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A.C. "The African-American experience, as photographed by Dawoud Bey." *The Economist*. February 20, 2020.

The
Economist



Dawoud Bey

DAWOUD BEY was 15 when his godmother gave him his first camera in 1968. The story might have ended there, had he not ventured to the Metropolitan Museum of Art a year later, where a controversial photography exhibit called "Harlem on My Mind" was on display. His intention was to protest against the scarcity of African-American artists in a show about their own community. But the picket was not happening that day, so he went in.

Mr Bey, now 67 and a professor at Columbia College in Chicago, is considered a luminary of American photography. Struck by the images he saw at the Met, he began producing work that moved black people in America into the foreground. Starting with street portraits, his photos have helped ensure that African-Americans are seen as legitimate subjects; increasingly, he presents them as witnesses to historical injustice, too. His profoundly moving work has been widely exhibited and collected; in 2017 he received a MacArthur "genius" grant.

Now the first full retrospective of his four-decade career has been co-curated by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show opened in San Francisco and will travel to Atlanta and New York. Subtitled "An American Project", it places Mr Bey in the tradition of

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American chroniclers such as Walker Evans and Robert Frank—but his aim is more pointed.

“Part of my agenda with this work is to transform the space of the museum by bringing this [African-American] community into that space, and make it a place where they belong,” he told a sell-out audience at SFMoMA. Starting with his first, 35mm black-and-white portraits in the 1970s, he said, he wanted to “reshape the world, one person at a time”.

The 80 works on display fulfil this promise. Mr Bey’s subjects, from elegant Harlem ladies and men in fashionable hats to mothers combing hair and boys sucking sweets, all share a remarkable, intimate gaze. In a shot from 1972 a young boy in dark shades lounges in front of the 125th Street cinema in Harlem; in an image taken in 2012 an older man dressed in impeccable pinstripes regards the camera from a once-segregated gallery at the Birmingham Museum of Art. In each photograph the sense of calm and trust is palpable. Mr Bey set out to create “equitable, reciprocal relationships” with those he photographed, he has said, treating them as participants in the making of the work.

Equally striking is the clarity and formal precision of these portraits, which depict worlds— from marching bands to revival tents to places of work—that are reminiscent of the German photographer August Sander. Mr Bey pushes his subjects into the foreground, not as “social subjects, but people with rich interior lives”.

A profound shift occurred in his art in the past decade, when he became interested in photographing not just the present, but the weight of the past and the passage of time. In the “Harlem Redux” series, which Mr Bey began in 2014, he returns to the streets he lovingly captured 40 years before. Now they are shown as almost empty of life, cluttered with the barriers and building sites of gentrification. One large colour shot depicts white tourists at a Baptist church, revealing the absence of a community that once thrived there. This series, he says, is where he “figured out how to make photographs where the narrative is about space, place, and absence”.

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His two most recent projects use that focus on place to address the painful history of enslavement and discrimination. The first, “The Birmingham Project”, is linked to his early experiences. At the age of 11 he saw a photograph of one of the survivors of the Birmingham church bombing of 1963, in which four girls were killed. Years later, the image of a girl in a hospital bed with eyes bandaged came suddenly back to him. “I sat bolt upright in bed,” he says. “I never thought that was anything but a metaphor, but it is true. I truly sat bolt upright.”

This series exemplifies Mr Bey’s thoughtful style. Searching for a way to illustrate the passage of time, he decided to photograph children the same age as those who died. Later he pictured adults the age those children would have been now, had they survived. Though photographed individually, he paired the figures in diptychs which reveal uncanny resemblances. They sit on church pews and in the museum in Birmingham from which those very adults were barred entrance in 1963.

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The last series, “Night Coming Tenderly, Black”, is just as subtly and beautifully layered. The astonishing nocturnal landscapes are printed in rich blacks and greys, showing spots thought to have been stations on the Underground Railway in Ohio, where fugitive slaves sought a path to freedom. For the first time, Mr Bey imagines a way to photograph black subjects through their own eyes, moving “under cover of darkness” through sharp foliage and past white picket fences. The title derives from a poem by Langston Hughes: “Night coming tenderly / black like me”. Mr Bey reminds the viewer that night—like his work as a whole—“is not a hard or dangerous, but tender space”.

“Dawoud Bey: An American Project” continues at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until May 25th. It will then open at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, in June and at the Whitney Museum, New York, in November. Photos are courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery