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Hank Willis Thomas

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Freedom Ride

Hank Willis Thomas: Freedom Ride

Hank Willis Thomas

A KSMoCA collaboration
between Hank Willis Thomas,
For Freedoms, and students
from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
School and Harriet Tubman
Middle School

KSMoCA

A contemporary art museum in a
public school in NE Portland, OR.

KSMoCA

FREEDOM RIDE

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School Museum of Contemporary Art (KSMoCA) is a museum-as-artwork project within the walls of a functioning Pre K–5th Grade public school in NE Portland, OR. It is founded by Lisa Jarrett and Harrell Fletcher who work alongside students, teachers and administration from Dr. MLK Jr. School and Portland State University’s College of the Arts. The project reimagines how museums, public schools and universities shape people, culture and perspectives by cultivating space for art to educate within and beyond the classroom through mutual exchange. Internationally renowned artists collaborate with students on site-specific projects, exhibitions and workshops. In turn, students learn about museum careers as they practice the roles of curator, preparator, publicist, artist, copywriter, registrar and docent.

KSMoCA’s program includes quarterly rotating exhibitions with visiting artists, Creative Research Centers with local arts institutions, a 1-on-1 mentorship program with local artists, a public artist lecture series, site-specific commissions, community and neighborhood events, and more. The public is welcome to experience the museum by appointment and during selected open hours. For more information, visit www.ksmoca.com or check out @ksmoca on Instagram for the latest updates.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School is a Pre K–5th Grade public school located in the King neighborhood of NE Portland, OR. In 2018 we celebrated the 50th anniversary of our legacy and our name change, a student-led initiative directed by middle school students who worked with district administration to change the school's name just days after the death of Dr. King. At Dr. MLK Jr. School we believe in the unlimited potential of everyone in our diverse community. We believe that a caring well-balanced student will be motivated to become a global citizen who is inspired to take action.

Dr. MLK Jr. School is an authorized International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years Programme and Middle Years Programme, a program that helps students develop the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills to live, learn, and work in a rapidly globalizing world. We are also proud to be a Mandarin Immersion School. Students in the immersion program receive Mandarin instruction for half the day and English instruction the other half of the day. We welcome all families to come find out more about what Dr. MLK Jr. School has to offer both in our Mandarin Immersion and our English only programs.

A Hank Willis Thomas collaboration with kids on exhibitions at KSMoCA and Portland Art Museum.

Hank Willis Thomas: Freedom Ride is an exhibition of works at KSMoCA by Hank Willis Thomas, For Freedoms, and students at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School. The exhibition features two bodies of work—political advocacy button slogans and the *For Freedoms Digital Quilt*.

Hank Willis Thomas: Freedom Ride at KSMoCA ran concurrently with the exhibition *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal...* at Portland Art Museum (PAM). Elementary school students participated in aspects of both exhibitions by writing labels, giving tours, conversing with PAM curators and staff, going on field trips to learn about museum practices and to see their labels on display, attending talks and workshops, and (at KSMoCA) creating artwork with Hank Willis Thomas.

Finally, student participants from the Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice (a KSMoCA satellite project) wrote an interview with Hank Willis Thomas

and worked to create a viewer's guide of their experiences of *All Things Being Equal...*

This publication documents the students' many contributions to these exhibitions both as coauthors of *Freedom Ride* at KSMoCA and as participants in *All Things Being Equal...* at PAM.

Mimicking Quilts

Essay written
by Ella Ray

Amidst a global pandemic and large-scale uprisings in defense of Black life, the museum-y phrases “community engagement” and “youth partnership” fall short of what I hope to facilitate as an Black arts worker and as a Black woman. While the conditions of these two intersecting moments in time are not as unprecedented as we’re being told, right now feels different.

I would also argue that this has everything to do with art. While on one hand museums, galleries, donors, audience members, patrons, and individual artists are being actively protested for violent and exclusionary practices, art is a vehicle for radical dissent. We cannot forget the role art plays, in all of its iterations and through all of its practitioners, in revolution-making.

I would be remiss if I did not alter this text to reflect these feelings and acknowledge the part young people are playing in envisioning not only a different language to speak about community, but a different future that necessitates a kind of radical engagement that demands more of us—including institutions, artists, and arts workers. We must fervently support the youth in their processes of self determination, in the arts and otherwise.

Through textile, video, sculpture, and photography Hank Willis Thomas’ survey exhibition *All Things Being Equal...* acknowledges a centuries long resistance against white supremacy. I see Thomas’ interdisciplinary approach as a kind of active annotation. This body of work, which often shifts to reveal challenging messages about our individual participation in history, feels like carefully articulated marginalia in a book—underscoring multiple counternarratives that locate power within the people. In reflecting on this exhibition, I am reminded that Thomas has provided clear examples of how humans repeat history. In other words, we’ve been here before.

The Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School Museum of Contemporary Art (KSMoCA) and its sibling organization, the Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice (HTC), were one of six artist and

community-ran organizations in residence at the Portland Art Museum for the duration of the *All Things Being Equal...* project. These connected but distinctly different youth programs contributed research, exhibition labels and texts, engaged in ongoing dialogue with the artist about his practice and theirs, and regularly took up space within the museum.

When approaching Lisa Jarrett and Harrell Fletcher to work on this partnership, I had no predetermined outcomes attached to the ask. The only goal was to recognize young people as decision makers in mounting exhibitions. With Jarrett and Fletcher, Thomas' studio, Julia Dolan and Sara Krejewski (the exhibition's curators), we spoke about refusing the conventions of adding youth programming to the calendar after the show is "fully cooked." Thomas' participatory ethos provided fruitful ground to attempt to integrate this partnership into the curatorial process. The kids involved formulated individual and collective goals for participation that cracked open and expanded the loose boundaries we'd set up for them. They challenged what it meant to be stakeholders in an artistic endeavor and pushed the project to be truly fluid and flexible. Their work presented in this catalog is both indicative of the pleasure that they took in regularly working with a museum and an artist for a sustained period of time and of their frustrations with institutional and art historical limitations. Outside of our time spent in the galleries and classrooms, we regularly explored the "off-limits" areas of the museum. In the library, vault, conservation labs, and curatorial offices, they sharpened their critique of the museum and of museum workers—repeatedly asking why information and objects were seemingly kept away from the public. Unprompted, they urged staff to make the museum free, to let kids play in the galleries, and to share more of their processes. The students often came to the conclusion that if these things could happen, young people would feel safer and more creative while engaging with art. I couldn't agree more.

I often recall in October of 2019 when the middle schoolers came to the museum for an after hours and after school viewing of the exhibition. I was unsure of how this visit would

pan out—both for myself and the class—as I had no experience using the museum when there weren't other people there. As an employee of the curatorial department I technically had the authority to work privately with partners in the galleries, but my position as a fellow made me feel like I was overstepping a boundary by challenging the defined hours of operation, specifically with youth. Despite these anxieties, our visit was a generative experience where the students expressed their interest in the stillness of the space. Unmonitored by the public, we sat in the middle of the floors mimicking the quilted figures, stretched out on benches for breaks, and danced in the reflections of the mirrors. Their questions and answers echoed, filling the spaces between Thomas' work. While I'd spent the morning before the tour wondering if we were "allowed" to engage with the show outside the unspoken, and seemingly universal, temporal confines that are expected within a museum, the evening immediately following the tour was spent recounting the collective joy we experienced by breaking that very small "rule."

The youth involved in the *All Things Being Equal...* exhibition dedicated 10 months to sitting with the work of Hank Willis Thomas. As they peeled back the layers, they made connections between the objects and their own experiences with policing, antiblackness, joy, art history, and solidarity. Layered within and on top of Thomas' annotations on Black life, these students' notes on contemporary art extend, complicate, and question so much of what adults take for granted with engaging with art objects. The longer you spend with their work it becomes evident that these students have an acute understanding of what kind of future they need and desire.

I want to extend deep gratitude to the students from Mrs. Jones' 5th grade class, Mrs. Jones, and the 2019 cohort of the Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice for the time, attention, and curiosity they brought to this project. Lastly, I thank Hank Willis Thomas and his studio not only for giving us the room to play with exhibition-making customs, but for producing work that feels endlessly challenging—forever increasing our desires to keep looking and learning.

**For
Freedoms**

**Digital
Quilt**

The For Freedoms Digital Quilt is a digitally-woven grid of images, names, and self-defined freedoms shared by students, staff and friends of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School. When combined, the portraits act as a woven representation of our community's desire for various freedoms. The work speaks of our fears, dreams, and desires—and together we knit the fabric of our imagined democracy. The students included in this artwork were volunteer participants during their lunch break in the cafetorium.

















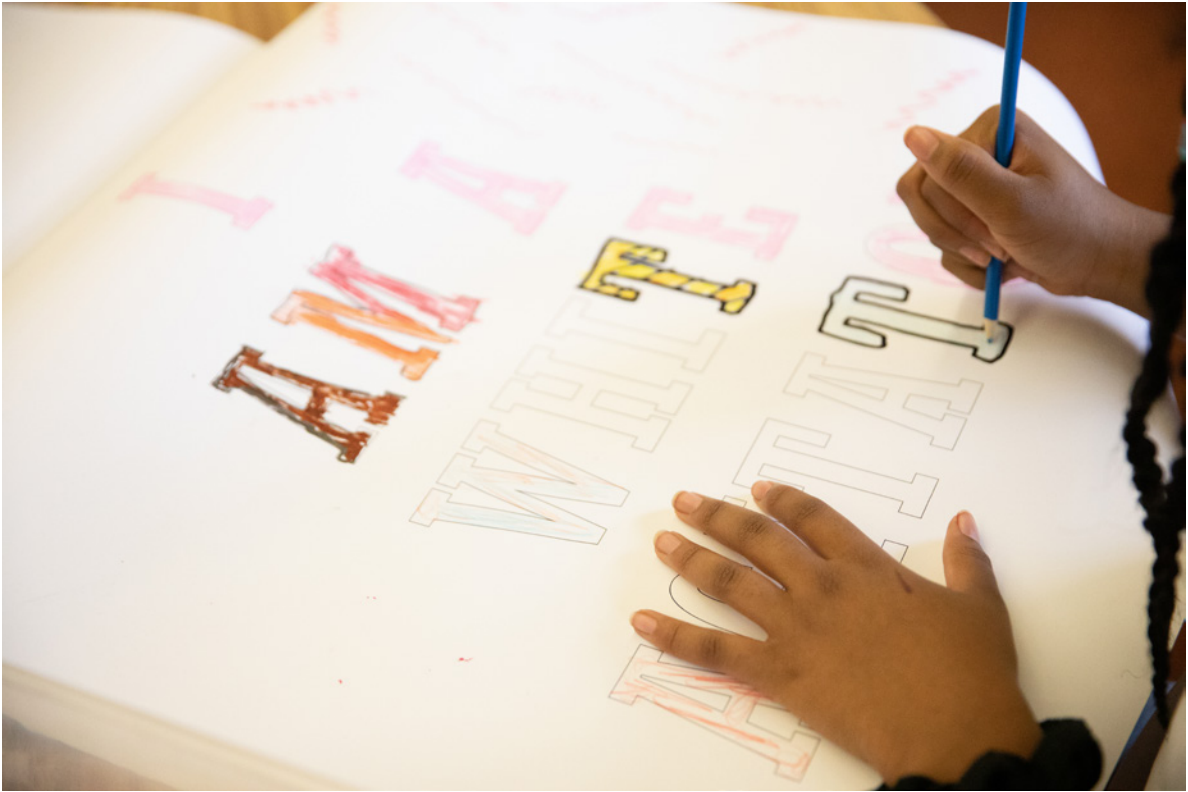
Workshop

**Led by Hank Willis Thomas
with Mrs. Jones' 5th Grade
class and PSU students**

Hank Willis Thomas asked students in Mrs. Jones' 5th Grade class to choose a large-format advocacy button slogan and "make it better." Students rotated around the room to work on multiple prints using various drawing materials. The slogans are from buttons that have been worn by advocates in support of political parties, movements and ideologies over the past 50 years. The images and text are enlarged to draw attention to the power of symbols and the influential visual language of political parties throughout history.



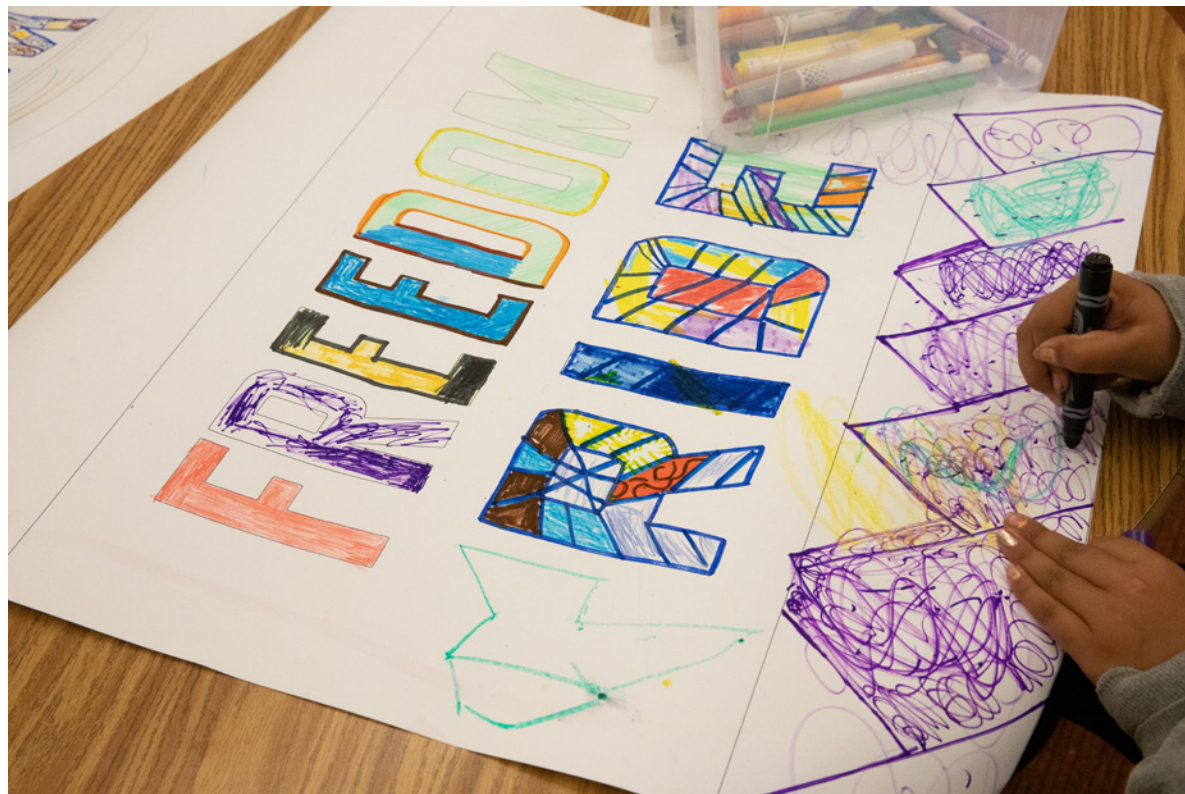














**Work by
Mrs. Jones'**

**5th Grade
Class**

“Grow big.”
—Aleese

“You should grow up and learn new things.”
—Jimya

“Because I’m growing.”
—Kaloi

“You should grow up with your family.”
—Gianna

Gianna, Erica, Clo,
Aleese, Maria, Jimya
Grow
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019

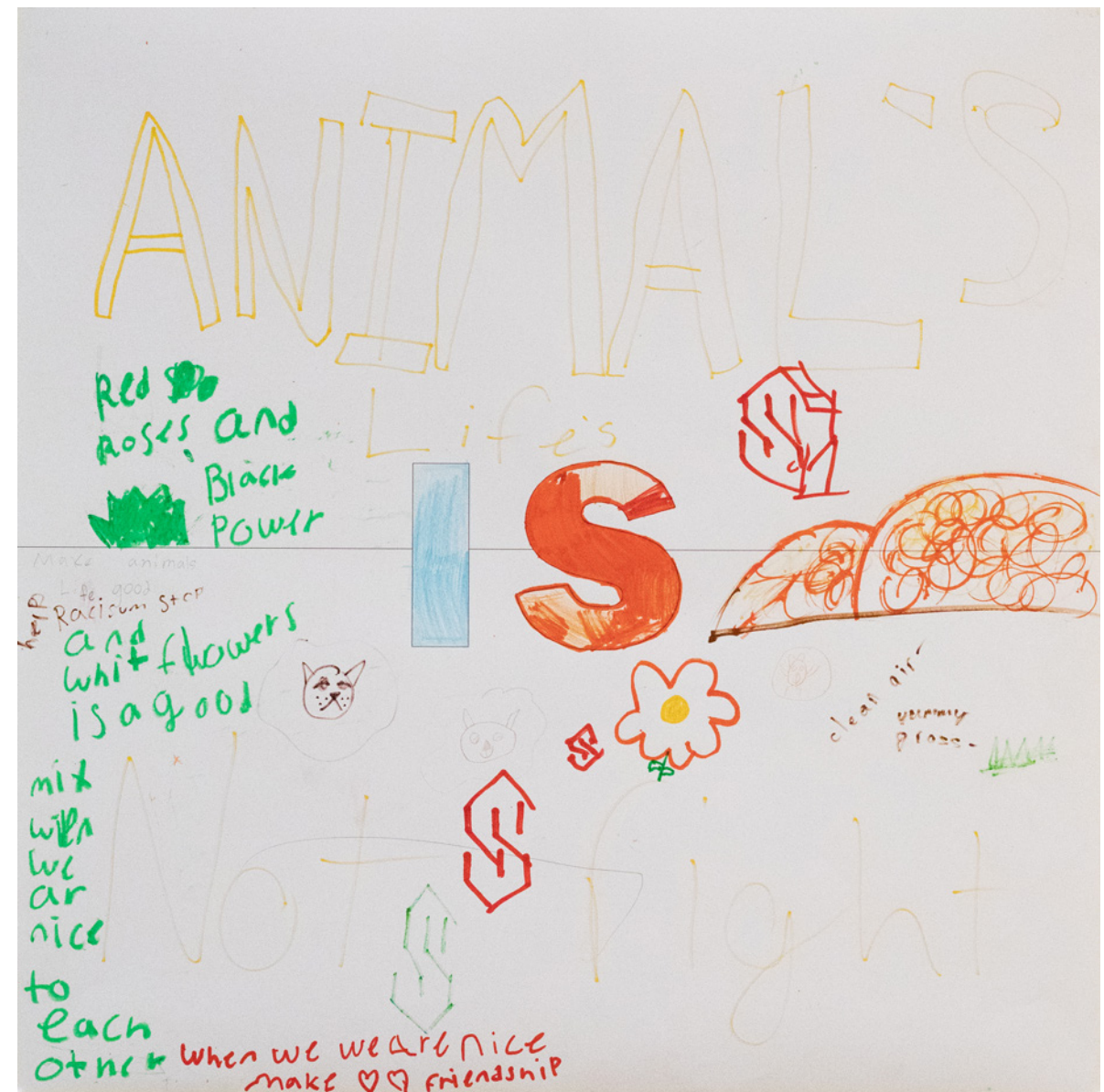


This slogan, Get Rid of Wallace (GROW),
was a button worn at Selma marches
during the Civil Rights Movement.

“Animals’ lives matter because they are losing their lives, trees are going down and the air is polluted. They can’t breathe so they die.”
—Aimee

“You should treat animals good.”
—Maria

Clo, Maria, Aimee, Mekhi
/s
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button was found in the Oakland Museum of California’s collection. It is interpreted as a sign of equity in being and existence.

“It means that you are white and you are agitating people about civil rights and black and brown and white.”

—Erica

Kiyan, Erica, Aleese, Maria,
Lorenzo, Clo
I Am A White Agitator
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button's slogan was claimed by Congress of Racial Equity (CORE).

"It looks creative. It says deuces to racism."

—Kiyan

"Civil rights."

—Clo

"It means Rest in Peace."

—Da'marion

Diana, Clo, Maria, Aleese
Moratorium
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button was worn by members of the
Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.

"The men are doing 100% of their job."
—Erica

Erica, Diana, Lorenzo,
Aimee, Maria, Aleese, Jimya
100% Efficiency Man
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button was an award given to employees
of American Sheet and Tin Plate Company.

"I feel like it means we want to
see more black people."
—Aleese

Lorenzo, Kaloi, Aleese,
Erica, Martin, Aimee, Mekhi
We Want Brown
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button is a slogan from Jerry Brown's
campaign for Governor of California.

“It means to never give up faith. Because the second you give up faith, you give up living.”
—Adam

Gianna, Adam, Jimya,
Kiyon, Lorenzo, Kaloi
Keep the Faith Baby
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button's slogan references Adam Clayton Powell Jr.'s legendary speech during the Civil Rights movement, "Keep the faith, baby: spread it gently and walk together, children."

"It means a strong fight for rights so
people can't boss me around."
—Amy



Da'marion, Jimya,
Aimee, Gianna, Dianna
Power Circle
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019

This button's slogan is an indictment
or charge for justice.

“Black people won’t go away just
because of Donald Trump.”
—Kaloï

“We won’t go to jail for being innocent
of crimes that are not true.”
—Da’marion

Mekhi, Da’marion,
Aleese, Erica, Kaloï, Enrique
We Won’t Go
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button’s slogan is associated with
the National Mobilization Committee
to End the War in Vietnam.

"It's about encouraging people to give back."

—Diana

"I give back to the community."

—Kiyon

Diana, Kiyon, Erica
I Give
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This slogan comes from a set of vintage cufflinks the artist encountered during his research. The slogan speaks of generosity.

“Like a trip to freedom. Just to be free. And
take a ride on the freedom train.”

—Jimya

“You free the people, then they go on a train
to freedom. It’s called the Freedom Line.”

—Gianna

Enrique, Da’marion,
Gianna, Adam, Jimya, Kiyan
Freedom Ride
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button was worn by CORE Freedom Riders,
a group of civil rights activists who rode
various forms of public transportation in the
South to challenge local laws or customs
that enforced segregation in 1961. One member
of CORE was named Hank Thomas.

“Black lives matter. Stop racism. Black people should be treated like white people, or should I say equally.”
—Mekhi

Gianna, Clo, Adam,
Mekhi, Enrique, Kiyon
Wonder Woman
Mixed media, 24" x 24"
2019



This button references feminism, black power, and solidarity. The artist first encountered the button through Samuel Fosso's *Untitled from the series African Spirits*, 2008. Fosso dressed as Angela Davis while wearing this button.

For Freedoms Exhibition

Works by Hank Willis
Thomas, For Freedoms,
and Dr. Martin Luther
King Jr. School students

















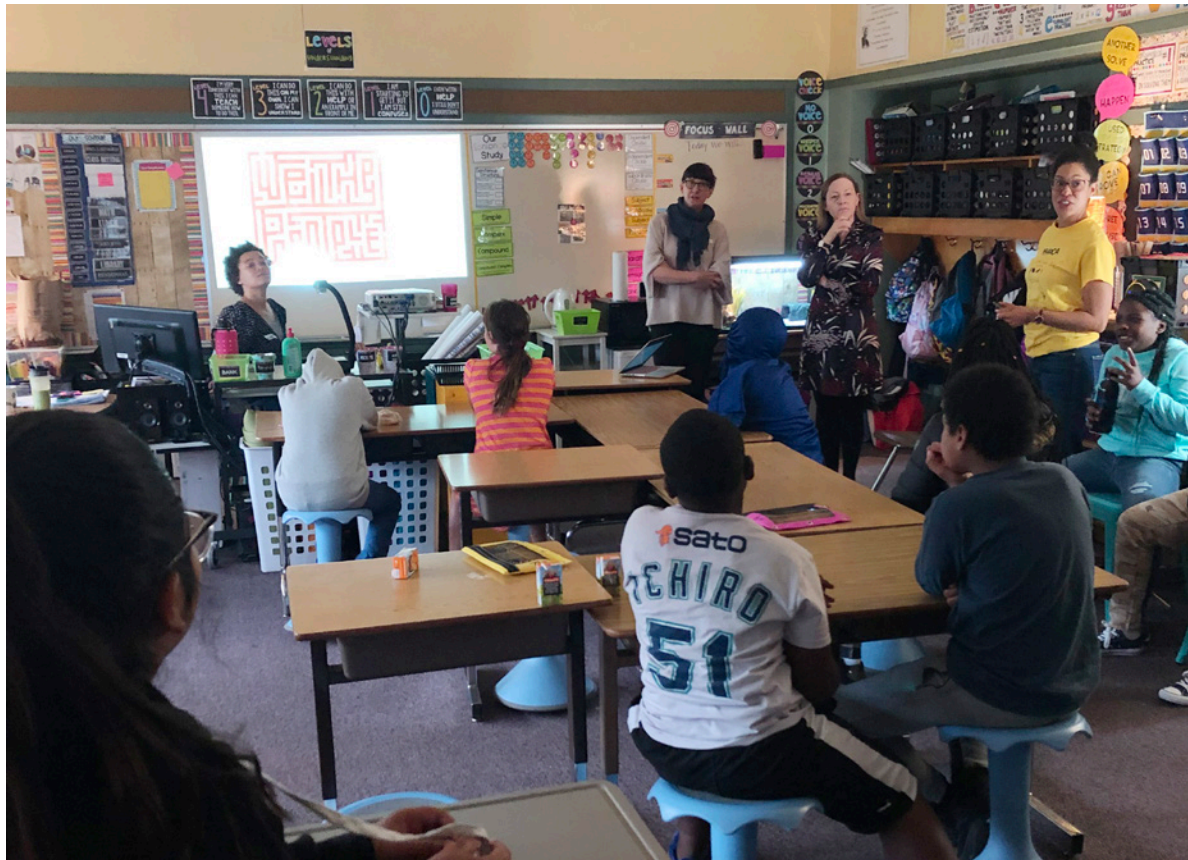




Writing Exhibition Labels

Portland Art Museum
and Mrs. Jones' 5th Grade
Class for the *All Things
Being Equal...* exhibition

Students in Mrs. Jones' 5th Grade Class were invited by Ella Ray, Julia Dolan, and Sara Krajewski from the Portland Art Museum to write exhibition labels for Hank Willis Thomas' exhibition *All Things Being Equal...* Students wrote interpretive descriptions for artworks in the upcoming exhibition. After the exhibition opened, the class visited the museum and went on a tour with Ella Ray.



The descriptions, information, and interpretations on the artwork labels have been written by:

Julia Dolan, co-curator of the exhibition and The Minor White Curator of Photography;

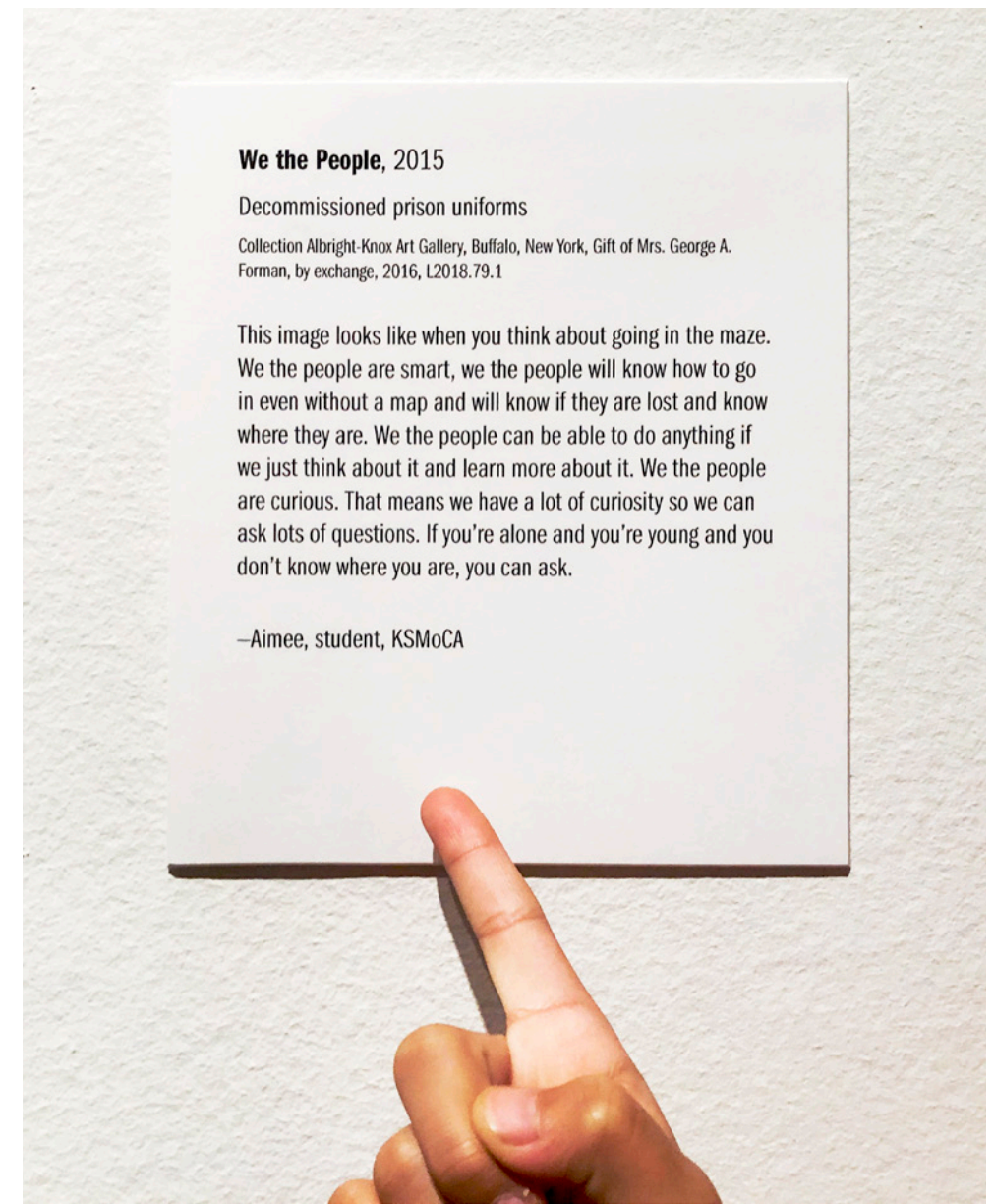
Chloe King, full-time intern whose position was funded by the Association of Art Museum Director's undergraduate diversity internship grant, Summer 2019;

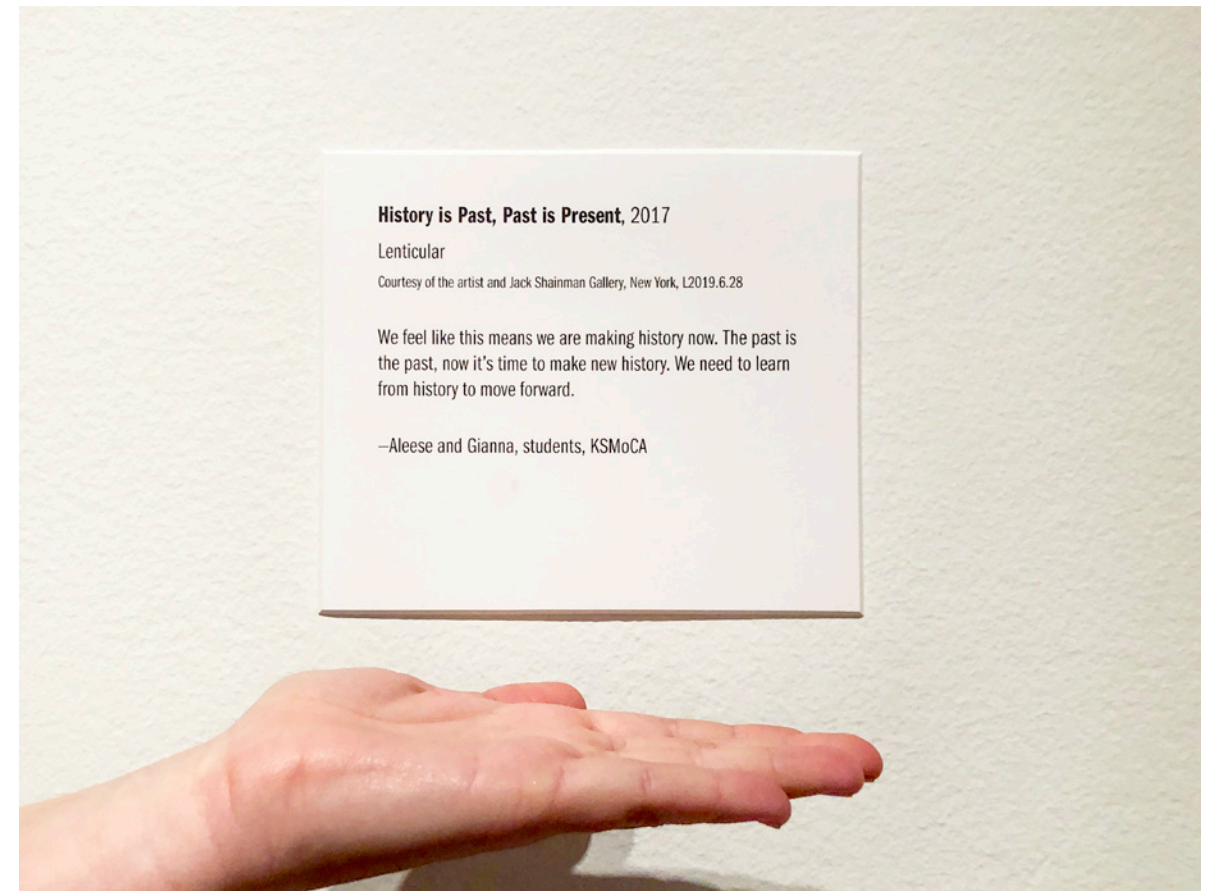
Sara Krajewski, co-curator of the exhibition and The Eichholz Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art;

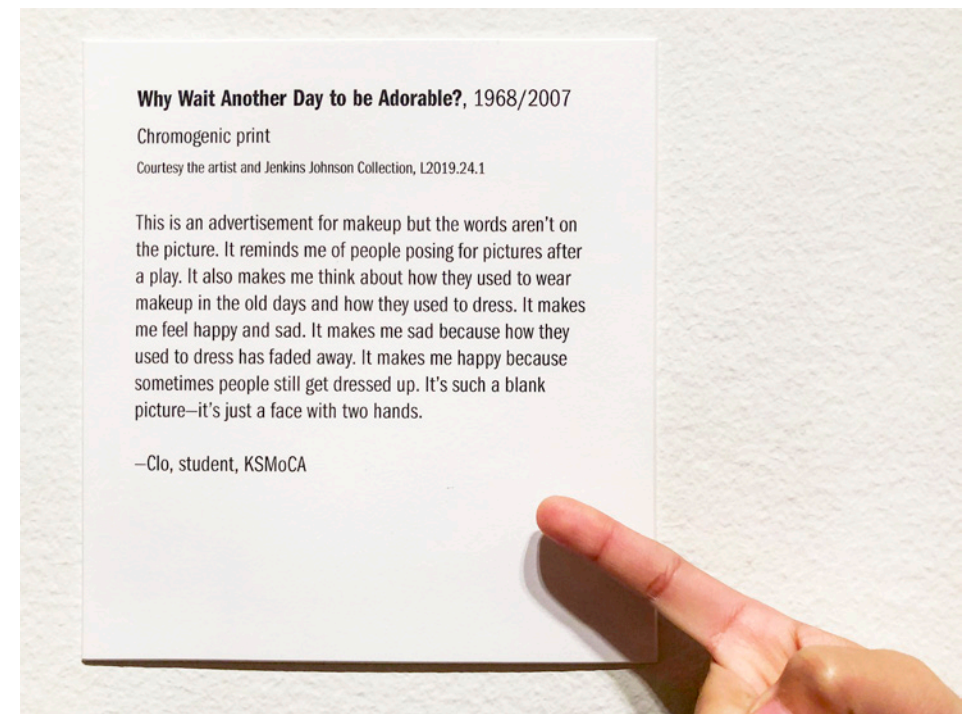
Ella Ray, The Kress Interpretative Fellow/Community Partnerships Coordinator for the exhibition;

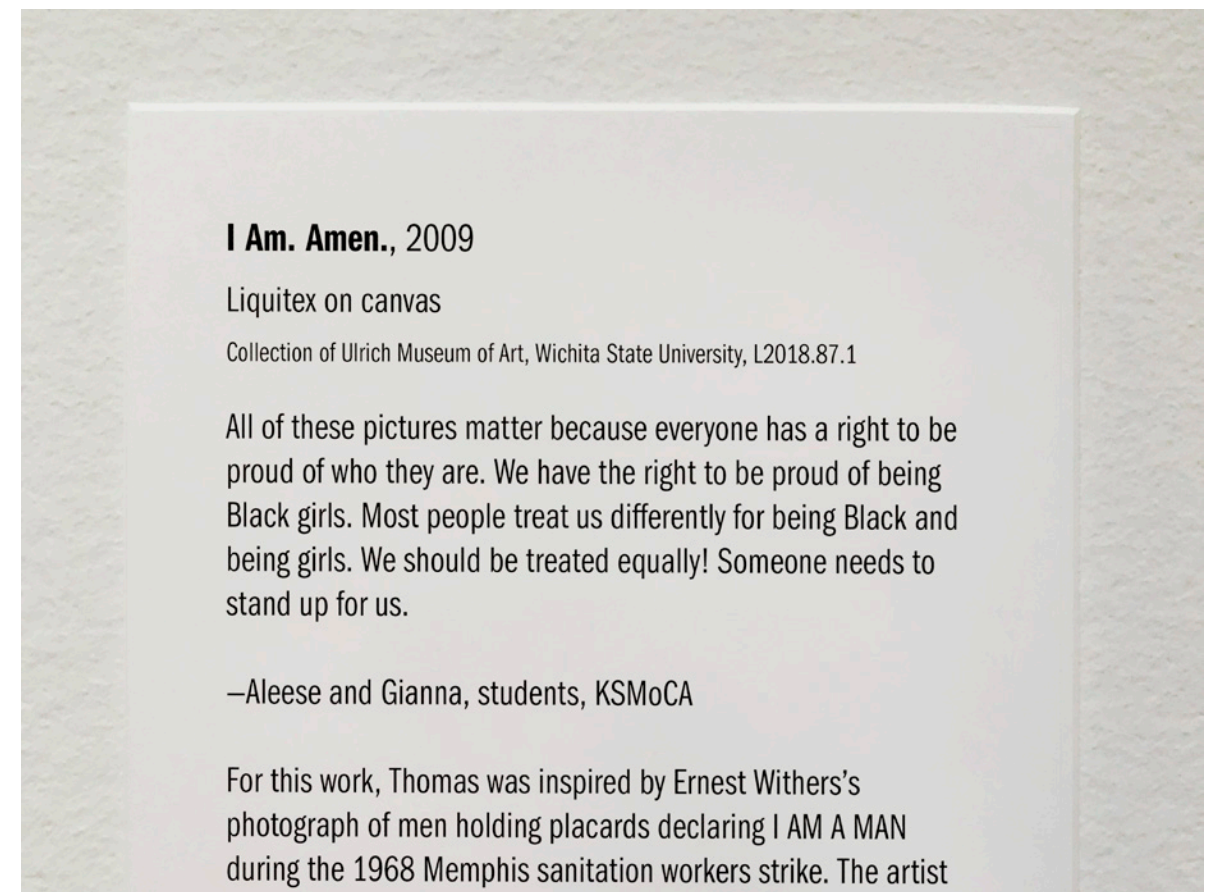
Hank Willis Thomas, exhibiting artist;

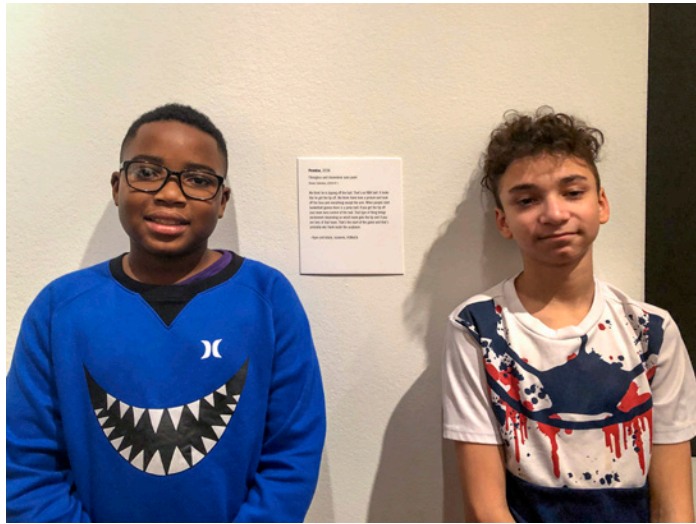
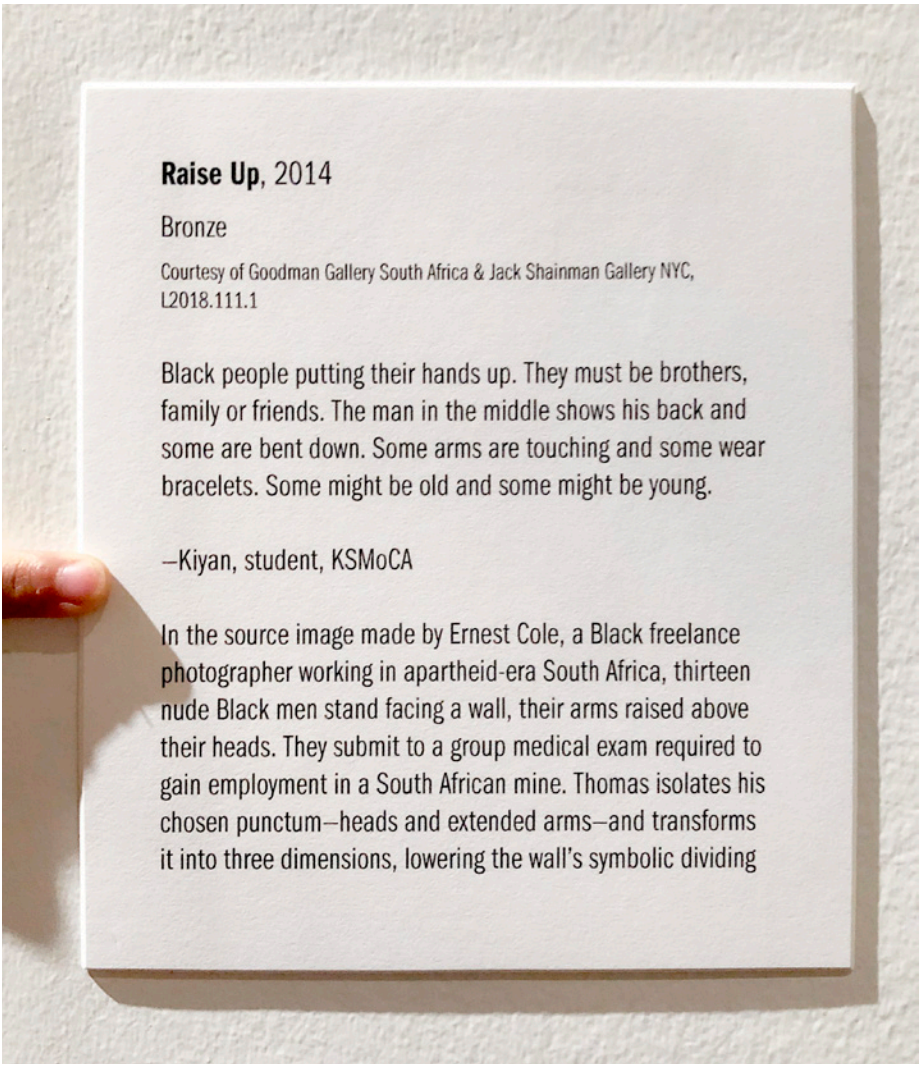
Adam, Aimee, Aleese, Clo, Da'marion, Diana, Enrique, F, Gianna, Jimya, Kiyan, Lorenzo, and Mehki, student-participants from Mrs. Jones's fifth-grade class at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School, a KSMoCA Creative Research Center partnership with the Portland Art Museum. KSMoCA is a contemporary art museum embedded in the elementary school and facilitated by Portland State University's School of Art.

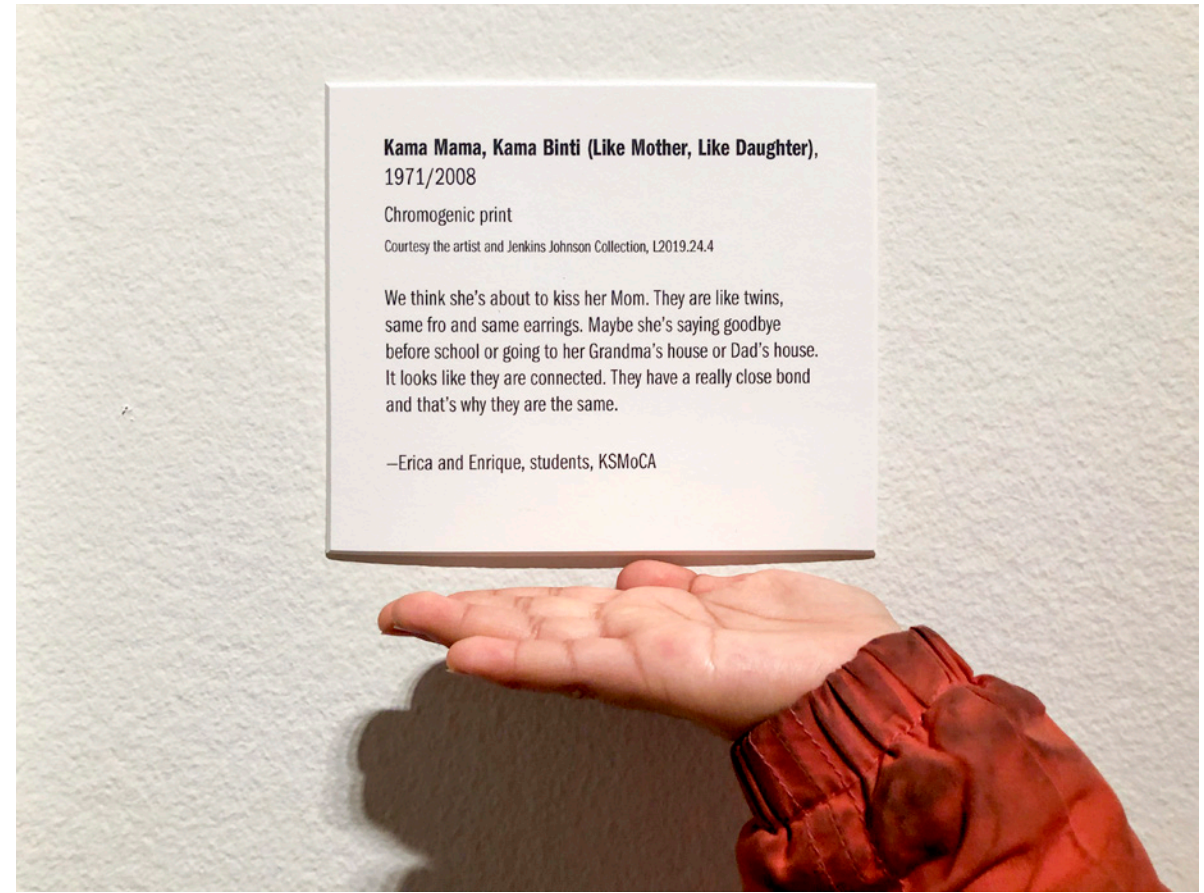


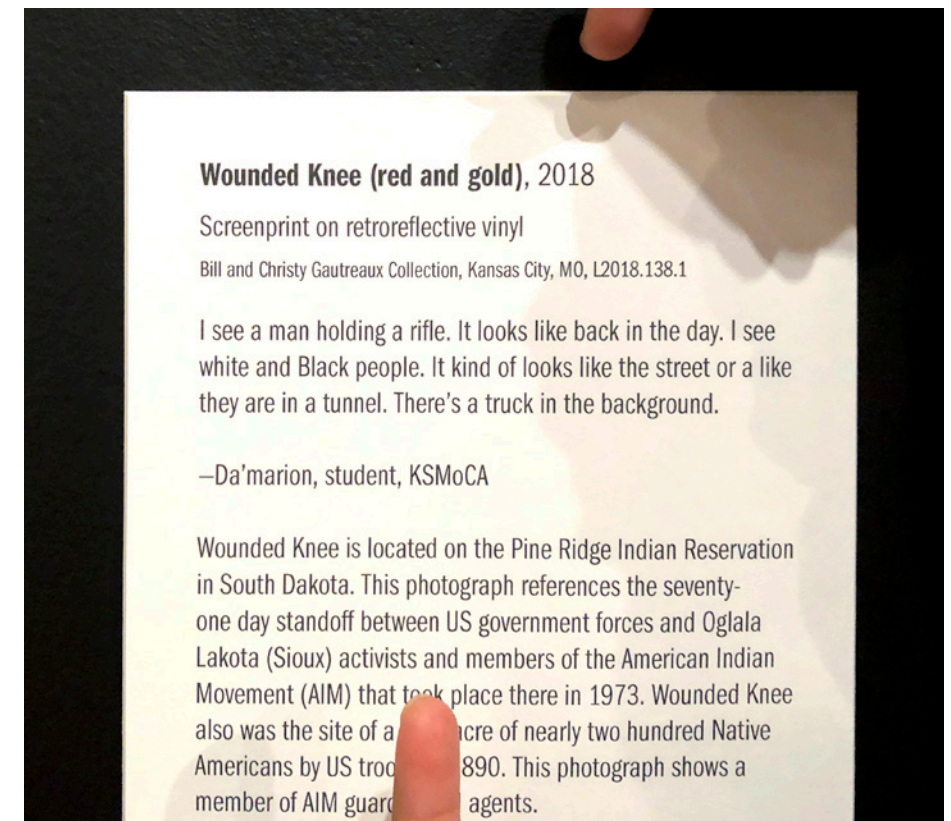
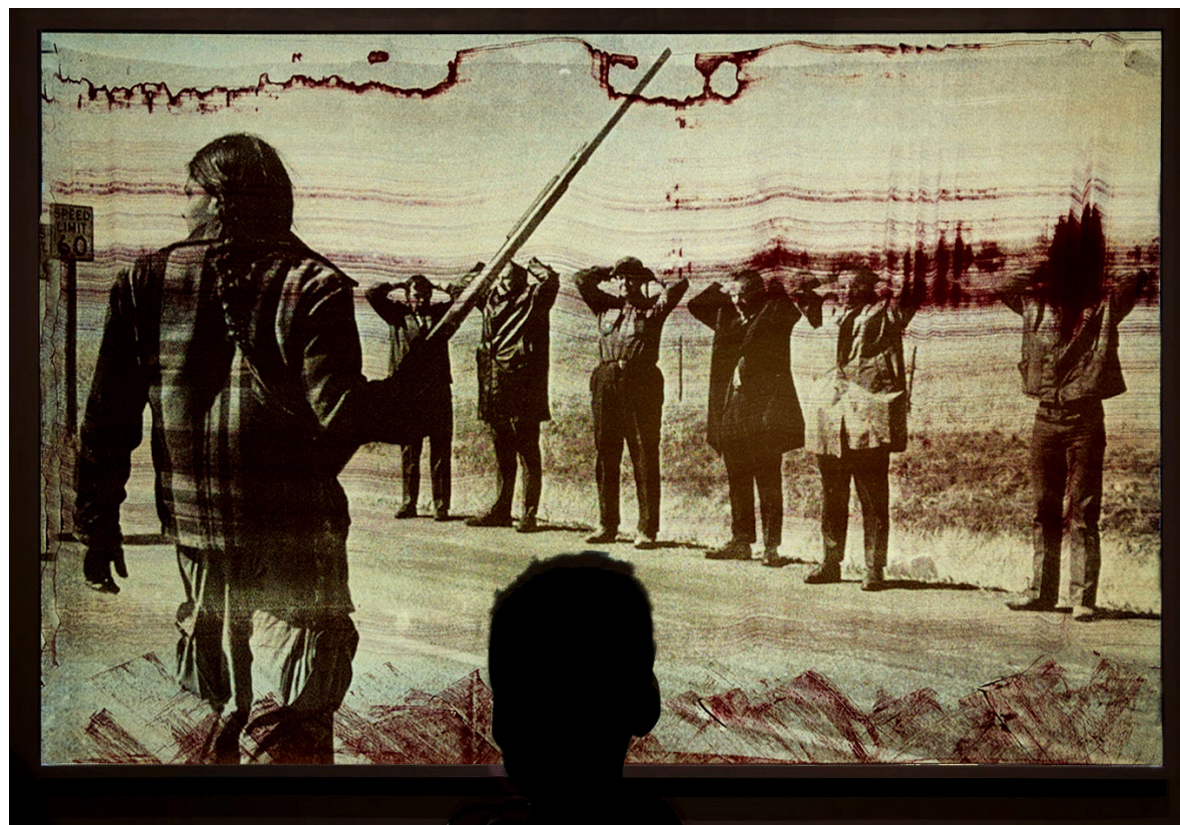


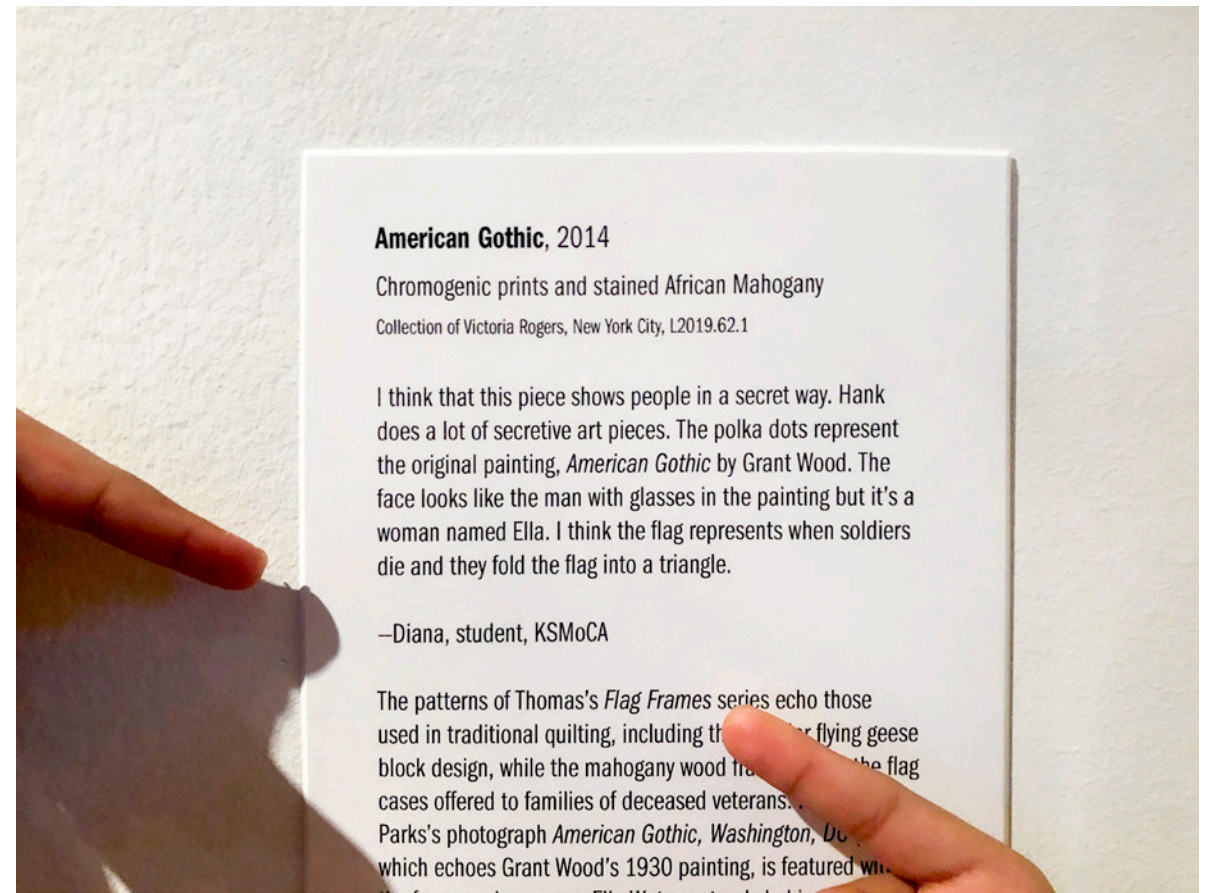


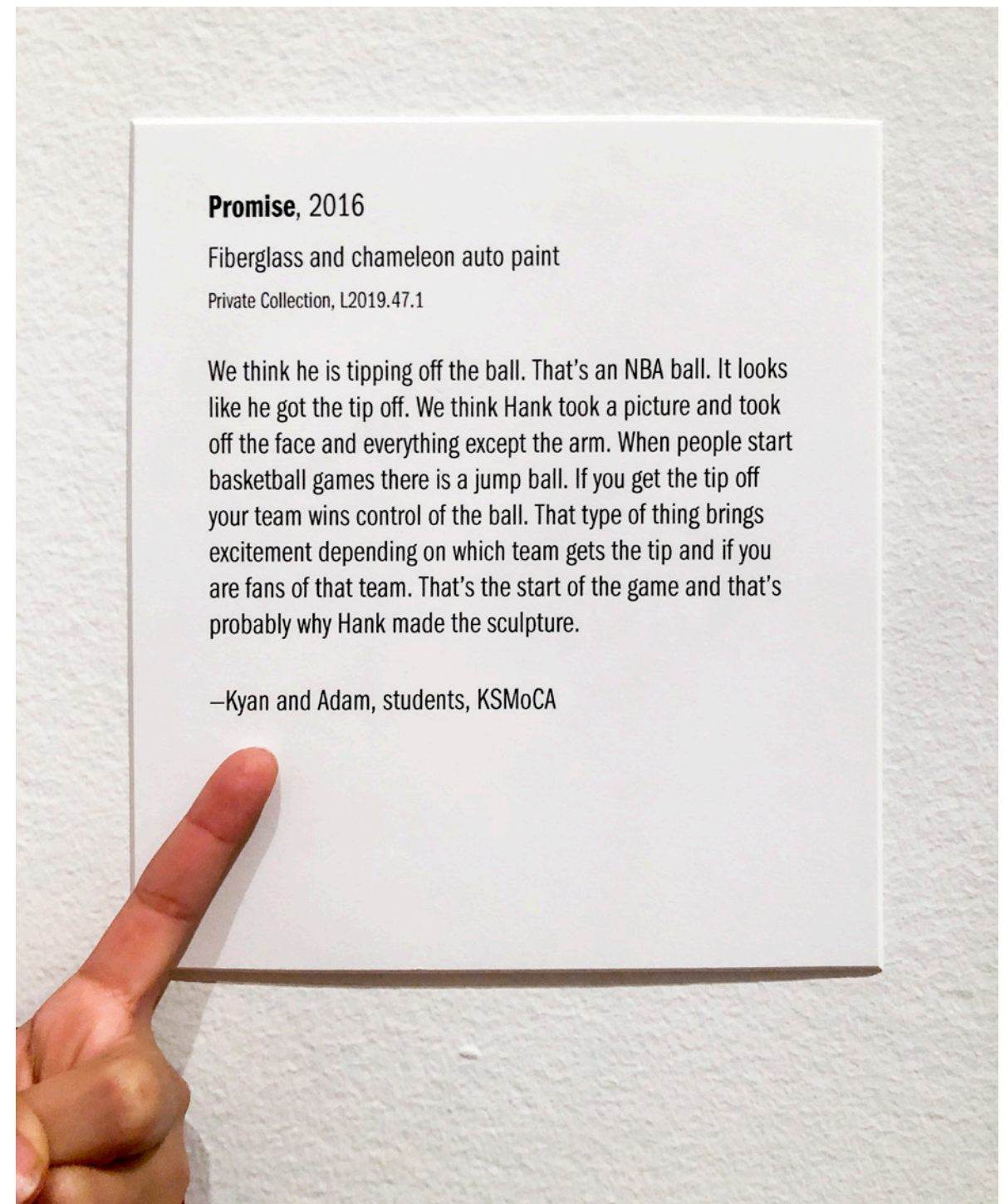


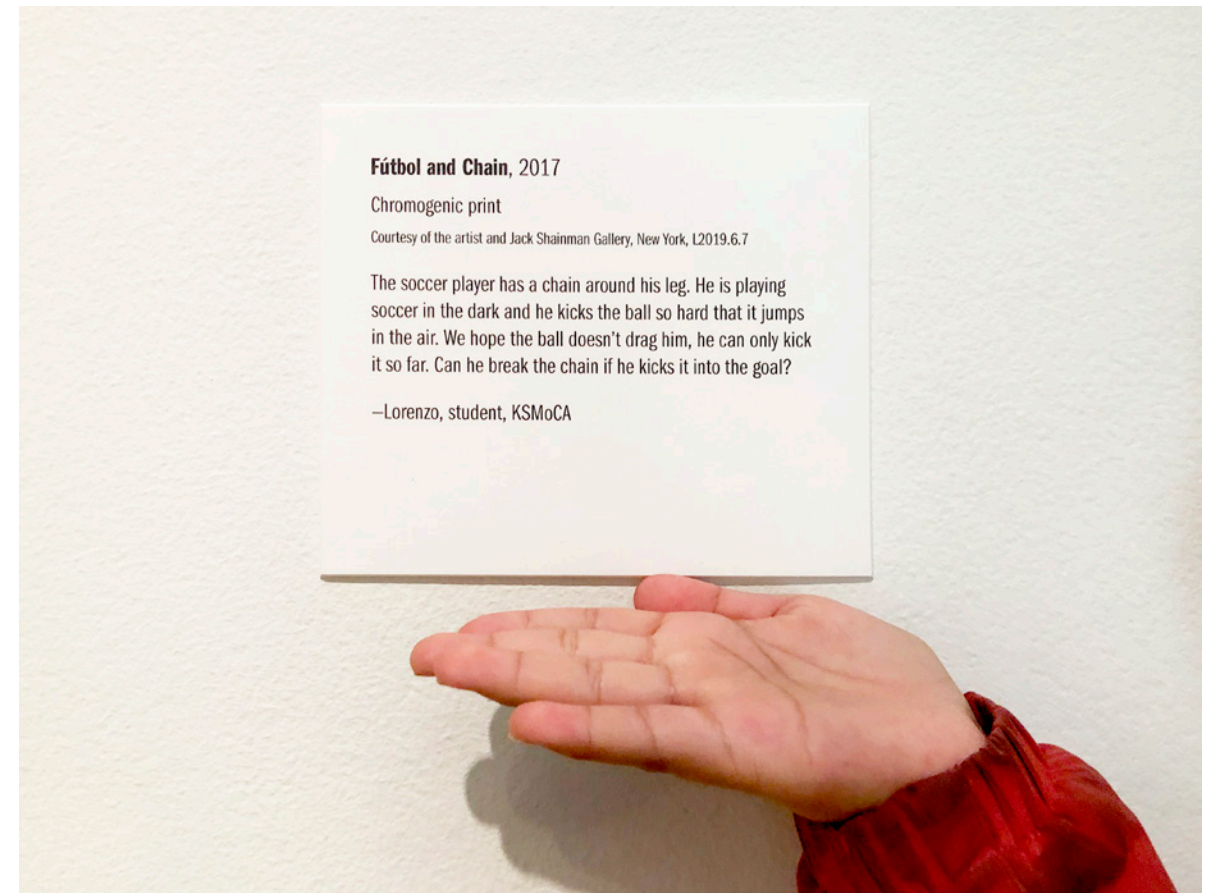


















Us Seeing the Exhibition

Harriet Tubman Middle
School Center for
Expanded Curatorial
Practice views *All
Things Being Equal...*



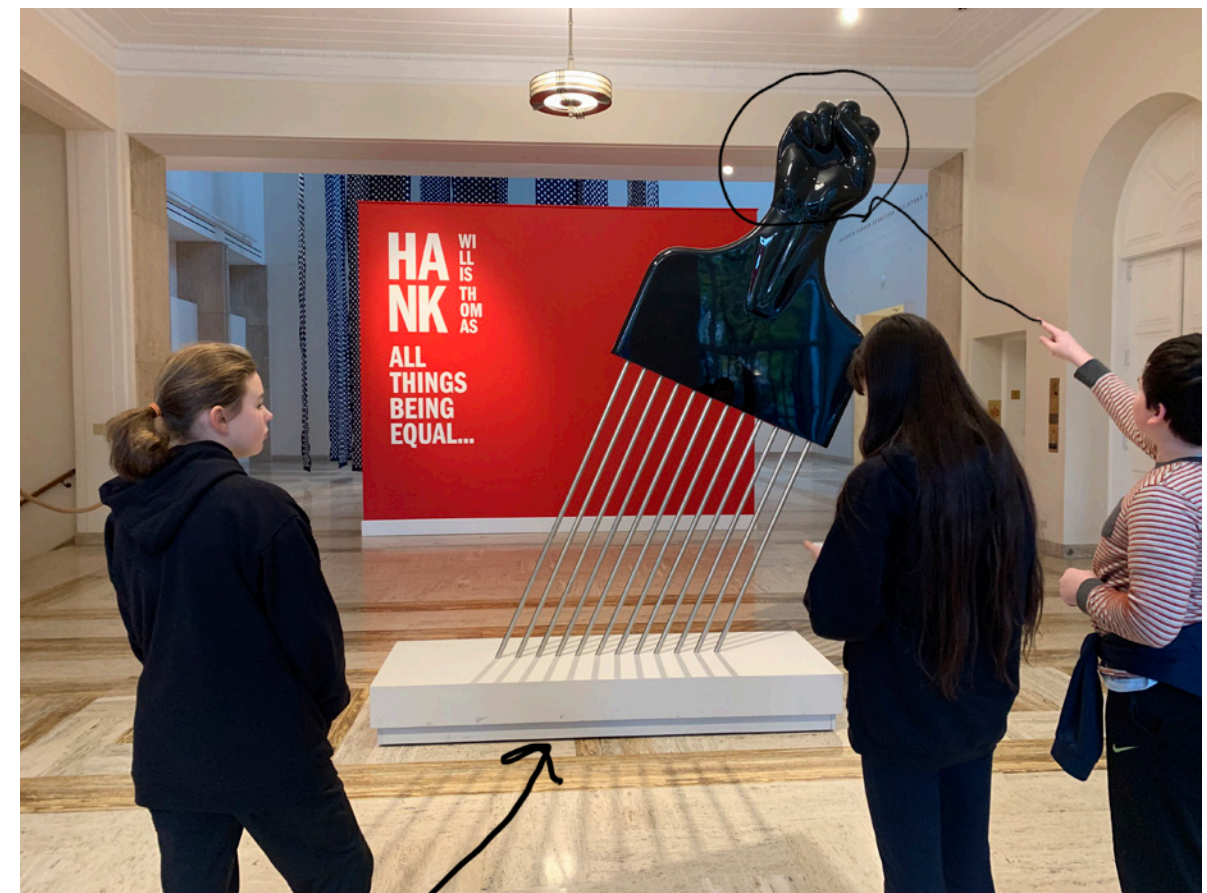
The Harriet Tubman Middle School Center for Expanded Curatorial Practice are a group of middle school students from Harriet Tubman Middle School in NE Portland, OR who work together with Portland State University professors Lisa Jarrett and Harrell Fletcher to learn about and do curation in various forms. We were given the special opportunity to have a behind-the-scenes guided tour by Ella Ray who worked on the Hank Willis Thomas exhibition, *All Things Being Equal...*, at the Portland Art Museum. (They actually opened the museum for us because we meet on Mondays and the museum is closed on Mondays.)

This whole show is all about interpretation. Hank probably had an idea of how he expected you to interpret the work but you might interpret it the way your mind chooses. You might interpret this exhibit as a piece about slavery and rising up from it, or you might think it's about taking brands off people that advertisements and media created. As you look at the pieces, try to find the deeper meaning of the work and maybe write it down like we did. We were surprised by so many themes in the show. For example, we had never thought about slavery and sports together. It was very impressive. Joyce said she thought about food to try to get the thoughts about slavery out of her head because in the pieces about slavery and sports Hank was trying to get you to figure out the connections. It was dark and depressing in a powerful way.

Think about this as a viewer's guide.

—Beatrice, Elliot, Esperanza, Harrell,
Joyce, Lisa, Nora, and Syncier

Elliot explained that the sculpture of the hair pick being large meant it was more important, not just a household item. We agree. A fist is for striking, demanding, or grasping. A fist doing just that on top of the comb is for representing the black power fist. The sculpture takes something everyday but significant, culturally and personally, and makes it into a monument.



It was in the
entrance way.
Elliot was pointing
something out
to the group.

They took a everyday
object and made it
larger and therefore
more important
The fist means
black power.



this changes
when you move
around it

joyce looking at art
pieces

what got joyce so
interested in this
piece?

We think it is cool but it makes us feel dizzy. We have to close our eyes. It makes us dizzy because it is an optical illusion. Humans are blinded by illusions. The piece deliberately suggests, in a dizzying fashion, that there are three things that imitate each other: art, life, and ads. This goes hand-in-hand with Thomas's other pieces which include ads with the words removed. This was an irritating piece because it was confusing. We couldn't put the meaning together quickly. We think the statement that art imitates ads and ads imitate art is true because ads use art concepts like song and illustration. Art is also imitating ads because in art it's like a collection of ads from mass media and ads are part of mass media. We are wondering if imitation is a form of art too.

It's confusing. It's sort of like a maze. It's made from prison uniforms and spells out "We the People." I think it is about how people should be treated equally no matter what they have done, whatever took them to prison. Not everyone is treated equally in the United States regardless of what the preamble and the Pledge of Allegiance says.

This image of a quilt I really like that because I like to sew



It says
"We the
People".



this was
where
Jocye
was **Born**

Even though
this is in the
Place of south
America, it's in the
Shape of Africa

I think this piece is about how deeply connected Africa and America are in history and how many resources from Africa were brought to America and how America grew to be the way it was because of it. As an artwork we think it was okay, even though it didn't give much detail it showed through image how important geography is. Jocye is pointing to her birth country, Ghana, which is one of the African countries that provided the states with some of its resources we use today such as gold and cacao.

This piece was made from sports Jerseys. Ella said Hank was commissioned to make the piece but it was too big to be installed in its original location so its first chance to be shown is at the Portland Art Museum. The work is inspired by Pablo Picasso's famous painting Guernica. Instead of making this artwork anti war-related like Picasso's, the piece uses Jerseys to show how professional athletes are branded. It's kind of like how slaves got branded.



Originally I thought that this quilt was just colorful peice but it is so much more powerful.

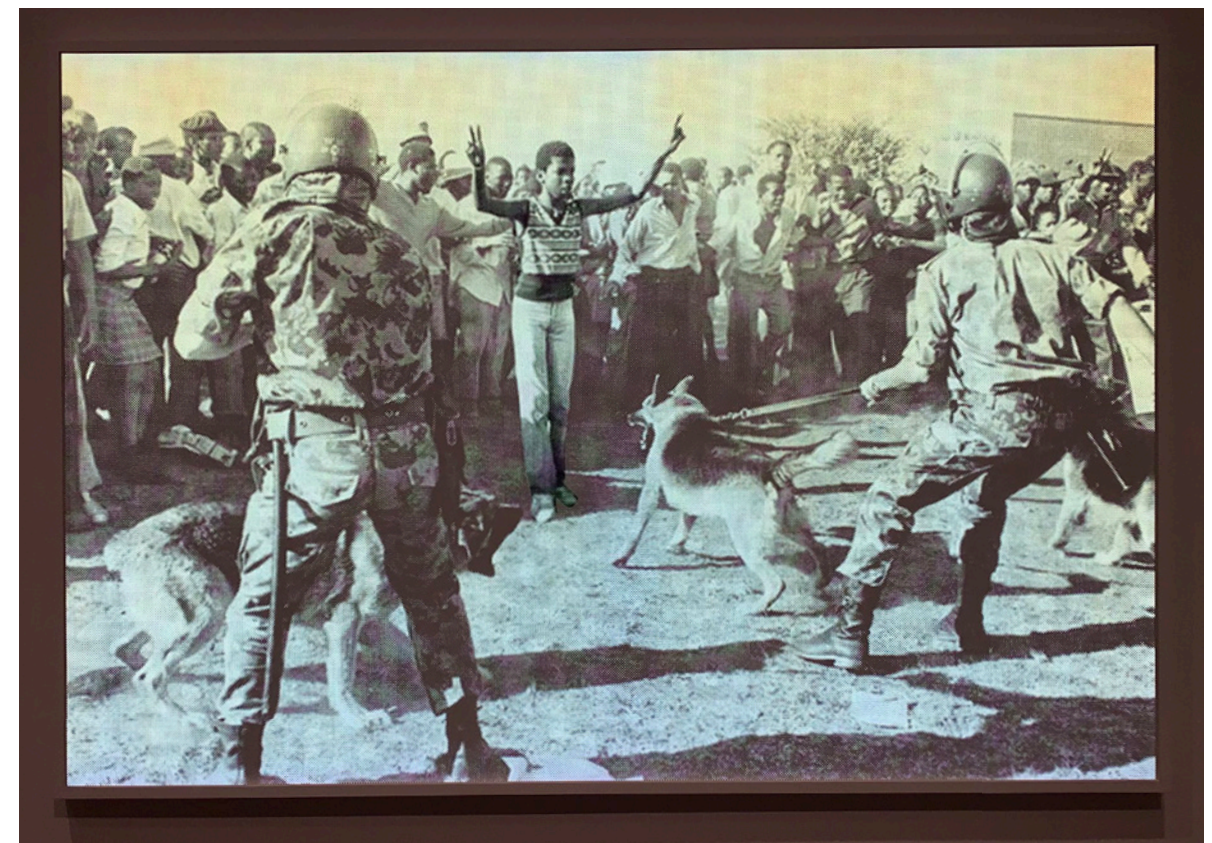
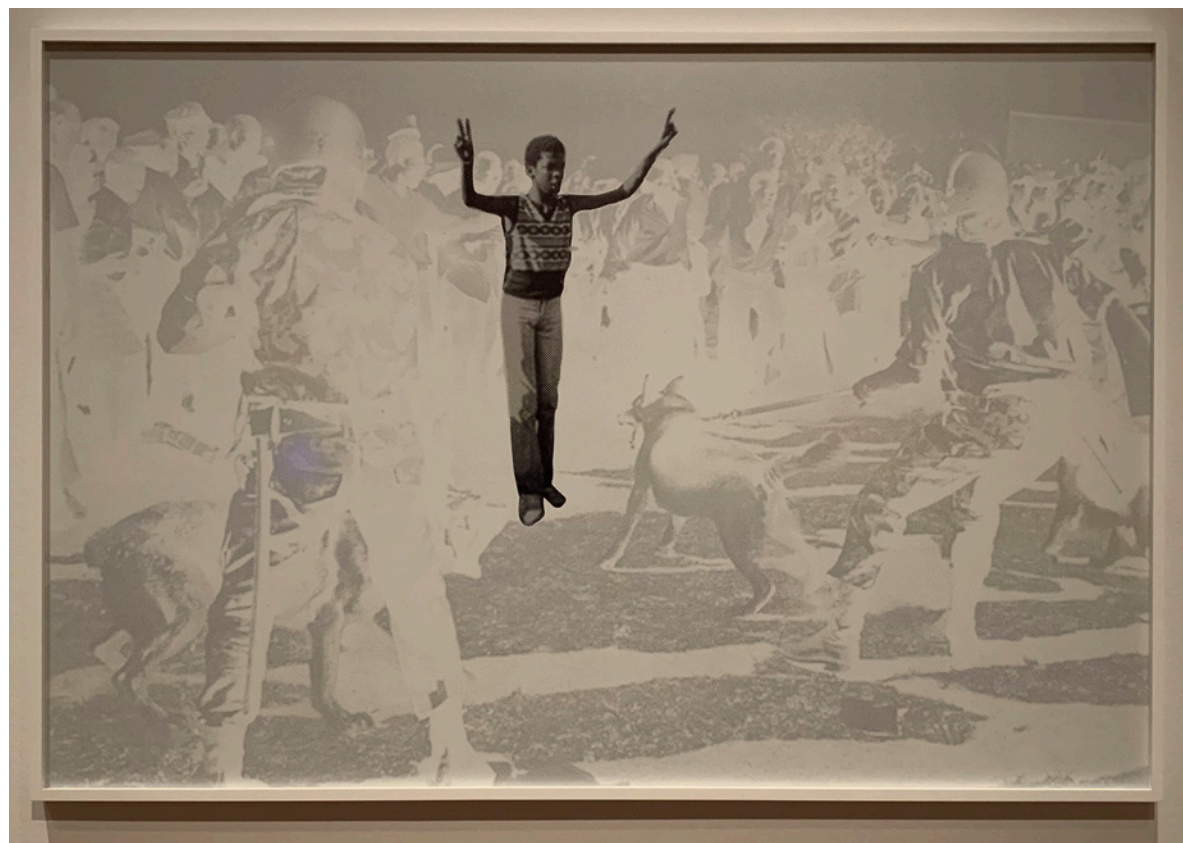
It is inspired by a piece by picasso.



These are giant plus, plus, PLUS-sized buttons. And yes, they really do have large pins on the back, so don't even ask about that. Making something small and personal bigger means it becomes more powerful and more important. Pins are so small and hard to read. Making them larger means that you are much more likely to pay attention to them.

I think it represents ego

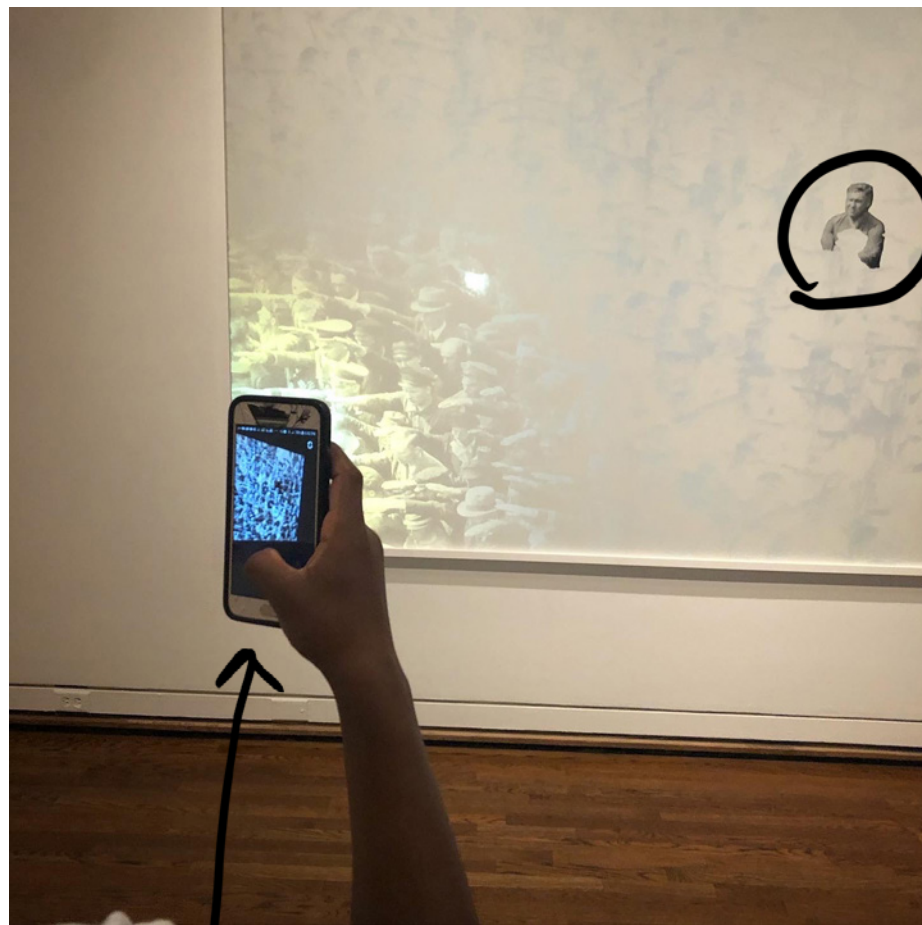
All of the messages are positive



these photos as
seen here showed a
man standing out in
the crowd, but
when you took a
photo with flash it
showed the whole
thing



This is a powerful piece about the civil rights movement, and the injustices that the police acted on. A VERY special thing about some of Hank's photographs is that when you see them with a flash of light you uncover a bigger picture. In 21st century society, the main way we can give it the light we need to see the whole picture is with our phones. In this way we need our electronics to enjoy and understand the artworks. Normally when we go to a museum for a piece and we document the piece it doesn't change it at all, it just replicates it. But in this case when you turn on your flash you can dramatically change the piece.



you can only see the full photo
if you take it with flash.

This image is about how people have different perspectives when it comes to certain stuff and how maybe rumors go around without knowing the real truth about stuff. But then, when you find out the truth it's way different than what you heard or were told.

At first you can
only see a little
bit of it.

If you don't
have a phone
they have goggles
for you.

It's kind of abstract and I'm thinking about stereotypes about how all black people being good at sports is one of those and they get stereotyped like that. This person is now just walking around with that stereotyped brand on him. That's what I think.



In this photo Syncier is examining the piece in which a black man's head has the Nike swoosh logo on it. Nike is a popular sports brand from Oregon. In this piece and others Hank is expressing the feelings that professional sports can be a lot like slavery because the players get owned by the team and traded without their consent. Consumers that buy and wear Nike and other sports brands in some way are branded by the corporations.

I'm really trying to understand what this piece means. It's called Branded.. maybe it's about being committed to Nike.

syncier looking at the branded art work



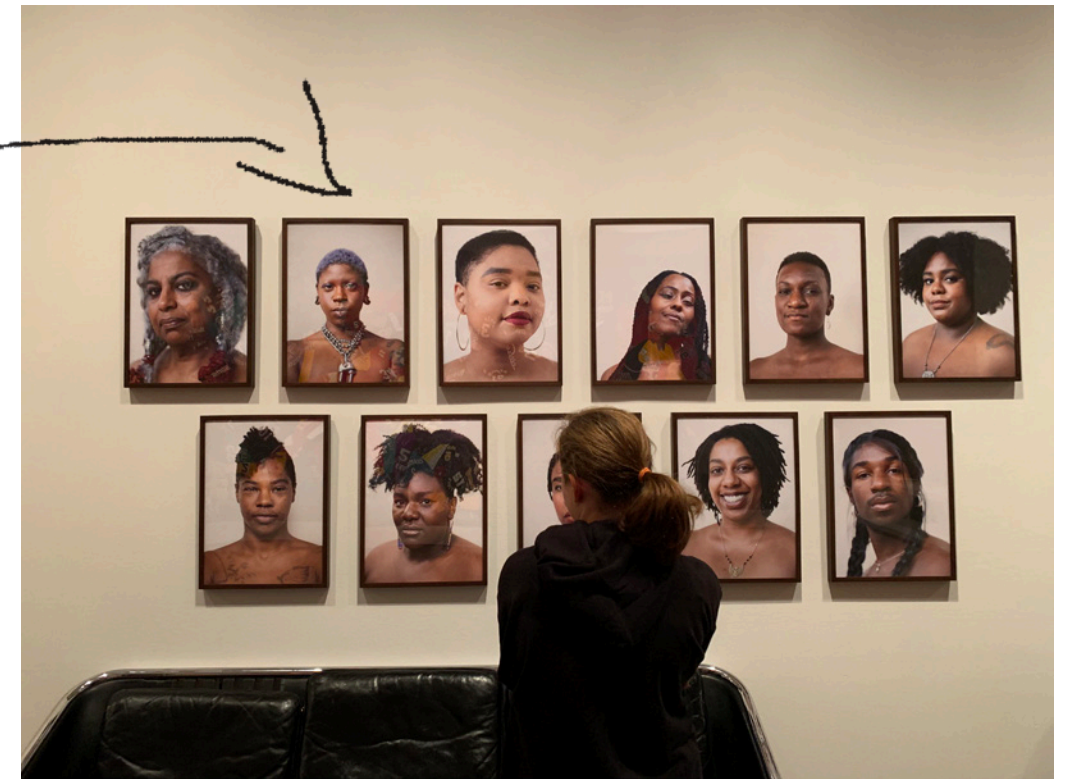
Standing inside of this piece felt kind of foreign. We didn't know these people but they lost their lives in unfair ways.

It felt like standing in a graveyard but not. Standing in the middle of the banners, it's like being surrounded by lost lives and you can pay your respects to people even if you didn't know them.

In this picture we are in a ring of flags. The stars on the flags represented all the lives that were taken from gun violence in the United States in 2018. Hank's cousin was shot, so he has done many pieces on gun violence. Two of our questions are, who were the people represented by the stars on the banners and how did they die?

in this piece, there were banners with lots of stars all over them. the stars represented all the lives lost in shootings/ gun violence. we talked about it and on how we felt about the piece and the meaning of it.

These photographs were included in the Hank Willis Thomas's show but they are by Intisar Abioto, an artist from Portland. They are almost a separate show within the show. Ella curated Intisar's pieces into Hank's retrospective because it fit into the ideas that Hank projects within his work. When seeing this piece, I was immediately captured by it. In this picture, I was trying to figure out why. Why did this piece hold all of my attention? Did I connect with this? All these people identify as women and they are all of color. When you "identify" as a human I feel like people in power put everyone into groups and are expected to be all the same, as soon as you are different from the mold they want everyone to be made into, you are forced to be put back into the "normal" expectation. I think everyone pictured here seems to defy the status quo.



These people are expressing themselves without clothes I think. Clothes can cover up a lot of things and this shows who you truly are, down to the bone. These are by Intisar Abioto. Somehow they are connected to Hank's work and the themes Hank shows in his work.

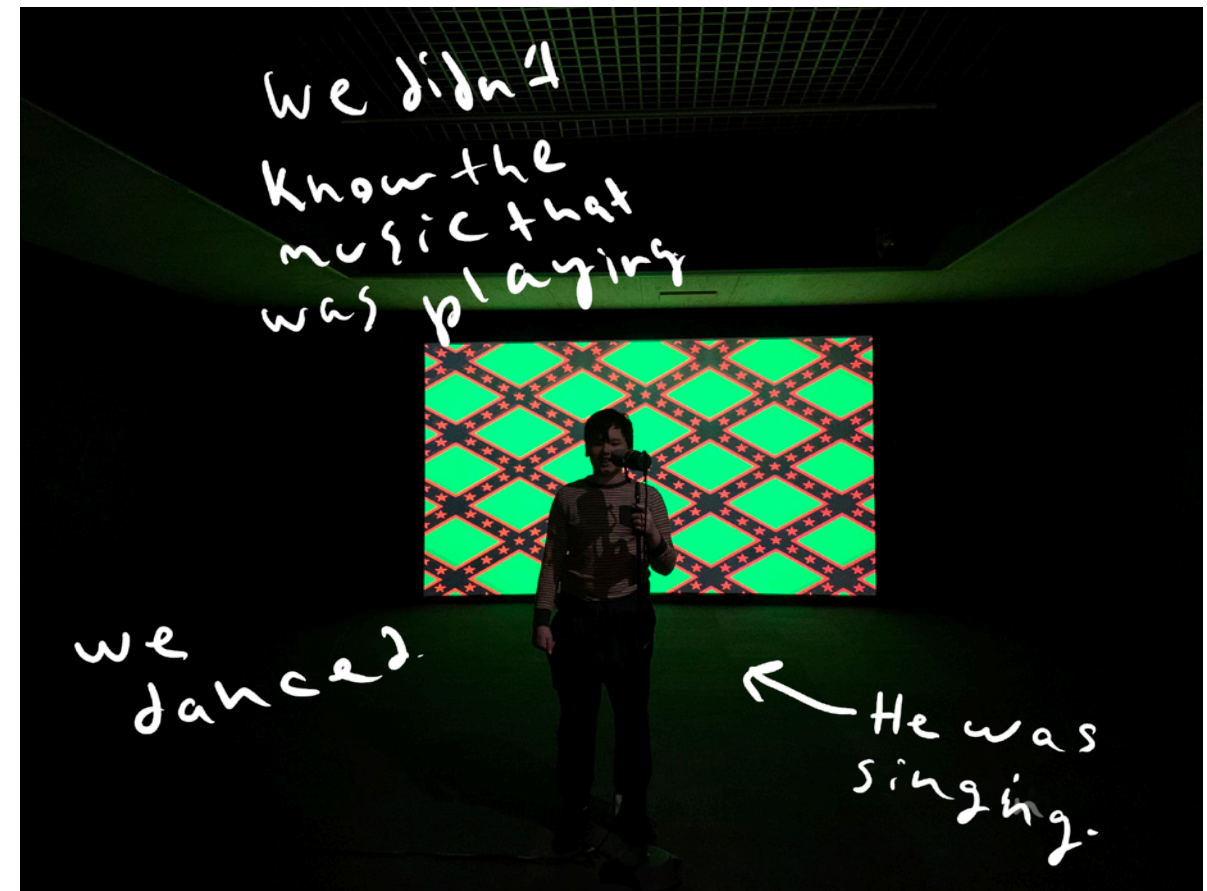


This piece contains two framed pictures of African American men and women. The photo on the right features what appears to be a couple but the woman is holding a cigarette but we don't know what that symbolizes. The concept for these pictures is that they were ads that Hank took the words away from, giving them a different meaning. Instead of selling products they became strange portraits showing the way that black people are depicted for different purposes in commercial advertising. We also believe that the Sherwin Williams logo is awful.

These are photos from old
ads without words.

I think the second
one is about
cigarettes.

This was a piece displayed in a very small space that is quite warm. The image is played, constantly moving and changing, making it quite tricky to look at. There is also a microphone in front of the piece. It could represent people of power's changing viewpoints because people of power get microphones and get to represent their viewpoints. The piece allows museum visitors to have the experience of being in front of a microphone. It was fun, but we still don't totally understand what Hank was doing with this piece.



These pictures are on windows. What is interesting is how these are all different people that are connected by one person. They all have completely different lives.



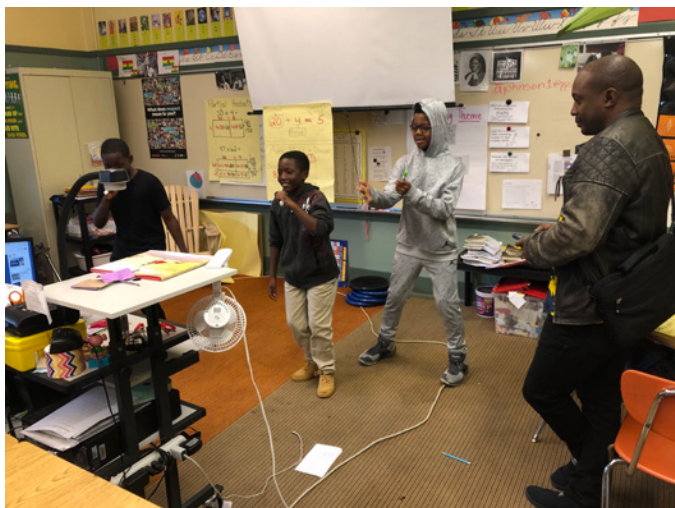
This is Ella Ray who gave us a great secret tour at the Portland Art Museum!

It was odd to be on a stairwell and it's interesting that we were blocking the staircase to look at artwork. People would clump up the staircase to see this draw-dropping piece.

We think it's interesting how all the people in this piece are of different colors, genders, and cultures. The places where people are placed are kinda random. Which is like life—you can't find a pattern. I mean you can say that all humans go through school, get a job, get married, etc. but humans are NOT all the same. They experience things at different places in life, and go through their life spans carrying different burdens and joys. If you actually look past "the mask" (the standard or expectation of what other people should do in their life or how they should look) you might find something interesting. During certain times of day, some things on the people presented are more hidden or are revealed. This shows that if you look closer into people's lives you might see things in people that they like to be hidden but are covered up by things that are much easier to show.

Interview

**Questions for Hank
Willis Thomas from the
Harriet Tubman
Middle School Center
for Expanded
Curatorial Practice**



Top: Hank gives a lecture about his work in the Cafetorium at Dr. MLK Jr. School.

Bottom: Hank visits with Dr. MLK Jr. School students.

SYNCIER: *The giant pick was the first piece I saw in the museum at the entrance, what inspired you to make that work?*

HANK: This was inspired by an Afro Pick I had as a child and the public artwork by Claus Oldenburg who enlarged everyday objects to monumental size.

ELLIOT: *When I was at the Portland Art Museum I walked into a piece that had a lot of flashing lights, chairs, and a microphone and I wonder what it is supposed to be? I was confused when I was interacting with it and I want to know more.*

HANK: That is exactly how I feel. It is a voice activated installation that changes the colors and shapes of the image when you use your voice. I have always been more mesmerized by it and the sound track of African American and Afro Caribbean musicians and activist who changed the world using their voices.

SYNCIER: *What were you trying to highlight with the retroreflectives? How does current technology illuminate the past?*

HANK: The answer is in your well formed question.

NORA AND SYNCIER: *How deep is the meaning of your art? Is there a certain meaning that you want each viewer to take away from your work? Or can everyone take away their own meaning?*

HANK: I don't have a good answer for this because I am still learning about the work sometimes 15 years later.

BEA: *What does it mean to juxtapose an image of a sharecropper and an image of an athlete in your work Cotton Bowl?*

HANK: This is another work that is changing meaning after Colin Kaepernick and the killing of George Floyd and the changing of the Mississippi state flag.

NORA: *We remember your project Branded, we want to know if you feel as though you have been personally branded or stereotyped? Was that the motivation of this project?*

HANK: I feel that all advertising relies on stereotypes in order to market to us. When we are wearing a brand we are often buying to stereotypes. I have always liked good branding and advertising. That was my inspiration.

BEA: *Does all your inspiration come from one place? It seems like it's all coming from one place.*

HANK: Yes. Every artist is asking questions and trying to find their place in the world.

SYNCIER: *How do you think the work influences others? The first time I saw your exhibition it really spoke to me, this is the first time art has made me want to do research and know more.*

HANK: I don't know. So many people have inspired me in so many ways to rethink what I was doing when I made something. I think the curators and other viewers can influence the work almost as much as the artist.

NORA: *Did Ella Ray work with you in a way that you felt like you could express and exhibit your art in the way you wanted to?*

HANK: Yes. Ella is brilliant.

SYNCIER: *What is your personal association and meaning with the Cotton Bowl? If you were to personally attend the Cotton Bowl would you think back to your art?*

HANK: Yes. I would look back on my art. I'd think about the history of

slavery and sharecropping and the how many of the players who don't get paid are related to slaves.

ELLIOT: *How is it different or similar to show your work at the Portland Art Museum versus a museum within an elementary school like KSMoCA?*

HANK: I'm more nervous about KSMoCA.

NORA: *Did you receive any questions about your work from the kids at Dr. MLK Jr. School that you haven't received from adults?*

HANK: Yes. Most questions are unique. I also think the person asking the question changes and makes me think about different things.

ZAZA: *We know the show traveled to different places around the United States, how do different people in different places interpret your work?*

HANK: I don't know. I know that a lot of people in Portland are connected to Nike, Adidas and Apple where in Arkansas a lot of people are connected to Walmart. Showing the work in the south has weight because of the

history of slavery in the south. Showing it in Oregon connects it more to popular culture and advertising to me.

ZAZA: *How has the covid-19 shutdown impacted All Things Being Equal...? How do you feel the different materials and media that you use affect your messaging?*

HANK: Marshall McLuhan said "The medium is the message." I think the choice of materials is as much a part of the work as the content if not more. Covid-19 closed almost all museums in the country. They are now uncertain about reopening and how to have the same impact on audiences. I've learned a lot about patience and managing expectations.

ZAZA AND ELLIOT: *We noticed your art is visually appealing and catches people's eye but it has the content of racial justice, gun violence, and branding. So, where did you find this medium where you could get people to focus on the lessons and realities you're trying to get across?*

HANK: I have always been inspired by advertising. It is such a powerful language that is used all over the world to sell ideas and products. I have been trying to

use the same language to talk about things that big companies don't normally care about such as racial justice, history and gun violence among others.

NORA: How did you find a method of balancing making work that is both visually appealing and also challenging?

HANK: I am still learning. I sometimes just want to make something pretty but people won't let me because they feel like it won't be me.

ZAZA: We've noticed you use a lot of different mediums in the exhibition, how do you make them work all together?

HANK: It's like the inside of my brain, very diverse and sometimes overwhelming in its diversity of thoughts and ideas. I think everyone is like that though.

What kinds of art resources did you have in middle school? What exposure did you have to art outside of school?

HANK: My mother is a curator so I was always surrounded by artists and cool people trying different techniques. Exploring new materials and challenging the norm. I

went to high school in Washington D.C. and studied Museum Studies. That taught me that critical thinking is an art form.

NORA AND ELLIOT: Did your mother play a critical role in you becoming an artist? Do you ever feel like you have to live up to her legacy?

HANK: Yes. Both of my parents have big shoes to fill. I am so grateful for all that they taught me about being an authentic person. I see myself in their legacy and in the legacy of their parents. It is a real honor that I can never completely live up to. That makes it so much easier to accept my shortcomings.

NORA: What was your education like in middle school and high school? Are there experiences during that time that are still meaningful to you?

HANK: I went to a cool middle school with a lot of creative people. Same with high school. There were also so many people from so many cultures. I got my best education from learning about other cultures and other people's approaches to life.

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976) is a conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to perspective, identity, commodity, media, and popular culture. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad. He lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Founded in 2016 by artists Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman, For Freedoms is a platform for creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action. Inspired by American artist Norman Rockwell's paintings of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms (1941)—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear—For Freedoms' exhibitions, installations, and public programs use art to deepen public discussions on civic issues and core values, and to advocate for equality, dialogue, and civic participation. As a nexus between art, politics, commerce, and education, For Freedoms aims to inject anti-partisan, critical thinking that fine art requires into the political landscape through programming, exhibitions, and public artworks. In 2018, For Freedoms launched the 50 State Initiative: the largest creative collaboration in U.S. history.

Acknowledgements:

Bloomfield Family Foundation

Ella Ray, Kress Interpretive Fellow and

Community Partnerships Coordinator (PAM)

For Freedoms

Hank Willis Thomas Studio

Jay Platt

Julia Dolan, Ph.D., the Minor White Curator

of Photography (PAM)

Nicole Brodeur and Alex Payne

Oregon Community Foundation

Parent Teacher Association

at Dr. MLK Jr. School

Peter and Noel Koehler

Portland Art Museum (PAM)

Portland Public Schools

Portland State University College of the Arts (COTA)

Regional Arts and Culture Council

Sara Krajewski, The Robert and Mercedes Eichholz

Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art (PAM)

Umpqua Bank

Union Pacific

Co-founders and co-directors: Harrell Fletcher and Lisa Jarrett

Editor and Program Support: Amanda Leigh Evans

Program Support: Roz Crews

Design Director: Kimberly Sutherland

Graphic Designer: Ariel Fogden

Photography: Intisar Abioto and KSMoCA

For Freedoms Digital Quilt Design Support: Sadie Jordan

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for artwork pages 26–35, 140–168

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