

WHITNEY

Whitney Museum
of American Art
Press Office

99 Gansevoort Street
New York, NY 10014

pressoffice@whitney.org
(212) 570-3633

PRESS RELEASE



Anthony Barboza, *Kamoinge Portrait*, 1973. Digital print, sheet: 20 1/16 × 24 in. (50.96 × 60.96 cm); image: 18 × 20 in. (45.72 × 50.8 cm).
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Eric and Jeanette Lipman Fund. © Anthony Barboza

WHITNEY TO PRESENT EXHIBITION OF KAMOINGE WORKSHOP PHOTOGRAPHERS THIS NOVEMBER

NEW YORK, NEW YORK, October 15, 2020 – This November, the Whitney presents *Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop*, a groundbreaking exhibition featuring over 150 photographs by fourteen early members of the Kamoinge Workshop, nine of whom are living and working today. In 1963 a group of Black photographers based in New York came together in the spirit of friendship and exchange and chose the name Kamoinge – meaning “a group of people acting together” in Gikuyu, the language of the Kikuyu people of Kenya – to reflect the essential ideal of the collective. Focusing on the first two decades of the collective (1963-1983), *Working Together* celebrates the Kamoinge Workshop’s important place in the history of photography and foregrounds the collective’s deep commitment to photography’s power and status as an independent art form. The exhibition is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) and was curated by Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, associate curator of modern and contemporary art. On view from November 21, 2020 to March 28, 2021 in the Museum’s eighth floor Hurst Family Galleries, the installation at the

Whitney is overseen by Carrie Springer, assistant curator, with Mia Matthias, curatorial assistant.

Though each member of the Workshop developed a unique aesthetic approach and an independent photography career, they shared a perspective echoed in founding member Louis Draper's statement: "we speak of our lives as only we can." Highlighting the artists' distinct visual voices as well as their collective concerns, *Working Together* primarily includes works from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts as well as a selection of photographs unique to the Whitney's presentation, many of which were recently acquired for the Whitney's permanent collection. These works, as well as archival materials, foreground the achievements of fourteen early members who joined the collective between 1963 and 1972: Anthony Barboza, Adger Cowans, Daniel Dawson, Louis Draper, Al Fennar, Ray Francis, Herman Howard, Jimmie Mannas, Herb Randall, Herb Robinson, Beuford Smith, Ming Smith, Shawn Walker, and Calvin Wilson. Nearly sixty years after the Workshop's formation, their photography, self-organizing, commitment to community, and centering of Black experiences still resonate profoundly.

"We are honored to present this powerful body of work that demonstrates both the aesthetic innovation and social engagement of these remarkable artists," said Scott Rothkopf, Senior Deputy Director and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator. "We are especially excited to be able to feature many recent acquisitions to our permanent collection in *Working Together*. And I am pleased that our commitment to Black photographers will continue this April when *Working Together* is followed by the retrospective *Dawoud Bey: An American Project*. Bey has long acknowledged the great influence of the Kamoinge photographers, and together these two shows will trace a creative genealogy across half a century."

"It's a privilege to present this exhibition in New York where the collective was founded, and where much of the artists' influential, early work was created," said Carrie Springer, assistant curator. "Each artist had his or her own sensibility and independent career, but they shared a commitment to photography as an art form, and the exhibition demonstrates their insightful and inventive portrayal of the communities they saw and participated in. As Louis Draper said in an introductory statement to Kamoinge Workshop Portfolio No. 1, the Kamoinge artists' 'creative objectives reflect a concern for truth about the world, about the society and about themselves.' The photographs of these artists are as significant to the history of photography as they are to the current moment."

Organized thematically, *Working Together* presents insightful images of Black Americans that were largely lacking from contemporary mainstream publications, galleries, and museums. *Working Together* highlights Kamoinge artists' portrayal of the day-to-day life of people of all ages within the city and elsewhere at play, work, rest, or travel, and among these photographs are intimate depictions of friends and acquaintances in portraits and interior views that reflect quiet moments. Another source of inspiration and passion was music, particularly jazz, and Kamoinge members were acutely aware of key elements shared between that art form and their own, such as pacing, improvisation, and a mix of technical expertise, knowledge, and intuition. The artists often emphasized abstract or surreal elements of walls, streets, bodies and natural forms in their photographs, a practice explored in *Working Together*.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many Kamoinge members also photographed historically significant moments in Black Americans' struggle for civil rights and engaged the theme of civil rights on a symbolic level in their work. Kamoinge photographer Louis Draper noted that a significant factor in the formation of the Workshop was "the emerging African consciousness exploding within us."

Acting on this cognizance, many Kamoinge members traveled to African countries and other international locations with significant African diasporic communities that had recently gained independence from colonial rule. The global reach of Kamoinge members' travel expanded their sense of community, and likewise contributed to the world view they brought to their work in the United States. The archival materials included in the exhibition highlight the artists' commitment to self-organizing, mentoring, and to an expanded sense of community. Over the years, membership in the Kamoinge Workshop shifted and grew, and in 1993 the group incorporated as Kamoinge Inc., which has continued to the present.

About the Catalogue

The exhibition is accompanied by a 300-page illustrated catalogue by Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, associate curator of modern and contemporary art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The publication includes a preface by Deborah Willis and additional essays by Erina Duganne, Romi Crawford, John Edwin Mason, and Bill Gaskins. Planning for this exhibition began in 2015 when the VMFA acquired founding member and Richmond-native Louis Draper's complete archive, consisting of more than 6,600 items representing more than 50,000 images, including photographs, negatives, contact sheets, and slides, as well as valuable documents and publications which include significant materials about the formation and early years of the Kamoinge Workshop. After the exhibition closes at the Whitney, it will travel to the Cincinnati Art Museum and the J. Paul Getty Museum.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Exhibition Support

Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop is organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

In New York, the exhibition is sponsored by

BANK OF AMERICA 

Major support is provided by the Whitney's National Committee.

Generous support is provided by The Keith Haring Foundation Exhibition Fund.

Significant support is provided by Affirmation Arts Fund.

Additional support is provided by the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

The Whitney's Collection: Selections from 1900 to 1965	Through May 2022
Order and Ornament: Roy Lichtenstein's Entablatures	Through November 16, 2020
Making Knowing: Craft in Art 1950–2019	Through February 2022
Cauleen Smith: Mutualities	Through January 31, 2021
Vida Americana: Mexican Muralists Remake American Art, 1925–1945	Through January 31, 2021
Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist	Through November 1, 2020
Jill Mulleady: We Wither Time into a Coil of Fright	Through January 2021
Around Day's End: Downtown New York, 1970–1986	Through November 1, 2020
Salman Toor: How Will I Know	November 13, 2020–April 4, 2021
Nothing Is So Humble: Prints from Everyday Objects	November 20, 2020–Spring 2021
Working Together: The Photographers of the Kamoinge Workshop	November 21, 2020–March 28, 2021
Public Art Project: David Hammons: Day's End	December 2020
Andrea Carlson	On view February 2021
Julie Mehretu	March 19–August 8, 2021
Madeline Hollander: Flatwing	March 19–August 8, 2021
Dawoud Bey: An American Project	Opens April 17, 2021
Dave McKenzie: The Story I Tell Myself	Spring 2021
Jasper Johns: Mind/Mirror	September 29, 2021–February 13, 2022
My Barbarian	Opens October 2021
Martine Gutierrez	On view Fall 2021
2022 Whitney Biennial	Opens Spring 2022

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are: Monday and Thursday: 11:30 am–6 pm; Friday: 1:30–9 pm; Saturday and Sunday: 1–6 pm. Member-only hours are: Monday and Thursday: 6–7 pm; Saturday and Sunday: 10:30 am–1 pm. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 6–9 pm. Reserve timed-entry tickets in advance at whitney.org. For more information please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

###