

## Hank Willis Thomas: I've Known Rivers

July 15 – August 26, 2023  
1201 South La Brea Avenue  
Los Angeles



Left to right: Hank Willis Thomas, “*I’ve known rivers*” (variation without flash), 2023 © Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy Pace Gallery. Photography by: Kyle Knodell; Hank Willis Thomas, “*I’ve known rivers*” (variation with flash), 2023 © Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy Pace Gallery. Photography by: Kyle Knodell.

Los Angeles – Pace is pleased to present an exhibition of new works by Hank Willis Thomas at its Los Angeles gallery. On view from July 15 to August 26, the show, titled *I’ve Known Rivers*, will mark the artist’s first-ever presentation with Pace. This debut exhibition will showcase a selection of new retroreflective artworks—which reveal latent images depending on lighting and the perspective of the viewer—created by Thomas this year.

Over the last ten years, Thomas has mastered the retroreflective medium, creating mixed media works that reveal two distinct scenes transfigured by both ambient and flash lighting. Seen from one perspective, these artworks present bold figurations, abstractions, and landscapes in saturated colors; seen from another, fragmented archival scraps from Thomas’s production of other retroreflective works over the last decade are revealed. As these elements converge and transform, they shed light on new layers of images, ideas, and meanings that are hidden in plain sight. Thomas’s retroreflective works can also be understood as personal records of his artistic process and the historical references that recur throughout his practice.

The vibrant compositions on view in Thomas’s upcoming presentation with Pace in LA are steeped in art history, and they speak to the artist’s continued explorations of abstraction through the lenses of colonization, globalization, and appropriation. Alluding to the work of Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Roy Lichtenstein, Henri Matisse, and Malick Sidibé, the artist’s newest retroreflective works mine the complex origins and histories of modern art across Africa, the United States, and Europe.

The exhibition’s title, *I’ve Known Rivers*, references Langston Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” first published in *The Crisis* magazine in July 1921. Then a little-known writer, Hughes would later become an icon of the Harlem Renaissance. Water is a central subject in both this poem and Thomas’s show in LA—it is positioned as a visual anchor, a point of entry, a mover of people, a container of ancient knowledge. The journey described in Hughes’s poem, like Thomas’s work, is not linear or easily traced. Instead, readers of the poem and viewers of Thomas’s art are invited to investigate details and travel to unexpected places.

“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.

Thomas works across sculpture, screen-printing, photography, mixed media, video, and installation. Through his practice, he examines subjects related to mass media, popular culture, consumerism, and identity, often making use of perspectival nuance as part of these explorations. A trained photographer, Thomas is deeply interested in both the making and consumption of images, with his investigations into subjectivity and perception informing his work in photography and other mediums. The artist is also known for his galvanizing public works, which showcase his personal commitment to social activism and encourage participation and contribution from the viewer. His permanent public installations can be found in Downtown Brooklyn, New York; the Boston Common; Chicago O’Hare International Airport; and on the grounds of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, among other locations around the US.

Among Thomas’s recent projects is the large-scale bronze sculpture *The Embrace* (2023), which was unveiled on the Boston Common in January 2023. This permanent memorial is inspired by an archival photograph of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his wife, Coretta Scott King, embracing after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. As such, *The Embrace* can be understood as an ode to collaboration, love, and equality, reflecting Thomas’s ongoing inquiries into economic and racial justice. Thomas’s reconfiguration of a two-dimensional photograph into a large-scale, three-dimensional monument crystallizes a single moment in time, speaking to the importance of gesture, conviviality, and community.

Next year, two new installations by Thomas will be permanently unveiled on the East and West entrances of the new Judkins Park Station in Seattle. These public works center on the life and legacy of musical icon Jimi Hendrix, whose hometown was Seattle. His forthcoming public art projects also include *With These Hands: A Memorial to Honor the Enslaved and Exploited*, set to open at Davidson College in North Carolina in 2025.

**Hank Willis Thomas** (b. 1976, Plainfield, New Jersey) is a conceptual artist widely known for his investigations of themes relating to mass media, identity, popular culture, and perspective. A trained photographer, the artist works across many disciplines and media, including sculpture, film, screen-printing, and installation. In his practice, Thomas often seeks out and utilizes recognizable icons from popular branding and marketing campaigns, encouraging viewers to question commercial consumer representation and the racial stereotypes it perpetuates.

He is also renowned for his public artworks, which always invite a form of viewer participation and contribution. Among his recent public projects is the large-scale bronze sculpture *The Embrace* (2023), unveiled on the Boston Common in January 2023.

Thomas is the co-founder of For Freedoms, an artist-led organization that models and increases creative civic engagement. In 2022, For Freedoms received the National Art Award from Americans for the Arts, and it was awarded the ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform in 2017. In addition to For Freedoms, Thomas’s collaborative projects include *Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth)* and *The Writing on the Wall*.

The artist’s work has been exhibited at institutions throughout the United States and abroad, including the International Center of Photography in New York; the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris; the Hong Kong Arts Centre; and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.

He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a recipient of the Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship; The Guggenheim Fellowship; the AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize; and the Soros Equality Fellowship, among other awards and honors.

Thomas earned a BFA from New York University in 1998 and an MA/MFA from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2004. He has received honorary doctorates from the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore; the San Francisco Art Institute; and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts in Portland, Maine. The artist lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

**Pace** is a leading international art gallery representing some of the most influential contemporary artists and estates from the past century, holding decades-long relationships with Alexander Calder, Jean Dubuffet, Barbara Hepworth, Agnes Martin, Louise Nevelson, and Mark Rothko. Pace enjoys a unique U.S. heritage spanning East and West coasts through its early support of artists central to the Abstract Expressionist and Light and Space movements.

Since its founding by Arne Glimcher in 1960, Pace has developed a distinguished legacy as an artist-first gallery that mounts seminal historical and contemporary exhibitions. Under the current leadership of CEO Marc Glimcher, Pace continues to support its artists and share their visionary work with audiences worldwide by remaining at the forefront of innovation. Now in its seventh decade, the gallery advances its mission through a robust global program—comprising exhibitions, artist projects, public installations, institutional collaborations, performances, and interdisciplinary projects. Pace has a legacy in art bookmaking and has published over five hundred titles in close collaboration with artists, with a focus on original scholarship and on introducing new voices to the art historical canon.




Today, Pace has eight locations worldwide, including a European foothold in London and Geneva, and two galleries in New York—its headquarters at 540 West 25th Street, which welcomed almost 120,000 visitors and programmed 20 shows in its first six months, and an adjacent 8,000 sq. ft. exhibition space at 510 West 25th Street. Pace’s long and pioneering history in California includes a gallery in Palo Alto, which was open from 2016 to 2022. Pace’s engagement with Silicon Valley’s technology industry has had a lasting impact on the gallery at a global level, accelerating its initiatives connecting art and technology as well as its work with experiential artists. Pace consolidated its West Coast activity through its flagship in Los Angeles, which opened in 2022. Pace was one of the first international galleries to establish outposts in Asia, where it operates permanent gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Seoul, as well as an office and viewing room in Beijing.

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