DAWOUD BEY

Portait by L. Kasimu Harris. All artwork © Dawoud Bey. All images Courtesy Sean Kelly, New York.

STEVE MILLER: *There is a haunting and powerful mood in your plantation images. For me, it is put into place with images, the opening pages of Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad, a theme you have pursued. The sense of place and history is deeply disturbing. We know what happened here and the silence of the images speaks volumes. How did you think about using black and white to locate this struggle of our dark American past?* **DAWOUD BEY:** When I started the extended history project that has been my work since 2012, with *The Birmingham Project*, I decided I wanted to make the work in black and white, since black and white is literally the material of photography's past, its history and how we think of history when visualized photographically. I wanted that sense of history to be materially embedded in the work. To make this work in the form of large scale color prints reeks too much of the contemporary kind of photographic art object, as that is the form that much contemporary photo based work has taken for the past 20 or so years. I want the viewer upon engagement with the work to be inexplicably pulled into the past, to have a kind of liminal experience that is the past and present simultaneously. The entire project, *The Birmingham Project*, *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*, *In This Here Place*, and the final "chapter," which will be made in Virginia, will all be made in black and white, to keep the visual, material, and conceptual language consistent. **STEVE:** *The absence of figures in these images allows our mind to wander and ruminate on what happened here. Since you have such a history with portraits, there is a heightened sense of the missing inhabitants of the plantation. Was this just inevitable in visiting an historical location. The viewer is left to confront their own experience with slavery. Did you consciously enhance the solitary nature of your visual essay?* **DAWOUD:** The last of these history based photographs that took the form of portraits was *The Birmingham Project*. That particular traumatic history was one in which six young African Americans were killed in three separate acts of racist violence. Because I wanted to give the unfamiliar yet mythic presence of these young people a more palpable physical presence, I thought the portrait was the appropriate vehicle for this. That work allowed me to take my long experience and interest in the portrait and give it a very specific historical context, which was a new way of thinking and working for me, even though a sense of history has kind of filtered through my work all along, going back to my first project *Harlem, U.S.A.* which was motivated by my own family's history in that community. *With Night Coming Tenderly, Black and In This Here Place* I began looking at the landscape itself, the places in which history had both transpired and was physically embedded. In *Night*…when I was making those photographs, I was trying to envision those spaces and landscapes as if through the eyes of a formerly enslaved and now fugitive African American, trying to convey a sense of what that landscape may have both looked like and felt like from their vantage point. The photographs were made during various times of the day and then printed to convey the experience of having to traverse that landscape under cover of darkness to avoid detection. Some of the sites for that project were imagined sites, though imagined within reasonable proximity of the actual landscape of fugitivity in Northeastern Ohio. There are no visible subjects in the photographs, but we are seeing the landscape as if through their eyes, so they are present in that way, just looking out, not being looked at. The absence of a figure in the work, implicates the viewer in a way, makes *them* the figure, and allows them to situate themselves in those spaces. The large scale also allows for this kind of enveloping experience that gives the viewer room to

move around in, to enter the photographs. **STEVE:** *In many of the images, trees are not only in the title of the photos but visually prominent, not only for the physical presence they have in your images but from the shadows they cast. They are often a central image. What caught your attention to make this a visual theme?* **DAWOUD:** Trees figure in African American history in a number of ways, some quite horrific. If we think about Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," in which she sings about, "Southern trees bear a strange fruit… Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze…" we begin to get a sense of the place that trees have played in the historic Black narrative. And enslaved people were often tied to a tree on the plantation, and whipped mercilessly… or worse, to make them an example for either their justified intransigence or insufficient labor output. So those trees have seen much, and been a part of not only the plantation landscape but the horror of the plantation narrative; as such they embody those memories. In many African traditions, trees are seen as an ancestral symbols of wisdom, authority and custom, providing a bond between the dead and the living. They're also viewed as living keepers of memories. Certainly the trees in my photographs are silent keepers of much history. **STEVE:** *When looking at the landscape in the context of the slave quarters, what took place in those fields is impossible to forget. When viewing the images there seems to be strength in numbers, and a cycle of memory when viewed in total. How important is it that these images are viewed in their entirety?* **DAWOUD:** I always, in making my work, think in terms of a group of photographs, with each one adding something to the larger narrative that is the subject of the work. To me that is a very real part of the rigor and discipline of art making: to take an idea and then articulate that idea over several related but different photographs or

Dawoud Bey, *Mississippi River and Trees*, 2019.

objects, as the case may be, to fully explore the idea and narrative before calling the work "complete." I really wanted to give a sense of both the plantation landscape, the cabins and the sugar cane fields, as well as the surrounding landscape, including the Mississippi River, which was the means by which the sugarcane was shipped for processing and on to the market. I also made a few pictures in the swamps near Evergreen Plantation. During the 1811 uprising, fugitive slaves moved into the swamps to avoid captivity. These maroon settlements in the swamps are a part of the extended narrative of the history of the plantations. **STEVE:** *How is this project different from your other photo projects around history and what is the role of the artist to represent their historical moment?* **DAWOUD:** I consider it to be yet another aspect of that history, moving from the more recent moment of racist violence in Birmingham in 1963 as the subject, to the Underground Railroad, which deals with the escape from enslavement. The bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham is part of a continuing horrific narrative with trauma inflicted on Black bodies that begins wil slavery. *In This Here Place* reveals the very place from which enslaved African Americans sought their freedom through escape as they began the perilous journey along the Underground Railroad. The final project in this history cycle will take me to Virginia, where I'll be making work about the one of the places where enslaved Africans first touched American soil. So all of this work is part of a larger whole, part of a story that I am telling piece by piece, chapter by chapter. It's important for me to be making this work now as it puts a lot of the current moment in perspective, and gives it an historical context that is often overlooked or ignored. The past does explain the present. **STEVE:** *We know that the struggle still continues today and the painful images from*

Dawoud Bey, *Conjoined Trees and Field*, 2019.

the Black Lives Matters movement ties us deeply to your source imagery. Do you feel there has been any changes in our culture? **DAWOUD**: With *In This Here Place* I wanted to look closely at the place where the formative relationship between America and its Black citizens begins. The disregard for Black people as fully human, that allowed a police officer to squeeze that life out of George Floyd in broad daylight, has its roots in the dehumanizing violence of the plantation. The act of two white men chasing a Black man down on the back roads of Georgia in their pickup truck, and shooting him for sport while he was out jogging, while a third man filmed the chase and the killing, as happened to Ahmaud Arbery, can be traced directly back to the plantation, where Black lives were not considered human, but property to be worked, abused, and killed with impunity. So much of the racist violence confronted by Black people on a daily basis can be traced back to the fact that Black people were not initially brought to this country to be full participants in the making of this country, but to be unpaid forced labor that would drive and build the economy of this country. To do so required a full denial that one had kidnapped, and put to such abusive labor another human being, who were considered property not people. The suspension of empathy required to do this is at the foundation of continued attacks on African Americans, since it is the suspension of human empathy that I believe allows one to squeeze the life out of another person in full view of others, or to think that a Black man out bird watching in a park is a threat, or a little Black girl selling lemonade is "out of place" and doesn't belong there, or a group of Black people using a public park to socialize and and have a cookout don't belong there. The ways in which Black people are presumed to be where they don't belong is pervasive, and sometimes deadly. So our culture is still un-

Dawoud Bey, *Overgrowth and Fence*, 2019.

derpinned by this, even though the long history of struggle against it has helped to mitigate it. But very recent history shows us clearly that there are those among us for whom African Americans are considered less than deserving of basic human respect. **STEVE:** *This series visualizes the true meaning of grief and grievance. What is the next part of this series?* **DAWOUD:** One thing that is very important to remember is that from this traumatic history, this "grief and grievance," somehow a very rich and vibrant culture evolved. Black intellectuals evolved. Black statesmen evolved. Black doctors, lawyers, and teachers evolved. Black expressive culture of all kinds evolved, and so much more. While they were degraded and abused on the plantation, African Americans consistently sought their freedom from that landscape of degradation and exploitation. So the plantation is also a site of resistance and resilience. Somehow Black people were able to forge lives contrary to the racist expectation and conception of those who had enslaved them. Black people did not lose themselves on these plantations. This speaks to a profound sense of selfhood that could not be taken away, even under the most brutal of circumstances. The title of this project comes from one of Toni Morrison's novels "Beloved," in which the protagonist implores those newly freed from the plantations: "In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard." That self love is what drove Black people forward from an horrific beginning. What I intend for this work is to continue to make this history a part of our contemporary conversation, to visualize it richly, to engage those viewers who come to a museum or gallery by placing my work, my voice, and that history in conversation with other works of art in those spaces, and to remind people that the past is always present in some way.

Dawoud Bey, *Tree and Cabin*, 2019.