

Just Say OK
At 86, photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks feels he is just now ready to create art.

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Some bemoan the past and bitterly nurture memories of past injustices. Gordon Parks decided to use his childhood experiences of racism and poverty as a resource to create art that powerfully conveyed struggle and triumph, pain and love, hate and understanding. "I chose the camera as a weapon to challenge everything I disliked about America," said Parks following the opening of his retrospective here at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. "I was not about to let hatred or bigotry turn me around."

A 20th-century renaissance man, Parks was the youngest of 15 children born in Fort Scott, Kans., in 1912. After his mother died when he was 15, Parks moved to St. Paul, Minn. For the next 10 years, he held a series of odd jobs. While working as a dining car waiter he saw a photo essay in a magazine produced by the Farm Security Administration's Historical Section, an agency created to document social and cultural conditions across the country during the Depression.

Moved and inspired by what he saw, Parks purchased a pawn-shop camera for \$7.50 and started taking pictures while learning all he could about documentary technique. After his powerful photo essay on social conditions in Chicago was published in 1941, Parks won a prestigious fellowship and started shooting for the FSA in Washington, D.C.

In 1948, Parks was hired as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine and worked there until 1970. He became a master of the photo essay, evidenced by his poignant, searing images of a Harlem street gang. Included in the series was a photo of a gang member peering into the open coffin of a friend killed in a street fight.

In 1969, Parks was the first African American to direct and produce a film for a major Hollywood studio. *The Learning Tree* was adapted from the book he wrote about his childhood in Kansas. Parks also wrote the screenplay and the musical score for the film. His film *Shaft* (1971) made history by introducing an African American action hero to audiences around the world. He made eight other movies and last November was honored by the Producers Guild in Los Angeles for his contributions to film.

He recently spoke to a standing-room only crowd at Washington's National Museum of Art — a group that had braved a cold, rainy November day to attend a screening of *The Learning Tree*. He said that when Warner Brothers approached him to produce and direct the film, he replied, "I've never directed a film before, and Hollywood has no black directors." The studio head told Parks that he HAD to direct the film, and Parks replied, "OK."

Parks admitted he sometimes felt apprehension when starting a new project. "Then I'd just say OK," he added, and go about creating his works of art.

Parks plans to continue creating into the next millennium. "As I approach 86," he said, "I feel I'm just now ready to start."

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