

Cincinnati Art Museum *Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal...* Workshop

Amy Latessa – *A Place to Call Home (Africa-America)* Response Transcript

00:00:01,130 --> 00:00:04,892

Hank Willis Thomas's piece, *A Place to Call Home (Africa*

00:00:04,892 --> 00:00:07,970

America) reveals the superb strength of subtlety that with

00:00:07,970 --> 00:00:12,074

the simplest of gestures, turns a common image or idea into a

00:00:12,074 --> 00:00:15,152

complex masterpiece. This piece is large, but relatively simple,

00:00:15,152 --> 00:00:18,572

It depicts a map of North America with Africa connected

00:00:18,572 --> 00:00:21,650

below, with the largest lakes on the respective continents

00:00:21,650 --> 00:00:25,412

carved out. It is made entirely of polished aluminum and all

00:00:25,412 --> 00:00:29,174

black. Anyone who knows how large the continent of Africa is

00:00:29,174 --> 00:00:30,884

knows that the proportions are

00:00:30,884 --> 00:00:34,779

greatly distorted. In reality, you can fit all of the US,

00:00:34,779 --> 00:00:37,578

Europe, China, India and a couple other countries in

00:00:37,578 --> 00:00:41,310

Africa's land area. This is the first subtle clue that this piece is

00:00:41,310 --> 00:00:43,487

more than just a mixed-up map.

00:00:44,220 --> 00:00:49,008

Then there is the title, *Place to Call Home*, in parentheses. *Africa*

00:00:49,008 --> 00:00:52,998

dash *America*. Often when people use the word America, they

00:00:52,998 --> 00:00:56,988

intend the USA, not North America. In contrast, people are

00:00:56,988 --> 00:01:00,978

often referred to being from Africa, not their country, which

00:01:00,978 --> 00:01:04,170

removes the national and cultural specificity of the

00:01:04,170 --> 00:01:07,761

extremely diverse continent. This is another shrewd play on

00:01:07,761 --> 00:01:11,751

language. Furthermore, people live in these lands, but the new

00:01:11,751 --> 00:01:13,746

arrangement points to a more

00:01:13,746 --> 00:01:16,680

complicated relationship of
home. The Atlantic slave trade

00:01:16,680 --> 00:01:20,030
comes to mind where millions of
people from Africa were

00:01:20,030 --> 00:01:22,710
forcefully brought to the
Americas and enslaved for

00:01:22,710 --> 00:01:26,060
hundreds of years. It also sheds
light on colonialization and

00:01:26,060 --> 00:01:29,745
its continued effects, as well
as the great diaspora of African

00:01:29,745 --> 00:01:33,095
people throughout the world, and
the ways cultures ebb and flow as

00:01:33,095 --> 00:01:36,780
people make new homes. It calls
attention to immigration and who

00:01:36,780 --> 00:01:40,130
has a home, bringing the
timelessness of this piece to

00:01:40,130 --> 00:01:43,480
the forefront with our current
status under COVID-19, where the

00:01:43,480 --> 00:01:44,820
"stay at home" mantra

00:01:44,920 --> 00:01:47,146
is not an equal reality for all.

00:01:47,840 --> 00:01:49,345
I believe that we all want a

00:01:49,345 --> 00:01:53,666
place to call home and should
reflect on the title of this

00:01:53,666 --> 00:01:55,301
piece with empathy and urgency.

00:01:55,950 --> 00:01:59,415
In addition to immigration and
identity politics, this piece

00:01:59,415 --> 00:02:02,110
references the economic
connection between North America

00:02:02,110 --> 00:02:04,805
and Africa. Since time
immemorial, world civilizations

00:02:04,805 --> 00:02:08,655
have gone to Africa for her
abundant resources. The Atlantic

00:02:08,655 --> 00:02:13,275
slave trade was a period in
which there was a clear exchange

00:02:13,275 --> 00:02:16,355
of people, commodities, people
treated as commodities and

00:02:16,355 --> 00:02:19,820
currency. But when it officially
ended, things didn't didn't

00:02:19,820 --> 00:02:20,975
simply revert back.

00:02:21,590 --> 00:02:24,670
People lived in new places,
traumas have been endured,

00:02:25,690 --> 00:02:29,100
languages were mixed, people
relied on goods from all parts

00:02:29,100 --> 00:02:33,192
of the world and the global
economy was in full force. The

00:02:33,192 --> 00:02:36,943
thin strip of land connecting
Latin America to Africa in this

00:02:36,943 --> 00:02:41,376
work can be seen as a sort of
umbilical cord where it is

00:02:41,376 --> 00:02:44,104
impossible to untangle our
global dependencies. While this

00:02:44,104 --> 00:02:47,173
piece reveals the depths of
racism and economic dependencies

00:02:47,173 --> 00:02:50,583
that pervade our world, it also
demonstrates how we're all

00:02:50,583 --> 00:02:52,288
connected and in effect meet

00:02:52,288 --> 00:02:55,482
each other. With familiar
forms, subtle change of

00:02:55,482 --> 00:02:57,736
scale, choice of color, and
simple recontextualization

00:02:57,736 --> 00:02:59,990
Hank Willis Thomas
skillfully presents to the

00:02:59,990 --> 00:03:02,566
viewer how language and
shapes create our perception

00:03:02,566 --> 00:03:06,108
and how we are all implicated
in the layers of complexity

00:03:06,108 --> 00:03:09,650
that make up our global
society. As Hank does in all

00:03:09,650 --> 00:03:13,192
his work, I invite everyone
to consider how the power of

00:03:13,192 --> 00:03:16,412
images and words define and
affect us in our everyday

00:03:16,412 --> 00:03:20,920
lives and how we can use them
to make the world a safer and

00:03:20,920 --> 00:03:24,462
more equitable place. A place
we're all proud to call home.