A viewer steps into the frame

By Cate McQuaid
Globe Correspondent / April 27, 2011

HANK WILLIS THOMAS:
Scouring the Earth for My Affinity
At: Samson, 450 Harrison Ave.,
through May 7. 617-357-7177,
www.samsonprojects.com

Deciphering the coding
Hank Willis Thomas makes a witty and disturbing investigation of
representations of race in his show at samson. He harvests images from
advertising and popular culture and repurposes them, sometimes removing
brand names, sometimes adding his own text.

“Scandalously Good!” is a jaw-dropper. The titular words, minus the exclamation
point, appear in chrome over a grainy image of Jacqueline Onassis and the young
James Earl Jones. He wears a white robe (Jones was filming “The Great White
Hope,” in which he played boxer Jack Jefferson). Onassis is in black. There’s an
ocean of meaning between their shy smiles. She tilts her head, averts her gaze;
hers shadow falls between them. In art terms, and in celebrity culture, they are
both objects of desire and fascination. “The Great White Hope” came out in 1970;
what was the power dynamic between white women and African-American men
then? And how would it change if the white woman were Jackie O and the black
man, James Earl Jones?

Works from Thomas’s “Unbranded” series present pictures from ads of the last
40 or 50 years aimed at an African-American audience, minus the product,
asking us to put together what is encoded in the image about power and desire.
“Are You the Right Kind of Woman for It?” presents a black man on a throne-like
wicker chair, flanked by two sultry white babes. He’s manly, kingly, even, and
chomping on a big cigar. It’s funny to see these ads stripped of their products.
The manipulation of imagery has a visceral effect that, in the context of flipping
through a magazine, we are usually numbed to.