

REVIEW:

Thresholds: The Photography of William Anderson

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Through November 9

Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 6 p.m.

Gaines Foyer Gallery, Broyles Arts Center

The Westminster Schools

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Powerful documentary blends with finely-tuned art

By Debra Wolf

Thresholds: The Photography of William Anderson features thirty-two images offering a slice of African-American experience in the deep South.

Spanning four decades of work, the photographs on view originate in William Anderson's roots and personal experience. Born during the Great Depression, he grew up in Selma, Alabama, where he came of age during the burgeoning Civil Rights movement. In keeping with the theme of this show – thresholds – selections focus on societal and psychological barriers and transitions. Images often include windows, doorways, porches and even human chains, emphasizing the metaphorical aspects of work that runs the gamut from socio-political commentary to fine art photography.

Like Walker Evans, Anderson often frames his subject matter in richly textured architectural settings. The photographer uses vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines as key elements, in both structures and materials. Wood, brick, tar paper, and stone all add aesthetic interest, while evoking essential qualities of wear, fragility, and endurance, much like his human subjects.



One Minute to Rest
© William Anderson

Anderson offsets the linear with rounded forms, particularly in his portraiture. Soft contours – light cast on a cheek, the top of a shoulder, a baby's head – create a satisfying balance to hard-edged geometries.

In 1968's "One Minute to Rest," the elements of documentary style and composition come together expertly. An elderly woman sits on her porch. The curvature of her back is echoed in rounded tools that hang above her head, knots of wood in exterior walls, circular patterns in the cloth she clutches, and in the outline of her heels and slippers. All of this contrasts with the darkened opening to an interior room, as well as lines of exterior wall and floorboard.

Shot in 1970 in Savannah, Georgia, "Neighborhood Medical

Center” is an equally fine example of Anderson’s talent for blending documentary style and art. Children cross the street in front of a dilapidated set of buildings. The eye travels through angles and lines into a corner of an urban community that *should* be vital, yet seems to go nowhere. “Evening Shadows” (1978) uses similar architectural elements in a rural setting, symbolically enclosing two figures in an end-of-the-line framework of posts, board, and angled shadows, even as they look out onto an open landscape.

In “Po Monkey’s Lounge,” we see the same environmental context in 2007. A man leans in the doorway of a small, one-story nightclub. Irregular stepping stones in the foreground lead to two rectangular stairs, to horizontal lines of clapboard construction, the dark form of a low, flat roof with a sharp, triangular detail. A gray sky rises above the claustrophobically small building in an image that is both exquisite and sorrowful.



Neighborhood Medical Center
© William Anderson

“Joanna by the Window” (1998) and “Helen in the Morning” (2004) marry painterly skill to psychological interiors. Again, rectangles and lines masterfully contrast with the softening effects of circular forms. Exterior light is used to silhouette human figures, suffusing features and body language with a kind of hopefulness, while obscuring surrounding details. “Joanna by the Window” is particularly elegant and almost formal in its composition, reflecting the photographer’s admitted admiration for Rembrandt.

If Evans documented the condition of a depressed nation some eighty years ago, Anderson records the persistent poverty that still blights significant segments of the population. “I’d like for some of our politicians to take a hard look at this. I want the poverty to be seen,” says Anderson, as quoted by exhibition essayist and co-curator, Sally Hansell.



Evening Shadows
© William Anderson



Joanna by the Window
© William Anderson

Anderson studied both art and art history, but it was after graduate school (in the late 1960s) that his interest in photography began to flourish. He is a sculptor, painter, and printmaker as well as a photographer, and recently retired as an Associate Professor at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Increasingly recognized, William Anderson’s works are part of prestigious permanent collections including the National Gallery of Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Yale University Art Gallery, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and the High Museum, among others.

The inherent beauty that Anderson captures in his subjects is essential to the power in his work, even as the photographer refuses to shy away from grim political, economic, and social realities.