Devin Allen’s *Rising/Uprising in Baltimore: A Beautiful Ghetto*

This current national moment, with its heightened focus on discriminatory policing and other forms of structural racism, has produced a new cliché. Anyone with a smartphone, it now goes, can: film a cop, create a hashtag, start a movement. This may be true in the most abstract sense, but in reality is quite misleading. For one, it credits the technology, rather than the person using it, for radical acts. More importantly, however, it simply isn’t true. Almost invariably, the people capturing the images and crafting the language of this racial reawakening are the black and brown people most proximate to the realities they’re describing and sharing with the world. Last year’s most important piece of journalism came not from a professional reporter, but from Feidin Santana, who filmed the merciless execution of Walter Scott in South Carolina; Lavish Reynolds, in the car with her daughter and dying partner, broadcasted to the world what had just happened to Philando Castile. Activists are running for office, and Black Lives Matter has shifted presidential politics. Of course, much has still not changed. But this moment has brought forth images and stories that alter the historical and emotional record.

From this context comes the spectacular work of Baltimore’s Devin Allen, the self-taught photographer who documented his city after the police’s killing of Freddie Gray. The results are striking in their combination of breadth and specificity. Allen captures a range of experiences as only an insider could—in this collection we see not only the toll that segregation, poverty, and political neglect have taken on black Baltimore, but also the joy and community that thrive there anyway. Perhaps most importantly, Allen also focuses on the middle ground—the quiet, subtle moments of everyday black life that mainstream camera crews rarely even think to document. Taken all together, the points on this spectrum humanize Allen’s subjects in ways that so much art and journalism fail to do. He frames pain and dispossession as circumstances, not identities. The people he photographs protest and cry out, but they also ride their bikes, play with their children, sit around and chat. Of course, these are things that everyone does. These snapshots don’t seem radical until we realize how rarely we see black people at the center, standing in for all of us, as others often do.

Allen’s work perfectly encapsulates the ways in which this moment both diverges from and parallels the past. His black and white photographs place him in a lineage with Gordon Parks, Ernest Withers and other black citizen journalists of previous eras. Many of the photographs here could be from a much earlier time (a testament both to the entrenchment of racial inequality in Baltimore and the familiar perseverance of its residents). Other photos, however—marked with the names of the recently slain or chilling silhouettes of the newly militarized police—could only have been taken today. In these shots, the high contrast of the colors and the intimacy of the lens reflect the urgency of the fight to defend black life in America. Indeed, for some of these photos Allen was literally protesting with one hand and working his camera with the other. And the path of his work—from Instagram to the cover of a magazine, *TIME*, that was founded during the middle of Jim Crow—mirrors his blend of past and present. So is Devin Allen an activist or an artist? A professional journalist or a local archivist? An old-school photographer or someone absolutely modern? At another time these questions may have taken up space. Thankfully, now, we can simply answer, “yes.”

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