

Returning to her roots in Arkansas, **Lisa McCord** started work on photographing her family of tenant farmers and their community. The resulting bodies of work encompass an important moment in history. Susan Burnstine reports.

▶ susanburnstine.com



Frances and child

Last summer I had the good fortune to view two memorable collections of vernacular portraits created in the 1980s by Lisa McCord; the first depicted her extended family and the second focused on residents who lived in the community surrounding her family farm in Arkansas. The two series, *Rotan Switch* and *Southern Portraits*, were created as separate chapters in a larger collection of photographs, which she now refers to as *A Southern Family*.

McCord's great-grandparents first began as tenant farmers in the Arkansas Delta five generations ago. Once they saved enough money to purchase several small parcels of land, they

formed Ohlendorf Farms. She recalls: 'When I was a small child I can remember workers coming home from a long day picking cotton in the fields, riding on large trucks, returning to their families. I specifically remember the women, wearing bandanas wrapped around their hair, standing alongside the men, hoes in hand.'

After graduating from high school, McCord moved to New York City to attend film school at NYU. During college, her love affair with photography blossomed when she enrolled in an intermediate photography class with notable photographer Marcia Resnick. She then moved to Paris with the intention of studying film, but her inability

to speak French fluently made it difficult to work in the industry. So she shifted her plans and attended Le Contrejour photography workshop where she focused on image-making.

During the early 1980s, McCord returned to Ohlendorf Farms and began photographing family members and residents living at and around her family's farm. During the course of a few years she created an impressive collection of portraits for *Rotan Switch* and *Southern Portraits*. These two series work in tandem, but differ conceptually as the images in *Southern Portraits* include people from many neighbouring small towns

and farms, whereas the portraits in *Rotan Switch* focus only on the small community of Rotan where her immediate family lived and farmed.

For the most part, McCord's subjects were introduced to her by her nanny, Cully, and Cully's daughter, Cheryl. A significant portion of these portraits include representations of women and children who remained at home during the day while the men in the family were working in the fields or sheds. Often McCord's subjects confused her for her deceased mother – yet, ironically, this mistaken identity offered a warm acceptance into their homes.

In addition to introducing McCord to most of her subjects,



Cully cooking

Cully and Cheryl appeared as frequent subjects in her portraits. One of the most extraordinary pictures, *Cully Cooking*, illustrates her former nanny in the kitchen wearing just a bra. McCord recalls that Cully taught her many things over the years, including faith based ideas, cooking, cleaning, ironing – and, over the years, she shared personal stories with her about her family. Sadly, Cully died years ago, but McCord remains in contact with her daughter Cheryl and visits whenever she

returns to Arkansas.

As the years passed and the US farm industry began to undergo dramatic changes, McCord came to realise that her photographs illustrated her family's heritage in an authentic and raw manner. And the images examined the agricultural life of African Americans in the rural south, thus preserving a part of history that depicts the now extinct world of tenant farming.

Presently, McCord splits her time between Los Angeles and

Arkansas where her family farm remains in operation. Over the years she taught photography, but has since turned her focus back to making photographs full time. Currently she is creating a new body of work that focuses on found photographs of her mother and grandmother, which she pairs with handwritten family stories. She's also working on some new images created on her family farm, where she often hosts photography workshops.

▣ lisamccordphotography.com



Cheryl and silos

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▣ brooklynhistory.org

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▣ artic.edu

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▣ new.artsmia.org

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Danny Lyons:

Message to the Future

▣ deyoung.famsf.org