

Dawoud Bey

Kenneth

2001

Chromographic print

Image: 127 x 101.6cm (50 x 40")

Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL

Aileen

2001

Chromographic print

Image: 127 x 101.6cm (50 x 40")

Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL

Barbara

2001

Chromographic print

Image: 127 x 101.6cm (50 x 40")

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Rochey

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Michael

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Diamond

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Lisette

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Carlos

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Kyle

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Topo and Moises

2001

Chromographic print

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Dawoud Bey and Young People

(4:15 min)

My interest in young people as the subject of my work, probably has to do with several things. But one of the things that it certainly has to do with, I think, is the fact that, for the most part, within our society, young people only tend to come onto the radar in terms of social problematics. You know, we hear about the teenage drug problem, we hear about the teenage pregnancy problem, the teenage drinking problem, and socially it seems that young people are most useful on the social radar in terms of a set of problematic issues and one of the things I really want to do in my work is to first of all, challenge this one dimensional representation that I think does exist within the media and popular culture and to bring perhaps a more complex representation of young people through my work in terms of creating a certain kind of a psychological or emotional representation. Also through the scale of the work, create a very real sense of physical presence for the young people in my photographs that hopefully leaves the viewer with the feeling they have seen and engaged another complex, full, and rich human being.

When I make the work, I am very aware of the fact that the photographs are going to be seen in some type of public context, either in a museum or a gallery. And I'm very conscious of wanting to take these young people whom we tend to see every day in the world and giving them some larger presence in a space where we wouldn't perhaps expect to encounter them. And one of the ways in which I do that has to do with presenting them in the photographs in a kind of monumental scale. Sometimes the photographs are in fact larger than life-size. So I want to give them a kind of enhanced presence. I want to create something of a "in your face" presence, a kind of undeniable presence for these young people that allows them to be considered in a deeper way, perhaps, by the viewer.

And I think also with this idea of the world being seen within the museum context is my way of challenging the notion of what the museum is, or what we tend to expect to see when we go to a museum or whose presence is allowed to inhabit the museum. Certainly, historically the notion of the portrait in the museum has been one in which well-known or valorized figures come to reside, kind of like in permanent residence within the museum space. And I think the lives of the young people I photograph are just as important as the lives of anyone else. I think for that reason, their images and their presence are just as suitable for the museum walls as anyone else.

Dawoud Bey's Process

(3:31 min)

One of the things I am very interested in, in making these photographs that I make, has to do with the heightened quality of description that photographs made with a large format camera are capable of because I am in fact just as much interested in the process of making photographs as I am in the subjects that I choose to make photographs of. That is, after all, the reason I chose to be a photographer as opposed to something else perhaps.

And I think, you know, my choice to use the large format 4x5 camera mounted on a tripod has to do both with the heightened sense of physical description that the camera and the material allows for as well as the idea of the camera being placed on the tripod, implying a slowing down of the process. I'm taking a more sustained look at the thing or the person in front of the camera. So to me, you know, the process, as far as making the photographs, as far as the choice of camera, and the scale, all of that is very much related to wanting to make a certain kind of photographic object.

One of the things that I'm interested in doing in these photographs, too, has to do with the way in which the optics from the lens are used. The way in which a figure exists within a certain physical space, and how that space is described in relation to the subject. I use a very shallow sense of pictorial space to kind of push the subject forward in the photograph. So you have a sense of the environment, but the environment itself is never as clearly or as explicitly described as the subjects are. So I want to keep the viewer's attention, you know, right where the person is standing.

Then, in addition to that, fear also has to do with wanting the viewer to step closer, to take a closer look at the object and hopefully one of the things that you'll notice in looking at these photographs as you get closer to them is the fact that there're things that are visible in the photograph that one wouldn't necessarily see or notice about the subject if you were looking at them with the naked eye. And certainly we can't walk around, getting that close to strangers. So, I am interested in the idea of a certain heightened quality of physical description as well as a way of pointing to, I think, one of the possibilities of what photographs and certain materials of the photographic process have the potential to do.