

GILLIAN LAUB

PIONEERING SOUTHERN RITES AT LAMONT

It was 1971. I was 18. My dad had recently been installed as the new pastor of Wisconsin Avenue Baptist Church in Washington D.C. I'd moved from my home state of South Dakota to be with my family and attend college at the University of Maryland. I'd transferred my job as a telephone operator to a nearby Maryland suburb while establishing residency prior to starting school. I quickly accumulated new friends, many of them black as the D.C. area has, according to the most recent United States Census Bureau report, a 50 percent black population. By contrast, my home state (again according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau report) is only

1.7 percent black. My black friends would often attend church with me. And sometimes we'd hit the beach and boardwalk in Atlantic City, New Jersey. That's when I first noticed that a casual walk down the boardwalk with my tall, attractive black friend, Tony, drew an inordinate amount of attention.

Fast forward to May 2009 when American photographer and film maker, Gillian Laub, was assigned by New York Times Magazine to photograph what became an exhibition titled "Southern Rites," a provocative and timely visual study of a small-town Georgian community's struggle to confront longstanding issues of race and inequality. This

exhibition, which is currently featured at the Lamont Gallery on the Phillips Exeter Academy campus in Exeter, New Hampshire, began as an exploration of racially segregated proms and homecoming rituals. Laub's fascination with the subject ultimately expanded to encompass a decade of documenting the rural community of Mount Vernon's experiences – a poignant portrait of an American town. In doing so, she captured on film, and eventually in an HBO documentary, the racial tensions that scar much of American history. The story brought national attention to the town and the following year the proms were finally integrated.

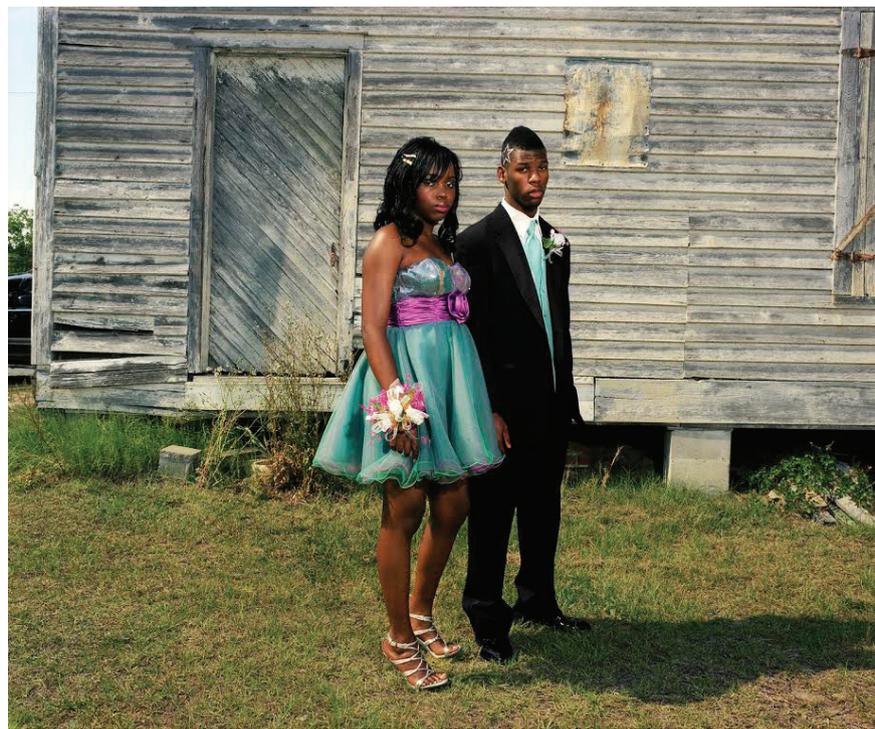
SPOTLIGHT EXHIBITION

**GILLIAN LAUB:
SOUTHERN RITES**

**LAMONT GALLERY
FREDERICK R. MAYER
ART CENTER
PHILLIPS EXETER
ACADEMY
20 MAIN STREET
EXETER, NEW
HAMPSHIRE
THROUGH DEC 15**



*Shavon, Justin, and Santa,
Mount Vernon, Georgia, 2012,
inkjet print. Courtesy of
Benrubi Gallery. © Gillian Laub.*



In 2011, the story took on unexpected intensity when the murder of an unarmed young black man by a white town patriarch in Montgomery County seemed to obliterate all the incremental progress that had been accomplished. (The older man called 911 to report the incident and said, “Well, I had a little trouble out here a while ago. It was just a black kid.”) This unexpected twist in the plot signaled to Laub that perhaps a larger story needed to be told – and she set about to do that. Through her intimate portraits and first-hand testimony, Laub captured the story on film as well as capturing photographs of the changes that were occurring. According to consulting curator, Maya Benton, of the International Center of Photography – the organization promoting Laub’s traveling exhibition – Laub’s project, which began as an exploration of segregated high school rituals, evolved into a decade-long mandate to confront painful, deeply rooted national realities.

“Through her lens and the voices of her subjects,” Benton continued, “we encounter that which some of us do not want to witness, but what is vital for us to see. Gillian’s work explores how a generation of African American youth is grappling with the legacy of segregation and racially motivated violence, and provides an inspiring example of how concerned photography can affect social change.”

The redeeming aspect of this sad documentary is that it did affect change. While the community’s older residents are often entrenched in their blatant, ingrained racism, the younger generation is thinking differently. Laub is encouraged that the next generation is holding onto optimism. After the integrated prom, several students from Montgomery County High School sent her pictures of their most recent prom

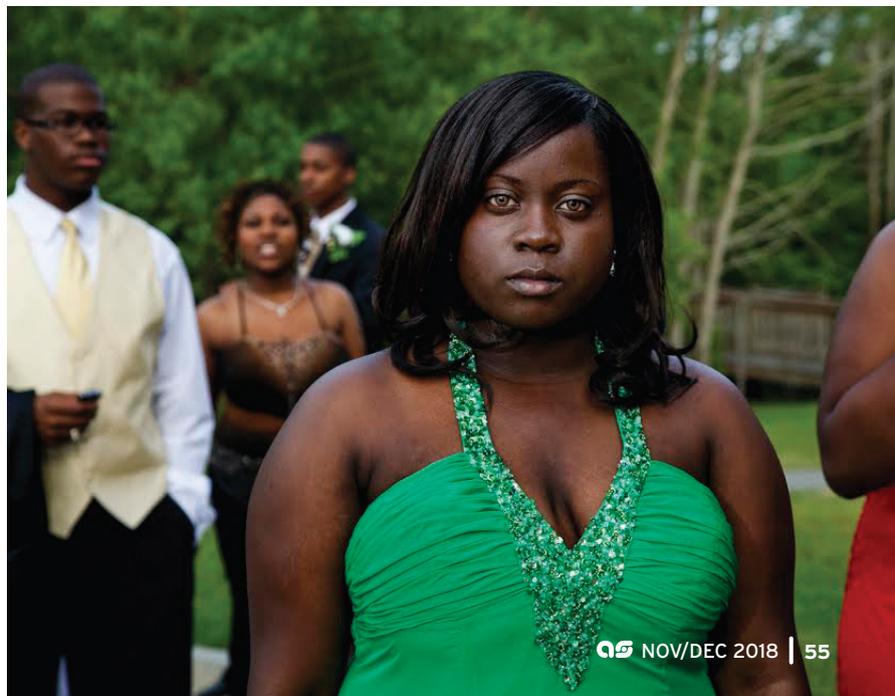
king and queen, a mixed couple, with a short note, “See, it’s really happening.” And Laub’s sensitive handling of this injustice through the power of the photographic image served as the catalyst.

I find the photos in this exhibition captivating. Partly because I grew up in such a totally different environment where my exposure to racial inequality was not a deeply ingrained issue, making the contrast of my experiences dramatic in comparison

LEFT: *Julie and Bubba*, Mount Vernon, Georgia, 2002, inkjet print. Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery. © Gillian Laub.

RIGHT: *Amber and Reggie*, Mount Vernon, Georgia, 2011, inkjet print. Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery. © Gillian Laub.

BOTTOM: *Angel Outside the Black Prom*, Vidalia, Georgia, 2009, inkjet print. Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery. © Gillian Laub.





Prom Prince and Princess Dancing at the Integrated Prom, Lyons, Georgia, 2011, inkjet print. Courtesy of Benrubi Gallery. © Gillian Laub.

to Laub's project, and partly because the images she captured tell their own evocative story.

"Amber and Reggie," a photo of a black couple, she in a pastel,

multi-colored flared chiffon dress and carrying flowers, and he in a matching tie and dark suit with a boutonniere, are juxtaposed against a gray, weathered shed in dire need of paint.

A mixed couple, "Julie and Bubba," are depicted in a photo where she's wearing a football jersey. He's sporting a black T-shirt with his arm casually wrapped around her waist. An attractive girl with alabaster skin, she wears flattering makeup, large hoops, and her hair drapes over the cross she wears on her neck. Neither is smiling.

Another far darker photo is titled, "Shavon, Justin and Santa." The photo depicts a young black man holding a photo of himself and his brother visiting Santa from years before. Justin was Shavon's older brother who was murdered. Justin shoved his little brother out of the way of harm and took the bullet himself.

So here we are in the 21st century and still wrestling with societal problems we'd long assumed would be remedied by now: racial inequality, sexual assaults on women, educational concerns, an unresponsive government, political freedoms, climate change issues and more.

But in her own way, Laub has addressed racial inequality with an approach that doesn't only feel timely, but timeless. It certainly opened my eyes wider and changed me.

|Linda Chestney

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© Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories*#26, 2004, Chromogenic prints mounted on aluminum, 60x48 In, Courtesy of the artist and Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston and Edwynn Houk Gallery, NY

LALLA
ESSAYDI

*From "Converging Territories"
to "Harem Revisited"*

September 28, 2018 – February 17, 2019