

LARGE PRINT GUIDE

DAWOUD
BEY
Elegy

Nov 18, 2023–Feb 25, 2024

VMFA

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

PLEASE RETURN AFTER USE

INTRODUCTION

This work is for the Ancestors, that their memory is not forgotten and that they be brought forth into our present conversations. May they be honored and pleased by this work on their behalf.

—Dawoud Bey

In the three photographic series and two films that make up this exhibition, Dawoud Bey has created an epic visual poem of early America. *Elegy* presents a deeply reverent and stirring narrative, composed of still and moving landscape images that speak to the early African American experience and its imprint upon the United States. In his photographic trilogy, Bey traces the arc of enslavement through sites central to its history: *Stony the Road* was created along the Richmond Slave Trail in Virginia, where Africans arrived in bondage;

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In This Here Place depicts the ruins of plantations in Louisiana where enslaved men, women, and children labored; and *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* portrays the last stages of the perilous journey north to Canada along the Underground Railroad around Cleveland, Ohio, where enslaved people sought self-emancipation. Bey does not merely document these geographic sites, he infuses them with a profound understanding of the implications of the past upon our present. Through the two film installations also featured in the exhibition—*Evergreen* and *350,000*—Bey further animates these spaces, evoking the human presence—present, yet unseen. His lens becomes the eyes and the voices of the hundreds of thousands of African Americans who have walked these pathways through bondage and toward freedom. Bey’s compositions draw us

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deeply into the horror and beauty of these fragmented stories in an effort to reconcile the America of today.

STONY THE ROAD

Taken along the Richmond Slave Trail here in Virginia, the photographs in this series retrace the path walked by the enslaved from Manchester Docks to Shockoe Bottom, along the James River. While Point Comfort in Hampton, Virginia, has been identified as the point of entry for the first enslaved Africans to arrive in British colonial America in August 1619, Richmond would become a hub of the transatlantic slave trade by the early 1730s, part of a triangular route that also included Liverpool, England, and Dahomey (now Benin), in West Africa. The series title, *Stony the Road*, is excerpted from the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” often referred to as the Black national anthem. While Bey’s series brings into focus Richmond’s historic slave trail, the photographs do not attempt to re-create the past but instead offer a conceptual

STONY THE ROAD

framework for understanding its imprint upon our contemporary lives.

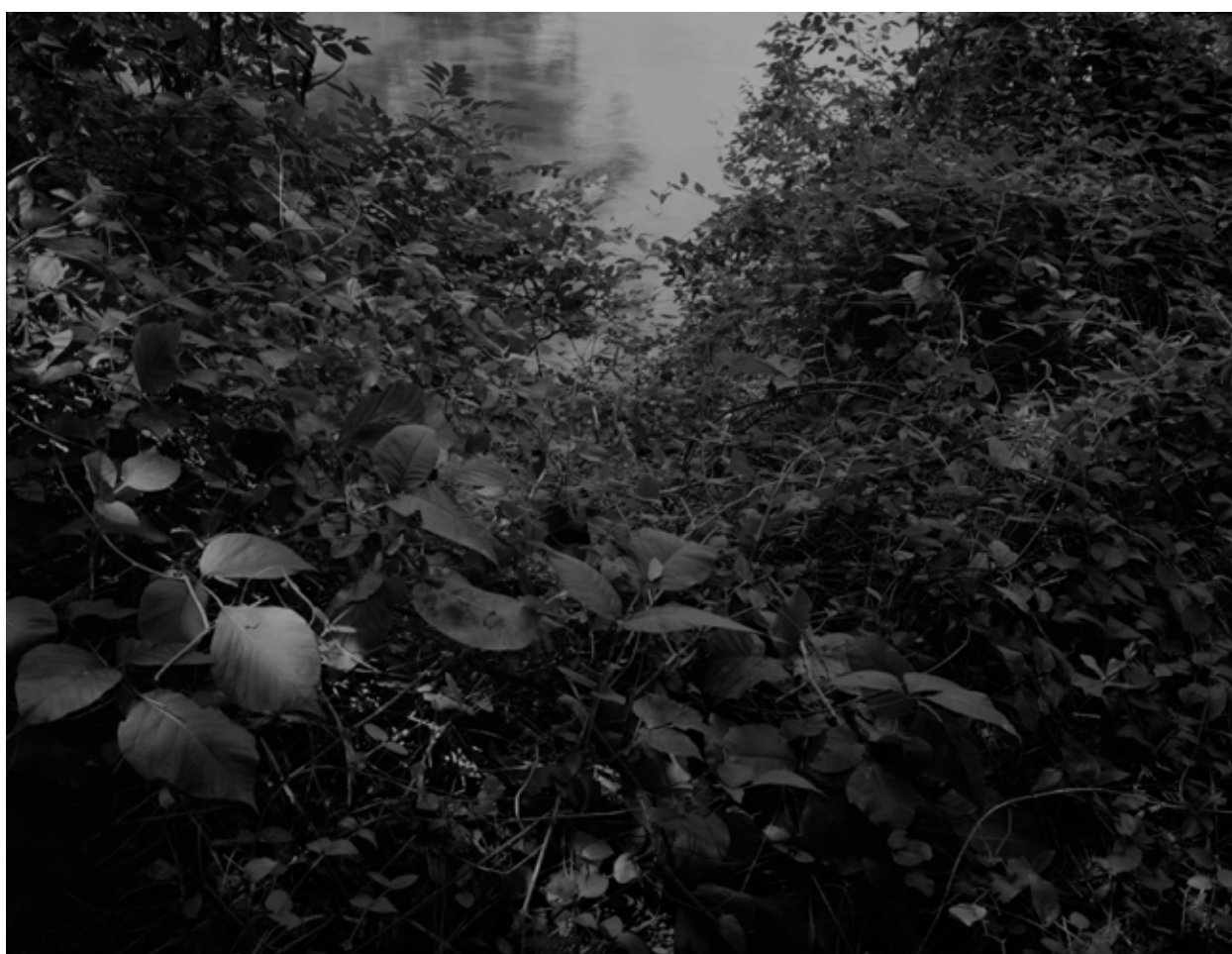
The film installation *350,000* is presented in the gallery following *Stony the Road*. Its title alludes to the early history of Richmond and its pivotal role in the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans for more than a century.



Untitled (Trail and Trees), 2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.1



Untitled (Leaves and James River),
2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.2



Untitled (Branches and James River),
2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.3



**Untitled (James River Through
the Opening), 2022**

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.4



Untitled (Trail Through the Trees),
2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.5



Untitled (Tangled Branches), 2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.6



Untitled (The Light on the Trail), 2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.7



Untitled (Crooked Trees), 2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.8



Untitled (James River), 2022

Gelatin silver print

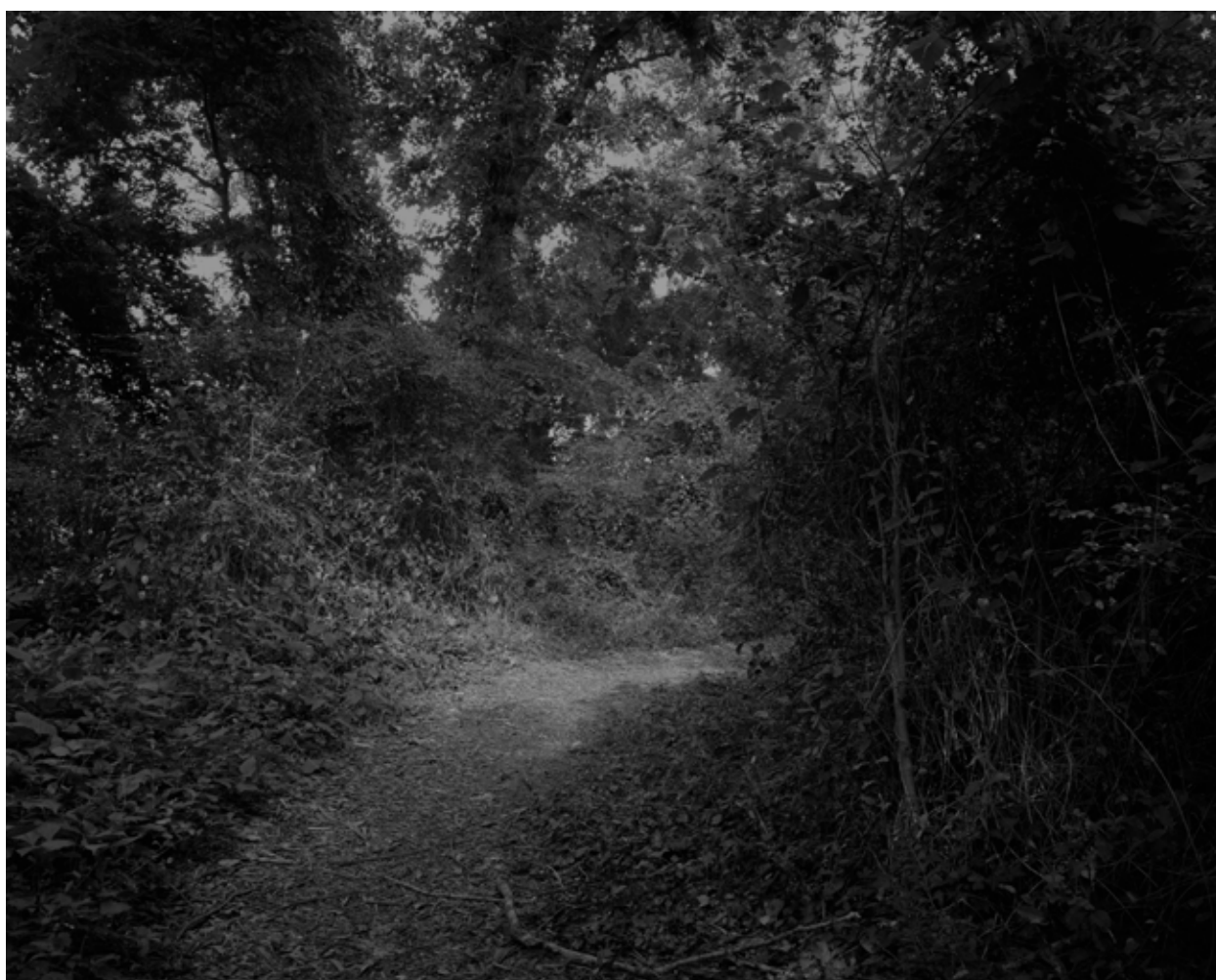
Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.9



Untitled (The Trail and the River),
2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.10



Untitled (Curve in the Trail), 2022

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.11



**Untitled (The Trail and Leaves
Above), 2022**

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2020.168.12

*Video
of Photography*

350,000

Video (documentation of photography of
Richmond Slave Trail), 2022

Gift of Mrs. Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2023.29a-c

350,000

The film installation *350,000* was conceived as an extension of the photographic series *Stony the Road*. Its title alludes to the early history of Richmond and its pivotal role in the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans for more than a century. By the 1830s, the city was the second-largest slave-trading market in the nation, and it is believed that Richmond, and thus its historic slave trail, served as a pathway for more than 350,000 men, women, and children to be sold into bondage.

Bey focuses not just on the geographic site framed by the James River on one side and lush flora on the other, but also on the dimensionality of time in relation to this space. The film's soundtrack, created by E. Gaynell Sherrod, brings an awareness that the past is ever-present, awakening an energy hovering just above the trail, gliding

350,000

along its route and existing above our
conscious existence on an almost parallel,
unseen plane.

350,000, 2023

2-channel video with sound, 10 minutes
and 10 seconds

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Mrs.
Alfred duPont, by exchange, 2023.49a–c

Dawoud Bey, Artist and Director

E. Gaynell Sherrod, Composer and
Performer

Bron Moyi, Director of Photography

350,000

In Your Ear Studios: Paul Bruski, sound designer and chief engineer; **SpangTV:** Melanie Cox, executive producer; Jordan Rodericks, producer; Maggie Melton, executive producer of post; David Muessig, Steadicam, lead colorist and editor; Erin Surber, head of production; Randall R. Taylor Jr., editor; Alex Jones, first assistant camera; Barrett Miller, production assistant; Colin Earner, coordinator.

IN THIS HERE PLACE

Dawoud Bey explores the experiences of the enslaved in the series *In This Here Place*, which takes its title from a passage in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. On visits to the Evergreen, Destrehan, Laura, Oak Alley, and Whitney Plantations in Louisiana, along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Bey photographed the ruins of places where enslaved men, women, and children labored. The sugarcane fields and architecture become central to the imagining of the lives lived, bringing home the profound realities of chattel slavery examined in Morrison's fiction.

In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)

IN THIS HERE PLACE

The film installation *Evergreen*, a cinematic portrait of the most intact and undisturbed plantation ruin from the era, is presented in the gallery following *In This Here Place*.



Tall Grass, Fence, and Cabin, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Trees and Barn, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Conjoined Trees and Field, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Cabin and Light, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Sugarcane II, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Sugarcane II, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Sugarcane I, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Cabin and Palm Trees, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Tree and Cabin, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Cabin and Benches, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Mississippi River and Trees, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Overgrowth and Fence, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Open Window, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Cabin, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Irrigation Ditch, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Light on the Swamp, 2019

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Evergreen, 2021

3-channel synchronized video

Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

EVERGREEN

During his visit to Evergreen Plantation, the most intact and undisturbed plantation ruin from the era, Bey looked upon the quarters where the enslaved lived, as well as the endless fields of sugarcane where they labored, peaceful vistas that belie the horrors of chattel slavery. This three-channel film installation, created in collaboration with the composer and vocalist Imani Uzuri, captures the haunting beauty of this unaltered landscape. As the camera pans slowly among the clapboard cabins, which have remained standing for more than a century, a disembodied voice hovers—whispering, humming, crying, then wailing—in a seeming clash between the physical and spiritual realms.

EVERGREEN

Evergreen, 2021

3-channel synchronized video with 5.1 surround sound, 10 minutes and 58 seconds

Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery

Dawoud Bey, Artist and Director

Imani Uzuri, Composer and Performer

Bron Moyi, Director of Photography

JaSaun Bucker, producer; Marc Thomas, editor; Jeff Cook, audio engineer, 2nd Story Sound; Daniel Waghorne, drone pilot; Mike Kennedy and Ken Cooper, remote head techs; Kennedy Remotes, camera car.

NIGHT COMING TENDERLY, BLACK

Elegy concludes with the first series Dawoud Bey created when he turned his lens to the vastness of landscape to evoke history, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*. In this series the artist bears witness to the enslaved fugitive's perilous journey along the last stages of the Underground Railroad to reach Cleveland, Ohio, the shores of Lake Erie, and eventually Canada. As in the previous series, the title is inspired by a literary source, in this case the closing lines of Langston Hughes's 1926 poem "Dream Variations." Bey correlates Hughes's words with the Black body being freed under the cover of night. Through the arrangement of overlapping dark tones within each frame, Bey depicts the fugitive's sense of tension and anticipation—the yearning to be safe, to be free. In one grand gesture, Bey, an astute scholar of cultural history, honors Hughes and the photographer Roy DeCarava, whose

NIGHT COMING TENDERLY, BLACK

mastery of dark tones pushed the limits of legibility and inspired the technical reach of this series.



Untitled #1 (Picket Fence and Farmhouse), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #2 (Trees and Farmhouse),
2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #3 (Cozad-Bates House),
2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #4 (Leaves and Porch), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #9 (The Field), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #10 (Whedon-Hinsdale House Through Branches), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #12 (The Marsh), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #13 (Trees and Reflections),
2017, AP2

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the Artist



**Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown's
Tannery), 2017**

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #16 (Branches with Thorns),
2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #17 (Forest), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #18 (Creek and House), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #19 (Creek and Trees), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #24 (At Lake Erie), 2017

Gelatin silver print

Rennie Collection, Vancouver



Untitled #25 (Lake Erie and Sky),
2017, AP2

Gelatin silver print

Courtesy of the Artist

