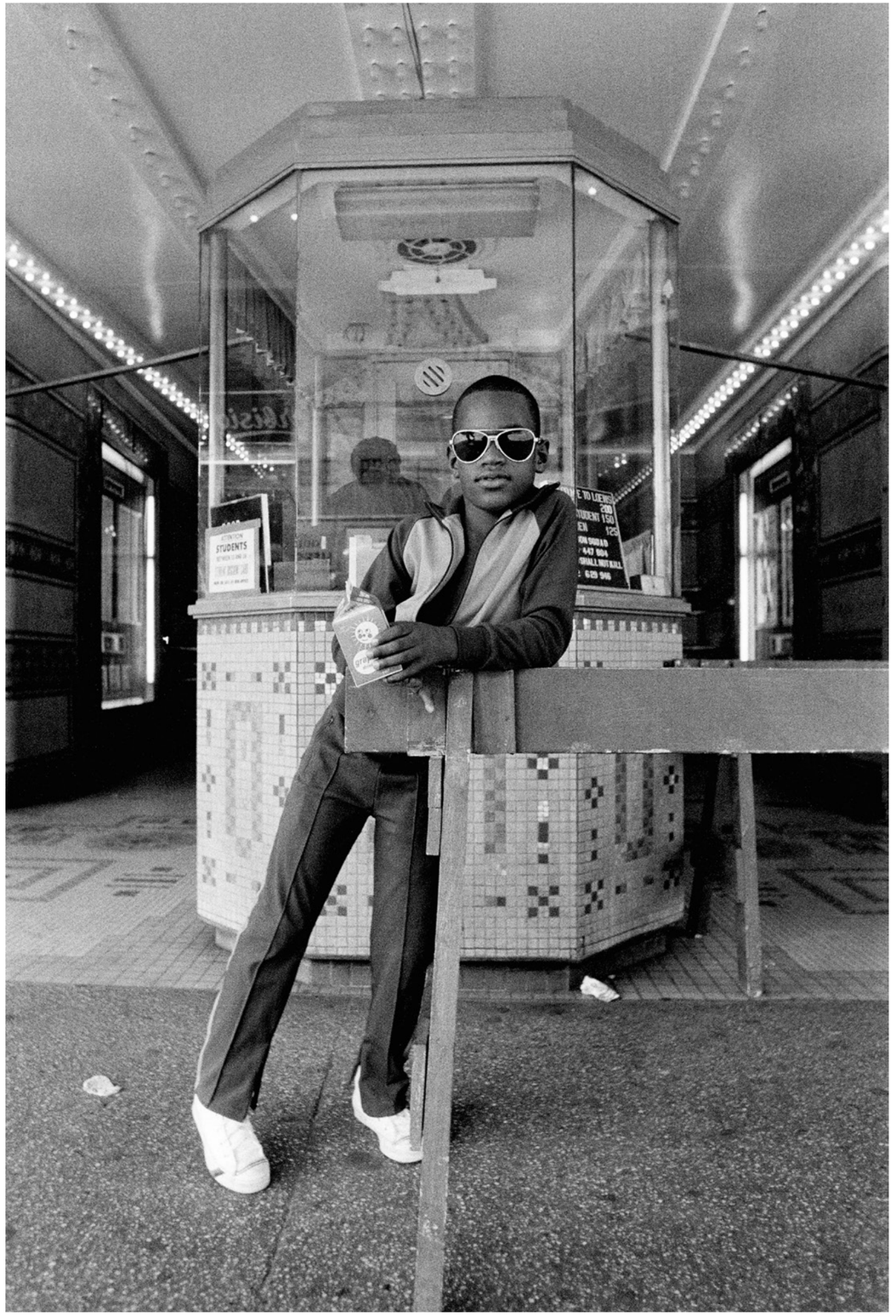
Dawoud Bey: An American lifetime

Dawoud Bey's compelling photographic oeuvre presents a quiet and unassuming distillation of African American history within the contemporary moment. From the streets of New York in *Harlem, U.S.A.* (1975–9), to the churches of America's Deep South in *The Birmingham Project* (2012) and former safehouses of fugitive slaves in *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017), Bey frames people and places as complex narratives within a wider, collective Black memory.

Since his debut series of monochrome urban portraits in the 70s, the Chicago-based artist has pushed the limits of his craft. Experimenting with scale, colour, cameras and concepts, Bey's evolving, near 50-year practice is bound by a commitment to amplify the presence of Black people through images of quiet intimacy and emotive charge. In recent works he omits the representation of people entirely, and instead conjures dark chapters of American history from landscapes and architecture loaded with memory and loss. This year sees the opening of *An American Project*, Bey's retrospective at The Whitney Museum, and one of the largest surveys of a living Black photographer in US history.

INTERVIEW
Finn Blythe



A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY, 1976

Three Women at a Parade, Harlem, NY, 1978

Finn Blythe: I wanted to begin by congratulating you on the upcoming Whitney retrospective. As a photographer who is constantly moving forward and adapting, how does it feel to pause and look back over nearly 50 years of work? Has the experience brought any surprises?

Dawoud Bey: Having the retrospective open in the moment of the pandemic has given it a new, different feeling. Not only is it a moment of looking back at what I've done over the past four decades, but it's also a moment where the work I was making had been disrupted for an extended period because of the lockdown. For the most part, my projects involve travelling to particular places to make work about a specific narrative. So I'm most anxious to get back to it.

Finn: How do you settle on a place to make work? Is it about finding somewhere that fits the narrative you're interested in exploring, or vice-versa?

Dawoud: I try to follow the thread of whatever idea has taken hold that I want to engage, and then continue to engage more deeply in order to give that idea a kind of dimensionality and depth. Sometimes it's the result of an invitation to make commissioned work, and I'll accept the commission with the condition that I have to bind it to the ideas and narrative I'm currently working through. That was the case with *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, which came about through an invitation to make new work for the Front International Triennial in Cleveland, Ohio. When I started researching the history of Cleveland in relation to African American history, the significance of that area to the Underground Railroad was one of the first things that came up. And having completed *The Birmingham Project*, I wanted to continue to think about visualising African American history in the contemporary moment as the narrative anchor of my work, to continue to think about Black space and Black history.

Finn: And that all began with *Harlem, U.S.A.*, the series you made in your twenties. I gather it was a very personal series to make – as much about re-acquainting yourself with an area full of memories as it was about chronicling it. Looking back on the series now, what were the most important lessons from making it? Has its aura changed for you at all?

Dawoud: *Harlem, U.S.A.* was very personal. My mother and father met there, which makes it the beginning of my own narrative since I wouldn't be here otherwise. In making that early work, I learned how to translate ideas into resonant photographs. I wanted to contribute to the visualisation of Harlem as an essential social and cultural space, adding something to that conversation while also reconnecting with a place that's a part of my memory and formation. I learned how to make photographs initially by photographing in Harlem since I hadn't been to art school when I started that work.

Finn: The series was made over four years in the late 70s – a tough time in Harlem, with record mortality, crime and unemployment rates. I read that wholesale abandonment of housing was so pronounced between 1976 and 1978 alone, parts of central and east Harlem lost almost a third of their total populations. What do you recall of that period? Were these statistics palpable in the mood of Harlem residents at the time?

Dawoud: I started *Harlem, U.S.A.* in the same year as the infamous Daily News headline: "FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD." While New York was certainly in the midst of a financial crisis, that was not what I went to Harlem looking for. That was more or less the backdrop for all of New York. Art and culture continued to thrive in New York in the midst of that turmoil. I went to Harlem looking for the way its past intersected with its present, along with looking for pieces of my own personal story, since my mum and dad had lived in that neighbourhood and met there. I was looking through the desolation to something more enduring, resilient, and vibrant. And I found it.

Finn: You certainly did. How did you forge relationships with the people you photographed? Were there people you maintained contact with over several years?

Dawoud: The relationships I created with people that I photographed over the years was a momentarily intimate one. One borne out of a real interest, but also a relationship that was necessary to make my work. I'm there to do my work, and I'm there to do my work with them. Only rarely have I heard from someone who I photographed in the past, and that's been because my work appears online, or someone mentions they saw them in my photograph somewhere. My work is about amplifying their presence in the world, not about creating an ongoing relationship.

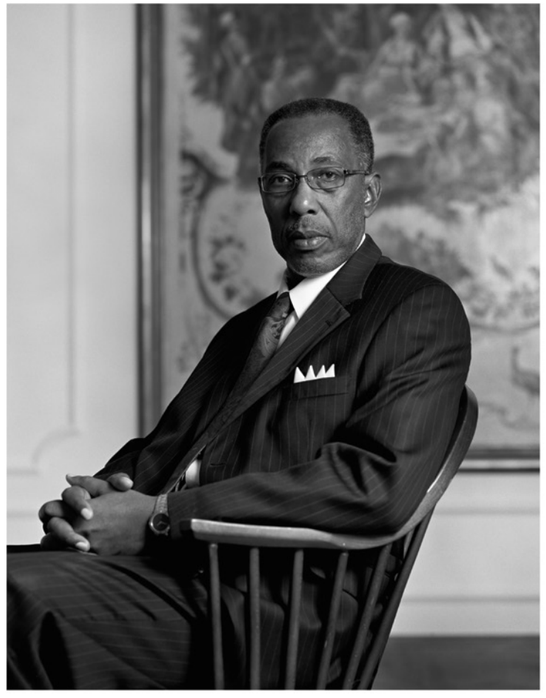
Finn: Early on in your career, how did you see the connection between your interest in politics and the potential of your photography? Would you say politics has always been of central concern to your work?

Dawoud: My personal politics has always informed the work I do, which has to do with making work and amplifying those communities and peoples often overlooked or stereotyped within the larger social and visual culture. While I don't see my work as a kind of didactic, reactionary, or illustrative project, the urgency that underpins it – and the type of moral centre of my work – comes from my sense of personal politics and responsibility.

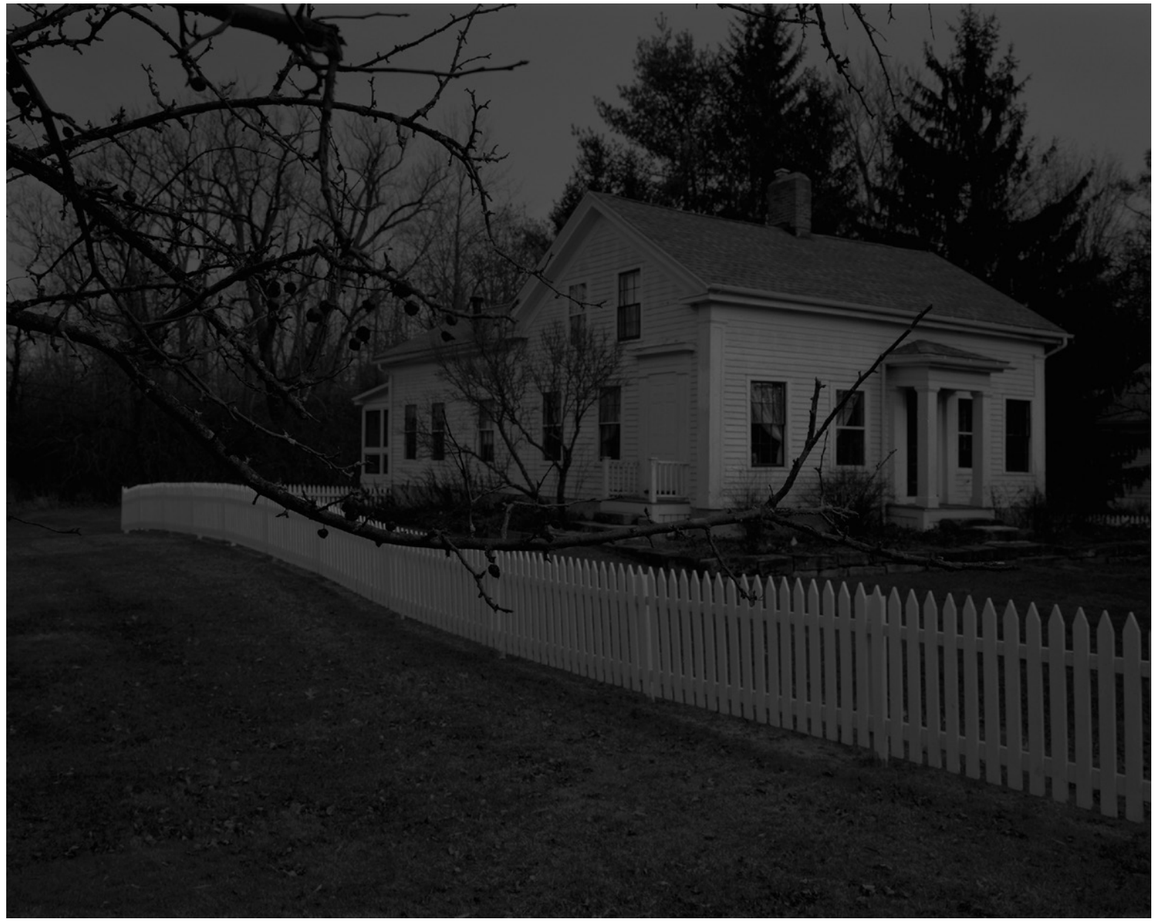
Finn: That sense of responsibility is particularly resonant in *The Birmingham Project* (2013). Can you tell me a little about how you approached the community for the series and how they responded to it?

Dawoud: I spent seven years visiting Birmingham before making any work there. I visited periodically over that time, meeting people, getting a sense of the place, and allowing people to get to know me, establishing relationships and also doing research in order to deepen my understanding of the history there. It was in doing that research that I found out that two young Black boys had also been killed in separate acts of racist violence on the same day

Martina and Rhonda, 1993



this page: *Betty Selvage and Faith Speights, Birmingham, AL*, 2012 opposite: *Don Sledge and Moses Austin, Birmingham, AL*, 2012



Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I), 2017

that the four girls were killed in the dynamiting of the 16th Street Baptist Church. I spent a lot of time hanging out in barbershops, beauty parlours, attending church services, eating in greasy spoon restaurants, and anywhere else people congregated. I felt it was important to not be a stranger once I started making the work. I wanted to have a good and comfortable sense of the community, to know my way around. I didn't want to be an interloper who suddenly parachuted in and then out. I still have a very close community of friends in Birmingham.

Finn: Can you tell me a bit about the significance of scale in your photographs? What prompts a decision to print larger or smaller?

Dawoud: When I started out, the scale of photographs being exhibited in a fine art context was relatively small. [Richard] Avedon was the first one to explode that with his large-scale photographs that I saw at Marlborough around 1977. But for the most part, photographs were printed as intimately scaled objects… and always in black and white. So my *Harlem, U.S.A.* photographs followed that presentational strategy. As photographs found themselves increasingly in conversation with other art objects, and not just other photographs, the sense of scale began to shift. For me, the *Street Portrait* (1988–91) photographs were the first photographs that I printed larger – 20x24 inches – because I wanted the African Americans in the photographs to have an even more resonant physical presence, to push into the space of the viewer even more, to move from being object to experience, which a larger scale allows for. And because those pictures were made with a 4x5 camera, they have a richer quality of material description. All of my recent work is large-scale, because I want the viewer to have a kind of physical space in which to enter the work, to be enveloped by it.

Finn: Speaking of your equipment, can you tell me a little about your transition from shooting on the street using a 35mm lens for a series like *Harlem, U.S.A.*, to shooting in a studio using a large-format Polaroid for your portraits at Columbia College Chicago and Providence-St. Mel High School in the mid-90s? What prompted the transition, and how was it successful in that series?

Dawoud: It was a gradual transition. I'm as interested in making certain kinds of photographs materially as I am in what I'm making photographs about. After using the 35mm camera for several years in my *Harlem, U.S.A.* photographs, I began working with a 4x5 camera on a tripod, to make the works that became *Street Portraits*. It's a more formal process that allows for a more sustained interaction with the people I photograph. The large-format camera results in a photograph with a lot more detail and material information that can be enlarged because of the negative's size. Working with the 20x24 Polaroid view camera in the studio was a continuation of that idea of formality, and an even more heightened description of the person while eliminating the narrative or sociology of place, focusing instead entirely on the individual. My earliest photographs were informed by my interest in Rembrandt's paintings, which I had written a report about when I was in the 6th grade.

Finn: What interested you about Rembrandt's paintings?

Dawoud: I've looked at, and thought about, a lot of painters. I fell in love with Rembrandt's heightened sense of the individual and the way he used that single light source to deepen the quality and physical description of the person. Caravaggio would definitely be another in relation to the human portrait, and how to use light to even further enhance the drama of the persons being visualised. Sean Scully, Candida Alvarez, and Jennifer Bartlett were painters who were very useful for me to look at when I was making multiple-image work, how to make multiple parts cohere into a visual whole. And Brice Marden too, for the continuity of line across the surface. More recently I've been in conversation with the painter Torkwase Dyson, whose very dark abstract paintings mine the histories of Black space and Black history in a way that I was very much interested in with the *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* photographs; the question of how to wed materiality to a narrative about Blackness, as subject and material.

Finn: I can imagine that conversation with Torkwase Dyson was a good one, there's a lot that connects your work. You're both concerned with exploring memory and mapping the spatial dynamics of Black history, and you both embrace a holistic approach. For a series like *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, first, could you tell me about the research and what you learned from making the series?

Dawoud: My research, which was done primarily at the Western Reserve Historical Collection in Cleveland, basically pointed out how little specific information is known about actual Underground Railroad so-called 'stations,' those places where fugitive African Americans took temporary refuge as they moved towards freedom. This allowed me to really make the project about my own re-imagining of that landscape, rather than having it totally rooted in fact, since so much was not known or confirmed with any real degree of certainty.

Finn: And how did you overcome that conceptual hurdle of wedding place and memory, materiality and narrative? Did the work of Dyson prove useful?

Dawoud: It wasn't so much a 'hurdle' as figuring out the spaces in which the work would be made, since so much depended on the imagination, seeing the landscapes 'as if' rather than what it actually is in the contemporary moment. It's a kind of radical imagination, to envision the past in the present, and then make that visible in the work.

Finn: Which photographers were particularly important to you in your early development?

Dawoud: Early on, the photographers I first looked at seriously were Roy DeCarava, whose pictures I first saw in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955). He was the first Black photographer I knew who

was making photographs of African Americans that were not photojournalism, but were his own aesthetic representations of Black people meant to exist in conversation with other expressive forms. I started going out to see exhibitions in the mid-70s. I spent time in the Richard Avedon and Irving Penn exhibitions at Marlborough, Mike Disfarmer at MoMA, along with Paul Strand and Walker Evans. I had also begun meeting the photographers in the Kamoinge group, and Louis Draper, who was in that group, became an important early mentor and friend. These are the photographers who, early on, I learned the most from looking at and thinking how their work functioned.

Finn: I love that series, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*. What was it about the synthesis of DeCarava's photographs and Langston Hughes' poetry that helped guide the making of *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*? [the title of which comes from a Hughes' poem]

Dawoud: The influence of DeCarava was in the experience of seeing his actual physical prints, the way he uses blackness and the greyscale in his photographs as part of the visual and material narrative of his subjects. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* alerted me to his presence early on. That material blackness seemed entirely appropriate to the narrative I wanted to construct with *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*.

Finn: As well as being a photographer you've spent a great deal of your life as an educator. What do you enjoy about spending time with young people, and how have these experiences informed your practice?

Dawoud: Teaching allows me to keep my finger on the pulse of what young photographers and artists are thinking about while also introducing my own sense of history and values in dialogue with them.

Finn: Do you attribute any of this time you have spent as an educator to the constant innovation in your style and technique?

Dawoud: My work evolves out of a set of ongoing questions that I continue to ask myself. The work is the visual, conceptual, and material response to those questions. Teaching has allowed me to bring my values into conversation with a younger generation of artists in a way that I hope is useful in helping them situate their own work and practice. It also gives me a sense of how they are considering their own practices and what their sense of history is, given our age difference. I'm able to bring a deeper sense of history into the room for them.

Finn: I'm interested to know more about your relationship to music, specifically jazz. When did this relationship begin and how do you feel it's contributed to your photography?

Dawoud: Before I was a photographer, I was a musician, getting my first set of drums when I was fourteen. I was fortunate to have some excellent and significant teachers early on who gave me a firm foundation in art practice rigour, regardless of medium. Because I played jazz for most of that time, the sensibility and confidence that comes out of improvisation is still very much a part of my practice. Of course, John Coltrane was the first significant musician I encountered who wedded his highly refined craft to a clearly stated moral dimension. He remains a significant influence and beacon for me.

Finn: Your 1990 photograph: *A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY* is a real favourite of mine. Could you give a little bit more context to the image?

Dawoud: I was living in Brooklyn at the time that photograph was made. I saw this young couple one day when I was in the park photographing, and knew immediately I wanted to make a photograph with them. As they approached me I stopped them and asked if I could. They agreed, and I began to shape the picture by asking them to get close. Looking on the ground glass as I composed the picture they reminded me of Tish and Fonny in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a young Black couple in love and facing the world together.

Finn: For *Harlem Redux* (2014–17) you returned to the site of your debut series to explore the devastating effects of gentrification on the now-absent Black communities. What was the emotional impact of walking those streets again 40 years on? Aside from the obvious changes to the landscape, what changes did you notice within yourself?

Dawoud: Well I'm certainly a *very* different and far more experienced artist than I was when I started photographing in Harlem in 1975. That was 46 years ago! I think I am appraising all of my work with a great deal more attention to the relationship between narrative, materiality, and scale. All of the history-based work I've been doing has been in black and white, since black and white is the actual material of photography's history. *Harlem Redux* is colour, because it's about a set of circumstances that are taking place in the present moment. Those photographs are also large-scale, like all of my recent work, because I want them physically to embody the scale of the transformed landscape of that community, and to create that physical space for the viewer on the two-dimensional surface of the photograph. But all of my work is approached with a good deal more intentional, rigorous craft now, both in the conception and the execution. I'm capable of a lot more than when I was 25, and I want to bring all of that to the work, at the highest possible level of execution.

Finn: The series offers a meditation on memory, absence, change and loss. The characters of *Harlem, U.S.A.* have been erased and the area seems to have grown increasingly homogenous. Does this series embody the sense of personal responsibility you mentioned earlier?

Dawoud: All of my work embodies that sense of responsibility. I feel an obligation to contribute something to the ongoing history, and to always make work that matters, that provokes a conversation about the things I want people to think about when they engage with my work. My work doesn't exist for its own sake, but for the sake of contributing something to history and to the art form.

Two Girls from a Marching Band, Harlem, NY, 1990

opposite: *A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, 1990* this page: *A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 1988*

All images courtesy the artist. *A Boy in Front of the Loew's 125th Street Movie Theater, Harlem, NY, 1976; Three Women at a Parade, Harlem, NY, 1978; Two Girls from a Marching Band, Harlem, NY, 1990; A Couple in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, 1990* and *A Woman at Fulton Street and Washington Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, 1988* courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery, and Rena Bransten Gallery; *Martina and Rhonda*, 1993 courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Eric Ceputis and David W. Williams; *Betty Selvage and Faith Speights, Birmingham, AL*, 2012 and *Don Sledge and Moses Austin, Birmingham, AL*, 2012 courtesy Rennie Collection, Vancouver; *Untitled #20 (Farmhouse and Picket Fence I)*, 2017 courtesy collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Accessions Committee Fund purchase.