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Dawoud Bey, "A Boy in Front of the Lowe's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY," from the series *Harlem, USA* (1976) (image courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery, © Dawoud Bey)

SAN FRANCISCO — Before exploring *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I had the distinct pleasure of hearing a conversation between Dawoud Bey and Corey Keller, a curator of photography at the museum and one of the retrospective's curators (the other being Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art). As an active working artist, Bey thinks of the idea of a retrospective of his work as wonderful and exciting, if not also "unnerving." As a self-described artist who "tends not to stop," he appreciates the opportunity to reflect on the methodological and artistic through line of his own body of work as the show travels to different institutions.

Bey began at the beginning: his watershed encounter with Black photography within a major institutional space. He recalled visiting the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968* as a 16-year-old in 1969. The show, famously, was protested by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition who objected to Thomas Hoving's curation of documentary-like photographs of life in Harlem that had a grossly insufficient representation of Black artists. Bey went to the museum to see the protests, but none were planned that day; his visit to the show made him realize, despite its problems, that images of Black people could exist within museums.

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Dawoud Bey, "Combing Hair, Syracuse, NY" (1986) (image courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery, © Dawoud Bey)

Bey has been conscious about showing his images to the communities he depicts before displaying them in institutions. He described doing this for two major reasons. The first is that he is "conscious of representational dynamics": he is cognizant of being a "white box artist who makes work on non-white box subjects" and brings them into museum settings. But, secondly, in doing so, he expands opportunities for represented communities to interact with and extract value and meaning from historically exclusionary institutional spaces.



Dawoud Bey, "A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY" (1990) (image courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery, © Dawoud Bey)

An American Project displays eight major series of his work. Some of the images are even iconic, immediately recognizable within a canon of contemporary photography that seeks to consider and articulate what it means to capture American subjects as an American photographer — Bey's work, of course, actively troubles the historical exclusion of Black people from each. But more interesting than representing Black life is his turn toward the historical, captured by two series in particular: *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017) and *The Birmingham Project* (2012).

About these historical projects, Bey asked: "What kind of work does one make to visualize the past in the contemporary moment?" Site

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documentation (i.e. visiting and photographing the present state of a historical space) is relatively simple and straightforward. But rather than merely reproduce the spaces he visits, Bey creates journeys. Akin to [Saidiya Hartman](#)'s idea of "critical fabulation," he uses a fictionalized narrative to breathe life into the archive's gaps and our imaginations.



Dawoud Bey, "Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)," from the series *Night Coming Tenderly Black* (2017) (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Dawoud Bey)

Night Coming Tenderly, Black — taken from Langston Hughes's "[Dream Variations](#)," first published in 1926 — is best described by Torkwase Dyson as a "register [of] black movement as a stealth methodology." Bey does not seek to illuminate or color "correct" the unnerving darkness of the scraggly trees, creeks, and unmarked houses on the Underground Railroad journey he traces through Ohio to Lake Erie. In an impressionistic vein derived clearly from [Roy DeCarava](#), it is, as Bey articulated at the talk, a "dark photograph of a Black subject" that takes darkness as representational. It is a representation of the enslaved person journeying to the north, of the clandestine, maneuvering genius of Black fugitivity that seizes freedom for itself in the dark of night.

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Dawoud Bey, "Untitled #17 (Forest)," from the series Night Coming Tenderly Black (2017) (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Dawoud Bey)



Dawoud Bey, "Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)," from the series Night Coming Tenderly Black (2017) (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase; © Dawoud Bey)

Because the images are so incredibly dark, I was compelled to close my eyes and rely on sensorial intuiting. I listened for the hum of the image, I leaned into the quiet of the image as it yielded a “deeper understanding of the sonic frequencies of the quotidian practices of black communities.” Tina Camp’s methodology of listening to images permits a reading of Black freedom practices that may otherwise be made opaque for our own safety but are still legible even under the cover of the blackest night.

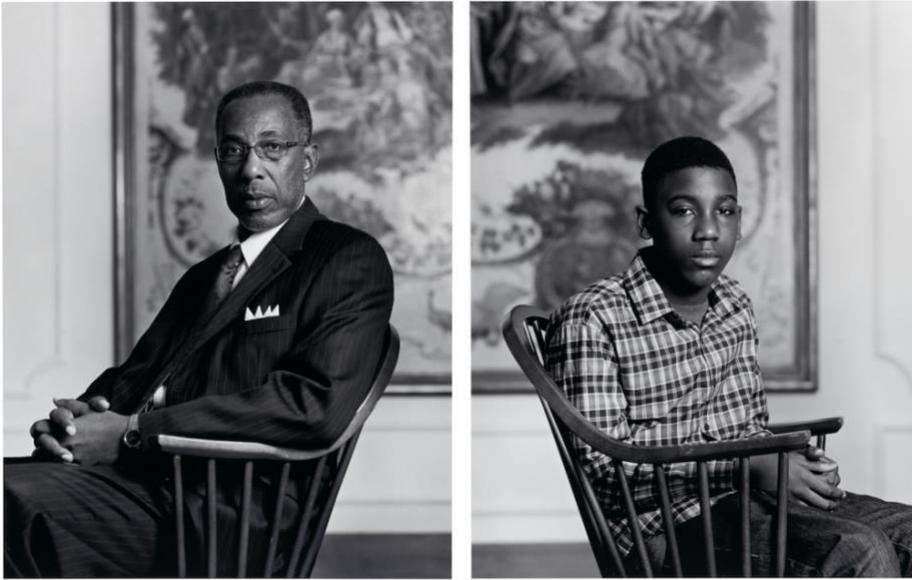
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Dawoud Bey, "Mary Parker and Caela Cowan, Birmingham, AL," from the series *The Birmingham Project* (2012) (Rennie Collection, Vancouver; © Dawoud Bey)

The Birmingham Project uses the diptych to explicate temporality, loss, and racial terror in its commemoration of the 1963 Klan bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Four little Black girls — Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair — were killed in the bombing and two young Black boys — Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware — died of their injuries hours later. Twenty-two more people were injured, including 12-year-old Sarah Jean Collins whose burned and bandaged face was photographed by Frank Dandridge and then seen by an 11-year-old Bey in Lorraine Hansberry's *The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality* in 1964. Without relying on often pornographic representations of anti-Black violence, the diptych is a deeply affective representation of the incalculable loss of Black life at the hands of white racial terror. In each photograph, there is an adult and a child. Each young person is close to the age of the four girls who were murdered (three of them were 14 and one was 11), and each older person is the approximate age that the girls would have been if they had not been murdered: around 70 years old, the age of many of our parents or grandparents or other dear older relatives.

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Dawoud Bey, "Don Sledge and Moses Austin, from The Birmingham Project (2012) (Rennie Collection, Vancouver; © Dawoud Bey)

As Imani Perry reminds us in the show's catalogue, "diptychs often served as portable icons," with one side "bear[ing] the names of the living and the other the departed." Without dehumanizing through deification, there is an overwhelmingly divine quality to these images, and not simply because the photographs are taken in a church. There is a specter that both haunts and animates the mirror images; each subject is posed similarly and shares a facial expression. We are confronted by our own mortality: a humble recognition of the impermanence of life paired with an abject fear of the unpredictability of white violence, the enthusiasm for which has been laid especially bare throughout the Trump administration and the many, many decades prior. But heartrending love, pride, resilience, and defiance also brought me to tears: a gratitude for the lessons learnt from generations of survival, and a mourning and fury for the ones taken from us.

Bey does not simply document Black life, but Black existence in a nation-state built upon the creation and maintenance of our subjugation. It is an existence marked often by violence, and at the same time, it is marked by a painful and adamant will to live, to reckon with, and to be free.

Dawoud Bey: An American Project continues at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (151 3rd Street, San Francisco) through May 25.

Correction: *A previous version of this article stated that the Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not include any Black artists. The exhibition did include some Black artists, though very few. This has been amended.*