

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Cheryl Castjohn, “30 Americans Review: CAC Showcases Diverse Works from 30 Black Artists”, *Nola Defender*, February 16, 2014



*Artwork by Glen Ligon, photo via CAC*

“30 Americans” opened at the Contemporary Arts Center on February 8th, just one week into Black History Month. A show organized by the Rubell Family Collection of Miami, “30 Americans” is described as focusing “on issues of racial, sexual, and historical identity in contemporary culture.”

The show is a powerhouse, featuring art greats like David Hammons and Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems among the thirty. While their decades and generations differ, their subject matter and sexual orientation, medium and canvas sizes find little common ground; their shared ancestry is what draws the show together.

I considered myself a big Mickalene Thomas fan before “30 Americans.” Her depictions of women are glamorous and gorgeous; they wear bright, beautiful clothes, and are often posed within impeccably decorated settings. When I saw “Baby I am Ready Now” and her “Portraits of Quanikah” series – thankfully hung in the CAC’s vivacious *Emerge* gallery – I was blown away by the volume and luxurious multi-materiality of Mickalene Thomas like never before. Their glitz added so much to the paintings’ presence. Thomas works frequently with rhinestones and glitter to accentuate the hair, clothing, cosmetics and jewelry of the women in her paintings. She also applies them like in “Quanikah” to toy with the idea of costumery and artifice, depicting one

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

woman in wildly varying looks. Without the context of these touches of pizzazz, Thomas's intent gets lost in translation onto the printed and digital page. The opportunity to appreciate her work fully and in person is an absolute gift of the exhibition. Now I am an even *bigger* fan of Mickalene Thomas.

Somewhat similarly, Hank Willis Thomas' three solo works in the show take a hard look at materialism and black culture. Willis Thomas features three solo works in "30 Americans" and two in collaboration with Rashid Johnson. His iconic black and white photo of a Nike swoosh branded onto a clean-shaven black head, "Branded, Lambda Photographs," "Basketball and Chain" and the bewildering "Priceless" are all on loan for the exhibit. Willis Thomas's imagery is always strong and clean, marked by bold and iconic singular subject matter like one might see in the work of Barbara Kruger or Andy Warhol. Willis Thomas' imagery, however, is original.

Other show highlights are Kerry James Marshall's "Vignette #10," a large work of acrylic on fiberglass which hangs on the first floor. Marshall's work depicts a hazy scene of partially-obscured slick, minimalist architecture as backdrop for a blissful Black boy and girl couple who grasp hands beneath a tree. An exaggerated sunrise beams up and out from the horizon, the same wide variety of grays to black as the entire rest of the painting. The only color emerges in the form of several cotton-candy pink, psycho-real hearts that emanate from between the hearts of the ecstatic children. Even the storybook frame of the flowers and trees that delineate the work maintain the grays. The 50's camp, the specific architectural style and the Pleasantville black and white color palette hint at a dreamlike theme.

Jeff Sonhouse's four large works deserve their own wall and they fill it well. His "Yellow is Mellow" features a Caucasian man with white dreadlocks and a huge belt buckle that reads, "MELANIN PROFILE" beneath a trendy purple suit with a long jacket. His nose, the barrel of a double shotgun, terminates in very round nostrils, a violent response to the archaic practice of genetic stereotyping. His two works "Graphic by Design" and "Visually Impaired" depict Black skin and hair of their male subjects from burnt matchsticks, the former paper canvas bearing the scorch marks above the head of the portrayed. Sonhouse's work takes on heavy subject matter head-on, with blistering directness.

The show bears a warning that some works on the first and second floors may be considered unsuitable for younger viewers, the silhouette work of Kara Walker's crucial "Camptown Ladies" is surely among these. Also Barkley L. Hendricks' "Fast Eddie Jive Niggah" which features full frontal male nudity. Less clear are Gary Simmons' "Duck, Duck, Noose" which features KKK hoods surrounding a noose and is a frightening enough specter to give a quadragenarian nightmares, and so possibly a child as well. However, the show is a rare opportunity to view essential works like Glenn Ligon's "America," Carrie Mae Weems' "You Became a Psychological Profile. . .," Lorna Simpson's "Wigs" and Kalup Linzy's "Conversations with de Churen V: As da Art World Might Turn."

*'30 Americans' is on view now at the CAC, through June 15.*