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A Powerful Exploration Of Race, Class and Sexuality

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Art: 'Fifty Years After'

By Leon Graham

"At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956"
Photo by Gordon Parks

James Barron has mounted a powerful show of work by four African-American photographers for his current exhibition. The best known, Gordon Parks, told the story of troubled race relations in America, particularly Harlem, in brilliant photo essays for Life magazine. He also was the first black person to direct a major motion picture, 1971's "Shaft."

Parks opened doors for younger black photographers, three of whom — all women — are included in Barron's exhibition. The three have brought personal stories to their work: family, lovers community, even themselves appear in their images. They speak to class and racial divides, to government actions more harmful than beneficial, to upending the stereotype of black femininity and sexploitation.

Parks' searing image, "American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942," riffs on the iconic Grant Woods painting. But instead of the severe husband and wife of Woods' picture with their pitchfork and sturdy house, Parks gives us a cleaning woman with a broom in one hand, a mop in the other. She stands ironically in front of an American flag, full of dignity and pride, a symbol of America's great wound — race.

"The Invisible Man, Harlem, New York, 1952" comes from a collaboration between Parks and Ralph Ellison, author of the controversial book that follows a man who says he has lived underground to avoid interacting with white people. In the photo, a black man peers out from under a manhole cover. "Invisible Man Retreat, 1952" shows the same man playing a phonograph in a sort of man cave lighted by strings of small bulbs. (In the book the narrator burns 1,369 bulbs simultaneously — he steals power from Con Edison — and listens to Louis Armstrong.)

Parks' "At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956" shows a black family on either side of two drinking fountains, one for "white only," one for "colored." The man helps one daughter drink while a smaller child waits her turn. It reminds how much, if imperfectly, the nation has changed.

LaToya Ruby Frazier is the photographer in the show closest to Parks. After graduation from Syracuse University with a MFA in 2007, Frazier continued chronicling the deterioration of her hometown, Braddock, Pa. At only 36, she has already received a MacArthur Fellowship — the genius award — and has exhibited widely. Barron has chosen to show her series of photo lithographs and silkscreen prints titled "Campaign for Braddock Hospital (Save Our Community Hospital)." Despite community efforts, the state demolished the hospital, a de facto community center, and built a new one in a white neighborhood. Frazier's poignant images are juxtaposed with billboards for Levi's, which had a plant in Braddock and refused to assist in saving the hospital.

The most personal photos are by Carrie Mae Weems, also a MacArthur Fellow. Barron is showing a complete portfolio of "The Kitchen Table" series, Weems' most personal work. In text accompanying the photos, Weems imagines a new lover and how he might change her life. Using a kitchen table as a symbolic stage around which life takes place, she creates characters played by herself, neighbors, friends and colleagues to explore relationships, race, gender and class. Barron also includes her "Museum" series that questions how museums select art and why they have so much power.

The fourth photographer, Mickalene Thomas, is perhaps the most dramatic, certainly the most colorful. A 2002 Yale MFA graduate, Thomas probes the meaning of femininity and sexuality within the context of African-American experience. In meticulously staged settings, she captures ripely beautiful women, comfortable in their bodies and boldness, who turn stereotypes on their head.

Although there are only two Thomas images in the show, they are unforgettable. In "Remember Me, 2006," a woman with a huge afro hairdo lounges on a small settee in front of a wall covered with iconic black music album covers and LPs. She wears a short, yellow print dress, her breasts are partially exposed — less than so many female celebrities today — and she looks out at us with total confidence.

In "Mama Bush, 2012," the woman is reclining on a busily patterned daybed, like one of Matisse's odalisques. She wears a black stomacher of some sort, her breasts are exposed, her face is turned away from the camera. She is luscious and knows it.