculpture to public performance. He is, however, predominantly known as a

photographer. Thomas told me his biggest artistic influence is his mother, Deborah Willis, an artist and art historian who is the author of such books as *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* and the chair of the photography department at New York University, Thomas's alma mater. He took obvious pleasure in presenting to me a portfolio of ads that he began compiling in 2005, which became the basis of a series of works called "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008," the title something of an ode to his mother. In his studio, he was quizzing the class, such as it was.

"But still, what's for sale?" he asked me, in reference to the 50 Cent ad. "Reebok sells what?"

"Shoes."

"And do you see any?"

"No."

"And so in this shoe campaign," Thomas said, "for an apparel company, you have this musician, an entrepreneur maybe, and"—he pointed to the fingerprints—"he's still a criminal at the end of the day. I saw this on the street and there was a kind of ethnically mixed group of teenagers nearby, but maybe three or four African American boys. And I was wondering how images like this affect how they understand and relate to one another. When you see images of, like, what the black guys are like in public, do you then have to perform that? And also how do the other friends who don't identify as African American men relate to their friends?"

He flipped through the portfolio, and continued showing me the Reebok campaign. There was Andy Roddick, meekly covering his face, juxtaposed with a silver trophy. And Lucy Liu, pictured next to an image of her as a little girl, laughing as she goes down a slide. Yao Ming appeared alongside an illustration of a monkey on a basketball illuminated by rays of light. Allen Iverson was represented by a picture of the devil. And Jay Z, lounging in a Manhattan penthouse, was parallel to an ominous brick building and a quotation: "I got my MBA from Marcy Projects."

"So it was like, OK," Thomas said. "African American men are five percent of the population and are represented three times in this ad. Women are half the population and they are represented once, and it's this stereotype of Asian women as docile, innocent things. And the one white guy is a champion, even though he feels bad about it. And then you have the Chinese giant, and they clearly don't know what to do with him. We have got a monkey on a basketball with a yin-yang symbol and the rising sun in the background even though that's Japan. Let's just throw it all in there. And then, yeah, the other black guy's a devil and the other one's a drug dealer. And this is to sell shoes! And there are no shoes!"

Thomas's work over the last decade has provided a working appraisal of representations of race and gender in both advertising and the real world. He is a skilled photographer, but I think he's at his best as a critic of the medium, creating images that lampoon the very language of corporate America, or in Thomas's words, "to use the symbolism of advertising to talk about things advertising can never responsibly talk about." For instance, *Priceless*, from 2004, a photograph of a black family grieving at a funeral service transposed with ad copy modeled after a MasterCard commercial—"9 mm Pistol: $80"; "Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless."

Hank Willis Thomas, *She's somewhat of a drag*, 1959/2015.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Certain pieces dealing with professional sports might have served as a Nike campaign if not for scattered, disturbingly altered details, like two black men dramatically posed in action playing basketball, the hoop replaced by a noose. In other works, he simply takes an ad and removes the copy. In his studio, Thomas showed me an image that originally appeared in *Ebony* magazine in 2005. He had deleted the text and what was left behind was half of a watermelon, with a small scooper sitting next to it. He asked me what I thought it was an ad for. I looked at it for a while

and said, perhaps hopefully, “Well, the scooper makes me think it’s some kind of ice cream maybe?”

“You’re looking at the right signifier,” Thomas said. “But it’s actually for kitty litter.” I registered a touch of horror in his voice.

“At some point down the line I was given this,” he told me, pointing to a page in his portfolio. It was a close-up photograph of a black man’s mouth in the midst of a toothy grin, with a small, gold SUV adorning one of his incisors. “Someone said to me, ‘You should do something with this,’” Thomas continued. “I didn’t know what to do with it. It’s an ad for a 2001 Toyota Rav4. And after four years of looking at it, all I could think of to do with it was this.”

He turned a page, and there was a picture of the same mouth, with the gold SUV removed.

Thomas’s new series is called “Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015.” and goes on view this week in New York at Jack Shainman Gallery. For the project, he scoured ads from the last hundred years featuring white women as their main subject. One for Drummond sweaters from 1959 has copy that actually says, “Men are better than women!” He had in mind the upcoming election, with the country on the verge of very possibly having a female presidential candidate.

“No one’s identity can be summed up by two things like skin color and gender,” Thomas said. “But what happens when you do advertising or marketing, you have to do just that: age, gender, skin color, and/or geographical location. Basically what advertising is fueled by is prejudice.”

He produced another portfolio and walked me through a century’s worth of ads, one for each year between 1915 and 2015. He placed the original ad side by side with his altered work, in which he had removed any information that might let on that the images existed to sell a product. For the year after World War I, a woman is cradling a man in uniform, and exposing her long legs. (The ad was for hosiery: “It’s like, your husband is back from the war, he’s damaged, and you want to awake his virility and give him hope so you have

to dress the part," Thomas said.) In 1920, the first year American women could vote in a national election, a woman can be seen with a flapper haircut behind the wheel of a car.

Thomas read aloud the tag for a Maxwell House ad from the 1920s, where two butlers in blackface serve an immensely satisfied middle-aged white woman coffee. The line that would supposedly emphasize the pleasure of buying Maxwell House was: "GOLLY MIS' MARIA. Folks jus' can't help havin' a friendly feelin' for dis heah coffee!" to which Thomas sighed and said, "Kind of amazing."

He turned to an illustration depicting the antebellum South, with a young white couple dressed in ornate evening wear, while a black servant slices up pieces of ham and gently slides them onto their plates. "What would you guess this is for?" Thomas asked. There was a long pause. I couldn't come up with anything.

"Exactly," Thomas said, then displayed the original ad—text and all—from his portfolio. It was for Budweiser. Thomas rationalized this as best he could. "I guess someone told them that in the old days you'd have your servant—your slave—offer people ham," he said. "And now you can offer somebody a Bud. That's the only real logic that there possibly can be."

Hank Willis Thomas, *Walk like a man*, 1978/2015.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

One thread, then, in Thomas's work is progress—Maxwell House wouldn't get away with such blatant racism today. And a 1952 ad for lingerie—featuring a woman in a skirt and bra standing on a platform beneath the line "I dreamt I won the election…in my Maidenform bra!"—seems completely ridiculous in light of Thomas's initial impetus for compiling this work. The ads increasingly tell a story of advancement—of second-wave feminism, of a growing black middle class, of the slow dissolve of the rigidity of gender roles. Thomas was genuinely moved when we came upon a Tylenol ad from a few

years ago, featuring a happy lesbian couple taking a selfie in front of the Manhattan skyline.

But of course, another story Thomas tells is of stereotypes merely shifting, of racism and sexism simply becoming more understated, and only in some instances. 50 Cent is still criminal, in other words.

“We find images like this,” Thomas said. He was looking at a picture of a blonde woman, swinging from a vine through a jungle and wearing a ragged bikini. “Christie Brinkley,” he said, and then read the tagline: “The natives will get very restless.” The ad was for Coppertone’s “tropical blend” tanning oil, Thomas said, and because of that, “Of course you have to speak about the tropics, about the dark people, and of course they have to be savage. And you have to have the blonde with the bone necklace and cowry shells, swinging from a vine.” He chuckled slightly, then paused. The date on the image was 1976. “This is the year I was born,” he said.

# The 1 Must See Art Event In New York This Week: Hank Willis Thomas at Jack Shainman Gallery

artnet News, Monday, April 6, 2015

Hank Willis Thomas, *The Breakfast Belle* (1915/2015).
Photo: Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

We're all too busy during the week to do all the great things we plan and hope to do. So if you can only commit to one arty event this week, here's what you should not miss!

**FRIDAY April 10**

**Hank Willis Thomas "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015" Opens at Jack Shainman Gallery**

Conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas, unveils his fifth solo exhibition at the gallery. "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015" explores identity and commodity within the context of media and pop culture, continuing the exploration begun in his earlier show "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008." Thomas appropriates advertising images from the past century, building on notions of virtue, power, beauty, privilege, and desire in America, while focusing on the conception of the white, American female.

A body of work that comprises the rise and decline of print advertising, Thomas, whose work appears in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum, offers representations of the "ideal feminine type" as showcased to the American public, with no consideration for the representation of gender, racial or socio-economic lines. The artist presents these images outside of the commercial framework they existed in, and thus forces the viewer to grapple with the meaning of these images as they stand alone.

One of his works, *Just as our Forefathers intended* (2015), depicts not-so-modestly dressed women piling into a boat pulled by an American-made truck. The underlying messages behind the work in this exhibit are startling and relevant; they bring to light current cultural disconnects. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Thomas notes, "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."

*Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20 Street, Friday April 10, 6-8 PM.*

MODERNPAINTERS

April 2015


**SAO PAULO**
Leda Catunda at **Galeria Fortes Vilaça**
*April 11*

**MIAMI**
Ryan Sullivan at **ICA Miami**
*April 16*

**LONDON**
Fernanda Gomes in "Organic Sculpture" at **Alison Jacques Gallery**
*March 27*

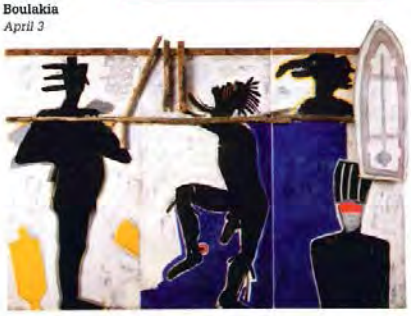
**PHILADELPHIA**
Tamara Henderson and Julia Feyrer at the **Institute of Contemporary Art**
*April 11*

### ...AND DON'T MISS

- New York: Elmgreen & Dragset, opening at Galerie Perrotin April 23
- Paris: Markus Lupertz, opening at Musée d'Art Moderne April 17
- Brussels: Pieter Vermeersch, opening at Galerie Greta Meert April 23
- Birmingham, U.K.: "Artists for Ikon" 50th anniversary exhibition, opening at Ikon April 24


**NEW YORK CITY**
Hank Willis Thomas at **Jack Shainman Gallery**
*April 10*

**PARIS**
Ouattara Watts at **Galerie Boulakia**
*April 3*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GALERIA FORTES VILAÇA; RYAN SULLIVAN, MACCARONE, AND JADE DOUKO HQ, LONDON; GALERIE BOULAKIA; HANK WILLIS THOMAS AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY; JULIA FEYRER AND TAMARA HENDERSON, WALTER PHILLIPS GALLERY, THE BANFF CENTRE, BANFF, CALGARY, AND CARLOTTA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER; MICHAEL BIZEZINSKI, FERNANDA GOMES, AND ALISON JACQUES GALLERY

NEW YORK OBSERVER

# 12 Things to Do in New York's Art World Before April 12

By **Nate Freeman** and **Alanna Martinez** | 04/06/15 1:43pm

**FRIDAY, APRIL 10**

**Opening: "Hank Willis Thomas Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015" at Jack Shainman**

Hank Willis Thomas presents 101 images of women from historical advertisements published between 1915 and 2015 for "Unbranded: A Century of White Women." Mr. Thomas strips the images of all text, and presents them chronologically, touching on issues of gender, race, and class that have dominated popular culture over the last century. The show will fill both Chelsea gallery locations. — A.M. *Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street and 513 West 20th Street, New York, 6-8 p.m.*

NEW YORK

April 6-19 2015

ART

# Would Peggy Olson Have Approved These?

## Without their words, vintage ads starring women speak even more loudly.

IN THE YEAR of Barack Obama's election, the artist Hank Willis Thomas created a project called "Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008." It was made up of 82 magazine advertisements, two from each year, that showed or made reference to African-Americans—except that he'd stripped all the text out. Sans captions, the illustrations and photographs turned flat-out strange, and were uncannily revealing about the intentions and attitudes of the (mostly white) people who made those ads.

Starting April 10 at Jack Shainman Gallery, he'll show a follow-up project, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015." Once again the images speak for themselves, as the original ads aren't on view or in the catalogue. The models are posed in just about every way you could put a woman in a corner: caged, dangled off cliffs, straddling all sorts of objects, straitjacketed. They're often funny—*can you believe that was considered okay?*—before they're not. But Thomas cautions us to avoid how-far-we've-come platitudes, in part because the ad images from the past few years aren't so progressive either. "Our values," he notes drily, "may be seen as pretty problematic to the next generation."

CHRISTOPHER BONANOS

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK


◀ 1967

***House Rules!***

Thomas says he was uneasy about using this photograph, which once advertised a line of pants called (of all things) Broomsticks. "I mean, this is not the kind of image I want associated with me." He adds that one recent viewer made a chilling observation: "At least she's smiling."


1951 ▶

***She's All Tied Up ... in a Poor System***

After the war, the working women in these pictures shift from Rosie the Riveter jobs to secretarial work and the like, almost always in support of men. The boss goes unseen in this ad for business forms, "and she's being driven crazy by the workplace—but of course *he* isn't."


**1981 ▲**
***And They'll Treat You Good***
In this ad for Texas-brand boots, published in the era of "Who Shot J.R.?," the power dynamic was the thing. "Cowboy boots are part of being a man, and she's taking off the boot—she's in control. But she's riding it, and it's an extra-long leg. A *black* leg."

ELEPHANT

Elephant Magazine #22
Spring 2015



# 20 ARTISTS WHO MAKE NEW YORK

Camille Henrot
Lena Dunham
Cory Arcangel
Charlie Kaufman
Cecily Brown
Dash Snow
Taylor Mac
Ryan McGinley
Stefan Sagmeister
Nan Goldin
Futura
Guerrilla Girls
Philip-Lorca diCorcia
Spike Lee
Kiki Smith
Marina Abramović
Joel Meyerowitz
Félix González-Torres
Robert Gober
Cindy Sherman
Sherrie Levine
Christo and Jeanne-Claude
Francesca Woodman
Richard Prince
Jeff Koons
Robert Mapplethorpe
Jenny Holzer
Patti Smith
Sturtevant
Lawrence Weiner
Vito Acconci
Barbara Kruger
Gary Winogrand
Martin Scorsese
Yoko Ono
George Maciunas
Bruce Nauman
Lee Friedlander
Stanley Kubrick
Allan Kaprow
Roy Lichtenstein
Sol LeWitt
Eve Arnold
Faith Ringgold
John Cassavetes
Yvonne Rainier
Diane Arbus
Andy Warhol
Merce Cunningham
Richard Avedon
Jack Smith
Romare Bearden
Jackson Pollock
John Cage
Joseph Cornell
Alfred Stieglitz
Irving Penn
Marcel Duchamp



CAROL BOVE
JOYCE PENSATO
JULIA WACHTEL
ANNE COLLIER
MICKALENE THOMAS
DAN COLEN
KARA WALKER
NICOLE EISENMAN
JACK PIERSON
MATTHEW BARNEY
LALLA ESSAYDI
HAIM STEINBACH
LUCIEN SMITH
SETH PRICE
WYATT KAHN
LYNDA BENGLIS
SHIRIN NESHAT
HANK WILLIS THOMAS
RASHID JOHNSON
DAVID SALLE

Lisa Yuskavage
Katsu
Matthew Weiner
Paul Sahre
Kaws
Spike Jonze
Elizabeth Peyton
John Currin
Coen Brothers
Christopher Wool
Abel Ferrara
Art Spiegelman
Vija Celmins
Robert Longo
Sean Scully
Keith Haring
Brice Marden
Woody Allen
Walter De Maria
Milton Glaser
Donald Judd
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Julian Schnabel
Richard Serra
Robert Ryman
Philip Guston
Dan Flavin
Frank Stella
Paul Rand
Jonas Mekas
James Rosenquist
Robert Rauschenberg
Jasper Johns
Willem de Kooning
Barnett Newman
Weegee
Edward Hopper
Mark Rothko
Piet Mondrian
Saul Steinberg

ALL IMAGES © SHIRIN NESHAT. COURTESY GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS

### AD & SUBTRACT (OR 'THE SEMIOTICS OF SLAM-DUNK')

HankWillis Thomas's practice in his *Unbranded* series sounds simple enough: take an ad and strip it of its text. The results, however, could hardly be less straightforward. 'The complexities, the hypocrisy, the contradictions, are what it's all about,' he tells **ROBERT SHORE**.

HankWillis Thomas likes images. He especially likes advertising images. 'I'm so seduced by them,' the photo-conceptual artist confesses affably when I visit him at his studio in Midtown Manhattan. But he's also deeply perplexed by those same images and by the importance attached to them, as becomes clear when he recounts his early exposure to the language of ad-making while working on *The Chris Rock Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, and then a highly ambivalent eureka moment when he was on the set of a Tommy Hilfiger perfume ad. 'There were 100 people, three models, 30 vehicles, and I thought: All of this to sell an odour?'

Thomas's dazzled if wary fascination with the scale and influence of the advertising industry led to his breakthrough work, *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America*, which creatively scrutinizes ads aimed at an African-American audience. He has described it as 'a collaboration with eighty-two unwitting photographers, art directors, and copywriters', with the series consisting of 82 print advertisements—two drawn from each year from 1968, when Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, through to 2008, when, coincidentally (Thomas began the piece in 2005), the US elected its first black president—presented chronologically and stripped of all typography or other signs of branding. He explains: 'When you "unbrand" an ad [i.e. remove all type, logos, etc.] you reveal what's really going on behind it. It sometimes speaks to the genius and it sometimes speaks to the absurdity of what's happening.'

'I love the language of advertising because it asks you as a viewer to do so much and we all do it so passively,' Thomas says. The point of *Unbranded* is precisely to force the viewer to engage much more actively with that language. As he points out, most of these ads were dreamt up by white men. 'So it's interesting to think how white men are in a sense shaping black identity through creating ads for African Americans to consume.'

From a technical point of view, unbranding ads isn't easy. Stripping away the type requires patience and skill: portions of moiré-pattern background have to be carefully matched and then a graft has to be made in Photoshop to create a final seamless, textless image. Thomas relishes how contemporary the process is. 'It's a method that didn't exist 20 years ago. You couldn't undo, undress an ad then.'

Occasionally some of his unwitting 'collaborators'—photographers and the like who contributed their skills to the making

**Hank Willis Thomas. Above:** *Founding fathers couldn't have been founding fathers without founding mothers*, 1973/2015, digital chomogenic print, from *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*; **Overleaf:** *Gotten*, 1996/2008, digital chomogenic print, from *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008.*

V

of the ads he has appropriated—have been upset by Thomas's reframing of their work in *Unbranding*. At least one threatened to sue. The artist was unfazed. 'I said: "Maybe you should,"' he recounts. '"Maybe we both have something to gain from you suing me because who does really own this image? And does the corporation really want to have a conversation about what this image is really selling?"' The last thing most corporations want is to engage in open discussions of that sort. Of course, no further action was taken.

'One of the things I've been contending with', explains Thomas, 'is what it means to be a photographer in the twenty-first century when there are more photographs taken in a single second than any of us can ever make sense of in our entire lives.' He compares the task of the contemporary artist-working-with-photography to that of a DJ who 'creates music out of music'. 'There's this new language that can be developed in visual culture just through repurposing and recontextualizing the images that our society has produced.'

The curator and writer Kalia Brooks has made some intriguing remarks in relation to works by Thomas that engage in such repurposing and recontextualizing activities: for instance, *Strange Fruit*, a photograph of a soaring basketball star in which the hoop has been replaced by a noose (the title is drawn from an early Civil Rights Movement protest song made famous by Billie Holiday), and *Scarred Chest*, a manipulated photograph in which Thomas has scored Nike swooshes into the torso of a black athlete. Brooks asks with considerable rhetorical force: 'What happens when the visual legacy of American lynching collides with the contemporary visualization of the Slam-dunk in American sports? Can 21st-century images of African-American men in athletic triumph be seen as responses to 20th-century images of them as tortured bodies?'

In Thomas's own words: 'My practice is really about trying to dig through historical archives to make contemporary art. I find images and try to find ways to make them relevant and present again.'

Does he ever take his own photographs? Yes, he says, leading me over enthusiastically to a hologram image hanging on the studio wall before pausing. 'Actually I didn't take this one,' he corrects himself with a smile, 'but there was a camera involved.'

'The image moves with you,' enthuses Thomas about one of his pieces made using Lumisty, a material popular with the advertising industry, which can make an image change from blurry to clear depending on where the spectator is standing. 'You as the viewer are part of the activation process in the making of the work.'

This restless experimentation has carried him into other media, too. 'I've been taking elements of photographs and turning them into sculptures. I've been exploring how to make a three-dimensional relationship to a photographic moment—a 3D scan of a moment.'

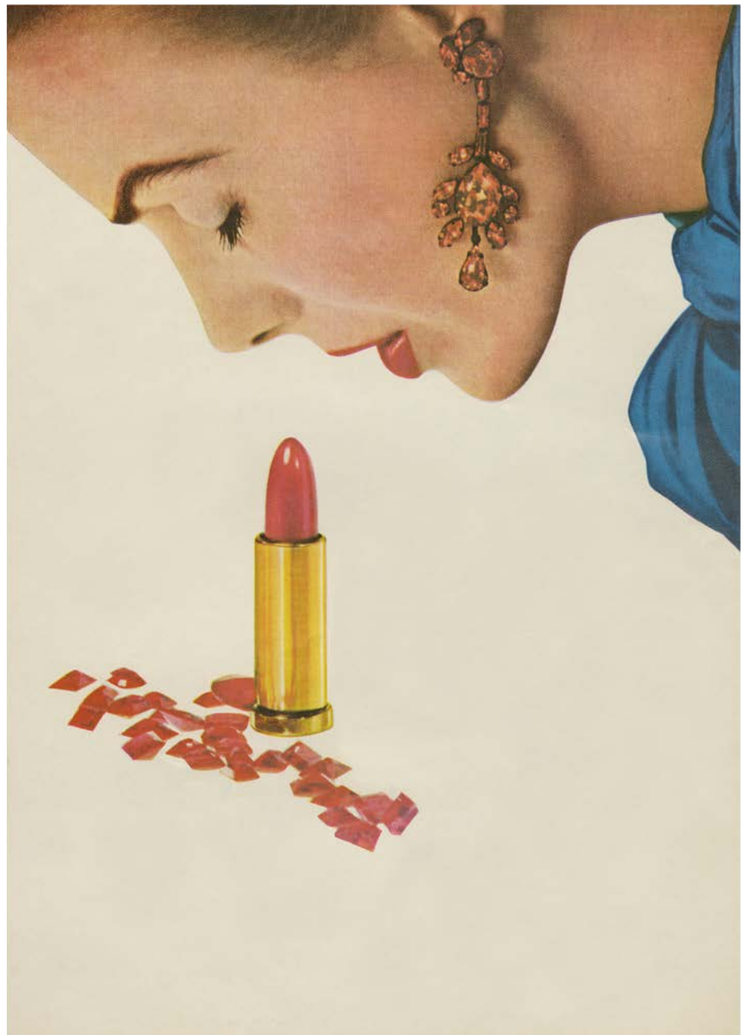
He's as busy as his practice is diverse. 'Last year was crazy,' he says. 'I'd need to consult the internet to tell you everything I did. I had somewhere in the realm of 30 or 40 shows,' including a collaborative project that toured to more than a dozen venues. 'I flew like 170,000 miles,' he smiles ruefully. It takes physical stamina to be a successful artist these days.

In *Secondhand* at Pier 24 in San Francisco, he's featured alongside Richard Prince and John Baldessari. Then there's *Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet and Contemporary Art* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, with the likes of Ellen Gallagher and Theaster Gates, where Thomas has a room that he's lined with a series of 'beauty of the week' pin-ups drawn from *Jet* magazine beginning in 1951. 'At some point it was an oxymoron for someone to say I'm black and I'm beautiful, so these publications started to do this as a way to show "black beauty", but they also were unconsciously objectifying women. So there's this way in which the politics of representation questionably entangled the politics of sexism.'

This 'entanglement' leads us neatly on to Thomas's new *Unbranded* project, which tracks the changing representation of white female identity across the past century via the medium of print advertising. Since the US may well be on the point of electing its first female president, Thomas's scrutiny of changing gender roles is once again very timely.

He has deliberately avoided including high-fashion ads. 'I look for ones that are trying to be on your side—more mainstream ads are more interesting to look at in this way. These are meant by and large not to offend. High-fashion ads are supposed to be provocative, they're trying to get at you.'

'When you look at these images unbranded, what's the story that we're being asked to buy into?' Thomas asks and proceeds to quiz me about half a dozen examples from which he has stripped away all identifying text. I fail to guess what any of the ads are trying to sell. Presented in their 'unbranded' state, these outpourings of the collective unconscious—which variously show women straitjacketed, hanging perilously from a rope and buried—reveal more than mere ambivalence to the idea of women's liberation on the part of the masterminding admen and the wider society their ideas reflect.



**"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE VISUAL LEGACY OF AMERICAN LYNCHING COLLIDES WITH THE CONTEMPORARY VISUALIZATION OF THE SLAM-DUNK IN AMERICAN SPORTS?"**

**Hank Willis Thomas** *Strange Fruit*, 2011, digital C-print.

**Hank Willis Thomas** *An Exciting Miracle*, 1953/2015, digital chomogenic print, from *Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015*.

The project asks a host of other questions of the viewer, too, some of which relate pointedly to all those people and social phenomena not shown in the images. As Thomas says: 'White women are considered to be the most valuable in the world. If this is how the most valuable bodies are represented, how are others treated?'

Some friends have expressed a worry that the project might be seen as further entrenching the patriarchal male gaze. 'I was like: I hope not!' But of course it's contentious territory for a male artist—the fact that Thomas is an African-American male artist only further complicates the question since, as he remarks: 'Black men have been killed in this country for looking at a white woman the wrong way or whistling at a white woman.

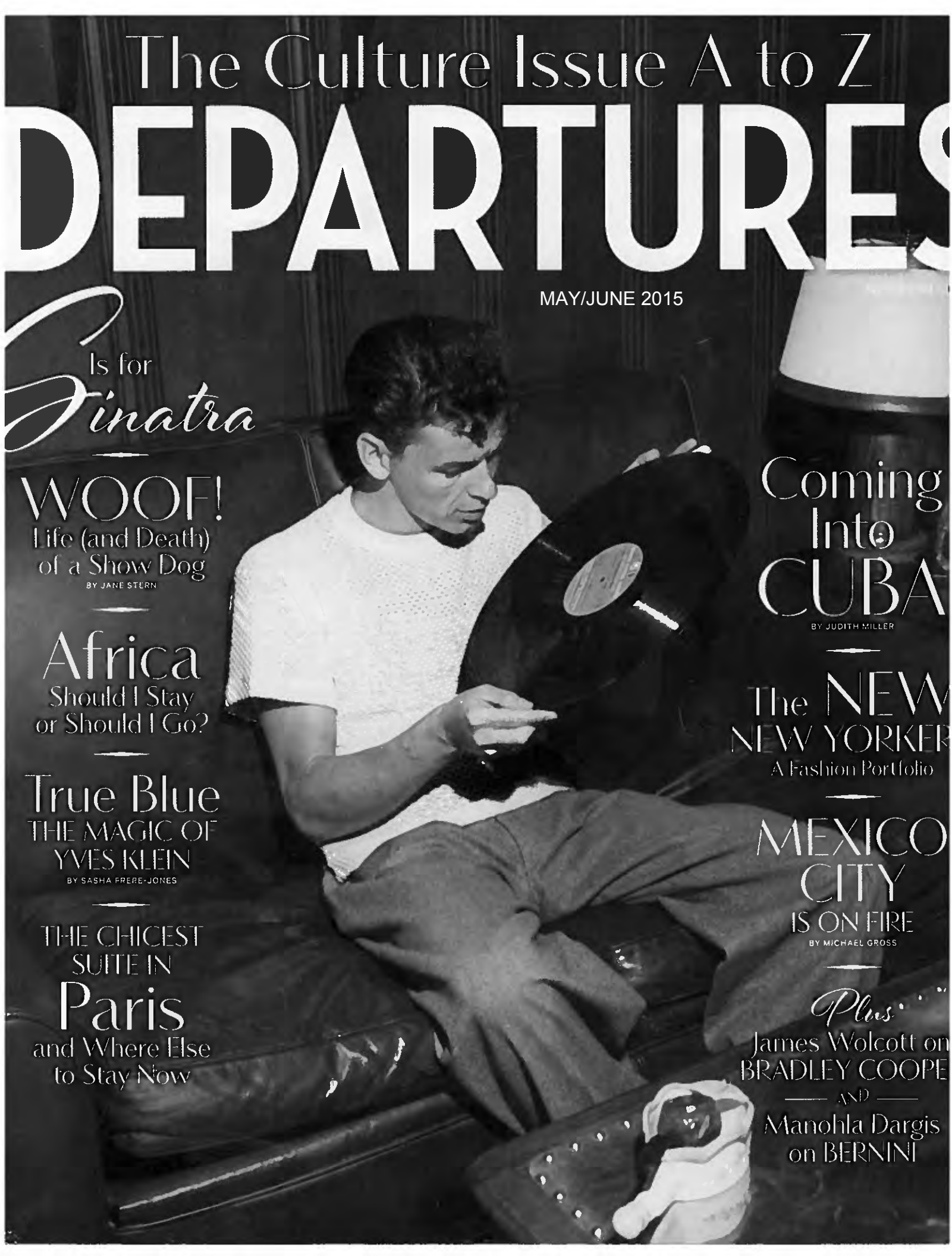
'But if you ask me: Is this a project a woman should be making? I would say it is.' It's intended, he says, as 'a provocation rather than a final statement'. As with his first *Unbranded* series, 'The complexities, the hypocrisy, the contradictions, are what it's all about.'

Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915–2015 *opens at Jack Shainman Gallery on 10 April*

The Culture Issue A to Z

# DEPARTURES

MAY/JUNE 2015



## S Is for Sinatra

## WOOF!
Life (and Death) of a Show Dog
BY JANE STERN

## Africa
Should I Stay or Should I Go?

## True Blue
THE MAGIC OF YVES KLEIN
BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

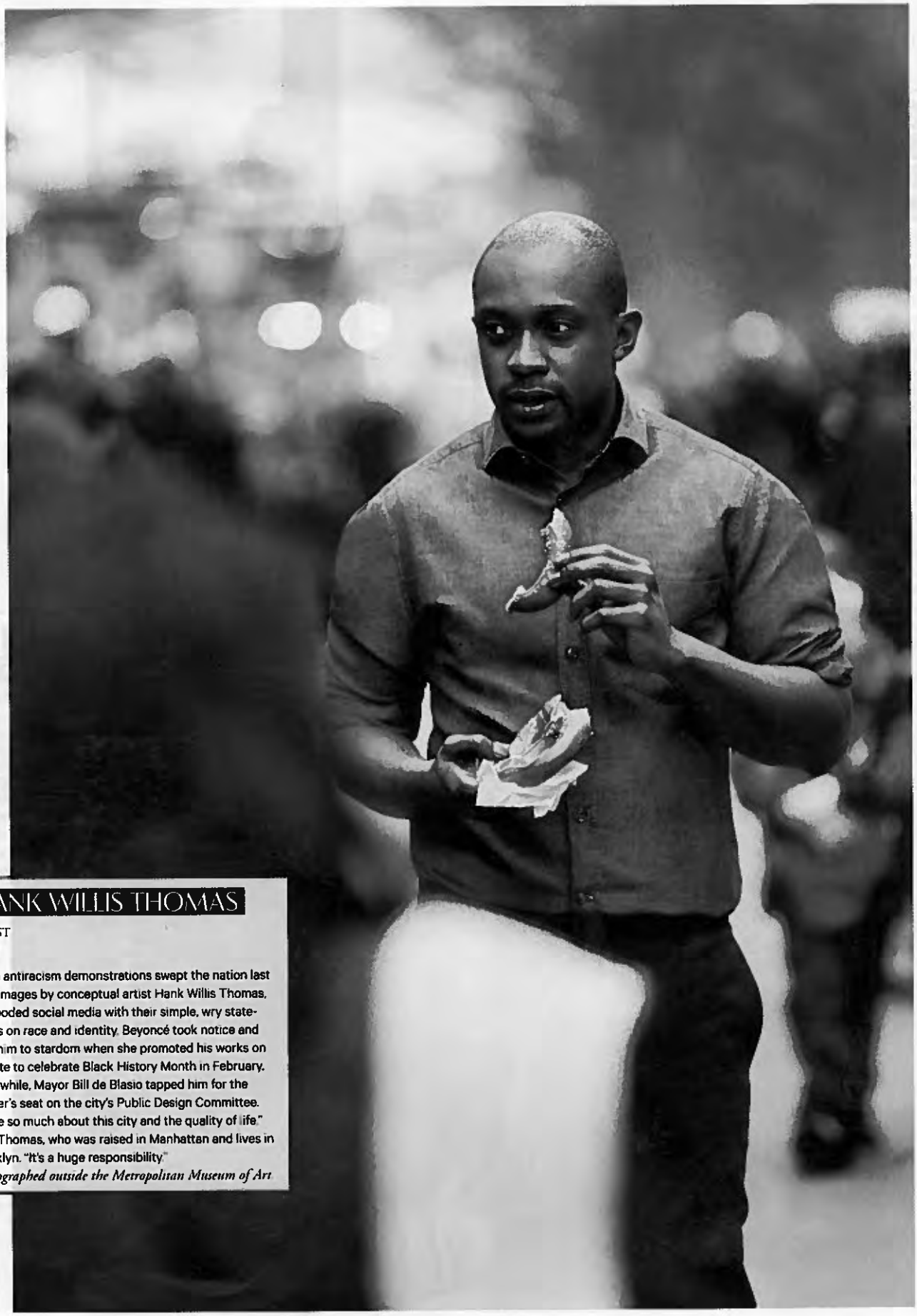
## THE CHICEST SUITE IN Paris
and Where Else to Stay Now

## Coming Into CUBA
BY JUDITH MILLER

## The NEW NEW YORKER
A Fashion Portfolio

## MEXICO CITY IS ON FIRE
BY MICHAEL GROSS

Plus
James Wolcott on BRADLEY COOPER
AND
Manohla Dargis on BERNINI



## HANK WILLIS THOMAS

ARTIST

When antiracism demonstrations swept the nation last year, images by conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas, 39, flooded social media with their simple, wry statements on race and identity. Beyoncé took notice and shot him to stardom when she promoted his works on her site to celebrate Black History Month in February. Meanwhile, Mayor Bill de Blasio tapped him for the painter's seat on the city's Public Design Committee. "I care so much about this city and the quality of life," says Thomas, who was raised in Manhattan and lives in Brooklyn. "It's a huge responsibility."

*Photographed outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

Brunello Cucinelli shirt, $515, and trousers, $740.

HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

# Celebrating Photographers of Color and the Collectives That Have Nurtured Them

by John Edwin Mason on March 20, 2015

John Pinderhughes (Kamoinge), “Charles Madison” (1982), from the series ‘Older Black Americans’ (courtesy the artist)

“And who else is there?” A staff member at a well-known photo festival and I were nearing the end of an awkward conversation. A number of us had publically criticized the festival for its failure to include photographers of Latin American, African, Asian, and Native American descent in its programming. Because the festival was heavily weighted toward photojournalism and documentary photography, images of black and brown bodies, usually in distress, filled the festival’s galleries and projection screens. The contrast between the color of the bodies on display and of the photographers who made the images only emphasized the absence of competing voices and visions.

The staff member, a genuinely decent man, tried to assure me that the festival had done its best to find deserving black photographers to include in its program. They had invited Roy DeCarava, he told me, only to discover that he was too frail to travel. (DeCarava passed away soon afterward.) Gordon Parks was already dead, he said, correctly. “And who else is there?”

Ana de Orbegoso (En Foco), “La Virgen Del Norte” (2006/2011), from the series ‘Virgenes Urbanas’ (courtesy the artist/En Foco) (click to enlarge)

It’s a question that never seems to go away, despite having been answered — conclusively, one would think — in countless exhibitions, catalogues, articles, and books over the last several decades. How was it possible for the staff member not to have known about the many other black — and brown and yellow — photographers who have produced significant work?

Invisibility of this sort isn't accidental, as Ashton Cooper makes clear in her recent article for Hyperallergic, "The Problem of the Overlooked Female Artist." Although she's concerned with gender, much of her argument applies equally well to artists of color.

The notion that female artists are simply "overlooked" is a myth, Cooper writes. There's nothing inadvertent about the decisions that people and institutions make to exclude them from the canon. The gatekeeping that's kept women out of galleries, museums, publications, and histories has to be part of any analysis of female artists. But it's important, Cooper adds, not to stop with narratives of exclusion and victimhood.

Female artists made art regardless of the forces that were arrayed against them. Cooper wants to know how they did it. What was her life like when "she was toiling away in obscurity. What was she doing then? Where was she showing? Who was she in community with? How did her practice change?"

Dulce Pinzón (En Foco), "Catwoman," from the series 'The Real Story of the Superheroes' (2005–10) (courtesy the artist/En Foco)

The great strength of Advancing the Frame, the first joint exhibition by members of the Kamoinge and En Foco photographers' collectives, is that it does much more than answer the "who else?" question. By showing us what African American, Latino, Asian American, and

Native American photographers were up to while gatekeepers' attention was directed elsewhere, it also provides analagous answers to Cooper's questions.

Organized by the Romare Bearden Foundation and currently on view at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, Advancing the Frame presents nearly 80 works by 45 artists. The photographs that curators C. Daniel Dawson, Robert G. O'Meally, and Diedra Harris-Kelley have selected from En Foco's permanent collection and the personal archives of Kamoinge's members erase any notion that either collective has a house style. The photographs often defy easy categorization, blending forms and techniques with purposeful abandon.

The exhibition, however, is more than an opportunity to evaluate the work of individual artists. It's a celebration of the strength and endurance of the organizations that nurtured them.


Ruddy Roye (Kamoinge), "Shrine" (2014) (courtesy the artist)

Kamoinge and En Foco emerged out of the cultural ferment generated by civil rights struggles in the 1960s and '70s. Kamoinge (a Gikuyu word meaning "those who work in concert"), founded in 1963 by a group of New York–based African American photographers, is the older of the two collectives by a decade. From the beginning, its aims were both artistic and broadly political. In their history of the organization, early members Louis Draper and Anthony Barboza define Kamoinge's "essential purpose" as "challenging one another to higher photographic attainment … in the face of a largely hostile and at best indifferent photographic community." Kamoinge also confronted a mainstream visual culture that all too often reduced African Americans to demeaning stereotypes. Its members would "speak of our lives as only we can," as Draper later put it.

A trio of Nuyorican photographers founded En Foco (In Focus) in a Bronx apartment in 1974.

Like Kamoinge, the new collective wanted to challenge mainstream representations of its community and at the same time support its members' artistic development. The founders were also determined to democratize photography, taking it out of galleries and museums and into the bodegas, banks, libraries, and schools of their neighborhoods. Both collectives began as men's clubs but have long since opened their ranks to women. En Foco has expanded far beyond its Nuyorican roots, embracing all photographers of color.

Frank Stewart (Kamoinge), "God's Trombones"
(2009) (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

Over the years, En Foco has become larger and more institutionalized than Kamoinge, which, while adding new faces, has remained small enough to hold its meetings in members' homes. En Foco's institutional structure has allowed it to assemble the nation's largest collection of photographs by US-based photographers of Asian, African, Latino, and Native American descent and to publish Nueva Luz, a journal that showcases work by photographers of color and provides a forum for reviews and conversations about the medium.

Advancing the Frame is by no means a small exhibition, but even so it can't hope to present a comprehensive overview of the work that members of the two collectives have produced over the last five decades. Instead the curators have highlighted ways in which members work in and across a wide range of styles and genres.

George Malave (En Foco), “Boy with Dead Bird” (1969, printed 2011), from the series ‘Varet Street’ (courtesy the artist/En Foco)

The earliest photograph in the show, George Malave’s “Boy with Dead Bird” (1969), from the series Varet Street, predates the birth of En Foco by five years. Lyrical and mildly surreal, it’s firmly embedded in the tradition of American street photography. The most recent photograph on display, Ruddy Roye‘s “Shrine,” is a 2014 image from Ferguson, Missouri, that captures the sorrow, bewilderment, and anger that the town’s residents felt after the police killing of Michael Brown.

Anthony Barboza (Kamoinge), “Fear” (nd), from the series ‚Black Dreams/White Sheets’ (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

Roye’s politically alert reportage is something of an outlier in Advancing the Frame. Although many of the photographers work at the confluence of politics and aesthetics, their approach is typically indirect. Anthony Barboza’s stark black-and-white image, “Fear,” from his series Black Dreams/White Sheets, employs nightmarish surrealism to reflect psychological aspects of the experience of being black in America. Someone — a man? a woman? — is seen from above, lying on the white sheets of a bed, dressed in robes that might be a Klansman’s, except that their color is black. Only the figure’s bare foot signals its race, as it stares back at the viewer with unknowable eyes.

On the other hand, playfulness, parody, and irony characterize works by Hank Willis Thomas, Larry McNeil, and Ana de Orbegoso. Thomas’s “Smokin’ Joe Ain’t J’mama” (1978/2011), from his widely exhibited series Unbranded: Reflections in Black from Corporate America 1968-2008, both deploys and subverts racial and gender stereotypes found in popular media and advertising to explore the commodification of blackness. “Smokin'” Joe Frazier, the former heavyweight boxing champion, who looks into the camera’s lens with a steady gaze and his fist cocked, would be the embodyment of masculine potency, were it not for the blue bonnet on his head and the stack of pancakes before him. Thomas has collaped whatever distance separated the boxer and Aunt Jemima.

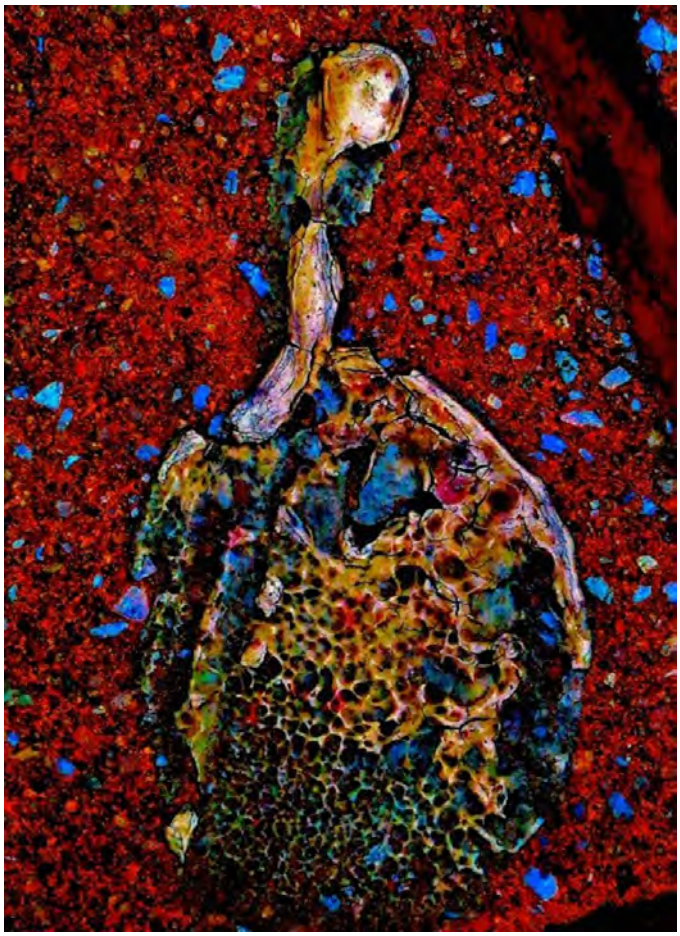
Hank Willis Thomas (En Foco), “Smokin’ Joe Ain’t J’mama” (1978/2011), from the series ‘Unbranded: Reflections in Black from Corporate America, 1968-2008′ (courtesy the artist/En Foco)

McNeil’s “In the True Spirit of White Man” (2002), from the series Fly by Night Mythology, embraces American icons — the flag and a hot rod — only to satirize them. His text, which begins with “In the true spirt of white man. I stole this car in my search for america.”, is embedded in the image, making it an inseparable part of the whole. De Orbegoso’s “La Virgen del Norte” (2006/2011), from the series Virgenes Urbanas, is also in the business of undermining the power of icons. She appropriates a Spanish colonial image that was designed to inculcate ideals of purity and submissiveness in conquered people, replacing the European face with that of a contemporary Peruvian woman who’s anything but compliant. Lola Flash‘s portrait “Kinky D, London” (2003), from her series [sur]passing, is similarly characterized by a self-possessed female gaze. Flash plays with viewers’ voyeuristic

impulses, knowing that this image of a brown-skinned woman with short hair, who wears a sleeveless T-shirt, jeans, and, conspicuous Ralph Lauren undershorts, will inevitably raise questions about ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. “Kinky D’s” calm, forthright gaze suggests that she will offer no easy answers.

Lola Flash (En Foco), “Kinky D., London” (2003), from the series ‘[sur]passing’ (courtesy the artist/En Foco)

The documentary impulse, often combined with portraiture, has always been one of Kamoinge’s and En Foco’s core concerns, as photographs by Dulce Pinzón, Frank Stewart, Samantha Box, John Pinderhughes, and Shawn Walker make clear. Walker is also represented by “Misterioso,” from his series Painting with Light, which would seem to be a purely abstract image but is, in fact, a picture of peeling and decaying paint on the side of a building — the elusiveness of the boundaries between documentary and art manifested in one small photograph.

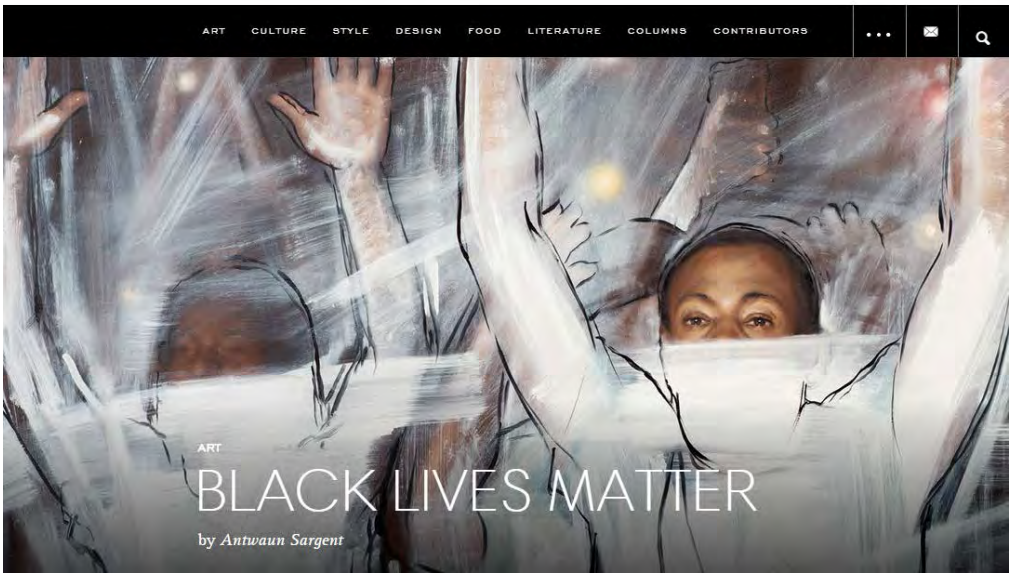


Shawn Walker (Kamoinge), “Misterioso” (nd), from the series ‘Painting with Light’ (courtesy the artist) (click to enlarge)

The artistic and intellectual coherence of the photographs in Advancing the Frame, as well as the sheer range of techniques and approaches contained within them, give the exhibition its power. The show also demonstrates how members of the two collectives reflect movements within the larger photo community, while maintaining distinct, often oppositional visions. And there is no doubt that that gatekeepers — including photo festivals — are finally paying attention to what photographers of color have been doing while they were looking the other way. But it would be unfair to the practitioners represented in Advancing the Frame to leave it at that. As much as anything else, the exhibition reminds us what a pleasure and challenge it is to look at photographs.

Kamoinge and En Foco: Advancing the Frame continues at the Nathan Cummings

THE AESTHETE




# SHOULD BLACK ARTISTS RESPOND TO THE MOVEMENT?

by*Antwaun Sargent*
Writer

In the aftermath of the recent killing of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, 148 artists showed work at the alternative art space Smack Mellon in a show entitled ***Respond***. The show included a diverse group of artists who contributed a range of work that served to survey the national reaction to the black deaths that have incited the growing Black Lives Matter Movement.

*Respond*, in raising questions about the ongoing failure of the nation to protect its black citizens, also posed a question: Should black artists specifically respond to the historic, recent, and continued killing of innocent black men and women in this country?

We asked nine contemporary black artists to continue the dialogue that*Respond* started and to answer the following question: Do you think black artists should respond to the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter Movement?


Hank Willis Thomas, Two Little Prisoners, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

**Hank Willis Thomas**

"I don't believe anyone should do anything they don't want to do, unless they feel they must. I don't believe that having a specific hue of skin should obligate or validate what they make. I believe that the more voices that feel compelled to speak out against injustice, the better. The fact of the matter is that broad injustice takes place everyday and all the time. The question for me is, 'How do we find new and innovative ways to respond and call out when we are oversaturated with image, music, text designed to distract and nullify us?' I'm still in search of answers."


Titus Kaphar, 1968/2014, 2014, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

**Titus Kaphar**

"I think that the problems of this world will be a natural outgrowth of some artists' practice and the celestial and ineffable will be the focus of others. Attempting to create mandates for the production of art in and of itself can be the death nail to creativity."

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

# Unlikely Tenants Filling a Neighborhood Vacancy

## ‘If You Build It,’ a Local Show Celebrating Local Art

By HOLLAND COTTER

Published: JULY 10, 2014

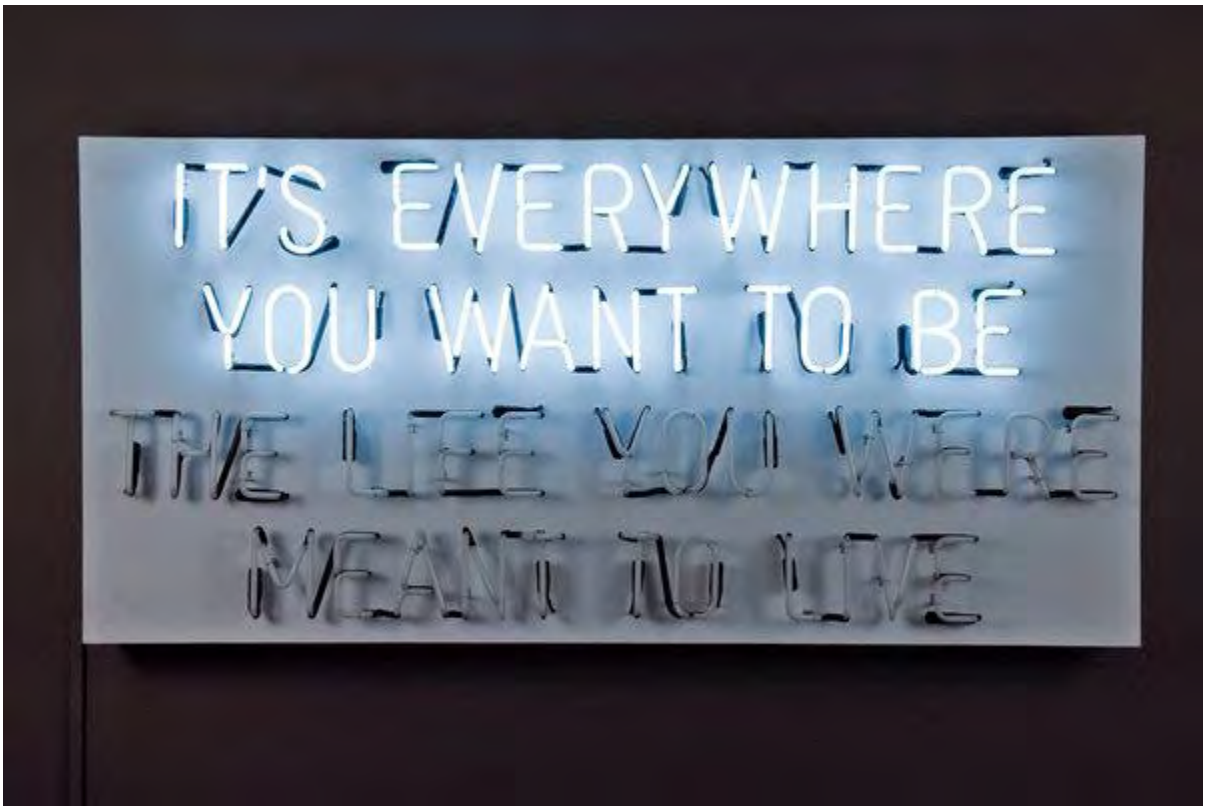
“A Blaze of Glory,” Raúl Ayala’s mural of Gwendolyn Bennett and Mary Church Terrell in the exhibition "If You Build It." Courtesy of the artist

In 2009, when a bad economy left commercial spaces vacant across New York City, an itinerant nonprofit art group called No Longer Empty started filling some of them — a storefront on West 23rd Street, the closed-up Tower Records on lower Broadway — with art. This summer, the organization adds a twist to its mission by working on premises that have yet to be occupied, an in-progress 13-story affordable-housing complex called the Sugar Hill Building located on West 155th Street in Washington Heights.

Cotter, Holland. “Unlikely Tenants Filling a Neighborhood Vacancy.” *The New York Times*, 10 July 2014: C22, illustrated.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/arts/design/if-you-build-it-a-local-show-celebrating-local-art.html?_r=0

Sponsored by Broadway Housing Communities and designed by David Adjaye, the development won't open until the fall. But for the next month, it has exhibitions installed on two floors, and in a ground-level space that will eventually be the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art and Storytelling.

In the early 20th century, Sugar Hill was deluxe turf: Duke Ellington, Thurgood Marshall and W. E. B. Du Bois lived here, and a bronze figure of Du Bois, depicted as a slender, stoop-sitting version of Rodin's "Thinker" by Radcliffe Bailey, opens an exhibition of 22 artists on the ninth floor. Organized by Manon Slome, No Longer Empty's president and curator, the show has celebratory images: neighborhood portraits by Bayeté Ross Smith; a gleaming steel riff on cursive graffiti by Carlos Mare (who used the tag Mare 139) and a red velvet runway hung with crowns by Shani Peters.




"Caesar's Visa" by Hank Willis Thomas. CreditCourtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

But there's also acknowledgment of intractable problems: racial profiling inDread Scott's 2012 video piece called "Stop" and homelessness in an installation by Kameelah Janan Rasheed, to which visitors are invited to contribute. In a nervously flashing neon sign by Hank Willis Thomas, lines from corporate advertising — "It's Everywhere You Want To Be" and "The Life You Were Meant to Live" — look more threatening than reassuring, as does the Sugar Hill Building itself, with its dark stone cladding, small windows and fortresslike bulk.

However forbidding the exterior, the views from the apartments are great. Looking east you can see all the way to Yankee Stadium, a perspective acknowledged in Freddy Rodríguez's painted homages to Dominican baseball players. And with 25 of the 124 new

Cotter, Holland. "Unlikely Tenants Filling a Neighborhood Vacancy." *The New York Times*, 10 July 2014: C22, illustrated.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/arts/design/if-you-build-it-a-local-show-celebrating-local-art.html?_r=0

apartments designated to go to homeless families, the building is sure to make hearts glad, as does much of the art that's here now. One piece, Raúl Ayala's handsome mural of African-American female writers — Gwendolyn Bennett, Ethel Caution-Davis, Mary Church Terrell — will stay on permanent view. (It's painted on a terrace wall on the third floor where various local art organizations — Harlem Arts Alliance, Dominican York Proyecto Gtafica — also have shows.)

And at least a few No Longer Empty pieces will leave an afterglow. For a project called "Sugar Hill Smiles," Nari Ward set up shop on surrounding streets and asked random passers-by to smile into mirror-bottomed tin cans. When people complied — hundreds did — he sealed the cans on the spot while the smiles were still fresh. In a win-win deal, the smiles are on sale for $10 each, with proceeds going to a Broadway Housing Communities educational program.

A version of this review appears in print on July 11, 2014, on page C22 of the New York edition with the headline: Unlikely Tenants Filling a Neighborhood Vacancy.

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.

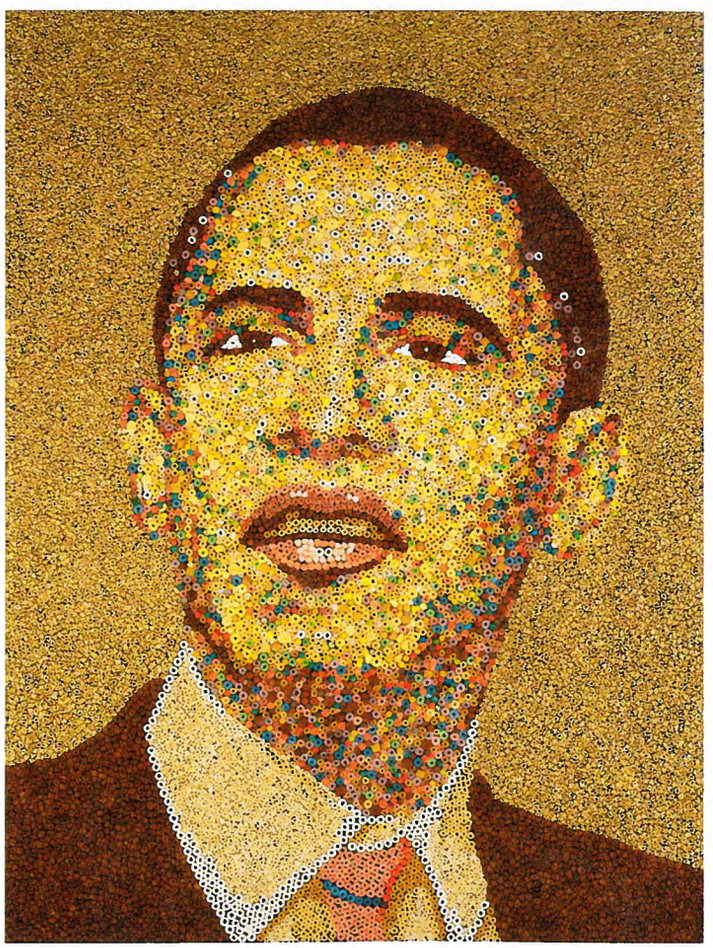
Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review—Hank Willis Thomas" (Jack Shainman Gallery exhibition review). *The New York Times*, 2 August 2013: C25, illustrated.

# TRIUMPH & IMAGE

## HANK WILLIS THOMAS BY DEBORAH WILLIS

My work is about framing and context. More specifically, I am fascinated with how history and culture are framed, who is doing the framing, and how these factors affect our interpretation of reality.—Hank Willis Thomas

Hank Willis Thomas is concerned with the representation, display, and reception of imagery, as well as the wider social context in which art and culture are experienced. As a curator, writer, photographer—and sometime collaborator with the artist—I am familiar with how such works challenge and expand our contemporary understanding of politics, history, and memory, and I see how his work engages these issues. It bears noting that I am also Hank Willis Thomas's mother. Having viewed his work closely for the past fifteen years, I believe he is at a critical juncture as an artist living and working at this point in history.



At a time when Barack Obama's image is promoted in the popular mind in so many complex ways, Thomas is weaving stories of black male subjectivity through conceptual photo-works. In 2009 he collaborated with Ryan Alexiev to create a (literally) sweet image of Obama titled *Breakfast of Champion* for Cereal Art Projects. The picture, based on a well-known photograph of the president, is a mosaic made of breakfast cereal. This ironic image is of course based on ads promoting Wheaties, as the "breakfast of champions" for sports figures: an idea of hope, built out of fiber, sugar, and a catchy promotional concept.

In the months leading to this year's elections, there have been a number of hotbed issues circulating in the news, classrooms, and cultural institutions, from voting rights and immigration to gay marriage, racial relations and tensions, and the economy. New voices are being heard through social media and culture jamming. At the same time, visualizing the past—for example, through

**PAGE 68:** ***Breakfast of Champion*** **(created in collaboration with Ryan Alexiev), 2008;**
**PAGE 69:** ***Intentionally Left Blank*****, 2010; ABOVE:** ***The Essential Predicate of the 8th Amendment/Proof*****, 2012;**
**OPPOSITE:** ***New Negro Scholars*** **(created in collaboration with Rashid Johnson), 2008.**

commemorative exhibitions focusing on the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation—allows us to reflect upon current issues and consider ways to challenge the status quo.

Much of Thomas's œuvre takes on the past and the present simultaneously. His latest works investigate perceptions of freedom, rights, and black Americans' participation in obtaining their civil rights, including the right to vote. He offers us a chance to pause and consider how images take on political and iconic significance, often recasting complex historical moments through portraits of himself and others, or staging narratives using news stories or controversial symbolic imagery. Thomas is among that group of contemporary photo-practitioners who are, as curator Charlotte Cotton notes, "framing the social world in a measured and contemplative manner."

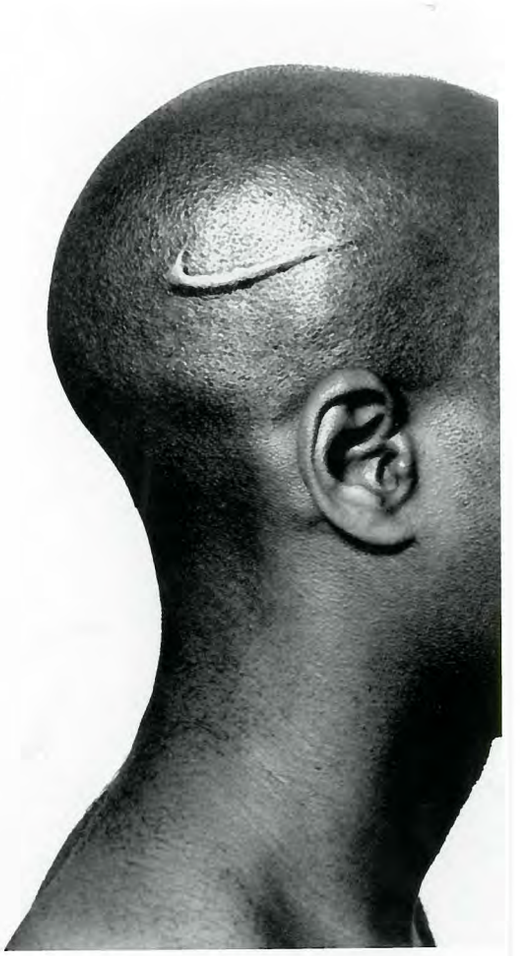
Through witty posturing and visual references to stereotyping, Thomas provokes us to consider the emotions surrounding voting and race. Posing and manhood, memories of childhood and ideas of fatherhood are central themes in his narratives, skillfully constructed in stylized portraits. In *This Negro Voted* (2008), created with artist Rashid Johnson, Thomas references Reconstruction-era photographs, the Confederate flag, patriotism, and notions of dandyism. The fearless "Negro" in this image—Thomas himself, smiling widely and sporting a suit and tie—has voted in the midst of adversity, symbolized by the flag of the Confederacy. But the artist is positioned at the apex of the flag's X, obscuring it so it reads as a V—perhaps for victory.

We encounter this dandy again, reconfigured, in the dual portrait of Thomas and Johnson. They are dapper in sharp suits and look directly at the camera, their identity offered in the work's title: *A Portrait of Two American Artists as Young Negro Scholars* (2008). The two men are apparently examples of what W.E.B. DuBois identified in his 1903 essay "The Talented Tenth": that is, "the Best of this race that [through education] may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races."

Thomas has a clear understanding of how words have historically been deployed to demarcate difference, whether used to subjugate or to empower. He also challenges how words and icons continue to control in his series *Branded* (2001–11) and *Unbranded* (2005–8). The former includes images of African-American men who have

been branded with the Nike logo: in *Scarred Chest* (2004), multiple "swooshes" stand out as scars on the torso of a muscular man, and in *Branded Head* (2003) on the back of a man's cranium. The Nike symbol evokes desire and wishfulness (materialist and athletic) even as the branding evokes the horrors of slavery. *Unbranded* is a series of magazine advertising images targeted at African Americans, from 1968 to the current day, which have been appropriated and digitally manipulated by the artist. He removes logos and text—"unbranding" the images—forcing viewers to think about what is being sold and how. Thomas observes: "I believe that in part, advertising's success rests on its ability to reinforce generalizations around race, gender and ethnicity which can be entertaining, sometimes true, and sometimes horrifying, but which at a core level are a reflection of the way culture views itself or its aspirations."

Thomas borrows from old-fashioned photographic practices to draw our attention to the photographic moment and the use of the image in its time. It has long been common practice for studio photographers to make portraits of schoolchildren during the academic year. Often an initial print will be brought home with the word *PROOF* in perforated dots across the face of a student, as an encouragement to families to buy further prints as keepsakes. Echoing this custom, Thomas prints the word *PROOF* on certain archival images—in one, *Remember Me/Proof* (2012), a neatly dressed African American man holding a rifle poses stiffly for the camera; in another, *The Essential Predicate of the 8th Amendment/Proof* (2012), a black man is about to be whipped by a white man—reminding us of the evidentiary nature of photographs.

Thomas's photographs link the present to the past in provocative and novel ways. By recalling and restaging moments from history, he uses the visual trope of the black body to interpret and reimagine lived experiences—from segregation to integration, from personal memories to collective histories. ◆

**THIS PAGE, LEFT: *This Negro Voted* (created in collaboration with Rashid Johnson), 2008; TOP: *Branded Head*, 2003; OPPOSITE: *Remember Me/Proof*, 2012.**

All images courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery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the means of display: with no high-tech hanging system or sexy mannequin hinting at just how such *accoutrements* could be worn, the romantic feeling that art objects shouldn't really be handled still niggled on the exhibition's opening evening, a halo buffering around the flocked forms. So perhaps the wings inspired less of a metaphorical leap than they served as a reminder of the naturalization of alienation, without actually requiring any viewer activation. Because in the social ring of the Greater New York art world, costumes are not worn especially lightly – tail feathers must always be out and flapping.

Since the 1990s, artificial wings have been worn by Club Kids, avatars and Victoria's Secret models as a kind of metaphysical drag, invoking a superpower subjectivity based on equipment, rather than utility or even outward appearance (ethereal beauty in an atheistic pop culture is certainly open to interpretation). That Ceccaldi's wings resembled both 19th-century scientific plates of unknown species from the New World (sorted by colour, shape, size, material, artistic treatment) as well as a character selection screen for a first-person shooter in a video game suggests a slippage of symbolisms. Both a certain wariness with regard to the superficial hierarchies of taxonomy and other Western rational systems – which scientifically treat aberrations in style as deviations from a 'norm' – and a modest proposal to leave the categorical behind, to recuperate a sort of 21st-century use-value in art (choose your armour, and your metaphors, wisely). Whether any concrete meaning was derived from its whimsical post-minimal presentation, or later unravelled in conversation, 'Wearables' spoke to the complexity of image-making today. While simply raising proto-ravewear to a serious aesthetic plane, Ceccaldi neither romanticized his material nor forgot the joke. His scrupulous manipulation of *things* – bastard physical objects sprouted from a loose idea – pointed productively to the entanglement of imagery in all sorts of commercial, technological and art-historical regimes, to flout heavy-handed interpretation. So carefully composed, the 'image' of this exhibition bore little relation to the sloppier substance of micro-blogging or cloying gratification of the meme. That a young artist's solo New York debut should address notions touching the linguistic and the poetic is a keen tribute to current discourse, and a refreshing attempt to invigorate the non-representational in art.

**KARI RITTENBACH**

2
Nicolas Ceccaldi
*Wearable 4*, 2012, mixed media, 51 × 56 cm

3
Nicolas Ceccaldi
*Wearable 5*, 2012, mixed media, 51 × 53 cm

4
Hank Willis Thomas
*Look Natural 1970*, 2010, digital c-type print, 99 × 76 cm

# HANK WILLIS THOMAS
## Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas shape-shifted in his recent exhibition 'What Goes Without Saying', if cryptic messages, abbreviated text and symbols of the enlightened are signs of the time. Pieces varied from African-American-inspired quilts to a video of the Confederate flag rendered in red, black and green, bursting into a cacophony of coloured patterns, it is accompanied with a speech by Martin Luther King. The flag itself, in *Black Righteous Space* (2012), is re-coloured and corresponds to the coordinates of John Sims' epic quilt *Afroconfederate* (2002). Here, as elsewhere, Thomas appropriates images and work with aplomb.

The show offered a miscellany of works from Thomas's *oeuvre* to date. He revisited an approach evident in his 'Unbranded' series (2005–08) which used figures from advertisements, digitally removing logos and text, created to target an African-American audience. His recent spin involves appropriating images used in cigarette advertising. Works such as *It's More You* (2012), *It Shows* (2010), *Believe It* (2010) and *Look Natural 1970* (2010) feature ads using figures and slogans without the product or original backgrounds. What are exposed are the fashions and hairstyles of a particular era in the 1970s. (The main figure in *Believe It* appears to be a spin-off of blaxploitation film star Richard Roundtree in his signature role as Shaft.)

Offering a critique of the late 1960s and '70s at the advent of the black power movement, Thomas strips objects to their bare essentials – sign and text – so as to coax new meanings. In *Fair Warning Signs* (2012), ad slogans divested of images are remade as prints with white lettering on black paper hung in black wooden frames. Statements such as 'For all the right reasons' and 'The length you go to for pleasure' sound like morality tales. Do these statements resonate for the artist as personal mantras or are they critiques of corporate America, subliminal messag that flip marketing slogans into life lessons? Thomas works like an advertising specialist, cod ing short statements and sentences to imply multiple meanings.

In *Flying Geese* (2012), Thomas uses slave quilt motifs. This work is set in stained African mahogany enhanced by cut-outs of a digitized vintage photo depicting a crowd scene, taken around 1910 by the African-American photographer A.P. Bedou. Raised, so to speak, amidst the archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, due to his mother's important work with early black photographers, Thomas's use of such images is certainly apropos. The Schomburg Center is a repository and archive of black culture, history and life, named after the acclaimed Harlem Renaissance historian, writer and activist, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg.

*South Bend* (2012) is, I assume, a nod to the so-called Gee's Bend quilts, which were made by women in rural Alabama. The work uses jerseys from various basketball teams to construct a 'Broken Dishes' quilt – a block-quilting style that utilizes half-square triangles. Quilting codes wer used as a way of communicating with slaves escaping from the South to the North along the Underground Railroad; the 'Broken Dishes' quilt indicated that broken crockery existed at a parti ular landmark. Thomas brings aspects of black tradition into the 21st century and this quilt establishes a connection with his 'Branded' serie (2003–ongoing) that includes commentary on black basketball players and the black male bod as a commodity. All-star college teams such as the Michigan Wolverines and UCLA Bruins are represented by fragments of the teams' jerseys, and included are the retired numbers of notable NBA stars Chris Weber and Tyler Hansbrough. Thomas's use of basketball icons, ephemera and silhouettes echoes the importance of the sport within the black community, where excelling at basketball is synonymous with success to many, especially black male youth.

Symbolic use of black and white in *Seeker* (2012) riffs on the artist's ideas about race and hybridity, transcribed into the figure of Sanford Biggers as a 19th-century black dandy/performe replete with top hat and tails, painted half white and half black. Thomas appropriates this figure from a well-known photograph from Emory University's repository of images depictin African-American life. In a recent interview, Thomas contended that we are now talking in terms of post-racialism, yet here is someone from the late 19th century dealing with these ideas as well.

In a collection of 16 square paintings made in 2012 and derived from political symbols, buttons and posters based on elections and movements covering a 50-year period, I get Thomas's drift about the relationship between identity and politics. But was the point here to show non-partisan support given that the opening of the show predated the US presidential election by several weeks?

Can Thomas be considered a political artist? In works such as *Seeker* and *Thenceforward and Forever Free* (both 2012), where the interjection of a white presence is made, and in the range of voices suggested by his political slogan works, he perhaps seeks to implicate a softer, gentler reality in reference to race relations.

**A.M. WEAVER**

4

JSOnline

# Hank Willis Thomas talks about Question Bridge

*By Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel* June 14, 2013

How do you know when you are a man? Why is it so difficult for black men in this culture to be themselves? Why wouldn't you be happy with your son being gay? Do you really feel free?

These are some of the questions that black men have asked other black men through a video-mediated art project called "Question Bridge: Black Males," by Hank Willis Thomas and Chris Johnson.

Creating honest and candid dialogue about what it means to be a black man is no small feat. Making a work of art that holds meaning for a wide audience is also no small thing. Doing both at once is remarkable, and that is what these artists have done.

The resulting three-hour, five-channel video installation is on view in the contemporary galleries at the Milwaukee Art Museum, 700 N. Art Museum Dr., through Sept. 8 and in conjunction with "30 Americans," a multi-generational exhibit of African American artists, and "Wisconsin 30," a show featuring African American artists from the state. Both shows open Friday.

The artists and other collaborators, including actor Jesse Williams, have just launched a Kickstarter campaign to raise $68,000 to create an online platform and leverage social media strategies for "Question Bridge" (See video at the bottom of this post). That platform will extend the dialogue among black males, make some of the gathered statistics searchable and create a tool that can be used for dialogue among other groups.

As part of the museum openings, MAM is holding a panel discussion Saturday at 2 p.m. featuring black men from Milwaukee, including James Causey, Tyrone Dumas, Ald. Willie Hines, Mike Jackson, Christopher McIntyre, Kwame Nsoroma and Eric Von. Johnson will also be present for the panel. Admission will be free both Saturday

and Sunday from 10 to 5 p.m.

After traveling from Dubai to Milwaukee to speak at MAM, Thomas, who also has work in “30 Americans,” sat down for an interview.

**Mary Louise Schumacher: Tell me a little bit about “Question Bridge” and how that idea got started.**

**Hank Willis Thomas:** As an artist who has been doing a lot of work about African American males, I always struggled with what it meant to be a black male in America. One of the things I always like to point out is that one of the craziest things about blackness is that black people didn’t create it. Europeans with a commercial interest in dehumanizing us created black people, and we’ve been enlisted to make it our own and make it beautiful. In a way, that is always going to be problematic. So we traveled the country and asked self-identified African American men to ask and answer each other’s questions. They say you can’t judge a book by it’s cover but even still I would see people come in the room and I would be like, OK, I know what kind of question they are going to ask or what kind of answer they are going to give. And literally, 99% of the time I was totally thrown off and embarrassed, you know, because here I was trying to do a project that is trying to fight prejudice and then having my own prejudice come up so blatantly.

**MLS: Tell me about some of the responses that you’ve found particularly meaningful.**

**HWT:** For me, it really was the general experience of watching people come into the room asking “What is this?” There was one guy who was very stern. His wife made him come. And then there was a question from an 8-year-old boy who asks, “How do I know when I become a man?” And (the boy’s) eyes were so beautiful and there was such innocence. And you could watch that man’s face soften and he smiled and he gave this answer, talking about how he constantly had to relearn the answer to that question.

**MLS: So you are in Milwaukee, one of the more segregated cities in America and a city that sometimes struggles with dialogues around race and difference. What does it mean to have “Question Bridge” here?**

**HWT:** That’s why we want do the web site (questionbridge.com) because we realize we can’t be everywhere. We really feel the need to not be limited by where we are. There is one participant from Milwaukee.

**MLS: A lot of your work uses the familiar imagery of advertising and “Question Bridge,” as you point out, is open to the control of the participants. This doesn’t seem like a coincidence that you are constantly using language that is open to a lot of audiences.**

**HWT:** Right. I had to get educated to appreciate this piece right here in front of us (pointing to artworks in MAM’s galleries). A lot of fine art is part of a conversation that’s been going on for maybe thousands of years. If you missed any sentence or any little line in it, you are going to have to catch up. I really try to walk that fine line between making work that is accessible to those who have no interest in fine art at all and those who maybe have the most distinguished of tastes, which is not an easy trick.

**MLS: So what do you think about the “30 Americans” show within the context of Milwaukee?**

**HWT:** I think it’s important to have this show here. In a way, I think Milwaukee will have to do another show. Since we’ve probably been ignoring so many of the local African American artists, this is our chance to get it right. You really wonder what happens to the institution afterward. Having the show and being an impetus for starting a conversation and shining a light on perhaps a problem is really great but I really think it’s going to be more interesting to see who from the “Wisconsin 30” (an accompanying show of African American artists from the state) gets pushed onto a broader, more national platform.

Schumacher, Mary Louise. “Hank Willis Thomas Talks About Question Bridge.” *The Journal Sentinel*., 21 June 2013. Online. <http://m.jsonline.com/more/entertainment/blogs/211438271.html>.

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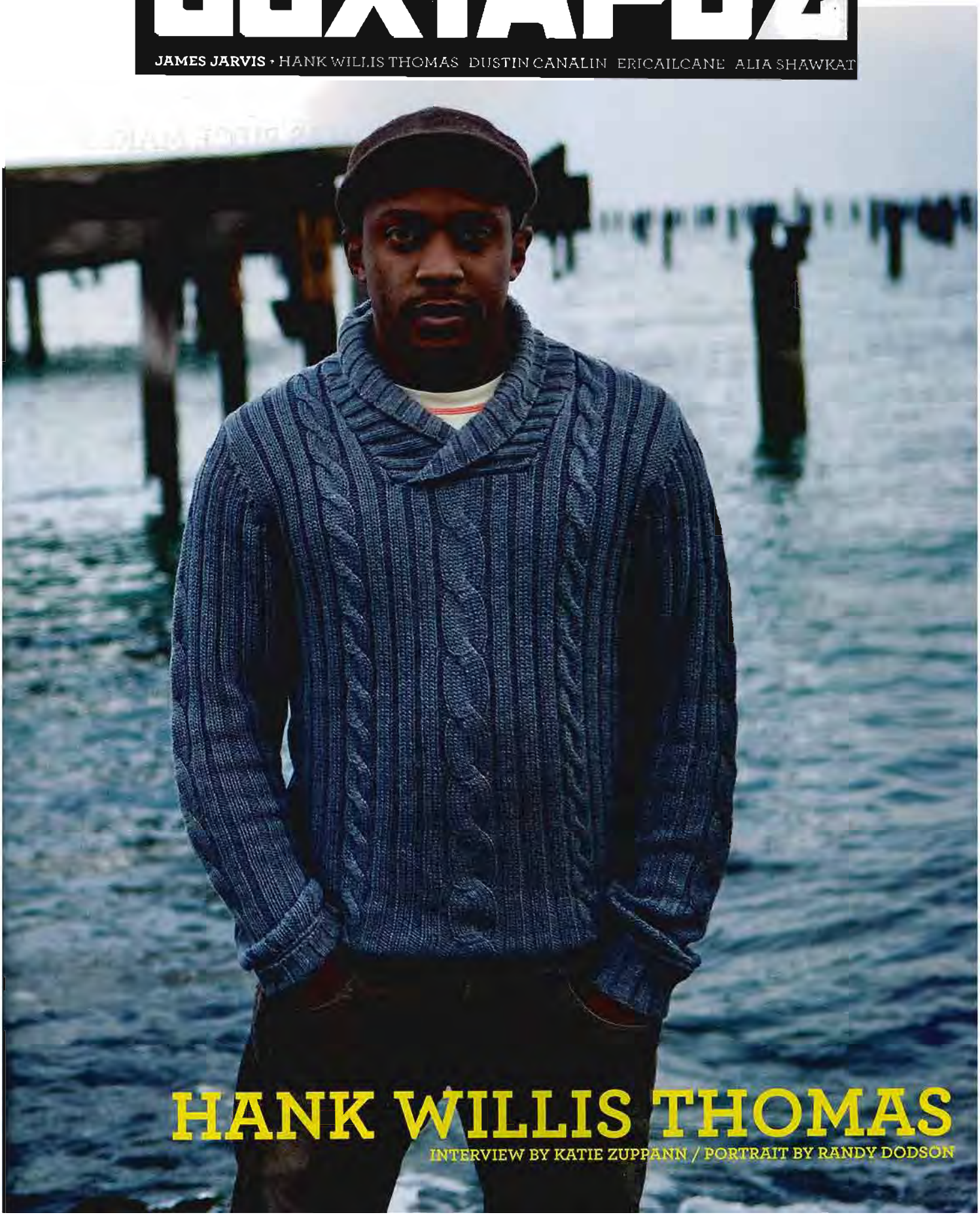
# JUXTAPOZ®

JAMES JARVIS • HANK WILLIS THOMAS DUSTIN CANALIN ERICAILCANE ALIA SHAWKAT



## HANK WILLIS THOMAS

INTERVIEW BY KATIE ZUPPANN / PORTRAIT BY RANDY DODSON

IF LOOKING AT A HANK WILLIS THOMAS PIECE MAKES YOU UNCOMFORTABLE, THEN MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. HE HAS STRIPPED THE SKIN OFF AN IMPERFECT AMERICA BY SWIFTLY DEALING A BLOW TO VIEWERS' HEARTS AND MINDS. MAKE NO MISTAKE, HANK HAS A POINT, AND HE WILL MAKE SURE YOU LISTEN UP. —*Katie Zuppann*

*Katie Zuppann*: Your work is sociological in nature and I was struck by the poignancy of your *Branded* series, with its very clear message that you convey to the viewer. Do you agree?

*Hank Willis Thomas*: It depends on what the viewer gets. You could have every intention, but I've found that I learn as much about the work from other people's interpretation as mine; that's kind of the genius of being an artist. What's great about doing something that uses the medium of advertising is that so many people have access to being able to decode it. I can put something out there with some sort of intention. I try to tread that line of saying something that we already know and is very simple, but also adding a bit more to suggest something beyond the obvious.

Do you think that kind of overarching goal encompasses all the different mediums in which you work?

I was always interested in frames within frames, especially in photography, what's going on just outside the frame of the camera to affect our perception. We look at it as a document, but it's such a manipulated medium from beginning to end.

I remember when I first started seeing how images are retouched and how that's just part of the industry. I was interested in that obvious manipulation that we sort of succumb to everyday, like when we watch television or read magazines.

Have you always been sensitive to that?

I think that has definitely been the theme. I always loved television and advertising so I've always been fascinated by how it works. It's the most seductive medium in the world, isn't it?

Do you find yourself falling into that trap as well?

Oh yeah. That's why I don't watch television. What I'm interested in with my work is trying to appeal to a broad audience. And one of the things that media culture—television, magazines, and increasingly, more the Internet—is all about how to appeal to a really broad audience.

**Unbranded Series**
*Are you the Right Kind of Woman for It?*
Digital C-print
1974/2007

Definitely the ultimate manipulation. I think, because it's so subtle.

It's like, why do we care about Jon and Kate Gosselin? Or whomever. How do these people capture our attention? They definitely aren't special. They got eight kids but, you know, 40 years ago that wasn't extraordinary. The media has become masters of making very unimportant things important.

What do you feel qualifies as important?

Trying to remind people to think beyond what goes without saying. We're all so prejudiced and it's important to think of ourselves and others beyond the prejudice. That's what was amazing about Barack Obama. He was able to see beyond his own prejudice, which is one of the things that has limited a lot of other African Americans. Beyond racism, we also self-select.

With the *Branded* series I was really struggling, because my cousin was murdered and there was no logic behind his murder. This guy Lawrence says to Alberto (the two guys there that night), "I want to go get a chain," and that's how it started. My cousin wasn't even wearing a chain. They robbed these other dudes my cousin just happened to be with at the club. Literally they took nothing from my cousin but his life. The other guys they were with ran when my cousin was lying face down in the snow, and the guys shot him in the back of the head.

I was really struggling with that, trying to figure it out. It got down to something in the construction of black male identity. And it is a construction. Black male identity, as we know it, started with slavery in the United States. Not in Africa. I'm interested in the way black men are the most feared and revered bodies in the world in this weird way. I was trying to figure out why, and the relationship to slavery and commodity, which is commerce, culture, cotton, and that body type. So that's kind of what started the *Branded* series and what it's about.

And that spurred you forward?

Then I did that *Winter in America* movie, which uses the GI Joe action figures. We had this

Unbranded Series
*The Mandingo of Sandwiches*
Digital C-print
1977/2007

weird conundrum with kind of having fun. I went back to my best friend's house and got my old GI Joes. One of them I'd had since I was six. We actually played with these toys 20 years before, but as men, now telling a story, that's serious. The idea was how do you tell a story that has been told a thousand times before in a new way?

Rather than thinking about my cousin specifically, we focused on the last five minutes of his life. And using this goofy, disarming format of stop motion, it immediately asked you to think of things in a different way. And it's still about that context, changing the context in order to say something that we already know.

We say that we don't condone violence in this culture but at least 60 percent of the movies we watch are about absurd, choreographed violence. There's another conundrum: you wonder how that affects people, especially little boys whose identity was kind of constructed for them before they could even know who they are themselves.

That also relates to what I think happened with Michael Jackson, who I think really had problems with black male identity and rejected trying to define himself independently from that. There was a Michael Jackson piece in one of my shows, a picture from 1984 of what they thought he would look like in the year 2000. It said on the page, "Time Can Be a Villain or a Friend"; like he could be this different kind of star. To me it said so much about how our assumptions of Michael affected him.

I think Michael Jackson is definitely one of the more powerful examples of how society can backfire on an individual. That constant interplay between fame, what you give to the public and how the public affects you.

Especially him who never, in a sense, had a private life. So then I did *Unbranded*. I felt like people were giving me way too much credit for the images in the *Branded* series, like, "Wow, that was really smart." But a lot of the ideas actually came out of previous dialogues. For that series I took two ads from 1968 and 2008 and removed all of the branding information, focusing on ads that were geared toward a black audience. I chose 1968 because that's


when Martin Luther King died, which was the symbolic end of the Civil Rights movement. It was interesting coming up on the fortieth anniversary, looking at what changed in the way that society perceived black America then and now.

Prior to the '60s most images you saw were black people treated like servants or caricatures so I was really interested in this maturation. Also, the fact that most of the people who made these ads were white men on Madison Avenue making decisions about what black people would love or should love, and that inherently complicated the notion of blackness.

What I say is interesting about existing ads is that I can't claim any responsibility over them per se, other than their selection and kind of undressing. We as a society brought them in. No photographer can claim them solely, no art director can claim them; it's really this thing that's of the moment. I say that we can learn as much about society by looking at a few certain ads as we can by reading an entire book about a certain time period. So that's what kind of inspired that project.

You've talked a lot on Barack Obama and his blackness. Do you see the election of Barack Obama informing your future work?

I had a show where the work focused on trying to figure out what the world was going to be like before and after the 2008 election. I felt like if John McCain won it would be a lot easier for me; I could just do the same old thing. With Barack Obama's election, although no problems are immediately solved, you can't speak about race the same way. Now we have this knowledge, like we used to talk about The Man. Now he's The Man, undeniably. In every way you can think about that term he's The Man, he's The Man, he's The Man.

In regards to one piece of my show, there was this rally in 1968 with posters that said "I Am" on them. I made 20 paintings that start with that, which is kind of weird because originally they said things like "I Am a Man ... I Am 3/5 of a Man ... I Am Your Man." The idea is by the end it says "I Am Human, I Am Many, I Am, Am I, Amen," this kind of progression. For me it hurts that six or eight years before I was born, black people in America had to make a collective political statement to affirm their humanity.

That's crazy. Think about the year 2000; that people from our time, people are saying "I AM A MAN" in this country. That's crazy! And I fortunately benefited from all of their work. And what we saw in the hip-hop generation was this more selfish perspective of "I am The Man." I'm really interested in that sort of progression.

Between the collective and the individual?

Exactly. So my work has to be a little bit more open minded. Ryan and I did this piece of Barack Obama out of cereal. Essentially cereal is second only to the auto industry in the amount spent on advertising. It's only four basic grains but most of it's sugar—and there are 400 different kinds of cereal. So this work's really about how we've become so masterful at marketing an idea.

With Barack Obama, who spent more money marketing himself than any president ever, the idea was that his campaign was a success in advertising as much as it was a political or cultural success. I think he took the best of Apple and the best of Nike marketing and melded those techniques to become a global phenomenon.

To make one really powerful statement

But he really didn't say much during the campaign.

He did reach a huge audience with what he was saying. It was a very simple message.

Yeah, "Change." Be nice to people. So our piece was trying to say we have a tendency to only critique things that we think are bad and we tend to shy away from critiquing things that we're inherently supportive of. When we made the piece we talked about this really lush, sugary image that we have of him, but also reminding ourselves that it's still the same basic four grains.

Still the same formula.

It's business as usual with a different kind of sugar. That's one of the ways my work has been affected by Barack.

I'm interested that you use the language of advertising to critique the language of advertising. You use the same strategy a lot of marketing campaigns and advertising companies use in order to artistically explore social issues.

Well, I say I use the language of advertising to talk about things that advertising couldn't responsibly talk about.

More importantly, I think the critique of my work is that it also exists within a market. Who can afford to buy contemporary fine art? Really wealthy people who have connections to the same kind of corporations I'm critiquing. And one of the things that's intriguing is that corporations are just like countries and just like families. Nobody's all bad. As Americans, there are so many things that we'd like to change about America, but as Americans we also have to accept the critique of our privilege. My work isn't trying to speak about popular

*Breakfast of Champions*
24" x 32"
2009
Edition of 1000
In collaboration with Ryan Alexiev

and commodity culture from the outside, but is trying to critique it from the inside. It's very complicated and makes me have to walk a very fine line.

There was this fascinating topic on NPR the other day, is it possible to sell out anymore? We had Bono and we had the Beatles. These people that had really strong political messages, like Dylan, are now doing stuff with Walmart, Apple, and all these other entities at a time that might be the way to lose credibility. We're so much in cahoots. At the end of the day our society in America is about making money. If you don't make money in America, America makes money off of you.

That's funny about the notion of selling out, because Shepard Fairey did the Obama poster and garnered even more fame through that. He graced the cover of *Juxtapoz* a few times long before he achieved mainstream attention from the Obama image. Some audiences who have followed Shepard's work for the past two decades accused him of essentially selling out. "He's working with Nike; he's working with Levi's. He's everywhere." But Shepard said, "You know, I'm doing the same thing that I always did." He still goes out in the streets, he still wheatpastes. It's just curious that when you reach acclaim or the mainstream media gloms onto what you're doing, people call it selling out. But he has two kids and he needs to pay his bills. What, then, is selling out?

One of the things hardest about San Francisco, and I love it here, is that there's so much talent and creativity going on but people are so intensely afraid of selling out that they either don't have the motivation to push their work to the next level or they're too stubborn. They'd rather their 500 friends know that they're the shit then have the world be affected by their work and be considered a sellout or have their authenticity diluted. Because it's diluted by the mainstream.

Shepard is selling out. But when you sell out it's at what cost? Because now he has much greater power in his voice than he ever would if he had just stayed in his college kid, hipster, cool community. He could effect them, but they already know. So how do you impact people who are totally different? You sell out.

Taking a broader perspective and looking at your artistic motivation, what first really struck me about your work also led me to get more critical with it.

I like criticism. That's market research.

Much of your work is social. There's a lot of race and gender relation and general social commentary, which appealed to me. Do you see yourself as a social artist? Where do you see yourself fitting into the grand historical art dialogue? How do you see yourself falling into the overarching scheme of the art narrative?

A lot of artists care about that. I care that as many regular people as possible see my work, because how many regular people go to art galleries on a regular basis? Really in a hundred years, who's going to be looking at art history books anyway? What's interesting, especially when you make work about media culture, is how things change so fast. It's like, is this still relevant? You hope so.

What I've said to a lot of people about art history is that the reason so many people don't get contemporary art is because they're walking into a thousand-year conversation at the last second. You hear the last word of a book and you aren't going to really get it. What art lovers or art enthusiasts are expressing is finding out more aspects of the conversation; what got said before that?

Are you choosing to focus on a more targeted period of time because, as you say, you're stepping into a thousand-year conversation? Because you do bridge a lot of different eras in commenting on our current situation. Do you choose only to focus on the last 40 years because you couldn't make an all-encompassing comment?

THE REASON SO MANY PEOPLE DON'T GET CONTEMPORARY ART IS BECAUSE THEY'RE WALKING INTO A THOUSAND-YEAR CONVERSATION AT THE LAST SECOND.

Well, there isn't one comment. Inspiring dialogue is the only real hope of my work. Dialogue that may not change the way you do things but change the way you think. That, in subtle ways, will affect the way you do things through conversations. You may be like, "I don't like it; I don't get it." But with my work I'm trying to make every attempt for somebody to be able to get it. Because if you try to meet me halfway you'll probably get something of it. That's what the work here is about. Whereas a lot of artists don't necessarily want you to get it, or care if you get it. They want people who know about art history to get it. And for me, in an ideal world, I'd like to be able to speak to both.

*For more information on Hank Willis Thomas, contact Hankwillisthomas.com.*

*Read the full, unabridged version of this interview at Juxtapoz.com/Features/Hank-Willis-Thomas-Unabridged.*