

Art in America

# FROM PROTEST TO REST: JOSHUA RASHAAD MCFADDEN AT THE GEORGE EASTMAN MUSEUM

By Jackson Davidow

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Joshua Rashaad McFadden, *I Can't Breathe* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), 2020, inkjet print, 22 by 28 inches. © JOSHUA RASHAAD MCFADDEN

Two years ago, photographer Joshua Rashaad McFadden drove 15 hours from his Rochester, New York, hometown to Minneapolis to take part in what is now recognized as a landmark event in American history. Police officer Derek Chauvin had just murdered George Floyd, and protests against police brutality were erupting in the streets of Minneapolis and quickly spreading across the country. McFadden joined the sea of protesters and photographed the collective expression

of fury and grief under the purpling twilight.

*I Can't Breathe* (Minneapolis, Minnesota), 2020, one image from that evening, centers on a Black man standing with his arms by his sides in a crowded street. Because a face mask emblazoned with black lives matter covers his mouth, one can only wonder if he's hoarsely calling out, "I can't breathe!" the epochal rallying cry that also appears like a caption on his T-shirt. Taken from a slightly low angle facing the man directly, the photograph suggests a closeness and rapport between photographer and subject. As McFadden pointed out in a 2021 conversation with Lyle Ashton Harris, a groundbreaking Black queer photographer of an earlier generation, "many times in these situations you see photographers on the sideline, moved up together, almost over-photographing what's going on. But I find myself in the crowd."

This image belongs to "Unrest in America," a series in which McFadden compassionately chronicles the aftermath of four incidents in which police killed Black people; in addition to Floyd in Minneapolis, he captures the community activism and memorialization surrounding the deaths of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Daniel Prude in Rochester, and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta. The most penetrating works are portraits of the victims' loved ones: One photograph of Brooks's family members at a candlelight vigil conveys the spectrum of emotions that state violence can trigger—each of the dozen or so faces shows a distinct expression of grief, horror, confusion, rage, resolve—underscoring the individual dimensions of collective loss. In another, four of Taylor's friends pose along an overcast waterfront, nightmarishly, of course, without her. The image was taken perhaps just before or after a summer storm, and the sun peeks out from behind an industrial bridge that extends down toward the women. In a way, this heavenly ray of light conjures Taylor. McFadden portrays the complexity of feeling without relying on visual languages of sentiment that characterize much photojournalism, even if he did take some of these pictures on assignment for major media outlets such as the New York Times and the Atlantic.

Comprising a total of seven series, "I Believe I'll Run On," McFadden's recent, impressive early career survey at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, troubled the boundary between reportage and more community-based and vernacular practices that often involve preexisting relationships between photographer and subject. While the exhibition's first gallery showcased "Unrest in America," the second presented smaller groups of more inward, aesthetically experimental, and less coherent images of Black and queer life, many of which revolve around McFadden's personal relationships and family archives rooted in Rochester. Since that section encompassed an overwhelming range of aesthetic strategies and intentions, it would have benefited from tighter curatorial framing.

Yet the work itself was extraordinary. For example, *Let Me Not to Him Do as He Has unto Me* (2018) is a nude self-portrait in which the artist, standing outside a house's front door, raises his arms as if offering himself to the night sky or preparing to take off in flight. *Tenderly Speaks the Comforter* (2020) is a photo of two naked lovers embracing almost symmetrically, their dark skin contrasting with the white curtains in the background. Another series in the next gallery, "Come to Selfhood" (2015–16), addresses themes of intergenerational Black masculinity and

empowerment through portraits of sons, fathers, and other paternal figures juxtaposed with the young men's handwritten reflections, many of which speak to the intersections of queerness and Blackness. Relatedly, *Come Ye Disconsolate Wherever Ye Languish* (2019) from McFadden's "Love Without Justice" series (2018–21) is a solemn portrait of the artist's mother, seated amid backyard autumnal foliage, following her own mother's death.



Joshua Rashaad McFadden, Shadai Parr, Elysia Bowman, Erinicka Hunter, Shatanis Vaughn (Louisville, Kentucky), 2020, inkjet print, 14 by 20 inches. © JOSHUA RASHAAD MCFADDEN



Joshua Rashaad McFadden, *Tenderly Speaks the Comforter*, 2020, inkjet print, 54 by 69 inches. © JOSHUA RASHAAD MCFADDEN

That somber image recalls the previous gallery's Tamika Palmer (Louisville, Kentucky), 2020, a photograph of Taylor's mother in front of her daughter's memorial, as well as McFadden's telling comment in the catalogue: "I approached [Taylor's family and friends] like I would approach my family members." A tremendous level of care is discernible across McFadden's oeuvre; it sometimes seems that the final prints are less important to the artist than the process of working with his subjects, whether the mother is Taylor's or his own.

While it is not uncommon for photographers committed to reportage to flip the camera around to document their own lives and communities, rarely are audiences granted access to a personal portfolio, and rarer still is it for museums to give these modes of practice equal weight, particularly in an exhibition devoted to such a young photographer (McFadden was born in 1990). Questioning our assumptions about the relationship between these two photographic genres, this ambitious retrospective insists on the expansiveness of community in the face of racial violence and social negation. For many Black and queer practitioners like McFadden, it can be difficult, in other words, to photograph on the sidelines.