



# Kid

# curator

Jefferson eighth-grader Kayne Davis helps shape Mia photography show

▲ Kayne Davis, 13, wrote six explanatory wall labels for the “Just Kids” photography exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Above, he points to Dawoud Bey’s 1990 picture, “A Young Man After a Tent Revival.” “This man’s face tells me he’s not having a good day,” Kayne wrote. “Maybe he feels he should be treated with more respect.”  
Photo by Zac Farber

**By Zac Farber**

**T**hirteen-year-old Kayne Davis lives in Whittier, just a couple blocks from the Minneapolis Institute of Art, but until October he’d never set foot inside the building. Now, a photography exhibition he helped to curate is on display at the museum.

Kayne, an eighth-grader at Jefferson Community School, was one of 11 student guest curators chosen to help Mia staff present a show exploring photographic images of children throughout the 20th century. The students weighed in on the brightly colored, multi-room design of the gallery, insisting a big neutral space would be “intimidating and boring,” and they wrote 75 explanatory wall labels interpreting the show’s nearly 200 objects.

In analyzing a photograph, Kayne tries not to think “about the background or foreground or size,” he said. “I just think what is it about the picture — what’s the person doing that makes me feel some type of way?”

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He starts by focusing on color, form and detail. Describing an anonymous snapshot of a girl sitting on Santa's lap, he notes that "it's a color photo but the color is off" and describes "Santa's slouching hat and his big belt, which is thicker than the girl's arm."

Next, he seeks to inhabit the headspace of the photo's subject. "I believe she feels free, happy, joyful — despite everything," he writes of a Palestinian refugee named Samira, who is portrayed by photographer Rania Matar smiling on a beach, fully clothed, as waves break around her. "She's having a great day and she believes she can do anything."

Finally, he looks to find commonalities with his own life experience. "One thing I related to," he comments on the portrait of Samira, "is that some days I feel exactly like this: I can do anything, I believe in myself. ... And some days I feel like I can't, and she probably thinks that, too."

Mia curator Casey Riley, a former high school teacher who conceived and directed the "Just Kids" show, said Kayne's Samira label was among her favorites in the exhibition.

"Kayne was remarkably connected to all of the photographs he chose on a pretty personal level," she said. "He really pushed himself to say something that I think was emotionally resonant in each case."

Those who know Kayne describe him as thoughtful, enthusiastic and remarkably self-aware. "He has a lot of strength of character," said Carlyn Shanley, his advisory teacher at Jefferson. "He takes a lot of pride in his work and appreciates acknowledgement from other people but doesn't need it."



**Rania Matar**  
Lebanese-American, born 1964

**Samira, Beirut, Lebanon, 2018**  
Archival pigment print on Baryta paper

One thing I notice in this picture is that she's on a beach and she has traditional clothes on, which she probably wears outside. She's standing in the [water], smiling with her eyes closed. I believe she feels free, happy, joyful—despite everything. She's having a great day and she believes she can do anything—she can find a good job, she can have kids, or help her kids. One thing I related to this picture is that some days I feel exactly like this: I can do anything, I believe in myself, I believe I can do whatever it takes to help people. And some days I feel like I can't, and she probably thinks that, too.

—Kayne Davis



*I just think what is it about the picture — what's the person doing that makes me feel some type of way?*

—Kayne Davis

After the "Just Kids" show opened at Mia, Kayne said he realized he has a knack for writing about art.

"I have a lot on my mind," he said. "I think a lot, I spectate a lot and I analyze a lot. I just process all that and put it all down."

### The experts

Casey Riley is a Lynnhurst resident who moved to the Twin Cities in August 2018 to head Mia's Department of Photography and New Media. She said her idea for the "Just Kids" exhibition was sparked by looking at Lewis Hine's photographs of child laborers from the early 1900s.

In previous shows she curated, Riley had worked hard "to think inclusively about who the experts are." For an exhibition on the work of the lesbian documentary photographer Meadow Muska, she asked Muska to provide extensive notes on every image used in the show and worked collaboratively with the artist on interpretation. Before opening to the public, she ran each label she planned to use by an external LGBTQIA+ group.

As Riley began to conceptualize a show portraying children, she realized she would need to ensure "their expertise was respected." "Because I was looking at images of child labor, which are incredibly powerful and complicated, I wondered what kids would think about them," she said.

Riley chose the works shown in the exhibition herself, but she and her Mia colleagues decided to take a risk and let a group of kids without any formal curatorial training choose how to interpret and present the works.

"When I pitched this show, some people said, 'You're going to have to make sure there's a digital element to it where they can Snapchat or whatever,'" she said. "I was like, 'We don't know what the kids will want; let's see.'"

On a Saturday in early October, 11 teenagers from four local middle and high schools woke up early and arrived at the museum at 9 a.m., not knowing quite what to expect.

Over the course of three intensive four-hour sessions, they were given a crash course in the behind-the-scenes work of a museum. They learned about paint budgets, sound baffles and how to handle photographs with nitrile gloves. They walked around the galleries and took mental notes on effective hanging strategies. They met with an artist, an exhibition designer, a collection manager and many other members of Mia's staff. "I can't believe how many people work in a museum," one student said. "I had no idea!"

Riley gave the kids a two-sided worksheet with questions like "What's one thing you wondered about in this picture?" that

were intended to help them slow down, look closely and think critically.

"The kids took the assignment seriously and challenged themselves to write things that exposed vulnerability," Riley said. "They pushed themselves to empathize or connect compassionately with the subjects in the photographs they chose."

Riley was struck by the students' appreciation of the photographs as physical objects.

"What I found in this experiment is that artifacts matter," she said. "They were clear they didn't want this to be an Instagram-centered show. They loved that these were objects with histories and material markings and a real person's imprimatur."

The students, she said, had a number of group conversations discussing whether "you are always you" in a photo or whether the person pictured is just a persona, a character inhabited, the exploration of an identity.

At one point, Riley asked the students what they wished adults understood about how kids use photography.

"I really wish people understood we are a nostalgic generation," responded Aliyya Marie Mahmoud, a freshman at Roosevelt High School.

Riley remembers thinking, "What does that even mean? You're 14. How can you be nostalgic for, like, 10 minutes ago?" But she prompted: "Say more."

"When I take a picture of myself," Aliyya said, "I'm imagining what I'm going to think about it in the future and how I'm going to remember what it was like to be myself at this age."

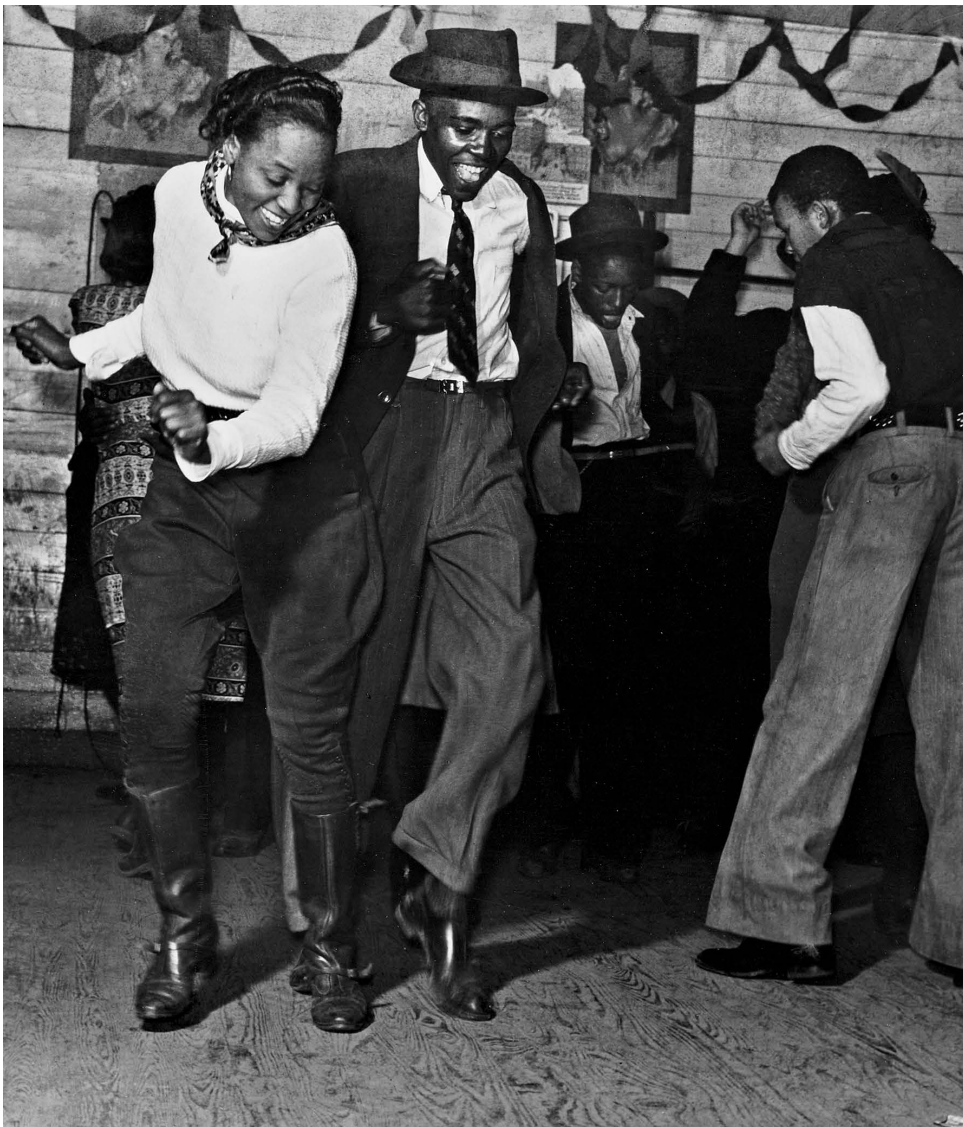
The statement stuck in Riley's mind.

"They're so attuned to this very profound philosophical connection to digital media and image making," she said. "They're born theoreticians."

### Making connections

Kayne studied art at Jefferson in sixth and seventh grade but these days he prefers to "go solo."

He sketches in pencil before tracing his lines in pen. He loves drawing Godzilla, anime characters and timeless mythical



**Marion Post Wolcott**  
American, 1910–1990

**Jitterbugging in Juke Joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939**  
Gelatin silver print

Everyone is wearing fancy clothes—hats, shoes, jackets and pants. The woman is wearing high-top boots. Since everyone is dancing, I assume they are at a party. There's a DJ and he's dancing too. They're listening to music like Michael Jackson, or maybe Snoop Dog. The floor is rough and dull, so maybe they're in a barn. It's hard to tell. There are pictures on the wall so maybe it's a bar—a place where you could go and hear music and dance. And there's no white people in the photo—I know this was taken at a time when the White Man had all the power, so this is probably a place where they could go and be themselves. I wonder if the photographer was white? Would they act like this in front of the White Man?

—Kayne Davis



*They were clear they didn't want this to be an Instagram-centered show. They loved that these were objects with histories and material markings and a real person's imprimatur.*

—Casey Riley, Mia curator

creatures. Among his artistic influences are Dr. Seuss and his close friend Anthony, whom he describes as an excellent doodler.

“Dragons for me are easy, people are normal, regular animals are harder,” Kayne said.

After completing work on the “Just Kids” exhibition, Kayne presented to his English Language Arts class about the experience.

For the Mia show, he’d analyzed a photo by Marion Post Wolcott, “Jitterbugging in Juke Joint, Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1939” — observing that the photo was “taken at a time when the White Man had all the

power” and speculating that the juke joint was somewhere the dancers “could go and be themselves.”

In class, he talked about this picture, wondering how the photographer’s race had affected the revelers’ behavior.

Shanley noted how Kayne’s critical racial analysis tied into a unit she’d taught about the civil rights movement, in which her class read courtroom proceedings from the trial of Emmett Till’s murderers and drew parallels between protests under slavery, the protests of the 1960s and the Black Lives Matter protests today.

“He is very eager to make connections between what we’re learning and his own personal life,” Shanley said. “He wants to know what other people are thinking about the things he’s thinking about.”

At an opening celebration for the Mia exhibition, Kayne was joined in the galleries by his mother, grandmother, grandfather, great-grandmother and his three younger sisters.

“Grandma, this is another thing by Kayne,” said one of his sisters as she ran around the gallery pointing out her brother’s contributions.

Kayne stood proudly with his arms crossed and his head cocked as artists and curators stopped by to offer their congratulations.

If his dream job of becoming a video game designer doesn’t pan out, he said, “I might come here and try to be a photographer or curator.”

## JUST KIDS’ PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT

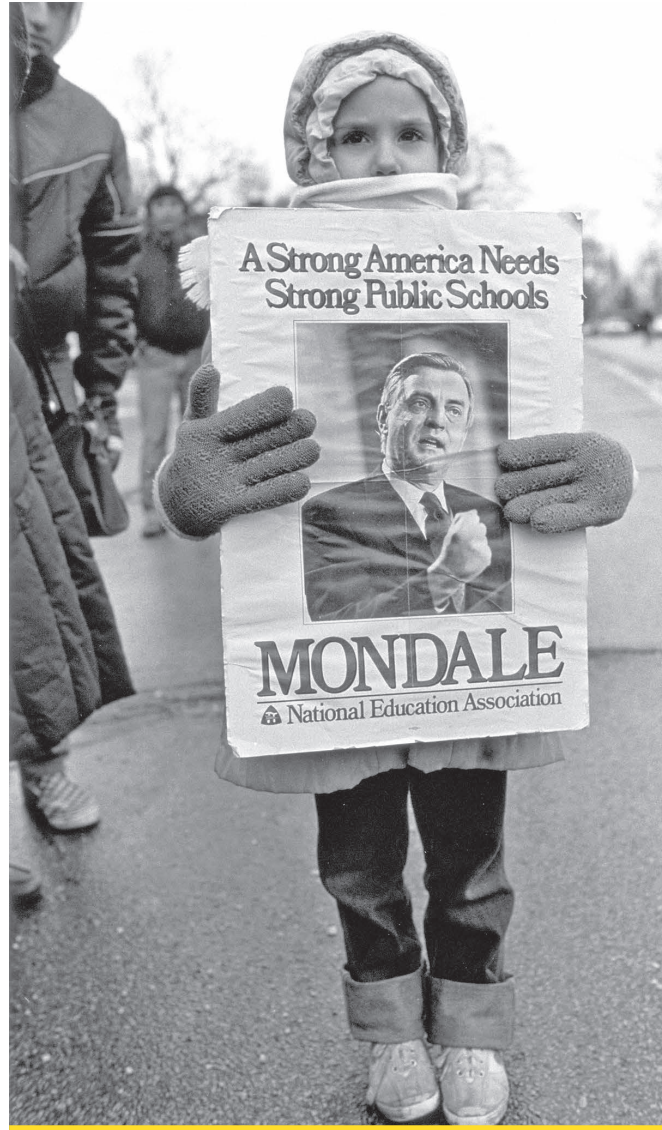
Composed of nearly 200 objects partially curated by middle and high school students, this exhibition includes images of children and teens by both celebrated and emerging photographers, as well as photographic books and series created for and by young people.

**When:** Through June 14

**Where:** Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2400 3rd Ave. S.

**Cost:** Free

**Info:** [artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org)



**Thomas F. Arndt**  
American, born 1944

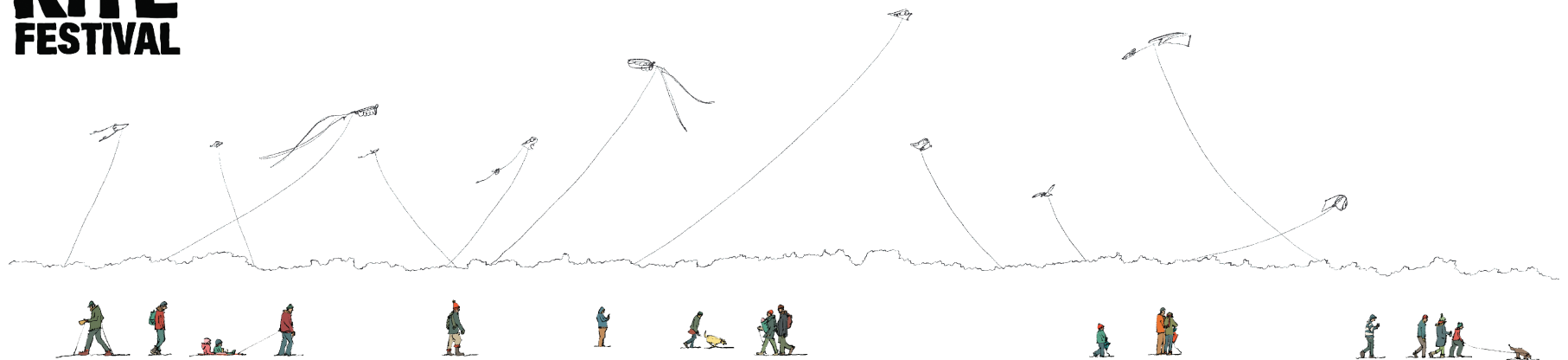
**Child, Mondale Rally, Waukegan, Illinois, 1984**  
Gelatin silver print

She looks like she’s wearing gloves, a jacket and a hat under her hood. It’s winter there. She’s going out there not caring what happens to her—she wants better schools. She wants to feel safe at school so she can get good grades and go to college and get a job. She looks like she’s 6 or 5, in kindergarten or first grade. She’s with her parents—maybe that’s them in the background. I want other schools to be stronger and more protective of their students. Check if people have guns or knives; if so, take them and give them to authorities, so the child who has the weapon will be safe and the school will be, too.

—Kayne Davis

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