

The Renaissance Society

at The University of Chicago
5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

Museum Hours
Tuesday - Friday: 10 am - 5 pm
Saturday, Sunday: 12- 5 pm
Closed Mondays
http://www.renaissancesociety.org

Dawoud Bey

Picturing People

Opening Reception: May 13, 4:00-7:00 pm

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00–6:00 pm

May 13–June 24, 2012

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Hyde Park, U.S.A.

By the late 1960s, Harlem, New York, a city within a city, had an extremely illustrious career as a photographic subject. Over the course of the twentieth century, its vibrant public life made it a staple of street photography. Given that black life played itself out against discrimination, not to mention negative stereotypes, portrayals of Harlem and its denizens came to exemplify photography’s humanist impulse—an impulse that was also subject to a mandate for dignified representations of blacks. From the Harlem Renaissance through the Civil Rights Movement, in an arc from, say, James Van Der Zee to Bruce Davidson, images of life in Harlem took on at one and the same time an increasing humanist depth and political urgency.

In 1975, when a 22-year-old Dawoud Bey, camera slung around his neck, took to the streets of Harlem, he would begin his career by recapitulating a trajectory-cum-tradition. Accordingly, Bey had at his disposal a host of canonical figures from whom to draw inspiration, be it Aaron Siskind or Roy DeCarava, Helen Levitt or Richard Avedon. Picture by picture, the body of work that would become *Harlem, U.S.A.*, situated itself confidently, lovingly, and above all discursively, within a history of Harlem street photography. With respect to Bey’s relationship to this daunting legacy, the subjects and situations he had chosen were all tried and true. More substantial than any change in subject matter, was a change in context, as the 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new black political and cultural consciousness defining Bey’s generation.

Bey worked his uptown beat four years before premiering the portfolio at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. Although there had been exhibitions about Harlem, notably *Harlem On My Mind* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969) and Bruce Davidson’s *East 100th Street* (The Museum of Modern Art, 1970), it was of no small significance that Bey’s was an exhibition about Harlem, in Harlem, at a venue fully manifesting the values of cultural self-determination. Here was a black artist photographing black life for a black audience. If, over and above being street photography, the images that comprise *Harlem, U.S.A.* were about identity, then it was one predicated on a self-identification triangulated between the photographer, the subject, and the audience. Given where they were shown, the images sought to solicit the willful blurring of distinctions between who is being represented by and to whom. These images were the site of communion, an inter-subjective connectedness confirming the ongoing imaginings of community where “I” might become “we.”

Over the course of nearly four decades and through several bodies of work, Bey, in many respects, has come full circle. *Picturing People* surveys his career subsequent to *Harlem, U.S.A.* The notion of community, all but implicit in *Harlem, U.S.A.*, has become wholly explicit in his newest body of work, titled *Strangers/Community*, an example of which is featured on the reverse side of this poster. Since 2010, Bey has been photographing two individuals that, although members of the same socio-geographic community, are unknown to one another. Casually positioned side-by-side, between them are differences in age, race, compartment, gender, etc.—differences calling into question the terms on which community is imagined in relation to self and vice versa. A project that began in Atlanta under the aegis of Emory University has now been brought to Hyde Park, Chicago, home of both the artist and the greater University of Chicago community. *Picturing People* contains five new works from the *Strangers/Community* series whose sitters were photographed in various University locals, including the Chicago Booth School of Business, Ida Noyes Hall, and the Mansueto Library.

Portraiture is Bey’s stock in trade. By and large, he has maintained integrity to the genre in its classical form. This is notable given that Bey’s artistic maturity coincided with a staunch and extensive critique of photography’s claim to represent an objective truth. Bey’s generation is one for whom photography could no longer be considered a transparent medium through which reality spoke. As the site where “the real” assumes an evidential order, the photograph was where meaning and deep-seated beliefs were best contested. An image’s truth was not to be measured in terms of its correspondence to a reality before the lens. Instead, it was measured against other representations, which it could challenge, displace, or augment, thereby bringing different truths or meanings to light. As it relates to the human subject, with its supposedly immutable codes of race, gender, and sexuality, this entailed the production of alternative and counter-narratives for which staged photography proved indispensable. While Bey was fully receptive to this agenda (tellingly, Carrie Mae Weems was a student of Bey’s), of greater importance to him was the emergent rhetoric of multiculturalism and its

emphasis on race and representation. Bey then translated an issue unavoidably fraught with politics into a genre-specific investigation of portraiture’s formal mechanics, beginning with the relationship between photographer and subject.

The informal portraiture that was a mainstay of *Harlem, U.S.A.* waxed and waned in the street photography of the mid-1980s, only to re-emerge with a vengeance in 1988. That year, Bey traded in his 35mm SLR for a tripod-mounted 4x5 inch view camera. He began using Polaroid Type 55 film, which in addition to making an on-the-spot print, also generated a negative. Portraits made with this camera were a highly formal affair, though still taken on the streets, forcing Bey to interact with his subjects. In exchange for their time (upwards of 20 minutes), Bey gave them the resulting Polaroid print. Focusing on a central figure whose gaze is aimed squarely at the camera, these images are of a different tone and tenor than his previous work. Graciously removing themselves from the flow of time, the sitters are not depicted as happenstance but declarative selves. They are depicted frontally. More than visible, they are wholly present, giving the camera their undivided attention, as seemingly aware of the viewer as the viewer is of them. They are assured, composed, self-possessed, conscious of their appearance before the lens and the ultimate succession of gazes that will fall upon their likeness in that moment time and time again.

Bey became increasingly interested in his subjects to the exclusion of their environs, having concluded that the sitters, regardless of whether the portrait was formal or informal, would be read in relation to their context. Bey would then forsake the streets for the studio. At that same time, he was invited to use the large-format 20 x 24 inch Polaroid camera. The isolation of the subject, in conjunction with that camera’s robust formal capabilities, further propelled Bey’s investigation away from the social and toward the formal dimension of portraiture where certain limits quickly became apparent. In isolating the subject, the face became the image’s primary index. As a result, the physiognomic as it defines portraiture would also delimit portraiture. In producing a fixed image of his subject, about whom the viewer could produce a kind of summary psychological evaluation, Bey would be culpable in producing precisely the kind of “truth” of which he had learned to be wary. As a response, Bey resorted to the diptych, photographing his sitter twice in order to destabilize a fixed reading. A latter day

example in the exhibition is the diptych portrait of Stuart Hall, where the noted scholar and social theorist acknowledges the camera’s presence in one instance only to be distracted, withdrawn in thought perhaps, the next. As early as 1993, Bey deployed the multi-panel format to group portraits. With the decontextualized subjects as the sole focus of his attention, he began zooming in and magnifying the scale of their faces, ultimately fragmenting them, subjecting physiognomy to a kind of analytic cubism.

The shift to a studio-based portrait practice, even if made on exclusively formal grounds, would not have been without its politics. By the late 1980s, advertising, fuelled by the sports and music industries, co-opted the mandate for positive imagery of blacks, recycling it at warp-speed through its own fun-house of mirrors, dissolving the ground from which to formulate a counter-narrative. Bey’s fragmented, multi-paneled works from the early and mid-1990s were read as a response to conditions in which images of black subjects, no longer able to be critiqued from the outside, had to be deconstructed from within. While Bey’s procedure offered itself up to a critical significance at the symbolic level, there was a formal precondition of equal, if not greater, significance that Bey had already put into effect at the literal level. Before fragmenting the figure, Bey understood that to isolate the human subject from any kind of context is to have already abstracted the figure. Bey’s fragmentation of his subject should be understood as an extension and reflection of the logic put into place by the initial decision to move from street to studio. Despite their legibility in relationship to the politics of representation, Bey’s decisions were guided more fundamentally by formalist concerns, making his 2001 return to formal street portraits all the more dramatic.

Young people are perhaps Bey’s favorite subject. His interest in photographing them as a discrete genre within his work was formalized in 1992 when he was invited to be artist-in-residence at the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. Since then, young people have remained a staple of his work. From 2002 to 2006, he embarked on a series of residencies designed exclusively to work with high school students. The resulting body of work, entitled *Class Pictures*, came from projects in Chicago, Detroit, Orlando, New York, San Francisco, and a return to Andover. Insofar as youth is defined by its

mutability, it serves a foil to post modernism’s contestations over other immutable codes ascribed to our being. Part of being young is to understand one’s self as an individual and learning to articulate the thoughts, emotions, and desires setting one apart from everyone else. As warranted by his subjects, Bey wanted to give them voice by having the students write a brief text about themselves. The first person texts, which accompany each portrait, signify youth as a time when being is produced; youth as the production of self, which in *Class Pictures* is affirmed by the image and authenticated by the sitter’s voice. As a result, *Class Pictures* is not a critique but a confirmation of subjectivity. It stands in dialectical distinction to the Polaroid works of a decade earlier. The combination of text and image aimed at the presentation of an authentic self, however, inadvertently speaks to the fate of portraiture at the hands of advertising where pictures of individuals accompanied by their words are at the service of testimonial given to goods and services.

Bey’s disposition for capturing young people was discernible as early as *Harlem, U.S.A.* This would reveal Bey’s interest in young people to be at a social level. In his words, “they are the arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular moment.” As the “arbiters of style,” young people follow the winds of fashion, which, as winds will, blow this way and that. Again, mutability of being is part and parcel of being young. With respect to youth, it is not only about their being, i.e. who they are in the moment of the photo, but also who they stand to become. This could likewise be said of Bey’s recent project *Strangers/Community*. But instead of being posed to an individual young subject—an “I”—the question of who one stands to become could be posed to a community—a “we.” For the most recent chapter of *Strangers/Community*, this would be the community of Hyde Park. Hyde Park, however, is not only home to Dawoud Bey and the University of Chicago, it is also President Obama’s old stomping grounds. This chapter of *Strangers/Community* not only poses questions of representation and identity to individuals and community but, how, based on these questions, we imagine the nation as a whole. Based on *Strangers/Community*, the process of imagining who “we” are nationally takes place from the inside out. If Hyde Park, U.S.A. is any indication, then hope hardly need be audacious.

Related Events

OPENING RECEPTION

Sunday, May 13, 4:00pm to 7:00 pm

Featuring a talk with the artist from 5:00 to 6:00 pm in Kent Hall room 107.

GALLERY TOUR

Saturday, May 26, Noon

Darby English

Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago

English is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, where he has taught modern and contemporary art and cultural studies since 2003. He is also affiliated faculty in the Department of Visual Arts; the Center for Gender Studies; and, the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture. English is the author of *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2007) and co-editor of *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (MIT Press, 2003; republished Rizzoli, 2007). He has received grants and awards from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Creative Capital Foundation, the College Art Association, the Getty Research Institute, the National Humanities Center, and the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute. This event will take place in the gallery. FREE

FOR NEWS ABOUT ARTISTS AND EVENTS

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This exhibition has been made possible through generous support from the David C. and Sarajeana Ruttenberg Arts Foundation and the Harper Court Arts Council. Additional sponsors include Jack and Sandra Guthman, Deone Jackman, Janis Kanter and Tom McCormick, Michael Alper and Helyn Goldenberg, Barbara Fosco and Paul Klein.

Program support has been received from Alphaswood Foundation; the CityArts Program of The Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, a municipal agency; Christie’s; Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, The John R. Halligan Charitable Fund; the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Mike Kelley Foundation for the Arts; Robert Lehman Foundation, The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; Chauncey and Marion D. McCormick Family Foundation; Nuveen Investments; the Provost’s Discretionary Fund at The University of Chicago; Pritzker Foundation; RBC Foundation; The Siragusa Foundation; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; and our membership.

**The Renaissance Society
at The University of Chicago**

5811 South Ellis Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637

Phone (773)702-8670

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A Young Man Wearing A Georgetown Jacket, 1989
Silver print, 20 x 24 inches

[that side]

Rudy Nimocks and Lindsay Atnip, Hyde Park, Chicago, 2012
Pigment print, 40 x 48 inches

Essay by Hema Walker. Layout by the J&J. Graphic Design, Chicago.

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