

**HANK WILLIS THOMAS**

American, born Plainfield, NJ, 1976

*Available in a Variety of Sizes and Colors, 1977/2007*

From the series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968–2008, 2007*

Digital chromogenic print, 54 × 50 1/2 inches (image)

Gift of The Block Board of Advisors in honor of Jean Shedd, 2018.4.2

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In the series *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America 1968–2008*, Hank Willis Thomas took advertisements aimed at African American consumers between the years 1968 and 2008 and digitally removed the language explicitly identifying the product being marketed, reinscribing them with suggestive titles of his own. *Available in a Variety of Sizes and Colors, 1977/2007* raises questions about what is being sold in the image. The composition and exchange of gazes in the image offer clues about the original advertisement and foreground the role of race and gender in consumer culture and in historical processes of commodification.

The work centrally features a young African American woman whose legs, casually crossed, yet poised, extend in the foreground of the photograph. The man behind her directs his gaze toward her legs, shifting his body away from the woman to his immediate right. The original 1977 advertisement aimed to market pantyhose as a barely perceptible other skin, though it could just as easily have been an ad for food, plates, or for hair or skincare products. In this case we might see pantyhose as a loose preexisting frame bound to ideals of femininity, masculinity, beauty, desirability, objectification, feel, and touch, into which women were encouraged to insert themselves to gain approval in the eyes of others. The intentional ambiguity of the title highlights a longer history in which Black women's bodies were subject to inspection, commodification, and other wanton uses.

The ad, however, includes details that might inadvertently highlight a history of Black women's refusal to be contained in or defined by histories and representations of objectification. The central female figure is depicted as oblivious to her suitor's gaze. Another woman curiously lingers in the background of the image, with her back fully turned looking at an artwork on the back wall. Her face cannot be seen—or consumed—by the viewer as she attends to her own aesthetic experience. The framing of these figures and where they direct their gazes foreground counterhistories that might be read into the unbranded advertisement.

—Krista Thompson

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