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# VOGUE

Gordon Parks Pictures the Segregated South at Salon 94

Freemans

by Julia Felsenthal



Gordon Parks, Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956  
Photo: Courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation / Salon 94, New York

In 1956, two years after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling deemed unconstitutional the Jim Crow ethos of "separate but equal," *Life* magazine sent Gordon Parks, its first African-American staff photographer (who would later distinguish himself as a film director, memoirist, composer, and a founder of *Essence* magazine), down to the deepest South to document how things had or had not changed. Parks photographed four generations of the Thornton family based in and around Mobile, Alabama, and Nashville, Tennessee, and found that their lives remained separate and very much unequal. Although Albert Thornton, the family's 82-year-old patriarch, himself the son of a slave, had managed to send four of his nine children to college, their fortunes remained constrained by systemic injustice. Family members who lived near Mobile had access only to squalid housing in segregated neighborhoods where the roads remained unpaved. One daughter, a teacher, could land a position only in a school that lacked basic necessities like indoor plumbing. Their children played in separate, lesser playgrounds and drank from different water fountains than white children. And no matter where they lived, their professional opportunities were limited: One son-in-law, a woodcutter, turned down a lucrative contract in the face of threats from his white competitors; one son, a college professor and department head, wasn't allowed to socialize with white peers or travel with whites on buses.

Twenty-six of Parks's images appeared alongside an accompanying article in a late September 1956 issue of *Life*. And those images, along with several others from the same project, are now the subject of "Segregation Story," a show at Salon 94 Freemans in New York City. Though the series has been displayed publicly before—including last year at Atlanta's High Museum of Art—this is the first time this collection of photographs has been shown in New York, the city where the Kansas-born, Minnesota-bred Parks lived on and off for years.

"About a year ago, Marilyn Minter texted me from Atlanta," I'm told by Salon 94 curator Fabienne Stephan, who

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gave me an early peek at the show ahead of its official opening tonight. "She was there for Thanksgiving, and she had just visited the Gordon Parks show at the High Museum. She kept texting me images. She said, 'Look! I can't believe this existed! I had no idea. They were shot in color. They're so powerful. I grew up in the South, in Florida. It's the quiet everyday life of my era.'" Stephan pointed to an image on the wall of six black children hanging on a fence and gazing at the wonderland of a white playground. "She really saw herself, maybe as one of the children inside this playground. It was very personal, obviously."



Gordon Parks, *Outside Looking In*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956  
Photo: Courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation / Salon 94, New York

At Minter's suggestion, the gallery contacted the Gordon Parks Foundation (Parks himself passed away in 2006) to look into bringing the body of work to New York. "[The foundation] loved the idea of giving a stage to those images in a setting that's not a photography gallery but a place where a dialogue about contemporary art happens," Stephan told me. "It's very important for them that Gordon's work lives in the eyes of young artists, is being seen in that context. If you're not being seen by the younger generation who are making work inspired by you, your work sort of dies."

Stephan gave me a tour of the show, which hangs in a single gallery, in a space nestled, ironically, between two stalwarts of retro nostalgia: Freemans Sporting Club boutique and barbershop, and Freemans restaurant. That tension between the contemporary and the antiquated reverberates throughout the exhibition. At the time they were originally published, Parks's photographs revealed to Northerners the entrenched racial injustice of the mid-20th-century South. Now his photographs are appearing, 60 years later, in a Northern city, at a time when the entire country is facing the persistent legacy of that racism. "The history of the Civil Rights movement is largely told in black-and-white," Stephan reminded me. Parks's photographs, by comparison, are in vivid color. They painfully juxtapose technology that feels relatively modern with an era that we would like to pretend is ancient history.

The first photograph, hanging just to the left of the gallery's entrance, depicts a billboard rising out of an overgrown empty field that reads "For Sale: Lots for Coloreds." "The idea is it's almost like walking through the city. You arrive at the edge of town," said Stephan, "and then you go through the landscape." Working our way around the room, we look at images of boys in overalls fishing, kids playing with toy guns, a girl gazing at a sea of white dolls in the window of a store. One particularly captivating photograph depicts a pretty young woman in a blue dress standing with a younger girl outside a movie theater. Parks, Stephan told me, was also a fashion

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photographer (he shot for Vogue in the Alexander Liberman era). His perfectly composed image, its subjects dressed to the nines, could easily be mistaken for a bit of fashion editorial—but, of course, for the neon sign that ominously hangs overhead, declaring “Colored Entrance.”

The photograph exemplifies why the series was so quietly yet powerfully revolutionary. “Instead of choosing to document very shocking images or images of extreme poverty, he very smartly chose to take images that brought the subjects of the photographs closer to the middle-class families who were reading the magazine up North,” Stephan remarked. “Children playing, children going with their mom to shop for a nice dress, children going to the ice cream parlor, to the cinema, to school. It’s all the same, and yet it’s completely different.”

The tactic may have endeared its subjects to Northern Life subscribers, but it did the opposite in the eyes of their Southern white neighbors. Allie Lee Causey, the Thorntons’ teacher daughter, was quoted in the article saying, “Integration is the only way through which Negroes will receive justice. We cannot get it as a separate people.” Those words cost her dearly: The Causeys were hounded by angry whites in their home of Shady Grove, Alabama. Allie’s husband, Willie, a woodcutter, had his truck seized. Allie was fired from her school. They were forced to flee town, and eventually they divorced.



Gordon Parks, Airline Terminal, Atlanta, Georgia, 1956  
Photo: Courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation / Salon 94, New York

Parks also booked it out of town as soon as his assignment was done. While in Alabama, the magazine hired a local African-American man, Sam Yette, to help Parks navigate the thorny customs of the racist South. “He was obviously not welcomed by the white community,” said Stephan. The pair suffered harassment and threats. And in an essay published in the catalog that accompanied the High Museum show, the critic Maurice Berger wrote of Parks: “His work complete, the photographer fled from the town with Yette via a back road: ‘After reaching Birmingham at dawn,’ ” Berger quoted Parks saying, “ ‘I took the first plane to New York. Not until it roared upward did I breathe easily.’ ”

Back in New York, Stephan and I paused at a photograph that did not appear in the Life story, a favorite of the curator’s. On the left of the image, taken in an airport waiting lounge, is a white woman wearing a black hat and a large turquoise necklace. In the middle of the frame is a black baby nurse wearing a white uniform and carrying a blonde white baby, presumably the first woman’s child. Dominating the right third of the image, well in the foreground, is a fuzzy sliver of a black person’s cheek.

“It’s totally a stolen image,” said Stephan, acknowledging that in the Jim Crow South, an African-American man would never have been allowed to take a photograph of a white woman. “You see from the shadow here”— she referred to the out-of-focus face—“he aimed it. It was obviously prior to digital camera, so he didn’t know what the final result would be.”

Was that blurry person in the foreground Parks, making this, Stephan and her assistant Jonathan Gardenhire



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joked, an early example of a selfie? Or was it a decoy subject, another black man also allowed into the integrated lounge at the airport, a privilege that would have been afforded Parks only because he was a Northerner who hailed from an unsegregated city?

We can't say for sure. But the final result is quite extraordinary. "He wasn't allowed to take this picture," elaborated Gardenhire. "But he took it anyway. He risked his life to do it."

*"Segregation Story" by Gordon Parks opens tonight and runs through December 20 at Salon 94 Freemans. Salon94.com for more information.*