

SEANKELLY

Wilson, Emily. "How Photographer Dawoud Bey Captured The Truths of Black America." *Daily Beast*. March 2, 2020.

DAILY BEAST

How Photographer Dawoud Bey Captured The Truths of Black America

| 'THEIR PRESENCE' |

When Dawoud Bey started photographing black subjects he wanted to show them in a positive light. Then he decided to "just try and describe clearly the people in front of me."



Photo Illustration by The Daily Beast/Getty]

When he was 15, Dawoud Bey's godmother gave him a camera. The now multi-award-winning photographer and educator didn't know quite what to do with it, and at first the camera itself fascinated him—how the lens came off and that turning a dial made the shutter open slowly. Eventually he started walking around taking photos, but he had no idea what his subject would be or even that he could have one.

The following year, 1969, a pivotal thing happened to Bey—he went to see a widely criticized exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Harlem on My Mind*,

SEANKELLY

which excluded African-Americans' work and participation. It drew furious responses from the like of artists Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis, who formed the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition and picketed the museum with signs reading "Harlem on Whose Mind?"

Bey wanted to see what all the fuss was about and maybe join the protesters, but the day he went, none showed up. So he went inside and saw the show. Seeing photos of ordinary African-Americans inside a museum was a revelation, and he started to think more seriously about photography and about wanting to show people in Harlem, where his mother and father had met.

"When I started out, I guess I wanted to make photographs that in some significant way contested some of the stereotypical notions of black urban communities like Harlem," he said. "I probably would have said I wanted to make photographs that represented the people of Harlem in a more positive light. "As I continued on, I couldn't quite figure out what a positive light looked like. I eventually came to this notion of wanting to make an honest representation of everyday people in Harlem, and it allowed me to let go of the binary notion of positive and negative, and just try and describe clearly the people in front of me and not put them in a box, and I realized that was enough."

Bey's first show of those people in front of him, *Harlem USA*, opened in 1979 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was important to Bey, as with all his work, that the photos be shown in the community where they were made.

Some photos from *Harlem USA* make up part of *An American Project*, a full-scale retrospective of more than 40 years of Bey's work organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (where the show is up until May 25) and the Whitney Museum of American Art (where it arrives in November). As the SFMOMA's show-notes say, Bey portrays "the black subject and African-American history in a manner that is at once direct and poetic, and immediate and symbolic."

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bey

Bey's desire not to stereotype is evident throughout the show. In the series, *Class Pictures*, done between 2003 and 2006, large-scale color portraits of high school students in different parts of the country are accompanied by text he asked them to write. One example is Gerard from Orlando, Florida, who wrote "I am a hard working man and I am black. I have a nice smile and nice long hair."

Bey said he's aware of the limitations and muteness of photographs, and he wanted a more dimensional representation of teenagers. "I thought it was important in that work that they not only be visualized in my photographs, but they have a place of self-representation, and they talk about their own lives in a way the photograph alone was not capable of," Bey said. "The two of them, my portrait of them and the text, could add up to something more than either one of them alone. In that project I thought it was important to give them a literal voice in the construction of the image."

Over the years the through line in his work has been a sense of history and place, Bey says. A couple of his recent projects are more explicitly historical, such as 2012's *The Birmingham Project*. Bey spent time in that city for seven or eight years to decide how to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1963 Ku Klux Klan dynamiting of the 16th Street Baptist Church, which killed four girls. Bey says making photos of historic sites where the events happened didn't interest him. Instead he took pictures of children the same age as the four girls in the church and the two teenage boys killed that day in related violence, who were 11 to 16. Bey did outreach, putting up fliers around the city, using social media,

SEANKELLY

and going on local TV to find children the specific ages of the murdered children for the photos.

“I wanted to give you a sense of not just what does a young girl look like, but what does an 11-year-old African-American girl look like?” he said. “It’s a way of making that history less mythic and more specific because history as time passes tends to become very gauzy. ‘The four little girls’ almost sounds like a girls’ singing group. I wanted to very specifically give you a sense of what a 14-year-old African-American girl looks like, an 11-year-old, a 13-year-old African-American boy and a 16-year-old. I wanted them to be that age as a way of invoking their presence in the work—not a presence, but their presence.”

Bey felt that the photos of just the children didn’t convey enough of the sense of loss, so he also decided to photograph people the age the children would have been if they had lived and put the photos together in a diptych.

While working on this series, officials at the Cleveland Museum asked Bey to do a project for them. Bey wanted to keep doing historical work, and he discovered that sites on the Underground Railroad on the way for people to get to Lake Erie and across the water to Canada were near Cleveland.

For that 2017 series, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (the title comes from a Langston Hughes poem), Bey made large black and white photos that were made in the daylight, but printed dark, looking as though they were shot at night, a process that Bey says was inspired by his friend Roy DeCarava. The photos show houses, woods, and fields at the viewer’s eye level to give the feeling of moving through that landscape under the cover of necessary darkness, traveling at night under threat of death.



Dawoud Bey

Bey had an interesting experience at the Art Institute of Chicago, where the photos were first shown.

SEANKELLY

“I came into the gallery, and two women had just finished looking at the work, and they looked disoriented, and they said to me, ‘You’re the one who made these photographs, right?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ ‘But you made them now, right, obviously you didn’t go back, but why am I feeling I’m someplace that I’m not?’” Bey remembered.

“I really want the work to pull you into the experience, so it’s not just a space of the imagination, which it is, but that it resonates as experience.”

An American Project is at SFMOMA through May 25, then the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, June 27–October 18, then the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November 20, 2020–April 4, 2021.