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Dawoud Bey's Poignant "The Birmingham Project" on View at National Gallery of Art, September 12, 2018, through March 17, 2019



Dawoud Bey

Mary Parker and Caela Cowan, 2012

2 inkjet prints mounted to dibond
overall: 101.6 x 162.56 cm (40 x 64 in.)

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the Collectors Committee and Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad Fund

Washington, DC—For more than 40 years photographer Dawoud Bey (b. 1953) has portrayed American youth and those from marginalized communities with an unusual degree of sensitivity and complexity. ***Dawoud Bey: The Birmingham Project*** celebrates the National Gallery of Art's recent acquisition of four large-scale photographs and one video from Bey's most important series, "The Birmingham Project," a deeply felt and conceptually rich monument to the victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 15, 1963. Coinciding with the 55th anniversary of this tragedy, the exhibition focuses on Bey's representation of the past through the lens of the present, pushing the boundaries of portraiture and engaging ongoing national issues of racism, violence against African Americans, and terrorism in churches. ***Dawoud Bey: The***

Birmingham Project will be on view at the National Gallery of Art from September 12, 2018, through March 17, 2019.

"Bey has long explored issues of identity and representation in portraiture through community-based projects in schools and museums. *The Birmingham Project* expands his abiding interest to use his art to bring the African American experience and American history to life," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the members of the Collectors Committee and Alfred H. Moses and Fern M. Schad, who made the acquisition of these extraordinary works possible."

In these photographs Bey pairs two life-size portraits representing the victims of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and related violence in Birmingham that Sunday in 1963: one portrait of a young person the same age as one of the victims, and another of an adult 50 years older—the child's age had he or she survived. The exhibition also features *9.15.63*, a split-screen projection that juxtaposes a re-creation of a drive to the 16th Street Baptist Church filmed from the window of a moving car with views of everyday spaces—some familiar (a beauty parlor and barbershop), some politically charged (a lunch counter and schoolroom).

Exhibition Organization

The exhibition is organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

About the Exhibition

On the morning of Sunday, September 15, 1963, dynamite planted by members of the Ku Klux Klan blasted through the church basement where young girls dressed for Sunday services, killing 11-year-old Carol Denise McNair and 14-year-olds Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson. Within hours of the bombing, two African American boys, 13-year-old Virgil Ware and 16-year-old James Johnny Robinson, were murdered in related violence. The bombing shattered the optimism of the March on Washington held two weeks before and awoke the world to the real hatred preventing integration, helping to convince the country of the urgent need for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

As an 11-year-old boy growing up in Queens, New York, Bey recalls, in his words, "the ground-shifting trauma" of seeing a picture of Sarah Collins, the surviving younger sister of one of the bombing victims. Lying in a hospital bed with cotton balls over her eyes and skin mutilated from the explosion, Collins's harrowing image initiated in Bey a long process of crafting a response to this pivotal event in the struggle for civil rights. After being haunted by this image for many years, Bey sought to give physical presence to these six young martyrs. He visited Birmingham several times over seven years and solicited sitters from the city's present-day African American community. After photographing people individually, he paired two life-size portraits, one of a young person the same age as a victim in 1963 and another of an adult 50 years older, marking the child's age had he or she survived.

Inviting his subjects to dress and pose freely, as is his usual practice, Bey photographed them in two historically significant locations. He made half of the portraits in the sanctuary of Bethel Baptist Church, a headquarters for the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights and site of earlier bombings. The other half were made in the 18th-century gallery of the Birmingham Museum of Art, the commissioning body for Bey's project and an institution with its own dark history of segregation: admission for African Americans was restricted to one day a week through the early 1960s. Representing these mythic victims with ordinary people looking directly into the camera, the diptychs connect different generations. Yet they also raise broader questions about how to visualize absence, loss, and memory in a medium that depicts the world in the present tense.

Alongside a selection of four diptychs, the exhibition will feature Bey's video *9.15.63*. This split-screen projection juxtaposes, on the right, a recreation of the drive to the 16th Street Baptist Church, shot from the window of a moving vehicle looking up at trees and the roofs of houses from the vantage point of a young child. On the left, slow pans move through everyday spaces—some familiar (a beauty parlor and barbershop), some politically charged (a lunch counter and schoolroom), as they might have appeared that Sunday morning. Devoid of people, these views poeticize the innocent, mundane existences ripped apart by violence.

A short film of approximately eight minutes will be screened in the project room in the West Building and also will be available on the exhibition's webpage. Featuring an interview with Bey, the film will provide valuable context for understanding the series in light of Bey's broader interests in portraiture and American history. It will explore how the artist became interested in the topic, how he arrived at the final formulation of his series in diptych portraits and a video, and what he learned on his repeated trips to Birmingham over seven years of research. Finally, the film will address the links between Bey's work in Birmingham and his current long-term project on the Underground Railroad.

Dawoud Bey (b. 1953)

Dawoud Bey began his career as an artist in 1975 with a series of photographs, *Harlem, USA*, that were later exhibited in his first one-person exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. He has since had numerous exhibitions worldwide at such institutions as the Art Institute of Chicago, the Barbican Centre in London, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the High Museum of Art, the National Portrait Gallery in London, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among many others. The Walker Art Center organized a mid-career survey of his work, *Dawoud Bey: Portraits 1975–1995*, that traveled to institutions throughout the United States and Europe. In 2012 the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago organized a survey exhibition titled *Dawoud Bey: Picturing People* that traveled to museums in the United States. That same year the Art Institute of Chicago acquired the complete vintage group of *Harlem, USA* photographs and mounted the first exhibition of that work since it was shown at Studio

Museum in Harlem in 1979. The Art Institute of Chicago and Yale University Press also published the complete *Harlem, USA* project for the first time. A 40-year retrospective publication of his work, *Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply*, will be published by the University of Texas Press in September, 2018.

In addition to many solo exhibitions at museums and galleries worldwide, Bey's works are included in the permanent collections of numerous museums in the United States and abroad, including the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, the Guggenheim Museum, the High Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Bey has received multiple fellowships and honors over the course of his long career, including the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. He was a 2015 United States Artist Fellow. In 2017 Bey received a MacArthur Fellowship. His critical writings have appeared in publications throughout Europe and the United States, including *High Times*, *Hard Times: New York Painting, 1967–1975*, *The James Van Der Zee Studio*, and *David Hammons: Been There and Back*. He has curated a wide range of exhibitions at museums and institutions including the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, Weatherspoon Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, GASP (Gallery Artists Studio Projects), and the Hyde Park Art Center. In 2018 a major retrospective monograph, *Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply, 1975–2017*, will be published by the University of Texas Press.

Bey holds a MFA from Yale University School of Art. He is a professor of photography at Columbia College Chicago, where he began teaching in 1998, and served as the 2008–2010 Distinguished College Artist. He is represented by Stephen Daiter Gallery, Chicago; Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco; and Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

Exhibition Curator

This exhibition is curated by Kara Fiedorek, Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Postdoctoral Fellow in the department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Related Activities

Lecture

John Edmonds

September 23, 2:00 pm

John Edmonds, artist, in conversation with Jessica Bell Brown, PhD candidate, department of art and

archaeology, Princeton University

Made possible by the James D. and Kathryn K. Steele Fund for Photography.

Arnold Newman Lecture Series on Photography

Dawoud Bey

December 16, 2:00 pm

East Building Auditorium

Dawoud Bey, artist

Press Contact:

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General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt, Twitter at www.twitter.com/ngadc, and Instagram at <http://instagram.com/ngadc>.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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