

SIDE GALLERY  
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**PRESS RELEASE**

**GORDON PARKS: A Choice of Weapons**  
**Side Gallery, Saturday 21 October - Sunday 17 December**  
**Tuesday to Sunday, 11am to 5pm, FREE**

Curated by Mark Sealy of Autograph ABP

As its contribution to Tyneside's Freedom City 2017 Side Gallery presents a focused exploration of key works by the great African American photographer Gordon Parks. The works selected for this exhibition highlight the struggle African Americans endured whilst fighting for equality in America, a struggle that concerned Parks throughout his long and astonishing photographic career. *Gordon Parks: A Choice of Weapons* has been developed as a partnership between Side Gallery, Autograph ABP and The Gordon Parks Foundation.

**GORDON PARKS**

Gordon Parks' photographic career began in earnest in the early 1940s with the legendary Farm Security Administration photography unit. In the struggle for social justice his camera became what he referred to as his weapon of choice against racism and social inequalities. In 1956, as the only African American photographer on the staff of the hugely influential *Life* magazine, he documented the impact of racial segregation in the American South. In the 1960's he explored the turbulence of the different political strategies of those involved in the struggle for social freedom: from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s participation in the March on Washington to the self-declared revolutionary approach of the Black Panthers. Parks' focus on the question of social change was unequivocal.

**A CHOICE OF WEAPONS**

*Gordon Parks: A Choice of Weapons* shares its title with Parks' 1966 autobiography and this exhibition aims to draw out critical questions concerning civil responsibility, human rights

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and modes of representation. Critically this exhibition highlights how Parks' photography informed the sense of responsibility he felt and the way he used his position to provide both agency and voice for his people. His immersive photographic narratives opened up dialogue across the difficult cultural, social and political divides that existed in America.

#### A HARLEM FAMILY

In late 1967 and as a direct response to the wave of riots that broke out across America Parks began documenting the Fontenelles, an African American family, living in Harlem and trapped in extreme conditions of poverty. This extended documentary project became a remarkable 16 page photo feature for Life magazine in March 1968. It was a ground breaking essay which provides a keystone through which to read Park's photography throughout this exhibition. An outstanding body of work, it illustrates the way he saw and portrayed the family - and others: not as objects of journalistic scrutiny but as unique individuals participating in the telling of their own story. The heartache, emotional and moral dilemmas that he faced in trying to tell story of the Fontenelle family would never leave him. He stayed in contact with the family and would later recall that, "the truth of their suffering lay ahead, and it would be terrifying and sorrowful."

#### GORDON PARKS & MARK SEALY

Parks was a remarkable figure - a photographer, a filmmaker, writer and composer. With *The Learning Tree* in 1969, he became the first black director of a Hollywood film. In 1971 he directed *Shaft*. Curator Mark Sealy developed a Gordon Parks retrospective at London's Photographers' Gallery and the British Film Institute in 1993, which Parks himself attended. Sealy was not aware, at the time, of the 20 minute documentary *Diary of a Harlem Family* Parks made in 1968 for the USA's Public Broadcasting Service. This photo-film will be presented on a loop throughout the Side Gallery exhibition.

"We don't think the film or the photographs of A Harlem Family have been shown in the UK before as a series," says Sealy. "It forms the heart of this exhibition. At the height of Parks'

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success he was asked by the editors of *Life* if he could explain the riots that were taking place across the country. The fact that he chose to do this through a focus on a single family is extraordinary in itself. He showed them struggling to cope with the relentless pressure of survival, documenting the minute details of their deprivation, the way the cold of the New York winter reduced their lives - the experiences he saw as fuelling the explosions of discontent in the cities that overwhelmingly took place in the summer. Parks never forgot his own experiences of poverty and cold. Working in the context of *Life*, he chose to use the position he achieved to represent his community in the struggle for social change."

Mark Sealy will talk at the opening of the exhibition at Side Gallery at 2pm on Saturday 21st October. The event is free. On Sunday 22nd October, together with Amber/Side Gallery and others, will take part in a symposium in Side Cinema, *Speaking to the Future*, discussing the role documentary archives and the contemporary creative directions they offer.

**For more information and images, please contact:** Side Gallery, 5-9 Side, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 3JE; tel: +(0)191 232 2208; e: [side.gallery@amber-online.com](mailto:side.gallery@amber-online.com)

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## NOTES TO EDITORS

*Gordon Parks: A Choice of Weapons* forms part of the Freedom City 2017 programme, marking the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s receiving of an honorary degree from Newcastle University. Parks was documenting the Fontenelle family in Harlem when King was in Newcastle.

## FREEDOM CITY 2017

Freedom City 2017 is a city-wide programme across Newcastle marking the 50th anniversary of Dr Martin Luther King Jr. receiving an honorary degree from Newcastle University. Featuring a large-scale outdoor event, thought-provoking theatre, inspiring exhibitions, uplifting musical performances, world-class academic research and more, Freedom City 2017 takes place at venues and public spaces across Newcastle and Gateshead throughout the year.

Inspired by the themes of Dr King's acceptance speech at Newcastle University, Freedom City 2017 brings international artists, musicians, filmmakers, academics and community groups together to inspire them to help tackle the three 'urgent and great problems' highlighted in Dr King's speech 'the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war'.

Watch Dr. King's acceptance speech: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwXfiTDyluY>

For more information about Freedom City, visit: <http://www.freedomcity2017.com>

## MARK SEALY MBE

Born in London, Mark Sealy moved to North Shields in 1969 and then to Wallsend the following year. He is interested in the relationship between photography and social change, identity politics, race, and human rights. He has been director of London-based

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photographic arts charity Autograph ABP since 1991 and has produced numerous artist publications, curated exhibitions, and commissioned photographers and filmmakers worldwide, including the critically acclaimed *Human Rights Human Wrongs* exhibition curated for Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, in 2013 and The Photographers' Gallery, London, in 2015.

He jointly initiated and developed a £7.96 million capital building project (Rivington Place), which opened in 2007. He has written for international photography publications, including *Foam Magazine*, *Aperture*, and *Next Level*. In 2002, Sealy and professor Stuart Hall co-authored *Different*, which focuses on photography and identity politics. Recent notable projects include the commissioning of *The Unfinished Conversation: Encoding / Decoding*, among many other cultural initiatives.

He has served as a photography jury member for World Press Photo, the Carmignac Gestion photojournalism award, the Hasselblad Foundation's Photography Award, and the Sony World Photo award. In 2015, he chaired the Kraszna-Krausz Foundation Book award and joined the Open Society Foundation's Documentary Photography Project Advisory Board. Sealy has guest lectured at institutions such as the Royal College of Art and Tate Britain, and devised a global photography MA studies program for Sotheby's Institute of Art. He was awarded the Hood Medal by the Royal Photographic Society and a Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) award for services to photography 2013, and received his PhD which focused on photography and cultural violence from Durham University England.

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