

# What a decade of ads say about a woman's place

July 06, 2015 by Marian Salzman



Marian Salzman, Havas PR

In his latest show, photographer Hank Willis Thomas stripped the copy from various ads to explore what they say about femininity. Havas' Marian Salzman reviews the result.

Legendary photographer Hank Willis Thomas has spent a career exploring the ways in which advertising has shaped notions of race and gender and persuaded consumers to accept them.

His most recent show, at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, was titled "Unbranded: A Century of White Women." It explored the depiction of women in advertising from 1915 to 2015.

I have spent a career that feels like a lifetime (alert: this review was authored by a middle-aged white woman who is into her fourth decade in the mad world of adland) selling more stuff to more people at a better price. I get that selling is the bottom line.

And yes, now in our age of sustainability and responsibility, we acknowledge that less can often be more, and we do what we can to change the world, but still. We're doing our best to get people to buy into what our clients are offering.

Thomas is talented, no question about that. Toggle through the photographs [on his website](#). He engages, he educates and he provokes.

I always admire an artist who makes me think different, a nod to the Apple campaign of the (ungrammatical) same name that was all about selling technology without a trace of gender bias. (The losers in that one were those drones who believed Microsoft was the only answer.)

His latest exhibition forces us to ask ourselves whether we have formulated a reality around our perceptions, and then whether those perceptions were based on stereotypes. Are we the drones from 1984 who forged forward without asking tougher questions? Yikes—am I one of those drones?

It's a crazy idea in our HeForShe world that, besides the battle for equal pay, we need to rethink the big picture—and the small ones of advertising.

All those gender ideals that have been front and centre for my working life, even if I never gave them much thought, seemed to me (blissfully naïvely) to be mere "isms" that were evaporating as I chugged along in the workplace.

But when you peel back the verbal advertising messages and let the images do all the talking, as Thomas did in his exhibition, you see a different picture.

Frenemies are us—women don't hang together unless, of course, they're vying for male attention in bathing costumes. We can think all we want about the sisterhood; what the exhibit showcases is the war within the sex, not the battle of the sexes.

It showed that white women have been depicted as almost entirely friendless, shown instead with their husbands or children. Especially at the beginning of the era, white women were clearly positioned as not black, and often shown being waited on by black servants.

As women slowly gained equality with men (e.g. entering the workplace), images began depicting violence against them, as if the art directors were threatened.

For all of these and a number of other reasons, the show strikes me as relevant and provocative.

We chicks might now be welcome in adland, and might do a bloody good job, and might even see that in our industry's depictions of other (fictional) women. But we still don't have penises, which means that, well, without that power tool, we can't quite level some things.

We can perform oral sex on our lipsticks, get pulled apart by men of all ages and even be treated as an equal at times, but the main thing Thomas has managed to reveal is a century of testosterone minus me.

Marian Salzman is the chairman of the global collective and chief executive of North America for Havas PR.

Read more at

<http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/1354804/decade-ads-say-womans-place#VKXIHJMcj9pUh0qi.99>