

EDITOR'S PICK

Addison Gallery of American Art

A sweeping view of the South at the Addison

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ANDOVER — Everyone has an image of the American South.

But an exhibit at the Addison Gallery of American Art looks at how generations of photographers have seen this region, from 1845 to the present day, through frequent periods of social upheaval.

“The South occupies an interesting place within the history of American photography, and within American culture more generally, because the South is at times positioned as this separate country within the U.S.,” said Gregory Harris, curator at the High Art Museum in Atlanta.

“It’s kind of an oddity within America. It’s at once mythologized and stereotyped in certain cases, and yet at other times it’s the crucible of American culture, it’s exemplary of what it means to be American, and so we wanted to dig into the depictions of America and how the South had been crucial in telling that story of the U.S.”

Harris and Sarah Kennel, a curator at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, organized “A Long Arc: Photography and the American South since 1845,” which will be at the Addison until July 31.

Harris and Kennel also recently discussed the exhibit in a Zoom visit hosted by

Andover's Memorial Hall Library, and their remarks will be available soon at the library's website, at mhl.org/videos.

The show, which is described as the first major survey of Southern photography in 25 years, occupies the entire second floor of the Addison.

The first photograph is from 1859 and depicts Gilbert Hunt, a Black man who had formerly been enslaved but purchased his freedom and commissioned this portrait of himself. He is wearing a fine suit and holds a hammer, a symbol of his profession as a blacksmith.

The portrait demonstrates Hunt's appreciation of the idea that photographs project power, and whoever decides how images get made and what they show is in control. It's a theme that resonates throughout the exhibit.

"Frederick Douglass was famed for championing photography in particular as a way that Black Americans could counter racist stereotypes by being able to project their pride, their beauty, in front of the camera," said Kennel, who worked at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem from 2015 to 2019.

Control is also at work in photos from the Civil War of Southern soldiers who try to project an air of confidence and bravery, as they were recorded by photographers who set up studios in tents near military encampments.

The exercise of power is present in another genre of photo that was common in the South before and during the war, which Kennel called nanny portraits, in which "enslaved individuals were pictured as members of households of white families, in part as a rhetorical device in the South to try to demonstrate that slavery could be benevolent."

A rhetorical device tries to persuade someone to adopt a certain position, and it operated in one of the most famous photographs in the show, "Peter," from 1863 by

McPherson and Oliver.

This photo shows scars on the back of an enslaved man who ran away and was whipped after he was recaptured.

“It was part of a series of photographs that were produced en masse as these cartes de visites, almost like calling cards, that was meant to support the abolitionist movement,” Kennel said. The photo was circulated widely at a moment when support for the war was flagging in the North.

Kennel contrasted its grim message with a photo from 1862 by Henry Moore, from Goffstown, New Hampshire, of formerly enslaved people who had formed an independent community on the South Carolina land they previously worked for slaveowners.

“So we see photography as a witness to this moment of transformation, both in terms of the war but also in terms of socially, as this group looks toward an uncertain future, I think with hope and some trepidation,” Kennel said.

In addition to the antebellum and Civil War periods, the photographs focus on the years from 1865 to 1930, when Jim Crow laws were implemented in the South.

There is an emphasis during the Depression years, from 1930 to 1945, on the documentary styles developed by well-known photographers such as Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke-White, who visited the South while working for New Deal programs.

Later periods examine the Civil Rights movement, and one of the most recent photographs shows graffiti covering a pedestal that previously supported a statue of Robert E. Lee in Richmond, Virginia, “literally rewriting history,” Harris said.

But along with photography that bears witness to public events, there is also a fair

amount of contemplative work, especially in years following the Civil Rights era.

“Many photographers turned inward and started making pictures that were about things that were closer to them,” Harris said. “They would photograph their immediate surroundings, or their own family.”

He gave the example of Ralph Eugene Meatyard from Lexington, Kentucky, who in the 1960s used to photograph his children in abandoned buildings and cemeteries, accompanied by props such as masks or dolls.

“There’s a sense that something is amiss in these pictures,” Harris said. “He was picking up on a lot of the themes in Southern gothic literature, and that comes through in this very unsettling and poignant way.”

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Sarah Kennel, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts
