Rightly viewed, the whole soul of man is a sort of picture gallery, a grand panorama, in which all the great facts of the universe, in tracing things of time and things of eternity, are painted.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

THE GREAT NINETEENTH-CENTURY ABOLITIONIST and orator Frederick Douglass understood the power of photography and the archive better than most. In his oratory and advocacy, he used both as tools for social change and liberation, shifting perspectives, and transforming lives. The passage that begins my essay is revelatory of a period at the start of the Civil War in 1861 when the very soul of the nation was under siege. Yet Douglass takes up the photograph and its archival uses in his “Lecture on Pictures” as a metaphor to signal concurrent battles over established and emerging media (forms of visual representation and presentation)—the picture gallery vs. the panorama, the painting vs. the photograph—and how this unprecedented time of national crisis would be remembered, documented, and archived. His specific reference to the picture gallery and the grand panorama demonstrates his deep knowledge of and personal experience with technological innovation and visual representation, notably photography, and the presentation and circulation of
images and ideas. It also serves as a rallying call for image-makers and activists alike to harness these emergent tools of communication for the dawn of a new era.

With his series of essays on photography, Douglass set the stage for Black nineteenth-century photographers to document generations of survivors of slavery, chart the progress of the race, and, indeed, guarantee the future. Photographers like C.M. Battey, whose 1893 seated portrait of Douglass captures the stalwart statesman in his sunset years (Pl. 12), went on to make lasting portraits of Black leaders and intellectuals, including Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Battey’s portraits of Black leaders frequently appeared on the covers of influential early twentieth-century Black publications, such as *The Crisis, The Messenger,* and *Opportunity,* while his status as official photographer at Tuskegee Institute, following his predecessor Arthur P. Bedou, promised future generations of Black photographers through his pedagogy and example.

Works by the Twin Cities photographers J.P. Ball (Minneapolis) and Harry Shepherd (St. Paul) offer a local perspective on the responsibility and legacy of nineteenth-century Black photographers. Ball, who was among the first generation of photographers in America, had studios in Cincinnati, Minneapolis, and Helena, Washington, boasting all forms of the medium from daguerreotypes to cabinet cards. In addition to his celebrated national reputation, which attracted sitters like Douglass and other abolitionists, Ball was famously known to have created a large-scale, painted canvas panorama in Cincinnati: *Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States Comprising Views of the African Slave Trade; of the Northern and Southern Cities; of Cotton and Sugar Plantations; of the Mississippi, Ohio, and Susquehanna Rivers; Niagara Falls &c* (1855). A staunch abolitionist and supporter of the Union Army during the Civil War, Ball later became the official photographer of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, held in Minneapolis in 1887. He is represented in the exhibition by an exquisite carte de visite of Mattie Allen (1874–77), her three-quarter pose revealing Ball’s innate talents in studio portraiture (Pl. 7).

Both Ball and Shepherd originally hailed from Virginia. Shepherd was active from 1880 to 1905 in St. Paul, where he operated the first Black-owned studio, the People’s Photography Gallery, and several other studios, infusing his practice with the portraits of men of prominent political stature, such as Frederick L. McGhee, the first Black lawyer in Minnesota and an organizer of the Niagara Movement with Du Bois (Pl. 94). Shepherd’s most notable commission came from Thomas Calloway of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, to make portraits akin to the formal three-quarter bust shown in the exhibition of McGhee for the critically acclaimed *American Negro* exhibit.
at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. Thomas E. Askew provided similar portraits of African Americans from his native Georgia for albums commissioned by Du Bois for the same show, uplifting Black progress despite the failures of Reconstruction and the landmark Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision of 1896 codifying Jim Crow laws that would endure for the next half century (Pl. 5). Together, their art and activism served as fodder for Black artists and photographers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to develop powerful mnemonic aesthetic practices foregrounding archival images in their contemporary works as catalysts of memory, activism, and determination.

**TRACING THINGS OF TIME**

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Black photographers continued to document Black life and culture in cities and rural communities around the country. Addison Scurlock moved from Fayetteville, North Carolina, to Washington, DC, in 1900 and opened a photography studio on popular U Street in 1911. His family firm served ordinary folks, politicians, and celebrities, and enjoyed a coveted role as staff photographers for Howard University. Scurlock’s pride in his practice can be seen in a telling self-portrait, which demonstrates his technical expertise with large-format studio cameras and his attention to the details of lighting Black subjects (Pl. 91). From New Orleans, Arthur P. Bedou enjoyed a long career, focusing on individuals of note in the South and the activities of prominent historically Black colleges and universities, including Tuskegee Institute and Xavier University. For seven years, from 1908 until 1915, Bedou, taking over from Battey, was the personal photographer to Tuskegee’s Booker T. Washington, creating the most memorable and dynamic images of this captivating leader. Bedou was highly attuned to an evolving Black political sphere, and his photographs of Washington and Marcus Garvey show how he used his camera for the purposes of social change (Pl. 15).

The Black Press was an important outlet for disseminating news and information to segregated Black communities around the country in the twentieth century. Photographs that accompanied news stories or stood on their own enabled generations of Black people to take pride in their self-images. Following his service in World War II, John F. Glanton returned to Minneapolis and opened a photography studio catering to families and the community. His untitled portrait of a young woman and her record albums gives a sense of the stylish vernacular images he made, showing the popularity of Black music in households (Pl. 54). Glanton’s photographs were published widely in the Twin Cities Black Press, including the *Minneapolis Spokesman* and the *St. Paul Recorder*. Charles “Teenie” Harris enjoyed a more than thirty-year career with the
popular *Pittsburgh Courier*, known for its documentary photographs and sophisticated marketing finesse around the country. Harris regularly photographed in and around the Hill District of Pittsburgh, capturing the work lives and leisure time of the City of Steel’s workers and performers (Pl. 61).

**MINING THE ARCHIVE**

Several of the artists in the exhibition working in the late twentieth century and today employ what I have called a mnemonic aesthetic practice, mining the archive of historical photographs to create works that relate the past to the present. In many cases, their works are realized as collages that involve multiple photographic images and multiple media. Krista Franklin’s *In Hea’bin* (2008) combines loving family portraits (a father and son reading, a young girl, a mother carrying a tray of drinks) with a portrait of Frederick Douglass and images of clouds in a mixed-media collage that serves as a memorial (Pl. 48). Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas digitally collaged reporter James “Spider” Martin’s documentary photographs of the Selma to Montgomery marches onto mirrored surfaces in *Bury Me Standing* (2016), which invite and demand that viewers see themselves in history and the passing of time (Pl. 102). In other works, Kesha Bruce’s *Begotten* (2008), from the series *(Re)calling & (Re)telling*, was inspired by a historical image of enslaved children. In this sepia-toned archival pigment print, the artist reframes the inspirational photograph in the simple shape of a house, which she places on a background with the words from the biblical Book of Matthew, tracing the genealogy of Jesus (Pl. 23).

The works of Thomas and Bruce show how the narrative practice of mnemonic aesthetics frequently uses documentary images precisely to reveal historical truths that impact if not drive social justice movements. In other examples, artists like Nona Faustine and Rashid Johnson use their own bodies, their own portraits, to uncover little known histories or to reify influential historical figures. In Faustine’s *Ye Are My Witness, Van Brunt Slave Cemetery Site, Brooklyn* (2018), her body covered only by a white sheath blowing in the wind, she marks this controversial site hidden from history for far too long (Pl. 43). In Johnson’s *Self-Portrait with My Hair Parted Like Frederick Douglass* (2003) and others, he reaches back in time to personify great African American leaders from history (Pl. 73).

In other works in the exhibition, historic familial images are centered in works of memorialization honoring ritual practice and generational legacy. For example, Albert Chong’s *Miss Peggy* (2015) honors her legacy by decorating her formal studio portrait from the 1950s with purple and white flowers, illuminating family photographs and his
roots in Jamaica with talismanic objects found in nature (Pl. 29). Atlanta-based artist Radcliffe Bailey often incorporates historic family photographs and those that he’s collected, notably tintypes and other nineteenth-century processes, in his mixed-media works. In 4, the upper half of this large-scale mixed-media work reveals the portrait of a woman from a nineteenth-century tintype (Pl. 6). Another work by Bailey titled Tricky bears the ghostly figure of a man wearing a top hat looking straight at the viewer through a spiritual haze, projecting the sense of a long-ago memory. Both Chong and Bailey frequently employ ritual practices in their works of photography, installation, and sculpture, whether through the manipulation of the photographic process, use of historic images, or incorporation of other meaningful symbols to create the overall work.

**PORTRAITIST = ACTIVIST**

A *Picture Gallery of the Soul* offers a dramatic and joyful survey of African American photography with a special focus on the portrait and its role in identity formation, social change, and community activism. Timely in its mounting, this historical survey shows the lasting impact of some of the nineteenth century’s seminal Black photographers and images on its counterparts of the next two centuries, foregrounding the portrait’s pivotal role in documenting moments of national reckoning, including the turbulent times in which we live today. For example, Vanessa Charlot’s *Love in Struggle* (2020) takes the setting of one of the many Black Lives Matter sit-ins of the last year to zero in on a masked couple taking solace in each other, a handmade “No Justice, No Peace” sign giving way to their sense of purpose (Pl. 28). The work of Mark Clennon in *Untitled* (2020) highlights the intergenerational nature of the ongoing political struggle, documenting the moment for his three-year-old daughter and posterity (Pl. 30).

As Douglass demonstrated in his writings and by his example, to have one’s portrait made is a form of self-determination and self-preservation. Armed with cameras in their hands, the Black photographers exhibited here not only document the historical record, they also imbed themselves within it through radical and intentional acts of self-portraiture, as in works by María Magdalena Campos-Pons (Pl. 25), John Pinderhughes (Pl. 84), Coreen Simpson (Pl. 95), and Kwame Braithwaite (Pl. 19). Thus, if a photographic portrait is evidence of humanity’s perseverance despite the odds, a testament to having been there, then documentation of Black life and culture—of beauty, triumph, failure, art, music, place, and education—proposes a mode of photographic practice that uses memory as an aesthetic tool, uniting communities, sharing stories, creating possibility, and forging pathways to sustainable Black futures.
NOTE


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