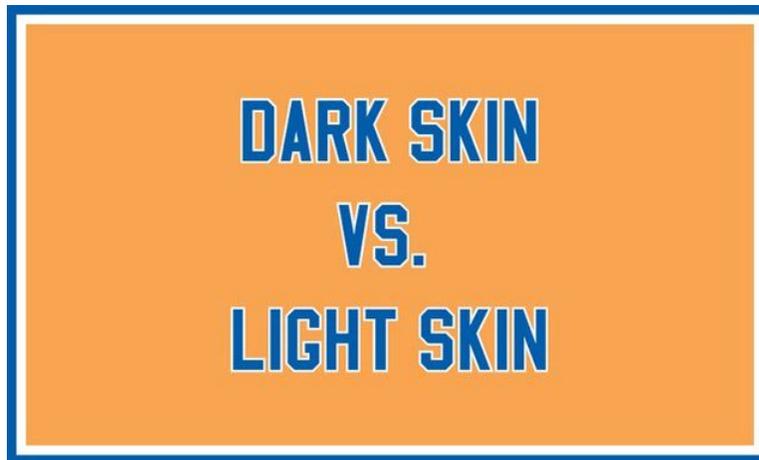


Hank Willis Thomas Turns Curator, Mixing Politics and Sports in 'March Madness'

Brian Boucher, Wednesday, March 16, 2016



Cheryl Pope, *Dark Skin vs. Light Skin*, 2015.

Photo: courtesy Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.

Artist Hank Willis Thomas has stepped into the political organizing field recently, as co-founder of a political action committee, For Freedoms, with fellow artist Eric Gottesman.

An upcoming show he's organized at New York's Fort Gansevoort gallery, along with the gallery's founder, Adam Shopkorn, takes a look at artworks that take on political and social subjects, in this case via sports. The show taps into and is titled after March Madness, the national college basketball tournament now under way.

Works range from Robert Longo's charcoal painting showing the St. Louis Rams football team assuming the "hands up, don't shoot" pose associated with the Black Lives Matter movement to Nari Ward's *Medicine Bats*, in which glass baseball bats sprout tufts of cotton, alluding both to slavery and to steroid scandals. Other works touch on topics like O.J. Simpson, Muhammad Ali, racial bias by police, and the supposed promise of sports to lift young people out of poverty.

The show includes 44 works by 28 artists, ranging from those in their thirties, like Sadie Barnette and Cheryl Pope, to established artists like Robin Rhode and Gary Simmons, and the late photographer Gordon Parks, whose documentation of segregation-era America was recently on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. There's also market star Jeff Koons, whose retrospective closed out the Whitney Museum's decades on Madison Avenue.

In a press release, Thomas and Shopkorn point out (penned by sports writer Robert Lipsyte) that athletics and political positions have intersected many times before, in ways both inspiring (Tommie Smith and John

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Carlos's Black Power raised-fist gesture at the 1936 Mexico City Summer Olympics) and sinister (Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl's documentary films of the 1936 Berlin Olympics).

The show comes just a few months after the release of *Concussion*, the feature film starring Will Smith that points up the National Football League's efforts to silence those bringing attention to the devastating brain injuries to its players.

"March Madness" will be on view March 18–May 1, 2016, at Fort Gansevoort, New York.



Robert Longo, Full Scale Study for Five
Rams (Ferguson/Hands Up/November 30, 2014), 2015.
Photo: courtesy the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.