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Feeney, Mark. "To matter to the viewer': 'Dawoud Bey: An American Project,' at the Whitney Museum of American Art." *Boston Globe*. August 12, 2021.

## The Boston Globe



*Dawoud Bey, "Two Girls from a Marching Band," Harlem, N.Y., 1990. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK; STEPHEN DAITER GALLERY, CHICAGO; AND RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO*

NEW YORK — There's a winning practicality to the subtitle of "Dawoud Bey: An American Project." The career retrospective runs through Oct. 3 at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Projects aren't grandiose, like visions or legacies, even if Bey's work can entail both. They're focused, directed: something to get done. They're about realities engaged with. They're real, the way that the people in Bey's photographs are, and that's very real indeed.

An objection might be registered that "American" is an abstraction. Except that the term's flesh-and-blood constituents, actual Americans, fill Bey's work. In his street photographs and portraits Bey achieves a rare degree of connection with his subjects. In a very real sense, they become participants in the work — partners even. The fact that the overwhelming majority of them are Black, as Bey is, lends a further urgency to both "American" and "Project."

Born in 1953, Bey first gained attention in the 1970s, with his series "Harlem, U.S.A." It's the first of eight sections in the Whitney show. Harlem's rich and varied prominence in American culture extends to photography. It was seeing the work of James Van Der Zee that drew Bey to photography. Roy DeCarava was a mentor, one whose influence on Bey is plain in his partiality to shadow and

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contrast. Aaron Siskind's "Harlem Document" was a signal achievement of American photography in the '30s, a very great decade for that enterprise.



*Dawoud Bey, "A Man in a Bowler Hat," 1976, from "Harlem, U.S.A." DAWOUD BEY*

Sympathetic as he was, Siskind worked as an outsider. Bey's family came from Harlem. That's where his parents met. He's at home there, which may have something to do with how at home his subjects feel in front of his camera. This isn't street photography so much as sidewalk photography: closer, more personal, less formal (in both senses of the word). There's also a sense of stylishness, usually understated, and sometimes quite marvelous, as in "A Man in a Bowler Hat," from 1976.

Bey doesn't restrict his fondness for everyday stylishness and the people who exhibit it to Harlem or in that series. The bit of millinery worn by a Brooklyn woman in 1988 makes that gentleman's bowler hat seem as mundane as a baseball cap in comparison.

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*Dawoud Bey, "A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue," Brooklyn, N.Y., 1988. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK; STEPHEN DAITER GALLERY, CHICAGO; AND RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO*

Nearly four decades after “Harlem, U.S.A.,” Bey would return for “Harlem Redux.” Where the earlier series is implicitly about the people who made the place what it is, these large color photographs — more than 40 inches by 48 inches — are about place as location. It’s the one instance in the show where Bey’s camera seems at all distanced. (An aside: Bey mostly works in black and white, but he’s quite comfortable with color. He’s one of those relatively rare photographers at ease with both.)

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*Dawoud Bey, "Tourists, Abyssinian Baptist Church," from "Harlem Redux," 2016. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY SEAN KELLY GALLERY, NEW YORK; STEPHEN DAITER GALLERY, CHICAGO; AND RENA BRANSTENGALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO*

The sense of connection — and participation — comes through most clearly in the several portrait series here. Some are street portraits, an extension of the work in “Harlem, U.S.A.” The uniforms worn in “Two Girls From a Marching Band,” from 1990, are eye-catching. But they’re positively lackluster compared to the face of the young woman on the right. The way her gaze meets the lens is a marvel.

With posed portraits, the role of the sitter is explicit. There’s a further dimension to that relationship in Bey’s “Class Pictures” series, from 1992 to 2006. “Class” has a double meaning: education (the sitters are high school students) and social status. The portraits are big, roughly 40 inches by 32 inches, and in color. Each also comes accompanied by a text from the sitter, making the aspect of collaboration explicit.

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*Dawoud Bey, "Betty Selvage and Faith Speights," 2012, from "The Birmingham Project." RENNIE COLLECTION/RENNIE COLLECTION, VANCOUVER*

The weight of the past can be felt throughout Bey's work. It comes to the fore in

"The Birmingham Project" (2012) and "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" (2017). "The Birmingham Project" (that word again) observed the 50th anniversary of the church bombing in that Alabama city that killed four Black girls. The same day, two Black boys also died as a result of racial violence. Bey created portrait diptychs of Black Birmingham residents. One sitter is now the same age as the murdered children; the other is an adult 50 years older — that is, the same age then as the murdered children. The strength of the sitters' faces makes the diptychs memorable. The larger context makes them nearly unbearable.

Formally, "Night" marked a real departure for Bey. The title comes from Langston Hughes's "Dream Variations," "Night coming tenderly/Black like me." The photographs show sites associated with the Underground Railroad, but the connections are oblique. We see clouds, open water (Lake Erie), picket fences, trees, shrubbery, a clapboard house. These are landscapes empty of people — hence such a departure for Bey — except that they are populated, only differently. Ghosts and memories fill them, both of which can be a more enduring presence than an actual person.

The images are doubly distinctive. They're very big, 48 inches by 55 inches, and Bey has printed them extremely dark (DeCarava would approve). It's darkness visible, both as idea and in presentation. Conceptually, this is inspired. Visually, though, it doesn't quite work — or at first it doesn't seem to. But the darkness makes the glass covering the image a kind of mirror. The viewer's reflection becomes part of the image. Now he or she is a participant, too, and instead of the past informing the present the present now informs the past. What would *you* have done back then?

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*Dawoud Bey, "Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)," from "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017. SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART*

In an interview two years ago with *Aperture*, the photography quarterly, Bey said, "I want the things that matter to me to matter to the viewer." That's a tall artistic order, a project unto itself. This retrospective shows how well he's succeeded.

## **DAWOUD BEY: An American Project**

*At Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort St., New York, through Oct. 3. 212-570-3600, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org)*

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Mark Feeney can be reached at [mark.feeney@globe.com](mailto:mark.feeney@globe.com).