HOW KHALIK ALLAH BENT THE RULES OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY, AND FOUND HIS VISION

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By David Walker

Untitled from "125th & Lexington", 2019 .© Khalik Allah

Link to article online and selection of new work from "125th & Lexington"

A still from Allah's film *Black Mother*.© Khalik Allah

Earlier this year, Allah released his fifth film, titled *Black Mother*. The 77-minute film is Allah's spiritual journey through—and personal meditation on— the confluence of history, culture and economics in Jamaica, where his mother grew up. "[Allah's] complex sense of audiovisual composition—textural, tonal, thematic, rhythmic, philosophical—is as original and as personal as his cinematography," *New Yorker* critic Richard Brody wrote in a glowing review of the film in March.

That originality suffuses his previous films, too. In 2005, he released his first film, called "The Absorption of Light," about the awakening of a wayward youth. The film was inspired by Allah's own story: He was left behind in eighth grade, and by his own account had a rebellious streak that was leading him down the wrong path. As a Long Island teenager in search of himself, he made frequent trips to New York City, where he discovered the Five Percent Nation in Harlem. Formed in the 1960s as a breakaway group from the National of Islam, Five Percent Nation is a cultural organization with a mission to educate young black men in its particular beliefs and teachings.

It was a social and intellectual refuge for Allah, who immersed himself in the Five Percent Nation "street curriculum," as he calls it. He had no aspirations at the time to become an artist. "I was just trying to save myself from the savage spell of ignorance," he writes in *Souls Against the Concrete*.

But Five Percent Nation gave him direction, and opened doors. When he made "The Absorption of Light," he used Wu-Tang Clan rap songs for the soundtrack. Through Five Percent Nation, he was able to connect with Wu-Tang Clan members and showed them his film. That led Allah to work on some of the group's music videos, and eventually to his first feature-length documentary project, about Popa Wu, the patriarch of Wu-Tang Clan.
The film took four long years from 2006 to 2010. Allah struggled with the editing, and thought he'd never finish. "When I was done, I didn't want to make another film, but I wanted to express myself creatively," Allah says.

GZA, a founding member of Wu-Tang Clan. © Khalik Allah

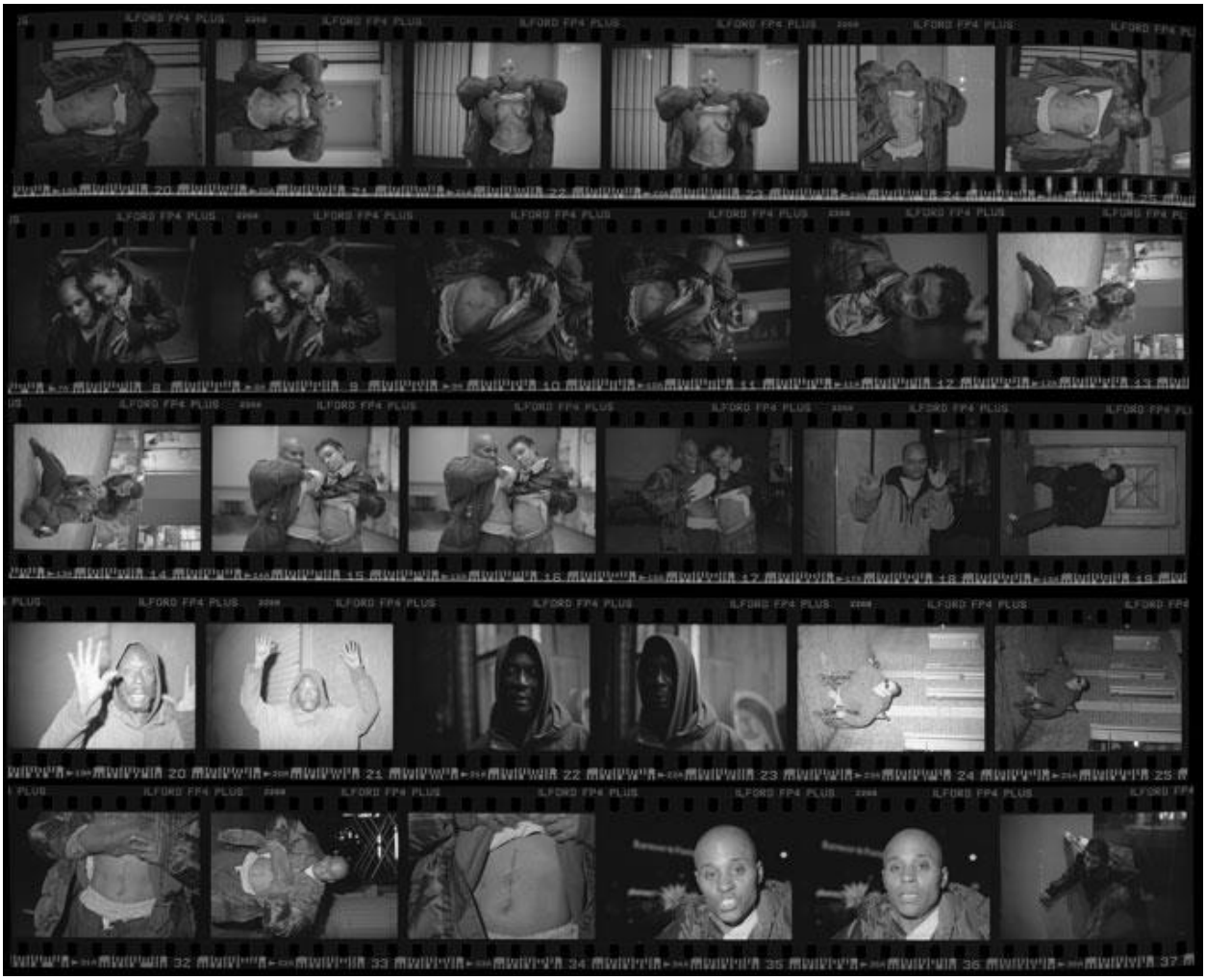
That's when he stumbled by chance into photography: GZA, a founding member of Wu-Tang Clan, was coming to Allah's house to visit. He was excited, and wanted to take some pictures. Allah asked to borrow his brother's Canon Rebel. "He said, 'Yo, man, I don't let people borrow my shit," Allah recounts. "So I ended up asking my dad: Remember that camera that you used to take family pictures with, where is that? And he went and found it, in his closet."

It turned out to be a Canon AE1 that hadn't been used in a decade. The AE1 was a fully manual film camera, with glass lenses, and heft. Allah was enthralled. "From that night on I knew I was going to become a photographer," he says. He thanked his brother for selfishly guarding the Canon Rebel, because he's sure it never would have captured his imagination. "The AE1 wasn't a flimsy plastic thing. Digital didn't strike me as an art form the way the film camera did," Allah explains.

To learn more about photography, Allah started going to the New York Public library to study the work of legendary photographers, from Paul Strand and Cartier-Bresson to Robert Frank, Daido Moriyama, Bruce Davidson and others. He was inspired by their work, and began taking photos as he wandered the streets from the Lower East side to Harlem. "After a while, I said, What makes them distinguishable from each other? It's that they have their own unique approach and style," Allah says. "I'm trying to succeed by emulating them, but I'm not keeping it real with who I am and my personality."

He explains that he was trying to take a traditional street photography approach, without engaging with people he photographed. But it didn't feel right to him. "My personality is to stop you and talk to you," Allah says. "I don't really believe in the concept of strangers, where somebody is so distant, they have no relationship to you. I'm more of a spiritual person, I'm a person who would rather have somebody's permission."

In addition to engaging with people he was photographing, Allah decided to stop wandering around, and stake out one place instead. That decision came after watching a YouTube interview with Joel Meyerowitz. “He said he was shooting with Garry Winogrand on 5th Avenue. I was like, I want my own place, where I’m the only person shooting.” The place that came to mind was 125th and Lexington—a corner he’d avoided out of fear during his frequent visits to Five Percent Nation headquarters in Harlem. Fear of that corner kept other photographers away, too. “The only cameras [there] was the surveillance cameras,” Allah says.



A contact sheet from November 21, 2011—Allah’s first night working on his “125th & Lexington” project. © Khalik Allah

Shooting at 125th and Lexington “was a process of easing into it,” Allah says. Initially he shot during the day, with color film. One day, he photographed a crack addict, and a black police officer challenged Allah for taking pictures that put the community in a bad light. On the defensive, Allah said he was there to photograph everything—“good, bad and ugly”—and other bystanders signaled their support for what he was doing.

So Allah kept working, and in late 2011, he decided to photograph at night instead of during the day. At the time, he was working the graveyard shift at AMC Networks as a broadcast technician, and awake at night, even on nights he had off. Shooting at night also suited him, he says, “because I like contrast.” Initially, he shot at night with Ilford FP4, a black-and-white film rated at 125 ISO. Eventually, he switched to Kodak Portra 160, a color film.

“That’s for a sunny day on the beach,” Allah observes. On the streets of Harlem at night, the film “is really struggling to create an image, and it leads to a heavy amount of contrast.”

As a practical matter, the limitations of the film helped distinguish Allah’s esthetic, pushing him to improvise with whatever light he could find, including storefronts and lighted signs, but also the flashing lights of police cars and emergency vehicles. Struggle—his own as an artist, and the existential struggle of the people he photographed—became a metaphor for the work. And Allah approached it as a spiritual mission.

“In dark situations, I found myself saying to so many of my subjects, ‘Walk with me into the light,’” he wrote, explaining that it was a literal command that he also recognized as a religious metaphor. “After that I started calling my work on the street ‘Camera Ministry.’ I felt like I was baptizing people with Light: the Light of truth awarded to the mind that withholds judgment, because judgment always obscures truth.”

Allah started sharing his photographs from 125th and Lexington in 2012. “I feel like I’m a visual rapper,” he says. “I got to the point where I felt my ‘lyrics’ [photos] were getting better. So I was like, OK, cool, I’ll throw it out there and see what the response is.”

At first, he shared some of his black and white work by printing it out inexpensively on copy paper at CVS, and showing the pictures to a few of his Wu-Tang Clan friends. Eventually, he decided to put some of his work on Tumblr and Facebook. By then he was also back to making films, which enabled him to express his impressions of the neighborhood in ways he couldn’t with still photography alone.

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His critically acclaimed 2015 documentary, called *Field Niggas*, is essentially a film version of *Souls Against the Concrete*. For that film, Allah shot video portraits of his subjects, as well as scenes of life on the street at night. The film cuts back and forth among the portraits, which are rendered in slow motion. For a soundtrack, Allah intercut snippets of conversations he recorded as he was filming with his own meditations on the dynamics—historical, racial, and cultural—that shape the social microcosm at 125th and Lexington.

The film attracted attention to Allah’s photography, and he started getting inquiries from collectors about buying prints. “And I was like, ‘What? You want to buy one of my prints? Are you serious?’” Allah recalls. He posted a price list, topping out at $100, on Facebook. “This man named Michael Pollack called me and he said, ‘I don’t think that you know your value.’”

Pollack, a curator for the FotoDC festival, put Allah in touch with Vikki Tobak, another FotoDC curator. Tobak ended up helping Allah negotiate a book contract for *Souls Against the Concrete* with University of Texas Press. Meanwhile, photo collector Michael Kinberger also reached out to Allah, and introduced him to New York gallery owner Tom Gitterman. Allah is now represented by Gitterman Gallery, which mounted his first solo show in New York in 2018.

For Allah, it was a whirlwind rise in the fine-art world that other artists dream of. Last summer, while he was on a month-long residency at Light Work in Syracuse, Allah started work on a second book. It will be

another collection of images from his 125th & Lexington project, which has continued. “The work is getting better,” Allah says. “This [new] work is getting deeper and deeper.”

Holding up Japanese Nobuyoshi Araki as a model of his book-publishing ambitions—the famous Japanese photographer has published nearly 500 books to date—Allah says, “That’s how I want to be.” His aspirations as a filmmaker are equally large. “I’m still beginning as a filmmaker,” Allah says. “I have other themes, other subject matter.” Whatever those subjects are, count on the work to be strikingly original.