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## PHOTO EXCHANGE

### KEY WORDS

- **mourning:** expressions of sorrow after a loss, such as the death of a loved one, moving from one home, country or school to another, or ending a relationship; formal or informal acts, often religiously prescribed, following someone's death
- **commemorate:** to remember and show respect for someone, through informal or ritualized events or gestures; to erect a building, plaque, or statue in someone's honor
- **intergenerational:** relating to, involving, or affecting several generations

### Background for Caregivers:

Caregivers of young children should preview the background information provided for this work and the history of anti-Black violence that informs it for their own preparation. We recommend considering how to discuss truths about racial violence and injustice with age-appropriate language that is sensitive and responsive to children's knowledge and experiences.

This activity focuses on the work of photographer Dawoud Bey (b.1953, Queens, NY), whose work is included in "**Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America**." Bey's *The Birmingham Project (2012)* honors the four African American girls—Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair—who were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan at the **16th Street Baptist Church** in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 and two African American boys—Johnny Robinson and Virgil Ware—who were killed in the violent aftermath during protests. Visiting Birmingham between 2005–2012, Bey got to know the city, eventually photographing six young people the same age as those who perished in the 1963 violence, and six adults the same age the bombing victims would have become. Bey paired photographs of children with ones of adults based on similar poses, physical features or disposition. Through this intergenerational pairing, Bey mourned and visualized the 50 years the children lost on this earth.

Below are some examples for discussing the specific historic context informing *The Birmingham Project* with young children.

- We are going to look at art about a historical event of violence towards Black people in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1960s, a city where people were organizing and protesting for civil rights at the time. Older people in your life might remember this time. You may be familiar with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was one of the leaders of the Civil Rights movement at this time. What have you learned from talking to people about what they remember from times before you were born, what has changed, and what has remained the same?
- The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was the first black church in Birmingham, organized in 1873 as the First Colored Baptist Church of Birmingham, Alabama. In the 1960s, the church served as headquarters for meetings and rallies of people struggling for civil rights. It was targeted with violence by people who are racist, and people were killed. The church remains a place of sacred and celebratory worship, a monument of survival and resistance, as well as loss and mourning. How does knowing the history of this church, the loss there, and that it has existed for nearly 150 years as an important place in the community, make you feel?

“And so as I began to think about this idea of how does one visualize the past in the contemporary moment...to address very directly, the question of what does an 11- and 14-year-old Black girl look like and what does a 13- and 16-year-old Black boy look like, to give them a tangible, physical presence, which still didn't address what I thought was the more resonant question of their lives being so violently cut short, and the 50 years that had ensued. And so over the course of seven years of going back and forth to Birmingham, making periodic visits, I decided that the way to in fact visualize this idea about the lives that they had never gotten to live would be to make portraits of those in Birmingham who were the ages that they would have been.”

**– Dawoud Bey, The Birmingham Project, National Gallery of Art**

To learn more about Bey's process of memorialization through photography, you can **listen** to or **watch** him speak.

**START WITH ART: DAWOUD BEY**



- Compare the poses and clothing of the two figures. How are they similar? How are they different?
- They were taken in the historic 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama. Are the backgrounds similar? What details do you notice?
- How would you describe the mood of the subjects? Try to replicate the poses and facial expressions. How does it feel?
- Can you imagine what the older person might have looked like as a child in the 1960s? Can you imagine what the young person might look like in the future?
- What do you think the two people of different ages, who both live in the same city, could learn from a conversation with one another? What would you ask them?

Bey's **mourning** and **commemoration** through **intergenerational** portraits can inspire us to pair new and existing portraits. Doing so gives an opportunity to consider and commemorate moments in our lives.

### LOOK AROUND

- Do you have current selfies or family photographs of celebrations or important events?
- Do you see older or historic family photographs displayed at home?
- Do you notice any similarities between older and current family photographs or self-portraits? Are the poses similar? Are the locations or events similar?

### MAKE ART

Let's pair two photographs from different time frames and taken at a similar occasion or event, like a birthday or holiday.

## Materials

- Existing photographs
- A camera
- Optional: a printer
- Optional: a scanner and digital editing software
- Optional: a picture frame large enough for both photographs, or use cardboard paper, or objects around the house to create a frame.

## Making

1. Look at current and older family photographs from special events, and select one that you associate with a special memory, or that you find interesting.
2. If the photograph is recent, ask a family member if they have a historic photograph from a similar event. For instance, if you found a photograph of a recent birthday party, ask a family member for a photograph celebrating that same birthday.
3. If no one at home has a photograph from the same event and age, call or email a relative and ask if they can email or mail you a photograph. Or, stage new photos with you and a family member of another generation.
4. Once you have both photographs, place them side by side. You can frame them if a frame is available, or simply create a border that surrounds both images with objects from around the house.
5. If the photograph you chose initially is an older one, stage a new photograph, mimicking the poses in the original to the best of your ability. If the photograph includes multiple people, ask family members or friends to participate.
6. If you have access to a printer, you can print your new photograph and pair it with the older one. Alternately, you can take a photo of the older photograph and place both images side by side digitally.

## REFLECTION

- Did you have any conversations about memories prompted by the photographs? Perhaps ask people about the time when these photos were taken, what was happening in their lives and the world then, what is happening now.
- How might you use photography to commemorate future events?

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**IMAGES:** Dawoud Bey, *Fred Stewart II* and *Tyler Collins*, from the series "The Birmingham Project," 2012. Archival pigment prints mounted on Dibond, 40 × 64 in (101.6 × 162.6 cm). © Dawoud Bey. Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, CA and Rennie Collection, Vancouver

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