

04/2022

Gordon Parks

Pittsburgh Grease Plant, 1944/1946

Main description

By 1944 Gordon Parks had established himself as a photographer who freely navigated the fields of press and commercial photography, with an unparalleled humanist perspective. That year, Roy Stryker—the former Farm Security Administration official now heading the public relations department for the Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)—commissioned Parks to travel to Pittsburgh Pennsylvania and document the Penola, Inc. Grease Plant.

Parks spent two years chronicling the plant's industry—critical to Pittsburgh's history and character—by photographing its workers and their occupations. The resulting images, dramatically staged, lit and composed, showed the range of activities for Black and white workers, divided by roles, race and class. The photographs were used for marketing and made available to local and national newspapers, as well corporate magazines and newsletters. Yet they served as much more than a documentation of industry—enduring as an exploration of labor and its social and economic ramifications in World War II America.

Featuring more than 100 photographs, many previously unpublished, this is the first book to focus exclusively on Parks' work for the Standard Oil Company, illuminating an important chapter in his oeuvre prior to his landmark career as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine.

Co-published by The Gordon Parks Foundation and the Carnegie Museum of Art

Biography

Gordon Parks (1912–2006) was a photographer, filmmaker, musician and author whose 50-year career focused on American culture, social justice, race relations, the civil rights movement and the Black American experience. Born into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks was awarded the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1942, which led to a position with the Farm Security Administration. By the mid-1940s he was working as a freelance photographer for publications such as *Vogue*, *Glamour* and *Ebony*. Parks was hired in 1948 as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine, where for more than two decades he created groundbreaking work. In 1969 he became the first Black American to write and direct a major feature film, *The Learning Tree*, based on his semi-autobiographical novel, and his next directorial endeavor, *Shaft* (1971), helped define a film genre. Parks continued photographing, publishing and composing until his death in 2006.

Bibliography

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Series edited by Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr.

Edited by Dan Leers

English

Book design: Holger Feroudj / Steidl Design

224 pages

153 photographs

25 x 29 cm

Clothbound hardcover with dust jacket

€ 58.00

ISBN 978-3-96999-005-6