

Unscripted

Explorations of the Inside and the Out

by [JEN GRAVES](#)



PHOTO BY GILL BAKER / COURTESY OF AARON DIXON

KIDNAPPED (WITH REAGAN) Out in front of the Seattle Black Panther Party office on 34th and Union in 1968.

"Do you feel free?"

"What's so cool about selling crack?"

"Am I the only one embarrassed eating chicken, watermelon, and bananas in front of white people?"

Those are some of the questions in *Question Bridge: Black Males*. Once asked, each one gets answered by a number of other black men. To that latter question, the answers include

"You're not the only one, brother—I don't even eat watermelon" and "There are times when you feel like you are the stereotype," followed by testimony of the occasional contrarian desire to hide a true love for basketball and "Why do we care what they think? I don't need their approval."

The men are in videos projected on a wall. It looks like they're talking to each other, back and forth, chewing on one question for a while until somebody throws out a new one. Each man gets to talk until he's finished, no interruptions. Occasionally, they all laugh at the same time. But they're not in one room. Each man is in his own video; they were filmed separately, more than 150 of them, in eight cities around the nation, and most of them have never met. They appear together but separate, sort of like the *Brady Bunch* intro but with all black males, of all ages, from all walks, pastor to politician to famous actor to prison inmate.

"This question is for all the black gay men out there. How do you feel about yourself? Are you frightened to be out? What do you do to take care of yourself?"

"What are you afraid of?"

"What do you really think of white women?"

"I try to live good but I'm surrounded by bad. How can I live peaceful?"

"Suppose I like classical music... and Picasso over Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence... Am I still black?"

"Which are you first, black or male?"

It's like that. Raw, intense, funny, in-depth, trusting.

Question Bridge creates a place that doesn't exist anywhere else. It's like being inside someone's living room, if a living room could feel warm and still accommodate 150 people in focused, honest conversation. You should visit. It's rare to be asked like this to come on in.

Artists created *Question Bridge*. It's kin to a project called *The Roof Is on Fire*. That happened one night in June 1994, when 200 public high school students sat in cars on a rooftop parking garage over Oakland, talking to each other while an audience—instructed not to interrupt—leaned and listened in. The teenagers had chosen topics of conversation that mattered to them, like sex and race and values and the future, but what they said was unscripted.

The organizers were Oakland artists and teachers Suzanne Lacy and Chris Johnson. Johnson extended the idea to black men and created an early, small version of *Question Bridge*, which he shopped to TV stations and museums including the Smithsonian in the 1990s, but nobody bit. Smithsonian curator Deborah Willis ended up with a copy of Johnson's video, and a decade later, it was discovered by her son, Hank Willis Thomas, who'd happened to study with Johnson in college. Willis Thomas, by that time, was known for his own photographs, including a Nike symbol branded into the skin of a black man. (Deborah Willis, now head of photography at NYU, was a visiting scholar at the Henry Art Gallery last year, where she organized the exhibition *Out [o] Fashion*.)

Johnson and Willis Thomas teamed up with two other people—New York artist Bayeté Ross Smith and film producer/director Kamal Sinclair—to form the corps of creators needed for the herculean tasks of conducting the interviews and editing the hundreds of hours of footage into a film that feels like one smooth conversation. *Question Bridge* has played Sundance, been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, and is now touring extensively. At the moment, it's in Seattle and Los Angeles.

The person responsible for bringing it to Seattle is Michelle Dunn Marsh, the recently appointed director of the Photo Center Northwest. She saw *Question Bridge* at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York this summer while she was teaching at Parsons. Her idea was to add a local component in the form of an exhibition of photographs submitted by men of African descent in the Northwest, which she invited Maikoioy Alley-Barnes to cocurate, also with Photo Center gallery director Ann Pallesen.

Some of the pictures are strictly personal reflections: an old Polaroid of a smiling, big-haired couple on a halcyon sunny day, the man wearing groovy round-framed sunglasses. Today, that man is King County Council member Larry Gossett. There are shots of Aaron Dixon at the Seattle Black Panthers office, and Robert Wade contributed a stunning portrait—this one a work of art—of Connie Matthews, a Panther operative and organizer in Copenhagen (and his then-girlfriend). Other pieces are self-portraits meant to convey a message: *We're not all deadbeat dads, I'm beyond your narrow definitions of African and African American, I'm gay and fabulous*. Still other pieces are abstract landscapes, or surrealistic photocollages. As in Deborah Willis's exhibition at the Henry, photography, like black-male-ness, is revealed to contain unseen multitudes. This show is called *Seen: an exploration of the inside and the out, the then and the now, by the (still) invisible men*.

Seattle's a small town, and *Seen* is full of connections. (Dunn Marsh's own mother was assisted in coming from Burma by a relative of the Gossetts.) How honest can self-representations be in this context? How in-depth can *Seen* go in presenting the identities of known locals? The horizon—from field versus house slave to Ellison to the soul shake to beyond Obama—is the real view, anyway. ★

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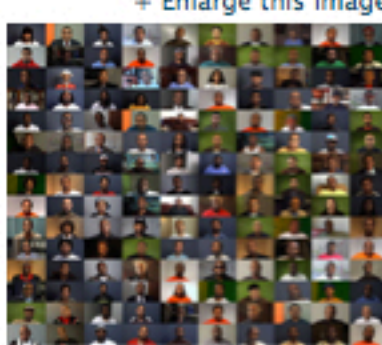
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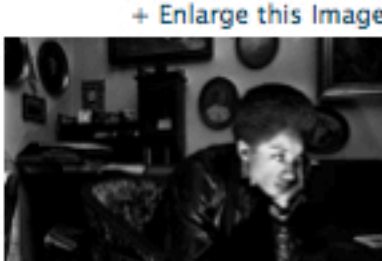


THE 150 MEN From all walks of life, in *Question Bridge: Black Males*

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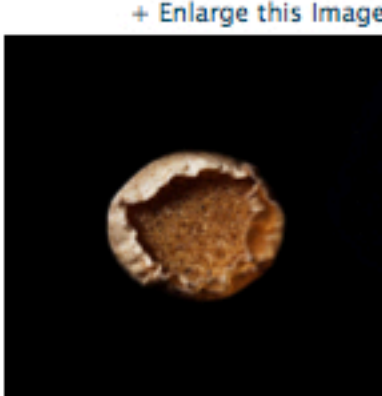


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ROBERT WADE'S PORTRAIT OF CONNIE MATTHEWS Taken in Copenhagen in 1969

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DAVE KENNEDY'S CIGARETTE-FILTER PHOTOGRAPHS are intended as portraits.

[Question Bridge: Black Males](#)

Photographic Center

Northwest

Jan 16–March 8.

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[Hank Willis Thomas](#)

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