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MacMillan, Kyle. "Dawoud Bey photos 'Tenderly' reimagine Underground Railroad's Ohio landscape." *Chicago Sun Times*. January 10, 2019.

CHICAGO SUN★TIMES



Dawoud Bey, Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse), from the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017. | Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

Best known for his probing portraits, Dawoud Bey took a notably different direction in his latest body of work.

The nationally known Chicago photographer, a 2017 winner of a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," targeted his camera on sites related in some way to the Underground Railroad around Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio.

Nearly 17 of the 4-by-5-foot prints in the series, titled "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," will be shown Jan. 11-April 14 at the Art Institute of Chicago in the Bucksbaum Photography Gallery. This first exhibition of the black-and-white photographs in a museum setting will travel in late 2020 to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a larger Bey retrospective.

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'Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black'

When: Jan. 11-April 14

Where: Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan

Tickets: Free, with regular museum admission

Info: artic.edu

Although focusing on places instead of people might seem like a significant deviation in Bey's artistic trajectory, Matthew Witkovsky, the Art Institute's chair and curator of photography, doesn't see it that way. He believes that all of the African-American photographer's subject matter, whether animate or inanimate, revolves around a "deep humanism" — a caring about the lives of people whatever their station.

"That is certainly continuing in this most recent body of work," Witkovsky said, "even though there are no people visible. So, he's changed a lot of things on the surface, but the value of that undercurrent of humanism and democracy seem very much still on his mind."

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Dawoud Bey | Mike Majewski Photo

What has transformed is what the curator called “the scale of his ambition.” With these images, Bey, 65, is no longer concerned with a small group of persons or an isolated historical event but a massive network that is believed to have helped as many as 100,000 slaves escape in the first half of the 19th century.

“The person I put him on a par with in that regard is Toni Morrison, the novelist,” Witkovsky said. “Dawoud is working in that same vein of being able to talk in the present tense in photography but bring in a range of history and bring it in with its mythic dimension.”

When Bey was commissioned to undertake a new project for the inaugural edition of FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art, which concluded in September, he wanted to do something that related to that region. In addition, he sought to continue an engagement with black history that began in 2013 with “The Birmingham Project,” a tribute to the victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing there 50 years earlier.

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Dawoud Bey, Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown's Tannery), from the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," 2017. | Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

Cleveland and the surrounding area was an important stop on the Underground Railroad, so Bey decided to explore that story. Because many of the original sites no longer exist, the resulting series is not so much a literal documentation but what the photographer called a "reimagining of that landscape."

"The photographs," Bey said via e-mail, "are meant to evoke the feeling of what it might have both looked and felt like to those fugitive black bodies moving through the Ohio landscape. I want the vantage point of the photographs to suggest what they might have seen, and what that landscape might have felt like."

Bey first turned away from his usual human subjects in 2014 in a project called "Harlem Redux," in which he examined the economic and social forces upending the physical landscape of the historically African-American neighborhood of Harlem in New York City.

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“So, I had to learn another language of picture-making,” he said, “that didn’t rely on the human subject as the formal or conceptual anchor in order to show how the space around the human subject was being reordered. It took me a year or so to get my bearings and to actually begin to make the kinds of pictures I was imagining.”

As part of the switch, Bey set aside his bulkier tripod camera and purchased a smaller, more portable medium-format camera — one that he continued to use for his Underground Railroad images. He employed old-school, non-digital film, choosing black and white and not color, because he thought it a more apt vehicle to evoke the past.



Dawoud Bey. Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky), from the series “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” 2017. | Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

Indeed, with this series, he pays homage to Roy DeCarava (1919-2009), a mentor who made photographs of African-American subjects that were enveloped with what Bey called a “lush and seductive blackness.”

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“When I thought about the fugitive black bodies moving through the darkness of the landscape,” he said, “those things put me in mind of DeCarava, and he became a material touchstone for this work.”

Bey also tipped his hat to poet Langston Hughes, whose poem “Dream Variations” ends with the couplet, “Night coming tenderly/Black like me,” which inspired the exhibition’s title.

To complement his images, Bey has chosen about three dozen photographs from the Art Institute’s permanent collection that he believes resonate with them and create a kind visual and thematic conversation. They will be shown just outside the gallery housing his prints.

“I’ve done a number of curatorial projects in the past,” the photographer said, “and wanted to continue that part of my practice with this exhibition.”

Kyle MacMillan is a local freelance writer.

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