

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

Julie Willis - *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around* Response Transcript

00:00:00,540 --> 00:00:04,752

Hi, I'm Julie and I'd like to share my response to Hank

00:00:04,752 --> 00:00:06,156

Willis Thomas' work,

00:00:06,660 --> 00:00:08,784

Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us

00:00:08,784 --> 00:00:13,682

Around. The artwork consists of 17 images derived from

00:00:13,682 --> 00:00:18,322

photographs taken in the mid 1960s by a photojournalist who

00:00:18,322 --> 00:00:21,570

was documenting civil rights marches in Alabama.

00:00:22,240 --> 00:00:27,370

Among them, we see heartrending images of Bloody Sunday, violent

00:00:27,370 --> 00:00:31,987

clashes between the police, and unarmed people marching against

00:00:31,987 --> 00:00:33,526

voter suppression and

00:00:33,526 --> 00:00:39,390

segregation. In the center row of photos you can see the

00:00:39,390 --> 00:00:41,190

sequence of events foreshadowed

00:00:41,190 --> 00:00:46,084
and unfolding. Contrast the
unarmed defiance on the

00:00:46,084 --> 00:00:49,787
protester side with the
tense weaponized readiness

00:00:49,787 --> 00:00:51,903
on the other side.

00:00:53,200 --> 00:00:56,503
Why are some of the officers
checking their watches?

00:00:57,620 --> 00:01:01,811
After seeing the artwork, I was
inspired to look further into

00:01:01,811 --> 00:01:05,621
the historic photos. We see
leaders like Martin Luther King

00:01:05,621 --> 00:01:08,288
Junior and John Lewis in some of

00:01:08,288 --> 00:01:13,154
the photos. In the excruciating
photo in the bottom center we

00:01:13,154 --> 00:01:17,290
see Amelia Boynton, who is the
woman in the white coat.

00:01:17,990 --> 00:01:23,102
I think she's also in the top
middle photo with her

00:01:23,102 --> 00:01:24,806
purse on her arm.

00:01:25,340 --> 00:01:31,040

She was a voter rights activist
and a leading organizer of the

00:01:31,040 --> 00:01:36,378
march. Tear gassed and beaten
unconscious by the police, she's

00:01:36,378 --> 00:01:39,210
being aided by others amid all

00:01:39,210 --> 00:01:45,440
the chaos. I am happy to
say she not only survived, but

00:01:45,440 --> 00:01:47,610
she lived to age 104.

00:01:49,080 --> 00:01:53,470
The background settings have
been cut out, which is really

00:01:53,470 --> 00:01:58,299
more to the point, I think, of
Thomas' is work.

00:01:58,820 --> 00:02:04,304
He printed the photos on mirrors
so that the images become part

00:02:04,304 --> 00:02:09,788
of a new context. When you look
at the artwork, you are

00:02:09,788 --> 00:02:11,616
literally in the picture.

00:02:12,130 --> 00:02:17,998
It's startling and sobering to
see yourself looming really

00:02:17,998 --> 00:02:20,606
large over these scenes.

00:02:21,130 --> 00:02:26,800
You're at once standing
passively looking at photos in a

00:02:26,800 --> 00:02:29,864
gallery. While passively

00:02:29,864 --> 00:02:33,525
observing yourself observing

00:02:33,525 --> 00:02:40,400
passively. If you take out
your camera phone, you have a

00:02:40,400 --> 00:02:44,424
photo of yourself recording the
image using technology

00:02:44,424 --> 00:02:49,957
unavailable in 1965 that has
been able to bear witness to

00:02:49,957 --> 00:02:54,484
terrible injustices like the
heinous killing of George Floyd.

00:02:56,350 --> 00:02:59,032
To me, this artwork is about

00:02:59,032 --> 00:03:02,422
reckoning. It's about witness

00:03:02,422 --> 00:03:06,889
and responsibility.
It's about truth,

00:03:08,090 --> 00:03:10,328
reality and illusion.

00:03:11,190 --> 00:03:17,766
It's about racial inequality,
entwined with economic health,

00:03:17,766 --> 00:03:20,232

an environmental policy.

00:03:21,050 --> 00:03:24,150

It's about voting in the

00:03:24,150 --> 00:03:29,990

upcoming election. It's about am

I going to let somebody turn us

00:03:29,990 --> 00:03:33,830

around? It's about do I stay in

00:03:33,830 --> 00:03:36,850

the picture. Or do I step away?