

Artist Profile – Hank Willis Thomas

b. 1976 Plainfield, NJ; lives and works New York City

Thomas studied at New York University where he received his B.F.A., before moving on to the California College of Arts where he obtained an M.F.A. He then went on to receive honorary doctorates from both the Maryland Institute of Arts and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. Thomas has received, and continues to receive, many awards and fellowships, a few being the Infinity Award, the Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship.

Thomas's work focuses on the extraction and recontextualization of ideas and symbols drawn from popular culture, he critiques symbols and objects that are consumed on a daily basis and often point to racialized tensions in American society. Thomas's work often points to slavery being the cause for continuing inequality today, and is about reflection as well as participation. For example, in many of his installations, there is a microphone in the center for visitors to respond to the pieces they are seeing, adding their own voice to the many other perspectives.

A common symbol Thomas uses is the confederate flag, a symbol directly related to slavery and still somewhat of a taboo subject, it was sometimes hard for Thomas to find places willing to show these works. Along with taboo symbols, Thomas also uses common logos or ads in his works to comment on the company or on society as a whole. His digital and multimedia works often look like ads or stills from commercials, but looking closer there is a deeper meaning behind it where Thomas is making a statement. With these types of works Thomas is exploring African Americans and their place within consumer culture based on the product messages from the certain companies he looks at. A common subject Thomas uses is African American athletes alongside common stereotypes that follow them.

One technique that Thomas carries out in his work is resurrecting archival photographs from the civil rights era, and adding a new collage element or transforming it to make a statement. One way he alters these images is by using retroreflective technology, which uses light-reflecting glass beads suspended in vinyl to reflect light and images back to viewers. This means that if a viewer were looking at one of Thomas's pieces under normal lighting circumstances, they would only see part of the image, if a flash of light were to happen, say from a camera, then the entire image would be revealed to the viewer. Another technique Thomas employs is using reflective surfaces on the viewer so that they see themselves in part of the picture, participating in the past events.

With his works Thomas addresses social injustices, racism, negative aspects of pop culture, mass media, and many other contemporary issues that he believes are caused by a long history of inequality. An example of Thomas's work that takes the shape of an ad, commenting on companies and current issues, is titled the *Discover Card (1)*. *In a Non-Violent Movement, Unmerited Suffering is Redemptive (2)* is an example of Thomas's technique of resurrecting images from the civil war era and adding his own style and message to it. Lastly, *Basketball and Chain (3)* is one of his images that discusses African American athletes and the issues they still face today.



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