November 2016

Artist behind 'Make America Great Again' billboard speaks

This billboard in Pearl, Miss. is using Donald Trump's campaign slogan with an image from the 1965 Selma Civil Rights campaign. *(For Freedoms)*

By William Thornton

The artist behind a billboard gaining notoriety in Mississippi is no stranger to controversy in Birmingham.

Hank Willis Thomas is a member of For Freedoms, an Artist-run Super PAC which created a series of billboards running for the past few months. One in particular gained attention in the last week in Pearl, Miss.

Hank Willis ThomasWilliam Thornton

The billboard uses an image from "Bloody Sunday" in Selma during the 1965 voter registration campaign, juxtaposed with President-Elect Donald Trump's campaign slogan - "Make America Great Again." According to WTJV, Pearl Mayor Brad Rogers hopes to have the billboard taken down this week.

On March 7, 1965, more than 50 people were injured when marchers crossing the Edmund Pettis Bridge were confronted by Alabama State Troopers and a sheriff's posse.

Thomas, 40, said For Freedoms used similar billboard images in cities throughout America, but Pearl was the only location using that particular image. The intent was to ask a question that he said went unasked during the presidential campaign.

"One question that never came up with the President-Elect was, when are you talking about?" Thomas said. "The Cold War? The crack and AIDS epidemic? Interning Japanese citizens? The Depression? The Civil War? When was this time you want the country to go back to? There's never been a greater time for more citizens than right now."

Thomas gained attention in Birmingham in 2007 with one of his works at the Birmingham Museum of Art. "Priceless #1" was a satirical take on the "priceless" Mastercard commercials which turned the image of a grieving family into a powerful statement about inner-city violence.

The piece included text placed over a photo of a family at a funeral. It says "3-piece suit: $250; new socks: $2; 9mm pistol: $79; gold chain: $400; bullet: 60 cents ... Picking the perfect casket for your son: Priceless." The family depicted was Thomas' own, mourning the loss of his cousin.

It was then, Thomas said, that he realized the power of public art. "It's more effective when it's on the street," he said.

In the case of the billboard, Thomas said he is only now able to comment on it as he and the other members of For Freedoms have been at a conference in South Africa. But he noted the billboard was on display for weeks before the election, with no complaints.

"It would be interesting to know what reaction this same image would have gotten two years ago," he said.

Another way to read the billboard image is to consider that perhaps the greatness of America is best depicted in the Civil Rights struggle. Thomas said Alabama and Mississippi, during those days, was the "epicenter" of change.

"That was a time of greatness because people stood up and fought for change," he said. "We wanted to pay homage to this. Through a non-violent response to brutality, they helped overcome the status quo."

Art in America
February 2009

Pitch Blackness: A Conversation with Hank Willis Thomas

by Petrushka Bazin

Hank Willis Thomas's show Pitch Blackness remains on view at Jack Shainman Gallery through March 14th. The Aperture Foundation published his first monograph of the same title in October 2008, and his work was included in 30 Americans, an exhibition this past December at the Rubell Family Collection, in Miami. Hank and his former studio assistant, Patrushka Bazan, had a recent conversation about the making of his new body of work.

PB: I guess we should begin with the most obvious question – What is your show, Pitch Blackness, about?

HWT: I think *Pitch Blackness* is a show that's trying to contend with issues of race, identity, and history in the age of Obama. The title of the show, which I took from the book Aperture published of my work, plays on the idea of pitching or throwing away blackness, the permanency of the color black, and the proposal of blackness as a race.

PB: In the B®anded series, you make and manipulate images so they resemble commercial advertisements. In Unbranded, you erase text from advertisements from the late 1960s to the present as a means of focusing your viewer's eye on the charged imagery advertisers use to sell their products. Appropriated and manipulated images lie at the core of both bodies of work. I feel like you've made a very clear shift in this show from the use of appropriated images to manipulated text. Did you make those choices intentionally, as a parallel to the current shift of power in our country's government?

HWT: One of the most challenging things [about this show] was that most of the thought and research happened before the election and there was a lot deliberation in the studio. How do I make work that's relevant, and that talks about race and culture? With the prospect of having a black president it seemed like it was easier to make same of the old work or present some of the same ideas [if McCain had won]. But with Obama, I had to at least make work that was a little more open-ended and perhaps try to inspire some degree of hope, openness or lightness. That was very hard for me to try to visualize and photograph in a way that would have a lasting impression.

There had already been so much iconography [produced in response to] Obama. With that in mind, and having read a lot of books and looking at old photographs, I decided to make a piece that used text from a book published in the turn of the last century called *The Progress of the Race*. For the piece, the text was engraved on the surface of three granite headstones. The first phrase says, "Some fair questions." The second one, "The slate is clean;" and the last, "Everything must go." Those three phrases stood out for me. I was trying to ask fair questions of the moment; if the slate is "clean" as so many people were trying to suggest and celebrate after the election, then everything must go – all of our ideas about race, identity, history, and the past must be rethought and restructured. I don't happen to believe the slate is "clean," in that context. These headstones are a way of trying to lay history to rest.

PB: I am curious about your choice of materials for a lot of the pieces. Your background is in photography, yet the show diverges from that, both materially and in terms of content. Can you talk a bit about your decision making process regarding the use of new materials?

HWT: Due to my choice of materials, this is the first show where I relied on other people [for production]. I wanted to create work almost as thought I were an art director, and I wanted to think about the show and the concept behind it as though it were an ad campaign. I worked with various sign companies and graphic designers to actually make work that in some ways had this look or feeling of the advertising industry. I often say that I try to use the language of advertising to talk about things advertising couldn't talk about responsibly. Since this show didn't primarily feature advertising as the subject or as a tool, though the work functions [as advertising].

PB: I see this approach in the neon pieces, the suite of 20 canvases that reference the "I am a Man" posters from 1968, and the headstones, but what about the piece, *The Day I Realized I Was Colored?*

HWT: That image was from a 1961 issue of *Negro Digest*, which was a literary weekly magazine for African Americans. I had been tooling around with that picture for the past couple of years trying to figure out the perfect phrase or idea to express this image that said so much. I actually went back and found this magazine again; the text below it said, "The Day I Discovered I Was Colored," which really spoke to so many issues that I was trying to bring up in the show. With this idea of pitching blackness, letting go of these ideas, we should go back to the origin and the fact that we do, at some point, find out that we are Black, or White, or Asian, or Latino, or female, or male. That picture, [in the magazine] with this black boy being told that he is different by these two white kids, and having to try to understand – it really made the moment clear for most black people when we learn that we are 'colored.' Recently, I remembered the day I discovered I was 'colored,' officially.

PB: When was that?

HWT: Another artist friend of mine, Bayeté Ross-Smith and I were walking down the street twenty-five years ago; we were coming from an after school program. I asked a question about why we were called 'black' if our skin was brown and Bayeté tried to tell me that my skin may be brown, but I'm black. I said, "No, I'm brown." He said, "Yeah, but they call us 'black' to simplify it. It's more direct." In so many words, he was saying that it's easier to group people into one [definition of] color, as opposed to identifying them under the many hues within their race. He helped me realize that though my skin may be brown, my identity is black and in that moment, it became clear to me that I was black.

PB: Friends always keep us even -- thank God for them! I'd like to talk a bit more about other pieces in the show. How about Time Can Be a Villain or a Friend.

HWT*: Barack Obama and Michael Jackson are two figures that helped me in thinking about the show because Michael Jackson is the first person to actually "pitch blackness" in that he literally got rid of it. He thought the concept of blackness was not useful to him, or to his identity. That image, Time Can Be a Villain or a Friend, refers to the title of an article printed in a 1984 issue of Ebony magazine. [The feature] imagined how Michael Jackson would look in the year 2000; it said that by age 50 his fans would have grown tenfold and that he would have matured in all of these different ways. How much further off could they have been to see him as this brown skinned, more refined gentlemen compared to who he is today? What's interesting about Obama was that originally he wasn't "black enough." Then, because of his relationship with Michelle and Jeremiah Wright he quickly became "too black." By the end of the campaign, he managed to reposition himself in a way that people were talking about him as "post-black." The way in which his "blackness" changed over the course of 18 months is pretty fascinating.*

PB: Which piece from the show is most significant to you?

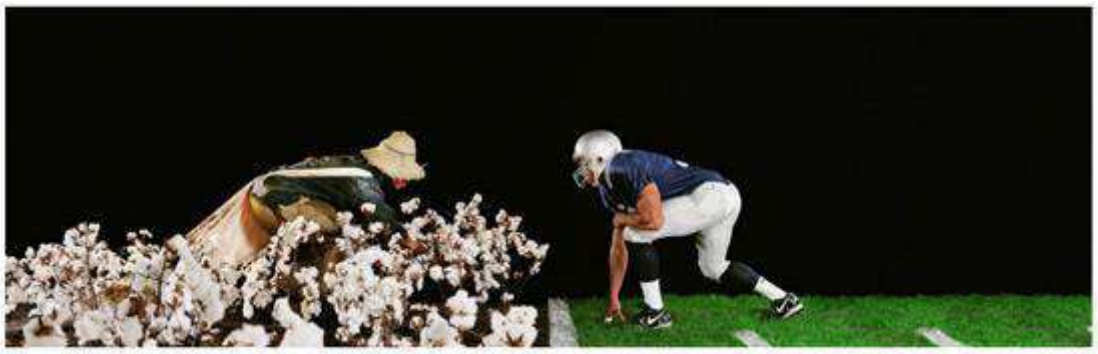
HWT*: The neon sign that says, This is My Best. Sell Your Hard Times, as it's one of the first pieces that I've produced publicly that really doesn't respond directly to race. It is a weird step for me to talk about things and make work that has a broader interest, which I think is also important for artists of color to do.*

ART NOUVEAU MAGAZINE

March 2012

Strange Fruit: Interview with Hank Willis Thomas

Ilysha McMillan



Hank Willis Thomas latest body of work *Strange Fruit* expresses the historical truths blacks had to endure throughout their journey here in the United States. Hank created vivid comparisons of black perception between the pre-slavery era and post-Civil Rights Movement. The irony that drips and oozes from his canvas, visually gives a voice to those in history who didn't have one. Hank's symbolism exposes the role media plays in the down fall of our popular culture. This creative genius shed light on the method behind his madness.

Read writer Ilysha McMillan's conversation with Hank Willis Thomas, exploring images from his recently released Strange Fruit body of work.

"…Popular culture influences the way we as a culture learn and perpetuate stereotypes about ourselves."
– Hank Willis Thomas

Art Nouveau: Which piece came about first and what triggered you to develop that idea into your newest collection?

Hank Willis Thomas: My work is primarily concerned with popular culture, history, and race in America, and many of the pieces in this show are building on themes found in older work. I created the piece "Hang Time" over a year ago, but had always wanted to photograph more images for the series. The rest of the work is a meditation exploring this issue of African American's complicated history with the noose. The opportunity to create a new body of work around these themes was given to me by the Corcoran Gallery of Art with support from Jack Shainman Gallery.

AN: Was there any research done before or during the making of this collection and if so, what did you spend most time on? Why?

HWT: Much of the inspiration for my work comes from history, and the ways cultural history is told. I spend a lot of time with archival materials, including texts, magazines, and images from the last 100 years. The most important book I referenced was *Without Sanctuary.*

Art Nouveau: What role do you believe the media plays in bringing to life the symbolism you used throughout your *Strange Fruit* collection?

HWT: *Strange Fruit* is a series of works that is questioning how the media represents and portrays black bodies, particularly with regards to their physicality. To me, popular culture influences the way we as a culture learn and perpetuate stereotypes about ourselves.

AN: What influenced you to use the graphics you did for the 4 hanging blacks in the "Martyr" piece?

HWT: Martyr: Lige Daniels, Aug 3, 1920, Center, TX, 2011

Martyr: Laura Nelson, May 25, 1911, Okemah, OK, 2011

Martyr: Unidentified Man, 1925, 2011

Martyr: Clyde Johnson, Aug 3, 1935, Yreka, CA, 2011

The "Martyr" piece includes images from documentation of lynchings that occurred across the southern states of America in the early part of the 20th century. 1940s. The photographs were distributed via postcards and collected as paraphernalia. I wanted to see what would happen if we were to place victims of lynching in the same way we treat martyrs and religious icons. We preserve them in churches windows with stained glass.

AN: What does the noose represent in our current society? What do you believe needs to get accomplished so that we can one day remove the noose from our around our throats?

HWT: I wonder what it means to you. I'm still investigating that myself. In some of the work in *Strange Fruit*, I was trying to reinterpret the noose–what does it mean when a black man powerfully and easily dunks a basketball through a noose?

AN: What are your views on the reoccurring NFL/NBA lockouts and in what ways do you represent your views in your recent collection?

HWT: I believe the lockout somehow brought about the rise of Jeremy Lin.

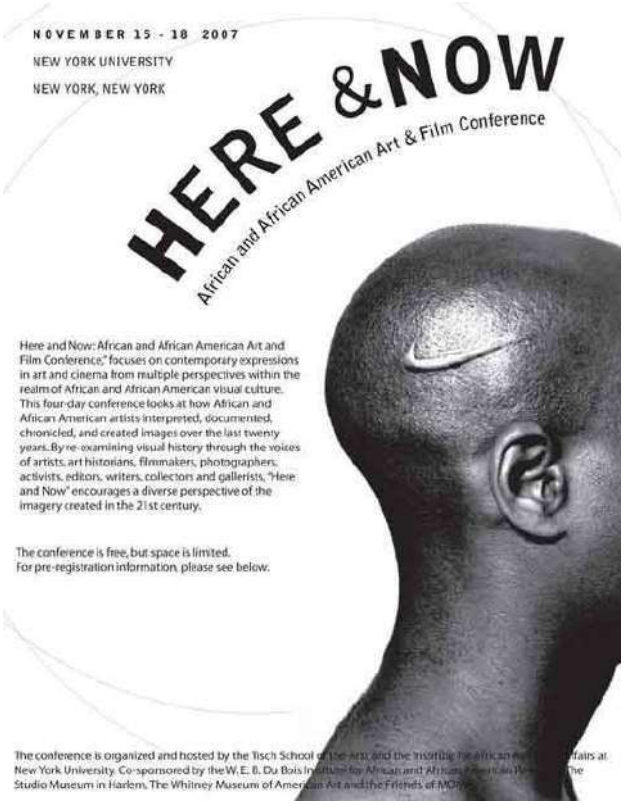
October 2012

Hank Willis Thomas: Believe It.

by Nettrice Gaskins

Hank Willis Thomas. “Believe It” from the “Fair Warning” series (left) and “What Goes Without Saying” (right). Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

This entry is part interview, part review, and part reaction to works by artist Hank Willis Thomas. I first heard Hank speak at the *Here and Now Conference* at New York University in November 2007. The conference looked at how African and African American artists interpret, document, chronicle, and create images. Hank gained recognition with his *Branded* series (2006) for which he digitally added a scarred Nike logo on different parts of the body of a black model. One of the images was featured on the NYU conference poster.



Here & Now conference poster, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University (2007).

Five years later I had a chance to speak with Hank about his work currently on view in *Believe It* at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) in Atlanta and in *What Goes Without Saying* at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Hank is also featured in the November 2012 edition of ARTnews, with artist Sanford Biggers in black and white on the cover.

Nettrice Gaskins: One of the things that interests me as a writer and a researcher is the ways that contemporary artists interact with the material forms and affects of technology. This includes the new notions of "hybridity" that you mention in ARTnews. Can you unpack this a little more?

Hank Willis Thomas: Everyone in America is a cultural hybrid. Black artists are often expected to have this authentic or mythical perspective. My experience of "hybridity" comes partly from the experience of being a minority in this country. Many of my contemporaries have had educations in environments that are not exclusively black and that influence our identities in ways that are often ignored. I talk about how we as African American men live within these different identities similar to W.E.B. Dubois' notion of *double consciousness*. [I also refer to double consciousness in my post *Kara Walker: The Art of War*.]

Nettrice Gaskins: I'm also interested in your translation of existing cultural-historical artifacts, and how you re-purpose them to reveal the process of their agency. Can you talk more about that process? How do you start or organize this work?

Hank Willis Thomas: I grew up at the Schomburg Center where my mother (Deborah Willis) was once a curator, so I've been around and negotiated these artifacts for

most of my life. Photographs capture moments and photographers turn these moments into documents and archive them. As a photographer I try to organize the world I'm seeing. I pay attention to the corner, the foreground and background of an image. I take it, look at it, throw ideas at it, listen to others' feedback about it, sketch it, render it, and then over a long period of time, make it into a finished work.

Nettrice Gaskins: New media is my area of study at Georgia Tech, so I am always looking for how contemporary artists who work in or with traditional materials incorporate the new or now. How does new media figure into your production process?

Hank Willis Thomas: It depends. It depends. I've grown comfortable not limiting my work to my own talent or skills. Philip Perkis once said that form is nothing more than an extension of content. I look at what media I can employ to best articulate the content or concept I am trying to create. This forces me not to rely solely on photography to make a work.

Nettrice Gaskins: Can you talk a bit about how the work in the SCAD show links with work in the Shainman show?

Hank Willis Thomas: Some of the work at SCAD is in the new show. The images deal with framing and how forms of presentation influence how we read or understand a message or story. I am trying to figure out if there are ways to re-contextualize corporate-generated images to tell different stories of representation that aren't solely in the service of selling a product like cigarettes in the *Fair Warning* Series.

Hank Willis Thomas. Installation view of "Fair Warning/Rebranded/Remember Me," 2010. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

Hank began his SCAD lecture with the photo of a wooden Buddha he saw on display while visiting Vietnam. This Buddha was holding a MasterCard welcome sign that the artist feels is a metaphor for commodity culture and consumption, a major part of the "global culture dynamic." He connected this memory to his practice of collecting, archiving (and re-

purposing) cultural and historical artifacts. In my view, this is *bricolage*, or the process of figuring out how to make things work, not from standard rules or methods but from messing around with whatever materials are on hand. In this way, Hank Willis Thomas is an *interpretive bricoleur*. His artwork often consists of multiple interconnected images and representations.

"People 'bricolage' technologies, practices, materials, and the socio-political context together in a constant cycle of evaluation, mediation and translation – fitting new elements into the whole and adapting the whole to its new parts." [Anna Dezeuze, *Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life*, 2008]

In addition to "commodity culture," *framing* and *seeing* (from multiple perspectives) has played a big role in Hank's work. He referred to the *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a collaboration between photographer Roy DeCarava and writer Langston Hughes, as an example of an influential work. His mother, Deborah Willis, came across this book as a child and Hank says that this was the first time she had seen images that reflected black life as she experienced it in the 1950s. This led her to explore how the person holding the frame and taking the picture can effect the way we understand the world. Hank noted that African American photographers have been creating images of their world since the 1840s and these images reflected their/our understanding of history and everyday life–in contrast to the images that mainstream society was creating of African Americans at the time.

"The Sweet Flypaper of Life" by Roy Decarava and Langston Hughes (1955). Courtesy of AIGA.

Hank shared his mother's undergraduate thesis, which aimed to bring the work of African American photographers more to the center stage at a time when there were very few examples of their work in the history of photography. She proposed research that dealt with the inclusion of works by African American photographers, including Roy DeCarava, which become the source material for her first book, *Black Photographers 1840-1940*. Since then Hank has followed in his mother's footsteps. He presented a collaborative piece called *Sometimes I See Myself in You* (2008) that explores how the relationship with his mother influenced his artistic practice.

Hank Willis Thomas/Deborah Willis. “Sometimes I See Myself in You,” 2008. Courtesy the artist.

I’ve previously heard Hank speak about (and have viewed work) from *Branded* (2006) and *Unbranded* (2010), so, in this post, I’ll write about his more recent work. I am intrigued by his exploration of different dichotomies, double entendres, and symbolic artifacts – i.e. as representations of social-political constructs, like “knowing what blackness is or isn’t.” For this work Hank references a quote from artist/writer Carl Hancock-Rux:

There is something called black in America and there is something called white America, and I know them when I see them, but I will forever be unable to explain the meaning of them….

Hank recently staged a photo shoot with Sanford Biggers for the November 2012 edition of ARTnews. Rachel Wolf highlights a connection to ‘hybridity’ that I think is part of the emergence of postcolonial discourse and critiques of cultural imperialism. Wolf writes that, “Thomas wants to build his own take on the subject by combining… images, riffing on this idea of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic hybridity…” [Note: I revisit hybridity as *polyculturalism* on the Art21 blog.] In the ARTnews article Sanford says,

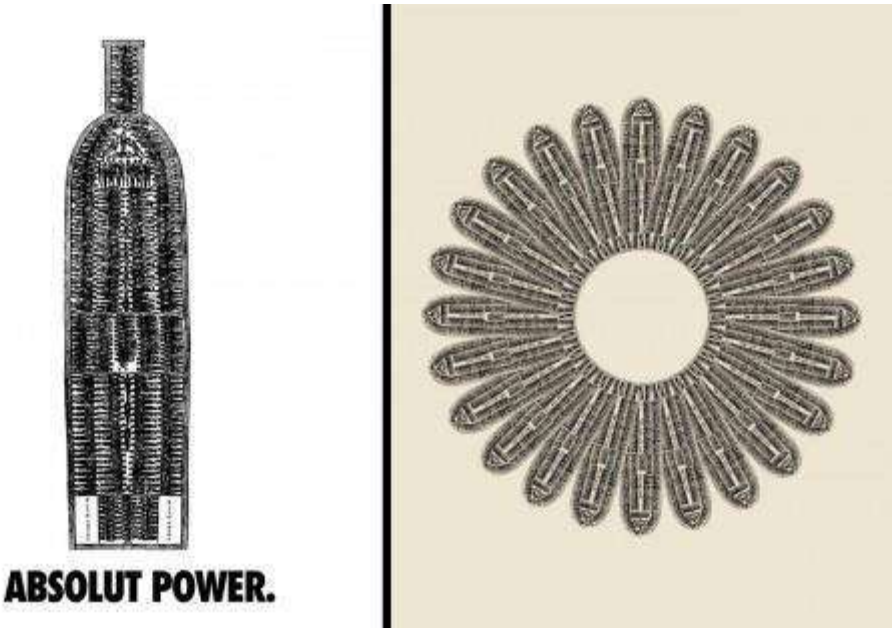
[T]his photograph and the character in it become more about duality and a more multifaceted being. It’s about the yin and yang, and pathology and moralism, and life and death. And superego. Those types of things. Which are things I’ve really been exploring in my recent work as well.

Hank Willis Thomas and Sanford Biggers. Photo shoot for ARTnews (2012). Photo (left) by Rebecca Robertson and (right) by the artist.

Hank's interest in commodity culture and identity through multiple perspectives shows viewers how images/objects can diverge from common understandings of Black life in the Western tradition. Similarly, scholar Shigemi Inaga (2012) offers his treatise on art and globalization, i.e. as a "cross-reading" of Asian and African art that makes use of consumer goods. Inaga writes about the "metaphor of global resource circulation" that can be compared with Hank's practice. Specifically, Inaga writes about the art of El Anatsui:

By recuperating the abandoned materials of commodity goods, accumulating the scattered pieces, and recycling them, El Anatsui weaves a collective memory of the world into his own texture, while letting the texture be woven back into the world [pg. 53].

Sanford talked about being inspired by the weaving of vernacular (as collective memory) – i.e. American Southern vernacular, African vernacular and culture, mythology, history, and other artifacts from popular culture and Black life. Like other artists Hank Willis Thomas produces art that weaves the vernacular of his reality into his own texture, seeking solutions for our present time. El Anatsui, Sanford and Hank demonstrate symbolic bricolage by referencing their knowledge of culture, history, spirituality and their experiences as black men living and working within dominant society. For example, whereas Hank re-purposes the symbolic black and white image of black bodies on a slave ship and fashions it into the shape of a liquor bottle, Sanford uses the source image to create a flower motif.



Left: Hank Willis Thomas. “Absolut Power,” 2003. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery. Right: Sanford Biggers. “Lotus,” 2007. Courtesy the artist.

Call it chance or synchronicity that I was in Sanford’s Harlem studio talking to him about *Lotus* a month before viewing *Absolut Power* (2003) at SCAD. Hank talked about the Middle Passage, when slave traders kidnapped millions of people of diverse cultures, languages and identities, packed them tightly into ships, sent them halfway around the world and put them in the same category as a people. Even today, Africans and African Americans are largely seen as passive consumers. Inaga writes that Africa is more seriously touched and damaged by mass-consumption culture than successfully industrialized countries. Even in the United States some researchers note that the production of materials and technology in African American (and Latino) communities is still relatively rare.

Hank Willis Thomas. “Strange Fruit (series),” (2011). Image courtesy of the artist.

Hank spoke about how comfortable we’ve become seeing certain kinds of images of Black people, especially in advertisements and sports. He said that mainstream audiences have grown used to seeing black male (athlete) bodies hanging from things like nets and some of them may have descended from people who were lynched during Jim Crow. The noose continues to be a symbol of domination used to threaten Black Americans, even during the 2012 Presidential election. Sports is a multi-billion dollar industry, fueled on the backs of the descendants of slaves, sometimes on the same fields where their ancestors picked cotton. Other artists like Kara Walker provide their own layers of meaning to these symbolic, cultural and historical artifacts. They take these images/objects beyond the American reality and, as Inaga writes, into the realm (and practice) of connecting seemingly disparate ideas and representations to create and expand their respective art forms.

The repetition of the connecting operation multiplies in proportion to the increase in the number of craftsmen involved. The gradual spreading in dimension of the (work) is… aimed at establishing solidarity among dispersed people [Shigemi Inaga, pg. 53].

Hank Willis Thomas addresses SCAD students on October 25, 2012. Photo by Nettrice Gaskins.

African American creativity often centers on the vernacular. Throughout the trajectory of Hank Willis Thomas’ artistic practice he has woven the memory of Black America into his own images and assemblages. What I think is important about his art is that it reveals the multifaceted nature of the Black American experience, especially in consumer culture and in the practices of everyday life. During the SCAD lecture Hank talked about this process of engaging material artifacts as opposed to merely presenting black-informed expressive or aesthetic representations of the world. This work, as a type of bricolage, offers guideposts to new frontiers of production that rest in the liminal zones where multiple disciplines and realities collide. I believe that Hank’s work will inspire more underrepresented minorities to create, share, and distribute content rather than just consume it.

ARTNEWS
December 2016

Maybe They Can Handle the Truth: Hank Willis Thomas Will Take His Public Art Installation on a 50-State Tour

By M. H. Miller

People recording messages in the Truth Booth.

Hank Willis Thomas's *Truth Booth* has been installed in diverse locations, from Collins Park in Miami to Bamyan, Afghanistan, as well as numerous places in between. (Most recently, the piece was on view at MetroTech Center in downtown Brooklyn.) The work is an inflatable recording booth in the shape of a comic-book word bubble, with the word TRUTH written on the exterior. Inside, visitors record a two-minute message in response to the prompt, "The truth is…" This has resulted in a number of very candid replies from the public. "The truth is I don't think I have enough money to finish college," said a student from Hofstra University in 2012. One participant in Brooklyn said that she wanted to get back together with her estranged husband. The truth for an eleven-year-old in Miami was that unicorns are real.

Now, in honor of the election season, Thomas is hoping to take the *Truth Booth* across the country, to all 50 states, in order to create a dialogue during what Thomas described in a phone interview as "a difficult moment in human history."

"In political seasons, truth is a very contested domain," he said. "And I believe that there are multiple truths existing at all times. So how do we start to find space for acknowledging that there could be different perspectives on the same issue?"

On Tuesday, Thomas—along with his collaborators from the Cause Collective, Ryan Alexiev, Jim Ricks, and Will Sylvester—is launching a Kickstarter campaign to help fund the *Truth Booth*'s U.S. tour. The goal is to raise $75,000. Since Thomas is a successful visual artist, many of the proposed locations so far are cultural institutions, but the plan is to expand to some more unexpected terrain. (Museums, Thomas said, are "not the entirety of the United States, obviously.")

Thomas is having quite an active election cycle so far. Earlier this year, he formed a political action committee called For Freedoms with artist Eric Gottesman. The funds raised by the PAC, which will be headquartered at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea (Thomas's New York dealer), will go toward commissioning political ads by artists.

"I think the stakes of elections in the 21st century are high," Thomas said, citing the 2000 presidential election and the Supreme Court case that resulted from its contested vote as a breaking point in American politics. "Everyone is trying to figure out how to get back on track," Thomas continued, "and people have very different ideas about that. Some people would say that it's never been on track."

Presidential campaigns are always circus-like, but the one in 2016 has really outdone itself in terms of contentiousness. Thomas hopes his work will serve as a kind of portable neutral ground.

"What we primarily want is to invite the public to use their voices, because if we don't speak for ourselves, other people are gonna speak for us, and we have no idea what they're going to say," he said. "If the truth belongs to all of us, then we have to recognize that we have something in common."

ARTNEWS
July 2015

‘Advertising Is Fueled By Prejudice’: An Hour With Hank Willis Thomas

By M. H. Miller

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 a 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.

Artspace

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Hank Willis Thomas on the Art of Talking About Race

By Andrew M. Goldstein

The contemporary art landscape is filled with artists who plumb the formal challenges of their mediums or examine the self-reflexive concerns of the art market—in other words, who make "art about art." What's arresting, and refreshing, about Hank Willis Thomas's work is that it speaks powerfully about an issue that resonates far beyond the art world: the problematic state of race in America. Carrying forward a lineage of satirically engaged art that goes back to Goya's "caprichos," Hank uses his work to expose the unsettling ways that commercial interests use advertising to propagate myths—to borrow a term from the French cultural critic Roland Barthes—about race that uphold an unequal social order and, of course, sell products. A celebrated new media artist whose work has been shown at museums around the world, Hank is also a sought-after thinker on issues of inequality: last year he was an independent scholar at Harvard's W.E.B DuBois Institute; he is currently a fellow at Columbia College's Institute for the Study of Women & Gender in the Arts & Media. In this he follows in the footsteps of his mother, a celebrated photographer and MacArthur "genius grant" scholar who is now the chair of Tisch's photography department. Artspace editor-in-chief Andrew M. Goldstein sat down with the artist to talk about his work. (This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Let's jump in by talking about one of the central ideas underpinning your art: you see race itself as a myth. This is, of course, supported by science, which long ago discredited the notion that racial divisions have any genetic foundation. Can you talk about how this informs your work?

Well, I think I'm basically obsessed with it. I think there is quote by Carl Hancock Rux in his essay called "Eminem: The New White Negro" where he says: "There is something called black in America and there is something called white in America and I know them when I see them but will forever be unable to explain the meaning of them because they are not real even though they have a very real place in my daily existence." It speaks a lot about how although race does not exists, we can't see beyond it. Especially in the United States. Having spent a lot of time outside of the country, I've recognized how malleable and shifting racial dynamics are, and how many of the people in this room who would be undeniably black here are not considered black [elsewhere in the world]. In Belgium, for instance, I had an argument with this woman about someone. She said, "He is not black." I'm sorry, in America he is. That really speaks to the complexities of race and how we are all limited by racial, gender, and ethnic stereotypes—things that I am kind of always struggling with in my work. There is one project called *Along the Way* that I did with a collective where we wanted to show the diversity of the Bay Area with a 25-foot media wall of videos in the Oakland Airport, so we walked around and shot 2,000 video portraits of Bay Area residents to show this diversity. In one of the debates about the collaboration, Bayeté [Ross Smith, one of the artist collaborators] brought up the point that just because you look different doesn't mean you're diverse. We have this shallow understanding of diversity because in the Bay Area, for instant, is people vote 80 percent the same way, and increasingly the class divide isn't as big. So there is less and less diversity within class and politics and in ways of seeing the world in the Bay Area, although ethnically people tend to look different. So these are all things that I'm always kind of obsessed with.

But while race may be a fictional construct, racism is still as real as can be. And to an insidious extent popular culture both affirms and encourages these deep-seated cultural prejudices by retelling old fictions about race. In his seminal 1957 essay "Myth Today," Roland Barthes called these invented ideologies the "what-goes-without-saying." One famous piece from your *Unbranded* series shows an imposingly built black man wearing a blue bonnet. Can you talk about what's going on in that piece?

That is from an ad for Blue Bonnet margarine from 1978, and the figure in the ad is the late, great Joe Frasier, heavyweight boxing champion. What's relatively amazing about this ad is that he's right at the peak of his career, and when you look at it unbranded you immediately begin to see a caricature of a mammy figure—a slave caricature—which makes us think of Aunt Jemima, but with the text on it you're just reading about him sounding tough and talking about this product. And I still can't necessarily see the connection between him and this product, but I thought it was pretty interesting to take the heavyweight boxing champion and to in some way make him related to this mammy character—it's questionable, to say the least, and it started to make me question other ads I was looking at, which encouraged me to start this project titled *Unbranded: Reflections in Black of Corporate America 1968-2008* where I took two ads a year from 1968 to 2008 that were looking at a black audience and I wanted to see, kind of, what's really for sale. When you remove the branding information you start to see things that are thinly veiled, and so in a lot of my work I'm always really thinking about advertising. I see advertising as a form of brainwashing, and I think about the ways in which

it affects the way we see the world—because without race and gender advertising would be a lot harder. You get these pockets of assumptions: people who are this old care about this, people who live here care about this, people who speak this language care about this, people with this background care about this—which isn't true, but it makes it easier for us to be trained into what we believe. And I believe we buy into these values that are incredibly problematic, as we see with the very successful cigarette marketing campaigns, which has trained us into thinking that products say things about us that they don't. Like my iPhone.

How did you find the original ad?

Basically, with this work it's all about discourse. I think we really take ephemera for granted, like historical documents in archives and like magazines and posters—they're either kitsch or things that we throw away, and I think that they can really tell us a lot, and I want to spark a discourse about things. So now I have too many magazines, and [searching] eBay was a challenging process to find all these kind of ads that I thought were interesting.

You mentioned cigarette ads. When one thinks of cigarette ads in an art context, one thinks of Richard Prince's Marlboro Man series, and when one thinks of Richard Prince, one thinks of an artist who gets into a lot of legal difficulties over his images. I wonder, do you ever get angry letters from the corporations whose advertising you appropriate?

No. For one thing, I think corporations like to get over on people without ever having to acknowledge the problematics of what they're doing. So for them to sue me would give exposure to something they're just not that interesting in exposing. But I have been trained as a photographer, and photographers really despise this notion of appropriation and see it as stealing. So I've had probably about eight photographers whose work I've used who've reached out to me, and about half of them like it and half of them didn't. I was actually in a show about civil rights work at the High Museum in Atlanta and a civil rights photographer was there and saw my work, and he was like, "That's my picture!" And I said, "Oh, so what do you think about me using it?" And he said, "I don't know." So it's complex, because I think truth is better than fiction, and if I was trying to make [original] images that are like these ads not only do I think I'd still be potentially infringing on somebody's copyright but also it would kind of be more about me. And I say that ads are a reflection of a society's hopes and dreams at a particular moment in time.

A lot of your work draws on advertising as expressions of embedded ideologies about race, but there's also an economic angle to many of the pieces that comes through, especially in the credit card works like the American Express card that you revamped as an "Afro-American Express" card, with slave imagery in the background. Can you talk about that a bit?

I have a confession to make. Even though my mom was the chair of the photography department at NYU, she was somewhere else while I was there—she was hired three years after I graduated. So my sophomore year in college we didn't have any money. And you know how they send you all those credit card things in the mail? Unbeknownst to me, my mom signed up for all these credit cards, so my whole sophomore year of college was paid for on credit cards. And she was nice enough to pay the minimum until I graduated college, and then upon graduating college I got all this debt. Fortunately my father helped me pay some of it down, but even after paying it down I realized I was still getting billed for things.

Increasingly in our society you need a credit card even if you don't use it, and you get billed for it, so I started thinking about credit as a form of indentured servitude, because of the way we're conditioned to buy into this and to carry around all this debt. And so one of my friends, Ryan Alexiev, who is a graphic designer, and I started thinking about credit cards, and we made the *Afro-American Express* thinking it would be an interesting way to speak about this form of indentured servitude, using imagery from the abolition movement.

It also seems to allude to the fact that much of the United States' economic power was built on the backs of slaves.

It's like the slaves packing the ship, and the slave ship is the American Express. It's the foundation of wealth that gave us a lot of power and opportunity, so for us we were also thinking of the notion of the MasterCard-like, "Who's the master?" And there's irony in it, because I had the Chase MasterCard and its funny when you think about in the context that Chase made some investments that were in support of the slave industry, and the Bank of America Visa card too. There's just like these weird connotations you can take away by actually looking at the cards and seeing secret meaning.

A lot of your work employs the Situationist tactic of detournment, where you take a freighted image or piece or archival material and revise it to tell an antithetical story. How does this come about?

I had always been fascinated with this image of how slaves were packed into the slave ship Brookes. It was made around 1787 in England to show the horrors of slavery, to imagine what it was like to be chained to another human being for weeks who was only 18 inches away from you and to have so little space above you. And it's amazing to me that someone, or some ones, in my ancestry survived the Middle Passage. "Wow, I'm tougher than I think!" is really what goes through my mind when I look at that image, because I really don't believe that I could have survived that. But at the same time I was really thinking about this notion of race and how I always like to say that the crazy thing about blackness is that black people didn't create it—that Europeans with a commercial interest in dehumanizing us created black people. So 500 years ago in Sub-Saharan Africa there were no black people, there were just people. It really came out of this commercial industry of slavery, where in order to have people as chattel you had to create a subhuman brand of people and ship them off halfway around the world, and 500 years later their descendants are still trying to figure out who they are. That I call absolute power. But then there are also different kinds of interpretations. And the terms "blackness" and "whiteness" when the majority of the world is neither black nor white are problematic. I mean, I'm brown—I can tell. So even those terms alone don't make any sense, but they're so real to us.

Where do you get the archival images?

Well, one of the benefits of growing up in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, where my mother worked for several years, and the Center for African American Studies was that this stuff was just around. As a child you don't really understand, so as I came into consciousness I started to think of it in a different way. And I often try to use advertising language to talk about things that advertising can't responsibly talk about—if you call something art it can be provocative and but, in the end, less offensive. With corporations behind it, though, it becomes incredibly problematic. I'm interested in using this really powerful advertising language—the most ubiquitous language in the world—since most of

the time it's only used in one direction, rather than speaking between individuals transglobally.

Much of your work very explicitly ties in to athletic and professional sports, portraying things like Nike endorsements as literal branding. Can you talk about that parallel?

I was just really thinking about literal branding. In historically African American colleges the branding in the fraternities is a relatively common thing, and even Michael Jordan has the brand of Omega Psi Phi on his chest. I wanted to think about how scarification and branding is a symbol of power in a certain communities, and how poorer communities and America African communities latched onto the brand of Nike through the adorning of it on our bodies, and how for famous athletes on billboards it became a sign of ownership like when slaves were branded by their masters to see who they belong to. Interestingly enough Bayeté and I were in Cuba and we met a guy with a Nike logo tattooed on his forehead. I was like, "We're in Cuba. It's a communist country and you have one channel. How the heck did this symbol become so potent in your understanding of the world?" And we were in Costa Rica and this woman had a Nike tattoo. Some of my research has suggested that it's second only to the cross [as a tattoo], and I wonder how something could become so ubiquitous in no more than 30 years. I like to think about logos as our generation's hieroglyphs, and what meanings they carrying in the narrative of their relationship to athletes and their stories as well as to the black body.

Your photo of the black athlete with the Nike logos branded on his chest also recalls a number of other photographs, like the famous photo Richard Avedon took of Andy Warhol's chest after he was shot. I don't know if it's intentional or not, but it's a convenient segue into asking you: Who are your influences in using advertising and this kind of pop culture imagery in addressing the culture at large?

I mean, Richard Avedon is one of my favorite photographers, but I don't think I'm a tenth as good. So I don't think that was a clear relationship, but I will say that next time. [laughs] As for Warhol, I really have a funny relationship with both Warhol and Richard Prince. Because if it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here—I don't know what I'd be doing. But at the same time it's like they really got one over on the public. There's a real lack of taking responsibility for a lot of the ways in which their work affected the world that I have problems with. So it's like, "I love you! But why?" I'm always finding these challenges, where I recognize the art market and I think about the Factory and other artists who work in productivity-based ways, and I think my art lends itself to that. So I think, "Should I just make it and let the art historians and critics figure it out? Or should it always mean something on a personal level?" Ironically, my gallery is always trying to make it mean something on a deeper level. Thanks! So I think as an artist who is critiquing commodity culture and capitalism and is working in an über-capitalist situation, there's always this question of how authentic I am being. Am I a part of the system that I'm trying to critique? And I personally justify it by saying that I'd prefer to be part of the system that I'm critiquing than trying to critique it from the outside, because I think it's more authentic. But, I don't know, I can't walk in their [Warhol and Prince's] shoes. I do think there's a certain degree of white male privilege that they take in the work that they make. The idea that you take a picture of an ad and then sell it for a million dollars? That's crazy! Am I the only one who thinks that's a little weird? But I'm not going to say that it's not worth it, and that's crazy too. But so I'm always struggling with my own American privilege or middle-class, upper-class American privilege as I get older, and really questioning that.

Your *Unbranded* series does put you in direct lineage with Warhol and Prince, though, since both of whom are famous for their work with ads.

I mean I do like the work. But my problem is how they position it. I think it's a little bit easy to put it on someone else to make it important. And it's also about audacity, which I think a lot about when it comes to hip-hop, like with Jay-Z and Lil' Wayne. I think about how hype creates history, and how many people there are who did so much to affect how we think, how we create, how we evolved, but whose stories we'll never know because they weren't cool. And I'm always surprised when I learn about someone to realize how much I'm caught up in the hype and not really thinking about the depth.

One piece you have on Artspace, *Shooting Stars*, links Michael Jordan and his iconic "Jumpman" Nike logo to black-on-black gun violence. The text underneath it is alarming. Can you talk about that work a bit?

The text is from the 2000 and the 2005 census—the statistics really didn't change—which said blacks were six times more likely to be murdered than whites, and 94 percent of them were killed by other blacks. And that statistic just rocks my world, when you think of African Americans are roughly 11 or 12 percent percent of the population. For such a small portion of the population to be six times more likely to be murdered than the majority, and for most of them to be killing each other just says that there's something wrong with the group. That people within this group have such problems with each other that they're killing each other—and, ironically, other people are more afraid of them than they are of each other. My problem is with the fact that this identity was created by other people to dehumanize us, and I think that we drank the Kool-Aid. And in the work I'm thinking of people reaching for their dreams, and someone shooting them down—t's crabs in a barrel, and that kind of story is everywhere. But I really wanted to make a work specifically about that, using the logo as a hieroglyph, and we made it actually as a print to support my *Question Bridge* project.

One thing that's important to know about your work is that it's not theoretical—it's actually grounded in personal tragedy. Your cousin, Songha, was senselessly murdered in 2000 at the age of 27 by another black man who robbed him and then, without any reason, killed him. In your piece *Absolut Reality* you re-stage that murder, putting yourself in Songha's place. How has his murder affected the choices you make in your art?

Well, one thing I always like to point out is that my cousin wasn't robbed. The people he was next to were robbed for a chain. They just killed him because… for reasons I don't know. They made him lay down in the snow and shot him in the back of the head. And one of the things that I kind of kept with me for a long time was the shirt that he was wearing that night. When I was growing up we were best friends, and I grew up under him, and most of my awkwardness is because I was never bred for being in public. He was the cool one and I could just sit back. So in his passing I kind of was pushed to the front in our family in the way we relate to each other and how I relate to the world, and I had to speak about a lot of things I never, ever thought I'd be speaking about. And when I made this piece I was again hanging out with Bayeté, and I had some lights and I had the shirt and this idea of death being absolute and how we live in this society where we're so fascinated with guns and violence and how all of the movies are that we see are like this and somebody's getting shot and killed and, like, why is it we're so fascinated with that? And, again, I wanted to make a commentary about that, so I'm actually wearing the shirt that my cousin was wearing. So as I was making

it I was thinking, "I hope this isn't at all prophetic as an art piece." I'm actually really uncomfortable with this piece.

It's also important to point out that there is a wide range of tonality in your work, and sometimes your work has a lighter sensibility. For instance, for your installation piece *Black Is Beautiful* you plastered a gallery walls with black pinups from the civil rights era to today. Can you talk about this work?

It's funny, but my friends aren't really nice to me. And so my friend and I were looking at a lot of my other work from around 2006, 2007, and he said, "I really like your work but it really bums me out." And it just stuck with me. I thought, "Wow, can I make anything that's actually good that isn't a bummer?" And that is part of the reason that I started the *Unbranded* project, and it's part of the reason that in more recent years I've really been trying to find ways to talk about things in a critical way that are more open that kind of don't have so much of my own agenda in them. And one of the things that I've kind of danced around a lot is how to talk about the female body because I think misogyny is deep in my veins—it's part of who I am as a heterosexually-identified man in America. So, how do I talk about it without being so obviously messed up? And my mother was writing a book called *Posing Beauty*, and in the introduction she talks about and how in the early 1920s magazines like *The Crisis* and *The Silhouette* and later positivist magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet* started making images representing this notion of black beauty, because in the 19th century the notion of black and beautiful was just an oxymoron. You couldn't be black and beautiful.

And so a lot of magazines had this agenda of putting forth representations of our own beauty, and basically I went on Google and downloaded every "Jet Beauty of the Week" from 1953 to 2008 in order to look at this ephemera as a kind of timeline tracking notions of beauty and class and identity and social structure over the course of nearly 60 years. And when they started making the pinups no one thought there was anything wrong with just putting up these pictures of women in bathing suits and saying, you know, so-and-so likes to snowboard and wants to be a doctor and her dimensions are 34-27-36. But then you see fascinating things, like how in the 1950s most of the women were really light-skinned with long straight hair and then later the 1960s you begin to see more darker-skinned bodies and different body types and you see the afro come to the fore. And then you see this amazing jump from black-and-white to color. As a child I thought that everything that happened before I was born happened in black and white. And so you also have a realization where you start think that I was born one of these weeks, and that most people looking at the work were born one of these weeks, and MLK died one of these weeks, and Malcolm X died one of these weeks, and 9/11 happened one of these weeks, and our president was born—all of these things happened during these weeks, and the fact that this enduring marker of black beauty continued is interesting to ponder, I think. Also, when it was set up in a huge gallery space and you walked around it you started to notice things, like, "Hey, isn't that woman wearing the same bathing suit as that other one?" We figured out it was a mother and daughter, and the daughter was wearing the same bathing suit that her mother had worn 20 years earlier. Being a Jet Beauty is and was a major thing in the African American community, and at least four of them came to the show who had posed in 1959, 1960. And they were still looking good!

Let me ask you, in your capacity as a fellow at Columbia College's Institute of the Study of Women and Gender, does the level of objectification, or the mode in which women are portrayed physically, change over time?

One of the things that we've been playing around with in my studio are these poses, the ways that you put yourself on display that are supposed to be sexy—how in one of the pinups she's like, "Let me squeeze my afro-pumps!" You know, I really feel like there's a language, or a catalogue, of posing here that really should be researched and decoded. And only someone in the art world would ever think it was worth their time. So, I'm still learning.

Now in 2009, right after Obama's swearing in and in the depths of the economic crisis, I vividly remember walking into the Armory Show and seeing the portrait of Obama that you made in collaboration with Ryan Alexiev, in which you portrayed the first black president of the United States in multicolored cereal. What was going on in that piece?

Well, around that time everyone was making a piece about Obama, and I like to be late—I don't like to be on time with my art, so I usually try to wait like until something is already over and everybody's done talking about it so I can start talking about it. But in this case one of my collaborators, Ryan, had been making cereal portraits—everyone who knew him was spending a lot of time gluing pieces of cereal on things—and one of the premises behind his fascination with cereal is that it's basically just four basic grains that create four hundred different products. So we have this illusion of choice in America, and his family comes from communist Bulgaria where they thought of America as this land of the free with all this opportunity, but then you get here and you realize it's not really opportunity—it's really just the same old thing, you know, with a different cereal box cover on it. And as much as I love our president I think there is something problematic, because how do you critique something that you inherently support? I mean, I would say that Obama's first campaign is probably the most successful advertising campaign in the history of the world, which took someone who was relatively unknown for years and turning him two years later into the most powerful person in the world—and no one actually knows exactly really what he stands for. And cereal is second only to cars in the amount of money that's spent on advertising in this country, but think about how much money was spent on his campaign to create this brand. I think he used the best of the Nike and Apple advertising strategies to build that first campaign. And so we made the portrait so that if you like him you can say, "He's so good, I just want to lick him!" And if you don't it's cereal. It's thinly veiled. And also it comments on the fact that politically we get these two choices that are supposed to be radically different, and anybody on either fringe says that they're basically the same.

I would think that Obama is someone who embodies a very interesting and branded approach to race, because he is a multiracial man who is identified as black, and there are very significant political considerations for doing so. Also, his presidency has yielded some incredible images, going back to the "Hope" poster. What do you make of the imagery that has emerged from his presidency?

One of the things that really bothered me was there was this image that was really popular around the time he was elected of him smoking a cigarette, and if you ever really looked at it you could tell it was totally Photoshopped. So it's one of these images that was used to show his darker side, and there's all these incredibly racist images made of him that make me feel really uncomfortable. But I don't think he ever, or very frequently, calls himself black. I remember when he called himself a mutt, and everybody got pissed. And while everyone talks about him as the first black president, I always say he's the first multiethnic president because I think, first of all, the way they campaigned would be very different if he was African-American and the way that society responded to him would be very different, even if he was biracial but one parent was African-American. Whereas his father, whom he barely

knew, was from Kenya, and he grew up in Hawaii, which is 2 percent black, and went to Occidental and Columbia and Harvard, and he also lived in Indonesia, so his his relationship to race and even nationalism is so much more complex than we give him credit for. So calling him the first black president just doesn't make any sense in my mind because he is so much more complex, and the way he navigates the world so complex.

One of the images making the rounds online recently was this viral image of him in the Oval Office bending down and letting the young black kid feel his hair to see if it feels the same as his. And you can tell, just from the amount of media addressing the picture, that it's enormously resonant.

Well, I think it's resonant that a five-year-old can actually think that, you know? I mean, why did that kid have to be like, "I have to have proof!" He's five and he already knows that there's something wrong with the world. And he's like, "All right, I'm in this White House thing, now you have to bend over and let me touch your hair. So I can know for myself and I tell my friends, 'Ok, he's real.'" But one of the things that's really fascinating and that I like to talk about is that there is this change in the status quo, and recently a friend of mine was talking about telling their children who are 7 or 8 years old about slavery and the Emancipation Proclamation and how all these things were happening to black people at the time, and the kid said, "But wait a minute! Wasn't there a black president at that time?" Because, you know, this kid's whole consciousness has come to the point where he doesn't recognize how things have changed, so future generations aren't necessarily going to carry the same baggage we carry because it doesn't even make sense that there would be a time when there wasn't a non-white male president.

To branch off from the idea of Obama's identification of himself as multiracial while America identifies him as black, as an artist you have been grouped with the generation of artists that has been termed "post-black," a coinage popularized by Studio Museum in Harlem director Thelma Golden. How do you feel about that term?

Well, from a commercial standpoint, this goes back to branding. One of the major things that happened in my career is that I was put in that show *Frequency*, which was the second iteration of the "F" shows where Thelma does a survey of relatively young artists of African American descent making work under the guise of post-black. And I think they just they just slipped me in under the radar because I think I'm definitely still very much a project of my mom's generation, thinking about multiculturalism but thinking very much about the politics of race. I'm only post-racial when I collaborate with people. I'm trying to move out of that, but I think the notion of race is something that has dictated most of my work.

Speaking of your mother's generation, they had a subversive strategy that they called "culture-jamming," which I think that also applies to your work. Where do you find this license to use readymade images the way that you do?

Watching TV. And there's a song now called "Stupid Ho" by Nicki Minaj: "You a stupid ho, you, you a stupid ho." That's a million dollar song, and I'm thinking, "Ok, if she can make a song called 'Stupid Ho' and everyone's loving it up, I can do whatever I want!" [laughs] Why not?

What an inspirational story!

I mean, that's the reality. I feel like there are so many people making crap in the world that like, and out of all of that crap I had two revelations that made me an artist. One of them was actually somewhere around 2003 when I recognized that Lil' Wayne was like 17 years old and selling millions of albums and he created the term "bling-bling," which went viral. So I thought: "Ok, this kid is 17 years old, and because he can say something that sounds really cool for like four minutes there's a million-dollar production to make that one song, and he's got millions of people paying for him. At least ten thousand people might be willing to pay attention to whatever I do." The other moment was at Art Basel Miami Beach where my friend brought me in 2004 and we were in Jay Jopling's booth and there were these Sam Taylor-Wood photographs on the wall of her jumping around in her studio. They were really good pictures, about 30x40, and my friend put on his best collector's face and asked, "So, how much are these photographs?" And the dealer said, "They're $50,000." And my friend said, "Did you say these are $15,000?" And the dealer said, "No, they're $50,000 and they're an edition of seven and here's the book of the portfolio of 20 different images that look basically the same." And we're just sitting there doing the math of seven times fifty times twenty. For $50,000 you could feed a whole town somewhere, and somebody's actually putting that on their wall. And I'm not one to say what somebody should do with their money, because most people who have a lot of money don't just hoard it, they spend it on a lot of things that are socially good and blah, blah, blah. But why would you only spend your money on that? You might as well spend it on things to make you feel good, and art is one of those. But I was thinking if someone is paying $50,000 for her photograph, my work has got to be worth at least 1 percent of that, and I thought if I sold three or four a month at $500 each, then that's a start. Up until then I didn't want to be an artist—I was just making art because I didn't want to pay my student loans, and it let me stay in school. [laughs] But at that point it occurred to me that if someone is paying that much for Sam Taylor-Wood, something that I make must be worth something to someone in the world. And that's kind of given me that audacity to make art for a living.

Speaking of audacity, your new project *Question Bridge* must be one of your most audacious yet. Could you talk about it a little?

It's a project in collaboration with Bayeté Ross Smith and Chris Johnson and another artist named Kamal Sinclair that is basically a mediated video conversation among African American men. The premise is there's as much diversity within any demographic as there is outside of it, and you can show that by actually empowering the people who are part of this group who actually self-define as African-American men. We went to Birmingham first, and Bayeté and Chris met some guys on an airplane and they were like, "Hey, we're doing a project on black guys. Do you have any questions?" And miraculously they came to our hotel room two days later, about eight of them, and they had these questions that sent us on this journey. We went to New Orleans, we went to San Francisco, we went to New York, we went to Oakland, Chicago, Atlanta, all these different places and we basically were facilitating this conversation, showing these questions and people were answering them. We wound up having about 160 participants and about 1,600 question-answer exchanges, and we turned it into a five-channel, three-hour video installation that launched in January at the Sundance Film Festival and traveled to the Oakland Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, Utah MOCA, and a city gallery in Atlanta, and it went to the L.A. Film Festival and the Sheffield Doc/Fest. It's been really fascinating to see kind of how people have responded to this, where

you get to be a fly on the wall. You always kind of wonder: "What do people talk about when I'm not in the room?" So you see these African American men speak about things that can be really intense or really personal in a context where you can imagine that, if you were in the room witnessing it, the responses might be different.

What was the genesis for this project?

The genesis for this project is Chris Johnson, one of our collaborators, who was a professor of mine at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, and he did this project in 1996 where he asked five members of the upper-middle-class African American community who aren't engaged in the hood to ask and answer questions mostly from the younger generation, but also from the poorer side of the black community, and wanted to use questions as a way to bridge the gap, and he thought that rather than have people sit in the same room where there are social mores that don't allow you to be as candid, if you facilitate it through video you can get more authentic and get candid answers where also people will actually spend more time listening to the actual question, because you can't just interject with what you want to say. And so it really was about the power of questions. Questions that we think about are often more generous than the answers, because you're actually giving the opportunity for someone else to be the expert to share something with you. And it's also revealing about vulnerability. And so I was nominated by the Tribeca Film Institute's new-media fund to come up with a project, and for some reason I thought that that project would be the ideal project. And so I asked Chris to collaborate with me on it, and then Bayeté came on, and then our friend Kamal came on, and it became this sort of transmedia project that has five different components: it's an art exhibit, we have a curriculum, we have an iPad app, we're building this user-generated website, and there's also a documentary to come. So it's been incredibly rewarding. At the Brooklyn Museum's First Saturday event there were about 13,000 people there, and 4,000 people in our exhibit, which is nuts. Especially in the art world, where if you say "black male" people only think of Thelma Golden. And I personally think this is a post-black project, but the title kind of betrays that.

To conclude, what do you think is the artist's role in society?

Whatever he or she wants

It seems that you take on more of a role than that.

But that's my problem. My friends will tell you—they're always saying, "You're taking on problems that aren't yours." But I don't think my practice is the best way to go about it. If everyone went around my way we'd be bummed out and arguing all the time. I really feel that there are so many artists who make work that is dramatically different that mine and that is equally important and potent and invigorating and exciting for me, and I think that's the benefit of Warhol and Duchamp. You don't have to be one kind of thing to be an artist, you have to be a person who believes that whatever they have to say is worth something, and the rest is in the world's hands.

I like to think of artists as people who digest ideas in their work that don't quite get digested by the general population, or at least in polite company.

Yeah. The artist Charles Long kind of broke it down for me in a way that made me feel real comfortable with it. I was doing this residency at Skowhegan, and he was giving me a

critique, and he said to me, "We work in our society's subconscious." In a day and age when everything is so ordered—where we have wristwatches, iPhones, iPads, TiVo, all these things that arrange and order our lives—something is just not normal. That's not how we were created as organic animals. And part of the role of the artist in the 20th and 21st century is to actually do the things that don't make sense. So it's okay for somebody to say, "I just mess around with chairs," or "I just look at the color blue because it's really interesting to me." It opens doors to our minds that are less tapped, less used, because we're not robots. And societies where art is repressed wind up in fascist societies, and they don't last as we saw with communism. If you suppress those voices, people freak out and it collapses. Because it's in our nature to do what we're not doing right now. It's cute for a moment, but we need other things.

You said that you were interested in making work that doesn't explicitly tackle race as a way of moving into new terrain. Now you have a show coming up at Jack Shainman Gallery this fall. Is moving away from race something that you're interested in as a deliberate direction to take your art, or is it something of an expansion of your existing interests and concerns?

The basic ideas I'm talking about in my work you can make about race. But it's really very much about class and about social structure, and I think that resonates in a variety of cultures. So I'm hoping in ten years that my work isn't so grounded in this notion of blackness, which I don't even believe in. But my personal art is my friendships. It's creative to maintain friendships over a long period of time. The big problem with any collaboration is the collaboration. Especially with artists, everyone has their own direction, but what I also like about it is that they say you can't make art by committee, and I think that our project is proof that you can.

CULTURED
June 2016

The Body Politic

By Michael Slenske

Eric Gottesman and Hank Willis Thomas. Portrait by Landon Nordeman

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.

Eric Gottesman, Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, Hank Willis Thomas, Michelle Woo and Wyatt Gallery photographed by Gallery at the For Freedoms campaign headquarters.

“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?"

Worship Fear Want Speech, 2016, is a limited-edition print commissioned by *Cultured*, and available for purchase at artsy.net/culturedmagazine

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.

Hank Willis Thomas | BRANDING USA

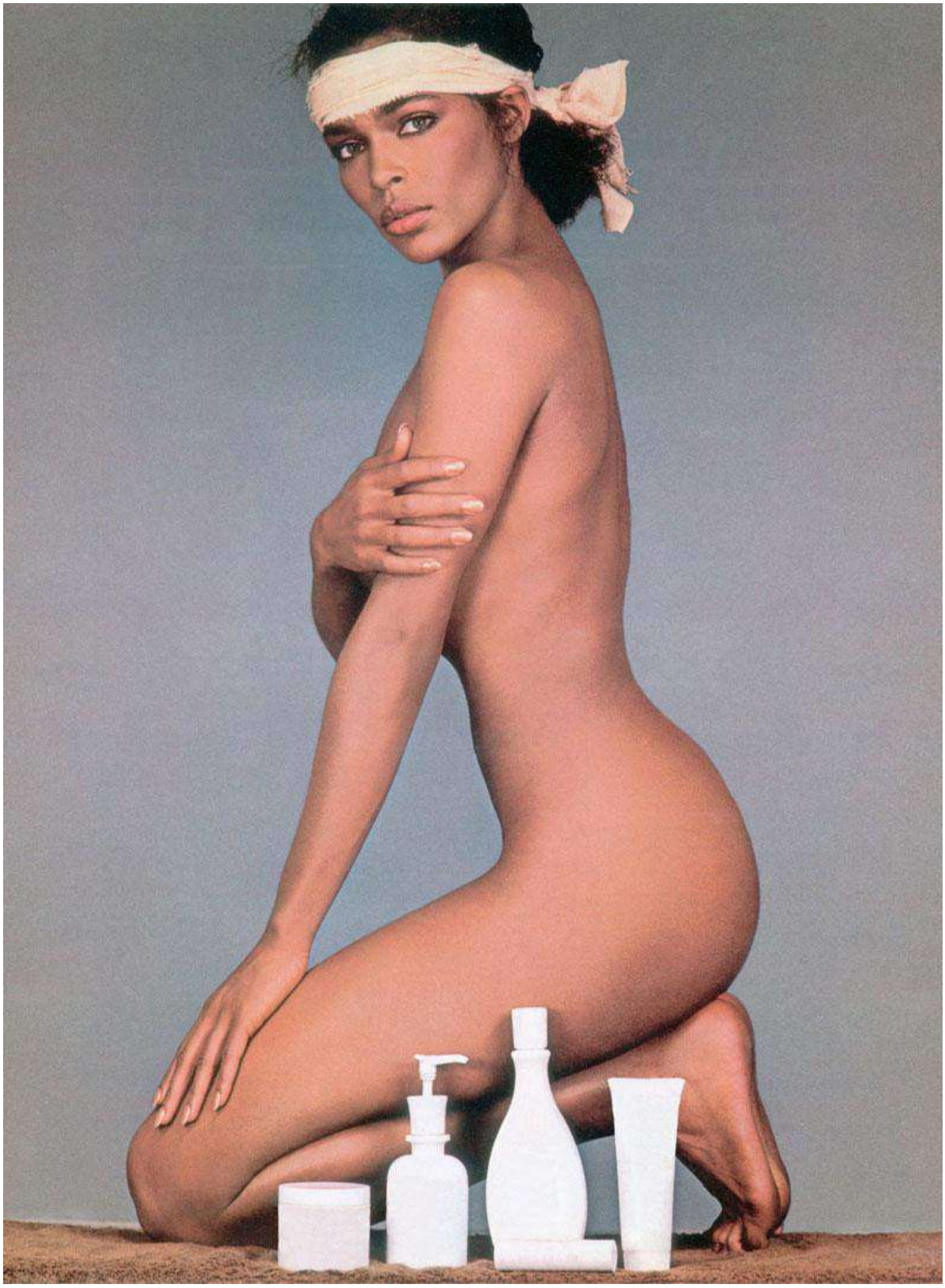
A conversation with Hank Willis Thomas and Sarah Lookofsky.

Hank Willis Thomas, The Cotton Bowl, series: Strange Fruit, digital c-print, 2011.

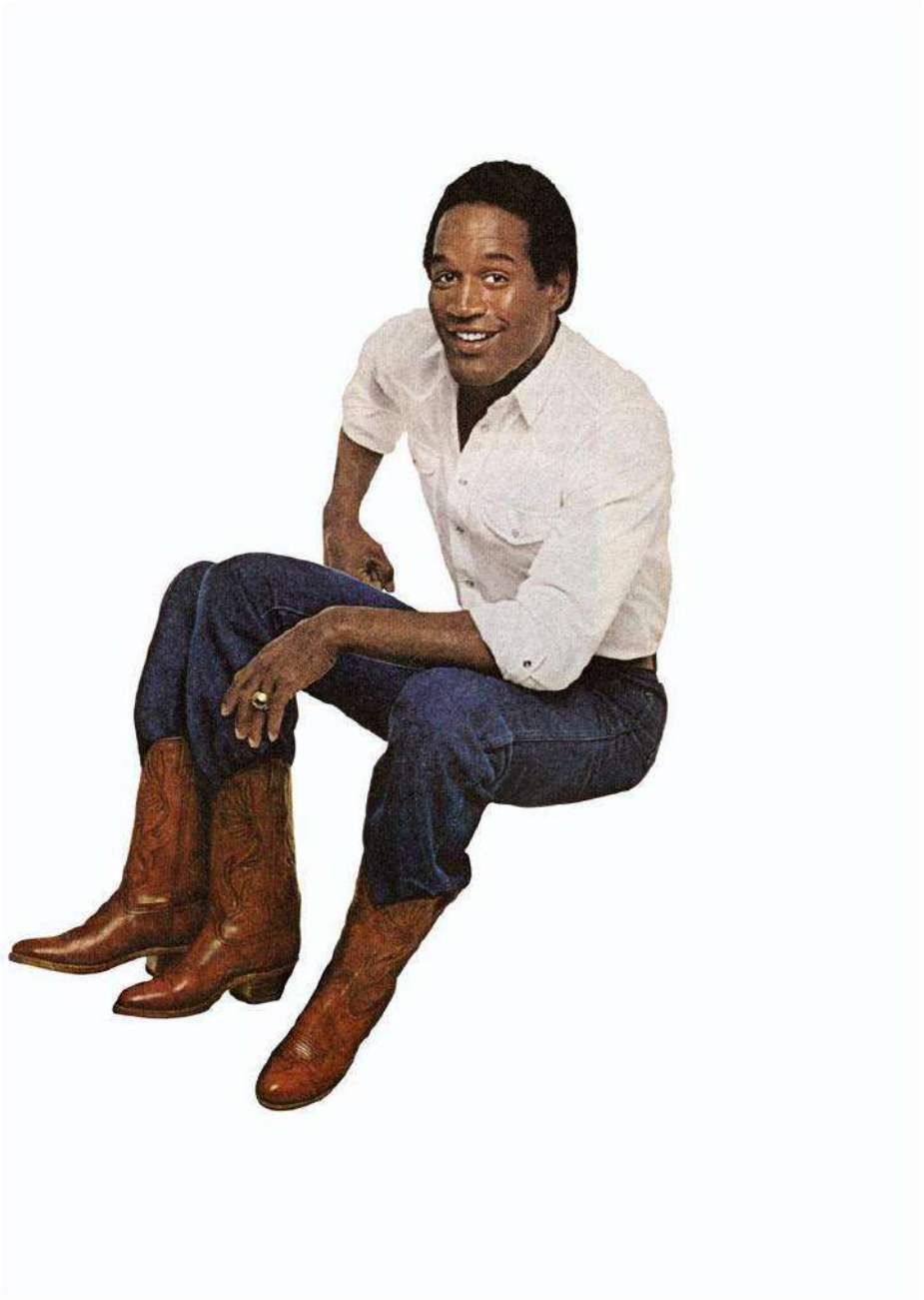
Sarah Lookofsky In *Unbranded* (2007), you remove logos and slogans from advertisements that feature black bodies, leaving them to "speak for themselves." I found it striking that some of the images include very clear-cut racist and sexist stereotyping, while others appear more ambivalent, even defamiliarizing or unsettling when perceived out of their commercial context (this was especially the case for me with older images that are distant from the present moment). To your mind, does this series function to make apparent the racism and sexism that is otherwise obscured by the commodity allure or do you think that the de-branding might also in some cases free up the subjects represented from the overdetermining weight of the brand?

Hank Willis Thomas, The Johnson Family, series: Unbranded, lambda photograph, 1981/2006.

Hank Willis Thomas This is a great question. The project is actually titled *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America* 1968-2008. With that series I took two ads for every year between the symbolic end of the Civil Rights movement, 1968 (the Year RFK and MLK were assassinated) and 2008 (the year our first clearly multi-ethnic president was elected). I wanted to track "blackness" in the mind of corporate America over these years and thought that by digitally removing all the text, we could simply look at them as images. As with most art, we bring our own preconceptions in decoding and reading them. I thought that my previous series, *B®anded* was too often interpreted to be about my own thoughts or feelings. With this series, the viewer is as much the expert as I am. If anything, I am kind of an editor. No one person can take full responsibility for an ad. They are reflections of a society's hopes and dreams at a moment in time. What we see is what we get. So in a sense, I think your answers are in your question.

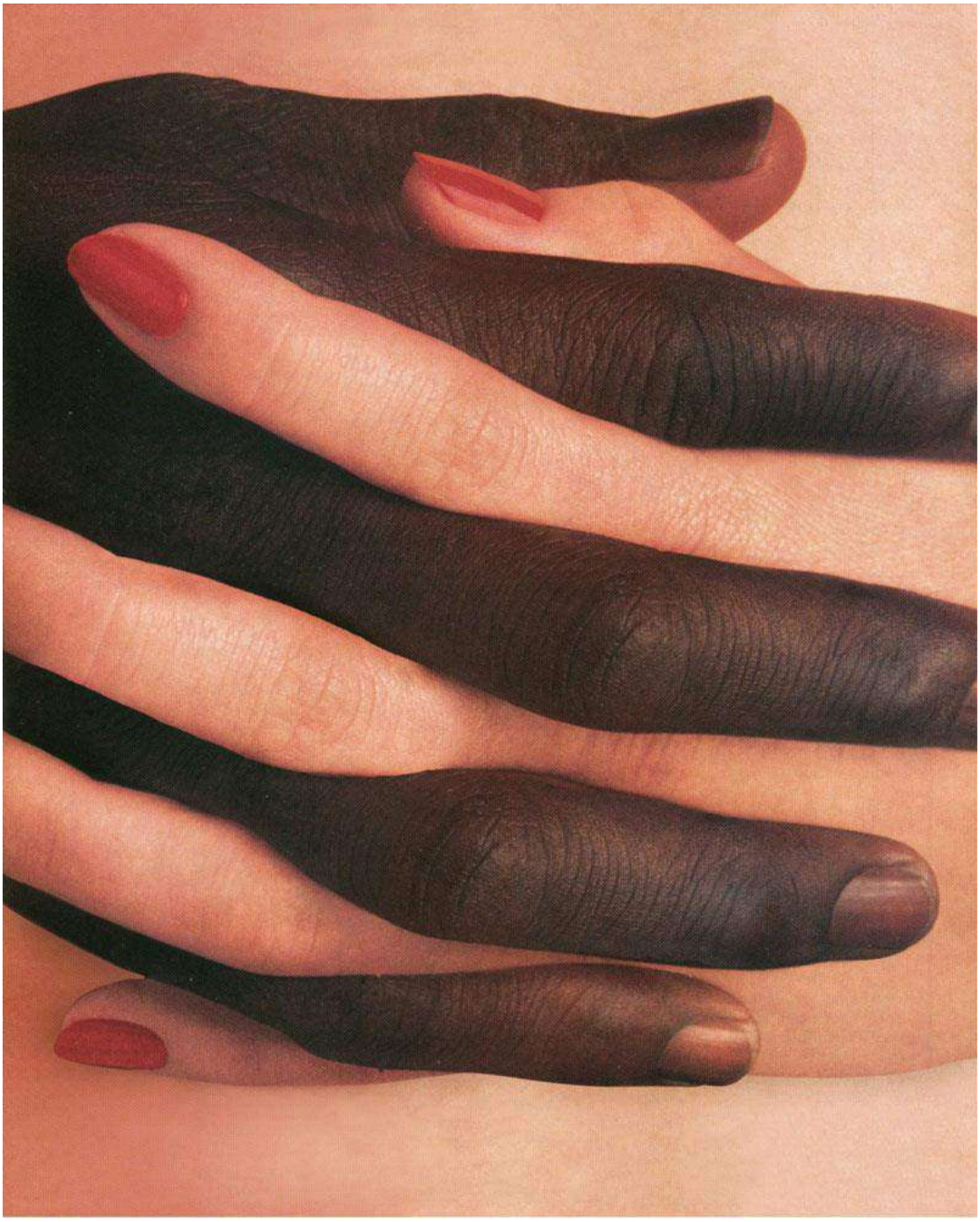


Hank Willis Thomas, Caramel Cocoa Butta' Honey Lova- You're Like No Otha', series: Unbranded, Lambda Photograph, 1982/2006.



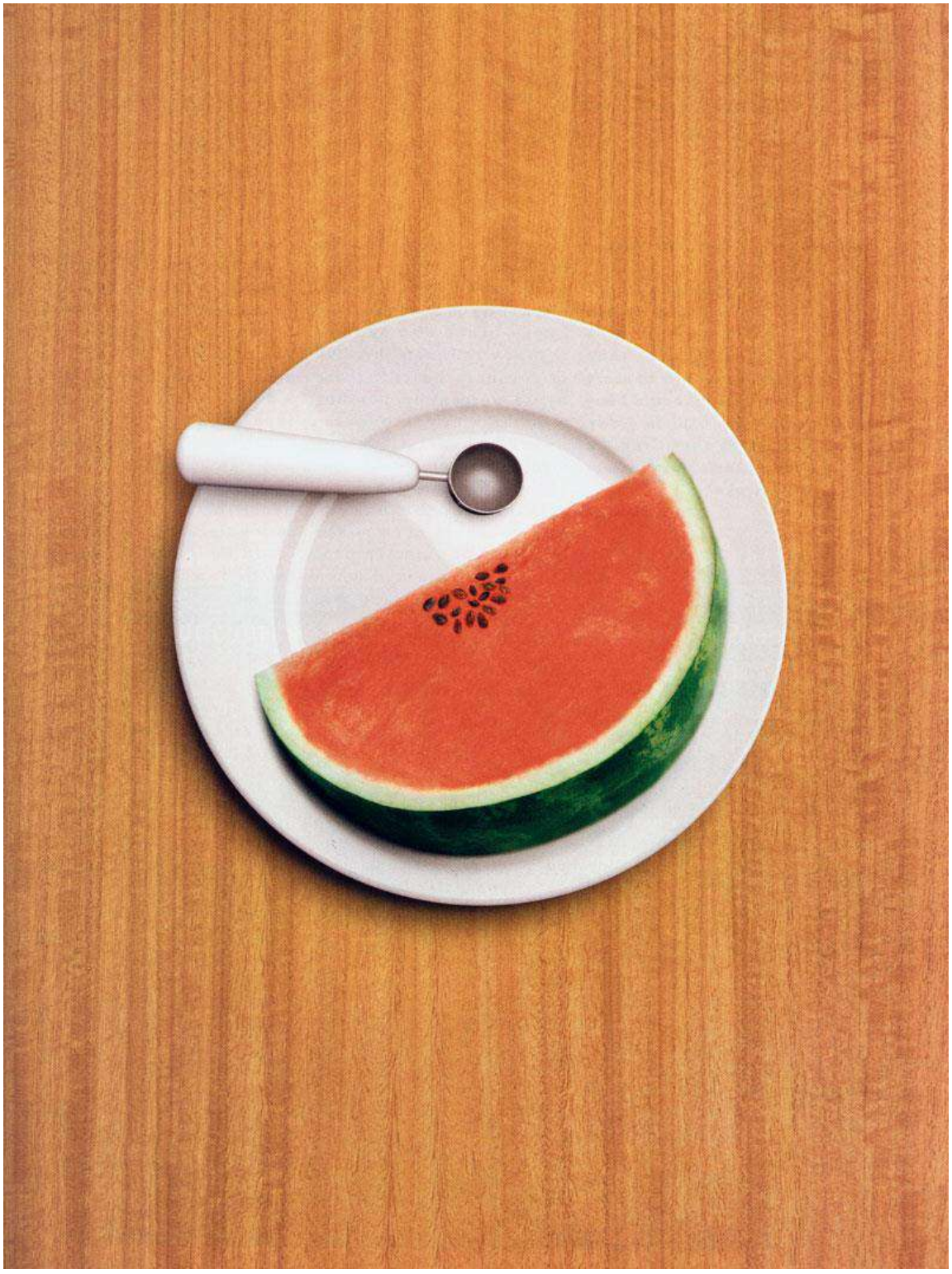
Hank Willis Thomas, O.J. Dingo, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 1980/2007.

SL Viewing *Unbranded* in succession, with its advertisements from 1968 until 2008—and hence from a key moment in civil rights history to the year in which the first black president was elected—gives a clear view of how image culture has shifted over the decades. There are claims that we have now progressed to a "post-racial America," but this image lineup seems to tell a different story: while positive developments in the politics of racial representations have no doubt taken place since 1968, *Unbranded* might also illustrate some counter-movements and regressive slides backward. How do you think about the changing representations that *Unbranded* gives testimony to?



Hank Willis Thomas, Jungle Fever, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 1991/2007.

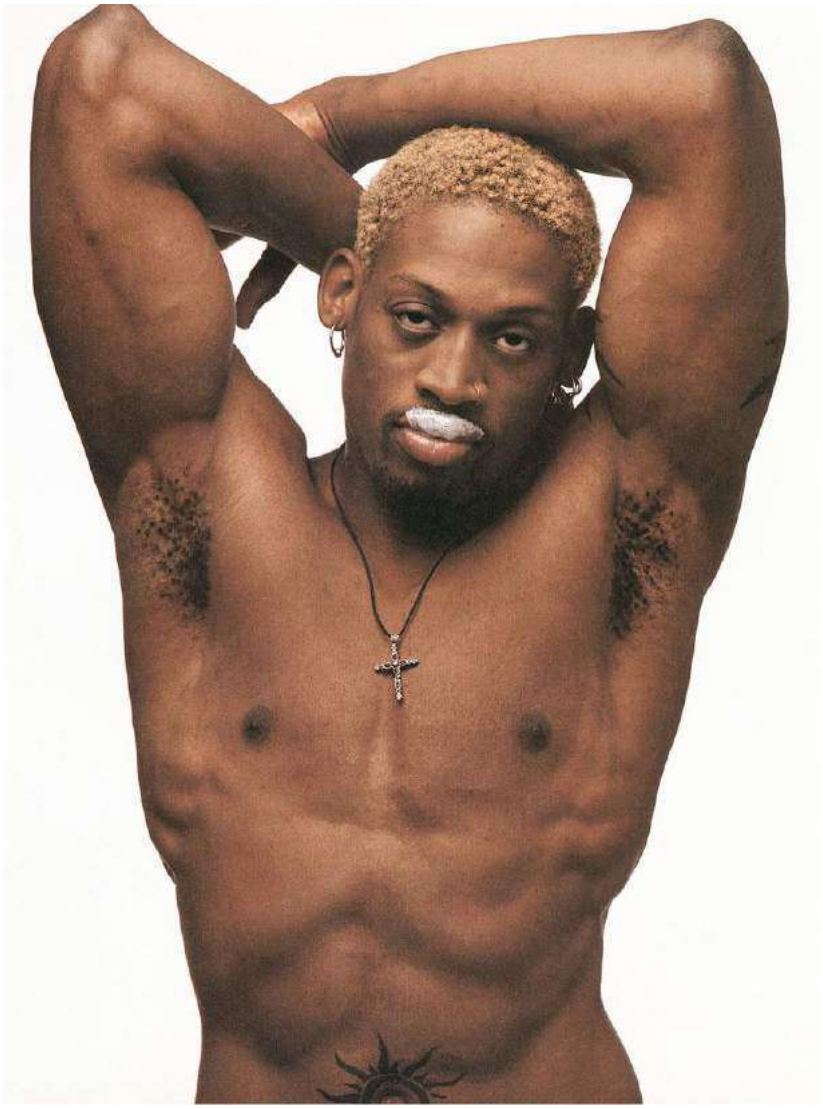
HWT I'm waiting for someone smarter or more informed to write about these ideas. I have a similar sense though. There are so many trends and strands that people could explore from issues related to class, family, hair, gender roles, values, the notion of a collective community, pride, and prejudice. All ads are based on generalizations, so they are inherently prejudiced. What does exposing these prejudices in this way tell us about ourselves and each other?



Hank Willis Thomas, How to Market Kitty Litter to Black People!, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 2005/2006.

Hank Willis Thomas, The Mandingo of Sandwiches, series: Unbranded, lambda photograph, 1977/2007.

SL Your series *Strange Fruit* and *Branded* link contemporary sports and advertising with the history of slavery. While basketball is frequently celebrated as a ticket out of poverty to fame, wealth and glory, these pieces suggest that the celebration of the black male body's physical prowess in contemporary commercial culture is still tethered to this long history of exploitation—generating vast wealth that does not benefit the laboring body in view. I was hoping to draw you out a bit on how you think of this connection.

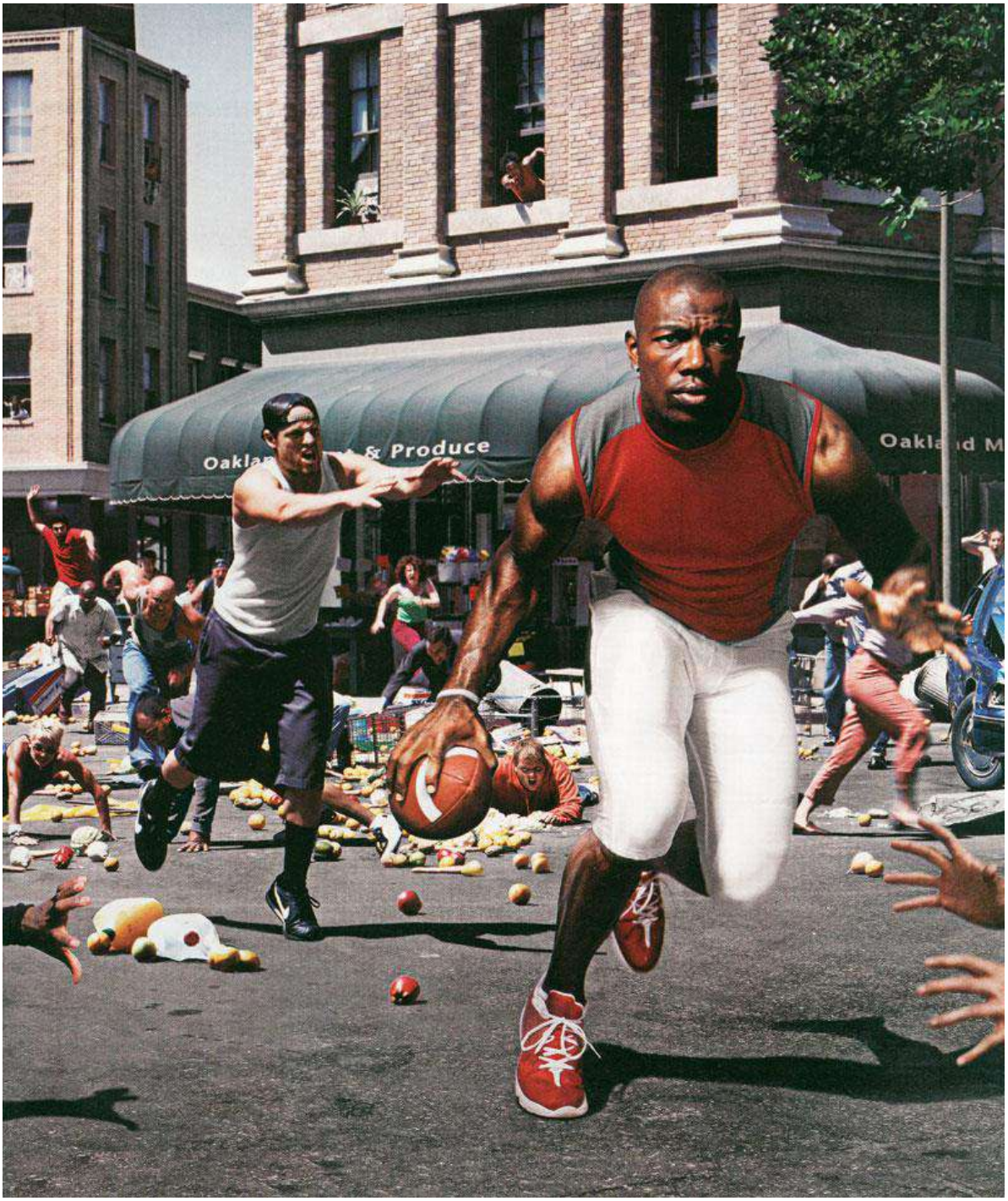


Hank Willis Thomas, Gotten, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 1996/2007.

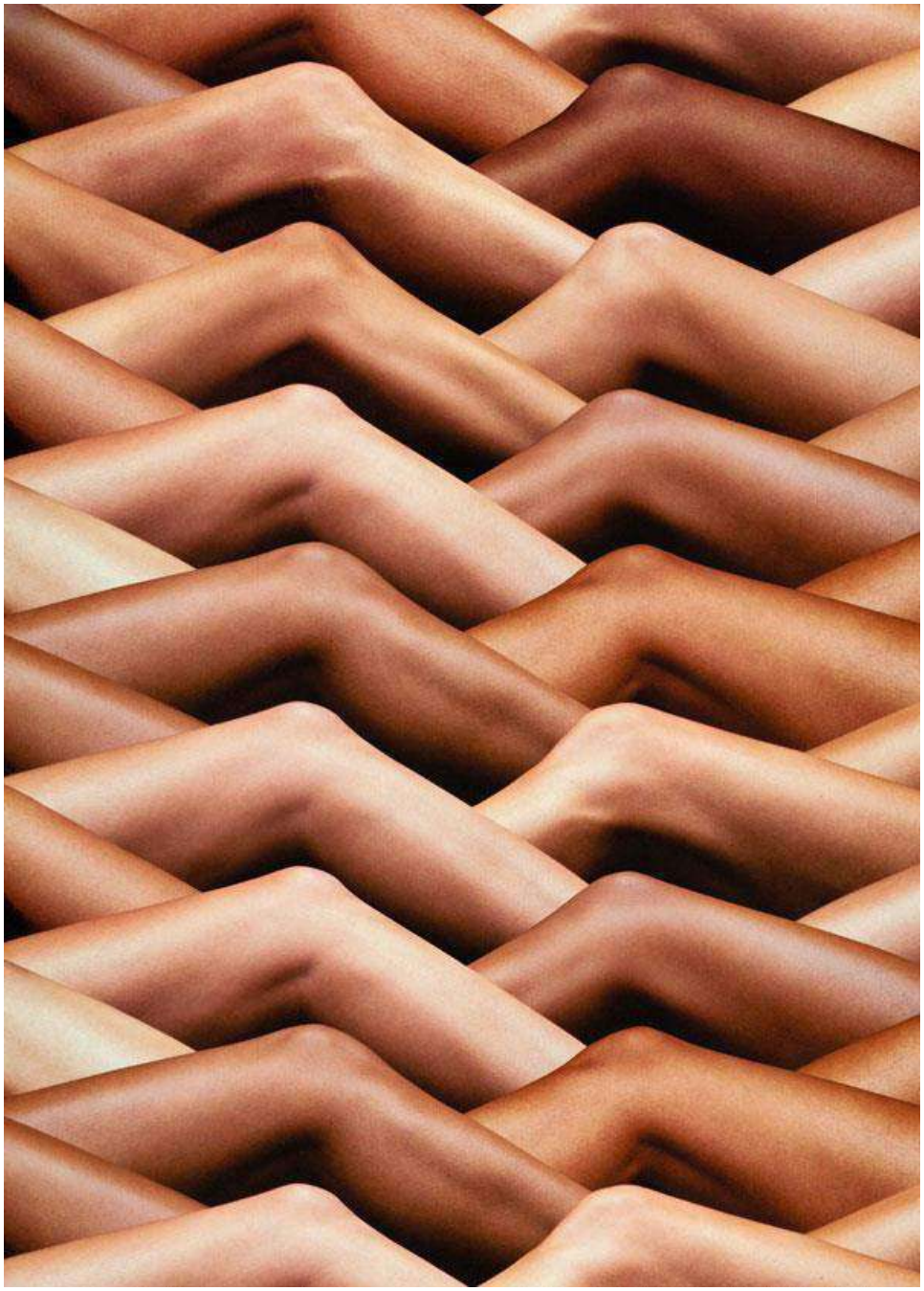
HWT The *B®anded* series definitely deals a lot with slavery and commodification of the black body then and now. I don't see anything about slavery in Strange Fruit though. That's part of the problem. It's title, *Strange Fruit*, is a reference to the poem written by a Jewish American school teacher, Abel Meeropol. The poem was about Lynching and made famous by the singer Billie Holiday. The other works in that series speak about the sharecropping and whipping posts, which were very much 20th century practices. This is about exploitation, but also about spectacle. I think we too often conflate lynching and sharecropping with slavery. They are definitely connected but very necessarily distinguishable. Black bodies were spectacles in slave markets and on lynching trees and whipping posts. They are spectacles in the NCAA, NBA, NFL drafts and combines. Their ancestors may have worked the cotton and tobacco fields that later became football fields. Their ancestors may have been lynched. I am really trying to draw people out to talk about these very likely possibilities, so that we can think more critically about the present moment. Exploitation is what our country was founded on. It's the american way. We should be more upfront about it. The NCAA is a multi-billion dollar business built primarily off of the free labor of descendent of slaves. What a bargain!

Hank Willis Thomas, And One, series: Strange Fruit, digital c-print, 2011.

SL Advertising and media representations have proven a very fruitful ground for artists to appropriate and provide commentary on. Recent legal battles have unfortunately illustrated that artists can face severe legal retribution for adopting these image sources. Have you run into any copyright problems in your practice?

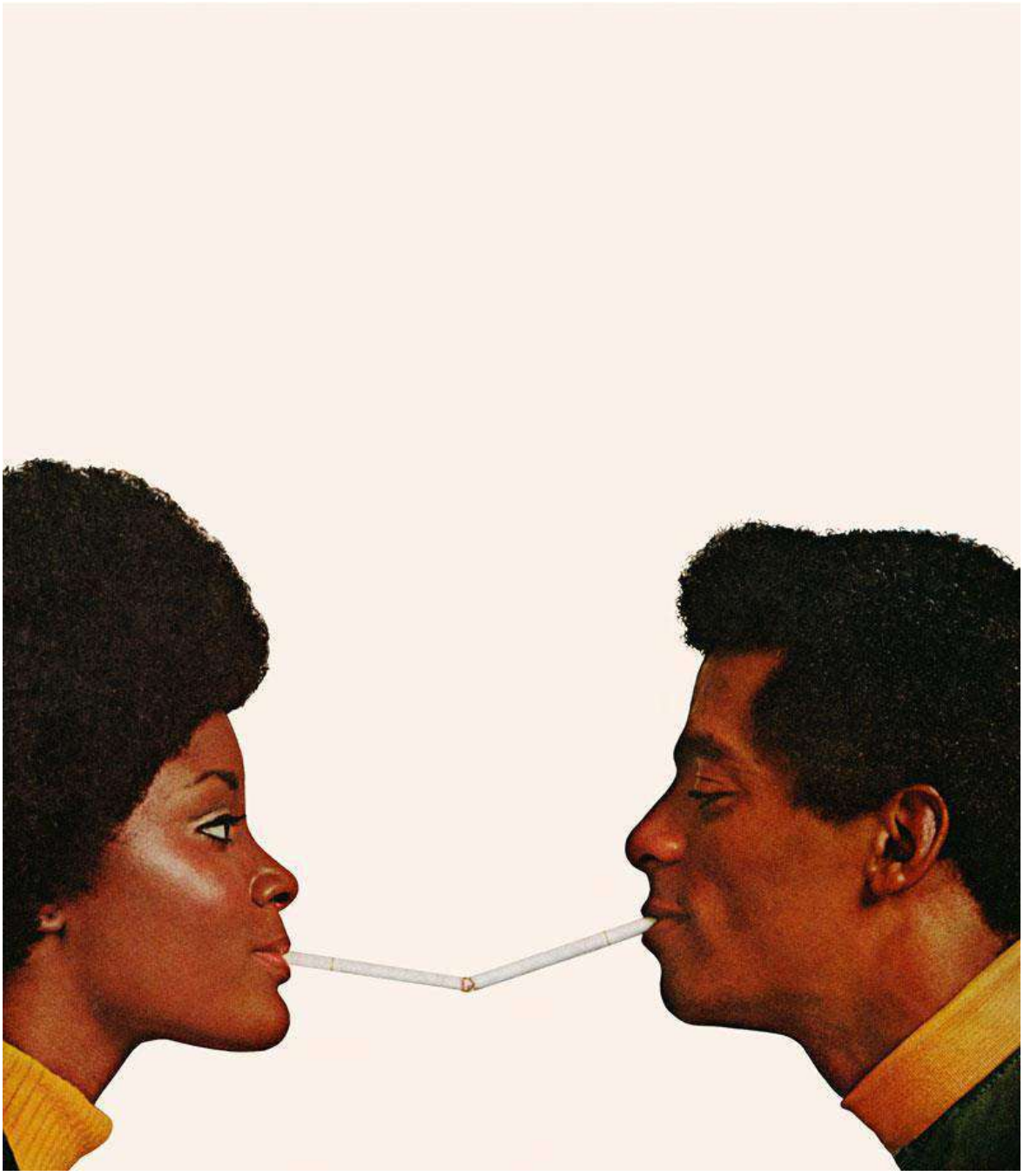


Hank Willis Thomas, The Liberation of T.O.: “I’m not goin’ back to work for massa’ in dat darned field!”, series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 2004/2005.

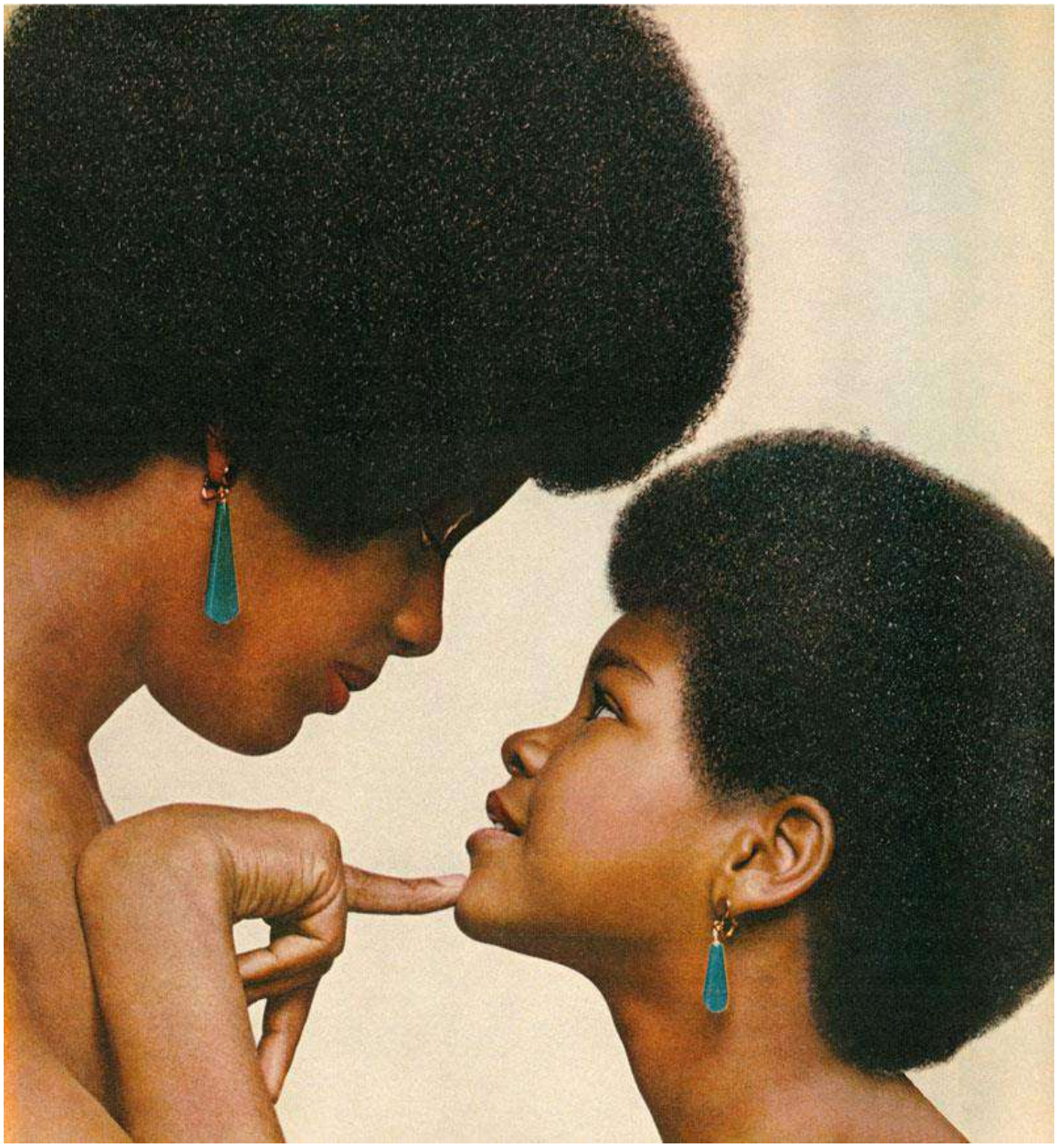


Hank Willis Thomas, Your Skin Has the Power to Protect You, series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 2008/2008.

HWT Not yet. But I don't just do it for the sake of it. Maybe that's the difference. Who wants to talk about how their copyrighted images might be perceived as racist? What trumps what? Race is kind of a third rail. A lawsuit could really raise consciousness about the problematics of copyright law and exploitation/representation of black bodies in popular media.

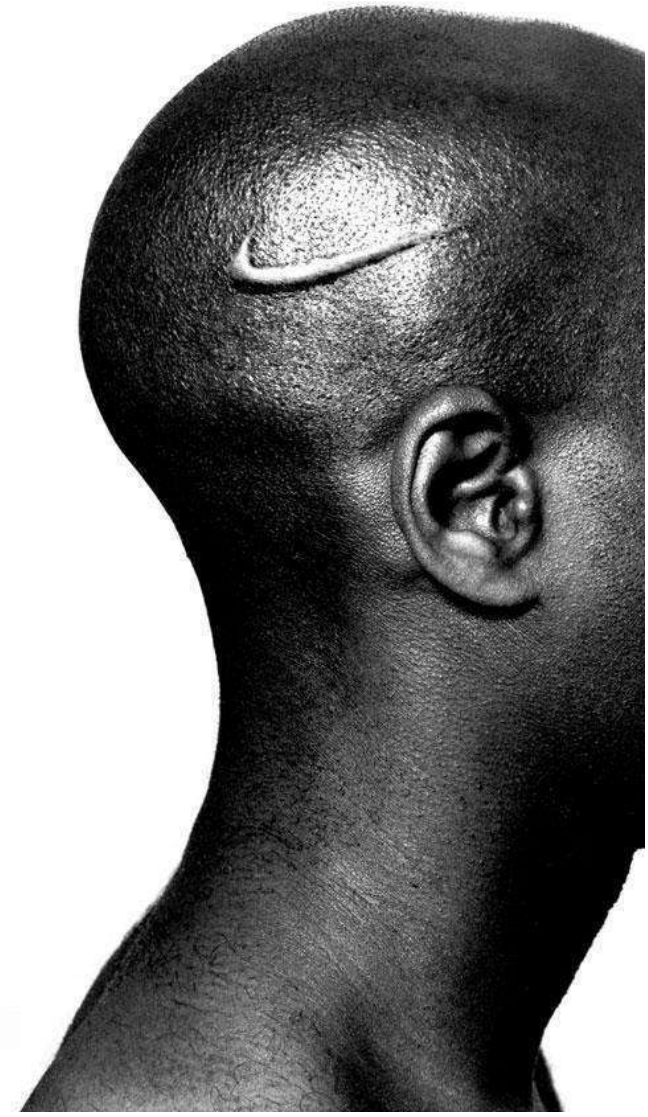


Hank Willis Thomas, Pucker Up!, series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 1972/2008.



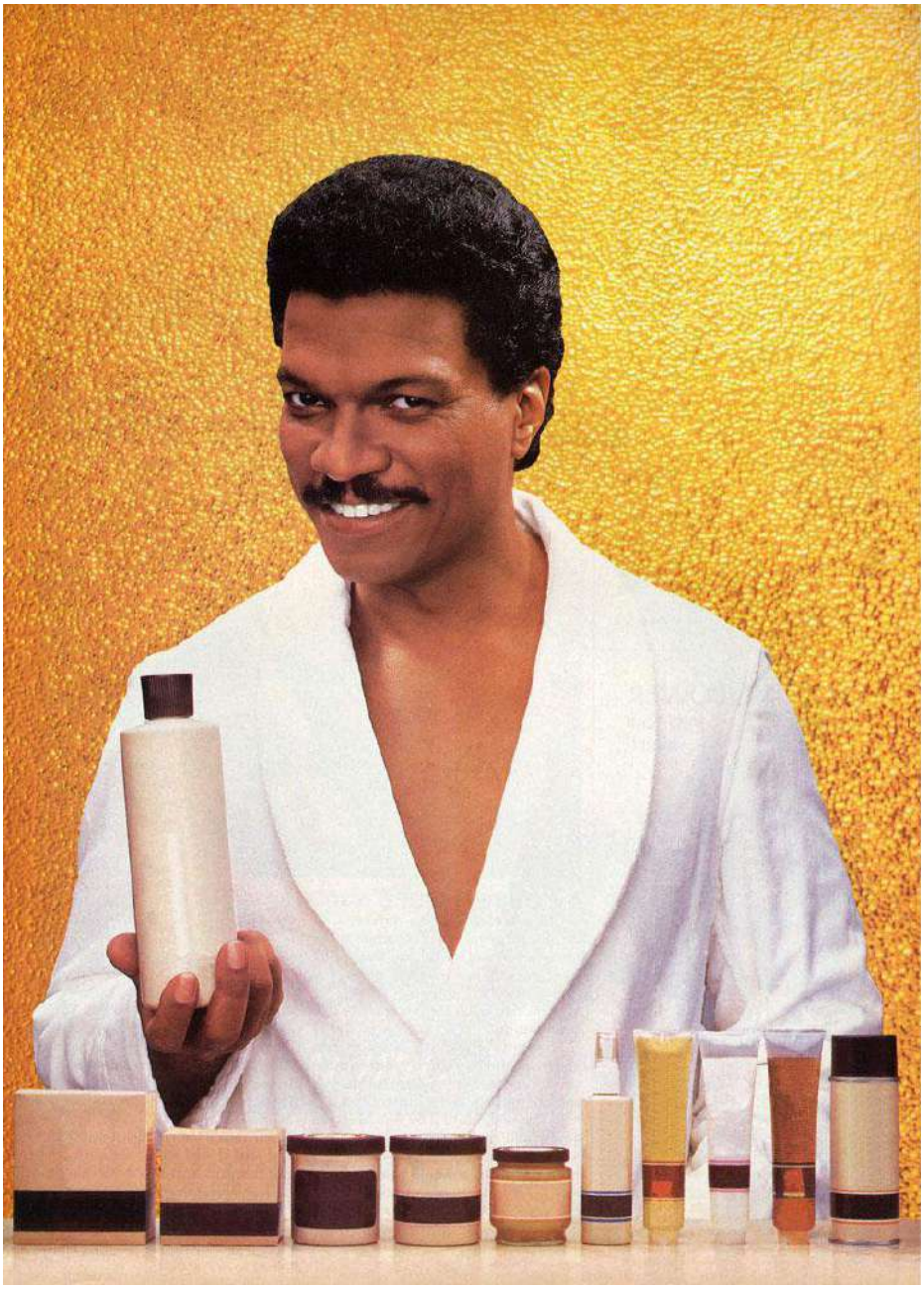
Kama Mama, Kama Bind (Like mother like daughter), series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 1971/2008.

SL Your work is interesting to me in part because it really highlights the centrality of branding today. I think of branding as the process by which commodities become associated with feelings, but also vice versa: how affects become connected to consumables. These days branding not only applies to products, but also to institutions and people. The constant imperative to sharpen one's own brand no doubt also penetrates the art field that is very dominated by such market logics. Do you find that you also struggle with the artworld's compulsion to reduce every artist to a set of recognizable characteristics?



Hank Willis Thomas, Branded Head, series: Branded, Lambda photograph, 40 x 30 inches, 2003.

HWT The best thing about the art world is that anything goes. The worst part about the art world is that I don't get it. Some people can see the matrix. I'm not one of them.



Hank Willis Thomas, Something to Believe In, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 63.5 X 50 inches, 1984/2007.

SL Your work could be interpreted to attest to the idea that advertising does not just tap into intrinsic identities, desires and emotions, but that it actively works to create those identities, desires and emotions for us. This is a bleak picture, of course. Is it one you subscribe to? Are we more complex and capable of resisting such interpellation than advertisers count on?

Hank Willis Thomas, Smokin' Joe Ain't J'Mama, series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 1978/2006.

Hank Willis Thomas, Many Happy Returns, series: Unbranded, LightJet print, 1980/2007.

HWT It may sound trite, but commercialism is the new religion. We are all believers. Even the most radical of us. If you don't believe in commercialism, you have to create your own non-commercial brand and market it. It's not propaganda anymore. It's just another ad. There are challenges that come with that, but also benefits. Barack Obama clearly had the most successful advertising campaign of all time. In three years he went from being completely obscure to being one of the most powerful people in human history. All he needed was discipline and a good brand strategy. What a bargain! He got my vote! Twice.

Hank Willis Thomas, Why Wait Another Day to be Adorable? Tell Your Beautician “Relax Me.”, series: Unbranded, LightJet Print, 1968/2007.

Forbes
April 2015

Hank Willis Thomas Reveals Truths About Women in Advertising

Ann Binlot

When I went to Hank Willis Thomas's studio a few weeks ago, the artist showed me two photographs. The first showed model and actress Rebecca Romijn clad in a cream-colored bikini in the middle of Times Square clutching a glass of milk with a milk mustache on her face in a 1998 *Got Milk?* ad. The second image was of model Kate Upton 14 years later, on the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* 2012 Swimsuit issue, wearing an ombré bikini. Thomas pointed out that both women fit the blonde-haired, blue-eyed standard of beauty, but that in the older image, we can see Romijn's moles and freckles, but that in Upton's cover, all marks on her body have been airbrushed off. "We know a lot of work must have happened here, but if somebody that's already 'perfect' needs this much work to be done to be 'perfect,'" commented Thomas. "How does that distort our notions of reality, and beauty, of place?"

An image from Hank Willis Thomas's exhibition Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015 (Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery)

With Hillary Clinton running for presidential office in 2016, Thomas — whose work is often centered around perceptions in advertising — decided that this was the perfect time to explore how Caucasian women have been depicted in advertising over the last century. The result is the exhibition *Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015*, which is currently on display through May 23 at Jack Shainman Gallery's two Chelsea locations. Willis culled advertisements from old magazines he got from thrift stores and eBay, and from books. He selected one image for each year, and used Photoshop to strip away all text and branding, leaving only the image used to sell the product. "I think of advertising as a form of social conditioning," said Thomas.

The end products of Thomas's Photoshop experiment revealed just how much the ad men — and later on ad women — of the past used images that at first glance appear unrelated to the products they were selling to manipulate the way the public perceived women. One ad from 1920 shows a woman driving a car. "1920 was the year women got to vote in the U.S. and driving was like a method of self-determination, so of course when you're trying to sell upholstery, you do that," remarked Thomas sarcastically. The exhibition shows 101 images that span the last century. One 1929 ad shows a couple reading a newspaper. One would never guess that it's selling Fatima Cigarettes. An illustration from 1936 shows a white woman and man being transported to the tropics, with natives and palm trees in the background. The product it's selling? Pineapple juice. Another ad from 1967 shows a group of five men surrounding a woman dressed only in her underwear who looks like she's about to get gang raped. As the years progress, women are depicted in more masculine roles, like as a telephone repairwoman in a 1972 ad. Through Thomas's work, one can see how gender roles have evolved over the last century, not just how women have been hypersexualized and marginalized, but also the progress they've made.

Thomas says he's still trying to dissect the meaning of the images. "I show it to people so I can understand it," said Thomas. "I'm still learning." One conclusion he has made is, "it's not at all about the product," said Thomas. "It's about what sort of ways we can manipulate people into buying an idea. If the idea is about being darker it's this. If it's about getting lighter, it's this. But you also see the maturation, about how things change with the times." Sadly, while progress has been made, there is still a long way to go.

Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015 is on display through May 23 at Jack Shainman Gallery.

frieze
March 2013

Hank Willis Thomas

By A.M. Weaver

Look Natural 1970, 2010, digital c-type print, 99 × 76 cm

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 messages that flip marketing slogans into life lessons? Thomas works like an advertising specialist, coding 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 were 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 particular landmark. Thomas brings aspects of black tradition into the 21st century and this quilt establishes a connection with his ‘Branded’ series (2003–ongoing) that includes commentary on black basketball players and the black male body 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/performer 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 depicting 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.

December 2015

Hank Willis Thomas- An Intersection of Art, Race and Identity

Ameera Khorakiwala

Hank Willis Thomas is a contemporary African-American photo-conceptual artist working primarily with themes of race, identity, history, advertising and popular culture. His work goes beyond just making art, to examining and exposing deeper divides in our culture. Thomas sees cultural disconnects everywhere in day-to-day living particularly as it relates to race. He chooses to focus and exhibit this in his work.

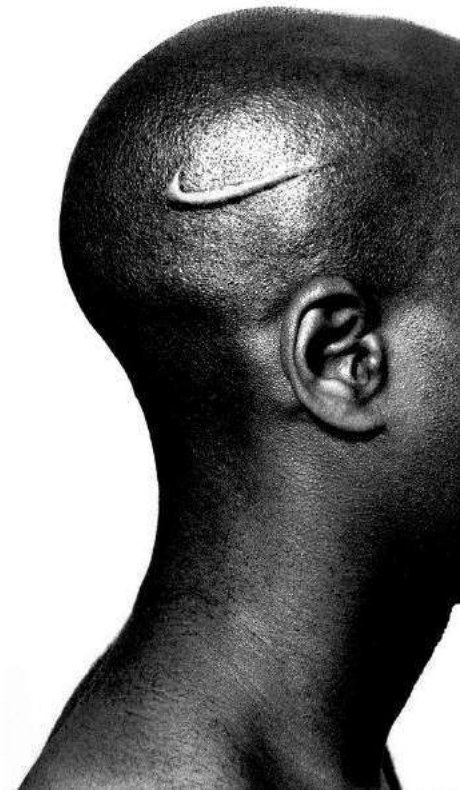
He has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad including, the International Center of Photography, Galerie Michel Rein in Paris, Studio Museum in Harlem, Galerie Henrik Springmann in Berlin, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others. Thomas' work is in numerous public collections including The Museum of Modern Art New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The High Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC.

Based in New York, he is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery.

Here are excerpts of our conversation.

Tell me a bit about yourself. How did you first get into art and photography?

My mother is an artist, art historian and curator, I figured I might as well follow in her footsteps. (Deborah Willis)



In this picture: *Hank Willis Thomas, Branded Head*, 2003

As a multi-medium artist, would you say there is a continuous relation between your works or are they independent of one another?

All of my work is about framing a context, and the various mediums are the best ways I feel I can get this point across. I like diversity.

Could you walk us through your process? How do you go from idea to conception?

I come up with an idea randomly; I think about it for a few years, I talk to people about materials randomly. I talk to more people. It's more like alchemy than it is physics.

In this picture: *Hank Willis Thomas, The Cotton Bowl*, 2011

You explore themes of race and the male body in visual culture – could you describe to us a little about what you have discovered?

I have discovered that people will believe what you tell them about themselves if you say it in factually and paint-pretty pictures to prove it.

You are surprising viewers with your work in the advertisement industry by 'unearthing the insidious underbelly of marketing, and an industry determined to turn profit at any cost'- when did you first see this scheme and how are you trying to change it?

I first became aware of the potency of media images as a child who loved TV, movies, and commercials. I also grew up going to the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture and I was always aware that there were other stories not being told. I also saw this movie called, "They Live with Roddy Piper". I think it influenced a lot of artists especially Shepard Fairey.

What would you say is your favorite piece of your own work and why?

The best is yet to come…

In this picture: *Hank Willis Thomas, Art Imitates Ads/ Imitates Life, 2013 (L) & Liberty, 2015 (R)*

Interview

March 2015

HANK WILLIS THOMAS IN NEW YORK.

PORTRAITS BY HAO ZENG.

Flipping through more than 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 Shainman 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 year), as 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, 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," 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 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.

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.

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?

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.

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.

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?

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.

THOMAS: Well, you've seen the residue of it all over. It was a movie starring Rowdy 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?

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?

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.

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?

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.

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 had 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—

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?

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?

THOMAS: I wouldn't 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?

THOMAS: When I went to grad school at California College of the Arts, 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?

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.

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?

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?

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?

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.

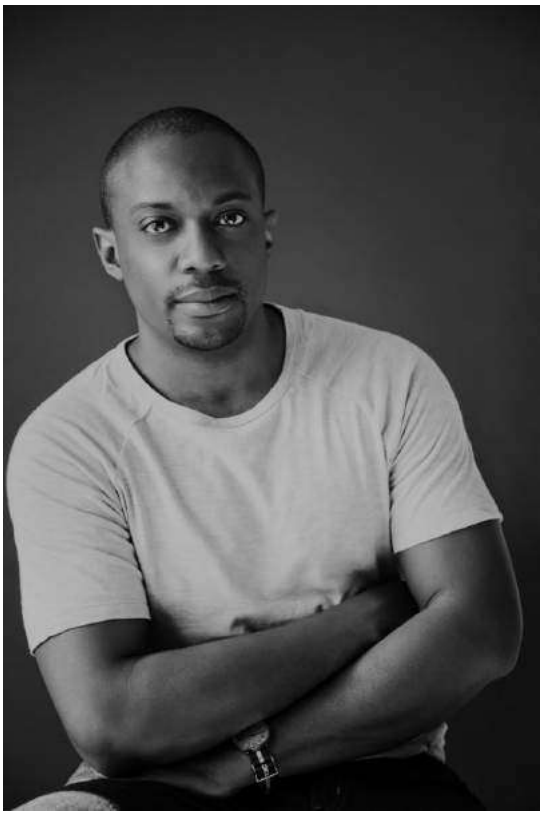
MCDERMOTT: Another theme is this idea of double consciousness.

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" IS ON VIEW TODAY, APRIL 10, THROUGH MAY 23 AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

MUSÉE
VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE
June 2013

Meet the Photographer: Hank Willis Thomas



Hank Willis Thomas

Hank Willis Thomas received his BFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and his MFA in Photography, along with an MA in Visual Criticism, from California College of the Arts in San Francisco. His work was published in his monograph Pitch Blackness (Aperture, 2008). His collaborative projects have been featured at the Sundance Film Festival and installed publicly at the Oakland International Airport and The Oakland Museum of California. He is currently a Spring 2012 Fellow with the Ellen Stone Belic Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media at Columbia College Chicago and is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City. Thomas shot new images exclusively for Musée's Breaking Tradition issue.

Thomas' work is in numerous public collections including The Whitney Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and Museum of Modern Art. His work has been exhibited prevalently in the United States as well as other parts of the world, including Trade Dress: Value Judgments at Diaspora Vibe Gallery in Miami, Black is Beautiful at Roberts and Tilton Gallery in Los Angeles, and All Things Being Equal… at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa. Thomas has also collaborated with other artists in group exhibitions such as Day Labor at P.S. 1 in New York City, The Black Alphabet at Zacheta National Gallery in Warsaw, Poland, and Making History at Museum für Modern Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany.

Interview with Hank Willis Thomas

Where did you go to school?

I went to NYU for undergrad and got a BFA in Photography and Africana Studies. After, I went to CCA (California College of the Arts) in San Francisco and Oakland, where I received my MFA in Photography and an MA in Visual and Critical Studies.

Coming from a creative family, did you feel any pressure while growing up to create?

Not growing up, but when it came time to go to college. I would say they just kind of forced me. I didn't really want to be an artist. I didn't really want to go to art school, but I had already taken up an interest in photography, and it was my mother's dream to go to NYU. We were living in D.C., so she kind of forced me into going there. Three years after I graduated, she got hired, and soon became chair of the department.

What's one word that would describe you?

Eclectic.

What's one word that would describe your work?

Earnest.

What advice would you give for emerging artists or photographers?

Do. Keep doing. Embrace failure; embrace rejection. Enjoy it because those are the most useful lessons that you could have as an artist. If you never fail or acknowledge that you have failed, you can never be good. No one steps on stage and is the best actor; you have to start somewhere. Recognize where you falter or where you have challenges, and be open to some sort of degree of criticism. At least until you are confident in your own voice, or once you've had a wide range of criticism from a variety of people who you respect and admire. You can take what you want and leave the things that you don't think are helpful as you master what it is you're trying to do.

Do you think you've mastered what you're trying to do?

No, but I've gotten pretty good at it.

Do you think you'll continue this exploration?

Until someone better picks it up! I don't think I'm the best and I don't think that I have everything to say, but there's not enough people in fine art who are engaging with popular culture and advertising in a critical way.

How did you feel when using the iPhone for a project?

Well, I got really into it. The images I gave you were all images that I took in the past six months, so it's not my oeuvre. This shows what I could do with the camera, as well as what it means to take an image and share it with the world, theoretically, within seconds. When I started using Instagram, I began to really look at photographs because the social media site becomes an exhibiting venue to your "followers". It's like curating an exhibition of your life experiences. I wanted to look at what was happening in 2012 in terms of important moments and highlights.

Aesthetically, did you find that there were any obstacles or challenges using it?

I always feel a little cheap when I use digital media for making photographs because if I don't like it, I can delete it immediately. There's no consequence to it. The real challenge is trying to pay real attention to it or as I recall at least when there was no digital media. Now when I shoot film, I don't care as much, because I know that I can take a better or faster picture easier with digital. When I look back at the time that I was shooting a lot of medium-format film with only twelve exposures, I realize that I was very, very cautious and careful about how I exposed the film and what I chose to take a photograph of. I wasn't really going to take a photograph unless I was thinking about printing it. I never just took photographs for the heck of it, so when I shoot with my iPhone or even just point a digital camera, I'm blindly recording. I've probably taken more photographs in the past seven years than in my entire fifteen just because I can do it without accountability.

You're not really a reportage photographer?

I tried but I wasn't the best. I went to school with a number of really great photojournalists, as well as reportage, and documentary photographers. I would probably give myself a solid B! I'm sure that if I were more courageous and more invested, I could probably have improved. I recognized from the feedback that I was getting that it wasn't really the direction that I wanted to go in anyway. However, I've always had great admiration and respect for people who photograph that way. Now we see so many images on a daily basis. I believe that there are more images taken in a single second than any of us know what to do with in our entire life and I'm not so confident that was true even thirty years ago. There are ten times more photographers now than when I got into photography. It calls for a little bit of an identity crisis; should I really try to be the best photographer or should I be looking at the images society creates and try to understand what they mean in the present moment? You could do that or wait for art history to look at the plethora of images created and understand what they might be saying about our values today.

What do you think is the difference between your personal art and your other art? I have never made a distinction.

The one thing that has always made me uncomfortable is when friends who are editorial or commercial photographers have sections titled "personal work" or "personal projects" on their websites. It's like saying "I know you really care about this, but this is what I care about". Even though I understand the importance of separating it, it does make an omission that what you believe personally isn't as valuable as a picture of John Cougar Mellencamp or something. The benefit of being an "artist" is that everything you do is personal.

Forgive me, I don't mean to offend you, but if you woke up white, what do you think your art would be like?

If I woke up white, it would probably be the same. If I woke up white and was still myself, I would probably make the same work. One of my best friends is John Davidson. He's Jewish and does this thing that cracks everyone up. He says, "I feel like a failure. I'm a poor Upper West Side Jew". It's partially because he's creatively interested in conversations about race, ethnicity, gender, and other complex issues. I think it's because he and I grew up listening to people like Eddie Murphy, centered on comedy, who influenced the way we look at the world. That's my closest reference to someone who has a relationship to the world similar to mine because we've known each other for almost thirty years. I would say that some of my "white" peers don't have the burden of having to deal with their identity so to speak. There are some white, male artists who make work about that. I'm actually curating a show next year called *White Boys* at Haverford College. I'm interested in making work about "whiteness" and "white maleness." The discourse is different. A lot of the ideas that come out of my work have been influenced by my white peers and that's heavily taken for granted. A lot of successful black artists have non-black partners, so you can't suggest that it doesn't influence the work they make. I really feel like race is a fabrication that we choose to believe and because we choose to believe it, we now look at the world in a way that is limiting to our perspectives. That's why I do a lot of collaborative projects. There's a website, www.causecollective.com, where you can see all of my collaborative work including a project that we did in Ireland last year.

Do you think your work will always be in some way politically influenced?

Until I master it, yes.

In your opinion, how important is grad school?

I think it's really important, but only to those people who aren't afraid of wasting their time. Part of being a successful artist is getting comfortable with wasting your time because you can never tell what's going to be worth it and what's not. If you're in the process of growing, sometimes looking at a wall for two months is going to be more useful than someone coming in and talking to you. There is a process that you're going through intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally that you have to submit to. It's really hard to do when you don't have the privilege of having people around whose job it is to care about what you do. When you graduate high school as an artist, no one cares about whether or not you're going to make it. If you go to art school, people are paid to care about it. If you go to grad school, even more people are paid to care even more about it. It's the investment in yourself that is really fruitful for a lot of people, but I don't think it's for everybody.

What inspired you to start experimenting with conceptual photography?

In undergrad I did conceptual photography where I took photographs, but I was really trying to make a comment on the lie that is photography. We look at the photograph as a document, but it's really a split-second in time and a two-dimensional space where basically only one of the senses is triggered. Even that is distorted because it's a thirtieth of a second and it's in a narrow frame.

So your advertising, branding, and un-branding – is that collage?

The branded is all pictures I've taken, while the unbranded is all Photoshopped.

What influences you in the art world now, or what artists influence your work?

All.

How did you get your first break?

I didn't… I guess I was just born. My first break was getting into college and then into grad school. My peers in grad school really helped me to get my first shows and one of my friends from grad school got me my first gallery.

What would you say is the high point of your career up to now?

I had the most fun at Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture. I'd like to say the high point is everyday, but it's also the low point (laughs).

What haven't you done that you would like to do?

Save the planet.

When is your next show?

My next major show is at the Jack Shainman Gallery in October 2013.

Would you ever consider curating one of Musée's issues?

Sure.

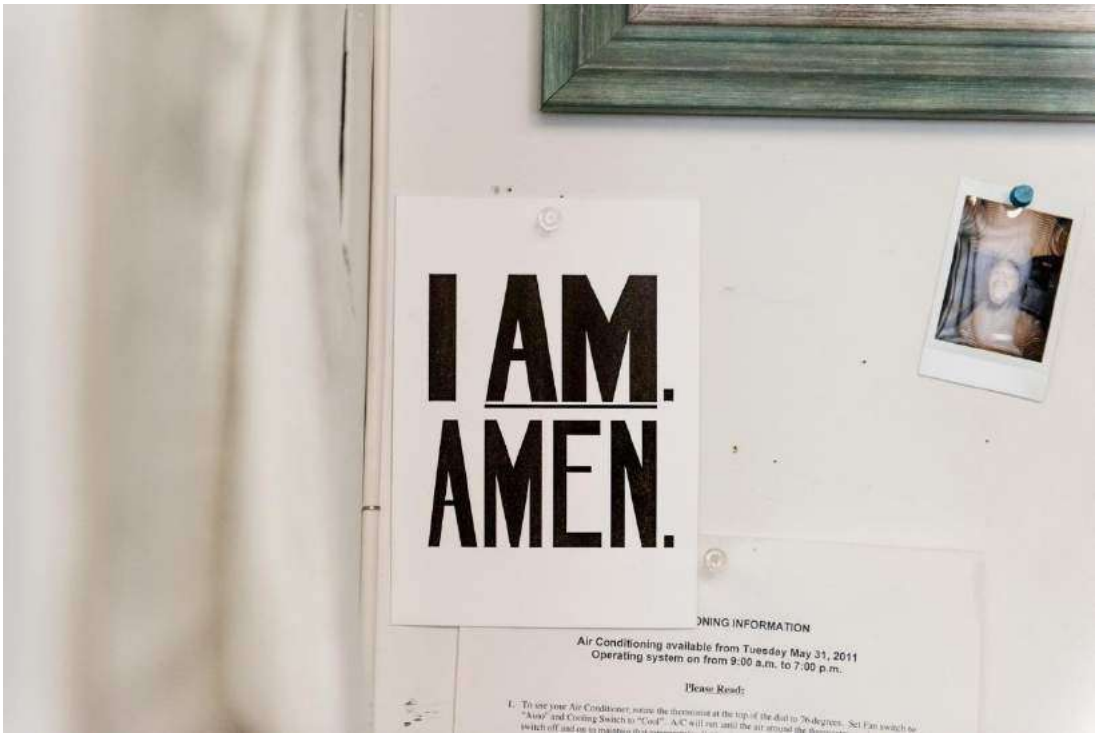
SURFACE

November 2016

Hank Willis Thomas Would Consider Running for Office

In the lead up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the New York-based artist and super PAC founder reveals what making art taught him about the art of politics.

INTERVIEW BY SPENCER BAILEY
PHOTOS BY EMILY ANDREWS



Where do you stand on this year's election?

Where do I *stand*? Am I standing? Am I kneeling and praying? It's probably the most exciting election that any of us have been witness to because it's reality TV meeting reality. That's a hell of a show. I still think at least Donald Trump was the best choice we had on the Republican side. I'm not sure about Hillary Clinton on the Democrat side. I'm not sure, of the candidates, we had that many better options. Which I think is a bigger problem than being for or against one person.

The thing that's fascinating about Donald Trump is that we just don't know what he thinks. Hillary Clinton has had the luxury and the misfortune of having so much experience. For Freedoms is about the complexities. I think finally we're starting to get to a place where we can deal with the reality that there is no simple solution or perfect answer.

Your art deals a lot with identity and popular culture. But this year your projects have really focused on politics. Is this in part because you've seen a merging of popular culture and politics?

For Freedoms is my art project; it's not my *art*. It's a collaborative project with about 200 other people. The reasons why I wanted to start a super PAC—because I have my own ideas I wanted to put out there—didn't happen. Instead, we wound up facilitating a space for other artists to use their voices, and for people who don't see themselves as creative to get creative. I've been saved by not having to make specific works of art around the political discourse of this time. What often happens when you [as an artist] enter political discourse is that [your art] becomes dated. Part of the reason we wanted to have fine art enter the conversation is that a great work of art is never really dated. We're trying to figure out how to manifest that.

Would you ever run for public office?

I would. That was actually one of Eric and my first ideas, that maybe I should run for office. He's actually the more wholesome one, so maybe he should run for office and I'll be the guy behind the scenes whispering in his ear. I don't think politicians are any more gifted than the rest of us. They're just determined to actually have their voices heard.

That idea sounds like it relates to your other ongoing project, "The Truth Booth." Much like a politician, it's a traveling kiosk that's inflated for public appearances. Once inside, participants, on camera, are asked to say what they think "the truth is." What did you imagine that would accomplish?

I come from a photography background, and one thing every photographer is hyper-aware of is their perspective, because of the camera lens, but also their position to the subject. A different angle could give you a totally different insight on the truth of that moment. I think that runs through all of my work: It's all about framing and context, that whoever's framing gets to tell the story. The truth is a contentious space. We thought that by creating a modern-day confession booth, where people can go to tell the truth from their perspective, we'd be instigating and claiming a space for speaking your mind, but also listening to others. Since June, the booth has been to almost 35 states and thousands of people have participated.

Which encounters have resonated with you the most?

One video I saw, recorded in Detroit, was of a little boy who was making a case for his faith, Islam. It was frightening to see someone, at such a young age, feel the need to justify their belief. He was saying, "It's a religion of love. All we want is love, like everyone else. We worship the same god that you worship." What world do we live in that a little boy—who couldn't be older than 8—feels the need to tell the world that he is not a threat? That was pretty powerful.

I wonder what Hillary or Donald would say.

I don't think they're capable of telling the truth. I don't think it's the responsibility of a politician to tell us the truth, because we can't handle the truth. That's the reality.

I have two requirements for my president: One, I want to think they're smarter than me, and two, I want to be pretty sure they're not crazy. That's it. I think you can be a good person before you're President of the United States, and I think you can be a good person after you're President of the United States, but while you're president it's not your job to be a good person. It's a falsehood for us to think that you can have that much power and be "good" in the traditional or moral sense.

A lot of your artwork deals with race and what it means to be African American. What do you think has been President Obama's impact on culture and politics?

I think our current president is a fascinating subject, because he's the first clearly multi-ethnic president we've had. He was born in Hawaii, which is two percent black and whites are not in the majority. The binaries we see in the mainland United States of black, white, and other is different than what he grew up with. Then he went from Occidental to Columbia to Harvard to the south side of Chicago, which is a route that very few people take. For a long time, he talked about himself as "multi-ethnic," and even referred to himself as a mutt. People say he's the first black president, but he was not raised by black people and his black parent is not the descendant of a slave. His notion of race is different. What's great about our president is his openness to nuance; he's seen how nuance shapes everything. In my work, that's what I've been interested in. Nothing is black and white; everything's grey. Nobody's black or white—my skin is brown. He's brought conversations that have needed to be had to the forefront—about same-sex marriage, about interracial relationships, about police misconduct, about criminal justice. Until Obama, you could speak in dog whistles and say these really offensive things in code. No one can get away with that anymore.

The New York Times
August 2013

Hank Willis Thomas

Art in Review

By HOLLAND COTTER

A five-channel video presentation of a work in process, “Question Bridge: Black Males.” Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

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.

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.

MARCH 13, 2017 (/NEWS/2017/3/13/THE-CATCHLIGHT-FELLOWSHIP-SHORTLIST-ANNOUNCEMENT)

THE CATCHLIGHT FELLOWSHIP - SHORTLIST ANNOUNCEMENT (/NEWS/2017/3/13/THE-CATCHLIGHT-FELLOWSHIP-SHORTLIST-ANNOUNCEMENT)

© Kirsten Luce, "As Above, So Below"

CatchLight is delighted to announce the shortlist for the inaugural CatchLight Fellowship (http://www.catchlight.io/catchlight-fellowship/), which recognizes excellence in the novel use of photography to depict and bring awareness to challenging social issues. The shortlisted photographers were selected for creative leadership and a remarkable body of work with the potential to achieve a next level of excellence in visual storytelling, innovation in distribution and measurable social impact.

The Fellowship, which includes $30,000 awarded to each of three photographers, will be announced on April 25, 2017. Each Fellow will be aligned with one of CatchLight's three media partners, which will offer their expertise and distribution structures to their selected Fellow. The 2017 media partners are The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting (http://pulitzercenter.org/), Reveal (https://www.revealnews.org/) (from The Center for Investigative Reporting) and The Marshall Project (https://www.themarshallproject.org/#.ixMaGTIAa).

The Shortlist includes 11 photographers from six countries—Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Singapore, Spain and the United States. Their work ranges from experiencing life in policed communities to the current global shortage of sand. The shortlisted photographers for the 2017 CatchLight Fellowship are:

- Laia Abril (http://www.laiaabril.com/) (Spain)
- Poulomi Basu (http://www.poulomibasu.com/) (India)
- Sarah Blesener (http://www.sarah-blesener.com/) (USA)

· Danny Wilcox Frazier (https://www.instagram.com/dannywilcoxfrazier/?hl=en) (USA)

· Brian Frank (http://www.brianfrankphoto.com/) (USA)

· Ziyah Gafic (http://www.ziyahgafic.ba/) (Bosnia-Herzegovina)

· Tomas Van Houtryve (http://tomasvh.com/) (Belgium)

· Kirsten Luce (http://www.kirstenluce.com/) (USA)

· Carlos Javier Ortiz (http://www.carlosjavierortiz.com/) (USA)

· Hank Willis Thomas (http://www.hankwillisthomas.com/) (USA)

· Sim Chi Yin (http://www.chiyinsim.com/) (Singapore)

The Process CatchLight received a total of 327 proposals for consideration. A jury of seven leaders in the field of social documentary photography—spread across four continents—spent two weeks reviewing the top 170 of the submissions before meeting on March 4, 2017 to agree on a shortlist of finalists. Working as a focused team with guidance from Stephen Mayes (former secretary to the World Press Photo competition) and with input from the three media partners, the jury assessed the proposals with several key criteria in mind:

· Quality of photography and creative leadership

· Collaborative ethos and commitment to creating and contributing to fellowship community over time

· Ability to leverage stories to engender change

The judges reached a strong consensus that each of the shortlisted candidates abundantly represents the qualities sought for the CatchLight Fellowship: excellence in visual storytelling on a vital social issue, with particular emphasis on innovative distribution.

The Final Selection Final award decisions will now be made by the three media partners and CatchLight, conducting interviews and reviewing references to find the right fit between the issues and the organizational resources. **CatchLight Fellowships will be announced on Tuesday, April 25, 2017.**

CatchLight is very grateful to its talented panel of judges and trailblazing media partners:

· Lacy Austin, *Director of Community Programs, International Center of Photography*

· Ed Kashi, *Photographer, VII Photo Agency*

· Shahidul Alam, *Photojournalist and Writer, Bangladesh*

· Paul Lowe, *Director at the London College of Communication, England*

· Lekgetho Makola, *The Market Photo Workshops, South Africa*

· Jamie Wellford, *National Geographic*

· Amy Yenkin, *Independent Photo Editor*

· Carroll Bogert, *The Marshall Project*

· Robert Rosenthal, *Reveal,* from *The Center for Investigative Reporting*

· Jon Sawyer, *The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting*

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March 2017

Open Society Foundations Announces 2017 Soros Equality Fellows

NEWS PROVIDED BY
Open Society Foundations →
Mar 20, 2017, 17:09 ET

NEW YORK, March 20, 2017 /PRNewswire-USNewswire/ -- The Open Society Foundations is pleased to announce the recipients of the Soros Equality Fellowship, a new initiative to help emerging mid-career professionals become long-term innovative leaders in the field of racial justice.

The seven fellows, chosen from over 1,000 applicants representing a diverse array of professions—from the arts and advocacy to journalism and documentary filmmaking—will work on a wide variety of ways to advance racial justice: documenting the oral histories of queer and trans people of color; tackling structural racism in the food supply; chronicling how slavery helped build a major modern institution of higher learning; and creating an ad campaign to take on distortions in America's contemporary racial narrative.

The program is intended to help incubate innovators and risk-takers striving to create and develop new ways of addressing the challenges of racial disparity and discrimination in the United States. Beyond nurturing their specific projects, the program seeks to promote leadership development training, networking and other professional support aimed at building a pipeline connecting the energy and ideas of youth with the wisdom and influence of experience.

"We are living in a time of enormous challenge, when forces peddling fear and hate are pushing ever harder to normalize xenophobia and racism," said Leslie Gross-Davis, director of the Equality team within U.S. Programs at the Open Society Foundations, who launched the initiative. "While the magnitude of the challenge is daunting, the inaugural class of Soros Equality Fellows gives me hope for the future. Their energy, creativity, and determination to tackle even the longest odds are an inspiration. The Open Society Foundations is honored to have the opportunity to support this amazing cohort of next-generation racial justice leaders."

The 2017 Soros Equality Fellows will receive stipends ranging from $80,000 to $100,000 to support projects over the course of 12 to 18 months.

2017 Soros Equality Fellows

Alice Hom will create a digital archive of oral histories of queer and trans people of color, designed to promote and share cross-generational stories of resistance and community organizing.

Deepa Iyer will create a platform to provide racial justice organizations with resources to sharpen organizing and coalition building strategies, and promote solidarity across communities.

Leah Penniman will train farm activists of color in strategies for addressing structural advocacy in the food system, with a particular focus on farmworker rights.

Purvi Shah will create a hub to promote collaboration, coalition-building and experimentation among lawyers working on racial justice issues.

David Felix Sutcliffe will produce a documentary musical examining the mainstream media's role in spreading Islamophobia, and a series of short videos exploring the role of discrimination in current events.

Rachel Swarns will write a book exploring the role slavery played in the history of Georgetown University, and the impact of that chapter on the lives and descendants of the enslaved.

Hank Willis Thomas will use the tools of a contemporary advertising agency to create a campaign aimed at exploring and discrediting distortions in the racial narrative in the United States.

The Open Society Foundations work to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. Working with local communities in more than 120 countries, the Open Society Foundations support justice and human rights, freedom of expression, and access to public health and education.

SOURCE Open Society Foundations

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https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org

2017 INFINITY AWARD: ONLINE PLATFORM AND NEW MEDIA — FOR

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For Freedoms, co-founded by Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman, is the first artist-run Super PAC using art to inspire deeper political engagement for citizens who want to have a greater impact on the American political landscape. Thomas is a photo-conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history, and popular culture who has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad. His work can be found in numerous public collections including The Museum of Modern Art New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The High Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. Thomas' co-founder Gottesman photographs, writes, makes videos, teaches, and uses art as a vehicle to engage people in critical

conversations about the social structures that surround them and him. Gottesman is currently a Visiting Associate Professor in Film, Photography, and Video at Hampshire College, a Visiting Professor at Addis Ababa University School of Fine Arts, and a Mentor in the Arab Documentary Photography Project. His work is in various collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The For Freedoms team is rounded out by photographer Wyatt Gallery; nonprofit arts organization strategic planning and development consultant Dena Muller; art historian and business consultant Michelle Woo; and Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, a Director at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

THE GUARDIAN | ONLINE | 22 AUGUST 2017

My best shot

My best summer photograph: sand, scorpions and sausage sarnies

Phallic corn, the world's greatest lay-by, an ostrich on the rampage and Iggy Pop in the pit ... top photographers, including Wolfgang Tillmans and Chloe Dewe Mathews, pick their great summer shots

by Nell Frizzell, Tim Jonze, Alex Needham and Dale Berning Sawa

'They came to Aberystwyth from all over' Chloe Dewe Mathews

I was visiting my boyfriend in Aberystwyth when I overheard some people on the seafront asking: "When are the Jews arriving?" I was baffled. When I asked a local person, they explained that a large community of Orthodox Jews came every year for a couple of weeks in August and stayed in the university accommodation at the top of the hill.

They would come from all over - New York, Canada, Israel, but mostly London and Manchester. They spent the mornings in a conference and then in the afternoon came down to the seafront or went up to enjoy the town. I said to a number of different families that if they were happy for me to photograph them, then I would take some portraits of their children for free.

Hasidic holiday-makers by Chloe Dewe Mathews.

The boys in this shot had been feeding the seagulls with bread, which is why the birds are circling overhead. I caught them right before they all got into formation for a family photo. They were just messing about: the young boy was chasing the gulls and we were chatting about what they'd done that day. I like the palette of the shot - that grey blue of the British seaside holiday, with thin cloud over the whole sky and seagulls swirling.

There was an incident in 2013 where something caught alight in one of the flats so the university barred the community from using them, saying it was a health and safety issue because they used candles. It's really sad, as the families had been going to Aberystwyth for more than 20 years.

Most people I approached were happy to chat to me. That was what interested me: here is a community often perceived as outsiders, as people who don't want to talk to anyone outside their group. And there they are - out on the beach enjoying family holidays. I wanted to reflect that warmth. *(NF)*

'Iggy's wild - and he's still killing it' Lindsey Byrnes

Iggy Pop at FYF by Lindsey Barnes.

I love Iggy Pop. He's wild, he's a spectacle, and he's still just killing it. He's so punk and so tough - but I also think that if he wasn't performing, he would be the nicest guy.

This was taken at FYF Fest, a three-day music event in Los Angeles. For me, what makes a good live photo is that moment of eye contact. I got lucky, though. There were so many photographers in the pit and there's a lot of dynamics around positioning yourself. I'm only 5'1", so I'm not really going to get in anybody's way, although I did have a stool with me. Every photographer brings stools these days.

My autofocus wasn't working, so I was adjusting the camera manually. I'd spotted some stairs and knew Iggy was going to go down them into the pit at some point, so I wasn't all that concerned about what was happening while he was on stage. If he had laid down and rolled around I wouldn't have been able to see it anyway, because I'm too short. *(NF)*

'They do a three-sausage sandwich here' Peter Dench

Layby picnickers by Peter Dench. Photograph: Peter Dench/Reportage by Getty

In the summer of 1998, I went on assignment to what was apparently the most sociable lay-by in England: the Old Willoughby Hedge on the A303. All sorts of people would stop there, from the army to missionaries on their way to spread the joy of Jesus to Exeter. There were people sunbathing in their socks, children playing badminton, all against a backdrop of articulated lorries thundering past. I asked one sunbather where his destination was and he just said: "Here." When I asked why, he looked at me like I was mad and replied: "You get three sausages in your sandwich here."

We were pottering around when two cars towing caravans pulled in and this lovely scene unfolded. Sandwiches were unwrapped, biscuits and a flask of hot drink shared. Three generations of family had been on holiday to Dawlish, in Devon, and were on their way home to Epsom. They'd been up packing since 6am, so they were in need of a break.

> The older girl had terrible burns - caused by a freak caravan fire on a previous holiday

After awhile, I noticed that the older girl, Hayley, had some terrible burns on her face and body. Her scalp looked raw and there were sores on her head, but it wasn't a new wound. Apparently, on a previous holiday, there'd been a freak flash fire in a caravan they'd been staying in. They think a fragment of broken glass had ignited in the sun.

She wasn't self-conscious about it, though. You can see she's got a smile on her face, her hair is up and she was keen to be photographed posing with her favourite packet of biscuits. As a photojournalist, you tend to dismiss the more posed shots, where people look directly into the camera, but sometimes when you hold someone's gaze like this it just works.

I think the picture says something about British stoicism. This family had been through a terrible incident but they were undeterred and continued to go on caravan holidays. That's how we are as holidaymakers: we'll drive to the seaside in the rain, we'll eat fish and chips in the car and we'll soldier on. Our motto seems to be: next year will be better. *(TJ)*

'It's harvest time and life is harsh' David Goldblatt

Afrikaners at harvest by David Goldblatt.

In the early 1960s, I became very interested in photographing the people of the Plots, Afrikaners who lived on smallholdings around Randfontein, the town where I was born, near Johannesburg. I would drive around, knock on a door and ask if I could take photographs of whatever life was taking place. At the time I worked in my father's shop - a men's clothing shop - and I had become acquainted with these people, and their language, when they came to buy clothes.

It was the beginning of the harvest. Younger people were taking part, including the girl who was helping. It was an unusually bucolic scene. Most of these places were harsh, in the landscape and in the standard of living - harsh, too, in terms of the relationships between the white owners and the black servants who lived on the plots.

I didn't speak with the owners, so I couldn't say this about them in particular, but many others were deeply racist. They had a profound fear of black people. At the same time, they had a relationship with them on their plots that was intimate and affectionate, generous to a degree that surpassed what I knew from my middle-class urban life.

> They had a profound fear of black people - yet their relations with them could be affectionate and generous

One Saturday, I found a family gathered around some woodwork. It turned out to be a coffin they were making for the neighbour's black servant who had died. Because they knew that the family could not afford a coffin, they were making one, which is a considerable thing to make if you're going to do it properly. They were taking a great deal of trouble over it, while joking about whether the lady would fit - about whether they'd need to tie knots in her legs, or cut her neck. The combination of great generosity and crudity was astonishing. *(DBS)*

David Goldblatt will have a solo exhibition at Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, in July 2018.

'The corn's hair is like a huge orgasm' Wolfgang Tillmans

Husked corn by Wolfgang Tillmans.

When I lived in New York in the mid-90s, it was the first time I'd seen coloured corn, and they made it into a couple of still lifes. Corn is like agave: succulents that have always interested me as shapes sculpturally - their outlines and volumes and fleshiness and body. But they've proven extremely difficult to photograph.

The agave, I tried for 20 years. Only a few years ago, I found a cut-off piece on a wayside in La Palma on the Canary Islands, and I made a still-life with it. That seemed to be the moment I was able to make it my own. With the corn, it's similar.

The fascination with this fresh corn on the cob is of course when you unpeel it, it's extremely virgin inside. This hair, these strings - I don't know what their role is but they seem to stay fresh for only minutes. What makes me happy about this picture is that it's so unlikely that it would work, but I think it does. The upward angle is very phallic and the hair becomes like a huge orgasm - but at the same time, it is a pure natural beauty.

I never make deliberate art-historic references, but certain subjects have a fascination, a charge that has interested artists through the centuries: the idea of a fruit, at this lush pinnacle moment, which will eventually perish. It's like a hinging moment. On the one hand, they have a meaning - but on the other hand, they are incredible volumes and that interests me. I've always understood photography as a tool to talk about three-dimensional objects.

It's unlikely this subject could work and not just be too beautiful. Sometimes something looks too good and then that wears off, but here there is a mysteriousness. It's not uncanny but a little bit strange. It's not a pretty-pretty depiction of nature, and it's celebrating life, I guess. *(AN)*

'All we had to do was wait for the sunset' Alice Hawkins

Havana at dusk by Alice Hawkins.

Cuba is a fairytale place. I like that you can just stay in people's houses or wander into someone's home and eat with a family. My last trip there was for a fashion shoot with Love magazine in 2012. We had so many clothes that the stylist had to stay over the road from me with this glamorous single mum called Lily and her son Richard.

> We put her in a Versace outfit and she just owned it

I thought Lily was so sexy and hot that I asked her to be a model in one of our shoots. We put her in a Versace outfit and she just owned it. She knew exactly what she was doing.

My work is influenced by 18th-century portraiture, which is why they are both posing in a formal manner. HThe boy ended up throwing a strop after about 20 minutes. I have another shot of him lying on the floor in a mood while his mother stands there in her high heels telling him to get up.

This was taken just around the corner from Lily's house. I had seen an art deco building that looked beautiful - all we had to do was wait for the sun to go down. Although it is not a shot of a sunset, you can sense that's what's happening from the way the buildings are all lit up in different colours.

Cuba won't stay like this for ever. It is only a matter of time before you see a McDonald's or an HSBC in a scene like this. It is as if you are seeing everything through a 1950s-style Instagram filter. *(TJ)*

'He certainly wasn't trying to blend in' Jon Tonks

A scorpion in Namibia by Jon Tonks.

I was on my way to St Helena, having left Cape Town on a Royal Mail ship. To break up the journey they kick you off for a day in Namibia, where I was handed a leaflet for the "small five safari". It was a way to make money from cruise ship tourists, a tongue in cheek take on the big five safaris you get elsewhere in Africa - the big five being lion, elephant, buffalo, leopard and rhinoceros.

A group of us hopped in to off-road vehicles and headed for the desert to look for lizards, scorpions, beetles, snakes and chameleons. I remember it being ridiculously hot - mid-30s or something, proper middle-of-the-day heat, when only an idiot would venture into the desert. The tour guide was quite a big chap, and every now and then he would stop his van, jump out and then run, dive and stick his arm into the ground before returning with some form of creature.

This scorpion was one of them. He must have been

> Every now and then, the tour guide would stick his arm into the sand and bring out some creature

wandering across the desert when suddenly he ends up being clamped in pliers and shown to tourists. When he got put back down I stopped to take a couple of pictures. Then off we went looking for the next thing.

Having said that, he was pretty brazen, poised there with his tail and tip up. He certainly wasn't interested in blending in. You've got this epic, stark desert behind you and then the contrast with this black creature silhouetted against the white sand.

The Namibian desert is stunning, especially at sunrise and sunset, when all these rich colours come out. We were there at completely the wrong time. I would have loved to have stayed and seen the sunset, but we had to get back to the boat. *(TJ)*

'The car was a bull, the guy a matador' Martin Bogren

Boy racers by Martin Bogren.

I spent three summers hanging around with this group of "tractor boys" - farmer kids from a remote Swedish village, similar to the one I grew up in. There is nothing much to do in this kind of place, other than drive cars or play football.

Out of shot, there are seven or eight other cars positioned in a half circle. Each vehicle took turns to drive into the middle and do this crazy burnout thing, with smoke blowing out of the back. To me, the car was like a bull and the guy standing in the middle was the matador. There were girls watching it all unfold; they were quite bored, with nothing to do but smoke and look at the guy in the middle. It was like a mating dance, the boys taking turns to show off.

A camera can be a wonderful tool for gaining access. If I'd turned up and said, "Hey, I'm 45, can I hang around with you guys for three summers?" they'd have told me no. I was able to win their trust. I also made the effort to get into their mindset. Before meeting up with them, I would sit in the woods and meditate, thinking: "I'm 15 years old, I'm 15 years old." Some evenings I really fooled myself and, what's more important, I think I fooled them. It was on those nights the best pictures happened.

The light is so beautiful in Scandinavia in July and August. After the sun has gone down there's still light for another hour or two, seemingly coming from nowhere. It creates a special mood. It says summer is about to end and something else is about to come in. It is a time of shifts, and that's how it was for these boys. They were at that age between childhood and adulthood. Some of them would do a couple more years at school, others would start work. But for every one of them, life was about to change. *(TJ)*

‘She charged our vehicle 10 times’
Hank Willis Thomas

Kenyan ostrich by Hank Willis Thomas.

I did a residency at the Segera Retreat in Kenya this summer. It’s primarily a nature reserve with lots of animals, including the white rhino. We had already seen cheetahs and leopards that day, but as we were driving over this ridge one of the guys pointed out a pair of ostriches. They’re monogamous, and we could tell they had chicks because of the way they were behaving. The male walks away to get the chicks to safety and the female charges.

I was in the front seat of an open vehicle, and the mother started running at us, about 10 times. She would turn away right before she hit, but it was still pretty impressive. She was at least 6’ and I’m only 5’9” so it was pretty intimidating, especially when she raised her wings.

It’s hard not to feel like a cliche photographing wildlife, but at the same time it’s great to witness it. I was practically singing The Circle of Life in my head all day. I was on the game drives for two weeks, and that was pretty humbling. I didn’t appreciate what we’re losing until I was there - not just how the animals live, but how we fit into their existence. We tend to see nature as something we’re removed from, but it’s critical for our survival.

I shot this with an iPhone. Ironically, when I was shooting, it was actually winter in Kenya. *(NF)*

Hank Willis Thomas’s first solo UK exhibition, The Beautiful Game, is at Ben Brown Fine Arts, London, 5 October to 24 November.

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Mural Arts Philadelphia

COMPANY FOR THE RIZZO STATUE

DIVERGING MEMORIES OF AN ERA

MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

"All Power to All People" – a temporary 12-foot Afro pick installation – honors the 1960s and '70s. The statue is part of Mural Arts Philadelphia's inaugural Monument Lab program. Story, **B1.**

New statue for the city

The 12-foot Afro pick has been provocatively placed near Rizzo.

By Tirdad Derakhshani
STAFF WRITER

Mural Arts Philadelphia added its own wrinkle to the Frank Rizzo statue controversy Tuesday, unveiling a provocative piece of public art on Thomas Paine Plaza at the Municipal Services Building across from City Hall: a 12-foot Pop Art Afro pick topped by a handle that looks like a Black Power fist.

The temporary installation, by sculptor and multimedia artist Hank Willis Thomas, sits at the southeast corner of the plaza, well apart from the Rizzo piece, but they are within sight of each other.

So now when you visit the plaza you'll not only see Rizzo's smiling face and outstretched arm, but also will see him twinned with a symbol of black culture and of the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the period during which Rizzo had his tenure as police commissioner (1968 to 1971) and mayor (1972 to 1980).

Titled *All Power to All People,* Thomas' statue is the opening salvo of Mural Arts' inaugural Monument Lab, a provocative cele-

See **SCULPTURE** on B3


The Philadelphia Inquirer
ALL CHARGES DISMISSED

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Mural Arts Philadelphia

bration of monuments and public art that will feature installations by 20 artists across the city. The fest will officially open on Saturday and run through Nov. 19.

Amid the national outcry over statues memorializing Confederate leaders, Philadelphia City Councilwoman Helen Gym and others have called for the removal of the Rizzo statue, citing the former mayor and police commissioner's brutal tactics aimed at minorities.

"The central guiding principle of Monument Lab is the question, 'What is an appropriate monument for the current city of Philadelphia?' " said Mural Arts founder Jane Golden.

Golden said she hopes *All Power to All People* provides a counterbalance to the Rizzo statue and will hopefully open a dialogue between them.

Thomas, 41, a New York artist who spent his childhood in Philadelphia and Washington, has been working on his statue for the better part of a year. He said the Rizzo controversy was nowhere in his mind as he worked on the piece.

"The curators asked me to consider Philadelphia and its history, its people, and its neighborhoods and ask myself how I would commemorate the city in a monument," said Thomas, who is the son of two noted Philadelphia natives, photographer and New York University scholar Deborah Willis and jazz musician and film producer Henry "Hank" Thomas Sr.

Thomas and Golden both said they did not go into the project with the intention of placing the Afro pick near Rizzo. Golden said Mural Arts pushed for that spot once the Rizzo statue controversy flared up.

So if not Rizzo, then what did inspire *All Power to All People*?

Well, Claes Oldenburg's *Clothespin*, for a start, Thomas said of the giant sculpture at the corner of 15th and Market Streets. "I think that is definitely a piece I love, and he's an artist who has been a big influence of mine."

Pop Art, he said, helped define his experience of the city as a child.

"When you're a kid and you are driving around the city, what you see are these wonderful things, you see the huge clothespin which is weird and wonderful and of course [Robert Indiana's] LOVE statue," said Thomas.

The Afro pick was part of that fabric of childhood images and memories.

"It was one of the first objects I remember pondering as a kid," said Thomas.

"I remember the sneakers strung across telephone lines, and people playing basketball with milk crates nailed to poles, and I remember people walking around with Afro picks with a fist in their hair. ... They sold them with handles like that, shaped like the Black Power fist. And as a 4-year-old I was fascinated by it [and asking] 'Why does it have a fist?' "

His statue represents a moment in history when ideas such as Black Power began to gain currency in the wider culture, he said, and stands as a symbol "for the potency of the tools of the Black Power movement as they related to everyday life, to coiffing with a level of consciousness and of a certain kind of solidarity."

Thomas said people would be making a mistake if they saw his statue as an attack either on Rizzo or the police. "My mother's father was a Philly cop, and so were two of his brothers," said Thomas. "My grandfather actually was at the police academy with Rizzo."

Thomas got a taste of both sides of the Black Power movement. His mother's family were defined through and through by their identity as police officers, while his father was a member of the Black Panthers, he said.

That said, won't the proximity of the Afro pick and Rizzo suggest some kind of confrontation?

"People tend to be oppositional about these issues, but things are always more complicated than we admit," said Thomas. "I grew up around cops and my dad was a Black Panther, and we got along."

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The artwork "All Power to All People" grabs the attention of passersby at Thomas Paine Plaza. MICHAEL BRYANT / Staff Photographer

EveningStandard
September 2017

The Beautiful Game: Artist Hank Willis Thomas creates his work from football shirts

A new exhibition looks at the battle grounds in sport, culture and history

Evening Standard Arts In Association With HISCOX

JESSIE THOMPSON |

The Beautiful Game

Artist Hank Willis Thomas finds the beauty in the beautiful game with his artworks made from football shirts.

His first solo exhibition, The Beautiful Game, will be held at Ben Brown Fine Arts next month, and will feature floor and wall based sculptures and quilts.

His work aims to explore the intersections between art, sports and geopolitics, referencing the battles on the sports pitch as well as in art, culture and history.

The quilts he makes from football shirts reference the works of Matisse and Picasso, whilst his sculptures are inspired by Brancusi.

culture, asking the viewer how the sense of 'us' and 'them' might manifest itself in our own lives.

The Beautiful Game is at Ben Brown Fine Arts from October 5 to November 24; benbrownfinearts.com

Are you a budding artist? Enter the Evening Standard Contemporary Art Prize in association with Hiscox and you could win £10,000. Visit standard.co.uk/artprize

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Mural Arts Philadelphia

Strictly Philly

Project aims to spark dialogue on public art in city.

By Maddie Hanna
STAFF WRITER

Peter Bartscherer was sitting on a stoop in Washington Square on Saturday afternoon, as if he were in front of any of thousands of rowhouses in Philadelphia.

But this stoop was a sculpture in Washington Square Park, on the first official day of the Monument Lab project, which runs through Nov. 19 in squares and parks across the city.

Bartscherer, calling himself the type of person who tends "to read every plaque," is intrigued by Philadelphia history and how neighborhoods define the city. So he liked how the installations "sort of capture the sense of neighborhood," Bartscherer said. Mindy Bartscherer, his wife, said that since they live in an apartment building, "this is our stoop right now."

Made of marble, brick, and concrete from demolished Philadelphia buildings, *On the Threshold (Salvaged Stoops, Philadelphia)* is staggered along the square's east side. It seemed to be pretty popular with those in the park.

Organized by Mural Arts Philadelphia, the Monument Lab project asked 20 artists to create monuments appropriate for Philadelphia in the 21st century. It's all taking place amid debate nationally and in the city over the role of sculptures in public space. People can propose their own monuments at "labs" near the prototypes.

Also sitting on a stoop was Philadelphia-based artist Kaitlin Pomerantz, who designed *On the Threshold* and watched what people did around her artwork.

"One guy came up and said, 'I feel like I'm home,' " said Pomerantz, 31. "It's amazing to see how easy it is for people to engage with them. Everybody

See **MONUMENTS** on B10

knows what to do with a stoop."

Pomerantz, whose project encompasses 12 stoops in all, said they "speak of something greater, how people occupy space and exist as neighbors."

Some in the park were unaware of that concept. "That I did not get," said Gordon Pessano, sitting on one Saturday. Because *On the Threshold* is replacing benches on the square's east side, he thought the aim might have been to deter homeless people from sleeping there.

"Not that I think that's positive," he said. "But I do like them." Noting the craftsmanship, Pessano was "pleased they incorporated the red brick — red brick is Philadelphia."

Up in Franklin Square, another Monument Lab installation let users get creative.

"Let's go play with the music!" exclaimed Anahi Hernandez, running with several other children into the *Sample Philly* booth.

Designed by Kara Crombie, *Sample Philly* is a mixing studio with samples of Philadelphia songs and local music. Users can select samples and mix them with an array of buttons.

Hernandez, 9, said the sculpture was "really fun. You can make the volume high and change different features."

Her neighbor and friend Ernne Juncal, 11, liked that "you can change the tuning. You can learn about the different music."

As they left, Pete Magliocco wheeled a stroller in. "Hear that? What song is that?" he said to his 8-month-old son, Leo.

Magliocco deemed the addition to the park "awesome. I just heard the old-school 76ers song." It likely won't be his last interaction with it: "We'll probably be back tomorrow, if it's nice."

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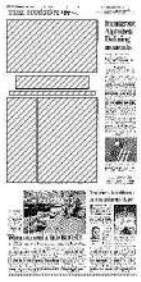

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Getting comfortable with the artwork, Jon Fox (left) of Linwood, N.J., and his dog, Alfie, experience "On the Threshold (Salvaged Stoops, Philadelphia)," as does Art Etchells of Philadelphia and his dog, Gibbs. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

Brothers Zahir Murray, 2, and Symiir Hamilton, 13, of Philadelphia, try out the "Sample Philly" mixing studio in the Monument Lab project. ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

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Mural Arts Philadelphia

The installation, 12 stoops in all, was a hit with many in Washington Square.

"One guy came up and said, 'I feel like I'm home.' It's amazing to see how easy it is for people to engage with them. Everybody knows what to do with a stoop.

Kaitlin Pomerantz, designer of "On the Threshold," at left with her beagle-Lab, Maybe

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Information about Monument Lab is available in this shipping crate at Franklin Square. The project was organized by Mural Arts Philadelphia.

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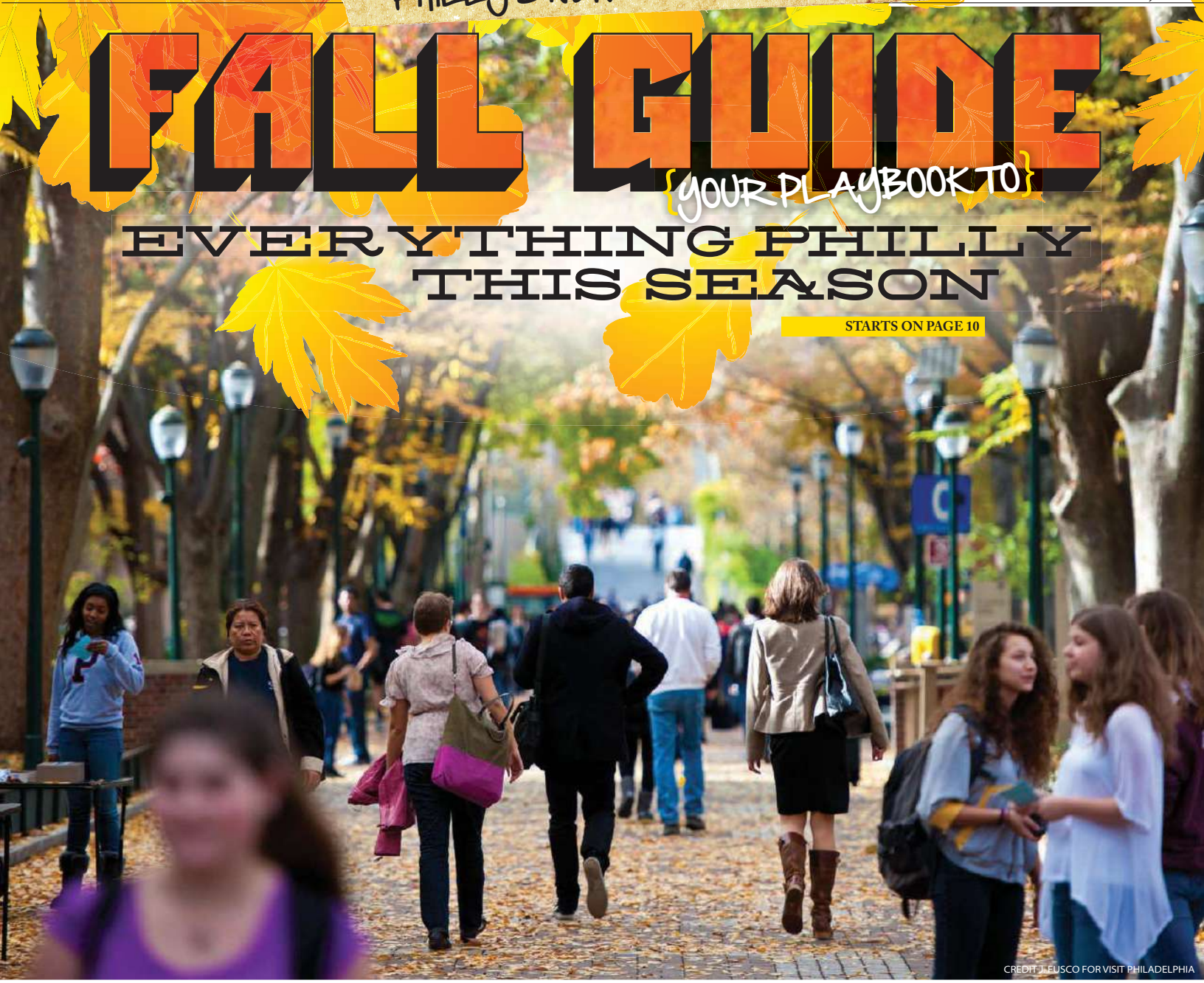

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The creation of the Monument Lab from Mural Arts Philadelphia arrives at a critical time for many landmarks throughout the country.

Monumental power

With all the political upheaval over national monuments, Philly Mural Arts' Monument Lab is asking big questions.

BY MAX MARIN

What is a monument? What does it mean? What gives it power – and who can take it away?

Monument Lab, the brainchild of Mural Arts Philadelphia, has been asking these questions since long before the national controversy erupted around which historical figures should be memorialized in public spaces.

The city-wide public art exhibition is set to return to Philly on Sept. 16. Now in its second year, the exhibit will feature 10 temporary public artworks installed in 10 locations across the city, made by the hands of 20 (mostly local) artists.

PW sat down to chat with five of them – Karyn Olivier, Marisa Williamson, Michelle Angela Ortiz, Shira Walinsky and Kaitlin Pomerantz – about the importance of the questions raised in the work.

Throughout your research and design and construction process for Monument Lab, what was one thing you learned about the power of monuments and their place in a city like Philadelphia today?

Karyn Olivier: I realized that interrogating monuments is critical — now, more than ever.

Marisa Williamson: My research often made me sad. I fell in love with a young activist cut down by racialized violence in the prime of his life. I learned about vicious attacks on the children of Philadelphia's black community by people opposed to integration. I identified (as jarring events were unfolding in our own time) that struggles for equal access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, have seen so many setbacks – that, it's sorely under-noted how extraordinary and faceted the triumphs of justice have been. Murals have the power to make note of that struggle. They remind us that we must keep up the fight or perish.

Michelle Angela Ortiz: Monuments are a record of time and history. They hold a physical space that marks a moment or honors a person's contribution to society. I can say as an artist growing up and living in Philadelphia, there are not many monuments that honor my own community, or the communities that I have collaborated with in the past.

Shira Walinsky: I have spent a lot of time working with high school students and women's groups who came as refugees to the United States. I learned so much about the desire to learn here in the United States and the value of education. I've learned about older women coming every day to ESL classes to learn and hope to become U.S citizens, refugee families reclaiming abandoned lots for gardens and farms.

Kaitlin Pomerantz: I have come to think that the city of Philadelphia may itself be a monument, and that each one of the Monument Lab creations is like a gesture seeking to retell and reshape the city's story and legacy, and fill in the many gaps in its public history.

The controversy surrounding public monuments – from Confederates in Charlottesville to Frank Rizzo in Philly – often feels intractable. It also focuses disproportionately on history and biography, rather than the artworks themselves and the public spaces that they inhabit. Do you think Monument Lab can help correct part of this imbalance in the conversation?

Olivier: Monuments are established with the assumption that we as a nation have collectively decided that something should be remembered, honored and celebrated. In reality, we don't have equal voices in this mandate. I think Monument Lab is attempting to offer a corrective. Many projects in Monument Lab invite us to see and imagine our critical role in the ever-changing American story.

Williamson: The more people see good art and see it operating in public spaces, the more literate they'll become in our dense visual-cultural landscape. Hopefully, people will be able to use that literacy – and expanded vocabulary – to talk about their feelings, observations and desires when it comes to problematic monuments. Up to now, I've heard many articulate and profound arguments for the removal or repositioning of Confederate monuments and the statue of Rizzo. I have yet to hear a well-informed or well-reasoned argument in defense of having them stay as they are.

Ortiz: Monument Lab has been asking these questions for a long time. These monuments are symbols, they are a reminder of how powerful an image can be and what impact it has to a person seeing this image every day. Monument Lab is presenting other ways to think about monuments and it is giving space to honor people and their histories that are often ignored.

Walinsky: I think the works created in Monument Lab will get people to think more not only about what needs to come down but what is an alternative vision. How can public art, monuments and murals speak to those who don't feel represented in public spaces? How can we write history in a way which leaves room for the difficult parts of our history?

Were you thinking of a particular person or type or person as you created your monument? Who was the audience, in your mind?

Olivier: I was thinking of my neighbors, my community and this monument that stands a few blocks away from my home. My reinterpretation of the Battle of Germantown Memorial asks the monument to serve as a conductor of sorts – to transport, transmit, express and – literally – reflect the landscape, people and activities that surround it.

Williamson: I was thinking a lot about Philadelphia's public school students in the production of my project.

Ortiz: My monument, an animated projection that will be seen on the gates of City Hall, is dedicated to the undocumented mothers detained at the Berks Detention Center in Pennsylvania. It illustrates the stories of two mothers who have been detained with their sons for close to two years while fighting for their freedom.

Walinsky: My audience is really anyone in Philly interested in taking the time to reflect on the work.

Pomerantz: My monument is, ostensibly, to Philadelphia stoops (or "steps"). In this, it is a monument to neighborhood culture, community, shared space, public engagement, and the architecture that fosters all that. But really, it is a monument that is actually a pedestal: the real monument is the person who sits upon it. The audience is the monument. The audience is any person who is willing to engage, to take a seat.

How would you encourage Philadelphians to get the most out of the Monument Lab installations this fall?

Williamson: People should find a map of all the projects. They'll be amazed at how many parks are participating – in areas of the city they've never been to or haven't been to since they were a kid. People should consider taking a SEPTA bus to one, ride an Indego bike to another. They might take a detour to a monument on their way home from work, or make a

scheduled trip to see Washington Square on the day of its scheduled programming. They might encounter some projects without planning to. Alternatively, they can look them all up and mark off the ones that seem most interesting. In which case, they'll have to visit them all.

Walinsky: I would encourage Philadelphians to get out and see the monuments and go to the talks and events happening! There are so many opportunities to learn, to be part of a dialogue and to learn about the city while you are thinking about monuments and monuments while you take in the city.

Pomerantz: Think of all the hands that went into each one of these projects, and the ideas that those hands might also have contributed. Read the curatorial information, which is full of ideas from both the curators and artists that may offer insight into how to approach the work and its context. Appreciate this temporary exercise in new forms of celebrating the past and considering the future. Consider how some of the goals for the work could live on once the work comes down. ■

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Educate yourself this season with these interesting (and a few interactive) museum exhibitions this fall.

"Gardens of the Mind: Echoes of the Feminine View"

The African American Museum in Philadelphia's fall exhibition will showcase five black female artists: Barbara Bullock, Martha Jackson Jarvis, Joiri Minaya, E.J. Montgomery and Glynnis Reed. Though their styles are diverse and their media range from installation to painting to photography, their works revolve around the garden as a metaphor — a vehicle to explore spirituality, memory, history and the natural environment through the female identity. In the words guest curator A.M. Weaver, "evident in their art is connectivity to the earth and living matter particular to their gaze as women."| Oct. 6-Jan. 16. $14. African American Museum in Philadelphia, 701 Arch St. ***aampmuseum.org/exhibitions.html***

"Chuck Close Photographs"

PAFA has got its hands on the 90 images taken between 1964 and the present day by an artist better known in another medium. Who knew Chuck Close even needed a camera? At a time when his contemporaries were obsessing over abstraction, Close achieved international fame for his hyper-realistic, larger-than-life portraits. And now, PAFA's never-before-seen retrospective will reveal Close's photographic work, "from early black and white maquettes, to monumental composite Polaroids, to intimately scaled daguerreotypes and the most recent Polaroid nudes." | Oct. 6 - April 8. $15. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. 118 N. Broad Street. ***pafa.org/exhibitions***

"BIG OBJECTS NOT ALWAYS SILENT"

Meanwhile, in University City, the Institute of Contemporary Art has opened a retrospective on the prolific artist and designer Nathalie Du Pasquier. Although native of France, Du Pasquier helped found the Italian design collective Memphis in 1981. She has worked in design, sculpture, installations and more, while focussing on painting for the last 30 years. The exhibit will show more than a 100 works spanning the years, including new and never-before-seen pieces. A must-see for fine art design enthusiasts. | Sept. 13-Dec. 23. Free. The Institute for Contemporary Art. 118 S. 36th Street. ***icaphila.org/exhibitions***

"Kiefer Rodin"

You know the Barnes Foundation offers more than in its eponymous collection, right? Head on over to the facility's modern gallery for "Kiefer Rodin," a collaboration with the Musée Rodin in Paris that juxtaposes 19th century master sculptor Auguste Rodin with contemporary German painter Anselm Kiefer. Curators suggest you think of it like a conversation between old and new. In more than 100 works of art, Kiefer and Rodin engage in a sort of one-way dialogue about " the architecture of the human body and the drama of humanity."| Nov. 17-March 12. $25. The Barnes Foundation. 2025 Benjamin Franklin Parkway. ***barnesfoundation.org/whats-on/kiefer-rodin***

"Philadelphia Assembled"

Philadelphia Assembled is not an art exhibit, per se. Think of more like an experimental workshop for blending art and civic engagement, now in its second year in Philly. The brainchild of Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk — with, thankfully, plenty of collaborators — "Philadelphia Assembled" opens up the artist's stage to ideas about radical community building" and "active resistance." | Now-Dec. 10. Pay what you wish. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2600 Benjamin Franklin Parkway. ***philamuseum.org/exhibitions***

ARTNET | ONLINE | 2 OCTOBER 2017

Not a VIP? Here Are the Best Frieze Week Events Everyone Can Attend

From hip performance evenings to elegant satellite fairs, it's all here.

Naomi Rea, October 2, 2017

Zadie Xa, *Crash, Boom, Hisssssss*. Legend of the Liquid Sword (performance). Photo by Arron Photo, courtesy Serpentine Galleries.

Frieze Week is upon us once more. As the art world floods into London for the prestigious fair, a host of ultra cool events will be taking place all over the city from the Monday October 2 right through to Sunday October 8, when the fair closes.

Here, we bring you the inside scoop on the best parties and satellite fairs on during the week, so you can rub elbows with the rich and famous, sneak previews of the most coveted art, and eavesdrop for the next market trends.

Most of these events are open admission, and for those that aren't, just remember that a little swagger can go a long way in the art world...

1. Unveiling of the Turbine Hall commission by SUPERFLEX

Portrait of SUPERFLEX in 2014, courtesy SUPERFLEX.

This year's commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall marks the institution's third collaboration with Hyundai Motor and has been taken on by SUPERFLEX, the with-it Danish collective comprising Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, Jakob Fenger, and Rasmus Nielsen. The Copenhagen-based trio have been working together since 1993 and are known for their playfully subversive artworks, which they call "tools" for initiating important conversations.

What SUPERFLEX have it store for the coveted 85-foot-high exhibition space is anyone's guess, but if their previous work is anything to go by, it will be timely and political, with a bit of humor thrown in. The unveiling of the commission is on the Monday of Frieze Week, but if you're not "on the list," do not fear: the general public will be able to check out the work from October 3.

SUPERFLEX's Turbine Hall Commission will be at Tate Modern between October 2 and April 2, 2018.

2. PAD Art + Design Fair London

Joan Miró, *Figure and Bird* (1977-79). Image courtesy Mayoral.

The 11th edition of the intimate art and design fair is returning to Berkeley Square from Monday to Sunday. This year, 68 galleries present a mishmash of contemporary, modern, and historical design, art, jewellery and antiques. Tickets are £25 for adults and art highlights this year include works by Joan Miró from the 1970s on display at the booths of Mayoral and Vertes, the latter of which is also showing works by Sigmar Polke, Andy Warhol, and Willem de Kooning. Elsewhere, De Jonckheere is showing a Lucio Fontana, and a Sheherazade-themed painting by René Magritte inspired by Edgar Allan Poe.

PAD London is in Berkeley Square from October 2 and October 8.

3. (X) An Evening of Performances + DRAF 10th Anniversary Party

Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, *Mega Hammer* performance at Glasgow International, 2016. Photo ©Mark Pinder, courtesy the artist & Sadie Coles HQ, London.

DRAF's annual Evening of Performances is a Frieze Week must-see. This year, coinciding with its 10th anniversary and the closure of its London space, the event will take place at KOKO in Camden, a historic music and performance venue, with capacity 1,400 people, a mere five-minute walk from DRAF's current home. The line up is strong, featuring performances by artists including Marvin Gaye Chetwynd with MEGA HAMMER, Jamila Johnson-Small under the moniker 'Last Yearz Interesting Negro,' DJ Nkisi, Laure Prouvost + Trim, and Hannah Quinlan. Everyone is welcome and admission is free. Just be sure to arrive early if you want to avoid spending the night lining up outside in London's crisp October weather.

(X) An Evening of Performances + DRAF 10th Anniversary Party takes place at KOKO on Tuesday October 3 from 7pm till 1am.

4. West End Night

Hank Willis Thomas, *Hand of God* (2017). Photo: ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

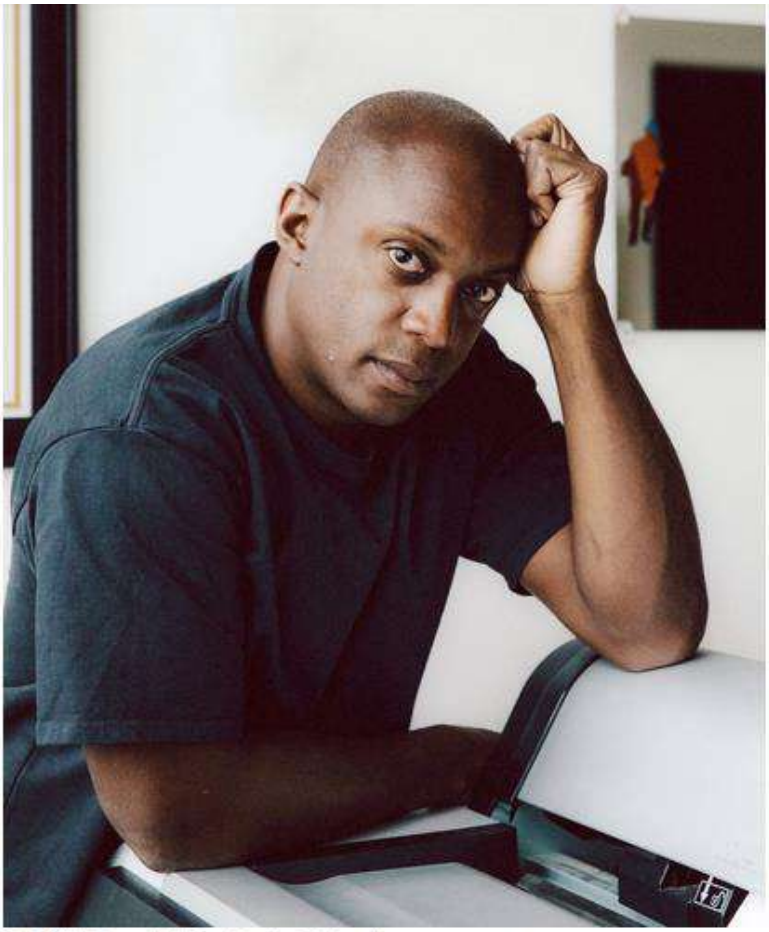
It'll all be popping off in the West End on Thursday night, with galleries and non-profits in the upscale district of Mayfair extending their opening hours for Frieze audiences and hosting special events and private views. One must see is Hank Willis Thomas's UK solo debut at Ben Brown Fine Arts. Other galleries and non-profits involved in the evening include Almine Rech Gallery, Alison Jacques Gallery, Alan Cristea Gallery, Artangel, Blain | Southern, Colnaghi, Frith Street Gallery, Gagosian, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Hauser & Wirth, Herald St | Museum St, kamel mennour, Luxembourg & Dayan, Marlborough Fine Art, Massimo De Carlo, Mazzoleni, Olivier Malingue, Pace Gallery, Pilar Corrias, Richard Saltoun Gallery, Robilant + Voena, Rodeo, Sadie Coles, Sam Fogg, Simon Lee Gallery, Southard Reid, Sprovieri, Sprüth Magers, Stephen Friedman Gallery, The Gallery of Everything, The Photographer's Gallery, Thomas Dane Gallery, Timothy Taylor, Tornabuoni Art, Victoria Miro, and Waddington Custot. Can you make it to all?

West End Night is happening across various venues on the evening of Thursday October 5.

ART & DESIGN

Artist Sews Together Sports and Geopolitics

By GEORGE VECSEY OCT. 4, 2017



Hank Willis Thomas in his Brooklyn Navy Yard studio. Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

As an American conceptual artist, Hank Willis Thomas has often referred to worldwide themes like power and money and colonialism.

Now Mr. Thomas is using the spectacle of international sport for his first solo exhibition in Britain — "The Beautiful Game," which will be on display at Ben Brown Fine Arts in Mayfair, London, starting on Thursday.

Mr. Thomas, who was trained as a photographer, has diversified into artistic forms like African tribal quilts, totems and sculptures. In this show, which runs through Nov. 24, he depicts the colors and energy of sport, often suggesting the deeper forces at play in games like soccer, rugby and cricket.

With African players flocking to western European soccer leagues in the last generation, Mr. Thomas used his art to link that with the colonization of Africa by European powers.

Mr. Thomas worked with his associates in his airy studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, cutting out soccer symbols and names for a series of quilts, based on "the function and aesthetic of Asafo flags, which have been made from the colonial period to today by the Fante people of Ghana, developed in relation to African contact with Europe starting in the 18th century," according to the notes from the Ben Brown gallery.

The quilts incorporate techniques used by Picasso and Matisse, who were influenced by African art and symbols. Mr. Thomas points out that the Asafo flags borrowed symbols from the western invaders and colonists — yes, even the Union Jack — in their own military flags, to intimidate rival tribes.

Mr. Thomas's interest in the overlap between sport and national interests also shows in his sculptures of a powerful-looking arm or an implement like an oval rugby ball or a flat-faced cricket bat.

"Hand of God," from 2017.
Hank Willis Thomas, via Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

His eclectic references are also seen in his sculpture "Endless Column, 22 Totems" — with 22 painted resin soccer balls, stacked on top of each other and pointing toward the sky — which will be on display in the annual summer exhibit in Frieze Sculpture Park in Regent's Park in London through Sunday.

Mr. Thomas and Ben Brown said that the work was inspired by Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column," which celebrates the survival of Romania, the artist's homeland, after World War I.

Social issues are never far from the surface. Mr. Thomas, 41, has sometimes used photographs of American athletes who spoke out.

"I can't ignore that there were very many other people active in civil rights, but Jackie Robinson not only integrated baseball but was also part of a World Series team here in Brooklyn," he said. "It changed the world, right?"

He expressed admiration for Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who refused to stand for the national anthem and is out of work, and noted that athletes are part of the national conversation. "They're not supposed to be political," Mr. Thomas said. "They're supposed to do their job. They don't get paid for speaking. If Ali, if Jim Brown, if Paul Robeson hadn't spoken, what would the world look like?"

Mr. Thomas's work often suggests the dangers hiding behind the rewards and fame of sport. One of his photographs depicts a noose looming just above an athlete about to dunk a basketball.

A bulletin board in Mr. Thomas's studio.
Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

"Strange Fruit," he said, invoking one of Billie Holiday's trademark songs, about the frequent image of lynching victims.

His blend of art and political awareness reflects the influences of his life. He said his father, Hank Thomas, has been "a physicist, Black Panther, jazz musician and film producer." His mother, Deborah Willis, has a doctorate from George Mason University and is a professor and chairwoman of the department of Photography & Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, where Mr. Thomas did his undergraduate work.

He was a student at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, where he became interested in what his mother does, but he said he wanted to be "more than a photographer."

From 2017, "Only God Can Defeat Us," a mixed-media piece that includes sports jerseys.
Hank Willis Thomas, via Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

Much of his work about violence and black lives alludes to his mourning of his cousin, Songha Willis, a former basketball star at Catholic University, who was murdered in a robbery attempt outside a nightclub in Philadelphia in 2002.

In an interview in early 2009 in NY Art Beat, Mr. Thomas said that his earlier work, "Winter in America" and "Bearing Witness: Murder's Wake," came after his cousin was murdered "and after years of trying to find out creative ways to talk about issues that were related to that for myself."

Mr. Thomas recently married Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator at the Whitney Museum, whose mother is Fadzai Gwaradzimba of Zimbabwe, the assistant secretary general for safety and security at the United Nations, and whose father is Trevor Hockley, an Englishman who roots for West Ham of London. (The Hammers' distinctive colors, claret and blue, are among the team references in one of Mr. Thomas's quilts.)

Mr. Thomas uses sports equipment like balls or a flat-faced cricket bat in his art.

Nathan Bajar for The New York Times

Mr. Brown, in a telephone interview in mid-August, praised Mr. Thomas for adhering to an artistic tradition while examining the powerful presence of sport in today's society.

He had seen Mr. Thomas' work at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery, which has been handling Mr. Thomas for over a decade. When they met, Mr. Brown suggested a London show with a sports motif.

"I don't think there is much overlap between art and sport," Mr. Brown said, referring to the artists Damien Hirst (with his love of snooker, a form of pool) and Jeff Koons (who often uses basketballs and other sports objects) and Andy Warhol (whose informal Polaroid photos of sports stars were recently included in Gail Buckland's well-received show, "Who Shot Sports," at the Brooklyn Museum).

A detail of Mr. Thomas's sculpture "Endless Column III," with painted resin soccer balls stacked on top of each other.
Hank Willis Thomas, via Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

"You don't see much of it," Mr. Brown said, musing that sports stars should be patrons of the arts. "I don't know what the footballers do with their cash," he said, referring to wealthy people from "finance, hedge funds, the dot-com world. But sport is very rare."

However, Mr. Thomas is hardly tailoring his work to depict the glory of sport. More likely, he is suggesting the athlete, however wealthy, is just another rower in the galley.

“Sport can also be seen as a proxy for war,” Mr. Thomas said. “And it’s not a coincidence that the World Cup came around at the same time as colonialism. A lot of football clubs in England were part of the Industrial Revolution because workers needed some kind of leisure time.”

One of Mr. Thomas’s firm ideas is put in his low-key, thoughtful way: “Art gives clues about our values in society. Art is timeless. Your art will outlive you.”

He added, “I believe all art is political. I certainly believe all sports are political. Not only because of the amount of money spent. You have to pay attention to it.”

A version of this article appears in print on October 5, 2017, on Page S2, in The International New York Times.

THE INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES | PRINT | 5 OCTOBER 2017

THE ART OF COLLECTING

The wider world behind global games

The artist Hank Willis Thomas finds deeper forces at play in sports

BY GEORGE VECSEY

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Now Mr. Thomas is using the spectacle of international sport for his first solo exhibition in Britain — "The Beautiful Game," which will be on display at Ben Brown Fine Arts in Mayfair, London, starting on Thursday.

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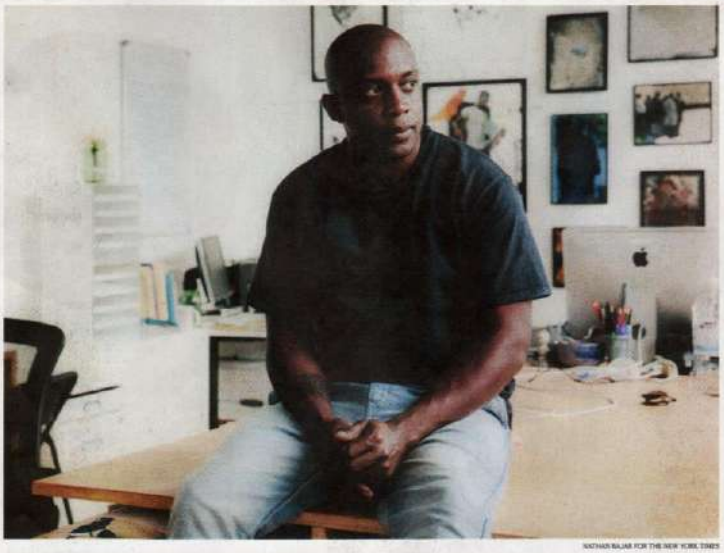

NATHAN BAJAR FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

What lies beneath "I believe all art is political. I certainly believe all sports are political," said Hank Willis Thomas, seen here in his Brooklyn studio. His work includes "Hand of God," left, and "Only God Can Defeat Us," a mixed-media piece that incorporates sports jerseys.

Mr. Thomas and Ben Brown said that the work was inspired by Constantin Brancusi's "Endless Column," which celebrates the survival of Romania, the artist's homeland, after World War I.

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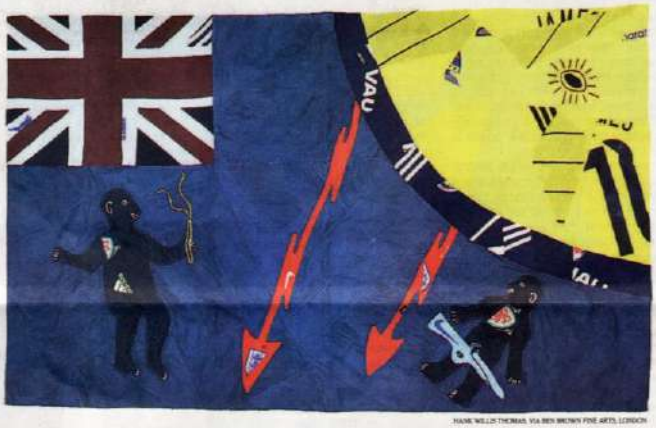

HANK WILLIS THOMAS, VIA BEN BROWN FINE ARTS, LONDON

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ARTNET | ONLINE | 4 OCTOBER 2017

Art World

Hank Willis Thomas on His New Work, Charlottesville, and Modernism's Debt to African Art

We spoke to the artist about his upcoming first UK solo exhibition, identity politics, and America's painful steps towards progress.

Naomi Rea, October 3, 2017

Portrait of Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Image: Levi Mandel

New York-based, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas is deeply invested in the idea of representation and, particularly, self-representation. His work urges us to see beyond socially constructed categories of identity, and reminds us that binaries such as black and white or male and female don't have to define us or the way we relate to one another.

Several of his artistic series have explored the influence power structures (such as advertising agencies and governing bodies) exert over our understanding of the world, and in his work he has used the language of visual culture to speak back to the corporate commodification of various identities.

These questions about identity come to the fore in his latest show, "The Beautiful Game," which will be his first solo exhibition in the UK. Opening to the public October 5, to coincide with the beginning of London's Frieze Art Fair week, Thomas will showcase new sculptures and intricate mixed media quilts at Ben Brown Fine Arts in London.

As hinted in the title of the show, "The Beautiful Game" interrogates the sports world on a few recurring motifs of Thomas's practice: sports' symbiotic relationship with globalization and nationalism, and the historic and contemporary commodification of a homogeneous black male identity.

Inspired by various quilting traditions in the US and English militaries, as well as the African-American South, Thomas has fashioned his own quilts out of soccer jerseys (and not the cheap ones, either!) to reproduce works of art by Matisse and Picasso, as well as Asafo military company flags made by the Fante people in Ghana. He will also debut new sculptures, some of which gesture towards Brâncuși.

Recently, we spoke to artist about his new work, his interest in sports, and the catastrophic events that happened in Charlottesville this summer.

Hank Willis Thomas, *The Sword Swallower*, (2017). Photo: ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

Let's start by talking about your upcoming show at Ben Brown, and how it fits within your body of work. Why has your practice been so invested in the sports world, and why have you chosen soccer jerseys as the material for your new quilts?

A lot of masculinity is shaped by perceptions of physical prowess. When I was becoming a man, I realized that although I liked to play sports and I liked to compete, I'm not particularly exceptional when it comes to physical prowess. People are elevated to superhero status just because of their capacity to control a ball with their hands or feet! I think there's an overemphasis on the value of physical prowess in our society, when it comes to evaluating one's humanity and virtue.

When I'm talking about black bodies and sports, I'm trying to address that, historically, for many people of African descent, one of the few ways to overcome the negative impact of colonialism and slavery was to show through physical prowess that they could outmatch the Europeans. And if they were able to do that, like we saw with Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, and Muhammad Ali, among others, that's when they were able to become, "free" and make more space for others to become freer. Of course you now find they've become pretty commodified for the same thing that they were once told that they couldn't do.

I am also really fascinated with globalization and how sports has been an accelerator, in some ways, of global commerce and cultural hegemony. As the world has become less militarized, sports has become a proxy for that. The World Cup, and the Olympics are proxy wars, in a sense, about nationalism.

You can actually see globalization and the intersection of commerce on the front and backs of soccer jerseys: on the back the players' names are increasingly global, but then you see international companies like Ethiad, Chevy, and Standard Chartered Bank on the front. So the quilts being made from this material is also a reference to the ongoing competition for global dominance in a much more complicated and sometimes hidden way.

Can we tease out some of the other aspects in your quilts: the motifs from Asafo flags, and modernist paintings such as Matisse's *The Sword Swallower* (1947) and Stuart Davis's "Champion" series?

When I first encountered the Asafo flags, I really couldn't quite understand how they came to be, because of the clear reference to British heraldry in what I've come to understand as African and East African mythology and narrative in visual storytelling. As I start to learn and am still learning, the more I realize the marriage is a tale as old as time: somebody said that mythology and storytelling are what brings us power. What brings nations power, what brings cultures power, are the stories that we tell about ourselves and that are told about our people. So I believe that whoever is holding the frame gets to tell the story, and create the reality because history is, as it says in the word: his-story, typically a man's singular perspective on the past, and so what I love about the Asafo quilts and English heraldry is the way that mythology is kind of made physical and paraded with the flags and the coats of armor.

These quilts are really also referencing, specifically for this show, Stuart Davis and Matisse paintings. I'm very much looking at Matisse and Stuart Davis as both European and American painters who were seen as very early and influential figures in abstract and modern art. Both were interested in popular culture, but also became really interested in abstraction around the time Europe and the United States started to encounter African art in a kind of commodifiable, collectible, way. And, as we know through Picasso and many more, this idea of primitivism is basically the foundation of modern art, and I'm really curious about that. What I am exploring is the maybe "primitive" roots of modern society, and modern art.

I don't really believe in primitivism, obviously, but I do find it curious. The way that Duchamp, and Picasso, and Matisse, and Gaugin started painting dramatically differently and were praised for their innovations, which were in some cases clearly stolen from unnamed and probably un-compensated artists from the colonies of England and France and Holland. African art IS modern art, it just wasn't named as such. You could make an argument that modern art is an extension of African Art, and so the way in which a lot of times African artists are put into a category that's regional, and not contextualised as maybe the foundation of contemporary thought.

Hank Willis Thomas *Visa*, (2017). Mixed media including sport jerseys. Photo: ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

What about the sculptures in the show: Your totem currently on view in Frieze Sculpture Park riffs Constantin Brâncuși's iconic *Endless Column,* will there be more like that?

There will be two different kinds of sculptures: two more totems, a different variation of that soccer totem in Regent's Park, and also a rugby totem.

Brancusi's *Endless Column* is also a clear reference to African art, and in the United States obviously there's a lot of Native American art where the totem functions. There's this idea of reaching towards infinity that happens in the repetition of the form but also the form that begins to have meaning because of the material that I'm using to make the column, and the repetition and the movement that's implied.

And then there will be two of my sculptures that are based off of photographs. I look at these sculptures as if I could 3D-print a photograph and crop it in a specific place to talk about specific things, so I attempted to recreate Diego Maradona's "Hand of God," the decisive moment in the Argentina versus England game in 1982, and then a bicycle kick inspired by Pélé.

Hank Willis Thomas, *Hand of God* (2017). Photo: ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

Many contemporary artists have come under fire in recent years for producing "easy" work that is reactive to the contemporary political environment rather than actively seeking change. In the run up to the presidential election you co-founded the first artist-run political action committee and campaigned for democracy through your Truth Booth project. Do you strive for your work to be politically active?

Well, what does acting look like? I believe that Daniel Buren said that every act is political, which means that all art is political. So it doesn't have to look like art as we know it to be art, and it doesn't have to look or sound political to be political. I think we should be very wary of people demanding that others speak in our language. You can encourage people, of course, to use their voice, to speak out, but there is progress to be made on many levels and on many fronts, or as our president would say "many sides." So no one knows what's most effective. But I do think it's important to be visionary instead of being reactionary. The challenge I have and I think many people have in this moment is that we thought we knew what mass destruction was before, but now there's more of an extraordinary mass destruction.... Who can see past the headlines? How can one be visionary when you are literally overwhelmed with the fear of annihilation? The American presidency has been exposed for all of its flaws, the mask has been ripped off and everyone is staring at all the open wounds and the scars and no one is actually looking at how to heal it because they're still in shock.

Speaking of shock, what was your reaction to the events that transpired in Charlottesville this summer?

The events in Charlottesville are shocking and surprising and horrible.They also, to me, actually look like the painful steps towards progress. Because of the actions of the white supremacists, there's been a expedition of the process that was already in motion to remove and recontextualize confederate statues, so in a sense they actually did the opposite of what they wanted to do. By protesting the way they did they actually brought a greater scrutiny to what those symbols actually represent to them, much less the rest of us in society. What I think is incredibly frightening and scary is that something's bubbling and we don't know when it's going to pop, and what it's going to look like. But at the same time, if we look at the painful progress we've made over the past 50 years, the fact that, in this case, the white supremacists are the fringe group, is good. So there's a real shifting of positions, and a weakening of an already discredited and weakened agenda and perspective.

Hank Willis Thomas, *Perseverance* (2017). Photo: ©Hank Willis Thomas, 2017, courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London.

This will be your first solo show in UK. Have you considered how so-called "racial" relations differ here, and how that might affect reception of your work?

I struggle because I don't really believe in race, and a part of the reason I don't believe in race is because race is not a uniform. Who gets to be white and who gets to be black changes from country to country, and time to time. So it's really difficult to talk about "race relations."

I think that race was created and founded primarily out of the experiment of slavery, turning people into human cargo, and many of the black British people are the descendants of slaves but there are also obviously many people who are immigrants, and the children of immigrants from former colonies and other countries that weren't colonies of England, so it's a much more complicated cultural history. In the United States we're having more and more immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, but then the notion of blackness that is kind of sold to us is still very much rooted in ideas that were generated during the time of slavery.

I encountered similar issues in another of my series, "Unbranded: A Century of White Women." To me, it's less about race than it is about the ways in which people are put into groups and how they are judged and valued upon whatever group they are presumed to be part of. We look at history, for example, and find there were some suffragettes who were abolitionists and some who were not. And there were male African black human rights activists who weren't necessarily suffragists either, and you recognize how people, even if they have the same struggles, find it difficult to align themselves. We all have that capacity to be both for women's rights and a misogynist. I don't know if that's going to go away but the best we can do is make ourselves and others aware of it, start to question the validity of a racial purity, or a gender purity, so that we can change our own behaviour and our own relationship to what these things are.

There's no "pure" race, and there's no "pure" culture. People have been moving around the world and having sex and exchanging ideas for thousands and thousands, of years. At what point were they ever fixed for even more than a few moments, much less centuries?

Portrait of Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Photo: Levi Mandel.

I believe in multi-nodal and intersectional identity. We are all complex. Whatever I choose to tell you I am first, if I say I'm a man first, if I say I'm black first, if I say I'm an American first, if I say I'm an artist first, that affects the way you relate to me. I am all of those things, and sometimes I'm none of those things, depending on the context. And the more that we accept that, the better off we will all be. I think the danger is that we pretend we are one thing, and that one thing should affect the way that other people relate to us and how we relate to them. Those categories were typically made by people who were more powerful, more influential, as a way to keep people in line. People need to find new forms of agency. That's the progress. I say the road to progress is always under construction. Every time we reach a certain level of freedom and opportunity, we have that much more work to do. What happened, for instance, after the election of Barack Obama, was that a lot of people put their feet up. "Oh! Racism is done! War is over! Let's give him a Nobel Prize before he gets to be president," even though that's just not how life works. You have to keep working.

"Hank Willis Thomas: The Beautiful Game" will run from October 5–November 24, 2017 at Ben Brown Fine Arts in London. Additionally, the Hank Willis Thomas sculpture "Endless Column, 22 Totems," is on public view in London's Regent's Park until October 8, 2017, as part of Frieze Sculpture.

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ARTNET | ONLINE | 5 OCTOBER 2017

Art Guides

Must-See Art Guide: London

This week's guide features Hank Willis Thomas, Catherine Opie, Jeff Elrod, and more.

Tatiana Berg, October 5, 2017

Hank Willis Thomas, *Visa* (2017). Courtesy of Ben Brown Fine Arts.

Frieze Week is upon us, making London fuller of galleries than ever. The fair is host to over 160 international galley powerhouses bringing together the very best in contemporary art in one blockbuster collector's dream. Need help navigating the tent? We've got you covered. Want to know some of the hottest museum exhibitions in the city at the same time? We've got those too.

But not to be missed are the bevy of local gallery shows, and we've rounded up some of our favorites. From the new, bold graphic work of Hank Willis Thomas to the elegant photography on view at Prahlad Bubbar Ltd, there's something for everyone and enough to keep you busy all week. Of particular note is the celebration of Lisson Gallery's 50th anniversary with the supergroup show "EVERYTHING AT ONCE." Lisson has gathered 45 new and historic works by 24 of the artists represented by the historic gallery, and will feature some of the biggest, most spectacular installations you're likely to find—inside London or out. It's pretty unmissable.

Find our full list of picks below, and get outside the tent.

Exhibition: "Hank Willis Thomas: The Beautiful Game"
When: October 5–November 24, 2017
Where: Ben Brown Fine Arts, 12 Brook's Mews, London, United Kingdom

Jack Whitten, *Yellow Cross for Naomi* (1980). Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

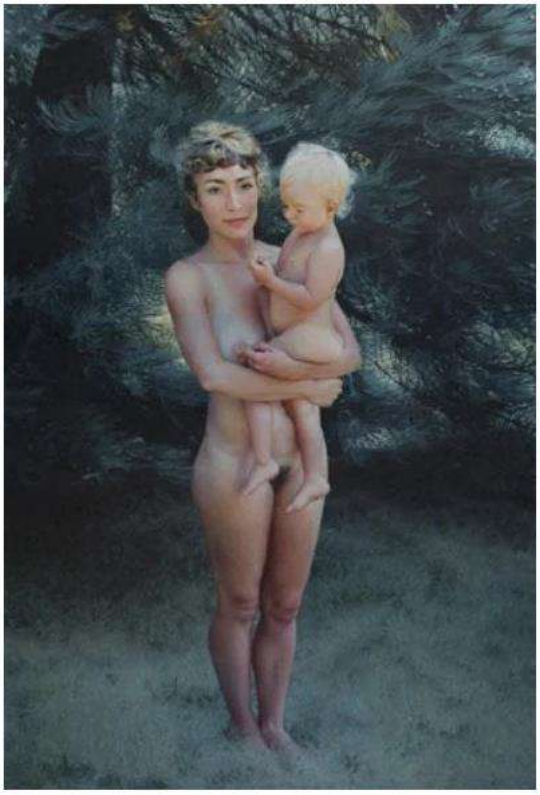
Exhibition: "More Dimensions Than You Know: Jack Whitten, 1979–1989"
When: September 27–November 18, 2017
Where: Hauser & Wirth, 23 Savile Row, London, United Kingdom

Martin Basher, *Untitled* (2017). Courtesy of Sophia Contemporary Gallery.

Exhibition: "Im/material: Painting in the Digital Age"
When: September 29–November 17, 2017
Where: Sophia Contemporary Gallery, 11 Grosvenor Street, London, United Kingdom

Amar Kanwar, *Such a morning* (2017). Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.

Exhibition: "Such a Morning"
When: September 19–October 14, 2017
Where: Marian Goodman Gallery, 5-8 Lower John Street, London, United Kingdom



Aleah Chapin, *Under the Curve Of Time* (2017), Courtesy of Flowers Gallery.

Exhibition: "Aleah Chapin: Within Wilds"
When: October 4–November 4, 2017
Where: Flowers Gallery, 21 Cork Street, London, United Kingdom

THE GUARDIAN – G2 | PRINT | 10 OCTOBER 2017

A family murder re-enacted by toy soldiers, giant afro picks, football as warfare ... **Tim Jonze** meets Hank Willis Thomas, the provocateur-in-chief of American art

'Race is a myth'

For some people, football is a matter of life and death. But for Hank Willis Thomas, much like Bill Shankly, it's far more important than that. Yes, on an aesthetic level The Beautiful Game, his first solo UK show, is a riot of colour and energy: dazzling patchwork collages of Premier League football tops; totem poles of rugby, football and cricket balls inspired by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncuși; a solitary leg performing a midair bicycle kick that invites you to hear the gasps of a non-existent crowd.

But Thomas is also attempting to start a conversation about what the game represents. Beyond the shock of seeing Liverpool and Manchester United jerseys snuggled up next to each other, cooperating in the same colour scheme, you're also asked to examine the web of corporate sponsorship logos and expensive players from across the globe, and to question the contradictions that underpin Britain's national sport. Who is really making the money? How many people's dreams and labours come to nothing so that a select few can succeed? And why are we so determined to pick sides?

That last question confronts you the moment you descend the stairs into the gallery – to be greeted by a hand protruding from the wall pushing a football. This is a recreation of Maradona's infamous Hand of God goal, which helped Argentina knock England out of the 1986 World Cup, outraging England fans and leaving a wound that has yet to heal.

"Football is often a proxy for war," says the 41-year-old artist from New York as he guides me around. "So if you think of the Falklands war" – which took place four years before the Hand of God – "this piece speaks to that colonialism, to how the rules of a game can be changed, and how important it is to win at any cost, even when you're already the best. All of these questions play out on the football field. On one level, sport is about local competition. But it's also about international competition and corporate competition. There's a lot of stuff clashing."

Thomas is also weaving a narrative about art history with his quiltwork football tops, which recreate iconic works: Verve, from Matisse's jazz series; Stuart Davis's proto-pop art piece Visa; and the asafo warrior flags created by the Fante people of Ghana. These works, he says, were part of the back-and-forth conversation between European and African art that took place around the first half of the 20th century following colonisation.

With such a tangle of ideas, even Thomas admits the show is about starting conversations rather than concluding them. That's something he's proven adept at. Last month, his sculpture of a giant afro pick, topped with a black power fist, was installed in Thomas Paine Plaza in Philadelphia, just metres from a statue of the divisive former mayor Frank Rizzo. "I can see it's provocative but you hope every work of art you make is provocative," says Thomas, who wasn't responsible for the sculpture's position.

On America under Trump: 'I think things have never been better – because if you can't point at the problem, you can't address it'

Thomas's earlier work approached things from a more personal – although no less political – angle. In 2000, his older cousin and role model Songha was shot dead during a mugging in Philadelphia, in what seems to have been a completely senseless murder – Songha was lying face down in the snow when he was shot. Thomas decided to confront it as an artist, recreating the killing using GI Joe figures for Winter in America, a 2005 collaboration with Kambui Olujimi. Another piece from this period, Priceless #1, displays a photograph of mourners at Songha's funeral, overlaid with the text: "3-piece suit: $250. 9mm pistol: $80. Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless."

"I guess there's an irony in it," he says. "For me, witnessing my aunts in the funeral home, there was the $7,000, the $2,000 and the $500 casket, and then asking themselves the question, 'Do I love him more if I buy the $7,000 one?' Even in mourning, we're still being marketed to."

A fascination with advertising runs through much of Thomas's work – most notably in his Unbranded series, which stripped the words from old adverts to reveal the damaging ways black Americans and white women were being sold to the public. Shorn of context, the standalone images showed women in borderline pornographic poses, or black men reduced to crude stereotypes. A 1978 ad for Blue Bonnet margarine featured heavyweight boxing champion Joe Frasier wearing the titular bonnet, portraying him, Thomas said, as a "mammy figure – a slave caricature – which makes us think of Aunt Jemima."

Recently, Thomas has been using this marketing nous in a more direct manner. In 2016, he helped set up For Freedoms, the first artist-run super PAC (political action committee). In the lead-up to the US election, the

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY THE ARTIST/BEN BROWN FINE ARTS; SARAH LEE FOR THE GUARDIAN/AP/KAMBUI OLUJIMI

Clockwise from main, **Priceless #1; Winter in America; the afro pick in Philadelphia; the artist; his Maradona Hand of God**

group were responsible for billboards that showed the Bloody Sunday stand-off between police and civil rights protesters in Selma, Alabama, underneath the words: "Make America great again." The 1965 protests led to a change in the law, protecting African-Americans' right to vote.

"There's no nuance in politics," says Thomas. "And the people who try to have a nuanced conversation are normally seen as trying to be intellectuals. So I think simple arguments lead to simple solutions." For all Thomas's talk of simplicity, however, many residents were confused by the message, with some believing them to be the work of far-right, pro-Trump groups. The billboards were eventually removed although, as with much of Thomas's work, a conversation had at least been sparked. "I guess we should have known it would be controversial," he says, smiling. "But if you *really* think about that picture, who were the real winners on that day?"

The decision to get more involved with politics came after witnessing the rise of both Obama and Trump: "They both succeeded by creating the newest, most exciting brands. In Trump's case, he proved that no amount of money can take down a great brand. He'd been advertising himself as a winner for decades. So when they [his opponents] spent $2bn trying to tarnish that brand, even with his help they couldn't do it."

Has Thomas been surprised by what's been revealed to be bubbling under the surface of the American psyche since Trump's election? "I feel like one of those weird people who thinks things have never been better. Because if you can't point at the problem and really see it, you can't actually address it."

He mentions the recent NFL protests - where players have gone down on one knee during the national anthem to protest at police brutality against African Americans - as a positive sign. "Right now we're seeing hundreds of millionaires, and billionaires, actively protesting injustice," he says. "It's exciting to see people using their visibility for something more than just corporate gain."

Seeing players from rival teams come together against a different enemy, witnessing NFL team owners shift their allegiances - such blurring of the boundaries between sides is exactly what Thomas is trying to unpick with The Beautiful Game: the idea that the team we're fighting so hard for may be completely arbitrary. "The context of who is us and who is them is very malleable and always changing, which is why I always tell people that race isn't real, it's a myth, a divide-and-conquer strategy to keep people bickering while other people exploit them." He smiles and adds: "Much like sport."

i The Beautiful Game is at Ben Brown Fine Arts, London, until 24 November.

THE GUARDIAN | ONLINE | 10 OCTOBER 2017

Hank Willis Thomas: why does America's great protest artist think things are better under Trump?

He is one of America's most outspoken artists. As his new show The Beautiful Game hits Britain, Hank Willis Thomas talks about sport as warfare and why race is a myth

The artist at his new show The Beautiful Game. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

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War by proxy ... Hand of God, 2017. Photograph: Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

That last question confronts you the moment you descend the stairs into the gallery - and find yourself being greeted by a hand protruding from the wall and pushing a football. This is unmistakably a recreation of Maradona's infamous Hand of God goal, which helped Argentina knock Englandout of the 1986 World Cup, outraging England fans and leaving a wound that has yet to heal.

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Thomas's All Power to All People afro pick sculpture, with the statue of Frank Rizzo in the background. Photograph: Matt Rourke/AP

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Gun over Songha, from Winter in America. Photograph: Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

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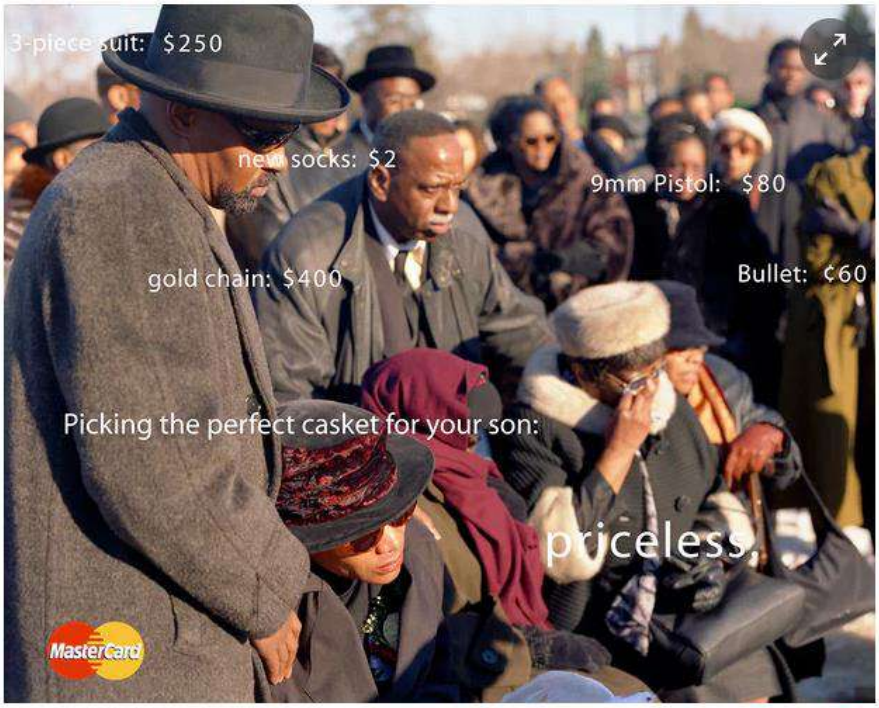

Priceless #1, 2005, inspired by his cousin's murder. Photograph: Hank Willis Thomas/Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

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