

HYPERALLERGIC

Questioning the Idea of Progress in an Exhibition on the Black Panthers

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I'm looking at photographs of the Black Panthers: men in formation wearing black leather jackets, with buttons featuring Huey P. Newton's image fixed to their lapels. I see women standing together, their solidarity signaled by their afros — big, blown-out, defying the mandates of the dominant culture. I look at group of girls in thick coats carrying signs that decry a fascist state that carries out a campaign of murder, brutality, and torture — as the signs insist — against black people. I see other children, boys in a classroom setting, looking expectantly at the adult who seems to be in the process of instructing them, cups of juice and neat placemats in front of each of them. There are images of Black Panther Chairman and co-founder Bobby Seale speaking into a microphone, eyes fiercely focused, mouth open, head cocked to the side, one finger pointing upward and away, perhaps beyond the sky. I go back to the women, notice again the T-shirts they are wearing with the Black Panther Party insignia, that cat always pouncing toward the viewer.

Sometimes you go backward. "We want Freedom," was the first point on the Black Panther Party's Ten-Point Platform and Program, as outlined in October 1966. The party also demanded full employment for black people, an end to the "robbery by the capitalist of our Black Community," an "immediate end to Police Brutality and Murder of black people" (emphasis in the original text), and the now infamous "40 acres and 2 mules" in restitution for slavery and "the murder of

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50 million black people.” It’s been 50 years since then — half a century — and each point on this platform still needs to be addressed, because police continue to casually murder unarmed black men and women; a bill, H.R. 40 — the “Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act” — has been introduced to Congress every year since 1989 by John Conyers and cannot get out of committee to make it to the floor for a vote.



The exhibition *Power to the People: The Black Panthers in Photographs* by Stephen Shames and *Graphics* by Emory Douglas at Steven Kasher Gallery makes me think of retrograde motion. I think about how, during the period immediately following on the Civil War, a period known historically as Radical Reconstruction (1867–77), 2,000 African Americans came to hold public office, with 16 of them serving in the US Congress during Reconstruction, and more than 600 elected to state legislatures. These gains were aggressively rolled back in the early 20th century and now, despite gains that make the 114th Congress the most diverse in history, it’s still disproportionately white. I’m being encouraged to imagine that making up ground previously lost counts as progress. “In the Bay Area a few years after 1965 ... people wanted to be open to new experiences, so everyone listened to everyone else’s music — and their ideas,” reads a Stephen Shames quotation in the exhibition wall text. “Races mixed more freely than ever before or since; politics crossed racial and cultural boundaries. Anything and everything seemed possible.”

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This exhibition is indeed a look over our collective shoulder to see what happened back there where possibility bloomed in the Black Panther Party's breakfast program — which, at the end of 1969, fed 20,000 children each day in 19 cities around the country — a revolutionary approach to community education, and a coalition of white groups on the left eagerly joining the Party in the movement for social justice. Shames shot all his photos in black and white, though color film was available at the time, an aesthetic choice that evokes a powerfully sentimental response in me. It's precisely the fact that the Panthers were so uniquely formidable and effective in their organizing and community leadership, and yet they fell apart eventually, that gives me little to

hope for in our current situation where nakedly racist rhetoric is being affirmed and encouraged by a candidate for the US Presidency. The tacit assumption undergirding much of Western civilization — and indeed the US, particularly in its notion of manifest destiny — is that we are improving, becoming more efficient workers, generating more wealth, developing greater technological advances, creating more leisure time, having healthier and better lives. But we are not necessarily, and sometimes we go backwards.

Throughout *Power to the People*, I see the Panthers in many poses: camaraderie; fervent public address; the defensive posture of sand bags piled against a window; and sex appeal, in Huey Newton's interaction with women in the Party. I don't pay much attention to the posters and graphics, because they give me more strident and fanciful information than what I take from the photographs. Still, what I don't see is the Panthers falling apart, the acts of failed policy, the intimidation and misogyny and malfeasance that occurred despite their revolutionary intentions. Even the Panthers sometimes slipped downhill. Partly due to internal conflicts, structural issues and the devastatingly hostile campaign waged by the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover, they didn't survive in any meaningful way. I get the Panthers at their best from this show, but not necessarily at their truest. Truth to tell, for this show I don't need the entire tale to be told. It's disheartening enough to see how far we once came and imagine that what will count as progress even if that can be torn from the hands of white racist entitlement and fear is what we should have achieved already.

Power to the People: The Black Panthers in Photographs by Stephen Shames and *Graphics* by Emory Douglas continues at the Steven Kasher Gallery (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 29.