

CHARLES DESMARAIS *Art*

Ingenuity elevates blunt political works

Race is not merely a difficult topic, one of the last taboos at the dinner tables of polite society. Its place in our world is, to use a word seemingly invented for the purpose of this sentence, perverse. It doesn't even exist, except as a lie upon which we have come to depend.

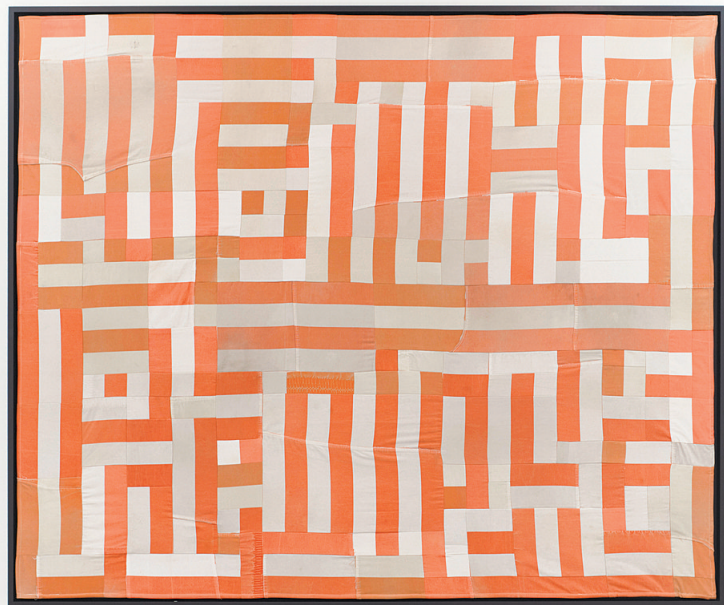
For more than a decade, Hank Willis Thomas has taken up the challenge of talking about the real effects of our society's belief in that imaginary thing. A compact but intensely powerful exhibition of recent work opened Wednesday at the influential, below-the-radar

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**Hank Willis Thomas:
Evidence of Things Not**

Seen: 2-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays through April 9. Free. Kadist Art Foundation, 3295 20th St., S.F. (415) 738-8668. www.kadist.org/en.

A film series curated by Hank Willis Thomas will be presented at the Roxie Theater and at Kadist Art Foundation throughout the period of the exhibition; information is available at the Kadist website.



Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

A close examination reveals that Hank Willis Thomas' "We the People" (2015) is a quilt made out of soiled prison uniforms.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

For “Two Little Prisoners” (2014), Hank Willis Thomas printed an image from a news magazine on a mirror so that the observer becomes part of the picture.



Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Hank Willis Thomas, “With All Deliberate Speed” (2015), viewed in ambient light.



Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In Thomas’ “With All Deliberate Speed” (2015), only the American flag is visible in ambient light. The use of a flash reveals Stanley Forman’s searing Pulitzer Prize-winning image in its entirety.

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Kadist Art Foundation in San Francisco’s Mission District. It shows him at his complex best, opening a vein to expose the hurt and, at the same time, honoring a culture that resists the most vicious attempts to destroy it.

Consisting of a dozen works, including two major video installations, the show, titled “Evidence of Things Not Seen” — after a James Baldwin essay — is Thomas’ first solo outing in San Francisco in 10 years. Several of the works have been acquired by the nonprofit foundation, which is based here and in Paris. (The purchase of art is one of many ways that Kadist supports art and artists.)

Entering the exhibition, we are promptly immersed in the bouncy sounds and brilliant colors of “Black Righteous Space: South African Edition” (2014), a continuously looping projected video. The work appropriates the graphic symbol of the South African neo-Nazi party Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, progressively turning it from a Germanic, implicative black-on-white-on-red emblem to a flashing, swirling kaleidoscope of changing hues.

A soundtrack of black South African music and sound, from Miriam Makeba’s famously joyous dance “Pata Pata” to freedom themes and speeches, drives the imagery. (The sound shapes the projected abstract patterns, a bit like a computer-

More online

Go to <http://sfchron.cl/1XQ5UJS> to see a video of the opening-night performance by Marc Bamuthi Joseph in interaction with “Black Righteous Space: South African Edition.”

controlled light show.) A microphone is provided so that we, too, might participate.

It is a typical work for Thomas, in that it subverts the original intent of the flag, neutering the cruel symbol and giving it a new meaning. It takes off from his earliest wide success, which was based on a series of photographs that teased racial stereotypes out of mainstream advertising.

Other pieces in the exhibition also rely on the appropriation of images, twisting them into new or heightened significance. For “Two Little Prisoners” (2014), the artist simply lifted a news-magazine image of a police officer with two young boys, one holding a card that suggests a crime-booking photograph. By printing the image in outline on a mirror, he forces the viewer to become part of the picture, and thereby implicated in the event.

Geometric abstraction takes a satirical hit, as well. “We the People” (2015) appears, at first, to be a nonobjective painting. Look closer, and the design resolves into text — the first words of the Constitution;



Courtesy Hank Willis Thomas

Installation by Hank Willis Thomas, “Black Righteous Space: South African Edition” (2014).

closer still, and it reveals itself as a quilt made from striped, variously soiled, decommissioned prison uniforms.

If it sounds as though this work can get a bit heavy-handed, well, it can. But the visual strength and ingenuity of most of the objects carry them out of the realm of the cliché and into the tradition of the best political and protest art. Political art — whether in graphics or song or theater — often depends on the retelling of collectively remembered stories and the reinforcement of strongly held beliefs.

A five-channel video work from 2014, “A Person Is More Important Than Anything Else,” is partly an extraordinarily touching, 28-minute documentary on James Baldwin, but it also veers close to

visual sloganeering, as intercut images from old movies and snippets of advertising underline the author’s recorded statements. I see this as the expressive part of the video — the art part. I can’t watch the piece through without crying (I’ve tried three times). Yet there is no denying its flat-footedness.

That said, Thomas’ best work transcends the single-note political statement. One of the strongest works in the exhibition is “With All Deliberate Speed” (2015). It is based on Stanley Forman’s 1976 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph “The Soiling of Old Glory,” a picture of such polemical impact it could certainly serve as a compelling poster without embellishment. Thomas has

manipulated the historic photograph, however, so that we can’t see the whole picture at first. Viewed in ambient light, we discern only a flag, inconspicuously flying from the side of the frame. Only if we use a camera flash to (re-)photograph the framed object before us is the famous image revealed: a flag on its pole being used to attack an African American man in a three-piece suit.

A flash of light, a recovered memory, a brutal moment. This is not simply a reminder; it is its own, new experience: the work of art as blazingly tangible shock. Hank Willis Thomas was born in 1976. He would not have been conscious of the picture in that year, when I and millions of others saw it. At what age, then, was the image branded on his mind, as it was instantly seared into the consciousness, surely, of countless Americans of color, as our nation blithely celebrated its bicentennial? What can that have felt like?

A “white” person cannot know that experience. But this extraordinary work is no longer a photograph, a symbol; it is an unforgettable, physical immersion in that terrible encounter.

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