

Dawoud **BEY**

The 20x24 Diaries

Bey portraits explore young Cleveland artists

Before the next adventure, our trusty Polaroid 20x24 Camera collapsed! Not to fear, however. In that condition, it fit into its custom-made crate for a flight from New York to Cleveland and a residency at the Cleveland School of the Arts with famous photographer, Dawoud Bey.

An acclaimed portraitist, Bey often uses the 20x24 camera to involve students in his unique and personal style of photography. As both subjects of Bey's art and experimenting photographers, the students investigate new ways of seeing themselves as well as their art. Using 4x5 cameras and Type 55 Positive/Negative film to create their own portraits, they also discover that the 20x24 Camera—once described as a cross between an armoire and a Volkswagen—is not only big but truly phat.



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The seven larger-than-life size Polaroid portraits shown here are part of an exhibition at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art that featured work produced by Bey during the project. Each piece, composed of 20"x24" Polaroid prints on a series of panels, reveals something of one's interior life, a common yet deeply individual dimension, that emerges when Bey interacts with his subjects.



In Queens, where he grew up, Bey had little experience with art until he inherited an old Argus C3 Range Finder as a teenager. Taking pictures of people in Central Park provided a way to explore his own identity and reflect on the lives of others. Since then he has focused his camera on urban teenagers, mostly African-Americans, depicting, encouraging and confronting them with the wheeled 20x24 colossus for the past six years.

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Beginning with *Harlem U.S.A.*, his first series of documentary style street portraits taken in the 1970s, he has moved toward greater interaction with his subjects. The triptychs shown here present separate but integrated portrait views—the back of a head, hands at rest, two sides of a face composed and reflective or curious and inquiring—pieced together for a deeper look into each subject.



"In Cleveland, I wanted to move the work in another direction," says Bey. "I felt like I had accomplished what I wanted to in the earlier work where the images were more continuous. I never want to know exactly what I'm going to do before I get to the studio; once I start to feel like I know, it's time to shake things up."

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He decided he wanted to begin to create a sense in the photographs of the camera moving around the subject, looking for different aspects through which to describe the person physically, formally, and psychologically.



"What's actually happening during the making of the photographs is that the subjects are moving in front of the camera, since the Polaroid 20x24 camera in a studio context is restricted by the placement of lights and the available space. In order to create that sense of shifting and moving around the person, I move them instead."

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Bey's multiple images are a reaction to the limitations of single images in describing human experience. The challenge of the Cleveland work was to make something that had the psychological resonance he aims for, while also making individual images that worked formally when put together.



In using teenagers as the ongoing subjects for his work, Bey says he wants to suggest—contrary to popular stereotypes—that teenagers are actually complex and engaging people.

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"During the projects, I try to get the students to become critical consumers of visual images and, certainly, to begin thinking about the portrait—and representations of human experience in photographic form—in a more critical way," he says. "By being the subjects of my work, they are able to examine the differences in how they see themselves and how I as an artist perceive and represent them."



"We also examine the ways in which stereotypes are created in photographs and popular media, and look at the differences in how photographs function when they are made as personal keepsakes and how they function in the public arena. For instance, the students are aware that the photographs they are making are going to be shown at some point. I get them to think about how this influences the choices they make."

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Bey recently had work on display in a one-person exhibition at the Queens Museum in New York. This work, taken with the Polaroid 20x24 camera, is of students from three Queens High Schools—including Benjamin Cardoza High School where he went to school. In addition, he recently completed a 20x24 camera project with students at the National Portrait gallery in London that was exhibited in the fall of 1998 and then toured the United Kingdom.



Photographer John Reuter, who manages the 20x24 Studio in New York, helped Bey with the camera and also instructed the Cleveland students on Polacolor [Image Transfer](#), a technique whereby one-of-a-kind images are created by pressing partially developed instant 4x5 prints onto a variety of surfaces from silk cloth to hand-made paper.

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