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Gordon Parks

I Am You. Selected works 1942 - 1978

16 June – 6 September 2017

The camera can be a powerful weapon against repression, racism, violence and inequality. The American photographer Gordon Parks (1912-2006) referred to the camera as his “weapon of choice” and used photography to expose the deep divisions in American society. Parks was an important champion of equal rights for Afro-Americans and in his work addressed themes such as poverty, marginalisation and injustice. Aside from his iconic portraits of legends like Martin Luther King, he especially achieved fame through his photographic essays for the prestigious *Life Magazine* and his films *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft*. With the exhibition *Gordon Parks - I Am You. Selected Works 1942-1978*, Foam presents some 120 works from the collection of the Gordon Parks Foundation, including vintage prints, contact sheets, magazines and film excerpts.

Gordon Parks is best known for his black and white photographs, but he also produced a lot of work in colour. The exhibition includes many colour photographs as well as portraits, documentary photos and fashion photography. Excerpts from Parks’s films *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft* are also shown, which, in combination with the contact sheets and magazines containing his work, portray the social and political context in which he worked. It was a time in American history in which the Afro-American call for equality rocked the nation.

The self-taught photographer Gordon Parks came from a family of fifteen children and grew up in poverty in the state of Kansas, USA. At the age of twenty-five, he bought his first camera in a thrift store and began taking on assignments in the fashion industry. Starting in 1942, he worked for the photography programme of the Farm Security Administration, a government programme aimed at combating poverty in the rural areas of the United States. In 1948, Parks gained fame with a photo report on a gang leader named ‘Red’ in Harlem, New York. He was the first Afro-American photographer to join the staff of the then most popular photographic journalism magazine in the world: *Life Magazine*. Through his photographic essays, he put stories on the agenda in which Afro-Americans played a prominent role. As a result, a broad audience was introduced to such subjects as poverty, inequality and racial segregation.

Gordon Parks took portrait photographs of leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Martin Luther King and Black Muslim leader Malcolm X, as well as of the boxer Muhammad Ali. Aside from his iconic photographs and photographic essays, Parks became known as the first Afro-American director to direct mainstream Hollywood films. In 1969 he made *The Learning Tree*, which was loosely based on his own experiences as a black teenager growing up in Kansas in the twenties. *Shaft* (1971), on the other hand, presented the very first black ‘superhero’. It was the start of the popular genre of *Blaxploitation*: films starring black actors and primarily aimed at a black audience.

Gordon Parks - I Am You. Selected Works 1942-1978 presents the work of a fabulous storyteller. Parks carved out a place for underexposed topics during a turbulent time in the United States. He stands out for his open attitude to the various groups making up a fiercely divided America. Through the striking narrative imagery of his photos and his films, Parks managed to connect with a wide and diverse audience.

The exhibition in Foam is part of a European tour initiated by C/O Berlin. This exhibition is made possible with support from the American Embassy and the Democracy and Media Foundation.

I Am You, by Gordon Parks can be seen from 16 June – 6 September 2017 at Foam. Open daily 10am - 6pm, Thurs/Fri 10am - 9pm.

Note to editors: For information and visual material please check www.foam.org/press or contact the Press Office of Foam, e-mail pressoffice@foam.org or call +31 (0)20 5516500.

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