

### Art Horse 3: *Dawoud Bey: Elegy*, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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Welcome to *Art Horse*, an occasional audio essay about art. I'm Sommer Browning.

My child keeps complaining that he's getting ads for Dawoud Bey's show *Elegy* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts while he's watching YouTube. I don't know what it feels like to be watching a video by Drew Durnil, his favorite geography YouTuber, say the one about what would happen if ancient Rome colonized North America, and then have it interrupted with an ad for *Elegy*. Maybe it's discombobulating?

The ad is short. 15 seconds maybe. A camera glides smoothly through thick summer trees—a scene from Bey's video *350,000*, one of two you see in *Elegy*—or maybe it's the ad where the camera glides smoothly behind museum visitors as they look at Bey's large gelatin silver prints of thick summer trees, from his series called *Stony the Road*. If it's the ad with the *350,000* clip, the ad is quiet—well, it's American South summertime quiet—which is actually a kind of noise—a humid, layered sound of cicadas and Carolina wrens calling to each other. The summer trees are close together, large, scraggly, minding everyone's business but their own. These trees are new to my child since we only recently moved to Virginia from his native Colorado six months ago. How thick they are here. How the woods teem with life here. How when you go outside here the sky is occluded, there's no horizon line. The only reason you know you're looking up is because it feels different in your body. Your neck stretches, your upper back tightens, but the view is the same—trees. Leaves. Branches. When you look to the right, to the left, in front of you, above you. Space is different here. To be in the woods, the camera hints in the ad, is kind of like being inside nature, rather than outside in it.

*Elegy* is one of the most amazing things I've seen in a long time.

It's an experience. One in which you move through several rooms holding 42 silver gelatin prints and two videos. And experience of time slowing that Bey manifests through the images which are really just manipulations of darkness and light—with movement—your own body's, and with sound and quiet. He slows time enough for you to enter a meditation, to enter an elegy. That's it. That's what it is. You enter a poem you move through the show as if through a poem as if through a memory, as if through prayer, as if through a lamentation, and grief.

We can't call anything good “immersive” anymore because that word's been destroyed by capital—so I'll say Bey created a situation in which you transcend the inputs and outputs of reality—you know that moment when you're meditating when you kind of come to, a part of your brain jerks awake, then you feel the chair and realize your hands are kind of cold—the experience of *Elegy* is that infinity right before you come to.

There are a hundred things I'd like to say about this installation and none of them are adequate.

The first room holds a series of photographs called *Stony the Road*. They are large, gelatin silver prints of images taken on the Richmond Slave Trail – the wooded path over 350,000 enslaved

men, women, and children walked from the holding cell of the ship they arrived in to their future of forced labor and servitude, from one container to another. The photos look like they were taken in summer, thick brush, the trail is overhung with branches so it becomes a tunnel.

In the next room *350,000* plays, a 10 minute 10 second two channel video, also without color. The camera moves gracefully down the same trail, its often out of focus like when sweat is in your eyes or you're just about to lose consciousness, the light playing through the leaves blurs into sequins then into smeared bubbles. The camera has you look right and left and up and down: trees, then some water obscured by trees, then some sky streaked with trees—and one bird—I think the only alive thing we see in the whole installation—one bird flies upward in slow motion before you on the path.

The installation is desolate of living, but also heavy, dripping, weighty with life. It's an elegy—it's for the living and about the dead—it's about the living and for the dead—it is a place where they both get as close as they can to the other.

As with the soundtrack for *350,000*, the soundtrack for the second video *Evergreen* is a mix of things--birds, cicadas, leaves crunching, metallic machine sounds, loud and threatening, horses clopping, human voices—you can make out a few words here and there, I mistake human keening for a machine, a machine for a bassline, I hear constant birdsong but remember I only saw one bird.

The installation as a whole has very few words. It's accompanied by very little wall text. In that we read some sentences about the setting of the photographs, descriptions of the places, some historical facts—but not many adjectives that I remember. And no words like “pain.” No words like “atrocious.” No words like “death.” So, what shines bright are the words of Toni Morrison, the words of Langston Hughes, the words of James Weldon Johnson that Bey uses to name and inspire each of the three photographic series.

“Photography is my language. It's the language I've chosen as my way of speaking publicly in the world.” Says Bey in a video made by the Seattle Art Museum in 2022.

You move through the exhibit with your own words, too, of course, with what you know of the history of this country, of the land, with maybe a shoddy education or with deeply researched thoughts, you move through claustrophobically pining for a wide-open sky or maybe looking down, looking inward, thinking, alone but fully animated by the long line of people who lived and died to make you.

Bey never lets you inside the clapboard shacks of the sugar cane plantation in Louisiana in the photographic series called *In This Here Place*. He never lets you in any of the buildings the drone surveilles in *Evergreen*—the second video, which offers the only other color in the show, green, green, greeeeeen with 100 e's in the middle of it—and eventually Bey never lets you inside the nice, well kempt houses in *Night Coming Tenderly, Black*—the final series of photographs. These are dark, nighttime images taken in locations near the end of the underground railroad in Ohio. In Cleveland. Pretty, historic, white farmhouses seen through fences or trees; their windows closed, their doors shut to you. The whole of *Elegy* takes place

outdoors. Such a total, encompassing outdoors that maybe it becomes a container, a vast building, with tree walls, a grass and sugarcane floor, the river a door, the trail a hallway through trees.

Have you been to the beach and been pummeled by a wave so hard you went under, you somersaulted, scraped your cheek on the sand, couldn't control any of your movements until what feels like hundreds of pounds of water pressure on all sides of you recedes and your feet find the bottom and your head finds the air. What just happened. How did that happen. In this moment, I don't know what it's like to live longer than this, and I don't know what it's like to live any shorter.

The last image Bey shows you is the same one that greeted you. It's on the wall just before you enter the very first room. Dark water, dark sky, the horizon line barely dividing up two infinities.

Can you get anymore vulnerable or unprotected or open or haunting than this image? You're left here. Disoriented without landmarks, without an anchor, without land, without stability, footing, are you on the shore? Are you in the water? It's an image of no place, an image of placelessness—it's Lake Erie, an expanse of water so large it might as well be another Atlantic ocean.

Goddamn this exhibit is amazing. Thank you for making it. I will think about it for the rest of my life. It's up until February 25 at the VMFA. It was curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver.

Thank you for listening to Art Horse 3. Art Horse is written, edited, and produced by me, Sommer Browning. Art Horse's theme song is written by Georgia Eli Browning.