



PRESS RELEASE

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BAMPFA Exhibition Explores Untold Story of *Life* Magazine Photo-Essay by Gordon Parks

On View September 27–December 17, 2017

***Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* Features Rare Vintage Photographs and Unpublished Materials From Parks's Iconic Series "Harlem Gang Leader"**



(Berkeley, CA) August 17, 2017—This fall, the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive ([BAMPFA](#)) presents a major exhibition of work by the photographer, artist, and filmmaker Gordon Parks, whose indelible images chronicled the twentieth-century African American experience. [Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument](#) is the first exhibition to explore the production of Parks's breakthrough work: "Harlem Gang Leader," his first photo-essay for *Life* magazine, which documented life among the street gangs of 1940s Harlem. Featuring more than eighty objects from the Gordon Parks Foundation—including previously unseen photos that were redacted by the magazine's editors—the exhibition illuminates the untold history behind the series that launched Parks's career, revealing formerly submerged tensions between photographer, editor, subject, and truth.

Parks began his work in Harlem by establishing a relationship with Leonard "Red" Jackson, a seventeen-year-old gang leader who is the primary subject of the photo-essay. Through his friendship with Jackson, Parks was able to photograph daily life in postwar Harlem, where he observed the struggles of black inner-city youth contrasting with scenes of communal and domestic resilience. Images in the series range from street brawls between rival gangs to moments of unexpected

tenderness between Jackson and his family, providing a thoughtful and nuanced portrayal of African American urban life.

The project yielded hundreds of photos that Parks submitted to his editors at *Life*, who ultimately selected twenty-one images for publication. When it was published in 1948, the series was celebrated as one of the most emotionally textured depictions of the African American experience to date, and it remains an iconic work of photojournalism to this day. However, a deeper look at the selection process—represented in the exhibition through contact sheets, archival issues, and dozens of unpublished photos—reveals unacknowledged tensions between Parks’s artistic vision and an editorial process that did not fully align with his intentions. By contrasting the photographer’s initial ambitions with the series that eventually reached newsstands, the exhibition raises profound questions about the intersection of artistic representation, mass media, and curatorial intent.

BAMPFA is the exclusive West Coast venue for **Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument**, which originated at the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA). The BAMPFA presentation features screenings of multiple films directed by Parks, including three early documentary films, *Flavio* (1964), *Diary of a Harlem Family* (1968), and *Moments Without Proper Names* (1986); *The Learning Tree* (1969), the first major Hollywood studio film directed by an African American; *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* (1984), an early adaptation of the memoir *12 Years A Slave*; and *Shaft* (1971), which is widely credited with launching the “blaxploitation” genre. The exhibition also coincides with another presentation of Parks’s work, **Gordon Parks: Legacy**, which opens at San Francisco’s [Jenkins Johnson Gallery](#) on October 26, 2017.

“We are thrilled to mount an exhibition that offers visitors a new perspective on one of the most artistically ambitious works of photojournalism to emerge from the mid-twentieth century,” said BAMPFA Director and Chief Curator Lawrence Rinder. “BAMPFA’s presentation of **Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument** is a timely reminder of the ways in which mass media can be manipulated and profoundly impact our understanding of social and political issues.”

“Given how profoundly Parks’s photographs advanced the discourse around African American representation in mass culture, it is remarkable to contrast his ‘Harlem Gang Leader’ series as published with what we can discern from the more complete series that he initially submitted to *Life*,” said BAMPFA Assistant Curator Stephanie Cannizzo, who curated the exhibition’s BAMPFA presentation. “The extraordinary archival holdings of the Gordon Parks Foundation have allowed us to provide visitors with a new way to engage with a series of images that have resonated in the public consciousness for decades.”

In conjunction with **Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument**, BAMPFA hosts a [curator’s talk](#) on Thursday, September 28 at 12 p.m. with Russell Lord, who curated the exhibition’s presentation at NOMA. Other programs include a [panel discussion](#) on Saturday, September 30 at 1 p.m. with Makeda Best, curator of photography at the Harvard Art Museums; Tina Sacks, assistant professor at UC Berkeley’s School of Social Welfare; and Ken Light, Reva and David Logan Professor of Photojournalism at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and a noted documentary photographer. Both presentations are free with BAMPFA admission. Dates for the film programs will be announced in September.

Support

Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument is organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) in collaboration with The Gordon Parks Foundation, and curated by Russell Lord, Freeman Family Curator of Photographs at NOMA. The BAMPFA presentation is organized by Assistant Curator Stephanie Cannizzo with assistance from Curatorial Intern Maya Raiford Cohen. The exhibition is made possible with generous support from an anonymous donor and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

Above

Gordon Parks: *Untitled, Harlem, New York*, 1948; gelatin silver print; 13 1/4 x 10 3/8 in.; courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Visitor Information

Address

2155 Center Street, Berkeley, CA 94720

Hours

Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Fridays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Information

bampfa.org

(510) 642-0808

Gallery Admission

\$12 general admission

\$10 non-UC Berkeley students, disabled, 65+

Free for BAMPFA members; UC Berkeley students, faculty, staff, and retirees; 18 & under + one adult

Free First Thursdays: Free gallery admission on the first Thursday of each month

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About BAMPFA

An internationally recognized arts institution with deep roots in the Bay Area, the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) is a forum for cultural experiences that transform individuals and advance the local, national, and global discourse on art and film. BAMPFA is UC Berkeley's premier visual arts venue, presenting more than 450 film screenings, scores of public programs, and up to twenty exhibitions annually. With its vibrant and eclectic programming, BAMPFA inspires the imagination and ignites critical dialogue through art, film, and other forms of creative expression.

The institution's collection of more than 19,000 works of art dates from 3000 BCE to the present day and includes important holdings of Neolithic Chinese ceramics, Ming and Qing Dynasty Chinese painting, Old Master works on paper, Italian Baroque painting, early American painting, Abstract Expressionist painting, contemporary photography, and Conceptual art. BAMPFA's collection also includes more than 17,500 films and videos, including the largest collection of Japanese cinema outside of Japan, impressive holdings of Soviet cinema, West Coast avant-garde film, and seminal video art, as well as hundreds of thousands of articles, reviews, posters, and other ephemera related to the history of film.