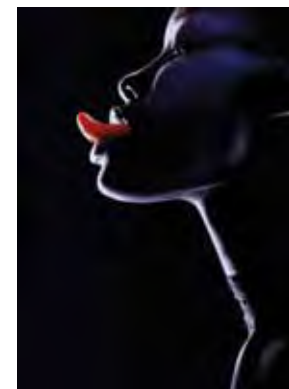


I had been making a lot of images that looked like ads for a series called *Unbranded*, and they were speaking to issues related to the exploitation of primarily the black male body in popular culture, but also in history—looking at slavery and commodity culture in general. In the midst of that, I was doing a talk somewhere or maybe showing some of my work, and someone gave me an ad for a 2001 Toyota Rav4 that had an African-American male's mouth smiling with bright white teeth. In the middle was a gold tooth in the shape of the Toyota Rav4. The person who gave me the ad said, "You should do something with this." It almost seemed like the truth was better than fiction. I had been trying to make work to speak to these issues, but they were actually still very present and maybe more potent in real life. I realized that with any ad, the moment you remove the text and the logos all you're left with is the photograph, and basically the photograph tells us what's really for sale. I had been talking about the ways that black bodies were used to sell things, and then here we have Japanese cars being sold through gold teeth as kind of a value system that's attributed to African-American men.

I wanted to look at how real ads could tell stories about the way we learn identity and culture, etc. I think about advertisement as a form of social conditioning and almost brainwashing, and that it's where we learn what our values are in our society. You look at most ads and the actual image has nothing to do with the product. It's only the myths and generalizations that we have that bring to light this kind of logic that makes an ad work. I started this series that ultimately became *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America*. I removed the text from two ads for every year from 1968 to 2008, and I really wanted to track blackness in the corporate eye over the course of forty years. I chose 1968 because it was the symbolic end of the Civil Rights Movement, when Martin Luther King and RFK were assassinated. I chose 2008 pretty randomly, but it ultimately wound up being the year that the U.S. elected its first president of African descent. That means it's bookended by these two historic events. The fact that most of the people who were making the ads for black people to consume—then and now—were white men on Madison Avenue, basically, I found fascinating. So, the values that are created, are they "black" values? Or are they just generic American—some people might call it "white"—values that are being projected onto the African-American community? By "unbranding" advertisements, I can literally expose what Roland Barthes referred to as *what-goes-without-saying* in their images, and hopefully encourage viewers to look harder and think deeper about the empire of signs that have become second nature to our experience of life in the modern world.

The piece *Priceless* is probably the most personal photograph that I've created, even though it's a mockery of an actual ad. MasterCard had this "Priceless" campaign, and this campaign was very much about nostalgia, and the fun moments of life that you share with your family. My cousin was murdered in the year 2000, and for that moment I say I stopped being a photographer and artist, because up until then I was using art and photography especially as a means to tell my stories and how I felt, and to document things. But at that point I felt like the camera couldn't document all of the feelings and complexities our family was dealing with at my cousin's funeral. For years I looked at the photographs and tried to figure out what could happen with them, and at some point I realized in thinking about the language of that MasterCard "Priceless" campaign that I could maybe speak to something that was more to the heart. There was this moment when I was in the funeral home with my family and there was the casket, my cousin was lying on the table, and they had to choose the casket. There was a \$7,000 box of wood that was going to be thrown in the dirt, never to be seen again, and





then there was the \$2,000 box of wood to be thrown in the dirt, never to be seen again, then there was the \$5,000 box of wood. There was this unspoken thing, like maybe you couldn't afford to love him enough if you bought the \$2,000 box of wood; maybe you loved him more if you bought the more expensive one. It was really an impossible decision to watch my family members make, because I realized that even in mourning we're still being marketed to. So I used that to make the last lines, "Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless." I also used the numbers for the chain—my cousin was with his friends and they were robbed. The chain that was stolen was sold in the street for \$400, and then I was thinking about the price of the gun, and the price of the bullets. You have to buy a new suit for him, new socks. There are all these weird commodities, things that add up to the culmination of someone's life that I wanted to address.

Hank Willis Thomas

Priceless, 2004, digital chromogenic print, ed. AP, 71 x 89 in. (180.3 x 226 cm), acquired in 2007
Branded Head, 2003, digital chromogenic print, ed. AP, 99 x 52 in. (251.5 x 132 cm), acquired in 2006

