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Amirkhani, Jordan. "PLANTATION LANDSCAPES AND MURKY WATER: DAWOUD BEY AT SEAN KELLY." *Art in America*, October 22, 2021.

Art in America



Dawoud Bey, Tree and Cabin, 2019, gelatin silver print, 44 by 55 inches.

For the exhibition "In This Here Place," **Dawoud Bey** continues his photographic index of locations significant in the African American experience, focusing in this iteration on an historically fraught section of Louisiana's landscape. Troubling the landscape genre's affiliation with the sublime, Bey looks to the Southern plantation as a place where memories of horror clash with beauty. The outcome of more than two years of research, Bey's twenty-four large-scale, richly printed silver gelatin images depict five different plantations scattered primarily along the western bank of the infamous River Road—a seventy-mile corridor between Baton Rouge and **New Orleans** that once connected the most lucrative cash crop economies in the world. Lush with the indigo bushes and sugarcane fields once cultivated by enslaved peoples, this stretch of land is known today as Cancer Alley due to the petrochemical plants that have transformed the area into a contamination zone, exposing its largely low-income African American communities to carcinogens. Like a time capsule, River Road's swampy wetlands link past to present, showing how this population continues to be subjected to life-threatening and inhumane conditions across industries and generations.

The exhibition commences quietly with *Tree and Cabin* (2019), in which deep shadows emphasize the restored slave quarters, and rich monochromatic tones and textures establish the emotional atmosphere for Bey's series. Titled simply and without specific reference to the plantations where they were captured, the

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photographs dwell on anonymous stretches of open fields, forests, swamps, and dwellings. Bey attends to graphic patterns and repetitive formal elements that transform the unremarkable into something more eerie, as in *Tall Grass, Fence, and Cabin* (2019), which captures a weathered wooden building from behind a fence and a dense hedge of wild grasses. While many have remarked on the absence of figures in Bey's recent work, the artist still emphasizes embodied presence through human-scale vantage points. That compositional device—along with the absorbing print size and relative absence of temporal markers—seems to place the viewer in the depicted site, while suggesting that the camera and viewer might be seeing something similar to what enslaved people saw as they moved through these landscapes in fear and resistance.

Bey also evokes those former inhabitants through the natural landscape itself, as in *Conjoined Trees and Field* (2019), which pictures a remarkable entwining of tree trunks, which resemble two bodies embracing—once separate, now forever entangled. Within the vast expanse of an open field, vulnerable to the elements, these trees, in this context, point to the necessary solidarity among those who worked these lands as well as those who were able to escape the torturous violence of the plantation on underground routes.



Dawoud Bey, Swamp, 2019, gelatin silver print, 44 by 55 inches.

These images of a haunted place might seem to mourn a history of violence, but Bey is also invested in capturing a history of resistance—and this is where he finds beauty in the landscape. He attends to the spaces beyond the plantation's borders where escape and freedom were possible. In particular, Bey emphasizes the cypress swamplands surrounding the Mississippi River, as in *Light on the Swamp* (2019), an image whose murky water scattered with cast shadows and sunlight invites us to remember those who swam and hid in these mosquito-

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filled marshes. Unlike the white Euro-Americans who viewed the swamps and borderlands as uninhabitable and valueless, African Americans (enslaved, runaway, and free) saw the lack of oversight and harsh conditions of this terrain as an opportunity to conduct religious ceremonies, exchange goods, and hide from slave catchers and their dogs. In Louisiana before and after the **Civil War**, groups known as Maroons established nomadic underground communes in the swamps, often seizing goods and necessities from the plantations in resistance to the brutal capitalistic enslavement system. Bey's attention to how light shifts and punctures the surface of these dark waters, turning what was opaque into something more translucent, reflects his desire to render these once secret communities and their ephemeral histories more visible. "These sites present themselves mutely," Bey acknowledges. "The scale of these narratives can now only be suggested."

These fluid sites index a more complex story than does the plantation architecture that is usually seen as the primary trace of these histories. It's a story that tends to be rendered invisible by the passage of time and the constant re-centering of white supremacist narratives. While some of these plantations (such as the Whitney Plantation, midway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge) have been repurposed as educational museums dedicated to acknowledging the horrific truths of slavery, others still produce the crops once tended by enslaved peoples, and many continue to be framed as "great houses" restored to their "former glory and beauty." In Bey's hands, **photography** does much more than merely document—it grants space for uncomfortable truths.