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Lyle Ashton Harris

Reclaiming the Photographic Narrative of African-Americans

By JAMES ESTRIN
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Sitting for a portrait by Lyle Ashton Harris was a daunting yet revelatory experience for Sarah Lewis as she waited, alone, in the cavernous Polaroid 20 by 24 studio in Manhattan. She delved past her "cosmetic self to her deeper self," and through generations of the complicated relationship between photography and African-Americans. That history included some whites using it to perpetuate racist pseudo-scientific concepts as well as some blacks using it to control how they wanted to be seen.

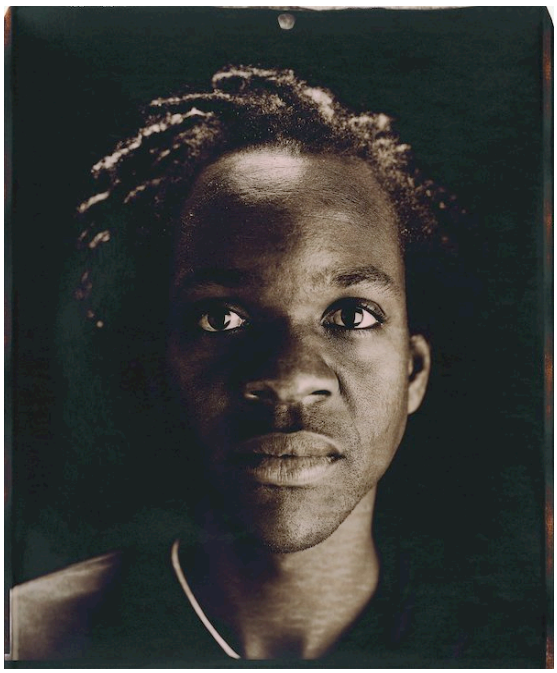
Mr. Harris said little as she posed before the industrial-size camera while he exposed a few sheets of instant film. It seemed like a collaborative experience — a throwback to 19th-century attempts to capture "the essence of a person," Ms. Lewis recalled.

"When I look at that image of me now I realize he captured something nascent in me that I did not know I would grow into — a steely-eyed clarity, a willfulness, tenacity and commitment," she said. "I was very young. It was an image that showed where I was going."

Untitled (Face #110 Sarah). Sarah Lewis. Courtesy of Jablonka Maruani Mercier Gallery, Brussels, and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.
Lyle Ashton Harris

Eleven years after the portrait session Ms. Lewis has indeed become that woman: After curatorial positions at the Museum of Modern Art and the Tate Modern, she is now a professor of art history and African-American studies at Harvard. She just finished editing "Vision and Justice," the first edition of Aperture magazine devoted to African-Americans, race and photography. It is an insightful volume that reveals the weight and urgency of images that Ms. Lewis described as offering "correctives to the sometimes denigrating narratives of African-American life."

The volume was inspired by Frederick Douglass's speech "Pictures and Progress," which raised the issue of how African-Americans are represented visually and spoke of the transformative power of photography in effecting change in the United States. The edition, available on May 24, includes texts by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Thelma Golden, Teju Cole, Margo Jefferson and Maurice Berger and photos by Carrie Mae Weems, Deborah Willis, Sally Mann, Lorna Simpson, Ruddy Roye, Awol Erizku, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Deana Lawson and Hank Willis Thomas.



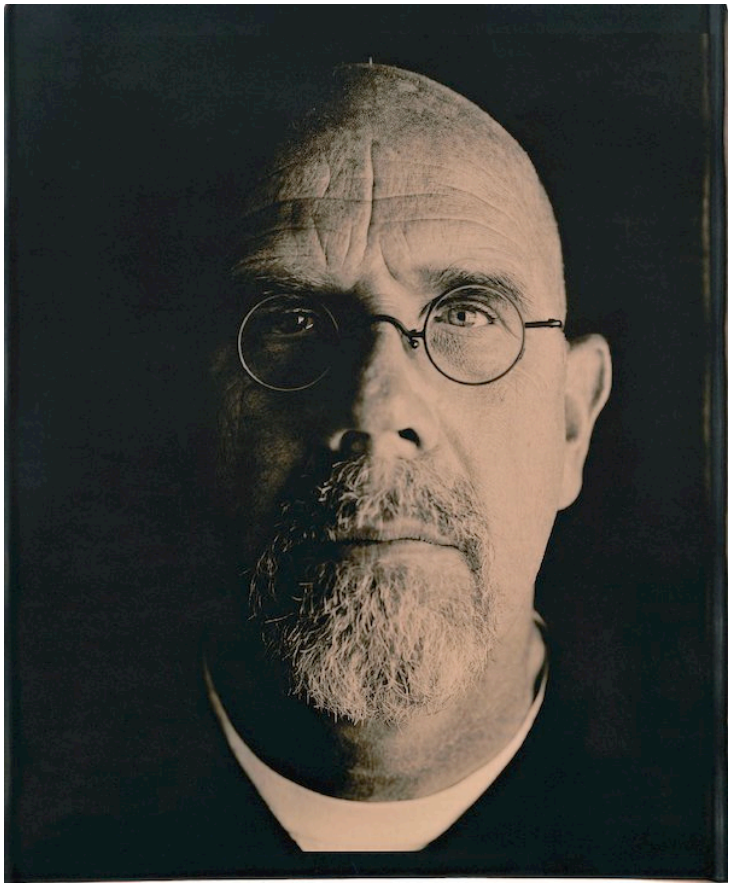
Untitled (Face #155 Lyle). Lyle Ashton Harris.
Courtesy of Jablonka Maruani Mercier Gallery, Brussels, and David Castillo Gallery, Miami.
Lyle Ashton Harris

The issue also includes images from Mr. Harris's "Chocolate Portraits," named because of the brown color of the prints created by a (Cross processing) technique used on the 20 by 24 Polaroids during development. That series — published in Mr. Harris's 2010 book, "Excessive Exposure" — looks not only at blackness, Ms. Lewis said, but also at more general identities that include race, sexuality and class. Started in the 1990s, the portraits include 200 subjects, ranging from the famous, like Chuck Close, Al Sharpton and Yoko Ono, to the completely unknown. All are rendered in various shades of brown.

Each was photographed in close-ups of the face as well as the back of the head, a nod to the pseudo-scientific use of photography to support

supposed theories of racial inferiority. Photography has often been used in “cataloging the other” and as a “tool of control,” Mr. Harris said.

“Since its inception photography is implicated in ethnography, anthropology, colonialism, imperialism and eugenics,” he added.



Untitled (Face #2 Chuck). Chuck Close.
Courtesy of Jablonka Maruani Mercier Gallery, Brussels, and David Castillo Gallery, Miami
Lyle Ashton Harris

Mr. Harris’s subjects were treated with equal care and dignity no matter their race, gender or background, and they also exerted some control over how they presented themselves to the camera. The magazine featured just his portraits of African-Americans.

The Aperture issue features an essay by Professor Gates, who noted that Frederick Douglass was not only a master orator and impassioned activist, but also perhaps the most-photographed man in 19th-century America. He was, as well, a theorist on the new medium, Mr. Gates wrote, stating that “Frederick Douglass used photographic images of himself like he used his oratory, in the battle to end slavery and to ensure for the Negro full citizenship rights.”

Professor Gates also wrote that Douglass was quick to embrace photography to counter the narrative “of the debased, subhuman Negro fabricated and so profusely distributed by the slave power.” As such, Douglass “was a reformer on a mission: he seized upon those long-exposure glimpses of black and majestic human forms, miraculously generated by the chiastic magic of Daguerre’s camera obscura, to fabricate — to picture — the very images through which, at long last, the Negro as anti-slave could emerge and then progress, clothed in his own form.”

As Mr. Harris captured a cross section of some of the leading artists and intellectuals, he explored “a certain zeitgeist in the birth of a new multicultural moment,” he said — “like an updated ‘Family of Man’ capturing a newer time.” Influenced by August Sander, James Van Der Zee, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, he was cataloging his own time — both leveling the playing field and making clear the field was now much larger than before.

And that, Ms. Lewis said, connects Mr. Harris to Douglass: “Lyle is the photographer that Douglass would have wanted to see working in the 21st century.”

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