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Dawoud Bey on His Powerful Photographs of Black American Life



Dawoud Bey, Braxton McKinney and Lavone Thomas, 2012, from the series 'The Birmingham Project', 2012, archival pigment prints on dibond (diptychs), 1 × 1.6 m each.

Simone White: You have an ability to articulate what your work is doing with an incredible degree of subtlety.

Dawoud Bey: I was a musician before I became a photographer, so I already had this notion that there was a way to take my experience of the world and give it an expressive shape. I was primarily playing jazz music, which isn't lyrical, so it doesn't tell you what to think. Formally, it leads you there through the articulation of the music itself. With photography, I had to ask myself what I was going to articulate through the camera. I've always been very socially and politically active, even as a teenager, so naturally that sensibility found its way into my photographs, but I had no idea how to give it coherent form until I went to see the exhibition 'Harlem on My Mind' [1969], at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, when I was 16 years old.

It was my first time going to a museum on my own. I went because it was an exhibition about the Black community of Harlem and the social and political climate of the neighbourhood at an explosive moment in US history. I also went because of the controversy surrounding it. My mother and father had met in Harlem but, up to that point, it never occurred to me that any part of my life could have a place in a museum. And, because people were speaking back to the museum, it allowed me to participate in the conversation about institutions, community and artistic production at a very auspicious moment.

SEANKELLY



Dawoud, Bay, *Deas McNeil, the Barber*, 1976, from the series 'Harlem, USA', 1975–79, gelatin silver print, 28 × 36 cm. All images' courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago, and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco © Dawoud Bey.

SW: This idea that there are things that could be in museums but aren't seems to have been an important part of your practice for the past 40 years. In describing some of your recent work, for instance, you've spoken about 'visualizing the past'. In 2007, however, when you made Barack Obama's portrait, that was really a projection of what the Black future was going to be. Can you talk about the connection between your sense of history and how you choose a subject for the future?

DB: I have always wanted to make work in conversation with history – whether it's the history of photography, the history of the representation of the Black subject or the history of the Black urban community. It was my own personal history that first drove me to photograph people for my series 'Harlem, USA' [1975–79]. When I returned to the area for 'Harlem Redux' [2014–17], I wanted to look at how that community had evolved, to insert myself into a historical moment of gentrification and its effects on the people living there. We know what Harlem will look like eventually – more big-box stores, more condos – but what does this process look like as it's unfolding?

I hadn't thought about the Obama portrait in this context. The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago commissioned me to make a portrait of a significant Chicagoan, and I knew it had to be him. To my mind, he was not only a significant Chicagoan, but someone whose presence loomed even larger than his status at that time: he just exuded promise.

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bay, *Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot*, 2016, from the series 'Harlem Redux', 2014–17, archival pigment print on dibond, 1 × 1.2 m.

SW: You seem to have a sense for being in the right place at the right time. I'm sitting here looking at your cover photograph for Elena Filipovic's book *David Hammons: Blizzard Ball Sale* [2017].

DB: David would have an idea to do something, and he would call me up and say: 'Be there. Cooper Square, tomorrow, 12 o'clock. I want you to check it out.' And I would know that meant he wanted me to bring my camera to document his work and give it some interesting photographic form. All his actions and performances were transitory; only a handful of people ever actually saw them. No one saw *Pissed Off* [1981] except me, David and the police officer who approached him for urinating on Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* [1981]. The photographs I made are the only evidence that the event ever took place. My collaborations with David were so fluid that it's difficult to call them collaborations because he never said: 'Hey, I want to collaborate with you, why don't you come ...' No, it was just: 'Hey, I'm gonna do something; make sure you come by.'

SW: That speaks to a general understanding in the community that you were living and working in. You did understand what could be in a museum and had some sense that your projects could be artistically, historically and politically significant.

DB: Well, I knew that we as Black artists had been left out of a certain historical narrative, and I also knew that we were part of a long history of Black expressive culture. So, there was that challenge to make something that rose to the level of the historical. Our community was very fluid then: there were photographers, dancers, poets, painters, musicians. And, whenever someone was doing something, we all knew it was our job to show up. David once said to me: 'Dawoud, if we're not going to celebrate ourselves, why should anyone else?'

SEANKELLY



Dawoud Bay, *Girls, Ornaments, and Vacant Lot*, 2016, from the series 'Harlem Redux', 2014–17, archival pigment print on dibond, 1 × 1.2 m.

SW: That reminds me of something I heard you say in an interview about portraiture: 'You have to get people to represent themselves to the camera.' Can you talk about how you get people to interact with you, both on the street and in more constrained environments?

DB: I think there are two or three ideas operating at the same time. One of them is the foundational idea of Black representation: using my work to amplify the presence of Black people in the world. But how do you imbue that with something more than mere surface description? Working in Harlem, I came to understand that part of the challenge in approaching strangers is making it seem like the most natural thing in the world, as if we were just having a very open, engaging conversation. Because it's kind of unnatural to be stopped by a stranger on the street with a tripod and a large camera, I try to back up for a moment to give them the space to re-enter the world that they were in before I showed up. I want them to be comfortable enough that my camera and I effectively disappear. What then becomes apparent in the photograph is the rich, resonant experience of an individual who doesn't look at all like they're being photographed. Part of it is directing them to perform themselves because, even as I'm talking to them, I'm observing their gestures so I can tell them to try things that will be true to who they are.

SW: Is that also true of the work in 'The Birmingham Project' [2012], which seems much more structured?

DB: The logistics of that were very different from casual encounters in the street, but the quality of performance is consistent because that's what interests me about photographing Black people: creating a visible representation of interiority, a sense that these are people with rich interior lives, not just social types. I want some aspect of that to be momentarily visible on the surface. And, again, I think it's about directing the way that they engage with the lens. I can tell them to relax a little bit, and the intensity of their gaze would go down a little. Or I tell them to look deeper into the lens, and all of a sudden there's this intensity. It's very subtle, but I'm acutely aware of how to create nuance when they're in that performance.

SEANKELLY

I met all of the people in 'The Birmingham Project' the moment they showed up at the church or the museum to be photographed, and the last thing you want to capture is a sense of nervous encounter.



Dawoud Bey, *Betty Selvage and Faith Speight*, 2012, from the series 'The Birmingham Project', 2012, archival pigment prints on dibond (diptychs), 1 × 1.6 m each.

SW: We began by talking about the museum as a framing device. How do you understand the ongoing conflict with arts institutions right now?

DB: The museum is not, for me, an end destination of achievement: it's an institutional space that I collaborate with. Museums are places where ideas are made visible. From the outset, I wanted to insert my ideas into that conversation, which, for me, began in 1969, when there were protests not only in front of the Metropolitan Museum but the Whitney and Museum of Modern Art, which tried to create a sense that these institutions needed to be held accountable. Now, as a society, we've returned to that era and are again demanding access and accountability.

It's been clear to me for a long time that museums are not benign spaces, but ones that we can and should engage with. For me, this means engaging with them not only as a citizen but also as an artist, asking: how might we draw the museum into this conversation about citizenship?

'The Birmingham Project' would not have existed without the Birmingham Museum of Art. I needed a structure of support; I had never been to Birmingham before, but I knew that I wanted this work to be accessible to the people in that city. So, I contacted the museum and told them I had an idea. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I wanted to make work that referenced 15 September 1963, the day white supremacists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church. My conversation with the museum allowed me to begin to think about what I might do and how I might, through my work, create a different kind of dynamic and relationship between that institution and the Black community in Birmingham.

One morning, my assistant and I were at the Birmingham Museum of Art waiting for an older woman to show up to be photographed. She was 15 minutes late, so we called her, and it became apparent that she had gone to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which, to her, was the museum. As an older person, she had lived through a time when

SEANKELLY

the Birmingham Museum of Art was a segregated space. When she finally arrived, from the way she was looking at the ceiling and taking in the architecture, it was apparent that she had never been inside that museum before. Her experience was true for a number of older folks in the city. It was very important to me to have photographs of those African Americans in Birmingham on the wall of a museum that, during the 1950s and '60s, they had not even been legally allowed to enter. I'm looking to create a reordered set of relationships between the museum and the larger social community through my work. I'm the catalyst that brings these two entities together.



Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)*, 2017, from the series 'Night Coming Tenderly, Black', 2017, gelatin silver print on dibond, 1.2 × 1.4 m.

The current conversation about the role of museums in anti-racist movements is a context that is technically different from 1969. The pandemic and the sense of truncated movement is the umbrella under which all of this is taking place. Everyone is feeling the pressure of not being able to move freely – not being able to have any escape from your screen, or your home, while watching a Black man being killed.

Even though racism and police violence continue as they always have, it's interesting to see how institutions have chosen to respond in this new context. There have been a lot of missteps as institutions try to figure out how to situate themselves in a conversation about how, in a very authentic way, to engage in a reimagining and restructuring. Some of them just put a black square on Instagram, which is not enough. We want you to say something. Some of them claimed not to know what to say, but all they needed to say was: 'Black lives matter and we, as an institution, intend to do everything that we can to support and advance that. We are standing with you.' Period. Some of them used the work of Black artists in their collection as a kind of surrogate voice, which was really disastrous. How do museums become more inclusive at the highest level? That's where the tension remains.

SW: In a recent article for *Artforum*, Ciarán Finlayson wrote that you were engaged in a move away from portraiture. How do you feel about that characterization?

SEANKELLY

DB: That shift began with 'Harlem Redux'. I didn't want to produce contemporary portraits of Harlem residents; I wanted to look at the way the physical and social geography of that community was being transformed. It required a very different kind of visual and conceptual language. There has been a mass displacement of businesses and populations in Harlem, and there are a lot of empty spaces where things used to be. Once enough familiar spaces disappear, it's almost like a piece of your experiential memory of a neighbourhood has been disrupted. Because the things that then take their place fill in the gaps so completely, there's an erasure of history, an erasure of memory. By figuring out how to visualize that, I was able to go on to produce 'Night Coming Tenderly, Black' [2017]. It gave me a real sense of what it means to make photographs about the history embedded in the landscape itself.

This article first appeared in frieze issue 215 with the headline "That's what interests me about photographing Black people: creating a visible representation of interiority."

DAWOUD BEY

Dawoud Bey is a photographer and educator. His survey exhibition, 'Dawoud Bey: An American Project', will open at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA, in spring 2021. His solo show at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, will run from 10 September to 23 October 2021. He lives in Chicago, USA.