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## The New York Times

### Dawoud Bey: 40 Years of Photos Affirming the 'Lives of Ordinary Black People'

A new retrospective book "Seeing Deeply" reveals his decades-long exploration of community, memory and photography.



*Mark and Eric, Chicago, 1994. From the "20 x 24 Polaroid Works" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

As a socially conscious teenager, Dawoud Bey was intrigued by the controversy over the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 exhibition, "Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968." The show featured photos, audio and text about daily life in Harlem. It did not, however, include paintings, drawings

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or sculptures by African-American artists, which sparked protests organized by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. Mr. Bey, then 16, went on his own to the museum, hoping to see the picket lines and find out more, but when he arrived there were none that day.

A sense of fate drew him inside.

He was immediately struck by James Van Der Zee's photographs of Harlem residents. As he walked through the show, seeing the work of African-American photographers in a museum profoundly affected Mr. Bey's ambitions and what he thought could be possible for himself. Just the year before, his godmother had given him his first camera.



*The Woman in the Light, Harlem, New York City, 1980. From the "Small Camera Work" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*



*Four Children at Lenox Avenue, Harlem, New York City, 1977. From the "Harlem, U.S.A." series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

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*Men From the 369th Regiment Marching Band, Harlem, New York City, 1977. From the "Harlem, U.S.A." series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

Thus began his education in photography, influenced by the works of artists like Charles White, Romare Bearden and Emory Douglas, the minister of culture for the Black Panther Party whose graphic art appeared in the organization's newspaper. Mr. Bey's touchstones in photography included Roy DeCarava, Walker Evans and Gordon Parks, and even his own family's photo albums. These explorations gave him a sense of what his own subject matter could be, leading to his first series, "Harlem, U.S.A.," which he spent five years making and was exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979.

"I wanted to make photographs that affirmed the lives of ordinary black people in the community that my mother and father had previously lived in," said Mr. Bey, a longtime professor at Columbia College Chicago who was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2017. "From the time I spent visiting family, friends and relatives there when I was growing up, I knew that with the exception of DeCarava's work, the people of Harlem were often viewed through photographs in terms of social pathology. I wanted to contest the history of those kinds of black representations and also amplify through my photographs the lives of people like my family who still lived there and were making a way."

An impressive 40-year retrospective of his work is now showcased in a 400-page book, "Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply," published by the University of Texas Press. Essays by leading curators and critics introduce each section and show the many

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ways Mr. Bey places value on the full exploration of the medium of photography, agency, representation, community and memory juxtaposed with loss.



*West 124th Street and Lenox Avenue, Harlem, New York City, 2016. From the "Harlem Redux" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*



*Three Men and the Lenox Lounge, Harlem, New York City, 2014. From the "Harlem Redux" series. .Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

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The book's cover features a striking image, from his "Black-and-White Type 55 Polaroid Street Portraits" series, of a young black girl with a knife-shaped nose ring, staring directly into Mr. Bey's lens. Framing his subjects with subtlety, he concentrates on people others take for granted.

"All of those Street Portraits were about giving the black subjects an affirmative space in which to present themselves to the camera and to the world," he said. "The subjects in those photographs all direct their gaze toward the camera, and by extension the viewer. I wanted the respect that I had for each of them to be the thing that the viewer was also left with."

Mr. Bey returned to Harlem in 2014 to photograph a city in the throes of gentrification for his "[Harlem Redux](#)" series. As Harlem's physical and social landscape changed drastically, Mr. Bey's images offer a meditation on the loss of cultural memory, place and identity. It was his first sustained project that was not portrait based, using a more conceptual visual language. Amid a backdrop of increased tourism, the erasure of community and the demolition of landmarks, Mr. Bey documented the privatization of public space through steel gates and fences, exploring the notion of areas that were shared, but off-limits.

"Although these structures are abstract, they have real implications for black life," Leigh Raiford, an associate professor of African-American Studies at University of California, Berkeley, said. "We need Bey's work to make sense of a major historical transition that other cities are also experiencing. How do you render that absence and loss? How do you image a system? What does a picture of white supremacy look like? In 'Harlem Redux,' you can only see through a cutout, a gate or a veil. There's a sense that there is something that keeps you from moving."

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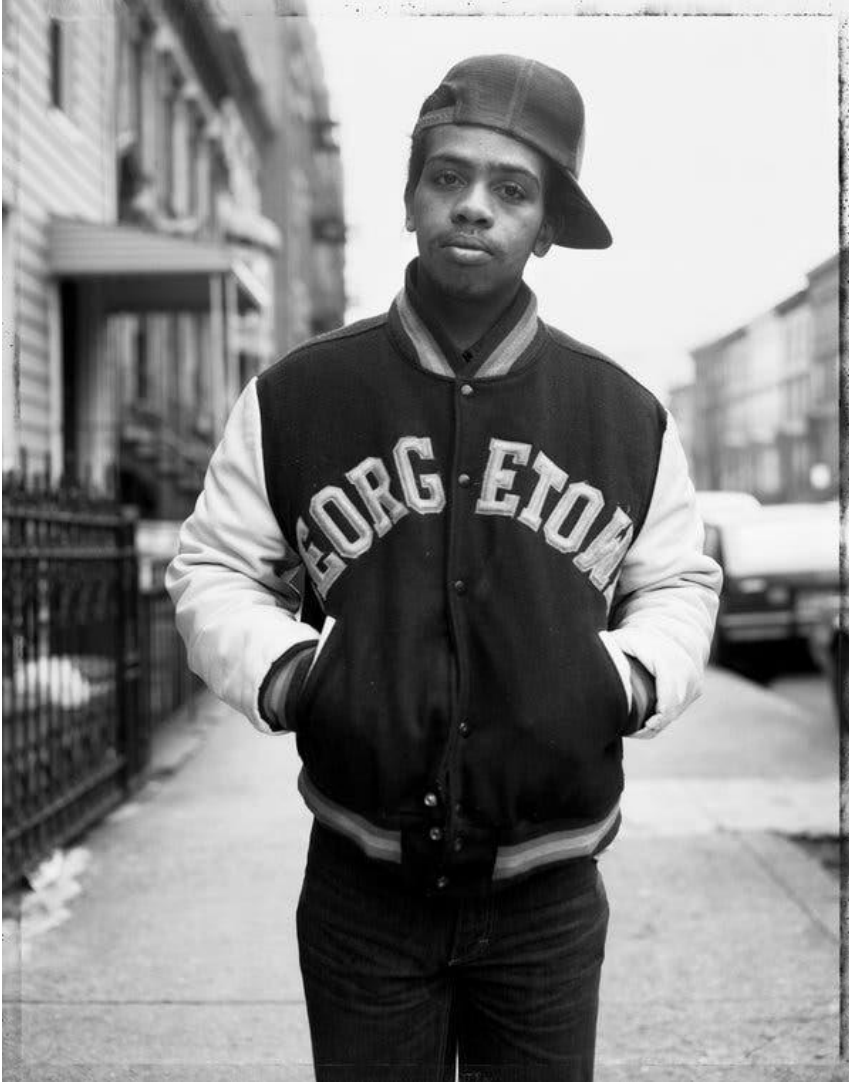


*A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1990. From the "Black-and-White Type 55 Polaroid Street Portraits" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*



*A Girl with a Knife Nosepin, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1990. From the "Black-and-White Type 55 Polaroid Street Portraits" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

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*A Young Man Wearing a Georgetown Jacket, Brooklyn, N.Y., 1989. From the "Black-and-White Type 55 Polaroid Street Portraits" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

A sense of deep contrast and close attention runs throughout Mr. Bey's oeuvre, most notably in "The Birmingham Project," which also looks at collective history and memory. Prompted by the 50th anniversary of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, he set out to reflect the painful legacy of racism, showing children the same age as the four girls and two boys killed in 1963, alongside adults who in 2013 were the same age that the children would have been.

"What is so appealing to me about the Birmingham series is how he finds a visual language that forces us to recognize the past and the present, the ongoing cyclical nature of this history and its intergenerational legacy," Dr. Raiford said. "He doesn't let us retreat to any sort of safe space of saying 'I'm not implicated' or 'this doesn't affect me.' In that simple pairing of the elder and the youth, the symmetry of it offers that meditation of time and history demonstrating how these histories continue to work on us and through us."

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*Michael-Anthony Allen and George Washington, Birmingham, Ala., 2012. From "The Birmingham Project." Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*



*Jean Shamburger and Kyrian McDaniel, Birmingham, Ala., 2012. From "The Birmingham Project." Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

In "Class Pictures," Mr. Bey's portraits of high school students are paired with the subjects' words, giving self-representation and self-definition a place. The portraits are meant to be displayed both in galleries and in conversation with communities as a part of his collaborative practice, which has influenced curators and educators to consider how their work could have a greater impact, believing that young people have a rich interior life.

"I make the work that I do in order to visualize the things that are important to me, and to make them matter to someone else, whether that is the black subject, young people, history, the ways in which black physical and social space is being reshaped in places like Harlem, or how to bring African-American history — such as the Birmingham tragedy or the Underground Railroad — into the



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contemporary moment and conversation,” Mr. Bey said. “I do that in a way that is mindful of the history that I am operating inside of and in a way that resonates with the person standing in front of my work or looking at it on the printed page. If I can make someone stop and alter their thinking or knowledge through my work, then I believe the work is doing what I hope it will.”

Ultimately, his work is as an ongoing exploration of photography’s possibilities, informed by his research and cultural influences. “I’ve also never wanted to be my own oldies show, settling into a comfortable groove,” he said. “I used to be a drummer, and I’m very much influenced by those musicians like Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Prince who continually pushed their music forward reinventing themselves and their ideas rather than settling into a kind of comfortable creative complacency.



*A Young Woman Waiting for the Bus, Syracuse, 1985. From the “Small Camera Work” series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*

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*Mgbechi, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., 2005. From the "Class Pictures" series. Credit Dawoud Bey/University of Texas Press*