

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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***Dawoud Bey: Elegy* Explores Early African American Experiences as
Imagined Through Historical Landscapes**
Three Interwoven Photographic and Filmic Series Seen Together for the First Time



Untitled (Trail and Trees) from the series *Stony the Road*, 2022, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange

Richmond, VA — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) will present the highly anticipated exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Elegy* from November 18, 2023, to February 25, 2024. A profound exploration of early experiences of African Americans in the United States, the groundbreaking survey marks the comprehensive exhibition of three photographic series and two film installations by renowned contemporary artist Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953). *Elegy* will also debut Bey’s newest photographic series, *Stony the Road* (2022), as well as the artist’s latest film, *350,000* (2022), both created in Richmond.

“The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is pleased to present this extraordinary opportunity to engage with the powerful and thought-provoking work of Dawoud Bey, one of America’s most significant living photographers,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “*Elegy* opens with *Stony the Road*, Bey’s series of 12 photographs of the historic Richmond Slave Trail commissioned by the museum. Visitors will gain a deeper understanding of the impact of embedded histories on our present experiences.”

Organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at VMFA, *Elegy* chronicles Bey's radical shift from portraiture and street photography to site-specific meditations on history and landscape. The historically grounded images included in the exhibition spur moving and visceral experiences, inviting visitors to become active participants within Bey's immersive compositions. From the Richmond Slave Trail, where enslaved Africans were first marched onto auction blocks and the plantations of Louisiana where enslaved people lived and labored, to the last stages of the Underground Railroad in Ohio, a route fugitive slaves traveled in their quest for freedom, Bey's powerful images evoke both factual and imagined realities.

"These histories are no longer visible," explained Bey. "We, in fact, cannot photograph or make cinematic work about this history. My work deals with trying to reimagine the sites of this history. I apply a set of conceptual, formal, optical and material strategies to the visualization of these spaces that activate the imagination around these particular landscapes that still have deep meaning. This act of radical reimagining allows the viewer to momentarily let go of the fact that you're looking at a photograph or a film. You can be so deeply drawn into the experience that a film or a photograph is describing — you begin to inhabit it in a way — that it seeps into your consciousness."



Irrigation Ditch from the series *In This Here Place*, 2019, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Rennie Collection, Vancouver

The most comprehensive presentation of Bey's landscape photography to date, *Elegy* features 42 gelatin silver print photographs and two immersive film installations that originate from three distinct series — *Stony the Road* (2022), *In This Here Place* (2021) and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017). Bey's evolution from portraiture to landscape serves as a testament to the power of art in retelling history and encouraging dialogue, transporting viewers to sites in Virginia, Louisiana and Ohio that present profound repositories of collective memory and witnesses to American history.

Elegy opens with the photographic series *Stony the Road* (2022). Named after a line in the Black national anthem, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the series visualizes the nearly three-mile-long Richmond Slave Trail, beginning at Manchester Docks and running alongside the James River in Richmond. This still-visible foot path served as the epicenter of the domestic slave trade where Africans arrived in bondage and where they walked into enslavement.

Alongside the landmark debut of *Stony the Road*, Bey also presents his newest moving film work, *350,000* (2023). Produced in collaboration with cinematographer Bron Moyo, and local production companies, Spang TV and In Your Ear Studios, *350,000* serves as a poignant reminder of the more than 350,000 men, women and children sold from Richmond's auction blocks between 1830 and 1860. The film's soundtrack, designed with Dr. E. Gaynell Sherrod, Associate Professor of Dance and Choreography at Virginia Commonwealth University, was produced by recording interpretive dancers' intonations and movements.



Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse) from the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Rennie Collection, Vancouver

The second series of works in the exhibition, *In This Here Place* (2021), meditates on Black life and labor through photographs taken of Louisiana plantations and sites along the Mississippi River, evoking forgotten narratives that linger among the haunted cabins and landscapes as imagined through Bey's lens.

Bey's *In This Here Place* series is accompanied by a related three-screen video installation, entitled *Evergreen* (2021). Created in collaboration with vocalist and composer Imani Uzuri, *Evergreen* integrates a moving human presence to the otherwise desolate landscapes visible on Louisiana's "Evergreen" plantation, the only plantation in the Deep South that features original, extant slave cabins.

The exhibition concludes with Bey's first series of landscape photographs, entitled *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017), which derives its name from the poem "Dream Variations" by Langston Hughes. This selection of photographs, taken around Cleveland and Hudson, Ohio, imagines sites and pathways traveled by fugitives as they made their way along the last stages of the Underground Railroad toward freedom.

Distinct within each comprehensive series, Bey underscores the perilous circumstances and uncertain scenes that those fleeing bondage may have encountered on their flights to self-emancipation, moving along the invisible route to freedom under the cover of night — gingerly hung picket fences, open fields and tight brush, homes with darkened doorsteps, cold and unfamiliar terrain, and vast, turbulent bodies of water.

"The narrative arc as presented through the photographic lens of Dawoud Bey is a deeply moving visual poem steeped in history and conceptual resonance," said Cassel Oliver. "*Elegy* will impact visitors and provide an unflinching look into the history of African Americans in this country as well as the enduring legacies of their experience."

To reserve exhibition tickets and for more information about programs related to *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*, visit www.vmfa.museum.

Ticket Information

Tickets for the exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Elegy* are available at www.vmfa.museum: \$12 adults, \$10 for seniors 65+, and \$8 for youth 7–17 and college students with IDs. Museums for All participants can purchase tickets to this special exhibition at the reduced price of \$2 each with a limit of four tickets per Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card. Tickets are free for VMFA members and children ages 6 and under. As a participant of Blue Star Museums, VMFA also provides free tickets for all active duty, National Guard and Reserve military personnel and their immediate families.

Exhibition Related Programs

The works included in *Elegy* will be explored through a fascinating conversation between artist Dawoud Bey and Valerie Cassel Oliver, VMFA's Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, on Sunday, November 12, 2023, at 2:00 p.m. in the museum's Leslie Cheek Theater. Reservations are available at www.vmfa.museum, and tickets are \$8 or \$5 for VMFA members.

Designed to elucidate ideas featured in the exhibition, VMFA will hold a symposium, *Picturing the Black Racial Imaginary*, featuring leading scholars, writers, artists and community activists, on January 26 and 27, 2024. Panelists and speakers will focus on the intersections that exist between history, art and the contemporary realities of Black existence. Tickets for the symposium, which is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for



Untitled (James River) from the series *Stony the Road*, 2022, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange



Cabin and Palm Trees from the series *In This Here Place*, 2019, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Rennie Collection, Vancouver

American Art and the Community Foundation for a greater Richmond, will be available at www.vmfa.museum on November 14, 2023, for museum members and November 21, 2023, for non-members. Tickets to the keynote address on January 26 will be \$20 or \$15 for VMFA members. Tickets to the symposium on January 27 will be \$8 or \$5 for VMFA members and free for students with IDs. Livestreams of the keynote and symposium will also be available via www.vmfa.museum.

Dawoud Bey: Elegy Catalogue

A fully illustrated hard-bound catalogue, published by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Aperture Foundation will accompany the exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*. The publication, available for sale in the VMFA Shop and online at www.wmfashop.com beginning November 13, 2023, will include essays by Cassel Oliver and contributing authors LeRonn Brooks, Imani Perry and Christina Sharpe.

Artist Dawoud Bey

Celebrated for his rich, psychologically compelling portraits, Dawoud Bey was born in Queens, New York in 1953. Highly regarded as an educator as well as a photographer, Bey's work has been defined by the empathy he brings to his subjects and the complexity with which he depicts them. Renowned for his early street photography and deeply probing portraits, the artist's recent bodies of work focus on the construction of history and memory.



Dawoud Bey. Photo by Frank Ishman

Bey holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University School of Art and is currently Professor of Art and a former Distinguished College Artist at Columbia College Chicago. In 2017, he was awarded the MacArthur Foundation "Genius" Fellowship and he has also received fellowships from United States Artists, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The artist's works have been included in solo and group exhibitions worldwide. His recent solo exhibitions have included *Dawoud Bey: Pictures, 1976–2019* at the Sean Kelly Gallery, Los Angeles (2023); *The Birmingham Project* at the Birmingham Museum of Art (2023); and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* at the Brandywine Museum of Art (2022), the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (2022) and the Art Institute of Chicago (2019). In 2022, the Grand Rapids Art Museum organized the two-person exhibition *Dawoud Bey & Carrie Mae Weems: In Dialogue*. In 2020, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and the Whitney Museum of American Art opened a major retrospective exhibition of Bey's works, which also traveled to the High Museum of Art.

Featured in numerous publications, Bey's photographs were the subject of *Class Pictures* (Aperture, 2007), *Harlem, USA* (Yale University Press, 2012), *Picturing People* (Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2012), and *Dawoud Bey: The Birmingham Project* (Birmingham Museum of Art, 2013). In 2020, Yale University Press and SFMOMA published the monograph *Dawoud Bey: Two American Projects*. A major forty-year retrospective publication, *Dawoud Bey: Seeing Deeply*, was published by the University of Texas Press in 2018.



Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky) from the series *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, 2017, Dawoud Bey (American, born 1953), gelatin silver print. Dawoud Bey Studio

Bey's works are in several international permanent collections, including the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Brooklyn Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, the High Museum of Art, the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, SFMOMA, the

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Tate Modern and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Sponsor Information

The exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Elegy* is presented by Altria Group and sponsored by the Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans Exhibition Endowment; William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust; Julia Louise Reynolds Fund; Community Foundation for a greater Richmond; Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Garner, Jr.; Dr. and Mrs. William V. Garner; Elisabeth Shelton Gottwald Fund; Nancy and Wayne Chasen; and Anne and Gus Edwards. VMFA is also grateful to the following sponsors: Caprice Bragg and Larry Thomas; Kate and Matt Cooper; Marietta Daniel; Eucharia “Ukay” and Richard Jackson, M.D.; Arnel Manalo; and Michelle and John Nestler. This project is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA’s permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris and one of the nation’s finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, previously the largest in its history. A new expansion, the McGlothlin Wing II, is planned to open in 2028. Comprising more than 170,000 square feet, it will be the largest expansion in the museum’s history and will make VMFA the fifth largest art museum in the United States.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.vmfa.museum.

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