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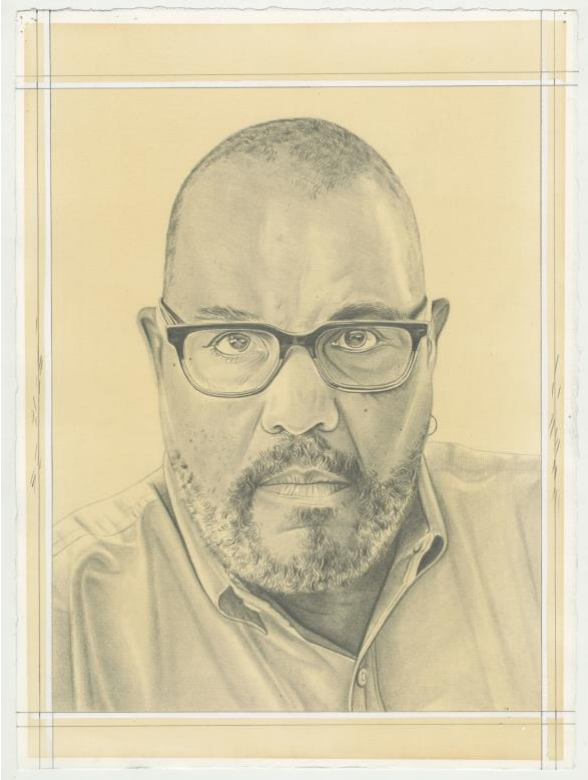
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Art | In Conversation

DAWOUD BEY with Lyle Rexer

“I want you to be able to feel yourself physically moving into the space of the photograph.”



Dawoud Bey. Pencil on Paper by Phong H. Bui

Photographer Dawoud Bey has been a Guggenheim Fellow (2002) and a MacArthur Fellow (2017). He’s had exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the National Gallery of Art, among others. His retrospective opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and traveled to the Whitney Museum. This is just a very short list of his accomplishments. He has been a Distinguished College Artist and remains Professor of Art, at Columbia College, Chicago.

Dawoud Bey, A Man in a Bowler Hat, from "Harlem, U.S.A," 1976. Silver gelatin print, 11 x 14 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Lyle Rexer (Rail): Dawoud, it's a pleasure to talk to you because this is a conversation I've wanted to have for a long time. I don't know why it hasn't happened.

Dawoud Bey: I don't either, but I am happy the *Rail* has brought us together.
Rail: For some reason, photographers are hooked on origin stories. They always seem to want to begin at the beginning with a first camera and a first photographic experience. I wonder if you'd talk to us a little bit about that early experience you had in 1969 at that landmark exhibition at the Met, *Harlem on My Mind*. That might qualify as an origin story.

Bey: I was 16 years old, and I was not at all interested in—or remotely interested in—photography at the time that the exhibition opened. But I was very socially engaged. By then I had joined the Black Panther Party and was involved in a number of local organizations that were organizing active resistance around various issues, which of course was a moment of deeply significant social turmoil in America, with the war in Vietnam taking place, and that overlapping with the tail end of the Civil Rights movement and the beginning of the Black Power movement and the women's movement. As its way of responding to that moment, the Metropolitan Museum mounted an exhibition about Harlem, which was still a largely African American community. The exhibition was well-intentioned but fraught with a number of missteps. And out of those missteps

came protests when the exhibition opened. I don't want to go into a long history lesson here—I highly recommend Susan Cahan's book, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power*, which detailed all of this—but the controversy made its way into the media, and I read about it in my local paper and decided that I wanted to see what the controversy was about. There were picket lines mounted in front of the museum, but as fate would have it on the day that I got there, there were no picket lines. If there had been, I probably would not have crossed them. And that left it open for me to go in and see the exhibition. It was a transformative moment. To see pictures of ordinary African Americans on a wall in a museum changed everything. It also was not a conventional kind of exhibition. But never having gone to a museum to see any exhibition on my own before, I didn't even think about the presentational strategy. It was more the fact that I was inside of a museum looking at photographs of people who looked like me or people in my family and community, and certainly the protest gave me from the outset a very different sense of what the museum was. The museum was not a benign space, but a space that could be actively engaged, actively spoken back to. And the social construct of the—in this case the Black community—could be actually brought into the museum and made to be part of what one thought of as a museum.

Rail: When you saw those photographs in that exhibition, did you have the idea that it was photography that could be that thing that would translate your experience directly to other people?

Bey: I had in fact gotten my first camera from my godmother the year before. I had no idea what to do with the thing.

Rail: [*Laughs*]

Bey: That exhibition was instrumental in that it began to give me a sense of what my subject might be. My mother and father met in Harlem, so I have personal history in that community. The combination of the exhibition in the museum and my own family's history with that community led me to my first project, which was to go to Harlem and continue that conversation by making my own photographs.

Rail: Who did you think would see these pictures because this is not the same thing as making a personal album that you might share with family?

Bey: That was the furthest thing from my mind. I didn't even know how to make photographs. That was the first challenge. Every Sunday my father bought the Sunday *New York Times*, and I gravitated towards the Arts section. On the last few pages was a listing of exhibitions, and all the way down at the bottom of that listing was a separate listing for this thing called photography.

Rail: Way at the bottom.

Bey: I'm like, "Oh, photography. I have this camera. I've gone to see this exhibition. Maybe I need to look at some pictures." And from looking at the listings, I ended up at the Marlborough Gallery, looking at photographs by Irving Penn, the *Small Trades* exhibition. These were ordinary people that he had brought into his studio to make photographs of. I have to tell you, being a young Black teenager, walking into the Marlborough Gallery was a pretty intimidating thing.

Rail: That was not your space.

Bey: I'm standing at the desk. No one said anything. They don't say hi. They don't say, "Hi, welcome, if you have any questions feel free to ask," or even, "Good afternoon, how are you?" Just a stony silence. But I was determined to see these photographs! I didn't care whether these people spoke to me or said hello or not, I would go. I saw Richard Avedon's portraits there as well, different of course from Penn's, but they had in common that they were pretty straightforward photographs of people. Somehow, something meaningful could be drawn from that very fundamental relationship between the subject and the photographer, through the camera, that left the viewer with some compelling sense of the individual. That was the beginning of my self-education, really. I went to MoMA, and what resonated the most for me during that first visit were photographs by someone I had never heard of, Mike Disfarmer. I was looking both for my subject, but also for a conversation within the medium that I could attach myself to. Out of all of that looking, I also stumbled across a copy of Roy DeCarava's foundational book, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), with words by Langston Hughes. These were a very different kind of photograph. They were much more aestheticized. They were not direct portraits. There was obviously some other idea of photography, but it also centered on the Black subject.

Rail: So when you got to Harlem as a young photographer, this was not your neighborhood. How did you get your feet wet? How did you talk to people? What did you discover when you started to photograph on the streets?

Bey: Initially I actually spent considerable time just walking the streets, getting to know the community, and allowing people in the community to get used to my presence. I had some intuitive sense that you couldn't just show up and start making work.
Rail: Would that have been a political awareness as well?

Bey: Certainly. I had a very clear sense of how images of African Americans had been used or misused within both popular culture and within the larger visual culture. I mean, going all the way back to 19th and early 20th century photographs of African Americans that represented them in a grotesquely stereotypical way. I wanted to make what I thought was an honest photographic representation of this particular Black community. I probably started initially with wanting to make a positive representation. But confronted with the complex reality of the community, I had to let go of that binary of negative and positive. I spent a lot of time with my camera hanging around my neck, not even making any photographs, kind of establishing my presence as a photographer. If you take a photograph like *Mr. Moore's Bar-B-Que* (1976), I probably waved hello to him through the window three or four times before I even set foot in that place. He might have wondered who this guy was that was waving at him. But by the second time he kind of recognized me. By the third time he waved back and then—I was also aware that even though I was like the people I was photographing, African American, by virtue of the fact that I didn't live there, I was an outsider. I was able to move around in the community with a degree of comfort, but I was also aware that the majority of people moving around in the community are not making pictures of ordinary people.

Dawoud Bey, A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, from "Street Portraits," 1988. Archival pigment print, 40 x 30 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: Exactly.

Bey: With the camera, it can be a very off-putting thing. Eventually I just started asking people if I could make a photograph of them. I would walk in the barber shop and just tell them, "I'm making photographs in Harlem, do you mind if I make some photographs of you?" Then I had to figure out how to give that situation resonant human and photographic form. I was always very much interested in those two things: making compelling photographs and compelling representations of the individual in the photograph.

Rail: Why I love these early pictures is I see a young artist who's speaking in tongues. I can see James Van Der Zee, I can see Roy DeCarava, and I can see maybe a little Gordon Parks. I can see all these different pictures by others circulating in your head as you look to make a good picture.

Bey: I'm trying to find my visual language. I made a photo of a man in a bowler hat that I consider my first successful photograph, the first that realized the

ambitions that I had set for myself. It didn't come easy. One Sunday morning, I saw him from maybe halfway down the block. He was talking to a group of three other men, but I saw him and I knew that I wanted to photograph him in all of his beautiful elegance. I wanted to photograph him, not the other three, but him. How do you insert yourself into a conversation with four older men, because, mind you, I'm probably 19 or 20 years old at this time, and this idea of interrupting a conversation that four adults are having and saying to one of them, "I want to make a photograph of you. Not you other three," was not an easy thing.

Rail: You guys go peddle your papers!

Bey: [*Laughs*] It let me know from the outset that I was going to have to figure out not only the picture-making part, but the very real social part. How does one insert themselves into someone's life, and come away with something that doesn't have any sense of the disruption this implies because he wasn't standing there waiting for me. When I passed that group of four men, I lost my nerve [*laughter*]. I just said "good morning" to all four of them and kept walking, and that was actually the moment when I had probably the first significant conversation with myself: "If you're going to do and be this thing that you say you want to do and be, you're going to have to figure this out, because it's clearly more complicated than you thought." So I turned around, steeling myself, walked back and we locked gazes, and I asked him if I could photograph him. Then the next problem comes up: he says yes [*laughter*]. He says, "Yes, what do you want me to do?" I thought, "What do I want him to do? He needs some direction here." I told him to just relax. Of course, there's always some lucky little grace that creeps into the picture that you can't quite direct. You know, that beautiful gesture with the hand in the foreground, that was all him.

Rail: I noticed you changed your camera as well. As you moved through Harlem, eventually you moved to a Polaroid, right?

Bey: You know, I'm making these very deliberate photographs with a small handheld camera, 35 mm, single-lens reflex. I'm working in a way that's very deliberate in terms of the framing, and I am as much aware of the place and the space that wraps itself around the subject as I am aware of their physical presence, their gestural behavior, and not wanting my presence to disrupt that. But this work is very much about the idea of this place, this community, Harlem. It's about the individual, but it's also an idea about a place. I am discovering how to work out my ideas through different kinds of picture-making with the Black subject. A picture of four school kids playing is very different from the one of the man in the bowler. It's a conversation with a different photographic tradition, more Garry Winogrand than Walker Evans.

Rail: Exactly. It's got that rhythm in the figures.

Bey: I went on to spend a few years making work in that tradition of “street photography,” in which one tries to create a visual choreography out of the rush of the everyday urban environment, something coherent and perhaps poetic out of the chaos, this piece of this particular moment, in which there is an extraordinary synchronicity between the elements. So, the photographs are always about ideas, ideas rendered in photographic form, using the Black subject as the anchor to keep the work fixed in a social place

Dawoud Bey, Brian and Paul, 1993. Dye dispersion Polaroid prints (diptych), 30 x 44 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: Can you tell me about that shift you made—in the late ’80s—into large-format photography? First it’s 4 × 5, then everything moves into the studio. You’re doing portraits that are multiply framed, elegant 20 × 24-inch Polaroids.

Bey: When I was making those spontaneous pictures, I would also make more formal portraits, even though I was still working with the small camera. But eventually in 1988 I began working with a 4 × 5 inch camera on a tripod, using black-and-white positive/negative Polaroid film. It’s a very deliberate way of working. There’s not much room for spontaneity there, although there is freedom with gesture and other small things. But the basic shape of the picture has to be figured out, and then you work with the subject to make the photograph. I spent from 1988 to 1991 making photographs in various Black communities, beginning in Brooklyn, making these works that I came to call “Street Portraits.” They’re about giving the Black subjects in these photographs a kind of performative space. It’s participatory. The gaze of the Black subject towards the viewer becomes important. It’s a very dialogical way of working.

Rail: Very much.

Bey: Making photographs with the 4 × 5 film and a view camera on a tripod allows for a much richer quality of material description and it also allows for the making of larger prints. So they exist in a very public kind of space, and I wanted to give the subject an even greater physical presence in the space in which the work was shown, museums and galleries, to allow them to inhabit the space in a much richer kind of way.

Rail: All the relationships change.

Bey: I wanted that. The use of the positive/negative Polaroid film also allowed me to give each of the people that I photographed an instant 4 × 5 print of themselves in return for their participation. It was a much more reciprocal kind of process. I began to have ethical problems with the idea of making photographs of people in the street as another saw them. If I saw someone that I thought I could make a photograph with, I asked them if they would be interested and I was able to tell them that I was going to give them a photograph at the end of that.

Rail: How did they respond when they were able to hold that picture that you gave them?

Bey: They would ask me, “What are you going to do with these?” And I said, “Well, I exhibit them; sometimes I publish them. They’re going to be seen in a very public way.” With only one exception, no one ever objected to this idea that I was going to amplify their presence in the world.

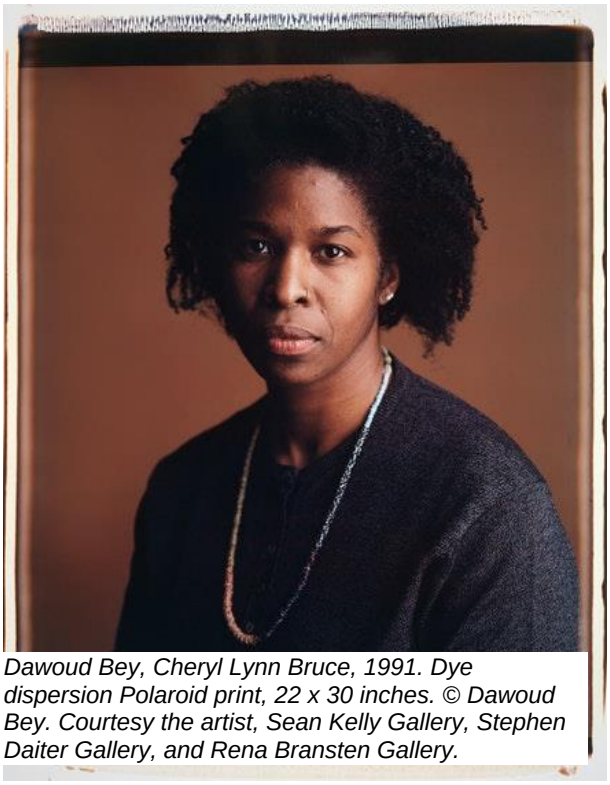
Rail: When you moved into the studio, were you thinking about painting?

Bey: I was thinking about Rembrandt.

Rail: Absolutely! [*Laughs*]

Bey: I had to do a report on Rembrandt when I was in the sixth grade, and I fell in love with the work. I did the report, and I never forgot the work. And after several years of working with the Polaroid material in the streets, and after having worked in the streets making pictures from 1975 up until 1991, I decided that I wanted to continue making portraits, but I wanted to find a different way into that conversation. I wanted to remove the narrative and the sociology of place

and make something that was more resolutely about the individual. My relationship with Polaroid through the Artist Support Program led me to this work in the Polaroid studio. Certainly I knew about the 20 × 24-inch Polaroid camera. I had seen Will Wegman's work and Chuck Close's work, so I asked Polaroid if I could spend some time in the 20 × 24 Polaroid studio. There's this huge 265-pound camera, and the Polaroid technician, and a bunch of lights. I could do pretty much whatever I wanted. I thought, "Maybe I can have that conversation with Rembrandt."



Dawoud Bey, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, 1991. Dye dispersion Polaroid print, 22 x 30 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: [*Laughs*] Let's bring him back.

Bey: I photographed mostly artist friends of mine. The very first one that I made was of an actress friend, Cheryl Lynn Bruce. There was a former classmate of mine from Yale, a dancer and choreographer, Trajal Harrell; another classmate of mine from Yale, Rebecca Walker; an artist friend, Whitfield Lovell. It was basically my community. But as I was pinning these up to the wall to dry and looking at the various versions of each portrait session and trying to decide between them, I'm like, "Why do I have to make this choice about one or the other?" Something more interesting might begin to open up if I keep them together. Maybe this will be an opportunity to stretch this notion of time in the still photograph. And I had been looking at other works that were constructed of multiple images or panels during and before that time. My former wife Candida Alvarez is a painter, and for a while she was working with multiple panel paintings. When Lorna Simpson came back from grad school in California, she invited me over to see the work she had done, and they were large scale multiple image works. I went to see Jennifer Bartlett's work at the Brooklyn Museum, and was doing those multiple panel enamel tile paintings at the time. And I've always liked Sean Scully's paintings as well, the idea of multiple panel paintings. So all that probably primed me to have a more expansive response to the work I was doing as I decided that the photographs did not have to follow the single image orthodoxy.

Rail: The momentary is the limit of the photo portrait.

Bey: You know, there's tension: how can one represent time and multiple psychological dispositions in the photograph? I began to let go of the single

photograph even though the quality of lighting remains the same because I love that single light source. It's very Rembrandt; it's very Caravaggio. In the initial diptychs I made I wanted to hold on to its emotional resonance but deal with both the gaze—the subject's awareness of the world and the viewer—and a second picture that was more inwardly directed. Putting them together suggested an almost cinematic shift.

Dawoud Bey, Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot, from "Harlem Redux," 2016. Archival pigment print, 40 x 48 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: I know that John Coltrane was very important to you, as an innovative musical and creative influence, and I see you constantly innovating, always looking for new ways to do whatever's on your mind.

Bey: I never think about it in a self-conscious way, i.e. "let me do something different." Part of making the work is asking the question, "What would it look like if I did this, and use that kind of camera and turn it into a more reciprocal process as a way to unburden this notion of a single ownership of the image, especially in the context of the Black subject? What would it look like?" When I feel that I have

explored that idea, and answered that question as far as I can, I feel like I want to give myself another challenge. And yes, John Coltrane was a profound influence, a kind of creative and spiritual awakening for me, and an expressive benchmark.

Phong H. Bui: If I can jump in, thank you so much, Dawoud for being so open and honest about your work. You mentioned earlier about Caravaggio and Rembrandt as you experienced their work when you were so young. When I was in my freshman year of college, I took a photography class and was asked to read Jean Genet's famous essay, "What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down the Toilet" (1988).

Bey: [*Laughs*]

Bui: Genet sat across from an older man in a train, and his realization of physical decay, related to the last time that he had seen a self-portrait of Rembrandt. Rembrandt died as a poor man after his son Titus and second wife died. The point being, vulnerability was the key to the late Rembrandt self-portraits. Was there an issue of urgency and vulnerability when you were thinking of Rembrandt?

Bey: I am acutely aware of the vulnerable position that the person has placed themselves in allowing me to take a sustained look at them through the lens—without even knowing what's going to come out of that. Out of that relationship, more so than vulnerability, the thing that I am interested in with the portraits is the idea of interiority. How to give the impression, not only of the physical person, not only of the social being—because I think in relation to Black people in particular, they're often seen through a lens of sociology while overlooking their rich interior lives. Part of the challenge for me has been how to make that interiority momentarily visible on the surface and to sustain it in the photograph. How to construct within the unnatural act of photographing someone intimately, how to get out of my own way and have the camera be there but also not be there, even though that's the instrument that they are engaging with.

Dawoud Bey, Former Renaissance Ballroom Site, from "Harlem Redux," 2015. Archival pigment print, 40 x 48 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: I wanted to return finally to the topic I introduced earlier, one that runs through your work, that of the relation of person and place. The context of that relation is the broader one of history. Your project "Harlem Redux" and the recent work on the Underground Railroad address this more abstract idea, and your approach in both cases is comparatively oblique.

Bey: I had over the years since my early work visited Harlem periodically. Harlem has undergone several different waves of gentrification, the most recent having to do with the increasing influx of global capital that is reshaping the community socially and physically. It's reshaping the sense of space and the narrative of space and place, and I felt it was really important to try to figure out a way to insert myself into this conversation. And so from 2014 to 2017, I spent a considerable amount of time in Harlem trying to figure out a formal language and a conceptual language for talking about this change. What I didn't want to do was continue the idea of the portraits in the contemporary moment. I needed to show how space and place itself were being disrupted. And because it's a very contemporary set of circumstances, I wanted to make this work in vivid color. I didn't want it to have any tinge of nostalgia that black and white can sometimes imply. The project became "Harlem Redux", where I began to grapple with the formal visualization and narrative of space. It was very difficult work for me to do, quite frankly.

Rail: I can see the difficulties, and I can see you trying to position yourself, photographing around corners, photographing up at tour busses, all those things that you never did before. Did you feel a sense of loss when you came back to Harlem? Did you feel like you were a lost person suddenly in this place?

Bey: A sense of loss, a sense of anger, a sense of ambivalence. And having to channel all of that through a particular visual strategy, a conceptually subjective one, yeah. It took me about a year and a half to figure this out until I finally was able to make the kind of photographs that I wanted to make, consistent for the project.

Rail: I can see this in what feels like almost an autobiographical picture, a picture taken through a hole in a construction fence. It feels as if you are asking, “Where do I look? How can I possibly see this now?” The series is really quite moving.

Bey: Space and places are being disrupted, and places begin to open up where something used to be. You almost can’t remember what had been there. The work is also about the way in which place-memory is being disrupted for those people who have lived in Harlem for a long time, and are seeing all of the spaces and places that they knew, by which they marked their lives, disappearing around them.

Dawoud Bey, Untitled #15 (Forest with Small Trees), from “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” 2017. Silver gelatin print, 44 x 55 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Rail: That sense of displacement and dislocation leads us to this final series, one that gathers so many things together from all the work that you’ve done. I wonder if you’d talk about these pictures of the Underground Railroad. The series title

comes from that great poem of Langston Hughes's, "Dream Variations," with the following lines: "To fling my arms wide/In the face of the sun,/Dance! Whirl! Whirl!/Till the quick day is done./Rest at pale evening…/A tall slim tree…/Night coming tenderly/Black like me." You borrowed that line, *Night Coming Tenderly Black* for the title of this series.

Bey: This work, which has to do with finding a way to visualize the past in the contemporary moment, comes out of two things. It comes out of my understanding of how to visualize space and place and the landscape that began with "Harlem Redux," and it also comes conceptually out of *The Birmingham Project* (2013), which is also about the past and making work about the past in the contemporary moment. *The Birmingham Project*, of course, did that while still remaining anchored to the portrait. "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," which is made in northeastern Ohio, breaks completely with the portrait subject. It is exclusively locations, landscapes. In a way, it's a tribute to Roy DeCarava. Blackness is the narrative, and the Black subject is embodied in what is, materially, a very dark photographic object. All this puts me in mind of DeCarava. The photographic print can actually be a material equivalent for the experience of the Black subject. So when I was invited to make work in northeastern Ohio by the FRONT Triennial, I took Langston Hughes's last refrain from that poem, "Night coming tenderly/Black like me," because in DeCarava's photographs, the prints are very rich, they're very black, but that blackness is not a threatening place. It's an embracing place. It's a space through which the Black subject moves, much like the darkness of night, through which the escaping fugitive slaves were moving along the Underground Railroad, thinking about the cover of darkness and the blackness of night as enslaved people made their way through that blackness to Ohio and finally to freedom in Canada. I wanted to make something that was the material narrative equivalent of that. In fact, the photographs were made at different times of the day, and then printed to feel as if they were made under cover of darkness. The series continued my interest in how to bring pieces of significant African American history back into a contemporary conversation.

Rail: They have a physical impact. I feel my eyesight is inadequate. I have to grope.

Dawoud Bey, Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky), from "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017 Silver gelatin print, 44 x 55 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Bey: They're very large scale, because I want them to have a real sense of physicality that the viewer can almost immerse themselves in. I want them to move from merely being photographs to being experience. Because you know, a small photograph is a certain kind of photographic object. And it never loses its—

Rail: Its preciousness.

Bey: Yeah, yeah. Its preciousness as an object. These are very large, because I don't want them to be viewed only as objects. I want you to be able to feel yourself physically moving into the space of the photograph.

Rail: I think it's fitting too that the final image of your presentation is of Lake Erie, a vast space of dark waves and water. You can imagine what it must have been like to come to the shores of Lake Erie after traveling up from the South, under constant threat. It's an incredibly moving picture, and I've been thinking about it a lot since I first saw it.

Bey: Yeah, because 50 miles across is Canada.

Rail: Exactly.

Bey: This is like the last view on American soil that enslaved people, making their escape to Canada and a presumed freedom, this is the last view that they would see on this side.

Contributor
Lyle Rexer
Lyle Rexer is the author of several books on outsider art, including *How to Look at Outsider Art*. He is on the faculty of the School of Visual Arts.