

Artist's unique portraits teach people not to judge based on first impression assumptions

By Cole Villena

In everyday life, we draw on a variety of visual cues to determine what the people we meet are actually like: what an individual is wearing, where they are, how they interact with others and so on.

In his new “Us & Them” exhibit on display at the [Durham Arts Council's](#) Allenton Gallery, Chapel Hill painter William Paul Thomas challenges viewers to build perceptions of individuals by looking only at their faces- and to use questions raised by those first impressions as inspiration for building deeper, more fulfilling relationships.

“How these individuals identify is one thing,” Thomas said. “How we assume based on a likeness (is another).”

Thomas' portraits are not intended to fully capture the essence of their subjects. Instead, they raise questions about a person's identity based on basic, universally understood facial cues such as the curve of a smile or the sadness in one's eyes. Text is included on some paintings to guide a viewer's reflection, but the subjects in Thomas' portraits are mainly portrayed as “hovering heads” on simple, brightly colored backgrounds.

He feels that removing visual distractions leaves a portrait open to interpretation and widely relatable.

“I would hope that anybody would be able to come to any image that you see here and see something that they would recognize or is familiar to them,” Thomas said.

Finding community in relationships

Thomas, who was born in Chicago and spent much of his life in Wisconsin,



William Paul Thomas with one of his newest artworks at the exhibit, “Big Paul.” The picture is a portrait of his father, William Paul Neal. Photo by William Paul Thomas

“I don't feel like I need to narrow (down) how each of these individuals identify.”

— William Paul Thomas

moved to the Triangle in 2011 to pursue a graduate degree in fine arts at UNC-Chapel Hill. Now a Tar Heel alumnus- and the Brock Family Visiting Professor in Studio Arts at Duke University- Thomas says the relationships he and his wife, Shameeka, have built in Durham and Chapel Hill have made the area feel like home.

“We just like the people that we've encountered,” Thomas said. “We were embraced by people that we, I think, have started to think of as extended family.”

Those moments of relationship building have been vital to Thomas' artwork. Many of the portraits in the “Us & Them” exhibit feature Thomas' friends and colleagues from the local arts community, including former classmates Samantha Amblard and [Christopher Musina](#) (featured in “More Still” and “My Hitta,” respectively).

“Big Paul,” one of the most recently completed works in the exhibit, features one of Thomas' oldest friends: his father, William Paul Neal.

Thomas hopes visitors to “Us & Them”

will leave with an understanding that true relationship building comes from shared experiences, conversation and intentional effort, not from judging people based on appearance.

“I don't feel like I need to narrow (down) how each of these individuals identify,” Thomas said. “I'm more interested in ... what label (a viewer) might place on the individual based on their own kind of knowledge base or experience.”

And the relationships Thomas has made have likely had an impact on his artwork.

“Having a true sense of community does come from making an effort to build relationships with people,” Thomas continues. “I feel like people have done that with me, and I've intended to do that with people (in my work).”

“Us & Them” will be on exhibit at the Allenton Gallery on the first floor of the Durham Arts Council at 120 Morris St. in Durham through Sunday, May 20. An exhibit reception will be held in the gallery on Friday, April 20.

For more information on William Paul Thomas and his work, you can visit his [website](#).