

SEANKELLY

Gural, Natasha. "Take An Assiduous Look At Dawoud Bey's Gripping Portraits And Chilling Landscapes At The Whitney." *Forbes*. June 30, 2021

Forbes



Dawoud Bey 'Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theatre' (1976) Gelatin silver print (printed 2019), 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm). Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

Uptown swagger and youthful exuberance collide with charisma, as a Black boy in aviator sunglasses, sharp white kicks, colorblock track jacket, and pleated pants, casually holds a paper milk carton while leaning against a wooden barricade outside a tiled movie theater ticket booth. The shadow of the seated ticket agent is precisely set to the left of the boy's face, forming a stunning composition that highlights the magnificent architecture and hints at the glamor of what awaits on the screen.

Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theatre (1976) welcomes viewers to *Harlem, U.S.A.*, the first of eight compelling and unique series of photographs on view at *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York through October 3. The retrospective opened at SFMOMA (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) in February 2020 and traveled

SEANKELLY

to the High Museum in Atlanta in November 2020 before coming to the Whitney on April 17. The exhibition is co-curated by Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney, and Corey Keller, curator of photography at SFMOMA. Every image is a highlight of a prolific career that examines the various processes of photography as painstakingly as it explores and exposes the human condition. Prepare to spend hours gazing at the portraits in an intimate exchange with Bey's sitters and situations.

Born and raised in Queens, Bey was drawn to Harlem where, in 1975, he began creating portraits depicting the complexities of residents while eschewing stereotypes. His parents met in Harlem and many extended family members lived there at the time, and the series was exhibited upon completion in 1979 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Using a 35mm camera with a somewhat wide-angle lens, Bey captured closeups of his subjects while also emphasizing the singular cityscape as a backdrop. The agile apparatus enabled him to meticulously frame his sitters, honoring the vibrant, inimitable Black community before the neighborhood's heart was expunged by gentrification.

Wide-eyed innocence is underscored by burgeoning emotion, perhaps the stirrings of revolutionary ardor. A glimpse of her headscarf, her long beaded necklace punctuating a white, button-down shirt, and her fierce yet delicate knife nosepin, draw the viewer deeper into those bright eyes that seem to convey fear or sorrow too intense for her someone her age in the captivating *A Girl with a Knife Nosepin* (1990).

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bey 'A Girl with a Knife Nosepin, Brooklyn, NY' (1990) Pigmented inkjet print (printed 2019), 40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 76.2 cm); Frame: 50 1/8 x 41 1/8 x 2 1/8 in. Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. [-] © DAWOUD BEY

Wide-eyed innocence is underscored by burgeoning emotion, perhaps the stirrings of revolutionary ardor. A glimpse of her headscarf, her long beaded necklace punctuating a white, button-down shirt, and her fierce yet delicate knife nosepin, draw the viewer deeper into those bright eyes that seem to convey fear or sorrow too intense for her someone her age in the captivating *A Girl with a Knife Nosepin* (1990).

Bey shifted focus in 1988, swapping the handheld 35mm camera he'd relied on for more than a decade, for a cumbersome tripod-mounted 4-inch-by-5-inch-format camera that revolutionized the style and intent of his portraiture. The relationship is evident, as we gaze into their eyes, study their body language and surroundings, and wish to learn their stories. Mindful of the ethics of traditional street photography, "which privileged the photographer at the expense of the subject," Bey led his contemporaries in transforming and subverting the principles of street photography.

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bey 'Martina and Rhonda, Chicago, IL' (1993) Six dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroid), 48 × 60 in. overall (121.9 × 152.4 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art; gift of Eric Ceputis and David W. Williams 2018.82a-f. [-] © DAWOUD BEY

Two young Black women in boldly printed, colorful blouses lean slightly forward while seated with arms crossed and resting on their laps. Both their heads tilt faintly toward the center, as they stare directly and purposely at the camera. *Martina and Rhonda, Chicago, IL* (1993), six 20-inch-by-24-inch Polaroids dye diffusion transfer prints create a monumental portrait, measuring 48 inches by 60 inches. The full-color 20 × 24 Polaroids series challenges the viewer with the first departure from black-and-white photography in the exhibition.

In 1991, Bey started using a massive 20-inch-by-24-inch camera that Polaroid Corporation offered artists through its Artist Support Program. Weighing more than 200 pounds and hulking over six feet tall and five feet wide, the photographer needed a technician to help operate it. A seismic shift from the quick snaps available with a 35mm camera, the Polaroid camera studio sessions compelled a pensive session with his sitters.

Bey's earliest subjects were his artist friends, and later teenagers that he met at high school residencies and museums throughout the country. During eight years of wielding and mastering the 20 × 24-inch Polaroid camera, Bey embraced the intricacies and opportunities of multipanel portraiture, emphasizing the length of a portrait session and revealing that a single image cannot fully portray an individual's depth.

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bey 'Untitled #20 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse), from Night Coming Tenderly, Black' (2017) Gelatin silver print, 48 x 55 in. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. [-] ©

DAWOUD BEY

Swept away by the eerie and elusive image of a large white house behind a white picket fence to the right, the eye travels to the left, as a gnarly, imposing tree branch points, almost like an extended arm, back to the house. *Untitled #20 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)* of the haunting *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* series is bone-chilling, goosebumps erupting with every careful view. Bey's most recent work reimagines the escape of enslaved Black Americans across the path of the Underground Railroad in Ohio, the last 50-some mile stretch before they reached the sweeping swath of Lake Erie, leading to Canada and freedom. Bey evokes the stealth network of safe houses and churches in his first-ever study of landscape photography, completely erasing the figure while implying the perspective of folks who were forced to remain invisible in order to survive.

The shocking yet serene series is a homage to the dark, emotive photography of Roy DeCarava, and Langston Hughes, borrowing its title from the final couplet of the poet's *Dream Variations*: "*Night coming tenderly / Black like me*. DeCarava, at the time a 34-year-old from Harlem, visited Hughes, then 52, in the summer of 1954. It was a pivotal moment for Black art and cultural history, as Hughes was, at the time, one of very few Black artists who supported himself on art alone. The following year, the two masters published *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a seminal collaboration that depicts and illustrates Black family life in 1950s Harlem through the character Sister Mary Bradley.

SEANKELLY

“The challenge in the future will be to make sure that the works of Black artists are written about, talked about, and published alongside non-Black artists, to realize that this work is American art made by a Black artist, and that is part of an ongoing continuation of the evolution of American art,” Bey told me in January for an article in ***Black Art In America*** (BAIA). “There are increasingly more publications devoted to the works of Black artists. Still, it is important to make sure that this is not seen as tangential to the broader conversation but central to it and that those works are included in that broader conversation.”