

What Does Democracy Look Like? Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

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← *What Does Democracy Look Like?*, installation view, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, 2020.

Photo : courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

Darryl Cowherd

† *Stop White Police from Killing Us - St. Louis, MO, c. 1966–67*

Photo : courtesy of the artist & Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago

What Does Democracy Look Like?

Can an exhibition be more timely? *What Does Democracy Look Like?*, presented at the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP) in Chicago, addresses this hefty question through more than two hundred works from its outstanding collection. Co-curated by seven educators from Columbia College Chicago, the result is a diverse and impactful range of perspectives emphasizing the role photography plays as historical document, humanitarian voice, and artistic model through which better futures can be envisioned.

Issues of race, national identity, and representation loom large in the sections of the exhibition curated by Onur Öztürk, Melanie Chambliss, and Joshua Fisher. Öztürk's contribution delivers a multicultural message of solidarity. Lines from Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet, which roughly translate as "To live! Like a tree alone and free / Like a forest in brotherhood / This yearning is ours," underpin his selection of works. According to Öztürk, democracy lies between the respect for individuality and the responsibility for our communities. In this curatorial contribution, a rarely seen photograph of limestone sculptor William Edmondson by Louise Dahl-Wolfe works as a great reminder of the power interracial alliances can have. A son of enslaved people from Tennessee, Edmondson began working with limestone at around the age of sixty. It was on a trip to Nashville that Dahl-Wolfe first documented the artist's work, and these photographs would prove influential in convincing Alfred Barr, the director of MoMA, to give Edmondson a solo show in 1937—MoMA's first solo exhibition by an African American artist.

In different ways, curators Melanie Chambliss, Joshua Fisher, and Joan Giroux explore the co-existence of simultaneous Americas, where distinct social realities unravel in unison upon the same land but across very different worlds. Fisher contrasts Greg Stimac's colour photographs of men mowing their front lawns with black-and-white shots of

social unrest by various photographers, including Carlos Javier Ortiz, Dan Lyon, and Bruce Davidson. An interactive Virtual Reality (VR) interface situated in the centre of the room transforms statements by audience members into messages for social media platforms, thus demonstrating how language can be weaponized and used to create social division. Chambliss's selection magnifies the inequity of representation through the number of images on display and their chromatic value. Giroux's presentation of photographs—of people, places, and objects that evoke the messiness, opportunities, and gaps in democracy's objectives—focus on segregation and redlining: discriminatory practices that denied access to housing based on race, and lead to the marginalization of all Black neighbourhoods in Chicago.

Colour, visibility, and representation remain central preoccupations in the section curated by Ames Hawkins, in which infographics expose the lack of participation in American elections. 2020 is the 150th anniversary of the 15th Amendment's ratification, and the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment—two landmark moments that allowed many more Americans to vote. Hawkins's selection highlights the alarming truth that fifty percent of Americans simply do not cast their vote, thus leaving the other half of the country in charge of life-changing decisions. Trapped between a band of predominantly red and blue photographs, the empty white wall space in the middle symbolizes the truly problematic symptom of disengagement, disenfranchisement, and systemic exclusion in our society. How can this gap be narrowed or closed altogether?

Sharon Boyd-Peshkin juxtaposes the work of established professional photojournalists to others who documented everyday life independently from the media. Newsworthy images of crimes and social injustice are juxtaposed to everyday moments of normalcy and serenity—the side of life



which far too often remains invisible in the media. Works by African American photography giant Gordon Parks, who poignantly recorded the segregation of Chicago's South Side, are a highlight of the exhibition. His images communicate a sense of strength and resilience in the face of injustice—a reminder of how far we have come and of how much more work still lies ahead.

A focus on the often undocumented joy in the lives of those who regularly endure systemic oppression is provided by Raquel Monroe's selection of works by positive Black female role models. Through the collages of African American poet and artist Krista Franklin, this uplifting part of the exhibition explores the work of The Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist lesbian organization active between 1974 and 1980. The collages include works by many artists, activists, and writers who were instrumental in shaping rights and freedoms for women of colour in the United States. In Monroe's curatorial contribution, hope and strength are distilled in the iconic image by Alun Be titled *Potentiality* (2017) in which a proud young Black woman wearing a cape confidently looks at the future through her VR goggles; this new superhero represents the ultimate celebration of strength and hope, in an exhibition that carefully ponders the weight of the past upon our complicated present.

Overall, *What Does Democracy Look Like?* is curated with a good balance of criticality and optimism. While some sections are expressly assembled to reveal and visualize social injustices omitted by the dramatic documentation of photo-journalism, others fill in the blanks of an emotional glue that still binds America together in spite of the divisiveness promoted by politicians on social media. It is against the backdrop of 2020's overlapping crises and unprecedented circumstances that the questions posed by this exhibition appear more urgent than ever. Ultimately, what the exhibition

really shows is that a democracy is not solely contingent upon voting rights but a matter of representation and visibility—a reminder that photography of the kind that ambiguously flickers between straight documentary and art is a privileged medium in the context social commentary.

Giovanni Aloï

**Museum of Contemporary
Photography, Chicago**

October 1—December 23, 2020

Alun Be

† *Potentiality*, 2017.

Photo : courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago