

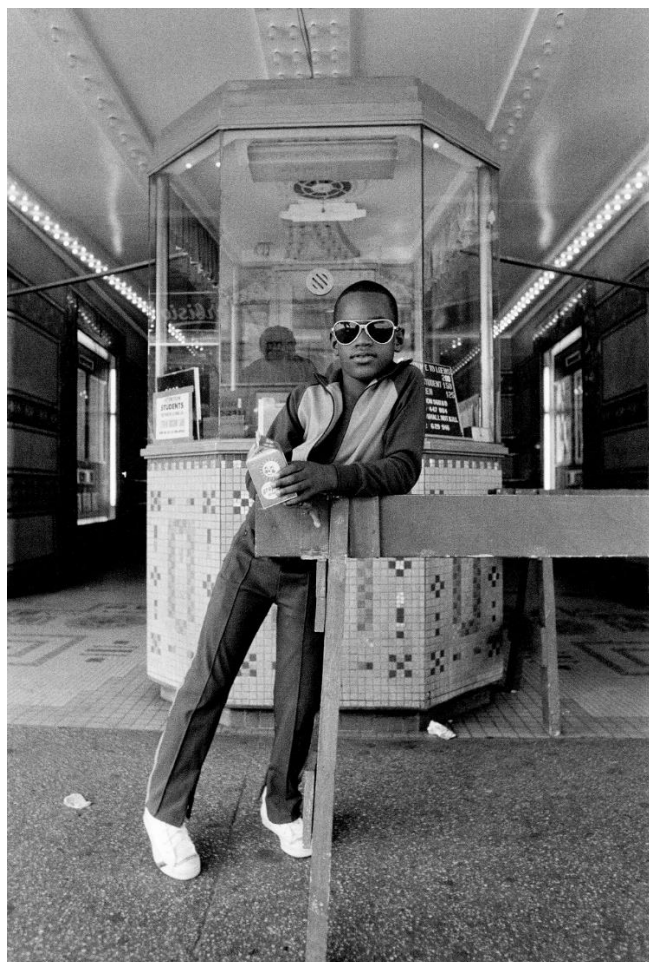
WHITNEY

PRESS RELEASE

Whitney Museum
of American Art
Press Office

99 Gansevoort Street
New York City, NY 10014

pressoffice@whitney.org
(212) 570-3633



Dawoud Bey, *A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater*, Harlem, NY, 1976. Gelatin silver print 14 x 11 in. (35.6 x 27.9 cm) © Dawoud Bey and courtesy of the artist, Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery.

DAWLOUD BEY'S CAREER RETROSPECTIVE, *AN AMERICAN PROJECT*, TO OPEN AT THE WHITNEY ON APRIL 17

Exhibition unites nearly eighty works from eight major series, spanning Bey's forty-six-year career

NEW YORK, NY, January 26, 2021— Dawoud Bey (b. 1953, Queens, NY) has committed more than four decades to photographing underrepresented subjects and fostering dialogue that addresses African American history and contemporary society and politics. The artist's first retrospective in twenty-five years, *An American Project*, explores the arc of Bey's career from 1975 to 2017 through nearly eighty works across eight major series. Reflecting the evolution of Bey's vision, the exhibition examines his enduring engagement with portraiture, place, and history. From early portraits in Harlem and classic street photography to multi-panel studio portraits and nocturnal landscapes, Bey has consistently focused his lens on Black individuals, foregrounding the uniqueness of his subjects while reflecting the profound and ongoing effects of the history of the United States. Co-organized with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, *An American Project* will be on view at the Whitney

from April 17, 2021 through October 3, 2021. The exhibition is co-curated by Corey Keller, curator of photography at SFMOMA, and Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

“Presenting Dawoud Bey’s exhibition at the Whitney feels like a wonderful double homecoming. Not only was he born in New York City and made many important works here, but he has been a beloved part of our collection and exhibition program for nearly thirty years,” said Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator. “Presenting Bey’s work directly after that of the Kamoinge Workshop photographers creates a beautiful resonance with artists who greatly inspired his practice and whose legacy he advanced with a vision all his own. We’re delighted that this important retrospective will stretch across multiple spaces in the Museum, so that Bey’s crucial *Birmingham Project* can be seen free-of-charge in our Lobby gallery.”

Deeply committed to the processes, materials and histories of the medium, Bey’s work is grounded in the traditions of photographers who came before him, including James Van Der Zee, Roy DeCarava, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Walker Evans, and the members of the Kamoinge Workshop. With these artists as touchstones, Bey has worked to broaden established notions of photography, practicing portraiture as an ethical act that demands collaboration and exchange, and intervening in entrenched systems of circulation and display by working directly with museums and schools. Both a form of personal expression and an act of political responsibility, Bey’s art emphasizes the necessary and ongoing work of artists and art institutions to break down obstacles to access, convene communities, and open dialogue.

“These bodies of work are testament to Bey’s technical mastery and of his profound contributions to the medium of photography,” said Elisabeth Sherman, Whitney assistant curator. “From his earliest body of work, *Harlem, U.S.A.* (1975–79), through his most recent project, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017), the impact of these images lies in the intentionality of Bey’s process and his ability to expand the boundaries of the medium while working intimately with his subjects and engaging with American history. Working with Bey to realize this project has been a profound honor and I am excited for Whitney audiences to engage with his formally and conceptually complex body of work.”

Organized thematically and chronologically, *An American Project* will occupy the John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Gallery on the Museum’s first floor and the eighth floor Hurst Family galleries, where Bey’s work directly follows the presentation of *Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop*. The exhibition draws out continuities across bodies of work and explores Bey’s engagement with street photography, studio portraiture, and American history.



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

Created from 1975 to 1979, Bey's first series, **Harlem U.S.A.** presents complex, intimate depictions of the neighborhood's residents situated within the surrounding cityscape. Born and raised in Queens, Bey was drawn to Harlem both as the site of his parent's meeting and home to many friends and family as well as a symbol of and wellspring for Black American culture. Described by the artist as a sort of homecoming, the series debuted at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. Bey revisits the neighborhood nearly forty years later in his series **Harlem Redux**, a wistful and elegiac look at the community's recent, rapid transformation and gentrification. Made from 2014-2017 using a new medium format camera, these larger color photographs address the neighborhood's shifting topography, population, and daily rhythms.

Harlem U.S.A. was made with a 35mm camera and wide-angle lens, and Bey continued to use that same camera for much of the 1980s. During his 1985 residency at Light Work in Syracuse, NY, Bey continued to push the possibilities of this format, exploring new ways to make use of shadow and light to help define a dynamic composition.

In 1988, Bey began working with a larger, and more conspicuous, tripod-mounted 4-x-5-inch format camera. Seeking a more equitable, reciprocal relationship with his sitters, Bey approached his subjects openly, creating a series of more formal "street portraits" in areas such as Brooklyn and Washington, DC. By using Polaroid Type-55 film, Bey was able to produce instant pictures that he gave to the sitters, as well as negatives that he later used to make large-scale prints.

In 1991, Bey transitioned to the studio and began using the 20-x-24-inch Polaroid View Camera to capture his subjects. While cumbersome in size, the camera allowed for sustained engagement with his sitters and the ability to orchestrate all aspects of the image. With this new format, Bey made a series of portraits first of his artist friends and later youth whom he met through residencies at high schools and museums around the country. As the project evolved, Bey also experimented with multi-panel Polaroid portraiture, creating a series of large-scale works that render his subjects using several individual frames. In **Class Pictures** (2001-2006), Bey began making large-scale color portraits of high school students during a residency at the Smart Museum of Art in Chicago. Each portrait is accompanied by text that he invited the students to contribute furthering his interest in creating more collaborative relationships with his sitters. Bey expanded the series during residencies around the country from 2003 to 2006.



Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)*, 2017. Gelatin silver print 44 x 55 in. (111.8 x 139.7 cm) Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art © Dawoud Bey

The most recent series included in the exhibition, *The Birmingham Project* (2012) and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017), urgently address African American history through expressive portraits and evocative landscapes. In 2012, Bey made a series of portraits commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and its violent aftermath. The series of diptychs pairs portraits of children the same ages as the victims with adults fifty years older--the ages the victims would have been had they lived. Bey made the portraits in the Bethel Baptist Church, an early headquarters for the civil rights movement in Birmingham, and in the Birmingham Museum of Art. Also on display is Bey's split-screen video titled *9.15.63* (2012), which corresponds to the date of the 1963 church bombing and was shot in locations across Birmingham. Shown together, these powerful projects honor the tragic loss of the six children and make plain the continued impact of violence, trauma, and racism.

Night Coming Tenderly, Black (2017) imagines the flight of enslaved Black Americans along the leg of the Underground Railroad that operated in Northeastern Ohio. Marking Bey's first complete departure from figuration, these landscapes reimagine the experience of the journey by fugitive African Americans and the topography and buildings that may have provided shelter and protection along the way leading to Lake Erie and freedom in Canada.

About Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey was born in New York City in 1953 and began his career as a photographer in 1975. Since his first solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979, his work has been featured in exhibitions at numerous institutions worldwide including the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Brooklyn Museum; the Detroit Institute of Arts; the Fogg Museum, Harvard University; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; the Museum of Contemporary Photography (MoCP), Chicago; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among many others.

Bey's photographs are represented in collections around the globe, and his critical writings on photography and art have appeared in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues. The recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, Bey received the prestigious MacArthur "Genius" fellowship in 2017. He holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University, and is currently professor of art and a former distinguished college artist at Columbia College Chicago, where he has taught since 1998.

Institutional and Curatorial Credits

Dawoud Bey: An American Project is co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. It is curated by Corey Keller, curator of photography at SFMOMA, and Elisabeth Sherman, assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

The exhibition premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from February 15 to October 12, 2020. *An American Project* is currently on view at the High Museum of Art, Atlanta through March 14, 2021 before its New York debut at the Whitney from April 17 to October 3, 2021. It will then travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston where it will be on view from March 6 to May 30, 2022.

About the Catalogue

Dawoud Bey: An American Project is accompanied by *Dawoud Bey: Two American Projects*, a 128-page catalogue featuring Bey's two recent historical series — *The Birmingham Project* and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* — both represented in the exhibition. The publication includes approximately seventy illustrations and contributions from Corey Keller; Elisabeth Sherman; artist Torkwase Dyson; Steven Nelson, Professor of African and African American Art and Director of the UCLA African Studies Center; Imani Perry, Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies, Princeton University; Claudia Rankine, award-winning poet, essayist, playwright, and Frederick Iseman

Professor of Poetry, Yale University. The catalogue is edited by Corey Keller and Elisabeth Sherman and is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Exhibition Support

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In New York, the exhibition is sponsored by



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The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965	Through May 2022
Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950–2019	Through February 2022
Cauleen Smith: Mutualities	Through January 31, 2021
Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945	Through January 31, 2021
Salman Toor: How Will I Know	Through April 4, 2021
Nothing Is So Humble: Prints from Everyday Objects	Through Spring 2021
Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop	Through March 28, 2021
Andrea Carlson	Through Fall 2021
Julie Mehretu	March 25–August 8, 2021
Madeline Hollander: Flatwing	March 25–August 8, 2021
Dawoud Bey: An American Project	April 17–October 3, 2021
Public Art Project: David Hammons: Day's End	Spring 2021
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself	Opens May, 2021
Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror	September 29, 2021–February 13, 2022
Martine Gutierrez	On view September 2021
My Barbarian	Opens October 22, 2021
2022 Whitney Biennial	Opens Spring 2022

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Adults: \$25. Full-time students, visitors 65 & over, and visitors with disabilities: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Current public hours 10:30 am – 6 pm Thursday through Monday; with members-only hours on Monday from 5 – 6 pm and Saturdays and Sundays from 10:30 – 11:30 am. Pay-what-you-wish admission will be offered on Thursdays from 1:30 – 6 pm. Reserve timed-entry tickets in advance at [whitney.org](https://www.whitney.org). For more information please call (212) 570-3600 or visit [whitney.org](https://www.whitney.org).

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