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Dawoud Bey Recalls Horrors Of African-American History Beautifully

Dawoud Bey, Mary Parker and Caela Cowan, 2012, 2 inkjet prints mounted to dibond, overall: 101.6 x... [+] NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, GIFT OF THE COLLECTORS COMMITTEE AND THE ALFRED H. MOSES AND FERN M. SCHAD FUND

Do you like your art tough?

Do you want it to ask you difficult questions?

Do you want it to punch you in the gut?

If so, then two photography exhibits wrapping up in April from Dawoud Bey are a must-see for you. Bey is a 66-year-old African-American artist who has made contemporary a pair harrowing experiences inseparable from the story of blacks in America: the Underground Railroad and the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

The Art Institute of Chicago presents *Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black* through April 14 while the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. offers *Dawoud Bey: The Birmingham Project*, through April 21.

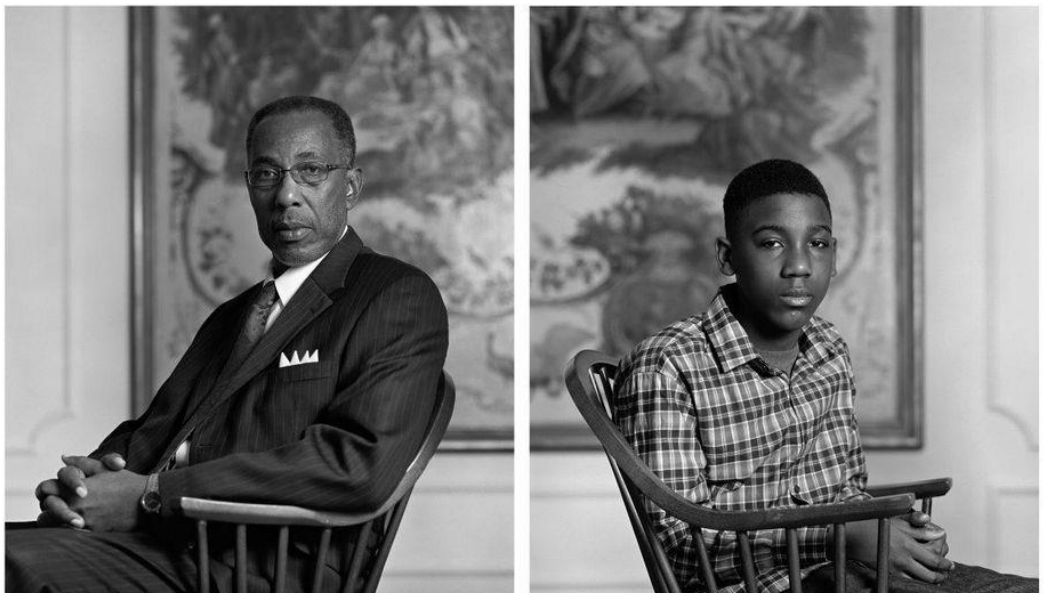
Kara Fiedorek curated the National Gallery exhibit and discussed the value of remembering the country's worst episodes through art.

"Remembering tragic moments from our history is important because it keeps those who have been lost alive in our memory and helps some in their process of healing. Remembering also forces us to draw connections with our present. From the time this show opened in September 2018, the news has been filled with two major acts of violence in houses of worship across the world. Sadly, the hatred and extremism that Bey so poignantly addresses in his work remain urgent."

Four black girls, three aged 14 and one aged 11, were killed in 1963 by a bomb blast before the Sunday services at a predominantly African-American church in Birmingham which also served as a meeting place for Civil Rights leaders. This episode is well documented and often chronicled.

Far lesser known is that on that same day in Birmingham, September 15th, two teenage boys were murdered in racially motivated violence.

Bey memorializes both events with equal tenderness, creating diptychs picturing what the



Dawoud Bey, Don Sledge and Moses Austin, 2012, 2 inkjet prints mounted to dibond, overall: 101.6 x 162.56 cm (40 x 64 in.)

victims would have looked like at their age when they died, and now, 55-plus years later.

"Certainly, visitors who directly experienced the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960s have been deeply moved," Fiedorek said. "Yet, because the photographs bridge generations themselves and resonate so strongly with current events, they speak equally to younger visitors who may not even have heard of the bombing in Birmingham."

At the Art Institute of Chicago, Bey interprets the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes and safe houses that aided enslaved African-Americans on their path to freedom, by placing visitors on that path. The photographs, unusually darkened for a museum exhibit forcing visitors to strain seeing the images and imagine navigating the routes through darkness, were made around Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio, a final way station for those seeking freedom in Canada. The photographs show homes and patches of land that are rumored to have formed part of the invisible railroad “track,” leading those seeking freedom from one unfamiliar place to the next.

“Dawoud shifted in this series from portraiture to landscape,” Matthew S. Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator, Department of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago, said. “The photographs are richly, darkly printed and they draw viewers physically and mentally into an unfamiliar nocturnal landscape.”

The darkened printing has led to unusual reactions to the show among visitors which Witkovsky has observed.

“Searching for a way through the territory. Taking time to adjust to such deeply, darkly printed photographs. Trying to take a snap to post on media and realizing the phone picture looks like a dark rectangle. Slight frustration and then signs of realizing how special it is to be surrounded by the works.”

Not only the darkened photography, but the scale of the pictures demands their being seen in person to fully appreciate.

“The online works are really far from the real thing. They are so much smaller. And they have been altered—lightened—to make them readable. One key point of the series, with photographs at four-by-five foot size, is to make you feel the experience of moving through unfamiliar territory trying to find a path to freedom. That's an experience a great many people continue to have today, all over the world. To have that experience in person and to think at the same time about the weighty history of freeing enslavement in our country—nothing online can compare to that.”

Concurrent exhibits at two of America’s–and the world’s–elite art institutions speak to Bey’s prominence in the field of fine art photography. That prominence, and the power he achieves with these two exhibits, comes in a fashion uncommon in today’s loud, blingy, excessive culture.

Dawoud Bey. Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky), from the series Night Coming Tenderly, Black, 2017. RENNIE COLLECTION, VANCOUVER. © DAWOUD BEY.

"What I find so amazing about *The Birmingham Project* is that it's deeply complex, but not complicated," Fiedorek said. "It's a powerfully simple idea—to memorialize the young victims of September 15, 1963 by portraying ordinary people in Birmingham, with sitters who are the ages the children were and the ages they would be had they survived. There's nothing sensational about Bey's project and yet it provokes so many social, aesthetic, and philosophical questions about how we relate to and represent history."

If you make it to D.C. for *The Birmingham Project*, another remarkable photograph representing a key figure in American and African-American history, Underground Railroad "conductor" and abolitionist Hariett Tubman, was recently discovered and will go on view for the first time ever at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.