

Hank Willis Thomas

ISSUE 06 // SPECIAL EDITION

Selected by Stephanie Cristello
Foreword by Janet Dees and Tamar Kharatishvili

UNBRANDED: REFLECTIONS IN BLACK AND A CENTURY OF WHITE WOMEN

For over fifteen years, conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas has consistently explored the representation of stereotypes within mass media and American consumer culture, particularly as it relates to African-American subjects. His projects often appropriate and repurpose imagery drawn from advertising campaigns to investigate the subtle, and not so subtle, ways in which visual imagery reproduces and reinforces ideas about race and race relations.

The following selections are drawn from two related bodies of work—the series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008* (2005–08), and *Unbranded: A Century of White Women 1915–2015* (2015), which are the focus of the exhibition *Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded* currently on view at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University. Exploring the visualization of African-American identity and white femininity within the same eras, Thomas removes slogans and product names from historical and contemporary advertisements, asking us to confront the impact of images on the popular imagination.

Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America explores fifty years of print advertising targeted towards African-Americans—from 1968, a year of heightened social and political protest that saw the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., until 2008, the year of the election of the first African-American president. *Unbranded: A Century of White Women* ends with the year in which Thomas finished working on the series, stretching back to five years before American women gained the right to vote.

Employing an aspirational tone, these images present contestable messages about beauty, desire, virtue, and ideal white femininity.

The selected juxtapositions presented here within THE SEEN highlight visual resonances between these two bodies of work. Thomas’s provocative titling of the works hones in on particular interpretations of the images. *They Satisfy 1942/2015* from *A Century of White Women* is juxtaposed with *Farewell Uncle Tom 1971/2007* from *Reflections in Black*. Where *They Satisfy* ostensibly refers to the cigarette dangling from the mouth of the uniformed woman sporting a seductive countenance, the cigarette also plays a prominent visual role in *Farewell Uncle Tom*, though the title emphasizes assertively black cultural politics signaled by the couple’s natural hairstyles and dashikis. *Travel Light! 1940/2015* and *We Are On Our Way 1970/2008* both focus on women’s mobility and movement. While *Travel Light!* seemingly promotes independence for middle-class white women in the 1940s, *We Are On Our Way* reflects on a post-Civil rights moment, with mothers bringing their children together across a metaphorical racial divide that is also visually delineated in an aisle.

This special edition emphasizes themes of beauty, travel, labor, and leisure, and how gender, class, and racial dynamics play into the expression across both of Thomas’ series.

—
***Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded* will be on view at the Block Museum of Art through August 5, 2018.**

PAGE 62: Hank Willis Thomas, *It’s done with a simple push of the hand...*, 1946/2015, digital chromogenic print, 47.25 x 40 inches. **PAGE 63:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Membership Has Its Privileges*, 2006/2008, LightJet print, 36 x 28.5 inches **PAGE 64:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Betcha can’t have just one*, 1995/2015, digital chromogenic print, 52.4375 x 40 inches **PAGE 65:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Make a Radical Departure*, 1985/2007, LightJet print, 34 x 30 inches **PAGE 66:** Hank Willis Thomas, *They Satisfy*, 1942/2015, digital chromogenic print, 48.25 x 40 inches **PAGE 67:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Farewell Uncle Tom*, 1971/2007, LightJet Print, 36 x 30 inches **PAGE 68:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Bounce back to normal*, 1933/2015, digital chromogenic print, 44.5625 x 40 inches **PAGE 69:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Available in a Variety of Sizes and Colors*, 1977/2007, lambda photograph, 32 x 30 inches **PAGE 70:** Hank Willis Thomas, *One tiny little step*, 1969/2015, digital chromogenic print, 50.125 x 40 inches **PAGE 71:** Hank Willis Thomas, *The Oft Forgotten Black Flower Children of Harlem*, 1969/2006, Digital C-Print, 34 x 27.5 inches **PAGE 72:** Hank Willis Thomas, *Travel Light!*, 1940/2015, digital chromogenic print, 40 x 43.8125 inches **PAGE 73:** Hank Willis Thomas, *We Are On Our Way*, 1970/2008, LightJet Print, 33 x 30 inches.

All images Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.









