

Unit 7: Teens
Dawoud Bey
Jacob



Dawoud Bey (American, b. 1953)

Jacob, 2005

Inkjet print and audio, 51 1/8 × 40 1/4 in. (129.9 × 102.2 cm)

Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Fund, 2006-45a-b

Getting Started

- Describe the subject's facial expression, pose, and attire. What do they communicate about the subject? What impression do you have of this person based on the portrait?
- Describe the setting. Where might this person be? What is the relationship between the setting and the subject?
- Describe the composition of the photograph, including the cropping of the image. How does the subject's proximity to us affect the way we view him?
- Think about the subject's gaze. To whom is it directed?

Looking Closely

In this nearly life-size color photograph, a teenage subject, Jacob, sits at the base of a staircase inside his home. Jacob's crossed arms rest on his thighs, as he leans in toward the viewer. The portrait is roughly three-quarter length, cropping the sitter's body just below the knees. Jacob wears a white T-shirt, baggy blue jeans, and a black do-rag. A few curls of his long hair hang over his shoulders. He looks straight out at us, his facial expression almost neutral. On the right is a sliver of a window, and through the venetian blinds we can see that it is dark outside. The wall, staircase, and blinds surrounding Jacob are all white. The photograph is tightly cropped around the subject, and the space contained within the photograph is shallow. The image has a narrow depth of field; Jacob is in sharp focus, but the background details are fuzzy.

About the Work

In 2002, Dawoud Bey and audio producers Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister worked with Chicago high school students to create a collaborative photographic, audio, and text project that addressed the following questions: "Is it possible for a photographic portrait to reveal anything 'real' about you to someone else? What aspects of yourself are you willing to share with the world, and how do others respond to those self-representations?" Bey's photographs in the Jewish Museum's collection, commissioned for the exhibition *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*, continue this line of inquiry and undermine assumptions about Jewishness. Adolescents from Jewish backgrounds were invited to speak about issues of race, religion, and ethnicity—including Jacob, who as the only child of a Jewish mother and a Belizean father identifies as both Jewish and black.

Bey's photographs explore the tensions of adolescence and project a vulnerability; in their directness, they also straddle the boundaries between public and private personas, i.e., what we keep to ourselves and what we show others. Bey has

photographed his subjects in their homes and posed some of them with arms or elbows propped on a table. These gestures are at once defiant and protective. Much of the impact of these photographs is achieved through the image's large scale and the proximity of the subject to the foreground. These photographs affirm the artist's belief that young people "are arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment."

About the Artist

African American photographer Dawoud Bey grew up in Jamaica, Queens, in New York City. He first received recognition in 1975 with his *Harlem, USA* portrait series, which documented everyday life in a predominantly African American community.

In 1992, during a residency at the Addison Gallery of Art in Andover, Massachusetts, Bey held a workshop on portrait photography with teenagers from local public and private high schools. Students posed for him and wrote statements about themselves to accompany their portraits. Bey has since focused on issues of identity and representation among adolescents from minority communities. He initially worked with Polaroid photographs but eventually moved toward crisp, monumental **chromogenic color** prints and finally to **pigment prints**.

Bey has said, "If the person doesn't like the picture that results, I try to make them realize that this is a picture, not reality, and it is my own subjective take on them at the moment we made the photograph. While I don't consider myself beholden to the subject's response, it is never my intention to demean them . . . What I try to do is to make all of the artificiality of the situation—the lights, the camera, and other activity outside the frame of the picture—disappear, so that what we are left with is a photograph that contains a certain level of emotional, psychological, or material information and credibility."

Sources

Benedek, Nelly Silagy. *Examining Identity in Contemporary Art and Photography: A Resource for Educators*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005.

Chevlowe, Susan. *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*. Exh. cat. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Further Discussion

- Dawoud Bey posed his subject for this portrait. How would you describe the pose? How do you think it affects the way we view the individual portrayed? For example, does Jacob seem approachable? Reserved? Does knowing that Bey, not the subject, chose the pose make you feel you have less insight into the sitter's identity?
- Does the knowledge that Bey photographed his subject at home affect your perception of the subject and his identity?
- Bey stated in an interview that young people "are arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment." What do you think this means? Do you agree with Bey's assessment?
- Bey included interviews with his subjects to complement the photographs. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Jacob:

My name is Jacob Goldstein and I'm 15.

My father was Belizean, my mom is American, and I'm Jewish. So I'm one of a kind, you could say. I didn't know my dad because he died when I was little. But I grew up with my mom, and she's raised me all by herself, and she's done a great job.

A lot of people thought I was adopted. But, when people think I'm adopted, I really don't think anything of it, I just have to tell them that no, she's my mom and my dad was black.

I identify myself as being black, but I also identify myself as being Jewish, too. I think of myself more as an individual than like any other person, because I'm both, like I'm Jewish and I'm black, so I'm different than most other people. I like being different than other people, I like being a leader, I don't like to follow other people and what they do.

People base too much on the way people look, like the way people dress, like they look at me, and might think, like, I'm in a gang or something. That's just because of the way I dress. You can't really put an identity on someone that you don't really know. When people don't know that much about you and you're just like, oh, I forgot to tell you, I'm Jewish, they're like, what? That's something they'd never expect.

- Read the above quote with your class. How does reading it affect your perception of Jacob?

- This work speaks to stereotypes about the Jewish community. We might imagine Jews to look a certain way, to have certain physical traits, when, in reality, there is much diversity within the Jewish community.
 - What aspects of your identity would someone never be able to guess from just looking at you? What might surprise them?
 - Are there ways that you try to express your identity so that certain traits do not go unnoticed?
 - Does it bother you when people make assumptions about who you are based on how you look? In what ways do you defy people's expectations of who you are?
 - Have you ever been stereotyped based on how you do (or do not) look? How did it make you feel? How did you respond? How have you actively challenged people's stereotypes of you?

Rineke Dijkstra

Abigael, Herzliya, Israel, April 10, 1999

and *Abigael, Palmahim Israeli Air Force Base, Israel, December 18, 2000*



Rineke Dijkstra (Dutch, b. 1959)

Abigael, Herzliya, Israel, April 10, 1999 and *Abigael, Palmahim Israeli Air Force Base, Israel, December 18, 2000*, 2000–2001

Chromogenic color print, each 49 5/8 × 42 1/8 in. (126 × 107 cm)

Melva Bucksbaum Contemporary Art and Photography

Acquisition Committee Funds, 2004-60b

From the beginning of her career, Dutch photographer and video artist Rineke Dijkstra has focused on adolescence, the transitional period when innocence yields to experience. She is best known for creating portraits in series—photographing different individuals in the same setting or photographing the same individual multiple times, sometimes before and after transitional events. Her **pendant** portraits of Israeli teenage girls capture a pivotal time in their lives that is both political and personal. For each subject, Dijkstra took a photograph immediately after the subject was drafted into the military and another shortly after the soldier was discharged. These pictures subtly capture the transformation of an adolescent into a soldier, her life changed irreversibly by the responsibilities and dangers of military service.

In *Abigael, Herzliya, Israel, April 10, 1999*, Abigael is shown with her hair down and wearing casual clothes and a necklace; in *Abigael, Palmahim Israeli Air Force Base, Israel, December 18, 2000*, we see her in her military clothes, with her hair tied back and draped over her shoulder. Her facial expression is subtly but significantly changed—her gaze in the later image is more penetrating and world weary and she also looks older, more grown up.

Sources

Benedek, Nelly Silagy. *Examining Identity in Contemporary Art and Photography: A Resource for Educators*. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2005.

Dijkstra, Rineke. *Israel Portraits*. Exh. cat. Herzliya and Tel Aviv: Herzliya Museum of Art and Sommer Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001.

Klein, Mason. *Collective Perspectives: New Acquisitions Celebrate the Centennial*. Exh. cat. New York: The Jewish Museum, 2004.

Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective. Audio guide. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 29–October 8, 2012. guggenheim.org/exhibition/rineke-dijkstra-a-retrospective

Discussion Ideas and Questions

- Dijkstra often eliminates contextual details in her photographs, whereas Bey typically shows his subjects in places they inhabit in their everyday lives.
 - Compare how Bey and Dijkstra use background space in their portraits. How does showing Jacob in his own home affect how we perceive him? How does seeing Abigael in a neutral, non-specific space affect how we relate to her?
 - Try to imagine if the reverse were true. How would seeing Jacob in a neutral space change our perception of him? Based on how she is dressed, her facial expression, etc., where do you think Abigael is in the two photographs? How might seeing the details of those settings within the photographs change our perception of her?
- Dijkstra has remarked, “There is always a tension, however, between the values of the individual and the values of the community. I am interested in the paradox between identity and uniformity, in the power and vulnerability of each individual and each group. It is this paradox that I try to visualize by concentrating on poses, attitudes, gestures, and gazes.”
 - What connections do you see between Dijkstra’s comment and the two images of Abigael? How is what she says relevant to Bey’s work and, more broadly, to adolescent identity?
- Both Bey and Dijkstra have created life-sized prints, with their subjects seen in crisp focus. Dijkstra has remarked about her work, “You can see things that you normally wouldn’t notice because everything is so much in focus. And the size, I think for me the size, it is important that you can still relate to the person in the picture.”
 - Reflect on the Dijkstra quotation. Do you think you would relate to Jacob and Abigael differently if their portraits were _____ the size of a snapshot? Of an Instagram image? Of a school _____ photo? What about if they were low resolution or grainy?
- What questions do you think Jacob and Abigael would have for each other if they were to meet?
- Bey’s *Jacob* and Dijkstra’s two portraits of Abigael are parts of series. Jacob is one of five teenagers Bey photographed from Chicago’s diverse Jewish population. Abigael is one of many young men and women Dijkstra photographed in Israel near the beginning and end of their mandatory military service. What might have motivated these two artists to document more than one subject? What advantages might there have been for Bey and Dijkstra to work in a series format? What advantages are there for the viewer?