

FORT GANSEVOORT



March Madness

5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY, 10014

On View: Friday March 18 – May 1, 2016

Opening Reception: March 18, 6-9pm

When sports and art collide with the impact of “March Madness,” a show of 28 artists opening March 18 at Fort Gansevoort, our games become metaphors, our heroes are transformed, even our golf bags reveal secrets. The artist’s eye finds the corruption, violence and racism behind the scoreboard, and the artist’s hand enhances the protest.

To fans, “March Madness” refers to the hyped fun and games of the current national college basketball tournament. To Hank Willis Thomas and Adam Shopkorn, organizers of these 44 works, it reflects the classic spirit of Tommie Smith and John Carlos raising the black power salute at the 1968 Olympics, of Leni Riefenstahl’s film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, of George Bellows’ painting of Dempsey knocking Firpo out of the ring.

The boxer in this show is still. The legendary photographer Gordon Parks reveals Muhammad Ali, the leading symbol of athletic protest, in a rare moment of stunning silence. The boxing champion is framed in a doorway, praying.

Contrast that to the in-your-face fury of Michael Ray Charles’ “Yesterday.” A powerful black figure in a loin-cloth bursts through a jungle to slam-dunk his own head through what looks like basketball hoop of vines. A cameo of Abraham Lincoln looks on. Is the artist suggesting that the end of slavery is the beginning of March Madness? More subtle but no less troubling is Charles’ rendition of the face of O.J. Simpson on the cover of “This Time” magazine entitled “The Fall of Proper Nigga.”

There is rage to spare in Robert Longo’s charcoal painting, “Hands Up,” as five St. Louis Rams football players storm onto the field with their arms in the air. These gladiators are protesting the 2014 shooting death in nearby Ferguson of an unarmed young black man who was reportedly surrendering to a white police officer.

Hank Willis Thomas’ commentary on race is often witty, sometimes shocking. It has ranged from such pleasing images as quilts made from basketball jerseys to troubling images of athletic torsos bearing Nike swoosh scars, football players running the ball through chaos, and basketball players rising to meet a hoop shaped like noose.

The diversity of image suggests how rich is the field of play. Glen Kaino’s runner bursts out of a mottled, obscured background as if he is sprinting through his own mind. What the artist has obscured are traces of a Newsweek cover entitled “Angry Black Athlete.” Does Kaino want to obscure such a glib ‘60’s description of hundreds of years of racial oppression? Who wouldn’t be angry about that?

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There is no end to questions. In Nari Ward's "Medicine Bats" seven brown glass bats sprout white cotton tufts. Are the bats medicine bottles, the tufts steroids?

In Pamela Council's "Ray Lewis Needs Love," the face of the beloved and reviled former Baltimore Ravens' linebacker is framed by strong, dirty fingers with purple nail polish. An acknowledged superstar, Lewis pled guilty to obstruction of justice in connection with the stabbing deaths of two men in a 2000 brawl. He avoided prison by testifying against his two companions. He also settled with survivors in a civil suit. Now a popular broadcaster, he is still polarizing. Why does he need love and from whom? From us?

Sometimes the message is blunt. In Emory Douglas's cartoon panel, "Olympics," a young African - American wins a gold medal in track and field but returns home to be harassed at gunpoint by the police, echoing Ali/Cassius Clay's experience of returning to be "the Olympic nigger."

Even sporting gear carry implications here. Charles McGill adds to the already symbolic load of the golf bag; what piece of sporting equipment lugs more classism, racism, and inequality? Yet in McGill's structured versions there are club protectors that suggest KKK hoods and straps that evoke slave restraints.

Cheryl Pope has subverted the kind of colorful banners that hang from the rafters of a high school gym proclaiming a championship team. Here they carry the desperation of the students in the grandstand. "Why Did He Do It" asks one banner. Another wails, "Sometimes I Feel Replaceable."

Jeffrey Gibson, who is a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and half Cherokee, used Native-American craft motifs to fancifully dress heavy punching bags with bright designs and beaded skirts. The ornate results have been called gender bending.

What to wear to punch such heavy bags other than Satch Hoyt's "Neverlast," a pair of boxing gloves that parody the Everlast originals with a delicate red design. Could this also be combat gear for romantic partners?

The show's organizers are clearly those rare fans who can see through the madness, beyond the white lines.

By Robert Lipsyte

Featured artists in the show are Derrick Adams, Sadie Barnette, Zoe Buckman, Michael Ray Charles, Pamela Council, Emory Douglas, Derek Fordjour, Jeffrey Gibson, David Hammons, Satch Hoyt, David Huffman, Alex Israel, Rashid Johnson, Glen Kaino, Jeff Koons, Robert Longo, Shaun Leonardo, Charles McGill, Gordon Parks, Paul Pfeiffer, Raymond Pettibon, Cheryl Pope, Ronny Quevedo, Robin Rhode, William Scott, Gary Simmons, Hank Willis Thomas, and Nari Ward.

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Hank Willis Thomas Bio

Hank Willis Thomas is a photo conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history and popular culture. He received a BFA in Photography and Africana studies from New York University and his MFA/MA in Photography and Visual Criticism from the California College of Arts. Thomas' monograph, *Pitch Blackness*, was published by Aperture. He has exhibited throughout the U.S. and abroad including, the International Center of Photography, Galerie Michel Rein in Paris, Studio Museum in Harlem, Galerie Henrik Springmann in Berlin, and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others. Thomas' work is in numerous public collections including The Museum of Modern Art New York, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Brooklyn Museum, The High Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. His collaborative projects have been featured at the Sundance Film Festival and installed permanently at the Oakland International Airport, The Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport, The Oakland Museum of California, and the University of California, San Francisco. He is also and a recipient of the New Media grant from Tribeca Film Institute and New Media Infinity Award from the International Center of Photography for his transmedia project, *Question Bridge: Black Males*. Recent notable exhibitions include Hank Willis Thomas at the Cleveland Museum of Art and *Repetition and Difference* at the Jewish Museum in New York. He was recently appointed to the Public Design Commission for the city of New York. Thomas is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City and Goodman Gallery in South Africa.

Adam Shopkorn Bio

Art advisor, gallerist and curator Adam Shopkorn began his career in art while attending NYU's Stern School of Business, putting together contemporary art collections for private clients. He continues to consult for a number of clients across the globe. From the fall of 2011 through the end of 2014, Shopkorn was the Cultural Ambassador for Morgans Hotel Group. In his time as Cultural Ambassador, he collaborated with many notable artists to enhance the creative ethos of Morgans Hotel Group. For the design of Mondrian SoHo, he worked with the estate of Sol LeWitt, to display the late artist's photographic series "On The Walls of the Lower East Side" on the exterior façade, and with Marilyn Minter, who created a customized wallpaper for the lobby. He completed a project titled *PLANE TEXT*, which took place at Art Basel Miami in December 2012 and won a prestigious *Wallpaper Magazine* design award for "Best High Art." The project was an aerial exhibition of word banners from 15 of the world's highest profile artists. Ed Ruscha, Richard Prince and John Baldessari, among others, each contributed a phrase that was then flown across the Miami skyline. Recently, Shopkorn organized two sports driven art shows at Salon 94 titled "For the Kids" and "Transition Game" and is currently building a dynamic art program for Flight Club New York, the world's number one sneaker marketplace. In the summer of 2015, he opened Fort Gansevoort, a gallery and multipurpose cultural space in the heart of NYC's Meatpacking District. In addition to his work in the art world, Shopkorn is also involved in film. Prior to attending NYU, he assisted Edward Pressman, producer of films such as *Wall Street*, *City Hall*, *Hoffa* and *American Psycho*. After leaving Pressman Films, he began work on a documentary about the life of ex-basketball player Lenny Cooke. The film was completed in 2013 where it premiered at New York's Tribeca Film Festival. The film found a home at Showtime and ESPN and was nominated for a 2014 Black Reel Award for outstanding independent documentary. Shopkorn has an English and Art History Degree from Tufts University and an MBA from NYU's Stern School of Business.