

Hank Willis Thomas's slick image masks a closed door



HARTFORD — Is it an ad? Is it a protest poster? Is it art? And anyway, what's the difference?

This photograph by Hank Willis Thomas, 39, an African-American artist born in New Jersey, hangs in the new postwar and contemporary galleries at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. It's part of a celebrated series of photo-based works that address, with wryness, precision, and visual panache, the implications of stereotypes pushed by commercial sport.

This work is called "Basketball and Chain." And while it is clearly a brilliantly effective political statement, it is impossible not to notice that it is also as slickly distilled as a Times Square billboard.

In fact, everything about it suggests a weird marriage between Malcolm X and Don Draper. You can almost imagine an advertising executive pitching it to potential clients, with suitably widened eyes, and smug follow-up smile.

"An African-American man . . . a basketball player . . . but you don't see his head, or in fact any of his body. . . . Only part of one leg and his feet . . . BRAND NEW sneakers. . . . It's pitch black behind him. As if he's in space. And he's jumping. (Think Michael Jordan. Think LeBron.) He's jumping so high that he's burst through the frame.

"But wait. *Is* he rising? Or is he actually being dragged down?"

"Because here's the thing: Attached to one ankle is a chain. A manacle. Think prison, folks. Think, if you will, slavery. The chain is taut. And at the other end is a ball.

"Ball and chain?" Significant pause. "*Basketball and Chain.*" Pause again.

"Thank you."

That's a parody, by the way. I'm only trying to tease out a layer of Thomas's work that is easy to overlook, because the image itself is so devastatingly succinct.

Thomas is using the visual language of advertising very deliberately. He knows — and is subtly reminding us — that this language is heavily implicated in the political realities that his art addresses. It permeates everything.

Advertising is about maximum legibility. It's about achieving a kind of clear reduction of the opaque and obstinate messiness of real people, real lives, and

real predicaments, in order to lubricate and maximize commercial possibilities.

In the process it promotes a few (a very few, if you are African-American) seductive ready-made identities. These may be something for some people to aspire to; they may bring riches, respect, a seraglio of self-actualization. Good luck with that.

They may also, for most real African-Americans, work more like the idea of justice in Kafka's parable, "Before the Law" — a parable that ends with the announcement: "This door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it."

## **BASKETBALL AND CHAIN**

By Hank Willis Thomas

At: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford

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