Curiel, Jonathan. “Photos that Echo With Resolve and History: Four Questions for Dawoud Bey.” *SF Weekly*. January 27, 2020.

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Dawoud Bey. Photo by Don Ross, courtesy SFMoMA

Dawoud Bey is one of the United States’ most celebrated photographers, known for projects that explore the lives and histories of black America or other subjects that are under-represented in popular media. Bey’s upcoming retrospective at SFMOMA, “Dawoud Bay: An American Project” (Feb.15-May 25) is a chance to see the entirety of Bey’s career — from his 1970s photographs of Harlem residents to his more recent images of Ohio scenes that approximate those that freedom-seeking slaves beheld on their route to Canada and an unknown future.

SF Weekly interviewed Bey by email, asking him four questions that revealed surprising answers — about Bey’s impetus for doing “history” projects, about the ongoing relevance of his project on the 1963 Birmingham bombings that killed four African-American girls, and about Bey’s deep connection to San Francisco and SFMOMA. Bey, who has hearing loss, preferred to do the interview by email instead of over the phone. A Queens, New York native who was named a MacArthur “Genius” fellow in 2017, Bey has a Master of Fine Arts from Yale and is Professor of Art at Columbia College Chicago.

SF Weekly: Your project called “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” is among those featured at SFMOMA. You told Chicago magazine last year that you felt the presence of former slaves as you were doing the project. Can you talk about your impetus for pivoting to “Night Coming Tenderly, Black” — and how difficult and also rewarding the project has been?

BEY: My projects tend to follow in some way the previous project that I've worked on. "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" followed "The Birmingham Project" that I worked on in Birmingham, Alabama that memorialized the six young African Americans killed in the dynamiting of the 16th Street Baptist Church and the continuing violence that ensued that Sunday morning in 1963. Those photographs were portraits, but they were — of course — not the actual subjects of that violence. They were young people the same ages as those six young people paired with photographs of adults who at that time were the ages those six young African American would have been. That project was the one that got me thinking both more deeply about history, and also how to represent the past in the present moment in a way that makes the past resonate in a deeply felt way in our time. It created a fundamental shift in my work that continued into "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," which is also about an aspect of history. In between those two projects I made the work for "Harlem Redux," which was the first extended work I made that were not portraits, or that focused primarily on the human presence. Those photographs — which are also included in the exhibition — gave me an opportunity to figure out how to visualize the narrative of place and how to talk about the changes that were taking place in that community. Spending four years (2014-2017) making that work gave me the facility to make photographs that did not depend on the human presence, and in fact were about human absence in a changing community.

Making that work allowed me to then make the "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" photographs, which are both about place and history.

The title itself is taken from a poem by Langston Hughes entitled Dream Variations, the last line of which is ". . . Night coming tenderly/Black like me." This led me to think about the darkness of night that fugitive slaves were moving through as not merely an intimidating space, but as Hughes described it a "tender" space, a space of tender embrace through which to move towards freedom. The success of the work for me has been in the visceral responses that people have had to those photographs, how they get drawn into them, and lose themselves in them as they engage with them. They are dark photographs that require a close engagement. And in that close engagement one momentarily shuts out the rest of the world.

SFW: "The Birmingham Project" is one of your best known, and photos at SFMOMA include those from 2012. Last year, the father of one of the girls killed in 1963 was held at the 16th Street Baptist Church. More recently, the church is doing work to make sure more people remember the tragedy — and your photos were recently shown at the National Gallery of Art. Do you think your photos have become even more relevant in the intervening years.

BEY: The issue of the murder of young African Americans is an ongoing one, sadly. At the moment I was making the photographs for what became The

Birmingham Project 17-year old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed. The unjustified murder of 12-year old Tmir Rice is yet another example of how the headlines continue to reverberate with the deaths of young African Americans much the way it did that Sunday morning in 1963. The killing Oscar Grant here in the Bay Area in 2009 is yet another example. So sadly it appears that The Birmingham Project as a kind of visual elegy for African Americans killed in the prime of their young lives will always resonate.

SFW: Your Class Pictures project took you to many classes, including one in San Francisco, where you took a photo of one student, Usha, with roots in India. In what ways did the project (and the students) surprise you?

A: The Class Pictures project was done with young people from high schools in several cities, beginning in Chicago then continuing in Detroit, then Orlando, New York City, Andover and Lawrence, MA, and San Francisco. It was a way for me to create a contemporary "snapshot" of young people in America at a particular moment. In San Francisco, working through San Francisco Arts Ed, I photographed at two different schools, The School of the Arts in Diamond Heights, and Gateway Charter School. Fourteen-year-old Usha was a student at Gateway who at that time aspired to be an actress and artist. She had an uncanny ease in front of the camera. Whenever I asked the students to write their self-reflective text before making the portrait of them I was always impressed and moved by the degree of self-reflection and complete self-awareness they were able to manifest and articulate. That's what that work was about: giving them a space to express themselves to the world through my work, and for me to use my work as an artist to give them an amplified presence in the world.

SFW: This is your first full career retrospective in 25 years. Does the retrospective stir up particular feelings about your life's work?

BEY: This is my third retrospective exhibition. The first was organized in 1995 by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The second was eight years ago, In 2012, and that was organized by The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Both shows traveled to other museums as well. And now here we are in 2020 and I am opening another career retrospective exhibition that includes the work that I have made since 2012, and going back to many first photographs made in 1975.

Retrospectives are totally unnerving affairs. It kind of demands that you stop and look back at a moment when all you probably want to do is to focus on the work in front of you, the work you are doing now. It's a "taking stock" moment while you're still in the midst of producing work. And when it's a traveling retrospective like this one is you have the opportunity to be pulled back each time it opens at another museum. So it's unsettling. At the same time, it's what an artist hopes for: to have an opportunity to have the broad sweep of your work presented in a

way that the development of your ideas and work is given serious consideration and display. SFMOMA is one of my favorite museums. I've visited that museum over the years more times than I could possibly count. My work has been in their collection for some time now, and the Photography Galleries is the largest dedicated space for photography of any museum in the country. When that space — The Pritzker Center for Photography—opened it felt to me like the center of gravity for photography had shifted from New York to San Francisco. So I'm thrilled that my work will now occupy that space.