

**In Conversation: Dawoud Bey and Gaëtane Verna**

Conversation between Dawoud Bey and Gaëtane Verna, in the Film/video Theater on October 24, 2024, for the Lambert Family Lecture, keynote for the Lambert Family Photography Symposium.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use.

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**Transcript**

Dionne Custer Edwards (0:09):

Good evening. It's good to see you. My name's Dionne Custer Edwards, and I'm head of Learning & Public Practice at the Wexner Center for the Arts here at The Ohio State University, and I'd like to begin by acknowledging the past and present of this territory by sharing a land acknowledgment from OSU Center for Belonging and Social Change.

We would like to acknowledge the land that The Ohio State University occupies as the ancestral and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe, and many other Indigenous peoples. Specifically, the university resides on land ceded in the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and the forced removal of tribes through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. We want to honor the persistence and presence of these tribal nations and recognize the historical context that has and continues to affect the Indigenous peoples of this land.

I'm thrilled to see you all here this evening for the 2024 Lambert Lecture, featuring the incomparable Dawoud Bey. Throughout his four-decade career, Bey's stunning photographs and film installations have pushed boundaries, examining and engaging the Black subject and exploring invisible histories of the Black presence in America.

(1:34):

Who better to feature alongside the exhibiting photographers, Ming Smith and Rotimi Fani-Kayode, renowned artists and thinkers whose work illuminates stories rarely told and push against cultural norms? Earlier today, over 50 individuals participated in our first-ever Lambert Symposium in connection to the work of Ming Smith and Rotimi Fani-Kayode within the context of contemporary photography practice. I invite you to the final session of the symposium tomorrow at 10 AM, which will highlight the life and work of Rotimi Fani-Kayode. We would be delighted to see you there.

This work could not happen without the support of donors. Our sincere thanks to these individuals and organizations for recognizing the value of the arts and this work. Today's programming is made possible by the generous support from the Lambert Family Lecture Series Endowment Fund, which promotes dialogue about global issues in art and contemporary culture. Our sincere gratitude to Bill and Sheila Lambert for their support.

Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by the American Electric Power Foundation, CoverMyMeds, and Huntington.

We are grateful for the partnership of Dr. Mark Sealy, who is the director of Autograph, London; curator of *Rotimi Fani-Kayode: Tranquility of Communion*; and thought partner of the symposium and lecture. It has been a joy to work closely with him, and we are grateful for his support.

I'd also like to thank the entire Learning & Public Practice team and our colleagues here at the Wex. It takes many of us to realize these programs and events. I'd also like to say a very special thank you to Curator of Public Programs, Emily Haidet. And I'd like to thank our Executive Director, Gaëtane Verna. Thank you for your support.

(3:24):

Now, let's get into the program. Groundbreaking artist and MacArthur Fellow Dawoud Bey examines the Black past and present. His photographs and film installations have been exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the United States and Europe. Bey's work has been the subject of numerous solo museum exhibitions, including *Dawoud Bey: An American Project* organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and *Elegy* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and New Orleans Museum of Art. Bey was recently recognized by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has been the subject of several monographs, including *Elegy*, which chronicles Bey's history projects and landscape-based work.

Accompanying Dawoud Bey onstage for conversation is the Executive Director of the Wexner Center for the Arts, Gaëtane Verna. Please join me in welcoming Gaëtane Verna and Dawoud Bey. Thank you.

Gaëtane Verna (4:31):

Good evening, Dawoud, and welcome. Or should I say welcome back? You do have many connections with Ohio and the Wexner Center for the Arts, and in preparation for our talk today, our archivist, Kristen Muenz, was able to share a bit of information with us about when you came to the Wex almost 30 years ago, in 1996, for a residency and workshop. You worked with students at a local high school, Fort Hayes, to take photographs and portraits that were made during this residency, three of which were then exhibited at the Wex. These were just outside the theater in the Wex lobby and other locations on campus. So it's so nice for us to have you come back and be in our space and be in our presence. Thank you so much.

Dawoud Bey:

Well, thank you. It's certainly good to be back, and thank all of you for coming out this evening.

Gaëtane Verna (5:35):

Yes. So as we welcomed people today, we were listening to Max Roach. For those of you who joined us yesterday, it is the centenary of Max Roach, and there's a series of programs touring the USA celebrating this incredible musician, social activist, and it was befitting to start our conversation with Max Roach, and with music, and jazz, and a drummer, since you were a drummer before you ever thought of becoming a photographer. So do you want to speak to us about how much Max Roach is important to you?

Dawoud Bey (6:21):

Well, Max Roach was, I guess, my initial introduction to drumming. He was my introduction to Black musical expressivity beyond the context of pop music. This particular album, *Drums Unlimited*, I first encountered this album probably when I was 12 years old. I would go periodically to the local record shop to pick up my 45s. Some of you of a certain age know what 45s are.

Gaëtane Verna:

All right.

Dawoud Bey (7:20):

The rest of you, we'll have to explain that later. But that's how popular music was available, on A- and B-side 45 RPM records. And I would go in periodically to buy my Aretha Franklin, Temptations, Rolling Stones, whatever. And in the back, there was the album section. Out of curiosity, one day, I went in the back and started flipping through the albums, and there was this album of a Black man sitting behind a drum set. I had taken piano lessons for most of my young life up to that point, strictly under protest, because I had told my parents, "I want a set of drums." And they were like, "maybe it's a good idea if you start with the piano," which actually, as I really advanced into music, piano is a good first instrument.

Gaëtane Verna:

It's a good base, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

It's a good found... But I wanted a set of drums. Next thing you know, I'm in the record shop and I see this Black man with an Afro sitting behind a set of drums, and it just ignited my young imagination. Two years later, after much persistence on my part, I did get a set of drums, and that began my career as a young musician and that became a part of my life. I grew up in Queens, New York, and at that moment, there were a lot of young musicians in the neighborhood.

Gaëtane Verna:

From which you could learn from, right, you said?

Dawoud Bey (9:22):

Yeah. And probably, I've thought about this recently, probably one of the reasons, if not the main reason, that there were so many young musicians in that neighborhood was that we grew up in houses and we had a basement to practice in. We had room to express our creativity in the house.

Gaëtane Verna:

And your mother allowed-

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah.

Gaëtane Verna:

this in the house?

Dawoud Bey:

Even though the drums, when I first got my first set of drums, I had them set up in the living room, driving my poor mother nuts. But she tolerated it and actually encouraged it, and I ended up, as I went along, increasingly finding drum teachers, some well-known, who got me past my early stages of being self-taught. But it was Max Roach and that album that gave me a sense of affirmation for this otherwise abstract idea I had about wanting to be a drummer, without really knowing what that was. So Max Roach marks an important turning point in the beginning of my young creative life.

Gaëtane Verna (10:41):

I've read somewhere you were talking about as a photographer, the relationship between the practice of music, you know, to be a musician, you practice day in, day out, and when people speak of an artistic practice, how you link both of those things, like the practice of the musical instrument and how it affected your practice as a photographer. Do you want to talk about that?

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, because musicians really practice.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey (11:12):

Young artists, everybody has a "practice," you know? Just, it's different. And fortunately, because I had some very serious and rigorous teachers, I started studying with Tootie Heath. Some of you who know the music would know Tootie Heath, Freddie Waits, Milford Graves, who's considered the father of free drumming. Milford lived in my Jamaica, Queens, neighborhood, and so I started studying with Milford. They were all very clear about the seriousness of the music and being rooted in and knowledgeable about the history of the music and treating the music and the instrument with great respect.

I would say that it's my foundational training as a musician and a drummer coming up under them that really continues in terms of the rigor that's involved in being an artist, being deeply rooted in the history of whatever art form you want to participate in, and then figuring out what you have to say within that art form to advance that conversation. But there was always from those teachers a sense that we were both creating something, but we were also participating in something that had a history, and that history was the foundation for whatever you were going to go on to do, and that it was best to know that, if you were really serious about this.

Gaëtane Verna:

And I guess also, if we're thinking of jazz and music in terms of emotion, and vocabulary, and also improvisation, that we can see how that affected your practice also.

Dawoud Bey (13:19):

Yeah, and certainly because I came up largely studying and playing improvisational music, that ability to improvise and to figure a thing out before you get there is still central to the way I work. All of the projects that I've gone on to do, I never know exactly what I'm going to do before I get there, but because I'm steeped enough in the medium and the history, and I understand the formal parameters within which I'm working, I have the confidence to just show up, and you start, begin to make the work. So I think that foundational confidence in having an improvisational sensibility certainly can be traced back to the music.

And I have to add, because along with Max Roach, as I think about these influences, the second most profound musical influence was John Coltrane.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

John Coltrane, you know... Max Roach began to change the shape of the world for me. John Coltrane changed the shape of the world for me because of his clearly stated intentionality, what he wanted his music to do. Now, on the liner notes of *A Love Supreme*, he said, "I want my music to be a force for good."

Gaëtane Verna:

Good, yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

He articulated that clearly that this music had the capacity to change the shape of the world, and he was committed to that. He was certainly, at the time that he was alive, and I would say even beyond, was the jazz musician who most single-handedly in the modern and contemporary moment changed the shape of the music-

Gaëtane Verna:

And influenced so many. Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

-and his rigor. Yeah, so Coltrane, the idea of being rigorous, steeped in the history, radically transforming that history, and having it steeped in a deep intentionality is something that continues to inform all of my work. So John Coltrane, the shape of the world changed when I heard John Coltrane's music.

Gaëtane Verna (15:37):

And so then, when do we get to the camera as the vehicle for your own emotion and your own ability to change the world through your work?

Dawoud Bey:

Well, I think what began to happen, music, playing music requires doing that with other people, and like all social transactions, it can be complicated. I guess I got tired of the complicatedness of waiting for four or five—the largest band I was in was probably an octet, eight people—waiting for eight people to show up. And my godmother had gifted me a camera around the same time that I got my first drum set, and I had no idea how to use it, but it put the interest of the camera in my hand. It seemed somewhat faded because the camera had belonged to my godfather. My godfather passed away, and before the funeral or after the wake, I don't remember which, my godmother asked me to come upstairs with her. She said she had something for me, and she opened up the top drawer of the dresser and gave me a camera. She said, "This camera used to belong to your godfather. I think you should have it."

Gaëtane Verna:

Wow.

Dawoud Bey (17:09):

So, that was a moment. I had no idea what to do with it, didn't know how to operate it, but I was polite enough to say "Thank you." I had no idea what I was going to do with this thing, but she intuited correctly that I was curious enough that I would figure out how to use this camera, which I did. And so the camera eventually led me from the group activity of music to a more solitary practice as an artist and photographer.

Gaëtane Verna:

Though in your work, there's a sense of community and you're always looking to work with community. So I imagine this sense of community that you did have in the music did transpire to how you chose to become a photographer also.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, it definitely gave me a sense that either music, any kind of art practice, actually takes place within a community.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

There was the community of musicians, and then if you go to my first group of pictures, the community of Harlem.

Gaëtane Verna:

We start with Stuart.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, let's not bypass Stuart Hall because-

Gaëtane Verna:

I know. We can't bypass the British.

Dawoud Bey (18:35):

Certainly on this occasion. Yes, Stuart Hall was very central to the critical conversation around postcolonial Black representation. He was central to that conversation, coming out of London, but his influence was global. And it was meeting Stuart Hall in London in an exhibition that Kelly Jones put together in 1989 or 90, *US-UK Exchange*, that's where I met Rotimi, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, whose exhibition is here. And Stuart Hall was at the center of that Black British community of artists.

Gaëtane Verna:

Which gave us Iniva and then Autograph also, of which Rotimi was a founding member. And at the center of all these conversations, there's always Stuart Hall and his ability to create community and to talk about the necessity of these unfinished conversations.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, Stuart Hall was hugely important to a lot of us. He gave voice and shape to this critical conversation and suggested the context in which we might either begin or continue to make our work.



Gaëtane Verna:

(clicks slide) Oops, sorry.

Dawoud Bey (20:07):

Speaking about community, my first project, because that's always, I think, for any artist and certainly for a photographer, what is one's subject going to be?

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah, what do you start with? Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

What do you start with? What do you make work about? For me, that ended up being Harlem, New York, which was very much a part of my family's history. My mother and father had met there. When I came along, they left, but we still had a very close relationship to that community. So that was a part of both my personal family history, and historically the community of Harlem loomed large in the Black sociocultural conversation. So there was that broader history that I was very much aware of, and my family's history that led me to want to participate in the larger conversation while making work that was deeply rooted in personal history and experience. So from 1975–1979, I did these. This is where I learned how to make photographs. Even before going to art school, I learned how to make photographs by photographing in Harlem every day.

Gaëtane Verna (21:39):

And then how would you approach the people to actually get them to stop and be in conversation with you in order for you to take these pictures?

Dawoud Bey:

I learned how to do that. And initially, it wasn't easy. The photograph of the man in the-

Gaëtane Verna:

The bowler hat?

Dawoud Bey (22:02):

in the bowler. I consider that to be the first successful photograph that I made, a photograph that lived up to the thing that I imagined I might make. I saw this man, he was standing with a group of his friends Sunday morning before church. As I was walking up the block, I saw the group, but what I really saw was the man. I said, "I want to make a photograph of this man."

Before I started making photographs, I was terribly shy. This was going to require me doing something that did not at all come easy. And as I approached the group, I said, "Good morning," and I kept walking. I lost my nerves because I didn't... This thing that



you're asking me, "How did you do it?" I didn't know how to do it. So I kept walking down the block, having this quietly loud internal conversation with myself.

Gaëtane Verna:

Telling yourself, "This is not going to go very far, if you don't talk to-"

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah. I was telling myself, "If you can't do this, you're not going to be able to do this thing that you imagined yourself doing and being. This is it. You're here. This is what it's about."

And so I turned around, and of course, now I'm thinking, "What you going to say?" I already passed by one time, now I'm coming back. And I approached the group again, and this time, I just focused my attention on the man that I wanted to photograph and asked him if he would mind if I made a picture of him. I simply didn't look at the other three. He said, "Fine," and this was the photograph that came out of that maybe three- or four-minute encounter. And when I saw it, it really reaffirmed for me the possibility that I could do this. Before that photograph, it was a big question mark.

Certainly, all of these photographs, and certainly the ones in which I'm directly engaging with people, required a good deal of trust, a trust that had to be earned within a matter of minutes or seconds, because it was a spontaneous engagement. I would see someone, I would imagine that I could make a photograph with them, and I just approached them as if it were not a particularly momentous occasion. It was just, "Good morning. I think you look interesting. Would you mind if I-

Gaëtane Verna:

Wow.

Dawoud Bey:

make a photograph with you?" In all of my young sincerity, you know?

Gaëtane Verna:

And shyness.

Dawoud Bey (24:58):

Yeah, you know, I'm sincere, and they have to trust me in order to consent to doing this. And so it was really a process of me coming out of my shell in order to make these photographs that I wanted to make that had to do with creating a particular form of representation of African Americans in this particular-

Gaëtane Verna:

Moment of time. Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

community, which had a long history of representation and misrepresentation.

Gaëtane Verna:

Exactly.

Dawoud Bey:

And so, yeah, it was a process. Before I made these photographs, however, I had been looking at a lot of photographs, just going on my own to galleries.

Gaëtane Verna:

Museums.

Dawoud Bey (25:52):

Museums. The *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum was the first time I'd ever set foot in a museum. And then I slowly started self-educating myself, looking at photographs, trying to figure out not only what my subject might be, but how does one give resonant and coherent form to whatever the subject was. And for me, the subject was going to be the African American community and Black individuals within that community, but having a *what* doesn't tell you the *how*.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

And for me, I wanted the photographs to be very rigorously seen, I wanted them to resonate, both with an authenticity of engagement, but with a kind of interiority. I became increasingly interested in not just the social representation, but the representation of the Black subject that carried with it a real sense of the interiority of the Black subject.

Gaëtane Verna:

The emotion that comes through the person through our gaze of them or seeing them-

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah.

Gaëtane Verna (27:07):

So you as a photographer, it's as if you're reaching out to see them in a way that no one sees them, or in a way that rarely they are presented with their own humanity and emotion.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah. And I was acutely aware that I was, even though I didn't have the means at that time, I was acutely aware that I was making these photographs in order for them to have some kind of public appearance. Ultimately, I wanted these photographs to be on the wall.

Gaëtane Verna:

To be shown, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

So I was aware that as much as they were looking at me through the camera, I also saw them as looking at the hypothetical viewer, who would ultimately be the viewer looking at this work. I was always mindful that I wanted this work to have a public place and reshaping the perception of the Black subject, even as it was a personal exchange initially, but it was really being made for...

Gaëtane Verna:

For presentation in a collective sense or a space, the museum. Because this series, you presented it at the Studio Museum of Harlem.

Dawoud Bey (28:23):

Yes, yes, that was the first place. These photographs were shown at the Studio Museum in 1979. I had a relationship with the museum from visiting frequently, and that became a significant part of my community. When I had enough of these photographs, a strong beginning, I approached the museum and asked them if they would be interested in showing the project once I completed it. Because I was keenly aware that I wanted the photographs to be exhibited in the community in which they had been made. I wanted the subject to also be part of the construct for the audience, and showing the photographs in Harlem allowed for that. And that was largely in response to the-

Gaëtane Verna:

*Harlem on My Mind.*

Dawoud Bey:

*Harlem on My Mind* exhibition, which was very controversial because it was photographs of African Americans that were not shown in the African American community, in which

people in the photographs and in the community did not have any say-so in their institutional self-representation.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

So even though when I went to see *Harlem on My Mind* I was 16 years old, I wouldn't have been able to then explain it to you that way, but all of the problematics around that exhibition imprinted themselves on me. And that's why when I completed this project, I knew that I wanted these photographs to be shown in and for the community in which they had been made. And then whatever else happened, they would go out into the world. But I wanted them, it was really important for me, for the people in the photograph to be able to see themselves in the photograph and to see themselves in the photograph on the wall of an institution, a museum in their community.

Gaëtane Verna:

And do you remember the first opening or the reaction of the people that were photographed?

Gaëtane Verna:

They came?

Dawoud Bey (30:41):

They did. They did. And it was a wildly successful exhibition because people from the community did come, in addition to the Studio Museum in Harlem's community. That encounter with both the Met and *Harlem on My Mind* and Studio Museum in Harlem with my own *Harlem USA* exhibition really made a lasting impression on me in terms of the significant place that institutions can play in one's practice. That one could engage with the institution intentionally. Because I approached the Studio Museum in Harlem. They didn't approach me.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

And I approached them because I had made some photographs in that neighborhood, and I wanted them to be shown in the neighborhood in which they were made. And that has pretty much gone on to define-

Gaëtane Verna:

How you work.

Dawoud Bey:

all the projects that I've done, working very intentionally with museums as partners in the making of my work.

Gaëtane Verna:

And I guess the interest of the museum as a place of power, a place of conversation, a place of, at times, erasure—so how do you change that narrative by inserting yourself and your work inside of the institution?

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, and it was at that young age, approaching the institution, because I had an idea that these photographs-

Gaëtane Verna:

Belonged there.

Dawoud Bey:

need to be shown there.

Gaëtane Verna:

Exactly.

Dawoud Bey:

Not somewhere else, but there.

Gaëtane Verna:

That's it.

Dawoud Bey (32:24):

And they agreed, and that was my first exhibition and my first intentional engagement with the museum.

Gaëtane Verna:

So in the end you weren't that shy. You were able to knock at the door, make a case for yourself.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, I was in my early 20s when I started that work, and I just turned 25 when that exhibition opened. It was, again, very foundational to my thinking about this idea of my making work of a community and how to bring the experience of the community inside of the institutional space.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah. So we'll move along. What's the next one? (clicking slide) So we'll go to the next.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, this jumps ahead several decades.

Gaëtane Verna:

I know. Yes, several decades, with a very striking image that haunted you for a long time.

Dawoud Bey (33:25):

A very long time. Yeah, this was Sarah Jean Collins, one of the girls who was, she was wounded in the dynamiting of 16th Street Baptist Church, in which her sister, Addie Mae Collins, and three other girls-

Gaëtane Verna:

Died.

Dawoud Bey: were killed on September 15th, 1963. She was standing farther away from where the dynamite had been planted on the other side of the wall, and so she didn't get the full effects of the blast, but as you can see, she was seriously wounded.

I first saw this photograph when I was 11 years old. It appeared in this book called *The Movement*. And my parents brought this book home after hearing a lecture by James Baldwin at the church where I grew up in New York. The book was published by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee as a fundraising vehicle, and they commissioned the writer and playwright Lorraine Hansberry-

Gaëtane Verna:

Hansberry, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

to write a text to weave these photographs together into a kind of coherent book form. And there were a lot of violent photographs. There were lynching photographs in this

book, and they were photographs of and about the civil rights movement and the civil rights era.

This, of all the photographs in the book, for whatever reason, this photograph really seared its way into my psyche. I didn't intuit at the moment that it probably had something to do with the fact that I was pretty much the same age as the young girl in the picture. And this picture haunted me for years until I somehow found someplace in my psyche to place it and forget it, which I clearly never did because some 40 years after I first saw this picture, one morning, I sat bolt upright in bed and this picture came flashing back to me. It was like that girl came looking for me. It was such a powerful moment that I decided then and there that I needed to go to Birmingham. I needed to figure out... First I needed to see the place where this moment that had haunted me for so long, I needed to see the place where the tragedy of that dynamiting of the church took place. I didn't know anyone in Birmingham, had never been there, but the force of her appearance that morning just-

Gaëtane Verna:

It's a calling.

Dawoud Bey:

told me kind of inexplicably that I need to go there.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes, need to go.

Dawoud Bey (36:50):

"There's no denying. You're not going to forget. You need to do something with this," and so I made that initial trip to Birmingham, visited the 16th Street Baptist Church. I needed to see the site where this traumatic incident took place. After that, I started making return visits, getting to know the people in the community, allowing people in the community to get to know me, as I tried to figure out what work might I make that was up to the significance of that history.

I made multiple trips, seven, eight, nine years. I was in the midst of other work while I was visiting Birmingham. And then I initially decided to make portraits of young people in Birmingham who were the same age as the six young people who were killed—four were killed that day, and two African American boys were killed in acts of racist violence immediately after the dynamiting of the church. So there were six young African Americans killed that day, the four girls and two boys. I only found out that, the second piece of it, the two young boys, from time that I spent doing research at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. And so once I knew that there were two boys who had been killed, that began to give me the shape of what I might do.

(38:42):

What I decided initially was to make photographs, to give palpable presence to those six young African Americans. The girls were 12 and 14, and the two boys were 13 and 16.



And over the course of all of these decades, they've taken on a kind of mythic presence. I wanted to give a tangible and palpable presence to what does a 12-year-old African American girl look like? 14, 13, 16. That was the initial idea, was to invoke their presence through the presence of young African Americans in Birmingham now, which still left it feeling incomplete, at which point I decided I needed to deal with the present moment, not just the past. And so I decided to photograph African Americans who were the ages that those young people would have been, and to put them together in a way that each diptych represented 50 years, because I was making these photographs 50 years after that date. It was a real conceptual breakthrough for me, this idea of the still photograph, which we generally think about as representing a moment.

Gaëtane Verna:

A moment, yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

How to make something that visualized or represented the past and the contemporary moment, and to put them together to create this kind of liminal space that was past and present at the same time. And so this work was first presented almost 50 years to the day at the Birmingham Museum of Art, again, the relationship of the work-

Gaëtane Verna:

And the place, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

to the institutional space, because at that time, in the 1960s, like all public institutions in the South, the museum was a segregated institution. Until they implemented a Negro day, African Americans could not visit the Birmingham-

Gaëtane Verna:

Museum.

Dawoud Bey (41:06):

Museum of Art. So part of the project, of course, was to open up that institutional space in light of its history. The photographs are made in two locations—in the Birmingham Museum, one, and the second location was Bethel Baptist Church. So I wanted to represent both the segregated institutional space and the Black communal space of the church in the construct of these portraits, to have that be the context in which the photographs were made.

So, this idea of representing specific history begins with *The Birmingham Project*. And along with the photographs, as I have in other more recent projects, I also wanted to think about visualizing and conceptualizing that day through the moving image. So after I completed the photographs, I returned with a film crew and made a split-image video

work, 9.15.63, trying to visualize that day, which was described as a bright, beautiful, blue Sunday morning. I wanted to try to reimagine through the moving image the day that this tragedy occurred. But it was *The Birmingham Project* that drew me into the work that I've continued doing, these history-based photographs that kind of look forward and backward at the same time. To look at the past in the contemporary moment, and to create some kind of visual and conceptual photographic language for doing that.

Gaëtane Verna:

I think what's really mesmerizing is the use of the diptych, and then also your idea of the 50 years between the two, which brings whoever is the age of those young people and then also to show the humanity, again, of these young people who were killed.

Dawoud Bey:

Mm-hmm. Because all of these older people-

Gaëtane Verna:

Were there-

Dawoud Bey:

were at that time-

Gaëtane Verna:

at that time, exactly.

Dawoud Bey (43:48):

Exactly. At that time, they were the ages of the young people who were killed. And many of them knew some of those young people who were killed, so they were the actual embodiment-

Gaëtane Verna:

Exactly.

Dawoud Bey:

of that history.

Gaëtane Verna:

Giving them shape, and also, the history is alive. And I imagine that for the community to trust you to do that work also, again, brings us back to how you engage with them on a

long-term to build that trust and then to accept to be photographed, because I imagine not everyone wanted to be.

Dawoud Bey (44:22):

Yeah. It took years to do that, because even after several years of visiting, it got to a point of the date for the show opened, once we agreed on the date, I still hadn't gotten any men to participate.

Gaëtane Verna:

Okay, wow.

Dawoud Bey:

Several women came forward. Several parents came forward with their children. I visited several schools in Birmingham with classes of young people that I knew would be the age. But still, the gentleman that you see in this diptych, Don Sledge, Don runs a popular barber shop in Birmingham. And I just passed by the barber shop—because I went to a beauty parlor, I went to the barber shop, I went to a greasy spoon restaurant, any place people congregated.

Gaëtane Verna:

Church.

Dawoud Bey:

And Don allowed me to hang out in the barber shop and talk to men who came in that I thought were the right ages. And the interesting thing was, I knew that Don was the right age, but he didn't volunteer, you know? Because who am I, an artist coming in from outside, to dredge up all of this trauma? It's not like anybody's walking around-

Gaëtane Verna:

Wanting to-

Dawoud Bey:

wanting to remember this.

Gaëtane Verna:

talk about this, yes.

Dawoud Bey (45:50):

You know? So all of the men were just reluctant to participate until I met Reverend Carolyn McKinstry, who had also been in the girls' room with those four girls and the fifth. She was the sixth girl who was at that site when the explosion went off. But she left moments before, because she was the Sunday school secretary-

Gaëtane Verna:

Okay.

Dawoud Bey:

and she had to turn in the Sunday school report before her church service started, so that the Sunday school report could be read. And just as she got to the top of the stairs, the explosion went off.

And I had read her book. She had written an autobiography about that moment. Wanted to meet her and finally did. She asked me how the project was going, and I said, "It's going okay, except none of the men are coming forward." And Reverend McKinstry started calling those men for me. She said, "I know you know Dawoud Bey's here, I know you know this project is happening. We need to be involved. We need you to be involved." And on her say-so, because of her standing and credibility in the community, and having been present at that moment, and the pretty much uniform respect that the community has for her, the men started coming forward. But that was only because of her.

Gaëtane Verna:

Wow.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, because I could go on and talk about the history of Birmingham at that point, but it was a very traumatic moment. Not anything, even if they were living in the midst of it-

Gaëtane Verna:

They didn't want to talk, yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

it wasn't dinnertable conversation. You tried to shield your children from it by talking about it as little as possible.

Gaëtane Verna (47:54):

Do you think that this project being shown in the museum changed the narrative for the local people, enabled them to find a way to deal with that embedded trauma?

Dawoud Bey:  
Absolutely.

Gaëtane Verna:  
Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:  
And then for that work to have its initial appearance in a place where the adults remembered not even being able to come to this museum, and now, not only are they coming there, but their portrait is in the museum. For me, all of that is the work. The photographs are a piece of the work, but that whole institutional transformation, all of that for me is a part of the work. It's why I make the work. And it's why the work ends up being situated in the conspicuously public way that it is, because the museum is my arena. That's where I enact my agendas, in the space of the museum, and trying to transform that environment and open up the institutional space to both greater participation, to turn it into a less exclusionary space and more a participatory space, through these kinds of projects and the projects that I've gone on to do.

Gaëtane Verna:  
Yeah. To change the visitors also, so everyone, from the internal to the external and the community around, from your incentive, you transform them, which is really what, you know, this is our work, this is what we're supposed to do.

Dawoud Bey:  
Yeah, there are multiple agendas being enacted in all of my work.

Gaëtane Verna:  
Exactly.

Dawoud Bey (49:38):  
Multiple agendas. And also, being in conversation with the history of my chosen media, trying to expand that history even as I do it through kind of expanding the notion of how the institutions can function, not as a place of display, but as an active partner and a place of display that brings the outside inside.

Gaëtane Verna:  
Inside, yeah.  
And the conversation of the people looking at the work, seeing themselves in the work, and also forcing the institution to move, to change constantly, never sitting still.

We should move on to... So this was the video that you were talking about, the single-screen projection.

Dawoud Bey (50:31):

Yeah, I filmed in four different locations in Birmingham, again looking at the communal space of the barbershop; the Black communal space of the beauty parlor; and then a segregated institution, a lunch counter—thinking about the lunch counter desegregation and how Black people couldn't eat at lunch counters—and then I also filmed in a public school, just trying to imagine those four different kinds of social spaces, empty and quiet as they would've been on that morning before that traumatic incident occurred.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah.

And then you take us to another place. And a completely... I mean you completely... I mean, it's a different conversation, but it's the same conversation.

Dawoud Bey:

Oh, it's all the same.

Gaëtane Verna:

Always the same.

Dawoud Bey:

It's all the same, yeah.

Gaëtane Verna:

But it's-

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, because the other thing that *The Birmingham Project* did for me was to want to begin to look back into the history leading up to that moment.

Gaëtane Verna:

To that moment, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

Because as I always tell people, nothing just happens.

Gaëtane Verna:

No.

Dawoud Bey (52:01):

History explains everything, and I wanted to begin to start looking back into that history leading up to that contemporary moment in Birmingham. And so I received a commission from the FRONT Triennial in Cleveland, Ohio, and they wanted to know if I was interested in making work for the triennial. I told them I would, but only if I could find some significant aspect of African American history that I could begin to grapple with in Cleveland, because I was intent on continuing this historical engagement. And I, from research, quickly came to realize Cleveland and Northeastern Ohio's place on the Underground Railroad due to its proximity to Lake Erie and-

Gaëtane Verna:

Canada.

Dawoud Bey:

Once I realized I had my subject, I agreed to take on a project for the triennial.

Well, there are two different points of inspiration and reference for the work. First is the title, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, which comes from a Langston Hughes poem, "Dream Variations," and the final couplet of that poem is, "Night coming tenderly. Black like me." And I just sat with that for a while, you know? "Night coming tenderly. Black like me." Because when you think about how Blackness has been used as a...

Gaëtane Verna:

Negative things.

Dawoud Bey:

Exactly.

Gaëtane Verna:

Tenderly is not what people use to refer to Blackness.

Dawoud Bey:

And you don't always or often see Blackness alluded to as tender.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.



Dawoud Bey (54:18):

So this idea of a tender Blackness, along with the deep influence of Roy DeCarava's photographs, which were... It probably had the same kind of profound impact on me as a photographer as John Coltrane did as a musician. And for those of you who know DeCarava's photographs, DeCarava-

Gaëtane Verna:

I brought that little book. Remember you were talking about the book?

Dawoud Bey:

Saw that book. I hate to say, but I saw that book when I was very young, probably in middle school, and I borrowed it.

Gaëtane Verna:

*The Sweet Flypaper of Life.*

Dawoud Bey:

I never returned it. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Gaëtane Verna:

You kept it.

Dawoud Bey:

I never returned it. I had to have it. I didn't know any other way to get it. I'm sorry. I did it. I did it.

Gaëtane Verna:

It served you right. It belonged to you.

Dawoud Bey (55:24):

I'd never seen this, photographs of Black people by a Black photographer that were not photojournalism or something of that sort.

Gaëtane Verna:

That's it.

Dawoud Bey:

But when you actually have the experience of looking at DeCarava, DeCarava created a material language through which to talk about the Black subject, a material photographic language. The photographs are very dark. So they have this idea of Blackness as subject, Blackness as narrative, and then blackness as material photographic object.

So I wanted to take on that vocabulary, that material blackness of DeCarava—the Black subject, moving through the blackness of space, in a space that is enlivened by and informed and shaped by the Black presence—and to bring that to bear on this narrative of the Underground Railroad. So Between Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava, that gave me the conceptual and material shape for the work that I went on to make.

(56:45):

I also wanted to use that title as a way of alluding to the fact that all of the work that I do is part of this ongoing conversation with the history of Black expressive culture, whether Langston Hughes or DeCarava, that I am in fact working in a way that is shaped by that larger history of Black expressive culture. So, using that, I made these photographs that the idea was to look at the landscape as if through the eyes of fugitive African Americans making their way to self-liberation through this landscape. So, where about Birmingham, the portraits, the subject, the portraits are here, the subject is out here. I wanted to now look at the landscape of fugitivity through the eyes of those who were moving through that landscape, to make it at a human-eye, a human-scale vantage point, and to also make these very large prints, which allude to the actual physicality of the space through which they were moving.

Gaëtane Verna (58:13):

What's incredible, I would say, is that when you present that series, I mean, I would say for anyone who's African American or not, when you think of escaping, when you think of being in this space that you don't know and you're approaching; and you're seeking freedom; but knowing, like, can you trust that space; and you can't really see it— there's something very powerful in the way that you've also, in this instance, removed the subject. We are the people.

Dawoud Bey:

You are. We are the subject.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes.

Dawoud Bey:

And we can move through that space that Langston Hughes called the tender embrace of blackness, night, moving through nighttime, night coming tenderly. This is a tender space of blackness, so let us have no fear.

Gaëtane Verna:

No fear, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

Let us move through this blackness, this imposing blackness that is also, it's a tender embrace that will carry you through.

Gaëtane Verna (59:25):

Instead of black being negative, you know? When I was a child, my mom was a French teacher, and she refused to allow us to say, "*Il fait noir*," it's black. She would say, "No, it's somber," right? She was always forcing us to not see black as a negative word-

Dawoud Bey:

Exactly, exactly.

Gaëtane Verna:

and then move in our vocabulary to change this perspective. And I think this series transforms what does nighttime mean? How could it be expressive of poetry, of wrapping the body of the subject? And then you, all of us, being the person that are, through your eyes, entering that very poetic space is just magical.

Dawoud Bey (1:00:15):

And DeCarava's very dark prints, they're very beautiful, photographic objects. There's a beauty to the object. And that beauty carries over to these prints that I've made, which are gelatin silver prints. I literally made some test prints as inkjet prints, but those of you who know photography know that the silver halides of a silver print actually sit in the paper.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

So there's this almost imperceptible but real depth that the image takes on.

Gaëtane Verna:

The sculptural effect of it, of the color, that doesn't quite come through with an inkjet.

Dawoud Bey (1:01:07):

Yeah, because the ink sits on the paper. It's not in the paper. And that's one of the reasons that DeCarava's prints have the effect that they do, because they're these dark, rich, black, silver gelatin prints, and yet you can see through that blackness, you can see the Blackness in the blackness in the blackness. It keeps pulling you in.

And so I wanted to take on Roy's vocabulary. I wanted to take up the challenge of Roy's material vocabulary and see if I could bring it forward and apply it to my own work. Something I would not have been able to attempt decades ago. This is definitely the most difficult, rigorous, challenging printmaking. Took years off my life, but it was worth it. It was worth it.

Gaëtane Verna:

Because those are very large, right?

Dawoud Bey:

Oh, this is... I call this- this work is my virtuoso performance. I'll just go ahead and say it. Because I-

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah, just say it.

Dawoud Bey:

I couldn't have done this years ago.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

I could only do this now.

Gaëtane Verna:

This was through practice, and practice, and practice to get to that moment where you feel-

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, to understand the material, and to be able to actually use the material, and then to push the material beyond its seeming limitations, which is what Roy was doing. He was pushing the material beyond the way in which it was conventionally used, and it can either be mud or it can be rich-

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah.

Dawoud Bey:

and it's a fine line between the two.

Gaëtane Verna (1:02:59):

Yeah.

And there's another series that's in the same vein, where, again, you've removed the body, but it's signified with everything that you showed, which this... It speaks so much to how you've grown. It's still a portrait of somebody, but the person is no longer necessary to be present in order to be signified.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah. You know, it's interesting to me looking back because the larger part of my career was spent making photographs of the human subject.

Gaëtane Verna:

Of people, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

And I'm now, obviously, very comfortable and conversant in this idea of subjectively visualizing the landscape. It was a sharp learning curve, to be honest, to get to the point where I have the kind of understanding and facility to make the work that I'm making now. And to also, within the tradition of what we might call the Black photographic tradition, there hasn't been a lot of work done in the area of the landscape.

Gaëtane Verna:

The landscape, yes.

Dawoud Bey (1:04:29):

Yeah, because the work has generally been about the Black subject present and visible in front of the camera, and I came out of that tradition. I'm trying to open up a space of significant Black participation in this idea of visualizing the landscape, using the formal and material language of the landscape to talk about the landscape in a way that's not... Well, it's clearly not Emersonian. You know, you think about the Emersonian notion of the landscape and the grandness. I'm using that language-

Gaëtane Verna:

The romantic notion, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

to talk about a very different narrative, a very different history that's embedded in the American landscape as I trace my way back into African American history and presence—through that presence that lingers unseen but very present in the landscape. And after having made the work about the Underground Railroad, the fugitivity from the plantation, I had to go back to the plantation.

Gaëtane Verna:

To the plantation.

Dawoud Bey (1:05:43):

I got to go back to that place. And using, again, this Black expressive culture conversation, using Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as part of my anchor. And that segment in *Beloved* where Baby Suggs gives this kind of sermon, "In this here place," affirming the Black presence in this here place, trying to raise up the race through the reminder of who we are and who we can be in this here place. And this is the place where not only enslavement happened, but Black culinary tradition, Black musical tradition, Black cultural-

Gaëtane Verna:

Black survival, Black transcendence of the moment.

Dawoud Bey:

Exactly, exactly. There's no denying... Like, this is foundational to our-

Gaëtane Verna:

This is where it starts, and this is where it continues, and it transcends this condition, and constantly doing it.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, the African American crucible.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yep.

Dawoud Bey (1:06:56):

And so I spent time photographing on the landscape of five different plantations in Louisiana and then ended up spending most of my time at Evergreen Plantation in Edgard, Louisiana, which is the single most intact plantation in the country.

Gaëtane Verna:

Wow.

Dawoud Bey:

There are 32 buildings that sit on that landscape, as they always have. All of the cabins, the big house, the entire landscape remains unaltered. For me, it's clearly, it's a sacred site, and you feel that presence lingering in that landscape when you're there. So I spent a good deal of time making these photographs at Evergreen and the other plantation sites in Louisiana, wanting to create a resonant representation, a resonant group of photographs about this place that is so foundational and problematic to the African American and the American narrative. And economy. The entire economy of this country rests on the plantations and the-

Gaëtane Verna:

This-

Dawoud Bey:

the enslaved labor that created this economy.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yeah, this free space, "free," quote, unquote, free for the taking, and then the free labor for profit.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, so I wanted to go back and make some photographs that'll allow us to inhabit that space, and again, to see that space as it might've been seen in that moment.

Gaëtane Verna:

And I think, again, how you've expended this notion of landscape, which is, again, void of subject, but subjects are ever so present.

Dawoud Bey (1:09:19):

And very much like the photographs in Harlem being shown at Studio Museum in Harlem, those photographs made in Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio, were first shown



here, and the photographs made on the plantation landscape were first shown in New Orleans at Prospect.

The relationship of the work being made and the place where the work is presented to me has always been very significant. Because the work will ultimately go out and appear in other places and in publications; the work will circulate. But it's important for me to initially create a conversation with the photographs and the place and the institutional space that inhabits the same landscape.

Gaëtane Verna:

And then you also move to video, but now in this three-screen.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, and this is a three-channel film. You know, when I'm making this work-

Gaëtane Verna:

In color also.

Dawoud Bey (1:10:36):

Yeah. I begin with making the photograph because I understand that language and that material is what I'm deeply invested in and knowledgeable about. But increasingly, I've become interested in wanting to find other ways to make these landscapes resonate through the moving image. I took film classes throughout grad school. I kind of spent a number of years as a closet filmmaker.

Gaëtane Verna:

You're revealing yourself now.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, and I finally decided to go public-

Gaëtane Verna:

Embrace it, yes.

Dawoud Bey (1:11:26):

to go public with this moving-image work. And so this is a three-channel film work called *Evergreen*, and I collaborated with a vocalist and a musicologist, Imani Uzuri, whose area of research is African American songs of resistance in the Antebellum era.

Gaëtane Verna:

Oh, wow.

Dawoud Bey:

That's her area of both research and performance. And I wanted to make a film work that, as much as the photographs—there are a lot of things that photographs don't do. They probably don't do more than they actually do. They don't make any sound, they don't move, there's information they don't give you, anything outside of the four sides of the photographic images. There are a lot of things that photographs don't do, and the moving image allows me to bring the things that photographs don't do to life. And so Imani created a vocal soundscape that invoked the presence of those African Americans who inhabited the plantation and the plantation landscape, and she kind of brought them back to life.

Gaëtane Verna:

Giving them more voice. The voice is coming through the music, and shaping the space that you've created through your pictures.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah. And it's all about heightening the experience of place, making it more palpable, more resonant, more tangible, more emotionally visceral.

Gaëtane Verna (1:13:07):

Mm-hmm.

And then I think we're coming to *Stony*. *Stony the Road* (2022), another series of landscape.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, this is Richmond, Virginia, *Stony the Road*, which comes from that song, wouldn't they ycall it, the Negro national anthem, the Black national anthem? "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod." And this goes back to the beginning. I made these photographs at the Richmond Slave Trail. Some people call it the trail of the enslaved. But it is the trail along which upwards of 350,000 enslaved Africans were brought to the US. You know, Virginia was the epicenter of the slavery trade and industry. And upwards of 350,000 Africans were bought into America. The waterways that you see, this trail runs alongside the James River, and the James River was the means by which they were brought into Virginia.

And so I wanted to, again, inhabit that space, to bring us into close, intimate, resonant contact with the past in this particular moment, but without having any evidence of the contemporary or present moment evident in the work. To kind of draw one inexplicably into the place of history. And so I made this work in Richmond at the trail. It was

commissioned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and when it was completed, it had its first showing at the-

Gaëtane Verna:  
The museum.

Dawoud Bey:  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. It's going to be going to other museums as well. Thankfully, museums in the South, the New Orleans Museum of Art, because this work was made in very close proximity to New Orleans.

Gaëtane Verna:  
And that's also, I would say, a really important gesture from the museum to address its past in choosing that work.

Dawoud Bey (1:16:04):  
Yeah, and again, it's consistent with what I've said about wanting to bring the outside inside of the institutional space, however messy some might consider it, but to use the institutional space and to use my work as a vehicle and a platform to provoke these necessary engagements and conversations around history.  
And this is a two-channel piece called *350,000*-

Gaëtane Verna:  
Yes

Dawoud Bey:  
that was also filmed on the trail. I collaborated with a choreographer and a dancer on this piece, Gaynell Sherrod. What I wanted to do was to answer the question of "What does history sound like?" I wanted to give this history of 350,000 Black bodies moving through this space. I wanted to give it a sonic presence. And so we worked on this soundtrack, recorded at a recording studio, In Your Ear Studio in Richmond, working with an engineer and a sound designer, Paul Bruski, layering, recording the sounds of her feet in what's called—filmmakers know about it, in the foley pits, where you can isolate and amplify the sound. In this case, beginning with the sound of feet, and then overdubbing that, and overdubbing that. And she brought in some young children because there were young children who were enslaved, and she told me, "You know, the sound of young children's feet are different from a 150-pound adult."

(1:18:25)

So we just kept recording, layering, brought in some ambient sound, brought in some material sounds, and just kept overlaying, and overlaying, and overdubbing, 'til we got to this cacophony of sound that's a cacophony, and yet which one can clearly

discern the sound and the rhythm of feet moving through space. We took some of the material, some of the dirt, the wood chips, and things from the trail and bought them into the studio so that moving on that material and recording that would be consistent with the sound of the environment that was visualized. I was fortunate enough to find a great film crew in Richmond to work with, along with the cinematographer and director of photography that I had used for the *Evergreen* video, Bron Moyi. So I'm now starting to work more consistently through the moving image. But of course, unlike making photographs, it requires a team.

Gaëtane Verna:

A team, a community, again.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, it requires a team. And I've finally gotten comfortable with being, I guess, the director of this while other people work with me to make the work. But the *Stony the Road* and the *350,000* video, that's the most recent project.

Gaëtane Verna:

And then there's books. Do you want to talk about your love of books and how books can translate?

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, *Elegy*.

Gaëtane Verna:

This is the book, *Elegy*. How that can also translate, in a more portable way, the emotion of the work.

Dawoud Bey (1:20:44):

Yeah, the book is another way for the work to exist. Books, obviously, don't have the scale of the photographic object, but it's another way to both sequence the work and then to bring in the voices of the writers to help amplify the work in that way. I had a great group of writers contributing to this, including LeRonn Brooks.

Gaëtane Verna:

Yes, who's here with us.

Dawoud Bey:

LeRonn's here somewhere.

Gaëtane Verna:

Right in front.

Dawoud Bey:

Where's LeRonn? There he goes. Yeah. LeRonn, Christina Sharpe, Imani Uzuri, and Valerie Cassel Oliver, who's the curator that I worked on this project with at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

I always start off as an object maker, but the books are another way for the work... I mean, books tend to have a much larger and enduring audience for the work. So I'm pleased. I had a great designer, Eileen Boxer, who supervised, who did the design and supervised the printing. It's about as good as the work is going to get in that form.

Gaëtane Verna (1:22:16):

In that form, yeah. I think that it feels like we're coming full circle as when we started our conversation with music. And as you move from portrait to landscape without the body, and then to moving image, where you're integrating voice or sound into your photographs in a moving image. And then I would say also this community of makers, that from a solitary practice, which required your audience or your collaborators to be the subjects, that you're kind of producing this together, and now film is all about a team effort, because you can't make a film by yourself.

Dawoud Bey:

I know. And it's interesting because I have finally found some filmmaking production crews that I really enjoy working with. And working on *350,000*, the only way I can explain what it feels like to me, it feels like being back in a band again.

Gaëtane Verna:

Exactly, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

As you just described, because you can't make this music on your own.

Gaëtane Verna:

That's it.

Dawoud Bey (1:23:44):

And under the best of circumstances, everybody contributing their piece to the making is what makes collectively the work. And the book is exactly the same thing. I had what I would call a great band of writers, because they each have distinctly different voices, and I could not have anticipated what any of them would write for this occasion-

Gaëtane Verna:

Exactly,

Dawoud Bey:

but I know what they've written in the past.

Gaëtane Verna:

In the past, yes.

Dawoud Bey:

And so if I can bring them into this and put them together within the construct of this book, it should be some pretty good music.

Gaëtane Verna:

Pretty good music, pretty good music.

Dawoud Bey:

Yeah, and I think it is.

Gaëtane Verna (1:24:38):

Well, Dawoud, this has been really wonderful to be able to spend this time together, to exchange, and to do it in the context of Ming Smith and Rotimi, both people that you knew, that you know, and that with whom you have different stories from different perspectives. But it brings us back to your sense of community, your sense of poetry, of sharing with people, and so thank you for bringing us into your world. And I don't think that any of us will ever quite look at nighttime landscape quite the same way, because you've really showed us a way to think of this embrace of darkness and creating such a poetic... at least I am moved and transformed. But thank you so much for being with us.

Dawoud Bey:

Well, thank you, thank you. As I said, I've enjoyed being back, and I've enjoyed having this conversation in front of you guys, so thank you.

Emily Haidet (1:26:06):

Thank you so much, Dawoud and Gaëtane, for such a lovely conversation and for your generosity. I'm Emily Haidet, Curator of Public Programs, and I just wanted to hop up on the mic and thank you all once again for coming. I think Dawoud is going to stick around in the theater for a little bit, so if you have any burning questions for him, maybe he'll stick around.

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I also wanted to make sure to note, the galleries are still open until 8 o'clock, so you're welcome to explore for another 24 minutes. Thanks, everybody. Have a great night.