

Inspired by Gordon Parks, art at Barron gallery

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By Gabe Lefferts

KENT — One year ago, during the KentPresents ideas festival, James Barron began thinking about how he could combine the festival's intellectual fervor with similarly stimulating art at his gallery in Kent Barns — James Barron Art.

And then Agnes Gund, president emerita of the Museum of Modern Art, asked him if he was interested in doing a show with black women photographers.

"You're on. I'll do it," he told her.

The show, called "50 Years After," will feature work by Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas and LaToya Ruby Frazier.

"As the show was coming around," Barron said, "I was thinking it needed the gravitas of Gordon Parks."

Parks, who died in 2006, was a well-known African American documentary photographer whose work from the 1940s through the 1970s became defining artwork of the Civil Rights movement.

Barron received permission from the Gordon Parks Foundation to showcase images from a project in which Parks teamed up with Ralph Ellison, author of "Invisible Man," to make statements about and to oppose racial injustice.

All three women photographers — Weems, Thomas and Frazier — "have said that Gordon Parks created the freedom for them so that they could change the world with a camera, a lens and photographs," Barron said.

"I'm feeling very political at this moment," Barron said of his decision to do this show at this time. "This is not a time when we can be quiet."

It's been a half century now since the peak of the Civil Rights movement, and since Parks opened the door for future generations of African American photographers and artists.

"Where are we?" he asked of racial issues in the current day. "We've taken a lot of steps backward. I want people to stop and think about it."

He expressed confidence that his gallery and KentPresents will reach a community of influential people who have the potential to "shift the needle."

"I do hope," Barron said, "that when people come in to any show that I've got, that they're moved. Whether they buy work or not is insignificant; but they can be moved by it."

And there is a great deal of emotional weight in "50 Years After."

"This show has a lot of stories," Barron said. "It's the stories of three black women photographers who are saying, 'I'm going to let you into my world.'"

The opening reception for "50 Years After" at James Barron Art will be on Aug. 20, the third and final day of KentPresents, from 5 to 9 p.m. It will remain in the gallery until Oct. 16.

The Chamber of Commerce is hosting Arts Night that evening, a town-wide open house, from 5:30 to 9 p.m.

Some of the scheduled events include: a movie screen running old movies at the Kent Station Pharmacy, art gallery exhibit openings and music at Kent Barns, the center of town and outside the Fife 'n Drum. The events are all free and open to the public.