



**ARTIST**

Lonnie Graham

**TITLE**

Hoodie Boy, Gang Member, Pittsburg, PA

**DATE**

1997

**DIMENSIONS**

21 in H x 16.5 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**IMAGE NOTES**

From the series Tribal Nations Toned Gelatin Silver Print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2002.001

**CURRENT LOCATION**

2432-3B

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**LONNIE GRAHAM**

**BORN**

1953

**BIRTHPLACE**

Cleveland, OH

**GENDER**

Male

## CITIZENSHIP

United States

## CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

## LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2000

Main Gallery, 2003

Group Exhibition - Embracing Eatonville Fine Print Program, 2004

Main Gallery, 2004

## LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

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## BIOGRAPHY

Lonnie Graham lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and is the founder of the African/American Garden Project, a physical and cultural exchange program. He has exhibited his work internationally, and was recently awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, one of the largest grants for an individual artist, which supported this project. Graham is a professor of photography at Pennsylvania State University. Graham participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from February 15 to March 15, 2000.

## ESSAYS

Family, community, and spirituality have been consistent themes in the work of photographer and installation artist Lonnie Graham for the past fifteen years. Graham was raised by his Aunt Dora and Uncle Floyd in the town of Seldom Seen, Pennsylvania, halfway between Pittsburgh and Uniontown. His life with Dora and Floyd is the pivotal influence in his exploration of family and spirituality. His extensive travels to Africa in the 1980s, and his job as director of the photography department and chief curator for the Manchester Craftsman Guild in Pittsburgh in the 1990s, were experiences that shaped his sense of community. Because Graham arrived at his central themes of family, spirituality, and community over time and through experience they flow easily through his work whether in a complex installation or simple series of portraits. In a Spirit House: Aunt Dora's Room is a pivotal installation Graham completed in 1993 at the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia. Graham was out of the country when his Aunt Dora died, and to honor her memory he began to enlarge some of the photographs he took of her from as far back as 1963. He used one of the portraits to make a large silkscreen print on translucent cloth and decided to mount the image in a doorway. Upon viewing the print in the doorway Graham realized that, "suddenly you're looking into another room and you have this ghostly figure standing there." This realization encouraged Graham to further explore the spirituality of his boyhood home. Graham went back to Seldom Seen, collected all of Dora's living room furniture, and installed it in a gallery at the Fabric Workshop, including the original silkscreen of Dora's portrait. The installation, which reminds us of our losses, was prophetic. A fire later consumed Dora's house, and the installation is now all that remains of Graham's childhood home. The installation is in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution, and Floyd and Dora, who encouraged Graham to make art in the first place, now have their old belongings elevated to museum pieces. In his most recent work, which he continued to pursue during his residency at Light Work, Graham extends his notion of how family and community are connected by memory, over distance, and through difference, in a series of portraits titled Tribal Nations, made in Africa, New Guinea, and the United States. In one image from the series Graham made a portrait in Kenya of a young man holding two chickens. While the picture describes a practice that might seem foreign to modern city dwellers, one could imagine the picture being made at any time in the past fifty years in rural Mississippi, or any number of places where you would expect to find people of African descent. Graham's photograph titled Man with a Saw, Vumba, Zimbabwe exhibits the same kind of elusive description of time and place. In both pictures Graham has allowed simple gestures to describe universal activities of labor and subsistence. Both images seem to suggest that life is very simple—when you are hungry you get a chicken and eat it, when you need shelter or warmth you cut down a tree, build a fire, and go to sleep. We know that life is not that simple yet these portraits persist in suggesting that perhaps it is not so complicated either. Graham moves from anonymous to specific descriptions in his portraits titled Mr. Rock and Roll, Detroit, Michigan and John Taniova, Papua, New Guinea. Both pictures are linked to very different places by the outward styles of the subjects' clothes and adornments, yet the gestures that they both use to present themselves to the camera are nearly identical. Like the previous pair of portraits these pictures seem to quietly suggest that as we move forward in modern times we are also pulled back to basic desires for self-expression. In his installation Aunt Dora's Room Graham transformed his aunt's prosaic possessions into a celebration of spirituality and memory. In this new series of portraits Graham explores how similarities and differences can be brought into the same room so that they might seem as familiar as our own everyday surroundings. Jeffrey Hoone Lonnie Graham lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program from February 15 to March 15, 2000. An Introduction The most profound questions confronting human destiny come to mind easily. However, the answers never do, for they are the substance of an everlasting dialogue humanity conducts with itself. The effort to make these answers comprehensible to ourselves so that they might be transmitted to other people, leads us into the past, beyond the origins of religion, and into the prehistoric night. It is here, in the eons before the discovery of fire, but simultaneously with cave painting, that many of these questions were first posed. The answers could never have been final. They initiated a profound inquiry, which metamorphosed into religion, art, the concept of family, and the communion of death. The adventure undertaken by Lonnie Graham in assembling these often mythic images, his perseverance in coming face to face with the eternal, raises to the level of consciousness our most ancient thoughts. James Wylie A Conversation with the World The concept of an interview or conversation is rooted in our inherent desire to communicate. Volumes have been published as a testament to their efficacy in addressing that need and our seemingly unending quest for knowledge. A Conversation with the World seeks to identify and reinforce the commonality of humanity. This project was conceived in 1984 in San Francisco, CA as a collaboration between photographer Kevin Martin and myself. At that time, we proposed to travel the world and document our encounters with random individuals by recording interviews and taking portraits. Over time, this project has gone through a number of incarnations. I asked James Wylie, a professor at the Cooper Union for Arts and Sciences in New York City, to formulate a series of questions that could be directed to the individuals preceding each photographic portrait. The questions were authored to address the essential issues relative to human existence. I believed that given the opportunity to respond in a relatively candid manner, the responses would act as a kind of template

by which one could measure the universality of the human condition. Individuals were chosen for interviews completely at random without reference to social status, political, or philosophical predilection. After encountering thousands of individuals and making tens of thousands of photographs over some forty years on this and other projects, what becomes clear after one is compelled beyond the idle seduction of superficiality, is the unyielding necessity to confront and to seek out our truer selves. After focusing countenance after countenance on the ground glass, after rendering scores and scores of portraits and staring into the eyes of lines and lines of individuals, the entity looking back reveals itself. The lucid moments shared during the critical instant of the collaboration that is portraiture, is universal. The moment of recognition resonates. We restlessly and relentlessly seek ourselves in every visage. If this practice is pursued without prejudice, our goal is achieved in a sublime recognition and the revelation is that of something beyond mortal cognition. The testament is documented in the recorded discourse that occurs between myself and the individuals who consented to this exercise. The inquiring reader who looks beyond the images reproduced here to the printed text will find individuals from across the globe who maintain universal values. Our ancestors commonly serve a singular purpose. The balance of life is defined by its cyclical nature, and there seems to be a general understanding that we cannot exist without others. My question is, if we understand this about ourselves at this very basic level, why do we not afford common levels of decency, honor, and respect to one another as human beings? In order to advance as a race, I believe that we must learn about our weaknesses and explore the possibility of who we might become through a greater understanding of ourselves. This is how I would like to begin the conversation. Lonnie Graham Chris Staley University Park, Pennsylvania Lonnie Graham: What are your family origins? How far back do they go? Prominent personalities? Role of ancestors? Chris Staley: Somewhat unknown, German-English, immigrated over 150 years ago to the United States. I have relatives that fought on both sides of the Civil War, Union and Confederate. My grandmother, who was an artist, died unexpectedly. My mother's father was the first scientific advisor to President Eisenhower [and] president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. LG: How dependent are you on your family and what is the nature of that relationship? Spirituality? CS: I often say we are a very close dysfunctional family. My parents got divorced when I was thirty. I was raised a Unitarian. I continue to question the meaning of life. I pray and meditate. LG: What, in your opinion, is the meaning of life in relation to death? CS: The challenge is to overcome my own concerns of ego and self-worth, and think of the world and others beyond myself. To believe love is eternal when my daughter says, "Daddy, I love you." It is a gift I want to send back to her. LG: Does death, for you, have any connection with the concept of salvation? CS: I turn fifty this summer. In all likelihood I've lived over half my life. As my body breaks down, I hope my spirit will grow. LG: How does your culture interpret the origin of the universe, or the principle on which the universe may be based? CS: I fear our culture is too full of ideology. It's too fixed. I believe the wise man seeks the truth. The fool knows the truth. LG: How do you define your traditional culture in relation to your own life? CS: Our culture is changing too fast. I am a potter. I believe I want to touch the earth to stay grounded or in touch with my past or roots. Touch makes me feel alive. LG: Do you see around you any connections (art, architecture, etc.) linking your traditional culture with contemporary life? CS: The sky. When I look up, the sky is always changing and it is the roof of which we all live under. LG: What is your opinion of Western culture in terms of its spirituality? CS: Woefully lacking—it has become a commodity like everything else. We are not taught the importance of reflection, or having a sense of awe. The root word of humility is humus, the black earth. Life comes from dirt where we all return. Nigel Duba Uyaku, Papua New Guinea I interviewed Nigel under a palm-thatched veranda roof of his home, constructed of bamboo and black palm logs, in the heat of the afternoon. As we refreshed ourselves with coconut juice, other inquiring elders leaned against the support beams of the great structure, while children played in the sandy yard nearby. Lonnie Graham: What are your family origins? Nigel Duba: The origin of my family is the Maisin tribe within the Gafi clan, which goes back some 300-400 years. I can trace our ancestors to the eleventh generation. My son's children will be the tenth generation. LG: Are there any prominent personalities? ND: My granny, (grandfather) my ancestor, our Gafi clan, who were Orocaro, whom I am proud of. A chief leads us to where we are, protecting them, looking after the Gafi clan and the whole Orocaro. He was able to get them together, leading them, establishing governance, making sure the unity and peace are there. The important thing for any leader of the clan is that he must be able to detect problems and solve them before they get out of hand, and that is what I am proud of. Coming earlier are my own brothers, my elder brother. I am proud of him. He knew development and education. My brother is the first doctor in Papua New Guinea. He is not alive now, but I am proud because he made a history in the new educational system. LG: What do you feel the role of the ancestor is overall? ND: The ancestors, overall, I personally feel that they must find a suitable place for generations to settle in where there is land and its resources. I think that is an important role. Now we enjoy it because they are able to find the good land for us. LG: They built a kind of environmental and cultural foundation. ND: Sure, sure, I think that is an important job and I cannot forget. I am thankful for it and proud. LG: How interdependent are you with your family? ND: If I am not dependable I am no use. It's important for me to help my family with making gardens, fishing, building a home. My father always says if you depend on others you are nobody. I must be part of the family because of my interdependence. LG: So in the nature of that whole relationship, you see yourself as a kind of provider? ND: Part of society that I belong to. LG: How about spiritually? ND: I have a feeling something that is not physically seen, but mentally part and parcel of me, I must have someone who is higher, someone who is overall. That is the completeness. LG: Do you feel that you have that kind of relationship with your family? ND: That is the relationship. LG: What, in your opinion, is the meaning of life in relation to death? ND: Death separates us, but I think it is the continuity of the life. LG: So does death have a connection with the concept of salvation? ND: Yes, the death, there is the salvation. Everlasting life. It's eternal life. It has connection. Death means living forever. A person's life is short and when death comes it's, I think, the beginning of everlasting life. LG: Now, before you spoke about some beliefs that your culture had before the new religion. How does your culture interpret the origin of the universe, or the principle on which the universe may be based? ND: Our culture, I believe, is part and parcel of the universe. The culture is made up of the universe. It's interrelated, as if there is—the culture is tied into the environment in which we live, and the universe is where we're living and that's how I see it. Environment is everything. The resources, the family life, the trees, the air, the language, for example. It's the environment, it's part and parcel of the universe. That's how I see it. LG: How do you define your traditional culture in relation to your own life? ND: Well, my traditional culture is my way of life. That's what I am. That binds me. I've got to live in that traditional culture. If I'm not in the traditional culture, then I'm not the Maisin tribe. LG: So, could you briefly define or just describe a little bit about your traditional culture? About who you are? ND: Traditional culture, and its practices and beliefs, is the way of living. It's dancing, it's gardening, it's hunting, the way of marriage. That's our culture. The ancestral stories, the inheritance of what I have from my ancestors, the family trees. If I don't know family trees then I'm no good. If I don't know my history, then I have no background. If I don't know my language I have no identity. LG: Do you see any connections linking your traditional culture with contemporary life? (continued on page 16) ND: Yeah. Some cultures and traditional practices, if they are thought out properly, they can be blended into the new culture and our old culture. If other cultures stop in development or it's bringing no peace, they are no good. There are cultures which can be mixed with the modern culture, modern way of life, contemporary life. An example is tapa (traditional handmade cloth). If tapa is made into a monetary asset, then I'm sure the modernized technology can be improved to make tapa better. Sometimes we didn't see very clearly about our cosmos, our cosmology. We didn't look very clearly at our cosmology, or how we relate with it. At this point Father Proudmore, who has been quiet, adds his voice. Father Proudmore: Because yours or others were written. That's what brother is saying now. LG: Okay. Would you care to talk about that a little more? FP: Our cosmology—the real one—sometimes it's not written and sometimes we have misunderstanding because we're based on a cosmos. But if we missed that one and we didn't see, then sometimes we miss our origin, the beginning of the origin. It might be a wider

experience from our fathers about the living, how we believe, because we believe in our ancestral spirits. We believe that they will stay with us and we call upon them to bring good things, and call upon on them in our cosmology to bring good things and bad things. That's what brother says. We are practicing those things now. And now we are advising the younger people how to go for hunting. LG: So you feel that within the context of the culture it remains very important to continue to have a relationship with your ancestral spirits? FP: Yeah, yeah. That's where we originate. That's the beginning of our worship, the beginning of our seeing. That is our view of things. When the Christians came, we took over the most important beliefs that then a practice came, a religion, and we base it on that. That's the way our central origin of our ancestor spirits, that's where we're based. LG: Would you tell me your name? FP: Father Herbert Proudmore. LG: Thank you. It's the last question. What is your opinion of Western culture in terms of its spirituality? ND: The Western culture, spiritually, is not a new thing. As brother has said, our ancestors, we do believe in spiritual, but when Western culture of religion came, we think it's different. It's not different because we believe in spiritual things. Spirits have more power than us. The new culture and religion, it's saying the same thing: God is more powerful. He's the creator. He's the boss. In our culture it was the same. Those who died, we always think they had way more power. They're the source of power. That's why I say, there's no big difference, that it's just the way they approached made us confused, but now I personally see it's no different. LG: Hmm. So you say that there exists a kind of similarity between your traditional religion and this modern religion? ND: Oh, I'm very positive. I'm very positive. Susanna Bravo-Bowman San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico Lonnie Graham: Now these indigenous people that went back, they were just here? Your relatives? Susana Bravo-Bowman: Yeah, yeah. LG: What did they do before? SB: They plowed the ground, produced their own food, and they were weaving, and mostly I suppose the crops. LG: So they were agricultural? SB: Especially corn and beans and string beans, chilies, hot peppers, and things like tomatoes and all that. They produced their own food. LG: So they had a kind of an agrarian life. SB: Mhm. And animals: Cattle... LG: Do you know any of those? SB: We still have one family left because everybody else has gone to the United States. (laughs) LG: So what do you think—I mean, given that you understand that your relatives have simply been here for ages, what do you suppose the roles of these ancestors are? SB: I have roots. I belong here and I feel very comfortable, and I love this country and I love the land and the people. My mother decided to move to San Miguel against my grandpa's will, and she settled here and she started working at Posada San Francisco. A few years after that, when she was about nineteen she was able to buy this house. Then she brought the whole family, her mother especially, my grandmother, and lived here. My grandfather was never very happy and he didn't want to move here. He died around those days. LG: What, in your opinion, is the meaning of life in relation to death? SB: Well, it's just a cycle, like plants, like everything else that's on the planet. We form part of this universe and we go through this cycle and we have this opportunity to be here. Then we just disappear into the ground and we come back into nothing. But we still are part of whatever is here as far as I'm concerned. LG: No, I'm talking about you. I'm saying, how does your culture interpret the origin of the universe? SB: Well, it's difficult because I don't belong to one culture, so I'm influenced by two. I always have a balanced point of view. I don't really go and say, "This is it or this is not it." So I, I don't know, but recent studies have shown—not proven, but shown—that we might have come from the stars. So, I mean, a lot of molecules and little particles and things might have just reached the earth and developed. LG: That's interesting. SB: Yes! It's very interesting! What about these pyramids and all the Mayan knowledge and all these big figures on the land that we don't know who made that or what's going on? So everything is interesting and everything is a possibility in my opinion. LG: So finally, what is your opinion of Western culture in terms of its spirituality? SB: Hmm. . . Maybe since I've lived here in Mexico I'm not really aware, truly aware, of what it might be. But from my point of view it's subtle. It's not too profound. It could be for some people, but what I see in the culture, what I see on TV, everybody is free to think whatever they want to think and however they want to feel, and the same in Mexico. But basically we all come from one source, and in this other culture, it's many, many, many different influences, so . . . LG: So by subtle do you mean . . . SB: Not as profound. El-Hadji Abdourahmane Thies, Senegal El-Hadji Abdourahmane: My name El-Hadji Abdourahmane. I have thirty-two years. Lonnie Graham: What do you do? EA: I'm in education. I'm a teacher. LG: What are your family origins? EA: My mother comes from Mali, Timbuktu. LG: Oh, are you Malawian? EA: Right. My mother lives in Timbuktu. My mother, Bambura, my father is Sera here in Senegal. LG: So, what do you think is the role of the ancestors? EA: To protect me, so sometimes you know, when I'm sleeping, so I can dream. You know [in] this dream, I can see my grandfather, or I see my grandmother, wearing white clothes. I say that's good for me. And when I see the shadow of my grandfather next to my mother, they say you have to do something. When you talk about civilization, people are forgetting. They think now you have to live in civilization. They forget our ancestors. When you forget, always you are trapped because you were born around this. We have it in our blood. LG: What, in your opinion, is the meaning of life in relation to death? EA: You know my father is dead. LG: I'm sorry. EA: He just changed. Like traveling, just like traveling. You change place with death. You die here. Always I think, when you think you die here you know what I mean? LG: Yeah. So when you die it's like you're traveling. You just change places. EA: Yeah, change places. You know, traveling when you take train and go to the United States it's the little brother of death. LG: (chuckle) Does death have any connection with the concept of salvation? EA: Is it life after death? LG: Okay. EA: Life after death. When I see scientists they say, "Life after death—it's impossible." For us in Africa, life after death exists. LG: So it exists? EA: In the family you have ones who are dead since a long of time. LG: Mhm. EA: And you got a baby. You give the baby the same name of the ancestor and the baby, when he is born, he became like the ancestor. For example, I have a baby. I give the name of my baba, my father. He grows. LG: He's like your father. I gotcha. EA: Yeah. LG: How interesting. EA: Personality. Here in Senegal, they say he can have seven personality from the name. LG: How does your culture interpret the origin of the universe or the principle on which the universe may be based? EA: When the scientists talk about big bang they make me laugh. When I know the origin of the universe I'm not gonna be here. LG: How do you define your traditional culture in relation to your own life? EA: My life is culture. I live culture. I live with my culture naturally. I was schooled at university. I know one part of my culture. Every time I try to understand the way of doing good that my culture requires. LG: What is your opinion of Western culture in terms of its spirituality? EA: I can't give you. I have to live in the culture to see what's going on there. LG: Okay, so you have no opinion? EA: No, they are selfish, always selfish. LG: What about in terms of spirituality? EA: In Europe you see society or culture. They don't respect their culture. Sometimes I say it's the savage civilization. LG: That is poetic. EA: Around Europe they have the state of wild. It's just they have...they come...they came across with the fundament of utter destruction, self-destruction. LG: Okay, with which? EA: Self-destruction. LG: Self-destruction. Yes. EA: Because they make boomerangs. You know boomerang[s]? LG: Yeah. EA: From their civilization they are wild because they use their civilization in a destructive way. When you don't know the roots, the source of your culture, you can't fit yourself into civilization, you know what I mean? You are wild when you do not know the roots of your culture. You can't fit yourself in this kind of modern civilization. LG: So would you say it one more time? EA: Yeah, if you don't know the roots of your culture, you can't fit yourself correctly in this kind of civilization. Spalbar Goba Karzou, Ladakh, India Spalbar Goba: I am Spalbar Goba, living in Karzou, Ladakh. Lonnie Graham: Goba is your family name? SG: Yeah, my family name, yes. LG: Your family is from? SG: I think they might come from Tibet. It's near to Tibet, I think, because we are Buddhists, so we are connected to Tibet a long time back. LG: So a long time ago they came across the mountains? SP: I don't know exactly, but it might be six, seven generations. LG: What did your mom and dad do? SG: They're farmers. LG: How dependent are you on your family? Do you still have any kind of dependency on your father or on your family? SG: Yeah, it's still existing in the younger generation. In Ladakh, in other parts of the world it's same, you know, the parents have to give the education to the youngster. LG: Does your father help you that way? SG: Yes. He educated me and I was living with him till eighteen or nineteen years. Then I was married and then moved into Leh. LG: Okay. So to change the subject a little bit, what, in your opinion, is

the meaning of life in relation to death? SG: (laughs) I mean, I'm born in this life, then I have to die, you know? That's what I'm thinking in my mind. You never know when and where. That's what I have in my mind. I'm going to die any day. I don't make a big plan for tomorrow that I'm going to live forever, you know, another forty years or sixty years. So, I mean, my dad is just behind me, so it can be anytime. LG: Does death have any connection with the concept of any kind of salvation? Spiritually? SG: Yes, I think so. I mean, there's a connection with—I mean that's why the Buddhists, we say, do good things this life and then you can be reborn again as a human being. If you don't do good this time then you can be born some other thing, maybe any kind of animal. Anything. That's why the idea that we have to think at this moment, at this time, that we have to do good things. So that's the top of Buddhism. I hope other religions say the same too. LG: We continue to build on good deeds? SG: Yeah, good deeds. Sure. LG: To continue to build toward a universal harmony? SG: Yes. I appreciate this life because I did something good. So in this life, I'm born as a human being. So if I do good again, I'll be reborn again. LG: So somebody did something right! (laughs) LG: It's true! LG: In that way, there's a very strong and necessary spiritual connection to the ancestors. SG: Yeah, too. Sure. LG: What is your opinion of Western culture in terms of its spirituality? SG: So, I'm telling about Europe. I was traveling from Cologne to Munich. It was about seven hours. I was in the cabin with some other people. I was trying to make conversation with them, you know? I just want to make conversation to pass time. LG: Yeah. SG: I said, "What's the time?" They said it was 3:30 or 2:30. That's it, nothing more. But they know I'm a stranger and I have totally different faith, but they don't care. After two hours and at the fourth station, some people come into our cabin with a dog. LG: Hmm. SG: And the people talk: (gasps) "Oh what a nice dog!" And "What's his name?" And they say, "Where he come from?" You know, "It's a beautiful dog. Oh, how beautiful." I was really upset. They can talk to a dog, but not to a human being sitting just in front of them? LG: Hunh. SG: And really, I get really mad. But, I can't do anything. So I feel very bad. I feel that, you know, for a human being there's no value. That's my point of view. Throughout the copious incarnations this project has assumed, the list of organizations, individuals, and communities deserving recognition for their kindness, support, guidance, inspiration, and provocative motivation has grown and I remain profoundly grateful. I'd like to acknowledge the sacrifices made by Floyd and Dora Simmons of Seldom Seen, PA and the most benign collaborator with my father, Lonnie Graham. Without knowledge of their values, I would not have been able to recognize the dignity or resolute harmony of humankind when I encountered it. Before his departure to Latin America in 1974, Tim Hall provided an endowment of artwork, books, and papers, among which were conversations and interviews that provided me with the inspiration to begin this project. In 1986, Kevin Martin and myself embarked on what would become the first pathway of this long journey. It is here that I must acknowledge the overwhelming kindness imparted to me by the Karioki family of Muguga and Kanyariri, Kenya. I thank Professor James Wylie who was able to fashion incisive queries that have proven to resonate not only across the globe and across continents, but throughout the course of humanity, striking a harmonious cord in the discourse of its respondents. I must also thank the individuals that I encountered who were indulgent enough to endure the eight probing questions with grace and good humor, and who shared a few moments of their lives and introspection with the world and myself. Thanks to Kippy Stroud. Without the commission from the Fabric Workshop and Museum I would not have found myself in the care of the Maisin tribe in Papua New Guinea. Their level of introspection, commitment to ideals, and intricate practice of politics should stand as a model to the world. Their understanding and preservation of heritage in the face of outside influences and their integral grasp of nature as a lifestyle must be preserved. I must acknowledge Cherifabib Ba for his uncanny effort at whisking us around the country of Senegal with little more than conceptual effort. I thank Spalbar Goba and his family for providing and facilitating the most profound interactions I had in the Himalayas. The generosity, kindness, and patience of Christina Roberts and the unending consideration of Mary Graham must be acknowledged. Jerushia Graham facilitated vocabulary and moral clarification. Angelica Georgiou endured miles of paranoia, months of indecision, and yards of paper and chemistry to produce photographs from the negatives I collected from around the world. I must thank Carrie Mae Weems for her generous encouragement and Jeff Hoone at Light Work for his guidance. Angela Bouwsma labored through hours of accent distractions and stories as she transcribed the interviews for this project. Greg Lanier deserves confirmation and certification as not only a premier Internet technologist, but also a profound cultural facilitator. As we attempt to advance and refine our values as a society, we must proceed from a firm foundation of wisdom in order to cultivate a climate of courage and strength. I owe a great debt to those who have imparted those values to me through the educational process with introspection, patience, and determination. I owe a great debt to John Collier, Linda Connor, Jack Fulton, Regan Louie, Susan Mahoney, and Hank Wessel. I'd like to acknowledge Kimberley Camp at the Barnes Foundation who has embraced my conversation projects as an integral part of the Barnes Foundation Oral Histories Project. I also thank the MidAtlantic Arts Foundation for their support, Penny Bach at the Fairmount Park Art Association, the Pew Charitable Trust in Philadelphia whose fellowship helped breathe life back into this project, the Pennsylvania Council for the Arts, and Pennsylvania State University for their support of A Conversation with the World. Lonnie Graham Un/Common Threads In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermane," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery

from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY. Embracing Eatonville Portfolio Prints from the portfolio: Lonnie Graham, Thompson Avenue, Eatonville, FL, June 2003; Deborah Willis, View from the Pulpit, Eatonville, FL, 2003; Dawoud Bey, Jason, 2003; Carrie Mae Weems, Untitled, 2003 -- Embracing Eatonville is a photographic survey of Eatonville, FL—the oldest black incorporated town in the United States, and a place where celebrated writer Zora Neale Hurston lived and worked. The project is a collaboration among Light Work, the artist's collective A Social Studies Project (ASSP), and the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts in Eatonville. Beginning in January 2002 and continuing through the middle of 2003, photographers Dawoud Bey, Lonnie Graham, Carrie Mae Weems, and Deborah Willis spent time in Eatonville making photographs in an effort to provide a meaningful reflection of Eatonville's spirit and character while concentrating on the social, political, and cultural landscape of this historically unique place in Central Florida. In an attempt to address the unique character of the community and its history, these artists have produced a diverse portrait of Eatonville using traditional documentary approaches, as well as interactive and interpretive methods. Deborah Willis' color landscapes and portraits describe the look and feel of the community, while emphasizing the importance of the church and the beauty parlor as traditional meeting places. Lonnie Graham's black-and-white landscapes evoke the feel of romantic charm reminiscent in the work of Clarence John Laughlin—on a more modest, but equally revealing scale—while his portraits present an openness between photographer and subject that reveals as much as his landscapes conceal. Dawoud Bey looked to the next generation of Eatonville's residents as he combined portraits of high school students along with quotes from each subject, which serve as both time capsules for the community and expressions of personal hopes, fears, and dreams. Carrie Mae Weems departs most from the traditional photographic survey format as she assumes the character of Zora Neale Hurston wandering through Eatonville. Her photographs reflect the quiet serenity, simple pleasures, and ease of enjoyment that Hurston found so familiar and comforting in her adopted home. Later in this catalogue Franklin Sirmans discusses the artists' work in greater detail, and N.Y. Nathiri, executive director of the Hurston Museum, provides her reflections on Eatonville's history and contemporary significance. The exhibition will travel to the Hurston Museum in January 2004 to be included in the Fifteenth Annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities. Plans are also underway for a more extensive traveling schedule for the exhibition. Zora Neale Hurston was an enigmatic artist and folklorist who wrote stories, novels, plays, anthropological folklore, and an autobiography. When compelled, or perhaps when necessary, Hurston would often embellish stories about her own life and experiences, never at a loss to improve on the ordinary. In the decades after her death in 1960, her spirit of creative independence, mixed with serious scholarship and a powerful personal writing style, made Hurston the perfect muse for a generation of artists and cultural workers looking for the signpost of change and a beacon of hope in the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement. She expressed her own passions for the creative spirit when she wrote, "Anyway, the force from somewhere in Space which commands you to write in the first place, gives you no choice. You take up the pen when you are told, and write what is commanded. There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you." The artists and organizations that came together to produce this project wanted to illuminate the untold story of Eatonville, while carrying the torch of Hurston's legacy as their inspiration. In the ensuing years since Hurston's time in Eatonville, the landscape of Central Florida has become fertile ground for the creative capital of America's tourist industry radiating out from Orlando a few miles away, increasing the pressure on Eatonville to retain its unique historical place and character. In 1987, a group of concerned citizens led by N.Y. Nathiri formed the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. (P.E.C.), which was successful in having Eatonville listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998. These efforts also led to the founding of the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts in 1990. Carrie Mae Weems was invited to exhibit her work at the museum in 1999. At that time, conversations between Weems and Nathiri led to serious discussions concerning the formation of this project. All of the artists selected to work on Embracing Eatonville have also participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program, bringing the project's partnership full circle from Eatonville to Syracuse. The collaboration, sparked by Weems' inquiries, began in earnest in 2001 with the idea to give artists the opportunity to look at Eatonville in order to draw attention to its character, its citizens, and its place in history. Photographic surveys were so popular in the 1970s that the National Endowment for the Arts created a funding category devoted to sponsoring these efforts. Several significant projects were supported during this time, but changes at the NEA and in the public's support of the arts eliminated the funding category of photographic surveys, leaving support of future projects to other sources which practically eliminated them altogether. Artists always work whether there is support of their work or not. Embracing the importance of a project about Eatonville, these artists, led by Weems, set out to do what the government no longer felt was relevant. While there are aspects of Embracing Eatonville that link it to the tradition of photographic surveys, the artists have worked to look at Eatonville as a starting point and springboard to extend Hurston's vision for the celebration, accomplishment, and preservation of African-American art and culture. We honor many things with this project: the enigmatic and creative character of Zora Neale Hurston, the importance of history celebrated by the successful efforts of the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, and the muse that Zora Neale Hurston is for artists more than forty years after her death, where her sense of the importance of place became a destination, a state of mind, a call to independence, and a cradle where community ideals and shared experience provide inspiration and sometimes, daily bread. Jeffrey Hoone (c)2003