

"Sunday School" is part of "Rotan Switch: An exhibit of photographs by Lisa McCord," a series of black and white images that documents life on Rotan Switch, one of the last tenant-run cotton plantations to operate along the Mississippi River. The exhibit is on view through Oct. 20 at The Cotton Museum in Downtown Memphis.

COURTESY OF COTTON MUSEUM



ART

Life through the lens

By Fredric Koeppe

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In the essay "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly," reprinted in her book "On Photography" (1977), Susan Sontag wrote that "to photograph is to confer importance." It's a principle that has always guided documentary photography, just as — as Sontag also says — to aim a camera at something ordinary or banal or even conventionally ugly imparts a sense of beauty by that choice and isolation. Dignity may be a bit more difficult to conjure, but documentary photographers from the time of muckraker Jacob Riis, through the WPA photographers of the 1930s, to a notable figure like Walker Evans, have conveyed their vision of the poor and downtrodden as proud and dignified through their manipulation of light, shadow and composition.

Regional photographer Lisa McCord honors those traditions in her images of the inhabitants of Rotan Switch, one of the last tenant-owned plantations along the Mississippi River, near Osceola, Ark., displayed at The Cotton Museum through Oct. 20.

McCord, whose grandparents owned the cotton plantation at the center of Rotan Switch, named for a nearby rail station, was granted extraordinary intimacy with her

"ROTAN SWITCH: AN EXHIBIT OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY LISA MCCORD"

At The Cotton Museum through Oct. 20
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Call 901-574-2586 or visit
memphiscottonmuseum.org.

subjects, who obviously trusted her instincts; some of them knew her as a child. The themes McCord develops, with documentary detachment and almost familial compassion, revolve around poverty, work, family and community. Particularly in the person of the middle-aged woman named Cully do we sense the heart of this community that works together, plays together and worships together.

We are so used to the garish and distorting hues of color prints that McCord's black and white images automatically convey a sense of authenticity, whether earned or not. It's like watching black and white films from the 1930s or '40s, with their formal, graphic and emotive elements of light and shadow, and thinking, "OK, this is what movies should be like." These pictures of hardship and improvised lives deliver a gritty quality that feels in accordance with the subject matter

and our own view of what the medium should be.

A few of the images hint at grievance and even despair. But most imply a sense of shared experience that seems to provide emotional and spiritual sustenance or simply a feeling of physical closeness, as in the scene at a pool table in a club or kids standing around with a bicycle, a prized possession, or a seemingly spontaneous hug between Cully and James. This attitude of community togetherness is conveyed best in the exhibition's signature picture, in which a group of boys stand by a car, stopped on a muddy dirt road, chatting with the people inside, except for the boy in front, who looks at the photographer and hence the viewer. A dog pauses somewhat forlornly to the left on the image.

This picture offers all the requisites of the modern photograph. The car is cut off at the right edge of the image; the important activity occurs to the right and left of the center of the picture, which is essentially blank. There's a sense that the moment depicted is not exactly the "decisive moment," but one among many moments recorded by a person with a camera who happened to be present. At the same time, that presence and that camera recorded a slice of life in its unique, teeming thereness.