TIME IS NOW

PHOTOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN JAMES BALDWIN'S AMERICA

September 13 – December 30, 2018
Level 3, Sert Gallery

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts
Harvard University
24 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

For the Visual Arts
By the time of his death, essay collections such as The Fire Next Time (1963) and novels like Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968) had earned the prolific African American novelist, playwright, poet, and essayist James Baldwin (1924–1987) an international reputation as one of the most consequential American cultural critics. In one of his last interviews, James Baldwin declared himself a “witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I’ve seen and the possibilities I think I see.” The work of witnessing was a central theme in his life. He once claimed that the artist’s role is “to be a witness to the truth” and “to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface . . .” In his widely acclaimed writing, Baldwin rigorously pursued and described a painful gap between America’s realities and its ideals, or what he referred to as the “American illusion.” Through works drawn from his own life, he articulated and charged his audiences with a communal mission. He linked the urgency of this quest and the nation’s survival with the words “Time is now.”

The belief in the transformative possibilities of photography and the call to witness similarly rallied, distinguished, infused, and propelled modern documentary photography in America in the twentieth century. The genre found its voice in the Depression era, and expanded its range and impact throughout the century. Baldwin himself interacted with these artists and learned from their historic images. Like Baldwin, they were conscious of their dual identities as citizens and critics and developed their personal creative visions through their illuminations of the everyday during a tumultuous period in the nation’s history. Echoing the need for critical views of American life that inspired dynamic photographic production, Baldwin called on his readers to free themselves from the nation’s myths and to “try to find out what is really happening here.” These words, like a photograph of young people marching in the street or a scene at a prison, still resonate.
in James Baldwin's America

Time is Now:

Makeda Best: 6 pm
Thursday, September 13, 5:30–7:30 pm
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ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin's America charts the nation's transformative cultural moment in the 20th century alongside the life of one of its most influential figures, interweaving the two narratives through the lens of the American documentary tradition. Photographers in the exhibition include Diane Arbus, Richard Baizel, Dawoud Bey, Ben Shahn, Peter Campbell, William Carter, Diane Arbus, Richard Balzer, Dawoud Bey, Peter Campbell, William Carter, Robert Frank, Leonard Freed, Venturi, Scott Schapiro, John Simmons, Francis Espada, Robert Frank, Leonard Freed, Joanne Leonard, Ken Light, Danny Lyon, John Ewing, Copy Editor

Time is Now: Photograph and Social Change in James Baldwin’s America
Thursday, September 13, 5:30–7:30 pm
Level 3

Curatorial Walk-through with Makeda Best
Thursday, September 13, 6 pm
Level 3

Curator Talk: Makeda Best and Barbara Norfleet with Dan Byers Tuesday, October 2, 6 pm
Level 3

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS
Reception: Fall Exhibitions 2018–19 Visual and Environmental Studies Visiting Faculty

The exhibition marks the continuation of an ongoing series of collaborations between the Harvard Art Museums and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, and is timed to coincide with artist Teresa Fernández’s Harvard Yard installation, Autumn (…Nothing Personal), which references Nothing Personal (1964) by Baldwin and photographer Richard Avedon. Commissioned by the Harvard University Committee on the Arts (HUCOA), Autumn (…Nothing Personal) is a site-specific work for the Tercentenary Theatre that will unfold as both a physical site and as a space for public dialogue and performance.

Time is Now: Photography and Social Change in James Baldwin’s America is co-organized by the Carpenter Center and Harvard Art Museums, and curated by Makeda Best, Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography, Harvard Art Museums.

Thank you to Widgeon Point Charitable Foundation, Martha Tedeschi, Maureen Donovan, Jennifer Allen, Lynette Roth, Dana Krance, John Ewing, Copy Editor

About the exhibition brings together an image of fine art, social documentary, and professional photography, the collection was established in the mid-1960s to consolidate some of Harvard University's holdings of significant historical photographs, and to support teaching of the history and aesthetic practices of photography by challenging existing paradigms about the meaning and function of photography through innovative exhibitions, publications, programs, and pedagogy.

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