



The Trail 1, 2025
Photogravure with chine collé
Paper Size: 25" x 40"; Image Size 20" x 35"
Edition of 15

For nearly five decades, Dawoud Bey (b. 1953 in Queens, New York) has lovingly photographed Black life, transforming how we see with each new series. Aesthetically beautiful, intellectually challenging, and emotionally compelling, Bey's portrait and landscape photography has garnered the artist numerous accolades and honorifics, including the Macarthur "Genius" Grant, and his work is housed in more than one hundred museums in the United States and internationally. With a virtuosic command of the breadth of photographic techniques, Bey is one of the most important artists working today.

Bey's collaboration with Paulson Fontaine—the press's first time working with a photographer—continues to break new ground. Combining multiple lens-based media with some of the oldest and most exacting printmaking techniques, *The Trail* visualizes the landscapes traversed by enslaved Africans when they were first brought to the shores of the Virginia colony. The five photogravure prints made with chine collé that comprise the series are each a still image taken from from Bey's 2-channel black-and-white video *350,000* (2023), and are the most recent works in Bey's

turn to history and landscape.

After decades of making formal portraits of Black city-dwellers (starting with *Harlem U.S.A.*, 1979), school youth (*Class Pictures*, 2001-2006), friends and other artists, Bey was compelled to memorialize the horrific bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church by four Klansman, along with two other tragic acts of violence that took the lives of six Black children on September 15, 1963, at the height of the American civil rights movement. What emerged was *The Birmingham Project* (2012-13), a series of sixteen diptychs that pairs Black youth and adults, sitters who are the ages of the child victims of the attack and the ages they would have been had they lived to be photographed fifty years later. This innovative framework moves us beyond the before and after of Black martyrdom and photographic memorialization of the dead and instead alerts us to the persistence of the past in the present.

As he was working on *The Birmingham Project*, Bey was also conceptualizing the series *Harlem Redux* (2014-16), a revisitation of his earliest portrait series *Harlem, U.S.A.* (1979), that charts the 21st century gentrification of the area



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The Trail 2, 2025
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through a focus on place and an emphasis on the absence of the Black residents that animated *Harlem, U.S.A.* Taken together, these two series lay the groundwork for Bey's recent turn to Black American history through the genre of landscape photography. *Night Coming Tenderly, Black* (2017-18), *In this Here Place* (2018-2021) and *Stony the Road* (2019-2022), offer dark yet fulsome images respectively of the Underground Railroad traversed by escaped Black Americans, Louisiana plantations along the Mississippi River, and the forced march of kidnapped Africans from the site of their first landing in Virginia's James River docks to the inland slave pens. Though devoid of people, these contemplative works demonstrate Bey's interest in the geographies that shape Black peoples, especially the enslaved, most of whom never had a portrait made. Through these dark patiently overexposed prints, Bey registers Black people not as objects to be seen, but as seeing subjects. These series remind us that the history of racial terror remains written in the terrain.

In these explorations of history and landscape, Bey also began to experiment with film, invoking sound and movement to help register the experience of the photographs' subjects, both seen and unseen. The single-channel color film, *9.15.63* (2012) was made in conjunction with *The Birmingham Project*; and *Evergreen*, a three-channel film made in Edgard, Louisiana, accompanied *In This Here Place*. As part of *Stony the Road*, Bey assembled a film crew and collaborated with dance choreographer Gaynell Sherrod to produce *350,000*, named for the 350 thousand pairs of feet that moved along the foreign Virginia soil after the harrowing experience of the Middle Passage. Even more,

350,000 is filmed with a Petzval lens, first invented in 1840 (the year after photography's worldwide inception) and then elaborated for movie-making in the 1930s. The Petzval produces a soft focus, bokeh effect and was often employed to film dream sequences and spirit photography. In *350,000*, the lens offers up the trail through a kind of swirling tunnel vision that helps convey this journey as one of surreal uncertainty.

Bey has said, "*my work was always about both... a conversation with the history of the medium and a conversation about the subject, with neither one being more or less important than the other.*" This conversation is powerfully evident in the prints of *The Trail*, carefully selected stills from *350,000*'s ten minutes and twenty-six seconds. This historical series is visualized through the language of landscape, as imagined by way of one photography and film's oldest lenses, before being captured digitally as screenshots. The stills are then produced using photogravure, one of the oldest and most demanding of printing techniques. Printed on sumptuous chine colle paper, the photogravure process has here been pushed to its very limits in terms of physical size and ink density. The final effect is a complex, dark and poetic softness that conveys the movement of the forest landscape, the physical and temporal motion of film, and the ongoingness of these terrible histories. *The Trail* is a landmark series that offers us still images that refuse stillness.

–Leigh Raiford



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