

Northwestern

MARY AND LEIGH

BLOCK MUSEUM OF ART

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Communications Manager: Lindsay Bosch

lindsay.bosch@northwestern.edu

847.467.4602



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

Artist Hank Willis Thomas ‘unbrands’ ads to reveal questions about cultural values

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

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

Renowned conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas (b.1976) has built his career investigating issues of American consumer culture, particularly as it relates to African-American subjects. The Block Museum of Art at Northwestern is proud to present "Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded," showcasing some of Thomas's most well-known works interrogating how advertising images reproduce and reinforce the changing American ideals of race and femininity. "Unbranded" opens April 14 and continues through Aug. 5, in the main gallery of the Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive on the Evanston campus.

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

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

"Hank Willis Thomas uses appropriation as a strategy to catalyze thinking about the value system operating within images which circulate in consumer culture. How does advertising shape our collective sense of self and individual sense of self-worth? How does it commodify race and gender? Northwestern is home to renowned programs in marketing and communications and our students will one day hold decision-making positions in these fields. We hope that this presentation of Hank's work will be a springboard for lively discussion of these questions." said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum's Ellen Philips Katz Director.

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

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

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

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

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



Hank Willis Thomas,
Bleach and Glow, 1975/2008, 2008



Hank Willis Thomas,
They Satisfy, 1975/2008, 2008

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

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

About Hank Willis Thomas

Hank Willis Thomas has exhibited extensively throughout the United States and internationally. Notable solo and group exhibitions include *Repetition and Difference* at the Jewish Museum, New York, 2015; *Hank Willis Thomas* at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, 2013-2014; *Speaking of People: Ebony, Jet and Contemporary Art*, Studio Museum Harlem, New York, 2014-2015; *Hank Willis Thomas*, The Art Museum at the University of Kentucky, Kentucky, 2013; *Hank Willis Thomas: Believe It*, SCAD, Atlanta, Georgia; *Strange Fruit*, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Connecticut, 2012; *Hank Willis Thomas: Strange Fruit*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2011-2012; *30 Americans*, Rubell Family Collection, Florida, 2008–2013 which is still traveling widely; and *Greater New York*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2010.

Thomas earned his BFA in photography and Africana studies from New York University in 1998 and MFA in photography/ MA in visual criticism from California College of Arts, San Francisco in 2004.

He is a 2017 recipient of the Open Society Foundations’ Soros Equality Fellowship awarded to practitioners from a variety of fields to support work that advances racial justice. He has been a W.E.B. DuBois Institute Resident Fellow at Harvard University, and has received awards and residencies from John Hopkins University, Headlands and Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris among others. His first monograph, *Pitch Blackness* (2008), garnered him the first annual Aperture West Book Prize. Thomas lives and works in New York.

About the Exhibition

“Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded” is curated by Janet Dees, Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, with assistance from Tamar Kharatishvili, 2017-18 Block Graduate Curatorial Fellow. Funding for this exhibition has been provided by the David C. & Sarajean Ruttenberg Arts Foundation, the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, and the Illinois Arts Council Program.

Block Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Saturdays and Sundays and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays. The Museum is closed Mondays. Admission is free and open to the public. For more information, visit the Block Museum website.

The Block Museum of Art is a member of the Northwestern Arts Circle, which brings together film, humanities, literary arts, music, theater, dance and visual arts. Search for events across all artistic disciplines at Northwestern Arts Circle.

Related Events

Exhibition Opening: Hank Willis Thomas in conversation with Huey Copeland

April 14, 2 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.
Norris University Center, McCormick Auditorium
1999 Campus Drive

Join the artist for an opening conversation on the ways in which his work has addressed advertising, race, gender and class for the past 20 years. Hank Willis Thomas's talk will be followed by a conversation with Huey Copeland, associate professor in Northwestern's department of art history. The event is presented in conjunction with the Northwestern Arts Circle "Arts on Equality" celebration. Information and registration are available on the Block Museum website.



Hank Willis Thomas,
Farewell Uncle Tom, 1971/2007, 2007

Branding Quality TV: Race, Gender and Representation

May 15, 6 p.m.
Block Museum
40 Arts Circle Drive

Block Museum and Northwestern's School of Communication co-present this program exploring how representations of women of color serve to brand TV networks and film studios. Aymar Jean Christian, assistant professor of communications studies, and Miriam Petty, associate professor of screen cultures in the department of radio/television/film, screen clips of recent critically acclaimed cable and TV shows such as "Insecure" and "Queen Sugar," and they discuss how the shows fit into strategies of major film and TV brands. Information and registration are available on the Block Museum website.

"Different Image" film series

April 13 - June 1
Block Cinema
40 Arts Circle Drive

The subversions of commercial imagery in Hank Willis Thomas's "Unbranded" series serve as a launching pad for this cinema series featuring films that explore and dismantle socially-imposed images and identities of race, class, gender and sexuality. The series' title comes from Alile Sharon Larkin's singular, underseen 1982 film, "A Different Image," in which a young black woman confronts sexual objectification in both her environment and in her relationships with friends and coworkers. A mixture of mainstream, independent and experimental cinema, the films in this series share strategies for creating disobedient, self-determined representations. The complete film schedule is available on the Block Museum website.

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