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PRINT JANUARY 2019

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Lava Thomas, *Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, Alberta J. James, 2018, graphite and conté pencil on paper, 48 1/4 x 34 1/2".

Lava Thomas

RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

As is well known, the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott began on December 5, 1955, four days after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in a premeditated act of civil disobedience. The boycott lasted more than a year, until a federal court's mandate that the state's bus system be desegregated. Although celebrated as an icon of the movement, Parks was hardly the only African American woman to become a leader in the struggle against segregation, racial discrimination, and the injustices of Jim Crow. In spite of the focus on male leadership in sanctioned histories, women of all ages played a tremendous role in the postwar civil rights movement.

Based on the mug shots of a dozen women who led the Montgomery bus boycott alongside celebrated leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy, Lava Thomas's series of larger-than-life portraits, exquisitely rendered in graphite and conté pencil, not only elevate their subjects to the significance they deserve but also defy the dehumanization implicit in the works' source material. Anticipating their arrest for breaking Alabama's boycott laws, these particular women turned themselves in to the police in late February 1956. Far from an act of surrender, this self-determining gesture both acknowledged their deliberate breaking of an unjust law and denied their oppressors the ability to completely set the terms of their detention. Refusing to be transformed into criminals by the mug shot—a format invented in the nineteenth century to visually abet the eugenic construction of a criminal “type” and still deployed today as a political weapon—the women of the boycott gaze with untrammeled dignity at the camera, save for a few who are caught with eyes partially closed or averted. We cannot gaze voyeuristically at these women as archival curiosities; rather, we must encounter them as thoroughly individualized agents of change.

Through her painstaking process, Thomas evokes the corporeal stamina required by all successful resistance movements. Her exquisite attention to detail consecrates her subjects, bringing every hair, wrinkle, and thread to life, and refusing to collapse the women into an undistinguished collective. In one of the most arresting images in the series, a very young-looking woman named Addie J. Hamerter is caught in mid-blink, her expression underscoring the contrast between the instantaneity involved in taking a mug shot and the slowness of the drawing process. In another, a heavyset middle-aged woman looks straight into the lens as she holds against her chest a placard bearing the number 7027. Though she is missing one glove and her jacket is rumpled, this Alberta J. James is far from vanquished. James would have been accustomed to the indignities of oppression based on both race and gender—black women were often physically molested and verbally abused by white bus drivers and passengers—and her unyielding gaze suggests the world-weary wisdom that comes from what might be described as a form of *triple consciousness*. Here is the look of a woman with no intention of giving up.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—their astonishing verisimilitude, Thomas's drawings transcend a merely mimetic relation to their source material. Her faithfulness to the evidence of the photographic record, to the vernacular materiality of flesh, skin, hair, and fiber, transforms these forgotten saints of the civil rights movement into the Albrecht Dürer subjects of our day. By honoring the endurance required of the protesters with the duration required to complete her meticulous drawings, Thomas thrusts the memory of their unflinching determination into our present moment of crisis. In an era in which hashtag activism often supplants more sustained, embodied forms of direct action, Thomas's drawings return to the past to suggest a way forward. It is thus ironic that her photo-based drawings cannot be entirely captured by photography. Wine cannot be turned into water again.

—Ara Osterweil

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