

ONLY  
SKIN  
DEEP

CHANGING VISIONS OF  
THE AMERICAN SELF



DECEMBER 12, 2003 TO  
FEBRUARY 29, 2004

Is the means of recording human likeness that has been used most often to describe and construct American identity. It has played a key role in shaping ideas about race and nation. **ONLY SKIN DEEP: CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF** is the first comprehensive look at how ideas about race have shaped our understanding of what Americans look like and the role that photography has played in conveying those messages.

For most of our country's history, access to the full benefits of U.S. citizenship has been restricted on the basis of race. To this day, evolving theories about race inform our ideas about who Americans are and what they look like. Most people these days realize that there is no scientific support for the concept of "race" and that there is no proof of any group's racial inferiority or superiority. Nonetheless, race remains with us as a very compelling myth. It is part of our American heritage. It has been one of the most important and powerful means of determining who is and who is not considered American. Photography has been the most effective form of image making for supporting and debunking the myth of race.

It is often assumed that exhibitions about race are really nothing more than exhibitions about racism, in which photographers demonstrate that they are either racist or that they are against racism. This exhibition explores racial imagery in a different way. Regardless of whether one believes that racism persists in American society, it is undeniable that racial iconography still circulates in our culture and, thus, in American photography as well. The exhibition is divided into five sections that look at race as a distinct set of visual symbols that are manifested through a variety of photographic techniques. Taken together, **ONLY SKIN DEEP** is about how photography works to make us "see" race.

Co-curators, **ONLY SKIN DEEP**

## LOOKING UP | LOOKING DOWN

The images in this category promote the idea that racial hierarchies are based in truth, or that they subvert this assertion through irony and parody. When photography was introduced in 1839, the notion that humanity was organized in a racial hierarchy was widely accepted in the United States. According to this worldview, the diversity of human beings' physical characteristics was taken as evidence of the "fact" of racial difference. Scientific racism attempted to link physical traits with invisible group characteristics such as intelligence or a propensity for social deviance. This view, often associated with eugenics, remained firmly entrenched until the mid-twentieth century, when its use by the Nazis compelled the international scientific community to formally repudiate it. Nonetheless, the legacy of these nineteenth-century ideas about race lives on: we still speak of race as synonymous with differences based on skin color or human typologies.

## ALL FOR ONE | ONE FOR ALL

The photographs in this category imply that some people can stand for all Americans or can embody an "ideal" American, while others can only represent specific ethnic or racial types. Over the past 150 years, numerous photographers have created images that "stand for" American ideals, showing us what "good" Americans look like and identifying those who do not belong in this category. Photographers were often enjoined to catalogue specific racial and ethnic types, in keeping with popular theories about human diversity. While many photographs of ethnic types were produced for anthropological studies and military and state records, this sort of imagery has also been extremely popular as mass entertainment and has regularly found its way into advertising, fashion, and art. Many contemporary artists have reflected on this legacy by recalling and recasting photographic techniques that were developed in the nineteenth century to communicate these ideas.

## HUMANIZED | FETISHIZED

This group of images contrasts photographs designed to emphasize a subject's individuality with those that objectify their subjects, replacing things for people or treating people like things. To promote racial equality or to reveal injustices, photographers have sometimes produced "positive images" to counter denigrating popular representations of ethnic groups. These works are often designed to elicit the sympathies of viewers by "humanizing" their subjects, making them appear to be more attractive, more patriotic, or more industrious. These attempts to elevate and humanize photographic subjects stand in contrast to images of people posed in ways that make them look like objects, such as sculptures, toys, or monsters. The act of substituting an object for a person evokes the idea of the fetish, in the sense that an inanimate thing is made to represent a living being. This gesture reinforces the notion that race is something fixed and concrete, rather than a compelling but fluctuating fiction.

## ASSIMILATE | IMPERSONATE

American culture is rife with examples of people's desire to adopt another racial identity or to temporarily masquerade as a member of another race. However, the capacity to transform one's appearance takes on different meanings depending on the status and identity of the subject. In some cases, the gesture is meant to suggest the individual's ability to transform himself or herself; in other contexts, it has been motivated by larger social and political agendas. With the adoption of the American myth of the melting pot in the early twentieth century, for example, an official policy of assimilation was applied to immigrants and ethnic minorities. Donning costumes that caricatured members of nonwhite groups as savage, excessively emotive, irrational, and oversexed, the people who posed for these photographs expressed commonly held notions of the "wild side" of the self suppressed by Western rationalism and social rigidity.

## PROGRESS | REGRESS

This part of the exhibition extends the question of race beyond the body into space, showing how ideas about race can be projected onto natural and man-made landscapes. The prevailing ideas about race in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conflated human evolution with technological advancement. This worldview, known as Social Darwinism, suggested that the greater military and industrial power of Europeans was evidence of their racial superiority and implied that their ability to dominate others was evidence of their heightened capacity for survival. The visualization of Social Darwinist ideas often involves demonstrating how some racial groups represent progress and America's future, while others are designated as throwbacks that evoke a preindustrial past that is often both romanticized and infantilized.

Cover Image:  
Gordon Parks  
EMERGING MAN, HARLEM 1952  
Gordon Parks, 1952

Exhibition Design: Dorteo Ren Sandhaus, Los Angeles



## FAMILY PROGRAMS

**Family Albums** SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2003, 1:00-3:00 P.M.

Who is your family? Create your own album of loved ones with museum educator Takema Robinson. Use old photos and recent snapshots, along with Polaroids produced during this workshop, to create your own personal album. Make it a gift for the holidays.

**Hero Collages** SATURDAY, JANUARY 17, 2004, 1:00-3:00 P.M.

Who are your heroes—real or imagined? Where do they come from? How do they inspire you? Join ONLY SKIN DEEP artist Wangechi Mutu in this exciting mixed-media workshop. Using photographs and magazine clippings along with colored pencils and pastels, families and children will create their own hero collage. Bring your own photos (originals or photo copies).

To register for Family Programs, please call 212 857-0001 or visit [www.icp.org](http://www.icp.org).

ICP thanks Samuel L. and Dominique Milbank and the Third Millennium Foundation for their dedicated support of these educational programs.

ONLY SKIN DEEP: CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF IS A MILLENNIUM PROJECT SUPPORTED IN PART BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS WITH MAJOR FUNDING PROVIDED BY CORBIS, ALTRIA GROUP, INC., THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION, FORD FOUNDATION, AND ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FROM SAMUEL L. AND DOMINIQUE MILBANK AND FROM THE THIRD MILLENNIUM FOUNDATION.



corbis  
start here



1133 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS AT 43RD STREET  
NEW YORK, NY 10036  
212 857-0000 | [WWW.ICP.ORG](http://WWW.ICP.ORG)

HOURS: TUESDAY THROUGH THURSDAY 10 TO 5  
FRIDAY 10 TO 8, SATURDAY AND SUNDAY 10 TO 6  
CLOSED ON MONDAY



**International Center of Photography**