

In 1963 a group of Black photographers based in New York came together in the spirit of friendship and exchange to form the Kamoinge Workshop. They chose the name Kamoinge—meaning “a group of people acting together” in the Gikuyu language of Kenya—to reflect the essential ideal of the collective as well as their global perspective. Deeply committed to photography’s power and status as an independent art form, the members of Kamoinge boldly and inventively depicted Black communities as they saw and experienced them, and in contrast with how they were often portrayed in art, media, and popular culture of the time.

Working Together focuses on the first two decades of the Kamoinge Workshop. In those early years, which coincided with the civil rights movement, the Black arts movement, and pan-Africanism, the collective’s members convened weekly to share their work, critical perspectives, and technical and professional expertise, and their meetings often included intense philosophical and political discussions. Albert R. Fennar, one of the Kamoinge artists, described long arguments about “whether or not, because a photographer is Black, he has to deal with subjects that are germane to the Black experience.” These debates, as he went on to explain, could never be resolved by the group. Each photographer developed a unique aesthetic approach and an independent photography career; yet they shared a perspective echoed in member Louis Draper’s statement: “we speak of our lives as only we can.”

This exhibition features the work of fourteen artists, nine of whom are living and working today, who joined the Workshop in its formative years and consistently remained central to the group and its dialogue. Kamoinge, however, engaged with a broader community of Black photographers throughout its history, some of whom came to meetings and participated in the group’s early exhibitions and portfolio releases. The Workshop reorganized as Kamoinge Inc. in the 1990s with expanded membership and nonprofit status. Highlighting the artists’ distinct visual voices as well as their collective concerns, *Working Together* celebrates the Kamoinge Workshop’s important place in the history of photography. These artists’ self-organizing, commitment to community, and centering of Black experiences still resonate strongly nearly sixty years after the Workshop’s founding.

Hear from the artists at whitney.org/Guide.

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