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Meyers, William. “ ‘Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black’ Review: Out of Darkness.” *Wall Street Journal*. March 28, 2019.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Dawoud Bey's 'Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)' (2017) PHOTO: DAWOUD BEY

Collectively and individually, the 16 prints in “Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black” at the Art Institute of Chicago are the darkest photographic images I have ever seen. Mr. Bey (b. 1953) has embraced the concluding lines of Langston Hughes’s poem “Dream Variations”—“Night coming tenderly / Black like me.”—as an anthem and paradigm. It is one of many literary and visual references in his project (which is made up of a total of 25 large-scale photographs), an attempt to re-create the experience of 19th-century fugitive black slaves treading north through an alien landscape, furtively groping for

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stations of the clandestine Underground Railroad. The black of night was an accomplice in their break for freedom.

Paradoxically, the pictures were all shot during daylight hours in the vicinity of Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio, in 2017 and then printed with imposed darkness in 2018 on 48-by-59-inch silver gelatin paper; silver gelatin because it gives an image a greater illusion of depth than one printed digitally.

For Mr. Bey the landscape is not just the physical environment; it incorporates the artistic and literary uses to which it has been put. So, for instance, when you get close enough to “Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)” to make out the fence in the foreground and the house beyond, you will be reminded, if you are familiar with the canon of great American photographs, of similar compositions by Paul Strand and Ansel Adams. This puts Mr. Bey in the company of peers and authenticates the subject’s provenance; it is the real America. The difference is that whereas Adams and Strand printed their images with considerable contrast, Mr. Bey’s are seen through a dark scrim.

Similarly “Untitled #13 (Trees and Reflections)” echoes Edward Steichen’s “The Pond—Moonrise” (1904), except that there’s no faint light of the moon. The thin trees in “Untitled #17 (Forest)” recede three dimensionally as they do in Ansel Adams’s “Aspens, Northern New Mexico” (1958), although it is too dark to tell what type of trees they are.

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Dawoud Bey's 'Untitled #16 (Branches With Thorns)' (2017) PHOTO: DAWOUD BEY

To help locate “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” artistically and historically, Matthew Witkovsky, the Art Institute of Chicago’s curator of photography who organized the show, arranged for Mr. Bey to go through the museum’s collection of photographs and select prints to accompany his exhibition. The 42 pictures on a wall outside the gallery include 13 by “Photographer Unknown,” mostly snapshots of African-American families, but also, inter alia, works by Danny Lyon, Alfred Stieglitz, Walker Evans and, importantly, Roy DeCarava. DeCarava (1919-2009) is a role model of Mr. Bey’s because he devoted himself to depicting the African-American community, and because his prints are very dark. Two of Mr. Bey’s pictures seem to have been inspired by DeCarava’s “Dark Water” (1985), which is on the wall.

In “Untitled #24 (At Lake Erie)” the dark gray water is seen through a silhouette of darker trees, as if one were approaching the lake at night. In “Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)” there is only the water with barely discernible waves and the lowering clouds above the horizon; the lake appears terminal—there is no getting over it. Did a fugitive slave ever stand there longing to get to Canada? There is no knowing and Mr. Bey makes no claim to historical accuracy, but if one did confront the vast expanse it might have had this Stygian aspect. The

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photographer drew upon his reading of Frederick Douglass and other slave narratives, as well as fictions like William Faulkner's short story "Red Leaves," to construct plausible slave vistas. The landscape, too, is a form of fiction.



Dawoud Bey's 'Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky)' (2017) PHOTO: DAWOUD BEY

Coming close to the tangled shrubs in "Untitled #16 (Branches With Thorns)," one sees the cruel thorns on the branch in the middle. What would it be like for a person escaping through these bushes at night to run into those thorns? Mr. Bey challenges us to make not only aesthetic judgments, but to view his pictures in the persona of a runaway slave; the judgments then are not about beauty, but refuge—where will I be safe?

There are houses in several of the pictures. Were they stations on the Underground Railroad? Hard to know; records are fragmentary and conflated with myth. The one in "Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)" is in the simple but elegant National Style, both timeless and particularly American. In this

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iteration it is seen in the open, but in “Untitled #21 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence II)” it is only partially visible, and then only by looking through the crotch of a tree, the point of view of a hunted person who must see without being seen, one who would look forward to “Night coming tenderly / Black like me.”

A tiny, anachronistic satellite TV dish, easy to miss, sits on the roof of one of the houses. I won't say which. It is Mr. Bey playing with history.