

People Everyday

People Everyday Curatorial Statement By Emann Odufu

People Everyday is an exhibition that combines the work of Hank Willis Thomas and Liu Shiming—two artists separated by time and geography but united by a profound commitment to portraying the dignity of the human condition. Working within vastly different aesthetic and cultural traditions, both artists center the human body, the caregiving figure, and the formation of community as sites of power, memory, and transformation. Through sculpture, concept, tenderness, and critique, *People Everyday* becomes a dialogue between past and present—a reimagining of the everyday not as mundane but as a space of care, resistance, and collective inheritance.

The exhibition explores how both artists, united by a compulsion to create and working through pivotal moments of national transformation, turn their gaze toward everyday individuals, not as background figures to history but as agents in shaping it. Their work challenges dominant narratives, placing the body at the heart of cultural memory and social critique.

In the 1960s, Liu Shiming carved out a quiet yet radical position within Chinese art. Seeking new sources of artistic inspiration, he immersed himself in rural life, living for extended periods in provinces like Henan and Hebei. His experiences at this time led him to eventually create hundreds of tender, small-scale ceramic and bronze works depicting street vendors, mothers, farmers, and boatmen. These sculptures depart from the dominant artistic conventions of the time, favoring poetic, intimate portraits of ordinary lives over grand, ideological narratives. Liu's work became a quiet celebration of everyday resilience and a deeply humanist response to the prevailing aesthetic values of his era.

Hank Willis Thomas, by contrast, came of age during the 1990s, a time marked by media saturation and shifting narratives around Black identity in the United States. His conceptual practice often interrogates how Black identity has been commodified, represented, and remembered, especially through the lens of advertising, visual culture, and archival photography. In *People Everyday*, his retro reflective photo collages draw viewers into a more active engagement. Constructed from archival imagery, these works depict anonymous individuals caught in gestures of resistance or care. They only become visible when illuminated by the flash of a camera, forcing viewers to shift their perspective and see themselves reflected in the histories they uncover.

Though their approaches differ, both artists share a sculptural language rooted in the body. Liu developed the "Chinese Method," blending traditional sculptural techniques with modernist abstraction. He bridged heritage and innovation by drawing from ancient forms while allowing space for personal expression. Thomas's sculptural works often isolate limbs—clenched fists, interlocked hands—rendered in materials like bronze and aluminum. These disembodied fragments reference protest and solidarity, using the historical archive to showcase how individual or communal gestures carry memory across time.

Two emblematic works, *The Embrace* (2023) by Hank Willis Thomas and *Cutting Through Mountains to Bring in Water* by Liu Shiming, anchor the exhibition's curatorial vision. In *The Embrace* (2023), Thomas monumentalizes the arms of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, rather than their faces, focusing on the universal gesture of love, support, and intimacy. In doing so, he breaks from heroic figuration, inviting a more emotional and human response. Similarly, Liu's *Cutting Through Mountains to Bring Water* (1958) integrates landscape with figuration, going against the sculptural orthodoxy at China's Central Academy of Fine Arts, at that time, which favored Western traditions that emphasized the figure in ways similar to works like Rodin's *The Thinker*. Liu's poetic merging of

figure and environment suggested a more holistic, culturally grounded view of human experience.

In Thomas's *Icarus in Sunlight* (2024) and *Icarus in Moonlight* (2024), limbs extend mid-motion, caught between ascent and fall.

These floating forms evoke both freedom and fragility, echoing Liu's sculptural figures whose bent spines, upturned faces, and cradled hands communicate entire inner worlds through minimal posture.

Fuse [big] (1991) distills the act of a union of two individuals into a compact, yet potent gesture. Across their works, both artists explore the tension between vulnerability and strength, offering the human body as a vessel for the natural forces of memory, hope, and connection.

In *Archimedean Solid I* (2024), we see an image of a map of the world paired with Liu Shiming's breakthrough piece, *Measuring Land* (1949). This striking juxtaposition introduces one of the exhibition's central inquiries: how human identity and history are imprinted onto geography. The pairing invites viewers to consider the land not merely as a backdrop for human activity, but as an active participant in shaping personal and collective narratives. The exhibition further explores how both Liu Shiming and Hank Willis Thomas engage with this idea through recurring symbols—rivers, mountains, and birds—that reflect how landscapes carry memory, labor, and meaning. These elements are not ornamental but integral to the human story, functioning as living records of migration, struggle, and transformation. Through their work, both artists ask us to see the Earth itself as a witness to the lives it holds and as a vessel of cultural inheritance.

This profound connection between people and place is especially evident in how both artists engage with water as a recurring motif. Thomas's *Godspeed Series* (2024) features layered, retroreflective imagery of rivers—fluid and shifting—positioned as both literal and metaphorical channels of trade, resistance, and displacement. His triptych *Emergence* (2023) similarly evokes migration and flight

through the use of monochromatic birds, symbols of freedom and fragility. These works are paired conceptually with Liu Shiming's sculptural portrayals of villagers and boatmen navigating rivers, such as *Boatmen on the Yellow River* (1990), *Wooden Raft on the Yangtze River* (2004), and *Boatwoman* (1994). Together, these pieces speak to water's dual role as a source of sustenance and a site of challenge, conveying stories of labor, endurance, and historical passage. Thomas's *Three Young Farmers* (2024) and Liu's *Farmer Crossing the Yellow River* (2002) further root the human form in environmental specificity, highlighting how identity is shaped by the terrain it traverses. Liu Shiming's *Where the Rivers and Mountains End* (2000), a portrait of a lone, contemplative traveler set against a sweeping natural backdrop, anchors this connection between land, natural landscape, and the individual human or everyday person.

Whether sculpting rural mothers, boatmen, or intertwined hands, both Liu and Thomas reject the glorification of the powerful. Instead, they elevate those who carry, cradle, walk, and row—those whose quiet or bold gestures sustain the world. Their work affirms that history belongs not just to icons, but to the everyday people who endure, nurture, and resist.

People Everyday is not merely a cross-cultural pairing. It is a poetic alignment. Through modest forms and monumental symbols, Hank Willis Thomas and Liu Shiming remind us that art speaks powerfully not from above, but from beside us; in the gestures of care, the weight of memory, and through the sacredness of the ordinary.

Monumental Sculptures

Two emblematic works, *Embrace* (2023) by Hank Willis Thomas and *Cutting Through Mountains to Bring in Water* by Liu Shiming, anchor the exhibition's curatorial vision. In *Embrace* (2023), Thomas monumentalizes the arms of Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, rather than their faces—focusing on the universal gesture of love, support, and intimacy. In doing so, he breaks from heroic figuration, inviting a more emotional and human response. Similarly, Liu's *Walking Through Mountains* integrated landscape with figuration, going against the sculptural orthodoxy at China's Central Academy of Fine Arts, which favored Western traditions that emphasized the figure in ways similar to works like Rodin's *The Thinker*. Liu's poetic merging of figure and environment suggested a more holistic, culturally grounded view of human experience.



Hank Willis Thomas, *The Embrace*, 2023.
© Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy Pace Gallery



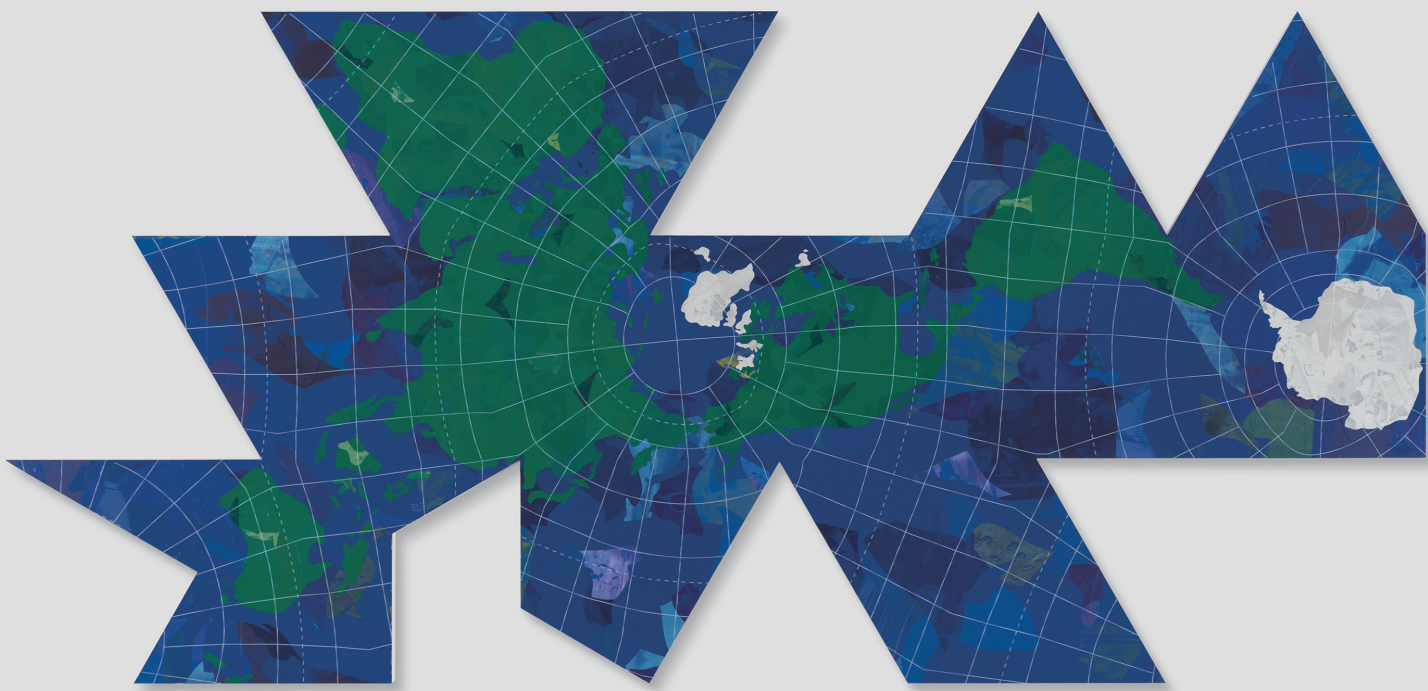
Liu Shiming, *Cutting through Mountains to Bring in Water*, 1958.
Courtesy of Liu Shiming Art Foundation

Connection between Humans and the Geography/Nature

In *Archimedean Solid I* [2024], we see an image of a map of the world paired with Liu Shiming's breakthrough piece, *Measuring Land*. This striking juxtaposition introduces one of the exhibition's central inquiries: how human identity and history are imprinted onto geography. The pairing invites viewers to consider the land not merely as a backdrop for human activity, but as an active participant in shaping personal and collective narratives. The exhibition further explores how both Liu Shiming and Hank Willis Thomas engage with this idea through recurring symbols—rivers, mountains, and birds—that reflect how landscapes carry memory, labor, and meaning. These elements are not ornamental; they are integral to the human story, functioning as living records of migration, struggle, and transformation. Through their work, both artists ask us to see the Earth itself as a witness to the lives it holds and as a vessel of cultural inheritance.



Liu Shiming, *Measuring Land*, 1949.
Courtesy of Liu Shiming Art Foundation



Hank Willis Thomas, *Archimedean Solid I*, 2024.
© Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy Pace Gallery

Water Motifs

Another deep resonance emerges in their depictions of water. Thomas’s *Untitled (Godspeed)* series, with its gleaming surfaces and layered imagery, conjures rivers as both metaphor and medium—fluid, reflective, constantly moving. Liu Shiming also returned to the river as a motif, sculpting boatmen and villagers navigating narrow waterways. This is best showcased in the works *Wooden Raft on the Yangtze River* [2004], *Farmer Crossing the Yellow River* [2002] and *Boatwoman* [1994]. These works, from opposite ends of the globe, speak to the currents of migration, labor, and change. Water, in their shared visual vocabulary, becomes a symbol of life’s perpetual motion: its hardships, its discoveries, and its quiet revelations.



Hank Willis Thomas, *Untitled (Godspeed)*, 2024.
© Hank Willis Thomas, courtesy Pace Gallery



Liu Shiming, *Farmer Crossing the Yellow River*, 2002.
Courtesy of Liu Shiming Art Foundation



Liu Shiming, *Wooden Raft on the Yangtze River*, 2004
Courtesy of Liu Shiming Art Foundation

Silk Road, Cross cultural connections, Greek Mythology

Liu Shiming's *Silk Road* (1986) serves as a powerful anchor for considering the ongoing dialogue between East and West—a dialogue that historically unfolded through the Silk Road's vast networks of trade, culture, and storytelling. In this bronze sculpture, Liu captures not just the physical journey across continents but the transmission of ideas, myths, and collective imagination. This spirit of exchange finds a contemporary echo in the cross-cultural gestures of both Liu and Hank Willis Thomas, particularly through their engagements with Greek mythology. Liu's *Greek Mythology—Centaur* (1986) reinterprets a figure from ancient Western lore through his own sculptural language, while Thomas's Icarus in the *Moonlight* (2024) and *Icarus in the Sunlight* (2024) revive the myth of Icarus to explore themes of ambition, flight, and vulnerability. Across their works, mythology becomes a shared bridge—a symbolic Silk Road in itself—linking disparate cultures through universal questions of aspiration, risk, and transcendence.



Liu Shiming, *Silk Road*, 1986.
Courtesy of Liu Shiming Art Foundation



Hank Willis Thomas, *Icarus in the Sunlight*, 2024.
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