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Desmarais, Charles. "Blackness is the subject in Dawoud Bey's thoughtful, haunting SFMOMA show." *SF Chronicle*. February 12, 2020.



"Rebecca, New York, NY" is a 1991 photograph by Dawoud Bey. Photo: Dawoud Bey

Photographer Dawoud Bey first came to broad acclaim as a knowing observer of daily life in Harlem. That attention was in response to an exhibition of his documentary images held in 1979 at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In the 40 years since that first important show, Bey's method and intention have developed, steadily and spectacularly, from heedful attention to the people in the streets around him — the documentary work — to something more personal, more like film or a novel. His latest work, a series called "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," is a kind of sleepwalk through an imagined landscape that suggests both the safety and the fear that nighttime must have represented to fugitives from slavery.

The artist's four-decade progress is neatly presented in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presentation "Dawoud Bey: An American Project," a retrospective of the artist's career that opens Saturday, Feb. 15, and continues through May 25.

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"A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY," is from Dawoud Bey's 1976 series, "Harlem, U.S.A."

For most of his life, Bey's artistic interest has been in people. At first, he was a street photographer in the mold of the greats who came before: Henri Cartier-Bresson, of course, but also, crucially, black artists like Roy DeCarava and Gordon Parks, who embraced both the possibilities of design and an imperative of empathy in a photograph. An image of a movie theater entrance, strictly rectilinear in framing, becomes a foil for the crosswise form of the stylish kid who confronts the camera in "A Boy in Front of the Loews 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY" from 1976.

The exhibition traces Bey's evolution from that kind of photograph, grabbed along the way of his walk through a neighborhood, where "a boy" might act as stand-in for other boys of his background and in his community, to a more intimate interaction with his subjects. Bey set aside his handheld 35mm camera in favor of a much larger view camera on a tripod, which required time to set up and express permission from the subject. He used a Polaroid material that produced both a picture he could immediately give as a thank-you to the sitter and a negative from which he could print.

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"A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY" from 1988 celebrates her regal bearing.

"A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY" celebrates the woman's flair — a look that few could pull off, which combines a hat of geometric exuberance with a dress in a stylized tropical pattern. The 1988 picture, at the same time, respects her almost regal bearing, for she wears them with the aplomb of a proud queen in full headdress.

By the time he made the large-format color Polaroid "Rebecca, New York, NY" in 1991, Bey had moved from the realm of subject-as-symbol to portraiture. Rebecca is not a woman representing others of her type; she is fully herself. In her individuation, she is proof of the catchphrase "Black is beautiful." But I don't want to put that down to her physical appearance alone.

There are few more boring topics than the fetishization of technique in art, and photography has more than its share of people whose love of the medium seems to start and end at the surface of the object. Bey is a master technician, or else he has such craftspeople making his prints (what matters is that the artist is in control, not that he is personally guiding the paper through the printer). In the case of his art, that's not precious — it's essential: The rich tones and impeccable detail make an argument words cannot. Of respect for his subjects. Of the exquisite glory of the human veneer.

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"Don Sledge and Moses Austin" is from the 2012 series "The Birmingham Project."

Bey's most affecting portraits were made for his 2012 series "The Birmingham Project." For these works, the artist chose people in the city of Birmingham, Ala., who would represent not only themselves, but also one of the four young girls killed in the 1963 bombing of a Baptist church, or the two teenage boys who died in related violence. Shown at the Birmingham Museum of Art to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the bombing, each piece pairs a photograph of a boy or girl the age of one of the victims with one of someone 50 years older — someone of the age the victim might have attained had they not been murdered. A related video supplies a somber note.



"Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)," from the series "Night Coming Tenderly, Black."

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The “Night Coming Tenderly” series concludes the exhibition. It consists of landscape images so dark their tones can only be approximated in print or online. As a result, they are impossible to understand without seeing them in the exhibition. They are demanding, disorienting and absolutely essential to this extraordinary exhibition.

“Dawoud Bey: An American Project”: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Friday-Tuesday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thursday. Saturday, Feb. 15-May 25. \$19-\$25; ages 18 and younger free. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third St., S.F. 415-357-4000. www.sfmoma.org