

THE DAILY GAZETTE

WHEN CREDIBILITY MATTERS

Photos worth seeing

By **Sara Foss** Thursday, February 21, 2013

There are two local photography exhibits that are very much worth seeing.

The first is the Gordon Parks exhibit at the New York State Museum, titled “Gordon Parks: 100 Moments.” Parks is probably best known as the director of the blaxploitation classic “Shaft,” but he was also a gifted photographer, and the State Museum exhibit features his photographs of African-American men, women and children living in Harlem and Washington, D.C.

Parks’ photographs are fantastic. He clearly had a gift for capturing ordinary, everyday moments — children walking to school, a woman and her dog leaning out a window, a well-dressed couple heading off to church — in a way that illuminates the hardships and joys of black people during the 1940s.

One series of photographs focuses on an African American woman, named Ella Watson, who worked evenings cleaning a federal building; through his photographs, Parks conveys how hard she worked and how little money she made, and how hard it was to support her family on such a meager salary.

We see her small, spare apartment, her grandchildren and the solitary hours she spent sweeping and mopping after the 9-5 workers had gone home. Other photos depict the impoverished Fontenelle family and daily life in a Washington, D.C., housing project.

Some of this subject matter is grim, but much of it isn’t — Parks is interested in revealing both life’s ups and downs. For many of his subjects, life was difficult, but it wasn’t without its small pleasures, either.

The other interesting photography exhibit is “Art or Evidence: The Power of Photojournalism” at Union College’s Mandeville Gallery, on the second floor of Nott Memorial, one of the cooler buildings in Schenectady. This exhibit showcases the photography of 18 photojournalists, and the majority of the images depict war and conflict.

Twelve of the photos are the work of Gilles Peress, a French photographer who witnessed some of the 20th century's most historic and significant events: Bloody Sunday, the Iranian Revolution, the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian war. Peress' photos are searing and eye-opening: He captures the brutality of war and killing, as well as the humanity and desperation of the victims of such conflicts. We see British soldiers firing on unarmed protestors in Northern Ireland, and Albanian refugees fleeing their homeland. But there are lighter moments. One especially moving photo depicts children in Northern Ireland playing in the snow.

The rest of the exhibit is devoted to the work of six photographers from the VII Photo Agency, which is known for its focus on "conflict photography." These photos date from 1999 to 2011, and include images from the war in Afghanistan, the uprising in Egypt that overthrow longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak and the Occupy Wall Street protests, as well as photos of poor women from Siberia attempting to break into the modeling business. One of my favorite photographs, by Adam Ferguson, is a quieter moment: A U.S. soldier smoking a cigarette while guarding a field of poppies in Afghanistan.

I hate taking pictures, but I enjoy looking at pictures taken by other people, and the Gordon Parks exhibit and "Art or Evidence" are both memorable and eye-opening exhibits, filled with great, thought-provoking and provocative images. If you have time, you should check them out.