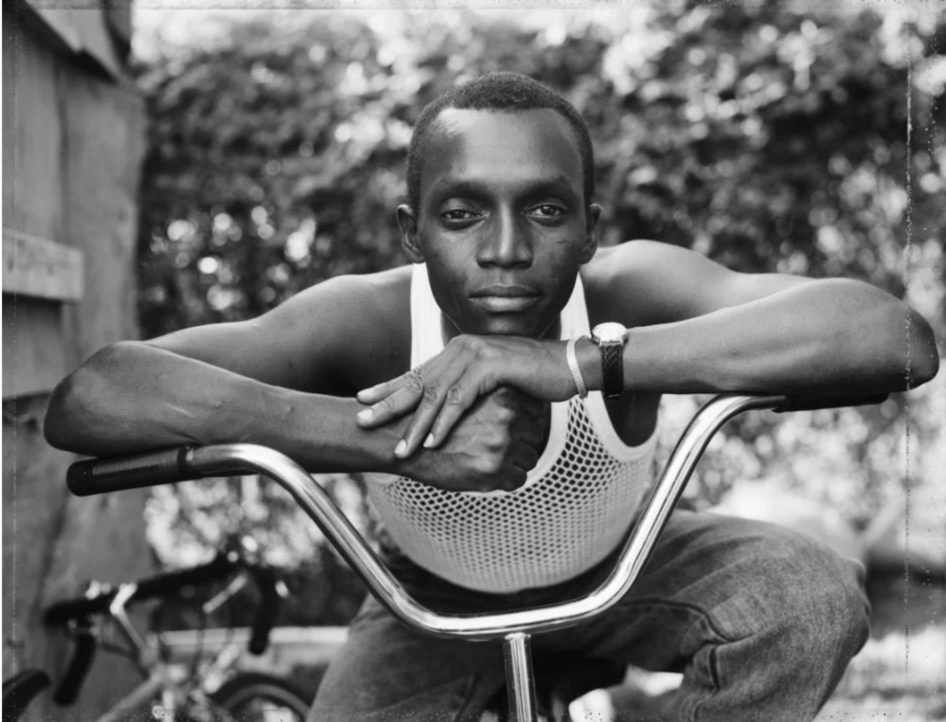
Bourland, Ian. “Dawoud Bey on expanding the photographic moment.” *ArtForum*. April 17, 2021.

ARTFORUM



Dawoud Bey, A Young Man Resting on an Exercise Bike, Amityville, NY, 1988, inkjet print, 30 x 40".

Over the past forty-five years, Dawoud Bey has critically reimagined photography’s social and political potential, whether through his collaborative portraits of under- and misrepresented communities or through his more recent explorations of the landscapes of northern Ohio, a terminus of the Underground Railroad. April offers three occasions to see Bey’s work: a new book, Street Portraits *(Mack), which gathers portraits of African Americans made between 1988 and 1991; the Okwui Enwezor–conceived “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America” at the New Museum in New York, which includes Bey’s “Birmingham Project” series; and “American Project,” a major retrospective that runs from April 17 to October 3 at the Whitney Museum of American Art.*

FROM THE BEGINNING, I was looking at a lot of photographers who were working in the space of the portrait: Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Mike Disfarmer, the studio photographer in Herber Springs, Arkansas. Something was compelling to me about how the individuals sat or stood, presenting themselves to the camera. It seemed that something resonant could result from that engagement. I wanted to apply that resonance to Black people, whose presence had not traditionally been given that kind of attention.

The first portraits I recall making were with a group of my grade-school classmates. I must have slipped my little Kodak camera into my book bag, and at lunchtime, I posed them in the schoolyard. I even printed the photographs in black-and-white, though I can't remember what led to that choice. I was in the sixth grade, so I would have been ten or eleven years old.

The "Street Portraits" were very deliberately made. I wanted to give the Black subjects in the photographs a performative space in my pictures, a space that would amplify their presence and direct their gaze out into the world. I was also dealing with the idea of the hierarchy between subject and photographer, and I addressed that by using Polaroid positive-negative film, which allowed me to give them a print of themselves, creating a more reciprocal and dialogical relationship. I wanted to open up the question of implicit ownership of an image.

I think I was able to figure out how to reshape the fundamental relationship inherent in the portrait project and make it a more collaborative one. My shift from using an unobtrusive 35-mm camera to the four-by-five camera on a tripod was an important part of this, since it slowed down the process and required a different level of consent and active participation. The grid grew out of the needs of the work itself. When I was working with the twenty-by-twenty-four Polaroid camera, I started with single-image portraits. I began to complicate that by consciously layering time into the work, first making diptychs and then triptychs.

As I moved closer to the person in front of the camera—in order to heighten the physical experience of the sitters—there were pieces of them that were being left out.

Dawoud Bey, Martina and Rhonda, 1993, six dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroid), 48 × 60".

I started to put those other pieces in by adding more photographs to the composition. Eventually, the portraits became variously formatted grids. At the same time, I was looking at artists who were making works in multiple parts, like Jennifer Bartlett, Sean Scully, and Candida Alvarez. I increasingly wanted to move beyond the strictures of how photographs had traditionally been made. So the grid found its way into my work when I let go of the notion of a photograph's being the embodiment of a single moment and expanded the medium to embrace multiple moments, which then resulted in a very different kind of photographic object.

I think the human community always wants to be in conversation with its own image. Photographs have long been the easiest and most democratic way to engage in that. I think that will remain true. I haven't made portrait-based work since my "Birmingham Project" of 2012. I'm thinking about other things right now, mainly how to make work about history, and the way that history is embedded in the landscape, and the way the past and present of African American history inform each other.

My work had always kept me optimistic, as it is where I reshape the world's experience into my own visual and conceptual form. That's what artists do.
We reshape the world materially, provoking conversations that may or may not be rooted in current debates. I've been engaging with the works of artists like Romare Bearden, David Hammons, Ed Clark, Sam Gilliam, Roy DeCarava, Mel Edwards, Jack Whitten, and others for decades now. And my optimism is based on their work and their lives. Others may not have known about them, but for those who have, they have been life-sustaining.
Most artists I know are most excited and engaged by the things that they are doing right now. And I would certainly include myself in that. The retrospective is a look back at a moment when I'm looking forward. The thing that is most striking to me is looking at the initial photographs I made in Harlem, beginning in 1975 when I was twenty-two years old. Those photographs have held up remarkably well!