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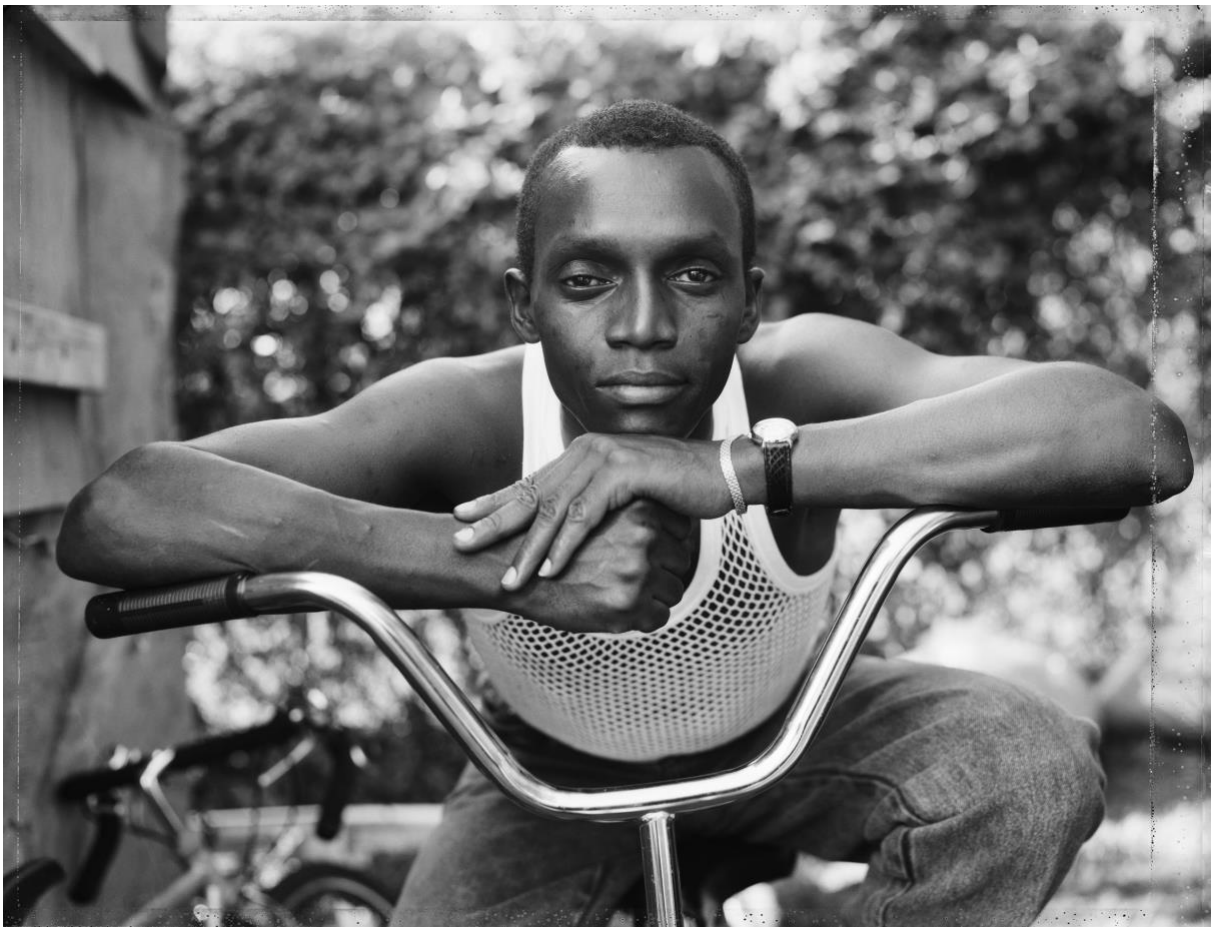
VOGUE

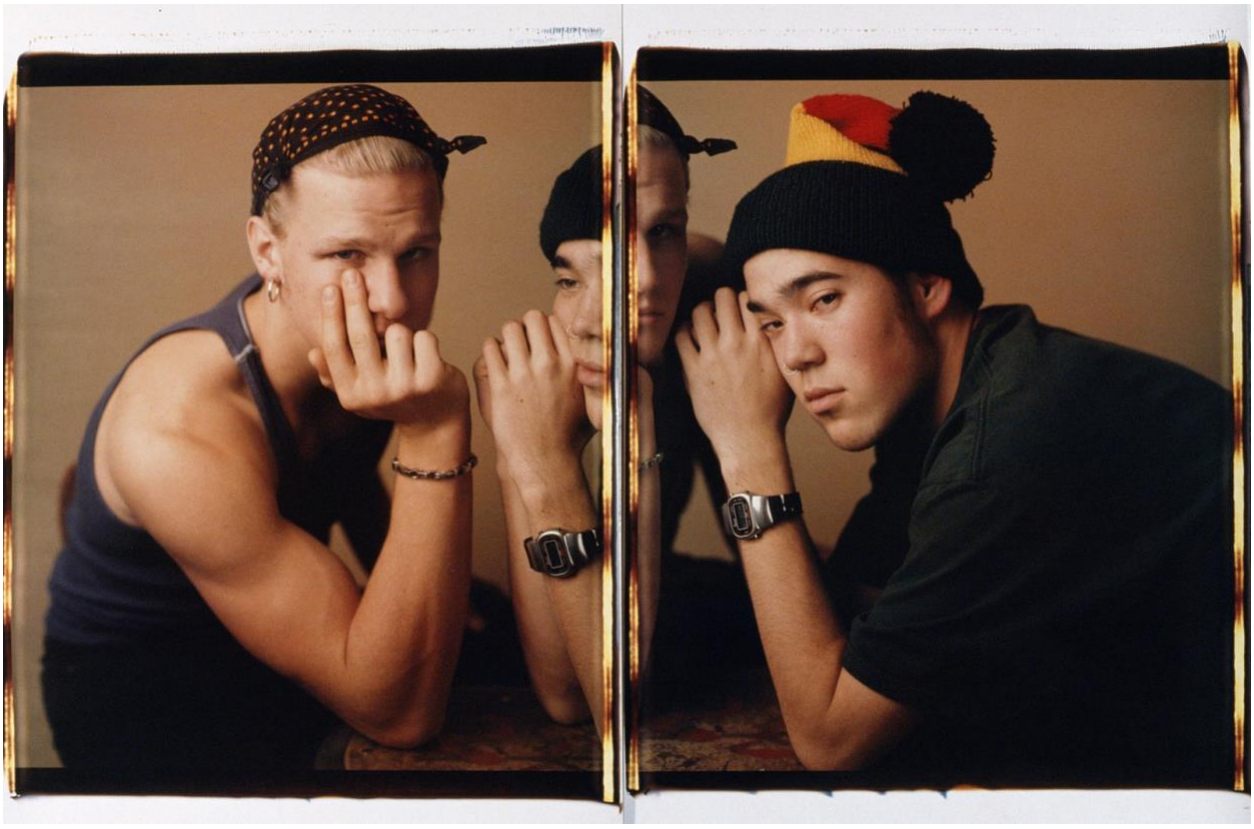


CULTURE

# 'The Past Doesn't Stay in the Past': Inside Photographer Dawoud Bey's Stirring New Retrospective

This weekend, after runs at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the High Museum in Atlanta, "Dawoud Bey: An American Project"opens at the Whitney Museum. Spanning some 80 works and eight series, the retrospective—the first in 25 years—charts the course of Bey's career between 1975 and 2017. "I like to think of myself as a white-box artist who makes work about non-white-box things," Bey told NPR in February. "I like to bring those things into spaces where folks don't necessarily think that's what they will encounter or they're not used to encountering certain kinds of works about certain kinds of subjects within the context of the museum."

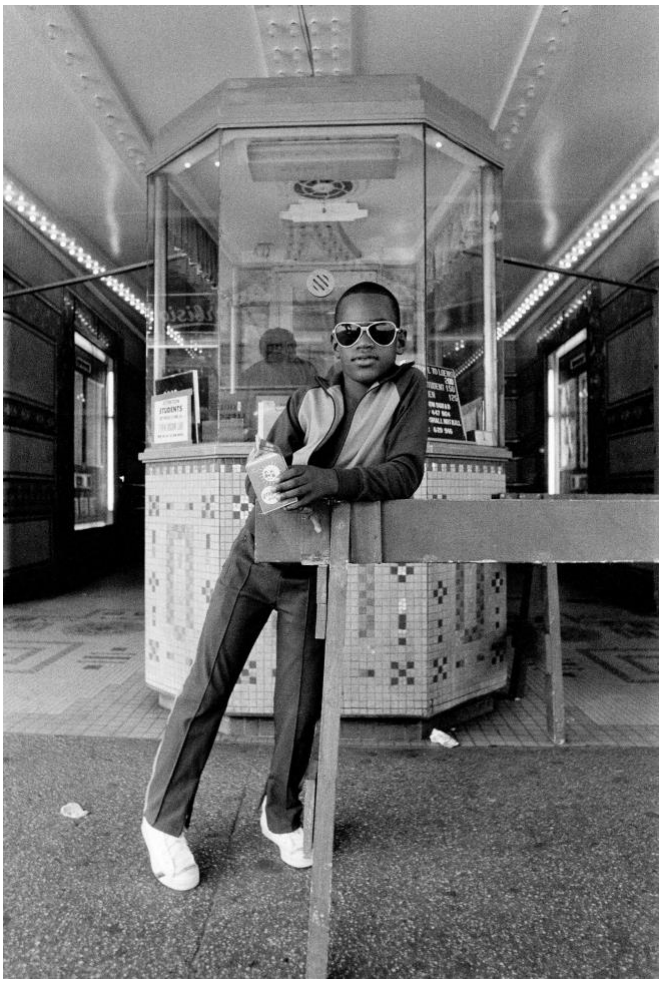
Bey, born in 1953, grew up in Queens, where his earliest artistic aspirations centered squarely on jazz. "I had started playing drums even before I got interested in photography, and through playing in different bands as a teenager, I discovered John Coltrane," he tells me. "The saxophone player in one of those bands brought Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* to rehearsal. When he put the needle on that album, the shape of the world changed for me." He taken not only with Coltrane's virtuosity, Bey explains, but also with the "deep sense of moral and spiritual purpose" that he attached to his craft.



*Dawoud Bey, Hilary and Taro, 1992. Two dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroids), 30 1/8 × 44 in. (76.5 × 111.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from the Photography Committee.© Dawoud Bey*

That intentionality would govern Bey's own approach to art-making—even when, at 15, he was given his late godfather's 35-millimeter camera and his world changed again. "Getting that camera was what got me interested in photography. It got me to start

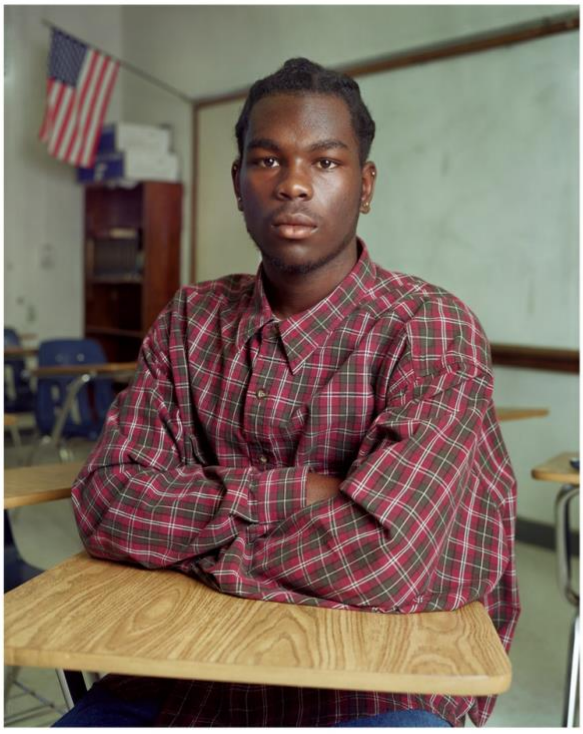
buying photography magazines and eventually going out to start looking at photographs," he says. He discovered Roy DeCarava, who in 1952 had become the first Black photographer to win a Guggenheim fellowship. "I was struck by the fact that he was making photographs about African Americans, but he wasn't a photojournalist revealing social pathology," Bey says. "He was making photographs through his own poetic visual language, insisting on the beauty and complexity of Black people and making photographs that were equal to that. He became the earliest model for me."
"An American Project" is organized thematically and chronologically, beginning with Bey's first series, *Harlem, U.S.A.* (1975–79). It pictures Harlem residents at work, at play, and candidly going about their business, foregrounding both the mundanity and the sublimity of a modern Black utopia. On the occasion of the series's debut at the Studio Museum of Harlem in 1979, Bey recalled his enchanted childhood visits uptown, where some of his family lived: "Driving through the crowded streets, I was amazed by what appeared to be the many people on vacation," he wrote. "It seemed to me that no matter what the day, every day was Saturday in Harlem."



*Dawoud Bey, A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY, 1976. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm).© Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery*

*Last updated: 16 April 2021*

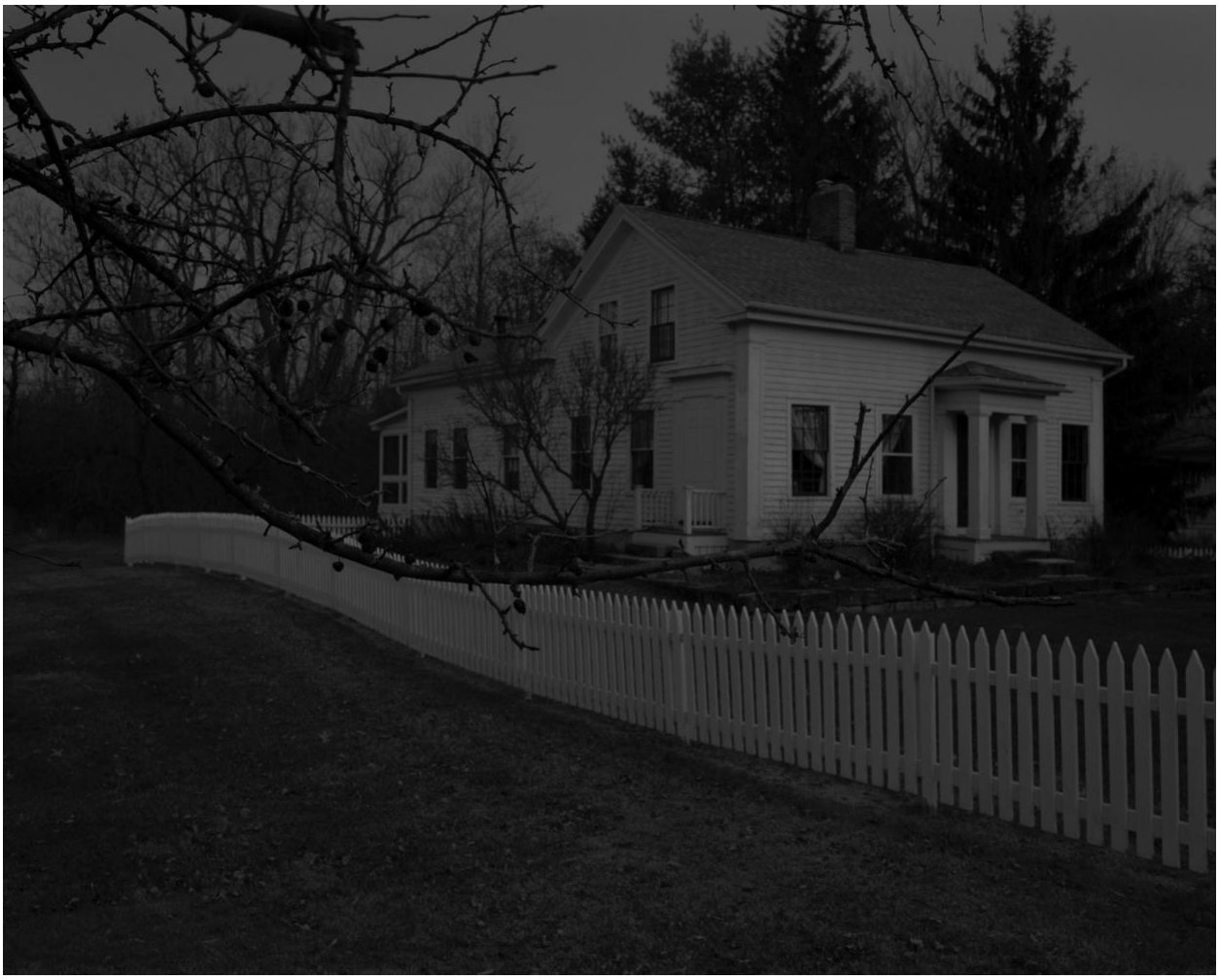
In a later series, *Street Portraits,* begun in 1988, Bey sought out sitters in his own Brooklyn neighborhood. Having switched to a 4x5 camera and Polaroid Type P/N film in the 1980s, he developed his formal prints from the instant negatives and handed the instant prints directly to his subjects. “The relationship I establish with the people I photograph is a momentarily intimate one, not a sustained one,” Bey says, but it’s one “born out of an interest in engaging with the person in order to make something that represents them in the world.” His *Class Pictures* (2002–6) would expand on the medium’s powers of representation by having his high school subjects write short texts to accompany their portraits.




*Dawoud Bey, Gerard, Edgewater High School, Orlando, FL, 2003. Inkjet print, 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm).© Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery*

Even the works of Bey’s trained deliberately on the past feel inextricably linked to contemporary life. The series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017)—which takes its title from the Langston Hughes poem “Dream Variations”—depicts purported stops along the Underground Railroad in big, dusky prints. “Atmospheric and haunting, these newer works were shot during the day but printed to look as though they were captured at night,” Lauretta Charlton observed in *T* Magazine in October. “They’re strangely unknowable scenes, rendered in stark black and white.” Bey draws a direct line between the treatment of Black people then, in the 19 century, and now. “*Night Coming Tenderly, Black* is about the landscape of Black fugitivity at a moment when the abuse of Black bodies was condoned by law,” he says, “even as today there is very little if any penalty exacted for the murder of Black people for simply being Black in a public space. The routine abuse and disregard for Black lives have its roots in the institution of

slavery.” Indeed, Bey had been at work on another series—*The Birmingham Project* (2012), commemorating the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—when Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in Florida. “That Trayvon Martin, a young Black boy, could be killed for no reason while walking home suggests that the past doesn’t stay in the past,” Bey says.



*D1awoud Bey, Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I), 2017. Gelatin silver print, 44 x 55 in. (111.8 x 139.7 cm). Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Accessions Committee Fund purchase.© Dawoud Bey*

*Dawoud Bey, Betty Selvage and Faith Speights, Birmingham, AL, 2012. Inkjet prints, 40 x 64 in. (101.6 cm x 162.56). Rennie Collection, Vancouver.© Dawoud Bey*

Coltrane once said that he wanted to be a force for good, and even now, as both an artist and a professor of photography at Columbia College Chicago (where he's taught since 1998), Bey adheres to that credo. He feels compelled "to make work that pushes the rigor of the craft and art form forward," he says, "but always doing that by making work that I believe matters." He adds: "As I've continued teaching, I've come to realize that my own experiences, my own continuing to rethink and challenge myself through my own practice, is the most valuable thing I have to offer my students, to give them a sense of what it means to think and function as an artist, day after day, year after year."

For Bey, that means tuning in to an inner voice and engaging whatever subjects carry the deepest meaning. "Young artists now are so inundated with images coming at them from every direction," he says. "I tell them, 'You can assume that if what you are making work about matters to you, it will matter to someone else.'"

*"Dawoud Bey: An American Project" opens at the Whitney Museum of American Art on April 17 and runs through October 3. For visiting information here, see here.*

*Last updated: 16 April 2021*