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Exhibit | Louis Draper

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Born in 1935, just outside Richmond, VA, Louis Draper grew up in a family that believed in education. While attending then-segregated Virginia State College, Draper picked up the camera. He never set it down. Instead, he moved to New York City in 1957 to study at the New York Institute of Photography. Here, Draper was mentored by legendary photographers Roy DeCarava, Harold Feinstein, and W. Eugene Smith.

Living in Harlem, Draper began documenting the people of his world, starting with his neighbor, the poet Langston Hughes. His talent was quickly recognized and his work was included in "Photography at Mid-Century", a significant exhibition at the George Eastman House in 1959. The exhibition elevated Draper

to the level of his mentors Feinstein and Smith. An auspicious start for the young man from Virginia.

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Louis Draper Malcolm X, 369th Armory, Harlem, New York City, 1964 Vintage gelatin silver print, printed c. 1964

In 1963, Draper became a founding member of the Kamoinge Workshop, along with Albert Fennar, Ray Francis, Herman Howard, Earl James, James Mannas, Calvin Mercer, Herbert Randall, Larry Stewart, Shawn Walker and Calvin Wilson, with Roy DeCarava serving as its first director. The group came together under the belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that they could work together to create a movement to support African-American photography. The group began meeting at members' homes, then opened the Kamoinge Gallery in Harlem, providing a salon environment for the interchange of art and ideas.

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, Draper spoke of his photography as a means of "engaged resistance." He observed, "The subjects I shoot, the people, the animate and the inanimate are not mine to exploit as some people in the arts do, but rather they are the medium of my expression. If I exploit them, I exploit myself."

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Louis Draper Untitled, c. 1965 Vintage gelatin silver print, printed c. 1965

In addition to capturing the soul of Harlem in a time of change, Draper also photographed some of the major figures of the era including Fannie Lou Harner, Malcolm X, Hughie Lee Smith, and Katherine Dunham. A selection of the most significant prints from the photographer's archive is currently on view in "Louis Draper" at Steven Kasher Gallery, NY, now through February 20, 2015. The exhibition includes 75 vintage black and white prints spanning Draper's career from the 1950s–1980s. In addition to Draper's iconic Harlem street photographs, the show also features the artist's images from Mississippi in the 1960s, as well as works taken in Senegal, which he visited in 1977–78.

Recently there has been a reappraisal of his work, made possible by the organization and preservation of his archive, spearheaded by his sister, Nell Draper-Winston. With the new attention to his life's work, Draper, who died in 2002, is being acknowledged once again as one of the most important American photographers of the mid-twentieth century.