

## AIPAD Announces Deborah Willis as Winner of the 2026 AIPAD Award

The Park Avenue Armory | 643 Park Avenue, New York  
April 22-26, 2026 | VIP Opening Wednesday, April 22, 2026



Deborah Willis. Photo: Jody Rogac

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The Association of International Photography Art Dealers (AIPAD) is proud to announce that **Deborah Willis**, University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, is the recipient of the annual AIPAD Award. The **AIPAD Award** is given to visionaries who have spent their lives committed to promoting and fostering a deeper understanding of and appreciation for fine art photography. Recognizing and celebrating these figures, the award ceremony will be presented during the VIP Opening of The Photography Show presented by AIPAD, taking place this year on Wednesday, April 22, 2026.

A prolific and award-winning author, Willis' scholarship has delved into the complex histories of photography, the representation of the Black body, gender, beauty and the power of images as tools for cultural memory and social justice. Willis has

published and edited dozens of seminal books, including *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (2000), *Posing Beauty in African American Culture* (2009) and *The Black Civil War Soldier: A Visual History of Conflict and Citizenship* (2021). She has contributed essays to exhibition catalogs, major journals and anthologies and her research has illuminated the intersections of art, history and identity.

Willis is also a celebrated curator, having organized and co-organized numerous exhibitions across major museums and universities. Her curatorial projects, such as *Photography and the Black Arts Movement, 1955-1985*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (2025-26); *Reflections in Black: A Reframing*, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, New York, NY (2025); and *Posing Beauty in African American Culture*, Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA (2010), have traveled nationally and internationally, shaping critical conversations about race, representation and visual storytelling. Her impact has been recognized with honors including a MacArthur Fellowship, a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, NAACP Image Award, the Don Tyson Prize for the Advancement of American Art and induction into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. Willis has received multiple honorary doctorates including from Yale and Colgate Universities along with major teaching awards, reflecting her role as a mentor and changemaker in the academy.

Beyond her scholarship and curatorial work, Willis is a sought-after lecturer, conference organizer and advisor to leading art foundations, museums and scholarly initiatives. Her service on advisory boards, including the Andy Warhol Foundation, Aperture Foundation and The Gordon Parks Foundation, underscores her leadership and influence across the field. Through her teaching, writing, curatorial vision and advocacy as co-editor of the *Vision and Justice* publication series, Willis has transformed the study and appreciation of photography and African diasporic visual culture, inspiring generations of artists, scholars and cultural thinkers.

At the core of all of Willis' work, regardless of discipline, is her training and sensibility as an artist. She was first introduced to photography by her father, whose photographs of their family and her mother's salon prompted Willis to start what has become a life-long investigation into Black beauty and familial bonds. Troubled by the lack of representation of Black photographers, Willis began photographing African American life around her. Drawing inspiration from her family's legacy in sewing, Willis regularly imposes archival imagery of family and civil war soldiers upon various fabrics, including quilts and textiles. Willis earned a BFA from the Philadelphia College of Art, an MFA from Pratt Institute, an MA from City College of New York and a PhD from George Mason University.

"Deb has profoundly expanded the understanding of photography as both an artistic medium and a force for social justice," said Lydia Melamed Johnson, Executive Director of AIPAD. "Through her visionary scholarship, incisive editing and curatorial practice, she has redefined and rewritten both the historical and cultural narratives of African American photography in the United States. Her dedication to nurturing emerging photographers and her unwavering belief in the power of images to create empathy and real progress continues to inspire."

Willis will open the acclaimed AIPAD Talks program in conversation with Brendan Embser (Aperture) on Thursday, April 23 at 1PM. She will also participate in a panel reflecting on America on the eve of its 250th anniversary and the realities of the many divergent histories of the USA and its documentation through photography.

The Photography Show looks forward to hosting these important conversations.

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**About Deborah Willis**

Deborah Willis, Ph.D., stands as one of the most influential figures in the fields of photography, visual culture and African American art history. Currently a University Professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, Dr. Willis has built an unparalleled career as a scholar, curator, artist and institutional leader. Her work has redefined the narrative of American photography, centering the cultural, historical and aesthetic experiences of Black communities and women and has made indelible contributions to the study and curation of visual culture.

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**About AIPAD**

Organized in 1979, AIPAD, with its global membership across six continents, is the collective expert voice for fine art photography dealers. Through its acclaimed education initiative, AIPAD Talks and its flagship event, The Photography Show, the organization enhances the confidence of the public, museums, institutions and others in responsible fine art photography collecting. Presented by AIPAD, The Photography Show is the longest-running exhibition dedicated to the photographic medium in the world.