



Hank Willis Thomas Studio

The Black Artist Who Thinks Race Is Fake



Emily Shire

Hank Willis Thomas believes race is a construct, and his latest exhibition, using a century of advertising featuring white women, illustrates his thesis at its most complex.

“I don’t really believe in race. It’s a fabrication,” Hank Willis Thomas tells me.

His words initially shock me for a few reasons. One is that when I meet the acclaimed African-American artist, it’s just a couple of days following the death of [Walter Scott](#), a black man, killed after being fired on repeatedly by white officer Michael Slager in North Charleston, South Carolina.

That came mere months after [Michael Brown and Eric Garner](#) died at the hands of white cops. As I write this, Baltimore is reeling over the [death of Freddie Gray](#).

Of course race is *real*, I think. It's at the nexus of so many social currents and tensions. What on earth is he talking about?

GALLERY: Unbranded: White Women in Ads, 1915-2015 (PHOTOS)

Thomas' declaration is all the more perplexing to me because he says it as we walk along Tenth Avenue, in New York's West Chelsea, between the two venues housing, *Unbranded: a Century of White Women, 1915-2015*.

Thomas' exhibition, which is currently on display at the Jack Shainman gallery through May 23, specifically examines depictions of white women in advertising. If race isn't real, what is the point of this show?

The exhibition follows the 39-year-old artist's 2011 series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America*, which similarly took advertisements depicting black people and stripped them of the text to scrutinize the visual representation.

His 2008 monograph, *Pitch Blackness*, examined black-on-black violence following the shooting death of his cousin, Songha Willis, when he was robbed at gunpoint in Philadelphia in 2000.

Race is intrinsic to his work and is even featured prominently in the very first piece in his latest exhibition. A 1915 Cream of Wheat ad shows a white woman sitting across from a white man being served by the brand's iconic black cook in his chef's hat.

When Thomas shows me it, he talks about how in 1915, black men had the right to vote (on the books, in reality it was very different) and white women didn't. "Technically, as a man, his [the black cook's] status is higher than hers," he says. But, as the visual demonstrates, "in reality, she still had a higher stature and more power," he says.

“What is an authentic female representation, an authentic black representation, when it's made up by people who don't know them and who are motivated by commercial interests?”

So, how exactly does Thomas not believe in race when it is a topic whose complexities and nuances he has doggedly and dynamically tackled throughout his artistic career?

“I try to tackle it because I'm trying to get rid of it,” Thomas tells me.

There are not many black people in the one hundred advertisement images selected for this series, and they are almost exclusively depicted as some form of help. A black maid toils in the background in a 1924 ad for laundry starch, while two white women in front more prominently fawn over their wardrobe.

A 1949 advertisement for Budweiser shows a disturbing nostalgia for the Antebellum South, with a black man serving a white woman in full-on Scarlett O'Hara regalia a slice of ham. “Hospitality is quickly recognized,” was the accompanying text, Thomas says.

Even when a black person is not present, Thomas contextualizes the depiction of white women in terms of the racial climate in the U.S. when it was made.

A 1955 ad shows a smiling white woman in a bra and corset being dragged by her hair by a white man; his veiny hand and muscled calf is all we see.

“Come out of the bone age, darling...” was the accompanying text in this ad for Warner’s lingerie. While it was meant to sell a modern take on undergarments—ditch the antiquated bone corsets—the brute violence is the standout message in 2015.

The violence is startling enough, but then Thomas points out that this ad was publicized the same year Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black boy, was kidnapped and murdered by an angry gang of white men after he whistled at a white woman.

“You see this violence [against white women] that’s really clear at the same time Emmett Till was killed for whistling at a white woman,” says Thomas.

“It’s publicly sanctioned violence,” he says of the Warner ad. “But of course, if it’s a white way of doing it, it’s okay.”

Yet, he is adamant that race is not real, despite the violence, discrimination and exploitation that occur all around us today with race seemingly at its roots.

“Black people were created by white people. Five hundred years ago in Africa, there were no black people. It was just people,” Thomas says.

But then, how does he make sense of racial profiling, stereotypes, and discrimination and their horrendous, sometimes lethal effects?

“The problem is people believe race is real. Trayvon Martin wasn’t seen as [just] a person walking through a neighborhood. He was seen as a young, black person, a kind of person that must be read as a threat,” he explains.

From Thomas’ perspective, racial oppression and strife exist in the U.S. because we buy into the construction of race.

To Thomas, race is a concept put together by outsiders trying to make a generalized message, just like Madison Ave executives trying to sell you a Maidenform bra or Coppertone sunscreen.

Unbranded takes an ad from every year of the 1915-2015 period, but the text is removed from each ad.

The only captions in the galleries are of the years in which the ads were published, with no indication of what products were actually being marketed. By doing this, Thomas suggests that the items themselves were incidental to selling a vision of white womanhood.

Thomas knows how much money and sheer manpower goes into creating advertisements. After graduating from NYU with a BFA in photography and Africana studies and an MFA in photography and visual criticism from the California College of Arts, his first jobs were working on advertising campaigns.

“I recall working on a shoot for Tommy Girl perfume. There were three models and about 100 crew. How much money could you spend to make a scent look attractive? It was fascinating to see how much went in from the back end making a picture that is supposed to represent a lie,” Thomas says.

The more he worked for and thought about advertisements, the more he realized how powerful they are. “You can learn as much about a culture from read an ad as you can from reading a book,” Thomas tells me.

He recognizes that advertisements do not directly mirror reality. Rather, one has to think about the messages being put forth and who is creating them. “What is an authentic female representation, an authentic black representation, when it’s made up by people who don’t know them and who are motivated by commercial interests?” he says.

Some of his early work involved creating “images that look like ads but say things I didn’t think advertisers could responsibly say.” His chilling [2004 *Priceless*](#) is a play on the popular MasterCard advertisement, taking the photo of a black family in tears at a funeral with the text, “Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless.”

Thomas began to toy with a new media critique while still relying on the medium of ads.

“At some point, I thought that instead of making images that look like ads, it might be interesting to use real ads. Truth may be better than fiction.”

It’s important to acknowledge that just because Thomas is working from original advertisements does not mean they are the “truth”—and it would be selling his latest series short to say that they were.

He doesn’t merely remove the text from an ad and slap it on the Chelsea gallery walls. He blows it up and zones in on specific elements or features that tell (or, maybe more accurately, reveal) a message that the advertisers didn’t intend.

While the sexism, the racism, and the objectification is often glaringly obvious, Thomas’ works are most jarring when he puts his artistic spin on modern ads we’ve probably never thought about twice.

I immediately recognized a 1998 advertisement for HBO’s *Sex and the City*, a naked Sarah Jessica Parker shielded only by her laptop with the Manhattan skyline behind her.

While certainly salacious, I never thought of the advert as particularly exploitative to women. But, stripped of the text and close to 20 years after it

originally ran, I couldn't help but wonder (to steal a line from Carrie Bradshaw) how much did HBO trade on Parker's body and sexuality to sell the series?

Overall, Thomas' selection of advertisements emphasized the limits to the changes in mainstream conceptions of white women. Thin, leggy, busty white women abounded.

They depressingly suggested that the prime change in hundred years of white women in advertising was the liberty to show more flesh and be more obviously sexual in the tone of objectification.

Which is not to say Thomas doesn't showcase an arc of improvement.

He also selected ads and played with the images to show the punctuated progress that came in small bursts, often fleeting ones.

World War II has long been considered a period of tremendous growth in financial and social independence for women, who were forced to take on roles as breadwinners and protect the home front while men were at war.

Thomas' ad choices speak to this new freedom for women. The ad for 1942 shows a woman in flying gear smoking a cigarette, a bold, brash gesture.

The 1944 one shows a woman doing intense manual labor, untangling thick coils of wires, presumably in the service of some military effort. In previous years, a company would not dare to show a white woman involved with such vigorous physical work.

In 1945, three women in full military gear stare straight forward, away from the camera. It is a sharp, defiant refusal to pose and primp.

But women were quickly ushered back into traditional roles when men returned home from World War II— and Thomas' series shows that. Immediately following the strong trio of women in 1945 is an ad featuring a blond woman in a dress and apron as she instructs her matching young, blond daughter in vacuuming.

When we approach the 1960s, Thomas points out how an ad from 1961 shows a woman eagerly mapping out her driving route from Beaumont to Houston, emblematic of creating her own path.

The 1962 ad next to it shows a woman's smiling disembodied head on the floor as she looks up at a man, who we only see from the waist down, gigantic in comparison (it was apparently, an advert for men's pants, Thomas tells me).

The juxtaposition between the two ads shows how messy the path towards social progress is. "I call it one step forward, two steps back," Thomas tells me.

Even after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, the establishment of the National Organization of Women, and the right for a

woman to have an abortion secured in *Roe v. Wade*, Madison Avenue did not process that the lives of women—especially white women who tended to have greater privileges by dint of their races—were changing.

The 1970s and 1980s are a blur of mostly blond women in bikinis or various seductive poses. My personal favorite is a 1984 ad of a fair-skinned woman with perfectly polished nails, holding a single finger to her lips to convey a sexy secret while she holds a chocolate pudding pop with a bite missing.

Thomas tells me that this ad came from Jell-O when Bill Cosby was the spokesman. The accompanying text was: “our deep, dark delicious secret.” That bit of knowledge transformed that ad from merely exploitative to eerily prescient and creepy.

In addition to the nude Parker, the 1990s selection included an even more naked Kate Moss. The first ad representing the new millennium featured a woman on her back in a bikini, her breasts bursting out of her top as a man stood over her with a martini glass in his hand.

A 2003 ad simply featured a woman sitting in the martini glass. It’s hard to think of something more objectifying than portraying women as substances for consumption.

But there are some striking improvements when we hit the 21st Century, especially in the representation of same-sex relations.

There are two ads featuring lesbian couples. One in 2006 shows a couple lying together in bed. The more powerful one is from a 2014 Tylenol ad. It is a shot of a lesbian couple embracing by an urban skyline as they take a selfie.

I smiled when I saw this image and assumed it was the final one to cap off the century— a resounding image of social progress and equality.

One of the gallery employees corrected me and took me to what was *actually* the final image: about a dozen models in metallic bikinis wearing tri-cornered hats, crammed in a boat and positioned to recreate the famous 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware* by Emanuel Leutze. It’s wryly titled *Just as our Forefathers intended, 2015*.

Two steps forward. One step back.

[Unbranded: a Century of White Women, 1915-2015](#) runs until May 23 at the Jack Shainman Gallery at 513 West 20th Street and 524 West 24th Street.