

People Over Products

Lesson Plan

The Studio Museum in Harlem



Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work explores consumer culture, identity, and race.

Hank Willis Thomas
Who Can Say No To a Gorgeous Brunette?
1970/2007

In his series “Unbranded,” Thomas uses appropriation as a tool to reclaim imagery from print advertising targeting African-American communities. He pulls from print campaigns spanning fifty years from 1968, a turning point for the Civil Rights Movement and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., to the election of the US’s first Black president, Barack Obama, in 2008. Thomas strips these advertisements of all text and brands through digital manipulation. This act pares the imagery down, reframing focus on the figure, once intended to sell products, and forces the viewer to confront intersections of race, gender, consumerism, and beauty.

In *Who Can Say No to a Gorgeous Brunette?* (1970/2007) from the “Unbranded” series, we see a

female presenting figure, gazing both at and past the viewer. Their expression is focused and steadfast, framed by an immaculate afro and golden hoop earrings. The absence of text intensifies this image, creating a portrait that plays with notions of power, contradictions in media of representation versus consumerism, and forces us to reflect on cultural ideals of beauty.

In this lesson, individuals have the opportunity to explore concepts of race in consumer culture, notions of representation versus individual identity, and engage in an activity to reflect deeper on the work of Thomas.

Objective

You are invited to engage with the piece *Who Can Say No to a Gorgeous Brunette?* by Hank Willis Thomas. This lesson offers a moment to reflect on broad and personal notions of race, identity, and personal power and how such concepts intersect with consumer culture and appropriation on multiple levels. After a moment of reflection, a collage-based project will follow.

Essential Question

How can cultures and communities who are represented in popular media and express their power? What does it mean to see yourself reflected in mass media? How can you reclaim and capture your own image? How do you see yourself and your community?

Vocabulary

Advertisement

a notice or announcement in a public medium promoting a product, service, or event or publicizing a job vacancy.

Representation

the action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone or the state of being so represented. The description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way or as being of a certain nature.

Identity

who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others

Appropriate

taking (something) for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission.

Materials

[Magazines, periodicals and/or print material](#)

[Scissors](#)

[Glue Stick](#)

[A sheet of paper](#)

Preparation

1. Take a first look at *Who Can Say No to a Gorgeous Brunette?* by Hank Willis Thomas. What do you notice about this image? About the figure depicted? What do you think this image was originally intended to sell?
2. For a more in-depth perspective of the artist, read this interview with [Hank Willis Thomas about image, material culture, and Beyoncé from Crystal Bridges](#).
3. Watch [this video presented by Beats by Dre](#). Ask yourself, what is the difference between loving a culture versus the members that make it? How can we become more conscious of our roles in such economies?

4. For a second time, meditate on *Who Can Say No to a Gorgeous Brunette?* What do you notice about this image now? Is anything different from your first look? What is this image selling and portraying now?

5. Collect materials and prepare your workspace.

Methods

1. Using magazines, periodicals, and other printed matter as your materials, first collect imagery from print campaigns and advertisements.
2. From these sourced images and using a sheet of paper as your base, create a collage that gives power to its subject.
3. Allow enough time for your work to dry.

Reflection

1. Display your work on a wall or table, view it from up close and a few steps away.
2. What was your experience making this artwork? How did you choose your source images? How have they been transformed from their origins and what do they express now?
3. Share your work with your broader community via social media and tag @studiomuseum.

Additional Resources and links referenced

- [Hank Willis Thomas: Unbranded](#)
- [Artist Hank Willis Thomas “unbrands” advertising culture at the Block Museum of Art](#)
- [Black Lives Matter | Burns Group](#)
- [Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans | National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)
- [Racial and Ethnic Notions: Representing Race through Popular Culture](#)
- [California Newsreel - ETHNIC NOTIONS](#)
- [Essence: Black women still poorly depicted in media - The Washington Post](#)
- [Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present](#)
- [Black Beauty: Photography Between Art and Fashion](#)



Hank Willis Thomas
Who Can Say No To a Gorgeous Brunette?
1970/2007
Lambda photograph
30 x 30 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of the artist and Jack Shainman. 2007.9