Chilling photographs of racism in America's segregated South

Exhibition

Gordon Parks: Part One

Alison Jacques Gallery, London W1

★★★★☆

By **Cal Revely-Calder**

We think of nostalgia as a love of the past, but in Greek the word means "an ache to come home", and history isn't homely for everyone. And so to an exhibition whose postponement from March, thanks to Covid-19, has made it more timely, not less.

The late Gordon Parks, a black American, chronicled the racial dynamics of his country from the Forties to the Noughties. He was also a musician, a writer and the director of the original *Shaft* – one of the pre-eminent figures, black or white, in American visual arts.

His photographs picture how "advanced" societies can lie to, and about, themselves. Many of them featured in *Life* magazine, as did all the work in this exhibition – *Gordon Parks: Part One* – at Alison Jacques Gallery, in central London. It's his first solo show in Britain for more than 25 years, and includes two series: Segregation in the South (1956) and the later Black Muslims (1963). (Part Two, a series on Muhammad Ali, will follow in September.)

Blown up here as largeish prints, Parks's photographs are cool and drama-free. In *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama*, for example, a sleek ice-cream parlour is set against the dwindling sun. The posters in the windows are a colourful whirl; they offer "hot dogs", "banana splits", "root beer floats". Nostalgia loves to indulge. And there's a black family, waiting at a hidden hatch, underneath a "Colored" sign.

It appears to be a scene of everyday ugliness, but it's far from a passing shot. Parks's photography was a complicated business involving plenty of equipment (the customers at the parlour would almost certainly have known he was there) and he meant for his segregated tableaux to look slightly, but discernibly staged, reflecting the artificial nature of racial division by law.

His photographs of children playing on a veranda, or eyeing the lens from a door have the same aura. You wonder: are we seeing an act?

In front of a camera, kids have a special naturalness that they feign if you tell them: "Be yourselves".

His most famous image was *Government Charwoman* (1942), a portrait of a black cleaner in Washington; her pose seems to gesture to *American Gothic* (1930), Grant Wood's painting of rustic life. But Ella Watson, Parks's subject, is holding a droopy mop, and the Stars and Stripes are hanging behind her as if with irony. You wonder if it's documentary or satire, but it's a blend of the two: critique.

In the photographs presented here, the expressions are largely inscrutable. The subjects are rarely named in the titles. One exception is *Mr and Mrs Albert Thornton, pictured at home in Mobile, Alabama*. They sit on their couch, aged 82 and 70, beneath a stiff portrait from their marriage in 1906. The elderly couple's faces are hard to read, and that's Parks's lesson about empathy: there's distance to be overcome.

Black Muslims, by contrast, is more expressly political – there are portraits of the civil rights activist Malcolm X, and Ethel Sharrieff, first daughter of the Nation of Islam – but their monochromatic palette makes for easy dichotomies: the white cowls against the sisters' black skin, or a bright placard ("Liberty or Death") against a policeman's shaded face.

They're stark and arresting shots, but the Segregation in the South images are richer because they insist on something more: that history lives on in the things it takes effort to see.

Our cultural memory is something we control – which means it's also, always, a responsibility.

Until August 1. Info: alisonjacquesgallery.com

THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION, NEW YORK AND ALISON JACQUES GALLERY, LONDON

Separated: *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama* shows a family at a 'Colored' serving hatch

Parks was also a writer, a musician and the director of the original 'Shaft'