

Visitor's Guide

Between the World and Me: African American Artists Respond to Ta-Nehisi Coates

September 20, 2016 through March 5, 2017

All quotes by Ta-Nehisi Coates from his book *Between the World and Me*



Glenn Ligon (b. 1960, New York, New York)
Double America 2, edition 2/3, 2014
Neon and paint

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me."* pp. 20-21.

How does Ta-Nehisi Coates' sense of duality and space compare with Glenn Ligon's *Double America 2*? Ligon decided to make the word "America" out of neon. How does his choice of material effect your interpretation of the work? What material(s) would you use to sculpt the word America, and why?



Rashid Johnson (b. 1977, Chicago, Illinois)
The Long Dream, 2014
 Burned red oak flooring, black soap, wax, spray enamel, vinyl,
 steel, bamboo, shea butter, books, plants, mirrored planter

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake."* p. 11.

What does Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Dream" smell like to you? Coates shares with his son that for a long time he wanted to escape into the Dream. Also, early on in his life, he thought he must create a carbon copy of the Dream. Eventually, he rejected the Dream. What does artist Rashid Johnson tell you about *The Long Dream*?

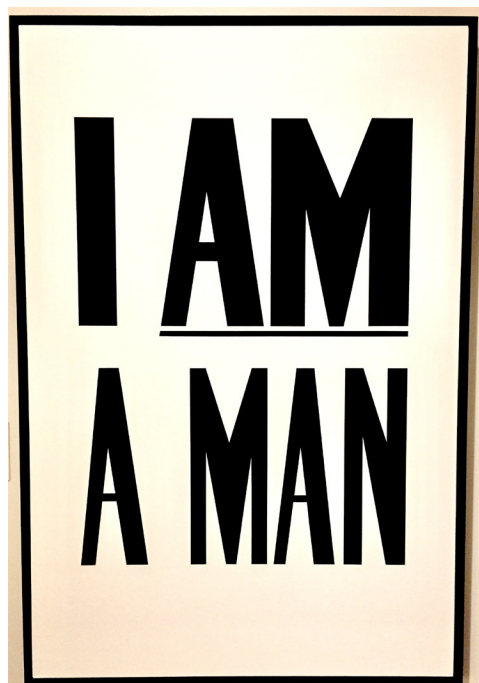


Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976, Plainfield, New Jersey)
Intentionally Left Blanc, 2012
 Screenprint on retro-reflective paper

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"The forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream."* p. 143.

"I believed, and still do, that our bodies are our selves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh." p. 79.

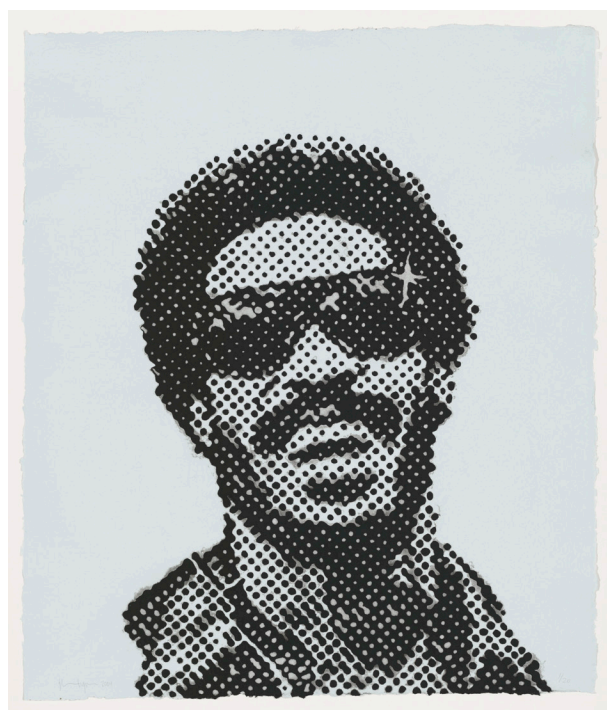
This screen print is pearlescent, but if you take a photograph of it using a flash you will see a detailed, black and white image of a crowd. What do you think is the context for this photograph? How does the title of Hank Willis Thomas' screen print, and states of invisibility and hyper-visibility impact your interpretation of the work? How does the United States engineer its own forgetting? Why does Willis Thomas involve the spectator to "complete" the image?



Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976, Plainfield, New Jersey)
I Am A Man, 2013
 Liquitex on canvas

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage."* p. 103.

Hank Willis Thomas' painting is modeled on the placards held and worn by thousands of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968. Why do you think he appropriated and painted a declaration of civil rights that took place before he was born? Willis Thomas made *I Am A Man* the same year Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi founded #BlackLivesMatter. How does the artist's painting relate to Ta-Nehisi Coates' inquiry into "the plunder of black life"? What is your reaction to the words, "I Am A Man"?



Glenn Ligon (b. 1960, New York, New York)
Self-Portrait at Eleven Years Old, edition 7/20, 2004
 Cotton base sheet with stenciled linen pulp painting

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people."* p. 149.

Glenn Ligon appropriated images of his childhood music idols to represent himself as a boy. *Self-Portrait at Eleven Years Old* features Stevie Wonder, as he appears on the cover of his 1977 compilation album *Looking Back*. How does Ligon's self-portrait differ from Ta-Nehisi Coates' recollections of his childhood? Many artists in this exhibition mine the past. Likewise, Coates' personal snapshots published in *Between the World and Me* and his interest in Malcom X are examples of "looking back." What photograph in Coates' book speaks to you the most and why?



Glenn Ligon (b. 1960, New York, New York)
Narratives, edition PPI, 1993
 Etching, chine collé on paper

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are."* p. 99.

"You must struggle to truly remember this past in all its nuance, error, and humanity. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine." p. 70.

Glenn Ligon personalized nine frontispieces, modeled after nineteenth-century, published slave narratives, to investigate the construction of personal history and identity. Who or what are some of the oppressors for Ta-Nehisi Coates and Ligon? How are Ligon's stories of learning to live free in his black body similar to the memories recounted by Coates? How do they differ? What events have had the greatest impact on your construction of identity?



Mildred Howard (b. 1945, San Francisco, California)
Millennials & XYZ #VII, 2014; *Millennials & XYZ #XIV*, 2014;
Millennials & XYZ #XII, 2014
 Monoprint/digital on collaged found papers

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"The struggle is really all I have for you because it is the only portion of this world under your control."* p. 107.

For her *Millennials & XYZ* series, Mildred Howard used the chine-collé print process to fuse current hip-hop and rap artists with Civil Rights Era articles from the Los Angeles Tribune. Her Janus-like strategy melds past events that effected L.A.'s black communities with an international perspective on the African diaspora. How do Coates' experiences of a convergence of local and global compare with Howard's work? How is "the struggle" different and/or the same for each generation in *Between the World and Me*?



Robert Colescott (1925-2009, b. Oakland, California)
Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People, 1976
 Acrylic on canvas

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"Serious history was the West, and the West was white. . . . We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior."* pp. 43-44.

Robert Colescott's work investigates double consciousness. W.E.B. Dubois introduced this concept--"looking at one's self through the eyes of others"--in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Colescott lived for extended periods in Paris, and he enjoyed going to art museums and looking at nineteenth-century history painting, like Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830). In his *Homage to Delacroix*, Colescott "blackfaced" some of the figures to push the standards of "fine art" taste, to exploit racism, and to question liberty and the heroic. How do Colescott and Ta-Nehisi Coates address the topics of race and racism in their work? How do they critique how history is taught and learned?



Theaster Gates (b. 1973, Chicago, Illinois)
Bank Bond #912, 2013
 Marble

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"Very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favor of black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream."* p. 33.

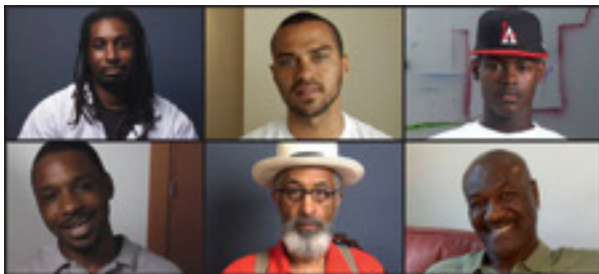
Abandoned buildings in South Chicago surrounded the studio of social practice installation artist Theaster Gates. He decided to reshape his environment one property at a time. Gates used marble slabs from the vacant and deteriorating Stony Island State Savings Bank to make "bank bonds" and he sold them to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to help convert the building into the Stony Island Arts Bank, a hybrid gallery, media archive, library and community center that opened last year. How does Ta-Nehisi Coates reshape the space between him and the world? On Gates' *Bank Bond* it reads "In Art We Trust." What would Coates write in this space?



Kehinde Wiley, (b. 1977, Los Angeles, California)
La Source (The World Stage: Haiti), 2014
 Oil on linen

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"She had seen other worlds, and she held the lineage of other worlds, spectacularly, in the vessel of her black body."* p. 58.

Kehinde Wiley's paintings create a dialogue between the contemporary black body and European masterpieces and master painters. *La Source (The World Stage: Haiti)* is based on Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *La Source (The Spring)* from 1856 at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Ancient Greek and Roman sculpture inspired Ingres' idea of beauty. The stylized floral background and frame of Wiley's painting recall the nineteenth-century designs of the British Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the English Arts and Crafts Movement. How does Wiley's image of a woman holding a vessel compare to Ta-Nehisi Coates' use of the vessel as a metaphor for the black body? What are the sources that inspire Wiley and Coates?



Chris Johnson (b. 1948, Brooklyn, New York)
Question Bridge: Black Males, 1996
 Transmedia; monitor

Ta-Nehisi Coates--*"The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and girded me against the sheer terror of disembodiment. And I am afraid."* p. 12.

Question Bridge: Black Males represents and redefines black male identity by facilitating questions and answers among hundreds of self-identified "black men." How do the feelings and concerns raised in the video compare to the reflections and convictions that Ta-Nehisi Coates expressed to his son? How was black male identity redefined for you while watching *Question Bridge: Black Males* and reading Coates' *Between the World and Me*?



Kara Walker (b. 1969, Stockton, California)
no world (from *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*), Edition
 XXII/XXV, 2010
 Etching with aquatint, sugar-lift, spit-bite, and drypoint, printed
 on Hahnemuhle Copperplate Bright White 300 gsm paper

Ta-Nehisi Coates—*“The Earth is not our creation. It has no respect for us. It has no use for us... Something more fierce than Marcus Garvey is riding on the whirlwind. Something more awful than all our African ancestors is rising with the seas.”* p. 150-151.

Kara Walker’s dramatic image reflects on the horrifying atrocities of the transatlantic slave trade. The title of the work is “no world” which is likely a pun on “New World.” What are the various silhouetted figures doing in this *no world*? How does this work comment on the past as well as the present? At the end of *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes that “The Dream is the same habit that endangers the planet...” What does Walker’s landscape communicate to you?

Activities

1. Write the word "America" twice on a piece of paper in a way that communicates how you identify with the concept or place.
2. Read Allen Ginsberg's poem *America* (1956) and write your own version in your own language.
3. In 1961, Studs Terkel ended his radio interview with writer and social critic James Baldwin by asking him, "How would you answer the question, 'Who are you, now?'" Write your own response to "Who are you, now?" and share it with someone.
4. Chose a famous person that you idolized as a child. Select an image of that individual to use as your self-portrait at an early age.
5. Using the format of one of Glenn Ligon's *Narratives*, write your own introduction to a personal ending and beginning and include at least one question.
6. Select an image of a famous painting or sculpture in the history of art and alter it, using collage, to address an urgent issue you are passionate about.
7. Write several questions you would like to ask an anonymous person of a younger generation and of an older generation.
8. Select a few local news articles and make a composition with them. Select an image of an international figure and place it over the articles. Write a paragraph about what you are communicating with this juxtaposition. Ask someone "What is going on in this collage?" and paraphrase the answer back to the person.

A Closer Look

About the Artist

Robert Colescott (American, 1925-2009) was a figurative painter who courageously tackled racism and sexual stereotypes with satire, transgressive commentary, and keen observation. He lived for extended periods in Paris, where he spent a lot of time in museums looking at nineteenth-century history painting. Beginning in 1975, he used landmark paintings from the canon of Western art, like Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), on view at the Louvre, to question truths, ideals, myths and beliefs.

Artist Quote

"Appropriation, as I cast it, is more about taking over a painting and putting it to a very different use or giving it a very different meaning than the original artist has done. It may even be contrary to the thread of meaning in that original work. In a sense, I would steal the painting—the idea and the look of it—and put it to my own use."

Looking at Robert Colescott's *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People*

- Describe some of the key elements of Colescott's painting style. Think of color, line, shape, space and brushstroke. Which areas have the most detail? Which areas did Colescott leave unfinished?
- Do you find Colescott's painting to be funny, shocking, offensive, confusing? Use specific examples in the painting to back up your opinion.

Compare Robert Colescott's *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People* (1976) to an image of Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830).

What are the subjects of these two paintings? What differences and similarities between these two paintings do you notice?



Robert Colescott, *Homage to Delacroix: Liberty Leading the People* (1976)



Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830)

A Closer Look

About the Artist

Hank Willis Thomas (American, born 1976) is a conceptual artist who was born in New Jersey and lives and works in New York City. His practice investigates themes related to identity through multiple perspectives, commodity, media and popular culture. His work examines and exposes deep divides in North American culture.

Artist Quote

"I'm interested in finding new ways of revealing things that are kind of latent in a given image."

"I talk about my work as an archaeology in a sense, and I might consider myself a photographic archaeologist, or a visual culture archaeologist. I believe that all the content in my work is really about framing and context, is about calling the viewer to think about how their position affects what they see."

Looking at Hank Willis Thomas' *Intentionally Left Blanc*

- What is the subject of this work?
- How does the artist use color, shape and texture in this image?
- If you have a phone or a digital camera with you, take a picture of the artwork using a flash. How does the image change after you photograph it with a flash? Does the subject change?
- Why do you think this artist appropriates photographic images from the past?
- How does duality or doubleness play a role in this work?



Hank Willis Thomas, *Intentionally Left Blanc*
Screen print on retro-reflective paper