

Deborah Willis



Deborah Willis, *The Clothesline 1: Women's work never praised never done, (Votes for Women with beauty shop and Adella Hunt Logan)*, 2020, Archival print on Epson Ultra Premium Luster. Courtesy of the artist and Kalia Brooks Studio.

Four black and white antiquated family portraits printed on linen sheets of varying sizes are suspended on a clothesline in an empty lot. The lot is paved and surrounded by two plain concrete and brick walls. Some green plants grow through the cracks in the concrete.

It's not an overstatement to call Deborah Willis the godmother of Black photography. As a scholar, archivist, author, curator, and artist, she has discovered, researched, and shared the work of thousands of black photographers from throughout the United States from the 1840s to the present. Her work as a scholar has made visible the lives of ordinary Black Americans that were absent or obscured from the record, and her work as

a photographer has expanded this practice.

Willis's commitment to this work began early. In a 2020 interview, she stated: "I started the research as an undergraduate at the Philadelphia College of Art, which is now the University of the Arts, and continued graduate school at Pratt. I did not have any Black photographers in my history books, and I knew, based on growing up in a beauty shop in my mother's house, that there was Gordon Parks. There was Roy DeCarava, and then there was my father's cousin who had a studio down the street. I knew that their stories were somewhere, and their photographs were somewhere, so I thought it was really important for me to think about how to plan my career when I was young."

An undergraduate paper became the foundation for her first book, *Black Photographers 1840 to 1940: An Illustrated Bio-Bibliography*, published in 1985, which revealed a century of overlooked artists and their pictures. That book was followed in 1989 by *Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest*, an exhibition and catalogue for the Williams College Museum of Art. Many books and essays about Black photographers flowed from this font. As a curator and archivist first at the Smithsonian Institution, Center for African American History and Culture, Washington, DC, and then at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, she organized exhibitions of Black photographers that traveled the country and brought ever-widening audiences to the work. She is currently the Chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch

School of the Arts at New York University.

Willis has made photographs throughout her life that explore the same themes she investigates in her scholarship, but with a particular focus on femininity, beauty, and love. Her ongoing project *Went Looking for Beauty: Refashioning Self* includes both intimate images of garments from her friends' closets and "Street Views," in which she documents gloriously dressed people on the street, often in Harlem. She wrote, "Throughout the history of art and image-making, beauty as an aesthetic impulse has been simultaneously idealized and challenged, and the relationship between beauty and identity has become increasingly complex within contemporary art and popular culture. My work challenges the relationship between beauty and desire by examining the representation of fashion and reinvention."

—Laura Steward

b. 1948, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States
MacArthur Fellow, 2000

Exhibitions