

## Dawoud Bey/MATRIX 132

"I am mindful that portraiture has been a way for a select group of people — the gentrified class — to perpetuate their images. Museums all over the world are filled with portraits that moneyed people were able to commission of themselves, and thus perpetuate themselves through the ages. I like to bring the same attention to ordinary people, and people of color. I particularly like to give this kind of attention to black people, as a people whose images have been stereotyped and ridiculed extensively in this country."

Dawoud Bey. "The Unflinching Gaze," The Chronicle of Higher Education (January 5, 1994), p. B104.

Dawoud Bey's Hartford Portraits '96 features ten large, multi-panel studio portraits made by the artist with the large-format Polaroid® 20-by-24-inch camera at the Wadsworth Atheneum in July 1996. Five of these works are on view in MATRIX, and five are exhibited in the Amistad Gallery. The individuals represented in these portraits are fourteen young people (from the Hartford-based Artist's Collective summer youth employment program) who participated in a five-week introductory visual studies workshop at the museum, organized by the Martin Office of Museum Education.<sup>2</sup>

Using photography as his tool, Dawoud Bey has been passionately committed to making authentic and forthright images of contemporary persons of color for nearly two decades. Over this time, he has been equally committed to exposing and contradicting the demeaning stereotypes that, until recently, have dominated representations (or should we say *misrepresentations?*) of African Americans in this country. Even after the abolition of slavery, crude stereotypes of blacks as lazy, shuffling, buffoonish, ignorant and unreliable continued to appear in popular culture with such frequency that they cripple our national psyche to this day.

Bey's work is consciously calculated to refute such stereotypes. Often monumental in scale and rich in color, his portraits have a commanding physical presence. Importantly, Bey chooses to photograph his subjects just as they are when they arrive in the studio. The sitters are allowed to present themselves on their own terms, without costumes, make-up, props, or other

mediating devices. With admiration for the significant and innovative contributions this age group makes to contemporary fashion, Bey's portraits often include seductive details that draw our attention to dress, hair styles, and personal adornment.

From early on, Bey encouraged his sitters to look directly into the camera. This translated into portraits in which the subjects gaze directly at the viewer, an unrestrained and uninhibited gesture of self-assurance. However, Bey points out that "in many of the works that I did in Hartford, the individuals are not looking directly into the camera. While the earlier works were concerned with the direct and reciprocated gaze, the recent work seeks to create a more internal and private space for the 'subjects.' This suggests to me a diminishing concern for the viewer, and a growing concern with allowing the 'subjects' to inhabit a different and more complex psychological space." In all instances, his portraits intend to honor the lives of his subjects.

In recent years, Bey has taken a special interest in working with adolescents as portrait subjects. Sometimes awkward and uncertain, they are often society's most misunderstood outcasts. As an extension of his artistic practice, Bey encourages the students to consider the ways in which all of the visual images — from television, print media, music videos, film, billboards, logos, and packaging — that inundate us on a daily basis carry both overt and covert messages. Under his tutelage the students are introduced to a vocabulary that encourages them to read and analyze such images with a critical eye.

During their time at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Hartford students spent seven days with Dawoud Bey, observing him at work on the camera, sitting for their own portraits, and watching others sit for very long and uncomfortable stretches of time. Bey also spent time with the students discussing issues of representation, viewing several contrasting MTV videos, and looking at nineteenthand early twentieth-century African-American portrait images in the sub-basement storage areas of the Amistad Foundation African-American Collection. He observed of his Hartford students, "There were some brilliant kids in the group. These kids have a lot of ideas in their heads that nobody asks them about."

Over the last several years, Bey has focused on the role of the museum or gallery as a site where he and the institution can engage in a dialogue with members of the local community. He has made these large-scale, composite

portraits of adolescents in a number of residencies — first at the Addison Gallery of American Art in 1992, and, subsequently, in Minneapolis, Chicago, Atlanta, Columbus, and, most recently, Hartford.

Bey joins an ever-expanding group of late-twentieth century artists who have challenged the long-held assumption that photography can capture objective 'truth'. Bey's carefully constructed, multi-panel photographs are intentionally off-register. The formal qualities of Bey's assembled portraits speak of the artist's recognition that no photograph of a given individual can be adequately comprehensive. Indeed, his use of a fractured image is reminiscent of the efforts of analytic cubism to embrace multiple perspectives on a single, static two-dimensional canvas. Bey intends for the subtle disjunctiveness of these portraits — from one panel to the next — to acknowledge the complexity of his subjects in real life.

When the Hartford students first examined their finished portraits, for example, they were struck by the discrepancy between the extreme physical discomfort they felt during their long, still poses and the total absence of any evidence of this pain in the final image. For Bey, "This was another opportunity for the students to realize that there is always a gap between what's happening in the real world and what the photograph actually shows." <sup>5</sup>

Bey received his first camera, an old Argus C3 range finder, at the age of fourteen from his godmother. Initially, he had little interest in photography. A gifted drummer from an early age, his focus was on music instead. However, a visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's highly controversial and hotly debated 1968 exhibition, Harlem on My Mind, introduced Bey to the power of the photographic image. "There were precious few African-American photographers included in this show," Bey recalls. "What impressed me about the show was that the photographs were of African Americans, even though they may not have been by African-American photographers."6 At the Metropolitan, he did encounter the elegant studio portraits of James Van Der Zee. This exhibition also introduced Bey to the intensity of the social and political dialogue surrounding issues of representation, particularly for persons of color.

From his previous experiences as a jazz musician, he brought to his photography an ease and confidence in his ability to improvise. Bey's improvisational skills continue



to play a central role in his work today. Despite the formality of the studio portraiture tradition and the imposing presence of a rare and costly camera, Bey begins each portrait without any notion of the final image in mind.<sup>7</sup>

Bey's first serious photographic project was outdoors on the streets of Harlem. From 1975 to 1979, he made both candid and posed photographs of local residents. Bey's first one-person museum exhibition at The Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979, entitled Harlem USA, is a vivid portrait of a community. He continued his street photography in urban centers, in Mexico and the Caribbean, among other places. In 1988 he began making composed, studio-like portraits of individuals and groups out on the street. For these images, he used a 4-by-5-inch view camera on a tripod with Polaroid Positive/Negative type 55 film, which allowed him to give the sitter a small Polaroid photograph on the spot and still retain a negative for his own use. This exchange was important to Bey, who had grown increasingly conscious of the complex dynamics that usually privilege the photographer over his "subjects." The larger, more cumbersome camera extended the time Bey needed to spend on each image. This, however, led to closer communication between Bey and the individuals he photographed.

Indeed, the artist has come to place great value on this collaborative notion of portrait photography. In his studio sessions, Bey can be found out in front of the camera as much as he is behind it, engaging his sitters with questions and conversation. In this way, he hopes to encourage his subjects to become an integral part of the process and to make them aware that they have an active role to play in determining the ways in which they are represented. As writer Greg Tate has observed, "Before we even look at Dawoud Bey's photographs, it behooves us to understand the social contract that this photographer imposes on himself as a means of maintaining an ethical balance between his sense of aesthetics and his responsibility to the communities he chooses to portray." 8

Dawoud Bey was born in Jamaica, New York in 1953 and grew up in Brooklyn. As a young artist he spent formative time at The Studio Museum and the Weusi Academy, both in Harlem. He received a B.A. from Empire State College in 1990 and an M.F.A. from Yale University School of Art in 1993. Currently he is on the





faculty at Rutgers University. He has been the recipient of numerous fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Arts Regional Fellowship in 1991. He lives and works in New Haven, Connecticut with his wife, Candida Alvarez, an artist, and their six-year old son, Ramon.

Andrea Miller-Keller Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art

Since 1991, Bey has worked on one of the Polaroid Corporation's largest cameras. Built in 1976, this 5 feet high, 3.5 feet wide, 200+ pound camera produces a 20-by-24-inch image on Polaroid film in just over a minute. There are only five of these cameras in the world. The Wadsworth Atheneum rented the camera for four days in July 1996. The camera was shipped to Hartford, accompanied by a Polaroid technician, Tracy Storer, who set up and supervised the camera's use in the museum's first-floor Hartford Courant Room.

<sup>2</sup> The students spent five weeks in residence at the Wadsworth Atheneum under the direction of Amy Sailor-Milner, Community Outreach Coordinator/ Culpepper Fellow in the Martin Office of Museum Education, and Gerald Walsh, a summer intern in the Department of African-American Art.

- <sup>3</sup> Dawoud Bey, in writing to Andrea Miller-Keller, January 1, 1997.
- <sup>4</sup>Dawoud Bey, in conversation with AMK, December 17, 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> Dawoud Bey, in conversation with AMK, December 17, 1996.
- <sup>6</sup> Dawoud Bey, in writing to AMK, January 3, 1997.
- Dawoud Bey, in conversation with AMK, December 30, 1996.
- <sup>8</sup> Greg Tate. "Reconstructing the Black Image: The Photographs of Dawoud Bey," *Dawoud Bey: Recent Photographs* Ledel Gallery (New York),1990, n.p.

The students who participated in this project are Asa and Keisha Boyd, Daniel Brathwaite, Onieka Chambers, Crystal Dowdy, Syretta Edmondson, Laneisha Hamilton, Damien Hough, Waynette Kerbo, Shakeia Long, Marcia McKay, Lakeisha Ruth, Jacqueline Stamps, and Daniel Warren.

Special thanks to Amy Sailor-Milner, Gerald Walsh, Nedret Abrahamson, and Tracy Storer.



Dawoud Bey and students at work during summer residency, July 1996, Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo: Gerald Walsh.

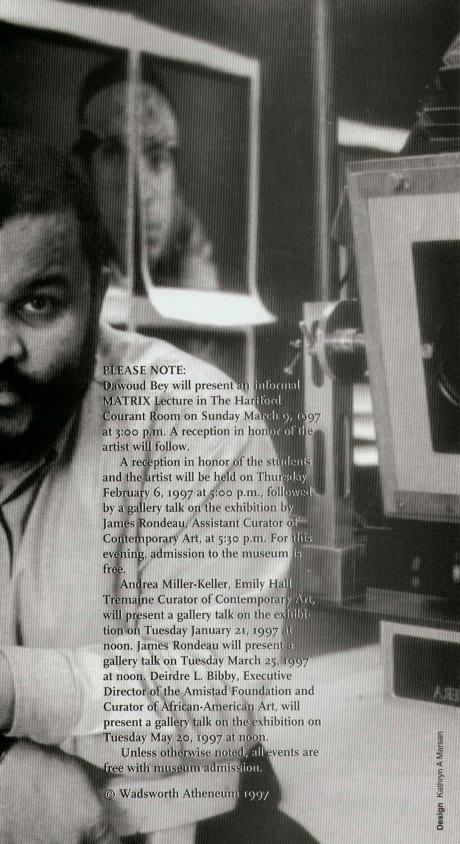
## Works by Dawoud Bey in MATRIX and Amistad Galleries:

Daniel and Damien, 59" x 66" (6 panels); Asa, 59" x 44" (4 panels); Laneisha, 87.5" x 44" (6 panels); Onieka, 87.5" x 44" (6 panels); Marcia and Waynette, 59" x 66" (6 panels); Daniel, 59" x 44" (4 panels); Shakeia, 29.5" x 44" (2 panels); Keisha, 59" x 44" (4 panels); Syretta, 87.5" x 44" (6 panels); Lakeisha, Jackie, and Crystal, 59" x 88" (8 panels).

All works are Polacolor ER prints from 1996. They are lent courtesy of the artist; David Beitzel Gallery, New York City; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL. Overall dimensions represent unframed works. Panel sizes vary slightly, each c. 30" x 22".



Dawoud Bey, Onieka. Photo courtesty of the artist.



### African-American Studio Portraits: Dawoud Bey Selects from the Amistad Foundation Collection

The exhibition of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century photographs from the Amistad Foundation African-American Collection was conceived to correspond with the exhibition of Dawoud Bey's recent portraits of Hartford youth on view in MATRIX and the Amistad Gallery.

During his residency here at the Wadsworth Atheneum in July 1996, Dawoud Bey spent several days working in storage reviewing photographs in the Amistad Collection. The studio photographs selected by Bey feature portraits of African Americans from urban and rural communities throughout the country from the 1840s to the 1920s. The images are of families and individuals, including laborers, doctors, business people, politicians, athletes, teachers, actors, students, masons, and preachers. Ranging from daguerreotypes, tintypes, and *cartes-de-visite* to albumen prints, these images capture a variety of attitudes and social demeanors, affirming the full personage and humanity of blacks.

This kind of studio portraiture differs significantly from generalized representations in many others works of art in which blacks rarely were imbued with a sense of individuality — as such depictions would attest to blacks having a full range and variety of human characteristics and abilities. African-Americans understood this unwritten law. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, those few prominent blacks who obtained access to the middle and upper classes commissioned paintings and, later, photographs of themselves, thus recording their own images of dignity and humanity.

Juxtaposed against stereotypical depictions in the Amistad Foundation Gallery — some subtle, others more graphic — the over forty works selected by Bey illuminate the ways in which portrait photography detailed a profound sense of the black sitter's individuality and integrity. Although stereotypical images are not abundantly exhibited here, the history of their proliferation throughout society (and their startling resurgence today) informs our own interpretation of the portraits from the Amistad Foundation Collection.

Together, the works in MATRIX and the Amistad Foundation galleries focus critical attention on current and historical representations of people of color, and, in the process, challenge our conventional ideologies and assumptions.

Deirdre L. Bibby Executive Director, Amistad Foundation Curator of African-American Art



## Statement by the Artist

This exhibition looks at the history of the representation of African-Americans in photographic form within the genre of the studio portrait, examining the differences in the representations of African-Americans in popular media and those representations that result from studio portraits that the subjects commissioned of themselves and their families.

Given the sometimes extreme differences in the stereotypical representations often found in popular culture and these studio portraits, this exhibition considers the studio itself as a site for the construction of an alternate identity, an identity which offers a strong challenge and rebuke to the distortions and misrepresentations that have long defined the black image.

Using a range of photographic media, the exhibition offers evidence of the affirmative power of the self-constructed image — an image that results from the collaboration between studio photographer and subject.

Dawoud Bey, Guest Curator October 1996

Well-dressed couple, daguerrectype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown. Amistad Foundation African-American Collection, Wadsworth Atheneum. Photo: David Stansbury.

#### Works in Amistad:

Powell Williams at A. carte-de-visite, c. 1870. Anderson Studios Richmond, VA: Mason wearing elaborate apron, carte-de-visite, n.d., George Fields Peoples Studio. Toledo, OH: Mrs. Mat Glave and granddaughter Mattie. carte-de-visite, c. 1890. Whittaker and Kennedy Studio. Weatherford, TX: Young woman posed with song bird, cabinet photograph, c.1800. Clark Studios, Atchinson, KS: Portrait of a young man, carte-de-visite, n.d., Alunster Studio, Springfield, OH: Young woman standing by pedestal covered with oriental rug, dressed in widow's weeds with a long veil, cabinet photograph, c. 1880. Hassall Studio, Keokuk, IA: Jessie Barkesdale of Richmond, Virginia, carte-de-visite, n.d., Roman Studio, Philadelphia, PA: Graduation portrait of Rosaline Guinn, carte-de-visite, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Two sisters standing amid elegant furnishings, cabinet photograph, c. 1880. O. Durgan Studio. Norwich CT: Communion photograph of two young girls in white communion dresses, photograph, 1929, Ashton Studio, NYC: White woman seated with two sons on either side. A black woman stands behind. tintype, c. 1870, photographer and studio unknown; Portrait of father sitting next to his very elegantly dressed daughter, tintype, c. 1870, photographer and studio unknown: Four cadets, two seated with dress swords, carte-de-visite, c. 1915, photographer and studio unknown: Young man with hat standing against a sideboard in front of draped window, carte-de-visite, n.d.. Schillare Art Photography Studio, Northampton, MA; Man in a dress suit posed with hat in one hand and cane in another, tintype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown: Well dressed man standing posed with left leg crossed over right, tintype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown: Woman finely dressed and wearing a hat, stands with left hand on chair, tintype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Man standing wearing three piece suit, tintype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Young boy dressed in button-up jacket and knickers posed next to spindle back chair, photograph, c. 1900, photographer and studio unknown; Woman wearing long black gloves, photograph, c. 1900, Dave and Hargrave Studio, NYC; Gardner, member of South Carolina Legislature; cabinet photograph, n.d., Wearn and Hix Artists Studio, Columbia, SC; Young man elegantly dressed standing with hands in pockets,

photograph, c. 1900, Rution and Werbalsky Studio, Boston, MA; Three women dressed in white; photograph, c. 1900, photographer and studio unknown; Two blackface minstrel caricatures, photograph, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Well dressed couple, photograph, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Young Baseball Player from Negro Baseball League, post card, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Young boy in suit standing by wicker chair; cabinet photograph, c. 1880, Scholten Studio, St. Louis, MO; Woman standing in a country lane wearing a fur coat and floral hat; carte-de-visite, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Actresses Anna Hyers in Arabian costume and her sister Emma Hyers wearing fur collar and hat with gingham ribbon, cabinet photograph, c. 1895, Thomas Houseworth Studio, San Francisco, CA; Two white men seated on boxes. In background standing with a hand on each shoulder of the white men is a black woman with bandanna and apron, tintype, c. 1870, photographer and studio unknown; Young woman leaning against the back of a chair, photograph, n.d., National Studio, Boston, MA: The Sherrah Quartett, photograph, n.d., Ferguson Studio, Clinton, VA; "Tut" Jackson and his manager, photograph, c. 1922, B. E. Kelley Studio; World War I Soldier, photograph, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Couple posed, man seated next to woman in hat standing to his left, cabinet photograph, c. 1880, Spellman Arcade Studio, Springfield, OH: Woman wearing hat standing with arm leaning on chair, tintype, c. 1840, photographer and studio unknown; Seated man in double breasted jacket, tintype, c. 1840, photographer and studio unknown; Portrait of a young girl, daguerreotype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Mrs. E. L. Hodgdon wearing bonnet and three gold rings, daguerreotype, c. 1860, photographer and studio unknown; Woman wearing buttoned collar, daguerreotype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown; Young man with large bowed-tie which extends far beyond his lapels, ambrotype, c. 1850, photographer and studio unknown: Well-dressed couple. He is seated with woman standing to his left with her hand on his shoulder, daguerreotype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown: Man with two women at his side, tintype, n.d., photographer and studio unknown.



#### Selected One-Person Exhibitions:

The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC Harlem USA '79: Cinque Gallery, NYC Dawoud Bey: Recent Photographs '83: Hunter College, NYC Puerto Rico: A Chronicle '84: Light Work, Syracuse, NY Recent Photographs '86; The Midtown Y Photography Gallery, NYC Photographs by Dawoud Bey '86; Blue Sky Gallery, Portland, OR Dawoud Bey '86: BACA Downtown Center for the Arts. Brooklyn, NY Brooklyn Street Portraits '88; Ledel Gallery, NYC Recent Photographs '90: Fogg Art Museum. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA Dawoud Bey '01: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA Dawoud Bey: Photographic Portraits '92; The Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College, Chicago, IL Polaroid Portraits '93; Drew University, Madison, NI Photographs from the Streets '93; Cleveland Museum of Art, OH Dawoud Bev Photographs: Portraits '94; Olin Art Gallery, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH Dawoud Bey: Photographs, Portraits '94; The Photographer's Gallery, London, England Dawoud Bey '95; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN Dawoud Bey: Portraits 1975-1995 '95 (Traveling also to Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Chicago Cultural Center, IL: Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, VA: The El Paso Museum of Art, TX; The Newark Museum, NJ; The Jersey City Museum, NJ): High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA Picturing the South: The Commission Project '96; Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus Dawoud Bey: Residency Exhibition '96; David Beitzel Gallery, NYC Dawoud Bey '96; University Gallery Fine Arts Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst, MA Dawoud Bey '96.

## Selected Group Exhibitions:

International Center of Photography, NYC Harlem: The Last Ten Years '79; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC Self Portrait '80 (Traveled also to Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA): Jazzonia Gallery, Detroit, MI Photography: Image and Imagination '82; The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYC Recent Acquisitions: Eight Photographers from the Schomburg Center '82: The Catskill Gallery, Catskill NY Candida Alvarez and Dawoud Bey '84: Kenkeleba Gallery, NYC Affirmations of Life: The Opposite of a Nuclear Nightmare '84; The Bronx Museum of the Arts, NY A Decade of En Foco '86: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA New American Photographs '87; Light Work, Syracuse, NY From the Collection: 1984-1987 '87; The Works Gallery, Newark, NJ America Juju: African Ritual Influence in Contemporary American Art '87: Washington Project for the Arts, Washington, DC The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism '80 (Traveled also to California Afro-American Museum, Los Angeles: Duke University Museum of Art. Durham, NC; Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston, TX: The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC): Jamaica Arts Center, Jamaica, NY US/UK Photography Exchange: Transtlantic Dialogues '89 (Traveled also to Camerawork Gallery, London, England and elsewhere in the United Kingdom); Galerie du Jour, Paris, France Un Couteau dans la Photo '90: The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC Home: Contemporary Urban Images by Black Photographers '90; Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY Four Residents: Io Babcock, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh and Mary Ann Toman '90; King's Lynn Arts Center, Norfolk, England The American Dream '91; de Meervaart Cultural Centre, Amsterdam. The Netherlands New York Time '01: The Northern Photography Centre, Finland Pohjoinen Valokuva 1991 '91: The Museum Of Modern Art, NYC From The Permanent Collection '92; Photokina, Cologne, Germany Selections 6 '92; Houston Center for Photography, TX About Faces: Approaches to the Portrait '04: DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park. Lincoln, MA Strokes of Genius: Mini Golf by Artists (a collaborative project with Bradley McCallum) '95; Center for Curatorial Studies Museum, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY A/Drift '96.

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Dawoud Bey, Keisha. Photo courtesty of the artist.