

- NEWS
- OPINION
- BUSINESS
- ARTS & CULTURE
- EDUCATION
- SCI-TECH
- MULTIMEDIA
- SPECIAL REPORTS
- IN THE PAPER
- ZAPIRO
- PARTNERS

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## Art and Design

# 'History Doesn't Laugh' for Willis Thomas

04 MAR 2014 14:19 GARRETH VAN NIEKERK

Hank Willis Thomas has revealed his latest exhibition of unconventional stills that force us to look at our history from a different perspective.



I met Hank Willis Thomas for the first time last year at his studio while on a month-long fellowship in New York City. Most of the trip felt a lot like watching a film of my experience. It may have been that so much of what I had seen before had been filmed there. It could also have been the energy and pure glamour of the place. Either way Hank, who opened his second South African solo last week at the Goodman Gallery, will forever be cast under the bright lights of the Big Apple.

His studio looked exactly as I imagined a famous artist's studio would look. On the third floor of a brutal modernist building in the heart of the old haberdashery district, Thomas and his team welcomed me into the midst of their laboratory.

As I opened the door to the studio the team had, quite conveniently, arrived at a breakthrough. Before I knew what had hit me, both arms were being steered toward the bathroom while being informed about the future of holographics. Behind me, a door is closed. The light is switched off. Both assistants begin fumbling with battery packs, one blaming the other for not being prepared. Before me, in a flash of red light, the darkness was illuminated with a glowing hologram of Thomas dressed as the magician, in top hat and tails. His expression seemed to prepare itself knowingly for my look of wonder.

We sat together for a breakfast and tried to break through the hologram – to meet the man behind the magic.

I saw you last year while doing a residency at Nirox. That wasn't your first time here though. No, it was in 2003. I attribute that trip to being the place where I realised that race is actually a mythology. I came with a group of students from New York University. In being somewhere where there are very set racial definitions and classifications, that are very different to the racial classifications in my own country, I started thinking that if everyone can't agree on what the parameters of race are then maybe it's not real. I think that was a pretty liberating opportunity for me. Also recognising some of the similarities between the US and South Africa.

What similarities?

I think that racial dynamics play a hyper-real role in the consciousness of the people, more so than I think in a lot of other countries. There's also a history of segregation or apartheid, the history of protest and there's also this frontier mentality that the early settlers had here, and in the US.

Before talking about the show on at the moment, something that has helped define you in my head was your early work. Particularly the Branded stuff. In the work you deal a lot with Du Bois's double consciousness theories.

I think all of us are constantly aware of how the world is perceiving us, and are trying to maintain a sense of self that we can have pride in. That is not necessarily, at least not in the 21st century, just about blackness and the outside world. I think many of us see ourselves as part of multiple minorities and majorities at the same time. One thing I have been more aware of (in terms of double consciousness) is the double consciousness of immigrants. Immigrants here or to the US who seem to succeed better than, for lack of a better word, the "indigenous" black community because they are conscious of racism and institutional racism. Watching people who break boundaries because they don't know the rules of a society is really fascinating to me. Does that make sense?

Yes, it does. Du Bois talks about African Americans coming back to Africa as the homecoming. As an African American what is your relationship to this continent?

Recognising what it means to be in a place with a black majority with a long-standing history that's complex and multifaceted helps me to appreciate my own humanity. In the US blackness is seen in a very limited way. From my understanding of the townships and within the many other black communities here there are a lot of different ways to be black. Being able to bear witness to that was really important to me. I think as an African American I am also hyper aware of my American-ness and the privilege of being an American. The black Americans that I know who came here during apartheid had a privilege; they were treated as

"honorary whites". This idea that because of your nationalities you supersede the status quo is something I am very aware of.

The first thing you experience when walking into the show is the wall, the Ndebele wall.

What's going on there?

I'm still thinking a lot about it. My first cultural understanding of South Africa was through a book about Ndebele painters and muralists that I saw in the 1980s. Most of the images I had seen before of African art didn't really deal with colour or symmetry in the way that the Ndebele did. I was really fascinated. I thought about Mondrian. Frequently we think about these European artists who were "groundbreaking" and then we find that Africans have been doing similar, or were working within the root of a similar idea for very long without being celebrated.

Like Picasso.

Yeah. When I came here for the first time I saw nearly every house has an electric fence, and a two- or three-metre perimeter wall. When the Great Wall of China was built it was supposedly designed to keep people from invading and coming in, but what it also does is limit people from being able to leave. How do you build a community and neighbourliness in a country when you can't even see who lives next door to you. Everyone lives in their own fortress. I think this country will fully be free once these walls come down.

You speak about your skin being brown and your identity being black.

Because blackness was grafted onto me by my American condition. When I think about myself as a "black" person I am willingly constricting my own identity due to something that I don't understand, much less subscribe to. All of us, I think, are defined by our social condition.

This year, as you know, is an election year in South Africa. You're showing a series of huge buttons from previous election campaigns.

It started as an interest in the notion of political buttons within the US during the civil rights movement, how people would wear these buttons to voice their alignment with certain political movements. I'm interested in how these disposable ephemera that we create can become historical objects and artefacts that actually open windows into the past. By looking at political buttons from the apartheid era we can actually think about the audacity of someone in a restricted environment choosing to wear this little symbol of themselves and what they believe in. The research came from the South African History Archives at Constitution Hill, where there are hundreds, if not thousands of buttons. I love those buttons.

You're showing a photo that is only visible by the flash of a camera. What is the relationship between your work, and technology?

Technology has allowed me to make magic. There are very few limitations, creatively, with technology. The show is called *History Doesn't Laugh*. Partially as a provocation to stare back into it. History is this thing that is told to us and makes this narrative about who we are, where we come from and what we're made of. It ignores the fact that there are millions of histories happening all at once and none are more important than the rest. I made a piece that's called *History Doesn't Laugh* where it's all of these faces of black South Africans staring at you, it was once an insurance ad. When you look at it with the naked eye it's basically white-on-white but when you shine a light on it, from your perspective only, this image becomes visible. I love this idea of there being these aspects of history that we can't see until we shine a light on them and then all of a sudden you have a revelation. That is what the show, in general, tries to do.

Your relationship to advertising and politics – I suppose campaigning – becomes clear in the space.

There's a few pieces in the gallery. One is an advertisement for Afro-American mail order, an ad that I found for black South Africans in *True Love* magazine where they could buy black American things like Kung Fu, long hair, massage bras, invisible body wraps and a fake gun. I thought it was interesting. Advertising plays a huge role in how we see ourselves 'marketed to and told these are the values you want to have, this is what you should believe in. Too often we'll willingly submit to these imposed ideas about our values, similar to politics. I'm trying to encourage people to look critically at these things but with a sense of humour. Actually look at the absurdity of the values that we have and how they're imposed upon us. A lot of my work is about speaking back to this all-powerful language. I think advertising is the most widespread language in the world. You don't have to speak Chinese to get a Chinese advert.

Do you consider yourself an activist?

I think anyone who uses their voice is an activist. How great of an activist they are would depend on how they're seen by those willing to tell their story. In other words there are people who we wouldn't think of as activists. There are people who have been washing dishes for 70 years who may have said things to people that they had access to. They may have changed minds and opened so many more opportunities for everyone. In that sense, yes, I am an activist.

What are you fighting for?

Part of our human nature is to be prejudiced. To see something three or four times and see it as a pattern no matter how random it really is. How do we really recognise that we are an inherently prejudiced species but also see the limitations of prejudice? When I see a "man," or a "woman" or a "transgender" person how do we start seeing the individual? How do we start relating to each individual human being as a person, not a symbol of a person? It's a campaign to expose the mythology of race.

What is your greatest magic trick?

I suppose convincing people that my ideas are worth talking about.

*History Doesn't Laugh is on at the Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg, March 29 2014.*