For over fifteen years, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas has consistently explored the representation of stereotypes within mass media and American consumer culture, particularly as it relates to African-American subjects. His projects often appropriate and repurpose imagery drawn from advertising campaigns to investigate the subtle, and not so subtle, ways in which visual imagery reproduces and reinforces ideas about race and race relations.

The following selections are drawn from two related bodies of work—the series Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008 (2005–08), and Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915–2015 (2015), which are the focus of the exhibition Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded currently on view at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University. Exploring the visualization of African-American identity and white femininity within the same eras, Thomas removes slogans and product names from historical and contemporary advertisements, asking us to confront the impact of images on the popular imagination.

Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America explores fifty years of print advertising targeted towards African-Americans from 1968, a year of heightened social and political protest that saw the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., until 2008, the year of the election of the first African-American president. Unbranded: A Century of White Women ends with the year in which Thomas finished working on the series, stretching back to five years before American women gained the right to vote.

Employing an aspirational tone, these images present contestable messages about beauty, desire, virtue, and ideal white femininity.

The selected juxtapositions presented here within THE SEEN highlight visual resonances between these two bodies of work. Thomas’s provocative titling of the works hones in on particular interpretations of the images. They Satisfy 1942/2015 from A Century of White Women is juxtaposed with Farewell Uncle Tom 1971/2007 from Reflections in Black, Where They Satisfy ostensibly refers to the cigarette dangling from the mouth of the uniformed woman sporting a seductive countenance, the cigarette also plays a prominent visual role in Farewell Uncle Tom, though the title emphasizes assertively black cultural politics signaled by the couple’s natural hairstyles and dashikis. Travel Light! 1940/2015 and We Are On Our Way 1970/2008 both focus on women’s mobility and movement. While Travel Light! seemingly promotes independence for middle-class white women in the 1940s, We Are On Our Way reflects on a post-Civil rights moment, with mothers bringing their children together across a metaphorical racial divide that is also visually delineated in an aisle.

This special edition emphasizes themes of beauty, travel, labor, and leisure, and how gender, class, and racial dynamics play into the expression across both of Thomas’ series.

Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded will be on view at the Block Museum of Art through August 5, 2018.