

# SEANKELLY

Sajej, Nadja. "The Birmingham Project: behind Dawoud Bey's haunting portraits." *The Guardian*. October 9, 2018.

**theguardian**



Betty Selvage and Faith Speights in 2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art

On 15 September 1963, the Ku Klux Klan planted dynamite in the basement of the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama, a church that previously had been the headquarters for Martin Luther King's anti-segregationist marches.

The bombing killed four girls getting ready for Sunday service – Carol Denise McNair, 11, and Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson, all 14. Within hours of the bombing, across the city, two African American boys, Virgil Ware, 13, and James Johnny Robinson, 16, were murdered by two white men returning from a segregation rally.

Chicago photographer Dawoud Bey (born David Edward Smikle) has paid tribute to the victims of the attacks, which were a turning point in the civil rights movement of the

*Last updated: 24 October 2019*

# SEANKELLY

1960s, in a photo series entitled *The Birmingham Project*, which is currently on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC until 24 March 2019.

“At the time I was making this work in 2012, [Trayvon Martin](#) was killed,” said Bey. “So clearly, the horrifying issue of the slaughter of innocents is still very much with us, making this work as relevant and pertinent as it ever was.”

The photo series features portraits of the church community who each have 50 years between them; each diptych has a young person the same age as one of the victims who died in 1963, paired with another of an adult 50 years older (how old the child would have been, had they survived).

The photo series features portraits of the church community who each have 50 years between them; each diptych has a young person the same age as one of the victims who died in 1963, paired with another of an adult 50 years older (how old the child would have been, had they survived).

He recalls seeing a photo of Sarah Collins, the surviving younger sister of one of the bombing victims, lying in a hospital bed with cotton balls over her eyes and her skin mutilated from the explosion.

Almost 40 years later, that image came back to Bey. “Thirty-eight years after seeing that photograph in the book, I sat bolt upright in bed one morning after that image appeared to me in my sleep,” he said. “I’m not sure what shook it loose, but I knew that I needed to go to Birmingham, to see the place where this traumatic event had occurred, and to think about how I might make some work in response to that moment.”

*Last updated: 24 October 2019*