



# LEGENDARY

INSIDE THE HOUSE BALLROOM SCENE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERARD H. GASKIN







Center for  
Documentary  
Studies AT DUKE  
UNIVERSITY

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**Electronic images available**

**Media Contact: Laura Sell**  
**lsell@dukeupress.edu**

<http://firstbookprizephoto.com/about/>

**DUKE PRESS PUBLISHES *LEGENDARY: INSIDE THE HOUSE BALLROOM SCENE*, WINNER  
OF CDS/HONICKMAN FIRST BOOK PRIZE IN PHOTOGRAPHY**

*Judge Deborah Willis Selected Gerard H. Gaskin's black and white photos celebrating black and Latino urban gay life for prestigious prize*

DURHAM, NC—Duke University Press is proud to announce the publication of *Legendary: Inside the House Ballroom Scene*, the sixth winner of the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography. Renowned curator, historian, and photographer Deborah Willis judged the competition and chose Gerard H. Gaskin to win the prize.

Gaskin's radiant color and black-and-white photographs take us inside the culture of house balls, underground events where gay and transgender men and women, mostly African American and Latino, come together to see and be seen. At balls, high-spirited late-night pageants, members of particular "houses"—the House of Blahnik, the House of Xtravaganza—"walk," competing for trophies in categories based on costume, attitude, dance moves, and "realness." In this exuberant world of artistry and self-fashioning, people often marginalized for being who they are can flaunt and celebrate their most vibrant, spectacular selves.

From the quiet backstage, to the shimmering energies of the runway, to the electricity of the crowd, Gaskin's photographs take us to the ball. *Legendary*, composed of photos taken at events in the New York area, Philadelphia, Richmond, and Washington, D.C., is a collaboration between Gaskin, a camera-laden outsider who has been attending balls for twenty years, and the house members who let him enter the intimate world of ball culture. In addition to an introduction by Deborah Willis, *Legendary* includes an essay, "The Queer Undercommons," by Frank Roberts.

Willis says that she found Gaskin's photographs "innovative and spirited," the images filled with both hope and struggle as "they explore ideas of longing, beauty, and desire."

Of his own work, Gaskin writes, "The balls are a celebration of black and Latino urban gay life. They were born in Harlem out of a need for black and Latino gays to have a safe space to express themselves. Balls are constructed like beauty and talent pageants. Women and men become fluid, interchangeable points of departure and reference, disrupting the notion of a fixed and rigid gender and sexual self. My images try to show

a more personal and intimate beauty, pride, dignity, courage, and grace that have been painfully challenged by mainstream society. All of this happens at night in small halls in cities all over the country. These photographs show us different views of these spaces as they are reflected in the eyes of house and ball members who perform what they wish these cities could be.”

Gaskin, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, earned a B.A. from Hunter College in 1994. As a freelance photographer based in the greater New York City area, his work has been widely published in such publications as the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Black Enterprise*, *OneWorld*, *Teen People*, *Caribbean Beat*, and *DownBeat*; other clientele include record companies Island, Sony, Def Jam, and Mercury. His work has also been included in the books *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* (2001) and *New York: A State of Mind* (2000). Gaskin has received a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, a Center for Photography at Woodstock artist residency, and a Queens Council on the Arts Individual Artists Initiative Award. Gaskin’s photographs have been seen in solo and group exhibitions across the U.S. and abroad, including the Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum of Art, and Black Magic Woman Festival in Amsterdam. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of the City of New York and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, among others.

Gaskin’s work was selected from two hundred entries in the sixth biennial First Book Prize competition. Sponsored by the [Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University](#) and the [Honickman Foundation](#) in Philadelphia, the prize is offered every other year and is open to American and Canadian photographers of any age who have never published a book-length work and who use their cameras for creative exploration, whether it be of places, people, or communities; of the natural or social world; of beauty at large or the lack of it; of objective or subjective realities. The prize honors work that is visually compelling, that bears witness, and that has integrity of purpose.

For more information about the CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography, visit the website at <http://firstbookprizephoto.com/>.

***Legendary: Inside the House Ballroom Scene***

**Gerard H. Gaskin**

Introduction by Deborah Willis

With an essay by Frank Roberts

ISBN 978-0-8223-5582-3, \$45.00 cloth trade

120 pages, 92 photos

Duke University Press in association with CDS Books of the Center for Documentary Studies

November 2013

Electronic images available: <http://cdsporch.photoshelter.com/gallery/FBP-Gerard-Gaskin-Press-Images/G0000.pRoyjrndww/C0000bF1d2nuigVg>

Password: fbppressgaskin

**Publicity Contact:** Laura Sell, Duke University Press, 919-687-3639, [lsell@dukeupress.edu](mailto:lsell@dukeupress.edu)





## *About Gerard H. Gaskin*



**Gerard H. Gaskin**, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, earned a B.A. from Hunter College in 1994. As a freelance photographer based in the greater New York City area, his work has been widely published in such publications as the *New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Black Enterprise*, *OneWorld*, *Teen People*, *Caribbean Beat*, and *DownBeat*; other clientele include record companies Island, Sony, Def Jam, and Mercury. His work has also been included in the books *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* (2001) and *New York: A State of Mind* (2000). Gaskin has received a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship, a Center for Photography at Woodstock artist residency, and a Queens Council on the Arts Individual Artists Initiative Award. Gaskin's

photographs have been seen in solo and group exhibitions across the U.S. and abroad, including the Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum of Art, and Black Magic Woman Festival in Amsterdam. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of the City of New York and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, among others.

View his web site at <http://www.gerardhgaskin.com/>.

Author photo by Phyllis Gaskin.

### ***Legendary: Inside the House Ballroom Scene***

**Gerard H. Gaskin**

Introduction by Deborah Willis

With an essay by Frank Roberts

ISBN 978-0-8223-5582-3, \$45.00 cloth trade

120 pages, 92 photos

Duke University Press in association with CDS Books of the Center for Documentary Studies

November 2013







**Gerard H. Gaskin**

**An interview with Alexa Dilworth, Publishing and Awards Director, Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University**

**March 12, 2013**

**How did you become involved in this project? How did it start?**

More than twenty years ago I met this guy, Douglas Says, a clothing designer and makeup artist who did work with Jules Allen, a photographer whom I was assisting at the time. Douglas knew all of these major figures in the ballroom scene. He made costumes and did makeup for transsexuals who performed at balls and on 42nd Street. He introduced me to people, and I started hanging out at Show World, and then later at a place called Sally's II (Sally's I was called Sally's Hideaway, that's where *Paris Is Burning* was shot, and it burned down). And I started attending balls, which back then only happened about ten times a year. The process began with me just hanging out at the balls. The first year I didn't take any photographs, though I had my camera on. I got a lot of advice telling me not to take photographs immediately, to wait until the community became comfortable with me. There had been some fallout from *Paris Is Burning*, because some members of the community did not appreciate how the film came out. Some people felt exploited—their interviews either ended up on the cutting-room floor, or they felt like they didn't get any return for their involvement in the film. (Livingston's film, like my series, started out as a project for school, by the way.) As a result, I was very careful about spending a lot of time with members of the community first; I didn't make my first image until 1993.

**Why were you interested in this project, in looking at this world?**

I was just really curious. I wondered, "Why does someone decide to become a transsexual? Why do people believe, feel so strongly, that they need to transform themselves?" And I am interested in the safe spaces that balls create, how performers at balls play with the idea of who they are and how they want to "live."

I grew up in a very Catholic home. My mother was a three-day-a-week Catholic. Queerness was



taboo in the church, even as I saw it all around me. So questions about innate versus acquired sexuality, about transformation and performance, are of interest to me.

**Were people welcoming? How does insider/outsider work in these particular situations?**

Some people were welcoming, some weren't. I'm not an insider. I was probably perceived in the same way that Livingston was—as an outsider, someone coming in who wasn't a participant, a performer. And I often feel like I'm still perceived in that way sometimes. But I am connected to the community. I'm asked to speak and show my work. When something happens like the fight that broke out at a ball in North Carolina—in Charlotte—I get texts and emails and am part of that chain. So it shifts. I'd say I'm a familiar outsider.

**Do you get permission? Do you ever ask people to pose?**

There are people I shoot over and over. And then there are the “young and new” people. I'm always wearing my cameras. I want people to see me, know I'm there. Yes, I always ask permission. I make sure my presence is known. And asking people to pose—I do sometimes. I mean, I've made dedicated portraits, but I will sometimes ask people to pause, wait a moment, in the middle of things, because I find it quiets things down. In that kind of space, with that many people, it's impossible to be invisible, so I put myself out front and then move into more of a documentary mode.

People are naturally wary; it's a gay space. But it's changed a lot over time too. Today, with smartphones, etc., people are used to seeing cameras and being constantly photographed. But while the environment has changed, as a non-gay person in a “gay space,” this question still matters very much, is still relevant.

The whole project is about being collaborative. I participate in the community—I run stuff past a lot of people. I check in about how images are presented, or for instance, how the book title would be interpreted in the community. I have political questions about representation that I don't want to make alone. I want the reactions and input of others. I know that I have an emotional attachment to certain images that have to do with me—what I was thinking or feeling at the time, or my relationship to the people in the photos. I don't want that to overshadow the images, so I ask and I listen. The project, itself, is the result of relationships.

**Did you have times of more intense involvement in the project than at other times?**

The period of my most intensive work lasted about five years, from 1998 to 2003. I went to every ball.

**How'd you get started in photography?**

I took a photo class when I was a freshman. I attended Queensborough Community College for the first three years I went to school. I didn't go full time. And Jules Allen was one of my professors there; I worked as his assistant. By the third photo class, I'd been bitten by the photo bug. I went to study at Hunter College. One of the main reasons I went to Hunter was because Roy DeCarava was there, and I wanted to study with him. He taught independent study, and only on Wednesdays. Because he had a lot of authority and power, he could just teach one day. I made sure that I took the class right before or right after lunch, so I could have more time with him, go to lunch with him and talk. (He always ate at this one Italian restaurant.) And we'd talk about his struggles as an African American artist, or difficulties he was having with a show. I started this project as a class project. That's what you had to do, work on a project and show him pictures every week. He'd critique them and all that.

**Who are your major influences as an artist?**

Well, early on, Jules Allen. But later, I gravitated toward Roy DeCarava and Stanley Greene's work. I met Stanley through working with Jules. From Stanley I learned about quietness in photographs. He's a really outgoing, fun-loving guy, but his photographs are about quietness. And they have a certain romantic feel to them. When we first met he was photographing Paris at night. One of his early books, *Somnambule*, hugely influenced me because it had these quiet, romantic qualities. That book influenced my visions. If you marry quietness with carnival, you have Gerard Gaskin.

**Do you think of yourself as a documentary artist? How do you describe yourself within the photographic tradition? How do you make a living?**

I'd say I'm a "documentary fine art photographer." Right now, I freelance. I shoot for magazines, record companies. I shoot events and advertisements.

**You've been working on this project for twenty years. And you keep working on it. Why?**

That's a good question. How to answer. . . . Do you watch cricket? Ultimately, I wanted this to be a book. That was always my goal. So I continued on.

**Why do you think of the book as the ultimate vehicle for presenting this work?**

Part of the reason is training. When I was being trained as a photographer, I was taught that a book is the culmination of any long-term endeavor, to really complete the project. I also love photography

books. I love to just sit and look at pictures, to look at book covers over and over again. I believe that a good book is a book that you want to return to. I always wanted to see my images in book format.

**What was your reaction when you learned that Deborah Willis had picked your work to win the CDS/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography?**

I was working as a part-time waiter when the phone rang. I saw the call was from Durham, but I couldn't take the call at work. After the shift ended, I listened to the message, and it was Alexa Dilworth at the Center for Documentary Studies asking me to give her a call. I went home that night and told my wife, Nimanthi, that I thought I had won. It was too late to call you back, and I remember not being able to sleep that night. The next morning, I got up and went to visit my mother, who was in hospital with cancer. When I reached you and you told me I had won, I started to cry like a baby. I just started to think about my life and how hard I had worked to make this happen. I also thought about how my mother, who had supported me for so many years. She died three days after I found out that I won. Thinking about winning the award brings up mixed emotions for me because of how difficult things were at the time.

**About new beginnings . . . are you working on a new body of work?**

Yes, I am working on three projects. One is a portrait project on Trinidadian artists; the second, is about West Indian identity and its relationship to the game of cricket. I draw from some of the arguments C. L. R. James makes in his book *Beyond a Boundary* about the relationship between the rise of anticolonial nationalism in the West Indies and cricket.

The third project is one I have been thinking about as I prepare to move to Syracuse, New York. My wife begins teaching at Colgate University this fall, and during my visits to Syracuse and the upstate area, I was struck by the starkness, and the aesthetic possibilities, of upstate post-industrial cities. So I hope to capture the landscape and urban life of Syracuse, very much inspired by the photographs W. Eugene Smith took in Pittsburgh.