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Civin, Marcus. "Dawoud Bey: An American Project." *The Brooklyn Rail*. June 2021.

BROOKLYN RAIL



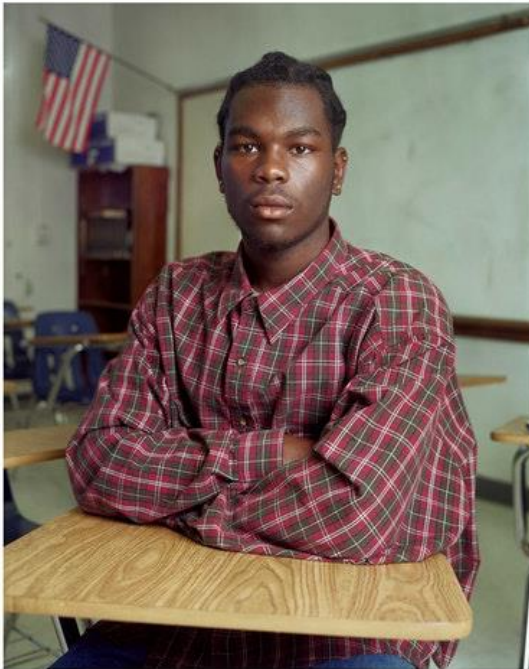
Dawoud Bey, A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY from Harlem, U.S.A., 1976. Gelatin silver print (printed 2019), 14 x 11 inches. Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chica

Over the last 46 years, the artist Dawoud Bey has presented humanistic black-and-white photographs of incredible depth and specificity. Here, a barber named Deas McNeil. There, a boy curious about the camera. Notice polished shoes, how a girl searches for something in two oversized school bags. Notice a fur coat, embroidered band uniforms, a man wearing a necklace with an "E" on it. Notice smiling, waiting. This is Harlem, circa 1976; Syracuse, 1985; Harlem again; and Brooklyn, 1988–1990. These photographs are direct, honest, reverent, and familiar. Although they're street photographs, home feels not far off, maybe just around the corner.

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In a short story included in the monograph *Dawoud Bey, Seeing Deeply* (2018), Hilton Als imagines a young Black man admiring Bey's portraits and street scenes, particularly their representations of Black people: "what he loved about the images was how the subjects held their own self-validation in their hands, their eyes, without being reduced to an ideology."

From life, Bey renders character. There are nearly 80 photographs in his traveling retrospective, *An American Project*, the artist's first in 25 years, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, originating at SFMOMA. The double portrait *Kerry and Cheryl I* (1993) shows the actor Cheryl Lynn Bruce lying across a warm red expanse. She rests her head against her husband, the painter Kerry James Marshall, and looks up resolutely at the camera. *A Girl with School Medals* (1988) shows a slender girl also looking at the camera, her medals proudly pinned to her shirt. A man wearing a felt hat rests his hand gracefully on the metal gate behind him. His forefinger forms an arc almost as perfect as the rim of his hat in *A Man at Fulton Street and Cambridge Place* (1988). In *Whitfield* (1991), the artist Whitfield Lovell sits in a three-quarter pose against a brown background as if readying for a Rembrandt-style portrait, but he looks down as if a passing thought reminded him of something he did not like



I am a hardworking man and I am black.
I have a nice smile and nice long hair.

Gerard

Dawoud Bey, Gerard, Edgewater High School, Orlando, FL, 2003. Inkjet print, 40 x 32 inches. © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

Bey's large-format, full-color Polaroids from the 1990s divide, reassemble, and reiterate their subjects. A single work in this series usually includes multiple

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photographs likely generated seconds apart. Yet, they don't always align perfectly. *Earl* (1996) comprises six separate framed transfer prints, as if Earl is behind a paned window. At the juncture where two pictures meet, something changes. Then, as if to prevent us from misreading these kinds of portraits, another series, Bey's "Class Pictures" from the early 2000s are exhibited with statements penned by the students depicted. In his statement, one student, Omar, contemplates how people perceive him: "I think that people see my skin color first."



I can speak four languages, I am an actress, and when I was about thirty seconds old I reached up and took my dad's glasses off of his face. When I was eight years old, I visited my cousin's school in India. They didn't have a roof, so during the monsoons they got rained on. When I went home, I raised enough money to build them a roof and buy some school supplies.

Usha

Dawoud Bey, Usha, Gateway High School, San Francisco, CA, from "Class Pictures," 2006. Pigmented inkjet print (printed 2019), 40 x 32 inches. Collection of the artist. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bran

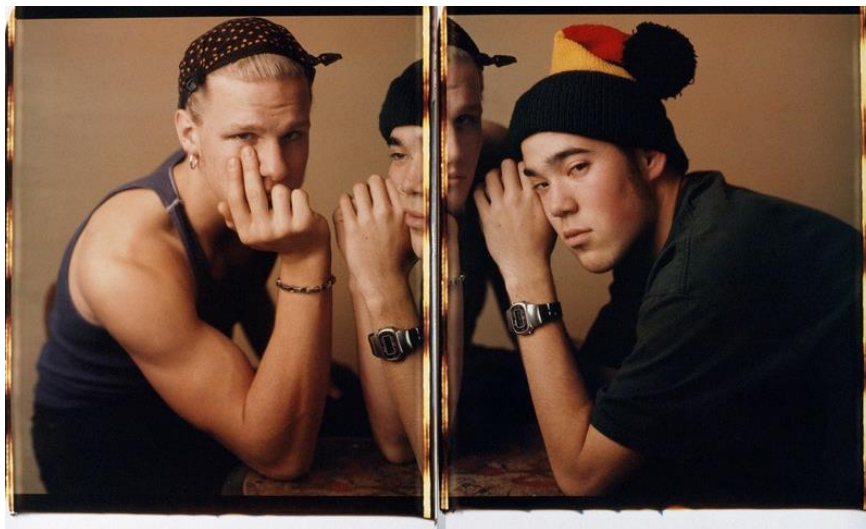
Wary of popular preconceptions, Bey's retrospective reflects gaps and absences. Five prints from the series "Harlem Redux" (2014–17) return to contemporary Harlem to find it a construction site with more tourists than locals. In Bey's hands, Harlem is the memory of a more comfortable place less marked by corporate greed. *His West 124th Street and Lenox Avenue, NY* (2016), is a photograph of a graffitied architectural rendering likely from the fence of a construction site. Someone has written various names on the rendering where commercial signage might be: "H&M," "Home Depot," but also "Dope Spot!," "Welfare Office"; another has painted the word "Lust" in large, loopy, drippy letters.

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Dawoud Bey, Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse), from "Night Coming Tenderly," Black, 2017. Gelatin silver print, 48 x 55 in. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey.

Gaps and absences are evident elsewhere in Bey's retrospective, particularly in his powerful work from Birmingham and Ohio. On a Sunday morning, September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, murdering four girls, Addie Mae Collins, Carole Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. Two Birmingham boys, Virgil Ware and Johnny Robinson, were also murdered the same day in other atrocious racist incidents. Bey's response takes the form of sets of portraits pairing a young person from Birmingham the same age as one of the September 15th victims and an adult the age the young person would have been had they survived. Between these photographic poles is everything that was lost. Along with the photographs, Bey also created the video 9.15.63 (2012), a hypnotic split-screen projection that shows Birmingham emptied of people.



Dawoud Bey, Hilary and Taro, Chicago, IL, 1992. Two dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroids), overall: 30 1/8 x 44 inches. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art. © Dawoud Bey.

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Night Coming Tenderly, Black (2017), is similarly unpopulated. Commissioned by FRONT International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art and first installed in the pews of that city's St. John's Church, a former site on the Underground Railroad, the series of dark photographs re-imagine the pathways of death-defying escapes from slavery. Night Coming Tenderly, Black: Untitled #17 (Forest) (2017), shows a seemingly impossible tangle of trees and branches, a quagmire. Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence II) (2017) shows what could be a way station, a safe house. Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky) (2017) offers a nearly discernible end of the road—almost Canada, still just enough darkness to safely complete a life-or-death clandestine journey. Looking at these photographs and Bey's body of work in general, one can sense great potential for looking and being—presence, complexity, and everyday freedom.