

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# 'A Long Arc' bends toward justice at the Addison Gallery of American Art

The show surveys nearly two centuries of photographs of the South

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 7, 2024, 6:00 a.m.



RaMell Ross, "iHome," 2013. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART © RAMELL ROSS

**A**NDOVER — Say what you will about the South, it has an unsurpassed cultural legacy. It's contributed more to American listening than any other region. The extent of that contribution is obvious. The South has given the world jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll, country and western. This is cultural "soft power" at its most powerful. The world hears with Southern ears.

"A Long Arc: Photography and the American South Since 1845" is a reminder of something less obvious: how large the region looms in American *seeing*. That's a very different kind of power. The topography and verdure seen in images of the South may be soft, but little else is. So much of what has been shown so indelibly — slavery, racism, poverty, violence — encourages averted eyes, which makes not averting them all the more of an obligation. The lyrics "Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land" take on a very different meaning. Seeing becomes an act of witness — though in no way an occasion to feel superior. This year marks the 50th anniversary of court-ordered desegregation in Boston.



Isaac H. Bonsall, "Bonsil's Photo Gallery, Chattanooga, TN," 1865. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

Organized by Atlanta's High Museum of Art, "A Long Arc" runs at the Addison Gallery of American Art through July 31. The title comes from Martin Luther King Jr.'s remark that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The show includes some 220 photographs, making it sweeping and ample, while at the same time, thanks to the wondrous specificity the camera bestows, precise and intimate.

Intimacy and amplitude might be seen to join in a single image: RaMell Ross's "iHome," from 2012. A 19th-century mansion is visible on an iPhone screen. The person holding the iPhone is Black. Look closely, and you can see the traditional classical colonnade of a plantation house. Hand, phone, and image dominate the foreground. Looming out of focus in the background is the house, at once portal to and emanation from a spectral past. That's a lot of history, a lot, packed into slightly more than 500 square inches.



Unidentified Photographer, "2nd Regiment, United States Colored Light Artillery, Battery A: Ram," circa 1864. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART

“A Long Arc” follows its own, chronological arc. It begins with the antebellum period and Civil War. One reason that Northern photographers were so much more prevalent is that the Union naval blockade largely cut off shipments of photographic supplies from Europe. History is even more likely to be photographed by the victors than written by them.

Here is the first, and most extreme, instance of a running theme throughout the show: images taken by outsiders vs. images taken by native Southerners. That interplay is most evident in the section on the civil rights years, 1956-68, with photographs from both Northerners, such as Danny Lyon and Bruce Davidson, and Southerners, such as Ernest C. Withers and Charles Moore.



Charles Moore, "Martin Luther King Jr. Arrested, Montgomery, Alabama," 1958. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA © ESTATE OF THE ARTIST

Some of those visitors you'd expect: Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, Robert Frank. There are even more whose presence is surprising: Edward Weston, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Lee Friedlander, even Diane Arbus (one of her two pictures here is a portrait of Coretta Scott King).

The period from 1865-1930, the next section of "A Long Arc," witnessed Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow, the emergence of the mythos of the Lost Cause, and promotion of "a New South." These years were crucially important, but the elements of that importance didn't necessarily lend themselves as well to visualization. This is another running theme: how the camera, confronted with daunting abstractions, like discrimination and inequality, sometimes can, and sometimes can't reveal their human impact. The next section, covering 1930-45, very much shows what the camera can do in this regard.

That's chiefly through the work of such [Farm Security Administration](#) photographers as Evans and Lange.



William Christenberry, "The Shack," Greensboro, Alabama," 1980. ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

The section devoted to 1945-1970 documents the postwar go-go years, when the South changed even more than the rest of the country did (no small feat). It overlaps with both the civil rights section and, a little bit, with the next section, 1970-96. That's largely thanks to the careers of William Eggleston (who turns 85 in July) and the late William Christenberry.

The two were friends, and their work shares a nobly deadpan quality, ultimately derived from Evans. Yet each deployed that deadpan in very different, if also surprisingly complementary ways. Eggleston is a kind of Memphian magical realist. Christenberry was an Alabamian elegist. In one of those happy implausibilities that refresh the culture, the locus of both Christenberry's work and RaMell Ross's is Hale County, where Evans

shot the photographs in his collaboration with James Agee, [“Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.”](#)





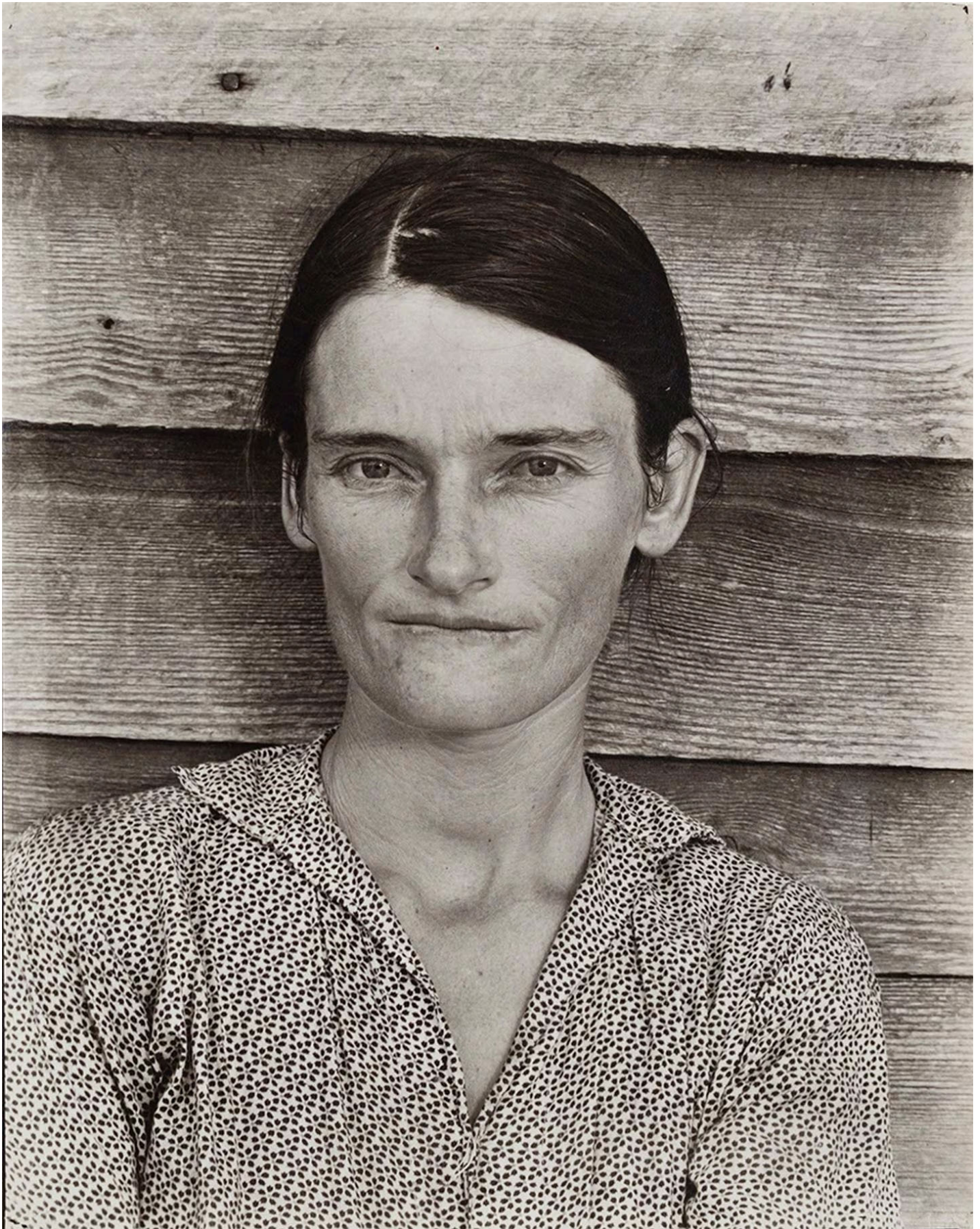
William Eggleston, "Huntsville, Alabama," 1978. ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

The final section, which covers 1996 to the present, has the amusing (because not inaccurate) title of "A New South, Again." It draws on the High's "Picturing the South" project. Starting in '96, the museum began commissioning photographers to document the region. That creative tension between inside and outside continues. Some have been Southerners: Emmet Gowin, Sally Mann. Others have not: Abelardo Morell, An-My Lê, Martin Parr. One associates Richard Misrach with the West, for example. Yet in his very large view of a swamp and pipeline — it's 5 feet by 6 feet — Misrach makes the Louisiana bayous very much his own.



Richard Misrach, "Swamp and Pipeline, Geismar, Louisiana," 1998. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA © 1998 RICHARD MISRACH /COURTESY FRAENKEL GALLERY, PACE-MACGILL GALLERY AND MARC SELWYN FINE ARTS

Even with so many photographs, and such a lot of ground to cover, “A Long Arc” finds room for internal grace notes. Evans’s 1936 portrait of Allie Mae Burroughs, from “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,” hangs cater-corner to an even more striking, if nowhere near as famous, Lange portrait, from 1938, “Formerly enslaved woman, Alabama.” Evans’s “Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia,” also from 1936, is by a set of family portraits by Evelyn Massengill, who helped run a traveling commercial photographic studio with relatives. Speaking of family, an Eggleston picture hangs near one taken by his cousin Maude Schuyler Clay.



Walker Evans, "Allie Mae Burroughs, Wife of a Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama," 1936. FRANK E. GRAHAM

So many of the most striking images here — of the Civil War, of economic conditions, of the civil rights protests — present mighty externalities, lives shared, public issues. Much of “A Long Arc” could illustrate a textbook for a civics or American history course, and that course would be well worth taking.



Alec Soth, "Enchanted Forest (36), Texas," 2006. HIGH MUSEUM OF ART, ATLANTA © ALEC SOTH / MAGNUM PHOTOS

That means there's all the more reason to note that no small part of the show's richness is the allowance it makes for inwardness and mystery. “Southern Gothic,” after all, is no less a part of the region's cultural baggage than “Lost Cause” or “New South.” Among the most memorable images here, because they're often the most inscrutable and/or evocative, come from Mann, E.J. Bellocq, Clarence John Laughlin, and Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Mann is from Virginia, Bellocq and Laughlin from New Orleans, Meatyard

from Kentucky. Yet their work transcends region, unless the South can be said to have a greater claim on the id and imagination than anywhere else (yes, that argument has been made). Alec Soth, another “Picturing the South” participant, isn’t a Southerner — though the Mississippi does pass through his native Minneapolis. Even so, Soth’s “Enchanted Forest (36), Texas” very much fits within the borders of this visual dream kingdom. The long arc bends. Sometimes it also shimmers.

## **A LONG ARC: Photography and the American South Since 1945**

At Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 3 Chapel Ave., Andover, through July 31. 978-749-4015, [addison.andover.edu/](https://addison.andover.edu/)

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