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A FILMMAKER AND PHOTOGRAPHER'S URGENT, PERSONAL PORTRAITS OF HARLEM AT NIGHT

By **Richard Brody** January 18, 2018

Khalik Allah, one of the most original documentary filmmakers working today, has made only a few short films and one feature to date, “Field Niggas” (the title is derived from a remark by Malcolm X), which he put out on YouTube and Vimeo and which was released, briefly and scantily, in 2015. (He was also one of the cinematographers for Beyoncé’s “Lemonade.”) The inspiration for Allah’s movies is on view in his photo book, “Souls Against the Concrete” (University of Texas Press), a series of images that were made, like his films, at the corner of 125th Street and Lexington Avenue at night.

These images—of people, mainly black people, many of whom endure drug addiction, physical infirmities, poverty, homelessness, and harassment from the police—have an essential documentary urgency. They also have a spiritual essence, an element of passion and grace that’s revealed by Allah’s compositional grandeur and textural intimacy—but these revelations of style arise from his own experience, which he also details in the book, in an extraordinary personal essay, “Camera Ministry.” In the essay, Allah—who has an exhibition opening at New York’s Gitterman Gallery, in March—discusses his first enthusiasm for filmmaking, in the late nineteen-nineties, as a teen-ager from Long Island, at the same time that he began to frequent Harlem, to study the work of the Five Percent Nation, and to become friends with members of the Wu-Tang Clan. He discusses the happenstance of his sudden interest in photography at a time, in his early twenties, when he had put his filmmaking on hold. It’s a story that involves his family, but, above all, it involves his relationships with the people whom he photographs, as well as with other people whom he encountered on the street.

Allah’s story of how he made these color photographs, between 2012 and 2016 (plus a handful of others, monochrome, made a little earlier), is a story of adventure, devotion, and love—a tale of pursuing a paradoxical form of beauty, one that arises from ravaging and destructive circumstances. (One of the essay’s main characters, a homeless man from Haiti who calls himself Frenchie, is the subject of Allah’s 2013 film “Antonyms of Beauty,” which is available online.) Along with its unsparingly dramatic narrative, “Camera Ministry” is also a sort of philosophy of the image, a freely imaginative exposition of the ideas that arise from Allah’s practice and motivate his work in photography and cinema. (I had the privilege of hearing Allah discuss some of these ideas last spring, in a seminar at the University of Missouri that was one of the best cinematic experiences I had all year.) The blend of image and language in “Souls Against

the Concrete” mirrors Allah’s films, which are vigorous talking pictures. His discussions with the people he photographs, which are chronicled in his essay, are as crucial to the films as are the images that he captures—and his way of connecting them is as original as the subject matter itself.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Allah’s films is their way with time, and he discusses, in this essay, the time-based metaphysics of his work. “I like to say that photography is my inside joke with God, because it’s my attempt to make the temporal become eternal, and that’s impossible,” he writes. The photographs in “Souls Against the Concrete” are traces of extended spans of time, embodying both the long duration of the intricate and powerful experiences that made them possible and the revelations of the infinitesimal—the vast depths of emotional connection that arise in the fraction of a second in which they’re snapped. He says, “I shoot at night to remind people that we’re in outer time, outer space. Time is over, and the world has ended.” His idea of the connection between the spontaneous and the enduring, and between the worldly and the transcendent, echoes the music of the visionary jazz musician Sun Ra, the seminal Afrofuturist who expounded that central idea in the composition “It’s After the End of the World.”

Indeed, Allah has described his own work as “a photography style inspired by jazz,” and that’s exactly what comes to mind in viewing the images in “Souls Against the Concrete.” In particular, I thought of the music of Charles Mingus, in which compositional precision and depth of tradition mesh with the focussed fury of political defiance and the ardent originality of aesthetic invention. Just as Mingus, a bandleader and composer as well as a soloist, brought together like-minded musicians to develop a framework of form and ideas within which they became more themselves than ever, so Allah reveals his participants in his images while he also, off-camera, reveals himself. They improvise on camera while he improvises with the camera, and the result is a comparably complex exaltation.