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Wheeler, André. "Blackness is not a straitjacket on the imagination': the photography of Dawoud Bey." *The Guardian*. February 17, 2020.

The Guardian



Two Boys at a Handball Court, Syracuse, NY (1985). Photograph: Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

A new retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art examines the photographer's transformation over 50 years

In his five-decade-spanning career, the photographer Dawoud Bey has made steady reinvention a pillar of his image-making.

His explorations of marginalized and misunderstood communities is the subject of a new retrospective at the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#). The exhibition is divided chronologically and thematically, an organization that underscores Bey's ever-changing approaches to blackness.

There are the fashion-centric street photos of Harlem residents he snapped in the 1970s. There is his tender, sensitive [Birmingham Project](#), for which he photographed an array of black subjects inside a historically black church located in Birmingham, Alabama, a city that experienced multiple church bombings during the civil rights movement. The photographs are diptychs: on one side are

SEANKELLY

portraits of black kids who are the same age as those lost in Birmingham's church bombings; on the other, black men and women the same age those murdered in the bombing would be today, if they had lived. And there's the 2017 series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, a poetic and lyrical exploration of what the fugitive slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad might have felt and seen under the cloak of night.



Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot, Harlem, NY (2016).

Bey strives to expand how the black experience is seen and understood through his photographs. "What I hope to create is work that makes it apparent that black people exist not only in a social world," Beys says at the press preview for the SF Moma opening, "but they also have rich interior lives as human beings."

Bey decided to become a photographer after going to a protest of the 1969 exhibition *Harlem On My Mind*, at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bey had gone to witness the planned demonstration after black artists and photographers were excluded from an exhibition that was focused on a predominantly black neighborhood.

However, when Bey arrived, there was no protest. So Bey viewed the exhibition and found himself struck by the work. He walked out with a clear vision: he wanted to insert black voices and faces into the museum space.

SEANKELLY



Alva, New York, NY (1992)

Early projects by Bey, such as *Harlem, USA* and *Syracuse, NY*, mine the effortless wealth and beauty of black people. The portraits have minimal staging and highlight how, not too long ago, black hubs thrived in cities.

“I would never know the narratives of the individuals before I made their portrait,” Bey says, reflecting on the early projects. “The picture-making moment is when I would begin to find out something about the person. My greater responsibility was to give them a compelling representation and presence.”



Top left: *A Boy Eating a Foxy Pop*, Brooklyn, NY (1988). Top right: *A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue*, Brooklyn, NY (1988). Bottom: *Mary Parker and Caela Cowan*, Birmingham, AL (2012), from Bey's Birmingham Project.

SEANKELLY

Bey's early work takes on darker tones through his revisitation of Harlem as a subject, from 2014-2017. This time, Bey captures Harlem through the harsh, whitewashed lens of a digital camera, focusing on the rampant gentrification occurring. The subject has changed from happy, smiling black children to barren construction sites and white men eating at cafes and working on their sleek laptops. The absence of blackness is noticeable.

In the early aughts, Bey became interested in a different kind of marginalized, misunderstood group: Teenagers. His series *Class Pictures* takes portraits of teenagers shot in empty classrooms and pairs them with personal narratives penned by the young subjects. The approach gives the teenagers control over how viewers see them – preventing us from throwing preconceived notions and ideas on to them. In a way, *Class Pictures* highlights how the need for multidimensional representation is a universal human need, not a racial one.



A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater Harlem NY (1976).

At the press preview for the San Francisco exhibition, *Dawoud Bey: An American Project*, the artist sits on a bench, looking at his early work over forty years removed. “When I look at these photos, I think, ‘That guy’s good!’” Bey exclaims, followed by a hearty chuckle.

Looking back is an unusual practice for Bey, he says. He always has his eye on the future. (“I am always most interested in whatever I am currently working on.”) Taking in his work in 2020, when black artists are still fighting to be seen and celebrated, it’s impossible not to wonder how Bey navigated the art world when there were fewer conversations about diversity and inclusion.

As a black photographer, how did Bey create room to make work about whatever he wanted? So often black creatives are pigeonholed and pressured to focus on race.

SEANKELLY



Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I), from Night Coming Tenderly, Black (2017).

“The work can be about the black subject without the black subject being literally and prominently in the work,” he says, using the dark, shadowed photographs he captured for *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* as an example. “Those are about the black body moving through space.”

He nods, reflective: “Blackness is not a straitjacket on the imagination.”

- *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* runs from 15 February to 25 May at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art