



ARTIST

Kris Graves

TITLE

The Artist

DATE

2014

DIMENSIONS

16" H x 20" W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2019.029

CURRENT LOCATION

2024-7D

KRIS GRAVES

BORN

1982

BIRTHPLACE

Queens, New York

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2019

BIOGRAPHY

Kris Graves (b. 1982 New York, NY) is a photographer and publisher based in New York and London. He received his BFA in Visual Arts from S.U.N.Y. Purchase College and has been published and exhibited globally, including the National Portrait Gallery in London, England; Aperture Gallery, New York; University of Arizona, Tucson; Blue Sky Gallery in Portland, Oregon; and Brooklyn Museum, New York; among others. Permanent collections include the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Brooklyn Museum, New York; The Wedge Collection, Toronto; and Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania.

circa 2019

ESSAYS

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt laid out her concept of the polis—the ancient Greek city-state that Webster’s now defines more broadly as “a state or society especially when characterized by a sense of community”—as an expansion beyond the ancient understanding of the term: The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. “Wherever you go, you will be a polis”: these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly. This space does not always exist... To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all. [Emphasis mine.] For Arendt, then, appearance, “constitutes reality.” We know that what we see exists because we know that others see it as well. She is also saying that reality is perspectival: things can and do appear differently depending upon the vantage point of their observation. Our nation’s rapidly shifting demographics, for example—and the increasing visibility of men and women of multiple skin tones and ethnicities—may appear to one American as a threat and to another as a form of hope and even deliverance. For Arendt, this battle-royale of perspectives daily makes our reality. What we enjoy is a fragile creation. Deprived of a healthy variety of perspectives, our reality shrinks. Man, the animal who appears, prefers that others see him in the best possible light, whether or not a distortion. I suspect that entire societies do. Though he necessarily renders his subjects silent, Queens-based photographer Kris Graves makes images that speak volumes about the American polis and the constant negotiation between how it likes to appear and what it really is. Who and what he chooses to render apparent—an older man surrounded by his thousands of books whose skin does not fit with our preconceptions of erudition, or a dark-skinned swimmer bobbing along turquoise Caribbean waters—creates an unmistakable space of Americanness, and often black Americanness: “Wherever you go, you will be a polis.” Both a quiet dignity and an interrogative aspect suffuse Graves’s portraiture and landscape photography—the physical testament of his perspective that helps constitute our reality. In 2016, he flew across the U.S. documenting locations where police killed unarmed black men and boys—from Eric Garner in Staten Island to Tamir Rice in Cleveland—as though they had no claim to the polis, let alone the physical space they inhabited. These were mostly inner-city scenes—ironically, precisely those spaces we’re conditioned to think are where black people belong—that he captured at times they were eerily devoid of human presence. These images can move me to tears. In another set of work, Graves plumbs what he calls “American privilege” and explores its many permutations and revocations. In one formally arresting image, we see four well-dressed, apparently white Americans from behind—perhaps a family?—walking along a street and even on top of a concrete wall, as if they own the entire public space. Graves sets that photograph, alarmingly, beside a similarly bright and sunny blood-soaked street in Ferguson, Missouri, where the corpse of a black teenager, who likely owned nothing at all, remained baking for hours. Graves has always defied limitation, traveling freely and widely. In his travels, he’s often photographed scenes of great natural beauty and wide-open expanse and black people in spaces where we do not typically imagine they belong—if we imagine them at all. What he understands, and what I think of as the Arendtian strain in his visual work, is that race is all appearance. Necessarily, its reality is a matter of continual reassertion and collective (mis-)perception. As such, it works in tricky and surprising ways. Skin tone doesn’t just pretend to serve as shorthand for what’s inside a person’s head or heart; it also seeks to tell us where in the polis—in the communal rendering—that person should be. Thomas Chatterton Williams Kris Graves lives in Long Island City, NY, and completed his residency at Light Work in July 2019. www.krisgraves.com Thomas Chatterton Williams is the author of *Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race* and a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Paris, France. www.thomaschattertonwilliams.com