Sources and References for Educators and Students

How to use these sources: As educators, we know that relevance and context to each learner is fundamental for higher level thinking. We offer this collection of sources and references related to Hank Willis Thomas’s work with the idea that educational resources should not be prescriptive, they should be generative. This document is intended to be a platform for information, history, and context to support educators and students who would like to take a deeper dive into this exhibition as a whole or into one section or one work. Enjoy! We welcome your feedback.

Created by Katie Gillard, Visual Arts Teacher, Beaverton School District, and Portland Art Museum Summer Teacher Leadership Fellow, including exhibition text by Julia Dolan and Sara Krajewski.

Questions or suggestions? Please contact Hana Layson, Head of Youth and Educator Programs at the Portland Art Museum.

Key Concepts/Themes:

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“Thomas uses a range of materials—collage, fabric, installations, photographic sources—yet his method hovers around a central conceptual tool: the investigative line aimed on archives of photography and consumer culture. His objective is to remind us of the harm of the fictions and narratives underlying racial categories—the line, the cut that structures and stratifies civic society.”


Hank Willis Thomas Website


Emily Nathan, “Hank Willis Thomas on Race, the Media, and His Upcoming Armory Show Takeover”, *Artsy*, February 25, 2015.

Laura Rely, “‘All art is political’: a conversation with Hank Willis Thomas’”, *Artsatl*, October 17, 2016.

Video: Deb Willis and Hank Willis Thomas “A Mother and Son United by Love and Art”, TEDWomen November 2017


Photography

“Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments.” John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 57.

“In photography programs, they teach you ways of seeing. Because photography is all about perspectives and timing, it’s not just about making a good image, but actually thinking about how the image will function in the world, the connections that viewers might have to it, how you might get closer to our subjects and further explore. Depending on where you stand, it affects what you see and everyone is negotiating different perspectives.” - Hank Willis Thomas conversation with Kellie Jones, *All Things Being Equal*, 78.

“In recent years I have approached my art practice assuming the role of a visual culture archaeologist... I am interested in the ways that popular imagery informs how people perceive themselves and others around the world.” - Hank Willis Thomas  “Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum opens Hank Willis Thomas Strange Fruit”, *Museum Publicity*, July 16, 2012
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“One thing that I always go back to is the archive. I collect images and objects in my mind, and even sometimes physically.” Hank Willis Thomas conversation with Kellie Jones, *All Things Being Equal*, 86.
**Black Righteous Space, 2012**

In this video installation, Thomas layers the colors of the Pan-African flag (red, black, and green), a symbol of Black nationalism and liberation, over the motif of the Confederate flag. The audio track plays excerpts of speeches, poems, and songs by African American leaders.

“I’m using this sound to disrupt historically oppressive symbols,” Hank Willis Thomas says of Black Righteous Space. “By pairing the soundtrack of these speakers with the reverberating, altered flag, the installation explores the idea of taking control of symbols and their meanings.”

- Artfix Daily


**Official Website of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League**

**Sampling of the Speakers in Black Righteous Space**

Video: Louis Farrakhan and Mike Wallace on American Moral Condemnation, 60 Minutes Interview, 1996.
Video: “Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth Recounts the Bombing of His Parsonage in 1956”, published by Facing History and Ourselves, August 20, 2008.
Remember Me

This series of works responds to gun violence in the United States and to the disproportionate losses experienced by African American communities. A monumental flag installation, titled 14,719, memorializes the people killed by other people with guns in the U.S. in 2018. On the second floor, Winter In America (2005) and Bearing Witness: Murder's Wake (2000–2008) respond to the death of Thomas' cousin and best friend, Songha Thomas, who was shot and killed during a robbery in 2000. In Priceless #1 (2004), Thomas layers the textual conventions of a Mastercard advertisement over a photograph of his family and friends at Songha's funeral, asking us to consider what we value.

Matisse’s Cut Outs & Jazz Series

Hank Willis Thomas, Icarus Falling, mixed media, including sports jerseys, 2016.

Priceless #1, from the series Branded, 2004

**Branded**

Thomas’s series *Branded* (2003–2006) explores systems, past and present, that turn humans into commodities. *Branded Head* (2003) echoes the punitive practice of branding slaves, demonstrates the disturbing ties between African American men, the physical demands of professional sports, and the ownership of team and brand endorsements. Basketball hoops become nooses (*Strange Fruit*, 2011), and football players face off with cotton pickers (*Cotton Bowl*, 2011) in a striking juxtaposition. Thomas transforms sports photography into sculpture, as iridescent arms reach for basketballs and footballs (*Liberty*, *Opportunity*, 2015). These works echo the torso, arm, and hand sculptures created from photographs of political prisoners detained during the Apartheid era (the *Punctum* series, 2013–2014).

“I started looking at and thinking about commodities—about how people were getting killed over JanSport backpacks and Air Jordan sneakers. I started thinking about logos as our generation’s hieroglyphs, and how I could use them... I realized that everyone feels comfortable talking about advertising, because it’s ubiquitous, and that they could be critical about it because it’s a language that you’re trained to recognize before you’re even aware that you’ve seen it. You’re already decoding it.”

**Kellie Jones:** “Can you talk about your relationship not only to those logos but also to a larger worldwide archive, of the history of slavery, imperialism, capitalism?”

**Hank Willis Thomas:** “I would come back to the East Coast from San Francisco and be bored. So, I just started poking around my mother’s stuff. I’d find interesting things like an image of a slave bill of sale from 1853, and that would remind me that black bodies were traded about sports, especially the NCAA, a multibillion-dollar industry fueled by the free labor of the descendents of slaves, or the NBA, where the amount of money the players make is nothing compared to the money that’s made off of them.”

**Resources:**
- Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”, *BillieHoliday.com*
What goes Without Saying

In the *Unbranded* series *Reflections in Black by Corporate America* and *A Century of White Women*, Thomas erases the text from ads to encourage viewers to consider how advertising reinforces generalizations surrounding race, gender, class, and cultural identity. Presenting selections from the two series (one focusing on Black consumers, and the other on white women) not only throws the construction of race into relief but also highlights how each group gains social currency while individuals lose agency when they are marketed to. Thomas refers to Roland Barthes’s view that advertising gains power by reflecting “what-goes-without-saying.” *Unbranded* asks us to look more critically at how cultural assumptions perpetuate through these images.

Unbranded Series

*Reflections in Black by Corporate America*, 1968-2008

Thomas selected advertisements aimed at Black consumers and published between 1968, the year of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, and 2008, the year that Barack Obama was elected president of the United States.

“By digitally removing all text from the original ads (but leaving the image otherwise untouched), Thomas points to the ways that the black community and black body have been used in product promotion and consumption. He simultaneously invites audiences to consider how advertising reinforces generalizations surrounding race, gender, class and culture. As Thomas states, “I realized that ads are never really about the product. It’s about what you get people to buy into through the language and the images and the stories that you tell.” All Things Being Equal, 60.

“I decided to track blackness in the corporate eye over the course of several decades. I started looking at real ads, and I realized that if you removed the advertising information, you could see a story behind them. These ads are never really about the product; they are about what ideas you can attach that product to.” Hank Willis Thomas conversation with Kellie Jones, All Things Being Equal, 84.

*A Century of White Women*, 1915-2015

“Thomas selected one image published during each of the one hundred years covered by the series, demonstrating the range of advertising imagery that worked to acknowledge with the women’s struggles for advancement—suffrage, war work, and the equal rights movement, for instance—while continuing to reinforce common ideas of the “weaker sex.” The illustrations, paintings and photographs—their guiding texts erased from the image, but excerpted and restated as each piece’s title—are a probing take on the history and treatment of white American women during a century of rapid change. Thomas’s series leaves us with a difficult question to answer: just what, exactly, are these companies selling us?” All Things Being Equal, 114.

Resources:


Adbusters Website

Adbusters Spoof Ads

Pitch Blackness/Off Whiteness

Through a stark palette of black and white, Thomas reveals the many shades of gray between the two colors and concepts. The shapeshifting materials reveal multiple meanings in the texts and images with many requiring the viewer to physically shift perspective to complete the picture. This section examines Thomas’s ways of complicating the stark forms and formats and the use of text in the history of conceptual art.

“In his dynamic text-based works, Thomas focuses on the malleability of words, like a poet. He isolates individual phrases to evoke how a shift in perspective can create a more nuanced understanding of language’s evocative power.” All Things Being Equal, 128.
**Trouble the Water**

Thomas regularly and expertly accesses historical archives from slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, selecting and reframing powerful images in ways that reflect on the ongoing patterns and institutions of discrimination, and how we might navigate them. Appropriating discarded prison uniforms and making “quilts” of photographic images reference coded communication methods of several kinds. The frame is a powerful tool that composes a story and a picture by focusing on the most important elements and excluding what lies beyond. Who controls the frame, tells the story. Thomas asks us to look critically at the way this operates in visual culture and claim the frame to better frame ourselves.

“The triangular framing device used in the Flag Frames series (2012-2014) replicates a basic shape used in traditional quilt-making. In the mahogany wood frames (typically used to hold folded US flags given to families of fallen soldiers), Thomas places historical images from the civil rights era,” All Things Being Equal, 146.

“Thomas also recasts and reinterprets quilt patterns and their symbolism in a series of textile pieces made from prison-issued inmate uniforms. We the People, stitched, from orange and white prison uniforms, invokes the preamble to the US Constitution but calls into question the guarantees of our founding national document, which have not been equally applied to people of color.” All Things Being Equal, 146.

“To fully experience works from Thomas’s ongoing Retrospective series, viewers must engage with each photograph-based image in phases, a strikingly complex reception strategy. The initial viewing stage involves positioning and repositioning in front of each piece, while the second requires exposing the work to strong, spectral light. The third and optional yet critical phase involves photographing the object with flash... These viewer-controlled bursts of light, and the resulting digital images recorded on personal cameras or cell phones, envelop the audience not only in the act of creation, but also in the act of possession.” Julia Dolan, All Things Being Equal, 178.

“Hank Willis Thomas sees the present in the photographic archive. He revives powerful visual references from the past through selective emphasis and invites audiences normally considered passive receivers of information to reframe their understanding of histories through innovative, engaging, and collaborative viewing opportunities.” Julia Dolan, All Things Being Equal, 178.


“August Landmesser, The Story Of The Man Behind The Crossed Arms”, All That’s Interesting, June 20, 2013

Gordon Parks Foundation
“Washington, D.C, And Ella Watson, 1942”, Gordon Parks Foundation
“Gordon Parks Artworks: American Photographer, Musician, Writer, and Film Director”, The Art Story

**Punctum**
“A photograph’s punctum is the accident that pricks me.” –Roland Barthes

Barthes’s influential writings on photography have long been a touchstone for Thomas. This section focuses on his transformation of the punctum, or the compelling detail, of Apartheid-era resistance photographs into sculpture. The series of works signal “race” based oppression as a colonial phenomenon that continues to impact multiple countries.

**Roland Barthes**

**Punctum**
“it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks these wounds are so many points……. punctum is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole- and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 26-27.

“The punctum, then, is a kind of subtle beyond - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see: not only toward “the rest” of the nakedness, not only toward the fantasy of a praxis, but toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.” Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida, 59.

**Liberty**
Liberty, Hank Willis Thomas, Brooklyn Museum
Hank Willis Thomas, (@hankwillisthomas) “So grateful to @juwanhowardofficial for lending his legendary hand to make this work. It was inspired by a photograph of the @harlemglobetrotters, who did more to make #blackslive-matter around the world than they ever get credit for. If you think sports is only entertainment, you aren’t paying attention. It is the world stage upon which many individuals from systematically oppressed communities slowly turn the wheels of power in the direction of the people. We need our athletes to recognize their power and influence beyond the bounds of the games they have learned to play.” - Instagram photo, May 30th, 2019.
Opportunity

“My Body of Art - Hank Willis Thomas on Eadweard Muybridge’s frozen movement photographs”, Phaidon website.

Hank Willis Thomas, Raise Up (2014). Original photograph by Ernest Cole, Mine Recruitment (1967). Cole documented the oppressive conditions under Apartheid in South Africa. This image portrays men, applying to work in the mine, who were forced to submit to a group medical exam.


Arrested demonstrators are driven away from the Supreme Court, Johannesburg, July 22, 1992 © Catherine Ross, Sunday Times

“Rise and Fall of Apartheid”, Lensculture
The Three-Fifths Compromise in the U.S. Constitution: Article I, Section. 2 [Slaves count as 3/5 persons]

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 [i.e., slaves].

- Exploring Constitutional Conflicts
- Video: The Three-Fifths Compromise, Khan Academy

Video: Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a Woman?


Video: Hank Willis Thomas: I AM A MAN.

Collaborations

The exhibition highlights several collaborative projects that Thomas has developed throughout his career. Key works include the experimental video Question Bridge with Bayete Ross Smith, Kamal Sinclair, and Chris Johnson featuring a question and answer between generations of African-American men of diverse backgrounds. Venues are encouraged to pursue installations of Truth Booth and public interventions by the artist PAC For Freedoms to take the exhibition outside the institution walls and into direct contact with the public.

Cause Collective Website

“The elementary call to recognize each other as unique human beings is undeniably necessary to achieve racial equity. Thomas is a part of two collaboratives, Cause Collective and For Freedoms, that adopt this ethos. Their projects coalesce around elevating the voices of everyday people by employing tactics learned from new genre public art, social practice, and institutional critique. Working in such activist-oriented, inquiry-based art forms, the groups..."
foreground dialogue and participation as a means to challenge hierarchies of authorship and power and to proffer alternatives to them. Their works are relational in their call for interpersonal connection.” Sara Krajewski, *All Things Being Equal*, 235.

**Question Bridge, 2013**

“With Question Bridge, we thought that we’d take the best question, the best answer, and weave those together into a documentary. Then we realized that there wasn’t a single best answer to any single question. We’d have five different answers by five different black men to a single question. Watching each person weave his own path through the questions, it became clear that for so many African American men, agency is the thing that they want more than anything- to be seen as an individual. I thought that it would be unfair for us to make it a documentary, where there’s a tidy beginning and end. Instead, we made a five-channel video installation accompanied by a curriculum. And because we still felt that there weren’t enough entry points into the project, we created an online platform where people could review the 1,500 question-and-answer exchanges we had collected, but also add to them. The idea was to show that black male identity is limitless.” Hank Willis Thomas conversation with Kellie Jones, *All Things Being Equal*, 85.

**Question Bridge Website**


**Chris Johnson Website**
“Question Bridge: Black Males”, *Docubase MIT Open Documentary Lab*

**Video**: “2015 Infinity Award: New Media”, *International Center of Photography*, February 26, 2015

**Discussion of Appropriation in Hank Willis Thomas’s Work**

Kerr Houston, “Recasting the Past: Hank Willis Thomas In South Africa”, *Bmore Art*, July 10, 2014

Athi Mongezeleli, “Challenging Appropriation via Scapegoating: Hank Willis Thomas v. Graeme Williams”, *Aficanah.org*, April 11, 2018


M Neelika Jayawardane, “Theft or artistic prerogative?”, *Aljazeera*, September 13, 2018


Resources for Teaching Black History

The 1619 Project, The New York Times
It has been 400 years since the first enslaved Africans arrived in the British colony of Virginia. “It is finally time to tell our story truthfully.” Essays, a podcast, and curriculum.

Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs: The Black History of Portland, Oregon

The Equal Justice Initiative Resources, including a History of Racial Injustice Timeline, and resources for teaching the legacies of lynching and segregation.

Teaching Tolerance Classroom Resources