ARTIST
Bill Gaskins

TITLE
Men at Black Greek Picnic at Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, PA

DATE
1992

DIMENSIONS
7.75 in H x 11.5 in W

MEDIUM
Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER
1993.018

CURRENT LOCATION
1620-27B

BILL GASKINS

BORN
1953

GENDER
Male

CITIZENSHIP
United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE
African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP
Artist-in-Residence, 1993
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1996
Book Collectors Program, 1998

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS
Contact Sheet 78
Contact Sheet 97
Menschel Gallery Catalogue 44

ESSAYS

Hair is a reflection of personality, and its ability to be shaped into a variety of styles asserts its role in forming, as well as repressing individuality. Hair can be a political statement or a cultural statement. It can express a philosophy, a love for a certain kind of music or a period in history, and it can express a kind of sexuality, to name just a few. In short, hair can change or stay as fixed as one's opinion about these very same ideas. Parallel to the individuality of a person's hair is the larger cultural construct of hair that circles around us in mass communication offering the best way to tease it, wash it, set it, dry it, cut it, and comb it. For most Black Americans, especially Black women, the question at hand is not the challenge of getting one's hair to 'do the right thing,' but rather do I have the 'right' hair. Photographer Bill Gaskins asserts that notions of 'good and bad hair' were instilled in him early in his childhood and continue to be reinforced by 'prevailing standards of beauty that exclude the essential physical features of African people, beginning with hair.' Gaskins believes that too many Black Americans have internalized an ethnically exclusive standard, hair that is blonde and blowing softly in the wind is 'good' and wavy, kinky, course in texture hair is 'bad hair'. Consequently, Gaskins says, people either meet the relatively conservative socio-politically acceptable hairstyles or reject them completely by creating a myriad of original hairstyles. Gaskins' images show that Black cultures, and specifically the younger generation, are wearing hairstyles that exert their individual and cultural pride, and in doing so they create a form of cultural expression that is a vital part of contemporary American life. Since 1991, Gaskins has documented Black expression through hair in the series 'Good and Bad Hair'. As the title suggests, there is a duality in the perceptions of Black hair, and this duality is present both within the Black community and within the white construction of the Black community. The series concentrates on asserting an aesthetic that celebrates the diversity of Black hair. In one photograph from the series titled Union Station, Washington, D.C., 1991, Gaskins' subject is a woman whose hair is beautifully styled as short and long, pinned up and free, straightened and curly. While her face is hidden, one can make out the outline of her eye in the waves of her hair suggesting that the hair exposes as much about her identity as it covers up. One cannot ignore the dualities of this hairdo and perhaps Gaskins sought out this particular hair because it so eloquently illustrates the meeting of the desired 'white standard' and the invention of her Black individuality. In one photograph from the collection, Gaskins records three men at a Black fraternity picnic at Fairmont Park in Philadelphia. The center subject turns his face from the camera but the back of his head asserts a powerful Black identity, a 'Fade' with a hair etching of a couple having sex. In this photograph, the caricature is an assertion of sexuality on this twenty-something generation head, and the brazen qualities of this disclosure equates the head to a billboard where one's sexual preferences are inscribed for public view. Gaskins' photographs document competitors in hairstyling shows, individuals in 'the theater of the streets,' and the people in his life. Gaskins' extraordinary sensitivity to his subjects, to the light and to the tonal range of Gelatin Silver Prints gives a harmony to the image that can only be achieved when one understands the setting and the subject like a musician would understand the whole song and each instrument's role. The images are an open challenge to look closely at what he calls one of the most dynamic periods of personal expression by Black Americans through hairstyles. At the same time, the viewer is asked to look beyond the image and to openly challenge those standards of beauty creating the polarities of good and bad hair in the minds of many Black and White Americans. Amy Hufnagel (c)1992NECESSARY EMBELLISHMENT BILL GASKINS' GOOD AND BAD HAIR All over the U.S., black people are walking around with flag-burnings on their heads. Flag burnings, picket lines, 'F____ the police!' and biblical citations ('I am black and comely,' 'Princes shall rise out of Egypt and Ethiopia will stretch forth her hands to God') inscribed in the most public of codes, the language of bodily adornment. Specifically, the grammar of hair styles — that is to say, the transformation and presentation of the single most prominent body site, the head. Most folks would say this has been going on since the Afro surfaced in the 1960s like a mushroom cloud marking the Black Pride/Power explosion. But some see the 'conk' (the male version of the chemically-straightened 'dos the Afro dramatically opposed) as a prior U.S. instance of coiffure-as-cultural resistance. And traditionally, hairdress has been a symbolic medium (for men and women) in many African cultures. With his series, Good and Bad Hair, photographer Bill Gaskins aims to counteract' an Afrophobic culture that excludes dark skin, broad noses, full lips and 'kinky' hair from accepted standards of beauty.' The African matrix is crucial to this project. Not because of romantic investments in 'African' (as opposed to 'African-American') identity. But, because the persistence of African beauty standards and practices, in spite of a long history of conscious repression and opposing cultural norms, literally embodies a collective refusal to trade the memory of the African-American nightmare for the amnesia of the American Dream. The titles of the works in this series are stark: Tanya, Baltimore, Maryland, 1994 — Stanley, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991, signaling the photographer's non-narrative intentions. Indeed, Gaskins has produced a set of icons — mysterious and unforgettable as any African god or Byzantine saint. Although they record a semiotics of hair, these photos heavily rely on their maker's ability to elicit poetry from his subjects' faces. Expressions and views range from the deer-stunned-by-auto-headlights/fashion model full-face stare (seen in India, Convention Center Plaza, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991) to the barely visible, over-the-shoulder, pensive profile (seen in Japonica, Baltimore, Maryland, 1994). As befits icons, they are all bust-length shots. But they never become monotonous, thanks to the photographer's attention to individualizing details of costume and pose — like the clown broach, rhinestone studded sunglasses, and equally spectacular hooped earrings that rival their wearer's baroque coiffure in Tiny, Artscape Festival, Baltimore, Maryland, 1993. Most of Gaskin's compositions feature a centrally positioned, single figure, framed by a black, near-black, or extremely out-of-focus background. Exceptions include the 'paternity' (note the unfamiliarity of this genre label as opposed to its female counterpart!), Father and Son, Artscape Festival, Baltimore, Maryland, 1993, and the double portrait, Kink and Coke, New York City, New York, 1994. Although there are some solo images of males, the series tends to show women as isolated individuals and men interacting with one another. But whether he is producing a single or a multi-figure image, Gaskins maintains a precarious balance between design that is relatively uncluttered overall, yet includes the frayed edges and casual asymmetries of ordinary life. All of which offsets and accentuates his subjects' fabulous hairdress….In a curious reversal, black hairstyles most 'foreign' to the dominant culture look least 'exotic' here. A fact that says volumes about the relationship between images and their makers' cultural perspectives. Thus, Gaskins' portrayal of a dark-skinned, full feature woman, who wears a string of cowry shells around her neck and whose head is studded with knots of short, twisted hair reads as a classic beauty portrait. Which is to say, it (Tanya, Baltimore, Maryland, 1994) reads completely against the grain of U.S. culture's routine, unconscious 'Afrophobia.' In contrast, the grinning, gold-toothed subject of Woman in Gold, Atlanta, Georgia, 1991, sports the ubiquitous, side-parted, asymmetrical bob of the '80s and '90s. Unlike Madonna and conventional white wearers, Woman in Gold wears a startling two-toned (dark brown and bright or platinum blonde) version that contrasts boldly with her 'definite brown' skin. While the shape and texture of her hairstyle quote prevailing white beauty canons, the unabashed artifice and dissonance of its coloring clashes with them. It is this sort of nose-thumbing irreverence in the face of hegemonic codes that derail alleged correspondences between the binary pairs self-esteem/hatred and natural/straightened — African-American hair. Several Photos also make pretzels out of familiar hair-related gender codes. Adorned by only a faint cap of stubble, the bare skill and men's sportcoat of the young woman in Nicole, Baltimore, Maryland, 1993 is no less jarring then the 'dead straight' luxuriant mane of the pinstriped suit-wearing fellow in Michael, Chicago, Illinois 1995. In both cases, Gaskin juices the effect through his use of extreme contrast between his sharp-focused subjects and their soft-focused settings, making us 'feel' the resulting psychosexual dislocations as ambiguities or unaccountable breaks in the visual field. More than three decades ago, when the First World Festival of Negro Arts took place in Dakar, Senegal, Harris Memel-fote, a scholar from the former French West African colony of the Ivory Coast presented the results of his research on African aesthetics. Unlike Western notions of disinterested beauty that 'functions' only as an object of

contemplation, the perception of beauty 'is, for Negro African culture, an active perception.' He wrote — It works theoretically toward a philosophy of action. It comprises a religious conception, it comprises an ethic and it implies also a policy touching on art. But, better still, the perception of beauty practically pledges action—it is liberating. The photographs in Good and Bad Hair simultaneously represent and re-enact a beauty ethic foreign to official culture, but familiar to everyone who has ever equated good character with good grooming, creativity with cosmetic embellishment, or wit with an ingenious hairdo. It is a beauty ethic that feels free to lift elements from available sources of all kinds and mold them to its own purposes. And, by fueling subliminal acts of resistance to a dehumanizing, anti-black system of cultural values, it has made African-American hair in all its forms — good and bad — a medium of subversion. Judith Wilson © 1996 Judith Wilson is a writer and an Assistant Professor in the History of Art Department and African and African American Studies program at Yale University. 1 In his 1952 novel Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison cannily described a trio of zoot suit-wearing youths on a Harlem subway platform. Noting 'their hard conked hair' as one of the components of an acutely stylized, angular mode of dress and movement, his protagonist is reminded of African sculptures,' which seemed to be distorted in the interest of design.' Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1952), p.380. A 1970 collection of essays by Albert Murray offers an alternative, but nonetheless oppositional reading of the conk: [T]ruly insightful students of culture will upon reflection come to concede that no matter what its origins were, the conk has long become a U.S. Negro 'thing,' and that therefore a young man sporting a Sugar Ray Robinson or Nat 'King' Cole process, say in the mid-fifties, was not copying someone who was trying to be like white people but rather copying a very special Negro whom he rated above all other people in the world. Albert Murray, The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture (New York: Vintage, 1983), p.512 Harris Memel-Fote, The Perception of Beauty in Negro African Culture, 1st World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, April 1-24, 1966, Colloquium: Function and Significance of African Negro Art in the Life of the People and for the People (March 30-April 9, 1966) (Paris: Editions Presence Africaine, 1968), p.64. As a child I remember seeing television commercials advertising hair products, in the 1950s, that meant hair products for white people only. Back then, there were no television advertisements for Black hair products like Dixie Peach Pomade or Murray's Hair Dressing. In all of those ads, I only saw women with hair that shook and bounced; and I wondered why I never say my father run one of those tiny little combs through his hair. When a black child was born, I would hear my mother or other black women refer to the child's hair as good. They'd say, 'that child has a good grade of hair.' Now, I don't ever recall hearing them say that a child's hair was bad. But between them and the television commercials, the concept of good hair was firmly set in my mind. Good hair has waves if you were male, length and manageability if you were female. I thought something was wrong with us. We weren't rich, we weren't white, and our hair wasn't on television! I would grow to learn that we were conditioned to believe that my hair, my family's hair and anybody's hair that naturally curly, naturally thick — essentially African, was bad hair. Later in life I would challenge these notions around Black people and our hair. But many a Black child becomes the adult who carries the same unconscious baggage of good and bad hair that grew up with. This is the man or woman who painfully tries to adapt their hair, and the rest of their body to an essentially Afrophobic culture, a culture which celebrates a single standard of beauty, a standard that excludes full lips, dark skin, and so-called 'kinky' hair. Today, more African Americans are rejecting the notion that our physical features are ugly or bad, choosing instead to celebrate our essential physical features. One of the most dramatic and diverse expressions of Black self-love and acceptance in recent years has been though hairstyling. While many African Americans who wear these styles personally reject any cultural connections between themselves and Africa, their hairstyles amount to an unconscious adaption of traditional African adornment – expressing what I refer to as ancestral recall. So regardless of the hair styles chosen, be it 'bone straight' or crown of 'locks,' there are African influences on all of those styles. These photographs bring attention to the symbolic role of hair in contemporary African American culture, and visualize what writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston described in her essay Characteristics of Negro Expression as our 'will to adorn.' Bill Gaskins © 1996