

SEANKELLY

Scott, Andrea K. "Dawoud Bey: An American Project." *New Yorker*. May 2021



Photograph © Dawoud Bey / Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery

One of the earliest pictures in **“Dawoud Bey: An American Project,”** the Whitney’s concise and thrilling retrospective of the Black photographer’s forty-five-year career (on view through Oct. 3), is “Three Women at a Parade” (above), from 1978. The elegant trio, clearly dressed for the occasion, seem oblivious to Bey’s camera. What emerges is a portrait of inner lives—of women seeing as much as being seen. The image is part of “Harlem, U.S.A.,” the artist’s first series, made nimbly in the streets using a handheld 35-mm. camera; it earned him his first solo show, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 1979. For subsequent projects, many of them in color, the Chicago-based artist has turned to more methodical, large-format cameras (including a two-hundred-pound Polaroid). The question of how a photograph can honor a subject that vision can’t register remains at the heart of Bey’s work, notably in the magnificent “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” from 2017, a series of penumbral black-and-white landscapes, made at sites in Ohio along the Underground Railroad, that convey both the nighttime fear of a fugitive and the beauty of freedom.