

HANK WILLIS THOMAS

HISTORY DOESN'T LAUGH
GOODMAN GALLERY, JHB



Apart from the reality that South Africa is celebrating twenty years of democracy, and that its people's ideological positions have been magnified by this year's general elections, what added value could one take from Hank Willis Thomas' exhibition *History doesn't laugh?*

For this exhibition, Thomas scoured numerous publications and archives in search of visual reference and audio materials that embody South Africa's recent history, drawing reference from popular magazines, namely *Drum*, *Bona*, and *True Love* as well as appropriating political signage for his series 'Advocacy Buttons'. In producing his sculptural pieces Thomas engaged with seminal photographs, which amongst others included Ernest Cole's *Naked Men* (1967) and Catherine Ross' *Arrested Demonstrators* (1992).

The result is a visual tapestry comprised of a video installation, sculptures, paintings and screen-printed images, which seek to represent the intricacies, desires, and

agency of oppressed people in negotiating self-worth. The exhibition sums up an agenda in which Thomas traces historical discrepancies of the recent past within our changing present, so as to create dialogue on a possible future. The works call for a conscious reading, for the audience to see, register and hopefully participate in worthwhile discussions on next twenty years of democracy, even if their subject matter reproduced a rhetoric in which Africans are still burdened by their history.

The body of work is indicative of a yearning to free ourselves, without being dismissive of the conditions in which our individual and collective identities are formed. Because of its eclectic conversation with visuals from the country's memory bank, the exhibition also provides a creative engagement with images which we, and others, have previously produced. In other words, the exhibition is not content in reminding us of how people are trapped in history, but extends to actively negotiate

the terms in which history lives within us. Furthermore it reminds us that ours is not a history restricted to South Africa but forms part of a global cause in which those previously marginalized can once again gather their senses as members of the human race.

The Black Righteousness Space is an audio-activated installation which invites viewers to insert their voices into conflicting ideals of nationalisms that were popular during apartheid South Africa. The installation kicks off with a symbol of the Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging (AWB) flag, and then proceeds to appropriate this by incorporating geometric patterns and motifs, and replacing its original colours with those of the current national flag. The flag's projection is accompanied by a playlist that features songs and speeches derived from a counter cultural perspective. The viewer could then add to these by speaking into a microphone that is placed in front of the projection or by protruding



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT Hank Willis Thomas, *Die Dompas Moet Brand ! (The Passbook must Burn!)*, 2014. Bronze and copper shim, 7 life cast arms holding pass books. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery. Hank Willis Thomas, *Terrific*, 2014. Carborundum print, 96.5 x 127 cm. Edition of 5. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery. Hank Willis Thomas, *Long Hair*, 2014. Inkjet print on Museum etching paper with carborundum flocking., 76 x 47.5 cm. Edition of 3. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery. Hank Willis Thomas, *Amandla*, 2014. Silicone, fiberglass, metal finish, 130 x 80 x 50 cm. Edition of 2. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

OPPOSITE Hank Willis Thomas, *Freedom in our lifetime*, 2014, prefabricated dry walling, security wire and spray paint, 230 x 400 x 400 x 15 cm. Courtesy of Goodman Gallery



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their silhouette onto the reverberating flag.

The Black Righteousness Space works well as a reflective trigger for the ongoing struggles between two or more ideals of nationalism; of Apartheid and Democracy, and of Afrikanerdom and Pan-Africanism. Or in Frantz Fanon's proposition, a familiar place where the settler and native get reacquainted. Thomas has previously exhibited another version of this installation in the United States of America. There, similar principles regarding the conflicted history of nationalisms were triggered by combining the shape of the Confederate Rebel flag with the colours of the Universal Negro Improvement Association flag. Thomas' aesthetic strategies of playfully appropriating the AWB flag and inviting people to comment on its legacy helps the call for a humanism that seeks to address nationalist gremlins that stealthily creep up in the comfort of our lounges or occasionally form part of early morning train station conversations.

These comfort zones have become a site where the marginalized find liberty in processes that disturb the structures of socio-economic advancement, as well as envision a scope in which their nationalist ideals can be woven into the tapestry of an all-inclusive democracy. Their hopes for emancipation and fears of increased relegation are not only compromised by those who loot the streets of Sebokeng or Cartonville in service delivery protests, but are also exploited by those who pronounce a return to Volkstads as a remedy to our social woes.

In such spaces people's hopes are robustly confronted by their fears and democracy's shortcomings are threatened by Apartheid's overbearing presence.

Juxtaposing our humanism with a movement, which presumes us to be otherwise, perpetuates a belief that ours is a freedom that needs to be monitored, inadvertently giving mileage to Sir Frederick Moor's assertion that: 'the natives [are]

incapable of civilization because they [are] incapable of sustained effort'. Like one would with a child, Moor proposes that our interests be supervised, and that our search for freedom and justice be scrutinised.

Though deeply problematic and misleading as Moor's proclamations are, I believe that the emancipatory efforts of the *Black Righteousness Space* will be best understood if we recognize the threat underpinning it.

The Black Righteousness Space is an installation which excites, illuminates, and maybe even inspires, new ideological positions of who we are and ought to be. But this can only happen if explored towards these ends. If not, it becomes another symbol for the historical preconditions that continue to produce the black subject.

TSHOLOFELLO MOCHE