

# SEANKELLY

Feinstein, Jon. "Dawoud Bey's Empathetic Lens." *Photograph*. January/February 2020.

## photograph

One of the most nuanced photographs in the 2014 Whitney Biennial was Dawoud Bey's portrait of Barack Obama, made in Chicago in 2007, two years before the future president was sworn in to his first term. It was direct and consistent with classical representations of powerful people - a straightforward, seated portrait, the subject staring confidently into the lens. But it also felt different. There was a layer of vulnerability, or perhaps just honesty, about Obama's pre-presidential pose; the way his hands folded softly across his lap; the way his jacket, worn without a tie, casually signaled his grace and humility; how the shallow depth of field throwing everything into a meditative blur might, two terms later, sit in tack-sharp contrast to the elongated red ties and overbearing business headshots of 45.

It is this complexity, this attention to layers of humanity and experience, this empathetic lens forming a connection between photographer and subject that has shaped Bey's 40-plus-year career, culminating in his first major retrospective, organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and SFMOMA, where it opens February 15.

The exhibition follows Bey's career from the early 1970s, when he was shooting 35 mm black-and-white street portraits in Harlem, through his series *Harlem Redux* (2014-17) and his most recent work, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017). It reflects the artist's attention to humanizing his subjects - specifically black communities in the United States - and creating work that follows what he has described as a mission of social responsibility.

The spark that ignited Bey's interest in photography was the first volume of *The Black Photographers Annual* in 1973, a collection of work from nearly 50 African-American photographers. While he cites Gordon Parks and James Van Der Zee, as well as the 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as having a significant impact on him when he was a teenager in New York City, Bey acknowledges the Annual as the pivotal moment in his decision to dedicate his life to photography. Shortly after seeing the 1973 issue of the Annual, he connected with a few of the contributors, including Beauford Smith, Lou Draper, Jimmie Mannas, and Shawn Walker, who became some of his early mentors.

While the Met's *Harlem on My Mind* rightfully drew protests for including no black artists, Bey recalled, in a 2012 New York Times article about his *Harlem U.S.A.* show at the Art Institute of Chicago, that he was moved, nonetheless, by images in the show depicting "ordinary black people," images that visitors clearly found compelling. The inspiration drawn from the *Annual*, as well as the focus and

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attention to everyday people in the *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, made a huge impact on Bey's work in the neighborhood during the 1970s.

In 1976, while walking through Harlem, Bey made the *photograph Man in a Bowler Hat*, which he considers his first "serious" picture. "It was a classic and almost timeless photograph of a man that looked like it could have been made 40 years before," Bey told me in a 2017 interview for *Daylight*, conjuring August Sander's democratic portraiture of people from all walks of life in early 20th-century Germany. As in Bey's portrait of Obama (which is not in the retrospective) two decades later, the man, standing in front of a Harlem tenement, connects with Bey, looking directly at the lens and participating in a shared moment with the photographer, an interaction often absent in portraits of strangers, in which the gaze often goes only one way.

Through the 1970s, Bey continued photographing in Harlem, producing images that would ultimately make up the series *Harlem U.S.A. (1975-79)*. While he was born and raised in suburban Queens, much of his family grew up in Harlem before moving elsewhere. Bey was drawn to the neighborhood and landscape, calling it "a homecoming of sorts" in a catalogue for the work's 2010 exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The series was a mix of portraits, like *Man in a Bowler Hat*, and street scenes with a wider context - stores, barber-shops, and other prominent neighborhood destinations. In all of the pictures, Bey's heightened sensitivity to the psychology of light, shadow, and the formal elements of the frame lead viewers to care about the people in his pictures. In one image (*A Woman and Child in a Doorway, 1975*), a sun-soaked woman stands holding her child in front of a shadowed doorway, going about her everyday business. The harsh, direct angle of the light brings out their every detail, transforming the doorway into a dark backdrop and pushing the pair to the front, enhancing their weight and significance. While the woman stares off, her baby locks eyes with Bey. He may be too young to speak, but there's a sense of communication and exchange.

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©Dawauld Bey, *A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY*, from the series *Harlem, U.S.A.*, 1976. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Daiter Gallery

In another (*A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, 1976*), a poised young boy wearing stylish aviator sunglasses leans on a wooden barricade in front of a movie theater. Bey recently learned, via an Instagram post by @blvckvrchive, that the boy, Damon Mitchell, died of leukemia in the 1990s at the age of 26. "For 43 years, I've wondered what became of this young boy that I photographed on a long-ago day in Harlem," Bey wrote in a recent Facebook post. "Our encounter that day probably lasted no more than five minutes at best, and now, 43 years later, I finally know his name." Whether Bey spends minutes

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or prolonged periods of time with his subjects, there is a sense of care in how he is looking.

During the 1970s, Harlem was in a period of exodus, crime, and poverty, yet Bey continually found moments of clarity. His empathetic eye portrays people who were likely overlooked or misrepresented by the mainstream media of the time with a sense of dignity, power, and respect. *Harlem U.S.A.* transcended photography's many flawed documentary traditions. For Bey, Harlem wasn't a landscape of narrow documentary or visual ethnography, it was a place of personal history.

In 2014, he returned to the neighborhood to make *Harlem Redux*, a three-year series of large-format landscapes, this time in color, that capture the neighborhood's recent gentrification while preserving details that might soon disappear, juxtaposing them against evidence of change - used coats hanging on a sidewalk fence; hairstyle posters in a barbershop window beside an abandoned, soon-to be developed lot; dripping red graffiti scrawled over an advertisement for a corporate shopping center. Unlike Bey's earlier work in the neighborhood, there are few, if any portraits, perhaps signaling the displacement of Harlem's residents.

Bey's photographs from the 1970s and much of the 1980s were taken with a 35 mm camera, which he had chosen for its speed. In the late 1980s, he began using a large-format 4x5-inch camera to get more detail and to better connect with his subjects, making more formal street portraits in various American cities. This created what Bey described in our 2017 conversation for *Daylight* as a "more clearly participatory and conspicuous process for mak-ing the work" beyond what was already evident in his earlier images. It also allowed him to make larger prints, which gave his subjects more weight. Given that he was almost exclusively photographing people from marginalized communities, these larger prints, both materially and metaphorically, helped them take up more space, and gave them more power.

In the early 2000s, Bey went a step further, using a 20x20 Polaroid camera to make *Class Pictures*, a series of similarly intimate color portraits of students from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds across the United States. Building on his tradition of photography as a respectful, participatory, two-way lens, each photograph is accompanied by text from the student about him or herself. The text enables those in front of Bey's camera to go beyond being an object to be gazed upon; to define themselves and narrate their own experiences.

Over the past two decades, Bey has continued his trajectory of empathetic photographic activism with *The Birmingham Project* and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, two series that speak to the cruel legacy of racism in America. *The Birmingham Project* is a series of diptych portraits and videos memorializing the

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victims of the 1963 Birmingham church bombings. Individual portraits of young people the same age as the four girls and two boys who were killed in the bombing appear beside images of older individuals, people the ages the victims would be if they were alive today. To emphasize the comparison, Bey photographs them in a straightforward manner - each person at the same distance from the lens, taking up the same physical presence within the frame. While this kind of comparative, repetitious approach could lead to an aestheticized or typological reading, the attention to each person's vulnerability, the subtlety of their hand gestures and eye contact, resonates deeply with viewers.

Like *Harlem Redux*, Bey's latest series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, its title a reference to a line in Langston Hughes's classic poem *Dream Variations*, applies the photographer's compassionate sense of looking to a historically charged landscape. Bey visited and photographed places in Cleveland, and the more rural Hudson, Ohio, that were locations on the underground railroad. Photographing them in black and white with rich black and murky grey tones, Bey draws attention to the tragedy of history while emphasizing the mystery of stories untold.

In a time when judgment seems to hang heavy - for how people look, for how they speak, for the views they espouse, for those they love - Dawoud Bey's empathic way of looking with, rather than at, is a multi-decade reminder of the positive potential of human connection.



©Dawoud Bey, *A Man in a Bowler Hat, Harlem, NY*, from the series *Harlem, U.S.A.*, 1976. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Deiter Gallery

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©Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)*, from the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Block*, 2017. Courtesy San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



©Dawoud Bey, *Amishi, Chicago, /I*, 1993. Courtesy Los Angeles County Museum of Art