

SEANKELLY

Brown, Jeffrey. "Dawoud Bey on photography as 'transformative experience.'" *PBS Newshour*. March 15, 2019.



For decades, Dawoud Bey has been considered one of the country's foremost street photographers, known for capturing the everyday lives of black Americans with a deep intimacy. Recently, Bey has shifted his focus to the historical, with an exploration of how the world might have appeared to fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad. Jeffrey Brown talks to Bey about "making the invisible visible."

[Read the Full Transcript](#)

Judy Woodruff:

And now: photographer Dawoud Bey has been considered one of this country's foremost street photographers, taking intimate portraits of everyday life. But now he's tackling a new subject, looking back at this country's history.

Jeffrey Brown has this report from the Art Institute of Chicago for our series on arts and culture, Canvas.

Jeffrey Brown: A young boy in sunglasses poses outside a Loews movie theater on 125th Street in New York City. A shoemaker sits in his workspace, cigarette hanging between his fingers.

SEANKELLY

Portraits of men, women and children, often amid the hubbub of daily life, yet somehow intimate. You might just pass us by, the subjects seem to say, but here we are. They're the work of photographer Dawoud Bey.

Dawoud Bey: 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 to kind of reshape the world one person at a time.

Jeffrey Brown: Bey, who has severe hearing loss, first made his name as a street photographer, capturing life in Harlem in the 1970s. In his work since, shot in many parts of the country, on streets and in a studio, he's continued to refocus how blacks are portrayed in art and popular culture.

Dawoud Bey: African-Americans in photographs have very often been viewed through a lens of social pathology. So, I wanted to respond to that kind of representation by making photographs that conveyed a deep, complex humanity.

I want there to be real sense of interiority, to go beneath the surface.

Jeffrey Brown: In more recent work, Bey, now 65, has extended his view into the past, as in the exhibition "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," now at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Dawoud Bey: I have come to call them the product of a kind of radical reimagining of history.

Jeffrey Brown: The history being reimagined is that of the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes used by runaway slaves in the 1800s.

In these photographs, no human faces or figures. Instead, they're dark and dreamlike, unidentified landscapes that place the viewer in the middle of sparse fields and backwoods.

Dawoud Bey: I'm trying to imagine them through the eyes of fugitive slaves moving through this landscape under cover of darkness.

SEANKELLY

Jeffrey Brown: But it's interesting because you're showing us what's not there, in a sense.

Dawoud Bey: And that's really what this project is about, making the invisible visible in the photographs, in a way that is palpable and in a way that resonates.

Jeffrey Brown: Originally created for the FRONT International exhibition in Cleveland, the photographs were shot in areas of Ohio once dotted with safe houses for slaves seeking freedom.

Research led Bey to possible Underground Railroad sites, but when shooting this spot overlooking Lake Erie, he knew he'd come on something important.

Dawoud Bey:

When I was making this work, I wasn't looking through the viewfinder, saying, I need to feel something. Please help me. I need to feel something to know this is authentic.

But when I got there, almost inexplicably, I felt a very strong presence, unlike anything that I have felt related to any other photograph. So, at that point, I said to myself, this isn't an imagined site. This is an actual location.

Jeffrey Brown:

And, for Bey, it's an important history to remember, one that's not often been documented.

Dawoud Bey:

It's about the history of people who were engaged in a process and a project of self-liberation. And I want to remind people about that, because I think it resonates even today. Globally, we have hundreds of thousands, if not millions of

SEANKELLY

people moving across the global landscape fleeing persecution, trying to find a place where they can live out their lives freely.

Jeffrey Brown:

Bey began his look into the past in 2013 with an exhibition on the 1963 bombing by members of the KKK of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

For The Birmingham Project, Bey paired two sets of portraits, one of children the same age as the victims killed in the attack, another of adults the age of those same victims, were they alive today.

Dawoud Bey:

That got me really deeply interested in this idea of, how does one visualize the past in the contemporary moment? How do you make the past resonate in the contemporary moment?

Jeffrey Brown:

Photography has also had a profound personal meaning for Bey.

Dawoud Bey:

The camera for me became a way having a voice in the world. And, over the years, I have come to suspect also, because I have a hearing loss, and because I do know that I have compensated for that by tending to see more probably than most people do, I don't think it's a coincidence that I have made my life and my work and career through my eyes.

Jeffrey Brown:

SEANKELLY

In 2017, Dawoud Bey received a MacArthur Fellowship, the so-called Genius Award.

And, last year, he published a beautiful retrospective of his work in the book titled "Seeing Deeply."

Dawoud Bey:

That's what I have been doing for the last 40 years. And that's what I think art has the capacity to do, to create the kind of transformative experience for each person who stands in front of it, and then, hopefully, when they leave the work, they go back out into the world with something that they didn't have before they encountered the work.

Jeffrey Brown:

The exhibition "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" runs through April 14.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown at the Art Institute Of Chicago.

Judy Woodruff:

It's wonderful.