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Hank Willis Thomas: Branding Black Men - Identity & Violence through Images of Black Masculinity

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HANK WILLIS THOMAS - BRANDING BLACK MEN
IDENTITY & VIOLENCE THROUGH IMAGES of BLACK MASCULINITY

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"There is something called black in America and there is something called white in America and I know them when I see them but will forever be unable to explain the meaning of them because they are not real even though they have a very real place in my daily existence." Carl Hancock Rux in “Eminem: The New White Negro”

“I have always suspected that nothing else matters; nothing is important except what I deem important not even conspiracies the media puts out everyday” – Anon

“My work brings history forward through framing our experience of race, class, and gender as conditioned by popular culture then and now. Ultimately, my goal is to subvert the common perception of ‘black history’ as somehow separate from American history, and to reinstate it as indivisible from the totality of past social, political, and economic occurrences that make up contemporary American culture” – Hank Willis Thomas

In view of the last quote, Thomas’s images may make you uncomfortable but incite you to a second look at race, identity, violence and the prejudices of black stereotyping reinforced by decades of advertising. Using the first quote in this paper, we see race as a social construct in
existence because its design is to segregate and control populations, a surreal binary manufactured by humans however, people cannot see beyond its dichotomies.

The myth of the young black male as naturally endowed, rapist, violent and not too intelligent circulating in mainstream culture is corroborated in part by statistics showing that blacks are 11-12% of the population in America and are six times more likely to be murdered than the majority; other people are more terrified of this community than they are by each other. Thomas believes this identity type was created by others to dehumanize African Americans so he uses “Jumpman” (Michael Jordan Nike logo) to depict this black on black gun violence where people are reaching for their dreams and someone shoots them down.

Using experiences of Manthia Diawara as an immigrant in France and America, the treatment of black males stems from social profiling which their image have suffered. In France, Manthia is suspected of being an illegal immigrant severally and a taxi he is in is stopped while he is asked to produce his passport to prove his identity. The French police officers mock him afterwards and one of them suggests for him to return to his home country if he was displeased by their treatment of him. In France, his identity was in constant question which he needed to keep proving to the French police and immigration office although he was supposedly an "assimilado". On the advice of a friend, he migrated to America in search of a better life but in the guise of academic pursuits. In America, he became a sort of exotic breed for the white people who preferred to deal with him and saw him in a better light than they did other Africans straight from the continent. He recounts a difference in shared history among black people - Africans vs Afro-American using the instance of his friend Mack who almost got the all killed and himself shot when he mouthed off racial slurs to a black American they met at a bar and who Mack assumed shared the same jocularity for the words as he did. Mack did not share the same history of slavery as the other man which led him to
misinterpret the severity of his words "fuck you Nigger" for example. Manthia points to the specificity of immigration raids for young black males, the feeling of being watched and always being cautious and vigilant to avoid deportation. The hunt, frisking for papers and proof of identity for the black men in France (where curiously other black men told him they had similar experiences but none of the women mentioned being harassed as such) and in America where they were constantly hunted, presumed illegal upon sight based off of social conditioning of illegal immigrants (sans les papiers) combined with the difference in historical narratives, the differences in these groups of African descendants becomes clearer when viewed in their separate dynamics as opposed to the homogenous capacity with which they are classified and prejudged in the American society.

Charles Johnson has this to say about the image of the black body not diminished by the customary strategies black people have employed to escape it - Nation of Islam (a persuasion of stain that sees white as antithetical, quasi-men grafted from the original black body until the caucasian appears pale and pitiful). The black body remains an ambiguous object in our society, still susceptible to whatever meanings the white gaze assigns to it. In his *A Phenomenology of the Black Body*, Charles Johnson examines the black male body as a cultural object and inquires into how it has been interpreted, manipulated and represented specifically in popular culture which ties neatly with the focus of this work. He starts with the myth of the black man as naturally endowed in his genitals referring to the reduction of the black male body as a body part and the eroticism this creates for the white female. He moves to the depiction of the black male as linguistically incompetent, retarded, violent, sex-obsessed, irresponsible, and stupid. Where he is viewed sans mind, lacking eloquence, charm and seen only as a stained body, a physicality, opaque in a room of white men. He becomes objectified while the other awaits a signal of his "Negroness": some
signal that their bodies are different. This Negro Beast stereotype is a mythology which Johnson says obscures and one-dimensionalizes our possibilities for experiencing each black person as an individual, historical and unique that it must be said, no one like them would ever live again.

Thomas raises the discourse of black on black violence with 2005 Bureau of statistics data listing 94% of blacks being killed by other blacks. He traces this to the construction of black male identity started during slavery in America. This ignited his interest in the way black men are the most feared and respected bodies in the world through this construction even though they do not necessarily agree with or relate to each other. Trying to figure out the why and what of this issue, its relationship to slavery and commodity i.e. commerce, cotton, culture and the black body type was the kindling for his *Branded series*. He sees connection in the way African-American slaves were branded as a sign of ownership and how in contemporary society, their descendants are branding themselves with corporate brands. He suggests that people brand themselves often with fashion, ideologies and personal interaction which he feels have been corporately manufactured for our benefit.

Although the American culture professes to condemn violence, Thomas calls attention to the movie content of which easily 60% is about choreographed violence which kids and young adults consume and acculturate to. Young black males grow up on this type of media culture which can change the way they identify and relate to other people. He defines branding as integral to consumption and to the American perception of self. In the American culture, people build their sense of self around brands they own or desire which in actuality, can be said to consume or own them as is the perspective he tries to share – the body as commodity during slavery and commodity culture today.

What is Black power? Is it that which the “other” has in mind when he sees a young black
athletic-type male and clutches onto his purse tightly albeit unconsciously or is it the show of prejudice that condemns a black male even before he speaks? If this is what black power symbolizes to the “other”, what does it signify for the Black male in a racialized community? Thomas uses the image of a mouth with “Black Power (2008)” written on tiny little gold false teeth and worn in the mouth of a black male. He invites us to ponder the racial, historical and social implications of the phrase “black power”; its origin, how it evolved, and what it has come to mean in contemporary society.

Hank Thomas agrees to using language of advertising to talk about issues advertisers could not responsibly discuss in their ads. He categorizes his work as critiquing America’s popular culture from the inside which he sees as a money-making venture – “if you don’t make money in America, America will make money off of you”. He states as the real purpose of his work, to inspire dialogue which may subtly influence the way you think and consequently, the way you do things through conversation. He sees his work as an attempt to make everyone familiar with art history and those that are not – to get the message.

In a project description, Thomas states as his goal, “to subvert common understanding of black history as somehow extracted from American history and reinstate it as indivisible from the totality of past social, political and economic experiences that constitute contemporary culture”. By employing varying media, he uses the familiar to draw connections and kick-start conversations about issues and histories often forgotten or circumvented in our ad-filled lives. He admits to using the ubiquitous language of advertising to identify the many challenges that exist in representing the elusive notion of ‘blackness’ - the aim is to expose things that are hidden in plain view of our culture. His body of work attempts to remind the viewer the power of storytelling in framing history. “Whoever is painting the picture has incalculable influence in shaping our ideas
about others as well as ourselves”. He identifies white males as making the advertising decisions and consequently, their interpretation of “black” male identity shapes African-American lives. He sees his response to Jim Crow postcards as fingering the normality, commodification and circulation of racist ideas in relatively recent mainstream American culture. This points to the relevance of familiar items – postcards, personal souvenir, pancake batter boxes – that could easily have been discarded but which are relevant because of the wealth of knowledge they hold and can reveal about cultural practices during specific periods of history and the different ways they can be interpreted many years from their time of production.

For Thomas, when text is removed from an ad, people tend to read it with their individual prejudices. He finds that most ads are not about the products but the subconscious or emotional connections possible through a combination of text, photography, ad copy and the presumed media culture or literacy of the intended audience which I find to be true in my experience as I would argue later in this paper. He reasons that when branding information is removed from images, things that were previously veiled, gets revealed. In this way, advertising brainwashes because it relies on race and gender without which product sales would be harder. Working with general ideologies and prejudices: old people care about this, people who live in a certain area care about this, people who speak this language care about that, people with a certain background care about this which isn’t mostly true but it makes it easier for ads to accomplish their goals since consumers have been trained to think in certain ways.

In the book “Pitch Blackness”, Robin Kelley describes much of Hank’s work as uniquely combing the archive for materials which he then reactivates by juxtaposing them with contemporary images from advertising, his own photos and contemporary representations of Black men. He succeeds in this task by using archival materials without erasing historical data from the object/text/artifact.
Even when he deliberately erases some elements from ‘original’ documents, the titles and the concept behind the imagery show the viewer the original context and intention of the ad. He is also keenly aware that the historical images he borrows from were intended for mass consumption hence, he strategically chooses slavery’s most popular iconic images which have come to symbolize the institution on a globally.

In an interview with Kate Zuppann, Thomas describes the intent of his work as double-sided, something already known but adding a bit to the commonality by subtract from it a single concise meaning. He invites us to look outside the frame of the photograph as opposed to ingesting its message entirely without considering that every photograph is a manipulated document from start to finish.

He explains that in the contemporary world, photo images are doctored from conception to post-production and arguably, 50 people may work on a photograph. These subjects who are sometimes celebrities, have had their images touched up, adjusted, photoshoped and polished by professionals whose job it is to make them look good and which is now sold to the public who take these ‘perfect’ bodies and try to tailor their identities towards them.

This obvious manipulations – television, advertising - he confesses is what attracted him to the genre of photography. He invites us to notice the seductive quality of the television which is capable of shutting off brain processes while a viewer absorbs the display. The person may only start critically thinking or accessing the information absorbed when the television is turned off. He characterizes media culture – television, magazines, increasingly, the internet - as the ultimate manipulation being very subtle in its appeal.

The media has mastered the craft of making unimportant things important as a form of distraction therefore Basketball and sports have become an American spectacle. Comparably, a major
American spectacle of the twentieth century was lynching. Encouraging people not to take things
for granted but rather think beyond the prejudices we may have for other people, Thomas cites
Barrack Obama as an example of thinking beyond the box and being able to overcome racial
prejudices on his journey to becoming the president.
Working with related issues of identity, race and popular culture, Branded series addresses the
commoditization of black male identity by raising questions about visual culture and the power of
logos. “The work of Hank Willis Thomas has often made use of vernacular imagery repurposed
with subversive results,” said Mark Robbins, ICP Executive Director.
Another journalist had this to say in January 25, 2013 after visiting the Haverford Cantor
Fitzgerald’s gallery. Rachel Heidenry, James Estrin and Katie Zuppann agree that seeing one of
Hank’s pieces and reacting with dislike or discomfort, marks it as successful which is the point of
his exhibitions because for him, there is still a lot to say about race in America. Goldstein sums
Thomas’s work as exposing the unsettling ways that commercial interests uses ads to propagate
myths about race which uphold unequal social order and sell products.
This artist aims to disturb your serene bubble by presenting provocative images and forcing you to
contend with them in the clean space of the gallery. Through his work, Hank immortalizes Songha
attributing his work inspiration to his cousin’s murder outside of a Philadelphia night club by
young men who robbed others but took Songha’s life meaninglessly; he was 27 at the time of his
death in 2000. Struck by all the lives lost and ruined over the quest for commodity, Thomas began
exploring the black male body and its history of branding, identity, wounding and commerce. With
the death of Songha, it all came back to him how people were getting robbed for Air Jordans,
Jansport Backpacks, Triple Fat Goose Coats and how young black men were losing and throwing
their lives away through the “misrecognition of themselves in commodity culture” According to
Zuppann, he has stripped the skin off imperfect America and dealt a blow to the hearts and minds of viewers.

This research has him continuously diving into ‘origins of blackness’, looking at statistical data, history of slavery and past and present advertisement campaigns. Branding as a concept was glaring to Thomas; the concept of literally branding slaves to stake ownership and the symbolic relationship of that to contemporary athletic brands that use the black male body. He ponders this stimulating question “Is an ad ever really about the product”? This brings to our consciousness the goal of every ad and commercial venture – profit.

“Close-up photographs of the black male body echo Michael Jordan posters and Sports illustrated spreads, highlighting definition, sleekness, and bone structure. (They should so clearly be erotic, but are anything but). Arrogance is conceptually subdued by the fact that these bodies are carved with Nike symbols, that definitive swoosh over the heart or on a shaved head – the placement symbolically pointing to the black male’s passion and intelligence as derivative of athleticism. Reference to scarification and popular culture, the past and the present, is reached with such precise simplicity, creating strong, powerful, and challenging statements”. Heidenry says She believes Thomas Willis has an arresting ability to connect popular images and symbols of slave history with contemporary portrayal of black sports figures and their endorsements. Timberland and Jordan logos are easily merged into a lynching narrative in his aluminum sculpture Jordan and Johnny Walker in Timberland Circa 1923, 2009.

Re-introducing these advertisements, Thomas is able to use them as cultural artifacts and sites of deconstruction thereby starting a discourse that would be otherwise silenced. The brilliance of his works pulls the viewer to imagine, re-imagine and ultimately critically analyze how popular culture has manipulated / managed to sweep this discussion of gender and race identities under the
carpet of time.

Heidenry however goes on to critique Thomas’s work as repetitive, sometimes redundant and not special making the work too obvious and after a few pieces, the viewer feels the message was passed before getting into the gallery itself. Zupann sees it as social commentary with a lot of race relation.

She nevertheless concedes that his images are necessary and powerful, his concepts, use of imagery and overall critique are present and strong. He has mixed his sense of history with today’s popular culture to construct at least one of the homogenous narratives for the black male body by making complex connections and entangled histories seem effortless, he brings to the fore those histories we inherently know even though we may ignore them.

In an interview with The Root by Lauren Williams, Thomas premises his concern on symbolism and the iconography of athletes in sports. He also cites “Branded Head” as his most iconic piece. It cannot be overemphasized how Hank Willis employs language of popular culture and advertising according to FLYP media in speaking about race, class and history in a way that is legible and comprehensible. His work has been described as an exploration of the affects of past visual culture as it intersects with our current world view - often creating correlations between African American historical debates and the present.

The photographs in the "Branded series" construct an analogy between slavery and corporate blaxploitation of the male body more directly as the double entendre - product branding and slave branding sets the tone for this critique. And to quote the artist, he is ‘attempting to draw comparison between the way the black male body was traded then (on slave auction blocks) and now (disproportionately popular in popular sports drafts)’ according to Earl Miller. He describes his work in “Branded” as images created to look like ads in order to generate discourse about
commodification of Black bodies in advertising branding methods.

Hank explores the question of identity among black people in America and how it has been created, reconstructed and linked to social violence and delinquency to a degree where young black men begin to buy into these social constructs losing their authenticity in the process. Black men in America through slavery have acquired physical traits and body types that appear well developed compared to the 'other'. Criminalizing these black bodies to enable their domination had to be strategically and gradually accomplished in such a way that even black people begin to accept these archetype of strong black athletic male bodies as violent and dangerous which is the social ideology prevalent today. On a train, I would automatically gravitate towards a safe-looking (don’t ask me to define) male than I would a muscular black male. This is simply an unconscious reaction, brought about by years of social conditioning on the myth of the black male till it is taken as norm and accepted as a yardstick for measuring safety around black men. The link to these social prejudices is evident in his realizations of issues in visual images through a flipping of the advertisers shock value - erasing safe images to expose the brutal truth underneath - exploitation of black bodies throughout history.

In "Pitch Blackness" and "Branded", I debate the race question in America and the tendency to use Black male bodies in sports adverts usually - Nike, Adidas, Air Jordan, Reebok - why are white male bodies not disrobed, crucified, hung or branded with the Nike logo? Is this color choice mere aesthetic? If answers are affirmative, we need dispute no further that the black man is being violently exploited, victimized and commoditized for capitalist gains.

Cassandra Jackson has argued variously that the black body has been viewed with less than clinical interests in many photography projects. Photography she agrees with Frederick Douglass could unravel racial representation to display subjectivity of white folks drawing attention to the
juxtaposition of 'ideal' where a likeness of Apollo is compared with a Negro/Chimpanzee relegating everything with a Negroid semblance, inferiority and otherness. I agree with her vision of photography as a reproduction of truth i.e. 'you only get what you give to the camera'. Using the 'scourged back' photograph, the camera captures fact, authenticating, preserving truth and giving it a reliability lacking in text which could sometimes be contradictory. Images create visual and sensual reinforcements through the authenticity they present to viewers.

Canonizing violence in the portrayal of black male bodies in society has been significant through hip hop and rap music where most of these black artists are already, almost always under a certain scrutiny and prone to being attacked because of their pigment. The wounds, violence and scars these black males acquire become a sort of badge and proof of manhood to the individual, art community, and within the black community in general. To be recognized as a man, you should have passed through some danger and come out with proof.

The black artist is in perpetual war with society, a cyclical need to prove his manhood. These wounds serve to contain and objectify these threats (black male), simultaneously dissecting and diffusing the 'threat' which Cassandra Jackson recognizes citing examples of notable black male artists - Curtis Jackson (50 Cent), DMX, Kanye West and Nasir Jones to reinforce this problem. Is that all there is to hip hop - violence and wounding?

In his recount of his wound, 50 Cent reclaims the pain of the experience which has been erased from media representations of his wounding. The media has carefully erased these painful remnants but somehow retained eroticism and scarring to indulge their visual fetish. Artists are not unaware of this power of expatiation and its relevance for American society. As Elizabeth Alexander sums it 'Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American spectacle for centuries' which I agree is evidenced in the way male slaves were used as Mandigo fighters for
the entertainment of their White masters or guests.

50 Cent has become symbolic of hip hop's mix with violence where he represents the jukebox of urban violence. In a facsimile reenactment of his gunshot wound, 50 cent on his album cover is bare-chested, staring at the camera from behind a frame, shattered glass surrounds his body with a crucifix hanging from his neck encircled by a bullet hole. The viewer cannot ignore his well developed body nor the brand of the holster strapped to his torso. The viewer seems to be pulling the trigger as the artist seems to be saying, 'you kill daily. Every time you look at me with 'the gaze', you shatter me again and again'.

As Cassandra Jackson puts it, 'the image of the wounded black man confirms not only the equation between blackness and suffering, but also the equation between whiteness and bodily integrity'. The wound has been one of the ways Hip hop has expressed civil inequalities and vulnerabilities. Hip hop is dictated by the commercial markets and this accounts for the fragmenting black male bodies are subjected to in order to satisfy the other in much the same way that the male gaze is turned on the female body (Kim, Fanon and Jackson (2011). In combining the violence of the bullet with the shattering of his glass body, nude torso and white underwear, 50 cent image fetishizes the wound. This wound fetish came about with the commoditization of black sexuality and nudity in hip hop - great emphasis on wounding, increased nudity and eroticized black bodies. Investors, artists and the rappers themselves came to understand the commercial value of eroticized black male bodies therefore a careful blend of homoeroticism, commercialism and hip hop formed the blend of visual hip hop today.

Consequently, hip hop has capitalized on this image of homoeroticism by marketing the image of the sexualized thug which plays on the 'dialectics of white fear' as Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien points to through gay pornography depicting black subjects. Therefore, through reproduction of
prison culture, gangster rap has successfully merged the image of the thug, with an eroticized, objectified black male body achieved by combining beauty with the threat of violence to produce a significant experience that exploits the simultaneous cultural anxiety about and attraction to the black male body Jackson (2011). Wounded black bodies reaffirm the objectification of these bodies by fixing the gaze on the bodily differences between them and the other, specifically, it reifies racialist power paradigms.

Representations of DMX aka Earl Simmons on the cover of his CD Flesh of my Flesh, Blood of my Blood (1998) is a visual expression of power over the object of representation, expressions of the mythic sexuality of black men and the viewer's ability to master that sexuality (Jackson 2011). As the critique Hazel Carby points out, the worship of the black male body and its desecration are not devoid of each other. Lynching as a visual signifier of white supremacy comprised of many rituals of dissection - body souvenirs, photographing the bodies for reproduction allowing individuals own such images and consequently, the bodies.

All these instances of violence against black men sought to control, contain and commodify their bodies at a time these bodies were gaining new liberties within the society. It was simply a way for spectators and participators to confirm/ reassert their power.

Hank’s images of wounded, lynched black men calls attention to the shared ideological framework that links these images: a social exploitation/ an urge to own, contain, control and limit the black body. Ownership cannot be over emphasized seen in the way Tupac Shakur's signature tattoo 'thug life' has been digitally manipulated and available on the web aiding wide redistribution and ownership of these 'Tupac' souvenirs. The image of a crucified Tupac not only show the treatment of his body but also marks the increasing appearance of the crucified black male body in hip hop which was precluded by his untimely death. However, parading visual representations of crucified
rappers, including Nasir Jones (Nas), Andre Nikatina (Dre Dog), and Kanye West indicate the ways the image is not so much about a single death as about the larger cultural resonance of the myth of the black male body. Subsequently, for Cassandra Jackson (2011) these crucifixions hover between dramatizing the persecutions black men encounter, and reenacting and exploiting the scene of persecution in ways that objectify and fetishize the black male body.

**Branded Series**

In *Branded series*, artist concerns himself with marking/wounding the black male has underwent throughout history and which is still visible and exploited in contemporary adverts where the black male body is exploited for its ability to sell name brands. Through a shrinking of persona and a containment of their bodies to fit the canvas of whatever ad space, the advert companies have successfully contained, conquered and hence, are able to commercialize this territory. Using images of wounding to expose the history ads seek to hide, this is achieved through defamiliarizing the familiar scenic scenes with shocking elements and insertion of violence. Summarily, this work bears witness to the wounds of capitalism.

The series inserts images of male black wounding into the ad space using images of 'Basketball and chain' (2003), 'scarred chest (2004)' branded with Nike logo, "Chase MasterCard (2004)" 'hang time (2008)' where a body is lynched, 'Priceless (2004)' and various instantiations tying Michael Jordan and the NBA to exploitative commercialization similar to slavery where the bodies of these 'mostly' black players are put on the auction block where the best player gets to be sold to the highest bidder.

Through the wound, Thomas conveys two related ideas - establishing a genealogical link between the exploitation of the black male body in the past and its contemporary exploitation in advertising. 2nd, he makes visible the forces of oppression by disrupting the 'magic' of historylesness that ad
campaigns use to downplay the pain/violence in the history of the black male.

Chase MasterCard 2004 - By embossing the card with the body of a wounded man in the background, he suggests that trade serves as the foundation for today's global economy. It is ironic that Chase Corporation made some investments in support of slavery. Thomas therefore sees the relation between the subhuman conditions of packing chained Africans onto ships bound for America. These became the foundation of wealth for the American economy through servitude and back-breaking labor. He appropriates the Credit card as a form of indentured servitude because it keeps the carrier in debt to the financial institution. Consequently, he sees the notion of race as created by Europeans with a commercial interest in dehumanizing black people in order to justify their exploitation of them. He coins it aptly “500 years ago, there were no black people in Sub-Saharan Africa. There were just people”. To justify chattel trade, specie of sub-humans was created, charted halfway around the globe, bound to servitude and 500 years later, their descendants are still battling issues of identity. This he terms “Absolute Power”.

Lynching is introduced through Basketball and Chain 2003 and Hang Time 2008. He implies captivity alluding to slavery through the chains tying the foot to the ball and the body to the tree. This serves to map the body's history from periods of slavery to lynching. The image of the black, athletic strong body chained to the ball brings to the fore the way these bodies are still marked by violence.

He argues that the popularity of these brand names -Nike, Air Jordan- and the way they have photographed, described/identified black males has grave consequence for young black men who ultimately accept the view of thru own bodies as branded products.

While Scarred Chest 2004 equates wounds of racial violence with those of mass produced images, Hang Time 2008 is concerned with how symbols of black manhood can be reduced, domesticated,
mass produced and commercialized for mass distribution.

He probes past and present to find origins of contemporary urban violence asserting a casual relationship between commercialism and violence where black males are the victims in this investment.

Represented in Priceless 2004, using a MasterCard design logo, he shows the endless capitalist cycle of marketing indicting the predominantly white financial industry that sees even death as a money-making opportunity -casket $5,000, $2,000 or $10,000 juxtaposed with the priceless experience of burying a son. Summing up her students views, Catherine Kroll recognizes he was able to fuse ideas that are separated in discourse - euphoria consumerism and everyday tragedy, material display and fragile family connections to aptly illustrate materialism.

Branded series express the deep bonds linking public and private lives in America as it relates to loss and grief reminding us that the history of wounding black male bodies has always been both a public and private event simultaneously. Also, by inserting this history of lynching, he illustrates the idea of violence against black men as a public event with serious personal repercussions.

Hank Willis Thomas challenges the fluidity of 'race' or 'color' binaries - black and white. Is the race question real, imagine or fluid? He protests ad campaigns using black bodies in shocking ways to generate attention and sell products -billboards, fashion magazines. There is nothing like a responsible advert reacting to Nike’s spokesperson who claimed the organization speaks to the representation of the Black race in America. Hank Thomas on the issue of branding and logos gives an example of the Nike Logo he saw as a tattoo on a man’s forehead in Cuba and on a woman in Costa Rica. He is of the opinion that the Nike logo has become pervasive even internationally enough to be second to the cross in tattoo culture. He also cites as popular college fraternity culture, Michael Jordan’s branding of the Omega Psi Phi brand on his chest. This branding and
scarification signifies power in some African American communities, how poor communities have used the Nike logo to adorn their bodies while for famous athletes; it has become a sign of ownership like in slavery. He sees logos as hieroglyphs of this generation and the narratives they carry of their relationship to athletes and the black body, worth considering.

**Pitch Blackness**

In undressing commercial images, a lot is revealed about a society’s hopes and dreams. Making ads involve huge collaborations of teamwork and can tell us about a time or culture more than an entire book.

Being Thomas's second solo exhibition, it marks an important curve in his work adding to his body of visual language materials, exploring questions of consumerism, power and the black male body. All the images in the book in Rosemary Simon’s view, relay a history of "America's shameful past" while simultaneously focusing on Blackness in the modern corporate context ultimately illustrating the artists' own dark interpretation of black identity in modern America. How do we define blackness except as 'other', something that is not white?

In this series, he goes deeper into symbolism exposing linguistic subtleties of subjectivity through his use of form and play. Looking at "The Slate is Clean (2009); Time can be a Villain or a Friend 1984/2009, (2009); and "Installation of I Am A Man (2009)."

The exhibit starts with three black granite tombstones on the floor in rectangular shape. Everything must go" is engraved on the first stone, "The Slate is Clean" on the second and "Some Fair questions" on the third. These mark the exhibit space as radicalized, conflicted and an evocation on death, cleansing, and importantly, race-gendered. The text on the stones are further energized by a picture of Michael Jackson done in 1984 and aged to simulate what he would look like in 2000. Thomas believes MJ had problems with the black male identity and the assumption of what he
should look like in future probably affected him and contributed to his decision to distance himself from the black male stereotype. This photograph with its linguistic data erased, is captioned "Time Can be a Villain or a Friend" leaving us to question if time was indeed a villain to Michael or if his wounds were socially inflicted. The subject, dressed in a suit and tie has linguistic captioning that negates contextualization through language, evoking a question of identity for the unfamiliar and a mobile linguistic use of black images and how these images culturally signify over time and space. It creates awareness of the branding culpable through text via previous contact with the original photograph.

In a series of twenty text paintings on canvas, the artist uses the words "I AM" in various realizations and phrasings - a decisively loaded political statement referring to placards held by black sanitation workers during a strike in Memphis 1968. These phrases trace changes in black subject hood beginning with "I AM 3/5 MAN" in reference to U.S constitution and its definitions of black men during slavery which brings us back to the question of agency and subject hood "AM I A MAN" and unto the assertion "I AM A MAN". Hank points to the progression black identity has taken from these twenty paintings of I Am a Man, I Am 3/5 of a Man, I Am Your Man but progresses to say I Am Human, I Am Many, I Am, Am I. Amen by the end of the piece. It seems absurd that not too far in the history of this country, people had to make such a collective stand to assert their humanity which Thomas feels has now progressed to saying “I Am the Man” in hip hop.

The last phrase "I AM AMEN" marks the instability of identity and language going from the play on words rooted in Black English "YOU THE MAN" to a firm reassurance of identity and hope that it won't be changed.

Hank plays with notions of color throughout this monograph by questioning notions of whiteness
and blackness as mirrors of one another "White imitates black. Black imitates white". In the series, the white board with the texts have 'white and black' sometimes in neon, seemingly interchangeable to complete the suffix 'ness' to further reinforce color binary as social construct. In "I am a Man" we see a big identity question. While in old Black English 'I be man?' where the artist seem to be emphasizing an identity choice for the individual to aspire to and the social requirements it contains. This series of texts start with questioning the speaker's identity to affirming his identity, to being confident in his identity and conscious reaffirmation of manliness and humanity ending with a spiritual consent of being 'Man and Human'.

Will Steacy applauds Hank’s ability to constantly tie broad cultural implications - race, class and history with personal experience, to set his work apart. His view of advertising is a shared one showing this generation of youths to be continuously influenced by the internet and the culture of adverts. What they see, what they believe to be true and possible, is relayed to them through adverts which they almost depend on to be in tune with their environment. Ads take an image, develop it, commercialize it saying to the people 'this is you, this is what you desire to be' and the people buy into this image of who they 'are'. Agreeing with Thomas, adverts are a sort of brainwashing requiring certain level of literacy to comprehend going by my difficulty to meaningfully 'get' local adverts during my first trimester in the U.S. I realized local adverts were constructed differently from international adverts. International ads were more legible. Thomas sees historical distortion and manipulation in adverts - repeating only legible aspects of history palatable to human memory. The artist admits to wanting to make people question the consequences and implications of their every action before indulging. American photographers have been creating images of their world since the 1840s and these images reflect their/our understanding of history and everyday life–compared to images that mainstream society was
creating of African Americans at the time.

Hank’s interest in commodity culture and identity through multiple perspectives shows viewers how images/objects can diverge from common understandings of Black life in the Western tradition. Producing art that weaves the vernacular of his reality into his own texture, seeking solutions for our present time, Hank demonstrates symbolic bricolage by referencing knowledge of culture, history, spirituality and the experiences of black men living and working within dominant society e.g re-purposing the symbolic black and white image of black bodies on a slave ship and fashions it into the shape of a liquor bottle.

Inaga writes that Africa is more seriously touched and damaged by mass-consumption culture than successfully industrialized countries. Even in the United States some researchers note that the production of materials and technology in African American (and Latino) communities is still relatively rare. Hank spoke about how comfortable we’ve become seeing certain kinds of images of Black people, especially in advertisements and sports. He said that mainstream audiences have grown used to seeing black male (athlete) bodies hanging from things like nets and some of them may have descended from people who were lynched during Jim Crow. The noose continues to be a symbol of domination used to threaten Black Americans. Sports evolved into a multi-billion dollar industry, fueled on the backs of the descendants of slaves, sometimes on the same fields where their ancestors picked cotton. Throughout the trajectory of Hank Willis Thomas’s practice, he has woven the memory of Black America into his own images and assemblages. What Nettrice Gaskins thinks is important about his art is that it reveals the multifaceted nature of the Black American experience, especially in consumer culture and in everyday life. Hank talked about this process of engaging material artifacts as opposed to merely presenting black-informed expressive or aesthetic representations of the world. This work, as a type of bricolage, offers guideposts to
new frontiers of production that rest in the liminal zones where multiple disciplines and realities collide. Netrice Gaskins believes that Hank’s work will inspire more underrepresented minorities to create, share, and distribute content rather than just consume it. of the society, make them reflect outside the fixedness and organization around them, to see patterns beyond the binaries and question themselves and their society. How much of our decisions are ours and how much of it is influenced by social constructs involuntarily and unconsciously?

Thomas is quoted in 2010 in the LA Times saying "using advertising was a means to track blackness from 1968 to 2008, before 1968 most images in ads were offensive. It wasn't until 1968 did advertisers realize that the black community was a viable market'.

Rebranded series

This exhibition looks at the ways blackness has been sold over generations. It generates comparisons between time periods and suggests to viewers to consider the history behind these images and the similarities between the then and now.

Here he looks at contemporary caricature and buffoon-type images of mostly non-African descendants’ e.g. South Asians where images that the African-American community will probably protest if they were made in the U.S are used to poke fun at the new minorities.

He uses Koon images from the 30s, 40s, 50s of African Americans and images very similar of
South, East Asians and indigenous people but because this is not a critical mass in the country, these images can still have a sort of life.

Thinking about how in contemporary concept it is not politically correct in the United States poke fun at black people or have them depicted as caricature or Koon, there are many other minorities in our society that we can point to and laugh at which started the “Rebranded” project. The image called “Now That’s Funny”, shows a black man pointing at an Asian, laughing at him in a reverse scenario. Thomas has used a 1940’s ad and a 2005 Altoids ad to depict that.

Next, there is this ad from 1940 also and a 2008 ad for a fair-trade tea leaf company and how still in our imagination that there is someone halfway around the world who is still being exploited to do this kind of labor. It is amazing to see the similarity between these two images taken 70 years apart. Thomas had this idea that somewhere around the world there is this woman still brown with a basket strapped to her head smiling in the sun because she’s making a couple of extra dollars to pick leaves and never to be considered human instead of spending time with her family.

Looking at these comparisons Hank is trying to show how although we think that we’ve progressed there are very many ways that our societies carried on the tradition because we become indoctrinated into this way of thinking as we become accepted and assimilate.

The images deal with framing and how forms of presentation influence how we read or understand a message or story. He tries to figure out if there are ways to re-contextualize corporate-generated images to tell different stories of representation that aren’t solely in the service of selling a product.

It is crucial to note that though images of wounding and violence are realized and represented variously, different viewing audiences will come to different perspectives of the same images. Cassandra notes that black redemption rests in visually reenacting history’s abuses and revisiting its crimes against black male bodies. The images of wounded black men for Cassandra Jackson
(2011) form a chapter in the long narrative though which black men have been invented and reinvented and for Thelma Golden whom I agree with, the African-American male is 'one of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century invented because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male's existence'.

I will close my argument with Charles Johnson who says one can only achieve adequacy in phenomenological terms to describe the black male body if we use "genetic phenomenology" i.e. by examining each individual as he (she) exhibits a series of profiles or disclosures of being over time. Life is a process not pre-determined: a verb, not noun.

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