

Sheila Pree Bright: Reflections

by Deborah Willis

Sheila Pree Bright is a photographer and activist-artist who continues to express herself through the visual experience. She makes engaging photographs and creates provocative installations while creating a series of critical images of what it means to be an American. For Pree Bright her creativity is part of a collaborative process. She contextualizes the voices of young protesters by weaving their words and faces into her portraits. She brings the same passion to her documentation of today's social protest movements from Atlanta, Baltimore, and Ferguson to Washington, DC as did her predecessors who made photographs in the 1960s civil rights protests for equal rights. From the right to free speech to the desire to have a sound education to a right to fair housing opportunities, she champions the right of all Americans to a full participation in the American democratic process. It is encouraging to see the work of Pree Bright connect photographs to this memory, hence the title of her series *1960Now!*

Not yet born when young civil rights activists took to the streets, boarded buses, and entered into spaces that would possibly harm them and or end their lives, Sheila Pree Bright recently wrote, "As I observe the state of our country, I feel art can assist in creating cultural and neighborhood awareness for social good." Always interested in documenting moments and telling visual stories through her projects, Pree Bright frames the ideas of the Black Lives Matter movement as reflected in the faces of the people who live in and traveled to cities such as Ferguson and Baltimore to support the local activists from young girls to young men, from mothers and fathers to women who walk the streets with banners carrying the messages Black Lives Matter. The powerful moments depicted in the photographs portray the empathy and support of Pree Bright as participant and observer. The beautifully rendered images are stark and direct. With her medium format camera, she hones in on the faces, the t-shirts and the handwritten placards — ALL NIGHT, ALL DAY WE'RE

GONNA FIGHT FOR FREDDIE GRAY; #STOLEN DREAMS with the high school portrait of Michael Brown; WE LOVE OUR PEOPLE AND WE WILL BE HERE UNTIL JUSTICE IS SERVED. The words and images equally become portraits in a sense because of the photographer's commitment and support of the movement. She cares deeply about the young girls and boys; men and women, both black and white, Asian and Latina; Christians and Muslims who are committed to human rights and civil rights for all American citizens. In pondering the past, Sheila photographed a banner that connects to the memory of the martyred civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. following his dream to obtain equal rights for black Americans. Digitally printing her photographs in black and white, Pree Bright honors the aesthetic of movement imagery creating photographs that memorialize the past and the present.

The lyrics to vocalist and songwriter Gregory Porter's hit title *1960 What?* inspired her initial project (*1960 Who?*), which inspired the current project's title *1960Now!* The *1960Now!* project focuses on policing in black neighborhoods and questions the use of extreme force resulting in the deaths of young black men such as Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, among others. As a photographer and a woman, this work is significant in making visible the voices and images of women prominent in her photographs. Rarely are the voices of mothers and women highlighted in social protest imagery. There is a powerful presence of women in the BLM movement as cultural worker and artist Alicia Garza writes in her essay *A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement*: "I created #BlackLivesMatter with Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, two of my sisters, as a call to action for Black people after 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder and the killer, George Zimmerman, was not held accountable for the crime he committed. It was a response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements. Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."ⁱ The

photographs by Pree Bright embrace and agitate; they also frame a sense of bonding and commitment as they portray a sense of hope.

As mentioned previously, memory is central to Pree Bright's social practice in making artful and documentary images. The most powerful experience of these images is that they expose the complexities in photographing social movements. The American Flag has been a central iconic object in Pree Bright's work and the final image in the series includes this symbolic banner, because she believes it "represents liberty, freedom and pride in this country."ⁱⁱ This is critical today as it connects the *1960Now* project, which includes portraits of young people today of the #blacklivesmatter movement groups throughout the country. Pree Bright defines this project as "generations of young people who have committed their lives for social good."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ http://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Garza_Herstory_of_the_BlackLivesMatter_Movement.pdf

ⁱⁱ Sheila Pree Bright undated Young American's artist's statement

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