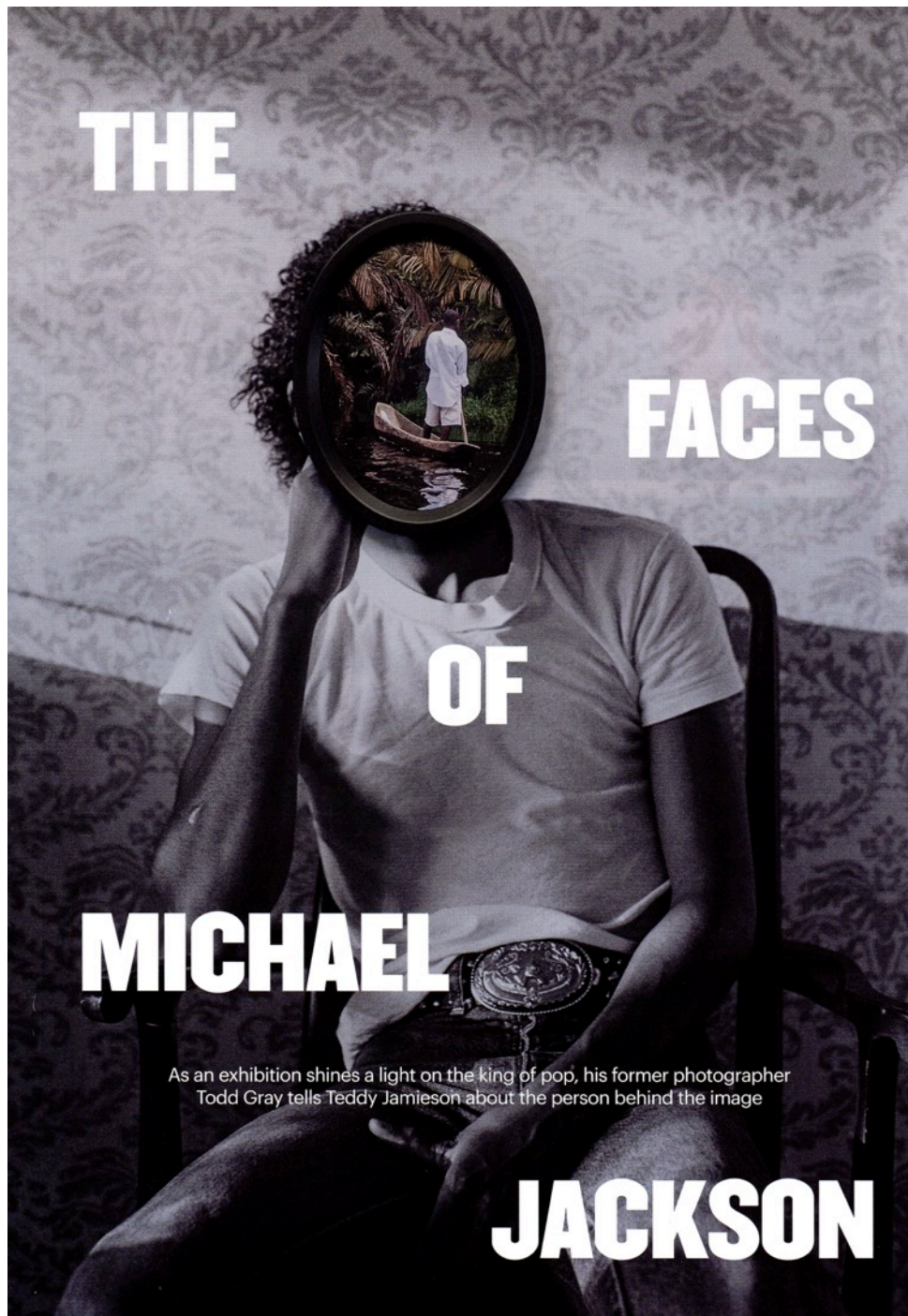


Meliksetian MB Briggs

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Meliksetian MB Briggs

INSIGHT



Todd Gray is remembering the call that changed his life. In 1980 he was already a successful music photographer. He had shot magazine and album covers, and was friends with rock singers. But now the manager of Michael Jackson was on the line telling him the singer wanted only Gray to take his photograph from now on.

"The manager called me and said: 'What kind of relationship do you have with Michael?'" Gray says down the line from his studio in Los Angeles.

"I think he felt under threat. Hollywood is a place where a make-up artist or a clothing stylist can whisper in your ear and kill a movie deal."

The reason Jackson asked for Gray, though, was simple. Fun.

A week before, the photographer had been with Jackson at Disneyland. "I had gone to photograph him doing a Disney special. It was lunchtime and Michael said: 'I want to hit some rides, Todd.' I grabbed my camera and he said: 'No, no. Don't bring your camera.'" So Gray set it down, and that made all the difference.

"I reconnected with my 12-year-old self," Gray remembers. "I just screamed on the rides with him, and mirrored his personality, which I think a lot of good photographers do. You mirror your subject. It makes them relax."

"So, I was basically mirroring Michael and I guess he really liked that. He told

'I reconnected with my 12-year-old self. I just screamed on the rides with him'

management he liked me because I didn't talk much."

As a result, Todd Gray became Michael Jackson's 'pocket camera' for the next few years.

It is morning on the west coast of America and Gray is starting his day when we speak. Since retiring from full-time teaching in 2016 – he is Professor Emeritus, California State University, Long Beach – he comes here to his studio every day to make art.

That art – photosculptures, he calls them – uses images from his archive, including those taken from his time as the personal photographer of the most famous man on the planet.

Some of the results will soon be on show at the National Portrait Gallery, London, as part of Michael Jackson: On the Wall, an exhibition examining how the late singer inspired contemporary artists, including the

TODD GRAY

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TODD GRAY

PREVIOUS PAGE, LEFT
Jackson on tour in 1981

PREVIOUS PAGE, RIGHT
Atlanta by Boat, 2015

FAR LEFT, TOP
Photographed at Disneyland
in 1980 during filming for a
TV special

FAR LEFT, BOTTOM
Jackson at his newly refurbished
private cinema

ABOVE
Jackson with Stevie Wonder
at the Record Plant studio in
Hollywood, 1974

LEFT
Gray says he was the first to
capture Jackson on pointe – the
singer's trademark pose

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• likes of Andy Warhol, Isaac Julien and the celebrity photographer David LaChapelle. It's an exhibition that explores Jackson's pop icon. Gray, of course, knew the man.

'He was extremely sensitive, extremely delicate, extremely shy,' Gray recalls. 'I remember going to a celebrity benefit that Jane Fonda had organised. John Travolta was there. And Michael said: "Todd, go up to John and ask him if he will take a picture with me." I said: "Michael, anybody here would break their arm to have a picture with you." He said: "No, he might refuse and I'd get so embarrassed. You go, you ask." "So, I

became his de facto publicist, going to these people and saying: "I'm Michael Jackson's photographer. Would you care to take a photograph with him?"'

Gray's own creative life started when he was given a camera for his 12th birthday. He was a black kid who grew up loving rock 'n' roll. He began shooting gigs and getting pictures in the music

'You don't need the body, you don't need the face. All you need are those shoes on pointe'

magazine *Rolling Stone* while still at high school. He was first hired to do publicity shoots of the Jacksons – at award ceremonies or in the studio with Stevie Wonder – but eventually he got the call to work with Michael exclusively.

What did he want to capture in his shots of the singer? 'I was always thinking: "How do I make iconic images of Michael?" I was the first photographer to shoot him when he goes on pointe, up on his toes. When I saw that I thought: "You don't need the body, you don't need the face. All you need are those shoes on pointe."'

'The other thing I wanted was to

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provide a visual counterpoint to a lot of the images of black people which reinforced our stereotypical concepts of inferiority, lack of sophistication or lack of intelligence. So it was really important for me to make images of Michael which showed him as a thinking individual.'

Gray's time with Jackson ended in the wake of 1983's *Beat It* video.

In the following years he returned to education, started teaching and concentrated on his art. That continues to the present day. His use of archive images to create collages is a way of interrogating the past. And maybe inevitably in a country such as America

TODD GRAY

race is one of the themes he returns to again and again.

Jackson is a lightning rod for those concerns. The star notoriously opted to alter his appearance via cosmetic surgery and lightening his skin. Even when Gray was working with him, Jackson would ask the photographer to lighten prints in the dark room.

In a performance piece Gray once suggested that Jackson had been born black but died white. The singer, he feels, was a victim of 'mental colonialism'. Altering his appearance was an attempt to fit in with a white aesthetic.

And the more Gray thought about it, ●



FACING PAGE
Hands, 2015

ABOVE
Bamboo Royals,
2014

PROFILE TODD GRAY

Michael Jackson's personal photographer between 1974 and 1984, Gray is now an artist and activist focusing on issues of race, class, gender and colonialism

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• the more he realised Jackson was not the only one who struggled with mental colonialism.

"Writing my thesis, accusing Michael of really embracing whiteness and distancing himself from his African heritage because of the assault of white superiority and mental colonialism, I thought: "Oh God, that's me too."

"I don't have a black accent because my parents made sure you couldn't tell I was black on the phone. And then on

'My chance of exhibiting was greatly diminished if they knew I was black'

my resume I took off all the shows in Harlem. I didn't want anyone to know I was black, a) as a survival mechanism because I knew my chances of exhibiting were greatly diminished if they knew I was a black person. And b) there was a certain kind of shame. So,

what I accused Michael of I could also say of myself.' That self-awareness is now at the heart of his art.

"I'm just so happy I can use the work that I have in a critical context so we can have dialogues about race and power, and how photography is used, because it really does define who people can be."

Michael Jackson: On the Wall is at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 28 June until 21 October

