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Binlot, Anne. "Dawoud Bey's 'Street Portraits' are a radical recentering of the Black community." *Document*. February 18, 2021.

DOCUMENT



Left: *A Young Girl Striking A Pose*, Brooklyn, NY 1988 Right: *A Young Man with Buttons*, Brooklyn, NY 1988

The legendary photographer speaks with curator Natasha Egan about his relationship to his subjects and the institutional response to Black Lives Matter

Dawoud Bey's photography is saturated with his innate sense of empathy for his subjects. Although it's not literally visible in his images, the Chicago-based photographer—who was born in Jamaica, Queens—makes it a point to have a reciprocal relationship and equal standing with the person he's photographing.

Bey's career spans five decades, and that connection between photographer and subject is present throughout— from the '70s street photography in his seminal *Harlem, USA* series, a response to his family's history in Harlem and the experience of seeing the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, to his 2007 exhibition *Class Pictures*, which featured portraits of students from both public and private high schools accompanied by a personal statement from each pupil.

Between 1988 and 1991, Bey made the images featured in this portfolio, formal portraits of African Americans in an informal setting—the streets of various American cities—using a large-format tripod-mounted camera and special positive/negative Polaroid film. This fall, Bey opened a retrospective at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta titled *Dawoud Bey: An American Project*; and in April

SEANKELLY

2021, Mack Books is releasing his monograph *Street Portraits*, in which these unpublished photographs will be featured.

Natasha Egan is the executive director of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College and has curated more than 50 exhibitions focusing on subjects like social justice and featuring a range of artists, including Dorothea Lange, Ai Weiwei, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Atta Kim, and Bey.

Bey connected with Egan, and the pair discussed his relationship with his subjects, using a museum as a laboratory, and the institutional response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Natasha Egan: I just spent my Sunday rereading and soaking in nearly every page of your beautiful monograph *Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply*, which has rested on my coffee table at home since the day you signed it for me. Your keen eye for detail, particularly your ability to capture the subtlest of human gestures, and your passion for giving a powerful voice to the often underheard are what make you a remarkable artist.

Could you talk about the book of street portraits from 224 the '80s and '90s in which these photographs will be published next year?

Dawoud Bey: I had completed at least two cycles of work with the small 35mm camera—*Harlem, USA* and then the more spontaneous street photographs—and I not only wanted to make a different kind of picture, a more directly engaging one, but to also create a more reciprocal and consensual relationship between me and the people I was photographing. At the same time that I started using the 4X5 camera, I also started using Polaroid positive/negative film—Type 55. It produced not only an instant 4X5 inch print, but also a reusable high-quality negative, from which larger prints could be made.

This question of reciprocation was one that I had started to think about as part of the critical conversation that was evolving around documentary photography and the nature of the hierarchy that is established in making that kind of work. [I was thinking about] how one might make a meaningful intervention into the conventional shape of documentary work, in which the often socially marginalized subject is used as a visual provocation to which a presumably more privileged viewer is expected to act on behalf of. And while I never considered my work to have been in that mode, it did make me think more critically about how the Black subjects I was photographing could be even more actively engaged in the work.

Natasha: How did taking portraits on the street with a large-format camera change your relationship to your subjects?

Dawoud: The large-format negative holds a lot more material information than a small 35mm negative. One can make larger prints from those negatives without the image breaking up into grain and losing its highly descriptive material quality.

SEANKELLY

This idea of being able to make large prints of African Americans, and give them an enhanced physical presence through my work, was very appealing also. I thought it would allow the work to move from a kind of preciousness of the small photographic object to something that had a sense of visceral physical presence.

The challenge was to first figure out how to use the large-format camera. It required a lot more steps in the operating process than simply putting the camera up to your eye and quickly making an exposure. From my years making portraits of people in the streets of Harlem I had no problem approaching strangers and asking if I might photograph them. The large-format camera gave an even more ceremonial air to those requests and a sense of occasion since it required a commitment of time as a consequence of the steps needed to operate the camera: figuring out the shape of the picture, the exact location, opening the lens to focus, requesting that the subject not move as the lens was then closed, the Polaroid back inserted into the camera, the film placed in the holder, the exposure made, and then the 30-second wait for the print. The relatively 'instant' print was important to be able to offer, since very often it was the fact that I was going to give them a print in exchange for their time that allowed them to consent.

I had an exhibition of these photos in Brooklyn, at the BACA Downtown Center for the Arts. I'm always interested in situating the work in a context that is related to the making of the work, showing them in the community in which the work was made, so that the people in the community can have access to these photographs of themselves and their neighbors.



Left: A Young Woman Coming from the Store, Rochester, NY 1989

SEANKELLY

Natasha: Could we dive deeper into the notion of displaying your photographic objects on the walls of an institution and engaging the community with whom you collaborate? Based on several of your commissioned projects with museums, you appear to actively utilize the museum space as a social space instead of a place to simply display works of art. How has the role of museums influenced or informed your practice?

Dawoud: The first time I ever visited a museum on my own was when I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a teenager in 1969. The *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition had opened there, and it was very publicly controversial. There were people in the community who took issue with the fact that there were hardly any Black photographers represented in this exhibition that was about Harlem, a largely Black community. For this and other reasons, demonstrators formed a picket line in front of the Met when the show opened, demanding a more inclusive voice in the institution. This was a very auspicious introduction to the museum as an entity as it gave me an immediate sense that the museum was an institution that could be engaged or otherwise spoken back to; it was not a benign space. So I went to see what the controversy was about. And because there were no picket lines on the day, I decided to go inside and see the exhibition.

It proved to be a transformative moment for me. In all of my school visits to museums, I'd never seen photographs of ordinary African Americans on the wall, people who looked like my family or the people in my community. That was a revelation. To see people walking around the galleries of the museum looking at these photographs was an entirely new experience to me. These weren't paintings by Rembrandt or Van Gogh. It wasn't even a fine art exhibition—not that I would have known the difference at that point—but just the fact of these photographs being on display in a museum reshaped my sense of what the museum was, or what it could be. It also began to give me a sense of what I might do with the camera I had gotten from my godmother the year before.

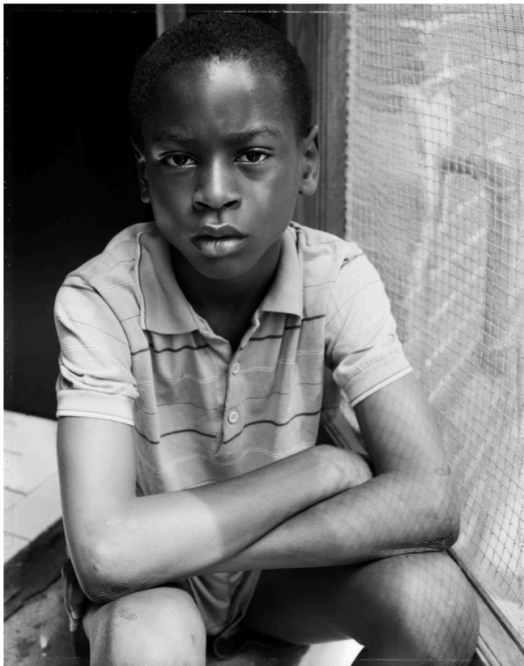
Seeing *Harlem on My Mind* partially led me to beginning my own project photographing in Harlem in 1975, once I had gotten a better camera and learned how to use it. That experience, and the controversies surrounding it, led me to seek out the Studio Museum in Harlem to exhibit my photographs, since one of the issues with that exhibition was that some people in the Black community felt that while the photographs were about them, they didn't have access to the work because it was placed in the Met, an institution that they did not frequent and which did not reach out to them as a potential audience.

So I decided when I completed *Harlem, USA* that I would exhibit that work in the community, in a space that was immediately accessible to the people in my photographs. That turned out to be the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was my first museum exhibition, the result of a deliberate attempt to create a relationship between the Harlem community and the institution through my work—to use the space of the museum in an intentional way, to create a situation in which people

SEANKELLY

from the Harlem community that I had photographed would have the opportunity to see themselves on a museum wall. In this way, the museum became an extension of the community in which it was situated, by bringing that part of the larger social world that isn't necessarily a part of the art world or museum world into the museum space.

From the very beginning, I've thought very deliberately about the kinds of relationships I wanted to have with the museum, and what kinds of relationships I could then create between the museum and the people and communities that have been the subjects of my work, bringing them together through my practice into a kind of relationship that transforms the museum from being merely a destination space for exhibiting work to something more dynamic and socially engaging. Museums have become very active partners and collaborators for me in making my work. I've actually used the museum as a temporary studio, and had young people come to the museum to be photographed. I have a very fluid notion about how museums can be engaged, and it has become central to the way I think about both making the work and the display of that work. I sometimes think of museums as sort of my laboratory, where I get to work out my ideas. I've done a number of curatorial projects with museums as well.



Left: Alfonso, Washington, DC, 1989 Right: A Woman Denim, Rochester, NY 1989

Natasha: The picket lines at the Met in 1969 demanding more Black artists should be included in an exhibition largely about a Black community sounds hauntingly familiar to the issues encompassing the art world in 2020. As a

SEANKELLY

director of a contemporary art museum, I am acutely attuned to the need to dismantle current power structures in the art world. In your five decades of engaging with museums on multiple levels—as a visitor, exhibiting artist, educator, and curator— have you witnessed any substantial changes since your 1969 visit to the Met?

Dawoud: This is certainly a particularly auspicious moment in this country, probably as contentious as the late 1960s. And, again, museums are being asked to engage in an open conversation about the institutional and representational power that they wield. The Black Lives Matter movement grew exponentially after the killing of George Floyd and demanded a response from everyone, individuals and institutions alike. A number of institutions, using their social media platforms, made some serious missteps. Demands have been leveled at museums to be more inclusive not only in their exhibition programming but in the structure and administration of the institution, adding people of color to senior-level positions of decision-making in the museums. I would suggest that it is just as important to add forward-thinking people of color to the boards of museums as well, since it is often the board members who determine what a museum is or isn't able to do.

Some institutions have been more responsive than others, and I think certainly there are a lot more artists of color being included in the programming of museum exhibitions. For me, the challenge is to engage with Black artists, or other artists of color in ways that do not preclude the fact that their work might not necessarily be visibly about race, or be driven by overt social issues that can easily pigeonhole the ways in which Black artists are or are not allowed to participate in a broader historical conversation within the museum and within art history. There are certainly more museum directors now who want to situate their institutions in more inclusive conversations and have both a diverse curatorial team and a supportive board that allow for that kind of inclusivity. There's always more that should be done, of course, and the chief curator at one museum recently stated in response to these calls for greater inclusivity that he 'still intended to exhibit white male artists.' Fortunately, he was asked to resign. So I'd like to think that we are increasingly seeing fewer tolerances for that attitude.

On the other hand, I read an article recently that said, 'Every museum should have a social justice curator.' I'm not sure exactly what that is, since I think that should be an institutional imperative and mission, not the job of one person on staff to monitor. Does that person vet the other curators' proposals to see if they meet the social justice benchmark? I had a Black staffer at a major museum who didn't think that the white curator I was working with was capable of curating my show because she couldn't possibly understand 'Black photography and Black representation.' Of course I disagreed since I consider my work to be part of a continuum of American photography, including Walker Evans and Richard Avedon as much as Roy DeCarava. I'm confident enough in my intentions and abilities in deterritorializing the museum space that I'd rather work with someone who's familiar with Mike Disfarmer, Irving Penn, and other photographers who

SEANKELLY

are not Black that I consider my work to be in conversation with, rather than someone whose training is strictly in race and representation theory, who knows little if anything about the deeper history of my work outside of that theory.



A Man with a Towel, Brooklyn, NY 1989

Natasha: Could you expand upon your idea of using the museum as a laboratory for your art practice and as a curator?

Dawoud: One of my most recent museum exhibitions was *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* which was mounted at the Art Institute of Chicago. The work is about the landscape of the Underground Railroad in northeastern Ohio and was originally presented in an old church in Cleveland that was a part of the Underground Railroad's history. When the work came to the Art Institute, which is a much more 'white box' setting, I wanted to activate that space in different ways. Because it is an encyclopedic museum with a large collection, I decided to curate a parallel exhibition from the Art Institute's photography collection that looked at the ways in which the American landscape came to be represented photographically, and then to also look at the ways that the Black subject began to be represented in the social and geographical landscape of the country.

It was a wide-ranging, salon-style exhibition that was mounted directly outside of the gallery where my own large-scale landscape photographs hung, and meant

SEANKELLY

to be in conversation with and add context to that work. Then, as a way to activate the 'white box' even further, and to make it a more dynamic space, I invited vocalist and musicologist Imani Uzuri, whose own work centers on African-American freedom songs from the past to the present, to do a performance in the galleries where both exhibitions hung, bringing a sonic dimension to this theme of Black bodies seeking liberation that is the basis of my own project and photographs.

Natasha: From the beginning, your artistic practice has been to engage with and build community, and by collaborating with a range of museums, you have helped break down institutional barriers. What projects are you currently embarking on?

Dawoud: I'm in the midst of finishing up work that I have been making in Louisiana on and around the landscapes of several plantations along the west bank of the Mississippi River. This work continues the history-based work I've been doing since The Birmingham Project, and looks at the sites of the foundational relationship of slavery, on which the American economy and its relationship with its Black citizens is based. Most of that time has been spent at Evergreen Plantation, which is the most intact and unaltered of the Louisiana plantations, with 22 slave cabins still sitting on their original brick foundations and 37 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places. I was originally planning to show this work at the Prospect.5 triennial this October, bringing these photographs into a conversation with some of the actual documents, objects, and ephemera of this horrific history from the Historic New Orleans Collection. Because of the pandemic, Prospect.5 has now been delayed to October 2021.

Natasha: We have much work to do in the art world to make our spaces more inclusive and equitable. Thank you!