

SEANKELLY

Smee, Sebastian. "This photographer transcends his medium — by turning day into night and past into present." *The Washington Post*. April 21, 2021.

The Washington Post



Dawoud Bey's "Martina and Rhonda," 1993, part of a series of works taken with a 20-by-24-inch Polaroid, combines multiple views taken at different moments of a portrait session into one multipaneled image. (Whitney Museum of American Art/Gift of Eric Ceputis and David W. Williams/ © Dawoud Bey)

NEW YORK — Art love can be founded on soul-shaking epiphanies or on little "A-ha!" moments. I remember, for instance, learning that many of the gloomy photographs in "Paris by Night," Brassai's classic vision of 1930s Paris nightlife, were taken during the day.

"A-ha!" I thought. You can do that?!

Well, yes, you can. You're an artist. You're playing with chemicals in a darkroom. You can do whatever you like.

"Night Coming Tenderly, Black," Dawoud Bey's haunting 2017 series of nighttime landscape photographs, named for a line in a poem by Langston Hughes, also were taken during the day. Instead of fabricating Paris's seedy glamour, Bey's photographs imagine nighttime scenes experienced by fugitive enslaved people on the Underground Railroad. Some of these big (44 by 55 inches) silver gelatin

SEANKELLY

prints are featured in their own gallery in a concise, insinuating survey of Bey's career at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Bey, 68, is primarily a portrait photographer based in Chicago. His portraits are at once so fresh and so assured that by the time you arrive in the "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" gallery, your mind is bobbling and humming like a new arrival at a housewarming party. The 2017 series, however, features no people at all. Composed in and around Hudson, Ohio, the works are pure landscape with only occasional glimpses of houses and fences.

The artful tonal contrasts of Bey's portraits have been blended into a rich, glossy reduction of medium and very dark gray tones. What these dark, unpeopled photographs visualize, art historian Steven Nelson writes in the catalogue, is "the removal of the black body from the white gaze."

We can think of this in several ways. Activating our historical imaginations, we can take Nelson to be referring to the vital cover that night would have afforded Black fugitives. And yet that may be too literal. Bey's photographs, after all, are knowing inventions, the product of darkroom trickery. As patent fictions, they register precisely what we *don't* know about the Underground Railroad, which relied on secrecy and was largely undocumented.



One of the photos in Dawoud Bey's "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" series. (Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art/© Dawoud Bey)

These dark, sensuously printed images also have an inviting, almost luxurious quality. As such, they encourage a more poetic interpretation of vanishing "from

SEANKELLY

the white gaze.” It’s linked to the freedom conjured in “Dream Variations,” the Langston Hughes poem quoted in the series’s title. Hughes imagines himself resting “at cool evening” beneath “a tall, slim tree. . . . Night coming tenderly/ Black like me.”

In Bey’s hands, in other words, photographs of empty, hard-to-see landscapes come to seem connected not just to history, but also to a whole repertoire of feeling.

Sometimes, the biggest gift an artist can receive is a limitation, an obstacle. Photography’s profoundest limitation is its mechanistic nature, which can bind it to a literalness and a brittle understanding of time. You photograph something in a certain moment, and there it is: a photograph of something in that moment. It can feel like there’s nothing more to say.

But push into these supposed limitations, and interesting things may open up. Bey has been doing this throughout his career.

Trying to overturn the camera’s tendency to concentrate power in the photographer’s hands at the expense of the subject, Bey has immersed himself in his subjects’ communities, accumulating deep knowledge and building trust where other photographers would be quickly in and out. He has made sure to show his work in the places he made it. He has displayed portraits of teenagers (a class of people unusually ripe for others’ projections) alongside their own self-descriptions. And in a series of remarkable works taken with a 20-by-24-inch Polaroid, he has combined multiple views taken at different moments of a portrait session into one multipaneled image.

SEANKELLY



I can speak four languages, I am an actress, and when I was about thirty seconds old I reached up and took my dad's glasses off of his face. When I was eight years old, I visited my cousin's school in India. They didn't have a roof, so during the monsoons they got rained on. When I went home, I raised enough money to build them a roof and buy some school supplies.

Usha

Dawoud Bey's portraits of teenagers — this one of a student at Gateway High School in San Francisco — are displayed alongside the teens' self-descriptions. (© Dawoud Bey/Courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery)

Many photographers have tried similar things. Few have been as committed or convincing.

Recently, and more originally, Bey has fought against the camera's literalness — its insistence on showing what's there — by trying to imagine precisely what *isn't* there.

Just as we don't know what the Underground Railroad looked like, we struggle and fail to imagine slain children as the adults they should have become. Bey turned his attention to this problem — which should haunt us all — in a body of work he called "The Birmingham Project."

In 1964, when Bey was 12, his parents went to a Baptist church in Queens to hear James Baldwin speak. They brought back a book that included a photograph by Frank Dandridge of 12-year-old Sarah Jean Collins, who, the previous September, had been injured in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. In Dandridge's photograph, Sarah Jean's head is turned to face the camera, but her eyes are covered in round white bandages.

"There's my life before this photograph, and there's my life after this photograph," Bey said during a roundtable discussion in 2018. His statement echoes Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous photographic doctrine of "the decisive moment," which art critic Peter Schjeldahl described as that split second "when the past, as blind preparation, pivots and becomes the future, as all-seeing consequence." Dandridge's photograph of Collins reminds us that some decisive moments —

SEANKELLY

bomb explosions, for example — don't so much open onto all-seeing futures as obliterate them.

Decades after seeing the photograph, it rose to the surface of Bey's consciousness. "I literally sat bolt upright in bed," he said, "and that picture . . . came flooding back to me."



"A Young Man Resting on an Exercise Bike, Amityville, NY, 1988." (© Dawoud Bey/Courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery and Rena Bransten Gallery)

This collapse of past into present triggered the Birmingham Project, which Bey first exhibited in 2013 in Birmingham, on the 50th anniversary of the bombing. Works from the series are included in the Whitney show (which was curated by the Whitney's Elisabeth Sherman and Corey Keller of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and across town in the New Museum's "Grief and Grievance" exhibition. They were displayed at the National Gallery of Art in 2019.

Because it killed four children, and because two more children were killed in racist attacks over the following days, there is no doubt that the Sept. 15, 1963, bombing was a decisive moment. But it wasn't isolated. It was the culmination of a long succession of bombings.

According to the art historian Nelson, the explosion that killed Sarah Jean's 14-year-old sister, Addie Mae, as well as Denise McNair, 11, Carole Robertson, 14, and Cynthia Wesley, 14, was Birmingham's "twenty-first in the preceding eight years, the seventh in the preceding twelve months, and the third in the preceding eleven days."

SEANKELLY



Betty Selvage and Faith Speights, 2012, from "The Birmingham Project," in which Bey paired local children, who were the same age as the children killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, with adults 50 years older. (Rennie Collection, Vancouver/ ©Dawoud Bey)

Contemplating this, Bey wanted to find a way to tear open the envelope of time inside which photographs are usually sealed. He first went to Birmingham in 2005 and, over several years, made return trips, conducting research and speaking to residents in a sustained effort to understand the long aftermath of that traumatic time.

He then made 16 diptychs — 32 portraits. In each diptych he paired local children, who were the same age as the children killed in 1963, with adults 50 years older. The resulting works are at once modest and poignant, rooted in time and place, but also deliberately open to other times, other lives, other possibilities. They touch on something dreadful, but they offer an alternative to photography's tendency toward macabre prurience.

They are still just photographs of course. But take a moment or two to contemplate the unique mode of commemoration these images enact — emphasizing who isn't there, honoring those who are — and you soon perceive how an artist, in transcending the limitations of a medium, can also transcend art itself.