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# Hank Willis Thomas

NEW YORK,

at Jack Shainman by Jean Dykstra

Hank Willis Thomas: *Aggressive loyalty*, 1963/2015, digital C-print, 40 by 42 $\frac{7}{8}$  inches; at Jack Shainman.



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Hank Willis Thomas has created a body of work over the last decade that attempts to unravel issues like identity and race in popular culture. Until now, he has looked most closely at representations of African-American men. His bronze sculpture *Raise Up* (2013)—a row of cast bald heads and arms raised in the hands-up “don’t shoot” gesture—was on view at Jack Shainman’s booth in Art Basel Miami shortly after the Staten Island grand jury decision not to indict officer Daniel Pantaleo in the death of Eric Garner. The collaborative video project *Question Bridge: Black Males* (2012), which won the International Center of Photography Infinity Award for new media this year, shows black men of different ages and backgrounds talking about their experiences of everyday life in America. In the series “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008,” Thomas stripped ads featuring black bodies of their text and logos to obscure the product being marketed. In doing so, he made clear what kinds of other things were being sold—underlying assumptions about race, class and gender, tapped into in order to sell beer, cigarettes, cars and sneakers.

Thomas has reprised the same technique in his latest series, “Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015,” which occupied both of Jack Shainman’s Chelsea spaces. For this series, Thomas selected one advertisement from every year between 1915 and 2015 and removed all the primary text from it, giving the viewer (via a wall label) only the year in which the ad was made. One gallery showed images from 1915 to the 1940s and the other had shots from the subsequent years. Following the pictures chronologically, viewers could track the constructed character of the white woman, as she moved from the home to the workforce, from virtuous damsel to wild, frighteningly sexual creature (literally caged in an image from 1966, originally promoting Martini & Rossi vermouth).

The conceit is effective, not to mention timely. As Thomas has noted in several interviews, “Reflections in Black” concluded the year that the first black president was elected. The span of the new series ended just when Hillary Clinton officially announced her candidacy. The coincidence made the show’s 1952 Maidenform ad in which a woman wearing only a skirt and bra dreams of being elected seem especially dated. Until, of course, you came to the 2015 ad for a Ram truck: referencing the 1851 painting *Washington Crossing the*

*Delaware*, it features a bevy of bikini-clad women in place of the brave revolutionaries.

Exoticism, racism and sexism are rampant throughout the images. Some shots (like those involving phallic lipsticks and cigarettes) are made funnier stripped of context, while others are less amusing: a 1967 ad for a brand of pants called Broomsticks shows a girl in a bikini surrounded by five clothed men, laughing and grabbing at her. Thomas's message in this series isn't a new one, but it reminds us to consider the extent to which the "white woman" is a social construct, used and reinforced by corporations.