

Bey, Dawoud. "Dawoud Bey: The Past Is Present." *The New York Times*. December 9, 2021.

## The New York Times

### Dawoud Bey: The Past Is Present

In a series of photographs taken on former Louisiana plantations, the photographer found echoes of the past that still inform the present.



A cabin on the Whitney Plantation in Wallace, La., 2019. Courtesy of the artist

*This personal reflection is part of a series called [Turning Points](#), in which writers explore what critical moments from this year might mean for the year ahead. You can read more by visiting the [Turning Points series page](#).*

*The following is an artist's interpretation of the year — how it was or how it might be, through the lens of art.*

[George Floyd's murder](#) occurred just after I spent several months photographing on and around the landscapes of former plantation sites in Louisiana, at which time I had been forced to stop photographing and go into quarantine because of Covid-19. For me, Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer reverberated with the history [embedded in the landscape](#) where I'd been spending those months, calling its history of gratuitous violence and disregard for Black life back into view. But this time, the world responded with an outrage suggesting that continued disregard for Black life, and its various recurring contemporary manifestations, would not be condoned or ignored. Returning to Louisiana recently only reinforced my belief that we forget history at our own peril, and that calling it to remembrance — as I do in my work — keeps us alert and responsive to the presence of those horrific pieces of a past, which, left untended, can return to haunt us yet again.

In 2019, the year leading up to the pandemic, I had spent considerable time in Louisiana, sustaining the work I do as an artist and photographer, and seeking to create

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an engagement with African American history and the ways that those inherent tensions and traumas not only point us back to the past, but also find resonance in our contemporary moment. The long year of self-quarantine that followed afforded me the time and space to reflect even more deeply on what this work of mine might mean now.



Dawoud Bey. Credit Sean Kelly

I had been researching and then beginning to make photographs on and around the landscapes of the Evergreen, Destrehan, Laura, Oak Alley and Whitney plantations on the western banks of the Mississippi. My choice of these locations — the sugar cane fields, cabins, swamps and trees — reflects my desire to make the sites of the foundational relationship between America and its Black citizens more resonant, and in so doing, to continue to make that [troubled relationship present](#) in our current conversations on race.

As history can often explain the present, so too does the narrative of the violent and inhuman exploitation of enslaved Blacks, a captive and unpaid labor force conscripted to work on American plantation soil. From that relationship, in which Black lives were exploited, expendable and deemed not worthy of basic human compassion, one can draw a straight line to the murder of Floyd. His merciless killing by a Minneapolis policeman echoes the brutality and cruelty enslaved African Americans faced at the hands of their overseers, on the very plantations I was now photographing.

After being away from the Louisiana plantation landscape for more than a year, I was finally able to return to those sites and resume my work. With all that had taken place since my last visit, the need to be there felt even more urgent. It made me wonder if the global response to George Floyd's murder suggests that, more than a year later, we are in a very different place as a country than we were before.