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Thad Duhigg: Assumptions Mediated

Organized by Laumeier Sculpture Park

Laumeier Sculpture Park would like to give special recognition to Nancy and Kenneth Kranzberg for their continued support of this very special annual exhibition series. Special thanks are also due to Thad Duhigg for producing an excellent exhibition and for bringing fresh, thoughtful dialogue to the world of contemporary art. Further thanks go to Ivy Cooper for her exceptional, thoughtful and insightful essay about the exhibition.

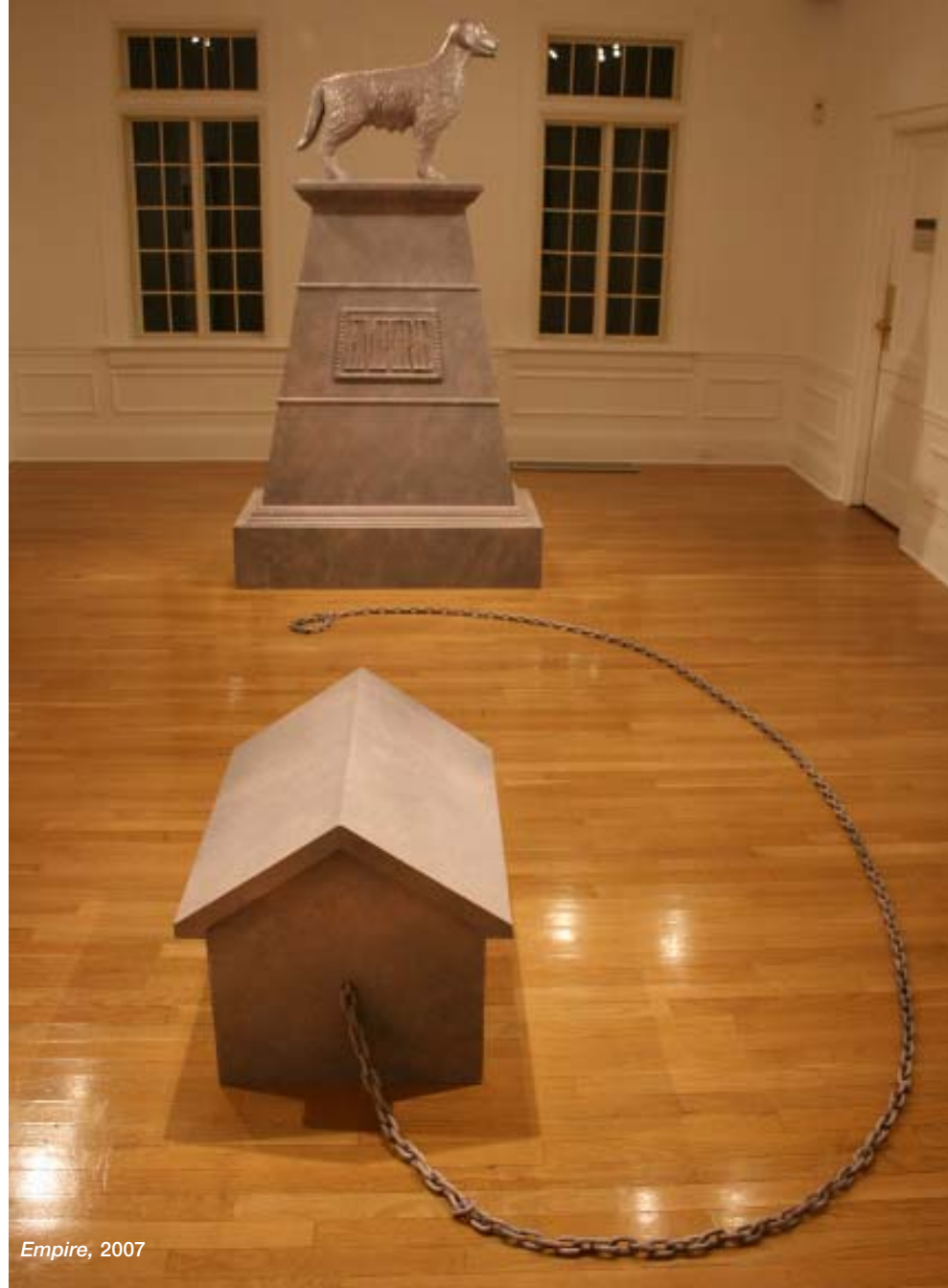
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This publication was produced on the occasion of the exhibition *Assumptions Mediated*.
Essay by Ivy Cooper. Cover photo: Thad Duhigg, *Other Americans*, 2007

EXHIBITION DATES June 8 to August 30, 2007



Details: *Other Americans* (front) and *Before God* (back)



Empire, 2007

Common Sense

The first sculpture the viewer encounters in Thad Duhigg's *Assumptions Mediated* is *Empire*, a work that sets the stage for Duhigg's exhibition of scathing and humorous political and social satire in sculpture. *Empire* suggests something of Duhigg's take on American cultural politics. A friendly looking dog tops a massive sculptural pedestal, at the base of which is a doghouse and chain. For her part, the happy mutt looks ready to nurse her puppies; she invites comparison to the famous ancient Etruscan sculpture of the She Wolf who, mythology has it, suckled the orphaned twins Romulus and Remus, founders of ancient Rome. If Duhigg's doggy represents the founding of the American empire, we have to imagine her suckling the Bobbsey Twins, or maybe Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, depending on your generation. So goes Duhigg's brand of commentary, which makes some acerbic but incisive comments on the United States, its cultural heritage and national emblems. Above all, Duhigg seeks to make us aware of the tendency of many Americans to consider themselves at the center of the world, and to envision the world in their own image, at the expense of those who don't conform to it.

Among other things, *Empire* represents the apotheosis of the all-American pet, a crucial cast member in the American dream, whom Duhigg has provided a home of her own in the form of a classic Cape Cod style doghouse. She appears to have escaped from the chain that binds her to the house, in order to take her place atop the pedestal to embody, however temporarily, that peculiarly American brand of empire. The sculpture is made of cast aluminum and medium density fiberboard, but painted to resemble marble. So it's not the classical monument it appears to be, but rather a scaled-down version in cheaper materials, done up to resemble the real thing. Or, as Duhigg bluntly puts it, "it's a fake." But it's a fake that corresponds to our ingrained American practice of appropriating classical traditions and reshaping them for our own needs. Take Thomas Jefferson, for instance, who modeled Monticello after a Palladian villa but made his columns out of wood.

The same sort of thing can be witnessed daily at houses all across the U.S., where markers of suburban stateliness are derived from architectural accents on palatial country manors. Curving sidewalks through modest front yards aspire to be winding roads through windswept acres. Brave little fences act as if they were keeping intruders off the "estate." Duhigg revels in such details of the suburban landscape, and has created his own, slightly warped versions of front yard Americana with *Three Stars*, installed on the lawn outside Laumeier's main galleries, which has ankle-high white plastic fencing surrounding three tidy star-shaped flower plantings.

Three Stars would look all-American and perfectly patriotic were it not for the color of the flowers. Pink doesn't exactly conjure up the image of Old Glory. Inside the main galleries, Duhigg has taken this game even further with



Three Flags, 2007

Three Flags. A trio of wooden Uncle Sam lawn jockeys carry flags with stripes, but no stars, and they come in three colors: red, white, and black. Across the room are three giant flowerpots holding flagpoles, but no flags, and they, too, come in three colors: red, white, and black.

Leave it to Duhigg to alter just one detail—a color—and defamiliarize the most common icons. By exchanging blue for black he undermines the traditional visual signification of the flags, the poles, and Uncle Sam himself. Even the colors red and white take on new and independent meanings when freed from the Red-White-and-Blue triad. Red may suddenly suggest revolution, maybe even of the Anti-American, communist variety. White might perhaps say “surrender.” And the addition of black may imply loss, mourning, a quiet passing.

Duhigg also alters scale in his sculptures to great effect. He enlarges the Uncle Sam figures to life size, completely reconfiguring our relationship to them as objects, and thereby transforming their meaning. Most of Duhigg’s sculptures are enlarged in scale—but not to the absurdly gigantic degree of works by Claes Oldenburg, for example; after all, he doesn’t want them to burst completely out of the bounds of normalcy. They remain recognizable but recontextualized for our consideration

Take Duhigg’s treatment of figures in *Other Americans*, an array of painted, cast bronze icons from American cultural and commercial folklore: the toy cowboy; Mrs. Butterworth; a grinning Irish character; the Cleveland Indian; and a Mexican marionette figure. They’re larger than we’re accustomed to seeing them, and placed on pedestals, but they’re not monumentalized. More importantly, they’re all enlarged to the same scale, which was intentional on Duhigg’s part. “Visually they all have the same weight,” he explains, “and conceptually that’s very important”—precisely because their equality in size contradicts the inequality of the groups they represent in American history.

Duhigg has exhibited these figures before, but this particular arrangement of *Other Americans* is new: backed by red-white-and-blue bunting, the gun-toting cowboy pits himself against all the other figures. The viewer is free to interpret the work’s meaning, to read it as an indictment of America’s long history of institutionalized racism, or its persistence in present-day politics. Either way, *Other Americans* leaves no doubt as to who’s in power. We know who wins this showdown.

At first glance, *Other Americans* seem reminiscent of Jeff Koons’ enlarged copies of cheap figurines and tabloid imagery from the 1970s and 1980s. But the comparison doesn’t really hold. Where Koons was fascinated by the operational aesthetic of kitsch, Duhigg examines the more overt ideological function of caricatures, icons and emblems. But Duhigg’s works also interrogate the accessory role played by art itself in the production of political meaning. He insisted, for example, on casting the figures in bronze, a demanding and difficult medium associated with monuments and official art. By painting the bronze, he purposely commits what’s considered a high art crime—but thereby heightens both the political and aesthetic implications of the sculptures.



East/West, 2007

Other Americans is a complex statement on the role that images play in instilling ideologies and in processes of cultural assimilation, as is the installation *East/West*, which focuses specifically on American representations of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East. In the center of the room, two trios of flat wooden cutout figures face off one against the other. Three are painted black and featureless, thus inscrutable—in American visual parlance, these are clearly the Muslims. The other three are painted white, with outline drawings that identify them as Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus. Most viewers will recognize the style in which the Holy Family is drawn—Duhigg has painstakingly copied the illustrations from a Christian coloring book. Mary and Joseph look like jovial cousins to the Flintstones; Jesus is an impish Dennis the Menace of Nazareth.

Viewing this work, there is no doubt as to which characters belong to the West, which to the East, which are “us” and which are “them.” Though they are gross exaggerations, these figures are astonishingly easy to read, stark reminders that we have all been subjected to visual forms of indoctrination from a very early age, and it has worked with alarming effectiveness.

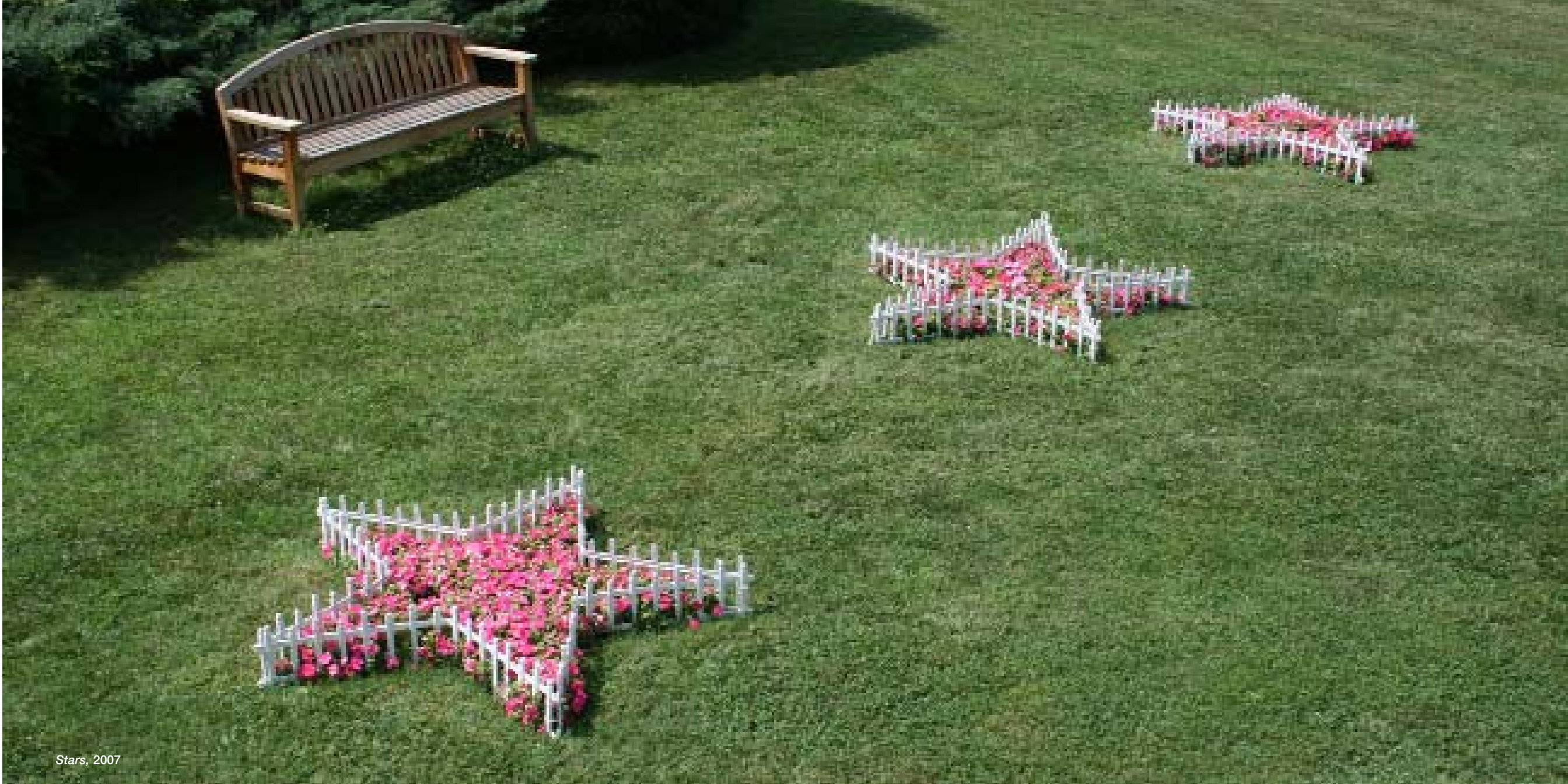
This partly explains Duhigg’s reliance on children’s imagery—toys, coloring book figures, paper dolls, silly advertising icons. It appears harmless enough, but it has a profound effect on young people’s minds, shaping their image of the world and its inhabitants. Imagery can reinforce such patterns of thought into adulthood, naturalizing ideologies that take hold on an unconscious level. “We always say it’s ‘common sense,’ or ‘human nature,’ all these things we learn, and we never question where we learned them,” Duhigg observes.

His comments draw out a certain irony in the title of the show’s final installation, *Freedom of Thought*. And irony is at the heart of the work, which is comprised of a gold painted torch emblazoned with the words “Freedom of Thought” sitting atop a stool in the corner and lit by a spotlight in the otherwise dark gallery. Stars cover the darkly painted walls, and dozens of sharply pointed dunce caps stand about the floor. It’s an uncomfortable space that resonates with the iconoclastic mockery of one of this country’s founding democratic ideals.

Freedom of Thought draws our attention to the gap between what the United States was intended to be, and what it has become. Which brings us back to where we started, with Duhigg’s *Empire*. America has been called a reluctant empire, and Duhigg’s sculpture gives that description visual form, in all its awkward, overblown, impatient aspirations to might. In other sculptures, Duhigg manages to work in the opposite direction, taking popular imagery and dissecting it, laying bare the often brutal functions and invisible interests it serves. Either way, with *Assumptions Mediated*, Duhigg subjects some of our most familiar, unquestioned ideals and practices—or, in other words, “common sense”—to the kind of direct, uncompromising scrutiny it has needed for a very long time.

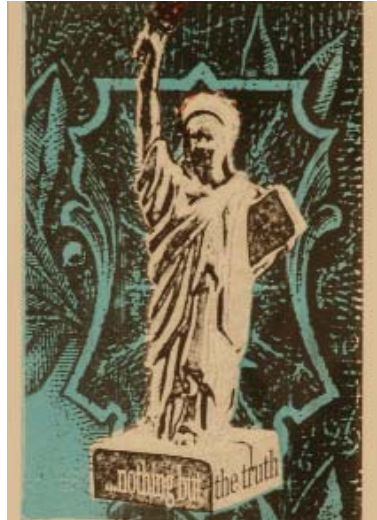


Freedom of Thought, 2007





Souvenir, 2003



Eraser, 2003



Cowboy, 2003



Trophy, 2007



Before God, 2007



A Pretty Picture, 2007



Bluebird, 2007



Free Press, 2007



Sold, 2007



Hello, 2007

artist bio

Currently professor of sculpture and the Chair of the Art and Design department at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, Thad Duhigg received his B.F.A. from Southern Illinois University – Carbondale and his M.F.A. from Syracuse University. He has taught at both Texas Christian University and the University of Wyoming. Duhigg joined the sculpture department at SIUE in 2002. He has also exhibited his work nationally and internationally. As a Fulbright Senior Scholar he worked at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest in 1997.

education

- 1989 Master of Fine Arts, sculpture specialization
Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York
- 1986 Bachelor of Fine Arts, sculpture specialization
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois

selected solo exhibitions

- 2007 Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis, Missouri
Greenville College, Greenville, Illinois
- 2005 Maryville University, St. Louis
- 2004 University of Illinois Springfield, Springfield, Illinois
- 2003 Conduit Gallery, Dallas, Texas
- 2002 Fort Worth Central Public Library, Fort Worth, Texas
Public Art Dedication, Arts Council, Fort Worth, Texas
- 2000 Baylor University, Waco, Texas
- 1998 Conduit Gallery, Dallas, Texas
- 1997 Midwestern State University, Wichita Falls, Texas
Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts, Budapest, Hungary
- 1996 Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, Alabama
University of Texas at Tyler, Tyler, Texas
Art Center of Plano, Plano, Texas
- 1995 Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas
Tarrant County College, Northwest Campus, Fort Worth, Texas
- 1994 Amarillo Museum of Art, Amarillo, Texas
Hardin-Simmons University, Abilene, Texas
Conduit Gallery, Dallas, Texas

public collections

- Fort Worth Central Public Library, Fort Worth, Texas
Fort Worth Southwest Public Library, Fort Worth, Texas
Fort Worth Parks District Commission, Fort Worth, Texas
Fulbright Commission, Budapest, Hungary
Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, Alabama

- Del Mar College Library, Corpus Christi, Texas
Del Mar College, Corpus Christi, Texas
Rockford Museum of Art, Rockford, Illinois
Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois

exhibition list | Thad Duhigg: *Assumptions Mediated*

gallery 1

- Eraser*, monoprint, 2003, 18" x 14"
Cowboy, monoprint, 2003, 18" x 14"
Empire, mixed media, 2007, dimensions variable
Souvenir, monoprint, 2003, 18" x 14"

hallway

- Trophy*, monoprint, 2003, 18" x 14"

gallery 2

- East/West*, mixed media, 2007, dimensions variable

gallery 3

- Bluebird*, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"
Free Press, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"
Sold, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"
Hello, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"
A Pretty Picture, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"
Three Flags, flagpoles, flags, figures 2007, dimensions variable

gallery 4

- Other Americans*, mixed media, 2003-2007, dimensions variable

gallery 5.1

- Before God*, mixed media, 2007, 40" x 30"

gallery 5.2

- Freedom of Thought*, mixed media, 2007, dimensions variable

outdoor gallery

- Stars*, flowers, garden fencing, 2007, dimensions variable

All works courtesy of the artist



Three Flags (detail), left; and Other Americans (detail) right, 2007

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