

FotoFocus Unveils Public Mural by Chip Thomas as part of the 2024 Biennial

The photographer, street artist, activist, and physician's latest work pays homage to fellow muralist William Rankins, Jr.



Chip Thomas, *Sight ≠ Vision*, 2024. Wheatpaste mural. Presented as part of *Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project* on view at the Contemporary Arts Center. Photo: Taylor Howard. Courtesy of FotoFocus

(Cincinnati, OH – October 22, 2024) — **FotoFocus is pleased to unveil a newly commissioned portrait mural of artist William Rankins, Jr.**, by activist, physician, and artist Chip Thomas at the locally beloved restaurant Ollie's Trolley in the West End near Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati. Presented as part of the **2024 FotoFocus Biennial: *backstories***, the mural is an extension of Thomas' exhibition, *Chip Thomas and the Painted Desert Project*, which opened September 6, 2024 and runs through January 5, 2025, at the Contemporary Arts Center.

Also known by his street artist name jetsonorama, Chip Thomas has been creating large-scale murals since 2009, mainly across the Navajo Nation, between Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, while he was working on the reservation as a physician. His works are often of people, bringing communities to life and showcasing human experiences to wider audiences beyond gallery walls.

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The new mural of William Rankins, Jr., honors the Cincinnati artist in the same location where Rankins painted a mural of Barack Obama in 2008, which was lost when the wall had to be repaired in 2019. Rankins is a well-known artist in Cincinnati, creating dozens of murals across the city between the 1980s and early 2000s that showcased prominent local and national figures and often promoted businesses. Many of his murals are no longer visible due to weather, removal, or redevelopment.

The title for Thomas' work, *Sight ≠ Vision* (read *sight doesn't equal vision*), was inspired by a phrase Mr. Rankins has repeated since losing his sight in 2014: "I walk by faith now, not by sight." Encompassing the forty-foot wall behind Ollie's Trolley, Thomas intentionally placed Rankins' eyes where the windows of the building are, expressing that, "If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the windows on this building, with remnants of Mr. Williams Rankins, Jr.'s artwork inside and outside, give us insight into his soul." Rankins seems to gaze to the left toward his remaining artwork on the walls of the building, a look toward the past and what has survived over the years.

The new portrait is based on a photograph Thomas took of Rankins and is adhered to the building in a wheatpaste style with gel medium, a format Thomas typically uses for his public murals. Wheatpaste murals are susceptible to weather conditions and have a limited life span of 2 to 3 years, making this mural an apt reflection of the uncertain fate of Rankins' remaining works and Ollie's Trolley, which in recent years has fended off pressure from developers to sell.

Ollie's Trolley used to be a popular take-out chain in the 1970s, but now only has three locations, one in Louisville, one in Washington D.C., and one in Cincinnati. The charming restaurant runs out of a walk-up window of a red trolley surrounded by toy cars. In addition to the mural of Obama, this location has a history of murals of Black leaders. Marvin Smith, the owner of the restaurant, is good friends with Rankins and the two often discuss the future of the neighborhood and how long they can leave their mark or if they will be erased. Chip Thomas and FotoFocus hope to keep their legacies alive.

"After meeting Mr. Rankins, I knew that I wanted to create a mural of him. The history of his work and impact in Cincinnati spoke to me and I hope that my work is just one of the many ways that this community continues to see him," said **Chip Thomas**. "It's been a pleasure to work with him and photograph him in the places he calls home."

"The story of Mr. Rankins is not just a story of one man's private struggle," said **FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator Kevin Moore**. "It's a story of a neighborhood and friendships shattered by development and a beloved restaurant—Ollie's Trolley—threatened by destruction. Chip's mural is a reminder of all those things."



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Photo Credit: Scott Sady

ABOUT CHIP THOMAS

Chip Thomas, a.k.a. jetsonorama, is a photographer, street artist, and physician who has been working in a small clinic on the Navajo Nation since 1987. There he coordinates the Painted Desert Project, a community-building dialogue which manifests as a constellation of murals painted by artists from the Navajo Nation and around the world.

Thomas' public artwork consists of enlarged black and white photographs pasted onto structures along roadsides across the country, but primarily on the Navajo Nation. Thomas was a 2018 Kindle Project gift recipient and, in 2020, was one of a handful of artists chosen by the United Nations (UN) to recognize the 75th anniversary of the UN's founding. With no formal artistic training, he identifies strongly with the DIY energy of punk and hip-hop.

ABOUT FOTOFOCUS

FotoFocus is a Cincinnati-based nonprofit arts organization that champions photography and lens-based art through exhibitions and public programming. Since 2010, the organization has engaged art and educational institutions throughout the region to support and expand the cultural dialogue around the medium that has come to define our time. With an emphasis on intellectually and academically rigorous programs, the organization provides uniquely enriching access to lens-based art, film, and practices



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inspired by photography. FotoFocus has collaborated with organizations, curators, academics, and more than 3,000 artists and participants, to present over 800 exhibitions and programs.

Signature FotoFocus programming includes the **FotoFocus Biennial**, most recently held in 2022 with the theme *World Record*. Past editions have presented work across the Cincinnati region by historic and contemporary artists, including Berenice Abbott, Eugène Atget, Baseera Khan, Karl Blossfeldt, Francis Bruguière, Zanele Muholi, Tony Oursler, Wendy Red Star, Thomas Ruff, Ian Strange, and Akram Zaatari. Other landmark events include the **FotoFocus Symposium**, which has contributed significant dialogue and insight to culturally relevant topics including the controversial Mapplethorpe exhibition, and the **FotoFocus Lecture and Visiting Artist Series**, which has brought globally renowned artists such as Zoe Leonard, William Wegman, and Roger Ross Williams to Cincinnati.

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