

## DAWOUD BEY, *EVERGREEN*

*In This Here Place*, Sean Kelly Gallery  
September 10 - October 23, 2021



Dawoud Bey, Installation view of *Evergreen*, as shown in *Dawoud Bey: In This Here Place* at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, September 10 - October 23, 2021.  
Photo: Jason Wyche, New York. Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

In approaching Dawoud Bey's *Evergreen* (2021), I feel my perspective shift to reconcile concurrent sets of thoughts and feelings that chafe against each other—not an uncommon experience for me. Inside this repetitive ode to DuBois' theory of double consciousness is where my reactions bloom. As humans we have the most fundamental thing in common, yet variations on that theme (e.g., different ethnicities or lived experiences) have a way of changing the way we view challenging, accusatory or even revelatory works of art.

Photons strike the surface of a canvas and convince us color exists, frequencies and soundwaves conjure music and words. At what point does *not quite the same* experience mean nothing alike? What part of a happening or encounter with art resonates the same regardless of one's identity?

The Evergreen plantation in southern Louisiana serves as site and historical context for Dawoud Bey's visual investigation of one part of the Black experience. It is the most "intact plantation complex" in the south. In a sense it is a timeless space with rhythms to match—it remains a functioning sugarcane plantation, where people still live. This place has a long memory.

In his three-channel video installation *Evergreen*, the landscape and structures are presented from languid angles and slow roving aerials that reveal the sunbleached corrugated roofs of twenty two former slave cabins. Then the "god's eye" view gives way to a more familiar frame of reference. Now, parallel to weatherbeaten sidings, paint chipped and whipped by the slow moving winds of change, the requisite southern porch becomes an observation post where ghosts of the past watch us. We embody perspectives that effectively place us in this space, allowing us to consider verdant shoots of grass from fertile tear-stained earth, then lift our gaze to the blue hope of the sky beyond. Hope nearly blocked from view by arboreal giants, sentient witness to generations of less than silent misery. On the surface, peace, then a whisper—"go by here"—sows doubt.

Narrative arrives by way of audio. The preeminence of sound in this work cannot be overstated. It is an elegantly powerful approach to one chapter of this American Experiment. An old negro spiritual soothes after the cacophonous assault on the ears by a human voice strained with exertion. It is the psychological equivalent of the "carrot and the stick," as is the rattlesnake vibrato of a tambourine that springs forth, warning about the soul of this place, then melts away. Bloody chains sing a ferrous melody of unrelenting bondage, yielding only to the sounds of whispered guidance, rest and death. The serene stillness of souls still waiting to be heard.

"She's got a right to the tree of life."

Watching the slow procession of scenes, I felt the moving imagery become a canvas, a context for the sounds that open a space, an imagined third space—Bey's soundscape—where our brain tries to add the people that are *missing*.

"Someone's praying."

The brutal conditions of slavery on the plantation are not shown but are *seen* nonetheless. For those that do not or cannot, this work will open their eyes through their ears. It is here where the viewer adds the human presence Bey excludes. The sounds of whispers and the distinct noise of hands rubbing together, breath, moaning, singing. What sort of bodies do we bring into this scene? Bent but not broken, proud? Like the centuries-old oaks and the moss that clings to them, proud and long-lived ... desperate to escape.

Being from the south, I know what that moss feels like, literally and figuratively. It clings to hands and fingers and arms like sticky memories of suffering I can only imagine. One chapter of Black History. I am in another chapter.

"Like a dream."

This piece is a vehicle for something else, something that can't be delivered in one of Bey's "mute" photographs. There is something visceral that picks at the memories of what you thought you learned or understood about the past ... in the present. It forces you to consider connections from then to now.

What does that connection look like for different people? Is there a connection to examine? The imagined memory of pain of people that look like me, makes my bones wither. Realizations of the current moment are frustrating. I look to the future.

A societal reckoning can be complicated, racial and economic injustice often overlap, but not always. It is by one definition a process of estimating, by another, an opinion. In the public arena it usually manifests as hot, fast and overdue vengeance for past wrongdoings—anything from relentless Cancel Culture to protesters marching on—what at least half the citizenry knows to be...the "right side of history."

While watching I kept trying to understand who this work is for—Bey is not making this for himself. I've decided it is an offering to the open-minded, the open-hearted, the survivors, their legacy and for the voiceless no more. This piece feels like the sort of work that exists because it has to. It is necessary because many of us are still not listening to the lessons of the past even when we can hear them loud and clear.

JONATHAN ELLIS