

# VAS VISUAL ART eNEWSLETTER

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Hank Willis Thomas, "I've known rivers," 2023, screen print and UV print on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond, 95 1/2 x 120 1/8 x 2 1/4". Right image with flashlight

## Hank Willis Thomas, "I've Known Rivers"

by Jody Zellen

PACE Los Angeles, California

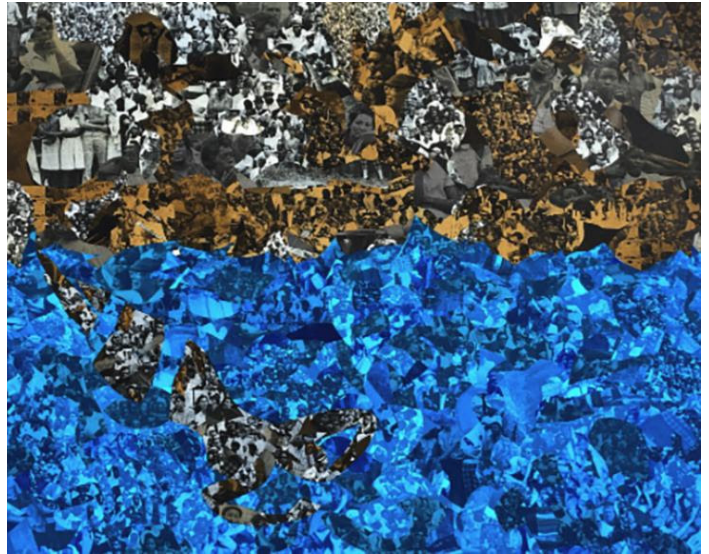
Continuing through August 26, 2023

Is more necessarily better? That question has become more relevant to the art experience with the advent of Augmented Reality and other technology-driven processes that create multiple viewing layers or experiences. There have been numerous artworks (and other entertainments) that offer something more when seen through mobile devices. Hank Willis Thomas has been experimenting with retroreflective materials, using them to create images that have two distinct but interrelated layers.

Retroreflective materials are made from tiny glass beads that reflect light back at the viewer. They are often used in the fabrication of traffic signs and pavement markings. For the second layer in Thomas' works to be revealed, however, it is necessary to take a flash photograph with a mobile device, or view the images with a flashlight (available from the gallery attendant). To capitalize on these dualities is thus cumbersome, as it necessitates looking at the work with or through a device.

Given that, these are visually stunning works that intertwine art and politics. Thomas freely appropriates from art history and advertising to explore issues ranging from race, colonization and globalization to identity politics. The titles of the individual works in "I've Known Rivers" quote lines from Langston Hughes' 1921 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (see below) thus anchoring the images to a literary context. Thomas simultaneously references art-historical figures such as Henri Matisse, Roy Lichtenstein, and Romare Bearden.

Formed from irregularly cut pieces of vinyl, many of the large-scale pieces are infused with tones of blue that suggest bodies of water. In "My soul has grown deep like rivers" and "I've known rivers," a silhouetted figure that is reminiscent of Matisse's late collages — either sitting on a rock or drifting below what appears to be



Hank Willis Thomas, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," 2023, screen print and UV print on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond, 95 1/2 × 120 1/8 × 2 1/4". Right image with flashlight

a night sky — is juxtaposed with a blue ground comprised of abstract shapes in different hues. When seen with a flashlight or photographed with a flash, these areas are transformed into dizzying collages filled with overlapping fragments of individual figures, or in crowds. The artist includes snippets of protest signs and newspaper headlines, as well as different types of currency. How these references relate to the unmediated image is something to ponder.

The largest work, "I looked upon the Nile and raised pyramids above it" pays homage to Lichtenstein's "Pyramids (Corlett 87)" (1969), an image of three triangles partially filled with his signature benday dot patterns against a yellow background. Thomas' transformation respects the structure and tones of the original image, but adds a gigantic and abstracted silhouette of a reclining man with African features in front of the triangular pyramids as well as references to nature — leaves, a red flower, the suggestion of an undulating river. This is the initial view of this striking and powerful image. While Thomas has mastered the dual effect and the layering of non-reflective and retroreflective materials, the "afterimage" becomes dense to the point of being indecipherable.

Thomas layers his works with content appropriated from a wide range of sources, graphically sophisticated, and visually compelling. What they are about suggests different possibilities. While the use of the retroreflective materials takes the works in a new direction that allows Thomas to present two images simultaneously, the journey from past to present, from black to white, from day to night and from abstraction to representation becomes our responsibility. The viewing of the 'other' content, still, is entrusted to an external device that may never be used. Once the wow factor has worn off, there is still much to reflect on beyond their beauty. They resonate on multiple levels without needing anything more.





Hank Willis Thomas, "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it," 2023, screen print and UV print on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond, 72 × 240". Below is the image with flashlight

## **The Negro Speaks of Rivers**

by Langston Hughes

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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**Jody Zellen** is a LA based writer and artist who creates interactive installations, mobile apps, net art, animations, drawings, paintings, photographs, public art, and artist's books. Zellen received a BA from Wesleyan University (1983), a MFA from CalArts (1989) and a MPS from NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (2009). She has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1989. For more information please visit [www.jodyzellen.com](http://www.jodyzellen.com).