

City of Coral Gables City Commission Meeting
Agenda Item I-3
May 22, 2018
City Commission Chamber
405 Biltmore Way, Coral Gables, FL

City Commission

Mayor Raul Valdes-Fauli
Vice Mayor Frank Quesada
Commissioner Pat Keon
Commissioner Vince Lago
Commissioner Michael Mena

City Staff

City Manager, Cathy Swanson-Rivenbark
Assistant City Manager, Peter Iglesias
City Attorney, Miriam Ramos
City Clerk, Walter J. Foeman
Deputy City Clerk, Billy Urquia
Historic Preservation Officer, Dona Spain
Arts and Culture Specialist, Catherine Cathers

Public Speaker(s)

Hank Willis Thomas
Helen Banach

Agenda Item I-3 [10:42 a.m.]

A Resolution approving a public art exhibition by Hank Willis Thomas, and for its application to "Art Basel and Miami Art Week," extending through Winter, 2019. (unanimously recommended by the Cultural Development Board approval/denial vote: 7 to 0).

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: We will take I-3, which is a resolution approving a public art exhibition...

City Commission Meeting
May 22, 2018

Agenda Item I-3 - Resolution approving a public art exhibition by Hank Willis Thomas, and for its application to "Art Basel and Miami Art Week,; extending through Winter, 2019.

City Attorney Ramos: You have...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: By Hank Willis.

City Attorney Ramos: Sir, you have a 10:30 time certain on E-1.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: What?

City Attorney Ramos: You have a 10:30.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: No, but this -- let's take this one first.

City Attorney Ramos: Okay.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: It's my call.

Commissioner Mena: Which one is it?

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: Good morning.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: I-3.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: For the record, Dona Spain, Historical Resources and Cultural Art Director, and I have Catherine Cathers here, Arts and Cultural Specialist for the City.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Wait. Please, please. Go ahead.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: We're very excited about this. I'm going to introduce Catherine so that she can tell you about the artist, and then the artist will come up and give a presentation.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Good morning, Mayor and Commissioners.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: You have to speak louder.

Commissioner Keon: Speak up, girl.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: So, we're here this morning very excited about our next initiative of public art that's going to coincide with Art Basel. I want to also let the Mayor and Commissioners know that we have both the chair of our Arts Advisory Panel and our Cultural Development Board here, Dr. Carol Damian and Dr. Bernice Roth, and we also have members of our Cultural Development Board here, Leslie Pantin, Nina Burgos and Betty Horwitz. This particular recommendation has been approved unanimously by both the Arts Advisory Panel and the Cultural Development Board, who's making the recommendation today. We're following up on the great success that we've had for the last couple years in partnering with Art Basel. And we've been very pleased this year for this particular recommendation to already receive support from Art Basel. In fact, in your packets, you'll note a note from Stefanie Reed with Art Basel, who calls out that our projects organized by the City of Coral Gables are a destination for our international audience. And, I think that speaks volumes for what we've done in the past and what we're proposing today. Our most important guest today is...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Can we see...

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Hank Willis...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Can we see some...

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Thomas.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Examples of his art?

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Do you have any?

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Yes.

Commissioner Keon: It's wonderful.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Please.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: May I read the bio?

Commissioner Lago: Of course.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yeah.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: And then I will introduce him. He will come up and speak about the...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Of course.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Proposal. So, Hank Willis Thomas is a conceptual artist working primarily with themes related to identity, history and popular culture. His work has been exhibited throughout the US and abroad, including the International Center of Photography, the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, Musée du quai Branly, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. Thomas' work is in numerous public collections, including the Museum of Modern Art New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the High Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., among others. His collaborative projects include Question Bridge: Black Males, In Search Of The Truth (The Truth Booth), and For Freedoms. For Freedoms was awarded the 2017 ICP Infinity Award for New Media and Online Platform. Thomas is also the recipient of the 2017 Soros Equality Fellowship, and the 2017 AIMIA | AGO Photography Prize. In 2017, Thomas unveiled his permanent public artwork "Love Over Rules" in San Francisco and "All Power to All People" in Opa Locka, Florida. Thomas is a member of the Public Design Commission for the City of New York. He received a B.F.A. in photography and African Studies from New York University, and an M.F.A/M.A. in photography and visual criticism from the California College of Arts. He's also received honorary doctorates from the Maryland Institute of Art and the Institute for Doctoral Studies in Visual Arts. Thomas lives and works in New York City. And, please help me welcome Hank Thomas Willis and his studio manager, Helen Banach.

(APPLAUSE)

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Good morning.

Hank Willis Thomas: Hi. Good morning. It's great to be here.

Commissioner Lago: Good morning.

Mr. Thomas: Thank you all for welcoming us to your wonderful city. It's fascinating to see how, you know, the people who plan our lives make these important decisions. And I think, for

me, it's amazing to be in this incredible building, because this is a city founded on the belief that art has a critical role to civic work. And for me, that's something that I'm always trying to build these connections. And essentially, I wanted to point out that I think art has -- without art, there is no culture. And without culture, we don't have society. And therefore, I think art is one of the critical pillars that every society is built on. And, when I think about Miami and Miami-Dade County and South Florida, it's a really big deal for me, because it's where I had my first exhibitions, my first collectors. My father lived here for a long time. And so, everything major for me kind of starts here. And so, even the project that we are proposing here is -- a small part of it was exhibited as art -- in Art Basel, Art Public. And, also recognizing that we're at an intersection of so many cultures from all around the world, we wanted to think about how we could make an installation that kind of integrates somewhat with civic work. So, thinking about how you guys do buildings and roads, but also benches and signs. And, our presentation -- which I don't know exactly if it's -- can you queue up this -- the presentation? Great. So, art allows us to think creatively about things we already know. And, what we want to do is propose benches and signs that allow members of the public to kind of engage in a creative and, hopefully, fun way about engaging -- about communication. So, we made benches. These are called Ernest and Ruth, where people sit inside these benches that are in the shape of speech bubbles and they kind of become a statement themselves. And we're -- Helen, this is your...

Helen Banach: This is my portion.

Mr. Thomas: This is your portion.

Ms. Banach: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much. I had the pleasure of being able to come and do a site visit with Catherine and Dona. Thank you so much for showing me around.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Can you speak closer to the mike, please?

Commissioner Keon: Or move it. Move the mike...

Ms. Banach: How's this?

Commissioner Keon: To make you comfortable.

Ms. Banach: Oh, thank you. Sorry, I'm less experienced with getting to speak in front of the mike. But, I had the pleasure of being able to do the site visit for some of these proposed locations, and also the pleasure of getting to talk to Hank about ideas for new benches. So, as you saw, we've done Ernest and Ruth, which is the traditional speech bubble shape. But, part of this activating of the space and also of speech and of these conversations were some of these new shape ideas that we had. And, considering you have such diverse neighborhoods throughout the city, we really wanted to be able to capitalize on that and have these throughout the city, so that they would become not only a conversation between the different spaces, but also as this entire project. So, we had -- we have the traditional shape we were thinking right in front of City Hall. We have one for by the Venetian Pool as a place that we know gets a lot of foot traffic and is really a unique location. We wanted to highlight MacFarlane Homestead, so we have one within walking distance of that as a very active neighborhood, as well as in the Dutch South African Village.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Will they be permanent installations?

Ms. Banach: They can be. Right now the proposal is for -- a similar project as you did last year for the month of December, but they can absolutely be installed both temporarily and permanently.

Mr. Thomas: And really, the hope is that we can, again, reimagine how we relate to public space and have kind of a reminder to be kind of open and imaginary. Another part that we wanted to do was do a series of speech bubble signs, which are -- I'm not sure if you can read them here. But, they say things like "The truth is I am you," "The truth is I hear you."

Ms. Banach: Go two more slides.

Mr. Thomas: “The truth is I love you,” “The truth is I see you,” “The truth is I hear you.” And each of them starts with “the truth” and “you,” and I feel like the truth is something that we’re always debating, but it’s also something that’s also very personal to each of us. And, we wanted to make a project where we encourage other people to make a generous gesture to one another. And so, in the 24 most spoken languages in the region, we have these signs that say, in English, “The truth is,” for instance, “I love you.” And then it might say, in Spanish, “The truth is I love you.” I was going to try to say that, but I was like let me just not. But -- and then there’s speech -- there’s little placards that teach you have to say that thing phonetically in someone else’s language. And, the idea is if I -- even if I try to say something poorly in another language, it’s a gesture that, hopefully, will make my vulnerability something that we can connect around.

Ms. Banach: And, we proposed the location of Miracle Mile for those hanging signs, knowing that it had just gone through a beautiful renovation, you know. I don’t know why, but I really -- I love this idea of the curb-less sidewalks and that accessibility and that really, really walkable portion of that. And, that having been here and seeing the foot traffic and seeing that’s where, you know, families are walking around and just that idea of -- what I love about these signs is that the perspective and the interaction changes just by people walking around them, moving underneath them, and then also reading them to one another or learning how to say a phrase in a new language. So, as such a beautiful walkable portion of the city, it just seemed perfect for those signs.

Mr. Thomas: Do you all have any questions?

Commissioner Lago: No. I just want to...

Ms. Banach: Yeah.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yeah. I think they're wonderful.

Commissioner Lago: I'd like to make a few comments, though.

Ms. Banach: Sure.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Wonderful.

Commissioner Lago: First off, it's a pleasure to finally meet you for a second time.

Mr. Thomas: Thank you for being a great advocate for the arts.

Commissioner Lago: No, no, no. This is incredible for me, and I'll tell you why, because I've been a fan of your work for years. And, I have had the pleasure of interacting with your work at multiple art fairs in New York, you know. And not only that, and seeing it at many, many museums and public collections where your work is exhibited. So, I just want to say thank you for not only going -- getting -- engaging the city, getting out there, becoming part of what Coral Gables stands for. We're a very interesting community. We have a lot of different backgrounds. We have a lot of different individuals that live in our community, like I mentioned to you before. I want you to go see MacFarlane and I want you to meet the ladies from MacFarlane. It's an incredible neighborhood. I want you to meet all the different areas of our city. And, I think that this is going to be something that is going to awaken people. And, I think that -- something that I was reading about your work in preparation today -- for today was the issue of the generous gesture. And we live in a world that we don't stop, you know. People nowadays, to hold the door open for somebody or to say good morning, people kind of freak out. They're like, whoa, you know, what does this person want. Why are they being so kind with me? and I think that any way that we can instill or promote just a simple generous gesture -- and if it comes from the arts, people are -- you know, they're more disarmed in a sense that, okay, it's an opportunity for

people to just become more and more engaged with the arts, become engaged with themselves, become engaged with their neighbor, their friend, their coworker. So, I'm just excited to have an artist of your caliber here in the City of Coral Gables. It's a big, big win for the City. And, I want to commend our Mayor and I want to commend this Commission, our cultural boards, our Art Advisory Board, Catherine, Dona, who have been working on this for a few months now. So, I think this is a big win for the City and we're grateful.

Mr. Thomas: Thank you so much.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you.

Mr. Thomas: We're really honored.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you very much.

Commissioner Keon: It's a pleasure.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Wonderful. Do I hear a motion?

Commissioner Lago: So moved.

Commissioner Keon: Moved.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Second? Will you call the roll, please?

Commissioner Lago: Yes.

Commissioner Mena: Yes.

Vice Mayor Quesada: Yes.

Commissioner Keon: Yes.

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Yes.

(Vote: 5-0)

Commissioner Lago: Do you mind if I nerd out with you and take a picture?

Mr. Thomas: That'd be cool. I didn't know we would take pictures.

Commissioner Mena: Well said.

Commissioner Lago: Hey, I (INAUDIBLE)...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Thank you very much.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: And I want to also...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: We'll take ...

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: Also add that...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: We'll take a ten-minute break.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: This is...

Commissioner Mena: Let's do it.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: With -- this is in collaboration...

Mayor Valdes-Fauli: Ten-minute break.

Arts and Cultural Specialist Cathers: I want to also add that this is in partnership with the Lowe Art Museum.

Historic Preservation Officer Spain: So, we're doing this installation as a part of collaboration with the Lowe for Art Basel.