



ARTIST

Hank Willis Thomas

TITLE

Branded Chest, from the B@anded Series

DATE

2003

DIMENSIONS

10 in H x 6.5 in W

MEDIUM

Platinum Prints

IMAGE NOTES

sheet 12 x 10", Light Work Platinum Edition; Light Work Fine Print Program

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2008.037

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-32B

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

BORN

1976

BIRTHPLACE

Plainfield, NJ

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2006
Platinum Editions, 2008
Fine Print Program, 2008
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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BIOGRAPHY

The old adage may advise to 'walk gently and carry a big stick,' but Bay area artist Hank Willis Thomas seems to have recoined the phrase, allowing his images to speak softly but carry a big 'whack.' His photographs, beautiful in composition and formal quality, carry a heavy punch emotionally. Since arriving at Light Work, Hank has been quietly working away. He admits that it is not unusual for him to be working on at least four different projects at any given time. Just a few weeks into his residency, he has spent his time scanning images on Light Work's high resolution scanner, editing photographs for his upcoming four exhibitions, working on his branding series, adapting his short film "Winter in America" on the murder of his cousin into film stills, and preparing for an upcoming lecture at a regional conference with the Society for Photographic Education. Hank Willis Thomas holds a BFA in Photography and Africana Studies from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and an MFA in photography and MA in Visual Criticism from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. His work has been shown in museums and galleries across the country. He has upcoming exhibitions at P.S.1 MoMA in Queens, NY; the Jamaica Center for Arts & Learning in Jamaica, NY; Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; and the African American Museum in Philadelphia, PA.

ESSAYS

Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi are expanding the scope of their recent collaborative animated video project, 'Winter in America'. The latest installment in this venture is a series of color prints based on the digitally-rendered depiction of the last five minutes of the life of Thomas' cousin, Songha Thomas Willis. Songha was tragically murdered on February 2, 2000 in Philadelphia, PA. An attempted robbery in the parking lot of a nightclub quickly escalated into a deadly altercation that ended his life at the youthful age of twenty-eight. The series of photographs have since been compiled into a book, also entitled 'Winter in America'. (1) The composition of medium-format stills were taken during the filming of the stop-motion animation video, where the artists have recreated the scene of the crime. The photographs consist of G.I. Joe action figures posed in a faux winter environment. Thomas and Olujimi documented and studied the details of the actual site, and positioned the action figures according to the police report and eyewitness accounts. They created a small-scale replica of the nightclub exterior complete with snow, streetlights, a chain link fence, and cars with twenty-inch rims. It is not uncommon for children to role-play with dolls as a means of communicating deeply repressed trauma. Thomas and Olujimi are employing the naivete of this psychological method as they work through the circumstances of Songha's death. By casting the action figures in the place of people, the plastic vessels become puppets at the mercy of their puppeteers. The haunting image 'Lawrence Takes Aim' presents the audience with a critical moment. The photograph depicts the menacing silhouette of a gunman, Lawrence, as he positions himself to pull the trigger. The stark white background accentuates the outline of the phantasmal figure, and suspends the blurred motion of his arm. Although Songha's body is absent from the scene, the title suggests his presence outside of the frame. Thomas and Olujimi capture the subtle gesture of this tragic confrontation that will eventually end in murder. The reliance on child-like materials critiques the ways in which boys are encouraged to express their masculinity by offering the viewer a sense of make believe. The plastic action figures and model cars are representations of boyhood. At an early age, miniature automobiles and simulated violence are perceived as appropriate forms of play. Young men become playfully indoctrinated to relate to each other as mobile, gun-toting war commandos. The premature exposure to materialism and overvalued aggression has promoted a false consciousness of the ideal male figure in American society. It is not uncommon for boys to grow up believing that the respectability and success of a man depends on the bounty of his possessions. Thomas and Olujimi's use of toy objects dispels these virtues as myth, and implicates the murder of his cousin as a painful symptom of the dysfunctional masculine archetype. In addition to providing a social commentary on gender roles and gratuitous violence, Winter In America expands on the artist's ongoing exploration of consumerism and value. The series is an ominous parable about the value of material things prevailing over the value of human life. Kalia Brooks (c) 2006 1. Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi, Winter in America (San Francisco: 81 Press, 2006) Hank Willis Thomas lives in San Francisco and New York City. He participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in October 2005. His collaborator Kambui Olujimi lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. His website can be found at <http://www.hankwillisthomas.com/>. Kalia Brooks is a curator and writer. She is currently writing a book on a documentary project in Philadelphia, PA. The project is a collaboration with Hank Willis Thomas. Un/Common Threads In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the

photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermame," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" *American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review* 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY.