

## REVIEWS

### “Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded”

#### The Block Museum of Art

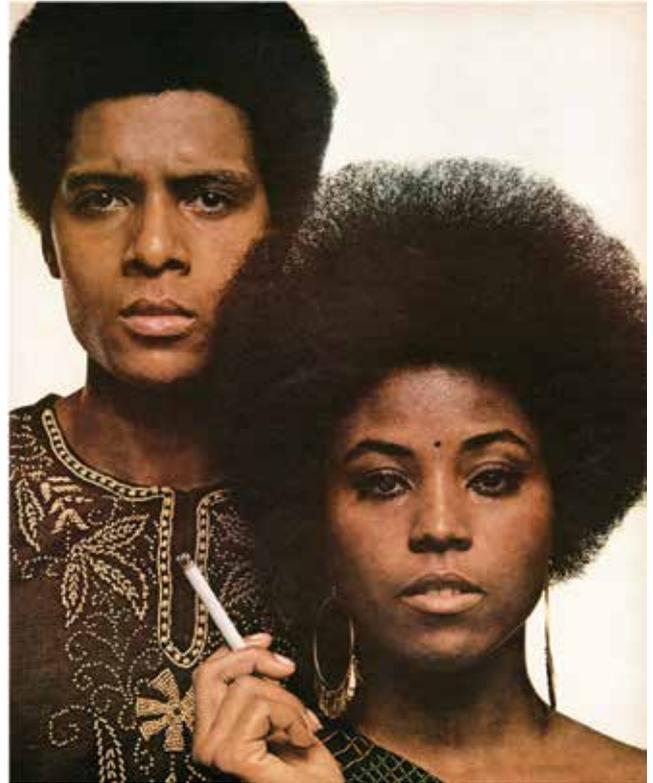
**H**ank Willis Thomas wants us to think about the power of advertising. His current exhibition at the Block Museum of Art, titled “Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded,” consists entirely of print advertisements, over several decades, blown up to poster size, from which Thomas has erased all of the text and branding information that would normally declare the advertisement’s use.

Half the works in the show are from a series called “Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915-2015.” They focus on advertising images of white women. The other half are from a series titled “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America,” focusing on advertising images of black people.

Thomas has consistently explored American consumer culture, particularly as it relates to African-American subjects. His appropriated imagery from advertisements investigates the subtle and not-so-subtle ways advertising reinforces ideas about race and race relations. He is a 2017 recipient of the Open Society Foundations’ Soros Equality Fellowship, which is awarded to practitioners from a variety of fields to support work that advances racial justice. He has also been a W.E.B. DuBois Institute Resident Fellow at Harvard University.

By removing the branding information, Thomas challenges us to consider more deeply how the people in the ads are being portrayed. Without the context provided by the original product information, the pictures seem dreamlike, idyllic, or absurd. Many portray characters engaged in something sexy, confident, or even heroic. Several also employ stereotypes that could easily offend.

Some ads are instantly recognizable, such as an iconic Honda scooter ad from the 1980s featuring Grace Jones or the movie poster from *Mr. Mom*. Others are generic in nature, showing idealizations of everyday situations, such as a woman baking, a group of business people having a cocktail, or a family exercising in the park. Every image is eye-catching, as the advertising artists intended them to be from the start.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Farewell Uncle Tom*, 1971/2007, LightJet Print, 55 x 46 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

And yet if these were only pictures of ads without words, this exhibition would be little more than quaint, which is why removing the branding from the ads was not Thomas’ only intervention. He went a step further by replacing the original advertising slogan for each picture with a new slogan in the form of an artist’s title.

One image in the show portrays a confident, smiling white woman in a military outfit lighting a cigarette. Thomas titled the picture *They Satisfy*. Another image portrays a white woman dressed in animal skins inside of a cage. Outside the cage is a white male hunter with two glasses of something boozy. Thomas titled the picture *The Taming of the Shrewd*.

For an ad that portrays two beautiful, confident, proud black faces—one male and one female—with natural hair styles in which the woman is smoking a cigarette, Thomas titled the image *Farewell Uncle Tom*.

On their own, each of these images shows a generalization, an idealization, or an absurdity. Thomas takes it up a notch by giving them titles that further diminish the subjects in overt ways. Upon first reading them, I reacted to these titles as though they were as cynical and offensive as anything I would expect from marketers. I wondered what intentions Thomas could possibly have.

My relationship with advertisers is cut and dried—they are trying to convince me to buy something. The only advertisements that bother me are the misleading ones, like product placements, or media reports placed by PR firms, or celebrities on social media showing off what products they use.

My relationship with artists is less well defined. I am always skeptical of art until I figure out whether the artist is going to let me think for myself.

At first, this exhibition got me asking: Is Thomas trying to sell me a point of view? Is he selling the idea that advertising is prejudiced? Or, as his titles imply, is he the one who is prejudiced? Is he critiquing the misogyny in the advertising world? Or is he the misogynist? Or by getting down in the mud with those who originally created these images, is Thomas just bickering with sharks and proclaiming the obvious—that capitalism creates a manipulative cultural wasteland?

Ultimately, I realized I was missing the point. It doesn't matter how I feel about these images, or about the titles Thomas gave them. The point of the show is not to get me to think about these pictures at all. The point is to make me think about who has the power.

Who do I let have the power to show me what humanity looks like? Or to feed me messages about gender, race, sexuality, or success? With these works, Thomas is claiming that power for himself and putting it to use. The result is visually fascinating and intellectually challenging. Even if, at times, the whole operation—from the original ads to Thomas' appropriated interventions—seems cynical, I have to remember that there is a reason why cynicism exists. Sometimes, even artists need to be cynical in order to make a point. ■

#### Phillip Barcio

**Phillip Barcio is an art writer and fiction author whose work appears regularly in *Hyperallergic*, *IdeelArt*, *La Gazette Drouot* and the *New Art Examiner*. His fiction has appeared in *Space Squid* and the *Swamp Ape Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Western Humanities Review*.**



Hank Willis Thomas, *Bleach and Glow*, 1975/2008, LightJet print, 61.9 x 50 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



Hank Willis Thomas, *They Satisfy*, 1942/2015, 2015, digital chromogenic print, 48 1/4 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York..

"Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded" is on view at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University through August 5th, 2018.

**NEW  
ART**  
examiner™

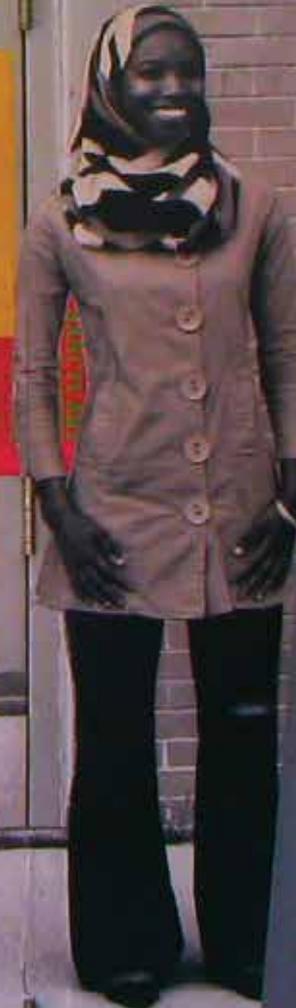
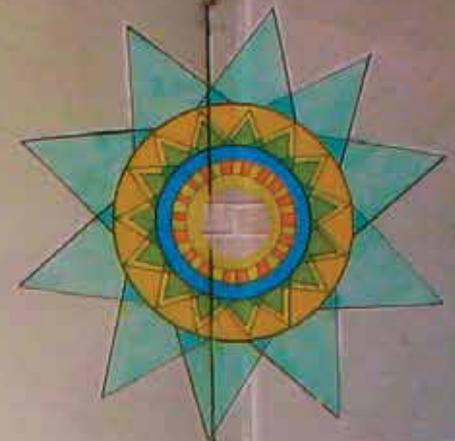
Established 1973

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE OF THE VISUAL ARTS

Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York

Volume 32 No. 6 July/August 2018

*The  
South Side  
& Beyond:  
A Chicago  
Art Legacy*



**INSIDE**

**Patric McCoy, Pioneering South Side Art Collector**  
**Seven Reviews Cover Shows of African-American Artists**  
**Cleveland Prepares to Host International Art Triennial**  
**Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists-Sponsored Show Features Martyl and (art)™**

\$8 U.S.