Johnson, Steve. “Underground Railroad sites exposed through lens of Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey in haunting new Art Institute exhibit.” *Chicago Tribune*. January 28, 2019.

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Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse) by Dawoud Bey, part of "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" at the Art Institute of Chicago. This image has been lightened by Bey for press purposes to show detail. (Dawoud Bey photo)

The photograph shown (Untitled #1 Picket Fence and Farmhouse) from “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” Dawoud Bey’s new exhibition at the Art Institute, doesn’t look like this in the Modern Wing gallery where it hangs.

“If you used that original picture and tried to share it, it just looks like a black rectangle,” said Matthew Witkovsky, curator and chair of the photography department. “Those files made to be shared with the press were made a bit lighter than the prints are. It had to be.”

The first thing you see upon entering the gallery is the blackness: large-scale images done in tones of obsidian and charcoal with an occasional

shaft of gray. Like when camping at night, Witkovsky advised, give your eyes time to adjust and you'll begin to see the details of fences and porches, thickets of branches and the imposing, promising openness of a great lake.

Bey made these prints big to envelop the viewer and purposely dark to reflect his subject matter: He photographed sites in and near Cleveland relating to the Underground Railroad that shepherded slaves to freedom.

"The darkness of the prints is meant to re-create the experience of moving through the landscape under cover of darkness. I wanted to find a material equivalent for that," the Chicago photographer and 2017 MacArthur "genius grant" winner said in an interview.

It is, he said, "my own telling and reimagining of that history. The Underground Railroad is as much myth as it is fact." Witkovsky elaborated: "You'll see more and more if you stand in front of (an image), but your eyes can never fully adjust. And so you're left in the situation that's being allegorized, that of being on a passage to somewhere hopeful, but without knowing the territory, without ever being able to know where you are, or really where you're going."
The photos themselves are magnificently somber, almost spiritual artifacts evoking the dislocation and seriousness of purpose that you can only imagine a human trying to reclaim his freedom must have felt. But they are works of deep beauty, too. A sharply focused nettle draws the eye here, the elegant (and foreboding) line of a fence there. And to remind you that this is a work of imagination rather than history, the photographer leaves in a splendid anachronism. In an image bearing one of the exhibition's plainspoken titles, "Untitled #18 (Creek and House)," the most remarkable feature isn't the creek or the aged-looking house. It's that shadow of an oddity pointed heavenward up on the structure's corner, the unmistakable outline of a satellite dish.

“My own intention with this project is to make work that makes the African American past resonate in the contemporary moment,” said the photographer, a long-time faculty member at Columbia College.

He wanted, too, to pay homage. “The photographs also carry on a conversation with two chosen antecedents,” Bey, who was born in 1953, says in the opening artist’s statement. “Roy DeCarava, a pivotal 20th century American photographer, printed in rich, dark hues that imbued everyday African American experience with a material blackness.” And the poet Langston Hughes “suggested that nocturnal darkness could be seen as a space of tender embrace.”

The title come from Hughes’s poem “Dream Variations,” in which the final refrain begins, “Night coming tenderly / Black like me.”
A powerful companion to the photos from Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio is Bey’s selection of pictures in the Art Institute collection that resonate with the Underground Railroad theme and hang on the wall just outside. These more than three dozen pictures are worth a visit in themselves. They range from a rare daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass from the middle of the 19th century to a news agency’s shot of a 20th-century lynching. The photos are by Gordon Parks, Walker Evans and Alfred Stieglitz, but also by unknown photographers.

It is, the wall text says, “a meditation on the nation’s social and physical landscape and the black presence within it.”
The “Night” photographs were commissioned by last year’s FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art to occupy the pews in that city’s St. John’s Episcopal Church, “which,” Bey has written, “served as Station Hope, the final station for escapees before their journey across Lake Erie.”

Selections by Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey from the permanent collection of the Art Institute to accompany his show "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," Monday, Jan. 14, 2019. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

As soon as he learned Bey was making this series, Witkovsky knew he wanted to bring it to the Art Institute.

“It was immediate and instant, but it was years ago,” he said. “Dawoud said, ‘I've been thinking about doing something with the Underground Railroad.’ I said, ‘Really?’ ‘Yeah, I’ve been thinking about Roy DeCarava and the pictures, and the way they’re so black, and the blackness has this symbolic meaning, but also a material meaning.’” When the project was eventually completed and Witkovsky saw the work, he was excited not just by the subject matter, but by what it represented for Bey, who became known first for his portraits of Harlem residents in the 1970s and has been thought of principally as a portrait photographer. (Many of his greatest images are found in a lavish

retrospective book that came out last year, “Seeing Deeply,” from University of Texas Press.)

“It's just fantastic to see an artist who's now in his mid-60s being able to do something so different,” Witkovsky said. “It does go back to the root of certain things, but you know, it's black and white, which he did once before, recently, but (otherwise) hadn't worked that way for decades. It's gelatin silver printing, which he hadn't done for decades. It's landscape, which he has done in the merest way, but really not at all that anyone would know. And it's not urban.”

For his part, Bey said, in the interview conducted via e-mail, “I've never considered myself ‘a portrait photographer’ as much as a photographer who has worked with the human subject to make my work.”
That changed, he said, with “Harlem Redux,” a 2014 project exploring the change visited upon the New York neighborhood where “it didn’t seem at all appropriate to make portraits. And so I had to learn another language of picture making that didn't rely on the human subject as the formal or conceptual anchor in order to show how the space around the human subject was being reordered. ‘Night Coming Tenderly, Black’ continues this work of looking at the narrative of space and place.”
It was, he said, like learning a new language: “Confronting the vastness of the landscape always seemed to me, before I started making these photographs, to present a particular challenge of how does one take in that vastness, where does one point the camera? … I had to learn to see specific pieces of the landscape and imagine them within the narrative that I was trying to convey. The human subject certainly takes up a lot less space!”

“It was definitely a learning process, and I was able to draw on my knowledge of the history of photography and the ways that the landscape has been visualized within that history.”

Witkovsky, for one, believes he succeeded: “For a while I think he's been looking for a set of ideas that would be really fresh for him in his season in life, and I think he found it.”

“Why not talk about the concluding image?” the curator asked, walking toward a shot of the vastness of Lake Erie, the last, giant hurdle for the escaped slave before crossing into Canada.
The water is roiling and not particularly inviting. Yet the image is also the most “open” in everyday terminology and in photography lingo, in the sense of being lighter, he said.

“There's a lowering sky full of clouds and yet there is a horizon line out there so you think you could get across,” Witkovsky said. “And it's a beautiful, beautiful ending. It's fraught. His stories are fraught, but Dawoud’s not a bleak thinker. He’s a humanist. And he’s an optimist in that he believes that in working together, we can make our own world a bit easier to travel through.”