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The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum Presents Photo Narrative by Ellis L. Marsalis III

The story of an urban neighborhood in Baltimore is the focus of a new exhibition that blends prose, poetry and black-and-white photographs by Ellis L. Marsalis III. Through his distillation of one neighborhood, Marsalis tells the story of the many blocks around the world and the “mythologies” foisted by those on and off of the block. “Voices & Visions of Tha Bloc: An Exhibition by Ellis L. Marsalis III” is on view at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum from June 10 until Aug.12.

“Voices and Visions” includes work developed by Marsalis during the past decade. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in photography from New York University's Tisch School for the Arts in 1986, the New Orleans native moved to Baltimore. Fascinated with the myths held by people inside and outside the economically stressed city, he began to photograph seemingly stereotypical images of city life.

Eventually, he confined his photographic survey to one physical location—his block in east Baltimore City. First settled by German, Irish and Polish immigrants 60 years ago, the block is now occupied by a mix of homeowners and renters. These are Marsalis' neighbors—they know him as a father, baseball coach and friend—and the intimacy granted him access to creating sometimes contradictory images about their lives.

“Many on the block are without parents, but almost all have families,” said Marsalis. “The block is a mythology, where people live under misconceptions not their own.” The project was published as his first book, “Tha Bloc: words, photographs and Baltimore in black, white and gray” (2004) under the pen name t.p. Luce. Segments of the book have been shown at several galleries; however, the exhibition at the Anacostia Community Museum represents the most expansive presentation of “Tha Bloc” to date and includes 27 images accompanied by prose.

Inspired by photographers Eugene Richards, W. Eugene Smith and Gordon Parks, Marsalis employed a photo narrative format in his book that is repeated in the exhibition. Poetry and prose bring the stories of contradiction together. According to Marsalis, “Sweet Flypaper of Life” by Roy deCarava and Langston Hughes served as his model for “Tha Bloc.”

Featured images include the following:

- “manchild: eyes on the prize”—At first glance, a teen sitting on a porch in the inner city, looking at a disassembled gun; upon a closer look, the teen’s thumb in his mouth and his repose reveals the vulnerability of a child.
- “in the shade of trees”—A bucolic background setting offers a striking contrast to the subject of the photograph: a young man with a gun.
- “the workers”—A paternal figure surrounded by children of all ages represents an image of joviality set against an abandoned home.
- “bloc congregation”—A mother and her three children beautifully dressed for church complete the full vision of life on one block: wonderful, hard and somewhere in between.

Throughout the exhibition, Marsalis’ prose challenges society’s perception of life on “Tha Bloc” and many others like it.

Marsalis’ work has been included in the 10th Annual Photographic Competition. His book, “The Bloc” was named Best Photography Book in 2005 by the Black Issues Book Review. His work has been displayed at the Photographic Center, Northwest in Seattle; Minas Gallery in Baltimore; the African American Museum in Philadelphia and Notre Maison in Baltimore. In 2005, Marsalis was named one of “Baltimore’s Up and Coming” by the Urbanite Magazine (Baltimore).

Renamed the Anacostia Community Museum in 2006, the museum opened in southeast Washington in 1967 as the nation’s first federally funded neighborhood museum. Today, it is recognized as a national resource, creating critically acclaimed exhibitions, engaging public programs and innovative community documentation initiatives. The museum’s collection features significant holdings in African American art, religion, photography and family and community history dating back to the 1800s. Located at 1901 Fort Place S.E., Washington, D.C., the museum is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25. Admission is free. For more information about the museum, the public may call Smithsonian information at (202) 633-1000 or (202) 633-5285 (TTY); for museum tours, call (202) 633-4870. Web site: <http://anacostia.si.edu>.

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