HANK WILLIS THOMAS

Primary Sources
HANK WILLIS THOMAS trained as a photographer, but he rarely takes his own pictures. Instead, he borrows from a wide range of sources that he transforms through physical and textual manipulations. His practice, which he describes as “photo-conceptual,” draws on the legacies of appropriation and pop art while exploring the physical and intellectual boundaries of the photographic medium. The works included in this exhibition upend the status of the photograph as something fixed; challenge the social function of the narrative image; and explore the phenomenological qualities of mimesis, while contending with what George Baker describes as the “spatial…expansion of the photograph” into real space.¹ Thomas’s experimental approach to image making reflects his broader investigation of the historical and cultural apparatuses surrounding issues of race, gender, and identity today. The artist frequently utilizes photographs that document civil rights struggles as the foundation of his work. He zeroes in on the physical details of the individuals in these images, highlighting universally legible hand gestures or identifying other forms of non-verbal communication. While, as Mary Fulbrook notes, focusing on bodily gestures may at first seem trivial in the context of a larger exploration of twentieth-century oppression, doing so helps “illuminate the ways in which dictatorships were enacted, experienced, or subverted in everyday life.”² In deconstructing the architecture of such primary sources, Thomas begins to decode their continued and contemporary meaning.

In his retroreflective screenprints Thomas dissects the contents of historical images into layers. The surface of each print is coated with a granular substance that causes light to reflect from the reproduced image. The result is a destabilizing fracture of the pictorial field where one section of the image is visible with light and another without. This strategy allows the artist to reveal a photograph in stages, undermining its temporal and spatial certainty. Refusal, is based on a 1936 photograph of German shipworker August Landmesser, who was a member of the Nazi party until he was expelled for marrying a Jewish woman. He was later imprisoned for “dishonoring the race.” At first we see a central figure standing firmly with his arms crossed on his chest, his brow pensively furrowed. When a spotlight shines on this surface, the glistening white background is transformed into a crowd of men giving the Nazi salute. Landmesser’s seemingly disinterested stance becomes a powerful act of resistance against the gestural politics of the Third Reich. Thomas’s subtle reframing allows us to reconsider the quotidian ways in which gestures become a physical index of the political self.

While Refusal offers a compelling analysis of the cultural specificities of gestural politics, the Punctum sculptures function as a study in the universality of non-verbal communication. The Punctum series derives its name from Roland Barthes’s eponymous notion of the compelling detail that draws a viewer into a picture. For Thomas this is often a limb that seemingly reaches beyond the planar frame, demonstrating the embodied knowledge of protest and surrender. Thomas is particularly drawn to certain ubiquitous hand gestures, such as the raised clenched fist or open hands up, as can be seen in the four Punctum sculptures exhibited at the Bell Gallery: Amandla, A Luta Continua, Raise Up and The Lives of Others (all 2014).
In sculptures, photographs, and video, Thomas appropriates and transforms the raw material of past social moments of contemporary agency and resistance. Considered within this context, the sculpture serves as a “tomato” in a visual salad of protest to offer a distinctive perspective of possibilities. Thomas often beginning with a single wax leg protrudes from the gallery wall as a literal reminder of the body’s fragility. However, where Gober’s leg rests in quiet solitude, Thomas’s hand manages to shout through its silence. This is the power of visual representation: a single wax hand rendered hyper-realistically in silicone and fiberglass and presented in a single set, as both the starting point and a moving target. 

I’m fascinated with how our history and our understanding of the world actually shifts, so I think of history as a moving target.

— HANK WILLIS THOMAS


"Amandla," for example, was a popular anti-apartheid rallying cry, whose title refers to the Zulu word for “power” and was a popular anti-apartheid rallying cry. Africans have favored the gesture ever since the 1960s, in the spirit of self-affirmation, subjecthood and subjectivity.4

The title of this five-channel installation is drawn from an interview with Baldwin, in which the author states: “I’m fascinated with how our history and our understanding of the world actually shifts, so I think of history as a moving target.”

Arrested demonstrators are driven past the fence. Catherine Ross’s "Lamentation," for example, was a common sight after mass arrests. It is a single black fist: its ability to point at once to the origins of the body politic and the spectacle of itself. Ross presents a single black fist against the backdrop of a glistening black metal door. The sculpture is based on South African prisoners who were jailed for their political activism, the most well known of which was Nelson Mandela. Ross uses a similar technique to memorialize an incident that occurred in a prison cell. In 1961, a prison guard dragged several black South African prisoners from their cells, summarily executed a single black hand, and left it protruding through a solid yellow metal door. The raised fist became an internationally recognized symbol of protest to offer a distinctive perspective of possibilities.

Considered within this context, the sculpture serves as a “tomato” in a visual salad of protest to offer a distinctive perspective of possibilities. Thomas often begins with a single wax leg protruding from the gallery wall as a literal reminder of the body’s fragility. However, where Gober’s leg rests in quiet solitude, Thomas’s hand manages to shout through its silence. This is the power of visual representation: a single wax hand rendered hyper-realistically in silicone and fiberglass and presented in a single set, as both the starting point and a moving target.

I’m fascinated with how our history and our understanding of the world actually shifts, so I think of history as a moving target.

— HANK WILLIS THOMAS
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Hank Willis Thomas is a photo-conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history, and popular culture. He received a BFA in Photography and Africana Studies from New York University and his MFA/MA in Photography and Visual Criticism from the California College of Arts. He has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad, including at the International Center of Photography, Galerie Michel Rein in Paris, Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others. Thomas's work is in numerous public collections including The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The High Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. His collaborative projects have been featured at the Sundance Film Festival and installed permanently in such places as the Oakland International Airport and the University of California, San Francisco. He is a recipient of the New Media grant from Tribeca Film Institute and New Media Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography for his transmedia project, Question Bridge: Black Males. He was recently appointed to the Public Design Commission for the city of New York.

LEFT
The Lives of Others  2014
Black urethane resin, 57 x 5 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

COVER
Raise Up (detail) 2014
Bronze, 112¼ x 9½ inches
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

With special thanks to Hank Willis Thomas, Michelle Woo and Will Sylvester at Hank Willis Thomas Studio, Joeonna Bellorado-Sameuls, Ruth Phaneuf, and Daniel Tsai at Jack Shainman Gallery, The Ernest Cole Family Trust, the Hasselblad Foundation, and Jo-Ann Conklin.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name
August 29 – October 25, 2015
Copyright © David Winton Bell Gallery, Brown University
Designed by Malcolm Grear Designers