

NOTEBOOK

NOVEMBER 2013



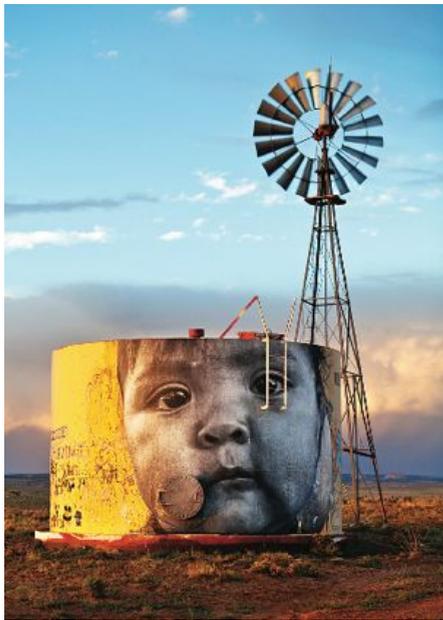


A Medicine Man's Masterwork

Physician Chip Thomas treats Navajo Nation citizens by day — and creates large-scale portraits of them by night.

by **STEPHANIE PEARSON**

FOR THE PAST 26 YEARS, physician Chip Thomas has treated patients at a low-cost clinic on the Navajo Nation — but his greatest contribution may be his artwork. Scattered across the U.S.'s largest Native American-governed territory — the 27,400-square-mile Nation encompasses sections of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico — Thomas' building-size black-and-white portraits of Navajo people adorn water tanks, abandoned barns, and any other surface he can find. Disintegrating in the desert's triple-degree heat, the images reflect a community struggling to survive in one of the country's most violent reservations (last year, the Nation's police received four unrelated homicide calls in a single day). While Thomas, 56, ▶



has gained worldwide recognition for his images, he forgoes a full-time art career for the one he has — treating Navajo patients. “Both are attempting to restore balance and create beauty,” he says of his medical practice and artwork. “One just happens to be more fun.”

Thomas’ path from physician to artist has been a wandering one. Born in Raleigh, North Carolina, as the lone son of an African-American doctor, he eventually attended Nashville’s Meharry Medical College and then spent his residency summers leading first-aid teams to Liberia. “When my plane touched down in Africa in 1985, I knelt on the ground and kissed it,” Thomas says. “Being there was part of a political awakening for me.” After medical school, Thomas decided to pursue universal health care in the U.S. and soon realized he had three job options: at a veteran’s hospital, a prison, or an Indian reservation. In 1987, he signed a four-year contract to work on the Navajo Nation. “I saw myself returning to a developing country,” Thomas says, “but started to appreciate the parallels between here and Africa.”

Almost three decades later, Thomas is still on the reservation and has a 16-year-old half-Navajo son. Most everyone knows Thomas by name — he’s either delivered their babies or photographed their cousins. Often wearing salmon-colored pants and flying-saucer socks, he lives in a government-issued house stocked with a drum set, an Eames molded-plywood chair, and floor-to-ceiling art. In 1992, a photo of Thomas (in dreadlocks) treating an elderly Navajo woman ran in the Patagonia catalog. The widely seen image led to an invitation to join AfricaTrek, a 12,107-mile cycling trip the length of the continent, which earned Thomas and his



From left: Thomas has made more than 100 portraits over four years; he plays jazz to unwind.

team a Guinness world record. “I like to call it cosmic affirmative action,” he says of his eclectic résumé.

To avoid burnout, in 2009 Thomas took a vacation in Brazil and came across the work of a French artist who pastes giant photographs of Rio de Janeiro citizens on favela shacks. Thomas was inspired to create his own version on the reservation. “My work as a physician brings me happiness,” he says, “but at times it depresses me. My objective with my art is to restore and reflect back the beauty I’ve witnessed.”

While the Navajo have long been averse to photographs — the tribe believes the images will steal their souls — Thomas asks his subjects for permission before shooting them, blowing up their images on bond paper and pasting them onto buildings. Amid the austere landscape, the outsize

artwork has a gravity unattainable in any gallery. The images change daily with the elements, deteriorating from exact replicas to impressionistic mirages until disappearing completely. Thomas’ work has begun attracting attention beyond the reservation — street artists worldwide know him by his tag name, Jetsonorama; he was recently invited to collaborate with local Navajo as part of a nationwide Honor the Treaties project; and other artists have traveled to collaborate with him on the reservation. “It was an interesting predicament not to be the most outstanding element on the landscape — I can’t compete with Monument Valley,” Gaia, a Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery artist, says. “What Chip does is very courageous. It speaks to the community and is simultaneously provocative.”

Despite the acclaim, Thomas downplays his own achievements, preferring to let the work speak for itself. “I’m just a wannabe hipster in a way isolated spot,” he says. ■