Dawoud Bey: An American Project

Dawoud Bey's photography bears a heavy weight. From the start of his career in the 1970s, Bey has used his camera to grapple with arguably the thorniest issues in photography's history. Focused on race and identity in the United States, his work confronts the dynamics of power at the heart of photographic representation. Bey wrestles with the problem of giving image to the past and its persistent mark on the present, and he shines a light on the role institutions play in codifying faulty historical narratives. *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* at SFMOMA pays respect to a photographer who is at once a master of his medium, an incisive critic of its limitations, and a powerful advocate for photography as a means of social change.

The exhibition introduces Bey's major bodies of work and emphasizes his profoundly humanist approach. Rather than unfolding chronologically, the show juxtaposes major series, cutting across time to highlight the continuities within his work as well as the evolution of his thinking. Images from the series "Harlem, U.S.A." (started in 1975), for example, hang in eyeshot of the more recent "Harlem Redux" (2015). Started while Bey was in his early 20s, the former project launched his career. At the time, Harlem was not only the undisputed capital of Black American life but also the artist's home. Comprised principally of portraits of neighborhood residents, the series marks Bey as an heir to documentary greats like Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava (a major influence). Bey's intense search for empathetic exchange is manifest in his subjects' unguarded poses and candid looks into the camera's lens—early evidence of the artist's desire to create equity between photographer and subject. The focus on human interconnectedness in "Harlem, U.S.A." renders the conspicuous absence of faces and bodies in "Harlem Redux" disquietingly poignant. Rendered in saturated color, the series pictures Harlem's physical transformation under the pressures of gentrification. Training his eye on abandoned buildings and new, innocuous commercial architecture, Bey captures a neighborhood gutted of the human vitality and cultural specificity that for more than a century gave Harlem life.

Bey doubled down on reciprocity with his sitters in "Class Pictures" (started in the 1990s), a series of portraits of American teenagers, many of them hailing from minority communities. Shot in rich color and framed with a tight focus on the sitter's face and torso, the images not only capture a figure's unique physical traits but also his or her individual style and personality. A short text from each sitter appends his or her portrait. In giving his subjects a literal voice, Bey allows the teenagers to construct their own identity, a rare privilege for a population denied the visibility and autonomy of adulthood. "Class Pictures" hangs in dialogue with other large-scale color portraits. Made with a cumbersome 20 x 24 inch Polaroid, these pictures monumentalize the artist's friends and young people he met while traveling. Often young people of color, these are not the faces and bodies typically associated with power or celebrated within museum walls.

The collaborative process that animates so much of Bey's portraiture was in many ways impossible to maintain in the last two series in the exhibition, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" (2017) and "The Birmingham Project" (2012). Inarguably the stars of the show, both series address major lacunae in the record of American history, imaginatively giving image to that which cannot be seen. "Night Coming Tenderly, Black" addresses the Underground Railroad, a clandestine network of passages and safe spots that enabled escaped slaves to travel north to freedom before the Civil War. The Underground Railroad's exact makeup remains a mystery, as secrecy was vital to its efficacy. Bey's photographs—monumental prints rendered in strikingly dark shades of grey—provide an affective analogy for the experience of moving along its routes. The series suggests possible structures and landscapes seen by travelers as they moved toward freedom. Searching these dark prints brings to mind the experience of thousands of African Americans who worked to make sense of unfamiliar terrains as they fled.

Substitution, rather than creative re-imagining, is the strategy at play in “The Birmingham Project.” The series commemorates the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. The Ku Klux Klan attack killed four young girls and wounded twenty-two others. Bey’s meditation on the bombing pairs a young person, the same age as one of the victims, with a man or woman in his or her 50s, the age the victims would be had they survived. The resulting double portraits remind us of the innocence of the victims, their lost potential and unfulfilled experiences. Here, the presence of two individuals only underscores the absence of the one lost. Bey’s insight is a crucial one, not only for our conception of the bombing, but also our understanding of a world increasingly awash in photographic imagery. Photography’s quick processing time and easy circulation may make possible a fuller, more complex visual representation of American life. In the hands of the right artist it can also redress lapses in our historical memory and crucial gaps in our visual knowledge.

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