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*Night Coming Tenderly, Black*

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Dawoud Bey  
Exhibition Critique



Madison Pope  
Professor Robert Blandford  
Exhibition Management  
February 19, 2019

## General Information

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|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Title:         | <i>Night Coming Tenderly, Black:</i> Dawoud Bey                                                                               |
| Venue:         | The Art Institute of Chicago                                                                                                  |
| Type:          | Temporary                                                                                                                     |
| Dates:         | January 11, 2019 – April 14, 2019                                                                                             |
| Size:          | ~1800 Sq. Ft                                                                                                                  |
| Budget:        | N/A                                                                                                                           |
| Sponsors:      | FRONT Exhibition Company                                                                                                      |
| Collaborators: | FRONT International: Cleveland Biennial of Contemporary Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art |

## Main Topic

Dawoud Bey photographically re-imagines the Underground Railroad through the perspectives of fugitive slaves navigating unknown territory in the Ohio region.

Sixteen large scale photographs engulf the viewer in darkness, a sensory experience that attempts to capture a history that lacks physical evidence. Despite its legendary, myth-like status the Underground Railroad was *very much* a real thing, allowing more than 100,000 enslaved African Americans a route to freedom. A few of the known locations are featured in this exhibition. Bey also reimagines the safehouses and invisible networks of pathways that were parts of the Underground Railroad through visual imagery of homes, wooded areas and even Lake Erie. The overall saturated darkness envelops the viewer and places them within the shoes of fugitive slaves navigating through unknown territory at nightfall; a visually jarring perspective that isn't often explored within history teachings. The lack of Bey's well-known portraiture does not mean this exhibition lacks a sense of humanity, instead the sense of humanity is strengthened. This exhibition calls for empathy from the viewer and intimately places them within the shoes of fugitive black bodies living in America at the time of slavery. A salon-style wall of photographs showcases imagery from the Art Institute's collection that continue the conversation outside of the exhibit, offering photographic historical documentation of black life in America rather than an imagined one.

## Mission

*Night Coming Tenderly, Black* fits perfectly within The Art Institute of Chicago's mission statement, which intends to represent the world's diverse artistic traditions while inspiring and educating the public in the most ethical way possible. The Art Institute also works to preserve and interpret

works of the highest quality and Dawoud Bey's stunning photography falls nothing short of excellence. Recently shifting his focus from portraiture of marginalized communities, Bey's sensory and spatial experiences provoke the perspective of African American slaves navigating towards freedom. Telling stories through the perspective of a black body offers a diverse take on a history we all know but are deficient of in terms of visual evidence. Bey is a well-renowned black photographer who was recently awarded the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the "Genius Grant". Prior to the fellowship he was a Professor of Photography at Columbia College Chicago. This exhibition offers a unique, educational perspective of a historically oppressed part of the American population.

A black banner proudly flew on the front façade of the Art Institute of Chicago during the first month of this exhibition's opening. The exhibition was publicly announced on November 15<sup>th</sup> by a press release from the Institute itself. Since then, it's still being promoted internally within the museum as well as featured on the front page of the Art Institute's website. *Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)* has been featured on the museum's Instagram page a total of three times; this strategic repetitiveness informed the museum's 462,000 followers before the exhibition opened, the day it opened, and even promoted it again one month after being opened. Not only does this serve as a great reminder for those who wish to attend, it also brings hype and anticipation. Social media advertisement of the exhibition is the most easily accessible way of promoting events. The Art Institute also has a Facebook and Twitter page to market its exhibitions.

## Walkthrough

Visitors are faced with a simple yet monstrous line of text before they reach the doors of the exhibit, it says "DAWOUD BEY NIGHT COMING TENDERLY, BLACK" and that's all they need to know. After opening the doors, two 48 x 59-inch photographs stare back blankly. At first these large photographs seem completely black, but as eyes adjust the image that has been plastered all over your city or social media timeline appears - *Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse)*. As you walk to the right of the pair, the gallery space opens up a bit more. Essentially, the whole gallery is a large rectangular space divided into two smaller, oblong rectangles by a 10 ft. wide wall on the left and another wall of half the size to the right. The left dividing wall holds two photographs and the smaller dividing wall on the right displays one. All of the photographs are 48 x 59-inch and are evenly spaced throughout the exhibition's white walls, which includes 16 of the 25 total photographs in this series. The stark contrast between the white walls and black photographs along with the evenly balanced spacing creates a truly minimalistic atmosphere.

The photographs all have about two-inches of white matting and are enclosed in black frames. The repetitive contrast between the wall, frame, matte, and photo create a simplistic yet classic feel that draws your eyes inward towards the photo. There is glass over the photos which tend to reflect the lighting above, and even reflect your own image into the photo itself. I particularly do not enjoy glare especially if the photo is this dark, it's just a little more difficult to see. Maybe Bey wanted to add a layer of difficulty to the "seeing" aspect as well as a small personal reflection.

The exhibition is so cohesive that I wouldn't say there's necessarily a thematic arrangement to the photos. The historical buildings that are known landmarks for the Underground Railroad are featured alongside similar buildings in the nearby Ohio region, although they are not differentiated in any way. There are also photos of wooded regions that surround the homes as well as various creeks and marshes which are visuals and vantage points that fugitive freedom-seekers would've seen. The viewer is placed directly into the scene thanks to their placement at eye-level. The black and white non-digital prints are printed on silver gelatin paper, which give the photo an even greater illusion of depth and undeniably add to the effect.

The visitors tend to circulate the exhibition a few times before feeling satisfied with seeing everything. The space is simply laid-out and open which allows for traffic to flow freely, there is no set path to follow in order to understand what the exhibit is trying to achieve. The viewers are meant to explore and discover the exhibit at their own pace.

The most interesting thing I noticed when first perusing the exhibit was my innate search for the main wall of text. I needed something to tell me more about these looming photographs. After circling the whole exhibit, I finally found it – it was on the opposite side of the small dividing wall that was holding the single photograph. The photographs themselves offer a sensory experience whereas the main wall of text offers a spatial one. I think Dawoud Bey wanted to elicit this reaction from the audience. They have to navigate through an unknown, darkened space to find something that might not even be there. Trekking an unfamiliar landscape under the shadow of darkness is precisely what fugitive slaves experienced on their way to freedom.

The introductory text contains two quotes to carry on the conversation about the black experience in America throughout history. The first quote is by photographer Roy DeCarava who says, "My work is about the concept of a world shaped by blackness". DeCarava's photos were developed with the darkest, rich tones which inspired Bey's photographs for this exhibit. The second quote is actually the closing lines of Langston Hughes' short poem "Dream Variations" and reads, "Night coming tenderly / Black like me" which inspired the exhibition title. Rather than darkness being daunting, Bey and Hughes suggest darkness as a tender embrace, or a guidance towards freedom.

The photographs are all untitled, the only differentiating factor being the number of the photo and its visual description located in parenthesis next to it. Outside this main wall of text there aren't any supplemental descriptions or additional text to support the exhibition. There is one other element of text located by the doors of the gallery as you exit, mentioning the wall of photographs outside of this exhibit that coincide with it. Dawoud Bey selected three-dozen photographs and curated a salon-style wall outside of the exhibit. The photos explore the various ways in which the black subject has been viewed or situated within American culture, physically and socially. The wall includes landscapes, photos of Malcom X and Black Panthers, to a Daguerreotype of Frederick Douglass. Among them also lies work from Carrie Mae Weems, Alfred Stieglitz, and unknown photographers who offer us a look at America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This collection of 36 photographs is more noticeable when walking out of the gallery versus walking in. I totally missed this wall the first time I visited the exhibition. I think it's meant to be only seen when walking out of the exhibit, but I'm not sure everyone noticed that the two elements were connected. There is one bench available to sit and take the wall in, along with a

guide with everything listed. This guide is meant to be shared among all onlookers and I can only imagine there was more than one when this exhibition opened. What I was left with was one misshapen and mangled pamphlet to share with everyone else there. There was no text on the wall to understand the copious amount of information otherwise. Great in theory, but not in execution. I just wish there were more pamphlets there (or that people wouldn't steal...).

## Visitors

I believe the intended audience is 20s and up, the audiences I observed ranged from all ages. Visitors around the age of 6 didn't seem to understand the subject matter but enjoyed running around the exhibition and looking at the darkened photos. Teenagers tended to speed through the exhibition whereas people 30 and up lingered for longer. I believe the audience Bey intended were in their 20s, or at least could understand the subject matter and be capable of empathy. We've all learned about the Underground Railroad in grade school, and no it was *not* an actual railroad. As you age history sheds its fable-like qualities and reality begins to shine in. This exhibition is intended to open eyes and to place the viewer within the position of enslaved African Americans – it requires empathy to fully understand (not that I'm saying children and teenagers aren't capable of empathy).

Visitors around the ages 40 and up spent the most time in the exhibition. One couple took their time viewing all of the photographs before coming upon the main wall of text. Afterwards, they went through and looked at all of the photos once more. Then they visited the wall of photographs curated by Dawoud Bey outside of the exhibit. This couple spent almost a half hour within this exhibit – staying even after I left to continue looking at everything. They did not have their phones out at all during this time. I would think this exhibit should take at least 10-15 minutes for the average visitor to experience fully.

I don't think the intended audience includes purely selfie-takers, whichever that demographic may be. I have seen multiple instances of teenagers and even people in their 20s take selfies in their reflections of the photographs. I can tell the difference between someone trying to take a picture of the photo versus taking a picture of themselves, it's all in the struggle to get rid of the glare or to embrace it. It reminds me of how our society consumes everything. People go to art museums to take a picture of a Picasso and leave only having seen it through their camera lens. This is not the right way to look at something, in my mind. This exhibit goes so much deeper than the surface level of the photos, it's an experience. Documenting this sensory experience is one thing, taking a picture for purely narcissistic reasons is another. Audiences not mature enough to care or understand what's happening tend to breeze through this exhibit.

Without much text to read at first, most people spend less time looking at the photos before seeing the main text wall than they do afterwards. Audiences tend to bounce around at first and come back to photographs once they know why they're seeing trees or marshland. Audiences get up close to the photos, stand far back and repeat. The exhibition is very much designed to be navigated in an organic way, its open and simplistic in format. It's interesting to see visitors come in for the first time and try to explain what they're seeing and why. I had some guy approach me

and ask me if I thought the artist accidentally underexposed his photos and this is what inspired him. I refrained from my full-blown art history speak yet he still didn't seem to think it was inspired by the vantage point of slaves escaping towards freedom at night... or Langston Hughes for that matter.

I think the audiences understood the meaning and flow of the exhibition for the most part. If the visitors missed the outside wall of photographs before coming into the exhibit, they would experience it afterwards. Some people saw the outside elements beforehand, but I see no difference in the ordering of the two. The element that seemed most compelling was the introductory wall text for the exhibit. It's in a different location from most exhibitions and it's also the only text, aside from the minimalistic labels for the photographs. It demands attention and definitely receives it.

## Success

Overall, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* is a highly successful exhibition. In terms of McLean's definition of success, Bey's exhibit is not just photos on a wall – it's a sensory and spatial experience which makes it all the more dynamic. It showcases an alternative perspective to a history we all know. This unique vantage point is innovative and interesting and requires a bit of introspection and empathy from the viewers. Also incorporated into the exhibit is a sense of discovery that mimics the very sense of exploration and navigation of unknown terrain that fugitive slaves had experienced. The viewers have to search for a meaning to these darkened photographs and are led to discover the artists intentions once they reach the back of the gallery. The added wall of photographs outside of the exhibition add a more historical layer to the story, and tie everything together. This will definitely be an exhibition I will remember for years to come.

## Appendix

### **i. Art Institute of Chicago Mission Statement**

The Art Institute of Chicago collects, preserves, and interprets works of art of the highest quality, representing the world's diverse artistic traditions, for the inspiration and education of the public and in accordance with our profession's highest ethical standards and practices.

### **ii. Art Institute Press Release: *Night Coming Tenderly, Black***

For Immediate Release  
November 15, 2018

CHICAGO— From January 11, 2019 through April 14, 2019 the Art Institute of Chicago presents the newest work of esteemed photographer Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953). In this captivating exhibition, the veteran photographer shifts his focus from the portrait and the human subject to a landscape that holds the memory of fugitive pathways. The series of 25 large-scale photographs depicts a reimagining of homes and grassy or wooded grounds along the Underground Railroad — the invisible network of routes and safe houses through which perhaps 100,000 or more enslaved African Americans found passage to freedom. Bey made these photographs around Hudson and Cleveland, Ohio, a final way station for those escaping to Canada. This is the first museum showing of *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*; most works from the series will be on view.

Bey aimed here not to trace the steps of passing people in a literal way, but rather intend to “reimagine and evoke the sensory and spatial experience of movement through the landscape” of fugitive slaves and to reimagine for our own time a monumentally significant period in American history. With this series Bey also pays homage to photographer Roy DeCarava (1919–2009) and poet Langston Hughes (1901–1967), who each addressed the African American experience by demonstrating what DeCarava called “a world shaped by blackness.” DeCarava’s tremendous ability to print a spectrum of dark tones gave Bey a model for picturing landscapes of twilight uncertainty. Hughes’s short poem “Dream Variations” closes with the couplet “Night coming tenderly / Black like me.,” which inspired the exhibition title.

Dawoud Bey has additionally chosen around three dozen photographs from the Art Institute collection to display alongside *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. “In conjunction with the exhibition of my own landscape photographs I wanted to mine the museum’s rich holdings to explore ways in which the American landscape has been pictured photographically, as well as ways in which the black subject has come to be situated in that landscape both physically and socially,” says Bey.

*Night Coming Tenderly, Black* is on view in the Modern Wing, in the Carolyn S. and Matthew Bucksbaum Photography Gallery; the artist’s selections from the Art Institute photography collection hang directly outside that gallery. The exhibition is organized by Matthew S. Witkovsky, Richard and Ellen Sandor Chair and Curator of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago. It will travel in late 2020 to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of a retrospective exhibition of works by Dawoud Bey.



**iii. Images**

Main Exhibition Wall

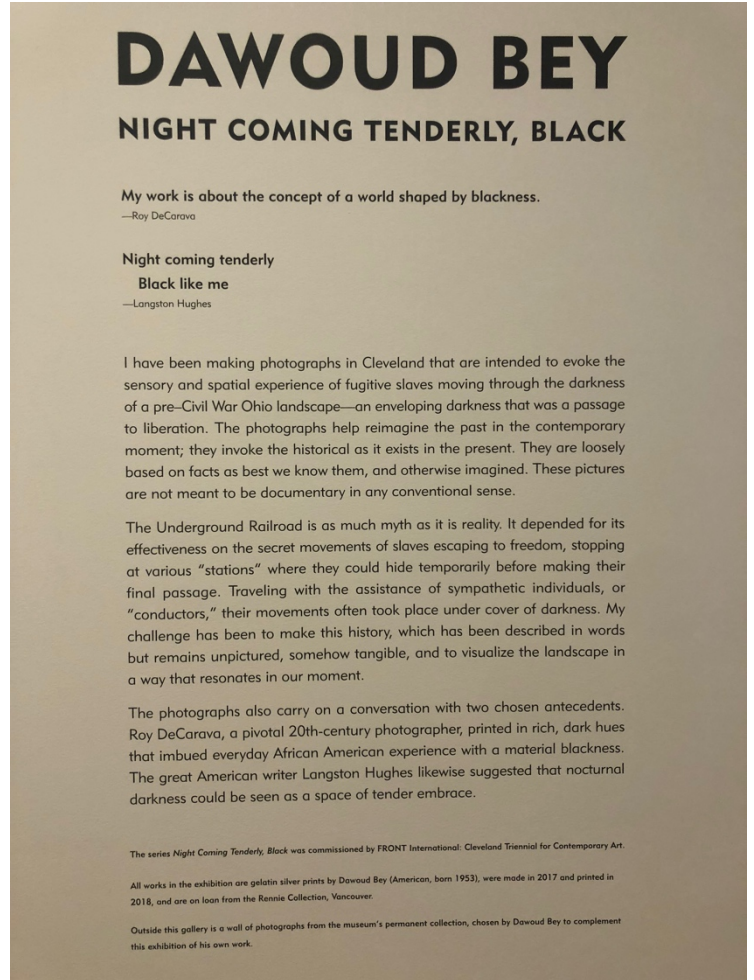


Left and Right Dividing Walls





## Main Wall of Text Opposite of Left Dividing Wall, and Detail



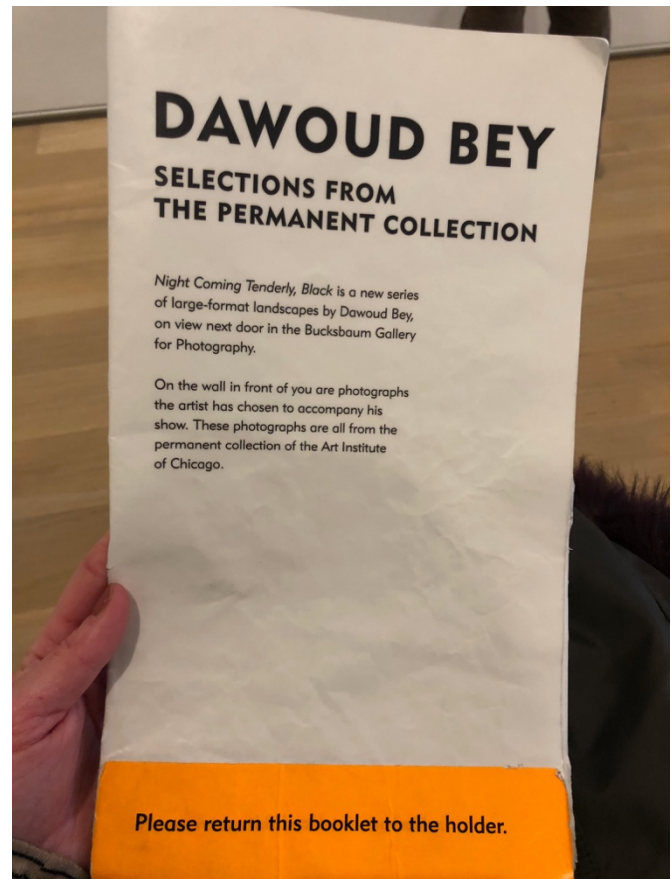
## Looking Towards Exhibition Entrance



## Text Regarding Outside Wall

For more information on these photographs, selected by Dawoud Bey from the museum's collection, please consult the brochure on the nearby bench. These photographs accompany the exhibition of Bey's own work in Gallery 188.

## Booklet for Outside Wall



## Outside Gallery Wall

