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DAWOUD BEY ON SHOOTING MEANINGFUL PORTRAITS OF STRANGERS



"Five Children, Syracuse, New York, 1985" from Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities (Aperture, 2019).

With his award-winning portraiture, Dawoud Bey captures the humanity of the people he photographs as well as the vibrancy of the communities where they live. Bey explains his process in *Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities*, just released as part of Aperture Foundation's Photography

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Workshop Series. In this excerpt, Bey explains how he collaborates with his subjects in order to make more meaningful portraits.

Just as the quality of the picture changes with each camera, the relationship between you and the subjects changes as well. With a 4 x 5, I can control the photos in a much more intentional way: "You need to stand here because I'm going to set the tripod here." There's nothing spontaneous about it. Using a view camera on a tripod in the street lends an almost ceremonial atmosphere to the proceedings. It's very large and requires a different level of participation from both subject and photographer. I had to slow down the way I was making photographs.

Slowing down allowed for a much more collaborative process. Working in this way allowed me to confront the implicit hierarchy that I believe is established when you make photographs of people. That hierarchy privileges the photographer, who both makes and possesses the image. In a collaborative effort where subjects help shape how they are represented, they have more ownership of the space. I also started using Polaroid Type 55 film, which unfortunately no



"A Couple at a Main Street Bus Stop, Rochester, New York, 1989," from Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities (Aperture, 2019).



longer exists. That film created an instant print, which I gave to the subject, as well as a reusable negative, which I used to make the finished photographs. Part of shifting from the 35 mm camera to the 4 x 5 was to deepen and extend my engagement with the person I was photographing. I wanted to see if I could chart a path that made use of photography's documentary tradition and also addressed the tensions between photographer and subject.

Walking around with the 4 x 5 camera and a tripod, I began photographing in the neighborhood I was

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agenda to make the black subject a visible presence in my photographs, and in doing so, give them a presence in the tradition I was working within and ultimately a place on the walls of galleries and museums when the work would be exhibited....

I saw this couple walking toward me in the park. I was already set up and waiting for someone to come by. If you take them out and look at the shape of the picture—the slanted tree, the hanging leaves, and the lines framing the open space—I just needed people to put there. So I asked the couple, “Do you mind if I make a picture of you? I’ll give you one.” They said yes, and then we began to put their pose and picture together. When I ask people to pose for me, I always allow them to make the first gesture. I just say, “Make yourself comfortable,” and then whatever they do, that’s the beginning of working their gestures into something that I think invokes a compelling sense of presence.

They stood there together, and I said something like, “Well, you can act like you know each other!” I didn’t know what they were going to do after that, but I knew they were going to do something. I worked from there. I might have said, “Pull a little closer” or, “Turn this way.” Again, I didn’t know how they were going to do this, but I gave them the space, hoping it would work out.

You have to give people the space to perform their own behavior because as one of my favorite teachers in grad school, Richard Benson, used to say, “The things that are going on in the world are so much more interesting than anything you can make up.” It’s true.

If the pose comes from the subject, it will ring truer than anything I could direct. I can’t anticipate subtleties like the drape of her hand or the placement of his hand—the little poetic gestures or grace notes. I have to let them evolve and then recognize them when I see them, like the slight raising of her head: “That’s great. Just hold that and look at the camera.” This takes time, so they get comfortable, and their gestures become more relaxed as they become more sustained. I look for how they are through their own gestures and dispositions, which help me make the photograph I can only imagine.

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I'm also figuring out exactly where the picture begins and ends. Here, I decided that it should begin at the bottom of the dress, so I probably backed up a little bit to make sure I didn't cut it off. And the picture needs to end at the top of his cap. While they were posing I realized that there was a little too much empty space.



"A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, 1976" from Dawoud Bey on Photographing People and Communities (Aperture, 2019). © Dawoud Bey

The picture needed something else. I noticed people riding their bikes to the right and thought they would fill in the space nicely. I'm looking at the couple, but I'm also waiting for the bicycles to come into the frame. It's funny because I can't tell them, "Hey, just hold it because I'm waiting for something to fill in that space." I'm just hoping the bikes go by soon. It's all about being responsive to the shape of the things in front of you. You don't want to disrupt the form of the content. You have to be able to see deeply...

I've come to believe, from making photographs in Harlem all those years ago, that the best work tends to result not from the imposition of an idea on a situation, but from being responsive to what is going on once you get there. Otherwise, what results is merely the illustration of an idea. The idea is still meaningful, because it is the impetus that gets you out the door. But once you get

there, the work has to be driven by the experiences you're actually having, the people you're actually meeting, and your best attempt of honestly and clearly describing these encounters. Hopefully, this process leads to something more than what you expected.