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## Black is Beautiful: Hank Willis Thomas

by *michele carlson* 06/30/09

In the wildly popular television drama about advertising executives in 1960's Manhattan, *Mad Men*, the main character Donald Draper tells one of his mistresses, "the love you want was created by guys like me ... to sell nylons." Images in mainstream media have long been driven and mediated by political, social and economic motivations. Notions of race and beauty, like the false love Draper struggles with, have also been influenced and molded by images that inundate the visual landscape. In her essay, "Racial Time, Racial Marks, Racial Metaphors," Coco Fusco reminds us that not only does the visualization of race have political power but that there is also a mainstream, multimillion-dollar entertainment industry that has continuous economic interests in the visual representation of race. The stakes are high: Images do not just record race and beauty; they have a hand in its production, too. In "Black is Beautiful", his current show at [Roberts & Tilton Gallery](#) in Los Angeles (June 13, 2009-August 1, 2009), [Hank Willis Thomas](#) considers beauty as a politicized act by surveying the prevalence of African American pin-up models in the media.

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From a distance the installation feels like a large-scale map, charting the topography of an unknown and barely recognizable landscape. Yet, upon entering the gallery's project room, one is overwhelmed by the 3,000 pictures that wallpaper the space, mapping an entirely different sort of landscape. Thomas has chronicled the shifts in beauty (and by default, desire) of the representation of raced female bodies, spanning half a century. There is a feeling of time passing -- decades left behind, changes in technology and desire bleed into one another as the photographs shift from black and white into color.

Yet, what is compelling about Thomas's installation is how the visual tropes of desire, beauty, and race so often stay the same. Once the changing styles, hairdos and fashions of the times have been stripped away, what is left? This excavation of thousands of images feels ominously repetitious as the female body is arranged in certain positions and within particular contexts that has varied little over half a century; a span of time that has included the Civil Rights era, women's liberation, multiculturalism



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to now, a moment where powerful and influential women such as Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey are household names. And yet, the desire to see beauty defined through sexualized representations of women of color still holds its ground.



Concurrently "Black is Beautiful," suggests a level of empowerment in the ability to re-appropriate what might otherwise be seen as objectified images of the black female body. This line is precarious, however, and often fraught. The force of the collection of images not only questions the lineage of using the raced body in media but also asks about what meaning is produced when the representations of beauty are not as diverse as the groups that it claims to represent-the troubling idea of difference within the context of sameness.

The contemporary visual landscape is a contested site in which more illusory, yet popular anxieties about race, gender and sexuality often manifest. "Black is Beautiful" asks viewers to begin questioning their own role in this cyclical relationship in dynamic exchanges that allow them to re-appropriate, challenge, or reject these conventions. Although there may be political agendas to advance and advertising accounts to land, the viewer and the everyday consumer hold a greater stake in this transaction. And if beauty is a politicized act, then Thomas succinctly reminds us that passive participation is still participation, regardless of the intention.

[Hank Willis Thomas, Black Is Beautiful (1953-2008), 2009, inkjet print on adhesive paper, Variable dimensions. Courtesy of Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, CA and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY. For more on Hank Willis Thomas, read Art in America's [interview](#) with the artist on the occasion of his solo exhibition at Jack Shainman gallery in March 2009.]

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