

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Above Left: Hank Willis Thomas, *No. 13*, 2022, Mixed media including NBA jerseys
Above Right: Hank Willis Thomas, *No. 8*, 2022, Mixed media including NBA jerseys
Courtesy of the artist and Erika Kapin [PHOTO CREDITS]

Hank Willis Thomas

The New Black Aesthetic **OPENING: February 17 - 20, 2022**

Cleveland, OH – Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the National Basketball Association, Hank Willis Thomas will present a new series of artworks in an exhibition titled *The New Black Aesthetic*. Coinciding with the NBA All-Star games in Cleveland, Ohio, Thomas’s new series will be on view for four days only, 3-blocks from the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse at the Caxton Building.

The topic of sports has long been a focal point for Thomas’s practice. Specifically, how identity, sports and politics interconnect. His work often examines the powerful presence sports has in history as well as today’s society. This exhibition includes six mixed media works and one large-scale stainless steel sculpture. “The New Black Aesthetic” takes its title from a 1989 essay of the same name by Trey Ellis where he describes the emergence of a new cultural identity influenced by the generation of African American athletes, artists and academics who found a way to thrive within mainstream American culture after centuries of exploitation and alienation. Ellis’ phrase refers to a movement, “the most exciting period” he’s ever known, of young Black artists who exist and thrive authentically in their entire complex cultural identity which “borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines.”¹

The National Basketball Association and sports across the world can also unite across both race and class lines. Many Black athletes have become cultural icons that unify across the sports, races, class and even national boundaries. With their awe inspiring creativity and athletic prowess, these athletes also have access to new spaces and platforms. Using

¹ Ellis, Trey. “The New Black Aesthetic.” *Callaloo*, no. 38 (1989): 233–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2931157>.

photography, sculpture and mixed media, Thomas explores the impact of sports, its logos, and its icons on the American psyche.

Last fall, in celebration of the NBA's 75 years, the NBA and Bleacher Report commissioned a lineup of talented, diverse artists from a range of disciplines to create original works of art inspired by the league. Thomas was one of the five artists who created an original work along with a set of artist editions and apparel inspired by their artworks. Thomas' original work, *That's Game*, reimagined the current NBA logo in jerseys from All-Star players throughout NBA history.

Thomas continues that exploration in "The New Black Aesthetic" with five additional icons who could equally be representative of the league shown alongside *That's Game*. The mixed media works depict these legendary athletes from the NBA: Kobe Bryant, Wilt Chamberlain, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, Bill Russel, and (current NBA logo icon) Jerry West. Inspired by various quilt traditions in the African-American South, Thomas has a long history of working with unexpected fabrics, such as old striped prison uniforms, US flags and sports jerseys. By utilizing such materials, Thomas requires the viewer to consider the bodies who have historically donned these uniforms, addressing our visual systems and their role in perpetuating inequality. The mixed media works in this show are made of deconstructed basketball jerseys then reconstructed into silhouettes of celebrated athletes who are emblematic of the league and the culture that has developed out of their individual and collective impact on and off the court.

Thomas will also present a new, large-scale version of his well-known *Liberty* sculpture. In *Liberty (reflection)*, Thomas creates a mirror-like, monumental, three-dimensional sculpture from a two-dimensional image inspiration. It is a continuation of Thomas' *Punctum* series, based on Roland Barthes' photographic theory of the *punctum*, which refers to the detail in an image that pierces or wounds the viewer, creating a direct relationship between them and the pictured object or person. Thomas uses this concept to select or reframe areas of images, which he then transforms into large-scale sculptures as part of his interest in popular culture, photographic history, and sports as a metaphor for individual and collective struggle.

The original inspiration photograph for *Liberty (reflection)* appeared in Life Magazine in 1986 and featured Meadowlark Lemon, Harlem Globetrotter No. 36, in front of the Statue of Liberty, spinning a basketball on his finger. Thomas started by creating a life-size sculpture of the moment from the arm of retired NBA All-Star Juwan Howard. The resulting work plays with the notion of cropping, isolation, and scale. Furthering this exploration of the moment, *Liberty(reflection)* is a larger-than-life version rendered in a polished finish so that the viewer finds themselves part of the work. Thomas' *Punctum* series encourages us to contemplate framing itself: what is left in or out of a photograph, narrative, or account of a historical event, and why?

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Location: Caxton Building, 812 Huron Rd E, Cleveland, OH 44115

Dates: February 17 - 20, 2022

Opening Hours: 11am - 8pm

Opening Reception: Friday, February 18th, 6-9pm

ABOUT HANK WILLIS THOMAS

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976, Plainfield, NJ; lives and works in Brooklyn, NY) is a conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to perspective, identity, commodity, media, and popular culture. Thomas' work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad including the International Center of Photography, New York; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Spain; Musée du quai Branly, Paris; Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Netherlands. His work is included in numerous public collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; High Museum of Art, Atlanta and the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Collaborative projects include Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth) and For Freedoms, which was awarded the 2017 ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform. In 2012, Question Bridge: Black Males debuted at the Sundance Film Festival and was selected for the New Media Grant from the Tribeca Film Institute. Thomas is also the recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship (2018), AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize (2017), Soros Equality Fellowship (2017), and is a former member of the New York City Public Design Commission, and represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; Kayne Griffin, Los Angeles; Ben Brown Fine Arts, London and Hong Kong; Goodman Gallery, South Africa; and Marauni Mercier, Belgium.

www.newblackaesthetic.com

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