



Hank Willis Thomas's Portland Art Museum Show is Anything but Apolitical

The Brooklyn-based conceptual artist addresses gun violence, inequality, and the negative aspects of pop culture in the first comprehensive exhibition of his work.

BY CLAIRE BUTWINICK OCTOBER 11, 2019



Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976). *I Am. Amen.*, 2009. Liquitex on canvas. Installation view. © Hank Willis Thomas. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Hank Willis Thomas never formally learned how to draw or paint. Yet he's made a quilt constructed from decommissioned prison uniforms inscribed with the Preamble to the US Constitution, took a photo of a black man's head branded with a Nike swoosh, and sculpted an iridescent bronze hand spinning a basketball on its middle finger. For nearly 20 years, the Brooklyn-based artist has confronted social and political injustice through captivating sculptures, photographs, videos, and mixed-media installations that unmask superficial notions of equality in pop culture and disrupt stereotypes of African Americans. Opening tomorrow, October 12, Oregon's [Portland Art Museum](#) unveils Thomas's first comprehensive exhibition, *All Things Being Equal . . .* (named after an artwork included in the show), highlighting 91 works that encompass his complex reinterpretations of mainstream culture.

"What I feel in much of Thomas's art is a moment to pause," says Sara Krajewski, the museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, who co-curated the exhibition with the museum's curator of photography, Julia Dolan. "[I] check myself and make sure I see the individual and resist 'othering'—grouping people by stereotypes or by statistics."

Audiences enter *All Things Being Equal . . .* through the museum's interior sculpture court, where Thomas's flag-based piece, *14,719* (2019), stretches 30 feet from floor to ceiling. In a riff on the stars and stripes of the American flag, its 14,719 stars represent each person killed by gun violence in the United States in 2018. Throughout the exhibition's following eight thematic sections, including "PitchBlackness/OffWhiteness," "Remember Me," and "Branded," Thomas unearths racist undertones in contemporary advertising and US culture's commodification of African Americans. In one photo, *The Cotton Bowl* (2011), he depicts two black men crouched down facing each other, one in a football uniform, the other in overalls picking cotton, drawing parallels between capitalism in sports and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, both systems that have treated black bodies as possessions.



Hank Willis Thomas, Cotton Bowl (2011)

According to Dolan, the Portland Art Museum doesn't just want *All Things Being Equal* . . . to be thought-provoking; it wants the show to inspire action. Alongside the exhibition, the museum has established a partners-in-residence program for community leaders whose organizations address gun violence, equality, and criminal justice. Partners such as Don't Shoot PDX, King School Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Oregon Justice Resource Center have been given a 250-square-foot space within the exhibition galleries to meet, make art, and host events.

"We want the exhibition to add more voices to conversations [about race and inequality]," says Krajewski. "Continuing to bring these conversations to the surface is part of this pivotal moment, but we must also act on them to work toward greater social justice."