



Gordon Parks

Law and disorder

Acclaimed photographer's latest work takes us on a journey back to the 1950s – a largely hidden world of violence, police work, and incarceration in the USA



WHEN *Life* magazine asked Gordon Parks to illustrate a recurring series of articles on crime in the United States in 1957, he embarked on a six-week journey that took him and reporter Robert Wallace to the streets of New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

Unlike much of his previous work as staff photographer at the magazine, the images were made in colour using only available light. The resulting eight-page photo-essay, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, was noteworthy for its bold aesthetic and sophistication, and how it challenged pervasive stereo-





types about criminality in mainstream media. The photographs provided a richly-hued, cinematic portrayal of a largely hidden world of violence, police work, and incarceration, depicted with empathy and candour.

Parks rejected clichés of delinquency, drug use, and corruption, instead opting for a more nuanced view of the social and economic factors tied to criminal behaviour.

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957, co-published by Steidl and the Gordon Parks Foundation, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art, transcends the romanticised gangster film, the suspense of the

THE ATMOSPHERE OF CRIME, 1957

Gordon Parks

Published by Steidl

www.steidl.de

US \$40 Can \$56

crime caper, and the racially biased depictions of criminality then prevalent in American popular culture to provide a rare window into the working lives of those charged with preventing and prosecuting criminals. Parks used his camera to do what it does best: record reality so vividly and compellingly so *Life's* readers understand the

complexity of these chronically oversimplified situations.

The book features an expansive selection of never-before-published photographs from Parks' original reportage, together with a series of insightful essays and the full issue of *Life* in which the photographs were originally published.

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957 is published on the occasion of the forthcoming collection installation at The Museum of Modern Art, *Gordon Parks and The Atmosphere of Crime*, which will include selections from the museum's recent acquisition of 56 photographs from the series. **CT**

