



About the Exhibition

We The People presents a selection of works by Hank Willis Thomas in diverse media, including sculpture, retroreflective vinyl and lenticular works, textiles, and neon. Organized in conjunction with the unveiling and dedication of a new permanent sculpture on the Davidson College campus by Thomas, in collaboration with Perkins&Will, *With These Hands: A Memorial to the Enslaved and Exploited*, the exhibition invites reflection on the ways the artist's broader practice connects to the themes embodied in the memorial, including identity, history, collective memory, and the legacy of exploitation and exclusion, while also looking forward, toward repair, reconciliation, and inclusion.

Thomas is widely recognized for recontextualizing popular imagery, familiar photographs, symbols, and language to examine how meaning shifts over time and across perspectives. Text-based works such as *We The People* and *Justice* transform decommissioned prison uniforms and U.S. flags, respectively, into words whose legibility changes with distance, reminding us that perspective alters meaning. Language also figures prominently in other works, including neon and lenticulars, where flashing or morphing words expose the fallibility and malleability of language, and again, demonstrate how one's standpoint alters their understanding. Retroreflective vinyl, another of Thomas's principal mediums, are

activated by both ambient and flash lighting—only fully visible when viewed from certain angles, reinforcing the notion that reality is shaped by perspective. As elements of the works converge and transform, they inform new layers and combinations of meaning. Images are hidden in the shadows, and reveal themselves when we look closely and, literally, shine a light on them.

Across bronze sculptures, Thomas highlights his interest in gesture, particularly of arms and hands, as seen in many of his larger sculptures and public art commissions. In *With These Hands*, based on his large-scale commission for Davidson College, two hands emerge in a gesture intended to represent toil, resilience, and care of unacknowledged enslaved and exploited laborers that built and maintained the college, while works such as *Reach*, *Loving Day*, and *We Have Had Enough* speak to human connection, unity, and community.

Thomas's newest works in the exhibition, including *Silver Lining*, which draws on imagery from the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, continue his ongoing commitment to using art to interrogate history, bringing to bear its fractures and omissions, while looking forward to help us imagine the future we want.

About the Artist



Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 1976) is widely recognized for recontextualizing familiar photographs, symbols, and language to examine how meaning shifts over time and across perspectives. His newest works continue an ongoing commitment to use art to interrogate history, bring to bear its fractures and omissions, and look forward, helping us imagine the future we want and deserve.

Thomas holds a B.F.A. from New York University, New York, NY (1998) and an M.A./M.F.A. from the California College of the

Arts, San Francisco, CA (2004). He has received honorary doctorates from MassArt, MA (2025), CCA (2024), the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, MD (2017), and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, Portland, ME (2017). His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad, including the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum

Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, Hong Kong Arts Centre, and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. His collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males; In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth); The Writing on the Wall; The Gun Violence Memorial Project; and For Freedoms*, an artist-led organization that models and increases creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action.

Thomas was the 2022 U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts honoree from the Office of Art in Embassies, Washington, D.C. Additionally, he is the recipient of the Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship (2019), The Guggenheim Fellowship (2018), AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize (2017), Soros Equality Fellowship (2017), Aperture West Book Prize (2008), Renew Media Arts Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation (2007), and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Award (2006). He is a former member of the Public Design Commission for the City of New York.

Thomas's public art practice includes permanent artworks around the country, including *The Embrace* (2023) on the Boston Common in Boston, MA; *REACH*, (2023) made in collaboration with Coby Kennedy, at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, IL; *Duality* (2023) at The Underline in Miami, FL; and *The Truth is I Love You*, at The Austin Public Library, Austin, TX. Additional permanent public artworks include *Unity*, in Downtown Brooklyn, NY; *Love Over Rules* in San Francisco, CA; and *All Power to All People* in Opa Locka, FL.





We The People

2025

Mixed media, including decommissioned prison uniform

Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

To make this textile, Thomas repurposed old striped prison uniforms, arranging the cloth pieces to spell out the phrase "WE THE PEOPLE." These words, also the title of this solo exhibition, are the first three words in the preamble of the United States Constitution written in 1787. They serve as a powerful reminder that the authority of the government derives from the consent of its citizens. But when the founders penned the document and used the pronoun "we," they did not mean it to extend to the enslaved, Indigenous people, or women. By using garments associated with incarceration, Thomas underscores how exclusion persists—particularly at a moment when protections are being rolled back and eroded.



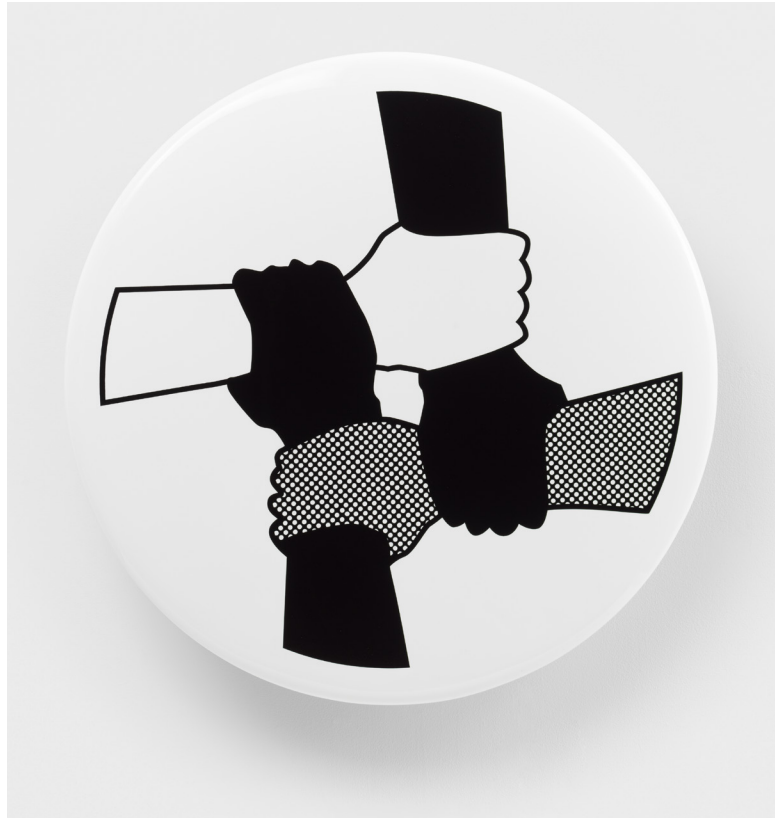
We Have Had Enough

2013

Fiberglass and aluminum

Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

This artwork is based on a button designed by the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), an anti-apartheid organization focused on non-racialism and non-sexism. Thomas has enlarged the text and imagery from many political buttons like this one, transforming a one-inch button, typically pinned to a jacket or backpack in a show of solidarity, into a large-scale work of art as a way of further amplifying these messages.





15,433

2021

Embroidered stars on polyester fabric

Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

The throughline of memorialization comes up throughout Thomas's work, both in large public art pieces like *With These Hands: A Memorial to the Enslaved and Exploited* on our campus, and in gallery works such as *15,433*, from the artist's *Falling Stars* series of flags begun in 2018 — 15,093 in 2016, 15,580 in 2017, 14,916 in 2018, 15,433 in 2019 and 20,923 in 2021. In these works, each embroidered star represents a life lost by gun violence that year, in the United States.

Initially inspired by the murder of his best friend and cousin, Songha Willis, in Philadelphia in 2000, this work represents the horrific, ongoing, grim reality of gun violence. According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), in the decade between 2013 and 2023, 127,914 individuals in the U.S. were murdered with a firearm.

Artists, including Thomas, have long been inspired to create and reimagine flags—to speak about identity, unity, war, and more. In this case, Thomas memorializes each victim of gun violence from a specific year with their own star, referencing an important element of the flag of the United States—the country with the most instances of gun violence of all the high-wealth nations.

When he first began creating these works, Thomas noted,

“While this installation is a memorial to the thousands of people who were killed by guns, it also pays homage to the countless loved ones who carry perpetual grief and trauma as unacknowledged victims of gun violence in America.”



What Happened On That Day Really Set Me on a Path (Black on White)

2018

Retroreflective vinyl mounted to Dibond
Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Retroreflective vinyl has been one of Thomas's primary mediums for more than a decade. Commonly used for road signs, this material allows Thomas to present two distinct scenes, with one revealed only when the viewer waves a flashlight or camera flash across the artwork.

Images are hidden in the shadows, and reveal themselves when we look closely and, literally, shine a light on them. Perhaps this references the role many artists, including Thomas, have taken on—to see, document, and render visible history and truth.

The primary subject of *What Happened On That Day Really Set Me on a Path (Black on White)* is Dorothy Counts-Scoggins at age 15 on the first day of school in 1957 as she integrated Harding High School and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. She stayed for only four days due to intense harassment. Thomas chose to highlight Counts-Scoggins in his work, with the rest of the image revealing itself when exposed to the light.





Pitch Blackness Off Whiteness

2009

Neon multiple

Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

Language is both subject and material in Thomas's neon work *Pitch Blackness Off Whiteness*. The artwork flashes alternating sets of words—"off-white" and "pitch-black"; the addition of the suffix "-ness" transforms the adjectives into nouns. Shifting back and forth, the work speaks to the fallibility of language.

By using neon, a medium most often associated with advertising and retail, Thomas alludes to power and commodification.





All Things Being Equal...

2010
Polished stainless steel with pin mount
Collection of the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

Language is an important aspect of Thomas's work. Here, he employs an ellipsis at the end of the phrase *All Things Being Equal...*, suggesting that the pursuit of equality is still ongoing. Viewers see themselves reflected in the mirrored surface of the stainless steel—acting as a reminder that we are all a part of the continued struggle.

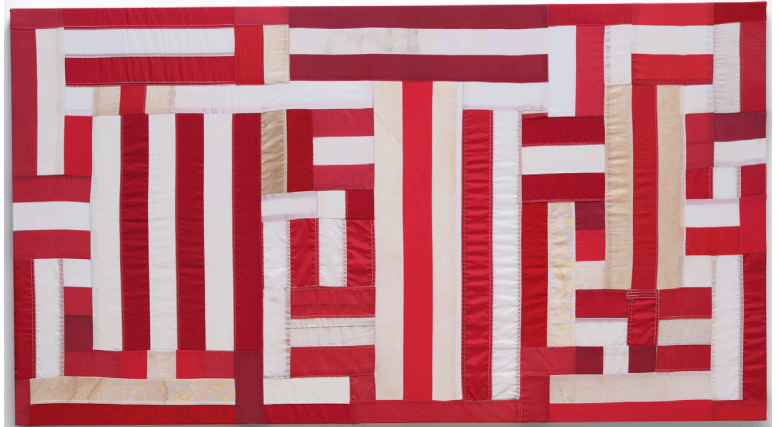


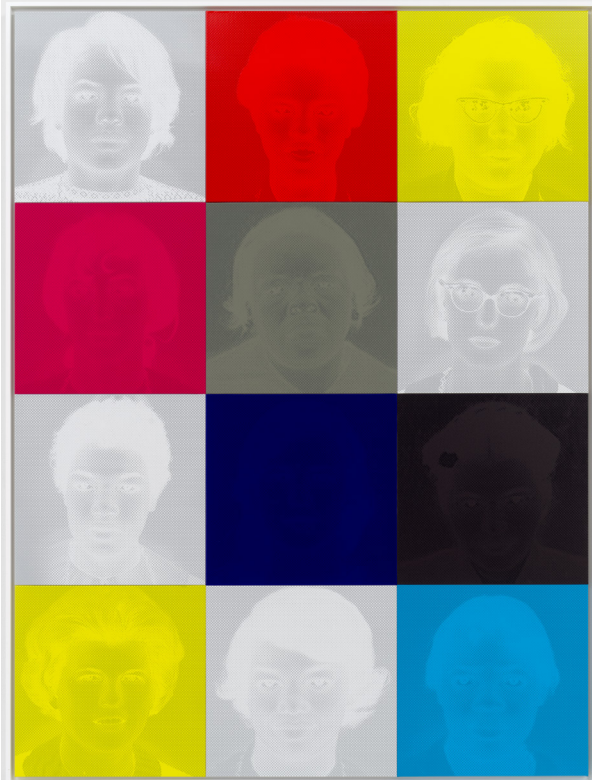
Justice (red)

2021

Mixed media, including U.S. flags
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

To create *Justice (red)*, Thomas references storytelling in the form of quilting used by previous generations of women in his family. Composed of the red and white stripes of decommissioned U.S. flags, up close, this work appears to be a simple, geometric textile; with distance, you can read the word *Justice* within the maze. Thomas once again reminds us that our experiences are altered by perspective.





Freedom Riders (“knowing what must be done does away with fear”)

2023

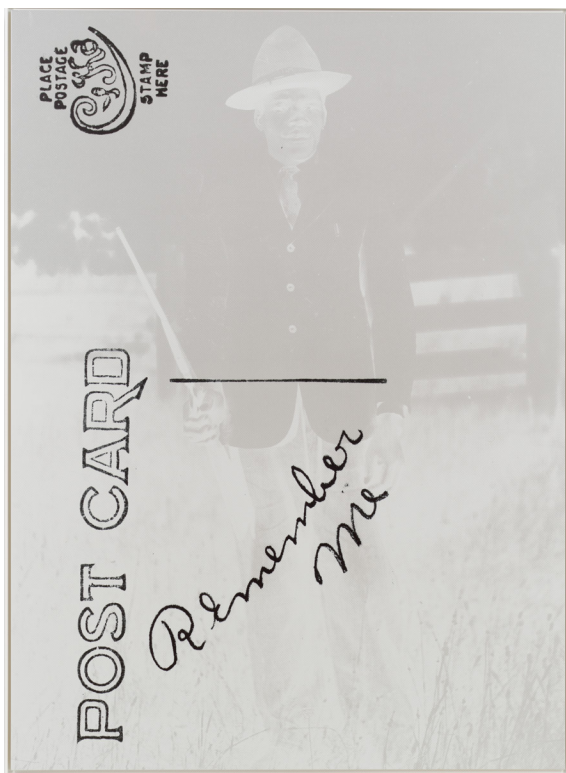
UV-printed retroreflective vinyl and overlamine on Dibond

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

The United States Supreme Court decisions *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946) and *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960) ruled that segregated public buses were unconstitutional, yet, many Southern states ignored the rulings. This work features twelve women who identified as Freedom Riders, civil rights activists who rode interstate buses into the segregated Southern beginning in 1961 to protest and challenge local laws and customs. Their courageous, legal actions called national attention to the disregard of the law, and the violence that sometimes ensued, in the name of enforcing segregation throughout the Southeast.

“Knowing what must be done does away with fear,” is a quote from Rosa Parks who, refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955, sparked the Montgomery bus boycott and helped launch the Civil Rights Movement, including inspiring the actions taken by the Freedom Riders.





Remember Me (Postcard)

2022

UV print on retroreflective vinyl on Dibond
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

This artwork combines the front and back of a vintage postcard Thomas found in the archive of the Amistad Center of Art and Culture at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Connecticut. Under regular gallery lighting, the handwritten words "Remember me" from the back of the postcard are visible. When illuminated with a flashlight or camera flash, however, a studio portrait of an unidentified young Black man emerges. Studio portrait postcards were popular in the early 20th century within Black communities as a way to share one's likeness with friends and relatives.

Depicted outdoors, the man holds a firearm and wears a military-style hat similar to those worn by Buffalo Soldiers. Created by the U.S. Army after the Civil War, between 1866 and 1916, the all-Black cavalry and infantry regiment built roads and protected settlers in the Western frontier.

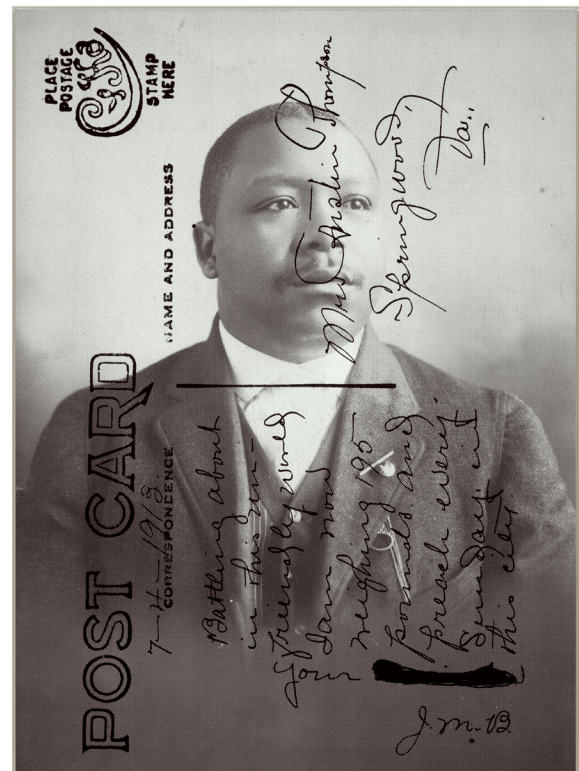
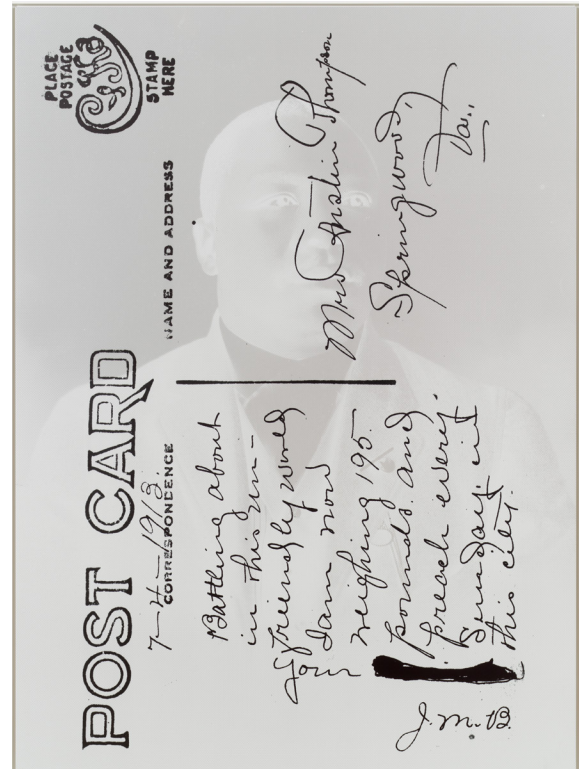
Thomas also utilized the handwritten phrase in a neon work (though not on view in this exhibition), as another way of paying tribute to those who are unrecognized, unknown, and overlooked. This gesture resonates with Thomas's campus memorial, *With These Hands: A Memorial to the Enslaved and Exploited*, which acknowledges the labor and lives of those who built and sustained the college during enslavement, through Emancipation, Jim Crow, and beyond, yet whose contributions were deliberately erased from institutional history.



This Unfriendly World

2022

UV print on retroreflective vinyl on Dibond
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery





Reach

2022

Black patina bronze

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

Small sculptures like this one echo some of Thomas's larger works and public commissions, which often rely on simple gestures, particularly of arms and hands, to convey a particular idea. In this artwork, as in the large-scale commission of the same title at O'Hare International Airport, two hands reach toward one another in an act of connection and unity.





With These Hands

2025

Patina and polished bronze

Courtesy of Walla Walla Foundry, Walla Walla, Washington

Enslaved people formed the bricks and helped construct Davidson College's original buildings, including the earliest dormitories and debate halls that surround this lawn. Their contributions remain visible through their fingerprints in the bricks. Beginning with the college's founding in 1837 through the Civil War, enslaved laborers worked in nearly every area of the college's operations including residences, campus grounds, classrooms, and laboratories.

During Reconstruction, emancipated individuals continued to labor on campus in indispensable but underpaid positions. Later, Davidson's leaders adhered to Jim Crow policies that prevented Black employees, including descendants of the enslaved, from voting, owning property, or getting an education.

This work is based on the public memorial of the same title commissioned for Davidson College, installed in nearby Oak and Elm Row. *With These Hands: A Memorial to the Enslaved and Exploited* is one step toward publicly acknowledging and commemorating the contributions of these individuals, many whose names remain unknown.



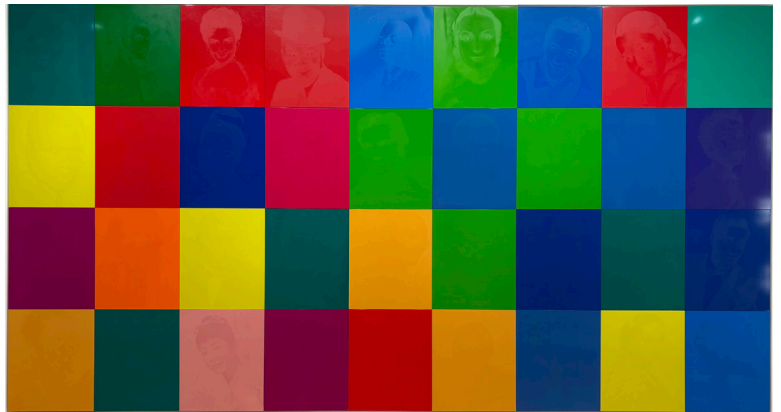
An All Colored Cast

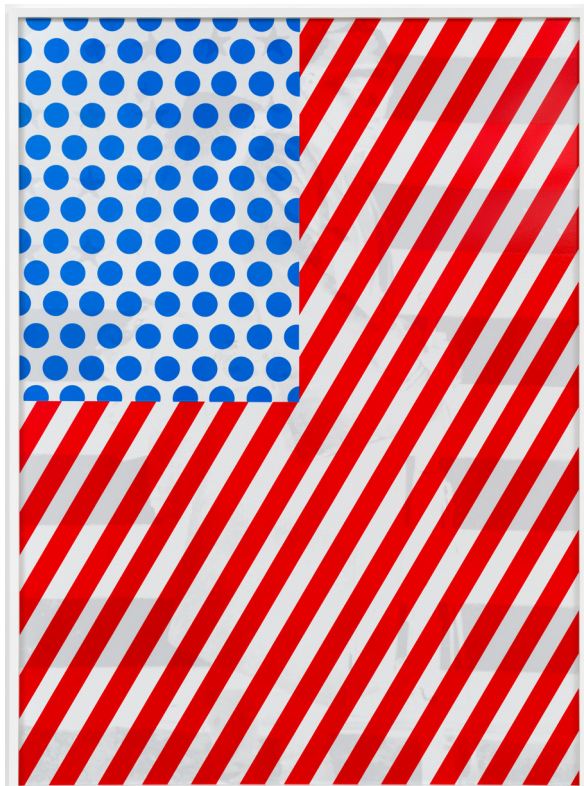
2019

UV print on retroreflective vinyl, mounted on Dibond
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

In this work, Thomas borrows from Warhol's composition of *Ethel Scull 36 Times*, to feature 36 individual portraits of different Hollywood actors from the 20th century. These actors specifically were ones that overcame the barrier of "color" and race portrayal through performance and character adaptation. Despite the racism that limited their roles, these individuals persevered, building successful careers and creative communities.

The title of this work refers to the slogan that appeared on 20th-century movie posters highlighting a segregated industry while also referencing the work's colorful presentation. Thomas is also known to re-examine common photography and film terms, such as "color correction" and "white balance," to underscore the role language can play in reinforcing exclusion, while also creating a work honoring those who paved the way for future generations.





Heavy Packed with Gas Mask (Amérique)

2022

UV-printed retroreflective and transparent vinyl
on Dibond

Courtesy of the Artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

Trained as a photographer, Thomas often relies on framing and process to offer context to his work. In this piece, Thomas overlays a portrait of an unknown Black soldier from World War I with a pop art flag inspired by Roy Lichtenstein's *La Nouvelle Chute de l'Amérique* (*The New Fall of America*). Viewers are prompted to shift their position, take a photograph with flash, or wave a flashlight over the surface to fully reveal the image. In both form and content, the work emphasizes how perspective can alter the way we perceive a historical moment or subject.



Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot (after Newman)

2023

Acrylic paint and UV print on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond

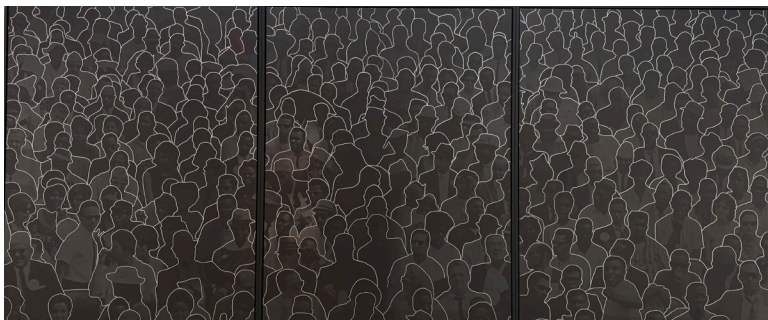
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

In 2018, the Delaware Art Museum partnered with organizations throughout the city of Wilmington, Delaware to mark 50 years since the powerful and community-changing public response that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. Civil disturbances in Wilmington followed by a nine-month-long occupation by the National Guard left an indelible mark on the community.

The Museum commissioned Thomas to respond to the events of 1968 through the creation of a new work of art that shed light on this complicated moment in the city's history. To create works in this series, which Thomas has continued beyond his initial collaboration, he combined historic *News Journal* photographs with the historic pamphlet *Black Survival Guide, or How to Live Through a Police Riot*. Informed by the uprisings of 1967, Cold War-era nuclear fallout pamphlets, and guides published for African Americans to navigate institutional racism during segregation laws, the booklet serves as a practical manual for surviving an occupation. The guide outlines that police and media response will be followed by business closures, electricity outages, and travel restrictions. Provisions—food, water, and basic medical supplies—must be gathered, and those under siege must also know how to provide basic care for medical emergencies.

Here, Thomas reframes a *News Journal* photograph devoid of the *Black Survival Guide* text and instead seen through a reference to Barnett Newman's painting *Fire Station* continuing Thomas's investigation into the myriad of ways that the past and present remain interwoven and interconnected.





Silver Lining

2025

UV printed retroreflective vinyl and
metallic paint marker

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

To create his newest works, Thomas merges techniques developed throughout his practice, including screen printing, UV printing, painting, and illustration. In *Silver Lining*, he zooms in on crowds from archival photographs of the more than 200,000 marchers who gathered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. What first appears as a sea of faces becomes a field of individuals: each figure outlined by a luminous thread, simultaneously distinct and interconnected. The glowing line that binds them becomes both metaphor and tribute—a celebration of what has often been called the Greatest Generation, those Americans who came of age during the Great Depression and, in many cases, served in World War II. The term was popularized by journalist Tom Brokaw in his 1998 book of the same name to describe a generation characterized as “citizen heroes” for their strong work ethic, sense of personal responsibility, and resilience.

Speaking about these new works, Thomas said:

“To me I think it’s just about the mélange of history that all of these different people who came together not knowing what the future would hold, but as a result of them showing up and coming together, facing adversity, dreaming, they were able to build a society more inclusive and more caring, more generous, more loving than the one that they were living in. And I think in moments like this, that kind of courage, knowing that there were people who were generous enough to sacrifice for us, it should encourage us to be that generous. A lot of the time with my work, it’s about paying homage to the unknown and the named and the many, many millions who paved the way for us. So much of the show is to me about the perseverance of the American spirit and the history of it and you can’t celebrate the present if we can’t acknowledge where we came from.”



If you can't fly then run

2025

UV print and paint on linen canvas
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery



How to View the Retro-reflective Prints



1. With your smartphone or tablet camera: Open the camera app on your smartphone, and make sure the flash is on. Take a photograph and view it alongside the work.
2. With the flash on your phone or a flashlight: Turn on the flashlight. Hold the phone close to your face with the flashlight facing the photograph. Move closer or further away to see different details and aspects of the image.
3. Don't have a smart device? Borrow a flashlight from the Gallery Attendant. Please return when you're done.

Hank Willis Thomas: We The People, curated by Lia Rose Newman, is on view in the Van Every/Smith Galleries in the Belk Visual Arts Center at Davidson College from Oct. 10, 2025, through Feb. 1, 2026.

Exhibitions and programs are supported in part by the Herb Jackson and Laura Grosch Gallery Endowment and Davidson College Friends of the Arts.

Special thanks to Hank Willis Thomas, Sam Giarratani, Christina Caputo, Helen Banach, Jack Shainman Gallery, Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, 291 Agency, and Walla Walla Foundry.

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