

**SFMOMA ANNOUNCES MAJOR CAREER RETROSPECTIVE OF INFLUENTIAL PHOTOGRAPHER DAWOUD BEY**

**Nearly 80 Works Explore Wide Range of the Artist’s 40+ Year Career**



***Dawoud Bey: An American Project***  
**February 15–October 12, 2020**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (October 2, 2019; updated September 30, 2020)—Photographer Dawoud Bey has dedicated more than four decades to portraying underrepresented communities and histories. From portraits in Harlem to nocturnal landscapes, classic street photography to large-scale studio portraits, his works combine an ethical imperative with an unparalleled mastery of his medium. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents the artist’s first full career retrospective in 25 years, on view in the museum’s Pritzker Center for Photography from February 15 to October 12, 2020.

Featuring approximately 80 works, the exhibition, co-organized with the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, spans the breadth of Bey’s career, from the 1970s to the present. Organized both thematically and chronologically, it ranges from his earliest street portraits in Harlem (1975–78) to his most recent exploration of the Underground Railroad (2017).

“The power of Bey’s work comes from the marriage of his extraordinary formal skill as a photographer with his deeply held belief in the political power of representation,” said Corey Keller, curator of photography at SFMOMA. “He sees making art as not just a personal expression but as an act of social responsibility, emphasizing the

necessary work of artists and art institutions to break down obstacles to access, to convene communities and open dialogue. It has been truly inspiring to work with him on this project.”

Describing his process, Bey has said, “It begins with the subject, a deep interest in wanting to describe the black subject in a way that’s as complex as the experiences of anyone else. It’s meant to kind of reshape the world one person at a time.”

Bey received his first camera as a gift from his godmother in 1968. The following year, he saw the landmark—and highly divisive—exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The exhibition, widely criticized for its failure to include significant numbers of artworks by African Americans, nonetheless made an impression on young Bey and inspired him to take up his own documentary project about Harlem in 1975. Since that time, Bey has worked primarily in portraiture, making tender, psychologically rich and direct portrayals of black subjects and rendering African-American history in a form that is poetic, poignant and immediate.

Keller and co-curator Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney, explain that the exhibition’s title, *Dawoud Bey: An American Project*, “intentionally inserts Bey’s photographs into a long-running conversation about what it means to represent America with a camera. There is a rich tradition of ‘American’ projects, including Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* (1938), Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958), Lee Friedlander’s *The American Monument* (1976) and Joel Sternfeld’s *American Prospects* (1987).” They continue to ask, “But what truly constitutes an American photograph, and who is considered an American photographer? The question of what it means to be an American photographer, or simply an American, is a particularly poignant one now. Bey evokes the distinctly American experiences of the people and histories he shares through photography. Bey also evokes his own distinctly American experience. Through his thoughtful compositions and arresting pictures, he demands our attention, and reminds us that the past is ever present.”



The exhibition includes work from eight major series and is organized to reflect the development of Bey’s vision over the course of his career, as well as his engagement with certain themes over time.

## THE STREET

A landmark black-and-white series created from 1975–78, *Harlem, U.S.A.* documents portraits and street scenes with locals of this historic neighborhood. As a young man growing up in Queens, Bey was intrigued by his family’s history in Harlem—his parents met in church there and it was home to many family and friends he visited throughout childhood. Bey describes the experience of creating this series as a sort of homecoming. This series premiered at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979 when the artist was just 26. The exhibition also includes a powerful series of street photographs Bey made in Syracuse, NY, demonstrating not only his keen eye for portraiture and the spontaneous choreography in the streets, but also his sensitivity to his subjects’ environment.

In the 1980s, Bey moved from the easily portable 35mm camera he used to photograph *Harlem, U.S.A.*, to a heavier, more conspicuous, large format (4 x 5”) camera and Polaroid film to create a series of more formal “street portraits” in areas such as Brooklyn, NY and Washington, DC. With new equipment and a new approach, Bey began to engage his subjects more deliberately, creating work that elicits an intimate exchange between photographer and subject and, by extension, with the viewer.

The series *Harlem Redux* marks Bey’s return to photograph the Harlem community from 2014–2017, almost 40 years after his original series. Unlike the black-and-white pictures of *Harlem, U.S.A.*, the new series comprises large-format color landscapes and streetscapes that mourn the transformation of the celebrated African-American community as it becomes more gentrified and its original residents increasingly displaced.



## THE STUDIO

From the street Bey moved into the studio, using a massive 20 x 24” Polaroid camera to make a series of sensitive and direct color portraits first of friends, then later of teenagers he met through a residency at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, MA. At this time, Bey also began experimenting with beautifully lit and framed multi-panel Polaroid portraits, inspired in part by an interest in challenging the singularity of the photographic print.

Bey's work at the Addison Gallery led to another residency at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum. There, he began a series he would call *Class Pictures*, creating striking, large-scale color portraits of high school students accompanied by text that he invited his subjects to contribute. Seeing this kind of collaboration and community-building as a key part of his practice, Bey views the conversational and attitudinal shifts that result from this process of exchange as integral to the work as the final objects themselves. Bey continued *Class Pictures* with high schools across the United States between 2003 and 2006. Focusing on teenagers from a wide range of economic, social and ethnic backgrounds, he created a diverse group of portraits that challenges teenage stereotypes.

## HISTORY

Two of Bey's more recent projects explore aspects of African-American history in a form at once expressive and immediate. *The Birmingham Project*, created in 2012 as a commission from the Birmingham Museum of Art, memorializes the victims of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and its violent aftermath. Expressive portraits of boys and girls the ages of the victims of the bombing and racial violence that followed are paired with photographs of adults the ages those children would have been in 2012 had they lived. As Keller and Sherman write in their introduction to the exhibition catalogue, "Each diptych represents what was lost and what could have been, charging sitter and viewer alike with the heavy burden of bearing witness." Half of this series was made in Birmingham's Bethel Baptist Church, which served as the original headquarters for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights during the civil rights movement. The other half was made in the Birmingham Museum of Art, which commissioned the project as part of a citywide effort to commemorate the lives lost on September 15, 1963.

Along with the portraits, Bey created a single-channel video shot in locations throughout Birmingham, entitled *9.15.63* (2012), which presents another perspective on the day of the 1963 church bombing. Like the photographic series, the video employs the diptych format. Keller and Sherman describe the video as "using a split screen to underscore similarities and disjunctions between two images: one side shows the view out the window of a car moving through the city, panning across treetops and an impossibly blue sky; the other shows seemingly ordinary objects and locations—lunch counters, barbershops, classrooms—from which African Americans drew sustenance and from where the civil rights movement took root." The video concludes at the 16th Street Baptist Church. Together, these projects honor lives lost, and confront continued national issues of racism and violence against African Americans.

In 2017 Bey completed *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, a series of beautifully rendered and evocative images made in Ohio where the Underground Railroad once operated. As landscapes, these large black-and-white photographs mark a formal departure from the artist's previous work, though they emphasize many of the same existential questions. Shot by day but printed as if they were taken at night, in deep shades of black and gray, they explore blackness as color—inspired in part by the photographs of Roy DeCarava—and as race. Named for the final refrain of Langston Hughes's poem "Dream Variations" and originally installed at St. John's Episcopal Church, Cleveland, thought to be a key stop on the Underground Railroad, the series conjures the spatial and sensory experience of a slave's escape to liberation as imagined by the artist.

## ABOUT DAWOUD BEY

Dawoud Bey was born in New York City in 1953 and began his career as a photographer in 1975 with a series of photographs, *Harlem, U.S.A.*, that were later exhibited in his first solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. Since then his work has been featured in exhibitions at numerous institutions worldwide including the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Brooklyn Museum; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Fogg Museum, Harvard University; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), Chicago; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among many others.

Bey's photographs are represented in collections around the globe, and his critical writings on photography have appeared in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues. The recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, Bey received the prestigious MacArthur "Genius" fellowship in 2017. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University, and is currently Professor of Art and a former Distinguished College Artist at Columbia College Chicago, where he has taught since 1998.

#### **EXHIBITION VENUES AND DATES**

SFMOMA: February 15 to October 12, 2020

High Museum of Art, Atlanta: November 7, 2020 to March 14, 2021

The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York: Opens April 17, 2021

#### **ORGANIZATION**

*Dawoud Bey: An American Project* is co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. It is curated by Corey Keller, curator of photography at SFMOMA, and Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

#### **SUPPORT**

Major support for *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Randi and Bob Fisher, and The Bernard Osher Foundation. Generous support is provided by the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman, and Diana and Steve Strandberg. Meaningful support is provided by The Black Dog Private Foundation, Wayee Chu and Ethan Beard, and Sarah Wigglesworth and Asiff Hirji. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts.

#### **CATALOGUE**

*Dawoud Bey: An American Project* is accompanied by *Dawoud Bey: Two American Projects*, a 128-page catalogue featuring Bey's two recent historical series—*The Birmingham Project* and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*—both represented in the exhibition. The publication includes approximately 70 illustrations and contributions from Corey Keller; Elisabeth Sherman; artist Torkwase Dyson; Steven Nelson, Professor of African and African American Art and Director of the UCLA African Studies Center; Imani Perry, Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies, Princeton University; Claudia Rankine, award-winning poet, essayist and playwright; and Frederick Iseman Professor of Poetry, Yale University. The catalogue is edited by Corey Keller and Elisabeth Sherman and is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

#### **HOURS AND ADMISSION**

Open Friday–Monday, 10 a.m.–5 p.m., and Thursday, 1–8 p.m. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

Adult general admission to SFMOMA is \$25; admission for seniors 65 years and older is \$22; and admission for visitors ages 19 through 24 is \$19. General admission and special exhibitions for all visitors aged 18 and younger are free.

#### **San Francisco Museum of Modern Art**

151 Third Street

San Francisco, CA 94103

SFMOMA is dedicated to making the art for our time a vital and meaningful part of public life. Founded in 1935 as the first West Coast museum devoted to modern and contemporary art, a thoroughly transformed SFMOMA, with

triple the gallery space, an enhanced education center and new free public galleries, opened to the public on May 14, 2016.

Visit [sfmoma.org](http://sfmoma.org) or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

\*\* Follow us on Twitter for updates and announcements: @SFMOMA\_Press

#### **Media Contacts**

Jill Lynch, [jilynch@sfmoma.org](mailto:jilynch@sfmoma.org), 415.357.4172

Clara Hatcher Baruth, [chatcher@sfmoma.org](mailto:chatcher@sfmoma.org), 415.357.4177

#### Image credits:

Dawoud Bey, *Three Women at a Parade, Harlem, NY*, from the series *Harlem, U.S.A.*, 1978; courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery; © Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey, *Mary Parker and Caela Cowan, Birmingham, AL*, from the series *The Birmingham Project*, 2012; Rennie Collection, Vancouver; © Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey, *Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot, Harlem, NY*, from the series *Harlem Redux*, 2016; courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery; © Dawoud Bey