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**California College of the Arts announces 2024 Honorary
Doctorate recipients Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas**



Left: Portrait of Deborah Willis by Laylah Amatullah Barrayn. Right: Portrait of Hank Willis Thomas.

San Francisco, CA—April 22, 2024—California College of the Arts (CCA) is proud to award an honorary doctorate degree to inspirational artists, designers, and thinkers each year at its Commencement Ceremony.

This year, CCA is thrilled to announce artist and scholar Deborah Willis and visual artist and CCA alum Hank Willis Thomas (MFA/MA Photography, Visual Criticism 2003) as the degree recipients at the 117th Commencement Ceremony held Saturday, May 11, 2024 at the Sydney Goldstein Theater in San Francisco. The mother and son duo will deliver remarks at CCA’s undergraduate ceremony and will also be honored at a private reception.

“We are honored to welcome Deborah Willis and Hank Willis Thomas to speak at our 117th Commencement Ceremony,” said David C. Howse, president of CCA. “Both luminaries in the art

world, Deborah and Hank signify the transformative power of art to challenge, inspire, and unite. Their words of encouragement will be a great inspiration to this next generation of artists as they venture into the world to pursue their passions as creative professionals.”

A renowned figure in the art world, Deborah Willis is celebrated for her contributions as a curator, historian, educator, author, and photographer. Her work focuses on African American culture, identity, history, and representation in visual arts. Willis’s interdisciplinary approach to teaching and art has made her a highly respected figure in academia, museums, and the art community. An advocate for all voices, she has been instrumental in furthering diversity and inclusion in the art world. Willis’s work continues to inspire generations of artists, scholars, and educators, cementing her legacy as a leading figure in art history and visual studies.

Hank Willis Thomas is a contemporary visual artist known for his thought-provoking work that explores themes related to perspective, identity, commodity, media, and popular culture. He stands out for his innovative use of photography, sculpture, and multimedia installations to critically examine and challenge societal norms and stereotypes. Thomas’s work engages with historical and contemporary issues of social justice, drawing attention to systemic inequities and advocating for change. Similar to his mom Deborah Willis, he is also recognized for his activism in nurturing diversity and inclusion in the art industry. Thomas’s contributions have left an indelible mark on the art world, provoking important conversations and reflections.

Following the remarks at the undergraduate ceremony, CCA alum Mohammed Soriano-Bilal (MBA Design Strategy, 2015) will speak at the graduate ceremony. He is an acclaimed Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) strategist, poet, and award-winning producer, also well-known for his role on *MTV’s Real World San Francisco* as the voice of reason. Bilal is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of California Berkeley School of Education and serves as the director of DEIB at Stanford University in the HR department. In this role, he works on equity-centered communities of practice, inclusive talent acquisition, learning and development, and equity-focused organizational efforts.

About Deborah Willis

Deborah Willis, Ph.D. is University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. She has affiliated appointments with the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Social & Cultural Analysis and the Institute of Fine Arts, where she teaches courses on Photography & Imaging, iconicity, and cultural histories visualizing the black body, women, and gender. Willis is a MacArthur and a Guggenheim Fellow. She is also the director of NYU’s Center for Black Visual Culture/Institute of African American Affairs. Her research examines photography’s multifaceted histories, visual culture, photographic history of Slavery and Emancipation, contemporary women photographers, and beauty.

About Hank Willis Thomas

Hank Willis Thomas (b. 1976 Plainfield, NJ) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY as a conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to perspective, identity, commodity, media, and

popular culture. His work has been exhibited throughout the United States and abroad including the International Center of Photography, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, Hong Kong Arts Centre and the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art.

His collaborative projects include Question Bridge: Black Males; In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth); The Writing on the Wall; and For Freedoms, an artist-led organization that centers art as a catalyst for creative civic engagement, discourse, and direct action. In 2017, For Freedoms was awarded the ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform.

Thomas is a recipient of The Medal of Arts award by Art in Embassies (2023), Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship (2019), The Guggenheim Fellowship (2018), AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize (2017), Soros Equality Fellowship (2017), Aperture West Book Prize (2008), Renew Media Arts Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation (2007), and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Award (2006). He is a former member of the Public Design Commission for the City of New York.

Thomas's public art practice includes permanent artworks around the country including *The Embrace* (2023) on the Boston Common in Boston, MA; *REACH*, (2023) at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, IL, made in collaboration with Coby Kennedy; *Duality* (2023) at The Underline in Miami, FL. Additional permanent public works include *Unity*, a monumental public artwork, in Downtown Brooklyn, NY and *Love Over Rules*, a neon in the Yerba Buena District of San Francisco, CA and "All Power to All People" in Opa Locka, FL.

Thomas holds a B.F.A. from New York University, New York, NY (1998) and an M.A./M.F.A. from the California College of the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2004). He received honorary doctorates from the Maryland Institute of Art, Baltimore, MD and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, Portland, ME in 2017.

About California College of the Arts

Founded in 1907, California College of the Arts (CCA) educates students to shape culture and society through the practice and critical study of art, architecture, design, and writing. Benefitting from its San Francisco Bay Area location, the college prepares students for lifelong creative work by cultivating innovation, community engagement, and social and environmental responsibility.

CCA offers a rich curriculum of 22 undergraduate and 10 graduate programs in art, design, architecture, and writing taught by a faculty of expert practitioners. Attracting promising students from across the nation and around the world, CCA is ranked among one of the top 30 most diverse colleges in the U.S. The U.S. News & World Report has ranked CCA as [one of the top 10](#) graduate schools for fine arts in the country.

Graduates are highly sought-after by companies such as Pixar/Disney, Apple, Intel, Meta, Gensler, Google, IDEO, Autodesk, Mattel, and Nike, and many have launched their own successful businesses. Alumni and faculty are often recognized with the highest honors in their

fields, including Academy Awards, AIGA Medals, Fulbright Scholarships, Guggenheim Fellowships, MacArthur Fellowships, National Medal of Arts, and the Rome Prize, among others.

CCA is creating a new, expanded college campus in San Francisco spearheaded by the architectural firm Studio Gang. The expansion will add an additional 82,305 square feet of all-new maker spaces, classrooms, studios, galleries, and a continuous indoor-outdoor environment. The campus design will be a model of [sustainable construction and practice](#); will unite the college's programs in art, crafts, design, architecture, and writing to cultivate collaboration across disciplines; and will provide [more student housing](#) than ever before. For more information, visit cca.edu.

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