

GLADSTONE GALLERY

David Amsden, "Angela Bassett by Spike Lee," *W Magazine*, February 13, 2019

W MAGAZINE

DIRECTOR'S CUT
ANGELA BASSETT by SPIKE LEE



Also Starring
YALITZA APARICIO by ALFONSO CUARÓN
EMMA STONE by YORGOS LANTHIMOS
BEL POWLEY by MARIELLE HELLER

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Iconic 20th Century Images, Reinvented: A History Lesson From Angela Bassett, Spike Lee, Ruth E. Carter, and LaToya Ruby Frazier

February 13, 2019 9:00 am

Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

Spike Lee needed a queen. Three queens, in fact. One in front of the camera, one behind it, another to make sure everything looked and felt just so. As a filmmaker who has been tackling racism in America for more than 30 years, Lee has often strived to do many things at once: mix comedy and drama, satire with seriousness, and brazenly resurrect the past, as he did with his latest movie,

Hence the three queens he had gathered inside a photo studio in Hollywood.

There was Angela Bassett, the actress, whom Lee first directed in *Malcolm X*, and whom he had chosen specifically for her imperial charisma. "So regal, so majestic," Lee remarked. There was LaToya Ruby Frazier,

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the artist acclaimed for her work exploring the intersection of race, family, and place, who also shot the

movie posters for *BlacKkKlansman*. And styling the proceedings was Ruth E. Carter, Lee's costume designer since *School Daze*, his second feature, whose intricate work on *Black Panther* helped give the blockbuster its singular aesthetic and earned her an Oscar nomination. Together, they would spend the day paying tribute to some of Lee's favorite photographers, including those in his personal collection, like James Van Der Zee, Irving Penn, and Gordon Parks, the late director of the original *Shaft*, and a hero of Lee's. The idea was not so much to re-create celebrated images as to channel them into something new, with Bassett starring in a variety of shape-shifting roles—formidable diva, bohemian temptress—as the director saw fit.

As Lee spoke, Bassett was being dressed by Carter for the second shoot of the day, which would become one of this issue's covers. It was an ode to a 1950s photo by Parks that itself was an ode to *Invisible Man*, the classic Ralph Ellison novel that slyly tackled issues of individuality and personal identity faced by African Americans in the first part of the 20th century. In the original photograph, a black man sits having a meal on a makeshift stool, his face obscured in shadow and backlit by a wall of Edison bulbs; it's a visual representation of the novel's nameless protagonist, who lives underground in a room illuminated by more than a thousand bulbs lit with pirated electricity. For the magazine, a similar backdrop was constructed, though Lee added gauzy curtains in pastel shades—an allusion to Parks's work from the 1980s. The effect was wholly different from the original. Bassett emerged in a purple Gucci dress and elegantly sauntered onto the set; as Frazier's camera clicked, Lee beamed at the images on a monitor: a radiant black woman who was aware of her power, proud to be seen.

"Boom shakalaka!" exclaimed Lee. "We got it!"

He was working under the gun, needing to finish up in order to catch a red-eye back to New York, so the celebration was short-lived.

"Okay, everyone, onto the next!" he shouted. "Go, go, go!"

Lee had been on a busy, booming run since last May, when *BlacKkKlansman* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Grand Prix. Telling the true but improbable tale of Ron Stallworth, a black police with this film," Lee said. "The time we're living in is too dangerous to be subtle."

While this sense of urgency has long fueled his work—Lee had asserted that black lives matter long before hashtags—*BlacKkKlansman* resonated with a larger audience; grossing \$89 million, it marked the second-best box office opening of his storied career. "It's loony tunes out there, total insanity," said Lee, growing animated as he referred to the political climate. "And that's why this film connected with audiences globally. They see this film, they see this guy in the White House, what's happening in America—but this resurgence of the far right is happening globally."

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Two days before the shoot took place, Lee had been at the Golden Globes, where *BlacKkKlansman* was nominated for four awards, including best drama and best director. He came away empty-handed. “I’m not going to sit here and lie to you and say it was nice,” he said. “But if that was the driving force for making films, me winning awards, I would have quit after *Do the Right Thing*.” Two weeks later, he would receive Oscar nominations for best director and best motion picture, both firsts; but he seemed already satisfied that his resurgence had triggered people to reevaluate some of his earlier work that carried a similar message but didn’t find its way into the mainstream. “At the time, people weren’t ready for films like *25th Hour* and *Bamboozled*,” he said. “So they fell through the cracks. But now people are ready.”

The shoot with Bassett was a frenetic affair, with a total of eight sets built and dismantled throughout the day. Bassett, who carried on in a sphinxlike silence, was posed in a position reminiscent of Irving Penn’s famous photo of the world heavyweight champion Joe Louis, and later transformed into Billie Holiday in an homage to Roy DeCarava, the renowned jazz photographer. Working with Frazier, a Guggenheim fellow and recipient of a “genius grant” from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, was for Lee a momentous occasion—momentous occasion—Frazier’s solo show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise last year featured “*Flint Is Family*,”

a harrowing series of photographs of three generations of women who endured the Michigan water crisis; it earned her comparisons to Goya. “When I really like people’s work, and there’s an opportunity to work with them, I love doing it,” Lee said, explaining that he saw Frazier’s photography as an extension of the same lineage they were now celebrating. “Simply put, she’s killing it.”

Exhausted from months devoted to promoting *BlacKkKlansman*, Lee was clearly enjoying the chance to spend some time doing instead of talking. Toward the end of the day, as Bassett was being prepped for a shoot inspired by the photographs of Charles “Teenie” Harris, who documented black life in Pittsburgh for four decades, Lee decided to give modeling a shot. Hopping onto the set, he sprawled across a vintage Chinese rug, mugging for the camera in a variety of faux-sultry poses. But then Bassett, his queen, arrived in a satin slip dress. Lee happily relinquished the throne.

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Posed in a setup often used by Irving Penn, one of Spike Lee's favorite photographers, Bassett wears a Moschino gown and Moschino Couture gloves; Balenciaga earrings; Toni + Chloë Goutal necklace; stylist's own stole.
Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

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The exuberance of Charles "Teenie" Harris's pictures of African American communities in Pittsburgh was the starting point for this image. Fendi coat; Nili Lotan dress; Bulgari necklace; Lagos ring; Miu Miu shoes. **Beauty note:** Embrace the spotlight. Chanel moisturizing Baume Essentiel in Sculpting imparts a showstopping glow via a sleek pearly stick. Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.



In her groundbreaking "Kitchen Table Series" (1990), the artist Carrie Mae Weems explored race, class, and gender in a domestic setting. Bassett channels that attitude of confident reflection, wearing a Gucci dress; Kenneth Jay Lane earrings; Elizabeth Locke ring (right hand); Cartier ring (left hand). Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

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A 1950s photograph by Gordon Parks, an ode to the Ralph Ellison novel *Invisible Man*, gets a glamorous reinterpretation. Gucci dress; Tiffany & Co. earrings; Bulgari bracelet; Gismondi 1754 ring; Prada shoes.

Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

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In his hometown of Bamako, Mali, Malick Sidibé chronicled the life and culture of his community, with carefully posed and styled photographs. Bassett pays homage, wearing a Salvatore Ferragamo blazer, blouse, pants, and shoes; Kenneth Jay Lane earrings; Boss pocket square; Chanel necklace; Vendorafa rings; bracelets: Elizabeth Locke, Marina B, Elizabeth Locke (right hand, from top); Vendorafa (left hand).
Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

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Bassett brings back to life the New York jazz-age spirit present in many of Roy DeCarava's black and white images. Roberto Cavalli dress; Bijou Van Ness fascinator; Rodarte earrings and bracelet; Marina B gold bracelet; Cartier ring; Miu Miu shoes; stylist's own stole. Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.

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The soul of the 1930s Harlem Renaissance, which was extensively documented at the time by the black photographer James Van Der Zee, is alive and well. Gucci dress, scarf, feline necklace, fan, and shoes; Jennifer Behr turban; Fox & Bond necklace; Gismondi 1754 ring. Directed by Spike Lee; Photograph by LaToya Ruby Frazier; Styled by Costume designer Ruth E. Carter.