Black Lives Hang on White Walls

By Viviane d’Adesky

The first floor of Florida International University’s Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum was grimly hung with images of the most riotous time period in American history. Danny Lyon’s “Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement” is more than a simple photography exhibition; it is a reflection of our not-so-distant past.

“I just can’t believe all this happened only 50 years ago,” said Laila Lipszyc, a student visiting the museum.

The exhibition is photojournalism at its core. Small and medium sized black frames neatly line the white-washed walls. These sleek black frames encompass the historic grayscale photographs.

The clean mounting of Lyon’s photographs ironically highlights the polarity between blacks and whites during the civil rights movement. The initial simplicity of the stark contrasts quickly becomes an uncomfortable and complex retelling of the past.

Lyon’s photographs capture scenes of the racially charged time period. Some are group shots of demonstrations and protests. A young man’s body is flung like a rag doll by police in one photo, showing the blatant violence that is a common thread throughout the exhibition.

“It makes me feel ashamed, but it is reassuring to see whites in some of these photos as supporters of the civil rights movement. It makes me remember that not everyone was filled with hate,” said Lipszyc.
The striking image of a screaming white woman completely surrounded by white males grabbed many students’ attention. The caption identifies the woman as defending and joining the desegregationists.

“It really shows that you can’t clump everyone into one group. I mean, the police in this photo don’t make me think all whites are monsters. I know better,” said Angela Watkins, another student at the exhibit.

The exhibition also includes still life snapshots showing the segregation of everyday objects like the piece titled “Segregated Drinking Fountains in the County Courthouse in Albany, Georgia, 1962”.

The most powerful photos are the close-ups of the individuals most affected by segregation, like the image of a black mother with two children standing closely in line.

“There’s so much fear and exhaustion in their faces. It shows they’re human,” said Watkins.

Lyon’s photographs force the viewer to look into the eyes of those who were once mistreated and reflect on society’s behavior. He is able to capture the emotional volatility of the 1960s without the need for words.

Walking through Lyon’s exhibition it is hard not to draw comparisons to today’s tumultuous political climate. Between the police brutality, xenophobia toward immigrants and shunning of the LGBT community, one begins to question if people ever truly learn from their mistakes.

“Prejudice doesn’t just wash away,” said Lipszyc.