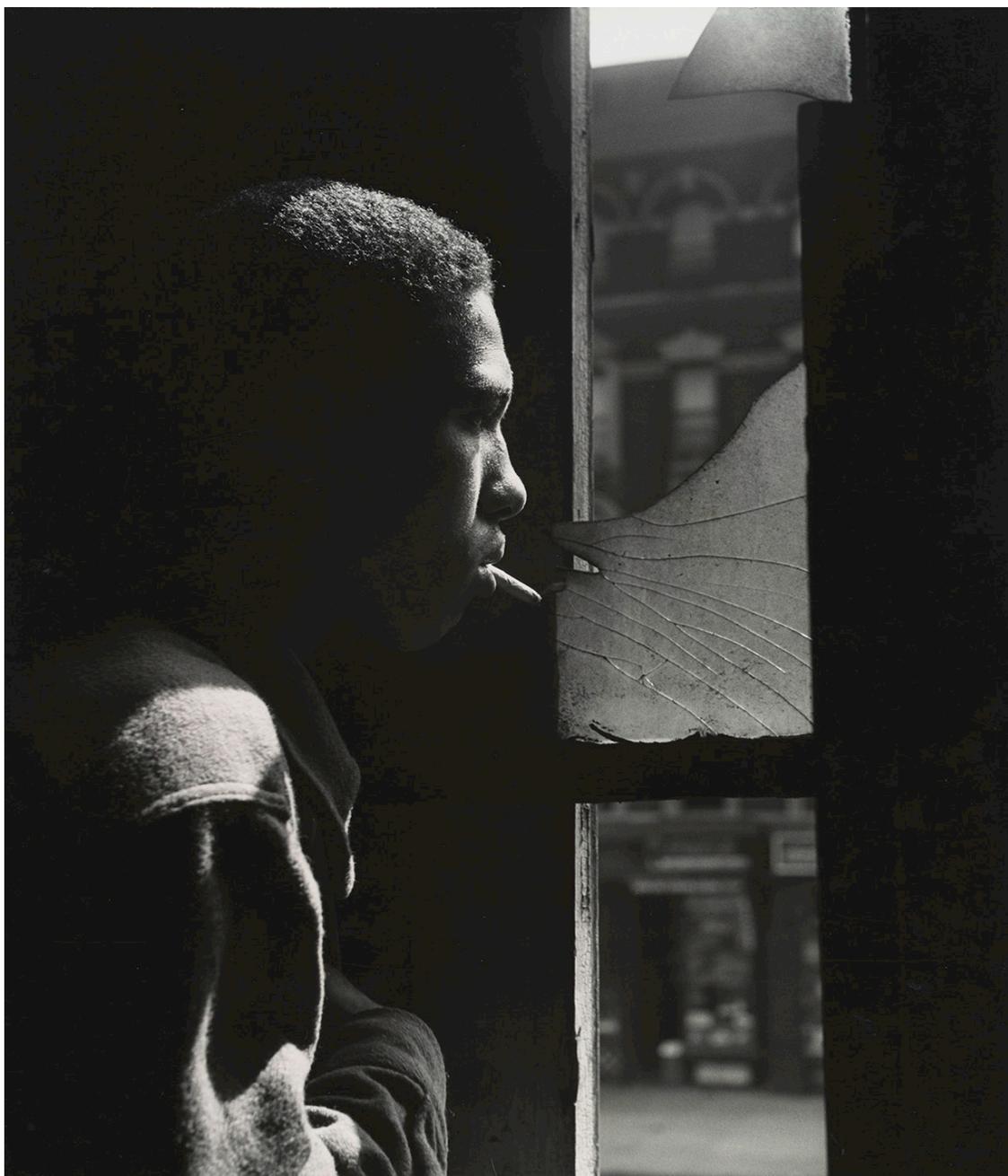


GLADSTONE GALLERY

"LaToya Ruby Frazier," *Phaidon*, February, 2017

PHAIDON

GORDON PARKS'S RED JACKSON



GLADSTONE GALLERY

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER



“There’s tremendous beauty in people’s pain and suffering.”

Since I was a teenager I’ve been obsessed with early twentieth-century social-documentary photography. In the photo history books that I trained with, one of the only significant African Americans was Gordon Parks. He allows the poor, ostracized, and alienated to have power and authority through their images; he’s photographing them with so much dignity and human awareness and care.

The photograph *Red Jackson* is important because it’s from Parks’s first assignment with *Life* magazine, known as *The Harlem Gang Leader*, in which he photographs Leonard Jackson, who goes by the nickname Red. In 1948 there wasn’t much opportunity for young teenagers: the education system was failing, they were living in squalor, and economically they were disempowered.

On its own, it’s a nonjudgmental portrait, but the way it was handled in the magazine was not. The subtitle includes the words violence and frustration, and *Life* set it up so the whole layout shows Leonard as a threat or a menace. People would rather only see a binary between good and bad.

What is impressive about Parks is that he was able to balance this cruel and tender world in a poetic way. Aesthetically and formally, I see Vermeer; I see the light and the shadow of a Rembrandt, I see Goya. I see beautiful understanding of texture, framing, proximity, juxtaposition...

There’s tremendous beauty in people’s pain and suffering. This is why we make art. The truth is we need social documentary, especially today. When I look at this image, I think about all the black men being killed by police right now, and the fact that there is no justice for them.

This photograph is also symbolic of Parks himself. In this portrait of Red, I can see the poetry of Parks. I see him as a filmmaker and a composer—it’s a silent image, but I can hear it. There’s a sound that comes from it.

That’s the genius of Parks—that’s what excites me about him and what encouraged me to keep using my camera. He could completely smash any stereotype by showing multifaceted dimensions of any one person’s psychology. It’s so humane and universal, and it’s undeniable.



LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER, *GRANDMA RUBY AND ME*, 2005 ←

GORDON PARKS, *RED JACKSON*, 1948 →

The most prominent African American photographer and journalist of the 1950s and 1960s, Gordon Parks documented the experiences of under-represented people and communities while also producing celebrity, fashion, and news photography. This image of Harlem gang leader Red Jackson is one of a series Parks made for *Life* magazine in 1948. The photo essay was the first to look closely and soberly at the reality of life in Harlem at midcentury and anticipates the more strident civil rights exposés by Parks and other photojournalists in the 1960s.
