



Dawoud Bey, *Martina and Rhonda, Chicago, IL*, 1993. Six dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroid), 48 × 60 in. overall (121.9 × 152.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art; gift of Eric Ceputis and David W. Williams 2018.82a-f. © Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey's American Project

Photographer Dawoud Bey's exhibit at the Whitney (now until 3 October) represents Blackness as an integral part of the American experience.

By
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Born in Queens, New York in 1953, Dawoud Bey is one of America's leading photographers. Starting with his street-level images of Harlem residents in the 1970s to his more recent work retracing Underground Railroad routes once traveled by fugitives from slavery, Bey's pictures of people and places speak to the Black experience in America.

His work has been exhibited widely and garnered a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur "Genius" Grant, and numerous other accolades. The retrospective "[Dawoud Bey: An American Project](#)" looks back on the artist's career, from its beginnings to the present. It's on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City until 3 October 2021, after having run at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), where it originated, and the [High Museum](#) in Atlanta.

Bey's entry into photography began at age 15 when he inherited a camera from his godfather. Before that he wanted to be a jazz musician, inspired by tenor-saxophone colossus [John Coltrane](#), especially his later work that combined creative experimentation with a commitment to moral and spiritual imperatives. The 1960s and early '70s, when Bey was coming of age, was the heyday of the Black Arts Movement with a broad spectrum of creative activity — free jazz, poetry, visual arts, theater, dance, and more — offering cultural expression to accompany the consciousness-raising and political activism of the Civil Rights Movement.

As a high school student, Bey participated in demonstrations and other actions with his classmates, including locking the principal in his office to demand more Black teachers in the classroom and student input into the curriculum; he sold the Black Panther Party's newspaper on the weekends. As he noted in a recent interview in [Cultured Magazine](#), even as a teenager Bey was “determined to change the status quo.” In terms of both form and content, he has done that with his photography over the course of some five decades.

Bey's first aesthetic insights came from studying the work of noted African American photographers such as [James Van Der Zee](#), one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, and most importantly [Roy DeCarava](#), who rose to prominence a little later. He acquired technical skills from a Black photographer in the neighborhood where he grew up. And he established an affinity early on with the [Kamoinge Workshop](#), a Black photographers' collective of the previous generation whose work was surveyed by the Whitney just prior to the opening of the Bey retrospective.

Bey's first photographs were black-and-white, shot in the 35mm format, depicting everyday subjects in Harlem, situating them in the tradition of street photography. He later expanded his technical repertoire to include large-format cameras, Polaroid film, and color, along with engaging in more formal studio portraiture, landscape, and video.

Taken over a period of four years, from 1975 – 1979, when Bey was still in his mid-20s, the series “Harlem, U.S.A.” was Bey's first major statement and the work that brought him initial recognition when his photographs were first shown at the [Studio Museum](#) in Harlem. Although Bey was raised in the Jamaica neighborhood of Queens, he was well acquainted with Harlem as the place where his parents had once lived and where his extended family continued to reside. Harlem held greater significance for its historic place in Black life and culture in America since the early 20th century and the beginnings of the Great African American Migration.



[Dawoud Bey, *A Woman Waiting in the Doorway*, Harlem, NY, 1976. Gelatin silver print (printed 2019), 11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm); Frame: 16 3/8 x 20 5/8 x 1 1/2 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. © Dawoud Bey. | Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art]

The idea that Harlem would be an appropriate place to start Bey's artistic career goes back to his teenage years when he visited the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)'s 1969 exhibition "Harlem on My Mind". (Consisting primarily of photo documentation, the exhibition purported to represent Harlem as the cultural capital of Black America, but did not include any work by Black artists, nor was community input sought while developing its program.) Of the encounter, Bey says: "It was the first visit to a museum on my own, and the first time that I saw images of ordinary African Americans on the walls of a museum. It began to give me a sense of what I might do with the camera."

In addition to revisiting a site of familial significance and contributing to Harlem's legacy as a center of American Black culture, Bey wanted to create work that repudiated the stereotypical representations of the urban African American community as dysfunctional. As is typical of the street-photography genre, Bey shot the images using a lens with a relatively short focal length, requiring him to get close to his subjects, revealing a complexity of moods and dispositions, from playful to thoughtful, as exemplified by *Two Girls at Lady D's* on the one hand and *A Woman Waiting in the Doorway* on the other, both from 1976.

In the late '80s, Bey began using a tripod-mounted 4×5 view camera, which required him to slow down his process and establish a more interactive relationship with his subjects. In addition to prompting a more deliberative aesthetic approach, the change had an ethical component. As Bey notes, street photography tends to privilege the photographer over the subject, due to the fleeting, transactional nature of the encounter. The more calculated aspects of working with the larger format, Bey says, gave his Black subjects more opportunity “to assert themselves and their presence in the world, with their gaze meeting their viewer’s on equal footing.” This can be seen in photographs such as *Young Man Resting on an Exercise Bike, Amityville, NY, 1988*, and *A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, 1990*, where the sitters dominate the frame and engage viewers head-on.



[Dawoud Bey, *A Couple in Prospect Park*, Brooklyn, NY, 1990. Pigmented inkjet print (printed 2019), 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm); Frame: 50 1/8 x 41 1/8 x 2 1/8 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. © Dawoud Bey. | Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art]

In 1991, Bey began working with the Polaroid 20×24 studio camera provided through the company’s Artists Support Program. (Other notables who created work using the apparatus include [Chuck Close](#), [Robert Rauschenberg](#), and [Lucas Samaras](#).) Weighing over 200 pounds and requiring two people to operate, the unit is much more cumbersome than the 4×5, requiring greater set-up time in a more controlled environment. Bey also began working with color and exploring multi-panel formats. A more formal approach to portraiture emerged and he began to identify his sitters by name, whereas earlier subjects of the street and 4×5 photographs had remained anonymous.

Bey has always aspired to represent Blackness as an integral part of the American experience. With two more recent series directly addressing Black history, his work has reached a higher register.



[Dawoud Bey, *Mathis Menefee and Cassandra Griffin*, from *The Birmingham Project*, 2012. Pigmented inkjet prints, each: 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm); Framed, each: 41 1/8 x 33 1/8 x 2 in. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. | Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art]

The Birmingham Project of 2012 was created to mark the 50th anniversary of the bombing of the [16th Street Baptist Church](#) in Birmingham, Alabama, which killed four Black girls who were trapped inside. The project additionally commemorates the two Black boys who were also killed as part of racially motivated violence that took place later that day. Bey created formal portraits of Birmingham residents, pairing children of the same ages as the victims when they were brutally murdered with adults 50 years older.

The project includes a split-screen video also shot during 2012 in various locations around Birmingham, titled *9.15.63*, after the date of the bombing. *The Birmingham Project* commemorates the violence of the past, but it also serves as a reminder of the violence against African Americans that continues to this day, not the least reason of which that [Trayvon Martin](#) was infamously shot down on the street in Sanford, Florida while Bey was in the process of creating the work.

The Birmingham Project prompted Bey to reflect more deeply on African American history, which led to the creation of his more recent series, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* of 2017. The series of landscapes takes its title from the 1926 poem "[Dream Variations](#)" by Langston Hughes and marks a departure from Bey's past work in that human subjects are totally absent. The landscapes depict locations along 50 miles of the Underground Railroad that Bey traveled in Northeast Ohio near Lake Erie, the point where fugitives from slavery could secure freedom by crossing over into Canada. Though shot in the daytime to capture the greatest detail, the photographs are rendered as if they had been taken in darkness, with subtle inky tones of black and gray, using a printing process not unlike the cinematic technique of "shooting day for night".

While human figures don't physically appear within any of the photographs, their ghost-like presence can be felt not only in the dimmed houses and picket fences shown in some of the images but also in the passages of forest in others that were likely traversed by those seeking liberation on their way north. The built structures project a two-fold sensation: on the one hand the refuge that may have been offered by "safe houses" along the way, and on the other the constant threat of discovery and the return to bondage or worse. The woods similarly offered opportunities to hide and yet also the constant threat of ambush looming behind the darkened trees. The capstone images are *Untitled #24 (At Lake Erie)* and *Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, the former providing a glimpse of the lake, and thus potential freedom, through an opening in the trees and the latter which shows its liberatory realization in the waves of the lake rolling off into the horizon.



[Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #2 (Trees and Farmhouse)*, from *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017. Gelatin silver print, 48 x 55 in. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. | Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art]

A deeper appreciation of *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* comes from reading the poem that inspired the title in its entirety:

Dream Variations

"To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
 Dark like me—
That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!

Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening . . .
A tall, slim tree . . .
Night coming tenderly
 Black like me."

"Dream Variations" has often been read as a metaphor of the yearning for Black freedom and self-realization in the face of racial oppression and the mechanisms through which it is enforced. The anonymous narrator speaks of dancing through the "white day" — navigating the systems of white oppression — to a night "Black like me" — to find refuge in the shared identity of Black community. The "dream" of the title is that of African American desire for a complete emancipation, from the earliest times of bondage into the present.



[Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)*, from *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017. Gelatin silver print, 44 x 55 in. (111.8 x 139.7 cm); Framed: 51 3/8 x 59 5/16 in. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund purchase. © Dawoud Bey | Courtesy of Whitney Museum of American Art]

Night Coming Tenderly, Black commemorates one of the significant historical struggles for Black liberation: the treacherous journey of enslaved individuals from servitude to freedom in the antebellum period, which often took place under the cover of darkness. The use of the word

“dream” in Hughes’ title indicates that emancipation, while hoped for, was yet to be achieved. And to be sure, it’s an ideal that continues to be elusive, as persistent episodes of police brutality, voter suppression, and other examples of racial animus make clear.

The suggestion of continuing struggle is palpable in the final photograph of *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* in which the rough waters of Lake Erie churn under the darkened clouds of what might be an impending storm, making the final realization of the journey to liberation still uncertain and fraught with peril.

Using his art to move the dream forward has been and continues to be Dawoud Bey’s American project.



Dawoud Bey: An American Project is on view now until 3 October 2021 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Visitors must book timed tickets in advance. Contact: info@whitney.org or call 212.570.3600.