



HIGH MUSEUM OF ART ATLANTA

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HIGH MUSEUM OF ART TO PRESENT MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE OF PHOTOGRAPHER DAWOUD BEY

Featuring nearly 80 works that span the artist's 40-year career

ATLANTA, Oct. 16, 2020 — For more than four decades, renowned photographer Dawoud Bey has created powerful and tender photographs that portray underrepresented communities and explore African American history. From portraits in Harlem and classic street photography to nocturnal landscapes and large-scale studio portraits, his works combine an ethical imperative with an unparalleled mastery of his medium. Coming this fall, the High Museum of Art will celebrate his important contributions to photography as the exclusive Southeast venue for “Dawoud Bey: An American Project” (Nov. 7, 2020-March 14, 2021), the artist’s first full career retrospective in 25 years.

Co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the exhibition will feature approximately 80 works that span the breadth of Bey’s career, from his earliest street portraits made in Harlem in the 1970s to his most recent series reimagining sites of the Underground Railroad (2017).

The High has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with Bey, who was commissioned in 1996 for the Museum’s inaugural “Picturing the South” series, which asks noted photographers to turn their lens toward the American South. For his project, Bey collaborated with Atlanta high school students to create empathetic, larger-than-life portraits. Made with the monumental 20-by-24-inch Polaroid camera, these photographs explore the complexity of adolescence as a time of critical identity formation and expand the concept of portraiture. The High now holds more than 50 photographs by Bey, one of the most significant museum collections of his work.

“Bey’s portraits are remarkable for their keen sensitivity and for how they elicit and honor their subjects’ sense of self, which is partly an outcome of the artist’s collaborative practice,” remarked Sarah Kennel, the High’s Donald and Marilyn Keough Family curator of photography. “Given the museum’s long relationship with Bey and the strength of our holdings, we are thrilled to present this important retrospective. We look forward to sharing the artist’s photographs and his powerful and moving reflections on African American history and identity in their country with our visitors.”

Bey, born in 1953 in Queens, New York, began to develop an interest in photography as a teenager. He received his first camera as a gift from his godmother in 1968, and the next year, he saw the exhibition “Harlem on My Mind” at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Widely criticized for its failure to include significant numbers of artworks by African Americans, the exhibition’s representation of Black subjects nonetheless made an impression on Bey and inspired him to develop his own documentary project about Harlem in 1975. Since that time, he has worked primarily in portraiture, making tender, psychologically rich and direct portrayals, often in collaboration with his subjects. More recently, he has explored seminal moments in African American history through both portraiture and landscape.

“Dawoud Bey: An American Project” will include work from the artist’s eight major series and is organized to reflect the development of Bey’s vision throughout his career and to highlight his enduring engagement with portraiture, place and history.

The Street

Bey’s landmark black-and-white 1975-78 series “Harlem, USA” documents portraits and street scenes with locals of the historic neighborhood in New York. As a young man growing up in Queens, Bey was intrigued by his family’s history in Harlem, where his parents met and where he visited family and friends throughout childhood. The series premiered at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979, when Bey was just 26.

In addition to works from that series, the exhibition will include a remarkable series of street photographs Bey made in Syracuse, New York, that demonstrate his keen eye for portraiture and his ability to respond with both spontaneity and sensitivity to his subjects and their environment. These works are accompanied by more formal street portraits that Bey created in the 1980s in areas such as Brooklyn, New York, and Washington, D.C. Made with a large-format camera and Polaroid film, these photographs reflect a more intimate and enduring exchange between Bey and his subjects, and by extension, the viewer.

The exhibition will also feature the series “Harlem Redux,” which marks Bey’s return to the area from 2014 to 2017. This newer series of large-format color landscapes and streetscapes at once documents and mourns the transformation of the community as it has become more gentrified and its original residents increasingly displaced.

The Studio

After honing his skills in street photography, Bey moved toward studio work in the 1990s, using a massive 20-by-24-inch Polaroid camera to make a series of sensitive and direct color portraits, first of friends and later of teenagers he met through a 1992 residency at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts. At the time, Bey also began to experiment with beautifully lit multipanel Polaroid portraits that challenge the singularity of the photographic print and suggest the complexity of identity.

In 2002, a residency at the University of Chicago's Smart Museum of Art inspired Bey to begin the series "Class Pictures." Using a view camera to create striking, large-scale color portraits of high school students, Bey asked the students to write narratives to accompany the photographs. Over the next four years, Bey continued work on the series at high schools across the United States. By focusing on teenagers from a wide range of economic, social and ethnic backgrounds and giving them an opportunity to reveal their thoughts, fears and dreams at a critical moment of identity formation, Bey created a diverse group of thoughtful and introspective portraits that challenge stereotypes of adolescence.

History

The exhibition closes with works from two of Bey's most recent series exploring African American history and collective memory.

"The Birmingham Project," created in 2012 as a commission from the Birmingham Museum of Art, memorializes the victims of the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and its violent aftermath. The series features expressive portraits of children who are the same age as the bombing victims paired with photographs of adults who are the ages those children would have been in 2012 had they lived. The photographs, along with an accompanying video piece, are stirring reminders of the precious lives lost and foreground the enduring legacy of racism and violence against African Americans.

In 2017, Bey completed "Night Coming Tenderly, Black," a series of beautifully rendered and evocative images made in Ohio where the Underground Railroad once operated. As landscapes, the large black-and-white photographs mark a departure from the artist's previous work, but they emphasize many of the same existential questions. The series, whose title is drawn from a Langston Hughes poem, conjures the spatial and sensory experience of an enslaved person's escape to liberation as imagined by the artist. Shot by day but printed in deep shades of black and gray as if they were taken at night, these evocative and mysterious works explore blackness as both color and metaphor for race.

"Dawoud Bey: An American Project" will be presented in the High's Wieland Pavilion Lower Level.

About Dawoud Bey

Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953) was born in Queens, New York, and began his career as a photographer in 1975 with a series of photographs, "Harlem, USA," that were later exhibited in his first solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. Since then, 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, D.C.; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, among many others. His photographs are represented in collections

worldwide, and his critical writings on photography have appeared in numerous publications and exhibition catalogues. Bey received the prestigious MacArthur “Genius” fellowship in 2017 and is also the recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. 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.

Exhibition 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 70 illustrations and contributions from the exhibition curators Corey Keller (curator of photography, SFMOMA) and Elisabeth Sherman (assistant curator, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York); 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; and Claudia Rankine, award-winning poet, essayist and playwright and Frederick Iseman professor of poetry, Yale University. The catalogue is edited by Keller and Sherman and is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Exhibition Organization and Support

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About the High Museum of Art

Located in the heart of Atlanta, the High Museum of Art connects with audiences from across the Southeast and around the world through its distinguished collection, dynamic schedule of

special exhibitions and engaging community-focused programs. Housed within facilities designed by Pritzker Prize–winning architects Richard Meier and Renzo Piano, the High features a collection of more than 17,000 works of art, including an extensive anthology of 19th- and 20th-century American fine and decorative arts; major holdings of photography and folk and self-taught work, especially that of artists from the American South; burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, including paintings, sculpture, new media and design; a growing collection of African art, with work dating from prehistory through the present; and significant holdings of European paintings and works on paper. The High is dedicated to reflecting the diversity of its communities and offering a variety of exhibitions and educational programs that engage visitors with the world of art, the lives of artists and the creative process. For more information about the High, visit www.high.org.

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