

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

FREEDOM ISN'T ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL

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SCAD: The University for Creative Careers

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Cover Image: **Hank Willis Thomas**, insert: *From Cain't See in the Morning til Cain't See at Night*, 2011, digital C-print

About the Artist

Hank Willis Thomas is a photo conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history and popular culture. Thomas' monograph, *Pitch Blackness*, was published by *Aperture*. In 2015, Thomas cofounded For Freedoms, the first artist-run super PAC. Thomas is a member of the Public Design Commission for the city of New York.

He has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad, including The International Center of Photography, Public Art Fund and Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain; Musée du quai Branly, Paris, France; and Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio, among others. Thomas' artwork is in numerous public collections including the Museum of Modern Art,

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art and Brooklyn Museum, New York; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Georgia; and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males* and *In Search of the Truth* by Cause Collective. He earned a B.F.A. in photography and Africana studies from New York University, as well as an M.F.A. and an M.A. in photography and visual criticism, respectively, from the California College of Arts.

Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful and *Blind Memory* are curated by Storm Janse van Rensburg, SCAD head curator of exhibitions.

About the Curriculum Guide

SCAD curriculum guides provide learning opportunities that fulfill the requirements of educational standards and are designed for use within the museum's exhibition spaces and in classrooms. The guides enhance understanding of art and design through investigations that reveal relevant personal, historical and cultural connections while promoting cross-disciplinary links necessary for today's innovative careers.

Recognizing the guides' overall design excellence and ingenuity, the American Alliance of Museums' Museum Publications Design Competition twice awarded SCAD curriculum guides first place in the education category, in 2015 and 2016.

This Hank Willis Thomas guide examines the artist's investigations into the interpretive impact of framing and context. Thomas' remixed and repurposed archival images from historical events and popular culture provide the basis for standards-based activities that explore conceptual arts practices and the influence of advertising on perceptions of race and gender.

SCAD would like to give special thanks to the Hodge Foundation for its support of the SCAD Museum of Art's award-winning curriculum guides.

Educational standards are listed on page 6.

Highlighted glossary terms may be found on pages 6-7.

Additional learning resources are located in the Curriculum Connections section on page 7.

1 Create text-based conceptual art



“What I was interested in was, how many other ways could I read that phrase?”

Hank Willis Thomas



Hank Willis Thomas, *I am a Man*, 2009, liquitex on canvas

Hank Willis Thomas uses photography as the starting point for much of his work, and it inspires his use of a variety of materials. As a conceptual artist, he emphasizes ideas over traditional artistic forms. Because conceptual art is “read” or interpreted, it is less concerned with physical objects and more so with the meanings they convey.

Thomas calls himself a visual DJ, and is fascinated with “remixing and riffing” on images. *I am a Man* is inspired by an Ernest Withers photograph of the 1968 **Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike**. The marching strikers carried protest posters stating, “I am a man.”

Thomas reproduced the format of the original posters, generating 20 variations on their iconic **affirmation**. The first row is a timeline, beginning with 1787, the year of the **three-fifths clause**, and ending with 1968, when Shirley Chisholm became the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Congress. The second row is a poem that builds to an assertion of a **resilient**, independent self.

Make plans for a conceptual work that uses text as its primary means of expression. Consider statements or phrases you have encountered that sparked a response from you. They could be from a book, movie, song, internet meme or social media post. Choose and record three examples in the spaces below.

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*Of the examples you chose, does one selection seem particularly significant? Is a meaningful theme revealed by the group selection? Using one or more of your choices, create a series of nine text-based conceptual works. Follow Thomas' method of "remixing and riffing" to create a work based on the statements that first inspired you. Think about the meaning you want to convey — for instance, does it have **aesthetic**, cultural, personal and/or political significance? Include your rationale for specific design choices, such as how the lettering and arrangement contribute to the communication of your message.*

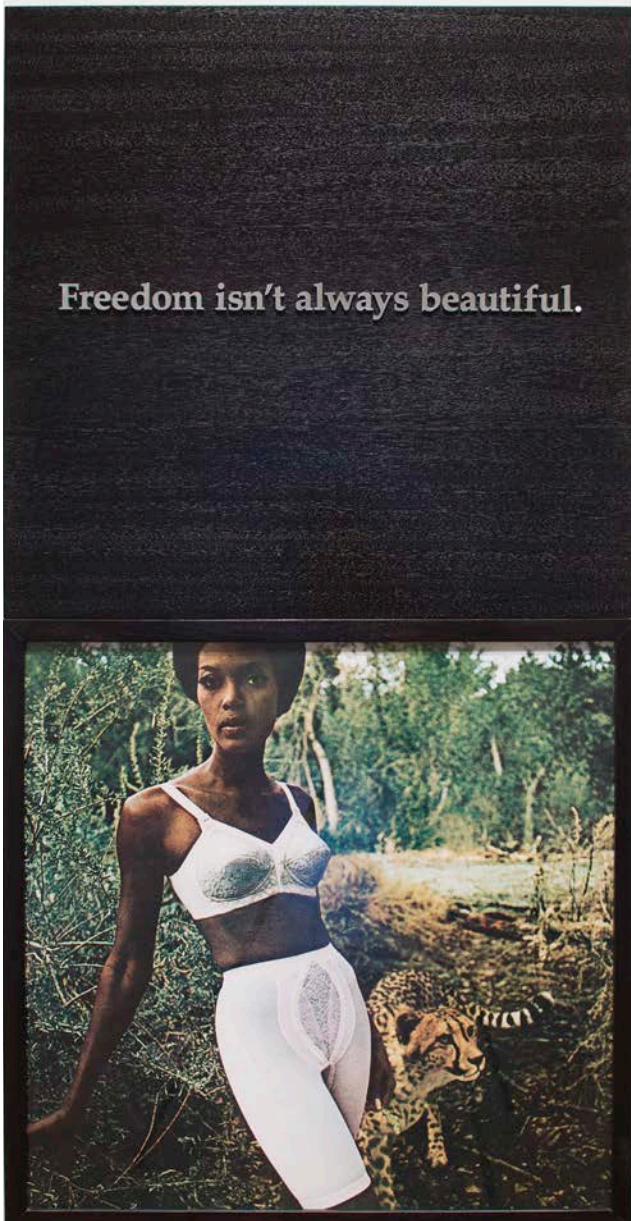
Statement:

2 Analyze the impact of framing and context



“I actually use real ads as a way to talk about how advertisements shape our notions of reality, our notions of ourselves and especially our notions of others.”

Hank Willis Thomas



Hank Willis Thomas, *Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful*, 2012, aluminum letters on wood and inkjet print

We often take our visual culture at face value, unmindful that the images and icons of **mass consumption** are designed with intent. Advertisers seek our attention through captivating content that affects our perceptions of what is desirable.

Hank Willis Thomas became interested in ads as a young child and began examining them seriously as a student of advertising photography. After graduating, he worked for *Saturday Night Live*, making films that looked like ads.

Today, he deconstructs and repurposes real advertisements to reveal how commercial interests influence self-identity, particularly that of race and gender. He removes or reinterprets logos, content and images, encouraging viewers to question, reevaluate and start conversations about what advertising is selling beyond the product.

The advertising image Thomas used for *Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful* dates from the late 1960s and originally included this text: “Go lean. Go lacey. Go live with color. Go wild.” The text from Thomas’ artwork came from another 1960s **girdle** advertisement. It read, “Freedom isn’t always beautiful. You’ve been running around in unrestrained freedom. And it’s beginning to show.” The drawing accompanying this ad depicted two men **appraising** and then disregarding a woman.

Thomas' **artist statement** characterizes his work as being about "framing and context" — specifically, how meaning can be influenced by what we focus on and how we present it. Thomas adds, "I am fascinated with how history and culture are framed, who is doing the framing, and how these factors affect our interpretation of reality."

Explain how Thomas' statement applies to both advertising and art. For instance, how do framing and context — his alterations, combined with placement in a museum and our modern perspectives — affect the meaning we give to advertisement images and text?

In the following quote, Thomas points out that art is able to approach some subjects that advertising cannot. He says, "I often try to use advertising language to talk about things that advertising can't responsibly talk about — if you call something art it can be **provocative**, but in the end, less offensive. With corporations behind it, though, it becomes incredibly problematic."

Why is approaching some topics problematic for advertising, but not for art? Can advertisements address problematic topics successfully? Discuss these questions with a group of friends and record your conclusions in the space below.



EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS

National Core Arts Standards — Sixth through Eighth Grade

Activity 1

Creating 2.3

Anchor: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

7: Apply visual organizational strategies to design and produce a work of art, design or media that clearly communicates information or ideas.

8: Select, organize and design images and words to make visually clear and compelling presentations.

Creating 3.1

Anchor: Refine and complete artistic work.

7: Reflect on and explain important information about personal artwork in an artist statement or another format.

Activity 2

Responding 7.1

Anchor: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

7: Explain how the method of display, the location and the experience of an artwork influence how it is perceived and valued.

Responding 7.2

Anchor: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

6: Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions and actions.

7: Analyze multiple ways that images influence specific audiences.



GLOSSARY

aesthetic *adj.* Concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty

affirmation *n.* A statement declared to be true

appraise *v.* To evaluate the significance of something or someone

artist statement *n.* An essay authored by an artist explaining the overall vision, influences and inspirations for his or her work

girdle *n.* An elastic undergarment designed to make a person's torso and thighs look smaller and firmer

mass consumption The use or purchase of goods or services by large numbers of people

Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike On Feb. 12, 1968, African-American sanitation workers began a strike for decent wages, safe working conditions and recognition of their union. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his last public speech to this group. His assassination the following day galvanized civil rights proponents to continue their peaceful struggle for justice. The strike ended on April 16 with union recognition and better wages.

provocative *adj.* Causing controversy, anger or another strong reaction

resilient *adj.* Able to withstand difficult circumstances

three-fifths clause A section in the U.S. Constitution that states, “Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons”



CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

I am a Man is courtesy of the Collection of The Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Kansas. All other works courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

pp. 2-3 1. Create text-based conceptual art

Additional Resources **Website** Learn more about the significance of the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike. www.archives.gov/education/lessons/memphis-v-mlk

Website Hank Willis Thomas shares his perspectives on poetry and the audacity of making art. www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/70020

Video Hank Willis Thomas speaks about creative values, making dreams come true and more. www.vimeo.com/110585783

Video Find out how artists use their work to spread messages about important issues. www.gpb.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/political-art/five-steps-to-make-your-own-political-art/#.WL7XIIUrJhE

Quote p.2 Volk, Gregory, et al. “Untitled (Blackness): Q+A With Hank Willis Thomas,” *Art In America*, 19 Sept. 2011. www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/hank-willis-thomas-istanbul-biennial/. Accessed 7 March 2017.

pp. 4-5 2. Analyze the impact of framing and context

Additional Resources **Website** Examine images of the original advertisements that inspired *Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful*. www.bvikkivintage.blogspot.com/2009/11/vintage-undies-from-1966-1969.html

Video Watch this one-minute encapsulation of advertising's history. www.youtube.com/watch?v=7d3VAYGnXjY

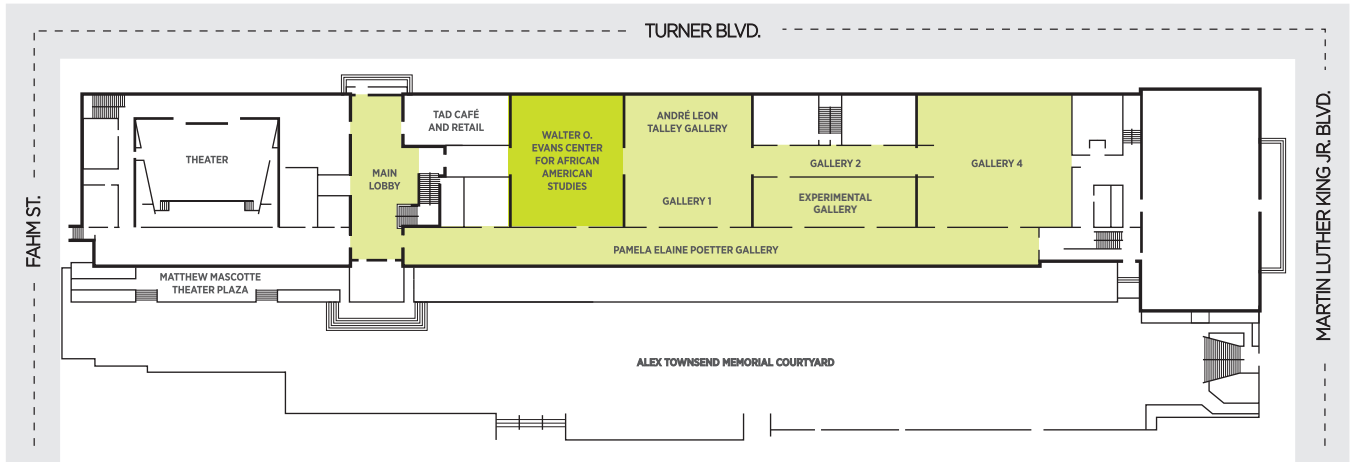
Citations Thomas, Hank Willis. “Artist Statement.” *Callaloo*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2014, pp. 957-960, www.muse.jhu.edu/article/556999/pdf. Accessed 7 March 2017.

Goldstein, Andrew M. “Hank Willis Thomas on the Art of Talking About Race.” *Artspace*, 20 Sept. 2012, www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_depth/hank_willis_thomas_interview-5202. Accessed 7 March 2017.

Quote p. 4 Frank, Priscilla. “How 100 Years Of Advertisements Created The ‘White American Woman.’” *The Huffington Post*, 3 April 2015, www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/09/hank-willis-thomas_n_7021480.html. Accessed 7 March 2017.

Museum Maps

SCAD Museum of Art



Main Level

- Galleries and main lobby
- Featured exhibition



SCAD de:FINEART 2017 EXHIBITIONS

SAVANNAH EXHIBITIONS

SCAD Museum of Art // 601 Turner Blvd.

From the Depths Above • William Singer

Jan. 31 – April 30

Lineages • Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian

Jan. 31 – Aug. 6

Roots • José Parlá

Feb. 7 – July 16

Florida Living • Hernan Bas

Feb. 14 – Aug. 20

With You... Us • Glen Fogel

Feb. 21 – May 28

Infinity Lines • Chiharu Shiota

Feb. 21 – Aug. 6

Chroma • Carlos Cruz-Diez

Feb. 21 – Aug. 20

Blind Memory • Hank Willis Thomas

Feb. 21 – Aug. 20

Freedom Isn't Always Beautiful • Hank Willis Thomas

Feb. 21 – Aug. 20

SAVANNAH GALLERY EXHIBITIONS

Oversaturated

Jan. 24 – Feb. 26

➤ Alexander Hall Gallery // 668 Indian St.

Take Note

Feb. 7 – April 17

➤ Gutstein Gallery // 201 E. Broughton St.

ATLANTA EXHIBITIONS

SCAD Atlanta // 1600 Peachtree St. NW

Catalyst: Master Prints by Pace Prints • Group Exhibition

Jan. 23 – April 21

➤ Gallery 1600

Noble Metal • Summer Wheat

Feb. 2 – April 7

➤ Trois Gallery

Project Diaspora • Omar Victor Diop

Feb. 17 – Aug. 20

➤ SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion + Film



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