

Winter in America, Hank Willis Thomas & Kambui Olujimi “His Coldest Winter Ever”

I’ve only seen three of them, those bumper stickers that read “Someone I Love Was Murdered.” Brief, unequivocal, and to the point, they leave you a little stunned, speechless, and somehow implicated. I wonder what they must do to someone like the woman I once heard on a radio call-in program, complaining about having to see roadside memorials to accident victims- those simple, stark crucifixes, more often embellished with rapidly fading and quickly filthy plastic flowers. She didn’t want to be reminded of someone else’s violent death as she passed by. Wal-Mart sells the plastic flowers pre-packaged now, no doubt importing these cheap memorials to our randomly brutal culture.

Similarly straightforward and disarming, *Winter in America*, Hank Willis Thomas and Kambui Olujimi’s stop-motion animation video and photographs, depicts the senseless 2000 robbery and murder of Thomas’s cousin Songha Thomas Willis. Shot with a digital still camera, it is both artists’ first attempt at stop-motion animation. “It is important to do both,” says Thomas of the video and still photographs. “Video carries the viewer through and still images all the viewer to ponder.” Thomas likens his collaboration with longtime friend Olujimi, who co-directed, to a marriage. “It is a lot like I imagine marriage to be,” he says. “You are at each other’s throats a lot because you both want it to work so badly. Kambui and I have a lot of respect for one another so we learned how to express ourselves unabashedly without dismissing the other person’s ideas.”

Thomas’s is a loss inconceivable for most of us, one that he has been grappling with through his art. In *Priceless #1* (2004), a photograph from Willis’s funeral is overlaid with text derived from the MasterCard advertising campaign of the same name. The thing you don’t think about, one you hope you never have to think about, is that, if there’s a trial, chances are there will be a blow-by-blow, sometimes verbatim transcript of the final moments of your loved one’s life, a strange artifact to go alongside the photo albums and high school trophies. Willis’s murder trial was a well-publicized capital punishment case, so Thomas and Olujimi could faithfully recreate the scenario in all its banality and horror. If there were no witnesses, the murderer gets to have the last word. “Just do it,” one of the killers callously utters in the video just before they flee; it also happens to be the tag line for Nike’s famous ad campaign. (Thomas’s earlier work, *B@ANDED*, explores the depiction of the African American male body in the popular Nike basketball ads.)

In his series *A Proper Burial* (2005), created as memorial for his mother, Olujimi also grapples with the content and structure of traditional memorials. He constructs a kind of portable altar housed within three separate suitcases: “Ballad of Baby Girl Washington,” “In Her Own Image,” and “Baltimore Glory.” The work seeks to honor and remember without the veil of nostalgia or postmortem perfection so often linked to the process of memorializing.

From Hans Bellmer’s grotesquely assembled *poupée* seductresses in the 1930s-40s to Todd Haynes’s 1987 banned masterpiece “Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story” told with Barbie dolls, artists have frequently turned to the seeming benignity of childhood toys in order to explore the darker realities of adult behavior and desire. For *Winter in America*, Thomas and

Olujimi use the dolls Thomas and Willis played with as children, carefully stored for years in a friend's basement. Yet these toys are no longer fantasy objects; Thomas and Olujimi are able to create a gripping tableau because in their attention to detail they achieve such unnerving authenticity. The first time I viewed the piece I couldn't hear the audio; even though I more or less knew the narrative, it read at times like a gay bashing, the easy male camaraderie and affection of the early moments turning ugly and in on themselves. The dolls- the steroidal soldier, the athlete, the Indian, the construction worker, the shirtless gym rat, the leather boys- look an awful lot like the Village People, pointing conspicuously to the hyper-construction of masculinity at play in the scene and, indeed, in our aggressively sexualized culture.

*Winter in America* takes its title from Gil Scott-Heron's 1974 song, an excerpt from which plays at the end of the video: "It's winter; winter in America and ain't nobody fighting 'cause nobody knows what to save..." Its selection is telling. Although this is specifically the story of young men of color, on both sides, and highly personal, this is ultimately a universal American tragedy, the inevitable and all-to-frequent by-product of a country hopped up on its own bullying bravado, blind to the consequences of its mad insistence on acquisition and dominance by any means necessary.

--Carla Williams