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Louis Draper and 'Timeless Photographs by Kamoinge'

By Martha Schwendener

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The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s included music, theater and literature, but also art collectives like Spiral and the photography group and workshop Kamoinge, founded in 1963. Kamoinge, which means “acting together” in Kikuyu, a Kenyan language, was dedicated to positive representations of African-Americans. Two shows currently in galleries examine Kamoinge’s legacy and coincide with the publication of recent books about the collectives.

Louis Draper, a Kamoinge founder, is — astonishingly — having his first solo New York show. This gorgeous exhibition, at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea, has more than 75 black-and-white images, including portraiture and still lifes. The works display the decisive moments and high-contrast techniques popular among postwar art

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photographers. Mr. Draper's image of Miles Davis from around 1965 shows that musician holding his trumpet and cloaked in a darkness that resonates with the '60s adage "Black is beautiful." Among the other photographs are anonymous figures on the streets of New York and a little girl, in Philadelphia in 1968, standing in front of graffiti that reads "Cuba" and clasping her hands against her chest passionately.

Downtown, at Wilmer Jennings Gallery, another Kamoinge founder, Herb Robinson, has organized a show of works by Kamoinge members including Mr. Draper, Roy DeCarava, Al Fennar, Ray Francis, Anthony Barboza (who has a show at Keith De Lellis Gallery through March 12), Adger Cowans, Frank Stewart, Russell Frederick, Herb Randall, Jimmie Mannas, Collette V. Fournier and Toni Parks (daughter of Gordon Parks). Some standout images include Ming Smith's 1972 photograph of a woman on the streets of Dakar, Senegal; John Pinderhughes's stunning "Pretty for a Black Girl #1," from around 1998, with a young woman staring in a mirror; haunting portraits by Mr. Draper and Gerald Cyrus; and Mr. Robinson's more recent photographs and photomontages commemorating Hurricane Katrina and the killing of Trayvon Martin.