

Black is Beautiful: Empowerment Through the Lens of Kwame Brathwaite, 1962-1975

May 21 – July 30, 2016

Cherry and Martin is proud to present the first West Coast solo exhibition of the work of American photographer Kwame Brathwaite. Inspired in part by the writings of Marcus Garvey, Kwame Brathwaite, his older brother, Elombe Brath, and the African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS) popularized the phrase “Black is Beautiful” in the late 50's and early 60's. “Black is Beautiful” is one of the most important political and cultural ideas of the twentieth century. Brathwaite and Brath did their part to spread this idea through Brathwaite's writings and photographs and the activities of the two organizations they helped co-found: AJASS and the Grandassa Models.

Kwame Brathwaite's photographs were specifically intended to shape the course of American visual discourse. His photographs foreground how artistic and political vision can affect change in popular culture and how popular culture can affect change on culture at large. The subjects of Brathwaite's carefully crafted photographs invoke the power of a range of objects, such as books, musical instruments and artworks. The dress and hairstyles of his subjects point to their sense of themselves, while the environs of his subjects direct the viewer to a community of artist activists—writers, painters, playwrights, fashion designers and musicians. Brathwaite's work demonstrates the power of photography as an essential cultural tool in the dissemination of new political ideas, its power to stage visual rhetoric and its ability make language visible.

Kwame Brathwaite was born in Brooklyn in 1938. His parents were born in Barbados. Brathwaite and his older brother, Elombe Brath, now deceased, and his younger brother John, were raised in a politically-conscious and artistic household. By the late 1950's, shortly after graduating from high school, Brathwaite and Brath became active in the African Nationalist Pioneer Movement (ANPM) led by Carlos Cooks. They were also involved in the early struggle in Southern Africa, forming in 1961 their Bronx-based South-West Africa Relief Committee to support Sam Nujoma's South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) and later, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). Parallel to these political activities the two brothers were regularly producing concerts—a who's-who of top Jazz figures of the time—at such venues as Club 845 in the Bronx and Small's Paradise in Harlem. Brathwaite took on the role of photographing these concerts, promoting them, and organizing the cultural activities that would often be held during the concerts, such as art shows and African dance performances.

The 1961 Garvey Day Celebration's “The Miss Natural Standard of Beauty Contest,” was a catalyzing moment for the brothers who saw clearly that the same models who eschewed make-up and wore their hair ‘natural’ for the contest would, by the following Sunday (when they came to pick up their prize money), have straightened their hair in order to feel comfortable going back to school, work and their everyday lives. Brathwaite and the other members of AJASS felt that African Americans needed to feel comfortable in their own skins and to be proud to display their natural beauty. He and Brath led the charge to establish studio and office space next to the Apollo Theater for AJASS, and started the Grandassa Models (named after ANPM leader Carlos Cooks's term for the African continent, “Grandassaland”).

AJASS's first fashion show, “Naturally '62,” headlined by Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach, and initially planned as a one-time event, proved so popular that a second sold out show was held that same night to accommodate the crowd. When traveling to other cities for concerts, AJASS members Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach helped spread the word and make contacts with other progressive organizations that

lead to “Naturally” show bookings in their respective cities. In February 1963, AJASS followed with shows at Robert’s Show Club in Chicago and Mr. Kelly’s in Detroit and continued to spread the “Black Is Beautiful” theme nationwide.

Brathwaite’s regular reporting and pictorials for leading black publications such as The Amsterdam News, City Sun and The Daily Challenge beginning in the early 60's helped set the stage for the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power movement. By the 1970's, Brathwaite was one of the top concert photographers, shaping the images of such public figures as Stevie Wonder, Bob Marley, James Brown and Muhammad Ali. Brathwaite wrote about and photographed such landmark events as the “The Motown Revue” at the Apollo (1963); “WattStax ’72” (1972); The Jackson 5’s first trip to Africa (1974); and the “Festival in Zaire” (1974, which accompanied the famous Foreman-Ali fight, “The Rumble in the Jungle”).

Elombe Brath died in 2014. He worked as a graphic artist at WABC-TV and served as a consultant for late television host Gil Noble’s groundbreaking WABC-TV show, “Like It Is.” The Elombe Brath Foundation was established in 2014 to continue the legacy of Elombe’s work.

Throughout the course of his career, Kwame Brathwaite has photographed such international figures as Nelson Mandela and Kwame Nkrumah—his namesake—and he still maintains a relationship with a range of African political figures, including Sam Nujoma, the first president of Namibia.

Due to the importance of Kwame’s work on political and cultural events, he was invited to the inaugurations of Sam Nujoma and Nelson Mandela, as well as the swearing-in of Namibian president Hage Geinbog in 2015. Kwame Brathwaite lives and works in New York.