

BEN BROWN FINE ARTS



Hank Willis Thomas, *Umbrella Man*, 2018, screenprint on retroreflective vinyl, 76.2 x 50.8 cm; (30 x 20 in.)
(left: no flash; right: flash)

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

MY LIFE IS OURS

20 September – 27 October 2018
PRIVATE VIEW: 19 SEPTEMBER 2018, 6-8PM

Ben Brown Fine Arts is proud to present Hank Willis Thomas's first solo exhibition in Asia, *My Life is Ours*, at the Hong Kong gallery. This is Thomas's second solo exhibition with Ben Brown Fine Arts, following his critically acclaimed show, *The Beautiful Game*, held at the London gallery in 2017. This exhibition will present a new series of Thomas's innovative *retroreflective* works, based on poignant photographic documentation of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and the Hong Kong protests, also known as the Umbrella Revolution, of 2014. Whether working in photography, sculpture, installation, video or mixed media, this conceptual artist continually strives to examine issues of identity, race, intolerance and protest throughout history, asking his viewers to reflect upon the perpetuality and universality of these themes.

For this exhibition Thomas delved through myriad archival photographs of the Tiananmen Square and Hong Kong protests, ultimately selecting images that illuminate parallels between the two historic events that occurred 25 years apart and reveal personal narratives and moments of oppression and bravery that should not be forgotten. Also included in the exhibition is an image from the 1967 riots in Hong Kong and from a mass protest in New York City's Chinatown in 1975. These images were screen-printed onto retroreflective sheeting, the industrial material used to make road signs visible in the dark, and then layered with painterly brushstrokes. While slight elements of the imagery are visible to the naked eye, it is only when the works are illuminated by a beam of light that the full details and crushing impact of these historical photographs are revealed. The works must be activated by the viewer, whether using the torch on an iPhone or taking a photograph with a flash, encouraging an engagement and personalized experience with each work of art. The works are constantly transforming depending on the variation of the light source and the angles and distance at which the works are viewed.

By employing the retroreflective material in these works, Thomas is able to prompt pause and reflection in his audience, a remarkable feat in an age when we are inundated by digital imagery from social media, news outlets, advertising and mobile phone cameras, spending only seconds glimpsing an image before moving onto the next. The activation and engagement these works require literally

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slows down the viewing experience and offers an opportunity for examination and contemplation, which is ultimately what interests Thomas most as an artist. In all his works, Thomas endlessly searches for connections between the past and the present, to demonstrate the cyclical nature of human struggles, looking back at history to connect to and create new perspectives on the present.

The elaborate process required to create these works brings Thomas back to his roots and training in traditional photography, a process that required patience, time, experimentation and technical ingenuity in the darkroom, and has now been replaced by the immediacy of digital photography. The screen-printed photographs of harrowing scenes, some of which appear in a gridlike arrangement within one work, recall the work of Pop artists such as Andy Warhol, while the haphazard brushstrokes painted over the imagery may recall Abstract Expressionism. Each work has many existences and iterations: in ambient daylight they are beautiful painterly abstractions only revealing hints of figures or street scenes beneath, while illuminated they are stinging images of struggle and protest unearthed from the past. Collectively, the works in the exhibition create an edifying narrative and offer opportunity for discussion. The title of the exhibition was inspired by one of the photographs Thomas came across of the Tiananmen Square protests of a young man wearing a t-shirt with a hand-scrawled phrase in English reading: "My Life is Yours, My Love is Yours," a poetic truth that resonates and provokes reflection today.

About the artist

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976) received a BFA in Photography and Africana Studies from New York University and an MFA and MA in Photography and Visual Criticism from the California College of Arts, San Francisco. He currently lives and works in New York City. Thomas's work has been exhibited extensively throughout the United States and abroad, at institutions including the International Center of Photography, New York; Studio Museum, Harlem, New York; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, Georgia; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada; Musée du quai Branly, Paris; Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong; Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Netherlands; Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain; and Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, South Africa. His work is in numerous public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, among others. His collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males*, *In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth)*, and *For Freedoms*. In 2017, *For Freedoms* was awarded the International Center of Photography Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform. Thomas is a recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship (2018), AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize (2017), Soros Equality Fellowship (2017), Aperture West Book Prize (2008), Renew Media Arts Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation (2007), and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Award (2006).

The artist will be at the Private View and is available for interviews on request.

FOR FURTHER PRESS INFORMATION AND ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT:

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