Allen, Brian T. “Dawoud Bey at the Whitney: Great Art, Nice Show, Book’s the Dregs.” *National Review*. July 22, 2021.

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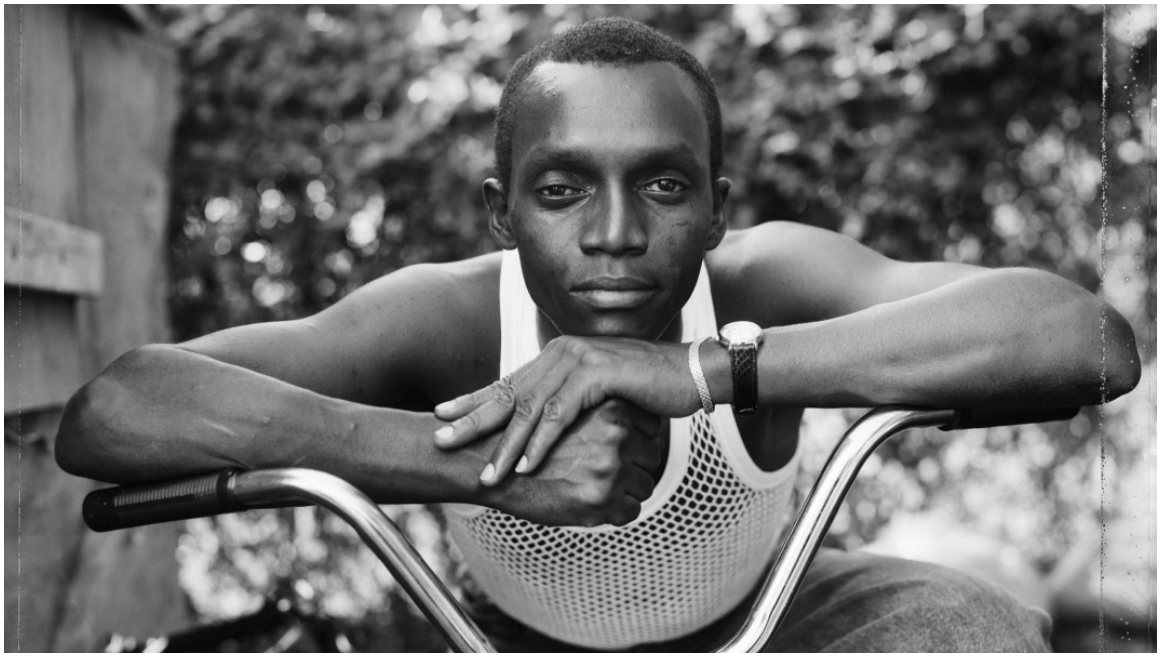


Dawoud Bey, A Young Man Resting on an Exercise Bike, Amityville, N.Y., 1988. Pigmented inkjet print (printed 2019), 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm); Frame: 41 1/8 x 50 1/8 x 2 1/8 in. (Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. © Dawoud Bey.)

Last week, I ended my story on the Whitney by noting how crappy its catalogue for *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* is. I said I’d write about the show and book before it closed, as I’m headed to Los Angeles for museum visits. It’s unfair to say something’s a flop and not explain why until some later point. So, greetings from Los Angeles, and one more story on the Whitney.

Dawoud Bey is a wonderful artist. He’s a mid-career master photographer, making work every few years that’s new, challenging, and moving, yet part of a coherent trajectory. He’s based in Chicago and teaches there, so he’s removed, by choice, from the Manhattan art scene, which can be a rat race and a creativity-killing bubble. He also finds distance between himself and New York through artist residencies. These give him space to think and grow, the money’s decent, the settings are sometimes plush, and new voices and places can be inspirational. I always make it a point to see his work when I’m visiting a museum that displays it.

Dawoud Bey, Two Girls from a Marching Band, Harlem, N.Y., 1990. Pigmented inkjet print (printed 2019), 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm); Frame: 41 1/8 x 50 1/8 x 2 1/8 in. (Collection of the artist; courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; and Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco. © Dawoud Bey.)

The exhibition, organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney, shows art from all his portfolios. As a young man in the late '70s, Bey took his camera to Harlem. *Harlem, USA* reminds me of Aaron Siskind's 1940 series, *The Harlem Document*. It's everyday life in Harlem but with tenderness. It's street photography like Siskind's work, but the figures, all African American, are less part of the furniture. Siskind's figures sometimes feel like motifs in a fin-de–Great Depression story.

In Bey's work, they're more confident and filled with agency and purpose. He's not a fatalist and not a grudge merchant. In the Harlem photographs, he shows himself as a realist tuned to human values. He's part of the long tradition of American artists concerned with everyday life. In *Two Girls from a Marching Band*, we see the warmth of his touch, a characteristic he shares with 19th-century American genre painting, which he translates into photography. His subjects are living day-to-day life unburdened by anger.

We're treated to six portfolios by my count, among them the beautiful *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. For this 2017 project, Bey visited stops on the Underground Railroad in Ohio and made for the first time works that are both nocturnes and without human figures, save for the ghosts we imagine.

Initially, Bey used a handheld 35mm camera, the standard for street photography, and then a tripod-mounted 4×5-inch format. For him, photographing an unaware, unconsenting subject seemed unfair, so the stationary format made sense. By 1991, he was using a big, 200-pound 20×24 Polaroid camera, obviously unluggable. This moved him to the studio. The Whitney's curators do a great job explaining Bey's technique, so we understand and appreciate his process choices. Each series has its

own space. This arrangement emphasizes the artist's evolution and makes for clear art history.

Dawoud Bey, Martina and Rhonda, Chicago, Ill., 1993. Six dye-diffusion transfer prints (Polaroid), overall: 48 × 60 in. (121.9 × 152.4 cm). (Whitney Museum of American Art, gift of Eric Ceputis and David W. Williams 2018.82a-f. © Dawoud Bey.)

Bey first used the monster camera in the early 1990s in work such as *Martina and Rhonda*. He created a signature look by fragmenting the scene. This work comes in six parts. It's attractive and arresting. Bey's thinking is simple: Teens can seem a limited batch of hormones and insecurities, but they have many dimensions.

Another series, called "Class Pictures," unfolded over ten years in the '00s and early Teens. Each work of art has two parts. They're 40 x 30-inch Chromogenic prints, so they make a visual statement. They're direct and lush.

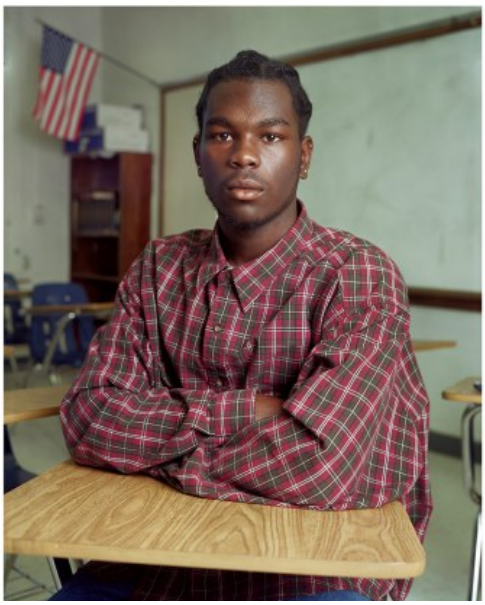
I can speak four languages, I am an actress, and when I was about thirty seconds old I reached up and took my dad's glasses off of his face. When I was eight years old, I visited my cousin's school in India. They didn't have a roof, so during the monsoons they got rained on. When I went home, I raised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

Usha

Bey instructs the teens to come as they would like to be represented. He asks them to write a short personal statement, a few sentences, describing themselves. Written there, these words are spontaneous, and Bey considers them as part of the work of art. He then asks them to pose. The look is casual. The statements vary from predictable teenage whining about being left out or misunderstood to touching, soulful, and haunting. Bey is a large, quiet, comforting presence, so kids are open to him.

I know the series well because it was conceived at the Addison Gallery, where I was director and where Bey has had three residencies over 20 years.

Of the forty or so works in *Class Pictures*, the Whitney is displaying some of the most predictable. In *Danny*, *Usha*, and *Kevin*, they've gone for *Vogue*-style exotic. These teens could be fashion models, which detracts from their stories, some of which are standard teenage fare and reduce the self to religious or ethnic identity. This is à la mode. *Omar* depicts a teen taunted because he's Muslim. *Sarah*'s statement tells us that the girl's father doesn't want her to say she's Iranian in her college application.



Dawoud Bey, Gerard, Edgewater High School, Orlando, Fla., 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)

In *Gerard*, the boy says only, "I'm a hard working man and I'm black. I have a nice smile and long hair." He's big and seems so reserved that he looks armored. Among all the subjects of *Class Pictures*, his autobiographical statement is the shortest. He's succinct, to be sure. Blabbermouth teenagers irritate. He might be a "hard working man," but he's not beyond vanity. It's a subtle, telling match Bey managed to get from him.

Kevin shows a slouching, African-American kid with a FCUK-logo wear. His autobiography dives into his family: Father went to prison, then died, mother is remote, indifferent, possibly manic-depressive. I know the boy, who was an Andover student when I was the director of the museum. Bey's residency at the Addison focused on what became the *Class Pictures* project. He worked with Andover students and kids from the heavily Dominican Lawrence High School. Could we tell the difference? Not really. Teens are teens. Bey got the personal and the universal out of them. The Andover students tended to write more. The school doesn't teach reticence.

What about the 17-year-old single mother, in *Shaheeda*, who wishes she "could fly to school and never be late"? She's pimply, with tinted red hair and big loop earrings. She sits on the floor. She adds that she wishes she could fly away for good.
In *Terrence*, the teen on the one hand looks defiant while on the other confiding that his best friend is his mother. These and other teens in the series radiate more profound states of angst, innocence, and ambition.

Dawoud Bey, Mathis Menefee and Cassandra Griffin, from The Birmingham Project, 2012. Pigmented inkjet prints, each: 40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm); Frame, each: 41 1/8 x 33 1/8 x 2 in. (Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Dawoud Bey.)

Two recent, great Bey portfolios are in the exhibition. In *The Birmingham Project*, from 2012, Bey commemorated the 50th anniversary of the horrible church bombing that killed four girls. He photographed African-American men and women in Birmingham who were, in 2012, the age the girls would have been had they lived. He paired these portraits of people, by 2012 in their 50s and 60s, with portraits of kids in Birmingham who, in 2012, were the same age as the bombing victims.

It's a new take on the old diptych model of conjoined portraits or religious pictures dating from early Renaissance painting and the tradition of double portraits of husbands and wives. Bey's are black and white, and young and old are posed identically, looking at the camera. They're more formally dressed, too, with some of the men in suits with ties and crisply folded pocket handkerchiefs.

The kids are in what I would call nice school dress, which means no crop tops for girls and, unlike *Kevin* in the *Class Pictures* series, no FCUK sweatshirts. They don't look Victorian and austere like an Eakins portrait, but they seem as if they know they're involved in a serious enterprise that treats a subject that's beyond self.

The series, the label tells us, "honors the tragic loss of these children and makes plain the continued impact of violence, trauma, and racism." I think that interpretation, or at least the last half of it, sells these photographs short. I remember the bombing. As a child, I found it very upsetting since the dead were my age and, like them, I went to church every Sunday. Not to beat a horse to death, but, as I recently wrote, I found The Whitney's Mehretu exhibition less fulfilling since the paintings come so heavily interpreted. The Bey show does a bit of the same thing here, pushing one meaning despite the absence of visual evidence.

What might we make of *The Birmingham Project* if we only had the title and the objects? I see age versus youth, experience versus innocence, and the strength and resilience of one generation offered as a legacy to another. I see honest, straightforward faces, dignity, heads held high, and, in the case of the 60-or-so set, the power to penetrate the viewer's thoughts and to question them. *Birmingham* and African-American subjects will, for a long time, at least, evoke Bull Connor, protest marches, and both apartheid and the violent resistance to its end. That's a given.

Where does this leave the viewer? To me, these photographs, seen as works of art, present a choice. You can let an atrocity define you and subsequently destroy you, or you can take God's gift of life and make something unique from it. That these photographs "make plain the continued impact of violence, trauma, and racism" is wishful thinking on the part of the curators. Visually, they really don't.

I think the curators are too quick to propose that what happened in 1963 froze Birmingham in place and that nothing is different now. That's a false value. It's also condescending. It drains the subjects of agency and trivializes the lives they've made for themselves.

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.)

The last gallery in the exhibition displays Bey's *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, his nocturnes from 2017. The title comes from a 1926 Langston Hughes poem. Exploring the Underground Railroad is not the easiest proposition, given that it wasn't a physical site. The stops are mostly unknown. It was impromptu and, after all, secret. Bey picked places in Ohio that might have been involved, but the series is evocative. He picked the nocturne style because movement mostly occurred at night. Bey photographed during the day but darkened the images in processing to stress

how little we know about the Underground Railroad, where it ran, who was involved, and how many benefited.

The photographs are big silver gelatin prints showing woods, picket fences, old Federal Style farmhouses, woods, and fields in glimpses. The 25 photographs, seen together, suggest a stealth journey ending at Lake Erie, freedom, and a new life.

Here's where the catalogue fails. It's a lame book, oddly designed to show a sea of white space and tiny type. I think it's 8-point type. I know we live in an era in which many graphic designers are moved to make pages unreadable in exchange for visual pizzazz, but this wins the prize of having a banal look and illegibility. The design also shrinks the illustrations to tombstone size when they're embedded in the text, though elsewhere in the book Bey's art is nicely presented.

Torkwase Dyson's essay is entitled "Black Compositional Thought: Black Hauntology, Plantationocene, and Paradoxical Form." Dyson's an artist. It's two pages with six long quotes from the work of other writers. I don't know what it's about. "Taking contradictory stimuli shrouded by death and inventing something liminal and object based to make liberation is black genius" is an awkward though lucid sentence after which she writes, "Here is what I mean." Ah, something scrutable, I thought.

Then she jumps into climate change. "The Anthropocene" — the epoch of significant human impact on earth — "is indelibly tied to racial/plantation slavery, and for this reason I'm interested in one of its alternative formulations, the Plantationocene." The current climate crisis, she said, is inextricably tied to race, and race to "a hyperviolent capitalist system." I can't say "on and on it goes" because it ends here and makes no sense. Where was the editor?

The other essays in the short book are better, but not much. *Class Pictures* has a recent catalogue produced by Aperture for the exhibition that traveled around the country. The Addison, where I was the director, hosted it. At least this fine project has some good scholarship done on it.

This is Bey's retrospective. Is this the best book that could be produced to honor his great work? I think not.