

EDUCATOR GUIDE



Chip Thomas **and The Painted Desert Project**

September 6, 2024 - January 5, 2025

Not for Public Use or Dissemination



Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are delighted for you join us at the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) for Chip Thomas', *The Painted Desert Project*. The exhibition is part of the FotoFocus Biennial and is on view from September 6, 2024 - January 5, 2025.

Chip Thomas is an American photographer, public artist, activist, and physician living in Arizona. In 1987, he moved to the Navajo Nation, between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, to work as a physician. Simultaneously, he began photographing the Navajo people (Diné) and maintained a darkroom to develop his work. Since 2009, Thomas has worked under the pseudonym "jetsonorama," combining photography and traditions of street art, placing work on billboards and abandoned structures in the region to celebrate the rich cultural history of the Navajo people. The exhibition includes examples of Thomas' original, documentary-style photographs and their application as elements in public art, installation, film, and graphic media. In 2012, Thomas developed the *Painted Desert Project*, a residency program in which he invited street artists from around the world to explore and execute work in the desert landscape. More than 25 artists have participated over the past decade, enlivening the region's public spaces with various distinct styles.

Note: The exhibit does not contain any obvious mature content. However, there is an audio work that is an interview with the subject of an accompanying visual work, Jordan Nez. The interview content involves discussion of gang violence, assault, and graphic language. While we believe art can provide a platform for visitors of all ages to explore challenging topics, we recognize that this work may be mature for some of our younger visitors given the subject nature. Keeping that in mind, this resource was written to present teachers of grades K-12 with lessons appropriate for the classroom. Guided student tours will not discuss or involve these pieces.

In this resource, the educator will be asked to challenge themselves and their students on the assumptions and evolving focal points of Indigenous politics. While not exhaustive, like the artworks themselves, the resources and readings presented are meant to pique curiosity and start a conversation. We invite you to explore, question, reflect - and like the artist - reimagine a more radically inclusive and authentic portrayal of American history.

Enjoy!

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About the Artist: Chip Thomas

- Born in 1957, North Carolina
- Lived and worked on the Navajo Nation, Northern Arizona, from 1987 to 2024.
- Self-taught photographer/artist
- Studied photography alongside medicine, transitioning from documenting community life to large-scale public art installations.
- Deeply influenced by the intersection of healthcare, community, and art, his work centers around themes of social justice and Indigenous rights.



About the Exhibition

- Chip Thomas's exhibitions often feature his dynamic street art and mural projects, showcasing his ability to merge social commentary with striking visual aesthetics.
- Exhibitions are usually immersive experiences, designed to engage viewers in conversations about social justice and community empowerment.
- While photography is often seen as an objective portrayal of reality, Thomas emphasizes the different perspectives of his work and the diverse viewpoints of his audience. Each person brings their own experiences and interpretations to his art.
- Thomas's murals and photographs are often displayed in groupings that tell a larger story. He encourages viewers to connect the dots and understand the broader narrative.

Quotes

"The question I'm asked most frequently is how a black doctor in his 50s working on the Navajo reservation started doing street art on said reservation. In retrospect, it was only natural for this evolution to occur." -Chip Thomas

"On May 6th 2020 when I put up the 1st version of this PSA, the Navajo Nation had the 3rd highest incidence of coronavirus cases per 100,000 behind New York and New Jersey. The poster is designed to inform the community of the public-health strategy to provide optimal health during this time and to support the work of Navajo Hopi Solidarity and Kinlani/Flagstaff Mutual Aid." -Chip Thomas

"I'd suggest billboards represent a form of oppression in contested spaces. For example, in 1989 the Pepsi corporation erected a billboard which read "Welcome to Pepsi Country" along Highway 89 near Moenkopi Wash outside Tuba City directed at motorists traveling from Flagstaff and Phoenix to Page and points further north. The billboard depicted cold, refreshing cans of soft drinks to relieve the motorists thirst traversing the hot, barren but beautiful Painted Desert. However, the ad neglected to recognize that the corn syrup laden drinks depicted appear in a region of the country with one of the highest rates of adult onset diabetes. Art was used to transform our idea of where oppression takes place." -Chip Thomas

"It's important people not necessarily embrace but at least acknowledge this thing has its own life and life span, and there's a period in which it is beautiful. But then it starts to age, and we are frequently repulsed by that because it's not as appealing and engaging – but that's what happens with people, too. Everyone says this is a youth-oriented culture, and we don't appreciate elders. There is that life lesson in this practice in doing an ephemeral art practice." -Chip Thomas

"Believe. That has basically been my motto when times get tough. When things get hard I have to look at my fingers enough to tell myself, this is it, Jordan, you gotta believe in yourself. Don't fall. Things may get hard on you. People may die around you but believe in yourself. Be proud of who you are because God gave us all the shoes to fit ourselves, so all we can basically do is just put them on and wear them." -Chip Thomas

"I try to use my art to tell stories, to share some of the humanity that's here. And so that people passing through get a better and deeper understanding of who's here." -Chip Thomas

Introductory Wall Text

Chip Thomas moved to the Navajo Nation, between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, to work as a physician in 1987 as part of a student loan payback program for public service in underserved regions of the country. There, he began photographing the Navajo people (Diné) in a traditional photojournalist style, using black-and-white film and developing the work in his home darkroom. In 2009, Thomas adopted the pseudonym “jetsonorama” and began combining photography and traditions of street art, placing work on billboards and abandoned structures in the region to celebrate the rich cultural history of his adopted community. At the heart of Thomas’ practice—both medical and artistic—is a notion of care: care for oneself, the environment, and the cultures that sustain us. “When I would see patients in the clinic, my objective was to help them find a state of wellness,” Thomas has said. “And then the effort [through my art] was to create a larger environment of wellness for the community.”

Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project is a story in three parts. Part One presents Thomas as a documentary photographer, capturing singular moments from his surroundings and, increasingly, telling stories through multi-image photo essays. In Part Two we see the emergence of jetsonorama, covertly (at first) activating various sites on or near the reservation through startling, sometimes provocative imagery. In 2012, Thomas founded the Painted Desert Project, a residency program in which artist-collaborators are invited to paint in the desert. Part Three offers a selection of works by more than 25 street artists from around the world who have brought their distinct styles to the region, adding an urban art element to this vast rural landscape.

Chip Thomas is a photographer, public artist, activist, and physician who has been working since 1987 between Monument Valley and The Grand Canyon on the Navajo Nation, where he coordinates the Painted Desert Project. He is a member of the Justseeds Artists Cooperative, an organization dedicated to climate awareness. Thomas was a 2018 recipient of a Kindle Project gift and, in 2020, was chosen by the United Nations in recognition of its 75th anniversary to help promote the UN’s goal of “envisioning and shaping of a more resilient and sustainable future.”

Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project is a Featured Project in the 2024 FotoFocus Biennial: *backstories*. Now in its seventh iteration, the Biennial activates over 100 projects at museums, galleries, universities, and public spaces throughout Greater Cincinnati, Dayton, Columbus, and Northern Kentucky in October 2024—the largest of its kind in America. The *backstories* theme focuses on stories that are not evident at first glance. These stories offer context for what happened previously or out of view, providing narratives not yet told or presented from a new perspective.

Key Words/Vocabulary

Climate Change

Community

Colonialism

Diné

Ephemeral

Indigenous/ Indigenous Rights

Oral history

Social Justice

Stereotype

Street Art

Wheat paste

Themes

Activism/ Social Justice: Thomas' desire to bring the culture and life of the Navajo people to life and expose the conditions under which they live, as well as his work within the community to promote wellness, discuss climate change/environmentalism, and unveil little known histories.

Storytelling & Celebration of Navajo Culture: In addition to the natural quality of documentary photography to tell stories, Thomas taps into the Indigenous history of storytelling and oral history. He chronicles the lives of the people on the Navajo reservation and helps them tell their stories.

Public Art: While starting as a dark room photographer, Thomas uses the democratic nature of murals, protest posters, and zines to reach a wider audience.

Role of the artist: Consider what roles the artist plays—activist, communicator, storyteller, historian.

Role of the Document: Is there a difference between a “document” and “fine art” in photography? Is the photographic document as powerful as a performance/protest?

CAC PRE-TOUR INFORMATION

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER HISTORY

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, "Why not start something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I'll help you."

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised \$5000 (about \$93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their "office" consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, "the best new building since the Cold War."

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to "open their minds" to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC's 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid's first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman.

Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC's former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis.

Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine's "100 Most Powerful Women," and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World," and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.

TOUR RULES AND GUIDELINES

- Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
- We require that there must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
- No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
- Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
- Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
- Walk throughout all galleries- no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY AND ACCOMMODATIONS

- Our facility is ADA compliant, and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
- Hearing protection is available upon request.
- Fidgets are available upon request.
- Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
- Large text is available upon request.
- Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and the Quiet Room on the 6th floor.
- For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org

PRE- AND POST-VISIT DISCUSSIONS

These discussions can occur during or after viewing.

- What is documentary photography? What is its role in our lives?
- Is there a difference between a photograph taken for the purpose of documenting facts or information - versus for the purpose of an artistic act? Is there a difference between photography as a document and photography as fine art? Why or why not?
- What category of photography would you consider these pictures? Documentary? Fine art? Personal?

How are these images different or like your own family photos? How many of you enjoy taking pictures of things you see and experience? Do these photographs look like the ones you take

- How does Thomas use images to tell stories?
- What happens when small photos are turned into murals?
- How does Thomas' relationship with the Navajo People impact the work?
- What is "social justice?" How is the work Thomas doing social justice? What does it mean to be a socially engaged artist?
- What can you tell about the Navajo people from Thomas' photographs?

Questions curated by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) from *Discussion guide for Forum on Contemporary Photography* (2011).

- Is photography the most universal medium?
- What is too sacred for photography to touch? What are our own individual boundaries? How do we set them up? Is there a collective boundary? (Question courtesy of Museum of Modern Art)
- How can I use photography to connect in a vital, meaningful way with another person at another time in another space?

LESSON PLAN IDEAS

Chip Thomas uses his work as a way of sharing the authentic, daily lives of the Navajo people to combat stereotypes and historical tropes, as well as to reveal personal, biographical stories of the families he treated and grew to befriend. Through collage, students can create self-portraits using magazines. Here are some questions to help students consider various aspects of themselves:

- How do you relate to your social and physical environment?
- Does your culture impact how you interact with the world?
- What roles does photography play in your everyday life?

Choose a civic issue and make a piece of visual art to deepen a viewer's understanding of the topic. Remember, the goal is to communicate the issue and its impact visually, so make sure your artwork is engaging and meaningful to your audience.

- A civic issue means a problem or concern related to the community or society. It could be something like pollution, homelessness, education, or any other issue that affects people's lives.
- Once you have chosen your civic issue, you need to do some research to find numeric data. Numeric data refers to information that can be measured or counted, like statistics, percentages, or numbers related to your chosen issue. This data will help you understand the problem better and provide evidence for your artwork.
- Visual art can include drawings, paintings, infographics, or any other creative representation that uses images, colors, and shapes to convey a message.
- An example: a student chooses the civic issue of homelessness. They research and find data about the number of homeless people in your city over the past five years. They discover that the numbers have been increasing steadily. Using this data, they create a creative infographic that shows a line graph with the years on one axis and the number of homeless people on the other axis. The graph visually represents the increasing trend, making it easier for people to understand the seriousness of the issue.

More Lesson Plan Resources

The Future is UnWritten: Chip Thomas, The Painted Desert - via Google Arts & Culture
<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-future-is-unwritten-chip-thomas-the-painted-desert-United-Nations/SQVBkLFGtZERKg?hl=en>

Representation Matters - via Anti-Racist Art Teachers
<https://www.antiracistartteachers.org/artists/medium-and-technique/street-art-public-art>

ARTWORK AND OBJECT LABELS

Note: Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert is a story in three parts. It is suggested to view the works holistically, in groupings (versus individually), as listed in the following guide. The works will not be identified in the guide by individual images.

Part One: Chip Thomas, Documentary Photographer

(Upper 2nd floor gallery, rotating clockwise starting from wall to the right of lower-level stairs. All works by Chip Thomas.)

*Minnie Chasing Her Sheep and Goats
Through Navajo Creek, 1995*

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

*Lula Carrying a Newborn Sheep and Goat in
Route, 1995*

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Ben, Lula, and Lamb Stop for Water, 1995

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Lula at the Sheep Corral, 1995

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

*Ben Leading His Horse into Navajo Canyon as We Head Toward Cumming's Mesa in the
Distance, 1995*

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Leaving the Winter Sheep Camp, 1995

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Lula and Minnie with Newborn Lamb, 1995

Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist



Minnie and Lula, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Lula and Minnie, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Minnie with the Pack Animals on Slick Rock, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Lula and Minnie Collecting Water, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Minnie in the Sheep Corral, Early Morning Light, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Sheep Flow, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Lula and Minnie at the Spot Where Minnie Wanted Her Photo Taken, 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Vitrine 1

This case contains a selection of Chip Thomas' personal collection of notebooks with printing notes and tools, such as dodging wands and filters; contact sheets; and loose prints. Thomas himself appears in several photographs, documenting his life as a physician on the reservation.

transhumance

noun

the action or practice of moving livestock from one grazing ground to another in a seasonal cycle, typically to lowlands in winter and highlands in summer.

"I remember hearing when I first started working on the Diné (Navajo) nation in 1987 that many years ago the wealth of the people was determined by the number of cattle they had. It was traditional for the Diné to have two homes—a winter camp and a summer camp—and people would move their animals between the two camps based on the availability of food and water for their animals. In 1995, I found a family of three—Ben, his wife Minnie and their daughter Lula—who still moved their animals seasonally. I was fortunate to spend three days with them during such a migration."—Chip Thomas

Alice Barlow Holding Her Great-granddaughter, 1991

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Wookie Watching TV with Aiden Ray, 2012

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Calvin Luther (Diné), 1997

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Jackie Meyers' Daughter, Sapphira, Playing with a Balloon, 2001

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Guy Madman at Home, 1998

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist



John Tchicai Practicing Bass Clarinet, 2004

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Wesley Barlow's Last Portrait, 1994

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Jimmie on Top of the World, 2022

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Martha Clark, 1992

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Art Shaving, 1989

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

It Was a Very Hot Day, 1990

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Charlotte Begay's Sheep Going Through the Drainage Culvert, 1997

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Minnie, 1991

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Corn Portrait, 2018
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Dog Outside Dollie Manyturquoise's Hogan, 1994
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Crowd at Pioneer Day Waiting for the Goodies to Drop, 1997
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Winning (Pioneer Day), 1997
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Boys on Fence at Bull Riding Practice, 1991
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Kayenta Flea Market, 1991
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Retrieving the Bronco Rider, Shonto Rodeo, 1990
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Hank and Thelma Nez with Dog, 1991
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Freddy Hunt with Satti, 1994
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist

Jackie Meyers' Son with His Puppy, 2001
Inkjet print
Courtesy of the artist



Bobbi Sitting on Her Suitcase with Princess Along Highway 89, 1992

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Clyde Goodman at the Turkey Shoot, 1994

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Julian Smoking with Friends, 2011

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Postnuptial Dance over Monument Valley as the Bride's Mom Looks On, 1991

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Lehigh on Swing, 1991

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Benny with "Pubby," 1995

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

KQED Arts & Culture Production

Representing Native American Dignity in Street Art, 2017

Video, 7:33 mins.

Courtesy of KQED

Part Two: jetsonorama

In this section, we see the emergence of jetsonorama, covertly (at first) activating various sites on or near the reservation through startling, sometimes provocative imagery.

(Lower 2nd floor gallery; all works by Chip Thomas)

"Indigenous communities have the highest rate of Type II Diabetes mellitus of any group in the country. It's one-fourth of adults over the age of 45. Wanting the Pepsi Corporation to consider the impact of their products on high-risk communities, especially those living in 'food deserts,' and hoping to prompt people most impacted by sugary drinks to consider the consequences of their food choices, a public health nurse and I 'corrected' this billboard late one night. It used to read 'Welcome to Pepsi Country.'"—Chip Thomas

James Sonny, 1992

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Amputation, 1991-92

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Welcome to Diabetes Country, 1989

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

"Diabetes Favors Minorities," 1991-92

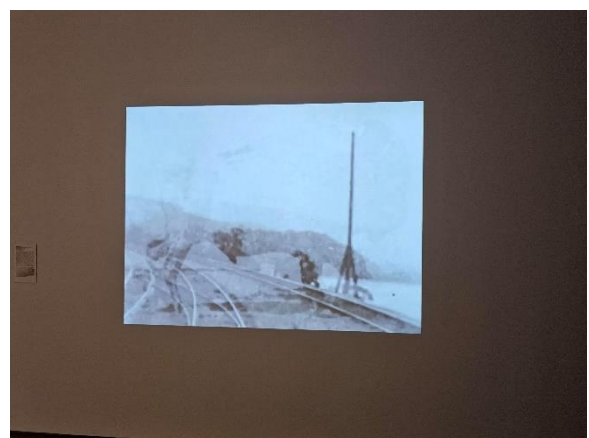
Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

*The Bison Didn't Cross the Tracks; The Tracks
Crossed the Bison, 2024*

Video, 5:38 mins.

Courtesy of the artist



Marley on Her Mom's Trailer, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Aldo Returning to the Jeweler's Stand, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Stephanie on JR's House, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist



Rose Hurley and Edzavier in Bitter Springs, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Vitrine 2

This case contains mockups for various installations Thomas executed under his street artist name "jetsonorama." Also on view are historic publications by Thomas and an assortment of stickers designed by the artist protesting uranium and coal mining, the appropriation and misuse of sacred lands, and water scarcity.

Jordan Nez, Believe, 2019

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Jordan Nez, 2019

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Interview with Jordan Nez, December 14, 2019

Audio recording, 43:59 mins.

Courtesy of the artist

Be advised: This audio contains mature content dealing with suicide, depression, gun violence, gang activity, imprisonment, sexual assault, sexuality, and the use of profanity. *"I met Jordan one day when he wheeled his dad into my examination room. Over the course of the visit, I was taken by his kindness and respect towards his dad, who used to be a Navajo Nation police officer. At the conclusion of the visit, I asked about his tattoos and whether I could come to his place to photograph him and learn more about them. He was happy to oblige."*—Chip Thomas



Jamaal Flying, 2024

21 separate images on loop, 40 secs.

Courtesy of the artist

Thomas photographed his son, Jamaal, jumping on a trampoline and has used the source images for various site interventions. *Jamaal Flying* is a video compilation of those various public projects.

Klee and Princess Benally, 2011

Inkjet print

Courtesy of the artist

Left to right

*The Bison Don't Cross the Tracks; The Tracks
Crossed the Bison*, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

JC with Power Plant on Coal Cloud, 2019

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Water is Life, 2017

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Corn Portrait, 2019

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

Klee and Princess, 2015

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist

I Am the Change, 2024

Screenprint

Courtesy of the artist



La Isla Memory Project, 2018

iPhone video compilation, 41 secs.

Courtesy of the artist

In 2019, Thomas was invited to the University of Colorado's Art and Rural Environment Field School at La Isla, a small, high-altitude farming community on the border of Southern Colorado. There, Thomas immersed himself in oral histories of the local inhabitants, many of whom traced their ancestry back to the Spanish Colonial period. An abandoned one-room schoolhouse, built of adobe as part of the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, became a focal point for Thomas' research. Former students described their experiences there throughout the 1950s, and shared family photographs, which became the basis of Thomas' collaged fabric installation. Observing the mesmerizing movements of the fabric in changing light, Thomas later noted, "I felt like narratives emerged from fabric."



From the beginning of his time on the reservation, Thomas has maintained that he does not speak on behalf of the Navajo (Diné) or others. But over time, trust has been established and he has been asked to apply his artistic sensibility to various causes, such as water rights, uranium mining, poverty, immigration, social justice, and environmental efforts. Thomas writes, "As a documentary photographer, I believe everyone has a unique story. Though not everyone wants their story told. For those who do, a trusting relationship established over time with the storyteller is critical to an objective telling of this story."

Part Three: The Painted Desert Project

A selection of works by more than 25 street artists from around the world who have brought their distinct styles of the region, adding an urban art element to this vast rural landscape.

(Upper 2nd floor, far left side of gallery, past small elevator)

The Painted Desert Project, 2024

Images and video on a loop, 19:29 mins.

Courtesy of Chip Thomas

Painted Desert Project artists include:

2501	Kill Joy
Alberto Aguilar	Labrona
Rubén Aguirre (Likes_1)	Nicolas Lampert
Andrea Avery	Troy Lovegates (OTHER)
Brian Barnecllo	Lunar New Year
Breeze	Mazatl
Monica Canilao	Nanook
Nani Chacon	OverUnder
Kate DeCiccio	PixelPancho
Alexis Diaz	Cheyenne Randall
Doodles	ROA
Ever	Mata Ruda
Billy Fefer	Jeremy Singer
Gaia	JB Snyder
Tom Greyeyes	Chris Stain
Jesse Hazelip	Stinkfish
Hyuro	Chelsea Wait
Icy and Sot	Nils Westergard
Votan lk	Debra Yepa-Pappan
Jaz	Raul Zito
Daniel Josley	

In 2012, Thomas developed the Painted Desert Project, a residency program in which he has invited street artists from around the world to explore and execute work in the desert landscape. More than twenty-five artists have participated over the past decade, enlivening the region's public spaces with various distinct styles. Works placed in the desert are understood to be ephemeral as they are vulnerable to weather, vandalism, or retagging by other artists. This is embraced as an essential aspect of both public art and Indigenous attitudes toward humankind's relationship to time and nature.

ROA

DIDELPHIS VIRGINIANA (N-American Opossum),
2022

Metal on wood frame, enamel paint
Courtesy of the artist

2501

Kaliyuga, 2015

Gold screenprint and black letterpress on
Coventry Rag
Courtesy of Chip Thomas



Stinkfish

Izoo (Little Deer), 2015

Spray paint and stencil on painted wood
Courtesy of Chip Thomas

Icy & Sot

Let Her Be Free, 2016

Stencil on galvanized metal
Courtesy of Chip Thomas

Hyuro

In Beauty it is Finished, 2014

Video, 9.8 secs.

Courtesy of Chip Thomas

Kill Joy

Healing Series, 2020

Screenprint

Courtesy of Kill Joy

Gaia

Junior, 2023

Linoleum block print

Courtesy of the artist

Wall Street Funds Climate Disaster,
2022

Digital screenprint

Courtesy of Kill Joy

Gaia

Amani, 2015

Silkscreen

Courtesy of the artist

El Capitalismo, 2021

Screenprint

Courtesy of Kill Joy

Chris Stain

Soweto Uprising, 2007

Hand-cut stencil, spray paint on paper

Courtesy of Chip Thomas

Liberation Through Public
Education, 2022

Digital screenprint

Courtesy of Kill Joy

Icy & Sot

Killing the Wind, Monument Valley, Arizona, 2016

Courtesy of Saman and Sasan Oskouei

Ken Ogawa and jetsonorama

How Did We Get Here? 2024

Video with audio, vinyl installation, and lantern made from polyacrylic acid, wood, LED, electronics

18 mins.

Courtesy of the artists

"As a physician at a small clinic on the Navajo nation since 1987, many of my patients have suffered and continue to suffer the effects of uranium mining. I asked a coworker whose father worked as a uranium miner in the mid-1960s and who died of a uranium-related cancer if she'd share with me any memorabilia she had of her father from that period. She shared with me stories of her dad and provided photographs from that period. Her mother died of a uranium-related cancer and she has an older brother presently suffering from a uranium-related cancer."—Chip Thomas



Resources

Find more curated content and insights on the CAC's exhibitions by downloading the free arts and culture app, Bloomberg Connects: <https://www.bloombergconnects.org>

Artist's Website: <https://jetsonorama.net/>

Social Media: <https://www.instagram.com/jetsonorama/>

Read

Bio: Chip Thomas via Just Seeds Artist Collective:

<https://justseeds.org/artist/chipthomas/>

Interview: Chip Thomas is Telling Navajo Stories with Street Art via Outside Magazine:

<https://www.outsideonline.com/adventure-travel/advice/chip-thomas-art-navajo-nation-arizona/>

Review: The Painted Desert Project via Dovetail Magazine:

<https://dovetailmag.com/2023/10/painted-desert-project/>

Blogpost: Sight Does Not Equal Vision (backstory of Ollie's Trolley mural installation)

<https://jetsonorama.net/2024/10/19/sight-does-not-equal-vision/>

Listen

Interview: Chip Thomas, Doctor & Public Artist via Humanitou Podcast:

<https://humanitou.com/chip-thomas/>

Watch

Artist Talk: 2023 Medium Festival of Photography via Medium Photo (1.5 hr.):

<https://youtu.be/o1Y7f3tL8Wg?si=Ej2ucQDxMQRkbZ1p>

Gallery Talk: Panaceas, promises + problems via Albuquerque Museum Foundation (3 min.):

https://youtu.be/4JmUCfgxfQA?si=dOo8487gSOHx0_4M

Interview: Street artist portrays Navajo life with large scale murals via PBS NewsHour (7 min.):

<https://youtu.be/PgHM4xJdGUI?si=GZKm4VRULPqg5AiY>

LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Ohio Common Core Links

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards>

<http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards>

Kentucky Common Core Links

<https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx>

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards>

<https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts>

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

<http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives>