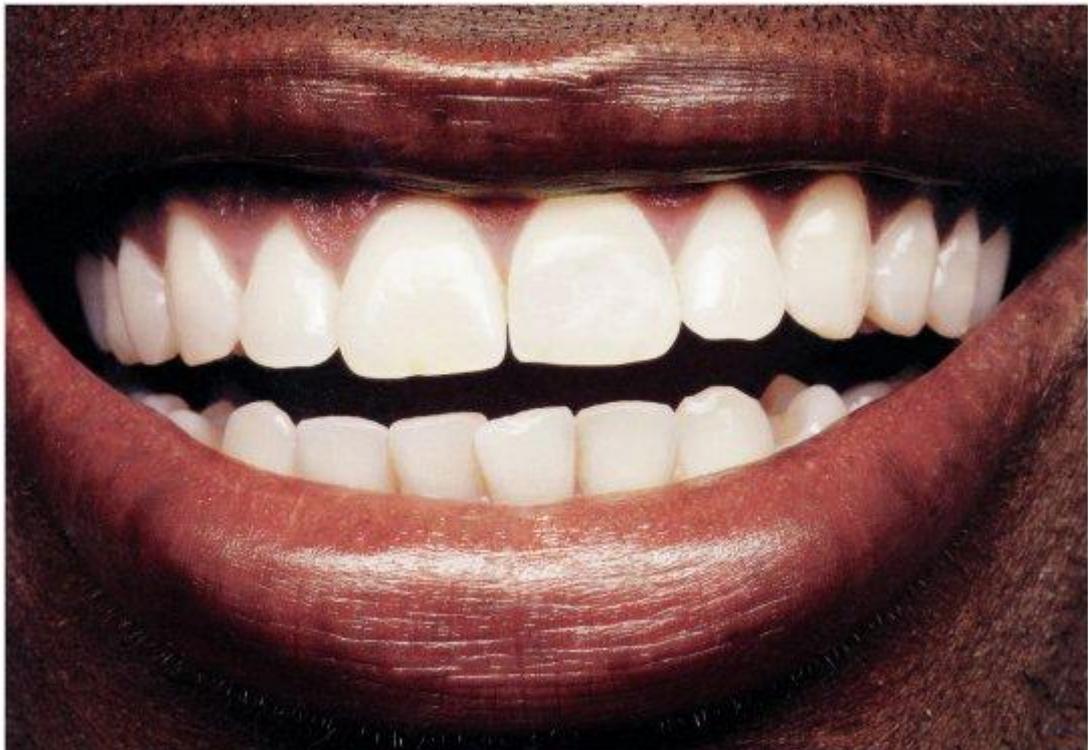


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Erasing Type: Hank Willis Thomas on What Advertisements Are Really Saying



Hank Willis Thomas

Things That Make You Go Hmmmmmm?!!

Year: 2000

Original Photographer: Unknown

Original Ad: Nissan Cars

"This was the first of the series because someone gave me this image and said I should do something with it. It became clear to me that truth is stranger than fiction and that by merely removing the text and logo from the advertisement you would never know this was an ad for a Japanese car."

Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968-2008,” part of a new installation at the [Brooklyn Museum of Art](#), is a project by artist Hank Willis Thomas. Appropriating ads that have targeted the black audience over the last 40 years, Thomas uses their images to explore identity, history and popular culture. By “unbranding” photographs—digitally removing the logos and text—Thomas allows the viewer to view the image, now stripped of its sale pitch, to take hard look at the way the advertising industry—and society at large—uses photography to reinforce generalizations about race and gender.

In an interview with TIME, Thomas shared his inspiration, process and technique:

What inspired you to start working on this project?

The *Unbranded* project is a response to a project of mine called *B@anded* [In that project, Thomas took ad copy and superimposed it over photographs, for example taking MasterCard copy and pasting over a photograph of a funeral]. There I was thinking about how black bodies were branded as a sign of ownership during slavery, and how their descendants bodies are branded today through corporate advertising. *Unbranded* came about when I realized that I could say more by using real ads as a form of cultural critique.

What is interesting to you about that time period?

With the murder of Martin Luther King, 1968 became the symbolic end of the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted to track “blackness” in the corporate eye during this amazing period of progress, which is book-ended by the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the election of Barack Obama.

Can you tell us a bit about the provenance of the photographs you picked?

Most of the people making decisions in advertising then, and now, are white males. I was interested in how white male interpretations of “black” identity shaped aspects of African American lives. The photographers of most of these images are unknown. I feel its integral to understand that these images are essentially created by our society, and that I did not contribute to, nor claim any authorship, of them.

What sorts of advertisements were you most drawn to?

I chose two ads for every year, trying to find as broad a range of ads as possible from films, foods, clothing, cigarettes and alcohol. What I’m most interested in these ads is not only how other people see black Americans, but also how we see ourselves. Part of advertising’s success is based on its ability to reinforce generalizations developed around race, gender and ethnicity which are generally false, but [these generalizations] can sometimes be entertaining, sometimes true, and sometimes horrifying.

While selecting ads and seeing the recurrence of common threads in advertisements, what did you find most intriguing?

I saw a lot ads for cigarettes, alcohol and hair care products. And themes of romance, family, and seduction and humor were common in all. I find it most intriguing that most of the ads appear to have nothing to do with the product once they are unbranded.