

BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



Hank Willis Thomas, 2017. Photo: Levi Mandel

Hank Willis Thomas

The Beautiful Game

5 October – 24 November 2017

Private view: 4 October, 6-8pm

In his first solo exhibition in the UK at Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hank Willis Thomas presents *The Beautiful Game* comprising new floor and wall based sculptures and quilts. Thomas's conceptually-based practice spans photography, installation, sculpture and performance.

The Beautiful Game will explore the intersection of art, sports and geopolitics. These arenas are often thought of as discrete and unrelated, but in fact they have significant overlap and resonance, particularly in relation to modernism, nationalism, colonialism, and human nature across time and culture. Containing sculptures referencing both Brancusi and football, and quilts made from football jerseys that reproduce iconic works of art by Matisse and Picasso as well as Ghanaian Asafo flags, *The Beautiful Game* alludes to skirmishes on the rugby field or football pitch as well as the battlefields of art, culture, and history.

Sport is often said to be a proxy for warfare, an “appropriate” channel for our inclinations towards division based on arbitrary signifiers such as tribe, nationality, skin colour, class, etc. This demarcation of “us” versus “them” appears throughout history and cultures; there is nothing that humans will not use as a basis for division and presumed superiority. In connecting sport – and specifically football, the most popular and among the most lucrative sports in the world, and one which relies heavily on the labour and skill of international players, frequently of the African diaspora – to this impulse, this exhibition asks us to see uncomfortable connections between our pasts and our presents.

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. Visual representations of military “companies,” their primary function is to connote intra-company belonging and exert power and dominance over competing companies – us versus them, again. European modernism, with Brancusi, Matisse, and Picasso its herald bearers, developed in relation to European contact with Africa in the same period, whether through art and material culture, photographic images of African people and places, or interactions with individual Africans in Europe. Though poorly acknowledged, this debt cannot be ignored.

Editor’s notes

Current and upcoming exhibitions by Hank Willis Thomas include *Freedom Isn’t Always Beautiful* (21 February – 20 August 2017) at Savannah College of Art and Design Museum, and *Prospect 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp* (18 November 2017 - 25 February 2018) in New Orleans. Thomas’s *Endless Column, 22 Totems* is currently on view at Frieze Sculpture in London’s Regent’s Park (5 July – 8 October 2017) and his work will be exhibited in Philadelphia at *Monument Lab*, a public art and history project produced by Mural Arts Philadelphia (16 September - 19 November 2017).

About the artist

Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history and popular culture. His work has been exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad including, the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. 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, among others. His collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth)*, and *For Freedoms* which Thomas co-founded in 2016 as the first artist-run super PAC. *For Freedoms* was recently awarded the 2017 ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform. Thomas is also the recipient of the 2017 Soros Equality Fellowship. Thomas is a member of the Public Design Commission for the City of New York. He received a BFA in Photography and Africana studies from New York University and a MFA and MA in Photography and Visual Criticism from the California College of Arts. He has also received honorary doctorates from the Maryland Institute of Art and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. Thomas lives and works in New York City.

Ben Brown Fine Arts

Ben Brown Fine Arts opened its first location on Cork Street in the heart of Mayfair, London, in 2004. The gallery has prominently positioned itself on the contemporary art scene with the sole UK representation of artists such as Ron Arad, Tony Bevan, Ori Gersht, Candida Höfer, Claude & François-Xavier Lalanne, Heinz Mack, Vik Muniz, Gavin Turk and Not Vital. Also renowned for its strong expertise in 20th century Italian art, the gallery has been exhibiting the work of Alighiero Boetti and Lucio Fontana, amongst others, since its inception. In 2008, Ben Brown Fine Arts opened a new exhibition space on Brook's Mews, also in Mayfair, designed by architect Alexander Maybank. The office and viewing room are conveniently located across from the gallery space. In 2009, the gallery took its first step in an international expansion with the opening of an exhibition space in Hong Kong designed by André Fu.

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