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Picturing Us Together: Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas

By Clarissa T. Sligh, 2005

Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas, mother and son, artists/photographers entered the flux of my life twenty years ago when we volunteered to organize a conference for the National Women's Caucus for Art. Then as now, Willis was simultaneously researcher, editor, writer, consultant, curator, mother, traveler, and teacher.

Her son, Hank, never considered the possibility of continuing in her footsteps. As a boy he said, "My life will be very different."

However, today Hank's work is handled by major art dealers in New York and San Francisco and he struggles to balance the demands placed on his young shoulders. Recalling his life with his mother, he says:

While I grew up, my mother worked all the time. She was essentially the only scholar actively researching the work of photographers of African descent, on a national and international level, without fellowships and very little institutional support. Persistent and with a belief that the work was worthy of a place in the history books, she was a die-hard idealist. These days, she receives fellowship and awards with ease, but for many years she toiled alone.

As a curator, Deborah Willis almost single-handedly provided a base of support and encouragement to emerging black photographers. And unlike many photography historians, she was open to innovative photographic ideas, alternative mediums and a wide range of expression. It is due to her persistent efforts as curator and author that the work of many now well-known contemporary African American artists became visible enough to gain the interest of mainstream curators, critics, and writers.

At home, Deborah's creative maelstrom resulted in an environment that Hank remembers as being "always full of interesting people and conversations." Deborah took Hank with her everywhere – to classes, meetings with colleagues, visits with friends, exhibition openings and book parties. While their cultural life was rich and full, Deborah struggled to meet the more mundane challenges.

“As a single parent,” she says, “it was economically difficult to raise a child alone, but family and friends were an important part of our lives. Hank’s (later) artistic development was influenced by my life work, my family, and my artist and photographer friends.”

Although Hank appreciated art when he was growing up, he had no interest in becoming an artist. He did inherit an interest in the photography medium and studied it at New York University. After graduation, he worked on corporate accounts with commercial photographs. And then, personal tragedy struck:

In 2000, I turned to photography to explore my inconsolable loss and grief when my cousin, roommate and best friend, Songha, was senselessly killed. It was then that the word “art” began to mean something different to me. It offered a little bit of hope for answers, or at least, better questions. At the time, I wasn’t conscious of it, but clearly my mother’s curatorial selection of artists who explored personal and family history and her own art practice over the years made the photographic medium seem like the most versatile tool for my investigation.

During this period, Hank says that his mother advised him “to push and test (his) limits” and he was inspired anew by her openness to exploration, curiosity and critical thinking:

Since that time I have worked to find creative ways to deal with my cousin’s murder and genocide between African American males in general. Having previously worked to produce advertising images, I began to critique the media image of the black male figure, not only because of the ways others view me, but because of the ways it informs how I view myself.

As she looks back on her own career, Deborah says:

“Even though I focused on working as a historian and curator, I always photographed. My art practice focused on biography and on documenting the female story. While Hank appears to use photography in a manner similar to mine, his path and motivation are quite different.”

Although career details differ, Deborah, like her son and with his encouragement, has used photography to creatively work through personal crisis:

As he came into maturity with his work, he also encouraged me to chronicle my own life events—including my battle with cancer—which I thought no one would want to see. And it was only at his urging that I recently published a book

about my personal journey, which is entitled Family, History, and Memory: Recording African-American Life (Hylas Publishing, 2005).

With two such strong personalities interacting, differences of view are inevitable. Hank says that he and his mom often disagree but they “continue to have long discussions with respect, love and consideration for each other’s perspective.”

They have already collaborated on two exhibitions: *Mother to Son: Deborah Willis + Hank Thomas* at Texas Woman’s University, Denton, Texas, February 2003 and *Mother to Son: Images by Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas*, the Light Factory, Charlotte, North Carolina, June 2005.

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