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Features USA

Documentary on black photography is more of a scrapbook than a comprehensive catalogue

“Through a Lens Darkly” aims to show the hidden history of African American artists using the medium

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Crossroads by Hank Willis Thomas. Photo: Hank Willis Thomas

Thomas Allen Harris’s film “Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People”, released in a limited run in US cinemas last year and now to get its debut on [PBS’s Independent Lens slot](#) as part of Black History Month, is quite an achievement. Purporting to be the first documentary on the hidden history of African American photography, it is an all encompassing broad sweep from the invention of the daguerreotype in France and its quick adoption by black photographers in the US, to the practices of contemporary artists.

The inspiration was the pioneering 2002 book *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present*, by Deborah Willis, the professor

of photography at the Tisch School of Arts at New York University and a producer of the film. She is also one of many commentators featured.

The film's revelations are numerous, from the autograph portraits sold by the early 19th-century abolitionist freed slave and groundbreaking women's rights activist Sojourner Truth bearing the legend "I sell the shadow to support the substance", to the assertion by historian Robin Kelley that the photographic history of the 180,000 black soldiers who fought for the North in the Civil War is a history of how they, not Lincoln, liberated the slaves of the South. The documentation of the Civil Rights movement and the emergence of black documentarians such as Gordon Parks (the subject of major exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, until 13 September; "my hero" says the photographer Dawoud Bey) is firmly acknowledged and throughout are commentaries on the practices on such current artists as Hank Willis Thomas, Glenn Ligon and Lola Flash, among many others.

And yet... Harris's reliance on the notion of the family album as a linking motif, while rightly identified as bearing much of the hidden imagery of black experience set against mass media promulgation of stereotypical imagery, can seem fey. And the prissy pixellated censorship of nudity, in a film that rightly if shockingly frames images of the brutal violence of racism, such as the bloated corpse of tortured and lynched teenager Emmett Till, is contradictory and unnecessary. Whom is being protected from what here?

It is a shame that there isn't a more coherent narrative—admittedly difficult in presenting such a big subject in a mere 90 minutes—and less intrusive music (sometimes used at times when absolute silence seems the only appropriate response).

This is a scrapbook—a family album perhaps—filled with snippets and insights that could form the basis of many films in their own right, but a scrapbook nevertheless hugely important in that it brings together artists and historians deeply engaged with their subject; in that alone it is compelling viewing and should be seen.

"Through a Lens Darkly" screens on PBS on 16 February. See local listings for exact times. Watch the trailer [here](#):

