

VANITY FAIR

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ON ART

THE *Disruption* ISSUE

DORIAN MAY MEETS
ARTISTS ON
THE FRONTLINE
OF THE NEW NORMAL

Photograph by
CHRISTOPHER STURMAN

PLUS

ART IN TIMES
OF CRISIS

DIGITAL VIRTUES

DAVID HOCKNEY:
REBEL WITH
A CAUSE

CAN POP ART
PROTEST?

Nina
CHANEL
ABNEY

Nathaniel
MARY
QUINN

Hank
WILLIS
THOMAS

In association with
CHRISTIE'S



THE HEAD



Words by
**DORIAN
MAY**

Photograph by
**CHRISTOPHER
STURMAN**

From left: Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Nina Chanel Abney and Hank Willis Thomas are photographed on September 1, 2020 in Tribeca, New York

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AMIDST A GLOBAL pandemic, complex racial tensions and much political mayhem, I have a conversation with three contemporary artists whose work reflects these stratified moments. Hank Willis Thomas, Nina Chanel Abney and Nathaniel Mary Quinn joined

me on a New York City rooftop to talk about disruption of the status quo in the art world.

Thomas, who recently launched the Wide Awakes, an artist-led movement of political activism originally founded 160 years ago, is best known for work addressing stereotypical imagery of African Americans and the way in which this influences identity and race relations. Abney is celebrated for her bold canvases, questioning politics, race and gender in contemporary culture. Quinn's mixed media portraits project the concept that we are all the sum of our experiences. All share in common that they were the sole Black student in their class at their respective Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programmes. In a world notorious for elitist cronyism, each has witnessed tremendous commercial success, which is a feat unto itself.

So, are the politics of "making it" as a Black artist its own art form? While the artists themselves have become social media stars, it is with intention that they are leveraging their platforms and positioning themselves on the frontlines of building a "new normal" in the art world.

LINERS



Clockwise from left: *Unity*, 2019; *Love Over Rules*, 2017; *The Fall of Icarus*, 2016; *Guernica*, 2016. All works by Hank Willis Thomas



DORIAN: How do you feel about the state of racial equality in the art world?

HWT: What does racial equality in a colonial system look like? That is the harder question.

NMQ: I don't know what it looks like—I've never seen it.

HWT: I just take racism and white supremacy for granted so it's almost invisible on a certain level unless someone smacks you in the face with it. I almost never walk into an environment where I am not expecting that to be there.

NCA: Racism starts with art history—a lack of representation of artists of colour in the books and in the canon, a lack of Black and brown students in MFA programmes. Young people not knowing they should apply or that being an artist is a viable career because they have no exposure to Black artists making it. And even if you get into an MFA programme, there is no faculty for Black art.

HWT: People see us as exceptional Black artists and that should tell you the pervasiveness of racism.

NCA: We don't have the luxury of mediocrity.

NMQ: Black folk and mediocrity is not a thing that is easily embraced in America, you have to be GREAT!

HWT: You not only have to be great, you have to be tenacious.

NMQ: Or you would love to be with a Black-owned gallery, but they don't have the resources.

HWT: Or you get boxed out.

NCA: The rare few of us who "make it" get into a professional art world where there are few Black institutions and Black-owned galleries that get the same level of support that white-owned galleries and white institutions do.

Do you believe your work helps raise awareness of the inequality?

NCA: I don't make work specifically to shed light on the inequality within the art world. My work raises questions around the inequality that is ubiquitous in the American landscape.

HWT: I really believe that artists are prophetic or psychic and that when we make work, we are actually touching something much deeper in the



Hank WILLIS THOMAS

psyche of our society and we are helping to shed light and create a reality where there is a greater awareness. We also pick up signs from each other and are on a psychic or spiritual connection that has permeated the world in this moment.

NMQ: I try to humanise experiences through my work when I meet collectors: I'm Black, you're white, but we have both experienced grief and pain and I find that they will then share their stories of pain and loss. Your skin doesn't make you impervious to those realities of life.

Why do you think the business side of the art world still lacks representation?

HWT: Racism. We have to be a lot more strategic in an entrepreneurial way.

NMQ: It's one thing to contribute and give back but the sense of controlling is a very different thing.

NCA: Racism, and I believe in collective sharing and the redistribution of resources as a means to combat the systemic barriers that we face.

Do you feel a social responsibility as artists?

NCA: My personal responsibility is supporting, mentoring and amplifying under-represented artists. My art itself isn't



Nina CHANEL ABNEY

Below, from left: *Third Time's the Charm*, 2018; *She was a real trouper—Acts of Service*, 2020. Both by Nina Chanel Abney



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