



ARTIST

Gerald Cyrus

TITLE

Untitled (from the Kinship series), New Orleans, LA.

DATE

1993

DIMENSIONS

10.5 in H x 15.75 in W

MEDIUM

Gelatin Silver Print

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1995.016

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-22B

GERALD CYRUS

BORN

1957

BIRTHPLACE

Los Angeles, CA

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1995

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 88
Contact Sheet 97

ESSAYS

For the past six years Gerald Cyrus has been photographing members of his immediate and extended family in a series entitled 'Kinship.' His images of family members in Long Island, New Orleans, North Carolina, and Los Angeles offer compositions that are naturalistic, yet poetic. Drawing on a rich tradition of documentary work by photographers ranging from Roy DeCarava to Henri Cartier-Bresson, Cyrus combines an understanding of the 'decisive moment' with the sensitivity of an intimate family chronicler. But while it is clear that his work is more about the rhythms within a family than about advancing a specific political agenda, any series focusing on the little documented black middle-class becomes a political statement almost inadvertently. Ironically, the power of 'Kinship' as a political statement is directly related to the ability of each individual image to convey emotions and relationships that are universal, and allow the viewer the space to interpret these moments without being directed by accompanying text or conceptual frameworks. Cyrus creates photographs of the black family that are complex yet unencumbered with extraneous information. Since most photography about the black family is generally about dysfunction, or intended to support a political agenda (be it liberal or conservative), his choice of subject matter and his desire to depict moments in an open ended way make Kinship a unique documentary project. The ambiguity of images like the young girl shining the flashlight in the man's eyes, picture family members in familiar yet unspecified situations. These moments allow the viewer to interpret the scene and bring their own memories, or family history into their reading without feeling directed towards any specific political, or emotional reading. As with the strong and poetic statement made by Roy DeCarava in the series of photographs published in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), Cyrus' images are most powerful when presented in series. The preconceptions and stereotypes imbedded in many documentary projects depicting blacks from the FSA work of Walker Evans and Gordon Parks to more contemporary images depicting the effects of drugs and poverty on the black family, are conspicuous by their absence in *The Kinship Series*. Cyrus' approach creates a desire for more information about this extended family, while at the same time, providing the viewer with visually interesting and sensitively rendered compositions. In addition to the work of other documentary photographers, Cyrus has also been influenced by music, in particular Jazz and Blues. The energy conveyed by human gestures, and the visual compositions that depend on modulated tones and forms, seems a parallel to Jazz and Blues which rely on, variation, improvisation, and an emotional expression. His work expresses a 'Blues Aesthetic' by virtue of its humanism, as well as the value placed on interaction, spontaneity, and an empathetic focus on the black community. The dynamic and expressive gestures in many of the images reproduced here are complimented by a delicate printing style. Cyrus' subtle printing lets the emotional tone express itself through the subjects themselves. The individual images in the series leave the viewer wanting more biographical information, and more narrative specificity. But taken together the work provides a broad and engaging view of a black middle class family. The scenes of these family members have not been set up and the presentation of the images is straightforward. But mixed in with this straight approach is a conscious knowledge of socio-political readings. These ambiguous moments combined with the spare, almost notational captions, creates desire and expectation in the viewer. The moments he captures remind us vaguely of our own families, while simultaneously drawing our attention to our own ideas about the black family in general and the way they have been depicted in the media. Our own personal need to have the full story of the people pictured is a testament to Cyrus' ability to create interesting and complex images without encumbering them with a heavy aesthetic or political agenda. The four images reproduced here combine the familiar with an open quality that gives the viewer an opportunity for reflection. This reflective quality gives the Kinship Series its power. Lisa Henry (c)1996