

APRIL 11–JULY 7, 2019

BIRMINGHAM,
ALABAMA, 1963
DAWOUD BEY
BLACK STAR

The MoCP is very pleased to present this exhibition, *Birmingham, Alabama, 1963: Dawoud Bey/Black Star*, organized by Dr. Gaëlle Morel, Exhibitions Curator at the Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto. The exhibition presents two works by artist Dawoud Bey (American, b. 1953), *The Birmingham Project* (2012) and *9.15.63* (2013), in conversation with a selection of photographs from the Black Star archive of photojournalism housed at the Ryerson Image Centre. Bey has been a colleague at Columbia College Chicago for twenty years, where he has taught and inspired innumerable students as a professor in the photography department. The MoCP began collecting his work in the 1990s, and we now hold more than sixty of his photographs in our permanent collection. As a powerful reflection on racial injustice in this country, Bey's *The Birmingham Project* is an important recent addition to our collection.

One of the grimmest events in American history is the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on the morning of September 15, 1963. Three Ku Klux Klan members committed the bombing that killed four African American girls: Denise McNair, eleven, and Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, all fourteen. Later that day, during the violent chaos that broke out in response to the bombing, two African American boys were killed: Johnny Robinson Jr., sixteen, was shot by police, and Virgil Ware, thirteen, was gunned down by a white teenager.

Although three suspects were quickly identified for their involvement in the bombing, the case was dismissed due to an apparent lack of evidence. No one was convicted of the crime until many years later. Robert Chambliss was charged with first-degree murder in 1977, fourteen years after the bombing. In 2001 and 2002, Thomas E. Blanton Jr. and Bobby

Frank Cherry were both found guilty and sentenced to four life terms in prison, thirty-eight and thirty-nine years, respectively, after the bombing. Jack Parker, the Birmingham police officer who shot Johnny Robinson, was never brought to trial. He died in 1977, long before the case was reopened in 2009. Larry Simms and his accomplice Michael Farley, who murdered Virgil Ware, were sentenced to seven months in jail but served only two years on probation.

The terrorist act of the bombing was a response to advances in civil rights legislation and desegregation. Although the struggle for basic human rights had been fought by African Americans for decades, the 1950s and early '60s had seen a unity of efforts and many successes surrounding the elimination of Jim Crow segregation laws designed to disempower blacks after the end of enslavement. In the early 1960s much of that activity centered in Birmingham, where civil rights activists started a series of peaceful demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts in protest of segregation laws. Many of these protests were staged out of the 16th Street Baptist Church.

As desegregation took hold, it was often met with violent attacks by white supremacists and authorities using tear gas, police dogs, and high-pressure water hoses. These events were documented by photojournalists like Charles Moore (American, 1931–2010), whose works from the spring of 1963 are featured in this exhibition. After the bombing, photographers Vernon Merritt (American, 1941–2000) and Matt Heron (American, b. 1931) captured its painful aftermath. The 16th Street Baptist church's now famous facade can be seen in this exhibition in a photograph by Franklynn Peterson (American, b. 1938). Dr. Morel selected the works of Moore, Merritt, Heron, and Peterson from the enormous Black Star archive of photojournalism, originally from

New York, now housed at the Ryerson Image Centre and containing over 300,000 images of twentieth-century world history. In the mid-1950s and early '60s, television and daily newspapers disseminated images like these across the country, not only helping to shape public opinion but also moving the country closer to the eventual passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 2012, nearing the fiftieth anniversary of the tragedy, Bey challenged himself to honor these struggles and the children who died in 1963, to, in his words, give them “a resonant presence.”¹

Commissioned by the Birmingham Museum of Art, Bey's diptychs feature a portrait of a child at the same age as one of those killed in Birmingham in 1963, paired with a portrait of an adult at the age the child would have been in the year 2013. These poignant images call attention to the injustices of the past while also evoking the lost potentiality of the lives of the victims. Bey photographed his sitters in two significant places: the Bethel Baptist Church, an important epicenter of the civil rights movement, and the Birmingham Museum of Art, which allowed African Americans to visit only one day a week in the 1960s. In the late 1950s and early '60s the Bethel Baptist Church was pastored by the activist Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, who, in an eerie foreshadowing of the violence of 1963, had been brutally attacked and his wife stabbed by the bomber Bobby Frank Cherry when they tried to send their daughter to an all-white school in 1957. Also on view is Bey's work *9.15.63*, a split-screen video poetically documenting the communal spaces of the black community and the contested and segregated spaces of the white community in Birmingham alongside a route to the 16th Street Baptist church from the vantage point of a child in the back seat of a car.

On September 18, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered the eulogy for three of the girls. In his remarks, King tied the loss of the girls to larger systems at work that support racism. He proclaimed that the four girls, in their deaths, had something to say:

*They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents with the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. . . . They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.*²

Karen Irvine
Chief Curator and Deputy Director

¹ Dawoud Bey, in conversation with Matthew Witkovsky and Jacqueline Terrassa at the opening of the exhibition *Dawoud Bey: Night Coming Tenderly, Black* at the Art Institute of Chicago, January 11, 2019.

² Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “Eulogy for the Martyred Children,” September 18, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/eulogy-martyred-children>.