

## Carnegie Museum of Art Announces *Sharif Bey: Excavations*

*Featuring new work by Bey in response to his recent “excavations” of the collections of Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History, a journey with the people, places, and encounters that informed the Pittsburgh-born artist’s practice and creative identity*



Sharif Bey, *American*, b. 1974; *Bird Study Skins* (detail), 2020–2021; site-specific installation with blue dacnis, blue-gray tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, and green violetear skins collected between 1909 and 1990; Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Collection of Section of Ornithology

**Pittsburgh, PA (September 8, 2021)** – Carnegie Museum of Art announces *Sharif Bey: Excavations*, opening October 2, 2021, and on view through March 6, 2022. The exhibition showcases Bey’s contemporary ceramic and mixed-media sculptures with artworks that first inspired him as a child visiting Carnegie Museum of Art. Also featured are unique, temporary installations by the artist that incorporate artifacts and specimens from Carnegie Museum of Natural History’s collections.

An artist and educator, Bey uses sculpture to draw upon the visual heritages of Africa and Oceania, as well as African American culture, exploring the significance of functional and ritual objects through contemporary reinterpretations of these forms. Working primarily in conventional media, such as clay and glass, Bey’s artistic process amalgamates disparate elements to reclaim and shape ancestral and cultural identities that resonate with his own heritage as an American artist of color.

The exhibition marks a return for Bey, who attended youth arts programs at Carnegie Museum of Art. “Coming from a predominantly African American community and public school, Carnegie Museum of Art was where I first confronted difference,” says Bey. “These experiences were instrumental in shaping my view of how one might interpret a work of art. I began to seek out works of art that challenged me or challenged my formative notions of art,” Bey explains.

The artist’s formative arts experiences beyond the classroom demystified art-making for Bey and allowed him to see beyond barriers and create by way of his lived experience. In *Sharif Bey: Excavations*, “excavations” refers to the process of Bey coming back to Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History, places of great importance in his life as a youth and reconsidering them with the critical lens of an adult in midlife. Through this framework of explorations of personal and institutional history, Bey probes three driving questions in this new exhibition: “What makes someone believe they can become an artist?”, “How does what I do connect to who I am?”, and “How do I fulfill a social responsibility to my community?”

*Sharif Bey: Excavations* includes new work inspired by Bey's excavations of the collections at Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History that first piqued his interest as a youth. On view are the artist's mask-like forms, necklaces made from pinch pot-style vessels as beads, and imagery referencing indigenous Tonga axes from Zambia and Zimbabwe, and Kayapo clubs from Brazil. By returning to these museum spaces with the eye of mature artist, he offers visitors a glimpse into the curiosity and critical inquiry that are hallmarks of his practice. Objects he encountered from West Africa, such as a Guinean D'mba headdress and a Kongo Nkisi nkondi power figure, continue to hold sway over his practice in recent years. While Bey celebrates the themes of these objects, such as power, ritual, motherhood, community, and the awesomeness of nature, his work also touches on contemporary questions such as "Who has creative agency? Who gets to speak through an artistic platform?"

"Revisiting collections at Carnegie Museums of Art and Natural History throughout various chapters of my life provided me with a unique opportunity to grow with works of art. I later brought contextual and technical knowledge to works that were touchstones during my childhood," Bey states. "Sometimes young people have encounters that they cannot fully articulate. I must have been nine or ten years old when I first viewed the Nkisi nkondi figure. Of course, I had no knowledge of West African art at the time but for me it was more than a curious object. It had presence but also evoked mystery. It intrigued me. I reflected on who made it and how it was made. It became one of those objects that I would visit like an old friend for years to come." Bey's commitment to considering and reconsidering artworks over the course of his life highlights key elements of his creative philosophy: "tolerating uncertainty and being open to ambiguity."

"Bey's title goes well beyond that of an artist. He is an educator, a mentor, and an inspiration for all of us at Carnegie Museum of Art as we each continue our own engagement with the arts in service to the public," says Rachel Delphia, the museum's Alan G. and Jane A. Lehman Curator of Decorative Arts and Design. "Bey effortlessly embodies a spirit of curiosity, openness, and a commitment to asking big, difficult questions while engaging multiple truths. He always expands the conversation."

Sharif Bey is an Associate Professor of Art at Syracuse University. Bey earned a B.F.A. in ceramics from Slippery Rock University, an M.F.A in studio art from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a Ph.D. in art education from Penn State University. He is a teaching artist with extensive experience in ceramics, sculpture, community art programming, and art teacher training. Dr. Bey has published numerous articles and served on the editorial board of *Studies in Art Education* and the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* and is past editor of *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*.

A series of events and programs will accompany Carnegie Museum of Art's presentation of *Sharif Bey: Excavations*. The exhibition opens to the public with an artist's talk, *In Conversation: Sharif Bey* at 1 p.m. on Saturday, October 2, 2021, in Carnegie Museum of Art's theater. *Conversations* throughout the fall will feature a combination of scholars, artists, and activists expanding on the exhibition context, themes, and materials. Additional learning resources will be provided in conjunction with workshops for K-12 public school students and educators. Unless otherwise noted, Carnegie Museum of Art events are pay what you wish with registration. To learn more about events and programs related to this exhibition, please visit [cmoa.org/calendar/](https://cmoa.org/calendar/).

The exhibition will be accompanied by a publication, slated for release in early 2022, which explores three of the artist's driving questions: what makes one believe they can become an artist, how does what I do connect to who I am, and how can I fulfill a social responsibility to my community? These questions are addressed through a series of autobiographical "excavations" written by Bey to highlight seminal places, peoples, and experiences in his artistic journey. The publication includes an essay by James Stewart, Penn State Emeritus professor of African American studies, an introduction by Rachel Delphia,

and archival material from the museum's records curated by Alyssa Velazquez, Carnegie Museum of Art's Curatorial Assistant for Decorative Arts and Design. The book will be designed in-house by Carnegie Museum of Art Design & Publication studio and complements and extends the exhibition themes.

*Sharif Bey: Excavations* is organized by Rachel Delphia, Alan G. and Jane A. Lehman Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, with Alyssa Velazquez, Curatorial Assistant for Decorative Arts and Design, and Kiki Teshome, Margaret Powell Curatorial Fellow.

### **Support**

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### **Mission**

Carnegie Museum of Art creates experiences that connect people to art, ideas, and one another. The museum is committed to global engagement and regional advancement. We champion creativity and its importance to society with experiences that welcome, inspire, challenge, and inform. Our core activities—collecting, conserving, presenting, and interpreting works of art—make those experiences possible. Our collection of over 34,000 works emphasizes art, architecture, photography, and design from the 19th century to the present. In addition, the museum houses the archive of more than 70,000 images by Pittsburgh photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris, whose work comprises one of the most detailed and intimate records of Black life in America. Through its programming, exhibitions, and publications, Carnegie Museum of Art frequently explores the role of art and artists in confronting key social issues of our time, combining and juxtaposing local and global perspectives. One of the four Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Museum of Art was founded by industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie in 1895. To learn more, please call 412.622.3131 or visit [cmoa.org](https://cmoa.org).

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