



Photography and politics

## The year of the great Gordon Parks

Aug 31st 2016, 17:33 BY A.B. | KENT, CONNECTICUT



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HALF a century ago in America, nonviolent protests and acts of civil disobedience, organised by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, helped put the spotlight on the bigotry and injustice that black Americans faced. The civil-rights movement prompted lawmakers to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination based on "race, color, religion, sex or national origin", and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. A fifty-something African-American photographer Gordon Parks, who also directed the Blaxploitation film

“Shaft” in 1971 and co-founded “Essence” magazine in 1970, was an integral part of that movement, from taking intimate portraits of the characters involved, to photographing the myriad rallies that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet Parks, who straddled protest and photography, remains outside the pantheon of great black leaders in civil rights, and is less known than his mostly white contemporaries in photography.

“Fifty Years After: Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas and LaToya Ruby Frazier”, an exhibition of work by Parks and three other African-American photographers for whom he paved the way, is one of several new shows aiming to change that. The show, at James Barron Art in Kent, Connecticut is just one of a number of exhibitions across the globe marking a resurgence in Parks’s impact, not just on the African-American community, but also on photography. “Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott”, on view at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond until October 30th, examines the dark realities of segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, where Parks attended a segregated elementary school and was a victim of racism. On September 9th, C/O Berlin will open “I Am You: Selected Works, 1934–1978”, showing 150 works from the Gordon Parks Foundation until December 4th. Over at the foundation itself in Pleasantville, New York in “American Champion” a number of previously unseen portraits by Parks of the boxer Mohammed Ali are on display until September 24.



Gordon Parks, American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942

The James Barron exhibition features ten of Parks’s images, starting with 1942’s “American Gothic,” a portrait of Ella Watson, a member of the cleaning crew at the Farm Security Administration. Parks photographed Watson while on a photography fellowship with the FSA. The image depicts Watson before an American flag, holding a broom and a mop, in the same manner of the 1930 painting of the same title by Grant Wood that

hangs at the Art Institute of Chicago, which just closed an exhibition of Parks's work on August 28th. "One of the things that's typical of Gordon is that he then went with Ella Watson to her home, met her family, met her children, grandchildren, went to her church, so he photographed her intimately in her environment," says Marisa Cardinale, an advisor at the Gordon Parks Foundation. "He wasn't the kind of photographer who snaps strangers on the sidewalk and moved on, or just took one image and then departed. He integrated himself with the subjects."

Although it has been more than 50 years since the civil-rights movement, America is still plagued by racial divisions, and especially by a wave of police killings of innocent black citizens (and reprisal-killings of police in several cities). Few of the killers have been punished. But for those who think things are worse than ever, Parks was there 50 years ago: An untitled 1963 colour photograph by Mr Parks taken at a Harlem rally of protesters holding their hands in the air echoes the "Hands up, don't shoot" gesture that has become synonymous with today's Black Lives Matter movement.



Courtesy of and © The Gordon Parks Foundation

The James Barron Art exhibition offers a broad view of Mr Parks's work, including portraits of notable African-American figures. A 1963 black-and-white photograph shows Ali standing at a table praying while he was in Miami training, and another black-and-white portrait depicts Malcolm X, who named Parks godfather of one of his children, at a rally in Chicago in 1963. "Life" magazine hired Parks to document segregation in the south, and two photographs in the

exhibition come from that assignment. One shows a black girl held up by a man as she drinks from a “coloured” drinking fountain in 1956, and another shows a white mother and a black nanny holding a white child in the “white only” section at Atlanta's airport. “You can see it was very hastily taken,” explained Ms Cardinale. “It’s actually cropped out; there’s a big figure here, because it’s so distracting, but he really just had to do this because for him to be photographing a white woman, at that time, in this environment, would have subjected him to unwanted attention.”

Street photography, documentary photography and photojournalism often seem to emphasise the detachment of the shooter from the subject. Not so with Parks (whose work extended to fashion, too). Thanks to his charisma, he could capture the humanity in the subjects he photographed during the civil-rights era as well as the glamour of high fashion for “Vogue”. “He had a rapport with people, and what you notice about Gordon’s work [is] the scope, the diversity, the diversity of people he photographed, what he photographed, how he photographed,” says Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, a photographer who was friends with Mr Parks.

Mr Parks’s personal stake in the civil-rights movement allowed him to gain an intimacy with his subjects that wasn’t possible for other photographers; but it was his ability to transcend that and master a wide breadth of subject matter that should make his name as memorable as those of Irving Penn, Steve McCurry, Richard Avedon and his other white counterparts.