

# WIDEWALLS

## Gordon Parks's Segregated America at Alison Jacques Gallery

Balasz Takac | 4 July 2020



As a response to the current circumstances of racial tensions happening throughout the United States, a number of exhibitions are now focusing on the practices of Black artists, especially the ones that have been left out in historical terms. In these strange times, it seems very adequate to revisit the domains of women and men who devotedly represented the social, cultural, and other implications of race and class in the American society.

The figure who holds a special spot in the hall of fame is the renowned photographer and pioneering filmmaker, creator of the iconic feature film *Shaft*, Gordon Parks (1912 - 2006). By depicting urban life, poverty and civil rights in general through his lens, he developed an impressive oeuvre that captured the very essence of racial hardship as the society shifted from one decade to another.

To look back at and compare Parks' outstanding socio-political analyses to the contemporary moment, Alison Jacques Gallery finally opened the first out of two-chapter exhibition *Gordon Parks: Part One* that was previously scheduled for March this year.



Left: Gordon Parks - Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks - Untitled, Mobile, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

## Representing The Black Communities

Namely, *Part One* featured two photo essays, *Segregation in the South* (1956) and *Black Muslims* (1963), both made by Parks during his two-decades-long tenure at the Life magazine. Gordon Parks's career reached the peak of critical acclaim during that period marked by the rise of the civil rights movement.

These outstanding images celebrated the marginalized black lives in all of their glory and were associated with the zeitgeist and the belief that the change is about to come. Parks used to spend a week at a location, getting to know the people and present them with respect.



Gordon Parks - Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1963. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

## The Series

The first series, *Segregation in the South*, document the racial division in 1950s Alabama. Differing from the civil rights photography of this period that most often featured violence and brutality, Parks decided to focus on the community life by presenting three related African American families. With considerate portraits of ordinary people, he wanted to underline empathy and speak of equality as a matter of healthy reasoning.

On the other hand, with *Black Muslims*, the photographer depicted the multifaceted view of the black Muslim movement that emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 1960s. Parks documented communities in Chicago, and New York after establishing a close relationship with Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam. The photographs of the peaceful protests and families at prayer are in dialog with the portraits of Malcolm X and Ethel Sharrieff, and as a whole, these deceptions largely contributed to a better understanding of the Black Power movement.



Left: Gordon Parks - Untitled, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks - Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

## Gordon Parks at Alison Jacques Gallery

Entwined together, these two encapsulate Parks' persuasion to critically examine the obstacles that prevented this nation from becoming what it claims to be - a free country for all men.

The exhibition is made possible in close collaboration with The Gordon Parks Foundation and is the first presentation of Parks' work in London for more than twenty-five years.

*Gordon Parks: Part One* will be on display at Alison Jacques Gallery in London from 1 July until 1 August 2020. *Part Two* focused on Parks' portrayal of the famous American professional boxer, philanthropist and activist Muhammad Ali will be on view from 1 September until October 1, 2020.

Featured image: Gordon Parks - Untitled, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation. All images courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery.