DAWOUD BEY
American, born New York, NY, 1953

Untitled (Chicago), 1993
Dye diffusion transfer prints (Polaroid) (diptych), 24 × 40 inches (overall)
Gift of Sari and James A. Klein in honor of Lisa Corrin and Peter Erickson, 2014.4.5

We are used to beginning the work of understanding images by looking at their centers. However, this double portrait engages the viewers at the margins of the images in an effort to transform their sense of center. This effect is highlighted by the presence of flame-like marks on the edges of the photographs—a vestige of Bey's use of one of the Polaroid Corporation's largest and rarest cameras. Made during Bey's 1993 residence at Columbia College Chicago and Providence-St. Mel High School, the project was an educational experience he created for the students, getting to know them well and translating their likenesses into monumental portraits.

The scale of the two images invites slow contemplation, complicating typical understandings of "instant" photography. The two-panel composition or diptych draws upon a long history of religious art for church altarpieces across medieval and early modern Europe. Bey mobilizes the force and power of this mode of image-making to give prominence to the representation of persons of color typically excluded from monumental art. The large format of these lushly-colored Polaroids gives the sitters subjectivity, their direct eye contact with the camera signaling empowerment and highlighting Bey's desire to insist on their right to look, a right largely denied in the history of photography. The multi-paneled structure shows the subjects at different moments and in slightly different poses, creating a sense of movement that sustains the viewer's gaze as they negotiate the deliberate play between "part" and "whole." Through his deep engagement with his subjects, Bey challenges the viewer to reconsider margins and centers across images and across society.

—Tamar Kharatishvili '22 PhD, Art History
Block Curatorial Graduate Fellow, 2017–18