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Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Deborah Willis professional files

1944-2011 [bulk 1980s-1990s]

Sc MG 452

Compiled by Joyce Joseph, 2016.

Summary

Creator: Willis, Deborah, 1948-

Title: Deborah Willis professional files

Date: 1944-2011 [bulk 1980s-1990s]

Size: 30.82 linear feet (75 boxes); 74.24 mb (107 computer files)

Source: Donated by Deborah Willis, in multiple donations between 1992 and 2005.

Abstract: Deborah Willis (b. 1948) is an African American photographer, curator, historian of photography, author, and educator. The Deborah Willis professional files date from 1944 to 2011 (bulk dates 1980s-1990s), and document her work on photographic publications and exhibitions.

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Creator History

Deborah Willis (b. 1948) is an African American photographer, curator, historian of photography, author, and educator. Willis was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and is the mother of visual artist and photographer Hank Willis Thomas. She is known for her pioneering work of investigating and preserving the legacy of black photography, and for curating various exhibitions on black culture.

She holds a B.F.A. in photography from Philadelphia College of Art (1975); an M.F.A. in photography from Pratt Institute (1979); an M.A. in art history from City College of New York (1986); and a Ph.D. from the Cultural Studies Program of George Mason University (2001).

Willis was the curator of the Photographs and Prints Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (1980-1992); as well as associate director for Research and Collections, and exhibitions curator at the Center for African American History and Culture of the Smithsonian Institution (1992-2000).

She is the author of numerous publications including, *Black Photographers, 1840-1940: An Illustrated Bio-bibliography* (1985); *J.P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer* (1993); *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (1994, Editor); *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (2000); and *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002, with Carla Williams).

Willis's curatorial exhibitions include "Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest" (1989); "Imagining Families: Images and Voices" (1994); and "Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties" (1996). She was also awarded the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship among others.

Willis is a university professor and chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, a position she has held since 2006.

Scope and Content Note

The Deborah Willis professional files date from 1944 to 2011 (bulk dates 1980s-1990s), and document her work on photographic publications and exhibitions. The collection is not a comprehensive record of her extensive career, instead focusing more on her earliest endeavors. Prominent projects represented in the collection include *An Illustrated Bio-bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988* (1989); *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (2000); *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002); the Smithsonian Institution's National African American Museum Project (NAAMP, 1990s); and the "Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties" exhibition (1996).

Publication Projects is a chronological grouping of working files for several of Willis's books including, *Black Photographers, 1840-1940: An Illustrated Bio-bibliography* (1985); *J.P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer* (1993); *VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983* (1993); and *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (1994). These files generally feature research materials; correspondence; permissions agreements and contracts; drafts and manuscripts; folders for individual photographers made up of brief biographies, artist statements, curriculum vitae, and some photocopies of their images; and book reviews and press information. *Picturing Us* files include drafts of essays from the contributors such as bell hooks and Angela Davis. There are also galley proofs and notes for the *J.P. Ball* and *Reflections in Black* books.

The Correspondence files are exchanges with photographers, artists, curators, librarians, archivists, and Willis's collaborators. Discussions are usually professional and related to photography. Many photographers and artists sent Willis information about their work and upcoming exhibitions to keep her informed about African diasporic activities. In addition, these files contain letters from the MacArthur Foundation about their fellowship award; as well as congratulatory cards in response to Willis being awarded the fellowship in 2000.

Exhibitions highlights Willis's curatorial work through a number of institutional and personal projects, including "Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest" (1989); "Self-Evident; Exploring Democracy through Photography" (1995); and "Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties" (1996). These files consist of proposals; catalogue and exhibition checklists; memoranda about installations; and drafts of panel texts. Materials for a few exhibitions where Willis presented her own work, such as the solo "Fabricated Memories" at the Project Row Houses (2000) are also present.

The collection holds materials from Willis's doctorate program at George Mason University (GMU) such as her dissertation proposal "Towards a New Identity: Reading the Photographs of the New Negro." Most of the research materials are photocopies and notes from various libraries and archives, which were retained to reflect Willis's developmental process and to contextualize her work. The collection also contains photographic slides from various projects interfiled with some artist statements, correspondence, and other contextual information. A few of the slides are personal images.

The Smithsonian Institution files primarily depict Willis's role in helping to establish the National African American Museum Project (NAAMP) through policy and mission statements; an institutional study; taskforce meeting minutes; outlines of divisional goals; and some collection development files. Willis's curatorial work on the NAAMP's exhibits "Imagining Families: Images and Voices" (1994); and "Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art" (1995) is also documented here.

There are also teaching files for some of Willis's courses such as "Surviving the Lens" held at New York University in 2003; and writing files comprised of drafts for articles, essays, and papers written by Willis.

Arrangement: The collection is arranged alphabetically by category, with the exception of Publication Projects leading the arrangement in chronological order.

Key Terms

Occupations

African American photographers
African American women authors
African American women photographers
Photographers, Black

Subjects

Art museums -- Exhibitions
Library exhibits
Photography -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Correspondence
Drafts (documents)
Galley proofs
Manuscripts (documents)
Photographs
Research notes
Slides (photographs)

Names

Ball, James Presley, 1825-1904
Van Der Zee, James, 1886-1983
Williams, Carla, 1965-
National African American Museum (U.S.)
Smithsonian Institution

Container List

Publication Projects

Black Photographers, 1840-1940: An Illustrated Bio-bibliography (1985)

- b. 1 f. 1 1983-1998
- b. 1 f. 2 Book Notes 1990s
- b. 1 f. 3-5 Correspondence 1973-1988
- b. 1 f. 6-11 Drafts and Notes 1980s
- b. 2 f. 1-3 Manuscripts 1980s
- Photographers
- b. 2 f. 4-16 Bedou, A.P. - Parks, Gordon 1973-1986
- b. 3 f. 1-11 Scurlock, Addison - Woodard Studios 1974-1998
- b. 3 f. 12-13 Photographs 1980s
- Photocopies
- b. 3 f. 14 Reviews 1985-1989
- b. 3 f. 15-18 Research Materials 1981-1990

An Illustrated Bio-bibliography of Black Photographers, 1940-1988 (1989)

- b. 3 f. 19 Biographies 1982-1989
- b. 4 f. 1 Captions for Illustration 1980s
- b. 4 f. 2-8 Drafts 1980s
- b. 5 f. 1 Drafts 1988
- b. 5 f. 2-4 Manuscripts 1980s
- b. 5 f. 5 Galley 1980s
- b. 5 f. 6 Lists: Index, Bibliography, Exhibitions 1980s
- b. 5 f. 7-8 Notes 1980s
- b. 5 f. 9 Permissions 1988
- Photographers
- b. 5 f. 10 1982-1987
- b. 5 f. 11-25 Abel, Oneal - Bernard, Donald 1970-1987
- b. 6 f. 1-42 Bey, Dawoud - Ferrill, Mikki 1971-1988
- b. 7 f. 1-36 Fournier, Collette - Jones, Julia 1970-1988
- b. 8 f. 1-44 Jones, Kenneth - Providence, Wayne 1970-1988
- b. 9 f. 1-35 Ragland, Phillda - Talamon, Bruce 1970-1989
- b. 10 f. 1-22 Thomas, Jon - Yearwood, Lloyd 1977-1988
- b. 10 f. 23 Photographs 1980s
- Photocopies
- b. 10 f. 24-25 Printed Matter 1973-1990
- b. 10 f. 26-27 Research Materials 1980s

J.P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer (1993)

- b. 11 f. 1 1990s
- b. 11 f. 2 Checklist 1980s
- b. 11 f. 3 Cincinnati Historical Society 1981-1990

Publication Projects (cont.)

J.P. Ball, Daguerrean and Studio Photographer (1993) (cont.)

- b. 11 f. 4 Intimate Images Catalogue 1990
- b. 11 f. 5 Letters 1993
- b. 11 f. 6 Montana Historical Society 1990
- b. 73 f. 1-5 Proofs 1990s
- b. 11 f. 7 Slides 1990s

VanDerZee: Photographer 1886-1983 (1993)

- b. 11 f. 8-13 1971-2000
- b. 12 f. 1-3 1990s
- b. 12 f. 4 Abrams 1993-1994
- b. 12 f. 5 Biography 1980s-1990s
- b. 12 f. 6 Documents 1975-1976
- b. 12 f. 7 Exhibition 1972-1991
- b. 12 f. 8 Garvey, Marcus 1980s
- b. 12 f. 9 "The Portraits of James Van Der Zee" 1992
- b. 12 f. 10 Prominent African Americans 1971-1985
- b. 12 f. 11-12 Research Materials 1980s-1993
- b. 13 f. 1-2 Research Materials 1980s-1990s
- b. 13 f. 3 Studio 1985

Picturing Us: African American Identity In Photography (1994)

- b. 13 f. 4 1990s
- b. 13 f. 5-12 Correspondence and Drafts 1983-1995
- b. 14 f. 1-7 Correspondence and Drafts 1993-1994
- b. 14 f. 8-9 Drafts 1990s
- b. 15 f. 1-4 Drafts 1990s
- b. 15 f. 5-6 Letters of Agreement 1992-1997
- Photographers
- b. 15 f. 7-14 Alexander, Adele Logan - Hamilton, Lisa 1992-1996
- b. 16 f. 1-21 Hamilton, Lise - Williams, Carla 1992-1994

- b. 17 f. 1-5 *Million Man March (1995)* 1994-1998

The Family of Black America (1996)

- b. 17 f. 6-11 1990s
- b. 18 f. 1-9 1990s
- b. 18 f. 10 Letters to Photographers 1996
- b. 18 f. 11 Request for Proposals 1996
- b. 18 f. 12 Van Der Zee 1996

Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present (2000)

- b. 18 f. 13 1990s
- b. 19 f. 1-12 1990s-2001
- b. 19 f. 13 Catalog and Program 2000
- b. 19 f. 14 Contract 1997-1999

Publication Projects (cont.)

Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present (2000) (cont.)

- b. 19 f. 15-17 Correspondence 1964-1999
- b. 20 f. 1-7 Correspondence 1990-2000
 - b. 20 f. 8 Film 2000
 - b. 20 f. 9 Invitations 2000
 - b. 20 f. 10 Permission List 1998
 - b. 20 f. 11 Permissions 1998-1999
- Photographers
 - b. 20 f. 12-29 A - Z 1998
 - b. 21 f. 1-34 Allen, James - DeCarava, Roy 1983-2002
 - b. 22 f. 1-35 Derby, Doris - Higgins, Chester 1969-2002
 - b. 23 f. 1-35 Hinton, Milton - Megginson, Felicia 1976-2002
 - b. 24 f. 1-38 Miller, Cheryl - Simpson, Coreen 1988-2002
 - b. 25 f. 1-32 Sligh, Clarissa - Williams, Willie 1985-2002
 - b. 72 f. 6 Watten, Jan 1994-1998
 - b. 26 f. 1-3 Withers, Ernest C. - Wright, Mel 1997-2000
- b. 26 f. 4-6 Photographs 1980s-1990s
 - b. 26 f. 7 Press Info 2000
 - b. 26 f. 8 Press Release 1999-2000
 - b. 26 f. 9 Program 1999-2000
- b. 74 f. 1-6 Proofs 1999-2000
 - Includes a couple of flyers.
- b. 26 f. 10 Publication Citations 1998-2000
- b. 26 f. 11 Rejected 1990s
- b. 26 f. 12 Research Materials 1998
- b. 26 f. 13 St. Martin Press 1993-1999
- The Black Female Body: A Photographic History (2002)*
 - b. 26 f. 14-15 1990s
 - b. 27 f. 1-9 1990-2003
 - b. 27 f. 10 Book Brochures 1988-1993
 - b. 27 f. 11 Book Specifications and Notes 1997
 - b. 27 f. 12-17 Correspondence 1991-2000
 - b. 28 f. 1 Bibliography 1990-1997
 - b. 28 f. 2-3 Getty Research Support Grant 1997-1998
 - b. 28 f. 4 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) 1995-1996
 - b. 28 f. 5 Outline 1996-1998
 - Photographers (and Artists)
 - b. 28 f. 6-7 1997-1998
 - b. 28 f. 8-27 Alexander, Elizabeth - Edwards and Walvin 1993-1999
 - b. 29 f. 1-47 Finney, Nikky - Piper, Adrian 1971-1999
 - b. 30 f. 1-23 Revue Noire - Willis, Deborah 1990-1999
 - b. 30 f. 24 Photographs 1977-1990s
 - Photocopies

Publication Projects (cont.)

The Black Female Body: A Photographic History (2002) (cont.)

- b. 31 f. 1-3 **Photographs** 1990s
Photocopies
- b. 31 f. 4 **"Regarding Venus"** 1990s
- b. 31 f. 5-13 **Research Materials** 1980s-1990s
- b. 72 f. 1 **Baldwin, James** 1980s
The Price of the Ticket button.
- b. 32 f. 1-3 **Biographies, Curriculum Vitaes, and Resumes** 1980s-2000
These document Willis's professional work.
- b. 72 f. 2-4 **Calendars** 1992-1997
A few of Willis's engagements are sparsely recorded in these three calendars.
- b. 32 f. 4-13 **College Art Association (CAA)** 1984-1999
These files document Willis's involvement in CAA through their board and Lifetime Achievement Award initiative.
- b. 32 f. 14-21 **Conferences and Symposiums** 1991-2001
Willis either presented or attended.

Correspondence

- b. 33 f. 1-11 **1972-2001**
- b. 34 f. 1-9 **1983-2006**
- b. 35 f. 1-10 **1989-2003**
- b. 36 f. 1-9 **1990-2002**
- b. 37 f. 1-10 **1992-2003**
- b. 38 f. 1-11 **1994-2004**
- b. 39 f. 1-10 **1997-2005**
- b. 40 f. 1-6 **2001-2003**
- b. 40 f. 7-13 **African American Museum Archives Project - Artist Information** 1971-2000
- b. 41 f. 1-8 **Artist Information** 1984-2004
- b. 42 f. 1-16 **Artist Information - Congratulatory Cards** 1974-2004
- b. 43 f. 1-13 **Contact Lists - Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs** 1965-2003
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs
Materials sent to Willis from various artists.
- b. 44 f. 1-7 **1968-2001**
- b. 45 f. 1-7 **1979-2004**
- b. 46 f. 1-7 **1984-2004**
- b. 47 f. 1-8 **1989-2003**
- b. 48 f. 1-6 **1992-2005**
- b. 48 f. 7-12 **Fernandez, Benedict - Greaves, William** 1990-1998
- b. 49 f. 1-21 **Greaves, William - Orlando** 1991-2003
- er. 1 **Lee, Sálongo** 2003
(1077 KB (42 computer files))
- b. 50 f. 1-27 **Photography - University of Maryland** 1982-2002
- er. 4 **Rodriguez, Elio** 2003
(71.35 MB (4 computer files))
Contains an executable art portfolio.
- b. 51 f. 1-5 **V - Willis, Songha (Sympathy Cards)** 1992-2003

Exhibitions

- b. 51 f. 6-11 1980s-2003
 - er. 2 1997-1999
(217 KB (3 computer files))
- b. 52 f. 1-4 1900 Paris Exposition -- American Negro Exhibit 2002
 - b. 52 f. 5 "Africa and America: The Continuing Connection" 1986-1992
 - b. 72 f. 5 "The African Americans" 1993
 - b. 52 f. 6 Amon Carter Museum Exhibition 1990
 - b. 52 f. 7 Articles 1981-1986
 - b. 52 f. 8 Atlanta Photography Gallery 1991-1992
 - b. 52 f. 9 "Black Dance and Theatre in Photographs" 1982-1995
- b. 52 f. 10-11 "Black Photographers Bear Witness: 100 Years of Social Protest" 1988-1989
 - b. 53 f. 1 "Black Photographers Bear Witness" 1991
 - b. 53 f. 2 Captions 1990s
- b. 53 f. 3-4 Center for African American History and Culture (CAAHC) 1997
 - b. 53 f. 5 Community Renewal Team of Greater Hartford, Inc (CRT) Craftery Gallery 1983-1986
 - b. 53 f. 6 Correspondence 1983-1986
- b. 75 f. 1-5 "The Dream Continues" 1991
Exhibition on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement.
 - b. 53 f. 7 Family Stories 1993-1997
 - b. 53 f. 8 Fragments of American Life 1976
 - b. 53 f. 9 Fusco, Coco -- "Only Skin Deep" 1997-2002
 - b. 53 f. 10 "Marcus Garvey Centennial" 1980s
 - b. 53 f. 11 Todd Gray 1987-1990
 - b. 53 f. 12 Holsinger Studio Collection 1997
 - b. 53 f. 13 "Home: Contemporary Urban Images by Black Photographers" 1990
 - b. 53 f. 14 "It's Time to End Our Isolation" 1987
 - b. 53 f. 15 "Jacob Lawrence's Migration of the Negro" 1992
- b. 54 f. 1 "Jacob Lawrence's Migration of the Negro" 1992
- b. 54 f. 2-3 Lists 1980s-2000s
 - b. 54 f. 4 "Locating the Spirit in African American Art" 1998
 - b. 54 f. 5 Manchester Craftmen's Guild 1995
 - b. 54 f. 6 Papers 1990s
Exhibition descriptions.
- b. 54 f. 7-12 "Half Past Autumn: Gordon Parks" 1990s
 - b. 55 f. 1 Permission Slips 2003
 - b. 55 f. 2 Photographers Biographies 2000-2003
 - b. 55 f. 3 Photographers Info 1987-1988
 - b. 55 f. 4 "Points of Entry" 1996
 - b. 55 f. 5 Postcards and Brouchers 1982-1990
 - b. 55 f. 6 Press Releases 1980-1987

Exhibitions (cont.)

- b. 55 f. 7 Project Row Houses 1999-2003
"Fabricated Memories"
- b. 55 f. 8 "Reading Between the Lines" 2000
- b. 55 f. 9-13 Paul Robeson 1996-1997
- b. 55 f. 14 Rotunda Gallery 1984-1987
- b. 56 f. 1 Schomburg Center 1981
- b. 56 f. 2-5 "Searching for Memories: Black Women and the 1895 Atlanta Exposition"
1990s
- b. 56 f. 6-8 "Self-Evident: Exploring Democracy Through Photography" 1995-1996
- b. 56 f. 9 Utah Info 2000
- b. 56 f. 10 Carl Van Vechten 1980s-1990s
- b. 56 f. 11-13 "Visual Journal: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties" 1980s-1996
- b. 57 f. 1-8 "Visual Journal" 1980s-1996
- b. 57 f. 9 Deborah Willis -- Art 2000
- b. 57 f. 10-11 World Fairs 1992-1995
- b. 57 f. 12-14 George Mason University (GMU) 1997-2003
- b. 58 f. 1-5 GMU 1997-2003
- b. 58 f. 6-10 International Black Photographers 1973-1986
These files document Willis's involvement with the organization.
- b. 58 f. 11-13 Photographs 1920s-1990s
Contains a few personal images.

Research Materials and Notes

May overlap with some of the project files.

- b. 59 f. 1-9 1970s-1990s
 - b. 60 f. 1-11 1990s-2002
 - b. 61 f. 1 2002-2003
 - er. 3 2002-2003
(583 KB (16 computer files))
 - b. 61 f. 2-15 Altick, Richard - Papers 1980s-2003
 - b. 62 f. 1-8 Papers - Saint Louis Art Museum 1980s-2003
 - b. 62 f. 9 Reviews and Portraits 1986-2002
Pertains to either an exhibition, publication project, or Willis.
- Slides
- b. 62 f. 10-12 1978-2003
 - b. 63 f. 1-8 1980s-2003
 - b. 64 f. 1-6 1986-2003
 - b. 64 f. 7-17 Camp, Donald - Stevens, Jane Alden 1980-2003
 - b. 65 f. 1-5 Sunday, Elizabeth - Tsinhnahjinnie, Hulleah 1980s-2000

Smithsonian Institution

- b. 65 f. 6-7 1980s-1998
 - b. 65 f. 8-15 Administration - National African American Museum Project (NAAMP) 1991-
2002
- NAAMP
- b. 66 f. 1-3 1992-1993

Smithsonian Institution (cont.)

NAAMP (cont.)

- b. 66 f. 4-11 African American Institutional Study Project - Kelley Collection 1988-1999
- b. 67 f. 1-13 Kelley Collection - Scurlock Collection 1986-2011
 - "Imagining Families: Images and Voices"
- b. 68 f. 1-10 1993-1994
 - b. 69 f. 1-7 1994-1995
- b. 69 f. 8-12 Lighting - Weems, Carrie Mae 1987-1995
- b. 72 f. 7-8 *Orator* 1993
- b. 70 f. 1-7 Teaching Files 1998-2003
- b. 70 f. 8-13 Writings 1944-1996
- b. 71 f. 1-12 Writings 1980s-2003