

PHOTOGRAPHING THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE

BY MARGARET DUFFEY, ARTS EDITOR
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Looming over Manhattan's Meatpacking District, the Whitney Museum of American Art's glass building sits between the High Line and the Hudson River. The building's surface reflects the city around it, while the outdoor access on the museum's top three levels offers some of the best views of the Big Apple. While on a family trip and trying to escape the stifling summer heat of the concrete jungle, I led my parents and younger brother across the city to the air conditioned museum. We split up once in the museum, pursuing our favorite pieces without any time constraints.

The exhibition, *Danny Lyon: Message to the Future*, consumed my attention. It features an extensive collection of photographs taken by Lyon, who was born in 1942 and was a major force in the street photography movement of the 1960s. Lyon used his camera to record subjects that traditional media sources were ignoring or glossing over. Subjects included Tennessee transgender youths, Texas prisons, the demolition of sixty acres of New York City nineteenth century buildings and the Civil Rights Movement.

In light of the growing Black Lives Matter movement, Lyon's pieces that focused on the Civil Rights Movement resonated in contemporary America. As racial tension between law enforcement and minority citizens heightens across the country, some of Lyon's images from forty years ago appear strikingly modern.

After watching John Lewis, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), give a speech advocating for the Civil Rights Movement in Illinois in 1962, Lyon moved south to photograph the movement in action. There, Lyon became the official photographer for the SNCC. He proceeded to record the group's southern effort in the form of sit-ins, altercations with law enforcement and marches. The images were used to create SNCC brochures and posters aimed at recruiting more movement supporters and raising funds.

The poster in the top image employs Lyon's photograph of a cross armed police officer staring intensely away from the camera. Above the image the SNCC posed the question, "is he protecting you" to push society to reassess law enforcement's treatment of minorities.

The photograph in the bottom image highlights the police brutality the poster was calling into question. Activist Taylor Washington's struggle against the officer's chokehold in the photograph reminded me of a more recent image: a cell phone recording of the 2014 death of Eric Garner in a New York police officer's chokehold. His repeated statement "I can't breathe" was broadcast around the world and became an anthem for the Black Lives Matter.

While Lyon was one of the few people recording the brutality during the Civil Rights Movement, today, in the digital age, images and videos of potential police brutality are far more accessible. Encounters with police are shared on social media and suddenly millions of other eyes have seen them. Lyon was a pioneer for this type of reporting. Without instantaneous access to the internet, he managed to put faces on a movement that was often deprived of a human angle. His decision to move south was a decision to create an accurate recording of history being made.

While race relations have changed since the Civil Rights Movement, Lyon's *Message to the Future* is still felt today. ■

SOURCE: whitney.org

