

Carnegie Museum of Art
Black Photojournalism Podcast
Episode 7: New York City

Ming Smith: I'm Ming Smith, and I am a fine art photographer. I also paint and do mixed media, dance and some short films.

It astonishes me that I didn't really understand, even though I lived in Jim Crow, that there weren't that many images at all. I remember *Jet* magazine, which was like a dime or something like that. And then they had a pretty girl in the middle of the centerfold. That people would look at that every month. But especially like to see a Black woman, in a magazine, I guess you would say that would be pretty sexy, right? For, you know, those times.

But my father, he was a avid photographer, but he also painted and he sculpted, and I also became aware at a young age that all the very negative images. *Life* magazine sometimes had stories, which was a big thing.

I remember once they had Dorothy Dandridge. And then I remember parts of Gordon Parks, when they went south, but on a whole, media, I was not drawn to at all. It was just facts. And who was against who, but not really the, humanity. So when I came to New York, that's one of the reasons I think why I was drawn to Kamoinge. Because they showed the humanity, the beauty, the love for each other. And that was so important to me.

I just thought they were just very good people. They had values and they had principles, and I love that about them. And they were sincere and they were all really good photographers by their own right. Each one was unique, each one was different, but they loved the images. And it wasn't just images. They wanted photography, their work, to represent high art as well. It wasn't just, 'Oh, a Black face.' No, there was a real respect for the art form.

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MARK WHITAKER: Welcome back to the Black Photojournalism podcast. I'm your host, Mark Whitaker.

For our final episode, we're heading to New York City with *five* different photographers—four of whom essentially came of age as artists together, as part of the legendary Black photography collective, the Kamoinge Workshop, which was founded in 1963 and still endures.

You just heard from Ming Smith, who was the first woman to join the group—and, later, the first Black female photographer to have her work acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. Ming hit on something key here. To this point, so many of the Black photojournalists we've talked about—and in some cases, talked *to*—aspired primarily to make a living and do right by their communities. They wanted to document a fuller picture of Black American life than they were seeing in the white-owned mainstream news. And they

wanted to do so beautifully, but they probably wouldn't have imagined their work on the walls of a museum.

The artists we're going to talk to in our final episode here followed in their footsteps and certainly shared their aspirations when it came to documenting a much fuller picture of Black life. But as Ming said, they aspired toward high art in their work, too. In so doing, they make a case for yet another critical lens through which we can consider this work—work that was more than a record of a people and a place; work that embodied subjectivity, creativity, and aspiration in and of itself.

Adger Cowans: My name is Adger Cowans. I'm a painter, photographer. I grew up in Columbus, Ohio and I studied photography at Ohio University.

I never thought about being an artist. That was actually the furthest thing from my mind. I was a musician. I studied music from the time I was in junior high school. My uncle gave me a Z-flat trumpet, so I played trumpet for years. But, you know, I wanted to play in the jazz band, that was my idea when I grew up. I didn't think about being an artist until many, many years later in New York.

My father was a butler. And, our neighbors next door, they worked in the factory. And most of the people worked in factories and were everyday kind of people, you know, I would say working people with middle class ideas. They wanted to better themselves, you know, people saved their money to try and do things, take vacations, et cetera, et cetera.

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Adger Cowans: I mean, I grew up in the Second World War, the end of the Second World War, so a lot of photographs about, you know, the Germans and the Japanese, and you know, stories about famous people, you know, movie stars. I think *Life* Magazine, *Post* Magazine, all the magazines that were being done at that time.

Of course, we couldn't actually afford, you know, comic books and magazines. But where my father worked, that family got the magazines and we would get 'em secondhand. So these were the magazines that had photographs in them.

But I was also a paper boy, so I knew a lot of things were going on in the world because I carried the day paper and the evening paper. I remember seeing pictures of Black people being hung down south, which frightened me, you know? I never wanted to go south, even to this day.

My mother was an avid picture taker and an amateur photographer. So she had all these books, must have been about eight or 10 books, filled with pictures that she started collecting when she was about 16 years old. Pictures of new babies and their family, pets, picnics, cousins, aunts, uncles, everybody. She had all these photographs. And on days when it was raining, you know, I would look through these books. And I used to think about who these people were. I realized that a photograph was very real to me because I could see my past relationships.

And then my sister's boyfriend had one of the few magazines of photography at that time, and it said in the magazine, 'Ohio University gives degree in photography.' So I showed it to my mother. I said, 'Mom, mom, look, I can study...' She said, 'Well, that's fine, but you know, wait till your father comes home,' you know?

So my father came home and I said, 'Well, I want to go to OU and study photography.' He said, 'What's wrong with you, boy, you crazy?' He said, 'Kodak makes a camera. You put the film in it. You shoot the pictures. You send it back to 'em.' He said, 'Boy, what are you talking about?' I said, 'Yeah, but this is like a college course.'

He said, 'That's ridiculous. Photography is a hobby. It's not a life's work.' So my mother said, 'But honey, that's what he wants to do.' So I went to Ohio University, 1954, that fall to study photography. And of course I did what most students do. I party, 'Oh yeah, I'm in college. I'm away from home.' Girls. You know? Wow. Yay. Second year, yay! Third year, you better get serious.

My junior year, I started taking pictures in my town there where I lived in Columbus, and I shot a picture of these little kids holding balloons. They were on Mount Vernon Avenue and my grandmother's church was right there on that corner. And it was what people said about the photograph that made me more interested in being a photographer because for me, it was a way into their heads.

When people talked, that was cheap psychology, sort of. And I liked that. I liked that I could show a photograph to somebody and they would tell me how they felt about it, but it was always from their point of view.

But anyway, that junior year, I got serious and my uncle said, 'Why don't you find somebody colored that's doing what you want to do?' I said, 'All my teachers are white. I don't know.' He said, 'Well, ask, ask one of your teachers.'

So I asked Walter B. Allen, 'cause he seemed to be the hippest of the teachers. He lived in New York, so I thought he was cool. So he said, 'There's a guy, a Black man at *Life* magazine.' I think this was 1955. And they published a book of *Life* magazine photographers, and on the back there was a picture of Gordon.

MARK WHITAKER: Gordon being Gordon Parks, widely considered to be one of the greatest photographers of the 20th century. He first made a name for himself taking pictures for the Farm Security Administration in the 1940s, having been inspired by other FSA photographers' Depression-era work. In 1948 he became the first Black staff photographer at *Life* magazine, where his subjects ranged from Black Power to high fashion; Harlem gangs to Barbra Streisand. He eventually made movies, too—most famously, the original *Shaft*. But let's get back to Adger...

Adger Cowans: So I wrote him a letter and told him I was a student at OU and studied photography and so he said, 'Well, call me,' you know. And we used to come to New York all

the time to hear Thelonious Monk at the Five Spot, or if Miles was at Carnegie Hall, so we would pile into cars, and we would drive to New York.

Adger Cowans: And so, when I came to New York, one of the times I called Gordon. He said, 'Well come up,' and so I, you know, got on the train to White Plains. And I'm standing there waiting and I see this powder blue Corvette with a white leather interior, turn the corner, a Black man with shades on and smoking a pipe. And I said, 'Shit, this is—I'm gonna be a photographer.'

And I got in the car and he took me to his house and talked about photography, and he said, 'Well, get in contact with me when you get outta school.' So when I did get outta school, I quit. I didn't graduate that year, I just quit. And I decided I was just going to go to New York, and I got on the bus.

I had \$12 – this is 1958. And so I got on the bus to New York and I checked into the Y on 34th Street. I called Gordon the next day. He said, 'Where are you?' I said, 'I'm at the Y.' He said, 'Come up here.'

I got on the train and went up there and he met me, went to the house. He said, 'So what are you gonna do?' I said, 'Well, I don't know.' He said, 'Well, what do you wanna do?' I said, 'I, I just like taking pictures.' He said, 'Why don't you work with me at *Life* magazine as my assistant and live with me and my family here.' And that started the ball kind of rolling from there. And then I got very serious about what I was doing.

I began to see photography as a way of telling stories.

MARK WHITAKER: Adger assisted Gordon Parks over that summer of 1958, but had to pause his photography career when he was drafted into the Navy. He returned to New York—and to Harlem specifically—right after his service and resumed taking pictures of...

Adger Cowans: ...Anything that moved me: people, abstracts, anything that I felt something was happening. I shot pictures of snow, people walking down the street. I had a lot of pictures of Harlem, kids playing basketball and the balls in the air, you know, and the color is not what makes the picture. It is the picture of people doing something that all people can relate to.

You know, all people can relate to pain, all people can relate to joy, you know, tragedy. There are all those things that make us human. You know, and all those things are still in Harlem, but not in the same kind of way because everything's always changing, you know?

MARK WHITAKER: Adger resists the notion that Gordon Parks taught him anything technical—he already knew how to make a good picture, like *Three Shadows*, the now iconic black and white photograph he took from a high vantage point of three young Black women walking down a Bronx street, their shadows stretched across the sidewalk in the late-afternoon sun, rendering them larger than life.

But his experiences with Gordon were still enormously formative. And the two photographers were lifelong friends.

Adger Cowans: What I learned from Gordon Parks was how to take negative energy and turn it into positive power. That's what I learned from Gordon, because he went through all the racism you could think of, but he did not let that deter him from his work. 'It's all energy,' he said, 'and it's what you decide to do with that energy. Put it into your work. Take that energy, that anger, pull it in and use that energy to do your work. Do better.' You know? And that's the lesson that I learned from Gordon, and that's the lessons I try to teach other people, too.

MARK WHITAKER: It wasn't long before he had the opportunity to impart this wisdom to others.

Adger Cowans: I did a picture of Louis Armstrong, 1961, for *Theatre Magazine*. And Ray Francis saw it—

MARK WHITAKER: Ray Francis being another photographer of the era who'd just co-founded a collective of Black photographers that would ultimately become the Kamoinge Workshop.

Adger Cowans: —and he said, 'Hey man, why don't you come up here and help us, 'cause you know, we're amateurs. We don't know what we're doing.' So I came up, this is 1961, and I showed the guys, I took out a meter and they said, 'What's that?' I say, 'It's a light meter.' They were all amateur photographers. But I was a professional photographer at that point. I was making a living from photography.

Then I just kept going to meetings and telling guys more and more and teaching more and more. I started to critique, I said 'Critique the work, not the person.' But of course they didn't listen to me.

We were meeting in—since 1961—very sporadically, and then we started meeting on Sundays, but there was no name for the group. And there were a lot of people who came in the group and left. They didn't wanna be part of an all Black group or just didn't wanna be part of, of a group.

So it wasn't that everybody wanted to get in Kamoinge, but those that came, they stuck it out 'cause people wanted to learn. They came to those meetings excited to learn. There were no schools at that time for young Black photographers that wanted to do photography. And that was one of the main reasons that we came together.

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Adger Cowans: The name Kamoinge is a Kikuyu word, it was brought to the group by Al Fennar.

MARK WHITAKER: Another photographer and Kamoinge co-founder...

Adger Cowans: And so we decided to take that because it meant a group working together. And that's what we wanted to do. And the idea was if you wanted to be in Kamoinge, you had to submit a portfolio. And then the next week they would come and they would be either voted into the group or not.

And then we discussed everything, film, jazz, music, you know, we discuss all kinds of things. It wasn't just photography. We're concerned about the whole art. And I was always trying to teach the fact that photography's an art. You have to learn to see. I would give people assignments, and people would bring work in and we critique it and we went back and forth.

At one meeting, we got in a long discussion about the negative images that white people were publishing. You know, the media was always negative, it was nothing positive. And so we decided we would take that mantle up and shoot pictures since we know our people better than they do, to begin to photograph positive images of Black people.

And that's what we did, but also fine art. What became fine art. You know, photography didn't become a fine art until Ansel Adams was on the cover of *Time* magazine.

MARK WHITAKER: This was in 1979. And what Adger means here is not a picture *by* Ansel Adams, but a picture *of* Ansel Adams on the cover of *Time* magazine, smiling as he holds his large format camera under the coverline: *The Master Eye*. The cover resulted in a surge of prices and recognition for Adams's prints and for fine art photography on the whole.

Adger Cowans: Then limited editions came in, and then it is the silver gelatin print, all these different things came in. But in those days—

MARK WHITAKER: Meaning the early-1960s...

Adger Cowans: —if people published your photograph in a magazine, they gave you \$15 and no credit. That was another thing people fought for. 'Who are you? You're just a photographer. This is a story, it's important to the magazine.' I mean, that's the reason I never really went to work for *Life* magazine. I worked with Gordon, but I never went to try to get a job there because Gordon told me, he said, '*Life* magazine is interested in their point of view. You can photograph something and it might be really beautiful and sensitive, but they're gonna publish what they wanna publish of your work.'

He said, 'And the kinda work that you do,' he said, 'I don't think you'd be happy working at *Life* magazine because your work is very good and it's very personal,' he said, 'and I think that you should continue doing the work that you're doing and not try to work for a magazine.' So I never did.

MARK WHITAKER: This is an important point about the founding and early members of the Kamoinge Workshop. They all did documentary photography and they sold images freelance; they shot for both local and national publications, newsprint and glossy. But few of them would have called themselves photojournalists. Their intent was personal,

they aspired toward high art, and more often than not, the mainstream media just didn't get it.

Shawn Walker: My name is Shawn Walker. I am an educator, photographer. Well, I'm a Harlem child. I was born in Harlem Hospital and I spent, what, 26 years before I left Harlem.

My uncle was a photographer. And he used to do photographs in bars and stuff like that. And give out a card and, you know, contact me and I could get you a print. So when Polaroid came out, I mean he, he took to that like a duck of water. So I used to carry the film and the camera equipment around with him. So I was in and outta bars before I was even sixteen. And, I went to high school for photography.

But at some point I was out in the street selling drugs. And I come from a middle class family. Took me a while to realize that because all the things that they said about Black folks at that time, I thought because my family didn't have a car and didn't have certain things like that, that I saw in television that white families had. I thought I was, you know, a poor ghetto kid.

And, before going to jail officially, one of the members of Kamoinge Workshop came and said, 'Listen, we're having a meeting, a group of Black photographers are going to get together and would you like to come and see what's going on?' And I understood that that was my lifeline and if I didn't grab that, bad things were gonna happen to me. So I came to the meeting, met with these guys and just said, 'Hey, this sounds like what I wanna do.' And that group turned into Kamoinge Workshop.

Eventually Roy deCarava came to meet the guys, and he said something to the group that I've never forgotten. He said that, 'What you guys are trying to do is art.' And it kind of blew my mind. You know, we'd looked at magazines growing up and we knew what that word meant. But to have someone say that this is what we were embarking on, was really powerful and motivating. So that's how the Kamoinge Workshop started as far as I'm concerned.

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Anthony Barboza: My name is Anthony Barboza and I'm a photographer.

When I was in the Boy Scouts, I was getting all these merit badges, but I looked at photography and said, 'Oh, that's too difficult. I can't do that at home.' And lo and behold, even though I thought that, I always walked home from school and stopped in the secondhand bookstore and looked at, *Life* magazine, *Look* magazine and, and liked looking at images.

So one day, I decided that I would go to New York because, Adger Cowans had known my aunt. So Adger brought me over to a Kamoinge meeting, and I didn't even have a camera. So lo and behold, in 1963, I got a little \$15 camera and I started taking photos, and I was living in a hotel in New York. And then all of a sudden I was drafted in the Army and I had to join the Navy. But what happens when I go into the Navy? After bootcamp, I was stationed in Pensacola, and that's where they had the photography school, but they gave me structural mechanic.

In the town, they had an art fair outside, and I put up some photographs and won all these ribbons. So they decided that, instead of being a structural mechanic, they put me in and I started working for the station newspaper. But Kamoinge was always on my mind, so I had to spend three years in the Navy and then get out. But I was photographing all the time down south.

So it became a fascination with me all the way through. So even when I got out of the Navy, I said I didn't wanna go and work on any of the jobs, so I'll just do any kind of photography as long as I had a camera in my hand. So I ended up doing advertising, fashion, everything. And also I made money to work on my own projects.

MARK WHITAKER: Here's Shawn Walker again:

Shawn Walker: Once I got into the Kamoinge workshop, I think it was Ray Francis said, 'Hey, listen, HARYOU Act was a program.'

MARK WHITAKER: HARYOU stood for Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited, an organization founded in 1962 by a pair of psychologists in close consultation with Harlem community leaders, ministers, and government officials. Its goal was to alleviate poverty, delinquency, and drug use in Harlem by creating educational and employment opportunities for the neighborhood's youth.

Shawn Walker: And one of the main centers was at the Theresa Hotel. So Ray said, 'Hey, I know a woman that's working up there. You should go see, show your photography, see what's going on.' And she saw the work and she said, 'Oh, you should go up and be on the newspaper.' So as a journalist, that was my first photographic job and it was my learning school. And I was sort of the guy that could roam the streets of Harlem and take pictures.

So I'm earning a living as a photographer at this early stage. Some gentleman walked up to me and said, 'They told me you are the guy that takes pictures for HARYOU ACT.' And I said yes. He said, 'Listen, I'm starting a newspaper. I'd like you to come aboard.' So I was the only photographer on the paper called the *Harlem Daily*.

So at 26 I'm working for two newspapers. So I really think I'm hot stuff. And what it did is it allowed me for a lot of entrée into organizations, into people, and it was really, the power of the camera was as important to me as it was to other people, because you gotta remember at that time, Black folks weren't being photographed. They could not have photographed themselves.

So we used to always have to go up to the arcade to do the machine where you could get that strip of photographs. That's the only way Black folks got pictures of themselves. So it was a point where people were just open. 'Yeah. Take a picture of me. I don't care whether you give it to me or not, I just wanna be photographed.' Because assuming that I worked for something important like a newspaper.

MARK WHITAKER: Yet for both Shawn and Anthony, Kamoinge was primary.

Anthony Barboza: I learned more from the group of photographers of Kamoinge than any place else. And what I found out is that every one of the photographers in the group photographed because of a feeling they had about us as a people. And that was very important. When you feel something for your own people, then you learn to do that with anybody you photographed.

I took those ideas, and when I went and go photograph other people for *New York Times Magazine* or *Life* magazine, that I worked for for a short time, I always met the people and tried to photograph them from the feelings I had being with them. And that helped me a lot.

Shawn Walker: And Tony, we became family for even that short period of time, we became family. [Yeah] And my learning not only in photography about art, about culture, I was made aware of that by being in the workshop.

Anthony Barboza: Yeah. Music, everything. Yeah.

Shawn Walker: Right. And you know, so we were all into jazz. So jazz played at our meetings constantly. But the reason why we weren't considered ourselves journalists, because we were self-motivated, because of our community and because of our culture. Where journalists had to go shoot assignments.

And the one thing I realized when I shot some—I remember this one shoot time, I, I was told, he said, 'Listen, there's a shooting down in Harlem somewhere, go down and get some pictures.' I went down there with a writer, there was nothing happening, there was no sign and there was a hole in the glass. And I called the office. He said, 'Shoot the hole in the glass. We'll write a story around that result of the shooting.' And I realized, this is not what I wanna do for the rest of my life.

MARK WHITAKER: Shawn has taken photographs throughout Harlem for more than 50 years. He's documented parades, storefronts, children, street scenes of joy but also hardship—his searing photographic series *Drugs* ran in *Essence* magazine in 1970. Shawn's work also took him around the world. He joined Third World Newsreel in 1965, where he did significant work in Cuba. He later did projects in Guyana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Mexico, too. In 2020, he became the first Black photographer to have his archive acquired by the Library of Congress.

Shawn Walker: You know, my family looked at my work, and that we were getting *Ebony*—I think it was *Ebony*. And they would say, 'Why aren't you shooting these upstanding Black people?' You know, everybody with suits and stuff like that, and you are out here shooting people in the street. But I'm saying, hey, but this is a positive cause of what we've learned from. My experiences coming from Harlem.

I remember when I wanted to try to smoke cigarettes in my little crew, we had to go four or five blocks from our block to smoke a cigarette [laughs] and even then a stranger could grab you and drag, take, 'Where you live at? I'm gonna take you home to your family.' And that point was that we understood that there were some pride in the way that people lived, that we wanted to show that part of us.

You know, all of us have shot Easter Sunday. Easter Sundays was when we looked our best. And Black people felt that this is, 'If I don't do this any other day, Easter Sunday, I'm gonna get some kind of a new outfit.' And all we had to do as photographers is go up to 125th Street and photograph people with suits. And if you look at all of the old photographs done by Blacks and some newsreels stuff, that all Black men wore hats.

Anthony Barboza: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Walker: My mother wouldn't let me outta the house without a hat. 'Where are you going? You ain't got no hat on.' And we talked about that amongst each other because we all came from different places. And to talk about what we are going to do is set a standard of what our photographs are gonna represent.

Anthony Barboza: Well, I didn't wanna do anything else but have a camera in my hand. So I opened up a studio and believe it or not, the first job I got was for *Esquire* magazine. So, it sort of got me in my grips to do anything I could to work on my projects. And the very first project I worked on was portraits in the studio of a lot of artists and musicians.

MARK WHITAKER: Artists and musicians like James Baldwin, Miles Davis, and Grace Jones.

Anthony Barboza: And each person, I did not figure out anything until they came into the studio, and then I would create a lighting for them and do the photographs. And then I started thinking about different ideas and there were things that popped up that reflected how I was feeling. And I realize now, after so many years, it is your subconscious that has you choosing what you do without thinking.

Most photographers go out and they think too much. And I always think it's better to feel than to think. When you start thinking, the photographs look like that, you start posing people. You can't do that in the street. You are missing something. To me, even when Cartier-Bresson came out with, *Decisive Moment*—

MARK WHITAKER: This was a book first published by the renowned French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1952. It put forth Cartier-Bresson's ideas about documentary photography and how the documentarian must not only bear witness to events, but learn how to recognize the precise moment when their significance is expressed.

Anthony Barboza: —well that's like having a framework in your mind when you walk out the door and you're always looking for that and you're missing other things. So this decisive moment didn't work for me either because I wanted to be open-minded, and see what's there and feel it.

And I always incorporated that no matter what I was doing, even if it's in the studio, even if I'm doing fashion, which I did a lot too as well. You are feeling the models and feeling the clothes. You're not trying to pose them too much. Let them feel the clothes they're in and they'll move the way they feel.

Shawn Walker: Now, I was into the decisive moment, that was my thing. I thought Cartier-Bresson, Roy deCarava, and all those guys, I thought were the best, that I went out to try to freeze a moment that people were unconscious of. For me, that was the important thing, that trying to get people in a natural state, that's what I was trying to do.

But one of the important things is that in Kamoinge meetings, you had to bring photographs regularly [laughs] and you had to be criticized, but it was constructive criticism. [Yeah] Right? So this is what was so important about the meetings.

And now again, we met every Sunday for at least three or four hours. Then sometimes we would go out to lunch or dinner after the meeting. So it bred problems with our family members, so girlfriends, wives, children, whatever. You know, there was a, 'What are you doing at those meetings?' [laughs] But that's what was the fundamental grounding. So that was like going to class. We were all stuck on Rembrandt. I mean, hey, Rembrandt was a favorite thing that just sort of floated through the air. So I think for me, that was why the group was so important.

MARK WHITAKER: But that higher calling that Shawn Walker, Anthony Barboza, Adger Cowans, and Ming Smith have all talked about remained essential—this idea of positivity, of uplift, of humanity, and of representation beyond the mainstream news.

Shawn Walker: Gordon Parks, you know, there are stories he did, I would not show to my students. Flavio in Brazil. I mean, these were people that were just really down and out and, and it reflected how the world saw us as a people.

Anthony Barboza: Yep.

Shawn Walker: And that was the one thing that we understood that we were out there trying to do different. And the only thing that was different was that we were trying to do these uplifting photographs with technical quality. That was the thing that we were bringing to the table too. But, I remember I had a photograph that I showed to Roy—

MARK WHITAKER: As in Roy DeCarava, another remarkable photographer and artist, and Kamoinge's first director.

Shawn Walker: —of a woman that lived in my building that had a humpback. I didn't photograph her for the humpback, I photographed her for the expression. But Roy would say, 'Hey man, you know, we're always being portrayed with something wrong with us, and you should think more about whether you want to use this photograph or not.'

And we argued and fussed and did a whole bunch of stuff that we, you know, we did, we did what families do. [We fight] Right? Yeah. We did what families do. And that was a key point.

When people came to the workshop, the one thing we did stress was quality in printing. Quality and subject matter and lack of commercialism. [Mm-hmm] So that's what happened in the workshop and that's what became so important to us.

MARK WHITAKER: That feedback often came from Adger Cowans, too. And as Adger himself attests, he didn't hold back. But he had his reasons...

Adger Cowans: I was like, 'That's bullshit. Take it down.' Well, don't embarrass us with this kind of work. You wanna be a professional photographer and you come in here and you would come with a lousy print that scratches and stuff. I was hard on everybody.

And people would say, 'Well, what I was trying to do...' I said, 'Take it down. Take it down.' Because if you tell me you are trying to do something, that means you didn't do it. So I don't wanna listen to what you tried to do. I wanna see what you did and the decisions that you made that make you think that this is a photograph that could last forever. 'Cause to me that's what art was. It had to do with, did you capture something that had a human essence from the heart that will remain relevant long after you're gone.

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MARK WHITAKER: Adger, Ming, Shawn, Anthony, and so many of their Kamoinge peers continued to have success into the 1970s, 80s, and beyond. Their work is in the collections of major museums, and they show and sell their photographs with great galleries.

Harlem, of course, has changed, but Kamoinge continues as a collective, mentorship program, and academic endeavor, with Adger currently at the helm. Its members have worked collectively to publish books and put on exhibitions. In 2020, the group was also the subject of a major exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Still, there was something singular that coalesced in those early years. As Adger Cowans puts it...

Adger Cowans: I think that we were a unique group. Because we were committed to the image. I mean, we went and bought film before we bought food and paid our rent. Film was more important, and making images was more important than anything else.

We were committed to the image because we realize that therein lies the truth of who you are as an artist and as a person.

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MARK WHITAKER: We have one last New York story to share with you, from Marilyn Nance, who followed in Kamoinge's footsteps, in a sense, and counted founding member Beuford Smith as a mentor. But I'll go ahead and let Marilyn introduce herself.

Marilyn Nance: My name is Marilyn Nance and I now call myself an artist. I started calling myself a photographer when I graduated from Pratt Institute. But I've always done a lot of

things. I've done radio, television, I studied graphic design and I think I'm an archivist by family trade. I don't know, my mom wasn't a collector, but she kept up with people?

I started calling my collection the *Marilyn Nance Archive*, and people thought I was being kind of smug, like, 'Ha you think you have an archive?' But now archive is a sexy word, so everybody wants to have an archive. Everyone's talking about, 'The archive, the archive, the archive.' But we all have a legacy and we all have a collection. And I acknowledge that.

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Marilyn Nance: I'm from the middle of the 20th century, and I guess onto the turn of the century, like, African American woman. My mom subscribed to a lot of magazines and so we looked at *Life* magazine, I think we subscribed to *Look*. And that was my introduction to photography and also to art.

I think that we were influenced a lot also by television. My mom was from Birmingham, Alabama, and so we saw a lot of what was going on in Birmingham on TV, and it just didn't jive with what we knew about Birmingham because when we think about Birmingham, we think about our uncles and cousins and grandmother and, you know, things like that. And then to see like hoses turned on people and dogs, I mean, that kind of affected us.

I don't recall my mother actually, like, her reaction, but I do know that the day of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church, was also my mother's birthday. So that always kind of stuck in my head.

MARK WHITAKER: This of course was in September 1963, when four members of the Birmingham Ku Klux Klan bombed a local church, murdering four young girls. At 11 years old, the youngest, Carol Denise McNair, was just about a year older than Marilyn was at the time.

Marilyn Nance: So, as children, we were pretty conscious of class and race and social position. And, I think one of my interests in photographing was to show, like, what I knew. You know the way Black folks are represented is not the way I thought of Black folks, you know, because here I am. So the images I make tend to be joyful. Quote 'positive.' I think that no matter what happens in the world, I'm trying to take a higher road or look for the good behind something.

Because, it is like your diet, you are what you see, you are what you eat. You don't wanna consume a lot of trash because it's bad for your health. So I guess that, my photographs kind of aid in mental health, but then it, some of them were like, so positive, people just didn't, especially when it came to like publications. It's like, 'This isn't Black life.' Oh, what do you know about Black life? You know?

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Marilyn Nance: I think that every photograph I make is a self-portrait. Every photograph is something that I was thinking, I was seeing and I wanted you to see it also. I don't know how

that practice evolved, but I do know that I've been places where I've been with other photographers and we are pretty much in the same position, but we'd wind up with totally different photographs.

Like, in a press situation where there's an event that's in front of us, I was always doing something different. And one of the reasons is, you know, I'm short, and if I can't photograph right there, I'm gonna find something else. But there's another way of telling the story that's not necessarily what's in front of you.

I remember once during like the Day of Outrage, there were meetings all over—

MARK WHITAKER: This action was in response to a racist attack that happened in December 1986, when a group of white teenagers set upon three Black men whose car had broken down in Queens. One of those Black men—Michael Griffith—was struck and killed on the Belt Parkway while fleeing the attack.

Marilyn Nance: —and, there was a meeting at a community center. And one of my friends, a white photographer, was being put out of the meeting because they were a white photographer and this was only for the community and da da da da...

And I was like, well, you know, the opportunity then is to photograph yourself getting put out of the meeting, 'cause sometimes we mistake what the story is, you know. We think that the story is what is presented to us, what's right in front of us, what the news says the story is. But the story is your experience of the moment. And so, what I photograph is always my experience.

They say that everything that sort of gets in your way is really just a redirection, so I don't get upset too much about a train that's stuck or like, there's always reasons why things happen or don't happen.

For me, photography is a way of being, it's a way of exploring with permission. I'm just nosy too. I'm really nosy. And the camera's a good excuse to get into places and talk to people. Because, if you want to see yourself in history, you have to show up, and you have to make that history because no one's looking for you.

When you see groups of photographers, they're always white, they're usually men. They're always taller than me, right? So, like, if you wanna see yourself, you have to really make that happen. And if you want to make sure that your work is seen after you're gone, you have to also make that happen.

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MARK WHITAKER: This idea of “showing up” is one that I have to imagine resonates with so many of the photographers we’ve talked to and about on this series. They showed up everywhere the community was—and everywhere that the white-owned mainstream media wasn’t. From Clinton Wright on the Westside of Las Vegas, to The

Kamoinge Workshop in Harlem, to Bruce Talamon on the road with Jesse Jackson in 1984.

For Marilyn Nance, showing up meant photographing young Black girls playing double-dutch on the streets of Brooklyn and documenting different kinds of Black spiritual practices all across the United States. She was a longtime freelance photographer for the *Village Voice*, too.

But in 1977, “showing up” meant traveling to Lagos, Nigeria, for an historic international Black arts summit called FESTAC, which brought delegations from throughout the diaspora to Lagos for cultural events and exchange.

Marilyn Nance: I used to like, hang out at the Studio Museum in Harlem and I'm sure there was a flyer or something about FESTAC. Everybody knew that this festival was happening. And the organizers of FESTAC 77—what became FESTAC 77—wanted regular people to come, cultural artists from the different communities. And so the word went out and we would talk about it. And any artist could apply and those who could go, went.

So I applied and I showed a portfolio of images and my buddy Ajuba Douglas applied. And my work was accepted to be shown in the exhibition at FESTAC. And Ajuba's work was accepted to be shown in the exhibition. She had some design work.

Both of us were on the young end, and so there were older artists who were well known, like Kamoinge were there. And, uh, AfriCOBRA. But there wasn't enough money for everyone to go so they had to cut the list. And I was cut off the list at the same time Ajuba was cut off the list.

So I was in a television production workshop, and I overheard two of the instructors talking about how FESTAC was looking for technicians to work the festival. And so I then wrote a letter to the FESTAC officials. Saying, ‘Listen, in light of the fact you didn't return my photograph, I think that when you're looking for technicians, please think of me like, first.’

And so anyway, I got to go because of that letter and also because I called like every day, every day, every day, every day. I'm pretty persistent. So I got to go and Ajuba got to go. I was listed on the manifest as a photo technician.

And so once I got to FESTAC—once we got to Lagos, I mean—I saw the schedule and I made up my own itinerary. I self-assigned and I photographed what I wanted to do. And that's the story. I brought my own film, my own cameras.

And, you know, matter of fact, I had rolls of a hundred feet and I was bulk-loading cassettes of film, in the heat of Nigeria inside of a changing bag. So like, yeah, I, I paid my dues.

So now you wanna know what FESTAC is?

MARK WHITAKER: As widely known and anticipated as the summit was in the 1970s, FESTAC is, unfortunately, a lesser known history today. Which is another reason why Marilyn's photographs remain so important.

Marilyn Nance: FESTAC was the second world festival of Black and African arts and culture. And it is said that 17,000 artists were there.

We all lived in like, sort of an Olympic Village, called FESTAC Village. All the artists lived there, and I don't know how many thousands of people came to, to witness the, you know, performances and films and, you know, all kinds of things happened there.

MARK WHITAKER: As soon as Marilyn learned about FESTAC, there wasn't any doubt in her mind that she would attend.

Marilyn Nance: I think I always had a sense of history, and that that's how I self-assigned other things. It's like, 'Oh, this is historic. I need to, I need to make sure that I get this.'

MARK WHITAKER: A book on Marilyn's FESTAC work was published by Fourthwall Books in 2022. It's called *Last Day in Lagos* and it offers exactly the kind of experience she's described: FESTAC, but through her eyes, her lens, her point of view. We see different delegations on and off the field at the main stadium; we see locals gathering, watching, having a Coke, having a meal, just hanging out. We see street scenes, travel scenes, music, painting, sculpture, dance; Sun Ra and others rehearsing in FESTAC Village; Stevie Wonder and others taking the stage.

But it was the quieter moments of exchange that Marilyn appreciated most.

Marilyn Nance: The photographs, the moments that I really enjoyed were like sitting in the restaurants, and meeting like other people, like sitting across from someone from Sudan or wherever, you know, like just talking to people, you know, these are people we saw in magazines or books, but, and they saw Americans maybe in movies or something.

Marilyn Nance: And here we are, like sitting across the table from one another trying to figure out like we, everyone's happy to be there. It was like a great exchange, and I guess it really wasn't even about the luminaries. Like, I'm flipping through too now, just to see, I photographed a lot of photographers, and I'm on like page 95 now—

MARK WHITAKER: This is an image from the FESTAC 77 opening ceremony. Young African men march in some sort of procession, as young African women watch, bedecked in beads.

Marilyn Nance: —and like the, the people in the foreground are like out of focus because that's how close I was to them. But I think I was just feeling a moment and just like, making that image.

Most of my images, if not all of my images, are photographs of people. You're looking at them. You can see the details in their face. You can read the humanity.

MARK WHITAKER: We asked Marilyn if she thought it was notable that she made these photographs—and made this journey—when she was only 23 years old. The answer was no.

Marilyn Nance: Everyone talks about, 'Oh, you were just 23.' But like, Martin Luther King Jr. was dead at 39. So he did a lot of things at 23. Young people do stuff.

MARK WHITAKER: But Marilyn also looks at that passage of time a bit differently.

Marilyn Nance: I think what's special is that I still have what I made when I was 23. I talked to artists whose parents, like, threw out their artwork or things like that. I think the amazing thing is, is not my age. I think it's my persistence.

I've always been really serious about, like, being in this world and making these photographs is an act of, like, self-determination. It's really activism. I think just, you know, I, I told someone yesterday, like, in terms of activism, I'm like, 'I'm Black and I woke up alive.' That's activism enough for me. You know?

But what I make a photograph of has to be readable 50 years from that moment. So, I think that was a consideration. Like, you know where's this gonna show up? Either nowhere or somewhere. And I'm still trying to make that somewhere happen and now it's truly history.

When I look at it, I'm just amazed at the history that I've witnessed.

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MARK WHITAKER: So we're just about at the end of our regional journey through Black Photojournalism in the mid-20th century. Which is why I feel it's incumbent on me to say that when it comes to Black photojournalism, we've only just scratched the surface. Think of all the unseen photographs out there—in the AFRO's archive, in Ernest Wither's archive, in the Charles Teenie Harris archive at Carnegie Museum of Art. Think of all of the discoveries still to be made.

The work of sharing and preserving these images, these artworks, these *stories* is ongoing. It's work that relies on dedicated archivists, curators, and artists, but also on people like you maintaining an interest in these photographers and their work.

We must understand the ways in which they saw history—and *made* history. And we must keep finding new ways to keep their legacies alive.

For a closing thought, here's Adger Cowans again.

Adger Cowans: We know our people better than anybody else. That's what I think. And so we show certain sides of us that can only be done by us, you see. It's just like when you're in a Baptist church and, the preacher's goin', 'And God said so and so and so,' and everybody says 'Amen.'

Well, you know, people say, well, what? Why? They say 'Amen.' It's called call and response. It's like you sit in the jazz club and a guy finishes a great solo and everybody claps. Everybody together. It's not, 'Okay people, it's time for you to clap.' No, the emotion is such that it makes you wanna clap. That person's played a line or a solo that's just so beautiful. That you, you have to jump up and clap, or you have to say something.

And that's what it's all about, for me anyway.

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MARK WHITAKER: Thank you Ming Smith, Adger Cowans, Anthony Barboza, Shawn Walker, and Marilyn Nance.

Thank you Charlene Foggie-Barnett and Dan Leers at Carnegie Museum of Art, and our executive producer, Rachel Wolff, of SandenWolff, Inc.

I also want to thank everyone who's listening for joining us on this exploration.

One last time: **Black Photojournalism** is a production of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. For more information on this podcast and the Black Photojournalism exhibition, please visit carnegieart.org.

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